

# Murder in the Flying Vatican

by Albert E. Cowdrey

*From his home in New Orleans, Albert Cowdrey continues to send us a variety of science fiction and fantasy stories. This month we bring you a sequel to his well-received story from our August 2004 issue, "The Tribes of Bela." After the events of that story, we never expected Colonel Kohn to leave home again, but unfortunately for him (and fortunately for us), he has been called upon once again to investigate....*

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I swore I'd never go into space again, not after the last time, not after the bloody events on Planet Bela.

I'd not only promised myself, I'd promised my wife—a much more serious matter. Yet there I was, listening to the hiss of an airlock. In the words of an ancient philosopher, it was *déjà vu* all over again.

I tried to comfort myself (as I'd tried to comfort her) with the thought that a mere orbital station isn't really *space*. Terra, big and blue and cloud-wreathed, hovered a mere 36,000 and some odd clicks below. And somewhere down there, in the Great American Desert, lay Manypalms Oasis with its new faux-adobe dwellings, its lush parks where retirees practiced tai chi amid flaming clumps of bougainvillea. Beyond it, a sun-shocked moonscape with hills of bare rock named for the animals they're supposed to resemble—the Mountain Lion, the Dromedary.

In my mind's eye I could see Anna hard at work in her clinic, helping those who'd already lived too long live longer yet. I should have been at the Wellness Center nearby, conducting a martial arts class I started to help the oldsters keep spry. Ever seen ninety-year-olds smashing bricks with their hands? Makes them feel like they're seventy-five again.

Well, I wouldn't be holding class for a while. I checked my new pocket omni, set it to record everything I heard, and buried it in a coded memory—including my own stream of consciousness, picked up from a chip embedded in my larynx. Then the seal on the airlock's inner door opened with a sigh of compressed air, a chunky hooded figure stepped forward to receive me, and I entered—for the first time ever—a lamasery of the White Monks.

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Nothing of the spook's face was visible except a bristly bearded mouth that growled, "Welcome to Heaven's Footstool. Please step through the scanner."

Not at all the smooth, unctuous, clerical sort of voice I'd expected. Glad to hear him talking English, though that was no big surprise. Sure, India and China dominate everything today, but that means they're at loggerheads all the time. So here we are still chattering in English, everybody's second language, which is easier

to learn anyway and politically okay because England and America don't amount to much any longer, so nobody feels intimidated by them. Indo-Chinese rivalry is also why the world capital's at New Angkor, sort of midway between the Dragon and the Elephant.

This trivia was drifting through my head (and recording itself in the omni), while I stood gawking at the ancient space station. Impatiently, the monk cleared his throat.

"I took my first trip to Luna from here," I explained. "Almost fifty years ago. In those days it was OS-1. Busy place, with people going into space and coming back, scientists doing astronomy, cosmology, weightless studies—"

"It's different now," he snapped. "The scanner, *please*. Left your gun at home? Good, we don't allow 'em here. Be sure your stickums are tightly laced. Pseudograv generator's practically dead, and you wouldn't want to bounce off the ceiling, eh? Now, look in the little mirror."

He pressed a small oblong white box against my face. I hardly had time to flinch before the expected flash of intense light. While crimson dots spun across my field of vision, the monk read my name, rank, and serial number from the display.

"Kohn," he muttered. "Robert Rogers. SN 52.452.928. Colonel, Security Forces, Ret. Why'd they haul you out of retirement?"

"Couldn't do without me," I lied.

Actually, HQ didn't want to waste a senior officer—which was what the monks were demanding—on what the cops called "the murder of some piss-ant little spook." I'd gained a kind of ambiguous fame handling offworld homicides during the Bela episode, which—in addition to bringing me and Anna together, and almost costing both of us our lives—also cost me a chunk of my hard-earned pension.

So, speaking religiously, all things worked together for good: HQ offered to reinstate my full pension if I would get the monks—who wield a lot of clout politically and can't be ignored—off their backs. They even supplied me a ride on an official cruiser, instead of making me wait two days and take the regular supply shuttle.

But no need for this spook, who introduced himself as Brother Ion, to know all that background. While he was busy stowing his retinagraph in one of his capacious sleeves, I hit him with a line I've always wanted to use.

"Take me to your Master," I deadpanned.

"Master Po's a hundred and twenty-eight," he answered, apparently seeing nothing funny in my wit. "I spend a lot of my time watching over the old guy. The CM runs day-to-day operations."

“CM?”

“Chief Monk. The Most Reverend Aung Chai. Lemme tell him you’re here,” he added. He pulled an omni out of the same sleeve—must’ve had pockets inside, like a kimono—and grunted into it, “Got him.” Then held the gadget in front of my face so the boss could see me. “Like the pseudograv,” he explained, “the whole damn monitoring system”—he gestured at an antique security camera on one wall—“is down, so we have to use omnis. Let’s go.”

We set off at almost a run. I gathered without being told that the CM was an impatient man.

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You get used to Standard Gravity—Earth standard, I mean. Among other things it gives you hemorrhoids, heart trouble, big muscles and the habit of using them. I was wearing Velcro-soled boots (“stickums”) that cling to the gray carpeting, but the rest of me bounced up at every step, because I was pushing down too hard. For every action there *is* an equal and opposite reaction, dammit.

I decided to start doing my job, storing away faces and IDs in what was still a trained and ample memory. “Could you dispense with the hood for a second?” I asked Brother Ion. “I like to see who I’m talking to.”

“No can do. Regulation Nineteen, ‘In public, monks will cover their heads at all times except when eating or performing ablutions.’ By the way, I’m not supposed to be talking, either. Regulation Four: ‘Except in dire emergencies, all monks will observe the rule of silence from the beginning of Morning Meditation to the close of Great Meditation in the evening.’”

“Isn’t murder a dire emergency?”

“For the corpse, yeah. Not for me.”

Abruptly he halted at an unmarked door and struck it once with his knuckles. A growl from within, and Ion threw it open.”His Reverence, honored Chief Monk Aung Chai,” he intoned, in a kind of chant. “Colonel Kohn, Security.”

“At least,” said a bass voice, “those clowns on Terra sent me a senior officer. *Very* senior. Call the doctor and make Brother Kendo ready to receive guests,” he added to Ion, who vanished, the door whispering shut behind him.

“Ion’s my seneschal,” the CM explained. “Closest thing we have to a cop here. Bit of a thug, I believe, before he got religion. Brother Kendo is the victim.”

He leaned over a broad red-lacquered Ming-dynasty table he used for a desk and waved one hand. I sat on a gilded chair facing him. Like all furniture there, it was clamped to the floor, and like all chairs it had a seatbelt that I cinched around my *hara*, or midriff, to keep myself from drifting.

The Chief Monk had his hood pushed back—apparently neither Regulation 19 nor Regulation 4 applied to him—and his face not only grabbed but held my attention. Whatever I expected a Chief Monk to look like, a puma was not on my list. I used to hunt them in the Northern Mountains before I gave up killing except in self defense, and their resemblance to the CM is startling. A long broad nose, a five-day growth of ginger whiskers, long sharp teeth, and a pair of dark mesmerizing eyes that didn't appear to blink. Only the round pupils stopped me from thinking that some nutcase scientist had made a chimera while playing with the genes of two species.

Yet I also felt an uneasy sense of kinship. He was about my size and we could've sung a bass duet if anybody ever wrote such a thing. He was clearly of European descent, his English accented from someplace near the North Sea. Adopted his name, I supposed, with a bow to Asia from which the White Monks derive their faith.

A small serving bot with one off wheel wobbled up, asking politely if I wished tea. Very much, said I, and it scooted off about its housewifely duties. The CM sat back, one long arm lying on the desk, the other resting upright on its elbow. He was checking me out, just as I was contemplating him. He fit well into his setting—the Ming desk, the elegantly loomed carpet glued to the deck, the walls hung with antique scrolls. Sung landscapes with beetling cliffs, fathomless valleys, drifting clouds, rushing streams. Souvenirs of the Earth, where people were meant to live. Why was he here? Why was I?

“A guest did it,” he said abruptly.

“Pardon?”

“People come up here, lay people. To make a retreat, escape the mindless distractions of worldly life. Recharge their spiritual power packs, so to speak. In addition to our eighty-seven monks, we have at present thirty-three guests. One of them stabbed Brother Kendo. Why, I can't imagine.”

The Chief Monk was either genuinely baffled or a very good liar. “He was so *unimportant*,” he said.

“What are your guests like?”

“Mostly people of consequence, in worldly terms. The rich and powerful need religion, too. But right now we have one who doesn't fit—just doesn't fit. Don't know what he's doing here. A gladiator, rich but crude, very crude.”

A gladiator. Hmm. I used to watch the Absolute Combat shows on telly before Anna made me stop. The eternal appeal of real blood—intermittently of real death. I was beginning to understand why the CM called on Earth Security for help.

The monks' excellent political connections are, of course, legendary. The

Council of State in New Angkor not only gave them this elderly space station free of charge, it made the station legally a sovereign world, even though it depended on Terra for everything from food to, well, detectives. Hence unbelievers' sardonic term for it: the Flying Vatican.

And here, like the bravos in old Roma who served the more murderous impulses of the Renaissance Popes, lived a guest whose profession was death. I figured I might need my martial-arts training before this was over.

“How and when did Brother Kendo die?”

The Chief Monk frowned, rather a fearsome event considering the size and shape of his face. “That question will be answered fully later on. First, however, I've got some things to show you.”

When I started to object, he held up a big, dead-white palm. “I have my reasons. You've been seconded to the government here, and I am the government. Under, of course, Master Po. Like it or not, you'll do things my way. And now I imagine the corpse has been removed from the refrigerator and prepared for your inspection. So let's go.”

He sprang up with the speed only weightlessness makes possible. The bot reappeared with steaming cups of tea and, robotically, started serving even though we were headed out. I could hear its off wheel squeaking as the door whispered shut behind me.

The CM had maybe thirty years on me and moved at a kind of modified gallop. I followed as best I could, stickums clutching the deck at every step and protesting as I pulled them free.

As we strode along, the structure of the station started coming back to me. Basically it was four concentric wagon wheels connected by nine spokes. Set at the center was a hub (creatively named the Hub), which contained the central control room, mainframe computer and machinery for heating, cooling, water processing and recovery, and so on. Heaven's Footstool hadn't kept its orbit for over two hundred years on sheer inertia; attitude and altitude were constantly being adjusted by plasma jets fired through a couple of hundred vents on the outer hull. The lingo of the place was maritime, I remembered: the floor was always the deck, a wall a bulkhead, the ceiling was I didn't recall what.

This was D Ring, the outermost. We turned from it into Spoke 9 and hastened past C and B Rings to A. Here the CM thrust like a battering ram through double doors into a big kitchen full of stainless-steel appliances, including a walk-in refrigerator.

“We lack a morgue,” he said by way of explanation.

Brother Ion and another, shorter monk were waiting beside the stiff and frosty

body of a thick-set fiftyish man lying facedown on a stainless-steel table. A blue sheet covered him to the waist; a strap kept sheet and man from drifting. His upper torso was bare, and just under the left scapula a red circle drawn with a grease pencil highlighted an almost invisible two-centimeter-wide knife wound.

For a few seconds we stood there, three monks and a detective viewing the one reality that links our professions, the fact of death. Then I asked, “Autopsy report?”

“I’m the local M.D.,” said the second monk. The voice was a pleasant surprise. This monk was a doc and this doc was a woman.

“You can call me Sister Jann,” she went on. “I’m not a pathologist, but I did a full-body scan and opened him up for a cursory check of the damage inside. He died from a single thrust by a thin, double-edged blade inserted posteriorly through the intercostal space between the fourth and fifth ribs. It nicked the aorta and leakage into the thoracic cavity killed him. Neat job, by the way,” she added with a touch of professional gusto. “Come to my office after Great Meditation and I’ll give you everything I have.”

“The Inspector will be joining us for the ceremony,” came the CM’s vibrating bass. He turned to me. “Brother Ion will take you to your cell. There you’ll find your luggage and a clean habit. Put it on and let him guide you.”

“Why do I have to attend a ceremony? I’m not a monk, I’m a cop, and I’d like to get on with the investigation.”

“It was at the Great Meditation three days ago that our brother was slain. To understand how it happened, you have to attend.”

So there it was. I was in for a session of cosmic consciousness because, somehow, it had to do with this guy taking a shiv in the back. There was more to the religious life than I’d expected.

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Let me make it clear that I have nothing against meditation.

My wife Anna, who’s Chinese by birth and also a doc, believes in it on medical grounds—it tunes up the alpha waves in the brain, lowers blood pressure, cures warts and I don’t know what. Every day for years we’d spent twenty minutes sitting on a rug back to back, hands pressed to our respective *haras*, eyes cast down, breathing out, letting nature do the breathing in.

I found it nice. Relaxing. I was glad she made me do it. But for me it meant communion with myself and her, not with the cosmos.

This, on the other hand, was clearly going to be a production. When I was robed and hooded, Ion led me back to D Ring and into a dim amphitheater. I recognized it as a lecture hall, once the scene of cosmological get-togethers in the

days when the orbital station was a scientific rather than a religious footstool to heaven. Below us, semicircular tiers funneled down to a stage holding a single empty chair like a throne. The only illumination came from a line of small red lights in the deck that divided the amphitheater into two unequal parts—more tiers below, fewer above. No seats; here you squatted or sat on the floor. Ion seated me on the highest tier, then descended and took up the half-lotus position in an empty spot near the stage. I saw him loop another belt around himself. The drifting problem again.

I did the same. Through open doors to the left and right other hooded figures began to enter, filling the lower tiers, settling with grunts into either the lotus or the half-lotus posture, depending on how limber their joints were. A moment passed and then other figures, equally anonymous in their robes, began to enter and fill the tiers above the lights. I figured these must be the guests—one of them presumably the gladiator suspected of knifing Brother Kendo.

Last of all the Chief Monk entered, robed and hooded. Leaning on one of his substantial arms was a tiny figure moving with a crablike gait. My first sight of Master Po, and I didn't see much—just one clawlike hand emerging from swathes of white. The CM deposited him on the throne and sat on the deck at his feet.

The red lights went out. Profound darkness followed, the down-in-a-cavern dark that blinds even a cat. Then the CM's voice boomed out like the thunder of an ancient god. "Thus, my brothers and my sisters, do all things begin. This is the original state of the cosmos, the abyss without form and without mode of the waste and wild Divinity."

His voice, if possible, deepened. "And then the forms of the universe emerged."

With a soft murmur of well-oiled machinery, the ceiling began to open. A long narrow V appeared and spread rapidly to the shape of a quarter-moon. We were looking away from Terra into limitless spangled darkness.

I sucked in my breath, and so did everybody else. The hall seemed to inhale. Going about your daily life, eating, sleeping, working, scratching your butt, you know it's always there, this fathomlessness. But to see it this way, to be projected into it, was simply stupefying.

"Brothers and sisters, behold your Self. That art thou," intoned the voice, now issuing from noplaces and everyplace. "Release yourselves from the bonds of ego. Release yourselves from the illusions of time and space. Know, feel, and experience the fact that this body, *your* body, already fills the ten parts of the universe."

He began to chant, and no human voice could have done it better than this invisible lion-faced monk.

"Auuummmmmmmmm," he intoned, and one hundred and twenty voices

followed his lead. As the m-sound stretched out and out, it mimicked the harmonics of a great gong. Suddenly a real gong crashed through the amphitheater. I felt the belt tighten as if I were trying to levitate, as maybe I was. Another long tremolo of dying echoes.

“Auummmmmmm,” came again as one voice. I was losing the sense of myself—or no, not that exactly: I was losing the sense that I’m *only* myself. At first it scared me and I fought against it. I was afraid of the darkness, the antiphonal chant of voices and gong, the stupefying sky bending over me.

Then gradually I stopped fighting. I let go, took a vacation from the ordinary. I was seeing with new eyes other forms of nature besides the transient atom called Robert—Robert—

Something. My name got lost. Like Alice in Wonderland, I was thinking, “L—I know it starts with L!” The bronze cymbal crashed. The chant resumed. The chains of time and place broke apart silently. How easy it would’ve been to slip off the belt, to let myself rise and mingle and converge. Float away on Heaven’s River, as the Japanese call the Milky Way. I was thinking: the atoms, the particles, the quarks that make me also make *this*. The natural laws that bind me bind *this* as well. *This* is my true body, already filling the ten parts of the universe. *This* am I.

*All things together make a harmony*, said Lao-Tzu. When not screwed up by human egotism and greed, added Kohn, unquenchably sardonic.

Oh right, that was my name. Slowly the religious experience faded. I started to breathe normally again, though I still had a fizzy, light-headed feeling. Machinery was purring, the ceiling was closing, the red lights flickering on. The whole amphitheater exhaled, the people sadly returning to their mere local selves. I checked my watch. Astounding. I could’ve sworn I’d been here maybe twenty minutes. In fact, one hour, nine minutes and an eternity had elapsed.

A long silence ensued. Then the Chief Monk stood up with a grunt, strode to a door, and eased it open. He returned to Master Po, helped him rise, and together they proceeded slowly out of the hall.

Others began to follow. Guests were standing, stretching cramped limbs. Somebody broke wind. The Great Meditation was over for the day.

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Following a light supper in a hall called the Refectory, I found my way to Sister Jann’s small cluttered office next to the infirmary. She was sitting in a comfortable-looking chair with her hood thrown back—another violation of Regulation 19—and frowning at the shadowbox of a computer. Floating in the darkness of the box was a three-dimensional schematic of a lengthy molecule. She gestured at the model. “Recognize this? We found it in a guest’s quarters during the *après-murder* shakedown.”



The display looked somewhat familiar. “Maybe GLS?”

“Very good, Colonel. You’re almost right. It’s a hypermodern designer drug derived from gamma-lysergin, just as GLS had its ancestor in plain old ordinary LSD. This stuff won’t have hit the street yet. It’s too exotic and too difficult to make. I suppose Councilor Mmahat uses it as an enhancer to his religious experiences.”

“There’s a Councilor of State up here?”

“The biggest of our VIGs—our Very Important Guests. Represents the Middle Eastern Council District. Background in Sufi mysticism, rich as sin and terribly important and powerful. His enemies call him the Whirling Dervish, among many other things. Here, sit down,” she added, moving a Chinese paperweight and a heap of hardcopy to reveal a chair hiding beneath.

I sat down and belted up. Sister Jann was a stocky woman with a short haircut and competent air. Her skin was almost translucent and her large gray eyes had the clear, unshockable calmness I’ve noticed in nursing sisters of the Mother Teresa Guild. Looking at her, the first word that crossed my mind was “virginal.”

Trying a friendly approach, I told her my wife was also an M.D. whom I met in space. To my surprise, she frowned and seemed to get angry. “That’s so typical. After centuries of effort, women still don’t get equal treatment in medicine on Earth. That’s why so many of us wind up in space.”

Hastily I shifted my ground. “You know, Sister, the Chief Monk’s quite a surprise to me. Isn’t he an unusual type for a lamasery?”

“Not really. In a religious community you need somebody with genuine insight to provide spiritual guidance, but you also need somebody to make things run. So there’s the Master, and there’s the CM, who very definitely knows how to make things run.”

“I found him pretty impressive just now.”

She shrugged. “He’s got charisma, I’ll admit that. But he’s about as deep as spit. This stuff he peddles—a little Taoism, a little Buddhism, a little this, a little that—it’s sort of Zen Lite.”

“Thanks for your frank opinion.”

“I can afford to be frank,” she said, “because his machinery of spying—pardon me, his monitoring system—is broken and he’s still trying to get a technician up from Terra to fix it. It’s such an antique, he can’t find parts for it. How’s the investigation going?”

“It’ll get started as soon as you give me the autopsy data on Brother Kendo and tell me exactly what happened to him. Incidentally,” I added, “whether you like

the CM or not, he was absolutely right when he made me attend the Great Meditation. While that's going on, *anything* could happen and never be noticed."

She nodded soberly. "It's sad, really sad in a way. This isn't the first time somebody's used a religious service as a cover for murder, you know. One of the Renaissance Popes tried to have Lorenzo de' Medici assassinated at high mass. The signal for the murderer to strike was the bell ringing at the consecration of the host. Well, let's get to work."

She rummaged in her desk, pulled out a memory cube and gave it to me.

"Here's everything you never wanted to know about Brother Kendo. I also pulled his personnel records because the record keeper was Kendo himself, and as you know he's in the refrigerator. So you've got how he died, the state of his health prior to that, his retinograph, DNA profile, personal history, his police record—or rather, his lack of one. In short, the works."

"I'm sure it'll make good reading. Now suppose you tell me something about the guy that's not in the records."

"He was a rather boring, sullen man. A loner. Hid himself away in the archives most of the time. Very good with numbers, I can't imagine why the CM didn't put him in the treasurer's office. Kendo had a temper, usually under control but not always. One day for no visible reason he punched a nuclear-steel rib of the hull so hard that he broke three bones in his hand. While I was splinting the hand I said, 'Now, brother, what made you blow up like that?' He said, 'It's private,' and that was all I could get out of him."

"So he was a guy with internal tension."

"Yes. But internal tension didn't kill him."

"Tell me about the crime."

She leaned back and put her fingertips together. A lot of technical experts make that gesture when they're about to give testimony. Makes them look judicious.

"Considering that everybody in the station was present, the crime was astonishingly easy to miss. A single outcry, so they say. I doubt if many people even heard it. I know I didn't. When the lights came on, Brother Kendo was sitting just below the lights with one hand clutching his chest. People were turning and looking at him. The brother seated nearest asked him what was wrong and he said, 'A stabbing pain. In the heart.'"

"Very accurate, that," I murmured.

"Well, Kendo had an esophageal hernia, so chest pains were an old story for him. It didn't seem serious at first, not even to him. Nevertheless, he looked quite pale and two brothers asked him if he could walk. He said yes. They helped him up

and he walked to the door. There he fainted. By the time they got him to the infirmary, he was dead. It was only when they undressed him that they noticed a bloodstain on his undershirt. Almost all the bleeding was internal. You should've seen the mess when I opened him up."

"Can you tell me why the CM thinks one of the guests did it?"

"For one thing, only guests were sitting behind Kendo. Besides, the killing was skillful, you know. Professional. Well, we've got a professional among the guests, as you may have heard. Our gladiator, a Korean called Huksa Byung. Must do real combat. He had a cyst on his back, took his robe off to let me work on it, and I can tell you he's got more scar tissue than skin."

"Do you think he's guilty?"

"I do not. Why in the world would a champion gladiator travel thirty-six thousand clicks into space to kill a morose, silent, friendless, penniless monk? The Chief Monk's trying to screw up your mind," she added, going back to her *bête noire*. "He doesn't want the killer to be a monk, because that would be embarrassing, and he doesn't want the killer to be one of his important guests because that would cost the lamasery a donor. That's why he's scapegoating Huksa Byung."

"Was there any physical evidence?"

"Not in the hall, with all those people tramping around. At least none that we could find. We're not set up here to do real forensic science, but I made the old standard tests for occult blood—neoluminol, black light and so forth. No luck. Brother Ion—he's the CM's enforcer, you know—led a search of every cubic centimeter of living and storage space in Heaven's Footstool, trying to find the weapon. No luck for him either."

"I presume the guests were also searched?"

"Patted down by a monk or nun."

"Body cavity searches?"

"Impossible, Inspector. You don't do a digital on a Councilor of State's rectum unless he agrees to it. Nor on Huksa Byung either, unless *he* agrees. Besides, the knife had to have a blade at least twenty centimeters long and must have been razor sharp. You might want to hide that in a body cavity, but I would not."

"Anything like that in your medical kit that somebody could have borrowed?"

"No. I do have a few scalpels for jobs like puncturing the gladiator's cyst, but they're all too small to make the wound. The CM's quite a fanatic about his no-weapons policy and everything that even looks dangerous gets catalogued and locked away. The chances are overwhelming that the weapon was brought here in

somebody's luggage, and that's another reason the CM's convinced the villain's a guest. You know," she added, "I don't like the man. He's a bully and a faker. But I do think he wants to find out who killed Kendo. The murder scares him, it baffles him, and he's not a man who likes being either baffled or scared."

That seemed to cover it. I pocketed the cube, got up to go. Then stopped. Before leaving, I wanted to satisfy my curiosity on one point that had nothing to do with the murder. I asked when Heaven's Footstool turned coed.

"It's an experiment. I'm all for it, integrating the monks and the nuns. Some are starting to marry one another, and I'm all for that too, though I'm celibate myself by choice."

"All this is rather different from the lamaseries on Terra," I commented.

"Our brothers and sisters down below follow the ancient rules of sexual segregation and forced celibacy. But they'll come to see our viewpoint in the end."

"I haven't heard of any murders in lamaseries down below."

"Perhaps they have no guests," smiled Sister Jann.

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Ironically—for a retired cop—my room was called a cell. It lived up to the name. Two meters by three, with a single bed, desk, chair, wash stand with a Lucite dome and a vacuum pump to recover water and cleanser. Wall clock, waste-material vent, the usual belts on the chair and bed, everything clamped to the deck. I'd already located the nearest latrine and shower room, down the corridor. I assumed that VIGs had more luxurious accommodations, but didn't really expect them for myself.

I'd had a long day, but decided to view the cube anyway, because I wanted to be up to speed about the victim when I started interviewing people in the morning. The clock murmured that the time—Heaven's Footstool used Greenwich Mean Time—was 2040 and Lights Out would come at 2130. I lay down on the bunk, took out my omni, inserted the cube, and on the ten-by-ten cm screen Brother Kendo's life started unreeling. He was born Drago Stancic fifty-four years ago in the warrens of the Luna Underground. Librarian and information control tech by profession. Married young, fathered two children whose present whereabouts were unknown. No police record on either Luna or Terra. Served briefly in the military without either distinction or disgrace. Divorced by his wife on grounds of incompatibility.

Then the big break in his life. Thirteen years ago he entered a lamasery, at that time making over his small worldly wealth to the Order. His satorist recorded that he made a "significant spiritual breakthrough into cosmic consciousness" nine years ago. After post-enlightenment training, he requested a transfer to Heaven's Footstool, where his professional skills proved useful. Assigned to keep the personnel records.

Further useless facts: Brother Kendo weighed seventy-eight kilos at his last physical before leaving Terra, stood one point six meters tall, had a sexual-orientation rating of point nine het, and suffered from a hiatal hernia, marginal blood-sugar, and a tendency to hyperlipidemia. He died in possession of his tonsils, appendix, and foreskin, the lucky devil. He was “predominantly celibate,” whatever that might mean. His work record was good....

I suppose at that point I conked out. When I woke, wondering where the hell I was, the overhead light was still on. The omni had switched itself off. It lay on my chest, a silvery oblong twenty-five cm long. A bell was shrilling someplace in the corridor outside. Wondering why my whole body felt stiff and cold, I fantasized briefly that I was Brother Kendo laid out in the freezer. In short, I was disoriented.

Then the clock—displaying 0430—informed me in the cool impersonal accents favored by garrulous machinery that I had half an hour to prepare for compulsory tai-chi muscle-toning exercises in Earthside Hall, followed by *zazen* or sitting meditation, followed by breakfast at 0700 in the Refectory. A new day had come to Heaven’s Footstool, and I rose up like Frankenstein, laid the omni on the desk, and staggered toward the door to meet it.

I spent the next thirty minutes in the company of a large number of male and female monks unhooded, as we all performed our morning rituals in the latrine and shower room. Interesting. The brother-and-sister lingo seemed to fit the way the men and women actually treated one another. Shower stalls had doors and small dressing cubicles and formed private spaces for whoever was occupying them. The general atmosphere resembled a unisex barracks or college dorm, though noisier because of the gulping sounds of the vacuum plumbing.

Then the community shuffled off, many sticky boots moving at once, in what I guessed was the direction of Earthside Hall. Didn’t figure I needed muscle-toning myself, since I didn’t plan to be here long enough to have mine turn to jelly. Instead, after robing I wandered the corridors until appetizing smells started to emanate from the Refectory. Here I dawdled until the monks appeared, then stepped in among them, noting with interest how easily one more robed figure could be absorbed into the throng unnoticed.

Breakfast turned out to be a subdued affair, eaten in silence—porridge and strong green tea, loaves of fresh hot bread from the monks’ own bakery and jars of fruit preserves with labels from half the farming regions of Terra. Meanwhile a reader perched on a dais read from the *Tao Teh Ching*. Anna introduced me to Lao-tzu, her fellow Chinese, and I’ve grown to like him as an honest man.

*“The Great Tao is without pity, it burns the families of men like straw dogs,”* intoned the reader. That I know to be true. The cosmos is fascinating, but it lacks a heart.

As I was finishing, a monk tapped me on the shoulder and Brother Ion’s gruff

voice invited me to visit the CM at my earliest convenience, “like yesterday,” as he put it. So I followed him out, trying to arrange in my head a plausible plan of action with which to appease his holiness.

\* \* \* \*

The Reverend Aung Chai sat at his desk in exactly the same posture as before—one forearm flat, the other raised.

“Sit, sit,” he said. “I want to know what you’ve found out, if anything, and what theories of the crime you may have formed.”

He glanced at his wall clock. “Ten minutes,” he added.

I gave him the usual bureaucratic run-around. If you haven’t accomplished anything, you try to look busy. I explained I’d reviewed Kendo’s records and discussed the autopsy findings with Sister Jann. I regretted the fact that a scientific examination hadn’t been made of the crime scene. Whatever evidence might have been found by now had been hopelessly corrupted, so interrogation would have to do the trick. I proposed to start with the guests, since the supply shuttle was due in two days and some of them might want to go home.

“As I told you,” he said abruptly, “I suspect one of them is guilty. You know which one.”

“You may be right. But I’m not yet convinced that any guest did it.”

I got that terrific frown again. “Exactly why not?”

I paused to appreciate the “exactly,” then went into my spiel. “With everybody dressed alike at the Great Meditation and the dim lights and all the shuffling around, I don’t see why a monk couldn’t have slipped in among the guests in the corridor, entered with them and sat down behind Kendo. Then mingled with the monks again during the confusion afterward. I mean, nobody was counting, right?”

The frown deepened. “Do you find that scenario more believable than mine? If so, why?”

I was getting sick of being grilled. So I spoke a bit more frankly. “Monasteries of all faiths are famous for their inner feuds and hatreds. Too many incompatible people living too close together. That sort of thing could provide a motive, and I’m sure you realize that the question of motive is fundamental. I naturally wonder why a guest—all of them well-heeled, from what I hear, and at least one a powerful public figure—would travel thirty-six thousand clicks just to stab a middle-aged monk. That also goes for your gladiator.”

I was practically quoting Sister Jann. He didn’t look terribly happy, but he didn’t argue either. I could almost see the wheels turning inside that huge head. If the gladiator didn’t do it, he’d prefer the guilty party to be a monk. Anything to shield

his VIGs.

But I wasn't finished. "However, there's another scenario that makes Kendo a more plausible victim. With the dim lights and everybody looking more or less the same, the killer might have made a mistake. After all, this murder was literally a stab in the dark."

Suddenly he was tense again. "If that's the case, then the real target of the attack is still in danger. And that means you can't afford to dawdle. We have some important people here, especially Councilor Mmahat. What would happen if a Councilor of State were murdered, I can't imagine."

On the contrary, I saw in his face that he could imagine it only too well. The uproar that would follow on Terra. The media overkill. The speeches in the Council. Maybe even Heaven's Footstool losing its sovereignty!

"Then perhaps I'd better get to work."

"By all means." Those mesmeric eyes didn't, however, let me go. "Wait a minute. I just realized something. A few years back—weren't you the fellow they blamed for the catastrophe on Planet Bela?"

"Yes. Because I made the mistake of surviving."

"Well, try not to make another mistake, Colonel. This is serious, very serious. I'll expect a progress report every day at 0730. Good-bye."

And that appeared to be that. The dark unblinking eyes followed me through the door, where Brother Ion or somebody shaped exactly like him waited with his fists opening and closing. Maybe just exercise? Or maybe he had internal tensions, too.

\* \* \* \*

During my pre-breakfast walk, I'd noticed a section of the B Ring marked *Reserved for Honored Guests*. I found it again and started exploring.

Here every door had a nameplate but I found no Huksa Byung. Checked again, found Rhee—the only name that looked Korean—and knocked.

The man who opened the door resembled a bronze ingot in a white robe, only much bigger. Shaved and polished scalp, keloid ridges on ears and brows. I explained why I was here and he nodded me in.

The cell of a paying guest turned out to be considerably larger than mine and boasted a separate bedroom and a private bath. Still, everything was pretty austere, all the furniture bare and bolted down in the usual fashion. The only decoration was a celadon vase holding a cherry blossom made of faux silk. Well, in the East the cherry blossom—odd as it seems to western eyes—is a traditional symbol of the warrior. It's the only reminder I could see of Rhee's earthly profession.

“Someone told me your name is Huksa Byung,” I began.

“That’s the name I fight under. It means Black Death.” He smiled. He had several gold teeth showing. “It makes my opponents uneasy.”

“I just bet it does. Are you a barehanded fighter, or—”

“Or a knife fighter?” Quick golden grin again. “No, I do straight Tae Kwan Do. Korean karate. Never liked those closed-channel butcheries where they use cesti and knives and spurs like animals. Fighting bare-handed or in gloves, it’s more like an art. Of course, people sometimes die anyway. When you’re in the habit of breaking stones with your hands, you’re bound to break bones occasionally. Or necks.”

He beamed like Hotei the Happy God, minus the pot belly. Considering he probably knew seventeen ways to kill me with one blow, he was an affable fellow. I suppose he could afford to be.

“Can I ask why you came to Heaven’s Footstool?”

“Wanted to see what it’s like. Meditation’s a fine discipline. It’s the opposite of the rough stuff, and therefore provides balance. Yin and yang, sort of. Also it purges the fear of death and, after all, my business is facing death. Sometimes handing it out. Whenever I kill an opponent, I always bow down to him, honor his spirit. Set up a tablet with his name in the Warrior Temple in New Seoul. After all, there’s no real difference between slayer and slain.”

“‘We be of one blood, thou and I.’” Quoting Kipling, one of my favorite ancient authors.

“Yes, exactly. I’m always aware that the guys I happen to kill are my brothers. That’s why I treat them with respect.”

This was the most civilized conversation about killing people I’d ever had. Pretty soon Black Death had his wallet out, showing me pictures of his wives and children. “I make all my kids learn self-defense, but I also tell them, ‘You decide to become a gladiator, I’ll break your arms!’ I don’t want them running the risks I do.”

We finally got down to the Great Meditation at which Kendo was killed. Black Death claimed that he sat two tiers above the victim and didn’t notice that anything was wrong until the man passed out near the door.

“Recognize any of the people sitting around you?”

“Not really. Well, Councilor Mmahat was sitting right in front of me, I could recognize him by his height. He’s nearly as tall as you are. But with the darkness and the chanting and all—no, I didn’t really notice anybody else. Just row after row after row of dim forms in the starlight, like white tablets lined up in a memorial temple. You know,” he added thoughtfully, “the murder was really a professional job. Bold,



but also cold. I like that. It shows class.”

My reaction to Mr. Black Death was that he showed class, too. Also, I was extremely glad I’d never have to fight him. So I said good-bye, stepped out into the corridor, found Mmahat’s door and knocked softly.

It was thrown open by a large man with black eyes and scimitar nose set in a long, horsy face. “Ah yes!” he cried. “You’re the inspector. Come in. Come in!” His expression seemed to say: *Your superiors grovel to me, so I know you will, too.*

I entered a large room whose walls were decorated with shields bearing intricate inscriptions in Arabic. On a mother-of-pearl inlaid table with magnetized strips a veiled serving woman was laying out bowls covered by clear plastic. Two lustrous dark eyes rested on me for a moment, then turned away. Her veil covered her top to toe, but was nearly transparent, and it rippled like clear dark water over opulent breasts and hips. The Councilor knew how to choose a handmaiden.

Reluctantly removing my gaze from the *houri*, I saw through a half-open door a bedroom—a serving bot was making the bed—and one corner of a bathroom sheathed in gold panels. Not only were guests better off than monks, some guests were more equal than others. Class distinctions had invaded heaven—or at any rate, Heaven’s Footstool.

The Councilor sat down to breakfast, and I was permitted to sit and interview him. He sipped a tiny container of Turkish coffee through a straw, but didn’t offer me any.

“You want to talk about this murder, of course,” he said. He had a resonant voice, accustomed to large halls and no contradiction.

“Yes, your excellency.”

“I was the one who convinced the CM to send for a professional to investigate this business. Can’t have a killer running around, putting important people in danger. Of course, whatever you find out, it’ll all have to be hushed up. Catch the bastard, push him through the airlock, and move on. Can’t have religion getting a black eye. Wealth, know-how, and the mysteries of faith—those are the three legs the world system stands on. I was raised to worship Allah, and I have Christian and Jewish colleagues I respect deeply”—he gazed at me meaningfully, as much as to say *Jews like you*—“but there’s no doubt that with China and India dominating the earth, this pan-Asian stuff the White Monks teach is the elephant in today’s religious menagerie.

“Doesn’t matter a bit, that’s my view. All roads lead to Roma, et cetera. New Angkor in this case. What counts is having the prevailing religion, whatever it is, bless the system that runs the world.”

“Just so,” I murmured. “Can we discuss the murder? I’m sure your

excellency will be a most important witness.”

“Important! I should say so! I saw the crime happen!”

“You *saw* it happen?”

Mmahat liberated a round rice cake from its prison in a bowl, let it float upward, captured it and spread it with some sort of jelly. “Yes,” he mumbled, chewing. “Of course I didn’t know it at the time. I’d found a place right behind the lights. The CM proceeded to do his act—absolutely marvelous! If he hadn’t dedicated his life to religion, he’d be in the Council of State today. Astounding performance! Where was I?”

“You sat down behind the lights.”

“Yes. Not entirely satisfactory, that. They really should have a section reserved for people who matter. I’ve brought that to the CM’s attention. But anyway. During the meditation I was simply enraptured, moved more profoundly, I believe, than the monks themselves at the glorious universe created by the Ever-Living One. I wouldn’t be surprised if I levitated just a bit.”

Remembering the super GLS discovered in his quarters, I found this easy to believe.

“Then, as the roof was closing I began to descend, so to speak. Yet my mind remained crystal clear. *Crystal* clear,” he repeated, as if he’d just coined the phrase.

“Suddenly I heard a cry. Not loud, but sharp and close at hand. A couple of meters away on the first tier below the lights—which were beginning to flicker on—I caught a movement in the corner of one eye and turned my head. An arm in a white sleeve was touching the back of the monk who’d made the sound. I thought someone was asking him to be quiet. Then the arm withdrew. The monk halfway rose to his feet and two others got up and went to him to see what was wrong. I heard a voice say ‘pain,’ I think—yes, it said ‘pain.’ The two assisted him to walk and the three of them moved off toward the end of the tier. Then, of course, everybody was rising, stretching if they felt cramped and so forth. I was heading for the door myself when I saw that the fellow had fallen, and several monks were bending over him.” He selected a hard-boiled egg, peeled it, and let the fragments of shell drift away. The handmaiden approached with serpentine grace and began capturing the bits of shell in midair with a tiny net such as goldfish fanciers keep.

“Getting back to my original statement,” Mmahat went on, “I actually saw the murder take place. Absolutely fascinating. When I get back to New Angkor, I’ll be dining out on the story for months.”

“Hard on the monk, of course,” I murmured.

“Yes, poor devil. However, I don’t suppose he had much of a life anyway.” He continued to eat his breakfast.

I rose, stole a last glance at the *houri*, bowed, and departed. As to how far I should trust Mmahat's testimony, and what use I could make of it if true, I had at that moment no idea whatsoever.

\* \* \* \*

Well, there's no use repeating most of the stories I spent that long, tedious day listening to. Like most witnesses, the VIGs divided into two groups, those who remembered nothing useful, and those who remembered things that had never happened.

Still, I did get a good feel for the lamasery's A-list. Quite a who's-who of prominent people who either had spiritual interests or liked to pretend they had. A couple of trillionaires, an artist who did holographic portraits said to be superior to Rembrandt's, society women with time on their hands (at least three of whom indicated they might find me interesting in an unofficial capacity, say later on that night). Plus some pale youngsters with drug problems, trust funds, and no idea how to make sense of their lives.

The very last interview of the day turned out to be different, even though at the time it seemed like more of the same.

"Immensely healthy and inspiring," said the witness, a Grande Dame of the Solar System, an elderly lady who looked, and undoubtedly was, rich. She spoke in squeaks and harsh grating noises, like a very expensive parrot.

Actually, the Grande Dame had seen nothing that contributed in any way to solving the murder. But she was quite willing to bend my ears with accounts of her life on Earth, which sounded pretty tedious, since she lived surrounded by a legion of bots and human servants who did everything for her except digest her food.

Heaven's Footstool was her great escape from the banality of wealth. She came every year; said it cost her seven hundred thousand a pop, but was worth it. (I surmised that if it cost less, she'd value it accordingly and stay home.) Living under weightless or near-weightless conditions was *so* good for the arteries. She slept better there than anyplace except in her hyperbaric chamber. The ceremonies were awe-inspiring; the Chief Monk possessed incredible charisma. On her last visit he gave her a *koan* or spiritual problem to work on. She gave him a conventional answer, and he slapped her—not very hard, but hard enough to destroy the cocoon of pride she used to live in.

"I really feel *that* was the moment of my awakening," she said.

I was beginning to envy the CM. But of course cops don't swat Grande Dames. Lest I be tempted to do so, I got up.

"Thank you for your assistance, my lady," I murmured, bowing and kissing her thin blue-veined hand. She saw me to her door, never ceasing to chatter.

“Such a disgraceful crime ... profaning a holy place ... like King Henry the Whatever, back in the Christian era, murdering that archbishop fellow on the altar ... the poor man, slaughtered in the very place where he thought he’d found sanctuary....”

I was halfway through the door when I realized that the last sentence didn’t refer to Thomas á Becket. “Just where *who* found sanctuary?” I demanded.

“Why, the poor fellow who was murdered. I saw him in the infirmary one day when I went in for a shot. He’d been injured somehow, he was lying down and his hood was pushed back. I recognized him at once. He used to run an investment bank in New Manhattan. Oh, he was just a teeny bit crooked, everybody knew that, that was how he was able to earn his more select clients such wonderful returns on their money. I was so shocked when the police came after him. You know these government prosecutors, always putting the worst possible construction on everything. Anyway, he got away in time, but until I saw him up here I didn’t know where he’d escaped to. Now what was his name—some Slavic name. Kristovsky? No ... Krovich, that was it! I never forget anyone who makes me richer.”

I bowed and kissed her hand a second time. “Don’t mention this to anyone else,” I cautioned her. “Remember, the killer’s still at large and might decide to silence you.”

“Oh, how thrilling! I do think, Inspector, that this has been my most profoundly interesting visit here ever. I’ll be silent as the grave until I get home, and then tell simply *everyone!*”

\* \* \* \*

Back in my cell, seated, belt clasping my *hara*, I tried to make sense of the few dubious pearls of information that my long, mostly boring day had brought me.

Heaven’s Footstool was silent, everybody but me at the Great Meditation. I’d grabbed some leftovers from the kitchen so I could eat a light supper alone and concentrate on the case. Questions: Should I arrest the gladiator, even though I think he’s innocent? Could I trust the Councilor, even though he’s a druggie? Should I believe the Grande Dame, even though she’s a fool?

The only checkable item was the real identity of the corpse, for whom I now had three names—Kendo, Stancic, and Krovich. Decided to run the memory cube Sister Jann gave me through Security’s central archives. My omni did the sending in a few milliseconds. Then I sat and ate bread and cheese and sipped wine through a straw, wishing Anna were there to share the goodies with me.

Nine minutes later, I got a return message confirming the data. The info on the cube matched exactly the dossier of Stancic, Drago, who took the name Kendo when he went religious. Nothing about anybody named Krovich. So that took care of the Grande Dame, with her probably failing memory, her boring life, and her consequent love of self-dramatization. She’d made up the story, that’s all.

Or did she?

Hmm. Liars, damn liars, and government archives. I never worked Fraud, and the name Krovich meant nothing to me. Nor did the man's face. Yet I could think offhand of at least three famous homicides—important person gets killed, planetary uproar follows—where the accused simply evaporated into thin air. Or into empty space.

I mean, look: If I assumed the records were right, I had nothing. If I assumed the Grande Dame was right—wow! A stunningly rich field for speculation. Heaven's Footstool. Legally a sovereign world, untouchable by Terran authorities. Perhaps granted its sovereignty precisely because well-heeled people sometimes need a getaway, and I don't mean a place to recharge their spiritual power packs. And by providing them a refuge, many, many other people could assure themselves of substantial bribes.

Great Tao, but it must have been expensive to get there! I could imagine a lifetime of ill-gotten gains vanishing like smoke as a refugee from the law bribed whole layers of officialdom to create a false identity, embed it in the central records, issue a forged exit visa, and make it worthwhile for the White Monks to accept and conceal him.

How frustrated Krovich must have been, a financier reduced to the life of a common monk while his wealth went to stuff the already weighty pockets of others. No wonder he punched a rib of nuclear steel. A private matter, he told Sister Jann. Yes—very private.

But was all this really possible? I sat drumming my fingers, wishing I had Anna to talk it over with. I could call her at home, of course, but somebody up here could very well monitor the call, and certainly it would be picked up Earthside by Security. And if by any chance I was right about what was going on, at least a few people at HQ had to be in on it.

Heaven's Footstool. The Flying Vatican. Suddenly I was remembering an anecdote Sister Jann told me about a homicidal Pope. Maybe, I thought, I'd better refresh my memory about the original Vatican. I knew it was centuries back in the Christian Era, during the Age of the Warring States—maybe even earlier, in the Middle Ages. And that was about all.

I told the omni, "Research," and asked my question. Great gadget. In a few seconds the answer began to unroll. Vatican, a hill just outside what was now the village of Roma in the European Council District. A long, colorful history. Magnificent ruins still visited by tourists. A hologram popped up, showing a vast shattered temple with statues of gods defaced by time, weather, and war.

Once the Popes ruled Roma, then it was taken over by a nation called Italia. In the twentieth century the Vatican was made an independent micro-state to give the chief priest of the Christians political independence. But it also became a refuge for

all sorts of unpleasant characters who happened to have an in with the church bureaucracy—absconding bankers (!), right-wing politicians with blood on their hands, prominent churchmen tarred by pedophile scandals. In time its reputation became so bad that the Vatican State was abolished and reabsorbed into Italia.

I went on reading for an hour or more. It was the first time I'd gotten an overview of this lost world, and it was fascinating. The Popes, the Cardinals, the religious orders. Among them were saints, ascetics, statesmen and scholars—also fools, debauchees, fanatics, and monsters. So everything I'd been imagining already happened, long ago. A holy place becomes a refuge for unholy characters. Lao-tzu again: *All things are bright on one side and dark on the other.*

Damn tiresome of history, telling the same old stories over and over.

But now I'd got at least a glimmer of a possible motive. Somebody going into space to kill a middle-aged monk—highly improbable. But what if the monk was an absconding banker? What if somebody that Krovich had cheated in the past found out where he was hiding, and either sent an assassin or came to do the job himself?

Mr. Black Death. Yes, even if I liked the guy, I had to admit he was prime material for a hired killer. Maybe getting a bit old for fighting, wanted to spend some years in peace at home with his family. Killing an unknown monk might strike him as equivalent to swatting a fly, only much more rewarding. There was a *lot* more to the religious life than I'd realized. This was starting to sound like Renaissance Roma. I'd just been reading about a Pope who had his bravos grind a cheap diamond to powder and sprinkle it on Bevenuto Cellini's dinner in order to perforate his intestines. That, I thought, was even nastier than—

At that exact moment the screaming started.

\* \* \* \*

It came from the corridor outside, pretty close to my door.

I unbuckled my seatbelt and jumped up, nearly launching myself against the ceiling, and ran out, stuffing the omni into my pocket after remembering at the last second to set it on Record. Then followed the sounds up the corridor to D Ring.

A crowd had formed near the airlock. The usual anonymous white-robed figures, now agitated, chattering away as if there were no Regulation 4, no rule of silence. I shouldered my way through and halted, staring into the open lock.

It was crowded in there too, monks gathered around another body. I pushed to the front. The corpse was frosted over, another chunk of frozen meat, lying on his right side with knees bent.

“Who's this?” I demanded.

“It's Brother Ion,” said an anonymous figure. I tried to turn back the stiff cloth of his hood and it cracked like glass, broke off and burned my fingers like dry

ice.

For a moment I was stunned, just staring. Then I shooed the monks out of the airlock like a flock of chickens and turned back to the body. So this is what Ion looked like. A set, square gray face, scarred on the cheek, the visible left eye fixed and bulging, a bristle of beard covered with hoarfrost now beginning to melt in the warm air entering from D Ring.

Oh yes, I knew him. Not the name—it had been a long time since I saw his dossier. But he was another fugitive, and the charge against him was murder. *Multiple murders.*

Mechanically I proceeded with a task I've been doing much of my life. As I worked, recording hundreds of angles on the omni, another kind of recognition began to dawn. Krovich had rested in a completely different posture, flat on his belly, back up. Yet gazing at Ion, I felt an overwhelming sense of déjà vu—felt it all over again, as the philosopher said. Here was another chunky, bearded, middle-aged man of medium height, wrapped in webs of ice.

Bizarre thoughts went flickering through my head. Some killers pursue a certain physical type. Especially sexual predators, with their specialized appetites for girls, boys, hookers, blondes, brunettes—even for dwarves, the crippled, or the blind. But somebody with a compulsion to kill middle-sized, middle-aged men with beards? I was shaking my head over that when Sister Jann slipped into the lock, carrying her medical bag.

She viewed Brother Ion, muttered “Oh dear,” then asked, “Can you turn him on his back? I'd like to check for a wound.”

I wrenched the body over. Like turning an ice statue. No wound appeared, but something just as informative did. A murmur ran through the onlookers in the doorway—also several stifled laughs. Everybody was looking at the little tent of white cloth over Brother Ion's crotch. The corpse had an erection, a substantial one at that, frozen in place.

Sister Jann shook her head. “Things become more and more embarrassing,” she murmured.

Abruptly the monks scattered as the CM erupted into the lock. All by himself, he seemed to overfill it. “What's this?” he roared. “What's this?”

Since the answer was perfectly obvious, neither Sister Jann nor I said anything.

“My right hand,” muttered the CM. “First they sabotaged the monitoring system. Now they've cut off my right hand.”

“They who?” I asked, ungrammatically.

“My enemies. It’s a campaign. It’s a deliberate campaign to ruin me.”

He’d sunk to one knee. The huge face turned up and gave me the fierce heartless stare of a wounded lion.

“What the hell have you been doing all day?” he demanded. “Why didn’t you prevent this?”

I stepped back, pushed by the almost palpable aura of rage and fear flowing from the Reverend Aung Chai. I said nothing because, once again, there was nothing to say.

Breathing heavily, he rose to his feet. Great *Tao* but the man was big. I’m used to looking down on people, but he looked me straight in the eye. He said in a quieter voice, quieter but perhaps more dangerous, “I want a complete report on this in the morning. Complete. Don’t think, Colonel, you have forever to stop this ... this *thing*.”

Then he was gone, whirling monks out of his way like chaff.

At Sister Jann’s orders, a couple of monks broke the corpse loose from the deck and pushed it—floating, no gurney needed—to the impromptu morgue beside the big refrigerators in the kitchen. I followed, walking beside her, pondering a case that suddenly had too much data instead of too little.

“Ion skipped the Great Meditation?” I asked.

“So it would seem.”

“But not alone.”

“No, that doesn’t seem likely. Well, nobody counts the attendees, you know. Over a hundred people, dressed all alike. The darkness, the chanting....”

“I know. Will you do the post-mortem tonight?”

“Yes. Not that there’s much doubt about how he died. He was quick-frozen. But after the body thaws, I want to check him over thoroughly before rigor sets in.”

I was turning to go when something struck me. “One question, Sister. What was Ion’s orientation rating?”

She looked baffled. “One-point-oh het. Rather unusual. These days, most people are a bit more ambiguous than that. But why do you—”

“Excuse me,” I said. “I’m feeling an urge to meditate.”

\* \* \* \*

Sometimes you just have to sit down and think, hard work though it is. But before I began trying to put the pieces together, I figured I’d better call my wife. I’d



have done so the night before, except that I fell asleep over Brother Kendo's bio.

"I thought you'd forgotten about me," she said.

"Never. How's everything in Manypalms?"

"Oh, the usual. Mr. Applebaum had a stroke, but I got to him in time and he's resting comfortably, or as comfortably as you can at the age of a hundred and six. Sometimes I wonder if living as long as people do nowadays really is a good idea. Your martial arts class called, they want to know when you're coming back to break piles of bricks with them. Speaking of that, how's the investigation going?"

Bearing in mind the possibility of being overheard, I told her, oh, things were getting sorted out little by little. She asked whether my asthma was acting up—a private code we'd agreed on before I left, meaning *Are you in danger?* I said no, no symptoms worth mentioning, "If I feel it coming on," I added, "I'll know what to do."

Incautiously, I added a few words of praise for her fellow medico, Sister Jann.

"Oh?" Anna said, in an absolutely neutral voice.

"Oh, come on. She's a nun, and celibate besides. Anyway, I'm too old to fool around."

"Too old —*you*??" she asked, with just the right amount of exaggerated wonder, and we enjoyed a chuckle. Before signing off, she asked when I'd be back.

"Before you think," I told her. At that moment I knew I was going to do whatever in the hell it took to get my aging butt back home soonest.

I settled down to work. Anna taught me long ago how to go at a problem the Zen way. Zen was originally Chinese; it was called Ch'an, and there's a Chinese pun that says, "The taste of *Ch'an* (Zen) is the taste of *ch'a* (tea)." Figuring that was a good idea, I revisited the kitchen and brought back a pot of strong black stuff to clarify my thoughts and help me stay awake. I put a straw into the teapot through a flexible nipple and settled down. I assumed the half-lotus position, belted in, and spent a while sipping, my mind blank, just breathing in and out.

Don't think ... don't think ... now, *think!*

I began reviewing the evidence, playing sections of my recordings back from time to time to refresh my memory. About midnight I started to draw conclusions.

First, there was no longer the slightest doubt about the CM hiding fugitives on Heaven's Footstool. Ion's real name still eluded me, but his face was engraved on my memory from the time when—ten, maybe twelve years ago?—I was briefly assigned to a task force that hunted him without success. Not an impulse killer,

either. The man was a pro. A skilled assassin, not a simple murderer.

Checking the Security records for more data on him would be pointless. I already knew that by the time a fugitive reached this—what did the Grande Dame call it?—this *sanctuary*, the records had already been purged. By now his physical data adorned a bland biography either stolen from some innocuous citizen, or made up out of the whole cloth. Only the brain of an aging cop had proved impossible to reprogram.

What mattered, I told myself, was that I knew who murdered Brother Kendo. Why the job looked so professional. Why it took place at exactly the right place and time, when everybody's attention was absorbed elsewhere. Why the weapon wasn't found—after all, Ion himself led the search.

Now for the real question: Who hired Ion for the job? Okay, I thought, let's assume the obvious—somebody with money. So maybe Aung Chai had been right after all when he accused a guest. The guest didn't do the killing, of course. The CM's own "right hand" and enforcer did it, proving only that assassins are apt to be bad employees.

But a guest suborned the murder. Why? I didn't know, but I knew I'd damn well have to find out before I arrested him. Yes, I said *him*. The fact that Ion was a perfect heterosexual and died in a state of arousal had caused me to waste a couple of hours suspecting a woman—until I remembered Councilor Mmahat and his sinuous handmaiden. Despite his act of pomposity, snobbery, and self-important foolishness, underneath lay a much deeper and darker character—or so I now believed. One who purchased a murder with money, drugs, and the promise of sex with the most seductive female in Heaven's Footstool. Then used her to lure the killer (maybe befuddled in advance with GLS?) into the airlock.

I wondered how many of my Security Forces colleagues had ever tried to get the goods on a Councilor of State. Not many, I bet. I'd have to have everything nailed down, and actual proof would be hell to find. I was still brooding when the clock coolly announced 0430, startling me. The whole night was gone and, more than anything else, right now I wanted a shower and breakfast.

Later I'd have to see Sister Jann to get the autopsy report on Ion. And I'd have to report to the CM—not exactly an inviting prospect, now that I knew him for what he was. Then the struggle to get Mmahat before the shuttle arrived to whisk him home, where he had power enough to stop any investigation. I needed to get him here, while he was far from home in a sovereign world where he was not a Councilor of State.

I needed help. I needed somebody with power to back me up. Well, I knew only too well where I *couldn't* get it. And I was beginning to think I might also know where I *could*.

\* \* \* \*

The military, with its unerring ear for the gross, thus sums up the beginning of a new day: shit, shave, shower, and shine. Only you can't shine stickums.

The usual good breakfast followed, the reader on the dais delivering some stuff from the *Diamond Sutra* I didn't understand at all. "*These 'living beings,' so called, are not really living beings at all. Such is only a word.*"

In context, that gave me a bit of a shiver.

I had my interview with the CM right after breakfast. It was at best painful, since I viewed him as an abettor of criminals and he viewed me as a failure at my job.

"Maybe it would have been better," he began grimly, "if Security hadn't sent us someone quite so *old*."

Setting the tone of confrontation early. He hadn't asked me to sit down, so for once I was able to stare down at him, at his tawny locks, the ginger fur on the backs of his big hands. I could've told him that I was completing my theory of the case. That I knew the guilty party. That with his backing, I could probably gather the evidence I needed, and go on home.

Right. The very suggestion that I might be thinking of arresting the most important of all his Very Important Guests would've caused an explosion fit to knock Heaven's Footstool right out of orbit. Besides, I was enraged by having to work for and with this sleazy criminal. So instead of asking for help, I went for his jugular.

"Why didn't your Reverence tell me you suspect a conspiracy? Did you send to Terra because Ion couldn't find out anything useful, you needed help and couldn't trust anybody here?"

"I'll ask the questions. I'm in charge here."

"Tell that to your dead dogsbody. There must have been other incidents before Kendo's killing that I don't know about. What were they? When did you first begin to suspect a conspiracy?"

"You know everything you need to know. In fact you know more."

"I know a *lot* more. Years ago I was engaged in hunting Brother Ion, or whatever his real name is, on a murder charge."

That stopped him. He eyed me the way a treed puma eyes a hunting dog. Unlike the dog, I could go after him, only modifying the truth a little to protect the Grande Dame.

"In checking Security's records, I also found out that Brother Kendo's real name is Krovich and that he's a fugitive on a fraud charge. Just how many of these

characters are you sheltering, your Reverence?”

“I was told—” he said, and snapped his jaws shut.

“That the records had been purged, I suppose. So they were, but not competently. Who’s your contact in the archives at Security HQ?”

“This is a sovereign world. You have exactly as much power as I choose to grant you. You’re here to investigate a homicide—two homicides now—and turn the guilty party over to me for judgment by the Master. You know, Colonel, I can call eighty-eight monks to my aid at any time, if you force me to deal with you as a new threat.”

“Yes, and I’m sure you will, too, with thirty-three well-heeled guests looking on. Incidentally, you have only eighty-seven monks now, and I’m not by any means sure that all or even most of them are loyal to you. Even when they wear white robes, criminals have a stink all their own.”

Our dialogue continued in this friendly fashion for another twenty minutes, after which I turned on my heel and walked out. At any rate, the shouting match cleared the air. He was right that I was bound by my orders and that I had no independent authority. I was right about everything else. So that’s just the way it was.

Now, I thought, to look for the help I need.

Sister Jann was already in her office, breakfasting on a chunk of fragrant bread and a cup of milk that she sucked noisily through a straw. She was wide awake, but with a frazzled look. I greeted her and she gestured me into the other chair.

“The tension’s starting to get me,” she apologized. “I didn’t sleep at all.”

“Murder has that effect,” I told her. “As Shakespeare did *not* say, murder doth murder sleep.”

She smiled wanly. “I checked Ion’s body last night. Under the robe, he’s one of the hairiest specimens I’ve ever seen. A kind of ape man. Maybe a double-Y-chromosome freak. But I was too tired to run his DNA and see. Oh, one thing. On his left shoulder he had the tattoo of a rat.”

“Standard. That’s the ancient symbol of the Ninja. Hijacked by modern thugs to give themselves a distinguished pedigree. Any other surprises?”

“Not really. When the airlock’s outer door opened, there must have been a catastrophic drop in pressure, but he froze solid so quickly his tissues didn’t have time to rupture. There was no external sign of trauma whatever. He wasn’t forced into the lock.”

“Of course he wasn’t,” I said impatiently. “He was lured in. Somebody said,

‘You go in first, I’ll be there in a minute, just go in and shut the door. Get yourself in the mood. When I’m ready I’ll knock.’ Tell me something—is the airlock often used for sex?’

She sighed. Polished off her milk. “The answer is yes. It’s hard to find privacy here—anybody’s cell can be opened at any time on the CM’s orders. So couples aiming at a quickie go into the airlock and push the button that seals the inner door. There’s enough air and warmth to give them half an hour or so to do whatever they’ve got in mind. Outside a warning light starts flashing, and when people see it they grin and chuckle. It’s an open secret, the kind that everybody knows and nobody talks about.”

“How’s the outer door opened?”

“The control’s on the bulkhead just beyond the metal detector. It won’t work until the inner door is sealed. Two people have to cooperate to open the airlock, one inside and one outside. The system’s intended as a fail-safe, to prevent accidents and suicides.”

“A fail-safe that failed.”

“Clearly.”

Time for me to make my pitch. “Look, Sister. I’ve gotten to trust you. And I need your help.”

She smiled a little, folded her hands. She had hands like Anna’s, small but competent, clean blunt nails, no jewelry, no lacquer. I had the feeling she’d been waiting for me to speak out.

“Well, Colonel, I’ve gotten to trust you, too. And I’ll help any way I can. Could I first ask why you’ve decided that I am, as the ancient Americans used to say, okay?”

“You were right from the beginning about the CM. I know that now. In fact, he’s even worse than you thought.”

Briefly I filled her in about Kendo, about Ion, about the CM’s racket. She wasn’t as surprised as I expected she’d be. Just listened carefully and nodded.

“There’s a kind of in-group of dubious characters surrounding him,” she said. “The brothers and sisters call them the Pack. They aren’t real monks, anybody can tell that. Trouble is, our robes and our rules of silence make anonymity so easy here, and monastic discipline makes questioning authority so hard.”

“How many in the Pack?”

“Maybe a dozen in all. Ironically, poor Kendo wasn’t one of them. Maybe he was too nonviolent to be useful. But now I do understand why the CM didn’t give

him a job in the treasurer's office."

To my astonishment, her gray eyes filled with tears, the first I'd seen her shed.

"Sometimes I felt so sorry for him. Isolated among religious people whose viewpoint he couldn't share and criminals who were so much worse than he was."

"Yeah, it's too bad," I muttered, not really meaning it, because I didn't care about Brother Kendo one way or the other. "Now, Sister, what I really need right now is—"

She wiped the tears and started to say at the same time, "What I think you need right now is—"

And we both finished together. "*To meet the Master.*"

\* \* \* \*

As we entered Spoke Seven, she whispered the news that seeing Master Po wouldn't be easy for me. He was the CM's prisoner, and had been for over a year.

"He's watched all the time. The CM used to spy on him through the monitoring system, and Brother Ion practically camped outside his door. A guard bot's stationed inside the Master's quarters, partly as his servant and partly as his keeper. It's not armed, but it's physically powerful and its command port has been sealed, so it can't be reprogrammed."

"How do you get in?"

"The CM wants Master Po alive for a while longer as a front for his schemes. So I'm permitted to check on his health. As soon as I understood the situation, I became his ally and his channel to the outside. After the monitoring system went down, the Master and I began talking to each other in indirect language, quoting haiku with a word or two changed—devices like that. Things the bot's brain is too rigid to catch."

Things were starting to connect up. "Were you the one who disabled the monitoring system?"

"Yes. We couldn't have the CM watching us. He'd have understood in a second what we were up to. All I did was cut the main optical cable. The whole thing's so old—late twenty-first century—that I thought a breakdown would seem quite natural. But the CM's paranoid, so he decided it must be part of a plot. And of course he was right. Well, you know, paranoid people have real enemies."

Spoke Seven contained the usual line of anonymous doorways. She paused at one, opened it quickly and checked inside. Then beckoned.

"Wait here," she whispered. "The Master's cell is just across the corridor. He and I have a signal worked out. When I say '*satori*,' he'll feign an attack—his blood

pressure's low, sometimes he goes into syncope—and I'll send the bot to fetch adrenaline. It's programmed to respond to medical crises, so I think it'll obey. The errand will only take it a few minutes, so you have to be in and out before it comes back. But you'll have time to meet the Master and let him know he has a new ally."

The door slid shut. I was in a cell much like my own, except for the lack of civilian clothes and two clean habits hanging from hooks in the clothes rack, their hems clipped to a bar below to hold them straight. The desk had been turned into an altar, with statues of Jesus, Buddha, and the Goddess of Mercy. A picture of a many-armed smiling god had been taped to the bulkhead above and a teaspoonful of charred incense still smoked faintly in a covered burner. Whoever lived there had a Hindu background and thought that all embodiments of compassion were avatars of Vishnu. I was surprised he missed Mother Teresa who, I understood, had become a goddess with her own temple in New Calcutta.

I put my ear to the door and listened."Yes, it's me," said Sister Jann's voice. She was speaking louder than usual to make sure I heard.

A bot's unmistakable flat tones answered, though I couldn't distinguish the words.

"I know it's not the usual day.... No, no one came with me.... Well, if you think you heard an extra pair of footsteps, you're wrong—"

Atonal voice again. Goddamn bots anyway, you never knew how acute their sensory equipment was until too late. I barely had time to step between the white robes in the rack when the door opened. Smell of heated metal. It was a little guy, about a meter ten. It rolled on sticky tires into the room. Sounded like an irritated snake.

I stepped out, hit the back of its "head"—the sensory center—with the edge of my right hand. The shock sent an aluminum plate flying and exposed a nest of glassy cables inside. I reached in and tore out a bunch. I didn't care what they did—they must have done something essential.

The bot started off on one wheel, whirled, flipped over and started spinning around the deck. I slipped out, letting the door close behind me. Sister Jann was holding the door across the hall open and I slid into the Master's quarters.

"I have more than a few minutes now," I told her.

"What about the bot?"

"Forget the bot."

The Master, like Mmahat, lived in a suite. The main room was austere, with no chair, no desk, only tatami mats glued to the deck and a low Japanese table or two. On one wall hung a scroll with a black-and-white Zen drawing of their prophet Bodhidharma, a ferocious-looking old gent with bulging eyes. A Japanese verse ran

vertically beside the picture.

“Do you read *kanji*?” asked a creaking voice like a cricket’s song.

“Sorry, no.”

“It says, *What’s the sound of one hand clapping?* Do you know what the koan means?”

The day before I’d have said no, and gotten irritated to boot with what used to sound like gibberish. Today I said, “Possibly.”

He chuckled. “Well, that’s a beginning. Tea?”

Master Po looked like a cicada shell—small, elaborately wrinkled, dry and brown. His eyes twinkled like black diamonds. He sat on the deck cross-legged behind the Japanese table, and at his gesture I settled down facing him. Sister Jann brought cups covered with plastic, with straws inserted through nipples.

“I don’t usually serve menfolk,” she explained. “But I make an exception for Masters and guys who fight bots and win.”

We toasted each other with green tea while she and the Master exchanged amused glances. He treated her as an equal with whom he shared some sort of secret joke.

“So you’ve come up from Terra to examine our dirty laundry,” the Master said. His tiny, ancient voice scraped, squeaked, and whispered, but was perfectly clear.

“Not my own doing, Master Po. Now, you won’t have heard yet about the murder of so-called Brother Ion—”

“So it’s happened, eh? And Sister just told me you’ve discovered Brother Aung Chai’s little game.”

“Yes.”

“He was my worst mistake,” sighed Master Po. “One of the Christian holy books warns against false prophets so sly they can deceive even the Chosen Ones. Well, I’m not sure I’m a Chosen One, but I know that he deceived me. What’s enlightenment but the discovery of our oneness with all beings? Once confirmed in it, we pursue right action naturally, like Jesus when he discarded the laws and the prophets for his gospel of love. But what if someone went only halfway? What if someone learned just enough to despise conventional morality without truly entering the enlightened state? He’d be a kind of walking cancer, you see, with no law and no love either.”

“And that’s the Chief Monk.”



The Master nodded. “His schemes don’t end with enriching himself. He means to leave the Order, return to Terra, and get himself into the Council of State with the aid of that pompous ass Mmahat. He’s got brains, forcefulness, a legion of rich supporters, an unearned reputation for being holy, and a genuinely mesmeric personality. So you see why we had to stop him.”

“Shutting down his spy system was the first step,” said Sister Jann, taking up the tale. “Then we had to kill his enforcer.”

“*We?*” I gazed at the old gent, now well into his second century, and the serene-looking nun, over whose pale face a delicate blush was beginning to spread.

“Well, I did at his command. It was very, very difficult for me to do. But for the sake of true religion we have to overthrow Aung Chai and restore the Master to rule and guide us.”

I felt like a man who’d just taken one of those banana-peel pratfalls you see in ancient comedies. Why did I think, in this of all places, that the motive had to be something practical, something worldly?

“What about Kendo?” I demanded, with anger directly proportional to my embarrassment over my blunder. “Did you kill him, too?”

The delicate pink darkened to rose on her pale cheeks. “I made a mistake. A terrible mistake. I was quite anxious anyway, I’d never tried to kill anybody before, and with the dim lights and so forth I thought I’d spotted Brother Ion. But I got the wrong man. It was terribly distressing.”

“Especially for Kendo. Poor guy, hiding from a measly fraud charge, and first he loses all his money and then he gets stabbed by a nun. Where’d the knife come from?”

“It was a sample from a medical-supply outfit on Terra. It came in a miscellaneous shipment of new equipment and went through the scanners unnoticed. A disposable scalpel made of mirror duroplast, not steel, and sharp as an obsidian blade. After I ... used it, I dropped it into a waste-materials vent. We’ve got kilometers of solar panels on the station’s exterior and they generate huge amounts of energy. Well, mirror duroplast’s got a relatively low melting point, only 550 degrees, so the knife was gone forever. Of course I’d worn gloves, and I threw them in, too. A tiny drop of blood got on the sleeve of my habit, but I was the one doing the neoluminol studies, so that didn’t matter.”

The Master waved a small, dry, clawlike hand. “Try not to be so conventional, Colonel. One death was a tragic accident, the other a well-merited execution. What matters is that Aung Chai’s enforcer has been removed by Sister Jann. Now I understand you’ve eliminated his bot as well. Next step: the man himself.”

“Perhaps,” I murmured, “Sister Jann can lure him into the airlock, as she did Brother Ion.”

She looked like I’d slapped her. “Maybe I deserved that,” she whispered. “It *was* rather a vile thing to do, exploiting his lust. But I simply couldn’t think of anything else. He was a professional killer, as you know, and after Kendo’s death he was on his guard.”

“Did the fact that you’re a nun bother him?”

“I think it excited him,” she said slowly. “Like Nero wanting to rape a vestal virgin. And he was bored with his usual prey, these foolish females who are our guests. He not only pursued them himself, he pimped for the Chief Monk, who surely is Rasputin reborn.”

Master Po raised his teacup, but suddenly halted the gesture and spoke out.

“Enough talk! We must purge Heaven’s Footstool and return it to right practice and the true path! I order the Chief Monk to be deprived of the place he has dishonored. Arrest him, bind him, hold him for an open trial before all the brothers and sisters.”

He sucked his tea down to the last drop. His hand descended and the cup rapped the table like the gavel of a hanging judge. I stared at him with exasperation and awe, thinking: *A man who can put death and damnation into a teacup needs watching.*

“Aung Chai is no ordinary man,” the cricket voice resumed. “He’s as big as you are and several decades younger. He recognizes no law but his own ego. Like the tyrant Hitler in the ancient world, he possesses the demonic power of alienation—because he cares for nothing, he’s capable of anything. And he will be aided by the criminals he’s brought here, for their survival depends on his.

“You must operate under difficult constraints. We have many friends among the brothers, who could make a good fight of it. Yet we can’t afford a bloodbath. Nor can Aung Chai. For him it would be a political disaster. For us, it would shame the Order and make the White Monks infamous. The Chief Monk must be removed suddenly, as if struck by a thunderbolt. I can’t compel you to aid us, Colonel, but it’s the only way you can carry out your obvious duty to eliminate a refuge for Terra’s felons. Once Aung Chai is gone, you can return home with a shuttlecraft full of scoundrels for whom there are outstanding warrants. You’ll be a hero down there.”

I smiled a little ruefully. Nothing was working out as I expected. First I got the wrong man in my sights. Then I found out that my ally, the good sister, did the killing. Now I was being invited to lead a *coup d’état* for the sake of true religion.

And it looked like I’d have to. That nest of felons did need cleaning out, and

this was the only way to do it. Master Po was a hundred and twenty-eight, and on Earth would have weighed maybe fifty kilos, but he had me in the mental equivalent of a headlock.

“Master,” I asked, “in your younger days, did you practice judo?”

“Yes, and was quite good at it. I could throw a man twice my own size.”

“That’s easy to be—”

But I didn’t have time to get out “believe.” The door slid open behind me and I turned to find the gap overfilled by the Reverend Aung Chai, with four chunky spooks behind him.

“So there’s a transmitter in the bot,” I remarked, “and it sounded a silent alarm.”

He and his friends entered the room, pushing back their hoods, Regulation 19 or no Regulation 19. With a sinking sensation I recognized three of his spooks from times and crimes past. Killers, armed robbers, brutes. Speaking religiously, an Unholy Trinity—and I felt sure the fourth was no better than the ones I knew.

A few minutes later I was sitting on the deck, back against a bulkhead, ankles tied together, knees under my chin, wrists tied behind me—the only one they bothered to tie up, which I suppose was a compliment of sorts. Sister Jann sat to my left, Master Po at my right. He was in the meditation position, hands against his *hara*, back ramrod straight, face composed and eyes cast down. He seemed to be ignoring the enemy whose career he launched and now had failed to stop.

My omni reposed in the CM’s left sleeve, where it continued to pick up our voices and the messages emanating silently from the chip in my larynx.

The CM was not a generous winner. “For you, the airlock,” he told me. “Later, when our honored guests are asleep. You’re nothing but a retired cop with a blot on your record, so I don’t imagine the accident will cause much stink on Terra.”

He smiled at Sister Jann, exposing his long teeth. She’d been his nemesis, and he acted accordingly. “She’s yours,” he told one of his followers, a short thick individual with a scar-seamed dark face and arms longer than his legs.

His name floated across my mind—Sirathan Radhakrishnan, an up-to-date thug and devotee of skull-garlanded Kali, who made himself quite a career in the international settlement at New Angkor, killing for pay and disposing of the bodies in the fish farms that dot the big lake of the Tonle Sap. He’d been missing three or four years. Now he grinned, bent down, grabbed Sister Jann and swung her over his shoulder with one smooth motion. He’d had a lot of practice moving bodies, though not live ones. Sirathan stepped into the Master’s bedroom and the door slid shut behind him.

I asked Aung Chai, “Did you have to do that?”

“Yes. I want her to suffer, and if I know the gentleman she’s with, she will.” He gave me his ferocious smile.

I try not to act in anger, you do dumb things that way, but at this point I just let go. What did I have to lose, anyway?

In standard gravity I’d have had a hard time moving. As it was, I pushed down hard with my heels and the equal and opposite reaction brought me halfway to my feet. Another hard kick pulled my stickums off the deck and sent me into a graceful arc, like a slow rocket, against the Chief Monk’s face and chest. I had only one available weapon, so I used it. I got my teeth into his throat and bit down on the windpipe as hard as I could, trying to strangle him.

Christ, it was like getting a mouthful of brambles. He made a gargling noise. Hands grabbed at me, trying to pull me off while I made like a bulldog, now tasting the salt in his goddamn blood. Then a heavy fist thumped the back of my neck and I saw stars and flashes. They yanked up on my bound hands and pain shot up through my shoulders and when I gasped they pulled me loose from the CM.

I twisted and turned like a gaffed eel in midair, folded up my legs and kicked as hard as I could. My feet sank into somebody’s gut, then rattled somebody else’s ribs and I heard a bone crack, or maybe two bones. There was yelling and curses as I broke loose and launched myself off a bulkhead at the CM and hit him in the belly with my hard, hard head. This time he was knocked loose from the deck and caromed off another bulkhead and came back at me.

His neck was bleeding, his thumbs were extended, he wanted my eyes, and when the others grabbed my arms again I was beginning to think he’d get them. Then Master Po hurled his frail body against Aung Chai. Did no damage, but deflected him for a few seconds, during which one of my captors screamed, doubled up, turned me loose and made a slow, elegant somersault while droplets of bright arterial blood sprayed, spread, and drifted in midair. That’s when I realized that Sister Jann had joined the melee. She was holding something like a gleaming shard of mirror. She clutched my hand and ducked behind my back and I felt the blade slide through the cords binding my wrists like a butcher’s knife slicing the tendons of a chicken. She stabbed another of my assailants in a motion so practiced and quick the gleaming blade vanished and reappeared almost in the same instant, only not as bright as before.

I went for the CM once again, this time with hands free and with lethal intent. But my feet were still tied and we fell all in a heap together, not against the deck but against a bulkhead—so far we’d bounced off all four—then up against the ceiling. But he’d had enough, he pushed me off, and he and his remaining bully tumbled through the doorway and disappeared.

This strange underwater ballet of a brawl was over. Sister Jann and I were left

bobbing around the room like corks, along with two bodies, one groaning, one not. As we reconnected with the deck, Master Po began clapping his ancient hands. “How splendid!” he exclaimed. “How splendid!”

I bent down and freed my feet. Recovered my omni, which had escaped Aung Chai’s sleeve at some point and was floating in midair. I was still trying to get my breath; the CM’s pals had almost dislocated my shoulders and I felt pretty battered. I foresaw a painful awakening next morning, but at least I would awaken.

I pointed at Sister Jann’s knife and gasped, “So there were two samples in that shipment?”

Apologetically she smiled. “Yes. I hid this one inside Brother Kendo’s body when I was doing his autopsy. After the search was over, I recovered it. Given the situation, I thought I’d better go armed.” She used her sleeve to wipe the CM’s loathsome blood off my face. I had to grin. This was not a lady I’d ever think about romantically, even if she were so inclined. But as an ally she was worth her weight in something a good deal more valuable than gold. I reflected that virgins in ancient myth were often pretty ferocious, like Athena and Brunnhilde, filled with magical power because they’d never learned either to love or fear men.

“Where’s the would-be rapist?” I inquired when she’d cleaned me up a bit.

She sighed, saddened by the things she’d had to do. “In the bedroom. I left him spinning in an eddy of red fog. What a fool, throwing me over his shoulder that way. I had the knife in my left sleeve and when the bedroom door shut I pulled it, twisted around and slashed his carotid artery. To think I’m a doctor and a nun, and here I’ve killed four men.”

She glanced at the body that was groaning, but had now stopped. “Maybe five.”

“Don’t fall into the absurdity of regretting necessary actions,” piped up Master Po. “There’s still much work to be done. And it will be dangerous work.”

“More dangerous than this?” I asked, gesturing at the casualties.

“Possibly. He underestimated us before. He won’t again. We haven’t yet seen the worst these people can do.”

“Then we’d better be going.”

I picked up Master Po. In this near-weightless world, with only an occasional gentle nudge he floated, the mythical Levitating Master came to life. All I really had to do was steer him. We hastened into the corridor, and the door whispered shut behind us.

\* \* \* \*

We didn’t know where the Chief Monk was, or what he was doing, but we

could all guess without any trouble. He was in his lair, summoning whatever remained of his gang. They would wait for lights-out tonight and come hunting us, scouring the rings and spokes one by one. We needed help, needed it quick, and I didn't have to think twice to know where to find it.

We hustled on down to B Ring where the Honored Guests resided, and I knocked on Death's door (!). Gladiator Rhee, otherwise known as Huksa Byung, opened up, stared in astonishment at the floating Master, then invited us in with a deep bow.

"Ah, my son," piped up Master Po, "we come to ask you for aid, and may joy and good fortune light upon you and your house if you give it to us."

"For you, Master, anything," he said. "But what—?"

Briefly I put him in the picture. A simplified version, of course: the Chief Monk had turned traitor and wanted to kill the Master in order to take his place. Black Death showed no surprise at hearing this.

"Sounds like home," he nodded. "In the whole history of Korea, whenever we weren't being invaded by foreigners, we were having palace revolts. I pray," he added to the Master, "that you will enroll me under your banner."

"With pleasure. And now," he said, "may I visit your bathroom, Honored Champion Rhee? I've drunk a great deal of tea, and the bladders of the very old are notoriously weak."

While we waited for the Master to reappear, I asked our new ally what usually happened to palace rebels in old Korea.

"If a rebel won, he became emperor. If he lost, he perished by the Slow Death."

"Which meant?"

"They started at the tip of his left little finger, and shortened him by one joint every day."

"Olden days, golden days."

Master Po returned, smiling blissfully. "I used to preach a sermon on the religious significance of urination," he said. "As with all of life, one must learn some conscious control, but ultimately one must yield to nature, and it's in the yielding that one finds pleasure and relief. Now, if you young people will hear an old man's advice, I have a few ideas to suggest. While I was a prisoner I had plenty of time to think, you see."

Briefly the old gent outlined his plan, which began with seizing the Hub and getting control of the machinery. Shrewd and sensible. I told him, "All the years of

my life I've underestimated sainthood."

"I'm not a saint. I belong to a different tradition, which honors the sage. The saint tries to rise above nature. The sage tries only to embody it."

"*The sage too is without pity,*" I quoted. "*He burns the families of men like straw dogs.*"

"But only when it's necessary," he pointed out. "Our real mission is to save, but everywhere positive and negative are so closely interwoven that sometimes we must destroy in order to save. Shall we go?"

"Stay here," Black Death commanded Sister Jann. "They're all afraid of me. You'll be safe in my quarters."

"No, no," murmured the Master. "She goes with us."

He looked a bit baffled by that. "Surely Sister isn't a warrior?"

"You might be surprised," I said, and quoted one of Anna's favorite lines from Lao-tzu. "*Soft weakness overcomes hard strength. This is called the Dark Illumination.*"

"You see," said Po dryly, "he has a quote for everything. One of these days he may begin to speak for himself."

We let the door close behind us. The spoke was empty; somewhere I heard faint sounds of chanting, but that was all. We set off accompanied by the patter, patter of our sticky boots. I was curious about how we were supposed to carry out the first phase of the plan.

"When you sabotaged the monitors," I asked Sister, "how'd you get into the Hub?"

"Couldn't. The lock's an antique with a sensor that reads fingerprints, if you can believe that. Antique but, I might add, very effective. A year or two back they hired an expert from a museum of technology, who set it to recognize only the CM and Brother Ion. And you have to be *inside* the Hub to reset it. You have to be inside to get inside."

"Then how—"

"It was easy enough. I came down here in the middle of the night. A Ring's separated from the Hub only by a circular corridor. I started unbolting wall panels until I found where the main cable comes out."

"So how do we get in now?"

"Think it over, Colonel. I'm sure you'll realize there's an easy way—oh, oh."

We heard an unmistakable bass voice, and it wasn't chanting *Aum*. We crowded into a handy cell.

Somebody with a Jewish background lived here—I recognized the nine-branched Hannukah menorah. Surrounded by all these symbols of faith, I wondered if I'd missed something critical in human life by coming from a family that hadn't been observant for a couple of hundred years.

Well, no time for that now.

Somebody, two somebodies, no three, no four, were shuffling past. Aung Chai was trying to keep his voice down, but it was hard to do when his bass-fiddle tones made our teeth vibrate. I had no trouble detecting the word *Hub*. Sister Jann caught my eye and shrugged.

“He's very bright, you know,” she whispered.

Damn true. He'd realized the importance of the Hub and he didn't want to trust entirely to the lock. Wondering how many guards he'd assign there, and where they'd be posted, I dropped to my knees, opened the door a crack, and got one eye looking down the spoke to the corridor that circles the Hub. One guard there. No, two. And here was another complication. The first guard was carrying a long-barreled pistol, a four-point-nine impact weapon, to be precise.

So it was no more Mr. Nice Guy. The CM had broken out the hardware. Now I saw why he banned weapons—so he could monopolize them.

The second guard was idly slamming one fist into another. Cracking sound. Making sure his brass knucks were comfy on his hand, I supposed. The two met, mumbled to each other, then slouched off together, out of my line of vision.

Briefly I paused to do some arithmetic. If Sister Jann was right about Aung Chai having a dozen criminals in his Pack, and if she'd killed five—*five!* I still couldn't quite believe it—and if three were assigned to the Hub, that left the CM and no more than four others to form the search party after lights-out. Our forces consisted of one aging cop, one gladiator, one lady with a blade, and one hundred-and-twenty-three-year-old with a lion's heart and a dead cicada's body.

I pulled back inside, let the door close. “Master,” I said humbly, “this will take strategy. I ask your advice.” Which he proceeded to give, concisely.

“So it'll be you, me, and Huksa Byung?”

“Yes. But Sister Jann will accompany you to the kitchen, for she has a duty, too. Now move quickly, children! The time of the Great Meditation is approaching. The CM has to preside or everybody will know something's seriously wrong. But he'll make the ceremony as brief as possible. The evening meal's always a snack, and he may well advance the usual hour of lights out on some excuse or other. Once the monks and guests are in their cells, the hunt will begin. Meantime we have our



window of opportunity.”

I checked the empty corridor again, slipped out with Sister Jann following. This close to the Hub the spokes were close together and we took only a few seconds to cross to the next one. Glanced down it, saw nobody, hurried to the kitchen and slipped inside. Empty and sterile; stillness of polished metal, ceramic tiles on bulkheads and deck, well-scrubbed sinks and a long, antique hotspot range scoured clean as a Zen temple. Leftovers for the evening meal laid out in covered dishes, each held down by a magnet in the base.

While she hastened to the freezer, I cracked a door leading to the circular corridor that surrounded the Hub. Heard the low tearing-paper sounds of stickums on the carpeting as the guards approached, completing their circuit. The curvature meant they could only see a bit of the corridor at any one time. Mr. Death now was giving Master Po a gentle shove and stepping back out of their line of vision. Meantime I waited, hoping I wouldn't hear the short dry cough that is the only sound an impact pistol makes.

“What the hell?” somebody said, and I stepped out behind the guards, who were staring dumbfounded at the Master floating toward them in midair, palms pressed together, eyes cast down, looking as if he traveled like this all the time.

I lunged, hoping to chop the guy with the pistol at the base of the neck, but he heard my stickums and whirled around. So instead I whacked him on the inside of the elbow, aiming for the ulnar nerve. The gun went flying and he jabbed at my throat with his left hand, but I let that go past and slammed into him with my shoulder. His boots popped free of the deck and he flew backward and bumped his pal's back.

The second goon turned, and he wasn't wearing brass knucks, he had a cestus on his right hand. It was equipment for the really nasty Absolute Combat bouts, the closed-circuit snuff shows where the sole aim was maximum butchery and blood. The Romans made cesti out of leather, but this one was the ubiquitous duroplast with studs designed to mutilate.

The gun had floated out of reach, so I assumed the position for combat. Then shrugged and turned my back. Unseen by either thug, Mr. Death had arrived on the scene. Like a true gladiator, he gave fair warning.

“Guard yourself,” he said.

I took maybe half a minute catching the gun, pressing the recognition stud, and waiting for it to learn the pattern of micro-bloodvessels in my thumb. (Otherwise it wouldn't fire.) So I didn't see what happened to the goons, but when I turned back, the guy with the cestus was down, with Black Death's foot on his chest, and the first guy was trying to get away, scabbling his way along the ceiling like an escaping cockroach. I felt embarrassed to shoot him in flight, but that didn't stop me from touching the firing stud. The bullet exploded inside him, he popped like a tick, and drifted on slowly, leaving a crimson jet trail behind.

The champ looked around, as if expecting a referee to declare the match over. Then removed his foot and touched the body of his late adversary gently with the toe of his boot.

“Ah well,” he sighed. “Another tablet for the temple.”

I noticed that the guy who’d had the gun didn’t qualify for the brotherhood of warriors. I knew him, by the way—another killer in the CM’s remarkable collection. So this too was what the Master called a well-merited execution, not that I cared a great deal whether it was well-merited or not.

We were still looking over the battlefield when Sister Jann reappeared. She was guiding the Master back to us with one hand, while carrying a gray object in the other.

“Ready?” she asked, and without waiting for an answer she shoved Brother Ion’s severed right hand into the sensor and the door to the Hub purred open.

The first firefight of the season followed. We heard two short coughs inside and two impact rounds exploded against the corridor’s outer bulkhead. You don’t think much under those circumstances, so I shoved my weapon around the jamb and tapped the firing stud three times, producing sounds of disintegration, human and mechanical.

Somewhere a shrill alarm bell began ringing.

I edged one eye into the opening, and yes, I got the third guard, but also some equipment I hoped wasn’t absolutely essential to our survival. Entered cautiously, leading the way, wondering if a fourth killer could be hidden somewhere. But this was the command center, all controls and dials laid out in a circle. It was like a clam; once it opened you saw the whole inside.

The door closed automatically behind us, shutting off the noise of the alarm bell. Sister Jann approached the dead body, but she wasn’t looking at it—in fact, looking at it wouldn’t have yielded much information, since one of my rounds happened to hit the face. She was staring instead at the damage done by my second and third shots to the console behind the body. One had torn a big hole. The next had gone straight through into a complicated maze of printed circuits.

I began to get a sinking feeling, confirmed when Sister Jann murmured inadequately, “Oh, dear.”

“What’d I do?”

“I’m no engineer, but judging by what’s left of these dials, I rather think you’ve wrecked the temperature regulating system. With the solar panels continuing to pour in power, this station’s going to have what amounts to a heat stroke.”

She moved down a row of undamaged dials, muttering, “Now where’s the

thermal register—ah. It's slightly elevated already, about a tenth of a degree. I'd guess that within a day the heat buildup will reach uncomfortable levels. Then rapidly become unbearable. Eventually all the circuitry will fry, including the computers that maintain the station's attitude and keep it in a stable orbit. Then Heaven's Footstool will start to wobble, the orbit will decay, and—"

\* \* \* \*

"I think," piped up Master Po, "that we had better conclude our business here sooner rather than later."

We tumbled into the corridor, scooted up the nearest spoke and popped into an empty cell. It belonged to the guy with the images of compassion. We were barely in time. Voices muttered in the ring we'd just left, including that unmistakable bass. Responding to the alarm, they were finding the corpses, the wreckage. A scream rose, a horrible long-drawn-out scream not of fear but of pure rage—the scream of a dying puma that made the hair stand up on the back of my neck.

I edged into the spoke again, every sense straining, followed by our gladiator. One thug stood outside the door to the Hub, gun in hand. The others must have gone inside to view the catastrophe. I checked the little window on the back of my own weapon to see how many shots I had left. Exactly one, and if I missed—Then Black Death intervened. With the speed only a pro can manage, he fell and rolled into the corridor. The guard whirled around and his gun coughed, but now the Champ was taking advantage of the curvature, he was out of sight and the guard—who couldn't have caught more than a glimpse of somebody in motion—went after him. His mistake.

By the time Black Death returned, I'd discarded my empty weapon and was pressing the recognition stud on the guard's. Softly it beeped at me, and then I used it to destroy the sensor on the door to the Hub. Was there a manual override so the CM could get out again? If so, I figured to give him a greeting he wouldn't forget.

The door remained shut, though we heard muffled thumping against the inside.

Sister Jann and the Master joined us. A Ring looked like the last act of *Hamlet*, except that the bodies were floating instead of lying around in heaps. Incidentally, the pseudograv wasn't totally dead, because over time the bodies drifted very slowly downward, like drowned mariners in a very salty sea. Droplets of their blood formed perfect, glistening spheres and for some reason seemed to follow the men they once helped to animate, like the tails of comets.

I said, "I'll stay on guard here, just to make sure nobody escapes. You go ahead, and—"

"Oh no," said Master Po, positively, shaking his head. "No, no. Our brother, Honored Champion Rhee, will do the guard duty. From you, Honored Colonel, I still have one final favor to ask."

I suppose I was looking stupid, for he said, as if that explained everything, “You see, it’s the hour of the Great Meditation. They’re waiting for the CM and me, all the monks, the real monks I mean. The nuns. The guests. And we must not disappoint them.”

So it happened that a few minutes after the slaughter, I entered the amphitheater with Master Po on my arm. My white robe enfolded me, the hood hid my face. I deposited him on his throne and sat down at his feet. He cleared his throat and in that dry, crisp little cricket voice that somehow reached the back of the hall with perfect clarity, made his announcement.

“Brothers and sisters, honored guests, I have sad news to communicate to you. I’m sure you’ve heard an alarm bell ringing and an outcry of grief. As you know, Heaven’s Footstool is very old, as orbital stations go. When I was born, it had already been serving humankind for almost a hundred years. We now have unquestionable evidence that its orbit is at last decaying. Soon this station must plunge into the atmosphere and be consumed.

“Instead of grieving further, let us be grateful in our hearts that we have had this exceptional place so long. When the shuttle arrives tomorrow, our honored guests will be the first to board, then the brothers and sisters. The Chief Monk and I will go last of all. That is as it should be.

“Now I call upon the Chief Monk to lead us for our last devotions in Heaven’s Footstool.”

The lights vanished. Again we were in the primal darkness from which being somehow distills itself—either spontaneously, *wu-wei*, as the scientists and the Taoists claim, or at the word of some sort of Ever-Living One, as the various faiths begotten by my people avow. Deepening my voice, trying for the orotund periods of the Reverend Aung Chai, I declared:

“Thus, my brothers and sisters, do all things begin. This is the original state, the abyss without form and without mode of the waste and wild divinity. And then the light appears.”

\* \* \* \*

In Manypalms Oasis, I spent the first night back beside my wife Anna, hoping never to rest anywhere else until I rested for good. I even welcomed the burden of my own recovered weight, pressing me down, nailing me to the bed.

We got up early, because there was a sight we wanted to see. While showering—my own shower, no vacuum plumbing, water plunging downward the way it was supposed to—I decided to write this narrative. Yeah, I turned in the customary formal report to HQ, with numbered paragraphs, all the customary bureaucratic boilerplate. But it was full of uncomfortable truths, and by the time it sees light outside the Security Forces, I know goddamn well it will have been transformed into something rich and strange. HQ isn’t about to admit publicly that

some of its own people were up to their armpits in the CM's racket.

By contrast, this account is taken direct from the omni I carried, the one that recorded it all, including the times when I made a fool of myself. I intend to file it, along with the memory cube, someplace safe—*not* in the archives of the Security Forces.

After a gulp of coffee, Anna and I set out walking along the edge of the desert, holding hands like young lovers. The sun hadn't yet appeared. The sky was a perfect pale fluorescent blue, the coming day a fiery serpent along the horizon's rim. The bulk of the Mountain Lion reared up to our right; cacti spotted the barrenness, otherworldly shapes that ranged from bristling spheres to long, thin Giacometti sculptures. That was when she chose to ask a question she'd carefully avoided until I'd had a chance to rest and unwind.

"Was the last night in orbit pretty bad?" she wanted to know. "When I first saw you I thought, oh great Tao, he looks like he's been through another Planet Bela."

I took a deep breath, knowing it was better to get the whole story out, and only then try to recover.

"It was bad," I admitted. "Not like Bela, but bad enough. The heat built up faster than we expected. When it hit 36C, everybody was outside their cells, shuffling through the halls, trying to get a breath. Robes were too damn hot, people were half naked, wrapping themselves in wet towels. The bulkheads got hot, the deck got hot, the ceiling got hottest of all. Our prisoners in the Hub turned out all the lights, or maybe they just burned out—good thing they couldn't shut off our air supply too, without shutting off their own.

"Emergency lights came on. When the decks got too hot, people took off their stickums and floated in the red dimness like ghosts trailing their shrouds. Councilor Mmahat started having hysterics, so I punched him out. That was satisfying, but really I was just as scared as he was, only hiding it better. I was thinking: if the shuttle doesn't arrive on time, we'll all be steamed like rice."

She shivered. The desert was cold in the morning, but that wasn't the reason. She put an arm around my waist, hand pressing my *hara*, holding me down to Mother Earth.

I told her about the finish. How the supply shuttle arrived on the dot and locked onto Heaven's Footstool. How Sister Jann and I worked the airlock together until the seals hissed open. People jostled forward, only to meet the shuttle captain, who was armed and going the other way. I told him to jettison his cargo, because over a hundred people had to be jammed into the shuttle somehow. He refused, the perfect bureaucrat, because he was responsible for the cargo until it was signed for. So Master Po signed the manifest in *kanji*, which nobody else could read, and only then would the captain agree to dump the cargo so the rescue could proceed. The

guests surged through the lock, Mmahat supported by his handmaiden, who seemed to be holding up a lot better than her master. The monks followed.

Last act. Everybody was aboard the shuttle except Black Death and me. He trotted up from A Ring, wearing only a loincloth and his stickums, panting like a dog and sweating rivers. His whole torso was covered with a spiderweb of fine white scars. He told me that our prisoners got the door to the Hub open somehow, and he had to shoot two more of them.

“Aung Chai?” I asked.

“Still inside, I guess. The leader didn’t lead. Or he led from the rear.” His grin gave me a flash of gold.

“Come aboard, Honored Champion Rhee.”

I was following him, the last rat leaving the falling star, when guess who came running in from D Ring? The CM was wild-eyed and wringing wet, and waving a pistol. He spotted me standing just inside the shuttle’s loading port and the shuttle’s door closing. He knew we’d cut loose in a few seconds, and with the airlock open every bubble of air in Heaven’s Footstool would rush howling into the void, blowing him with it.

“I’ll die!” he shouted. “I’ll die!”

“The great weakness of the demonic personality,” piped up Master Po’s voice at my elbow, “is that it believes in nothing but its own ego. Then how can it face death and the disintegration of the ego?”

Well, I know how the CM faced it. He didn’t. After all, I insulted pumas by comparing him to them. He didn’t *die* like a lion.

Instead of pumping shots at us in a final gesture of defiance, he ran to the control for the outer door of the airlock and pressed it. It began closing, sealing him inside alive and saving him for an infinitely worse death than being quick-frozen and blown into space. He was willing to be roasted alive in order to live another few minutes, a few hours at most. As some theologians have argued, a demon isn’t cast into hell—he makes it for himself.

Meantime the nuclear steel door of the shuttle’s port closed with a hiss, clamps clanged loose from the flanges of the airlock, and we began to drift away from Orbital Station One, which had been so many things, a place of learning, a place of prayer, and now had one last role to play—a burning tomb.

“What happened to Master Po?” Anna wanted to know.

“Earth’s gravity got him. Or maybe post-traumatic stress. He’d been through a lot, you know. His heart action was weak anyway, and shortly after we landed he passed out—went into syncope, as you medical types say. Sister Jann tried to revive

him, but couldn't. I think that devastated her more than anything else. Afterward, she told me she's leaving the White Monks to join the Mother Teresa Guild and spend the rest of her life caring for the dying."

"She does have a tropism for death, doesn't she?" Anna murmured. "Curious.... On a more practical note, what about your pension?"

"I wouldn't start spending the extra money yet. You've seen the news coverage. They're calling me Colonel Albatross because I always seem to be present at disasters. Councilor Mmahat's promoting a temple at New Angkor dedicated to his pal Aung Chai. By the time the official historians get finished, the CM will be the heroic captain who went down with his ship, and I'll just be the dumb cop who destroyed Heaven's Footstool. After all, that's what I did."

"No, you didn't," she said.

She stamped her size-4 foot on the dusty ground. "*This* is Heaven's Footstool. The real one. And always has been."

She'd told a truth worthy of Lao-tzu. Also she was telling me never to leave it again. I nodded agreement, but then went back to gawking at the sky, as usual. The reason we were out so early was to see a sight announced on last night's news.

"Look," I told her. "Here it comes. Last orbit."

A meteor came flashing out of the dark west. It passed over us toward the fiery east in a long, elegant arc that ended in nothing. Or in Everything—take your pick.