

## THE RULES

by Nancy Kress

The author's forthcoming books include an SF novel from Tor, *Steal Across the Sky*; a bio-thriller, *Dogs*, from Tachyon Publications; and a collection *Nano Comes to Clifford Falls and Other Stories*, from Golden Gryphon Press. In her latest tale for *Asimov's*, Nancy takes a grim look at what it takes to follow...

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Carmody surveyed the house clinging to the side of a steep hill and surrounded by three hundred acres of the haunting gold-green of a New England spring. A modest enough house, considering the owner. Vaguely rustic but not pushing the point. The weather vane on the top was a nice satiric touch. *Which way is the wind blowing for you now, you old reprobate?*

He walked the last of the driveway by himself, over the strenuous objections of his bodyguard. By the time he reached the portico, all of his electronics had ceased working. The door opened before he could push the bell. Somehow, Carmody wasn't surprised to see Tartell himself on the other side.

Tartell sat in an elaborate powerchair with neck braces. In his wasted hands trembled the house remote. The second Carmody stepped inside, saw the layout, and smelled the air, he realized his mistake. This wasn't a rustic home, no matter what it looked like from the outside. Nor was it the secret command headquarters he'd expected. This was a hospital, and Tartell was finally dying.

"Hello, Arthur," Tartell said. "I've been expecting you."

\* \* \* \*

It had begun five days earlier, on Monday evening. In Cleveland, Ohio, Ron DiSarto finished his dinner of Soy Surprise, kissed his wife on the top of her head as she fed the baby in the bunny-patterned high chair, and went through to the living room.

"This is NBC News live from New York, with Tanya Jones—" Tanya Jones, smiling professionally, vanished.

“What the...” DiSarto said. For a long moment his TV filled with snow. Then a picture burst into view, a village of wood-and-mud huts in a bare, sere landscape. A voice-over said urgently, “This is Nakmu, in Kenya, and this is Saya.” Close-up of a one-armed child with a heartbreaking smile. “Saya was mutilated by the band of robbers who burned down her hut and killed her parents.”

DiSarto frowned. Okay, it was a human interest story, or maybe a commercial for one of those do-good outfits like Amnesty International. He called, “Brenda, bring me a beer, honey, will ya?”

The commercial said, “Saya’s life was saved by a donation from Mr. and Mrs. James Sellers of Atlanta, Georgia, and a prosthetic arm is being paid for by Ms. Cassie DuForte of New York City.”

DiSarto sighed and reached for the remote to change the channel. He wanted real news. Although, come to think of it, it was a bit odd that individual people were being mentioned like that on—

The exact same program was on ABC and CBS.

“Brenda!” DiSarto called but she was already beside him, juggling the baby and the beer.

“Don’t yell, I’m right here.”

“Look at this! It’s on all three networks, exactly the same!”

“—medical clinic run by the Sisters of Charity Mission.” Shots of children huddled two and three to a bed, of empty supply shelves. “—three hundred doses of penicillin, paid for by Mr. Carl Venters of London, England. Saya—”

“And it’s not ending!” DiSarto said. “This is no commercial. Do you think somebody is actually fucking with the airwaves?”

“—new dress, her only one, paid for by—”

“The FCC must be having a cow!”

“That poor little girl,” Brenda said, patting the baby on the back. “God, she’s cute. Ronnie, we could afford the cost of a second dress for her. How much could a dress cost?”

\* \* \* \*

In the WRKC control booth, an NBC affiliate in Tampa, Florida, technicians worked frantically at their stations. “I can’t override it!”

“What do you mean ‘can’t’? Get that damn thing off the air and Tanya Jones back on!” The chief engineer pushed the tech aside. The signal was coming in from the outside and somehow it had seized, or replaced, WRKC’s frequency. How the hell could anything...?

The engineer tried everything he knew, including cutting off the live feed from New York and substituting an old episode of *Gilligan’s Island*. Nothing worked. *Saya* and the African village and the Sisters of Charity played for twenty minutes, ending with a title screen:

COMPASSION CHANNEL

SEND DONATIONS DIRECTLY TO

SISTERS OF CHARITY MEDICAL CLINIC

ALL CURRENCIES WELCOME!

YOU WILL BE TOLD EXACTLY WHAT YOUR HELP PURCHASES!

With an address in Kenya.

The title screen stayed on for fifteen seconds.

“Chief, we got New York on the phone!”

Thirty seconds.

“They say other affiliates got the same signal!”

Forty-five seconds.

“Not just in the East, either—maybe every station in the country!”

Sixty full seconds, an eternity in television. Of an unauthorized still shot! On his station!

No technology could do that. The chief engineer stared blankly at the Mission address.

\* \* \* \*

“We know the signal comes through Chinese satellites,” Carmody said, “and of course with the political situation the way it is, we can’t touch them.”

“Really?” Tartell said. “Coffee, Arthur?”

“Yes, please.” Carmody was curious to see who would serve. It was a young Hispanic girl that he recognized from StarCorps’ extensive surveillance: Juanita Perez. Legal Mexican immigrant, minimal English, IQ of about ninety. The coffee was excellent.

“I regret I can’t join you,” Tartell said. “Medical restrictions.”

“You must have given the Chinese an enormous chunk of change.”

Tartell merely smiled.

“Total override of all news shows for twenty minutes for the last five nights, right up until it was time for sports and weather. Which genius at which of your subsidiary companies developed the software, Glenn?”

Another smile.

“Oh, for God’s sake,” Carmody snapped, “We know your tech can prevent or erase any recording inside this house. How stupid do you think I am?”

“Pretty stupid,” Tartell said, “but not about technology.”

Carmody held up five fingers. “Kenya. Morocco. Argentina. Uzbekistan. Myanmar. One per night, each focused on a particular dirt-poor village, a particular child, and a charitable organization absolutely above suspicion. Superb production values, great story-telling. Hundreds of thousands of dollars pouring in, and you now have 88 percent of Americans watching your illegal broadcasts, breathless to see if the FCC can stop you.”

Tartell had a sudden breathing fit. His head jerked within the powerchair braces and his face turned ashy blue. Carmody stood and Juanita rushed in, but by the time she got to Tartell, his chair had snaked a gas mask up over the old man’s face. Tartell breathed deeply and the

gasping subsided.

“Sorry,” Tartell wheezed.

Carmody sat down again, leaning forward in his seat. Tartell’s dying was not going to deter anything. “Glenn—what the hell are you really after?”

\* \* \* \*

Sister H el ene-Marie sank to her arthritic knees before the statue of Notre M ere B enie in the dim, mud-walled chapel. *Enfin*, it was a miracle! Clothes for the children, drugs for the clinic, a computer with a satellite uplink to get real answers from real doctors! Never had she dared pray for such riches. When she thought of the lives this could save, tears came to her old eyes. And the food pouring in—not soysynth but real food, such as Sister H el ene-Marie had not tasted in years and the poor villagers, never.

*“Je vous salue, Marie, pleine de graces...”*

“There’s one in here!”

Light exploded into the chapel. Someone said, “Sorry, Sister, we just ... uh ... le crew...”

*Merde!*

Sister H el ene-Marie clasped her hands in penance, even though she hadn’t spoken the curse aloud. But these people ... they were everywhere! So many people, so many cameras ... Nakmu had never seen so many visitors, nor could it support so many. With them came litter and waste and confusion and intrusion ... and money.

Ashamed of her ungrateful thoughts, Sister H el ene-Marie struggled to her feet and forced a smile. These strangers in their desert suits and Netspecs were also God’s children.

“Just a few quick shots, Sister, just go right back to praying...”

The hot dry wind from the desert, which had been fertile grassland when Sister H el ene-Marie had come to this part of Kenya, blew through the open chapel door. The omnipresent dust swirled over her trousers, into her eyes. But obediently she knelt once more. This, too, must be part of God’s plan.

“Sister, do you think you could cry from joy? Arnie, move that light over there....”

Sister H el ene-Marie prayed for patience.

\* \* \* \*

“What are you really after?” Carmody repeated.

Tartell said, “Maybe those broadcasts—whoever’s they are—are just trying to help people find their souls.”

“Bullshit.”

“I hear,” Tartell wheezed, his sunken blue eyes sly, “that 312 American families have offered to adopt Saya.”

Carmody said dryly, “People can get a little hysterical when admiring their own compassion. But we’re finding it a bit hard to believe you’re expending your fortune, plus the technological breakthrough of the century, merely to get a handful of third-world orphans into good homes.”

“Well, you would find that hard to believe, wouldn’t you?”

“Don’t play games with me, Glenn. They’re all desert communities. All five of them.”

“Man-made deserts, you mean.”

“Call them what you will. Do you know how many people have traveled to Nakmu and the other four villages in the last week? Impossible to check them all out. News organizations from around the world. Telecom companies. Government security agencies. None of them care about the villages—they care about how you did it.”

“Oh, surely not,” Tartell said. “After all, they don’t suspect that it was I who allegedly ‘did it.’ If that were so, they’d all be camped here on my doorstep. Instead, there’s only you.”

“I know you, Glenn. I’ve tracked you for forty years.”

“Yes, you have,” Tartell said mildly. “More coffee, Arthur?”

“It’s the deserts, isn’t it? And what next?”

“Juanita could bring some cake, if you’d like.”

Moving very slowly, so as to alarm no security equipment, Carmody drew a folder from his suit pocket.

\* \* \* \*

The sixth night, Saturday, Ron and Brenda DiSarto invited some friends over for the broadcast. It had become a game. “Bet you tonight the feds shut down the Compassion Channel,” Ron said.

“You’re on,” said Maddie Lomax. “What odds you giving?”

Ted Smith said, “In Las Vegas it’s three to one for shut-down.”

“I’ll give you two to one,” Maddie said. “Ten dollars.”

“You got it. Brenda, honey, we’re ten dollars richer.”

The three couples circled the DiSartos’ TV, shouting “Four ... three ... two ... one ... go!”

“This is NBC News live from New York with Tanya Jones—” Tanya Jones, her expression somewhere between resigned and outraged, vanished.

“Give me my twenty!” Maddie crowed, as the screen filled with a village of wood-and-mud huts in a bare, sere landscape. The voice-over said, “This is Nakmu, in Kenya, this is Saya...

“Hey, it’s a repeat,” Jim Lomax said.

“No, it’s not,” Brenda said. “Listen!”

“...and this is the reason that, until recently, Saya was starving. This is the New Kenyan Desert.” Shot of desolate blowing sand. “But twenty years ago, the Great Kenyan Desert looked like this.” Grasslands, a town, a shallow river, healthy children splashing and shouting.

Maddie said, “Oh, God, it’s one of those boring global-warming specials.”

“This is Peoria, Illinois, right now,” the voice-over said, “and this is

what Peoria will look like in twenty years as the American Midwest undergoes desertification.”

“Turn it *off*,” Maddie said.

“No, wait,” Karen Smith said. “My sister lives in Peoria.”

“Peoria.” A partial desert. “New York.” The water, already rising over Battery Park, flooded Wall Street. “Kansas City.” Another creeping desert. “And this will be Washington, D.C.”—and the screen exploded into sound so loud and light so bright that Brenda screamed. A huge mushroom cloud filled the screen, followed by a scan of destroyed buildings, writhing bodies, and miles of nothing but rubble. “Does anyone,” said the voice-over, “really believe that if resources get much scarcer, it won’t lead to nuclear war? If you were a third-world country with the bomb and all your children were starving, what would you do? Anything. You’d do anything at all.”

“That’s no National Geographic Special!” Ron said. “Jesus!”

“And the deserts are the *key*. Reverse desertification and maybe we can feed everyone again, water everyone, provide homes for everyone. Maybe. The experts say that’s no longer possible, that the climate changes from global warming are irreversible. But maybe ... just maybe ... they’re wrong.”

\* \* \* \*

Carmody opened the folder, a simple blue paper with no markings, and laid it flat on Tartell’s lap. The old man lowered his chin to gaze downward at the two pieces of paper side by side. One slid onto the floor and Carmody bent to replace it. “Can you read at that distance, Glenn?”

“Well enough,” Tartell said.

After a moment Carmody said, “You knew we’d find this.”

“Yes.”

“How did you build these companies, Arthur? We know *when*, and *who’s* at each, but not *how*. There are no paper trails, no Net traces—and considering that you’ve hired not one but three Nobel Laureates in India, that’s a little amazing. How did you do it?”



“It cost a great deal.”

“I can imagine. What are they working on? No, I don’t imagine you’d tell me. But the TV programs that you’ve got everyone so worked up about—they’re just initial PR, aren’t they? Little maimed Saya and darling Ahmed and wells for Argentine villages and all the rest. Just to secure your audience and get them to trust you. It’s the deserts you’re after. But why? They’re just a symptom.”

“Using the word ‘symptom’ admits that you see a problem,” Tartell said.

Carmody smiled. “Or an opportunity. What’s going to happen, Arthur?”

“Wrong tense, I’m afraid. It’s happening already.”

\* \* \* \*

Sister H el ene-Marie needed to get away. Simply *needed* to. These people—they were everywhere! And now, added to all the rest, had come an American couple of truly astonishing persistence, who wanted to adopt Saya. They had arrived in a private plane this morning, they seemed to have more money than the Holy Father, and they did not believe, or pretended to not believe, that Sister H el ene-Marie could not arrange an adoption with a single phone call to Nairobi. To what was left of Nairobi.

She didn’t put on a full desert suit. Her flowing white trouser-habit would do for the short time she would be gone. But she did don boots and mask. The ultraviolet indicator was very high today, as was the CO2 level, and those nasty little *betes*, the sandworms, were spreading like sin.

Feeling a little sinful herself, Sister H el ene-Marie ducked out the back door of the Mission kitchen and, shielded by the outhouses and then by the ridiculous bulk of the visitors’ planes and helicopters, walked rapidly out into the desert. So dangerous, so vast—and so peaceful. Had not Our Lord spent fruitful time praying in the desert? Not that Sister H el ene-Marie could spend forty days here, of course, because, for one thing, the sand worms made it very dangerous to sit down.

But there was someone sitting down, in the distance.

She lifted her arm to shade her eyes. No, the figure, in full desert suit, was not sitting down but rather was crouching. It was difficult to see more

because the sand and rock were so bright...

Too bright.

Sister H el ene-Marie could hardly bear to look to the west. The desert there was much, much brighter than to the east or south or north. To be certain of that, she turned in a slow circle, squinting above her mask. *Much* brighter.

The figure straightened and raised an arm. One of the desert rovers, ubiquitous since this last week, rolled into view over the horizon.

The west grew brighter still.

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Tartell said, "Before you go any farther, Arthur, let me match your impressive sleuthing, if you don't mind a—" Another gasping fit took him.

This one, Carmody could see, was much worse. Tartell turned purple, even after the oxygen mask shot up to his face. His whole frail body twitched and a terrible noise, low and inhuman, came from the back of his throat. *Death rattle*, Carmody thought, jumping to his feet. Juanita rushed in, followed by a white-coated man, and now Carmody could hear an alarm ringing in back rooms of the building.

The doctor adjusted several dials on Tartell's chair and, before Carmody's very eyes, the old man returned to life. So it was not oxygen alone in that canister. But surely stimulants and brainies were dangerous to someone so weak ... Tartell was throwing the last of his life onto an artificially enhanced bonfire, so that it might burn brightly for the length of this interview.

Nothing could have shown better the lengths to which the old man was prepared to go.

Ice slid down Carmody's spine.

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"...what will happen to Saya." The TV screen showed the Sisters of Charity Mission as a ghost town. Desert wind blew between abandoned, eroded buildings. Blew and blew and blew, swirling the sand. The camera pulled back for a long shot, and the desert kept growing and growing, until

the shot was so high that features were barely distinguishable. Then a sudden cut to a close-up: the skeleton of a child, half-covered with sand.

“Oh, cheesy,” Maddie Lomax said.

“But...” Brenda hesitated. “It could happen. If the desert really *is* going to cover more and more land....”

Jim Lomax said sarcastically, “Like you haven’t heard that before?”

Ron DiSarto didn’t like Jim speaking to his wife in that tone of voice. Ron said harshly, “It’s different when you see it like this!”

And, all of a sudden, it was.

“Well, somebody should do something,” Karen Smith said. “Before it’s really too late. My sister in Peoria ... and that bomb in D.C....” She shuddered.

“It’s just a simulation!” Jim said.

“Even so,” Karen said, and both her husband and Brenda DiSarto nodded.

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Tartell, his color almost normal, waved off Juanita and the doctor, who both left reluctantly. Tartell pressed a button on his powerchair and a wallscreen lit up. Carmody studied the display, hiding his shock.

He’d underestimated the situation. Tartell knew about StarCorps’ water irrigation companies and salvage operations, but Carmody had expected that. Carmody had even expected his old adversary to know about the land buys through the Panamanian dummy corporation, all that cheap coastal land under a foot of water. The owners couldn’t afford to build dikes or drainage pumps ... but StarCorps could. However, Carmody hadn’t expected Tartell to know about the food-supply buy-ups in ten famished countries, buy-ups that had so artificially inflated the price of food. Or the hostile take-overs of six biotech companies on the verge of genetically engineered “rescue crops” that now would not see market. And certainly not to know about the political alliances to block organic climate modulators in the British Isles, which was now satisfactorily advancing into a state inhospitable for sheep. StarCorps had big plans for an economically destabilized England.

There were so many ways to make a profit when a civilization crashed.

Carmody got out, "All right, Arthur. I have very broad authorization to ensure silence. How much do you want?"

"You better wait until you see something else," Tartell said and pressed another button on his chair. The screen flashed into moving life.

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In her youth Sister H el ene-Marie had been a good walker. Now she covered briskly the miles to the edge of the bright-white area to the west. It was a risk, of course, but she had a half canteen of water at her waist and her brand-new radio phone in her pocket.

As she neared the bright-white, it shone even more. Sister H el ene-Marie's sunglasses were inadequate, but they were all she had. Shielding her eyes with her arm, she strode on. She wasn't sure what she expected to find, but certainly not what she did.

The bright-white consisted of millions of tiny particles. Carefully Sister H el ene-Marie got to her knees and scooped up a handful. Brittle, brilliantly iridescent, in the shadow of her hand they looked like nothing at all. But lying all together on the ground, they shone with reflected sunlight like ... like ... she didn't know what.

The edge of the bright-white was growing.

Even as she crouched on her heels, holding up her rough habit so that only her boot soles touched the desert floor, the bright-white edged visibly closer to her thickly shod toes. And overhead she heard the first of the news helicopters, swooping in lower for a closer look.

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"They're excreted by genetically engineered micro-organisms that replicate at a fantastic rate," Tartell said. His voice had become thick, the words forced out by sheer will. "With sufficiently strong sunlight, they pull nutrients from rock and sand, and can manage a generative division every fifteen minutes. Nearly all their energy not going for reproduction goes to secrete a thin, top-side external coating. Think of nacre created by marine animals, but much, much faster. The albedo of the coating is 10 percent

greater than ice. The area of desert land that they will cover should, in less than six months, equal the melted ice sheets on Antarctica and Greenland. Polar ice is so reflective that 90 percent of the sunlight that strikes it is reflected back into space, taking its heat with it. As a counter-effect to—”

“I know what effect it will have,” Carmody snapped. Jesus! Trapped greenhouse gases were what was warming the planet. If enough energy radiated back into space—something no one had thought possible—if *that* happened...

“The feds will swoop down on you like all the furies of hell,” Carmody said. “The UN. The International Emergency Effort Alliance. The ... Good God, Arthur! You’ll cover the whole planet in mother-of-pearl!”

“No,” Tartell gasped. “There’s a terminator gene built in. It’ll only cover the deserts.”

“You can’t do this! Public opinion alone—”

“Are you sure about that?”

\* \* \* \*

The DiSartos’ guests had adjourned to the poker table. Beer, chips, hearty camaraderie to cover the awkward moments in the living room. Ron had even left the TV on; Maddie Lomax liked to hear *Wheel of Fortune*.

“Raise you a quarter,” Jim said.

“I fold,” from Brenda.

“See you and call,” Ted said. “Read ‘em and weep.”

“Your pot,” Ron said. “Does anybody want—”

“—interrupt this program for breaking news!” trumpeted the TV. “According to satellite photos just released, a strange phenomenon is spreading over portions of deserts in Asia, South America, and ... Preliminary reports say that a blinding white organic cover—”

“Aliens!” gasped Maddie, just as the newscast was overridden by the Compassion Channel logo.

“Hey, it’s not time for that again,” Ted said.

“*Look at this,*” the voice-over urged, showing the same bright, white field as the newscast. “It’s like seashells, made by tiny desert-living animals. But it reflects like ice. You can see that, can’t you? It’s reflecting heat back into space, so that the Earth’s deserts won’t advance any more. This white coating is saving Saya’s life in Kenya.

“And Ahmed’s in Morocco.” Close-up.

“And Miguel’s in Argentina.

“And Ekaterina’s in Uzbekistan.

“And Ah Par’s in Myanmar.

“And *yours*. Because with this reflecting shield to replace Earth’s lost ice sheets, maybe—just maybe—we all will have a chance to avoid the disaster you saw earlier.” Replay, eerie in its soundlessness, of the horror of a nuked Washington, D.C.

“Is this white cover a risk? In some ways, maybe, like all new technology. Is it an unauthorized risk we have to take? Yes. It breaks the rules, but desperate times call for radical action. We need to do this—for the children.

“*Tell your leaders that.*”

The broadcast then repeated, word-for-word and image-for-image. As the third repetition began, Ron rose and abruptly clicked off the television.

Maddie shrugged. “So ... not aliens. Sue me.”

“I want to know more about this so-called ‘white cover,’” Jim said. “Where the hell did it come from?”

“Well, at least somebody’s doing something,” Karen said.

“But without any proper authority! You heard them—nobody authorized this! It’s against law and order!”

Ted said, “Who *could* authorize something like that?”

No one knew.

\* \* \* \*

“Why?” Carmody said, softly. His first anger had passed, morphing into the pragmatism that had made his career what it was. This was happening; it would have to be dealt with. Hundreds of billions of dollars were at stake. StarCorps would need business strategies, scientists, spin masters, all of it, and need it fast. Carmody had urgent calls to make. But he delayed a few precious seconds, because he felt genuine curiosity. “Why, Glenn? This wasn’t how you lived your life. Wasn’t ever among your goals.”

“No.” The old man was visibly weaker as the stimulants both wore off and took their toll.

“Then *why?*”

\* \* \* \*

Sister H el ene-Marie started the long walk back to Nakmu, a few bits of the bright-white clutched in her fingers. She still didn’t know what the bits were, or what they might be for. Undoubtedly government officials would, in the Lord’s good time, tell her. She would listen—but only to a point. They knew much, these government officials. But on one critical matter they were wrong, very wrong. They thought that each man’s destiny depended on what happened to the Earth.

When, in Jesus’ truth, it was the other way around.

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“Pirate broadcast signal has ceased again,” the WRKC chief engineer said wearily. “Resume regularly scheduled programming.”

*Hah*, thought the equally weary tech. The chief should know better. Nothing was regular about any of this. But maybe that was ... a good thing? “Regular” hadn’t been working well so far. Not even a little bit.

He could still see, in his mind’s eye, the radiating white cover on the dead desert.

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“Law and order,” Jim repeated, nodding vigorously.

Brenda glanced at Ron, then gazed at the closed door of the baby's tiny bedroom. Ron knew what she was thinking, just as if she'd spoken aloud. Those other kids were on her mind, the kids with the weird foreign names. Ron was surprised to realize that he remembered them all: Saya. Ahmed. Ekaterina. Miguel. Ah Par.

Brenda said hesitantly, "Maybe you do have to have law and order. Yes. But ... if those particles really can send a lot of heat back into space ... really can save lives..." She stopped, embarrassed. Brenda didn't like to antagonize anybody. But her chin rose.

Ron had always trusted Brenda's instincts. Not an intellectual, his sweet wife, but *sound*. That was the word. Sound.

"Well," Ron said defiantly, looking from the blank TV to Jim. *Desperate times call for radical action*. "Well, *I* think it's a good idea, too. And I'm going to call my congressman in the morning."

Jim said, "Do you even know who he is?"

Ron didn't. But he would find out.

\* \* \* \*

"Why, Glenn?" Carmody said.

Tartell was having trouble breathing. "Because ... life isn't ... same as ... death. Different ... rules."

"Sentimental claptrap."

Tartell smiled. "Wait ... until you ... get there."

Carmody didn't even bother to answer that one. He saw himself out, not stopping even when alarm bells started behind him and people again rushed into the room that he'd just left. Carmody vacated the dim house, cell phone already in hand, and strode rapidly toward the car, watching for the moment the phone picked up a tower.

But for just a second, as the too bright sunlight struck his face and the CO<sub>2</sub>-clogged air hit his lungs, a shiver ran over him. His own death—what would be the "rules" for that? The goals? For just a moment it seemed that it already surrounded him, that inevitable moment that comes to everyone,



anticipated or not. The ultimate desert.

He shrugged off the moment and started making business calls..