

Snow in the Desert

NEAL ASHER

Neil Asher (<http://website.lineone.net/~nealasher>) lives in Chelmsford, England. His short fiction has been published for several years in the UK small press. Books include *Mindgames: Fool's Mate* (1993), *The Parasite & The Engineer* (1997) *Africa Zero* (2001), and *Runcible Tales* (1999). The aforementioned are all short story collections and novellas. His first novel, *Gridlinked*, a kind of James Bond space opera, was published in the UK in 2001, and his second, *The Skinner*, in 2002. Both books are set in the same future—the “runcible universe,” where matter transmitters called runcibles link the settled worlds—and are forthcoming in the U.S.

“My aim is to entertain,” he says, “not blind people with my brilliance. I’m from the school of Arnold Schwarzenegger SF.”

“*Snow in the Desert*,” published in *Spectrum SF*, where several of Asher’s stories have appeared, is proof that space opera in the most traditional sense (related to the western) is still being written with verve and sincerity. It certainly is hyperbolic. Our hero, a long-lived albino gunslinger, is hiding out on a frontier planet because there is a bounty price on his balls. Everyone wants his genetic code because he may be the only immortal human. It is interesting to compare this to the *Moorcock* story on page 458.

A sand shark broke through the top of the dune, only to be snatched by a crab-bird and shredded in mid-air. Hiralda squatted down, wrapping her cloak around her and pulling up the hood. The chameleon cloth shaded to match the violet sand, leaving only her Toshiba goggles and the blunt snout of her singun visible. It was a small crab bird, but she had quickly learned never to underestimate them. Should the prey be too large for it to kill, the bird would take pieces instead. No motile source of protein was too large to attack. The shame was that all the life-forms on Vatch were based on non-Terran proteins, so to a crab-bird, human flesh was completely without nourishment.

The bird stripped the shark of its blade-legs and armored mandibles and flew off with the bleeding and writhing torso, probably to feed to its chick. Hiralda stood up and reappeared; a tall woman in a tight-fitting body-suit, webbed with cooling veins and hung with insulated pockets. On her back she carried a desert survival pack, to create the right impression. Likewise, the formidable singun went into a button-down holster that looked as if it might hold only a simple projectile weapon. She removed her goggles and mask, tucking them away in one of her many pockets before moving on across the sand. Her thin features, blue eyes, and long blond hair were exposed to oven temperatures and skin-flaying ultraviolet. So it had been for many weeks now. Occasionally she drank some water, just in case someone was watching.

He was called, inevitably, Snow, but with his mask and dust robes it was not immediately evident that he was an albino. The mask, made from the shell of a terrapin, was what identified him. That, and a tendency to leave corpses behind. The current reward for his stasis-preserved testicles was twenty thousand shillings, or the equivalent value in copper or manganese or other precious metals. Many had tried for that reward, and such was their epitaph: they tried.

Snow understood that there might be bounty-hunters waiting at the water station. They would have weapons, strength, and skill. Balanced against this was the crippling honor code of the Andronache. Snow had all the former and none of the latter. Born on Earth so long ago that he doubted his memories, he had long since dispensed with anything that might impede his survival. Morality, he often argued, is a purely human invention, only to be indulged in times of plenty. Another of his little aphorisms ran something along the lines of: “If you’re up Shit Creek without a paddle, don’t expect the coastguard.” His contemporaries on Vatch never knew what to make of that one, unsurprisingly as Vatchians had no use

for words like creek, paddle or coast.

The station was a metallic ovoid mounted ten meters above the ground on a forest of scaffolding. Nailing it to the ground was the silvery tube of the geothermal energy tap that powered the transmuter—which made it possible for humans to exist on this practically waterless planet. The transmuter took complex compounds, stripped them of their elementary hydrogen, and combined that with the abundant oxygen given off by the dryform algae that turned all the sands of Vatch violet. Water was the product, but there were many interesting by-products: rare metals and strange silica compounds were among the planet's main exports.

As he topped the final dune Snow raised his image-intensifier and scanned ahead. The station was truly a small city, the center of commerce, the center of life. He frowned under his mask. Unfortunately, he needed water for the last stage of his journey, and this was the only place he could get it.

Snow strode down the face of the dune to where a dusty track snaked toward the station. By the roadside a water-thief lay dying at the bottom of a condensation jar. His blistered fingers scratched at the hot glass. Snow passed by, ignoring him. It was a harsh punishment, but how else to treat someone who regarded his fellow human beings as no more than walking water-flasks? As he neared the station, cries from the rookery of hawkers and stall-holders in the ground city reached out to him, and he could see the buzz of activity in the scaffold maze. Soon he entered the noisy life of the ground city; a little after that he passed through the moisture lock of the Sand House.

A waiter spoke to Snow, "My pardon, master. I must see your tag. The Androche herself has declared the law enforceable by a two-month branding. The word is that too many outlaws now survive on the fringe." The man could not help staring at Snow's pink eyes and bloodless face.

"No problem, friend." Snow fumbled through his robes to produce his micro-etched identity tag and handed it over. The waiter glanced at the briefly revealed leather-clad stump that terminated Snow's left arm, and pretended not to notice. He put the tag through his portable reader and was much relieved when no alarm sounded. Snow was well aware that not everyone was checked like this, only the more suspicious-looking customers.

"What would you like, master?"

"A liter of chilled lager."

The waiter looked at him doubtfully.

"Which I will pay for now," Snow added, handing over a ten shilling note. The waiter, obviously alarmed at such a large sum in cash, hurried off with it as quickly as he could. Many eyes followed his progress when he returned with a liter of lager in a thermos stein with combination locked top, for here was an indication of wealth.

Snow would not have agreed. He had worked it out. A liter of water would have cost only two shillings less, and the water lost through sweat evaporation little different. Two shillings, plus a little, for imbibing fluid in a much more pleasant form.

He had nearly finished his liter and was relishing the sheer cellular pleasure of rehydration when the three entered the Sand House. He recognized them as killers immediately, but before paying the slightest attention to them he drained every last drop of lager from the frictionless vessel.

"You are Snow, the albino," the first said, standing before his table. Snow observed her and felt a leaden inevitability. Even after all these years he could not shake his aversion to killing women—or this time,

young girls. She could not have been more than twenty. She stood before him attired in monofilament coveralls and weapons harness. Her face was elfin under a head of cropped, black hair spiked out with goldfleck grease.

“No, I’m not,” he said, and turned his attention elsewhere.

“Don’t fuck with me,” she said with a tiredness beyond her years. “I know who you are. You are an albino and your left hand is missing.”

He returned his attention to her. “My name is Jelda Conley. People call me Whitey. I have often been confused with this Snow you refer to, and it was on one such occasion that I lost my hand. Now please leave me alone.”

The girl stepped back, confused. The Andronache honor code did not allow for creative lying. Snow glanced past her and noted one of her companions speaking to the owner, who had sent the nervous waiter over. The lies would not be enough. He watched while the owner called over the waiter and checked the screen of his tag reader. The companion approached the girl, whispered in her ear.

“You lied to me,” she said.

“No I didn’t.”

“Yes you did!”

This was getting ridiculous. Snow stared off into the distance and ignored her.

“I challenge you,” the girl said.

There, it was said. Snow pretended he had not heard her.

“I said, ‘I challenge you!’.”

By the code she could now kill him. It was against the law but accepted practice. Snow felt a sinking sensation as she stepped back.

“Stand and face me, coward.”

With a tiredness that was wholly genuine Snow rose to his feet. She snatched her slammer. Snow reacted. She hit the floor on her back, the front of her monofilament coverall punctured and a smoking hole between her pert little breasts. Snow stepped past the table, past her, and was almost at the moisture lock before anyone could react.

It rested on the violet sands at the edge of a spaceport, which was scattered with huge flying-wing shuttles, outbuildings and hangars. It stood between the spaceport and the sprawl of Vatchian buildings linked by moisture-sealed walkways and the glass domes that covered the incongruous green of the parks. And in no way did it resemble any of the structures around it. It could be found on a thousand planets of the human Polity, and it was the reason for the spread of the human race across the galaxy.

The runcible facility was a mirrored sphere fifty meters across, seemingly prevented from rolling away by two L-shaped buffers to either side. All around it, the glass-roofed embarkation lounges were puddles of light. Within the sphere, the Skaidon gate performed its miracle every few minutes: bringing in quince-mitter travelers from all across the polity, and sending them away again.

Beck stood back from the arrivals’ entrance and through it watched the twin horns of the runcible on its

dais of black glass. He watched the shimmer of the cusp between those horns and impatiently checked his watch, not that they could be late—or early. They would arrive on the nanosecond. The runcible AI would see to that. Precisely on time a man stepped through the shimmer, a woman, another man, another woman. They matched the descriptions he had been given, and his greeting was effusive as they came through to the lounge.

“Your transport awaits outside,” he told them, hurrying them to exit. Beck’s employer did not want them to stay in the city. He wanted them out, those were Beck’s instructions; among others. Once they were in the hover transport, the man he took to be the leader caught hold of his shoulder.

“The weapons,” he said.

“Not here, not here,” Beck said nervously, and took the transport out of the city.

Out on the sand Beck brought the transport down. Once the four climbed out, he joined them at the back of the vehicle, from which he took a large case. He was sweating, and not just from the heat.

“Here,” he said, opening the case.

The man reached inside and took out a small, shiny pistol, snubnosed and deadly-looking.

“The merchant will meet you at the pre-arranged place, if he manages to obtain the information he seeks,” Beck said. He did not know where that was, nor what the information was. The merchant had not taken him that far into his trust. It surprised him that he had been allowed even the knowledge that hired killers were on Vatch.

The man nodded as he inspected the pistol, smiled sadly, then pointed the pistol at Beck.

“Sorry,” he said.

Beck tried to say something just as he became aware of the arm coming round his face from the man who had moved behind him. A grip like iron closed around his head, locked, wrenched and twisted. Beck hit the sand with his head at an angle it had never achieved in life. He made some choking sounds, shivered a little, died.

Snow halted as two proctors came in through the lock. They stared past him to the corpse on the floor. The elder of the two, gray-bearded and running to fat, but with weapons that appeared well-used and well looked-after, spoke to him.

“You are Snow,” he said.

“Yes,” Snow replied. This man was not Andronache.

“A challenge?”

“Yes.”

The man nodded, assessed the two Andronache at the bar, then turned back to the moisture lock. It was not his job to pick up the corpses. There was an organization for that. The girl would be in a condensation jar within the hour.

“The Androche would speak with you. Come with me.” To his companion he said, “Deal with it. Her two friends look like they ought to spend a little time in detention.”

Snow followed the man outside.

“Why does she want to see me?” he asked as they strode down the scaffolded street.

“I didn’t ask.”

Conversation ended there.

The Androche, like all in her position, had apartments in the station she owned. The proctor led Snow to a caged spiral stair and unlocked the gate. “She is above.”

As Snow climbed the stair the gate clanged shut behind him.

The stairway ended at a moisture-lock hatch next to which depended a monitor and screen unit. Snow pressed the call button and waited. After a few moments a woman with cropped, gray hair and a face that was all hard angles peered out at him.

“Yes?”

“You sent for me.”

The woman nodded and the lock on the hatch clunked open. After spinning the handle Snow stepped back as the hatch rose on its hinge to allow him access. He climbed into a short, metal-walled corridor that ended at a single panel door of imported wood. It looked like oak to Snow—very expensive. Pushing the door open, he entered.

The room was filled with a fortune in antiques: a huge dining table surrounded by gate-leg chairs; plush eighteenth-century furniture; oil paintings on the walls; hand-woven rugs on the floor.

“Don’t be too impressed. They’re all copies.”

The Androche approached from a drinks cabinet carrying two glasses half filled with an amber drink. Snow studied her. She was an attractive woman. He estimated her age as somewhere between thirty-five and a hundred and ninety. She wore a simple toga-type dress over an athletic figure, and at her hip she carried an antique—or replica—revolver.

“You know my name,” Snow observed as he accepted the drink.

“I am Aleen,” she replied.

Snow hardly heard her. He was relishing his first sip.

“My God, whiskey,” he said, eventually.

“Yes,” Aleen acknowledged, before gesturing to a nearby sofa. They moved there and sat facing each other.

“Well, I’m here. What do you want?”

“Why is there a reward of twenty-five thousand shillings for your testicles?”

“Best ask Merchant Baris that question. But I see it was rhetorical. You already know the answer.”

Aleen nodded.

Snow leaned toward her. “I would be glad to know that answer too,” he admitted.

Aleen smiled, Snow leaned back, annoyed.

“There is a price,” he said flatly.

“Isn’t there always? There is a man. He is the Chief Proctor here. His name is David Songrel.”

“You want me to kill him.”

“Of course. Isn’t that what you are best at?”

Snow kept silent as Aleen lay back against the edge of the sofa, then regarded him over her drink. “That is not all I want from you.”

He turned and gazed at her and at that moment she lifted her feet up onto the sofa so that he could see that she wore nothing under the dress. Does she shave, Snow wondered, or is she naturally hairless there? He also wondered what it was that turned her on: his white body and pink eyes? Other women had said it was almost like being made love to by an alien. Or was it that he was a killer? Probably a bit of both.

“Part of the price?”

She nodded and set her glass to one side, then she slid closer to him on the sofa and hooked one leg over the back of it.

“Now,” she said, reaching up and opening her toga to display breasts just like those of the girl he had killed. Snow searched himself for an adverse reaction to that; finding none, he stood up and unclipped his dust robes.

“You’re white as paper,” Aleen said in amazement as he peeled off his undersuit, but when her eyes strayed to the covered stump terminating his left arm, she made no comment.

“Yes,” Snow agreed as he knelt between her legs and bowed down to run his tongue round her nipples. “A blank page,” he went on as he worked his way down. She caught his head.

“Not that,” she said. “I want you inside me, now.”

Snow obliged her, but was puzzled at something he had heard in her voice. No love-making then: just the act itself. Perhaps she wanted white-skinned children.

Hirald called out before approaching the fire. It had been her observation that the Andronache got rather twitchy if you walked into one of their camps unannounced. As she walked in she was surprised to see that these weren’t locals. Hirald noted two men and two women wearing monofilament survival suits that looked to be of Martian manufacture. She also pretended not to notice the weapons that one of the men had hastily covered on her arrival. She walked to the fire and squatted down. One of the women tossed on another crabbird carapace and watched her through the flames.

The man who had covered the weapons, a tall Marsman with caste markings tattooed on his temples, was the first to speak. “You’ve come a long way?” he asked.

“Not so far as you,” Hirald said. She looked from him across the flames to the woman. Her face also bore caste marks. The other couple were a black man with incongruous blue eyes, and a woman who had caps over the neural plugs behind her ears. She was corporate then—from one of The Families.

Hirald went on, “But why have you come here, I wonder?”

“We search,” the black said intently. “Perhaps you can help us. We search for one who is called Snow.

He is an albino.”

They all stared at Hiral.

“I have heard of him,” Hiral said, “and I have heard that many people look for him. I do not know where he is though.”

The woman with the neural plugs looked suspicious. Hiral quickly asked, “You are after the reward, then?”

The four glanced to each other, then the Marsman smiled to himself and casually reached for one of the covered weapons beside him. Hiral glanced at the Corporate woman, who stared back at her.

“Jharit, no.”

Jharit stopped with his hand by the covering. “What is it, Canard Meck?”

The woman, now identified as a member of the Jethro Manx Canard Corporate Family, slowly shook her head, still staring at Hiral.

“We have no dispute with you,” she said. “But we would prefer it if you left our camp, please.”

“She might tell him,” Jharit protested.

Canard Meck glanced to him and said, “She is product.”

Jharit snatched his hand from the weapons and suddenly looked very frightened. He flinched as Hiral rose to her feet. Hiral smiled.

“I mean no harm, unless harm is meant.”

She strode out into the darkness without checking behind. No one moved. No one reached for the weapons.

Snow removed the pistol from its holster in his dust robes and checked the charge reading. As was usual it was nearly full. The bright sunlight of Vatch acting on the photo-voltaic material of his robes kept the weapon constantly powered up through the socket in the holster. The weapon was a matt black L, five millimeters thick with only a slight depression where a trigger would normally have been. It was keyed to Snow. No one else could fire it. Rather than firing projectiles, as did most weapons on Vatch, this weapon discharged a beam of field-accelerated protons, but they could still make large holes in anyone Snow cared to point it at.

David Songrel was a family man. Snow had observed him lifting a child high in the air while a woman looked on. Snow wondered why Aleen wanted him dead. As the owner of the water station she had power here, but little influence over the proctors who enforced planetary law. Perhaps she had been involved in illegalities of which Songrel had become aware. No matter, for the present. He rapped on the door and when Songrel opened it he stuck the pistol in the man’s face and walked him back into the apartment, closing the door behind him with his stump.

“Daddy!” the little girl yelled, but the mother caught hold of her before she rushed forward. Songrel had his hands in the air, his eyes not leaving the pistol. Shock there, knowledge.

“Why,” said Snow, “does the Androche want you dead?”

“You’re...the albino.”

“Answer the question please.”

Songrel glanced at his wife and daughter before he replied, “She is a collector of antiquities.”

“Why the necessity for your death?”

“She has killed to get what she wants. I have evidence. We intend to arrest her soon.”

Snow nodded, then holstered his pistol. “I thought it would be something like that. She had two proctors come for me, you know.”

Songrel lowered his hands, but kept them well away from the stun gun hooked on his belt. “As Androche she has the right to some use of the proctors. It is our duty to guard her and her property. She does not have the freedom to commit crime. Why didn’t you kill me? They say you have killed many.”

Snow glanced at Songrel’s wife and child. “My reputation precedes me,” he said, and stepped past Songrel to drop onto a comfortable sofa. “But the stories are in error. I have killed no one who has not first tried to kill me...well, mostly.”

Songrel turned to his wife. “It’s Tamtha’s bedtime.”

His wife nodded and took the child from the room. Snow noted the little girl’s fascinated stare. He was used to it. Songrel sat down in an armchair opposite Snow.

“You have a nice family.”

“Yes...will you testify against the Androche?”

“You can have my testimony recorded under seal, but I cannot stay for a trial. Were I to stay this place would be crawling with Andronache killers in no time. I might not survive that.”

Songrel nodded. “Why did you come here if it was not your intention to kill me?” he asked, a trifle anxiously.

“I want you to play dead while I go back and see the Androche.”

Songrel’s expression hardened. “You want to collect your reward.”

“Yes, but my reward is not money, it is information. The Androche knows why Merchant Baris wants me dead. It is a subject I am understandably curious about.”

Songrel interlaced his fingers and stared down at them for a moment. When he looked up he said, “The reward is for your stasis-preserved testicles. Perhaps he is a collector like Aleen, but that is beside the point. I will play dead for you, but when you go to see Aleen I want you to carry a holocorder.”

Snow nodded once. Songrel stood up and walked to a wall cupboard. He returned with the device, rested it on the table and turned it on.

“Now, your statement.”

“He is dead,” Aleen said, smiling.

“Yes,” Snow confirmed, dropping Songrel’s identity tag on the table, “yet I get the impression you knew before I came here.”

Aleen went to the drinks cabinet, poured Snow a whiskey and brought it over to him. “I have friends among the proctors. As soon as his wife called in the killing—she was hysterical apparently—they informed me.”

“Why did you want him killed?”

“That is none of your concern. Drink your whiskey and I will get you the promised information.”

Aleen turned away from him and moved to a computer console elegantly concealed in a Louis XIV table. Snow had the whiskey to his lips just as his suspicious nature cut in. Why was it necessary to get the information from the computer? She could just tell him. Why had she not poured a drink for herself? He set the drink down on a table, unsampled. Aleen looked up, a dead smile on her face, and as her hand came up over the console Snow dived to one side. On the wall behind him a picture blackened, then burst into oily flames. He came up on one knee and fired once. She slammed back out of her chair onto the floor, her face burning like the picture.

Snow searched hurriedly. Any time now the proctors would arrive. In the bathroom he found a device like a chrome penis with two holes in the end. One hole spurted out some kind of fluid and the other hole sucked. Some kind of contraceptive device? He traced tubes back from it to a unit that contained the bottle of fluid and some very complicated straining and filtering devices. To his confusion he realized it was for removing the contents of a woman’s uterus, probably after sex. She collected men’s semen? Shortly after, he found a single stasis bottle containing that substance. It had to be his own. He suddenly he had an inkling of an idea—a possible explanation for his situation of the last five years. He took the bottle and poured its contents down the sink before turning to leave the apartment, but the delay had been enough.

Hirald looked at the man in the condensation bottle, her expression revealing nothing. He was alive beyond his time; some sadist had dropped a bottle of water in with him to prolong his suffering. He stared at Hirald with drying eyes, the empty bottle by his head, his body shrunken and badly sunburned, his black tongue protruding. Hirald looked around carefully—there were harsh penalties for what she was about to do—then placed a small chrome cylinder against the glass near the man’s head. There was a brief flash. The man convulsed and the bottle was misted with smoke and steam. Hirald replaced the device in her pocket, stood and walked on. Her masters would not have been pleased at her risking herself like this, but they did not have complete control over her actions.

The gray-bearded proctor was crouched behind the sofa, his short-barreled riot gun resting on the back and sighted on the bathroom door. Songrel stood by the moisture lock, his own weapon also trained on Snow.

Songrel glanced across at the Androche’s corpse. “You will be staying for the trial,” he said, nodding to the proctor.

The man stood and moved across the room, not letting Snow out of his sights for a moment. Even as the barrel of the riot gun was pushed up under Snow’s chin he noted how the man was careful not to block Songrel’s field of fire. Snow allowed his weapon to be taken. Maybe he could have dealt with the proctor, but not Songrel as well. Now the proctor backed off, flicking one puzzled glance at the weapon he had taken before pocketing it.

Songrel opened the moisture lock and gestured Snow over. There, maybe, Snow thought. He walked over, stepped through the lock and glanced behind him. The proctor, staying well back, shook his head and grinned. Swearing under his breath, Snow shut his plastron mask and ducked out into the arid day.

They gave him no openings, not on the stairs nor out on the dusty street. Always, one of them would be

covering him from a distance of two or three paces. Snow was fast; faster than most people had reason to suspect, but not fast enough to outrun a bullet or energy charge.

“You know you’re killing me,” he said to Songrel.

“There’ll be guards during the trial, and we’ll give you an escort after...if you’re released,” Songrel replied.

Opening his dust robes so both of them could see clearly what he was doing, he reached to the back of his belt and removed the holocorder Songrel had given him.

“You’ve got all the evidence you need here, and I have to wonder how many of your guards might be tempted by the merchant’s reward.”

Songrel appeared pained at this; he stepped closer to take the recording device, his weapon directed at Snow’s mask.

The woman seemed to come out of nowhere: one moment all movement in the street was warily distant, then she was there, holding the proctor’s riot gun as he stumbled and went face down. Songrel’s aim slid aside to track her.

That was enough of an opening for Snow. He snapped his boot forward, catching the man in the gut, then chopped down on the back of his neck as he bowed forward. Songrel’s gun thudded into the dust. Snow dropped, snatched and rolled, coming up to get the woman in his sights. She wasn’t there.

“I think this is yours,” she said, to one side of him.

Turning his head only, he observed her. With one hand she was covering him with the riot gun. In her other hand she was holding his own weapon. She lowered the riot gun.

“Perhaps now would be a good time to leave?”

By the condensation jar Snow paused for breath. The woman, he noted, seemed not to need the rest, hardly seemed to be breathing at all. He shook his head and studied the jar. The man was now dead, his body giving up the last of its water for the public good. Snow paused for a moment longer to observe the greasy film on the inside of the jar before moving on. Someone had finished the poor bastard off.

“Why did you help me?” he asked the woman.

“Because you needed help.”

Snow contained his annoyance. With a glance back toward the station he set out again, the woman easily keeping pace with him. She’d had her opportunity to kill him, so it was not the reward she was after. Time enough to find out what her angle was when they had put some distance between themselves and potential pursuit.

Once out of sight of the station they left the road, setting out across a spill of desert to a distant rock field. There, Snow felt, they would be able to lose themselves, unless a sand shark got them first. He drew his pistol as he walked and kept his eyes open. One sand shark twitched its motion-detecting palps above the sand, but shortly subsided. It must have fed in the last year; it would be quiescent for another year to come.

Having reached the rocks and firmer ground without event Snow slowed his pace while studying his companion. She was incongruously attractive and clean-looking and he found himself staring in

fascination, reluctant to tell her, after what she had done for him, that he normally traveled alone. That, he supposed was the problem—he traveled alone by necessity, not choice. He gave an open-handed gesture and she walked on a pace ahead of him. Whatever danger she represented to him, at least he had her in sight.

Now studying her from the side he said, “I won’t be going much farther. I want to set up camp before the Thira.”

The woman nodded, but made no comment.

Snow made a fire from old carapaces and removed his mask in the light of evening. He was curious to note that the woman had not replaced her mask, yet her skin was clear and unblemished. She sank down next to him by the fire, with a grace that could only reflect superb physical condition.

“You never answered my question,” he said.

With her head bowed the woman said, “You owe me, perhaps for your life. For that will you allow me to tell you in my own time?”

“People have been trying to kill me. I’m not sure I can afford to be that generous.”

She shrugged. “I could have killed you.”

Snow bit down on frustration: he did owe her for his life. She could have killed him and, without her help, killers would have gathered at the water station while slow due process brought him to court. He took a deep breath and searched for some stillness.

“What do I call you?” he asked eventually.

“Hirald.”

He struggled on, “Where did you come from...before?”

“Across the Thira.”

Snow had his doubts about that reply. He had crossed the Thira a couple of times and knew it to be rough going. Hirald looked like someone fresh from a month’s sojourn in a water station.

“I see,” he said.

“You are Snow,” she said, turning and fixing him with blue eyes that appeared violet in the fading red light.

He felt his stomach lurch at that look, and then he immediately felt self-contempt. After all these years he was still susceptible to physical attraction...to beauty...“Yes, I am.”

“I would like to travel with you for a while.”

“You know who I am, and I suspect you know why I am suspicious of your motives.”

She smiled at him and he felt that lurch again. He turned and spat in the fire.

“I’m crossing the Thira,” he said.

“I have no problem with that.”

Snow lay back and rested his head on one of the packs. He pulled a thermal sheet across his body and stared up at the sky. The red-tinted swathe of stars was being encroached on by the asteroids of the night—all that remained of Vatch's moon after some long-ago cataclysm. A single sword of light from an ion drive cut the sunset.

“Why?” he asked.

“Because I'm lonely, and I feel like a change.”

Snow grunted and closed his eyes. She was not out to kill him, but her motives remained unrevealed. Whatever, she could never keep to the pace he set and would soon abandon him, and the unsettling things he was feeling would soon go away. He slept.

Sunlight on his face, bringing the familiar tingling prior to burning, had his hand up and closing his mask across before he was fully awake. He looked at Hiralda across the dead ashes of the fire and got the unsettling notion that she had not changed position all night. He sat up, then after a muttered good morning, went behind a rock and urinated into his condenser pack. Following the ritual of every morning for many years now, he then emptied the moisture-collectors of his undersuit into it as well. The collector bottle he emptied into his drinking bottle before dipping his toothbrush and cleaning his teeth. By the time he had finished his ablutions and come out from behind the rock, Hiralda had opened a breakfast-soup ration pack and it was bubbling under its lid. Snow reached for another pack, but she held up her hand.

“This is for you. I have already eaten.”

“Did you sleep at all?”

“A little. Tell me, how do you come to be in possession of proscribed weaponry?”

“Took it off someone who tried to kill me,” he lied. He could hardly tell her he had brought it here before the runcible proscription and modified it himself over many years thereafter. He sat down to drink his breakfast.

When he had finished they set out across the Thira. Hiralda noted him looking at her after an hour's walking and closed her mask. He thought no more of it—lots of people disliked the masks, and were prepared to pay the price of water-loss not to wear them so much.

By midmorning the temperature had reached forty-five degrees and was still rising. A sand shark broke from the surface of a dune and came scuttling after them for a few meters, then halted, panting like a dog, tired or too well fed to continue—that, or it had sampled human flesh before.

When the temperature reached fifty and the cooling units of Snow's undersuit were laboring under the load, he noted that Hiralda still easily matched his pace. When a crab-bird dropped clacking out of the sky at them she brought it down with one shot before Snow could even think of reaching for his weapon, and before he saw what weapon she shot the creature with. She was a remarkable woman.

Shortly after midday Snow called a halt. “We'll rest until evening, then continue through the night and tomorrow morning. The following night should bring us out the other side.”

Hiralda nodded in agreement, seemingly unconcerned.

They slept under the reflective shelter of Snow's day tent, then moved on at sunset after Snow had checked their position. They walked all night and most of the following morning, and when they finally set up the tent again Snow was exhausted. With a hint of irritation he told Hiralda he wanted privacy in the tent and suggested she set up her own. Once inside his tent he sealed up and stripped naked. He then

cleaned himself and the inside of his undersuit with a cycle sponge—a device that made it possible to stay clean with a quarter liter of water and little spillage. After this he pulled on a pair of toweling shorts and lay back with his miniature air cooler humming away at full power. It was luxury of a kind. After half an hour's sleep he woke and opened the tent to look outside. Hiral was sitting in the sand with her mask open. She was watching the horizon intently, her stillness quite unnatural.

“Don't you have a day tent?” Snow asked.

She shook her head.

“Come and join me then,” he said, reversing back into his tent. Hiral stood and walked over, apparently unaffected by the baking sun. She entered the tent and closed it behind her, then, after a glance at Snow, she began to remove her survival suit. Snow turned away for a moment, then thought, what the hell, and turned back to watch. She had not asked him to turn his head. Under her suit she wore a single, skin-hugging garment. The material was like white silk, and almost translucent. Snow swallowed dryly, then tried to distract himself by wondering about her sanitary arrangements. As she lifted her legs up to remove her trousers from her feet he saw then how the matter was arranged and wondered if a blush was evident on his white skin. The garment was slit from the lower part of her pale pubic hair round to the top crease of her buttocks.

As she finally removed her trousers Hiral looked at him and noted the direction of his attention. He raised his gaze and met her eye to eye. She smiled at him and, still smiling, stretched the sleeves of the garment down and off over her hands and rolled it down below her breasts. Snow cleared his throat and tried to think of something witty to say. She was a succubus, a lonely desert man's fantasy. Still smiling she came across the tent on her hands and knees, put her hand against his chest and pushed him back, sat astride him, and with her pale hair falling either side of his head she leaned down and kissed him on the mouth. Her mouth was sweet and warm. Snow was thoroughly aware of her hard little nipples sliding from side to side against his chest. He touched the skin of her shoulders and found it dry and warm. She sat back then and looked down at him for a moment. There was something strange about that look—a kind of cold curiosity. She slid forward onto his stomach, then turned and reached back to pull his shorts down and off his legs. He was amazed at just how far she could twist and bend her body. Once his shorts were removed she slid back until his penis rested between her buttocks, then, after raising herself a little, she continued to push back, bending it over until it hurt, then with a swift movement of her pelvis, took it inside her. Snow groaned, then gritted his teeth as she started to move, still staring down at him with that strange expression.

In the evening, when it was time to go, Snow felt a bone-deep lethargy. He had not slept much during the afternoon. Each time he had tried to relax after a session of sex, Hiral would do something he could not resist. Her last climax had been so intense that she had cried out and shuddered uncontrollably, and after it she had looked down at herself in surprise and shock. Thereafter she had been eager to repeat the experience. Snow felt sore and drained.

As they walked across the darkened violet sands they had talked little, but one conversation had raised Snow's suspicions.

“Your hand, how did you lose it?”

“Andronache challenge. It was shredded by a flack shell.”

“How is it now?”

Snow had paused before replying. Did she know?

“What do you mean: how is it? It was amputated. It is no longer there.”

“Yes,” she had said, and no more.

The sun was crossing the horizon and the night asteroids fading out of the sky when they reached the rock-field at the edge of the Thira. With little energy for conversation, Snow set up his day tent and collapsed inside, instantly asleep. When he woke in the latter part of the day it was to discover himself undressed under a blanket, with Hiralda lying beside him. She was up on her elbow, her head propped on her hand, studying his face. As soon as she saw that he was awake she handed him a carton of mixed juice. He sat up, the blanket sliding down. She was naked. He drank the juice.

“I’m glad you came along,” he said, and the rest of the day was spent in pleasant activity.

That night they moved deep into the rock field. The following day passed much as the one before.

“I think it fair to tell you I have an implant,” Snow said as he rested after some particularly vigorous activity. “You won’t get pregnant by me, and my semen is little more than water and a few free proteins.”

“Why do you feel it necessary to tell me this?” Hiralda asked him.

“As you know, there is a reward out for my testicles, stasis preserved. This is not because Merchant Baris particularly wants me dead. I think it is because he is after my genetic tissue. At the water station the Androche... seduced me.” Snow was uncomfortable with that. “She did it so she could collect my sperm, probably to sell.”

“I know,” Hiralda said. Snow looked at her and she went on, “He is after your testicles or other body tissue to provide him with an endless supply of your genetic material.”

Snow considered that. Of course there had to be more to Hiralda than he had supposed, but the sex had clouded his thought-processes somewhat.

“It is the next best thing to having your entire living body. I suspect Baris thought it unlikely he could get away with that. He’d never get your entire body off-planet. This way he also corners the market.”

“You know an awful lot about what Baris wants.”

Hiralda gazed at him very directly. “How is your hand?”

Snow looked down at the stump. He unclipped the covering and pulled it off. What he exposed was recognizably a hand, though deformed and almost useless. The covering had been cleverly made to conceal it, to make it appear as if the hand was missing.

“It will be no different from its predecessor in about six months. I intended to walk out of one water station without a hand, then into another station with a hand and a new identity.”

“What about your albinism?”

“Skin dye and eye lenses.”

“Of course. You cannot take transplants.”

“No... I think you should explain yourself.”

“The people I work for want the same as Baris: your genome.”

“You’ve had opportunity...”

“No, they want the best option, which is you, willingly. I want you to gate back to Earth with me.”

“Why?”

“You are regenerative. It is the source of your immortality. We know this now. You have known it for more than a thousand years.”

“Still, why?”

“We have managed to keep your secret for the last three hundred years, ever since it was discovered. Ten years ago the knowledge was leaked. Now several organizations know about you, and what you represent: whoever can decode your genome has access to immortality, and through that access to unprecedented wealth and power. That’s why Baris was the first to track you down. There will be others.”

“You work for Earth Central.”

“Yes.”

“Wouldn’t it be better just to kill me and destroy my body?”

“Earth Central does not suppress knowledge.” Hiralid smiled at him. “You should be old enough to understand the futility of that. It wants the knowledge disseminated so that it doesn’t put power into the hands of the wrong people. It could do immense good. The projections are that in ten years a treatment would become available to make anyone regenerative, within limits.”

“Yet prior to this it kept a lid on things,” Snow said.

“It guarded your privacy. It did not suppress knowledge. Not to seek out knowledge is not the same as suppressing it.”

“Is Earth Central so moral now?” Snow wondered, then could have kicked himself for his stupidity. Of course Earth Central was. Only human beings and other low-grade sentients could become corrupt, and Earth Central was the most powerful AI in the human Polity. Hiralid, noting his discom-fiture, did not answer his question.

“Will you come?” she asked him.

Snow was gazing at the wall of the tent as if he could see through it across the rock field. “This requires thought, not instant decisions. Two days should bring us to my home. I’ll consider it.”

Draped in chameleon cloth the hover transport vanished into the surrounding dunes. Inside the transport Jharit shuffled a pack of cards and played a game men like himself had played in similar situations for many centuries. His wife, Jharilla, slept. Trock was cleaning an antique revolver he had picked up at an auction in the last water station. The bullets he had acquired with it were arrayed in neat, soldierly rows on the table before him.

Canard Meck was plugged in, trying to pick up information from the net and the high-speed communications the runcible AI exchanged with its subminds. The call came as a relief to all of them but her—she resented dropping out of that world of perfect logic and pure clarity of thought, back into the sweat-stink of the transport.

“I am Baris,” said the smiling face from the screen.

Coming straight to the point Jharit said, “You have the information?”

“I have,” Baris confirmed, his smile only slightly less, “and I will be coming to join you for the final chase.”

Jharit and Trock exchanged a look.

“As you wish. You are paying.”

“Yes, I am.” The merchant’s smile was gone now. “Turn on your beacon and I will join you within the hour.”

“How are you getting out here?” Canard Meck asked.

“By AGC of course,” Baris said, turning to look toward her.

“All AGCs are registered. The AI will know where you are.”

Baris flicked his fingers at this, assuming an expression of contempt. “No matter. We will continue from your position to...our destination, in the transport.”

“Very well,” Canard Meck agreed.

Baris waited for something more to be said. When nothing was he blanked the screen with a disappointed moue.

The merchant arrived in a fancy repro Macrojet AGC. He climbed out wearing sand fatigues and followed by two women dressed much the same. One carried a hunting rifle and ammunition belts; the other carried various unidentifiable packages. Baris struck a pose before them. He was a handsome man, but none of the four reacted to this foolish display. They knew that anyone who had reached the merchant’s position was no fool. Jharit and Jharilla looked at him glassy-eyed. Trock inspected the rifle. Canard Meck glanced at one of the women, took in the imbecilic smile, then returned her attention to the merchant.

“Shall we be on our way then?” she said.

Baris nodded and, still smiling, clicked his fingers and walked to the transport. The two women followed him, obedient as dogs. The four came after: hounds of a different breed.

Out of the rock field reared the first of the stone buttes, carved by wind-blown sand into something resembling a man-like statue sunk up to its chest in the ground. In the cracks and divisions of its head, mica and quartz glittered like insectile eyes. Snow led the way to the base of the butte where slabs of the same stone lay tilted in the ground.

“Here,” he said, holding his hand out to a sandwich of slabs. With a grinding noise, the top slab pivoted to one side to expose a stair dropping a short distance to the floor of a tunnel. “Welcome to my home.”

“You live in a hole in the ground?” Hiralld asked, with a touch of irony.

“Of course not. Follow me.”

As they climbed down, the slab swung back across above them and wall lights clicked on. Hiralld noted that the tunnel led under the butte and had already worked things out by the time they reached the chimney and the elevator car. They climbed inside the car and sprawled in plush seats as it hauled them

up a chimney cut through the center of the butte.

“This must have taken you some time,” Hiral observed.

“The chimney was already here. I first found it about two hundred years ago. Others had lived here before me, but in rather primitive conditions. I’ve been improving the place ever since.”

The car arrived at its destination and they walked from it into a complex of moisture-locked rooms at the head of the butte.

With a drink in her hand Hiral stood at a polarized panoramic window and gazed out across the rock field for a moment, then returned her attention to the room and its contents. In a glass-fronted case along one wall was a display of weapons dating from the 22nd century, and at the center a sword from some prespace age. Hiral had to wonder where and when Snow had acquired it. She turned from the case as Snow returned to the room, dressed now in loose black trousers and a black, open-necked shirt. The contrast with his white skin and hair and pink eyes gave him the appearance of someone who might have a taste for blood.

“There’s some clothing there for you to use if you like, and the shower. There’s plenty of water here,” he told her.

Hiral nodded, placed her drink on a glass-topped table, and headed back into the rooms Snow had come from. Snow watched her go. She would shower and change and be little fresher than she already was. He had noted with some puzzlement how she never seemed to smell bad, never seemed dirty.

“Whose clothing is this?” Hiral asked from the room beyond.

“My last wife’s,” said Snow.

Hiral came to the door with clothing folded over one arm. She looked at Snow questioningly.

“She killed herself about a century ago,” he said in a flat voice. “Walked out into the desert and burned a hole through her head. I found her before the crab-birds and sand sharks.”

“Why?”

“She grew old and I did not. She hated it.”

Hiral didn’t comment. She went to take her shower, and shortly returned wearing a skin-tight body-suit of translucent blue material, which she did not expect to be wearing for long once Snow saw her in it. He was occupied though—sitting in a swivel chair studying a screen. He was back in his dust robes, terrapin mask hanging open. She walked up behind him to see what he was looking at. She saw the hover transport on the sand and the two women pulling a sheet over it. She recognized Merchant Baris and the four hired killers.

“It would seem Baris has found me,” Snow said, his tone cold and flat.

“You know him?”

“Met him once when he was younger. He hasn’t changed much.” He nodded at the screen. “The four with him look an interesting bunch.”

“I met them: the Marsman and the Corporate woman are the leaders—mercenary group,” said Hiral. “What defenses does this place have?”

“None, I never felt the need for them.”

“Are you sure they are coming here?”

“It seems strange that he has chosen this particular rock field on the whole planet. I’ll have to go and settle this.”

“I’ll change,” said Hiral, and hurried back to get her suit. When she returned Snow was gone; when she tried to follow she found the elevator car locked at the bottom of the shaft.

“Damn you,” she said flatly, smashing her fist against a doorjamb, leaving a fist-shaped dent in the steel. Then she walked back a few paces, turned, ran and leaped into the shaft. The rails pinned to the edge were six meters away. She reached them easily, her hands locking on the polished metal with a thump. Laboriously she began to climb down.

Jharit smiled at his wife and nodded to Trock, who stood beyond her, strapping on body armor. This was the one. They would be rich after this. He examined the narrow-beam laser he held. He would have preferred something with a little more power, but it was essential that the body not be too badly damaged. He turned to Baris as the merchant sent his two women back to the transport.

“We’ll go in spread out. He probably has scanning equipment in the rock field and if there’s an ambush we don’t want him to get too many of us at once.”

Baris smiled and thumbed bullets into his rifle, adjusted the scope. Jharit wondered about him, wondered how good he was. He gave the signal for them to spread out and enter the rock field.

They were coming to kill him. There were no rules, no challenges offered. Snow braced the butt of his pistol against the rock and sighted along it.

“Anything?” Jharit asked over the com.

“Pin cameras,” Jharilla told him. “I burned a couple out, but there have to be more. He knows we’re here.”

“Remember, narrow-beam, we burn too much and there’s no money. A clean kill. A head shot would be nice,” Jharit added.

There was a whooshing sound, a brief scream, static over the com. Jharit hit the ground and moved behind a rock.

“What the hell was that?”

“He’s got a fucking proton weapon. Fucking body armor’s useless!”

Jharit felt a sinking sensation in his gut. They had expected projectile weapons, perhaps a laser.

“Who..?”

There was a pause.

“Trock?”

“Jharilla’s dead.”

Jharit swallowed dryly and edged on into the rock field.

“Position?”

“Don’t know?”

“Meck?”

“Nothing here.”

“Baris?”

There was no reply from the Merchant.

Snow dropped down off the top of the boulder and pulled some of the small but deadly grenades from his belt. Lacking a hand, he used his teeth to twist their tops right around. The dark-skinned one was over to his left, the Marsman over to his right. The others were farther over to the right somewhere. He threw the two spheroids right and left and moved back, then flicked through multiple views on his wrist screen. A lot of the cameras were out, but he pulled up a view of the Marsman. Two detonations. As the Marsman hit the ground he realized he had thrown too far. He flicked through the views again and caught the other stumbling through dust and wreckage, rock splinters imbedded in his face. Ah, so.

Snow moved to his left, checking his screen every few seconds. He halted behind a tilted slab and after checking his screen once more, squatted down and waited. With little regard for his surroundings Trock stumbled out of the falling dust. Snow smiled grimly under his mask and sighted on him, but before he could fire, red agony cut his shoulder. The smell of burning flesh. Snow rolled to one side, came up onto his feet, ran. Rock to one side of him smoked, pinged as it heated. He dived for cover, crawled among broken rock. The firing ceased. Now I’m dead, he thought. His pistol lay in the dust back there somewhere.

“He dropped his weapon, Trock. He’s over to your left. Take him down, I can’t get a sighting on him at the moment.”

Trock spat a broken tooth from his mouth and walked in the direction indicated, his antique revolver in his left hand and his laser in his right. This was it. The bastard was dead, or perhaps not. I’ll cut his arms and legs off, the beam should cauterize sufficiently. But Trock did not get time to fire. The figure in dust robes came out of nowhere to drop-kick him in the chest. The body armor absorbed most of the blow, but Trock went over. Before he could rise the figure was above him, a split-fingered blow spearing down. After that Trock saw nothing. Sprawled back he lifted fingers to the bleeding mess behind his broken visor. Then the pain hit and he started screaming.

Snow coughed as quietly as he could, opened his mask and gasped in pain. The burn had started at his shoulder and ended in the middle of his chest, but luckily his dust robes had absorbed most of the heat. A second more and he would have been dead. The pain was crippling. He knew he would not have the energy to withstand another attack like that, nor would he be likely to take any of the others by surprise. His adversary had been stunned by the explosion, angered by injury. Snow edged back through the rock field, his mobility rapidly decreasing. When a shadow fell across him he looked up into the inevitable.

“Why didn’t you take his weapon?” Jharit asked, nodding back toward Trock, who was no longer screaming. He was curled fetal by a rock, a field dressing across his eyes and his body pumped full of self-administered pain-killers.

“No time, no strength...could only get him through his visor,” Snow managed.

Jharit nodded and spoke into his com.

“I have him. Home in on my signal.”

Snow waited for death, but Jharit squatted in the dust, seemingly disinclined to kill him.

“Jharilla was a hell of a woman,” said Jharit, removing a stasis bottle from his belt and pushing it into the sand next to him. “We were married in Viking City twenty years ago.” Jharit pulled a wicked ceramal knife from his boot and held it up before his face. “This is for her you understand. After I’ve taken your testicles and dressed that wound I’ll see to your other injury. I don’t want you to die yet. I have so much to tell you about her, and there is so much I want you to experience. You know she—”

Jharit turned at a sound, rose to his feet and drew his laser again. He stepped away from Snow and gazed around. Snow looked beyond him but could see nothing.

“If you leave here now, Marsman, I will not kill you.”

The voice was Hiral’d’s.

Jharit fired into the rocks and backed toward Snow.

“I have a singun and I am in chameleonwear. I can kill you any time I wish. Drop your weapon.”

Jharit paused for a moment of indecision, then whirled, pointing his laser at Snow. The expression on his face told all. Before he could press the trigger he collapsed into himself: a central point the size of a pinhead, a plume of sand standing where he stood, then all blasted away in a thunder-clap and encore of miniature lightnings across the ground. Snow slowly shoved himself to his feet as he stared in awe at the spot Jharit had occupied. He had heard of such weapons but had not believed they existed. He looked across as Hiral’d flickered back into existence only a few meters away. She smiled at him, just before the first shot ripped the side of her face away.

Snow knew he yelled, he might have screamed. He watched in impotent horror as the second shot smacked into her back and knocked her to the ground. Then: Baris and the Corporate woman, walking out of the rock field. Baris sighted again as he walked, hit Hiral’d with another shot that ripped half her side away as he and his companion moved past her.

Snow felt his legs give way. He went down on his knees. Baris came before him, a self-satisfied smirk on his face. Snow gazed up at him, trying to pull the energy together, to throw it all into one last attempt. He knew it was what Baris was waiting for, but it was all he could do. He glanced aside at the woman, saw she had halted some way back. She was staring back past Baris at Hiral’d, horror on her face. Snow did not want to look there—he did not want to know.

“O my God! It’s her!”

Snow pulled himself to his feet, dizziness making him lurch. Baris glanced at the Corporate woman in confusion, then pointed the rifle at Snow’s face. The merchant relished his moment for the half a second it lasted. The hand punched through his body from the back, knocked the rifle aside, lifted him and hurled him against a rock with such force he stuck for a moment, then fell, leaving a man-shaped corona of blood. Hiral’d stood there, revealed. Where the syntheflesh had been blown away, glittering ceramal was exposed, her white enamel teeth, one blue eye complete in its socket, the ribbed column of her spine. She observed Snow for a moment, then turned toward the woman. Snow fainted before the scream.

He was in his bed and memories slowly dragged themselves into his mind. He lay there, his throat dry, and after a moment felt across to his numbed chest and the dressing. It was a moment before he dared open his eyes. Hiral’d sat at the side of the bed and when she saw he was awake she helped him up into a

sitting position against his pillows. Snow observed her face. She had repaired the damage somehow, but the scars of that repair-work were still there. She looked just like a human woman who had been disfigured in an accident. She wore a loose shirt and trousers to hide the other repairs. As he studied her she reached up and self-consciously touched her face, before reaching for a glass of water to hand to him. That touch of vanity confused him for a moment. Gratefully, he drained the glass.

“You’re a Golem android,” he said in the end, unsure.

Hirald smiled, and it did not look so bad.

She said, “Canard Meck thought that.” When she saw his confusion she explained, “The Corporate woman. She called me product, which is an understandable mistake. I am nearly indistinguishable from the Golem Twenty-Two.”

“What are you then?” Snow asked as she poured him another glass of water.

“A cyborg discovering she’s more human than she thought. No one owns me.”

Snow sipped his drink as he considered that. He was not sure what he was feeling.

“Will you come to Earth with me?” she asked.

Snow turned and watched her for a long time. He remembered how it had been in the tent as she, he realized, discovered that she was still human.

“You know, I will never grow old and die,” she said.

“I see.”

She tilted her head questioningly and awaited his answer.

A slow smile spread across his face. “I’ll come with you,” he told her. He put his drink down and reached out to take hold of her hand. There was still blood under her fingernails and the tear duct in her left eye was not working properly. It didn’t matter.