

Girls and Boys, Come Out to Play

MICHAEL SWANWICK

From Hartwell, David - Year's Best SF 11 (2006)

Michael Swanwick (www.michaelswanwick.com) lives in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. His novels include the Nebula Award winner Stations of the Tide (1991), The Iron Dragon's Daughter (1993), and Bones of the Earth (2002). He is unquestionably one of the finest writers currently working in SF and fantasy. His short fiction collections include Gravity's Angels (1991), A Geography of Unknown Lands (1997), Moon Dogs (2000), Tales of Old Earth (2000), and The Periodic Table of Science Fiction (2005). Three years ago, he began a series of stories set in a fantastic Cordwainer Smithian future world, somewhat recovered from the destruction of the ancient civilization of the Utopians, where biotechnology rules. A human, Aubrey Darger, and a genetically engineered thief, lover, and dog, Sir BlaCkthorpe Ravenscairn de Plus Preciueux, also known as "Surplus," plan complex scams.

"Girls and Boys, Come Out to Play" was published in Asi-mov's, and is the third in the series. Set in a future Greece, an African post-human scientist uses biotech to invent gods patterned on some of the ancient Greek gods as a means of controlling a society. Surplus and Darger have a wild time. The story is a good illustration of Swanwick's current aesthetic: combining good old-fashioned SF ideas with a certain calculated luridness.

On a hilltop in Arcadia, Darger sat talking with a satyr.

"Oh, the *sex* is good," the satyr said. "Nobody could say it wasn't. But is it the be-all and end-all of life? I don't see that." The satyr's name was Demetrios Papatragos, and evenings he played the saxophone in a local jazz club.

"You're a bit of a philosopher," Darger observed.

"Oh, well, in a home-grown front porch sense, I suppose I am." The satyr adjusted the small leather apron that was his only item of clothing. "But enough about me. What brings *you* here? We don't get that many travelers these days. Other than the African scientists, of course."

"Of course. What *are* the Africans here for, anyway?"

"They are building gods."

"Gods! Surely not! Whatever for?"

"Who can fathom the ways of scientists? All the way from Greater Zimbabwe they came, across the wine-dark Mediterranean and into these romance-haunted hills, and for what? To lock themselves up within the ruins of the Monastery of St. Vasilios, where they labor as diligently and joylessly as if they were indeed monks. They never come out, save to buy food and wine or to take the occasional blood sample or skin scraping. Once, one of them offered a nymph money to have sex with him, if you can believe such a thing."

"Scandalous!" Nymphs, though they were female satyrs, had neither hooves nor horns. They were, however, not cross-fertile with humans. It was the only way, other than a small tail at the base of their spines (and *that* was normally covered by their dresses), to determine their race. Needless to say, they

were as wildly popular with human men as their male counterparts were with women. "Sex is either freely given or it is nothing."

"You're a bit of a philosopher yourself," Papatragos said. "Say—a few of our young ladies might be in heat. You want me to ask around?"

"My good friend Surplus, perhaps, would avail himself of their kind offers. But not I. Much though I'd enjoy the act, I'd only feel guilty afterward. It is one of the drawbacks of having a depressive turn of mind."

So Darger made his farewells, picked up his walking stick, and sauntered back to town. The conversation had given him much to think about.

"What word of the Evangelos bronzes?" Surplus asked. He was sitting at a table out back of their inn, nursing a small glass of retsina and admiring the sunset. The inn stood at the outskirts of town at the verge of a forest, where pine, fir, and chestnut gave way to orchards, olive trees, cultivated fields, and pastures for sheep and goats. The view from its garden could scarce be improved upon.

"None whatsoever. The locals are happy to recommend the ruins of this amphitheater or that nuclear power plant, but any mention of bronze lions or a metal man causes them only to look blank and shake their heads in confusion. I begin to suspect that scholar in Athens sold us a bill of goods."

"The biters bit! Well, 'tis an occupational hazard in our line of business."

"Sadly true. Still, if the bronzes will not serve us in one manner, they shall in another. Does it not strike you as odd that two such avid antiquarians as ourselves have yet to see the ruins of St. Vasilios? I propose that tomorrow we pay a courtesy visit upon the scientists there,"

Surplus grinned like a hound—which he was not, quite. He shook out his lace cuffs and, seizing his silver-knobbed cane, stood. "I look forward to making their acquaintance."

"The locals say that they are building gods."

"Are they really? Well, there's a market for everything, I suppose."

Their plans were to take a strange turn, however. For that evening Dionysus danced through the town.

Darger was writing a melancholy letter home when the first shouts sounded outside his room. He heard cries of "Pan! Great Pan!" and wild skirls of music. Going to the window, he saw an astonishing sight: The townsfolk were pouring into the street, shedding their clothes, dancing naked in the moonlight for all to see. At their head was a tall, dark figure who pranced and leaped, all the while playing the pipes.

He got only a glimpse, but its effect was riveting. He *felt* the god's passage as a physical thing. Stiffening, he gripped the windowsill with both hands, and tried to control the wildness that made his heart pound and his body quiver.

But then two young women, one a nymph and the other Theodosia, the innkeeper's daughter, burst into his room and began kissing his face and urging him toward the bed.

Under normal circumstances, he would have sent them packing—he hardly knew the ladies. But the innkeeper's daughter and her goat-girl companion were both laughing and blushing so charmingly and were furthermore so eager to grapple that it seemed a pity to disappoint them. Then, too, the night was rapidly filling with the sighs and groans of human passion—no adult, apparently, was immune to the god's influence—and it seemed to Darger perverse that he alone in all the world should refuse to give in to

pleasure.

So, protesting insincerely, he allowed the women to crowd him back onto the bed, to remove his clothing, and to have their wicked way with him. Nor was he backward with them. Having once set his mind to a task, he labored at it with a will.

In a distant corner of his mind, he heard Surplus in the room down the hall raise his voice in an ecstatic howl.

Darger slept late the next morning. When he went down to breakfast, Theodosia was all blushes and shy smiles. She brought him a platter piled high with food, gave him a fleet peck on the cheek, and then fled happily back into the kitchen.

Women never ceased to amaze Darger. One might make free of their bodies in the most intimate manner possible, handling them not only lustfully but self-indulgently, and denying oneself not a single pleasure... yet it only made them like you the better afterward. Darger was a staunch atheist. He did not believe in the existence of a benevolent and loving God who manipulated the world in order to maximize the happiness of His creations. Still, on a morning like this, he had to admit that all the evidence was against him.

Through an open doorway, he saw the landlord make a playful grab at his fat wife's rump. She pushed him away and, with a giggle, fled into the interior of the inn. The landlord followed.

Darger scowled. He gathered his hat and walking stick, and went outside. Surplus was waiting in the garden. "Your thoughts trend the same way as mine?" Darger asked.

"Where else could they go?" Surplus asked grimly. "We must have a word with the Africans."

The monastery was less than a mile distant, but the stroll up and down dusty country roads gave them both time enough to recover their *savoirfaire*. St. Vasilios, when they came to it, was dominated by a translucent green bubble-roof, fresh-grown to render the ruins habitable. The grounds were surrounded by an ancient stone wall. A wooden gate, latched but not locked, filled the lower half of a stone arch. Above it was a bell.

They rang.

Several orange-robed men were in the yard, unloading crated laboratory equipment from a wagon. They had the appearance and the formidable height of that handsomest of the world's peoples, the Masai. But whether they were of Masai descent or had merely incorporated Masai features into their genes, Darger could not say. The stocky, sweating wagoner looked like a gnome beside them. He cursed and tugged at his horses' harness to keep the skittish beasts from bolting.

At the sound of the bell, one of the scientists separated himself from the others, and strode briskly to the gate. "Yes?" he said in a dubious tone.

"We wish to speak with the god Pan," Darger said. "We are from the government."

"You do not look Greek."

"Not the local government, sir. The *British* government." Darger smiled into the man's baffled expression. "May we come in?"

They were not brought to see Dionysus immediately, of course, but to the Chief Researcher. The scientist-monk led them to an office that was almost Spartan in its appointments: a chair, a desk, a lamp,

and nothing more. Behind the desk sat a girl who looked to be at most ten years old, reading a report by the lamp's gentle biofluorescence. She was a scrawny thing with a large and tightly corn-rowed head. "Tell her you love her," she said curtly.

"I beg your pardon?" Surplus said.

"Tell her that, and then kiss her. That'll work better than any aphrodisiac I could give you. I presume that's what you came to this den of scientists for—that or poison. In which case, I recommend a stout cudgel at midnight and dumping the body in a marsh before daybreak. Poisons are notoriously uncertain. In either case, there is no need to involve my people in your personal affairs."

Taken aback, Darger said, "Ah, actually, we are here on official business."

The girl raised her head.

Her eyes were as dark and motionless as a snake's. They were not the eyes of a child but more like those of the legendary artificial intellects of the Utopian era—cold, timeless, calculating. A shudder ran through Darger's body. Her gaze was electrifying. Almost, it was terrifying.

Recovering himself, Darger said, "I am Inspector Darger, and this is my colleague, Sir Blackthorpe Ravenscairn de Plus Precieux. By birth an American, it goes without saying."

She did not blink. "What brings two representatives of Her Majesty's government here?"

"We have been dispatched to search out and recover the Evangelos bronzes. Doubtless you know of them."

"Vaguely. They were liberated from London, were they not?"

"Looted, rather! Wrenched from Britain's loving arms by that dastard Konstantin Evangelos in an age when she was weak and Greece powerful, and upon the shoddiest of excuses—something about some ancient marbles that had supposedly... well, that hardly matters."

"Our mission is to find and recover them," Surplus elucidated.

"They must be valuable."

"Were *you* to discover them, they would be worth a king's ransom, and it would be my proud privilege to write you a promissory note for the full amount. However—" Darger coughed into his hand. "We, of course, are civil servants. The thanks of a grateful nation will be our reward."

"I see." Abruptly changing the subject, the Chief Researcher said, "Your friend—is he a chimeric mixture of human and animal genes, like the satyrs? Or is he a genetically modified dog? I ask only out of professional curiosity."

"His friend is capable of answering your questions for himself," Surplus said coldly. "There is no need to speak of him as if he were not present. I mention this only as a point of common courtesy. I realize that you are young, but—"

"I am older than you think, sirrah!" the girl-woman snapped. "There are disadvantages to having a childish body, but it heals quickly, and my brain cells—in stark contrast to your own, gentlemen—continually replenish themselves. A useful quality in a researcher." Her voice was utterly without warmth, but compelling nonetheless. She radiated a dark aura of authority. "Why do you wish to meet our Pan?"

"You have said it yourself—out of professional curiosity. We are government agents, and therefore interested in any new products Her Majesty might be pleased to consider."

The Chief Researcher stood. "I am not at all convinced that the Scientifically Rational Government of Greater Zimbabwe will want to export this technology after it has been tested and perfected. However, odder things have happened. So I will humor you. You must wear these patches, as do we." The Chief Researcher took two plastic bandages from a nearby box and showed how they should be applied. "Otherwise, you would be susceptible to the god's influence."

Darger noted how, when the chemicals from the drug-patch hit his bloodstream, the Chief Researcher's bleak charisma distinctly faded. These patches were, he decided, useful things indeed.

The Chief Researcher opened the office door, and cried, "Bast!"

The scientist who had led them in stood waiting outside. But it was not he who was summoned. Rather, there came the soft sound of heavy paws on stone, and a black panther stalked into the office. It glanced at Darger and Surplus with cool intelligence, then turned to the Chief Researcher. "Ssss-soooooo...?"

"Kneel!" The Chief Researcher climbed onto the beast's back, commenting off-handedly, "These tiny legs make walking long distances tiresome." To the waiting scientist she said, "Light the way for us."

Taking a thurible from a nearby hook, the scientist led them down a labyrinthine series of halls and stairways, proceeding ever deeper into the earth. He swung the thurible at the end of its chain as he went, and the chemical triggers it released into the air activated the moss growing on the stone walls and ceiling so that they glowed brightly before them, and gently faded behind them.

It was like a ceremony from some forgotten religion, Darger reflected. First came the thurifer, swinging his censer with a pleasant near-regular clanking, then the dwarfish lady on her great cat, followed by the two congregants, one fully human and the other possessed of the head and other tokens of the noble dog. He could easily picture the scene painted upon an interior wall of an ancient pyramid. The fact that they were going to converse with a god only made the conceit that much more apt.

At last the passage opened into their destination.

It was a scene out of Piranesi. The laboratory had been retrofitted into the deepest basement of the monastery. The floors and roofs above had fallen in long ago, leaving shattered walls, topless pillars, and fragmentary buttresses. Sickly green light filtered through the translucent dome overhead, impeded by the many tendrils or roots that descended from above to anchor the dome by wrapping themselves about toppled stones or columnar stumps. There was a complexity of structure to the growths that made Darger feel as though he were standing within a monstrous jellyfish, or else one of those man-created beasts which, ages ago (or so legend had it), the Utopians had launched into the void between the stars in the hope that, eons hence, they might make contact with alien civilizations.

Scientists moved purposefully through the gloom, feeding mice to their organic alembics and sprinkling nutrients into pulsing bioreactors. Everywhere, ungainly tangles of booms and cranes rose up from the floor or stuck out from high perches on the walls. Two limbs from the nearest dipped delicately downward, as if in curiosity. They moved in a strangely fluid manner.

"Oh, dear God!" Surplus cried.

Darger gaped and, all in an instant, the groping booms and cranes revealed themselves as tentacles. The round blobs they had taken at first for bases became living flesh. Eyes as large as dinner plates clicked open and focused on the two adventurers.

His senses reeled. Squids! And by his quick estimation, there were, at a minimum, several score of the creatures!

The Chief Researcher slid off her feline mount, and waved the inquiring tentacles away. "Remove Experiment One from its crypt," she commanded, and the creature flowed across the wall to do her bidding. It held itself upon the vertical surface by its suckered tentacles, Darger noted, but scuttled along the stone on short sharp legs like those of a hermit crab's. He understood now why the Chief Researcher was so interested in chimeras.

In very little time, two squids came skittering across the floor, a stone coffin in their conjoined tentacles. Gracefully, they laid it down. In unison, they raised their tentacles and lowered them in a grotesque imitation of a bow. Their beaks clacked repeatedly.

"They are intelligent creatures," the Chief Researcher commented. "But no great conversationalists."

To help regain his equilibrium, Darger fumbled out his pipe from a jacket pocket, and his tobacco pouch and a striking-box as well. But at the sight of this latter device, the squids squealed in alarm. Tentacles thrashing, they retreated several yards.

The Chief Researcher rounded on Darger. "*Put that thing away!*" Then, in a calmer tone, "We tolerate no open flames. The dome is a glycerol-based organism. It could go up at a spark."

Darger complied. But, true though the observation about the dome might be, he knew a lie when he heard one. So the creatures feared fire! That might be worth remembering.

"You wanted to meet Dionysus." The Chief Researcher laid a hand on the coffin. "He is here. Subordinate Researcher Mbutu, open it up."

Surplus raised his eyebrows, but said nothing.

The scientist pried open the coffin lid. For an instant nothing was visible within but darkness. Then a thousand black beetles poured from the coffin (both Darger and Surplus shuddered at the uncanniness of it) and fled into the shadows, revealing a naked man who sat up, blinking, as if just awakened.

"Behold the god."

Dionysus was an enormous man, easily seven feet tall when he stood and proportionately built, though he projected no sense of power at all. His head was either bald or shaven but in either case perfectly hairless. The scientist handed him a simple brown robe, and when he tied it up with a length of rope, he looked as if he were indeed a monk.

The panther, Bast, sat licking one enormous paw, ignoring the god entirely.

When Darger introduced himself and Surplus, Dionysus smiled weakly and reached out a trembling hand to shake. "It is very pleasant to meet folks from England," he said. "I have so few visitors." His brow was damp with sweat and his skin a pallid gray.

"This man is sick!" Darger said.

"It is but weariness from the other night. He needs more time with the physician scarabs to replenish his physical systems," the Chief Researcher said impatiently. "Ask your questions."

Surplus placed a paw on the god's shoulder. "You look unhappy, my friend."

"Not to *him*," the dwarfish woman snapped, "to *me!* He is a proprietary creation and thus not qualified to comment upon himself."

"Very well," Darger said. "To begin, madam—why? You have made a god, I presume by so manipulating his endocrine system that he produces massive amounts of targeted pheromones on demand. But what is the point?"

"If you were in town last night, you must know what the point is. Dionysus will be used by the Scientifically Rational Government to reward its people with festivals in times of peace and prosperity as a reward for their good citizenship, and in times of unrest as a pacifying influence. He may also be useful in quelling riots. We shall see."

"I note that you referred to this man as Experiment One. May I presume you are building more gods?"

"Our work progresses well. More than that I cannot say."

"Perhaps you are also building an Athena, goddess of wisdom?"

"Wisdom, as you surely know, being a matter of pure reason, cannot be produced by the application of pheromones."

"No? Then a Ceres, goddess of the harvest? Or an Hephaestus, god of the forge? Possibly a Hestia, goddess of the hearth?"

The girl-woman shrugged. "By the tone of your questions, you know the answers already. Pheromones cannot compel skills, virtues, or abstractions—only emotions."

"Then reassure me, madam, that you are not building a Nemesis, goddess of revenge? Nor an Eris, goddess of discord. Nor an Ares, god of war. Nor a Thanatos, god of death. For if you were, the only reason I can imagine for your presence here would be that you did not care to test them out upon your own population."

The Chief Researcher did not smile. "You are quick on the uptake for a European."

"Young societies are prone to presume that simply because a culture is old, it must therefore be decadent. Yet it is not we who are running experiments upon innocent people without their knowledge or consent."

"I do not think of Europeans as people. Which I find takes care of any ethical dilemmas."

Darger's hand whitened on the knob of his cane. "Then I fear, madam, that our interview is over."

On the way out, Surplus accidentally knocked over a beaker. In the attendant confusion, Darger was able to surreptitiously slip a box of the antipheromonal patches under his coat. There was no obvious immediate use for the things. But from long experience, they both knew that such precautions often prove useful.

The journey back to town was slower and more thoughtful than the journey out had been. Surplus broke the silence at last by saying, "The Chief Researcher did not rise to the bait."

"Indeed. And I could not have been any more obvious. I as good as told her that we knew where the bronzes were, and were amenable to being bribed."

"It makes one wonder," Surplus said, "if our chosen profession is not, essentially, sexual in nature."

"How so?"

"The parallels between cozening and seduction are obvious. One presents oneself as attractively as possible and then seeds the situation with small deceits, strategic retreats, and warm confidences. The desired outcome is never spoken of directly until it has been achieved, though all parties involved are painfully aware of it. Both activities are woven of silences, whispers, and meaningful looks. And—most significantly—the Chief Researcher, artificially maintained in an eternal prepubescence, appears to be immune to both."

"I think—"

Abruptly, a nymph stepped out into the road before them and stood, hands on hips, blocking their way.

Darger, quick-thinking as ever, swept off his hat and bowed deeply. "My *dear* Miss! You must think me a dreadful person, but in all the excitement last night, I failed to discover your name. If you would be so merciful as to bestow upon me that knowledge and your forgiveness... and a smile... I would be the happiest man on earth."

A smile tugged at one corner of the nymph's mouth, but she scowled it down. "Call me Anya. But I'm not here to talk about myself, but about Theodosia. I'm used to the ways of men, but she is not. You were her first."

"You mean she was a...?" Darger asked, shocked.

"With my brothers and cousins and uncles around? Not likely! There's not a girl in Arcadia who keeps her hymen a day longer than she desires it. But you were her first *human* male. That's special to a lass."

"I feel honored, of course. But what is it specifically that you are asking me?"

"Just—" her finger tapped his chest—"*watch it!* Theodosia is a good friend of mine. I'll not have her hurt." And, so saying, she flounced back into the forest and was gone.

"Well!" Surplus said. "Further proof, if any were needed, that women remain beyond the comprehension of men."

"Interestingly enough, I had exactly this conversation with a woman friend of mine some years ago," Darger said, staring off into the green shadows, "and she assured me that women find men equally baffling. It may be that the problem lies not in gender but in human nature itself."

"But surely—" Surplus began.

So discoursing, they wended their way home.

A few days later, Darger and Surplus were making their preparations to leave—and arguing over whether to head straight for Moscow or to make a side-trip to Prague—when Eris, the goddess of discord, came stalking through the center of town, leaving fights and arguments in her wake.

Darger was lying fully clothed atop his bed, savoring the smell of flowers, when he heard the first angry noises. Theo-dosia had filled the room with vases of hyacinths as an apology because she and Anya had to drive to a nearby duck farm to pick up several new eider-down mattresses for the inn, and as a promise that they would not be over-late coming to him. He jumped up and saw the spreading violence from the window. Making a hasty grab for the box of patches they had purloined from the monastery, he slapped one on his neck.

He was going to bring a patch to Surplus's room, when the door flew open, and that same worthy rushed in, seized him, and slammed him into the wall.

"You false friend!" Surplus growled. "You smiling, scheming... anthropocentrist!"

Darger could not respond. His friend's paws were about his neck, choking him. Surplus was in a frenzy, due possibly to his superior olfactory senses, and there was no hope of talking sense into him.

To Darger's lasting regret, his childhood had not been one of privilege and gentility, but spent in the rough-and-tumble slums of Mayfair. There, perforce, he had learned to defend himself with his fists. Now, for a silver lining, he found those deplorable skills useful.

Quickly, he brought up his forearms, crossed at the wrists, between Surplus's arms. Then, all in one motion, he thrust his arms outward, to force his friend's paws from his throat. Simultaneously, he brought up one knee between Surplus's legs as hard as he could.

Surplus gasped, and reflexively clutched his wounded part.

A shove sent Surplus to the floor. Darger pinned him.

Now, however, a new problem arose. Where to put the patch. Surplus was covered with fur, head to foot. Darger thought back to their first receiving the patches, twisted around one arm, and found a small bald spot just beneath the paw, on his wrist.

A motion, and it was done.

"They're worse than football hooligans," Surplus commented. Somebody had dumped a wagon-load of hay in the town square and set it ablaze. By its unsteady light could be seen small knots of townsfolk wandering the streets, looking for trouble and, often enough, finding it. Darger and Surplus had doused their own room's lights, so they could observe without drawing attention to themselves.

"Not so, dear friend, for such ruffians go to the matches *intending* trouble, while these poor souls..." His words were cut off by the rattle of a wagon on the street below.

It was Theodosia and Anya, returned from their chore. But before Darger could cry out a warning, several men rushed toward them with threatening shouts and upraised fists. Alarmed, Theodosia gestured menacingly with her whip for them to keep back. But one of their number rushed forward, grabbed the whip, and yanked her off the wagon.

"Theodosia!" Darger cried in horror.

Surplus leaped to the windowsill and gallantly launched himself into space, toward the wagon load of mattresses. Darger, who had a touch of acrophobia and had once broken a leg performing a similar stunt, pounded down the stairs.

There were only five thugs in the attacking group, which explained why they were so perturbed when Darger burst from the inn, shouting and wielding his walking stick as if it were a cudgel and Surplus suddenly popped up from within the wagon, teeth bared and fur all a-hackle. Then Anya regained the whip and laid about her, left and right, with a good will.

The rioters scattered like pigeons.

When they were gone, Anya turned on Darger. "You *knew* something like this was going to happen!" she cried. "Why didn't you warn anybody?"

"I did! Repeatedly! You laughed in my face!"

"There is a time for lovers' spats," Surplus said firmly, "and this is not it. This young lady is unconscious; help me lift her into the wagon. We must get her out of town immediately."

The nearest place of haven, Anya decided, was her father's croft, just outside town. Not ten minutes later, they were unloading Theodosia from the wagon, using one of the feather mattresses as a stretcher. A plump nymph, Anya's mother, met them at the door.

"She will be fine," the mother said. "I know these things, I used to be a nurse." She frowned. "Provided she doesn't have a concussion." She looked at Darger shrewdly. "Has this anything to do with the fire?"

But when Darger started to explain, Surplus tugged at his sleeve. "Look outside," he said. "The locals have formed a fire brigade."

Indeed, there were figures coming down the road, hurrying toward town. Darger ran out and placed himself in front of the first, a pimply-faced young satyr lugging a leather bucketful of water. "Stop!" he cried. "Go no farther!"

The satyr paused, confused. "But the fires..."

"Worse than fires await you in town," Darger said. "Anyway, it's only a hay-rick."

A second bucket-carrying satyr pulled to a stop. It was Pa-patragos. "Darger!" he cried. "What are you doing here at my croft? Is Anya with you?"

For an instant, Darger was nonplused. "Anya is your daughter?"

"Aye." Papatragos grinned. "I gather that makes me practically your father-in-law."

By now all the satyrs who had been near enough to see the flames and had come with buckets to fight them—some twenty in all—were clustered about the two men. Hurriedly, Surplus told all that they knew of Pan, Eris and the troubles in town.

"Nor is this matter finished," Darger said. "The Chief Researcher said something about using Dionysus to stop riots. Since he has not appeared to do so tonight, that means they will have to create another set of riots to test that ability as well. More trouble is imminent."

"That is no concern of ours," said one stodgy-looking crofter.

"It will be ours," Darger declared, with his usual highhanded employment of the first person plural pronoun. "As soon as the agent of the riots has left town, she will surely show up here next. Did not Dionysus dance in the fields after he danced in the streets? Then Eris is on her way here to set brother against brother, and father against son."

Angry mutters passed among the satyrs. Papatragos held up his hands for silence. "Tragopropos!" he said to the pimply-faced satyr. "Run and gather together every adult satyr you can. Tell them to seize whatever weapons they can and advance upon the monastery."

"What of the townsfolk?"

"Somebody else will be sent for them. Why are you still standing here?"

"I'm gone!"

"The fire in town has gone out," Papatragos continued. "Which means that Eris has done her work and has left. She will be coming up this very road in not too long."

"Fortunately," Darger said, "I have a plan."

Darger and Surplus stood exposed in the moonlight at the very center of the road, while the satyrs hid in the bushes at its verge. They did not have long to wait.

A shadow moved toward them, grew, solidified, and became a goddess.

Eris stalked up the road, eyes wild and hair in disarray. Her clothes had been ripped to shreds; only a few rags hung from waist and ankles, and they hid nothing of her body at all. She made odd chirping and shrieking noises as she came, with sudden small hops to the side and leaps into the air. Darger had known all manner of madmen in his time. This went far beyond anything he had ever seen for sheer chaotic irrationality.

Spying them, Eris threw back her head and trilled like a bird. Then she came running and dancing toward the two friends, spinning about and beating her arms against her sides. Had she lacked the strength of the frenzied, she would still have been terrifying, for it was clear that she was capable of absolutely anything. As it was, she was enough to make a brave man cringe.

"Now!"

At Darger's command, every satyr stepped forward onto the road and threw his bucket of water at the goddess. Briefly, she was inundated. All her sweat—and, hopefully, her pheromones as well—was washed clear of her body.

As one, the satyrs dropped their buckets. Ten of them rushed forward with drug patches and slapped them onto her body. Put off her balance by the sudden onslaught, Eris fell to the ground.

"Now stand clear!" Darger cried.

The satyrs danced back. One who had hesitated just a bit in finding a space for his patch stayed just a little too long and was caught by her lingering pheromones. He drew back his foot to kick the prone goddess. But Papatragos darted forward to drag him out of her aura before he could do so.

"Behave yourself," he said.

Eris convulsed in the dirt, flipped over on her stomach, and vomited. Slowly, then, she stood. She looked around her dimly, wonderingly. Her eyes cleared, and an expression of horror and remorse came over her face.

"Oh, sweet science, what have I done?" she said. Then she wailed, "What has happened to my *clothes?*"

She tried to cover herself with her hands.

One of the young satyrs snickered, but Papatragos quelled him with a look. Surplus, meanwhile, handed the goddess his jacket. "Pray, madam, don this," he said courteously and, to the others, "Didn't one of you bring a blanket for the victims of the fire? Toss that to the lady—it'll make a fine skirt."

Somebody started forward with a blanket, then hesitated. "Is it safe?"

"The patches we gave you will protect against her influence," Darger assured him.

"Unfortunately, those were the last," Surplus said sadly. He turned the box upside down and shook it.

"The lady Eris will be enormously tired for at least a day. Have you a guest room?" Darger asked Papatragos. "Can she use it?"

"I suppose so. The place already looks like an infirmary."

At which reminder, Darger hurried inside to see how Theodosia was doing.

But when he got there, Theodosia was gone, and Anya and her mother as well. At first, Darger suspected foul play. But a quick search of the premises showed no signs of disorder. Indeed, the mattress had been removed (presumably to the wagon, which was also gone) and all the dislocations attendant upon its having been brought into the farmhouse had been tidied away. Clearly, the women had gone off somewhere, for purposes of their own. Which thought made Darger very uneasy indeed.

Meanwhile, the voices of gathering men and satyrs could be heard outside. Surplus stuck his head through the door and cleared his throat. "Your mob awaits."

The stream of satyrs and men, armed with flails, pruning-hooks, pitchforks, and torches, flowed up the mountain roads toward the Monastery of St. Vasilios. Where roads met, more crofters and townfolk poured out of the darkness, streams merging and the whole surging onward with renewed force.

Darger began to worry about what would happen when the vigilantes reached their destination. Tugging at Surplus's sleeve, he drew his friend aside. "The scientists can escape easily enough," he said. "All they need do is flee into the woods. But I worry about Dionysus, locked in his crypt. This expedition is quite capable of torching the building."

"If I cut across the fields, I could arrive at the monastery before the vigilantes do, though not long before. It would be no great feat to slip over a back wall, force a door, and free the man."

Darger felt himself moved. "That is unutterably good of you, my friend."

"Poof!" Surplus said haughtily. "It is a nothing."

And he was gone.

By Darger's estimate, the vigilantes were a hundred strong by the time they reached the Monastery of St. Vasilios. The moon rode high among scattered shreds of cloud, and shone so bright that they did not need torches to see by, but only for their psychological effect. They raised a cry when they saw the ruins, and began running toward them.

Then they stopped.

The field before the monastery was alive with squids.

The creatures had been loathsome enough in the context of the laboratory. Here, under a cloud-torn sky, arrayed in regular ranks like an army, they were grotesque and terrifying. Tentacles lashing, the cephalopods advanced, and as they did so it could be seen that they held swords and pikes and other weapons, hastily forged but obviously suitable for murderous work.

Remembering, however, how they feared fire, Darger snatched up a torch and thrust it at the nearest rank of attackers. Chittering and clacking, they drew away from him. "Torches to the fore!" he cried. "All others follow in their wake!"

So they advanced, the squid-army retreating, until they were almost to St. Vasilios itself.

But an imp-like creature waited for them atop the monastery wall. It was a small black lump of a being, yet its brisk movements and rapid walk conveyed an enormous sense of vitality. There was a *presence* to this thing. It could not be ignored.

It was, Darger saw, the Chief Researcher.

One by one, the satyrs and men stumbled to a halt. They milled about, uneasy and uncertain, under the force of her scornful glare.

"You've come at last, have you?" The Chief Researcher strutted back and forth on the wall, as active and intimidating as a basilisk. A dark miasma seemed to radiate from her, settling upon the crowd and sapping its will. Filling them all with doubts and dark imaginings. "Doubtless you think you came of your own free will, driven by anger and self-righteousness. But you're here by my invitation. I sent you first Dionysus and then Eris to lure you to my doorstep, so that I might test the third deity of my great trilogy."

Standing at the front of the mob, Darger cried, "You cannot bluff us!"

"You think I'm bluffing?" The Chief Researcher flung out an arm toward the looming ruins behind her. "Behold my masterpiece—a god who is neither anthropomorphic nor limited to a single species, a god for humans and squids alike, a chimera stitched together from the genes of a hundred sires..." Her laughter was not in the least bit sane. "I give you *Thanatos—the god of death!*"

The dome of the monastery rippled and stirred. Enormous flaps of translucent flesh, like great wings, unfolded to either side, and the forward edge heaved up to reveal a lightless space from which slowly unreeled long, barb-covered tentacles.

Worse than any merely visual horror, however, was the overwhelming sense of futility and despair that now filled the world. All felt its immensely dispiriting effect. Darger, whose inclination was naturally toward the melancholic, found himself thinking of annihilation. Nor was this entirely unattractive. His thoughts turned to the Isle of the Dead, outside Venice, where the graves were twined with nightshade and wolfs-bane, and yew-trees dropped their berries on the silent earth. He yearned to drink of Lethe's ruby cup, while beetles crawled about his feet, and death-moths fluttered about his head. To slip into the voluptuously accommodating bed of the soil, and there consort with the myriad who had gone before.

All around him, people were putting down their makeshift agricultural weapons. One let fall a torch. Even the squids dropped their swords and huddled in despair.

Something deep within Darger struggled to awaken. This was not, he knew, natural. The Chief Researcher's god was imposing despair upon them all against their better judgments. But, like rain from a weeping cloud, sorrow poured down over him, and he was helpless before it. All beauty must someday die, after all, and should he who was a lover of beauty survive? Perish the thought!

Beside him, a satyr slid to the ground and wept.

Alas, he simply did not care.

Surplus, meanwhile, was in his element. Running headlong through the night, with the moon bouncing in the sky above, he felt his every sense to be fully engaged, fully alive. Through spinneys and over fields he ran, savoring every smell, alert to the slightest sound.

By roundabout ways he came at last to the monastery. The ground at its rear was untended and covered with scrub forest. All to the good. Nobody would see him here. He could find a back entrance or a

window that might be forced and...

At that very instant, he felt a warm puff of breath on the back of his neck. His hackles rose. Only one creature could have come up behind him so silently as to avoid detection.

"Nobody's here," Bast said.

Surplus spun about, prepared to defend himself to the death. But the great cat merely sat down and began tending to the claws of one enormous paw, biting and tugging at them with fastidious care.

"Excuse me?"

"Our work now being effectively over, we shall soon return to Greater Zimbabwe. So, in the spirit of tying up all loose ends, the monks have been sent to seize the Evangelos bronzes as a gift for the Scientifically-Chosen Council of Rational Governance back home. The Chief Researcher, meanwhile, is out front, preparing to deal with insurgent local rabble."

Surplus rubbed his chin thoughtfully with the knob of his cane. "Hum. Well... in any case, that is not why I am here. I have come for Dionysus."

"The crypt is empty," Bast said. "Shortly after the monks and the Chief Researcher left, an army of nymphs came and wrested the god from his tomb. If you look, you can see where they broke a door in."

"Do you know where they have taken him?" Surplus asked.

"Yes."

"Will you lead me there?"

"Why should I?"

Surplus started to reply, then bit his words short. Argument would not suffice with this creature—he was a cat, and cats did not respond to reason. Best, then, to appeal to his innate nature. "Because it would be a pointless and spiteful act of mischief."

Bast grinned. "They have taken him to their temple. It isn't far—a mile, perhaps less."

He turned away. Darger followed.

The temple was little more than a glen surrounded by evenly-spaced slim white trees, like so many marble pillars. A small and simple altar stood to one end. But the entrance was flanked by two enormous pairs of metal lions, and off to one side stood the heroic bronze of a lordly man, three times the height of a mere mortal.

They arrived at the tail end of a small war.

The monks had arrived first and begun to set up blocks and tackle, in order to lower the bronze man to the ground. Barely had they begun their enterprise, however, when an army of nymphs arrived, with Dionysus cradled in a wagon-load of feather mattresses. Their initial outrage at what they saw could only be imagined by its aftermath: Orange-robed monks fled wildly through the woods, pursued by packs of raging nymphs. Here and there, one had fallen, and the women performed abominable deeds upon their bodies.

Surplus looked resolutely away. He could feel the violent emotion possessing the women right through the soothing chemical voice of the patches he still wore, a passion that went far beyond sex into realms of

fear and terror. He could not help remembering that the word "panic" was originally derived from the name Pan.

He strolled up to the wagon, and said, "Good evening, sir. I came to make sure you are well."

Dionysus looked up and smiled wanly. "I am, and I thank you for your concern." A monk's scream split the night. "However, if my ladies catch sight of you, I fear you will suffer even as many of my former associates do now. I'll do my best to calm them, but meanwhile, I suggest that you—" He looked suddenly alarmed. "Run!"

Lethargy filled Darger. His arms were leaden and his feet were unable to move. It seemed too much effort even to breathe. A listless glance around him showed that all his brave mob were incapacitated, some crouched and others weeping, in various attitudes of despair. Even the chimeric squid had collapsed into moist and listless blobs on the grass. He saw one taken up by Thanatos's tentacles, held high above the monastery, and then dropped into an unsuspected maw therein.

It did not matter. Nothing did.

Luckily, however, such sensations were nothing new to Darger. He was a depressive by humor, well familiar with the black weight of futility, like a hound sitting upon his heart. How many nights had he lain sleepless and waiting for a dawn he knew would never arrive? How many mornings had he forced himself out of bed, though he could see no point to the effort? More than he could count.

There was still a torch in his hand. Slowly, Darger made his shuffling way through the unresisting forms of his supporters. He lacked the energy to climb the wall, so he walked around it until he came to the gate, reached in to unlatch it, and then walked through.

He trudged up to the monastery.

So far, he had gone unnoticed because the men and satyrs wandered aimlessly about in their despair, and his movement had been cloaked by theirs. Within the monastery grounds, however, he was alone. The bright line traced by his torch attracted the Chief Researcher's eye.

"You!" she cried. "British government man! Put that torch down." She jumped down from the wall and trotted toward him. "It's hopeless, you know. You've already lost. You're as good as dead."

She was at his side now, and reaching for the torch. He raised it up, out of her reach.

"You don't think this is going to work, do you?" She punched and kicked him, but they were the blows of a child, and easy to ignore. "You don't honestly think there's any hope for you?"

He sighed. "No."

Then he threw the torch.

Whompf The dome went up in flames. Light and heat filled the courtyard. Shielding his eyes, Darger looked away, to see satyrs and men staggering to their feet, and squids flu-idly slipping downslope toward the river. Into the water they went and downstream, swimming with the current toward the distant Aegean.

Thanatos screamed. It was a horrid, indescribable sound, like fingernails on slate impossibly magnified, like agony made physical. Enormous tentacles slammed at the ground in agony, snatching up whatever they encountered and flinging it into the night sky.

A little aghast at what he had unleashed, Darger saw one of the tentacles seize the Chief Researcher and haul her high into the air, before catching fire itself and raining down black soot, both chimeric and human, on the upturned faces below.

Afterward, staring at the burning monastery from a distance, Darger murmured, "I have the most horrid sensation of *deja vu*. Must all our adventures end the same way?"

"For the sake of those cities we have yet to visit, I sincerely hope not," Surplus replied.

There was a sudden surge of flesh and the great cat Bast took a seat alongside them. "She was the last of her kind," he remarked.

"Eh?" Darger said.

"No living creature remembers her name, but the Chief Researcher was born—or perhaps created—in the waning days of Utopia. I always suspected that her ultimate end was to recreate that lost and bygone world." Bast yawned vastly, his pink tongue curling into a question mark which then disappeared as his great black jaws snapped shut. "Well, no matter. With her gone, it's back to Greater Zimbabwe for the rest of us. I'll be glad to see the old place again. The food here is good, but the hunting is wretched."

With a leap, he disappeared into the night.

But now Papatragos strode up and clapped them both on the shoulders. "That was well done, lads. Very well done, indeed."

"You lied to me, Papatragos," Darger said sternly. "The Evangelos bronzes were yours all along."

Papatragos pulled an innocent face. "Why, whatever do you mean?"

"I've seen the lions *and* the bronze man," Surplus said. "It is unquestionably the statue of Lord Nelson himself, stolen from Trafalgar Square in ancient times by the rapacious Grecian Empire. How can you possibly justify keeping it?"

Now Papatragos looked properly abashed. "Well, we're sort of attached to the old thing. We walk past it every time we go to worship. It's not really a part of our religion, but it's been here so long, it almost feels as if it should be, you see."

"Exactly what *is* your religion?" Surplus asked curiously.

"We're Jewish," Papatragos said. "All satyrs are."

"Jewish?!"

"Well, not exactly *Orthodox* Jews." He shuffled his feet. "We couldn't be, not with these cloven hooves. But we have our rabbis and our shuls. We manage."

It was then that Dionysus began to play his pan-pipes and the crowd of nymphs and women from the temple flowed onto the former battleground. Surplus's ears pricked up. "Well, it seems the night will not be a total waste of time, after all," Papatragos said brightly. "Will you be staying?"

"No," Darger said, "I believe I will return to our inn to contemplate mortality and the fate of gods."

Yet Darger was no more than halfway back to town when he came upon a wagon piled high with feather mattresses, pulled over to the side of the road. The horses had been unharnessed so they could graze, and sweet sighs and giggles came from the top of the mattresses.

Darger stopped, appalled. He knew those sounds well, and recognized too the pink knee that stuck out here, the tawny shoulders draped with long black hair that arched up there. It was Theodosia and Anya. Together. Alone.

In an instant's blinding insight, he understood all. It was an old and familiar situation: Two women who loved each other but were too young to embrace the fact in all its implications, and so brought a third, male, partner into their dalliances. It hardly mattered who. Unless, of course, you were the unimportant male himself. In which case, it was a damnable insult.

"Who's there?" The two women pulled apart and struggled up out of the mattresses. Their heads appeared over the top of the wagon. Hair black and blond, eyes brown and green, one mouth sweet and the other sassily sticking out a little pink triangle of tongue. Both were, implicitly, laughing at him.

"Never mind about me," Darger said stiffly. "I see the way the wind blows. Continue, I pray you. I retain the fondest memories of you both, and I wish you nothing but well."

The women stared at him with frank astonishment. Then Theodosia whispered in Anya's ear, and Anya smiled and nodded. "Well?" Theodosia said to Darger. "Are you joining us or not?"

Darger wanted to spurn their offer, if for no other reason than his dignity's sake. But, being merely human—and male to boot—he complied.

So for a space of time Darger and Surplus stayed in Arcadia and were content. Being the sort of men they were, however, mere contentment could never satisfy them for long, and so one day they loaded their bags into a rented pony-cart and departed. For once, though, they left behind people who genuinely regretted seeing them leave.

Some distance down the road, as they passed by the ruins of the Monastery of St. Vasilios, the pony grew restive and they heard the music of pipes.

There, sitting atop the wall, waiting for them, was Dionysus. He was wearing a peasant's blouse and trousers, but even so, he looked every inch a god. He casually set down his panpipes. "Bach," he said. "The old tunes are best, don't you agree?"

"I prefer Vivaldi," Darger said. "But for a German, Bach wasn't bad."

"So. You're leaving, are you?"

"Perhaps we'll be back, someday," Surplus said.

"I hope you're not thinking of returning for the bronzes?"

It was as if a cloud had passed before the sun. A dark shiver ran through the air. Dionysus was, Darger realized, preparing to assume his aspects of godhead should that prove necessary.

"If we were," he said, "would this be a problem?"

"Aye. I have no objection to your bronze man and his lions going home. Though the morality of their staying or returning is more properly a matter for the local rabbis to establish. Unfortunately, there would be curiosity as to their provenance and from whence they had come. This land would be the talk of the world. But I would keep our friends as obscure as possible for as long as may be. And you?"

Surplus sighed. "It is hard to put this into words. It would be a violation of our professional ethics *not* to return for the bronzes. And yet..."

"And yet," Darger said, "I find myself reluctant to re-introduce this timeless land to the modern world. These are gentle folk, their destruction of St. Vasilios notwithstanding, and I fear for them all. History has never been kind to gentle folk."

"I agree with you entirely. Which is why I have decided to stay and to protect them."

"Thank you. I have grown strangely fond of them all."

"I as well," Surplus said.

Dionysus leaned forward. "That is good to hear. It softens the hurt of what I must say to you. Which is: *Do not return*. I know what sort of men you are. A week from now, or a month, or a year, you will think again of the value of the bronzes. They are in and of themselves worth a fortune. Returned to England, the prestige they would confer upon their finders is beyond price. Perhaps you have been guilty of criminal activities; for this discovery, much would be forgiven. Such thoughts will occur to you. Think, also this: That these folk are protected not by me alone, but by the madness I can bring upon them. I want you to leave this land and never come back."

"What—never return to Arcadia?" Surplus said.

"You do not know what you ask, sir!" Darger cried.

"Let this be an Arcadia of the heart to you. All places abandoned and returned to must necessarily disappoint. Distance will keep its memory evergreen in your hearts." Now Dionysus reached out and embraced them both, drawing them to his bosom. In a murmurous voice, he said, "You need a new desire. Let me tell you of a place I glimpsed en route to Greece, back when I was merely human. It has many names, Istanbul and Constantinople not the least among them, but currently it is called Byzantium."

Then for a time he spoke of that most cosmopolitan of cities, of its mosques and minarets and holographic pleasure-gardens, of its temples and palaces and baths, where all the many races of the world met and shared their lore. He spoke of regal women as alluring as dreams, and of philosophers so subtle in their equivocations that no three could agree what day of the week it was. He spoke too of treasures: gold chalices, chess sets carved of porphyry and jade, silver-stemmed cups of narwhalivory delicately carved with unicorns and maidens, swords whose hilts were flecked with gems and whose blades no force could shatter, tuns of wine whose intoxicating effects had been hand-crafted by the finest storytellers in the East, vast libraries whose every book was the last surviving copy of its text. There was always music in the air of Byzantium, and the delicate foods of a hundred cultures, and of a summer's night, lovers gathered on the star-gazing platforms to practice the amatory arts in the velvety perfumed darkness. For the Festival of the Red and White Roses, streams and rivers were re-routed to run through the city streets, and a province's worth of flowers were plucked and their petals cast into the flowing waters. For the Festival of the Honey of Eden...

Some time later, Darger shook himself from his reverie, and discovered that Surplus was staring blindly into the distance, while their little pony stamped his feet and shook his harness, anxious to be off. He gripped his friend's shoulder. "Ho! Sleepy-head! You've wandered off into the Emyrean, when you're needed here on Earth."

Surplus shook himself. "I dreamed... what did I dream? It's lost now, and yet it seemed vitally important at the time, as if it were something I should remember, and even cherish." He yawned greatly. "Well, no matter! Our stay in the countryside has been pleasant, but unproductive. The Evan-gelos bronzes remain lost, and our purses are perilously close to empty. Where shall we go now, to replenish them?"

"East," Darger said decisively. "East, to the Bosphorus. I have heard—somewhere—great things of that

city called... called..."

"Byzantium!" Surplus said. "I too have heard wondrous tales—somehow—of its wealth and beauty. Two such men as ourselves should do marvelous well there."

"Then we are agreed." Darger shook the harness, and the pony set out at a trot. They both whooped and laughed, and if there was a small hurt in their hearts they did not know what it was or what they should do about it, and so it was ignored.

Surplus waved his tricorn hat in the air. "Byzantium awaits!"