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Cover by David A. Hardy

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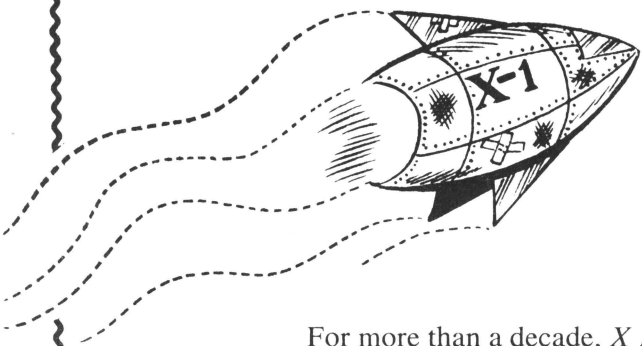


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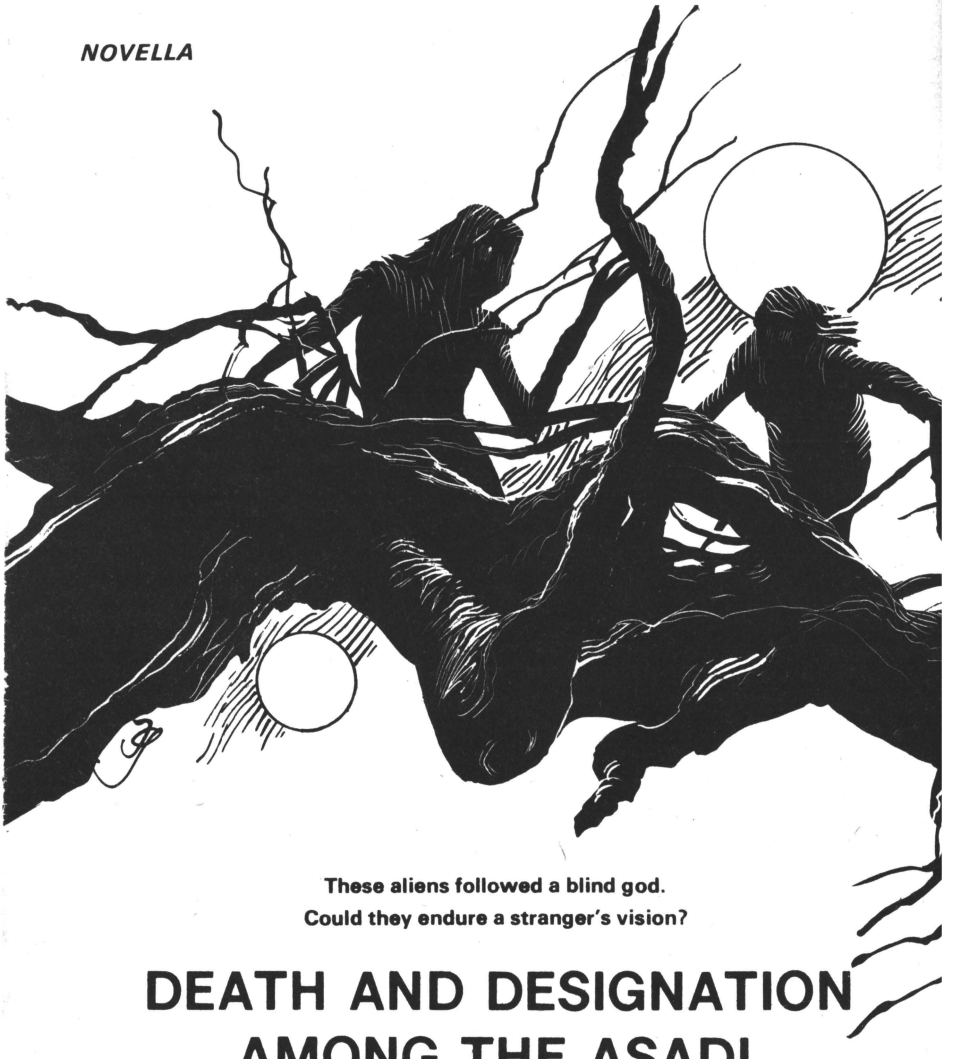

**These aliens followed a blind god.**
**Could they endure a stranger's vision?**

# DEATH AND DESIGNATION AMONG THE ASADI

**MICHAEL BISHOP**

*Being sundry notes for an abortive ethnography of the Asadi of BoskVeld, fourth planet of the Denebolan system, as compiled from the journals (both private and professional), official reports, private correspondence, and tapes of Egan Chaney, cultural xenologist, by his friend and associate, Thomas Benedict.*

**Preliminaries: reverie and departure**

*From the private journals of Egan Chaney:* There are no more pygmies. Intellectual pygmies perhaps, but no more of those small, alert, sway-backed black people of necessarily amenable disposition who lived in the dead-and-gone Ituri rain forests—a people, by the way, whom I do not wish to sentimentalize (though perhaps I may). Pygmies no longer exist—they have been dead for centuries. But on the evening before the evening when Benedict dropped me into the singing fronds of the Synesthesia Wild under three bitter moons they lived again for me. I spent that last evening in base camp rereading Turnbull's *The Forest People*. Dreaming, I lived with the people of the Ituri. I underwent *nkumbi*, the ordeal of circumcision. I dashed beneath the belly of an elephant and jabbed that monstrous creature's flesh with my spear. Finally I took part in the festival of the *molimo* with the ancient and clever BaMbuti. All in all, I suppose, my reading was a sentimental exercise. Turnbull's book had been the first and most vivid ethnography I had encountered in my undergraduate career—and even on that last night in base camp on the hostile world of BoskVeld, a planet circling the star Denebola, his book sang in my head like the forbidden lyrics of the pygmies' *molimo*, like the poignant melodies of BoskVeld's moons.

A sentimental exercise.

What good my reading would do me among the inhabitants of the Synesthesia Wild, I had no idea. Probably none. But I was going out there and on the evening before my departure, the day before my submersion, I lost myself in the forests of another time—knowing that for the next several months I would be the waking and wakeful prisoner of the hominoids who were my subjects. We had killed off all the primitive peoples of Earth, but on paradoxical BoskVeld I still had a job. And when Benedict turned the copter under those three antique-gold moons and flew it back to base camp like a crepitating dragonfly, I knew that I had to pursue that job. The jungle, however, was bleak—and strange—and nightmarishly real; and all I could think was *There are no more pygmies, there are no more pygmies, there are no*

**Methods: a dialogue**

*From the professional notebooks of Egan Chaney:* I was not the first Earthman to go among the Asadi, but I was the first to live with them for an extended period of time. The first of us to encounter the Asadi was Oliver Bow Aurm Frasier, the man who gave these hominoids their name—perhaps on analogy with the word *Ashanti*, the name of an African people who still exist,

but more likely from the old Arabic word *asad* meaning lion.

Oliver Bow Aurm Frasier had reported that the Asadi of Bosk-Veld had no speech as we understood this concept, but that at one time they had possessed a "written language." He used both these words loosely, I'm sure, and the anomaly of writing without speech was one that I hoped to throw some light on. In addition, Frasier had said that an intrepid ethnographer might hope to gain acceptance among the Asadi by a singularly unorthodox stratagem. I will describe this stratagem by setting down here an imaginary conversation that I could have had with Benedict (but didn't).

BENEDICT: Listen, Chaney [I, by the way, am Egan Chaney], what do you plan on doing after I drop you all by your lonesome into the Synesthesia Wild? You aren't thinking of using the standard anthropological ploy, are you? You know, marching right into the Asadi hamlet and exclaiming, "I am the Great White God of whom your legends foretell."

CHANEY: Not exactly. As a matter of fact, I'm not going into the Asadi clearing until morning.

BENEDICT: Then why the hell do I have to copter you into the Wild in the middle of the goddamn night?

CHANEY: To humor a lovable eccentric. No, No, Benedict, don't revile me. The matter is fairly simple. Frasier said that the Asadi community clearing is absolutely vacant during the night—not a soul remains there between dusk and sunrise. The community members return to the clearing only when Denebola has grown fat and coppery on the eastern horizon.

BENEDICT: And you want to be dropped at night?

CHANEY: Yes, to give the noise of your copter a chance to fade and be forgotten and to afford me the opportunity of walking into the Asadi clearing with the first morning arrivals. Just as if I belonged there.

BENEDICT: Oh, indeed—yes. You'll be very inconspicuous, Chaney. You'll be accepted immediately—even though the Asadi go about naked, have eyes that look like the murky glass in the bottoms of old bottles and boast great natural collars of silver or tawny fur. Oh, indeed—yes.

CHANEY: Well, Frasier called the stratagem that I hope to employ "acceptance through social invisibility." The principle is again a simple one. I must feign the role of an Asadi pariah. This tactic gains me a kind of acceptance because Asadi mores demand that the pariah's presence be totally ignored. He is outcast not in a physical sense, but in a psychological one. Consequently my presence in the clearing will be a negative one, an admission I'll readily make—but in some ways this negative existence will permit me more latitude of movement and observation than if I were an Asadi in good standing.

BENEDICT: Complicated, Chaney, very complicated. It leaves me with two burning questions. How does one go about achieving pariahhood and what happens to the anthropologist's crucial role as a gatherer of folk material—songs, cosmologies, ritual incantations? I mean, won't

your "invisibility" deprive you of your cherished one-to-one relationships with those Asadi members who might be most informative?

CHANEY: I'll take your last question first. Frasier told us that the Asadi don't communicate through speech. That in itself pretty well limits me to observation. No need to worry about songs or incantations. Their cosmologies I'll have to infer from what I see. As for their methods of interpersonal communication—even should I discover what these are, I may not be physically equipped to use them. The Asadi aren't human, Ben.

BENEDICT: I'm aware. Frequently, listening to you, I begin to think speechlessness might be a genetically desirable condition. All right. Enough. What about attaining to pariahhood?

CHANEY: We still don't know very much about which offenses warrant this extreme punishment. However, we do know how the Asadi distinguish the outcast from the other members of the community.

BENEDICT: How?

CHANEY: They shave the offender's collar of fur. Since all Asadi possess these manes, regardless of sex or age, this method of distinguishing the pariah is universal and certain.

BENEDICT: Then you're already a pariah?

CHANEY: I hope so. I just have to remember to shave every day. Frasier believed that his hairlessness—he was nearly bald—was what allowed him to make those few discoveries about the Asadi we now possess. But he arrived among them during a period of strange inactivity and had to content himself with studying the artifacts of an older Asadi culture, the remains of a huge winged pagoda in the Synesthesia Wild. Too, I've heard that Frasier didn't really have the kind of patience that's essential for field work.

BENEDICT: Just a minute. Back up a little. Couldn't one of the Asadi be shorn of his mane accidentally? He'd be an outcast through no fault of his own, wouldn't he? An artificial pariah?

CHANEY: It's not very likely. Frasier reported that the Asadi have no natural enemies—that, in fact, the Synesthesia Wild seems to be almost completely devoid of any life beyond the Asadi themselves. In any case, the loss of one's collar through whatever means is considered grounds for punishment. That's the only offense that Frasier pretty well confirmed. What the others are, as I said, we really don't know.

BENEDICT: If the jungles are devoid of other life—save inedible botanicals—Chaney, what do the poor Asadi live on?

CHANEY: We don't know that either.

BENEDICT: Well, listen, Chaney—what do you plan to live on? I mean, even Malinowski condescended to eat now and again. At least, that's what I hear.

CHANEY: That's where you come in, Ben. I'm going to carry in sufficient rations to see me through a week. But each week for the next several months you'll have to make a food and supply drop in the place where you first set me down. I've

already picked the spot—I know its distance and direction from the Asadi clearing. It'll be expensive, but the people in base camp—Eisen in particular—have agreed that my work is necessary. You won't be forced to defend the drops.

BENEDICT: But why so often? Why once a week?

CHANEY: That's Eisen's idea, not mine. Since I told him I was going to refuse any sort of contact at all during my stay with the Asadi—any contact with you people, that is—he decided that the weekly drop would be the best way to make certain, occasionally, that I'm still alive.

BENEDICT: A weapon, Chaney?

CHANEY: No, no weapons. Besides food I'll take in nothing but my notebooks, a recorder, some reading material and maybe a little something to get me over the inevitable periods of depression.

BENEDICT: A radio? In case you need immediate help?

CHANEY: No. I may get ill once or twice, but I'll always have the flares if things get really bad. Placenol and bourbon, too. Nevertheless, I insist on complete separation from any of the affairs of base camp until my stay among the Asadi is over.

BENEDICT: Why are you doing this? I don't mean why did Eisen decide we ought to study the Asadi so minutely. I mean, why are you, Egan Chaney, committing yourself to this ritual sojourn among an alien people? There are one or two others at base camp who might have gone if they had had the chance.

CHANEY: *Because, Ben, there are no more pygmies . . .*

End of simulated dialogue on initial methods. I suppose I have made Benedict out to be a much more inquisitive fellow than he actually is. All those well-informed questions! In truth, Ben is taciturn and sly at once. But when you read the notes for this ethnography, Ben, remember that I let you get in one or two unanswered hits at me. Can friendship go deeper? As a man whose life's work involves accepting a multitude of perspectives, I believe I have played you fair, Ben.

Forgive me my trespass.

**Contact and assimilation**

*From the private journals of Egan Chaney:* Thinking *There are no more pygmies there are no more pygmies there are no . . .* I lay down beneath a tree that resembled an outsized rubber plant and I slept. I slept without dreaming—or else I had grotesque nightmares that, upon waking, I suppressed. A wrist alarm woke me. The light from Denebola had begun to coppercoat the edges of the leaves in the Synesthesia Wild. Still, dawn had not quite come. The world was silent. I refused to let the Wild distort my senses. I did not wish to cut myself on the crimsons and the yellows and the orchid blues. Neither did I have any desire to taste the first slight treacherous breeze nor to hear the dawn detonate behind my retinas. Therefore I shook myself awake and began walking. Beyond the brutal need of having to maintain my direction I paid no attention to my surroundings. The clearing where the Asadi would soon con-

gregate compelled me toward it. That fateful place drew me on. Everything else slipped out of my consciousness—blazing sky, moist earth, singing fronds. Would the Asadi accept me among them—on external signs alone—as they negatively accept their outcasts? Upon this hope I had founded nearly six months of future activity—not a whit of my master strategy had I based on the genuine substance of this condition. Externality vs. substance. It was too late to reverse either my aims or the direction of my footsteps. Let the doubt die. Pattern the sound of your footfalls after the pattern of falling feet—those falling feet that converge with you upon the clearing where the foliage parts and the naked Asadi assemble like a convention of unabashed mutes. I so patterned the sounds of my footfalls. Glimpsed through rents in the fretwork of leaves, an Asadi's flashing arm. Seen as a shadow among other shadows on the ground, the forward-moving image of an Asadi's maned head. The Wild trembled with morning movement. I was surrounded by unseen and half-seen communicants, all of us converging. And then the foliage parted and we were together on the open jungle floor — the Asadi clearing, the holy ground perhaps, the unadorned territory of gregariousness and communion, the focal point of Asadi life. The awesome odor of this life—so much milling life—assailed me. No matter. I adjusted. Great gray-fleshed creatures, their heads heavy with violent drapings of fur, milled about me, turned about one another, came back to me, sought confirmation of my essential whatness. I could do nothing but wait. I waited. My temples pulsed. Denebola shot poniards of light through the trees. Hovering, then moving away, averting their murky eyes the Asadi—individual by individual, I noticed—made their decision and that first indispensable victory was in my grasp:

I was ignored!

**Xenology: in-the-field report**

*From the professional tapes of the library of the Third Denebolan Expedition:* I have been here two weeks. Last night I picked up the second of Benedict's food drops. It is fortunate that they come on time, that they arrive on the precise coordinates where Benedict first set me down. The Asadi do not eat as we do and the Synesthesia Wild provides me with foodstuffs neither in the way of edible vegetation nor in that of small game animals. I cannot tolerate the plants. As the biochemists in base camp predicted, they induce almost immediate vomiting or their furry bitterness dissuades me from swallowing them. There are no animals. The jungle is alive, but with writhing fronds and with the heat, the steam, the infrasonic vibrancy of continual photosynthesis. Rainwater I can drink. Thank God for that, even though I boil it before truly considering it potable.

I have reached a few purely speculative conclusions about the Asadi.

With them nothing is certain, nothing is fixed. Their behavior, though it must necessarily have a

deep-seated social function, does not make sense to me. At this stage, I keep telling myself, that's to be expected. You must persist, you must refuse to be discouraged. Therefore, I extrapolated from my own condition to theirs. I asked myself, *If you can't subsist on what BoskVeld gives you—how do the Asadi?* My observations in this area (and for fear of Benedict's kindly ridicule I hesitate to put it this way) have borne fruit, have given me the intellectual nourishment to combat despair. Nothing else on BoskVeld has offered me consolation.

In answer to the question, *What do the Asadi eat?* I can say, quite without fear of contradiction, *Everything that I do not.* They appear to be herbivorous. In fact, they go beyond the unsurprising consumption of plants: they eat wood. Yes, wood. I have seen them strip bark from the rubber trees and ingest it without qualm. I have watched them eat pieces of the very heart of young saplings, wood of what we would consider a prohibitive hardness—even for creatures equipped to process it internally.

Three days ago I boiled down several pieces of bark, the sort of bark that I had seen many of the young Asadi consume. I boiled it until the pieces were limply pliable. I managed to chew the bark for several semi-profitable minutes and, finally, to swallow it. Checking my stool nearly a day later I found that this meal had gone right through me. What, after all, does bark consist of? Cellulose. Indigestible cellulose. And yet the Asadi, who possess teeth not much different from ours, eat wood and also digest it. How?

Again I have to speculate. I am hindered by my lack of detailed knowledge about anything other than human beings. Nevertheless, hunkering here on the edge of the Asadi clearing as the dusk grows more and more ominous, hunkering here and talking into a microphone *(Testing, one—two—three, testing, testing)*, I will offer all you hypercritical and exacting people in the hard sciences an analogy. A ridiculous analogy perhaps. If you don't like it I'll undoubtedly defer to your judgment and back off. But just as primitive shamans must attempt to explain the world in their own terms, I, Egan Chaney, isolated from my fellows, must conjure up explanations of *my* own. Here is one: I believe that the Asadi digest wood in the same manner as Earthly termites—that is, through the aid of bacteria in their intestines, protozoa that break down the cellulose. A symbiosis, Eisen would say. And let that be a lesson to us all. It's time that people learned to get along with one another. Bacteria and Chinamen, legumes and pygmies...

This is later. Tonight I have to talk, even if it's only to a microphone. With the coming of darkness the Asadi have disappeared again into the jungle and I'm alone.

For the first three nights that I was here I, too, returned to the Wild when Denebola set. I returned to the place where Benedict dropped me, curled up beneath the overhanging palm leaves, slept through the night and then joined

the dawn's inevitable pilgrimage back to this clearing. Now I remain here through the night. I sleep on the clearing's edge, just deep enough into the foliage to find shelter. I go back into the jungle only to retrieve my food drops.

Although the Asadi disapprove of my behavior, I am an outcast and they can do nothing to discipline me away from my unacceptable conduct without violating their own injunction against acknowledging a pariah's existence. As they depart each evening a few of the older Asadi, those with streaks of white in their mangy collars, halt momentarily beside me and breathe with exaggerated heaviness. They don't look at me because that's taboo. But I, in turn, don't look at them—I ignore them as if they were the pariahs. As a result I've been able to dispense altogether with those senseless and wearying treks in and out of the clearing that so exhausted me at first.

My behavioral studies during the day, however, go on unabated.

To absolve myself of what may seem a lack of thoroughness I ought to mention, I suppose, that on my fourth and fifth nights here I attempted to follow two different Asadi specimens into the jungle in order to determine where they slept, how they slept and what occupied their waking time away from the clearing. I was unsuccessful in these attempts.

When evening comes the Asadi disperse. This dispersal is complete. No two individuals remain together, not even the young with their parents. Each Asadi finds a place of his own, a place utterly removed from that of any other member of his species. (This practice, by the way, runs counter to my experience with every other social group that I've ever studied.) On the fourth and fifth nights, then, I was humiliatingly outdistanced by the objects of my pursuit. Nor can I suppose that I'd have any greater success with different specimens, since I purposely chose to follow an aged and decrepit-seeming Asadi on the first evening and a small prepubescent creature on the second. Both ran with convincing strength, flashed into the trees—as if still arboreal by nature—and then flickered from my vision.

All three moons are up, burnt-gold and unreal, I'm netted in by shadows and my growing loneliness. Field conditions, to be frank, have never before been quite so austere for me and I've begun to wonder if the Asadi were *ever* intelligent creatures. Maybe I'm studying a variety of Denebolan baboon. Oliver Bow Aurm Frasier, though, reported that the Asadi once had both a written "language" and a distinctive system of architecture. He didn't bother to tell us how he reached these conclusions—but the Synesthesia Wild, I'm certain, contains many secrets. Later I'll be more venturesome. But for the present I've got to try to understand those Asadi who are alive today. They're the key to their own past.

One or two things—final ones—before I attempt to sleep.

First, the eyes of the Asadi. These are somewhat as Benedict briefly described them in the imaginary

dialogue that I composed a week ago today. That is, like the bottoms of thick-glassed bottles. Except that I've noted that the eye really consists of two parts—a thin transparent covering, which is apparently hard, like plastic, and the membranous organ of sight that this covering protects. It's as if each Asadi were born wearing a built-in pair of safety glasses. Frasier's impression of their eyes as murky is one not wholly supported by continued observation. What he saw as "murkiness" probably resulted from the fact that the eyes of the Asadi, behind the other lens or cap, are constantly changing colors. Sometimes the rapidity with which a sienna replaces an indigo—and then a green the sienna, and so on—makes it difficult for a mere human being to see any particular color at all—maybe this is the explanation for Frasier's designation of their eyes as "murky." I don't know. I am certain, though, that this chameleonic quality of the Asadi's eyes has social significance.

And a second thing: Despite the complete absence of a discernible social order among the Asadi I may today have witnessed an event of the first importance to my unsuccessful, so far, efforts to chart their group relationships. Maybe. Maybe not. Previously, no real order at all existed. Dispersal at night, then congregation in the morning—if you choose to call that order. But nothing else. Random milling about during the day, with no set times for eating, sex, or their habitual bloodless feuds; random plunges into the jungle at night. Upon Denebola's setting no

creature ever heads in the same direction twice.

What's a humble Earthman to make of all this? A society held together by institutionalized antisocialness? What happened today leads me irrevocably away from that possibility.

Maybe.

This afternoon an aged Asadi whom I had never seen before stumbled into the clearing. His mane was grizzled, his face wizened, his hands shriveled, his gray body bleached to a filthy cream. But so agile was he in the Synesthesia Wild that no one detected his presence until his incongruously clumsy entry into the clearing. Then everyone fled from him. Unconcerned, he sat down in the center of the Asadi gathering place and folded his long naked legs. By this time all of his kinsmen were in the jungle staring back at him from the edge of the clearing. Only at sunset had I ever before seen the Asadi desert the clearing *en masse*. Hence my certainty that what happened today is of prime importance to my mission here.

But I haven't yet exhausted the strangeness of this old man's visit. You see, Moses, he came accompanied. And not by another Asadi.

He came with a small purplish-black creature perched on his shoulder. It resembled a raven, a bat and a deformed homunculus all at once. But whereas the old man had great round eyes that changed color extremely slowly, if at all, the creature on his shoulder had not even a pair of empty sockets—it was blind. It lacked any organs of sight. It sat on the aged Asadi's shoulder and manipulated its tiny hands compulsively, tugging at the old man's mane, opening and closing them on empty air, then tugging again at its protector's grizzled collar.

Both the old man and his beastlike/manlike familiar had a furious unreality. They existed at a spiritual as well as a physical distance and I noted that the rest of the Asadi—those who surrounded and ignored me on the edge of the "communion" ground—behaved not as if they feared these sudden visitors but rather as if they felt a loathsome kinship with them. This is difficult to express. Bear with me, Eisen.

Maybe another analogy will help.

Let me say that the Asadi behaved toward their visitors as a fastidious son might behave toward a father who has contracted veneral disease. Ambivalence is all in such cases. Shame and respect, distance and intimacy, love and loathing.

But the episode concluded abruptly when the old man rose from the ground, oblivious to the slow swelling and sedate flapping of his *huri* (that's a portmanteau word for *fury* and *harpy* that I've just coined) and stalked back into the Wild, scattering a number of Asadi in his wake.

Then everything went back to normal. The clearing filled again and the ceaseless and senseless milling about resumed.

God, it's amazing how lonely loneliness can be when the sky contains three jagged, nuggetlike moons and the human being inside you has involuntarily abdicated to the essence of that which should

command only your outward life. That's a mouthful, isn't it? What I mean is that there's a small struggle going on between Egan Chaney, the cultural xenologist, and Egan Chaney, the quintessential man. No doubt it's the result more of environmental pressure than of my genetic heritage.

That's a little anthropological allusion, Benedict. Don't worry about it. You aren't supposed to understand it.

But enough. Today's atypical occurrence has sharpened my appetite for observation—it has temporarily calmed my internal struggle. I'm ready to stay here a year if need be, even though the original plan was only for six months—because a self divided against its stand cannot state. No, it can't. At least, not without fear of contradiction.

Hey ha and hey nonny, I'm going to bed. I may not touch my good old Yamaga mike for a week.

Dear God, look at those moons!

**The Asadi clearing: a clarification**

*From the professional journals of Egan Chaney:* My greatest collegiate failing was an inability to organize. I am pursued by that specter even today. Consequently, a digression of sorts. In looking over these quirkish notes for my formal ethnography, I realize that I may have given the student the completely false idea that the Asadi clearing is a small area of ground, say, fifteen by fifteen, measuring in meters. Not so. As well as I am able to determine there are approximately a thousand Asadi individuals on hand daily—this figure includes mature adults, the young

and those intermediate between age and youth. Of course, during all my time in the Synesthesia Wild I've never been completely sure that the same individuals return to the clearing each morning. It may be that some sort of monumental shift takes place in the jungle, one group of Asadi replacing another each day. But I doubt it. The Wild encompasses a finite area, after all, and I have learned to recognize a few of the more distinctive Asadi (more on this point later, gentle reader). A thousand still seems about right to me: a thousand gray-fleshed creatures strolling, halting, bending at the waist and glaring at one another, eating, participating in random sex acts, grappling like wrestlers, obeying no time scheme, sequence, or apprehensible rationale. Such activity requires a little space. Therefore the reader may not cheerfully assume that the Asadi communion ground is a five-by-eight mud flat between a Bosk-Veld cypress and a malodorous sump hole. Not at all. Their communion ground has both size and symmetry and the Asadi maintain it discrete from the encroaching jungle by their unremitting daily activity. I will not quote you dimensions, however. I will say only that the clearing has the rectangular shape, the characteristic slope and the practical roominess of a twentieth-century football field. Pure coincidence, I'm sure. Astroturf and lime-rendered endzones are conspicuously absent.

**A dialogue of self and soul**

*From the private correspondence of Egan Chaney:* The title of this exercise is from Yeats, dear Ben. The substance of the dialogue, however, has almost nothing to do with the poem of the same name.

I wrote this imaginary exchange in one of my notebooks while waiting out a particularly long night on the edge of the Asadi clearing (just off the imaginary thirty-yard-line on the south end of the field, western sideline) and I intend for no one to read it, Ben, but you. Its lack of objectivity and the conclusions drawn by the participants make it unsuitable for any sort of appearance in the formal ethnography that I have yet to write.*

But you, Ben, will understand that a scientist is also a man and may perhaps forgive me. Since even *futbol* fanatics of Century XX required announcers to describe the action or binoculars through which to see it, I herewith provide a program. You can't tell the players without a program. The numbers on the backs of the players' metaphysical jerseys are Self and Soul.

PROGRAM

Self = The Cultural Xenologist
Soul = The Quintessential Man

Manger(s): Egan Chaney

SELF: This is my eighteenth night in the Synesthesia Wild.

* Even though we lived only a building away from each other in base camp, Chaney "mailed" me this letter and I received it in my postal box for probeship dispatches. We never discussed the "letter" contents. *Thomas Benedict.*

SOUL: I've been here forever. But let that go. What have you learned?

SELF: Most of my observations lead me to state emphatically that the Asadi are not fit subjects for anthropological study. They manifest no purposeful social activity. They do not use tools. They have less social organization than did most of the extinct Earthly primates. Only the visit, four days ago, of the old "man" and his frightening companion indicates even a remote possibility that I am dealing with intelligence. How can I continue?

SOUL: You will continue out of comtempt for the revulsion that daily grows in you. Because the Asadi are, in fact, intelligent—just as Oliver Bow Aurm Frasier said they were.

SELF: But how do I know that, damn it, how do I know what you insist is true? Blind acceptance of Frasier's word?

SOUL: There are signs, Dr. Chaney. The eyes, for instance. But even if there weren't any signs you'd know that the Asadi are as intelligent in their own way as you or I. Wouldn't you, Egan?

SELF: I admit it. Their elusive intelligence haunts me.

SOUL: No, now you've misstated the facts. You've twisted things around horribly.

SELF: How? What do you mean?

SOUL: You are not the one who is haunted, Egan Chaney, for you're too rational a creature to be the prey of poltergeist. I am the haunted one, the bedeviled one, the one ridden by every insidious spirit of doubt and revulsion.

SELF: Revulsion? You've used

that word twice. Why do you insist upon it? What does it mean?

SOUL: That I hate the Asadi. I despise their every culturally significant—or insignificant—act. They curdle my essence with their very alienness. And because affect me so you, too, Dr. Chaney, hate them—for you are simply the civilized veneer on my primordial responses to the world. You are haunted not by the Asadi, friend, but by me.

SELF: While you in turn are haunted by them? Is that how you view it?

SOUL: That's how it is. But although you're aware of my hatred for the Asadi, you pretend that that portion of my hatred which seeps into you is only a kind of professional resentment. You believe that you resent the Asadi for destroying your objectivity, your scientific detachment. In truth this detachment does not exist. You feel the same powerful revulsion for their alienness that works in me like a disease, the same abiding and deep-seated hatred. I haunt you.

SELF: With hatred for the Asadi?

SOUL: Yes. Admit it, Egan. Admit that even as a scientist you hate them.

SELF: No. No, damn you, I won't. Because we killed the pygmies, every one of them. How can I say, *I hate the Asadi, I hate the Asadi. . .* when we killed every pygmy? Even though, my God, I do.

**Daily life: in-the-field report**

*From the professional tapes of the library of the Third Denebolan Expedition:* Once again it's evening. I've a lean-to now. It protects me from the rain much better than did the porous roof of the forest. I've been here twenty-two days. My flesh has mildewed. Beneath this mildewed flesh my muscles crawl like the evil snakes that BoskVeld doesn't possess. I am saturated with Denebola's garish light. I am Gulliver among the Yahoos and even my own familiar voice speaking into this familiar little recorder doesn't comfort me.

This, however, isn't what you want to hear.

You want facts. You want my conclusions about the behavior of the Asadi. You want evidence that we're studying a life form with at least a fundamental degree of the ability to ratiocinate. The Asadi have this ability, I swear it. I know it. But in my first week or two here my knowledge stemmed almost entirely from a hunch, a conviction with no empirical basis.

But slowly the evidence for intelligence has begun to accumulate.

Okay. Let me, then, deliver myself of an in-the-field report as an objective scientist and forget the hunches of my mortal self. Somebody in grad school used to say that, I'm sure. At any rate, the rest of this tape will deal with the daily life of the Asadi.

A day in the life of. A typical day in the life of.

Except that I'm going to cap my reporting of mundane occurrences with the account of an extraordinary event that took place just this afternoon. Like Thoreau, I'm going to compress time to suit my own artistic/scientific purposes. So hang on, gang.

At dawn the Asadi return to their football field. For approximately twelve hours they mill about in the clearing doing whatever they care to do. Sexual activity and quirkish staring matches are the only sorts of behavior that can in any way be called "social"—unless you believe milling about in a crowd qualifies. I call their daylight way of life Indifferent Togetherness.

But when the Asadi engage in coitus, their indifference dissolves and gives way to a brutal hostility—both partners behave as if they desire to kill the other and frequently this is nearly the result. (I haven't yet witnessed the birth of an Asadi, in case you're wondering. Maybe the bearing of young occurs only in the Synesthesia Wild, the female self-exiled and unattended. I can't yet say for certain.) As for the staring matches, they're of brief duration and involve fierce gesticulation and mane-shaking. In these head-to-head confrontations the eyes change color with astonishing rapidity, flashing through the entire visible spectrum—and maybe beyond—in a matter of seconds.

I'm now prepared to say that these instantaneous changes of eye color are the Asadi equivalent of speech. I'm sure that you, Eisen, would have ventured this theory much sooner than I have, had you been here—but I'm uneasy about the biological aspects of any cultural study and must go slow. Three weeks of observation have finally convinced me that the adversaries in these staring matches control the internal chemical changes that trigger the changes in the succeeding hues of their eyes. In other words, patterns exist. And the minds that control these chemical changes cannot be primitive ones. Nor can I believe that the changes in eye color result from involuntary reflex. The alterations are willed. They're infinitely complicated.

Old Oliver Bow Aurm was right. The Asadi have a "language."

Still, for all the good it does me they might as well have none. I continue to go through each day as if I were an amateur naturalist charting the activities of the inhabitants of my antfarm rather than a cultural xenologist attempting to find an ally against the monumental wilderness of space. One day is agonizingly like another. And I can't blame my pariahhood, for the only things even a well-adjusted Asadi may participate in are sex and staring. It doesn't pain

me overmuch to be outcast from participation in these. To some extent, I'm not much more of a pariah than any of these creatures. We're all outcast from life's feast, so to speak, with no bridge clubs, Saturday-night dances or home-study groups to enliven our lives.

Unlike every other society I've ever seen or read about, the Asadi don't even have any meaningful communal gatherings, any festivals of solidarity, any unique rituals of group consciousness. They don't even have families. The individual is the basic unit of their "society." What they have done, in fact, is to institutionalize the processes of alienation. Their dispersal at dusk simply translates into physical distance the incohesiveness by which they live during the day. And have we not learned over long centuries that such alienation is soul-destroying? How do the Asadi continue to live as a people? For that matter, why do they do so?

But enough questions. As I mentioned earlier, something out of the ordinary happened today. It happened this afternoon. (It's still happening, I guess.) And although this occurrence poses more questions than it answers, it has rescued me from the vitiating sameness of Asadi daily life. As before, this strange event involves the old man who appeared in the clearing over a week ago. Him and with him, of course, the blind reptilian creature perched on his shoulder like a curse—the huri.

Until today I'd never seen two Asadi eat together. As an Earthman from a western background, I find the practice of eating alone a disturbing one. Disturbing and depressing. After all, I've been eating alone for over three weeks now, and I long to sit down in the communal mess with Benedict and Eisen, Morrell and Jonathan, and everyone else at base camp. My training in strange folk ways and alien cultural patterns hasn't weaned me away from this longing. As a result, I've watched with interest, and a complete lack of comprehension, the Asadi sitting apart from their fellows and privately feeding—sucking on roots, chewing up leaves, and, as I reported a week ago, actually consuming the bark and heartwood of the trees. But doing so alone, apart, as a seemingly necessary exercise in isolation.

Today this changed.

At the beginning of the hour before the fall of dusk, the old man staggered into the clearing under the burden of something damnably heavily. I was aware of the commotion at once. Like last time, every one of the Asadi fled from the floor of the assembly ground to the edge of the jungle. I observed from my lean-to. My heart, dear Ben, thrumped like a toad in a jar. I had wondered if the enigmatic old boy would ever return and now he was back. The huri on his shoulder scarcely moved—it appeared bloated and insentient, a rubber doll without a trace of life. During the whole of the old man's visit it remained in this virtually comatose state, upright but unmoving.

The aged Asadi (whom I've begun to regard as some sort of aloof and mysterious chieftain) paused in the center of the clearing,

looked about him and then struggled to remove the burden from his back. It was slung over his shoulder blades by means of two narrow straps.

Straps, Eisen: S-T-R-A-P-S.

Can you understand how I felt? Nor did the nature of the burden itself cause my wonder to fade. For, you see, what the old man was lowering to the ground was the rich, brownish-red carcass of an animal. The meat glistened with the falling light of Denebola and its own internal vibrancy. The meat had been dressed, Eisen, it had been preapred and the old man was bringing it to the clearing as an offering to his people.

He set the carcass on the dusty assembly floor and withdrew the straps from the incisions in the meat. Then he stood back five or six steps. Slowly a few of the adult males began to stalk back into the clearing. They approached the old man's offering with diffident steps, like thieves in darkened rooms. I noticed that their eyes were furiously changing colors—they were speaking to one another with the urgency of a hundred electric kaleidoscopes.

All but the old man who had brought the offering. I could see him standing away from the meat and his eyes—like unpainted china saucers—were the color of dull clay.

His eyes didn't alter even when several of the Asadi males fell upon the meat and began ripping away beautifully veined hunks, silently pushing and elbowing and clawing at one another. Then more and more of the Asadi males descended upon the carcass and all about the fringes of the clearing the females and the young made tentative movements out of the shadows. I had to leave my lean-to to see what was going on. And ultimately I couldn't see anything but bodies and manes and animated discord.

Before most of the Asadi were aware, Denebola had set.

Awareness grew, beginning with the females and the young on the edges of the clearing and then burning inward like a grass fire. The first individuals to become aware flashed into the Wild. Others followed. Eventually, in a matter of only seconds, even the strongest males raised their bloody snouts to the sky and scented their predicament. Then they bounded toward the trees, disappearing in innumerable directions—like the dying light itself.

But here is the strange part. The old man didn't follow his people back into the Synesthesia Wild.

He's sitting out there in the clearing right now.

When all the Asadi had fled he found the precise spot where he had placed his offering, hunkered down, lowered his buttocks, crossed his legs, and assumed sole ownership of that sacred piece of stained ground. I can see him out there now, damn it. The moons of BoskVeld throw his shadow in three different directions and the huri on his shoulder has begun to move a little, rustling its wings and nodding its blind head.

This is the first night since I came here that I haven't been alone and —I don't like it. No, indeed, fellows, I don't like it at all.

**Personal involvement: The Bachelor**

*From the private notebooks of Egan Chaney:* My meetings of The Bachelor, as I called him almost from the beginning, represented an unprecedented breakthrough. It came on my 29th day in the field—although, actually I had noticed him for the first time three days prior to his resolute approach and shy touching of my face. That touch, which I permitted solely out of respect for Mother Science, frightened me more than anything else that had happened to me in the Wild. As far removed from a threat as a woman's kiss, that touch frightened me more than the first appearance of the old chieftain, more than the nightmare shape of the huri, more even than the chaos of rending and eating that followed the old man's gift of the flame-bright carcass. I had been alone for weeks. Now, without much preamble, one of the Asadi had chosen to acknowledge my presence by touching me. Touching me!

I must back up a bit. I must back up to the night that the Asadi chieftain, against all custom, stayed in the clearing. My first realization that he intended to stay was another moment of minor terror, I'll confess, but the implications of his remaining overrode my fear. Wakeful and attentive, I sat up to study his every movement and to record anything that might conceivably be construed as significant.

The old man didn't move. The huri grew restive as the night progressed, but it didn't leave the old man's shoulder. The pair of them stayed in the clearing all that night and all the following day. They sat on the stained ground. When twilight came on that second day they departed with all the rest.

I despaired. How many days would I have to suffer through before something else unusual occured? Would I spend the next five months watching the Asadi engage in brutal sex and senseless staring matches?

But on my 26th day on the edge of the clearing in the Synesthesia Wild, I saw The Bachelor. As far as I know I saw him for the first time. Certainly, if I had ever seen him before I had paid no attention. This anomalous event again broke the tedium for me—even though I didn't then fully understand what was happening. I knew only that the endless shuffling back and forth of the Asadi had given way momentarily to an instant of almost pure communion.

The Bachelor was a completely unprepossessing specimen.

I judged him to be three or four years beyond Asadi adolescence. Gray-fleshed and gaunt, he had a patchy silver-blue mane of so little length that the others surely considered him a virtual outcast. In fact, in all the time I knew him he never once took part in either coitus or the ritualized staring of the full-maned Asadi. When I first felt his eyes upon me The Bachelor was on my imaginary twenty-yard line, looking toward my lean-to from a pocket of his ceaselessly moving brethren. He had chosen me to stare at. The fact that he did not receive a cuffing for violating the one heretofore inviolable Asadi taboo confirmed for me the negligibility of his tribal status. It was he

and I who were brethren, not he and the creatures whom he genetically resembled.

But in one extremely salient particular he didn't resemble the vast majority of Asadi. His eyes; his hard, emotion-veiling eyes. These were exactly like the old chieftain's—translucent but empty, enameled but colorless, fired in the oven of his mother's womb but brittle like sun-baked clay. Never did The Bachelor's eyes flash through the rainbow spectrum as did the prismatic eyes of his comrades. They remained clayey and cold, a shade or two lighter than his flesh.

And it was with these eyes, on my 26th day in the field, that The Bachelor took my measure. The noonday heat held us in a shimmering mirage, our gazes locked.

"Well," I shouted, "don't just stand there making faces. Come over here where we can talk."

My voice had no effect on the teeming Asadi—it had no effect on The Bachelor. His posture unchanged, he regarded me with no more—and no less—interest than before. Of course, he could not "talk" with me. My human eyes don't even have the virtuosity of traffic lights—and since The Bachelor's never changed color, he couldn't even communicate with his own kind.

He was, for all intents and purposes, a mute.

But when I called out to him, I believed that his dead eyes indicated a complete lack of intelligence. It did not then occur to me that they might be the external sign of a physical handicap, just as dumbness in human beings may be the result of diseased or paralyzed vocal cords. Instead I decided that The Bachelor was stupid. I'm still not entirely certain that this initial judgment was not correct.

"Come on over here," I said again. "It doesn't bother me that you're mentally deficient."

The Bachelor continued to stare. He didn't approach. The distance between us measured almost thirty meters and occasionally a roving Asadi would intervene, its body blocking our vision.

"Even if you had a thumbnail for a brain," I mumbled, "you wouldn't be at a terrible disadvantage among this crew, old boy. I haven't seen anyone but the old chieftain even attempt to test their intelligence. And untested intelligence, like a cloistered virtue, isn't worth a—" I used an ancient and revered obscenity. The singing fronds of the Synesthesia Wild did not censure me for so saying. Some forty-odd light-years and a half-dozen or so centuries had invested the word with a mystic respectability and I was too tired to be more profane.

The Bachelor didn't respond to my inaudible cynicism. He stared at me for the rest of the afternoon. I tried to occupy myself with note-taking, then with a lunch of some of the rations Benedict had dropped and finally with cursory observations of other Asadi. Anything to avoid that implacable gaze. It was almost a relief when dusk fell. But that evening my excitement grew and I realized that something monumental had happened—I had been acknowledged.

The next day The Bachelor paid

me little heed. He wandered forlornly in and out of the slow aimless files of his aimless kindred, a lanky gray clown unheeded by everyone but me. I was disappointed that The Bachelor did not demonstrate the same interest in me that he had shown the day before.

On the 28th day he resumed his shameless staring and I was gratified. He followed a procedure different from his stationary strategy of the first day—he moved tirelessly about the clearing, weaving in and out of the clusters of Asadi, but always staying close enough to the western sideline to be able to see me. His eyes remained as dead as the insides of two oyster shells.

I felt better the following morning, the morning of the 29th day—something was happening. The light from glowering Denebola seemed softer, the tropic heat less debilitating. I left my lean-to and went out on the assembly ground.

Bathed in the pastel emptiness of dawn, I stood there as the Asadi came flying through the tendrils and fronds of the Synesthesia Wild to begin another day of Indifferent Togetherness. Their bodies broke through the green veils on the clearing's edge like a thousand swimmers diving into a spring and soon I was surrounded. Surrounded but ignored. Great ugly heads with silver or blue or clay-white or tawny manes bobbed around me, graceless and unsynchronized. And above us the sky of BoskVeld stretched out into the attenuated vastness of a universe infinitely less caring than even those dancing heads.

The sun burned the morning away and at last I found The Bachelor.

Undoubtedly he had had me in his sight all that morning—but, moving with circumspection among his fellows, he had not permitted me to see him. I had fretted over his apparent absence.

Then Denebola was directly overhead and The Bachelor threaded his way through a dissolving clump of bodies and stopped not five yards from me, atremble with his own daring. I, too, trembled. I feared that at any moment The Bachelor would fall upon and devour me—instead he steeled himself to the task he had set and began his approach. I stood my ground. The gray head, the patchy silver-blue mane, the twin carapaces of his eyes—all moved toward me. Then the long gray arm rose toward my face and the humanoid hand touched the depression under my botton lip, touched the most recent of my shaving cuts, touched me without clumsiness or malice.

And I winced.

**A running chronology: weeks pass**

*Day 29*: After achieving this unusual one-to-one contact with the Asadi native (hereafter referred to as The Bachelor) I did my best to find some method of meaningful communication. Nothing worked. Not words, of course. Not hand signals. Not signs in the dirt. Not even awkward charades. Nevertheless, The Bachelor could not be dissuaded from following me about. Once when I left the clearing for lunch he very nearly followed

me into my lean-to. I was almost surprised when, at the fall of dusk, he left with the others—he had been so doggedly faithful all afternoon. Despite this desertion I'm excited about my work again. Tomorrow seems a hundred years off and I can't believe that I ever thought seriously about scrapping the first painful returns from my presence here.

*Day 35*: Nothing. Nothing at all. The Bachelor continues to follow me around, never any more than eight or nine paces away—his devotion is such that I can't urinate without his standing guard at my back. He must think that he's found an ally against the indifference of the others, but what his listless devotion gains for either of us, I can't say. All I know is that I've begun to tire of his attentions, just as he seems to have tired of the monotonous routine that he will not, for anything, abandon. . . Life in the clearing goes on as always. The others ignore us.

*Day 40*: I am ill. The medicine Benedict dropped me during an earlier bout with diarrhea is almost gone. It's raining. As I write this, I'm lying on my pallet in my lean-to and watching the Asadi slog back and forth across the floor of their assembly ground. The odor of their morose gray dampness assaults me lika a poison, intensifies my nausea. In and out the Asadi go, in and out and back and forth. . .

I have formulated the interesting notion that their entire way of life, in which I have had to struggle to see even one or two significant patterns, is itself the one significant and on-going ritual of their species. Formerly I had been looking for several minor rituals to help me explain their society—it may be that *they are the ritual.* As the poet asked, "How tell the dancer from the dance?" But having formulated this new and brilliant hypothesis about the Asadi I'm still left with the question: *What is the significance of the ritual that the Asadi themselves are?* An existential query, of course. Maybe my illness has made me think this way. Maybe I'm going melodramatically insane.

The Bachelor sits cross-legged in the dripping, steam-silvered foliage about five yards from my lean-to. His mane clings to his skull and shoulders like so many tufts of matted, cottony mold. Thought he's been dogging my footsteps for eleven days now, I haven't been able to induce him to enter this ramshackle shelter. He always sits outside and stares at me from beneath an umbrella of shining fronds—even when it's raining. As it is now. His reluctance to come under a manufactured roof may be significant. If only I could make the same sort of breakthrough with two or three others that I've made with The Bachelor.

*Day 46*: A tinge of my illness remains. So does The Bachelor. The two have begun to get mixed up in my mind. . . Nothing else to report. In and out, in and out. Daybreak and sunset, sunset and daybreak. The Great Shuffle goes on.

*Day 50*: After the Asadi fled into

the jungle last night, I trudged toward the supply pickup point where Benedict leaves my rations of food and medicine each week. The doses of Placenol that I've been giving myself lately, shooting up the stuff like a skidrow junkie (figuratively speaking, of course), have gotten bigger and bigger—but Eisen, at the outset of this farcical expedition, assured me that P-nol in any quantity is absolutely nonaddictive. What amazes me beyond this sufficiently amazing attribute of the drug, however, is the fact that Benedict has been dropping more and more of it each week, providing me with a supply almost exactly commensurate with my increasing consumption.

Or do I use more because they drop more?

No, of course not. Everything goes into a computer at base camp. A program they ran weeks ago probably predicted this completely predicatable upsurge in my "emotional" dependency on P-nol. At any rate I'm feeling better. I've begun to function again.

While I trudged, a haunting uneasiness seeped into me from the fluid shadows of the rubber trees. I heard noises. The noises persisted all the way to the drop point—faint, unidentifiable, frightening. Let me record this quickly: I believe that The Bachelor lurked somewhere beyond the wide leaves and trailing vines where those noises originated. Once, in fact, I think I saw his dull eyes reflect a little of the sheen of the evening's first moon. But he never completely revealed himself to me—if, indeed, he was there at all.

A typed note on the supply bundle: "Look, Chaney, you don't have to insist on 100% nonassociation with us. You've been gone almost two months. A conversation or two with genuine hoo-man beans won't destroy your precious ethnography. Let us drop you a radio. You can use it in the evenings. If you want it, send up a flare tomorrow night before all three moons have risen and I'll copter it out to the drop point the next day. So, how about it, Egan? Your Friend, Beneficent Ben." But of course I don't want a radio. Part of this business is the suffering. I knew that before I came out here. I won't quit until things have at last begun to make a little sense.

*Day 57 (Pre-dawn)*: I haven't been asleep all night. Yesterday evening, just six or seven hours ago, I went into the jungle to retrieve Benedict's eighth supply drop. Another typed note on the bundle: "Chaney, you're a pig-headed ninny. You don't even know how to conjugate your own first name. It should have been Ego instead of Egan. I hope you've learned how to talk Asadi. If you haven't I'm certain that you'll have gone mad by now and started preaching neopentecostal sermons to the trees. What a picture. Send up a flare if you want anything. Ben." I wouldn't 've thought Ben quite so sardonically literate.

On the way back to the clearing I heard noises again. The Synesthesia Wild echoed with the plunging grayness of an indistinct form. I am certain (I think) that it was The

Bachelor spying on me, retreating clumsily before my pursuit. Yes, even with a backpack of new supplies weighting me down I determined to follow these noises, these supicious tickings of leaf and twig. And although I never overtook my prey, I was able to keep up! It had to be The Bachelor, that half-seen grayness fleeing before me—none of his fellows would have permitted me so much as a glimpse of the disturbed foliage in the wake of their disappearance. I went deeper and deeper into the Wild, away from the assembly ground. Splotches of moonlight fled across the jungle with us.

When, panting, I broke into an opening among the trees I all at once realized that the noises drawing me on had ceased. I was alone. Lost, maybe. But filling the clearing, rising against the sky like an Oriental pagoda, there loomed over me the broad and impervious mass of something built, something made.

The resonances of Time dwarfed me. Thunderstruck, I felt panic climbing up the membranous ladder in my throat. My own startled gasp startled me again. . .*It's hard to accept the fact that I've seen what I've seen. But that pagoda, temple, whatever, is actually out there! Old Oliver Bow Aurm studies the ruins of one of these structures—he learned only that the Asadi may have once had a civilization of some consequence. From this intact pagoda, however, I'll undoubtedly learn things that will eclipse even Frasier's discoveries. But God knows when I'll get out there again.* . .I stared up at the lofty wings of this sudden artifact, then turned, plunged back into the jungle and raced wildly away, my backpack thumping.

Where was I going? Back to the assembly ground. Which way to run? I didn't have to answer this question. Blindly I moved in the direction of the suspicious tickings of leaf and twig that had resumed shortly after I fled the pagoda. The Bachelor again? I don't know. I saw nothing. But in two hours' time I had regained the safety of my lean-to. . . Now I'm waiting for the dawn, for the tidal influx of Asadi.

I'm exhilarated and I haven't even touched my new supply of Placenol.

*Day 57 (Evening)*: They're gone again. But I've witnessed something important and unsettling. The Bachelor did not arrive this morning with the others. At least he didn't take up his customary position eight or nine paces behind me. That sort of peripatetic vigilance does not go unnoticed and this morning I missed it. Totally ignored, I wandered through the Asadi, looking for The Bachelor. He was nowhere among them. Could he have injured himself in our midnight chase through the Wild?

By noon I was both exhausted and puzzled—exhausted by my search and my lack of sleep, puzzled by The Bachelor's apparent defection. I came to my lean-to and lay down. In a little while I had fallen asleep, though not soundly. Tickings of leaf and twig made my eyelids flicker. I dreamed that a gray shape came and squatted on

the edge of the clearing about five yards from where I lay. Like a mute familiar, the shape watched over me...

Kyur-AAAAACCCCCK!

Groans and thrashings about. Thrashings and hackings. The underbrush beside my lean-to crackled beneath the invasion of several heavy feet. Bludgeoned out of my dream by these sounds, I sat up and attempted to reorient myself to the world. I saw The Bachelor. I saw three of the larger and more agile males bear him to the ground and pinion him there. They appeared to be cooperating in the task of subduing him!

I watched their actions intently. What they did next confirmed my spur-of-the-moment evaluation. Cooperation it was indeed. The three males, who ignored me with all the contemptuous elan of aristocrats, picked up The Bachelor and bore him to the center of the clearing. I followed this party onto the assembly floor. As they had done during the old cheiftain's two unexpected visits, the Asadi crowded to the sidelines—but they did not disappear into the jungle. They remained on the field, buffeting one another like the rabid spectators at one of those near-legendary "bowl" games. I was the only individual other than the four struggling males out in the center of the assembly floor. I looked down at The Bachelor. His eyes came very close to changing colors, going from their usual clay-white to a thin, thin yellow. But I couldn't interfere.

They shaved his mane. A female carrying two flat, beveled stones came out of the crowd on the eastern perimeter of the field—she gave the stones to the males. With them the males scraped away the last sad mangy tufts of The Bachelor's silver-blue collar. Just as they were about to finish, he gave a perfunctory kick that momentarily dislodged one of his tormentors, then acquiesced in his shame and lay on his back staring at Denebola. The entire operation had taken only about ten minutes. The three males sauntered off from their victim—and the satisfied spectators, aware that the barbering was over, strolled liesurely and with all their former randomness back into the clearing. Now, of course, they ignored The Bachelor with a frigidity they had once reserved for me.

I stood in the center of the clearing waiting for The Bachelor to get to his feet, the two of us a blurred focal point on the slowly revolving wheel of the Asadi Dance of Indifference. But for a long time he didn't move. His narrow head, completely shorn, scarred by their barbering stones (the first tools I had seen any of them but the chieftain employ), looked unnaturally fragile.

I leaned down and offered him my hand. A passing Asadi jostled me. Accidentally, I think. The Bachelor rolled to his stomach, rolled again to avoid being stepped on, curled into the foetal position—then unexpectedly sprang out of the dust and dodged through a broken file of his uncaring kinsmen. Did he wish to attain the edge of the Wild? Intervening bodies blocked my view of him, but I suppose he disap-

peared into the trees and kept on running.

All extremely interesting, of course. What does it signify? My hypothesis this evening is that the Asadi have punished The Bachelor for leading me last night, whether he did so inadvertently or on purpose, to the ancient pagoda in the Synesthesia Wild. His late arrival in the clearing may have been an ingenuous attempt to forestall this punishment. I can't think of any other reasons why the Asadi should have moved to make him even more of an outcast than he already was.

All this ambivalence mystifies me. It also convinces me that I can't permit the monotony of nine-tenths of their "daily life" to becloud my eyes to the underlying meaning of it all. Patience, dear God, is nine-tenths of cultural xenology. And the punishment of weariness (since I'm discussing punishments, cruel and otherwise) runs concurrently with the xenologist's term of patience. Consequently and/or hence, I'm going to bed.

*Day 61*: The Bachelor has not returned. Knowing that he's now officially a pariah, he chooses to be one on his own terms. During his absence I've been thinking about two things: 1) If the Asadi did in fact punish The Bachelor because he led me to the pagoda, then they realize full well that I am not simply a maneless outcast. They know that I'm genetically different, a creature from elsewhere, and they consciously wish me to remain ignorant of their past. 2) I would like to make an expedition to the pagoda. With a little perserverence it shouldn't be exceedingly difficult to find, especially since I plan to go during the day. Unusual things happen so rarely in the Asadi clearing that I can afford to be gone from it for a little while. One day's absence should not leave any irreparable gaps in my ethnography. If the expedition goes well that absence may provide some heady insights into the ritual of Asadi life.

I wish only that The Bachelor would return.

*Day 63*: Since today was the day of Benedict's ninth scheduled drop I decided to make my expedition into the Wild early this morning. I would be "killing two birds," as Ben himself might well put it. First: I would search for the lost pagoda. Second: if I failed to find it I would salvage some part of the day by picking up my new supplies. Therefore, before dawn, off I went.

The directional instincts of human beings must have died milliennia ago—I got lost. The Wild stirred with an inhuman and gothic calm that tattered the thin fabric of my resourcefulness.

Late in the afternoon Benedict's helicopter saved me. It made a series of stuttering circles over the roof of the jungle—at one point I looked up and saw its undercarriage hanging so close to the tree tops that a spy monkey might have been able to leap aboard. I followed the noise of the helicopter to our drop point. From there I had no trouble getting back to the clearing.

Today, then, marks the first day since I've been in the Wild that I've not seen a single member of the

Asadi. I miss The Bachelor as I would miss a prodigal child. I await each dawn with newly rekindled expectations. But the entire night lies before me and the only way to get through it is to sleep.

*Day 68*: Even though I could not justify an excursion on the basis of another drop (the next one is still two days away), I went looking for the pagoda again. The last four days have been informational zeroes. I had to get away from the clearing, had to take some kind of positive action, no matter how foolish that action might seem. And it was passing foolish—I got lost again, terrifyingly so. Green creepers coiled about me—the sky disappeared. And this time I knew that Benedict's helicopter would not fly overhead—not unless I could wait another two days for it. How, then, dear diary, did our hero get home? Once again, the suspicious tickings of leaf and twig. I simply followed them. Now I'm back in my lean-to again, confident that The Bachelor is still out there and steadfast in my decision to make no more expeditions until I have help.

*Day 71:* The Bachelor is back!

*Day 72*: Yesterday I could record nothing but the simple fact of the Bachelor's appearance in the clearing. This evening I'll note only three or four concomitant facts. The Bachelor still has very little mane to speak of and the Asadi treat him as a total outcast. These last two days he has demonstrated a considerable degree of independence in his relations with me. He continues to follow me about, but less conspicuously and with occasional side trips that remove him altogether from my sight. He no longer hunkers beside my lean-to at all. A made dwelling-place may put him uncomfortably in mind of the pagoda to which he led me and for whose discovery to an outsider he was publicly humiliated. I find this new arrangement a felicitous one, however. A little privacy is good for the soul.

*Day 85:* The note on yesterday's supply bundle: "Send up a flare tomorrow night if you wish to remain in the Wild. Eisen is seriously considering hauling you out of there. Only a flare will save you. The flare will mean, 'I'm learning things. Don't remove me from my work.' No flare will mean either that your stay has stopped being profitable or that you've reached your limit. My personal suggestion, Egan, is that you do nothing, just sit tight and wait for us. Okay? Your friend, Ben." I've just sent up two goddamn flares. Day 85 will go down in cultural-xenological history as Egan Chaney's personal Fourth of July.

*Day 98:* I'm holding my own again. Thirty days ago I made my second excursion into the Wild to find the elusive pagoda. I've survived almost an entire month without venturing away from the assembly ground.

Most of my time in the clearing has been devoted to noting individual differences among the Asadi natives. Since their behavior for the

most part manifests a bewildering uniformity I've necessarily turned to the observation of their physical characteristics. Even in this area, however, most differences are more apparent than real—I've found few useful discriminators. Size has some importance.

The ability of the eyes to flash through the spectrum is another discriminator of sorts. But the only Asadi who don't possess this ability in a complete degree are the old chieftain and The Bachelor.

Nevertheless, I can now recognize on sight several Asadi other than these prominent two. I've tried to give descriptive names to these recognizable individuals. The smallest adult male in the clearing I call Turnbull, because his stature puts me in mind of Colin Turnbull's account of the pygmies of the Ituri. A nervous fellow with active hands I call Benjy, after Benedict. The old chieftain continues to exert a powerful influence on my thinking. His name I derived by simple analogy. Him I call Eisen Zwei.

The Bachelor now seems intent on retaining his anonymity—his mane has grown very little since the shaving. I would almost swear that he plucks it at night in the Wild, keeping it short on purpose. Who is to say? These last few days he's avoided even me; that is, after he ascertains my whereabouts in the morning and then again in the evening, as if this simple knowledge suffices to maintain him secure all day and then through the uncertainty of night on Bosk Veld. The bloom, I suppose, has gone off our romance. Good. We're both more comfortable.

Today was another drop day. I didn't go out to retrieve my parcels. Too weary, too bloodless. But I've sworn off Placenol and the attendant psychological lift has made my physical weakness bearable. My parcels will be out there tomorrow.

Tonight I'm going to read Odegaard's official report on the Shamblers of Misery. And then sleep. Sleep sleep sleep.

*Day 106:* Eisen Zwei, the old chieftain, came back today! In thumbing through this notebook I find that I first saw him enter the clearing exactly ninety days ago. Has a pattern begun to emerge? If so, I can't interpret its periodicity. I don't even know, come to think of it, what sort of life span the Asadi have. It might be that a man would have to stay out here centuries in order to unravel a mere sleeve of the garment of their existence. God forbid.

This visit of Eisen Zwei—to return to the issue at hand—proceeded in a manner identical to that of his first one. He came into the clearing with the huri on his shoulder, sat down, remained perhaps an hour, then stalked back into the Wild. The Asadi, of course, fled from him—motivated, perhaps, more by loathing than fear.

How long will I have to wait until ole E.Z. returns?

*Day 110:* The behavior of the Asadi—all of the Asadi—has undergone a very subtle alteration, one I can't account for. Nothing in my previous association with them gives me a basis for evaluating its import. Even after 110 days in the

field I'm a slave to purely human concepts of causality—behavior changes for certain reasons, not from mere whim. But out here reasons elude me in the same way that the Asadi pagoda, about which I now only dream, once eluded me.

Let me state what I have observed. For the last two days every member of this insane species has taken great pains to avoid stepping into a rather large area in the center of the clearing. As a result the Asadi have crowded themselves into two arbitrary groups at opposite ends of the field. These "teams" do not comport themselves in exactly the same way as did the formerly continuous group. Individuals on both sides of the silently agreed-upon No Man's Land exude an air of heightened nervousness. They crane their heads about, clutch their arms across their chests, sway, suffer near-epileptic paroxysms as they weave in and out, in and out, among their fellows. Watching them I sometimes believe that they writhe to the music of an eerie flute played deep in the recesses of the jungle.

Sometimes staring matches will take place between individuals on opposite sides of the imaginary chasm. Eyes change color, bodies bend and limbs flail. But neither participant puts a foot inside the crucial ring of separation, which is about thirty yards long and almost—but not quite—the entire width of the clearing. Not quite, mind you, because there's a narrow strip of ground on each sideline through which the two "teams" may exchange members, one member at a time. These exchanges occur infrequently, with a lone Asadi darting nervously out of his own group, down one of these unmarked causeways and into the "enemy" camp. Why do they avoid the center of the clearing? The only reason my Earthman's mind can settle on is that the clearing's center marks that area of fearsome ground where an offender has been humiliated, blood spilled and flesh consumed. But all these things happened a good while ago. Why this fastidiousness now? Why this separation?

The Bachelor has reacted to it all by climbing into the branches of a thick-boled tree not ten meters from my lean-to. From dawn to sunset he sits high above his inscrutable kinsmen, watching, sleeping, maybe attempting to assess the general mood. At times he looks in my direction to see what I make of these new developments. I don't make much of them.

*Day 112:* It continues, this strange bipartite waltz. The dancers have grown even more frantic in their movements. Anxiety pulses in the air like electricity. The Bachelor climbs higher into his tree, struggling to the topmost branches where his hold is precarious—he wedges himself in place. In the last three days I can't recall having seen any of the dancers eat—none have engaged in sex. Even their staring contests have virtually ceased, though those that do occur are fierce and protracted. The nonexistent flute that plays in my head has grown stingingly shrill and I cannot guess what the end of this madness must be.

*Day 114:* Events culminated today in a series of bizarre developments that pose me a conundrum of the first order. What will happen tomorrow? I can't imagine any sort of follow-up to what I raptly watched today.

It began early. Eisen Zwei came into the clearing an hour after the arrival of the Asadi. As on his second visit, he bore on his back the dressed-out carcass of an animal. His huri, though once again upright on the old man's shoulder, looked like the work of a rather inept taxidermist—lopsided, awkwardly posed and inanimate. The people in the clearing deserted their two identically restive groups, fleeing to the jungle around the assembly ground. I could not help thinking, *How strange, how ironic, that the force that momentarily reunifies the Asadi is a shared loathing.*

The Bachelor, half-hidden by great lacquered leaves and unsteady in the fragile upper branches, leaned out over the clearing's edge and gazed down from his empty clay-white eyes. I clutched the bole of his tree, surrounded now by the curious, loathing-filled Asadi who had crowded into the jungle. They ignored me. Unaware of him, they ignored The Bachelor, too—but together we all watched the spectacle proceeding in the Center Ring.

Eisen Zwei lowered the burden from his back. He undid the straps that had held the meat in place. But now, instead of stepping away and permitting a few of the braver males to advance, he took the near-unconscious huri from his shoulder and set it upon the bleeding lump of meat. The huri's blind head did not move, but even from where I stood I could see its tiny fingers rippling with slow but well-orchestrated malice. Then this hypnotic rippling ceased and the huri sat there looking bloated and dead, a plaything for the children of scabrous witches.

Without a farewell of any sort Eisen Zwei turned and stalked back into the Synesthesia Wild. Where he left the clearing, foliage clattered from the efforts of several Asadi to get out of his way.

Silence fell again.

And now no one left the security of the assembly ground's edge to challenge the huri's ownership of this new and sorely tempting carcass—despite the fact that I had not seen any of the Asadi take food in almost five days.

Denebola, fat and mocking, crossed a small arc of the sky and made haloes dance in a hundred inaccessible grottos of the Wild.

An hour passed, and Eisen Zwei returned! He had simply left the huri to guard his first offering. Yes, first. For the old chieftain had come back with still another carcass slung across his bony shoulders, another dressed-out and flesh-strapped carcass. He set it down beside the other. The huri animated itself just long enough to shift its weight and straddle the two contiguous pieces of meat. Then the old Asadi departed again, just as before.

In an hour he returned with a third piece of meat—but this time he entered the clearing from the west, about twenty yards up from my lean-to. I realized that he had

first entered from the east, then from the south. *A pattern is developing,* I thought. *Now he'll depart once more and reenter from the north.* After all, even the most primitive peoples on Earth had ascribed mystical characteristics to the four points of the compass and I was excited by the prospect of my being able to draw a meaningful analogy.

Of course, Eisen Zwei saw fit to shatter my hopes by remaining on the assembly floor—he did not leave again at all. (In fact, as on my 22nd night in the Wild, he still has not left. Under a triangle of copper-green moons the old chieftain and his huri squat on the bleak, blood-dampened ground waiting for Denebola's first spiderwebbings of light.) He made one complete circuit around the clearing instead, walking counterclockwise from his point of entrance. The huri did not move.

This done, Eisen Zwei rejoined his noxious familiar at midfield.

Here the second stage of this new and puzzling ritual began. Without taking the third carcass from his back, E.Z. bent and picked up the huri and put it in its accustomed place on his shoulder. Kneeling, he tied straps through the two pieces of meat over which the huri had kept watch. Next he began to drag these marbled chunks of brown and red slowly through the dirt. He dragged the first into the southern half of the clearing and set the huri down once more as his guardian. This procedure he duplicated in the northern half of the clearing, except that here he himself stood guard over the second offering. The final carcass he still bore on his back.

Outlined in the dust were two distinct drag marks, inward-looping circles that delineated the chieftain's progress from the original resting place of the meat. The coil in the dust of the northern half of the field was single; that in the southern, double. The Asadi tensed.

Eisen Zwei stepped away from the second offering. Deep in his throat he made a noise that sounded like a human being, a grown man, trying to fight down a sob. This sound, I suppose I should add, is the first and so far the only example of voiced communication—discounting involuntary groans and a few guttural, growl-like mumblings—that I've heard among the Asadi. The huri responded to Eisen Zwei's plaintive "sobs"—undoubtedly a signal—by hopping, practically falling, off the object of its guardianship and then scrabbling miserably through the dust toward its master. Its rubbery wings dipped, twisted, folded upon themselves. (I've almost decided that the huri is incapable of flight, that its wings represent an anatomical holdover from an earlier stage of its evolution.) When both Eisen Zwei and his wretched huri had reached their sacred patch of ground at midfield the old Asadi picked up the beast and let it close its tiny hands over his discolored mane.

The two of them held everyone's attention.

Then the wizened old chieftain extended his arms, tilted back his head and, staring directly at the

sun, made a shuddering inhalation of such piteous depth that I thought either his lungs would burst or his heart break. The clearing echoed with his sob.

At once the Asadi poured out of their hiding places onto the assembly ground—not simply the adult males, but individuals of every sex and age. Even now, however, in the middle of this lunging riot, the population of the clearing divided into two groups, each one scrimmaging furiously, intramurally, in its own cramped plot of earth. Teeth flashed, manes tossed, bodies crumpled, eyes pinwheeled with inarticulate color. The hunger of the Asadi, like mid-August thunder, made low sad music over the Wild.

In this hunger neither The Bachelor nor I shared. We merely watched, he from aloft, I from the trembling shadows.

It did not take long for the Asadi, slashing at one another and sometimes half-maiming themselves, to devour the two carcasses. Perhaps five minutes. *Like piranhas,* I thought, *quick, voracious, brutal.*

And then Eisen Zwei inhaled his grief-shot moan and the confusion ceased. Every lean gray snout turned toward him. The dying went off to die alone, if any were in fact at the point of death. I saw no one depart, but neither did I see anyone prostrate in the dirt—as unlikely as it may sound. (Death, like birth, the Asadi must choose to experience in the intimate privacy of the jungle and the night—in my months here I've not seen a single tribesman die in the clearing. Illness, accident and age apparently have no sting here. And, believe it or not, I've only just now realized this. Does it mean anything? Sure. (But what?) All eyes upon him, silence steaming out of the very earth, Eisen Zwei made preparations for the third and final act of today's unanticipated, unexpectedly baroque ritual.

He lowered the burden from his back, sat down beside it and—in full view of his benumbed tribesman—ate. The creature on his shoulder leaned into his mane and I thought that the old chief might feed the huri, give it something for its contribution to the festivities. He gave it nothing. Inert but clinging, the huri did not protest this oversight.

An hour passed. Then two. Then three.

By this time I had long since retired to the shade of my lean-to, emerging at fairly frequent intervals to check the goings-on in the clearing. By the second hour the Asadi had begun to move about within their separate territories. By the third hour these territories had merged so that I could no longer distinguish the two distinct "teams" of previous days. The pattern of the Daily Life of my first 109 days in the clearing had reasserted itself—except that now the Asadi moved with incredible sluggishness, suspiciously regarding their chieftain and refusing to encroach upon a rather large unmarked circle containing him.

I decided that the ritual was about to conclude. Out among the Asadi, trying to feel through my pores the prevailing mood, I noticed that The Bachelor had come down out of his tree. But I didn't

see him in the clearing. All I saw was old E.Z., isolated by a revolving barricade of legs, chewing with an expression of stupid pensiveness. The huri flapped once or twice as the afternoon progressed, but the old chieftain still did not feed it.

Finally, sunset.

The Asadi fled, dispersing as they always have—but Eisen Zwei, no doubt as surfeited as a python that has just unhinged its lower jaw to admit a fawn, slumped in his place and did not move.

Now three alien moons dance in the sky and I'm left with one question, the one question that I'm frightened to ask, so stark and self-evident is its answer: *From what sort of creature did the old chief obtain and dress out his ritual offerings?* Once before I didn't ask this question at all—I couldn't ask it. But now, huddled beneath the most insubstantial of roofs, I am unable to fend off the terrible ramifications of the Asadi way of death.

**Speculations on cannibalism: an extemporaneous essay**

*From the unedited in-the-field tapes of Egan Chaney:* It's a beautiful day. Just listen. Let me hold the microphone out for you—hear that? Nothing but a thousand pairs of feet (minus six or eight feet, I suppose) slogging back and forth through a quarter inch of hot dust. Nothing but that and the soulful respiration of the Asadi and—somewhere beyond these scarcely tangible sounds—the stillness of all BoskVeld. A beautiful day, just beautiful.

And here I am, your roving reporter, Egan Chaney, right out here where the action is, thoroughly prepared to give you the latest and most comprehensive coverage of each new development in the clearing. Unfortunately, Eisen, I still do more waiting around than adrenelin-powered summaries of the on-going news. It's four days since your counterpart, Eisen Zwei, stirred things up with his disorderly three-course banquet.

Since then, nothing.

As a consequence, I'm now going to switch hats, doffing my correspondent's chapeau in favor of the dignified visor of a senior news editor. I'm walking. I'm walking among the Asadi. They fail to see me even though I'm just as solid, just as real, as they are. Even the ones I've given names to refuse to grant me the fact of my existence.

I've just walked by Werner. The configuration of his features gives him a gentle look, like that of a Quaker wearing a parka. His seeming gentleness leads me to the topic of this commentary—how could a creature of Werner's mien and disposition actually eat the flesh of one of his own kind? God help me if these aliens are sentient, my good base-camp huggers, because I'm walking among cannibals!

They encircle me. They ensorcel me. They fill me with a sudden dread, an awe such as the awe of one's parents that consumes the child who has just learned the secret of his own conception and birth. Exactly thus, my dread of the Asadi, my awe of their intimate lives...

Turnbull is missing. Do you re-

member him? I named him Turnbull because he was small, like the pygmies the first Turnbull wrote about. Now I can't find him. Since the ritual of Day 114, I've been through this clearing a hundred times—from sideline to sideline, from endzone to endzone—searching for him with all the devotion of a father. Little Turnbull, squat and sly, is nowhere among these indifferent, uncouth beings. I'd have found him by now, I know I would. He was my pygmy, my little pygmy, and now these aloof bastards—these Asadi of greater height than Turnbull himself possessed—have eaten him! Eaten him as though he were a creature of inferior status—a zero in a chain of zeroes as long as the diameter of time! May God damn them!

*(A lengthy pause during which only the shuffling of the Asadi can be heard.)*

—I think my shout unsettled some of them. A few of them flinched. But they don't look at me, these cannibals, because a cannibal may not go too far toward acknowledging the existence of another of his kind, so uncertain is his opinion of himself. A cannibal is always afraid that he'll ascribe more importance to himself than he deserves, In doing so, he discovers—in a moment of hideous revelation—where his next meal is coming from. He always knows where it's coming from and he's therefore nearly always afraid.

Yes, yes, I was philosophical, but I told you a moment ago that this was an editorial, not a news report. You've got to expect shallow profundities in these things. Shallow profundities and forthright circumlocutions. Okay? I don't want to disappoint anyone.

As a result (if I may continue) cannibals are the most inwardly warring schizophrenics in all of Nature. The dichotomy between the two self-contained personalities shines as clean and coppery as Denebola at dawn. The pattern of indifferent association during the day and compulsive scattering at night—as they flee from themselves—lends further credence, I think, to my interpretation of their dichotomy of soul. After all, who is more deluded than the cannibal? His every attempt to achieve unity with his kind results in a heightened alienation from himself.

So it is with the Asadi. So it is with—

Damn it, I agree! I'm talking sense and rubbish at the same time. —But it's hot out here, and they ignore me. They go by, they go by, revolving about me like so many motorized pasteboard cut-outs. . . And Turnbull's not among them, he doesn't revolve anymore, he's been butchered and consumed. Butchered and consumed, do you hear? With the same indifference that we used to poison the Ituri and rout out the people who lived there. Turnbull's dead, base-camp huggers, and *There are no more pygmies there are no more pygmies there are no*

**The Ritual of Death And Designation**

*From the final draft of the one*

*complete section of Egan Chaney's otherwise unfinished ethnography:*

PART ONE—DEATH. On Day 120 the old chieftain, whom I called Eisen Zwei, took ill. Because it had been several days since he had gorged himself during the "feast," I then supposed that his sickness was not related to his earlier intemperance. I am still of this mind. For five days he had eaten nothing, although the rest of the Asadi refused to observe his fast and began eating whatever herbs, roots, flowers, bark and heartwood they could find—just as they had done before their ritual feast. They ignored the old chief and the old chief's huri, much in the way they ignored The Bachelor and me.**

Eisen Zwei's sickness altered the pattern, altered it more violently than had his several appearances in the clearing. On the afternoon of the first day of his illness he abruptly rose from his reserved center plot and made the horribly glottal, in-sucking noises that he had used to summon his people to the meat six days before.

I came running from my lean-to.

The Asadi moved away from the old chieftain, stopped their shuffling and shambling and stared from great platterlike eyes, the lenses of which had stalled on a single color. This delicate stasis reigned for only a moment. Then the in-sucking noises were replaced by a spastic rumbling. As I broke into the clearing I saw the old man bent over at the waist, his arms above his head, heaving and again heaving until it seemed that he would soon be vomiting into the dust the very lining of his bowels. I turned away, abashed by the sight, but since the Asadi stared on, fascinated, I turned back around to observe their culture in action. It was at that moment, if at no other, that I earned the Oliver Bow Aurm Frasier Memorial Fillet, which the Academy has since bestowed upon me.***

The chieftain's huri flew up from his shoulder and flapped in the somnolent air like a small wind-collapsed umbrella. I had never seen it fly before—I was surprised that it was capable of flight. Its ungainly flapping excited the already well-aroused population of the assembly ground, and together we watched the huri rise above tree level, circle back over the clearing, and dip threateningly toward the branches of the trees on the clearing's western edge. The old chief and his vehement, body-wracking convulsions seemed forgotten. Every pair of color-stalled eyes followed the uncertain aerial progress of the huri. It plummeted, noisily flapping, toward that precariously forked perch where

**Several explanatory footnotes were provided with the published fragment. I wrote the introduction to the fragment, and the footnotes that follow this one are all from my hand. *Thomas Benedict.*

***This sentence did not appear in the published fragment. Egan Chaney has never received this award, though I believe he deserved it. According to Academy President Isaac Wells, he is not now, nor has he ever been, under consideration for the award.

The Bachelor sometimes sequestered himself.

But The Bachelor was not there. I did not know where he was.

The huri crashed downward through the branches, caught itself up, struggled flapping out of the jungle and returned with blind devotion to the air space over its master. I thought that at last it was going to feed, that its sole diet might well consist of Eisen Zwei's vomitings. I expected the starved creature to fall upon these—but it did not. Somehow it kept itself aloft, flapping—flapping—waiting for the old man to finish.

And when the old chief had completely emptied himself and fallen exhausted to his knees, it was not the huri that waded into the vile pool of vomit but the old man's shameless compatriots.

Now I did not even think of returning to my lean-to. My curiosity overcame my revulsion and I watched the Asadi carry away the half-digested mass as if each semi-solid piece were an invaluable relic. There was no fighting, no elbowing, no eye-searing abuse. Each individual simply picked out his relic, took it a short distance into the jungle and deposited it in some hidden place for safe-keeping.

All during this solemn recessional the huri quickened the air with its heavy wings and an anonymous Asadi supported Eisen Zwei by tenderly clutching the old chief's mane. When everyone had taken away a chunk of regurgitated flesh the chieftain's attendant laid him down out of the sphere of hallowed spew, and the huri descended to squat by its master's head. This newest ritual was over, all over.

I should mention, however, that The Bachelor appeared in the mourning throng to select and depart with some memento of Eisen Zwei's illness, just as the others had. He came last, took only a palm-sized morsel and retreated to the clearing's edge. Here he climbed into the tree above which the huri had flown its nearly disastrous mission only minutes before. Until sunset The Bachelor remained here, observing and waiting—as I, as a cultural xenologist, must always do.

On Days 121, 122 and 123 Eisen Zwei continued in his illness and the Asadi paid him scant attention, their chief ministrations consisting of bringing him water twice a day and refraining from stepping on him. The huri sat by the old chieftain's head. It shifted from one foot to the other and waited—smugly, I thought—for its master to die. It never ate.

At night the Asadi deserted their dying leader without a glance, without a twinge of doubt, and I was afraid that he would die while they were gone. Several times, looking out at his inert silhouette, moonlight dripping through the fronds, I thought he had died, and a mild panic assailed me. Did I have a responsibility to the corpse? Only the responsibility, I decided, to let it lie and observe the reactions of the Asadi when they came back at dawn.

But the old chief did not die during any of these nights and on Day 124 another change occurred. Eisen Zwei sat up and stared at Denebola as it crossed the sky—but

he stared at the angry sun through the spread fingers of both his hands, hands he crooked into claws and tore impotently through the blur of light that Denebola must have seemed to him. The huri did not move. As always, it sat smug and blindly knowing. But the Asadi noticed the change in their leader and reacted to it. As if his writhing dissatisfaction with the sun were a clue, they divided into two groups again and formed attentive semicircles to the north and south of Eisen Zwei. They watched his challenge to the sun, his wrestling with its livid corona, his tearing at its indistinct streamers of gas with gnarled hands.

At noon the old chief rose to his feet. He stretched out his arms. Sobbing, he clawed at the sky, suddenly gave up and sank back to his knees.

Without any sort of visible prompting a pair of Asadi from each group went to his aid. They lifted him from the ground. Others on the clearing's edge selected large, lacquered fronds from the rubber trees and passed these over the heads of their comrades to the place where their leader had collapsed. The men supporting Eisen Zwei took these fronds, arranged them into a regal pallet and then placed the fragile body on the bed they had made.

For only the second time that I could remember the Asadi had cooperated to bring about a desired end. (The other occasion, of course, had been the shaving of The Bachelor's mane.) But, like ancient papyrus exposed to the air, their cooperation disintegrated as soon as Eisen Zwei was stretched full-length on his pallet.

Each of the groups maintained a semblance of its former integrity, but aimless shambling replaced chieftain-watching as the primary activity within each group. Denebola, finally free of the old man's gaze, fell toward the horizon.

I walked unimpeded through the clearing and bent down over the dying chieftain, careful to avoid the huri that watched me from its uncanny, socketless face. I shrugged off the creature's literally blank stare and looked into the genuine eyes of its master.

I experienced a shock, a physical jolt.

The old man's eyes were burned out, blackened holes in a humanoid mask. It now made little difference that even before his staring match with the sun his eyes had not possessed the Asadi ability to run through the spectrum—for now, burned out, blackened, they were utterly dead, two char-smoked lenses waiting for the old man's body to catch up with their lifelessness.

And then the diffused red light that signaled sunset in this forested region of BoskVeld was pouring through the Wild.

The clearing emptied.

Alone with Eisen Zwei and his huri, I knew that it would be during this night that the old man died. I tried to find some intimation of life in his blackened eyes, saw none and withdrew to the cover of the Wild and the security of my lean-to. I did not sleep. But my worst premonitions betrayed me and in the morning I looked out to see Eisen

Zwei sitting cross-legged on his pallet, the huri once again perched on his shoulder.

And then the tenuous yellow light that marked sunrise and rejuvenation on BoskVeld filtered through the jungle.

The Asadi returned, filled the clearing with their lank bodies and once again took up their positions to the north and the south of the dying chieftain.

Day 125 had begun.

And, finally, the ritual that I had decided the Asadi *were* resolved itself into a lesser ritual in which they merely participated—the grandest, strangest, and most highly ordered ceremony in their culture. I call the events of Day 125, taken as a cumulative whole, the Ritual of Death and Designation. I believe that we will never fully understand the narrowly "political" life of the Asadi until we can interpret, with precision, every aspect of this ritual. Somewhere in the context of the events of Day 125 lies the meaning of it all. And how terrible to be confronted with an elusive truth!

The color of the eyes of every Asadi in the clearing (The Bachelor's excepted) declined into a deep and melancholy indigo. And stalled there. The effect of solemn uniformity struck me as soon as I stepped onto the assembly floor—even though I had intended to look first at Eisen Zwei and not at his mourners. Profound indigo and absolute silence. So deeply absorbent were the eyes of the Asadi that Denebola, rising, could cast no glare, could throw out not a single dancing, shimmering, uncapturable ray. Or so it seemed. The day was an impressionist painting rendered in flat pastels and dull primaries—a paradox.

Then the heads in which the indigo eyes so intriguingly reposed began to rock from side to side, the chin of each Asadi inscribing a small figure eight in the air. The heads moved in unison. This went on for an hour or more as the old chieftain, as blind as his companion, sat cross-legged on his pallet, nodding, nodding in the monumental morning stillness.

Then, as if they had inscribed figure eight's for the requisite period, the Asadi broke out of their separate groups and formed several concentric rings around the old man. They did so to the same lugubrious rhythm that they had established with their chins; they dragged their long bodies into place. The members of each ring continued to sway. The inaudible flute which I had once believed to be in the Wild had now certainly been exchanged for an inaudible bassoon. Ponderously, the Asadi swayed. Ponderously, their great manes undulated with a slow and beautifully orchestrated grief. And The Bachelor (all by himself, just beyond the outermost ring) swayed also in cadence with the others.

Now I was the sole outcast among this people, for I alone observed and did not participate.

The rhythmic swaying lasted through the remaining hours of the forenoon and on toward the approach of evening.

I retired to my lean-to, but thought better of just sitting there and climbed the tree in which The

Bachelor often perched. I forgot about everything but the weird ceremony in the clearing. I did not eat. I did not desert my station. Neither did I worry about my separation from the members of the Third Denebolan Expedition in base camp—it was for this moment, I instinctively understood, that I had refused any but the most essential contacts with other human beings. Leaning out over the clearing I gave myself up completely to the hypnotic movements of the shaggy-headed players that a generous universe had permitted me to study. No, thank merciful God, Egan Chaney had not been born too late.

I nodded but I did not sleep.

Suddenly Eisen Zwei gave a final sob, maniacal and heartrending, and grabbed the beast that clung with evil tenacity to his mane. He seized it with both palsied hands. (This was near the end of the day—I could feel the last dull rays of Denebola caressing my back, covering me like a threadbare blanket, unevenly warm.) Eisen Zwei exerted himself to what seemed his last reserve of strength and, strangling the huri, lurched out of the dust to his feet. The huri flapped, twisted, freed one wing and flapped harder. The old chief squeezed his hands together and attempted to grind the life out of the creature. He was not successful. The huri beat the air with its wings, beat the chieftain about the face and finally used its tiny hands to scour fine crimson wounds in Eisen Zwei's withered cheeks and buckled forehead.

During this struggle the Asadi stopped swaying, they looked on with eyes that gradually fell away from indigo toward a paler blue. Eisen Zwei drew a deep breath and shook the belligerent huri back and forth, up and down, like a bartender mixing a exotic drink.

But the huri flapped out of his grasp and rose to tree level. I feared that it would dive upon me in my borrowed perch, but it skirted the inside perimeter of the clearing—dipping, banking, silently cawing. Its imaginary screams replaced the distant but just as imaginary bassoon in my consciousness. Meanwhile Eisen Zwei, finding his hands empty, relaxed and dropped back onto his pallet. His body fell across it sideways, and his burned-out eyes fixed themselves—coincidentally, I'm sure—on me.

The Asadi chieftain was dead. He died just at sunset.

I waited for his people to flee into the Wild, to leave his brittle corpse in the clearing for an Earthman's astonished scrutiny. They did not flee. Even though the lethal twilight was gathering about them, they stayed. The attraction of the old one's death outweighed their fear of exposing themselves in an open place to the mysteries of darkness.

In my arboreal lookout I realized that I had witnessed two things I had never before seen among the Asadi: Death and a universal failure to repair. What would the night bring? The featureless, unpredictable night?

PART TWO: DESIGNATION The Ritual of Death and Designation had passed into its second major stage before I truly comprehended

that stages existed. I ignored my hunger. I put away the thought of sleep.

As I did so the Asadi converged upon the old man's corpse and those of smallest size were permitted to crowd into the center of the clearing and lift the dead chieftain above their heads. The young, the deformed, the weak, and the congenitally slight of stature formed a double column beneath the old man's outstretched body and began moving with him toward the northern endzone.

Arranged in this fashion, they forced a startling revelation upon me—these were the Asadi whose manes were a similar color and texture, a stringy detergent-scum beige. But they bore the corpse of Eisen Zwei with uncomplaining acquiescence. The larger, sleeker specimens of Asadi (those with luxuriant silver, silver-blue, or golden manes) formed single columns on each side of their lackluster counterparts and together these two units, like water inside a moving pipe, flowed toward the north—

—the one direction that Eisen Zwei had not entered from on the day he brought those three dressed-out, provocative carcasses into the clearing.

I recalled that driver ants in Africa had used just this sort of tubular alignment when they wished to move great distances as a group, the workers inside the column, the warriors without. And nothing on that immense dark continent was more feared than driver ants on the march—with, of course, the exception of man.

Almost too late I realized that the Asadi would be out of the clearing and beyond my reach unless I got out of The Bachelor's tree. Nearly falling, I scrambled down. The twilight glittered with the dust of the departing columns, and the foliage through which the mourners marched gave off a soft gauzy glow, as if viewed through a photographer's filter. I ran. I found that I could keep up with very little effort, so cadenced and funereal was the step of their procession. I slowed to a walk behind it.

Trudging in the wake of the mourners, incorrigibly hangdog in his pariahhood, was The Bachelor. As the huge gray procession snaked into the Synesthesia Wild, I noted that the circumstances of this march had reversed our roles—now I was following him. Three or four steps behind it all, Egan Chaney—the consummate outsider ridiculously hoping to learn the door-opening arcana of a group that had excluded him.

And all the while the twilight glittered, thickened, reverberated with the footfalls and leaf nudgings of a thousand single-minded communicants.

Before we had got completely out of the clearing, I looked around for the huri. I saw it flying above that part of the procession where its master was being borne forward on the shoulders of the smaller Asadi. Avoiding branches, the huri turned an inadvertent cartwheel in the air, righted itself and landed on Eisen Zwei's bony chest. Here, conspicuous above the heads of its master's people, it did a little preening dance. It looked like an

oil-coated rooster wooing a hen.

Then the column snaked to the left. The Wild closed off my view of the marchers and darkness began drifting in like black confetti.

I dogged The Bachelor's footsteps and waited for a new revelation.

How long we trudged through the singing fronds, the perfumed creepers, the blades of blue air, I don't know. Nor will I attempt to estimate.

There in the clearing, rising against the sky like an oriental pagoda, loomed the broad and impervious mass of something *built*, something *made*. By now all three moons were up and the solid black bulk of this structure was spotlighted in the antique-gold claret that the three moons together shed. Even before those of us at the end of the procession were out of the jungle, we could see the lofty, gemlike wings of this sudden artifact—and I may not have been the only one whose first inclination was to flee, to plunge back into the nightmare forest.

As we approached, members of both the inner and the outer columns began to sway from side to side, marching and swaying at once. The Bachelor's head, in fact, moved in wide arcs and his whole marching body trembled as if from the paroxysms of ague. If he had been punished for leading me to this place, perhaps he trembled now from fear. On the other hand, if the Asadi wished this temple kept inviolate, wouldn't they somehow punish me once they discovered my presence?

I did have the good sense to get out of the way. I climbed a tree on the edge of the clearing that fronted the pagoda. From this vantage point I watched the proceedings in relative safety.

Gray forms moved in the deep shadow that the Asadi temple cast. Suddenly two violently green flames burned in the iron flambeaus on either side of the top step of the immense tier of stone steps that led to the temple's ornate doorway. The two torchlighters—formerly the moving gray forms—came back down the steps. Never before had I seen the Asadi make use of fire—this sophisticated use both of flambeaus and a starting agent that I could not even guess at destroyed a multitude of my previous conclusions about them. Meanwhile the four columns of Asadi had ranged themselves in parallel files before the stairway of the ancient pagoda and six beige-maned menials bore the corpse of Eisen Zwei, now an uncanny apple-green in the torchlight, up the broad stone steps to the stone catafalque before the door. Here they set the corpse down and lined up behind it, staring out over their waiting kinsmen, facing the cruel ambivalence of the Wild, three on each side of the old man. I was not accustomed to such spectacle, such tawdry grandeur, and I began to think that perhaps Placenol did flow in my veins—Placenol or something more sinister.

The moons cried out with their silent mouths. The flambeaus uttered quick screamings of unsteady light.

But the ritual did not conclude. The night drew on—the moons rolled and the four files of Asadi

tribesmen shuffled in their places. They pulled at their manes. They looked up at the leaf-fringed sky. They looked down at their feet. Some stretched out their hands and fought with the tumbling moons just as Eisen Zwei had wrestled with Denebola, the sun. But none left the clearing, though I felt many would have liked to.

Instead, wrestling with their own fears, they waited. The pagoda and the corpse of their chieftain commanded them—while I, wedged like a spike into my tree, was commanded by their awesome patience. Then the last of the three moons fell into the farthest jungle of Bosk-Veld. The two iron torches guttered like spent candles. The Bachelor fidgeted.

Two vacuums existed. One, the vacuum in nature between the end of night and the beginning of day. The other, the vacuum in the peculiar hierarchy of the Asadi tribal structure, the vacuum that Eisen Zwei had so oddly filled—until his struggle with the sun and his subsequent death. Night and death. Two vacuums in search of compensatory substance.

Up in the air, clinging to two willowy tree branches, I made cursory mental notes in regard to this undoubtedly significant parallelism. When would dawn break? How would the Asadi designate their dead chieftain's successor?

A commotion in the clearing interrupted these transcendent speculations. Looking down, I saw that the four neat files of Asadi had dissolved into a single disorganized mass of milling bodies—as on their original assembly ground. A chaos. An anarchy. A riot of unharnessed irrationality. How could a vacuum of "leadership" exist in such an arbitrary melange of unrelated parts? Only the pagoda had solidity; only the pagoda did not move.

Then, looking up, I saw the old man's huri floating high above this disorder, floating rather than flailing, a gyrfalcon rather than a pelican. It rode the prismatic, predawn breezes with uncommon grace and skied off so effortlessly that in a moment it had dwindled to a scrap of light, picking up some predawn reflection, far beyond the temple's central spire.

Watching it, I grew dizzy.

Then the huri folded its wings behind it and plummeted down, dizzyingly down, through the roseate sky. I almost fell. My feet slipped through the fork that had supported me and I was left dangling, arms above my head, over one edge of the pagoda's front yard. The anxiety-torn communicants were too caught up in their panic to notice me.

Meanwhile the huri rocketed earthward.

It dived into the helpless crowd of Asadi and skimmed along their heads and shoulders with its cruel, serrated wings. Dipping in and out, the huri once again flapped like a torn window shade—all its ephemeral grace was gone, turned to crass exhibitionism (I don't know what else to call it) and unwieldy flutterings. But the creature did what it sought to do, for in that predawn dimness I could see that it had scarred the faces of several of the Asadi.

Nevertheless, a few of the

tribesmen tried to capture the huri—while, more reasonably, others ducked out of its way, fell to the ground, clutched their knees, crawled between the scrambling legs, or threw up their arms to ward it off. The huri did not discriminate. It scarred all of those who got in the way of its bladed wings, whether they attempted to catch it or to flee. And the eyes of the harassed Asadi flashed through their individual spectrums. The heat from so many changes made the clearing phosphorescent with shed energy.

I caught sight of The Bachelor and saw that his eyes had not changed. They were still mute, devoid of all intellect or passion. He stood apart from his panicked comrades and observed, neither grappling for nor fleeing from the huri. As for the noxious beast, it flew up, flew down, peformed wobbly banking movements, and slashed with its terrible pinions at everything living. Finally it shot up through the shadow of the pagoda, wildly flapping, then pitched over and dived upon The Bachelor. It flew into his face. It drove him to the ground and battered him with countless malicious thrashings.

To the last individual the Asadi quieted, queued up randomly and watched this unpredictable denouement, the penultimate act in their day-long ritual. It took me a moment to understand. Then I realized:

The Bachelor was the designee, the chosen one, the chieftain elect. Somehow it seemed an inevitable choice.

My arms aching, I dropped from the tree onto the floor of the clearing. In front of me were the backs of twenty or thirty Asadi. I could not see The Bachelor at all, though I could still hear the churning of the huri's wings and the newly modulated breathing of the tribesmen. Then a figure, insanely rampant, flailing its arms, disrupted the smooth surface of the crowd and darted through a quickly closing gap of bodies to my right. I knew that The Bachelor had regained his feet and was trying to fight off the huri. The two of them thrashed their way up the tier of steps in front of the temple and soon were on the paving beside the catafalque where Eisen Zwei still rested.

Now I could see as well as anyone, and there on that sacred, high place The Bachelor capitulated to the inevitable.

He went down on his knees, lowered his head, and ceased to resist. The huri, sensing its victory, made an air-pummeling circuit over the body of the dead chieftain. It sawed devilishly at the faces of the corpse-bearers and rippled like dry brown paper. Then it settled on The Bachelor's head. Beating its wings for balance, it faced the onlooking multitude of Asadi—and me—with blind triumph.

No one moved, no one breathed, no one acknowledged the dawn as it revealed the caustic verdigris coating the pagoda like an evil frost—like the rime on the forehead of antiquity.

Slowly, after a moment twice as ponderous as the pagoda's antiquity, The Bachelor rose to his feet. He was draped in his own resignation and the invisible garb of

an isolation even more pronounced than that he had suffered as an outcast.

He was the designee, the chosen one, the chieftain elect.

The huri dropped from The Bachelor's head to his shoulder and entwined its tiny fingers in the tufts of his butchered mane. There it clung, once again inanimate and scabrous.

Now the Ritual of Death and Designation was nearly over and two of the corpse-bearers on that highest tier moved to complete it. They touched the head and the feet of Eisen Zwei with the tips of the two great flambeaus, and instantly the old man's body raged with green fire. The raging flame leaped up the face of the temple as if to abet the verdigris in its patient efforts to eat the building away. The Bachelor stood almost in the very blast of this conflagration and I feared that he, too, would be consumed. But he was not. Nor was the huri. The fire died, Eisen Zwei had utterly disappeared and the corpse-bearers came back down the steps and joined the anonymity of their revitalized people.

The Ritual of Death and Designation had ended.

For the purposes of this ethnography I will minimize the signficance of what then occurred and report it as briefly as I am able.

Several of the Asadi turned and saw me in the pagoda's clearing. They actually looked at me. After having been ignored for over six months I did not know how to react to the signal honor of abrupt visibleness. Out of monumental surprise I returned their stares. They began advancing upon me, hostility evident in the rapid blurring of colors that took place in their eyes. Behind me, the Synesthesia Wild. I turned to escape into its vegetation. Another small group of Asadi had insinuated themselves into the path of my intended escape—they blocked my way.

Among this group I recognized the individual whom I had given the name Benjy. Cognizant of nothing but a vague paternal feeling toward him, I sought to offer him my hand. His own nervous hand shot out and cuffed me on the ear. I fell. Dirt in my mouth, gray faces descending toward me, I understood that I ought to be terrified. But I spat out the dirt—the faces and manes retreated as quickly as they had come and my incipient terror evaporated like alcohol in a shallow dish.

Overhead, a familiar flapping.

I looked up and saw the huri as it returned to The Bachelor's outstretched arm. He had released the creature upon his fellows in order to save me. This simple action, however, illustrates the mind-boggling complexity of the relationship between the Asadi chieftain and his huri. Which of them rules? Which submits to command?

At that moment I didn't very much care. Denebola had risen and the Asadi had dispersed into the Wild leaving me dwarfed and humble in the presence of their crumbling pagoda and the reluctant chieftain who stared down from its uppermost tier. Although he remained aloof, before the day was out The Bachelor had led me back

to the original assembly ground—for I would have never found it on my own.

The admittedly banal lesson that I learned from this experience, members of the Academy, is that even for a cultural xenologist—perhaps especially for a cultural xenologist—it pays to make friends.

**Thomas Benedict speaking: a brief interpolative note**

*I have put this paper together out of a simple sense of duty. As one of the few people Egan Chaney permitted to get close to him, I am perhaps the only man who could have undertaken this task. The section you have just read*—The Ritual of Death and Designation—*Chaney wrote in our base-camp infirmary while recuperating from exposure and a general inability to reorient himself to the society of human beings. In one of our conversations he compared himself to Gulliver after his return from the land of the Houyhnhnms. At any rate, beyond* Death and Designation *Chaney never wrote anything about the Asadi for publication, although immediately after his release from the infirmary I believe he intended to begin a book about them.*

*As I've already said, then, I undertook this compilation of disparate notes out of a sense of duty, a two-fold duty: the first to Egan Chaney, who was my friend—the second to the vast numbers of concerned humanity who wish to understand our neighbors on other worlds in order better to understand themselves. Chaney's failure need not be our own.*

*Upon his return to the original assembly ground of the Asadi after the Ritual of Death and Designation, Chaney stayed two more weeks in the Synesthesia Wild. On Days 126 and 133 I made supply drops, but, just as Chaney had requested, did not fly over the clearing in the vain hope of spotting him and thereby determining the state of his health. It was enough, he told me, to verify his robustness from the fact that each week when I coptered in his supplies I could note that not a scrap of paper from the previous shipment littered the drop point. The argument that he was not the only creature in the Wild capable of hauling away the goods intended for him impressed Chaney not at all.*

*"I might as well be," he wrote on one of his infrequent notes left in a canister at the drop point. "The Asadi have all the initiative of malaria victims. More horrible than this, friend Ben, is the face-slapping truth that there is no one else in the Wild—no one else at all!"*

*I am now the sole owner of the personal effects of Egan Chaney; these include both his private and professional journals, a number of unfiled "official" reports, a series of in-the-field tapes and a small bit of correspondence (alluded to in an early footnote). Those records concerning the Asadi that I don't own myself, I have access to as a result of my association with the Third Denebolan Expedition. I tell you this only because I know for an incontrovertible fact that during his last fourteen days in the Wild, either Chaney did not make a single entry in any of his journals or*

*notebooks or he so completely effaced these dubious entries from our material realm that they may as well never have existed.*

*We have only one complete report of any kind in regard to these last two weeks. It is a tape, a remarkable tape, and I believe that Chaney would have destroyed it, too, had we not taken his recorder from him the instant we picked him out of the jungle.*

*I have listened to this tape many times—in its entirety, I should add, since doing so is a feat which few other men would have the patience for. Once I attempted to discuss the tape with Chaney (this was several days after his release from the infirmary, when I believed that he could handle the terror of the experience with a degree of objectivity), but he protested that I had imagined the contents. He said that he had never recorded the least word in the tape's running account of The Bachelor's "—metamorphosis?" he asked. "Is that the word you used?"*

*I promptly played the tape for him. He listened to ten minutes of it, then got up and shut it off. His face had gone unaccountably lean and bewildered. His hands trembled.*

*"Oh, that," he said, not looking at me. "That was all a joke. I made it up because there was nothing better to do."*

*"The sound-effects, too?" I asked incredulously.*

*Not looking at me, he nodded—even though the circumstance of his pickup belied this clumsy explanation, exploded it, in fact, into untenable shrapnel. Chaney remained mute on this subject. In all of his writings and conversations in those last three months among us he never mentioned or even alluded to the sordid adventure of his final two nights. I present here a transcript, somewhat edited, of the tape in question. This final virtuoso section of our colloboration, our patchwork ethnography that I call. . .*

**Chaney's monologue: two nights in The Synesthesia Wild**

Hello all! What day is it? A day like any other day, except YOU ARE HERE! Here with me, that is. I'm leading you on an expedition . . . But forgive my initial lie—it isn't a day like any other day at all. How often do I lead you on expeditions?

It's Day 138, I think, and yesterday The Bachelor returned to the clearing—the first time he's been back since the day the huri anointed him, so to speak, with the fecal salve of chieftainship. I'd almost given him up. But he came back into the clearing yesterday afternoon, the huri on his shoulder, and squatted in the center of the assembly ground just as old Eisen Zwei used to do. The reaction among his Asadi brethren was identical to the one they always reserved for E.Z. Everybody OUT of the clearing! Everybody OUT! It was old times again, gang, except that now the actor holding down center stage was a personal friend of mine—who, by the by, had saved my life several times. Yes, sir.

After the heat, the boredom, and eight or a hundred sticky rainfalls—my lean-to leaking like a

colander—I couldn't have been more gratified.

Following the pattern old E.Z. established on one of his visits, The Bachelor spent the entire afternoon in the clearing, all of last night and maybe an hour or so this morning. Then he got up to leave.

I've been following him ever since. By the sun it's about noon.

Yes, The Bachelor permits me to follow him. Moreover, it's easy. As you can tell I'm not even breathing hard. I'm recording as we walk. If this were a terrestrial wood, you could hear birdsong and the chitterings of insects. As it is, you'll have to content yourselves with the sounds of my footfalls and the rustlings of leaf and twig. . . Here's a little rustle for you now.

*(The sound of a branch or leaf snapping back. General background noises of wind and, far less audibly, distant running water.)*

The Bachelor is several yards ahead of me but you may not be able to hear him—he walks like a stealthy animal. *Pad pad pad.* Like that, only softer. I don't care to be any closer than I am because the huri's riding The Bachelor's shoulder, clinging to his mane. It is not a winsome creature, base campers—no, indeed it's not. Since it hasn't any eyes you can't tell whether it's sleeping—or awake and plotting a thousand villainies.

That's why I'm happy back here.

Let me impress you with my cleverness. (*A heavy thump.*) That's my backpack. I've brought provisions for three or four days. You see, I don't know where we're going or how long we'll be there. But in The Bachelor I trust. Up to a point, at least. My cleverness, though, doesn't consist solely of hauling along some supplies. The backpack also houses my recorder, Morrell's miniaturized affair, the one that has a tape capacity of 240 hours, or, as Benedict would phrase it, ten solid days of Chaney's uninterrupted blathering.

I've rigged it so that my voice will trigger the recording mechanism whenever I speak and so that the absence of my voice for a ten-minute period automatically shuts it off. That's to conserve recording time—not that I plan on talking for ten straight days—and to keep me from fiddling with buttons when there might be other things to do. Of course, I can always go manual if I have to, countermanding the exclusive lock on my own voice, but so far none of the Asadi have been particularly voluble. Only Eisen Zwei. And his voice would not be apt to woo the ladies. Ergo, I'm once again your reporter in the field, your objective observer, your unbiased eyes.

I've been thinking. Yes, I have, too. And what I wouldn't give for a copy of one of the ancient works that no one reads any more—*The Brothers Karamazov.* Surely The Bachelor is none other than the Asadi equivalent of Pavel Smerdyakov, the illigitimate son who destroys himself out of his innate inability to reconcile the spiritual and the intellectual in his nature. Such passionate despondency! He cannot escape, nor accept, the dictum that the individual

is responsible for the sins of all. . .****

**1** CHANEY (*whispering*): It's quiet in here, as still as the void. And though you probably can't believe it, I've held my peace for an entire afternoon. Maybe I said, "Damn!" two or three times after scraping my shin or tripping over a partially exposed root—but that's all. In here I scarcely feel that it's kosher to talk, to raise my voice even to this hoarse whisper.

*(Chaney clears his throat. There is an echo, a hollow sound which fades.)*

We—the three of us—are inside the pagoda, in front of which The Bachelor became the designated "leader" of his people. I feel free to talk only because he and the huri have gone up a narrow iron stairway inside this pyramidal structure toward the ceiling—toward the small open dome from which the exterior spire rises. I can see them from here. The stairway spirals up and The Bachelor climbs it. The huri—no kidding, I'm not kidding at all—flies up through the center of the spiral, staying even with The Bachelor's head, but I can't—absolutely can't—hear its wings flapping.

In this place, that's strange. But it's preternaturally cold in here—maybe the cold has something to do with it—cold and dead, like no building ever erected in a tropical rain forest. No, damn it, even my whispers echo.

It's nearly dark outside. At least it was nearly dark twenty minutes ago when we came in through the heavy doors that the Asadi—two weeks past—didn't even open. Now the moons must be up. Maybe a little moonlight falls through the dome overhead . . . No, no, Chaney—the light in here comes from those three massive globes in the metal ring suspended several feet below the dome. The Bachelor's climbing toward that huge ring, the stairway rises toward it, it looks like a spartan chandelier, the globes like white-glowing dead-flesh lamps . . . Listen. Listen to the light fall . . .

*(There is no sound for several minutes, perhaps a slight amplification of Chaney's breathing. Then his voice descends conspiratorially.)*

Eisen, Eisen, another paradox for you physics majors. I think—I don't know, mind you, but I think that *both* the chill *and* the luminosity in here originate—emanate, so to speak—from those globes up there. It's just a feeling I have. Winter sunlight. The *texture* of the luminosity in here reminds me of the glow around probeship ALERT and EVACUATE signs, a deadly sort of lambence. Just listen. Hear that livid glow, that livid hell-sheen? All right, let's move to where we can see.

****There follows a totally irrelevant analysis of the ways in which The Bachelor resembles the character of Smerdyakov in Dostoyevski's novel. To spare the reader I've deleted it. I believe that the passage which follows was recorded approximately six hours later.

*(Silence. Rhythmic breathing. Footfalls echoing hollowly off polished stone.)*

I'm looking straight up the well of the stairway. (*An echo: Way way way way . . .*) C'mon, Egan, keep it down, keep it down . . . better, much better. I can see the huri flapping up there noiselessly—The Bachelor's legs ascending the spiral. The staircase seems to terminate in a glass platform off to one side and just a little below the suspended ring of the "chandelier." The Bachelor is ascending to this platform—there's nowhere else he can go. I'm looking up through the axis of the dome, right up through the chandelier ring.

Outside, above the dome, is a spire pointing up at BoskVeld's sky. Inside the dome, depending from its apex, there's a sort of plumbline—of what looks like braided gold—that drops down the central shaft of the pagoda to a point . . . just about a foot above the suspended ring. A foot, I think. Can't tell for certain. Been in the jungle so long my depth perception's shot—just as the Ituri pygmies used to have trouble adjusting vision to open savannah.

I apologize for the complicated description of the upper recesses of this temple, but the arrangement is intricate and that's where The Bachelor's going. I can make sense neither of the architecture nor of his intentions . . . And my neck's getting sore, tilted back. . .

**2** CHANEY (*conversationally, but still in something of a whisper*): Me again. The Bachelor reached the glass platform beneath the chandelier ring about an hour ago. He's been standing up there like a Pan-Olympic diver ever since, except that he's looking—as far as I can tell—at the braided gold plumbline that hangs slightly above him from the temple's dome. He can't quite reach it from the platform he's on. Would he like to? I don't know . . . no, he can't reach it. Not without a trapeze, daringly, could he reach that gilded pendulum. And then, what for?

As the channel announcers on the telecom operas would say, "Let's leave Billy Bachelor high atop the Callisto Medcenter, lamenting the lost Lenore, and follow E. G. Chanwick as he goes spelunking through the mysterious satellite's caverns of steel in his ongoing, bi-weekly endeavor to unravel the Secret of the Universe."

*(Unsuccessfully stifled snickers. Resultant echoes. Footfalls.)*

I'll be your tour guide, base campers. Follow me. This pagoda seems to be a museum. Or a mausoleum perhaps. At any rate, a monument to a dead culture. The walls around three sides of the bottom of this place are lined with tall spindly cabinets, display cases of a wildly improbable design. Each one consists of fan-shaped shelves that fold out from a central axis and lock into place on different levels from one another. (*Chaney blows.*) Dust. Dust on everything. But not particularly thick. On the shelves—the shelves have the fragile warmth of mother-of-pearl—are specimens

of implements and art work.

*(A click, like stone on stone. Chaney's breathing.)* I'm holding a statue about a foot-and-a-half high. It represents an Asadi male, full-maned and virile. But the statue depicts him with a kind of cape around his shoulders and a cruel pair of fangs such as the Asadi—those of today, at any rate—don't possess. (*Repetition of previous sound, followed by a metallic ping.*) Here's an iron knife, with a wooden handle carved so that the top resembles some animal's skull. Everything else in the cabinet looks like a weapon or a heavy tool, the statue's definitely an anomaly here.

I'm going across the chamber—to the wall without any cabinets on it. (*Footfalls. Echoes.*) The Flying Asadi Brothers are still up there, more rigid than the statue I just picked up. I'm passing directly beneath them now, directly beneath the dome, the iron ring, the energy globes, the weighted golden cord that falls from the dome . . . Dizzy . . . the dimness and the distance up there make me dizzy.

Don't look at them, then, Chaney. Just keep moving—moving toward the opposite wall. Through an opening in the lower portion of the helical stairway. Toward the horn-colored wall on which there are no cabinets, gang, just rows upon rows of—damn this light, this hollowness . . .let me get closer—of what look like tiny plastic wafers . . .rows of wafers hung from a couple thousand silver rods protruding for about five or six inches at right angles from the wall. The wall's just one big elegant pegboard glowing like a fingernail with a match behind it. The rows of these wafers—cassettes, cigarette cases, match boxes—whatever you want to call them—begin at about waist level and go up two or three feet higher than I can reach. Asadi height, I suppose.

(*Five or six minutes, during which only Chaney's breathing can be heard.*) Interesting. I think I've figured this out, Eisen, I want you to pay attention. I've just unfastened the carved wingnut from the end of one of these narrow silver rods and removed the first of several tiny cassettes hanging from it. Wafer was a serendipitous word choice, these little boxes are as thin as two or three transistor templates welded together. The faces of the things are about two inches square. I counted fifty of them hanging from this one six-inch rod and there are probably three thousand rods on this wall. That's about 150,000 cassettes altogether and this section of the pagoda, more than likely, is just a display area.

But I want to describe the one I've got in my hand. I want to tell you how it works and maybe—if I can restrain myself—let you draw your own conclusions. In the center of this wafer—which does seem to be made of some kind of plastic, by the way—there's an inset circle of glass with a diameter of less than half an inch. A bulb or an eye, call it. Beneath this eye is a rectangular tab, flush with the surface of the cassette. Above the bulb, directly under the hole through which the wall rod passes, is a band containing a series of different-colored dots, some of the dots touching each other, some not. The spacing

of them probably has significance—or so I'd guess. (*A chuckle.*)

And here's how this little cracker box works . . .oh, Eisen, don't you wish you were here instead of me? I do, too. I really do . . . It's purposely simple, I think. All you do is hold your thumb over the right half of the tab at the bottom of the cassette. Then the fireworks begin. (*A pleased laugh; subsequent echo.*)

Right now the eye in the center of the wafer is flashing through an indecipherable program of colors. Reds, violets, greens. Greens, sapphires, pinks. All premeditatedly interlaced with pauses—pregnant pauses, no doubt . . .In this dimness my hands are alternately lit and shadowed by the changing colors. Beautiful, beautiful. That's just it, in fact. The entire system probably sacrifices a degree of practicality on the altar of beauty.

There—I've shut it off. All you do is cover the left half of the control rectangle with your thumb. It may be possible to reverse the program—replay it back to a desired point, so to speak—but I haven't stumbled on the method yet. At least I don't think I have. It's impossible for me to remember the sequences of colors—though it probably wasn't a bit difficult for the Asadi who composed, manufactured and used these things, however long ago that may have been.

(*A thumping noise.*) I'm pocketing five of these cassettes, putting them in my backpack. For the greater glory of science. To set the shirttails of old Oliver Bow Aurm's ghost aflame with envy. So Eisen and Morrell will have something to put their screwdrivers to.

(*Musingly*) Look at that wall. Can you imagine the information on hand here? The level of technology necessary to devise a storage and retrieval system for a "language" that consists of complicated spectra patterns? By the way, what do you suppose I was "reading?" I'd guess that the band of colored dots above the eye is the description of the contents. The title, so to speak. Maybe I was scanning *Fornications and Deflowerings* by the Marquis de Asadi. (*A chuckle.*) I noticed that my hands had begun to sweat while the program was running.

(*Sober again*) No, the eyebook—let's call them eyebooks—was the first one on that particular rod. Maybe it's their *War and Peace*, their *Brothers Karamazov*, their *Origin of the Species*, their *Golden Bough*. And what the hell have they done with it? Stuck it in a crumbling godforsaken temple in the middle of the Synesthesia Wild and forgotten about it! What colossal waste—what colossal arrogance!

(*Shouting*) WHERE THE HELL DO YOU GET OFF DESTROYING THE ACCUMULATED KNOWLEDGE OF MILLENNIA? LETTING IT SIT UNUSED AND ROTTING!

*(A cacophony of echoes, a painful ringing.)*

*(A whisper, scarcely audible.)* That's right, you two, you Bungling Brothers aerialists, pretend I don't exist. Pretend you can't hear me. Ignore the millennia. Ignore your

ancestors whispering to you from their deaths. (*Venomously*) And damn you both to hell!

3 CHANEY (*in a lifeless monotone*): I think I slept for a while. I went to sleep under the rows and rows of eyebooks. Maybe for an hour. Not any more than that. I can tell time with the bottoms of my feet—by the warmth of the depression in the backpack where I put my head.

A noise woke me, a ringing of iron. Now I'm on the helical stairway high above the museum floor. I'm in a curve of the stairway a little below and opposite the glass platform where The Bachelor was standing. He isn't there anymore. A moment ago he chinned himself up to the cold ring of the chandelier, gained his feet and balanced on the ring, then reached out and grabbed the plumbline that drops down from the dome.

The huri? The huri squats on the globe, in the triangle of globes, pointing toward the front of the temple—he got off The Bachelor's shoulder a good while ago.

After grabbing the gold braid The Bachelor fashioned a noose and slipped his neck into it. Then he swung himself out over the floor so that his feet—right now, at this very moment—are hanging a little below the ring of the chandelier. I'm watching him hang there, his feet turning, inscribing an invisible circle inside the larger circle of the globe-set fixture.

But he isn't dead. No, he's not a bit dead. The noose is canted so that it catches him under the throat in the plush of his mane. In the two weeks since his designation his mane has thickened considerably, especially along his jaws and under his throat, and the new fur cushions the steadily constricting braid. So now he's just hanging there. The dangling man.

(*Listlessly*) A pretty damn interesting development, I suppose. At least the huri acts like it's interesting. The huri's watching all this with either excitement or agitation, beating its wings sporadically and skittering to stay atop the globe it's perched on. (*A bump. Unintelligible mumbling.*) See if you can hear it. I'll hold the microphone out for you. (*Silence, vaguely static-filled.*) That's it, the huri's claws scrabbling on the globe—the sound of The Bachelor's feet turning north, north-east, east, south-east, south, south-south west . . .

(*After almost ten minutes of near-silence*) A while ago I saw that The Bachelor had begun to drool. A thin thread of something milky glistened on his bottom lip as he turned, his feet revolving first to the right and then back to the left. I saw his mouth working—almost like an insect's mouth. The strand of drool got longer, it didn't drop away into the abyss of the stairwell, it kept growing and growing, lengthening like a somehow milky extension of the gold plumbline.

Now the strand has fallen down the center of the helix so that it's a little below the place where I'm sitting. I can see that it's not a liquid at all, not any sort of spittle or vomit. It's a fiber, something spun from The Bachelor's gut and paid out through his mouth. (*Unawed*) Beautiful and grotesque at once—

and I'll bet you think I'm drunk or drugged. Making silk out of a souse's fears, so to speak. But I've imbibed no bourbon, laddies, played with no Placenol—and I wish you were sitting on this cramped iron stairway watching this disgusting show, this ritual unraveling of The Bachelor's innards. Gut-strands. Beautiful and grotesque gut-strands.

(*Unemotionally*) God, but my patience has been tried . . .

*(Several more minutes pass. A faint flapping commences, continues for a while, then ceases.)*

The Bachelor's been paying out silk as if he were made of it. The single strand I told you about a while ago, well, it damn near reached the floor. Then he started working with his hands, reeling it back in and making his body turn faster in the canted noose. He's wrapping himself in the stuff, like an Egyptian king who's decided to be a mummy *before* he dies. Meanwhile he makes more and more cloudy thread.

Guess who's gotten into the act, gang? Right again. The huri flew off its globe when The Bachelor began reeling in his gut strand and caught up a section of the strand in its claws. Then, with both its claws and hands, flapping in higgledy-zig-gledy circles, it covered The Bachelor's feet, his ankles, and his shins. After that it settled on the old boy's wrapped feet. Now, its wings outspread, its claws probably hooked into The Bachelor's flesh, the huri's hanging up there like a bat and still wrapping its master in gut-extruded cable. And the damn thing's blind, mind you, blind as—a drunken xenologist. Good boy, Chaney.

I don't know how long it'll take, but in a while The Bachelor will be encased—completely encased, it seems—in a murky chrysalis. The huri looks as if it would like to finish and tie off the job as soon as it can. It's already binding in the Asadi's hands, pulling thread around his thighs, clawing up his long body inch by inch like a freakish circus performer. Then The Bachelor will be nothing but a lopsided pupa hanging from a gold cord inside the loft of his ancestors' rickety barn—I guess.

*(Chaney grunts. Shuffling sounds; perhaps the shifting of a burden.)*

I guess. Don't ask me. I won't watch any more of this foolishness. I'm dizzy. I'm fed up with this nonsense. If I can make it down these steps in this hell-glow I'm going to lie down beside the wall of eyebooks and go to sleep. Directly to sleep.

*(Footfalls on the iron steps. Unintelligible mumbling.)*

**Interlude: early afternoon of Day 139*******

CHANEY (*speaking conversationally*): Hello. I'm talking to Benedict alone now. Ben? Ben, you're supposed to make a drop tomorrow. Your twentieth. Can you believe that? I can't either. It

doesn't seem like more than ten or twelve years that I've been out here. Twenty drops. Well, I may not pick up this latest one. Not for a while, anyway. God knows when The Bachelor will want to lead me out of here and back to the clearing. At the moment he's occupied. Let me tell you how.

First, let me tell you what's going on. I'm standing here by one of the dusty display cases. All its shelves are folded up against the central axis, like the petals of a flower at night. But it's early afternoon, Ben—dull light is seeping through the dome. Even so, every cabinet in the place is shut up like a new rose. Every one of them. It happened, I guess, while I was sleeping. The globes overhead, the three globes in the chandelier up there—their fires have gone out of them, they're as dead and as mutely mottled as dinosaur eggs. I don't know exactly when that happened, either. One other thing—the eyebooks don't work today. I've fiddled with twenty or thirty of them, holding my thumb over the rectangular tab beneath the eye—but nothing, not even two colors in a row, not so much as a glimmer.

Today the pagoda's dead. That's all there is to it: the pagoda's dead. And I have the feeling that it won't come alive again until Denebola has set and darkness sits on Bosk-Veld like the shadow, the crumpled shadow, of the huri's wings.

But The Bachelor—the cocoon—you want to know what happened to him. To it. Again, I don't know exactly. During the night the plumbline from which he fashioned the noose—the line from which he then hung out over the pagoda's floor while the huri wrapped him in the false silk of his own bowels—that golden line, I tell you, has lengthened and dropped through the ring of the chandelier so that it's now only a few feet from the floor. It descended, I suppose, of its own accord. (*A chuckle.*) I'd estimate that between the floor and the bottom of The Bachelor's chrysalis there's now only enough space to wedge a small stool. A very small footstool . . .and now the ungainly pupa hungs in the daylight gloom of this chamber and turns slowly, slowly, first to the right, then to the left, like the gone-awry pendulum in a grandfather clock. That's it, Ben, brawny Big Ben, this whole building's just an outsized timepiece. You can hear Bosk Veld ticking in its orbit—Listen . . .

As for the huri, it crouches on the uppermost node of the pupa—the point at which the braid breaks through—and rides The Bachelor's mummified head as it used to ride his shoulder. Each time the wrapped body turns this way I feel that the huri's staring at me, taking my measure. If I had a pistol, I'd shoot the damn thing—I swear I would.

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*****From the end of the previous section to the beginning of this one Chaney engaged in a great deal of "irrelevant blathering." I have deleted it. Altogether, about twelve or fourteen hours of real time passed, time during which Chaney also slept and ate. In this "Interlude" I have taken the liberty of borrowing small sections from the deleted passages in order to provide a continuity which would not otherwise exist. For simplicity's sake, these insertions are not marked.

Even if it meant that the concussion would split the seams of this temple and send it crashing down on my ears—every fragile cabinet shattering, every eyebook bursting open. So help me, I would—which is probably why I didn't bring a pistol, a hand-laser or a light-cannon out here in the first place. But now the little beastie is clawing nervously at the silken membrane, unhinging its wings and shaking their outstretched tips a little—I think, gang, we're going to get some action. Give me a few minutes, just a few . . .

(*Later*) Action, indeed. The huri's moving in its own catch-as-catch-can fashion down the swaying cocoon that houses The Bachelor. As it moves it peels back pieces of the membrane, snips them off with its feet, transfers the pieces to its greedy hands and eats them. That's right, eats them. I had been wondering what the little bugger subsisted on and this apparently is the answer—it feeds on the husk of the Asadi chieftain's metamorphosis, it feeds on the rind of its master's involuntary change. That's phrasing it a little philosophically, I suppose, but I can't help thinking that the huri's eating The Bachelor's former self. It's crab-walking in a spiral down the cocoon—a spiral that mirrors the great corkscrew of the pagoda's staircase—and it furiously gobbles up the membrane that it has snipped away.

The beast is at the hollow of The Bachelor's chest and I can see my old friend's head. I mean that I can see the outline of his head—because even though the silken covering has been eaten away, a milk-blue film remains. It clings to his features like a thin hood. It's moist and trembly and through it I can see the death mask of his face.

Ben, Ben, you can't expect me to stay here and watch this. Tell the others not to expect that of me. The bitch-goddess of xenology has worked me over too many times already and I'm nauseated with fatigue. With disgust. It's worse than last night. There's an odor in the temple, a smell like excrement and rot and the discharges of the glands—I don't know what . . .

*(A retching sound. Then a rapid succession of footfalls, suggestive of running.)*

**4** CHANEY (*his voice thin but genial*): We're in the Wild again. Out in the open. Out among the singing leaves, the dancing moons, the glittering winds, the humidity is horrible. It makes my nose run. But after spending one sorenecked night in the refrigerated vault of that Asadi warehouse—and one stomach-turning day in it when it changed from a warehouse into a charnel house—well, the humidity's a welcome relief. Yes, indeed. Let my nose run as it may, where it may—even though I don't know where the hell the face it's running on is running to. Actually, we're not running at all. We're moving quite leisurely, the Bachelor and me and the huri—in no hurry at all.

(*Clinically*) I feel pretty well now. The horror of this afternoon has evaporated. I don't know why it made me ill. It wasn't that bad,

really, I should have stayed and watched everything. That's what I came out here for. But when the smell in there got so bad—my system's been under a strain. I had to get out of there.

I bolted for the pagoda's entrance, pushed the heavy doors aside, ran down the tier of steps. The sunlight increased my nausea—but I couldn't go back inside, Ben, so I'm not entirely certain what the final circumstances of The Bachelor's removal from the cocoon were. Like a little boy waiting for the library to open, I sat on the bottom step of the pagoda and held my head in my hands. I was ill. Really ill. It wasn't just an emotional thing. But now I feel better and the night—the stars twinkling up there like chipped ice—seems like my friend.

(*Wistfully*) I wish I could navigate by those stars—but I can't. Their patterns are still unfamiliar to me . Maybe we're going back to the clearing. Maybe I'll be able to pick up tomorrow's drop after all. I know I feel well enough now to try.

The Bachelor is striding ahead of me; the huri's on his shoulder. I know—

> *(The sound of wind and leaves corroborates Chaney's testimony that they are out of doors, out of the temple.)*

—I know, you're wondering what he looks like, what his disposition is, what his metamorphosis accomplished for him. Well, gang, I'm not sure. You see, he looks about the same. As I said, I didn't go back into the museum. I waited outside until the sun had set, thinking all the while that I would go back up the steps when the darkness was complete. I knew that my two charming friends couldn't get out any other way, that I wouldn't be stranded there alone. At least I hadn't seen any other doors while I was inside. The ancient Asadi apparently didn't see any need to leave themselves a multitude of outs. The end they've come to supports that hypothesis. But before I could steel myself to reentering the pagoda—just as the twilight had begun to lose its gloss—The Bachelor appeared on the highest step.

And came down the steps.

And walked right by me. He didn't look at me. The huri, clinging to his mane, had the comatose appearance that I remember it's possessing when Eisen Zwei came into the Asadi clearing for the second time. Now I know why it looked so bloated and incapable of movement—it had just ingested the old man's pupa, if Eisen Zwei could have so encased himself. So help me, I still haven't figured this out. I may never figure it out. Anyhow, I noticed only two small changes in The Bachelor as he stalked past me into the jungle. First, his mane is now a full-grown collar of fur—still a little damp from the filmy blue substance that lined the chrysalis. And second, a thin cloak of this film stretches between The Bachelor's naked shoulderblades and falls in folds to the small of his back. Probably, it just hasn't dropped away yet.

And that's it. His eyes are still as mute, as white, as uncommuni-

cative as they had ever been.

We're in a tunnel, sort of. We've been walking, slipping beneath the vines, about thirty or forty minutes. A while ago we came upon a kind of footpath, a beaten trail that permits us to walk upright—just as if we were in a recreation park. The only such trail I've seen in the Synesthesia Wild, ever. The Bachelor's moving down it easily and once again I'm having no difficulty keeping up.

But I'm lost.

*(A considerable pause during which the sounds of the Wild assert themselves: wind through the leaves, distant water, the soft shushing of feet in the dirt.)*

*(Pensively)* All the time I've spent in the Asadi clearing, all that time watching them amble around and wear down their heels to no purpose—it seems like centuries ago. No kidding, Ben, Eisen. That time in the clearing just doesn't exist right now. Lost as I am, I feel like I could follow The Bachelor down this narrow trail forever.

But his metamorphosis—or lack of it—bothers me. I've been thinking about it. My considered, but not necessarily considerate, opinion is that the old chieftain is exactly what he used to be. Anatomically speaking, that is. Maybe the very brief time he spent hibernating in that homemade sleeping bag of his altered him psychologically rather than physically.

*(Ten minutes of wind, water, and shush-shushing feet.)*

5 CHANEY (*whispering*): There's something in the trees ahead of us. A crouched, dark shape. The Bachelor just turned on me—he wouldn't let me approach with him. If I don't stay fairly close, I'll be lost out here. Damn you, you hulking boonie, I won't let you leave me. We're off the trail. We've been off it a good while and the trees, the vines, the twisted roots—everything looks the same; one spot is like another. I'm disobeying the bastard. I'm staying close enough to keep him in sight every second. He's out there in a ragged hallway of leaves moving toward the thing in the tree. I know that it's there because he knows that it's there. It's like a tumor in the branches, a lump to which the moonlight gives a suspicious fuzziness. You should see the way he's approaching that thing. He's spread his arms out wide and is taking one long step at a time, one long easy step. Like an adagio S.S. man. The membrane between his shoulder blades has opened out, too, so that it makes a fan-shaped drapery across his back. Shadows shift across it, shadows and moonlight . . . What a weird boonie. You should see him. He's a kind of moving, blown-up version of the drunken huri clinging to his mane. We're closer now. That thing up there, whatever it is, it's either dead or inanimate or hypnotized—hypnotized, I think. I'm sure that it's one of the Asadi. A gray shape. Ordinarily, you don't get this close at night, you just don't. The Bachelor's hypnotized it with his slow-motion goose step, the filmy rippling of the membrane across his back and arms—maybe even with

his empty eyes . . .now we're just waiting, waiting. I'm as close as I can get without jeopardizing the purity of this confrontation. I can see eyes up there. Asadi eyes, stalled on a sickly pink. (*Aloud, over a sudden thrashing.*) The damn thing's just jumped out of the branches! It's one of the Asadi all right, a lithe gray female. The Bachelor's wrenching her backward to the ground, the huri's fallen sidelong away from him, fluttering, fluttering in the thicket under the tree!

*(A heavy bump; continued thrashing.)*

(*Chaney's voice skyrockets to an uncontrolled falsetto*) I KNEW IT, I KNEW WHAT YOU WERE! DEAR LORD, I WON'T PERMIT IT IN FRONT OF ME! I WON'T PERMIT YOUR EVIL TO FLOURISH! (*Scuffling. Then, weakly*) Leave me alone, leave me .

*Violent noises; then a hum of static and low breathing.)*

**6** CHANEY (*panting*): My head aches—I've been ill again. But it's sweet here; I'm kneeling in grass under the trees by the edge of the pagoda's clearing . . . I've been ill again, yes, but I've done heroic things. I'm doing a damn heroic thing right now. You can hear me, can't you? I'm talking out loud . . . OUT LOUD, DAMN IT! And he's not about to stop me—he's just going to sit there opposite me with his long legs folded and take it . . . Aren't you, boonie? Aren't you? That's right, that's a good boonie . . . He can't believe the deed I've done, Ben. He can't believe I've freed him from that scabby little battlecock. There's blood on the grass. Dark sweet blood. Too sweet, Ben. I've go to get up . . .

(*Chaney moans. A rustling of clothes—then his strained voice*) Okay. Fine. A little bark to lean against here, a tree with spiny shingles. (*A stumping sound.*) Good, good—I refused to let myself get disoriented, Ben. We came marching—slogging, more like—right through that opening there, that portal of ferns and violet blossoms. . . oh, hell, you can't see where I'm pointing, can you? You wouldn't see, probably, even if you were here. But we slogged to this place from that direction I'm pointing and I kept my head about me all the way. My head, by the way, aches because he bashed me down—he elbowed me in the eye. They always elbow, the Asadi—they think elbows were given to them to jab in other people's ribs and faces, even The Bachelor. He knocked me down, bloodied me, damn him, when I tried to stop him from slaughtering this poor woman here, the one that lies here butchered in the grass. He knocked me down and I couldn't stop him. Then he whirled her up over his shoulder, grabbed the huri out of the bushes by its feet. Took off through the jungle, the Wild ringing like a thousand wind chimes because of my head, my aching eye. To keep from getting lost, I had to follow him. Dear God, I had to hobble along after that crazy crew... Then when we reached this little patch of grass among the trees—the

pagoda's right over there—he threw the dead woman on the ground and disemboweled her. I saw him doing it as I came up through the jungle after him. . . you see, I got here three or four minutes after he did. I collapsed, I collapsed and watched. I held my bad eye and squinted through the other . . . in ten or twelve minutes I'd forgotten what it all meant, and the woman didn't look like an Asadi any more. Now the grass is littered with her—and The Bachelor didn't even have to strike me to keep me from interfering. But, Ben, I couldn't help that; it was all owing to my head and my fatigue—I wasn't thinking straight. I didn't realize he was butchering the creature. As soon as I could I remedied the situation. And that's why I'm still a little sick. But my head's clear now; it aches but it's clear. And the boonie isn't about to strike me again. Are you, boonie? All he can do is sit and stare at me. I've intimidated the hell out of him. He thought I was some kind of maneless Asadi vermin and he can't reconcile himself to this new image of me. Poor mute bastard. My heroic deed kicked him right in his psychological solar plexus.

*(Almost pompously)* As the moons are my witness, I killed the huri. I killed the huri! No, no, the boonie can't believe it either but I swear by holy heaven it's true.

Just look at him, look at him making slow figure eights with his chin. God, but I've boggled him! He thought me just another Asadi, a low Asadi dog—and when he had finished carving up that pitifully helpless woman, that sweet long-legged lady, he set the huri down atop her carcass—I had to do something then. I pulled myself up. But the huri was sitting there on her butchered body, staring at me blindly. Old boonie-boy had put it there to guard her corpse, just the way Eisen Zwei had done in the clearing the day he carried in three slaughtered kinsmen as a feast offering. The huri meant I wasn't supposed to move, I was supposed to be a good cannibal and wait until dinner had been properly served. I'm not an Asadi—I'll be damned if I'm an Asadi and I didn't—no, by God, I didn't—pay any heed to The Batchie-boy's stupid sentinel. I killed it. I ran up and kicked the huri with my boot. It fluttered backward and I was upon it with the heel of my boot, grinding its filthy little no-face into the grass. Its body split open. Pus spilled out like putty from a plastic tube, stinking to the skies—that's what made me sick, the sight and the stink of the huri's insides. I stumbled away, fell to my knees. . .

The Bachelor couldn't move. Killing the huri had given me a hold over him, a power. He just sat, like he's sitting now, and watched me. The smell of the grass revived me, convinced me of my own heroism, my own crimson-bloody heroism—and that's when I knew I had to tell you about it, when I started talking through my sickness and the too-sweet smell of the grass.

*(Mockingly)* Are you awed, boonie? Is that your trouble? Could I walk right over there and kick your face in if I tried? Yes, oh, yes, I could. Damn it, Ben, I'm in control, I'm on top!

*(Laughter, prolonged laughter; then virtual silence.)*

Power's an evanescent thing, Ben. *(Musingly)* He just stood up, The Bachelor did, uncoiled and faced me like an enemy. I thought I was dead, I really did. I know that's a turnabout—you don't have to require consistency of me when I'm ill. But he only stared at me for a minute, then turned and walked across the open clearing toward the temple. He's climbing the steps right now, very slowly, a gray shape like the gray shape he killed. Every moon is up. The three of them ripple his shadow down the tier of steps behind him. I'm not going into that place again, gang, he needn't wait for me—and he isn't waiting. Fine. Excellent. I'll stay here in the grass, under the vines and fire blossoms, until it's morning. Let him go, let him go... But, damn him, he can't leave me in this gut-strewn glade! It reeks; the grass is black with gore. And here—just look at this. What the hell is it? You've got to get down *(groaning)* to see it: a little pocket of globular tripe here on the edge of the grass, just where the moonlight falls. Three of them nestled in the grass, three palpitant little globes—I think they're ova, Ben, all of them about the size of my thumbnails. Much bigger than a human being's minute reproductive cells. But ova nevertheless. Ovaries. That's my guess. They glisten and seem alive, glowing as they do... The Bachelor placed them here while he was butchering the poor lady. He was careful not to crush them—he laid them out so that they'd form an equilateral triangle here in this nest of grass. It's like—well, it's like the arrangement of the globes in the chandelier ring inside the pagoda...

But I'm not going back in there, boonie—I'M NOT GOING BACK IN THERE! DO YOU UNDERSTAND THAT? I'M NOT GOING...

7 CHANEY *(bewildered):* Where is it? Eisen, you said we could see it from this hemisphere—you said it was visible. But I'm standing here, standing out here in front of the Asadi's hulking temple where there aren't any branches to block my view and, damn you, Eisen, I don't see it. I don't see it! Just those blinding moons dancing up and down and a sky full of sparkling cobwebs. Where's Sol? Where's our own sun? Eisen, you said we could see it with the unaided eye, I'm sure you said that—but I don't see it! It's lost out there in a cobwebbing of stars—lost!

*(Suddenly resolute)* I'm going back into the temple. Yes, by God, I am. The Bachelor doesn't care if I stay out here and rot with the poor butchered lady he's abandoned. He's abandoned me, too. Twenty minutes I've been out here alone, twenty minutes staring at the dark grass, the dark sweet grass. He wants me to die from its cloying reek; that's what he's after. I killed his huri. A man who kills a huri isn't one to put up with a passive death, though. He forgot that. If I have to die, Ben, it'll be heroically, not the way he wants. I've taken too much to sit cross-legged under the trees and wait for either my own

death or the corrupt hunger that would keep me alive. I won't eat his offering, that poor butchered lady, and I won't stay out here either!

There's a beautiful golden cord in the pagoda, a beautiful golden cord. That should do it. If the boonie's still too shaken up from his loss, his stinking bereavement, to lead me back to the clearing—the Asadi clearing—that plumbline ought to serve. I've worked with my hands; I can fashion a noose as well as any dumpling-hearted boonie. And then carry it through where he couldn't. Just come along, gang, and see if I can't.

*(The shush-shushing of feet in the dirt, Chaney's shortwindedness as he climbs the temple's steps, the inward-groaning utterance of a heavy door.)*

*(From this point on, Chaney's each word has the brief after-echo, the telltale hollowness imparted by the empty volume of a large building's interior)*****  It's cold. You wouldn't believe how cold it is in here, Ben. Cold and dark. No light is filtering down through the dome and the chandelier—the chandelier's out! My eyes aren't accustomed. . .*(A bump.)* Here's a cabinet. I've scraped my elbow. The shelves are down and I scraped my elbow on one of the shelves. I'm going to stand here a minute. The cabinets give off their own faint light, a very warm faint light, and I'll be able to see a good deal better if I just stand here and let my pupils adjust. It's the same cabinet I described for you last night! Or one just like it, I guess. The statue, the knife, the implements and weapons—nothing is different. *(A scraping sound, somewhat glassy.)* Well, wait a minute. Here's a difference. The bottom petals of this cabinet have been broken off, torn away. I'm standing in the shards. And I'm not the vandal, Ben—the shards were already here. I just stepped on them, that's all. The little bump I gave the cabinet couldn't have done this—someone had to work energetically at these shelves to break them away. The Bachelor, maybe? The Bachelor's the only one in here besides me. Did he want an axe to stalk me with? Did he need one of his ancestors' ornamental knives before he felt competent to take on the pink-fleshed Asadi outcast who killed his poor rubber rooster? Poor, poor rubber rooster—IS THAT IT, BOONIE? YOU AFRAID OF ME NOW? *(Crashing echoes. Chaney's voice becomes huskily confidential)* I think that's it, Ben, I think that's why the globe lamps are out, why this place is so dark, why this cabinet is broken. The boonie wants to kill me—he's stalking me in the dark. Well, that's fine, too. That's more heroic than the cord, an excellent death—I'll even grapple with him a little. Beowulf and Grendel. It shouldn't take very long. The lady he killed felt almost nothing—I'm sure of

*****Just one of the many apparently unsimulable conditions that convinces me of the authenticity of the tapes. How much of what Chaney reports is hallucination rather than reality, however, I'm not prepared to conjecture.

that. OVER HERE, BOONIE! YOU KNOW WHERE I AM! COME ON, THEN! COME ON! I WON'T MOVE!

*(A confusion of echoes, dissonant and reverberating. Complete silence but for Chaney's chronic shortwindedness. This continues for four or five tense minutes. Then a forceful crack followed by a tremendously amplified shattering sound—like a box full of china breaking. Chaney gives a startled cry.)*

*(Whispering)* My dear God—the pagoda's flooded with light now—flooded with light from the three globes in the great iron fixture that yesterday hung just beneath the dome. It's different now—the iron ring is floating about five feet from the floor. The Bachelor is inside the ring, stabbing at one of the globes with a long-handled pick. He's already chipped away a big mottled piece of its covering. The piece shattered on the floor. You heard it shatter. *(Aloud)* And all three globes are pulsing with energy, angry energy. They're filling the temple with electricity—a deadly chill—their own anger. I'm sure they've generated the field that keeps the iron ring afloat, the ring hovering like a circular prison around The Bachelor's shoulders. The plumbline whips back and fourth as he jabs—it has damn near entangled him. And he's caught inside the ring—caught there and he keeps jabbing at the foremost globe with his pick.

*(The jabbing sounds punctuate Chaney's headlong narrative—apparently, another piece of the globe's covering falls to the floor and shatters.)*

Why the hell doesn't he duck out of there? Is he trapped in that field? I can see he's too damn busy to be worried about me, to want to kill me. All right. That's fine. I'll cheer him on, I'll give him moral support—HIT IT A LICK, BOONIE!

All the cabinets are open. All the shelves are down. I can see them now. The pagoda's alive again. All it took was the dark and a little violence.

The foremost globe has split wide open—he's knocked the crown off it. And listen, Ben, listen. Something is moving inside it, inside the intact bottom half. The ring is canting to one side and it's dimmer in here. Suddenly dimmer. If he keeps banging away at those globes this whole place will be drained of light—the shelves will fold back up and lock into position forever. Can you hear the scrabbling in the broken globe? Can you hear it, Ben? Do you already know what it is? I can see it and hear it both. In this dimness there's a flickering in that shell, a flickering like the hissing tatters of a black flame . . . Sweet Jesus, Ben, it's a huri scrabbling about in there, a black-black, blind-blind huri! It's clawing at the shell and pulling itself upright even as the ring dips toward the floor.

*(A fluttering which is distinctly audible over both Chaney's voice and the tapping of The Bachelor's pick.)*

It's in the air—a clumsy beast a little larger than the one I killed. And there's a smell in here just like the smell when I ground out the guts of the other huri. Damn it! The Asadi are idiots! The Bachelor is stabbing at another globe—he wants to let another one out. He wants to let all three of them out so that we'll be plunged in darkness and flapping wings and maybe even the dome will fall in on us.

To himself he can do that—to me, no sir! I'm getting out of here, Ben, I'm going to go tumbling down the steps while there's still light to tumble by. What a madhouse, what a sacred madhouse. Old Oliver Bow Aurm should kiss the nearest maggot for saving him from this—figurative maggot, that is. BoskVeld crawls with figurative maggots—and I'm coming home. I'm coming home to you. To you, my kinsmen . . .

*(Footfalls, a heavy wooden groaning, and then the unechoing silence of the night as Chaney emerges into the Wild.)*

**8** CHANEY *(exhilarated)*: God, look at them go off! I'm unloading my backpack. I'm lobbing them toward old Sol, wherever the debbil he at. Another Independence Day! My second one. *(Four or five successive whooshing sounds.)* I'm coming home, I'm coming home. To you, Ben. To Eisen, Morrell and Jonathan. You won't be able to say I don't do things with a flare. Or flares. *(Laughter.)* God, look at them stain the sky! Look at them smoke! Look at them burn away the reek of Asadi self-delusion!

No, by God, we don't destroy every race we run across. Maybe the pygmies, maybe we did it to the pygmies—but the Asadi, bless 'em, they're doing it to themselves—they've been doing it to themselves for eons. And, God, look at that clean phosphorescent sky! I only wish I knew which direction Sol was in—I'd like to see it. I'd like to see it like a shard of ice glittering in the center of those flaming cobwebs.

**Thomas Benedict speaking: last things**

*We saw the flares and picked up Chaney. Moses Eisen was with me in the copter. We had come out extremely early on the morning of Day 140 in order to complete Chaney's customary supply drop and then to circle the Asadi clearing with the thought of making a naked-eye sighting of the cultural xenologist. Captain Eisen ordered this course of action when it became apparent that Chaney was not going to communicate with us of his own accord. The captain wished to appraise himself of Chaney's condition, perhaps by landing and talking with the man. He wanted him to return to base camp. If it had not been for these unusual circumstances, Chaney's flares might have gone off for no audience but the empty sky.*

*As it was, we saw only the last two or three flares that he set off and had to reverse the direction of our copter to make the rendezvous.*

*By the time we reached him Chaney was no longer the exhilarated adventurer that the last section of his monologue paints him—he was a tired and sick man who did not seem to recognize us when we set down and who came aboard the copter bleary-eyed and unshaven, his arms draped across our shoulders. By removing his backpack we came into possession of the recorder he had used for the last two days and the "eyebooks" he had supposedly picked up in the Asadi temple. And that night I went back to the Asadi clearing alone in order to retrieve the remainder of his personal effects.*

*Back at base camp, however, we committed Chaney at once to the care of Doctors Williams and Tsyuki and saw to it that he had a private room in the infirmary. During this time, as I mentioned earlier, he wrote* The Ritual of Death and Designation. *He claimed, in more than one of our conversations, that we had picked him up not more than four or five hundred yards from the pagoda he describes. He made this claim even though we were unable on several trips over this area to discover a clearing large enough to accommodate such a structure. Not once in all of our talks, however, did he ever claim that he had been inside the pagoda. Only in the confiscated tape does one encounter this bizarre notion; you have just read the edited transcript of the tape and can decide for yourself how much credence to give its various reports. One thing is certain—the "eyebooks" that Chaney brought out of the Synesthesia Wild with him do exist. And they had to come from somewhere.*

*The eyebooks are a complete puzzle. They look exactly as Chaney describes them in the tape, but none of them work. The cassettes are seamless plastic, and the only really efficient way we've been able to get inside one is to break the bulb, the glass eyelet, and probe through the opening with old-fashioned watch tools. If the "books" were indeed programed as Chaney reports in his tape, we've found nothing inside the cassettes on which these programs could have been inscribed and no energy source to power such a rapid presentation of spectra patterns. Morrell has suggested that the programs exist in the molecular structure of the plastic casings themselves, but there is no ready way to confirm this. The eyebooks remain an enigma.*

*As for Chaney, he apparently recovered. He would not discuss the tape that I once—only once—confronted him with, but he did talk about putting together a book-length account of his findings. "The Asadi have to be described," Chaney once told me. "They have to be described in detail. It's essential that we get every culture we find out here down on paper, down on tape, down on holographic storage cubes. The pen is mightier than the sword and paper is more durable than flesh." But Chaney didn't do his book. Three months he stayed with us, copying his notes, working in the base-camp library, joining us only every sixth or seventh meal in the general mess. He kept to himself, as isolated*

*among us as he had been in the Asadi clearing. And he did a lot of thinking, a lot of somber, melancholy, fatalistic thinking.*

*He did something else that few of us paid much attention to. He grew a beard and refused to have his hair cut. Later we understood why.*

*One morning we could not find Egan Chaney anywhere in base camp. By evening he still had not returned. Eisen sent me to Chaney's hut and told me to spend the night there. He told me to go through Chaney's belongings and to see if I could determine his whereabouts either from an explicit note or a random scrawl. "I don't think he'll be back," the captain said—and the captain was right. He was wrong about the note, though. I found nothing but battered notebooks in his book-littered cubicle. And though I read through all of these that night, I found no farewell note.*

*It was not until I checked my mail box the next day that I found what Eisen had told me to look for. I checked the box merely out of habit—I knew there had been no probeship deliveries. Perhaps I was looking for a memo from one of the base campers. And I found the note from Chaney. The only comfort it gave me was the comfort of knowing that my friend had not decided to commit suicide and that he had successfully fought off a subtle but steadily encroaching madness.*

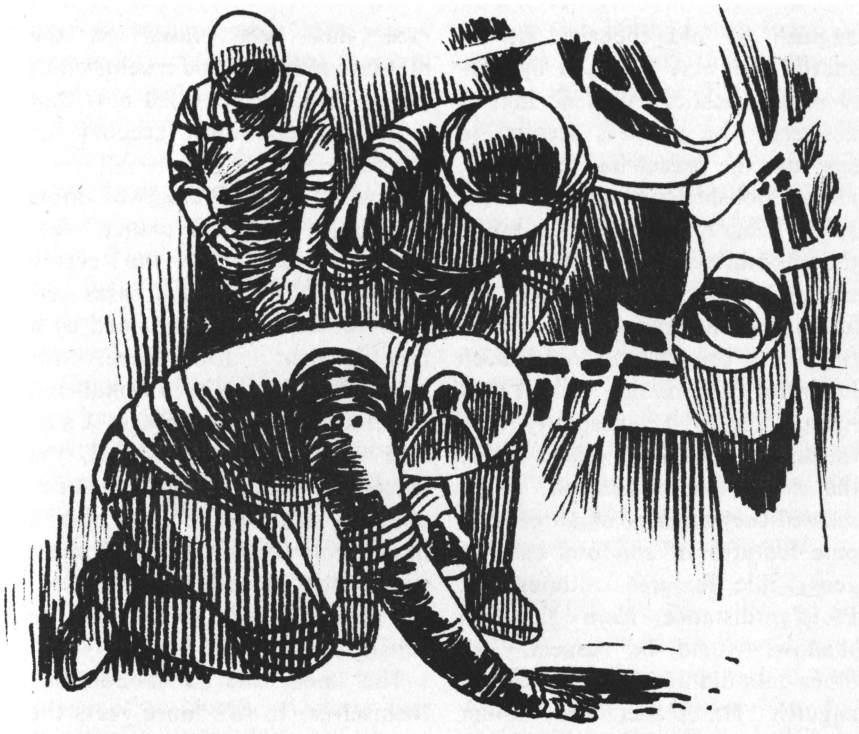
*(Eisen read this last sentence in rough draft and took exception to it: "Now you're dead wrong, Ben. Chaney not only succumbed to his madness but he committed suicide as well—a slow suicide, but suicide nevertheless.") The note expressed a peculiar sort of optimism, I think, and if you don't see this slender affirmative thread when you first read through the note, go back and read the damn thing again. Because even if Chaney did commit suicide he died for something he believed in.*

I'm going back to the Asadi clearing, Ben. But don't come after me—I won't let you bring me back. I've reached a perfect accommodation with myself. Probably I'll die. Without the supply drops I'm sure I will. But I belong among the Asadi, not as an outcast and not as a chieftain—but as one of the milling throng. I belong there even though that throng is stupid, even though it persists in its self-developed immunity to instruction. I'm one of them.

Like The Bachelor, I'm a great slow moth. A tiger-moth. And the flame I choose to pursue and die in is the same flame that slowly consumes every one of the Asadi.

Good health to you,
Egan

*A note from Moses Eisen:* Because of Egan Chaney's defection to the Synesthesia Wild and Thomas Benedict's lucid compilation of Chaney's notes, the Academy of Cultural Xenologists bestowed upon Benedict rather than Chaney the Oliver Bow Aurm Frasier Memorial Fillet. Though we do not forget the dead, we bury them. It is for the living that honors were made. ●



**It was the day of Creation—just another of those days when everything goes wrong. . .**

# CONSTRUCTION SHACK

**CLIFFORD D. SIMAK**

IN THAT same year when men first walked on Mars the probe was launched from the moon for Pluto. Five years later the first pictures were transmitted as the orbiting probe trained its cameras on the planet's surface. The transmission quality was poor; but even so, certain features of the photographs were productive of great

anguish as old theories fell to shards and were replaced by puzzlement, questions with no hint of answers. The pictures seemed to say that the planet had a smooth, almost polished surface, without a single geographic feature to break the smoothness of it. Except that at certain places, equidistant from one another along the equator, were tiny dots that would have been taken for transmission noise if they had not appeared consistently. Too, the dots still persisted when some of the noise was eliminated. So it seemed they must be small geographic features or shadows cast by geographic features, although at Pluto's distance from the sun shadows would be suspect. The other data did nothing to lessen the anguish. The planet was smaller than supposed, less than a thousand miles in diameter, and its density worked out to 3.5 grams per cubic centimeter rather than the unrealistic figure of 60 grams, previously supposed.

This meant several things. It meant that somewhere out there, perhaps something more than seven billion miles from the sun, a tenth planet of the solar system swung in orbit, for no planet the size and mass of Pluto could explain the eccentricities in the orbits of Uranus and Neptune. The calculation of Pluto's mass, now proved inaccurate, had been based on the measurement of those eccentricities and it must be admitted now that something else must account for them.

Beyond that, Pluto was most strange—a smooth planet, featureless except for the evenly spaced dots. The smoothness certainly could not be explained by a non-turbulent atmosphere, for surely Pluto had to be too small and cold to hold an atmosphere. A surface of ice, men wondered, the frozen remnants of a one-time, momentary atmosphere? But for a number of reasons that didn't seem right, either. Metal, perhaps, but if the planet were of solid metal the density should be far greater.

The men on Earth consoled themselves. In five more years the probe would come back to Earth, carrying with it the films that it had taken and from them, the actual films and not the low-quality transmissions, perhaps much that was hazy now might become understandable. The probe swung in its measured orbits and sent back more pictures, although they were little help, for the quality still was poor. Then it fired the automatic sequence that would head it back to Earth, and its beeping signals from far out in space said it was headed home on a true and steady course.

Something happened. The

beeping stopped and there was a silence. Moon base waited. It might start up again. The silence might indicate only a momentary malfunction and the signals might start again. But they never did. Somewhere, some three billion miles from the sun, some mishap had befallen the homing probe. It was never heard again—it was lost forever.

There was no sense in sending out another probe until a day when technical advances could assure better pictures. The technical advances would have to be significant—small refinements would do little good.

The second and third manned expeditions went to Mars and came home again, bringing back, among many other things, evidence that primitive forms of life existed there, which settled once for all the old, dark suspicion that life might be an aberration to be found only on the Earth. For with life on two planets in the same solar system there could no longer be any doubt that life was a common factor in the universe. The fourth expedition went out, landed and did not come back again and now there was on Mars a piece of ground that was forever Earth. The fifth expedition was sent out even while the Earth still paid tribute to those four men who had died so far from home.

Now that life had been found on another world, now that it was apparent that another planet at one time had held seas and rivers and an atmosphere that had been an approximation of Earth's own atmosphere, now that we knew we no longer were alone in the universe, the public interest and support of space travel revived. Scientists, remembering (never having, in fact, forgotten, for it had gnawed steadily at their minds) the puzzlement of the Pluto probe, began to plan a manned Pluto expedition, as there was still no sense in sending an instrumented probe.

WHEN the day came to lift from the Moon Base, I was a member of the expedition. I went along as a geologist—the last thing a Pluto expedition needed.

There were three of us and any psychologist will tell you that three is a number that is most unfortunate. Two gang up on one or ignore one and there is always competition to be one of the gang of two. No one wants to stand alone with the other two against him. But it didn't work that way with us. We got along all right, although there were times when it was rough going. The five years that the probe took to arrive at Pluto was cut by more than half, not only because of improved rocket capability, but because a

manned craft could pile on velocity that couldn't be programed—or at least safely programed—into a probe. But a bit more than two years is a long time to be cooped up in a tin can rocketing along in emptiness. Maybe it wouldn't be so bad if you had some sense of speed, of really getting somewhere—but you haven't. You just hang there in space.

The three of us? Well, I am Howard Hunt and the other two were Orson Gates, a chemist, and Tyler Hampton, an engineer.

As I say, we got along fine. We played chess tournaments—yeah, three men in a tournament and it was all right because none of us knew chess. If we had been any good I suppose we would have been at one another's throats. We dreamed up dirty ditties and were so pleased with our accomplishments that we'd spend hours singing them and none of us could sing. We did a lot of other futile things—by now you should be getting the idea. There were some rather serious scientific experiments and observations we were supposed to make, but all of us figured that our first and biggest job was to manage to stay sane.

When we neared Pluto we dropped the fooling around and spent much time peering through the scope, arguing and speculating about what we saw. Not that there was much to see. The planet resembled nothing quite as much as a billiard ball. It was smooth. There were no mountains, no valleys, no craters—nothing marred, the smoothness of the surface. The dots were there, of course. We could make out seven groups of them, all positioned along the equatorial belt. And in close up they were not simply dots. They were structures of some kind.

We landed finally, near a group of them. The landing was a little harder than we had figured it would be. The planetary surface was hard—there was no give to it. But we stayed right-side up and we didn't break a thing.

PEOPLE at times ask me to describe Pluto and it's a hard thing to put into words. You can say that it is smooth and that it's dark—it's dark even in broad daylight. The sun, at that distance, is not much more than a slightly brighter star. You don't have daylight on Pluto—you have starlight and it doesn't make much difference whether you're facing the sun or not. The planet is airless, of course, and waterless and cold. But cold, as far as human sensation is concerned, is a relative thing. Once the temperature gets down to a hundred Kelvin it doesn't much

matter how much colder it becomes. Especially when you're wearing life support. Without a suit containing life support you'd last only a few seconds, if that long, on a place like Pluto. I've never figured out which would kill you first—cold or internal pressure. Would you freeze—or explode before you froze.?

So Pluto is dark, airless, cold and smooth. Those are the externals only. You stand there and look at the sun and realize how far away you are. You know you are standing at the edge of the solar system, that just out there, a little way beyond, you'd be clear outside the system. Which doesn't really have to be true, of course. You know about the tenth planet. Even if it's theory, it's supposed to be out there. You know about the millions of circling comets that technically are a part of the solar system, although they're so far out no one ever thinks of them. You could say to yourself this really is not the edge—the hypothetical tenth planet and the comets still are out there. But this is intellectualization; you're telling yourself something that your mind says may be true, but your gut denies. For hundreds of years Pluto has been the last outpost and this, by God, is Pluto and you're farther away from home than man has ever been before and you feel it. You don't belong to anything any more. You're in the back alley, and the bright and happy streets are so far away that you know you'll never find them.

It isn't homesickness that you feel. It's more like never having had a home. Of never having belonged anywhere. You get over it, of course—or come to live with it.

So we came down out of the ship after we had landed and stood upon the surface. The first thing that struck us—other than the sense of lostness that at once grabbed all of us—was that the horizon was too near, much nearer than on the Moon. We felt at once that we stood on a small world. We noticed that horizon's nearness even before we noticed the buildings that the probe had photographed as dots and that we had dropped down to investigate. Perhaps buildings is not the right word—structures probably would be better. Buildings are enclosures and these were not enclosures. They were domes someone had set out to build and hadn't had time to finish. The basic underlying framework had been erected and then the work had stopped. Riblike arcs curved up from the surface and met overhead. Struts and braces held the frames solid, but that was as far as the construction had gone. There were three of them, one larger than the

other two. The frames were not quite as simple as I may have made them seem. Tied into the ribs and struts and braces were a number of other structural units that seemed to have no purpose and make no sense at all.

We tried to make sense out of them and out of the scooped-out hollows that had been gouged out of the planetary surface within the confines of each construct—they had no floors and seemed fastened to the surface of the planet. The hollows were circular, some six feet across and three feet deep, and to me they looked like nothing quite as much as indentations made in a container of ice cream by a scoop.

About this time Tyler began to have some thoughts about the surface. Tyler is an engineer and should have had his thoughts immediately—and so should the rest of us—but the first hour or so outside the ship had been considerably confusing. We had worn our suits in training, of course, and had done some walking around in them, but Pluto seemed to have even less gravity than had been calculated and we had had to get used to it before we could be reasonably comfortable. Nor had anything else been exactly as we had anticipated.

"This surface," Tyler said to me. "There is something wrong with it."

"We knew it was smooth," said Orson. "The pictures showed that. Coming in, we could see it for ourselves."

"This smooth?" Tyler asked. "This even?" He turned to me. "It isn't geologically possible. Would you say it is?"

"I would think not," I said. "If there had been any upheaval at all this floor would be rugged. There can't have been any erosion—anything to level it down. Micrometeorite impacts, maybe, but not too many of them. We're too far out for meteorites of any size. And while micrometeorites might pit the surface there would be no leveling process."

TYLER let himself down on his knees rather awkwardly. He brushed a hand across the surface. The seeing was not too good, but you could see that there was dust, a thin layer of dust, a powdering.

"Shine a light down here," said Tyler.

Orson aimed his light at the spot. Some of the gray dust still clung where Tyler had wiped his hand, but there were streaks where the darker surface showed through.

"Space dust," said Tyler.

Orson said, "There should be damn little of it."

"True," said Tyler. "But over four billion years or more, it would

accumulate. It couldn't be erosion dust, could it?"

"Nothing to cause erosion," I said. "This must be as close to a dead planet as you ever get. Not enough gravity to hold any of the gases—if there ever were gases. At one time there must have been, but they've all gone—they went early. No atmosphere, no water. I doubt there ever was any accumulation. A molecule wouldn't hang around for long."

"But space dust would?"

"Maybe. Some sort of electrostatic attraction, maybe."

Tyler scrubbed the little patch of surface again with his gloved hand, removing more of the dust, with more of the darker surface showing through.

"Have we got a drill?" he asked. "A specimen drill."

"I have one in my kit," said Orson. He took it out and handed it to Tyler. Tyler positioned the bit against the surface, pressed the button. In the light of the torch you could see the bit spinning. Tyler put more weight on the drill.

"It's harder than a bitch," he said.

The bit began to bite. A small pile of fragments built up around the hole. The surface was hard, no doubt of that. The bit didn't go too deep and the pile of fragments was small.

Tyler gave up. He lifted out the bit and snubbed off the motor.

"Enough for analysis?" he asked.

"Should be," said Orson. He took the bit from Tyler and handed him a small specimen bag. Tyler laid the open mouth of the bag on the surface and brushed the fragments into it.

"Now we'll know," he said. "Now we will know something."

A couple of hours later, back in the ship, we knew.

"I have it," Orson said, "but I don't believe it."

"Metal?" asked Tyler.

"Sure, metal. But not the kind you have in mind. It's steel."

"Steel?" I said, horrified. "It can't be. Steel's no natural metal. It's manufactured."

"Iron," said Orson. "Nickel. Molybdenum, vanadium, chromium. That works out to steel. I don't know as much about steel as I should. But it's steel—a good steel. Corrosion resistant, tough, strong."

"Maybe just the platform for the structures," I said. "Maybe a pad of steel to support them. We took the specimen close to one of them."

"Let's find out," said Tyler.

We opened up the garage and ran down the ramp and got out the buggy. Before we left we turned off the television camera. By this time Moon Base would have seen all they needed to see and if they

wanted more they could ask for it. We had given them a report on everything we had found—all except the steel surface and the three of us agreed that until we knew more about that we would not say anything. It would be a while in any case until we got an answer from them. The time lag to Earth was about sixty hours each way.

We went out ten miles and took a boring sample and came back, following the thin tracks the buggy made in the dust, taking samples every mile. We got the answer that I think all of us expected we would get, but couldn't bring ourselves to talk about. The samples all were steel.

It didn't seem possible, of course, and it took us a while to digest the fact, but finally we admitted that on the basis of best evidence Pluto was no planet, but a fabricated metal ball, small-planet size. But God-awful big for anyone to build.

Anyone?

THAT was the question that now haunted us. Who had built it? Perhaps more important—why had they built it? For some purpose, surely, but why, once that purpose had been fulfilled (if, in fact, it had been fulfilled) had Pluto been left out here at the solar system's rim?

"No one from the system," Tyler said. "There's no one but us. Mars has life, of course, but primitive life. It got a start there and hung on and that was all. Venus is too hot. Mercury is too close to the sun. The big gas planets? Maybe, but not the kind of life that would build a thing like this. It had to be something from outside."

"How about the fifth planet?" suggested Orson.

"There probably never was a fifth planet," I said. "The material for it may have been there, but the planet never formed. By all the rules of celestial mechanics there should have been a planet between Mars and Jupiter, but something went haywire."

"The tenth planet, then," said Orson.

"No one is really positive there is a tenth," said Tyler.

"Yeah, you're right," said Orson. "Even if there were it would be a poor bet for life, let alone intelligence."

"So that leaves us with outsiders," said Tyler.

"And a long time ago," said Orson.

"Why do you say that?"

"The dust. There isn't much dust in the universe."

"And no one knows what it is. There is the dirty ice theory."

"I see what you're getting at. But it needn't be ice. Nor graphite nor

any of the other things that have been—"

"You mean it's that stuff out there."

"It could be. What do you think, Howard?"

"I can't be sure," I said, "The only thing I know is that it couldn't be erosive."

Before we went to sleep we tried to fix up a report to beam back to Moon Base, but anything we put together sounded too silly and unbelievable. So we gave up. We'd have to tell them some time, but we could wait.

When we awoke we had a bite to eat, then got into our suits and went out to look over the structures. They still didn't make much sense, especially all the crazy contraptions that were fastened on the ribs and struts and braces. Nor did the scooped-out hollows.

"If they were only up on legs," said Orson, "they could be used as chairs."

"But not very comfortable," said Tyler.

"If you tilted them a bit," said Orson. But that didn't figure either. They would still be uncomfortable. I wondered why he thought of them as chairs. They didn't look like any chairs to me.

We pottered around a lot, not getting anywhere. We looked the structures over inch by inch, wondering all the while if there was something we had missed. But there didn't seem to be.

Now comes the funny part of it. I don't know why we did it—out of sheer desperation, maybe. But failing to find any clues, we got down on our hands and knees, dusting at the surface with our hands. What we hoped to find, I don't know. It was slow going and it was a dirty business, with the dust tending to stick to us.

"If we'd only brought some brooms along," said Orson.

But we had no brooms. Who in his right mind would have thought we would want to sweep a planet?

SO THERE we were. We had what appeared to be a manufactured planet and we had some stupid structures for which we could deduce not a single reason. We had come a long ways and we had been expected to make some tremendous discovery once we landed. We had made a discovery, all right, but it didn't mean a thing.

We finally gave up with the sweeping business and stood there, scuffing our feet and wondering what to do next when Tyler suddenly let out a yell and pointed at a place on the surface where his boots had kicked away the dust.

We all bent to look at what he had found. We saw three holes in

the surface, each an inch or so across and some three inches deep, placed in a triangle and close together. Tyler got down on his hands and knees and shone his light down into the holes, each one of them in turn.

Finally he stood up. "I don't know," he said. "They could maybe be a lock of some sort. Like a combination. There are little notches on the sides, down at the bottom of them. If you moved those notches just right something might happen."

"Might blow ourselves up, maybe," said Orson. "Do it wrong and bang!"

"I don't think so," said Tyler. "I don't think it's anything like that. I don't say it's a lock, either. But I don't think it's a bomb. Why should they boobytrap a thing like this?"

"You can't tell what they might have done," I said. "We don't know what kind of things they were or why they were here."

Tyler didn't answer. He got down again and began carefully dusting the surface, shining his light on it while he dusted. We didn't have anything else to do, so helped him.

It was Orson who found it this time—a hairline crack you had to hold your face down close to the surface to see. Having found it, we did some more dusting and worried it out. The hairline described a circle and the three holes were set inside and to one edge of it. The circle was three feet or so in diameter.

"Either of you guys good at picking locks?" asked Tyler.

Neither of us were.

"It's got to be a hatch of some sort," Orson said. "This metal ball we're standing on has to be a hollow ball. If it weren't its mass would be greater than it is."

"And no one," I said, "would be insane enough to build a solid ball. It would take too much metal and too much energy to move."

"You're sure that it was moved?" asked Orson.

"It had to be," I told him. "It wasn't built in this system. No one here could have built it."

Tyler had pulled a screwdriver out of his toolkit and was poking into the hole with it.

"Wait a minute," said Orson. "I just thought of something."

He nudged Tyler to one side, reached down and inserted three fingers into the holes and pulled. The circular section rose smoothly on its hinges.

Wedged into the area beneath the door were objects that looked like the rolls of paper you buy to wrap up Christmas presents. Bigger than rolls of paper, though. Six inches or so across.

I got hold of one of them and that first one was not easy to grip, for they were packed in tightly. But I managed with much puffing and grunting to pull it out. It was heavy and a good four feet in length.

Once we got one out, the other rolls were easier to lift. We pulled out three more and headed for the ship.

But before we left I held the remaining rolls over to one side, to keep them from tilting, while Orson shone his light down into the hole. We had half expected to find a screen or something under the rolls, with the hole extending on down into a cavity that might have been used as living quarters or a workroom. But the hole ended in machined metal. We could see the grooves left by the drill or die that had bored the hole. That hole had just one purpose, to store the rolls we had found inside it.

BACK in the ship we had to wait a while for the rolls to pick up some heat before we could handle them. Even so we had to wear gloves when we began to unroll them. Now, seeing them in good light, we realized that they were made up of many sheets rolled up together. The sheets seemed to be made of some sort of extremely thin metal or tough plastic. They were stiff from the cold and we spread them out on our lone table and weighed them down to hold them flat.

On the first sheet were diagrams of some sort, drawings and what might have been specifications written into the diagrams and along the margins. The specifications, of course, meant nothing to us (although later some were puzzled out and mathematicians and chemists were able to figure out some of the formulas and equations).

"Blueprints," said Tyler. "This whole business was an engineering job."

"If that's the case," said Orson, "those strange things fastened to the structural frames could be mounts to hold engineering instruments."

"Could be," said Tyler.

"Maybe the instruments are stored in some other holes like the one where we found the blueprints," I suggested.

"I don't think so," said Tyler. "They would have taken the instruments with them when they left."

"Why didn't they take the blueprints, too?"

"The instruments would have been worthwhile to take. They could be used on another job. But the blueprints couldn't. And there may have been many sets of prints and spec sheets. These we have may

be only one of many sets of duplicates. There would have been a set of master prints and those they might have taken with them when they left."

"What I don't understand," I said, "is what they could have been building out here. What kind of construction? And why here? I suppose we could think of Pluto as a massive construction shack, but why exactly here? With all the galaxy to pick from, why this particular spot?"

"You ask too many questions all at once," Orson told me.

"Let's look," said Tyler. "Maybe we'll find out."

He peeled the first sheet off the top and let it drop to the floor. It snapped back to the rolled-up position.

The second sheet told us nothing, nor did the third or fourth. Then came the fifth sheet.

"Now, here is something," said Tyler.

We leaned close to look.

"It's the solar system," Orson said.

I counted rapidly. "Nine planets."

"Where's the tenth?" asked Orson. "There should be a tenth."

"Something's wrong," said Tyler. "I don't know what it is."

I spotted it. "There's a planet between Mars and Jupiter."

"That means there is no Pluto shown," said Orson.

"Of course not," said Tyler. "Pluto never was a planet."

"Then this means there once actually was a planet between Mars and Jupiter," said Orson.

"Not necessarily," Tyler told him. "It may only mean there was supposed to be."

"What do you mean?"

"They bungled the job," said Tyler. "They did a sloppy piece of engineering."

"You're insane!" I shouted at him.

"Your blind spot is showing, Howard. According to what we think, perhaps it is insane. According to the theories our physicists have worked out. There is a cloud of dust and gas and the cloud contracts to form a protostar. Our scientists have invoked a pretty set of physical laws to calculate what happens. Physical laws that were automatic—since no one would be mad enough to postulate a gang of cosmic engineers who went about the universe building solar systems."

"But the tenth planet," persisted Orson. "There has to be a tenth planet. A big, massive—"

"They messed up the projected fifth planet," Tyler said. "God knows what else they messed up. Venus, maybe. Venus shouldn't be

the kind of planet it is. It should be another Earth, perhaps a slightly warmer Earth, but not the hellhole it is. And Mars. They loused that up, too. Life started there, but it never had a chance. It hung on and that was all. And Jupiter, Jupiter is a monstrosity—"

"You think the only reason for a planet's existence is its capability of supporting life?"

"I don't know, of course. But it should be in the specs. Three planets that could have been life-bearing and of these only one was successful."

"Then," said Orson, "there could be a tenth planet. One that wasn't even planned."

Tyler wrapped his fist against the sheet. "With a gang of clowns like this anything could happen."

He jerked away the sheet and tossed it to the floor.

"There!" he cried. "Look here."

We crowded in and looked.

It was a cross section, or appeared to be a cross section, of a planet.

"A central core," said Tyler. "An atmosphere—"

"Earth?"

"Could be. Could be Mars or Venus."

The sheet was covered with what could have been spec notations.

"It doesn't look quite right," I protested.

"It wouldn't if it were Mars or Venus. And how sure are you of Earth?"

"Not sure at all," I said.

He jerked away the sheet to reveal another one.

We puzzled over it.

"Atmospheric profile," I guessed half-heartedly.

"These are just general specs," said Tyler. "The details will be in some of the other rolls. We have a lot of them out there."

I tried to envision it. A construction shack set down in a cloud of dust and gas. Engineers who may have worked for millennia to put together star and planets, to key into them certain factors that still would be at work, billions of years later.

Tyler said they had bungled and perhaps they had. But maybe not with Venus. Maybe Venus had been built to different specifications. Maybe it had been designed to be the way it was. Perhaps, a billion years from now, when humanity might well be gone from Earth, a new life and a new intelligence would rise on Venus.

Maybe not with Venus, maybe with none of the others, either. We could not pretend to know.

Tyler was still going through the sheets.

"Look here," he was yelling. "Look here—the bunglers—" ●

**Though her life was unacknowledged, it remained hers to save!**

# THE NEVER GIRL

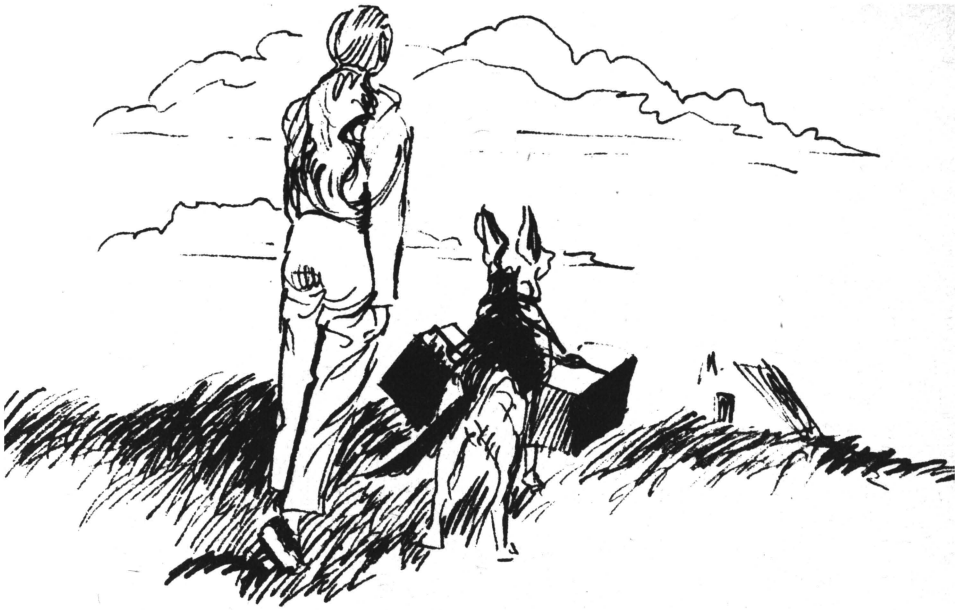
**MICHAEL G. CONEY**

SHE walked quietly through the deserted dawn streets of Axminster and the black mutated Alsatian padded with equal silence at her heels. Despite the early September chill she was warm, too warm in her light coat, and was prespiring nervously as she hurried close to the concrete walls. She paused at each corner, glancing to left and right, then running soundlessly across the exposed areas, the Alsatian following with slow bounds. She looked about fifteen years old—it was hardly possible that she was that age, but she might have been a hundred and thirty-four or a hundred and seventy. . .

As she passed the gaunt face of the Creche she saw the figure of a nurse in one of the windows, silhouetted against the lighted room. She envied the nurse—envied her job, her freedom from fear, her security—the nurse, she thought, is one of the Establishment and therefore safe.

She walked on.

Later she paused at the spacious entrance to a large building that towered to the crimson-streaked gray sky and, without much hope, tried the wide glass doors. They were, of course, locked. Above them a large sign read: TRANSFER CENTER. A smaller sign below



exhorted her to TAKE A FRIEND and at this she directed a nervous smile, one shift from terror. She moved away and, a few yards up the street, slipped down a narrow passage, dark and featureless except for the dim outline of a small window in the tall walls. She regarded this for a moment, gauging the height.

"Wait here," she whispered. The dog sat back on it haunches, tongue lolling.

She jumped, caught the sill, hung for a moment one-handed as she pushed at the glass. She felt it yield and pulled herself up, rocked forward on her wrists and butted the hinged window open. She swung her legs over the edge and sat for a moment flashing her torch around the interior. Satisfied, she dropped through, landing lightly on her feet, and played the beam around the large room in which she found herself.

"Who's there?" The question was harsh and metallic. "Is that you, Man Ewell? Come and talk to me for a moment, will you? I'm bored. These lazy bastards have all gone comatose."

The girl did not reply. Holding her breath, she pointed the torch at the source of the voice. The opposite wall was completely taken up

by a stack of boxes, each a cube of about one foot, enameled black and with a grille in the side facing her. There must have been a thousand of them and she knew that behind the wall of boxes were another thousand—and another and another. . . The voice was issuing from the right-hand side of the stack. Querulous, it spoke again. "Are you there? Are you there?"

Another voice replied amid a communal rasping as the other boxes roused themselves.

"There's nobody there. Be quiet, will you? I was almost asleep. God, I had almost made it for the first time. Then you had to start shouting."

"I tell you I heard somebody. I can hear him now. Breathing."

"Imagination. When you've been in a box as long as I have you'll learn to distinguish. It's difficult at first, I'll grant you." This was another box, down toward the left-hand bottom corner of the stack—the voice was more sympathetic.

"Sorry—" The first speaker still sounded doubtful, but became silent. The various mutterings ceased and the room was quiet again.

The girl tiptoed across it to a large card index set in the wall. She quickly ran her finger down the exposed edges of the cards, paused and extracted one. She read the punched information carefully, then pocketed the card and moved back to the window. She turned, played the torch over the boxes once more, then snapped out the light and climbed to the sill.

She dropped lightly to the ground outside—the Alsatian approached eagerly to lick her hand.

Trembling, she brushed the hair from her face. Her hand came away wet with tears.

LINTON JAMES looked up as the tall android entered the Transfer Center. The sound of traffic outside died as the door swung shut.

" 'Morning, Man Ewell."

"Good morning, James." Phillip Ewell paused at the reception desk. "Where's the secretary?"

"Late as usual. I'm standing in for a moment until she arrives."

The android sighed. "I'll get Johnson to have a word with her. How many cases have I got this morning?"

"Ten—sir." The polite address stuck in James' gullet—he detested having an android as a superior. Not that Ewell wasn't good at his job. James conceded that in the few days since the new Transfer Surgeon arrived at Axminster Center he had already proved his worth. Every operation had been completely successful. But Ewell would not confine his sphere of actvity to the operating theater. The man had a habit of popping up like a genie at unexpected moments—James would find him at his shoulder as he

lolled unsuspecting in his chair, reading the paper. The android seemed to be everywhere, reorganizing, criticizing, issuing directives. He was a worker. He had already looked in at the Creche this morning, James guessed. Such devotion to his patients was odd.

"All reincorporations?" Ewell was asking.

"Eight reincorps, two direct Transfers. A few disincorps, too."

Ewell bit his lip thoughtfully. James's report accounted for all available hosts of the right age in the Creche. If an emergency turned up Ewell might have to use an android baby. He turned away and made for the corridor.

"Let me know when the sec gets here, will you?" he called over his shoulder, and Linton James made a face at the broad, retreating back.

As soon as the surgeon was out of sight, the glass entrance door swung open and the receptionist entered, looking flustered. She hurried across to the desk.

"Is Man Ewell here yet?"

James eyed her appreciatively before answering. In her haste she had gained an attractive flush and she was looking up at him anxiously, in sharp contrast to her normal sophisticated disinterest. He savored the moment.

"He's here," he replied at last. "I'll put in a good word for you if you like."

The girl was not at all fooled by this. She sniffed, brushed past him and sat down at the desk, exposing a length of thigh. Linton James hung around, eyeing her covertly, weighing his chances. She was eighteen physical years old, two years younger than himself. Her last Transfer had been a fortunate one—she had a delectable figure and face. But she had ambitions. She was studying for a Preferred Trade and considered herself above him.

He sighed and turned away, intending to go to his small office at the end of the corridor, when his attention was caught by the entrance door's swinging open again. A young girl came in hesitantly, a carrier dog at her heels. She stood in the center of the entrance hall, looking about uncertainly, saw James watching and approached him with a nervous smile. He ran a hand over his hair and smiled back.

"May I help you?" he asked. Behind him the receptionist sniffed again.

The girl looked scared. She was about fifteen physical years old. Her eyes were large, blue and strangely innocent. As he looked at her he felt a pulse begin to beat thickly in his throat. She wore a light coat, open at the front to afford a glimpse of delicious young breasts maturing beneath a tight dress.

Staring at him like a terrified leveret she asked; "Is this the Transfer Center?"

"It is," replied James, still smiling.

"This is where I can contract to take Friends?"

"That's right." She could read, couldn't she? Obviously she was a stranger in these parts. He wondered if she wanted to be shown around the town.

"Oh, good. I want to take two Friends, please." She withdrew a slip of paper from the pocket of her coat and James had the undefinable notion that she was somehow acting a part. He glanced at the receptionist, who seemed intent on reading something, head bent.

"Right," said James briskly. "I can deal with that for you. Just fill in this form and I'll bring you a couple of Friends from the Habitation Room." He took a sheet of paper from the stack on the counter and placed it before her. He handed her a pen, standing close. Her head was level with his shoulder. His hip brushed against her. He had a powerful urge to put his arm around her.

HE HAD been in trouble before. Two physical lives ago, at the age of twenty, he had given way to his desires in the public park one night. By the dark walls of the ancient Minster he had come across a lone woman, a criminal convicted on a theft charge and with only one year to go before Total Death. She had confided this to him as they leaned against the wall together, he listening sympathetically while his mind assessed the possibilities. But he had miscalculated and the woman had begun to scream when he made his rough, uncontrolled advances. So he had run and lived in terror for two days, watching the indicator boards every minute in fear that his name would appear as a wanted man. No doubt the woman had reported the incident—herself bitter, she had wanted to take someone with her to the Euthanasia Room.

But the police had been unable to track him down. The night had been dark. They had not exchanged indentities—her description had been incomplete. And, possibly, the police had not had much sympathy for her. So he had gotten away with it. He had been more careful since.

The girl was regarding him with dismay, her face close to his. "Can't I choose my own Friends?" she queried.

"You have someone specific you wish to take?"

"Yes." She consulted the slip she had brought. "A-21867-AX and A-24536-AX, please."

"Anything to oblige." He dragged his eyes away from hers. "Just fill in this form," he instructed. "I'll go and get the Friends." He took the slip of paper from her, contriving to touch her hand lightly at the same time, then made his way to the Habitation Room. This was situated at the ex-

treme end of the corridor—it was a vast rectangular chamber, something like a library filled by parallel stacks of Friends.

The Conversationalist sat among the boxes, trying to interest the Friends in history. James paused in the doorway.

"The Compulsory Transfer Act was passed in the year 2056,"* the man was saying, "with the dual object of reducing the runaway birthrate and preventing the wastage of active, valuable minds through death. This law might fairly be said to have changed the face of civilization."

"I'll say," rasped one of the Friends. "If not for that law I'd have a physical body now—instead of being in this damned box!" The Conversationalist was frequently subjected to such heckling. James grinned, leaning against the door jamb.

"Except for the Act you'd have been dead this last hundred and fifty years." pointed out the Conversationalist. He leaned forward to confirm this. "A-28976-AX," he read from the metal plate above the Friend's grille. "So you had your first Transfer about 2085. You've probably had four physical bodies by now, a total of one hundered and sixty years active life. And just a total of twenty years Friendship in a box at various times. That's not bad. We can't help the Waiting List, you know. And Axminster is lucky. In some cities the list is over ten years long."

* The Act of 2056 guaranteed virtually everyone then alive immortality. It specified that on his/her fiftieth birthday every person of Earth had to attend a Transfer Center, where his/her brain was removed and placed into the cranium of a six-month-old child. The person then went through another childhood to maturity and the process was repeated at his or her fiftieth birthday—*ad infinitum*. So successful was the Act at curbing the human birthrate that by 2066 it became necessary to introduce what were euphemistically called Friendship boxes —metal containers filled with nutrient fluid in which a brain was placed pending availability of a host body. In order to make the wait more pleasant the boxes were equipped with audio pickups and vocal chords. By the year 2128 it was decided to decrease the active population (while birthrate had declined, the number of people had not) by reducing the age for Compulsory Transfer to 40. Simultaneously came about the Preferred Trade concept, which made it unnecessary for "essential personnel," such as government officials and civil servants, to spend any time in a Friendship box—at age 40 they were transferred into a host body.

By 2159 old heads were firmly in the saddle and the world was solidly in the grip of the System. Almost no one remembered what a young person was. Androids were developed to serve as host bodies. Handsome, healthy and intelligent, grown from the best genetic material available, they were nevertheless discriminated against because of certain skin discolorations and most people continued to prefer waiting periods in Friendship boxes.

The human birthrate, however, continued to drop—and Friends in boxes wielded votes. The Total Death Act—which prescribed termination of all persons convicted of any offense from overtime parking up—was passed in 2176 to shorten Friendship box waiting period for others.

The events in this story took place in the year 2256.

"Thanks," said someone sarcastically. "That makes me feel good. I've only got eighteen months to do in this box."

Linton James coughed. "Excuse me," he said. "I've come to collect a couple of Friends." He read the numbers out to the Conversationalist. The man nodded and James began to examine the boxes, which were in approximate numerical order, while the history lesson continued. Soon he found the two he wanted. "I've got them," he said. He took them down and checked the numbers off with the Conversationalist.

Harsh outcries rose from several Friends as they heard the numbers.

"Wait a moment!" someone yelled. "Those two only came in yesterday. How come they've found Companions already? What about me? I've been in this room for three years!"

"I can't help that." James addressed the box at the foot of the stack. "Contracting for Friends by active persons is entirely voluntary. A girl came in just now and asked for these two Friends. They're probably acquaintances of hers. If she's good enough to contract to look after a Friend she can have anyone she likes."

The Conversationalist spoke up. "One thing I'd like to ask you people," he said. "During your last physical life—how many of you took the responsibility of contracting to look after a Friend?"

An abashed muttering came from the boxes.

"You see what I mean?" the Conversationalist asked triumphantly. "If you wouldn't take a Friend when you could—why should anyone take you?"

Several boxes began to speak at once—loudly. James left the room. He didn't envy the Conversationalist his job. For several hours each day the man talked to the boxes, reasoning with them, teaching them, listening to their complaints...

LINTON JAMES quickly forgot the Habitation Room as he reached the entrance hall. The girl was bending over, her back to him, patting the carrier dog on the head and talking to it—carrier dogs were extremely intelligent and able to comprehend simple human speech. James could see the girl's thighs below the short skirt almost to her buttocks. He paused for a moment, involuntarily touching his tongue to his lips, then walked across to her.

"Your Friends," he said, placing the two boxes on the floor.

"Oh, thank you." She handed him the form and he glanced at it briefly, checking her name with that on the Code Card she offered. You had to be careful over that sort of thing. People had been known to put false name and number on a form, thereby gaining possession of a Friend without revealing their true identities. The claimant would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then disappear, resuming his or her correct identity in the city. The Friend, possibly an old enemy of the impostor, might also disappear for a while—in many cases to reappear later on a garbage dump, smashed and Totally Dead.

But this girl was genuine enough. Mary Atkinson. He smiled at her reassuringly—she still seemed nervous.

"They're all yours," he said. "Can I help you out with them?"

"I've brought the dog."

"No trouble." The pulse was beating again—his palms were moist. He glanced at the address on the form. "Cliff Cottage, Branscombe. That's well out in the country. Tell you what—" he was speaking fast, eagerly—"I'll run you there in my car. No trouble." He held her gaze—desire fluttered at the pit of his stomach.

"It's quite all right." She was looking scared again. "I'll take the bus. Thank you very much, sir—"

*Sir.* The eyes were intensely blue. James felt powerful, virile, masterful. A corner of his mind returned to the woman in the park. He had shown her. He had stifled her screaming with the palm of his hand. But he had never wanted anyone as much as he wanted this girl. What was it about her? She seemed virginal. An oddity. Almost an alien concept. Something one read about.

"No trouble," he repeated, his mouth dry. "The car's outside."

"Thank you very much," she said, "but I'd rather—" She seized one of the boxes and the carrier dog took the other in his powerful jaws. With another brief, terrified glance at him she turned and almost ran for the door, the dog trotting behind her. James watched the two, watched the door after they had gone. You didn't get many girls like that. Usually women were hard, experienced, inaccessible.

"My God." The cynical voice of the receptionist startled him out of his reverie. "I thought you were going to lay her on the spot. You'd better watch yourself, young Linton James. You're frustrated. You ought to grow up."

He wheeled furiously, hating her amused look, her thighs, the impossible longings she created in his mind and body. Then he recovered, eyeing her appraisingly. His standards had changed. She represented inferior goods, shop-soiled. He stared at her contemptuously and, to his surprise, she dropped her eyes.

"She was very pretty," she murmured, "Physically a bit young—mentally, too I thought. Just the type for you, really, Linton. I should look her up some time."

Amazed and not knowing quite what to say—he felt again inexperienced and unable to cope with the world around him—Linton James returned to his office to dream of the young girl with the blue eyes.

FIVE minutes later he was still staring at the form in his hand. Once again he read it, turned it over, read the other side. He was unable to understand what he saw. The only certainty was that the girl had committed an offense. For some unknown reason she, in removing the two Friends, had laid herself open to criminal proceedings and imprisonment—and consequently, when the date of her next Transfer came up in some twenty-five years, Total Death.

The front of the form bore her name and address, which he had checked with her Code Card, and her number—which he had not checked. There had not seemed to be any need.

A-24536-AX MARY ATKINSON, CLIFF COTTAGE, BRANSCOMBE.

The usual declaration and her signature followed: M. Atkinson.

On the reverse of the form appeared the numbers of the two Friends she had taken with her.

A-21867-AX

A-24536-AX

The same number appeared on both sides of the form. It was impossible. He had checked her name, which agreed with her personal Code Card. So the number to go with her name must have been correct. Yet he had also checked the numbers on the boxes with the back of the form filled in by her. How could a person be in two places at once? First, physically before him and signing a form—and secondly, demonstrably in a Friendship box, as witness the number?

It was some time before Linton James thought to check the Habitation Room. He entered quietly and made for the index racks. These contained the Code Cards handed in by people undergoing physical euthanasia before their minds were placed in Friendship boxes; the cards provided a cross-check with the boxes in the Habitation Room. He flipped through the cards, ignoring the cries of query from the stacked boxes were bored again. The Conversationalist was taking a break. Some of the cards had the folded forms clipped to them, indicating that the Friends they represented had been contracted for and removed from the room.

Soon he found what he was looking for. He pulled out a card.

A-21867-AX EDGAR GREENWOOD, CLIFF COTTAGE, BRANSCOMBE.

That took care of one of the Friends. He searched further, but soon gave up, convinced. There was no card for Friend number A-24536-AX. There couldn't be, because that was the one the girl had shown him.

She must previously have succeeded in removing it from the Habitation Room and had used it as identity to claim the Friends. Why?

He thought about it for a while, sitting in his office. He kept

returning to the same conclusion.

The only reason the girl would use that Code Card as identity was that she had no identity of her own. She didn't exist. Legally she was a nonentity.

And Linton James thought he knew why.

Substantial rewards existed for turning in a criminal and a nonentity had to—by definition—be a criminal. He folded the form and tucked it into his pocket.

He would turn the girl in.

He thought of her blue eyes, her unspoiled youthful air of innocence.

Yes, he would turn her in.

But first...

AT THIS time of morning the bus service from the city to the outlaying districts was infrequent and Mary Atkinson stood for some time at the bus stop, the dog and the two black boxes at her feet. From time to time people hurrying along the pavement to their various duties about the city would step close to the boxes and the dog's upper lip would curl back and he would move closer, crouching over the Friends. After a while a short queue had built up—a few people glanced curiously at the young girl standing at the stop, lost in thought, the dog and boxes at her feet.

Mary was, in fact, trying hard not to cry and by this unusual exhibition of emotion draw attention to herself. She hardly dared to look at the boxes—she knew that if she allowed her attention to dwell on them the tears would fall. In her misery she failed to notice the figure of Linton James, clad in a shapeless raincoat, tag on to the end of the queue.

At last the hoverbus pulled up with a whistle of expended air. She picked up one of the Friends—the dog took the other—and both climbed on board. Mary inserted her Code Card into the ticket mechanism.

The bus at this time was practically empty. She chose a seat in the rear, setting the boxes on the floor at her feet and calling the dog in close. He looked up at her from moist eyes, then settled under the seat. The bus started.

A woman sat on the adjacent pair of seats, entrenched among packages, glanced at her, then leaned across.

"Hello, there. Isn't it Woman Mary Atkinson?"

Mary looked up, startled. "Oh—Woman Biggs. Why, hello. Hello. You're leaving town early this morning."

"I just had to pick up a few things." She looked at the floor beside Mary. "Hi there, dog. What's that you've got? Friends?" She regarded Mary curiously.

"Yes."

"Oh." the woman hesitated. "Who are they? Anyone I know?"

Mary was silent.

"Well—now let me see." The woman stared at the boxes, her

expression intent and amused like one taking part in a guessing game."Let me see. You're from Branscombe. I don't know many people that far out of town. You keep pretty much to yourselves. But—wait a minute—a month ago I saw you in Sidford with two people. They must have been in their late thirties— Why, you're crying, Mary. What's the matter?"

Mary sniffed into her handkerchief.

Woman Biggs stared at her with interest. "I haven't seen anyone cry for years. It's nice to know people have emotions left. I don't think I've cried since I was eighty-nine mental—that was when Bob Secombe got Total Death on a driving charge. Do you remember Bob Secombe?"

Mary shook her head dumbly.

"I thought everyone knew Bob Secombe. I hope I knew him better than most, though. Funny you never knew him."

Mary made a supreme effort. She didn't want to talk about Bob Secombe. She gave her cheeks a final mopping and indicated the boxes. "These people looked after me during my last childhood," she said unsteadily. "They were very kind to me. One feels so helpless during childhood. It seemed the least I could do was to take them as Friends. The Waiting List for bodies is several years now. They—" She nearly broke down again. "They went for physical euthanasia yesterday. I collected them this morning."

"Oh. Very public-spirited of you, I'm sure." Woman Biggs regarded Mary with that special look of respectful dislike reserved for do-gooders. "I hope you realize what you're taking on. Friends can be difficult—always complaining. I know." Suddenly she chuckled, looking almost human. "I've been a bastard myself, during various Friendship periods. It's the inactivity that gets you. Ah, well. I'm thirty-four physical. I've got a clean record, so it's me for the box myself in six years' time. Comes to all of us. Mustn't grumble. May my next body be beautiful." With this cascade of platitudes she relapsed into silence, pulled out a portovee and stared at it avidly.

Relieved, Mary turned away and looked out through the window. The concrete suburbs had given way to more open, agricultural land—here and there huge machinery stalked the fields like stegasauri. She spoke quietly to the Friends. "Are you both all right?"

"Fine," the answer came back. The dog started beneath her feet and whined softly.

"Jason recognizes you," she murmured. Somehow this seemed important.

She sat in silence then. The countryside gradually became more hilly, with occasional outcrops of trees on land too rough and stony for economical farming. Twenty

minutes later the hoverbus hissed to a halt at a small village, a huddle of domes and rectangles between steep hillsides. Mary disembarked. With Jason trotting behind she made her way across the small forecourt and climbed into her car, lifting the Friends carefully to the back seat. The dog jumped in beside her, the door closed and she moved off, turning south down the narrow lane signposted BRANSCOMBE.

Standing in the shadow of the bus, Linton James watched the receding hovercar in some annoyance. He hadn't bargained for Mary's having her own transportation. He had no alternative but to follow on foot.

MARY drove slowly through Branscombe, a ghost village of ancient stone cottages, relics of the days before pollution had diminished the fishing and tourist industries. The village, once thriving, now had a population of some thirty dropouts from urban life who lived by marketing vegetables and fruits unsuited for mass production on the huge state farms. Broken windows gaped at the hovercar as it climbed the steep hill to the clifftop. The rough road deteriorated to a track.

Five minutes later Mary pulled up outside a cottage some fifty yards from the edge of the cliff. She and Jason carried the Friends inside and placed them on the floor. She sat down with a sigh of relief.

"We're here," she informed the boxes, rather shakily.

"Fine," one of the boxes said. "We're very grateful to you, Mary. You were under no obligation to bring us here."

"What? After all you've done for me these past years? It was the least I could do. I couldn't leave you in that place."

The other box spoke, a woman's voice. "But the risk you took, Mary. We didn't want you to do that. You could have left us. I couldn't believe it when the man said you'd come to fetch us—"

The male box said in a reproving tone, "It wasn't what we had arranged. You may have called attention to yourself. If I recall correctly, my girl, the arrangement was that you would get into the Center and take the Code Card so that you could use it yourself until we came up for placing in bodies again. The authorities would think the card had gotten lost somewhere and would issue a duplicate. Then we would all have cards."

"That's all right," said Mary. "I can keep you here for as long as I like. When I take you back to the Transfer Center the same thing will apply. They'll find they're a card short and will issue another. I don't see any problem."

"But the risk—" murmured the female Friend helplessly.

"Oh, be quiet, Mum," said Mary. She got up and began to prepare herself some coffee while

the two Friends chattered to each other.

EDGAR GREENWOOD and Mary Atkinson had sought refuge in Branscombe from the concrete falsity of Axminster some sixteen years earlier. Both were then twenty-four physical years old and considered themselves in love, a pleasant fantasy in which most people indulged approximately once every physical lifetime. It did no harm—indeed it was of positive benefit, this periodic heightening of the emotions. It provided most people with something to look forward to during their late thirties. A new childhood, a new adolescence with the added benefit of experience, a new love affair at the height of the new body's powers. The prospect also made the waiting period in the Friendship boxes more bearable.

A mutual acquaintance had told them of Branscombe and the deserted cottages, and they arrived one autumn morning for a short honeymoon. At first they stayed in the village itself and got to know the few hard-working inhabitants. The day they were due to return to their jobs in the city they loaded the hovercar with their baggage and climbed in. Edgar had even pressed the starter when he turned for a last look at the sea. Mary had been looking in the same direction—now, suddenly, she turned to face him. Without a word both of them got out of the car, unloaded their baggage and, under the amused gaze of the villagers, marched back into the cottage.

It seemed that there was no problem about their jobs—the local employment office took the view that it was their own business if they wanted to rough it in Branscombe. This was a relief—somehow, due to the extreme regimentation of labor in Axminster, they had gotten the idea that there was something illegal about dropping out in this manner—but apparently it was not so. There was unemployment in the city—someone else would be glad to take their places. There was just one small snag: it was suspected, though never overtly stated, that preference on the Waiting List for bodies was given to Friends who had held regular jobs in their last physical lives. But Edger and Mary were twenty-four and Transfer was sixteen years away.

Life was pleasant in Branscombe. The neighbors were helpful and Edgar soon established an adequate income from a smallholding on the hillside. The weeks went by and each day he and Mary discovered to their recurring delight that they were still in love. Soon Mary became pregnant.

They moved out of the village to Cliff Cottage, a half-mile away, and in the following October Mary bore a daughter. She was a wonderfully pretty baby, Edgar and Mary

thought. They had been living at Branscombe for a year by now and Axminster seemed far away—as did the laws of the land.

For days they avoided the subject of the Transfer Center and their legal obligations concerning the baby. It seemed to them diabolically wrong for this child to be taken to the Center—there to be implanted with someone else's adult mind. Unfortunately the law stated that it was a crime for them not to relinquish the baby.

There was never a definite time when Edgar and Mary admitted to themselves that they intended to break the law. But the days went by and the baby grew and somehow they never got around to reporting the birth to the authorities. Eventually Edgar took the villagers into his confidence—there was no way this could be avoided—and, not entirely to this surprise, they were sympathetic. The matter was discussed at an informal meeting, out of which came a surprising suggestion.

If the child became known as Mary Atkinson—if it took its mother's name—there would be no reason why it shouldn't move about freely, using the mother's Code Card as a means of identification when required. The same card would serve for both people.

So the child grew up as Mary Atkinson, looked after by Edgar Greenwood and Mary Atkinson Senior—and, indirectly, the village of Branscombe. Naturally, as the first real child many of the residents had seen for well over a century, she received the best of attention. Then—when she was fifteen years old—her parents became due for physical euthanasia. Their Code Cards had to be surrendered and Mary lost her identity again. It was likely that her parents would have to remain in Friendship Boxes for several years, during which period Mary might at any time be called upon to prove her identity.

So the scheme of stealing back the Code Card was born. It would probably have worked, too, if Mary had not, out of sympathy to her parents, contracted to look after them for a while.

"YOU'RE quite sure nobody suspected anything, dear?" asked Friend Mary Atkinson Senior.

"I'm sure they didn't," Mary replied. During the past hour she had answered the same question at least six times.

"What about that man I heard talking?" her father asked. "I didn't like the sound of his voice. He was trying to—make out with you, you know." Edgar Greenwood was concerned. In his present helpless state he doubted her ability to cope with the pack of lustful males his imagination saw sniffing around her.

"I didn't like him," Mary reassured him.

Edgar was silent, torturing himself. Mary was growing up and he had not thought of this soon enough. He had brought a totally innocent child into a world of men, any one of whom had had at least one hundred and sixty years' experience.

Mary poured herself a cup of coffee and sat down again, eyeing the Friends thoughtfully. The resilience of youth had abated her initial sorrow and now she must consider the implications of the present situation. Money was fortunately no problem. The villagers had offered their assistance toward keeping the smallholding in shape for the next few years. In addition, her father had built up substantial savings.

"What are you doing, dear?" asked her mother.

"I'm drinking a cup of coffee."

"Oh? I hope you haven't made it too strong, dear. Coffee's not good for a girl of your age."

EDGAR GREENWOOD broke in. "What I wouldn't give for a scotch right now."

Mary Atkinson Senior made a sound very much like the clicking of a tongue. "Edgar! Not at this hour of the morning. Oh—" She broke off as the needlessness of her remark struck her. "It always takes a day or two to get used to the Friendship box," she said in a small voice.

Mary, sipping her coffee and regarding the two boxes on the floor, felt the sadness well up in her again. She put down her cup. "I think I'd better get along to the smallholding and make sure things are all right," she remarked. "Jason can stay here with you." She stood up.

Edgar said, "Make sure Jeff's knocking the bottom leaves off the sprouts. They grow firmer that way. And those leeks should need earthing up again."

Mary stepped out into the autumn sunshine, closing the door behind her. She stood for a moment on the rough track to the village, looking out to sea. The sky was cloudless and the sea's ultramarine dashed with silver—a tanker crept along the horizon. She could hear the muted rumble of the waves at the cliff base and walked across the short springy grass, looked down at the rocks a hundred feet below. The water was deep there, the rocks jagged, and the waves lapped and slobbered in and out of the clefts. Mary shuddered involuntarily and wondered why the scene always suggested suicide to her. What was her fascination with the rocks washed by the sea far below? Why didn't they call to her mind fishing, bathing or climbing—or even murder? Why always, always suicide?

Shivering the thought from her mind she turned and walked along the cliff path toward the village. After a while the ground began to fall away and the cottages were in

sight, gray and peaceful in the sun. She walked over to the smallholding, a series of neat rectangles of cultivation on the hillside. A slight figure was there, bent double, weeding.

"Hello, Jeff," she called.

JEFF WATERS looked up and, seeing Mary, grinned. He was eleven physical years old and, like everyone in the village, believed in working to the best of his capabilities regardless of his physical age. The community was too small for passengers and it was accepted that people going through a childhood undertook light work.

"Hello, Mary. Can I assume everything went all right? I saw the car go past a while back."

"Oh, yes. No difficulty. I even brought Mum and Dad back as Friends."

"You what?" Astonishment changed Jeff's grin. "Well, I'm damned. You've got a hell of a nerve, Mary. That's the advantage of being truly young, I reckon. When you get to be my age and have had a few Transfers life seems more valuable with each body. You become so cautious that in the end it's a wonder you ever do anything at all." He sighed. "It must be great to be young."

"It's not all good." Mary smiled. "Every single person I meet is more experienced than I in every way. There was a man at the Transfer Center this morning who gave me the creeps in the weirdest way—and I couldn't think why. It was something to do with sex, I suppose."

Jeff regarded her, the intent adult appraisal incongruous on his childish face. She was flushed from her walk in the sun and the dress clung to her figure. He found himself wishing he were a few physical years older. "Oh, God," he said quietly, as the implications of her innocence struck him again. She was probably the only girl in the country who had never... "Be careful, Mary," he said earnestly. "You're growing up into a very pretty woman."

"I can take care of myself," she assured him. She laughed at his expression. "Mum and Dad have told me the facts of life."

"I dare say, but— Oh, well, I suppose it's safe enough here in the village. There are a lot of queer characters in Axminster, though."

Mary found his concern amusing. "Don't worry, Jeff. You all treat me as though I were a child. It does me good, though. I was feeling terrible a minute ago. It seemed everything was weighing me down, with Mum and Dad in boxes. Suddenly I had responsibilities—I've got to look after the two people who had been looking after me all my life. I found myself wondering if I was up to it. But talking to you and hearing all this nonsense about the sex maniacs in Axminister again—why, it's quite like old times. Can't you villagers realize

that Axminster folk are just like yourselves?"

"Maybe so, but we've known you since you were a baby, Mary. Nobody in the village would lay a finger on you." Jeff smiled. "Not that I don't find you attractive, myself."

"Why, you dirty young man! Speaking of dirt, Dad asked me to remind you about earthing up the leeks."

"All done." Jeff waved a hand at the neat ridges.

Mary glanced at him suspiciously, bent down and brushed away soil. Tips of strong, grasslike leaves showed. "Oh, good. A bit deep, aren't they? Will they come through again?"

"Of course," he replied patiently. "I always reckoned Edgar didn't put his leeks in deep enough."

"My Dad's the best gardener in Branscombe—" Mary broke off miserably at the thought of the immobile black box back at the cottage.

"Never mind, honey. I've done the brussels sprouts as well. I expect he asked about those."

"Thanks."

"And the potatoes—and everything else. You don't have to worry about a thing. Just take it easy and look after your parents. Friends get frustrated and crotchety after a while. I tell you what. Bring them down to my place tonight. The conversation will do them good."

"I might do that. And thanks for your help, Jeff. I'd better get back. I'll tell Dad everything's in good hands."

"Fine."

Jeff watched her as she climbed back up the hillside. He sighed, feeling inexplicably sad.

MARY herself was more cheerful as she took the road back to the cottage. With neighbors like Jeff Waters she would not need to worry. Apart from companionship, the needs of Friends were few. Also, she herself could move about with greater freedom now that she didn't have to share a Code Card with her mother. This meant that she could, if she wanted, get a job in Axminster. She decided that she ought to discuss this with her parents.

"Hello there! Wait a moment."

The shout came from behind her. She turned and saw a figure hurrying up the slope from the village. She paused, expecting one of the neighbors. As the man drew closer, however, she became puzzled and turned away, quickening her pace. He was a stranger and strangers were suspect in these parts. All too frequently they proved to be state investigators poking about, trying to catch the community harboring some illegality.

The man drew level and put a hand on her arm, restraining her. He smiled. "Hello, Mary. Don't

you remember me? Linton James, from the Center."

She remembered him now. It was he all right, hot and flushed with haste. She fought down panic.

"Of course I remember you," she replied. "What are you doing here? Did I forget to sign the form?" A dread sat heavily in her stomach—she tried not to show it.

"Oh, the form," he said lightly. "Never mind that. No. It's my day off—and seeing your address reminded me I hadn't been here for years. I thought I'd take the bus out and see what the old place looked like. I came here once—oh, three physical lives ago. A long time. How long have you lived here, Mary?"

"All of this physical life."

"How are the Friends? Settling in all right?"

"Fine." She tried to move on, but his grip on her arm tightened. His smile had become fixed and intent as he regarded her. She looked toward the village desperately, but the houses were hidden by the crest.

"Good," he said. "It's very kind of you to take two Friends like this. Helps us out a lot at the Center. I suppose you knew them in their previous life?"

"They were two of the villagers. They looked after me during my last childhood."

"Not enough people think of being grateful. You're a nice girl, Mary. I hope you don't mind my calling you Mary—I feel as though I know you quite well. Funny, how it sometimes happens like that. It was lucky for me I happened to be in the Center when you came in."

"I thought you said it was your day off."

"Well, you know how it is. I've got a pretty good position there. The boss—that's Man Phillip Ewell—practically eats out of my hand. So I just said to him, Ewell, I said, I'm taking the day off. Enjoy yourself, Man James, he said. We have a good relationship, Ewell and I. He's an android, but that doesn't worry me. He's only been in Axminster for a short while, so he has to depend on me a lot."

"I must be getting on. Nice meeting you again, Man James." Mary tried to detach herself. She had a suspicion that James was slightly insane.

"Don't go. Not yet. Let's sit down for a moment."

Mary found herself forced to the ground. James sat beside her, still gripping her arm, his feet dangling over the cliff edge. The waves below boomed dully.

"I don't often get the chance to talk to a nice girl like you," he resumed. "Woman Adams, she's the receptionist at the Center, she never speaks to me nicely. She thinks she's better than me because she's putting in for promotion to a Preferred Trade next year. She's a bitch. She's repulsive, physically, but she fancies her chances—"

Mary was terrified. The sea was a

long way below and her back was aching from holding herself bolt upright, rigidly away from James who was now sliding his arm around her. Why didn't someone come? She didn't know what to do. If she tried to get away from this madman he would push her over the edge, as like as not.

"What's more, I think there's something going on between her and Ewell—that's why she won't have anything to do with me. She's having an affair with that android. She thinks she's too good for me." James' grip around Mary's shoulders had relaxed and his expression was inward—he was reliving some past humiliation. "But why should I worry? I get plenty of girls. Funny thing—I've always been able to get on well with them. Girls seem to go for me. Do you find me attractive, Mary?"

He twisted her around until his face was inches from hers and she could smell his acrid breath. She didn't reply. She was trembling violently and a tear crept down her cheek.

"Because I find you attractive, Mary. I find you very attractive. Don't cry—it spoils your lovely face." His gaze traveled down. "You've got nice legs. Did anyone ever tell you your legs are nice, Mary?"

MARY flinched as his hand gripped her knee, squeezed, then slid upward. She pushed him away violently.

"Leave me alone," she protested. "Let me go!"

His breath was coming fast—his face had a curiously sullen look. He pushed her down and lay half across her, talking fast. "Oh, come on, Mary, come on now, I love you—make love to me Mary. There's nothing to be afraid of—"

He broke off suddenly as she slapped him across the face with her free hand. He gripped her wrist, winced as her knee drove into his stomach, pinned her to the ground while she twisted frantically.

"Like that, is it?" His eyes stared into hers with an amalgam of hate and lust. "I thought so. You think you're too good for me, like all the others. And that's not all. You've never had it before, you little bitch. I know. I know that stunt you pulled with the card. You're a nonentity. You've got no card of your own. I could turn you in." His hand was fumbling under her skirt. "I will turn you in, unless you lie still."

His other hand was cupped over her mouth. The terror in her eyes lent him confidence and strength. He felt supreme, all-powerful.

Mary looked past his face at the blue sky. Little puffs of white cloud hovered above her and she could hear, beyond the fast urgent breathing, the dim roar of the sea at the cliff base. Was this happening to her—so near her own house and

almost within view of the village? The coarse, short grass was rough against the backs of her legs. Her knees were forced apart and she tried to scream as the agony entered her, but something hot and stifling was covering her mouth.

## III

AFTERWARD he dragged her to her feet. She stood unsteadily.

"Now we go to your house," he said stonily. Keeping hold of her arm, he began to propel her along the cliff path. "It's along here, isn't it? You've got a car there." He felt dull and vindictive—the sight of the girl, bent and sniveling, irritated him. "For God's sake, stop crying!"

At the cottage he opened the door and pushed her inside. "Clean yourself up," he commanded. "We're taking a ride." He glanced at the two black boxes. "Hello, Friends," he said contemptuously. "I've just been enjoying your daughter's company. She is your daughter, right?" In the corner of the room the carrier dog growled softly. "You don't scare me, Fido. You're programed to obey and never to attack. Sit, you stupid bastard." The dog sat. James sniggered.

"What—what did he do to you, Mary?" Edgar's voice spoke.

Mary ran into the bathroom.

"She's grown up all of a sudden," James explained, cold amusement in his voice. "I did her a good turn, you might say. She's had her experience of adulthood just in time. Because she hasn't got much more time, has she? She's a nonentity. I've got proof. I'm going to take her to the Center now. Total Death. Still, she's learned what life is all about."

"You swine." The box spoke helplessly. "You lousy, rotten swine."

"Not very original," commented James. He walked over to the box and kicked it heavily. "You'd better watch your language, Friend. Come to terms with yourself. You realize that concealing a birth is punishable by Total Death? You're already in the box. There'll be a trial, of course, but the evidence is all against you. Which means that you'll never have a body again. After they find you guilty they'll just wipe you out. Obliterate you. And your wife—I suppose that's what you call her. Both of you. Oh, boy." He chuckled insanely, feeling quite exalted. He, Linton James, was totally in command of the situation.

"How old are you, exactly?" asked Edgar.

"What's it to you?" queried James suspiciously.

"I just wondered. I wondered what sort of lousy series of lives could bring a man to your situation. I'd guess you were one of the last children and in all your lives others have been superior to you. I ought

to feel sorry for you, I suppose."

"Thanks a lot. Very kind of you, I'm sure. And hasn't your wife got anything to say? Is the other Mary Atkinson struck dumb? How about a bit of motherly sympathy for poor downtrodden Man Linton James?"

The other box spoke at last. "There's nothing I can say." Mary Atkinson Senior sounded infinitely weary. "Except—why? What have you got against us all?"

"Nothing personal. It's just a question of cash. I get prize money for this."

"We've got money."

"Thanks, no. I also get the chance of being promoted to a Preferred Trade. You know what that means? No Friendship period for me. Immediate Transfer to another body at age forty. That's worth more cash than you've got." He walked to the bathroom and jerked open the door. "Hey, Godiva," he said, grinning. "Get some clothes on. We're going. Your folks have just failed to buy me off."

Eventually Mary emerged in a clean dress. Ignoring James, she addressed the boxes. "Bye, Mum," she said quietly. "Bye, Dad. I'm—I'm sorry. It's all my fault. I should never have tried to get you out of the Center."

"You can cut out the tender farewells," James said. He addressed the boxes. "We'll be coming back. You constitute evidence, right where you are in your own house. I want the police to see you here." He laughed, seized Mary by the arm and took her to the car.

MAN PHILLIP EWELL looked up as they entered. "Yes, James?" He regarded Mary with surprise.

Linton James smirked. "One nonentity," he said, pushing Mary forward. "Together with evidence." He reached into his pocket. "One Friendship contract incorrectly filled out, one Code Card fraudulently being used by said nonentity."

"Oh?" Ewell took the proffered items, glancing at James with some distaste. "Why didn't you go to the police?"

"Thought I'd see you first, you being in charge of the Center. There's more evidence at Branscombe. Two Friends—with carrier dog used in said fraud."

"For God's sake, stop talking like a policeman, James. Let's get this straight. Tell me the story in sensible language. What's it all about?"

Somewhat abashed, James explained, describing the visit of Mary to contract for the Friends. He laid emphasis on her nervousness. He related his discovery of the duplication of names and of the missing card in the Habitation Room. The chase to Branscombe. The confrontation with the parents. The confession.

"Mary Atkinson." Ewell read the name thoughtfully.

"So we've got one card representing both this girl here and a Friend at present in a cottage at Branscombe, both of whom have committed criminal acts punishable by Total Death," explained James unctuously. "To say nothing of another Friend at Branscombe who is guilty of concealing a birth. Here is his card from the Habitation Room."

"Yes, yes," said Ewell impatiently. He looked at Mary. The whole affair disgusted him—he wished James had gone to the police in the first place. He, Ewell, was a surgeon, not a tribunal. The girl looked scared stiff, which wasn't surprising. He felt sorry for her—after all, it wasn't her fault that her birth had been concealed. Still, his duty in the matter was clear. "Do you agree with what Man James has said, Woman Atkinson?"

Mary nodded dumbly.

"Oh." He tapped his fingers thoughtfully on the desk. James was right, of course. You could tell at a glance that this girl was immature. She reminded him of a daughter he once had.

Phillip Ewell was an android and therefore in unusual ways privileged, not by law, but by circumstances. The birthrate had fallen, as had been expected, following the enactment of the Transfer laws. Android births, however, had in recent years risen, with the result that many android children were allowed to progress to adulthood in the family atmosphere of their parents' homes. Other humans generally opted for Friendship rather than accept Transfer to an android body.

Phillip Ewell had once watched with undying delight his daughter's progress from childhood to womanhood and had thanked God that he was an android. The child's mother, a human woman named Alice Lander, with whom he had had an affair many years ago, had been a Placement Officer and had placed the tiny child in a creche for future use as a host body, though she had not been legally obliged to give up the child, technically an android. A woman in her position, she had told him, could hardly bring up a half-breed child. He had traced the infant, taken it home and, with the assistance of a female companion, brought it up.

Thus he was able to rationalize his sympathy as he looked at Mary. So it was tough on the kid and she reminded him of his daughter. But Mary was a human, a nonentity, and her parents were criminals. He had no alternative. He stood, picking up the evidence. Thumbing the button on his visiphone, he spoke briefly to police headquarters, requesting their presence at Branscombe.

"We'll take your car, if we may," he said to Mary.

She nodded and muttered something.

"What's that, child? Speak up."

Mary looked straight at him—there was decision in her blue eyes. "This man—" she indicated James—"raped me. I—I wouldn't say anything now, but—my parents know. I couldn't stand going all through it again—with them there. But they'll tell you—if you don't believe me. He bragged about it to them."

Ewell sat down abruptly, staring at James.

"Is she telling the truth?"

James shuffled his feet, then regarded Ewell defiantly. "She's telling the truth," he said. "Okay, I raped her. She led me on, though. I was following her to find out where she lived and she said hello and—made me want her. You know how they do." He winked knowingly. "Anyway, I don't see that it matters. She's a nonentity. You can't commit a crime against a nonentity. If she preferred a charge, it wouldn't even reach the courts."

Ewell looked at him for a long time. At last he said quietly, "James, you are a lucky, dirty little bastard."

"There's no cause to go speaking to me like that, Man Ewell!"

"There's every cause—and you know it. I know why you involved me in this thing instead of going straight to the police. It wasn't only because you wanted me as a witness. It was because you wanted my recommendation when you apply to be upgraded as Preferred. You thought the police might take all the credit. You wanted to be sure I understood how clever you'd been in making your miserable little arrest. Right? Well, I understand. And I tell you this: as long as I'm the surgeon in charge of Axminster Transfer Center you'll get no recommendation from me. This whole thing stinks. My job is performing Transfer operations, not running around the country after so-called criminals." He looked at Mary helplessly. "I'm afraid there's nothing much I can do for you, my dear. The law is clear enough."

"But I want you as a witness, Man Ewell," insisted James stubbornly.

"Right. Let's get over to Branscombe, then. And I want you to understand, James—I have not the slightest sympathy with your actions. I'll witness because the law compels me to, as senior of the Center. But I won't say one word that might cause your prize money to be increased."

Somewhat shaken, James stepped aside as Ewell politely took Mary's arm and conducted her from the room.

PHILLIP EWELL was essentially kind-hearted. He frequently came across instances of hardship where he felt the law might resonably be relaxed. The case of Mary Atkinson was one such. Through no fault of her own

the girl could not be allowed to exist.

The parents were a different proposition, he felt. They had committed their crime fifteen years ago for purely selfish reasons and without thought of the problems it would present their daughter as she grew older. At best she could have looked forward to a perilous life in hiding, knowing that detection would mean Total Death for her mother as well as herself. He had very little sympathy for the parents—if they had simply wanted her to survive they could have tried placing her with androids. He had heard of instances.

"What are your parents like, Mary?" he asked curiously as the hovercar sped out of the city, Linton James at the wheel.

She had been sitting hunched in a corner, gazing dully through the window. She brightened at his question. "They're nice," she said. "They both worked very hard, like all the dropouts at Branscombe, but they still had plenty of time for me and for enjoying themselves. These last few years I've been helping them on the smallholding. They've been wonderful to me all my life. Still, I suppose all real parents are like that—were like that, I mean."

"You don't think—" He hesitated, not wishing to upset her, but wanting nevertheless to know. The psychology of concealed births interested him. "You don't think that perhaps they were a little bit selfish, bringing you up the way they did? I mean, they must have known you'd be found out in the end—and they as well."

"And we'd all get Total Death?" She looked at him candidly—he was amazed at her composure. "That's the luck of the game. They went into it with their eyes open. They wanted a child of their own and they had one. As for me, what difference does it make? If they had reported me in the proper manner I'd have been taken from them as a baby. At six months my head would have been opened and someone else's grown-up brain would have been put in there." She made a face. "I'd never have known what it's like to be me, would I?"

She took his hand and stared into his eyes. "What does it feel like, Man Phillip Ewell, to be walking about in someone else's body? You're a Transfer Surgeon. I'll bet you've done so many operations you never even think of it any more. Tell me this. Have you ever wondered what the child—the one who's body you're wearing—would have grown up like?"

Ewell jerked his hand away as a thrill of pure horror ran down his spine.

In front, James twisted around, the car on automatic. "She's dangerous, Man Ewell. She's up to all the tricks like the rest of the dropouts. They've got no respect for the law, so they try to put their own twisted reason in its place. Do

you know, recently a lot of them have been opting for Total Death when the time of their Transfer comes around? That's probably why her parents weren't too worried about breaking the law. They have no thought for humanity as a whole and the drain on total brain-power people like them cause when they opt to die."

Ewell recovered—he wasn't going to let James get away with that. "I'm afraid I believe in the right of any individual to die if he wants to," he said firmly. "If you want to get along with me you'd better believe the same. There must be some freedom, for God's sake."

"Thank you, Man Ewell," said Mary.

SOME time later they drew up outside the cottage. Ewell climbed from the car reluctantly—he had no stomach for the painful interview to follow. At least, he thought, the police hadn't yet arrived. James led the way and he followed, holding Mary's arm lightly, half-hoping she would make a run for it. The area was remote and she had friends around.

After the early afternoon sunlight the interior of the cottage was dark. Ewell blinked, saw a table and a few chairs, sat Mary down and turned to James.

He sighed. "Let's get on with it. The police will be here in a minute. I'll just hear the confessions and then go, if you don't mind. You can deal with all the formalities."

James was staring into the corner of the room. There was a moment's silence.

"Well?"

James whispered, "Something's gone wrong. Oh, Christ—"

"What the hell's the matter with you?"

James swung round. "There's only one box there, Man Ewell. There's only one box. I left two of them. Her parents. I swear both her parents were here when I left." He was almost crying.

"Pull yourself together. Here, let me have a look." Ewell walked about the room, peering under the table, the chairs. There was no sign of the other Friend.

Linton James turned on Mary. "Where's it gone, you little bastard? What sort of trick have you pulled?"

Mary was silent. There was a quiet dread in her eyes.

James seized the remaining box and put it on the table. "Where's the other one?" he shouted. "What have you done with your—" Who the hell are you anyway?" He bent forward, peering at the number.

"I'm Edgar Greenwood," stated the box quietly.

"Where's your damned wife?"

"She's not here." the box sounded infinitely sad.

"I can see that!" shouted James, pounding the Friend with his fist. "Where's she gone?"

"Gone? Let's just say that she's

exercised one of the few right remaining to her."

Mary was crying softly. From a distance came the faint wail of the police siren.

"What the hell are you trying to say?" James was beside himself. He yelled into the Friend's microphone. "Are you telling me she's killed herself? Because I won't take that. She couldn't have moved. Oh, my God. The dog. Where is he?"

Ewell walked to the door and looked into the sunshine. He thought for a moment, his features grave. The police siren was nearer—he could see a dark spot moving rapidly along the cliff path. He turned and entered the cottage, placing an arm around Mary, who was sobbing uncontrollably.

"Oh, James," he said.

Linton James looked at him, his eyes wild. "What?"

"You're all overwrought." Ewell handed him a cigarette, took one himself, struck a match.

James puffed away gratefully. "Thanks. I'm sorry, Man Ewell. I got carried away, what with those crooks cheating me out of a third of my prize money— What are you doing?"

The match still flared in Ewell's fingers. He touched it to the edge of a piece of paper and watched with interest as it curled and blackened and flames crept around the edge.

"A dramatic moment, James," he murmured.

For an instant James stared uncomprehending. Then he sprang forward with a yell. Ewell thrust him away roughly. He stumbled, fell to his knees and watched helplessly as the flame consumed the last corner of the paper. Ewell ground the ashes under his foot.

"You've burned the form she filled in before," whispered James. "You've destroyed the evidence. What the hell are you playing at?"

Ewell reached in his pocket and took out a Code Card. He handed it to Mary. "Here you are, my dear. You now have an identity."

He turned back to James, who had climbed to his feet and was watching Ewell wide-eyed. "You see, James, sometimes things can work themselves out without, shall we say, bureaucratic intervention. We have one girl and we have one Friend. We have one Code Card here and one Code Card in the Transfer Center. It seems there was once an irregular document, but this has ceased to exist, so why

worry? All is technically in order."

James was silent, white-faced.

"Oh, except for one matter," Ewell went on. "Linton James, I regret I must have you charged with the rape of Woman Mary Atkinson. If found guilty you will of course receive a sentence of not less than eight years and also be statutorily ineligible for future Transfers. I believe I can hear a police car."

Linton James stared at him, mumbled something unintelligible and ran from the room. They heard the back door slam. The police car wailed to a halt outside.

Ewell touched Mary on the shoulder. "I'll be back in a minute," he said gently. He closed the door behind him. Outside, the police were emerging from their vehicle.

"Our man got away," Ewell informed them. "He just left through the back door. Rape case. He's a vindictive little bastard—he told me all sorts of yarns. You shouldn't have much trouble picking him up."

"Oh." The inspector looked surprised. "Seeing it was you called us, Man Ewell, I thought it would be some Transfer case. You certainly get yourselves involved in some odd crimes, you Transfer people. What's the man's name?"

"Linton James. A colleague of mine, unfortunately."

"So that's how you come into it. Where's the girl?"

"Inside the house. She's a bit upset right now, but she'll be all right. I'll bring her to see you when she's feeling better."

"Fine." The inspector murmured into his throatmike, then addressed Ewell again. "I'm getting his name put on the indicator boards, just in case he gives us the slip for an hour or two. Someone will spot him." He paused, looking toward the sea. "Nice place this. Bit remote, though." He climbed back into the hovercar. "You'll appear as a witness if necessary, Man Ewell?"

"Of course."

The hovercar glided across the short grass and turned inland. Ewell watched it go, then walked to the cliff's edge where the carrier dog sat, gazing at the rocks below, whining softly.

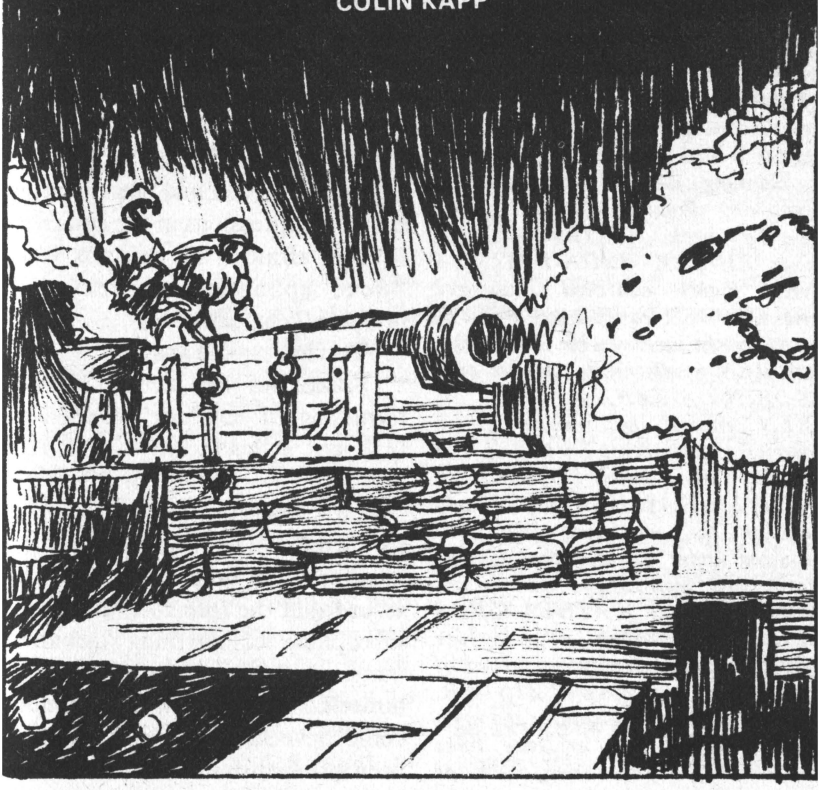
"You poor bastard," murmured Ewell. He remembered dogs as they used to be, before the abolition of pets on the grounds of economy. The dog regarded him, thumped its tail on the short grass, then looked down again at the rocks and the sea a hundred feet below. "Trained to obey, regardless. Well, you did the right thing this time, old boy. Even if it hurt. You know, I misjudged your mistress? I thought she was a selfish woman, bringing up a kid in this world. I was wrong. Come on, boy! Let's go and see how Mary is."

Together the android and the carrier dog walked back to the cottage. ●

*PART TWO*

# THE WIZARD OF ANHARITTE

COLIN KAPP



## WHAT HAS GONE BEFORE

*Civil unrest threatens Anharitte city on the planet Roget, just beginning the leap from feudalism into space-age technology. A giant Freetrade spaceport links Anharitte to an interplanetary mercantile system centered on Earth under the Freetrade Council. Council director MAGNO VESTEVAAL arrives on Roget to investigate, is briefed by Freetrade agent TITO REN. Cause of the unrest is enlightened treatment of slaves by the wealthy IMAIZ, also known as DIONDAIZAN, Lord of Magda, credited by natives as having magic powers.*

*TITO suspects the IMAIZ is a Terran-educated technological wizard and illegally a lord of Roget. He seems to be planning an end to feudalism, threatening Freetrade-fostered status quo. To check, VESTEVAAL confronts ZINDER—DION-DAIZAN's lovely, highly educated showpiece slave. ZINDER easily bests VESTEVAAL in the meeting. He then authorizes REN to discredit, perhaps even kill DION-DAIZAN.*

*REN enlists the services of a powerful native secret Society of The Pointed Tails, under leadership of CATUUL GRAS. REN immediately discovers his warehouse has been arsonized under auspices that suggest science and technology hitherto unknown on Roget. CATUUL GRAS retaliates by bribing a prefecture registry clerk to destroy the record of DION's legal ownership of ZINDER. The crooked clerk is instantly and mysteriously killed. No evidence links DIONDAIZAN to either arson or murder—he must, however, return ZINDER to auction. At the auction VESTEVAAL, according to plan, sets out to raise DION's bid for her to a point where the lord of Magda would be broken financially. Instead, DION lets VESTEVAAL buy her for the astronomical sum of "200 million million Solar dollars." Chagrined, VESTEVAAL signs the document attesting to his ownership of ZINDER—but as soon as he and she have left the room the document spontanously combusts.*

*ZINDER goes back on the block and is auctioned to DION for a nominal sum—against no opposition.*

## IX

IN THE laboratory aboard the battle cruiser at the spaceport Dr. Alek Hardun had been forming his own impressions of the *Imaiz*.

"I'm afraid," he said to Ren, "we're up against a pretty formidable technician."

"You have some answers, Alek?"

"Some. But they reveal a class of technology I had not expected to find on a backward world like this."

Ren sat atop one of the laboratory stools. "Don't worry about the location. I'm already quite convinced that the *Imaiz* is Terran and is capable of anything including outmanipulating Magno Vestevaal himself. The incident with Zinder could have been funny if it hadn't been so expensive."

Hardun's eyes twinkled momentarily. "I gather it was rather a warm evening," he said. "But all things taken together, I'm not surprised. The way the register clerk died was no less clever."

"Have you found how it was done?"

"Yes. We did a post-mortem examination, but nearly missed the point. We were looking for a projectile of some sort in the esophagus. Of course we didn't find one—rather, we did find it but failed to recognize it for what it was."

"Spare me the riddles," said Ren. "I've been up half the night helping the director to drown his sorrows."

"The answer, my dear Tito, was blood."

"I don't see—"

"Neither did we—at first. But trying to explore all possible avenues we ran some blood analyses to see if anything unusual showed up. Something did. We found two distinct blood groups. One was the blood group of the clerk. The second was undoubtedly human blood but of a completely different group. Working on the second type of blood alone, we were able to determine that it had been carefully processed and then frozen.

"The rest is conjecture, but it's a reasonable supposition that what killed the clerk was a shaft of frozen blood projected by some high velocity instrument at a fairly short range. Such a projectile in the throat would, of course, pass almost unnoticed amid the blood and fragmentation caused by its impact and very shortly it would melt in the warm blood of its victim. A rather neat, self-obscuring murder weapon, I think."

Ren nodded thoughtfully. "And not one likely to be detectable by Di Irons and his primitive police methods. What sort of weapon could have been used to throw a shaft of frozen blood with the necessary velocity?"

Alek Hardun pursed his lips. "That's difficult to say. At first we thought in terms of an air rifle, but your fellow, Catuul Gras, was positive that he and his friends heard no sound at all. I think now that some form of crossbow is more likely. A good one can give you velocity and accuracy not much inferior to a rifle's. The only special requirement is that the bolt must be maintained in a frozen condition until immediately before firing. This presupposes somebody with a Dewar flask and some experience in producing and handling materials at low temperatures. It all ties in neatly with your liquid-oxygen fire at the warehouse. I would not have believed it if I hadn't seen the evidence—but there must be a

competent cryogenics man at work in Magda."

"I can't imagine our being able to use your evidence to convince Di Irons," said Ren. "His world is bounded by the four elements—earth, air, fire and water. I don't think the distinction between cryogenics and necromancy is sufficiently obvious to make him move against Dion-daizan. Especially when Dion can set a sheet of paper afire at thirty paces without even moving."

"But he didn't," said Hardun. "The director set that afire himself."

"Explain it to me."

"It's another example of the technology I hadn't expected to find. We've been working on the fragments of the page you gave us—and it isn't paper at all. Somebody had inserted a special page in that book. Certainly the sheet was a fibrous cellulose material, but it had been impregnated with some strong oxidizing compound. Frankly, it would have crumbled to dust in a few weeks anyway, assuming that nobody had even touched it. But it was the ink in the director's pen that touched off the fast reaction."

"But all the others wrote on it without effect," objected Ren.

"True. But on Roget all the available inks are water-based—and I'd be willing to bet the others all used an old-fashioned wet-dip nib pen."

Ren thought back carefully. "I think you're right."

"Well, the effect of a water-based ink on the sheet is negligible. It redistributes the oxidant, but doesn't react with it. But the director predictably signed with his own pen—and that contained a modern outworld organic-based ink. The organics were rapidly oxidized and produced almost spontaneous combustion. The local heat thus liberated was sufficient to touch the rest of the page off in a self-destructive mode. That bond entry was definitely designed to have no future."

Ren smiled ruefully. "I suppose you could say we've only ourselves to blame. We did the same thing to Dion-daizan—but with only a fraction of the subtlety. The devil alone knows how much support he's gained from the incident. I'd guess all Anharitte is laughing at us this morning."

"I think," said Hardun, "you're taking completely the wrong approach. You're making a game of this instead of trying for a fast, decisive strike. I know it's your war, but the problem of *Imaiz* is also within my competence. I'd tackle the whole affair quite differently."

"This morning I could use a few ideas. I don't promise to agree, but

I'd like to hear your version of how it should be done."

"Not how it should be done," said Hardun. "How it *must* be done. I was thinking more on the lines of dusting the Castle Magda with carcinogens—or the careful application of nerve gas. Perhaps even the introduction of an ergot derivative into their drinking water—"

CASTLE DI GUAARD was a daunting prospect. Constructed originally as the first defense fortress overlooking the broad Aprillo river, it had seen much service against the Tyrene pirates who ventured to pass under its cannon to reach the internal waterways leading to the soft underflesh of the city and the provinces beyond. The pirates were gone now—their impetus having retreated into the more profitable enterprises of respectable trading houses—but the guns and the grim, crenelated battlements of Castle Di Guaard remained unchanged as though caught in some eddy of time itself.

Matching its image as a fortress was the preparedness of the soldiery contained within its gray stone confines. Indeed, a full lookout and guard were maintained on all walls as though in anticipation of an imminent attack. As Ren was admitted by Sonel Taw, the castellan—or governor—of the castle, he was immediately conscious of being in an armed citadel and, more surprisingly, one in which the men at arms not only carried primed muskets, but seemed fully prepared to use them on the slightest provocation.

The unchanged character of Di Guaard also extended to the slaves, who in the main were ragged, wretched and nervously watchful, as though their lives depended on the speed with which they responded to a call for service. Many of them bore the scars of barbarous punishments—all wore the hangdog expression of whipped curs, which turned Ren's stomach slightly. Nowhere else in Anharitte had he seen slaves reduced to this condition. Remembering the proud strengths of Zinder, he experienced a slight twinge of conscience that his mission to Di Guaard was to gain support for the destruction of the enlightened House of Magda.

Castle Di Guaard was built on the principle of a bailey within a bailey, the outer containing slave quarters, stores and work yards, the inner housing the soldiery. Both were surrounded by the great walls whose machicolated parapets and mural flanking towers were designed to resist attack from any point of the compass. There was no

moat, the castle being on two sides met by the sheer drop of the cliffs overhanging the Aprillo delta. The two great gates inland were amply overseen by formidable gatehouses, each with outworks in the form of separate barbican towers.

Ren followed the castellan without comment—and the latter seemed disinclined to enter conversation. At one corner of the inner bailey stood the mighty round-tower of the great keep—the home of Delph Di Guaard himself—and it was here that Ren was led. The tower's broad, flat roof was said to be the highest point in all the provinces and formed an excellent platform for observation and for the light chain-throwing cannon of which Di Guaard seemed inordinately fond. The whole atmosphere was one of preparation for a battle or a siege. Ren could not help thinking that if the *Imaiz'* influence should ever bring to pass a revolution Castle Di Guaard would probably be the last place to fall to the insurgents.

THAT Di Guaard was mad was no news to Ren, but having come from more civilized worlds he had forgotten that, without psychiatry and the overriding authority of the state, madness has no checks. Even more appalling was the realization that the gross madman whose chambers Ren now entered was undisputed lord of his own castle and held life or death control over a considerable number of soldiers and slaves. Even Sonel Taw, the castellan, went patently in fear of his terrifying master and excused himself rapidly at the chamber door.

As he crossed the floor alone Ren felt the full impact of the man. Delph Di Guaard was leaning over a huge table, his back to the door. His vast bulk suggested superhuman strength and even from the rear Ren could sense the aura of power of the man's tyrannic personality. He found himself almost afraid of the moment when the creature would turn and face him.

"Well?" Di Guaard's voice made the chamber reverberate. "What news do you bring of the Tyrene?"

"No news of the Tyrene, my Lord. I come about other matters." Ren controlled his voice with a confident, faultless presence. His verbal bouts with Magno Vestevaal had been excellent training for this occasion.

"Other matters?" Di Guaard shouted. "In time of war?" He swung about and Ren looked unflinchingly into the staring, accusing eyes of the mad lord. The fellow's visage writhed constantly with the underplay of some shaded thoughts in which anger and

comprehension chased each other continuously through the flesh. "Ah, an outworlder. That would explain your naivete. You must be Agent Ren. My castellan mumbled something about your coming. Well you've come to the right man. Have the Tyrene sacked your warehouse, slaughtered your servants or raped your daughters?" His mouth almost drooled at the vision.

"None of those," said Ren. "My news is more serious. It concerns the very existence of Anharitte itself."

Di Guaard hit the table a heavy blow with his hand. "I knew it! I told that fool Di Irons that one day the pirates would attack in force. You see here—" His thick fingers jabbed pointlessly at a torn chart on the table. "That's the reason why so many of their ships have congregated to the north. We have constant sightings of a hundred, two hundred ships—they say an armada. And I, Di Guaard, am the only one in the three hills who keeps his defenses ready. The rest of them think me mad; but now it's I who am proven sane. Don't you agree that unpreparedness in time of war is mad?"

"Of course," said Ren, determined to remain undaunted. "But the danger I speak of comes from within Anharitte, not from the sea."

Di Guaard's scowl changed to an expression of intense consternation. "You mean the Tyrene came overland across T'Empte?" He consulted his charts again and then threw them furiously back on the table. He rounded on Ren in a frightening blaze of anger.

"Liar! What mischief are you selling, merchant? Dion-daizan keeps close watch on the inland waters. If any Tyrene were coming that way he'd have been sure to let me know."

"Listen to me." Ren let his voice grow loud for the first time. "While you watch for the Tyrene an even greater threat is growing right beneath your feet. Dion-daizan is educating slaves. If enough become educated there will be a revolution that will ruin us all more surely than any pirate raid."

"Really?" Di Guaard's face lit up with the malicious interest of a wolf about to tear apart a particularly succulent lamb. "And what makes an outworld merchant's lackey presume to tell the lords of Anharitte what they should or should not do with their slaves? Dion's more capable than most at controlling an uprising among his bondslaves. Dion's more than capable of controlling anything." As he said this last phrase, Di Guaard's voice fell to an unexpected wistfulness, as if even he ac-

knowledged the power of the *Imaiz*.

"I didn't say he wasn't," said Ren, suddenly forced on to the defensive. "My point was that his activities are likely to cause an uprising."

The suggestion was wasted on Di Guaard, who was rounding the table with a maniacal expression of glee on his face. His gross hands were shaping themselves to fit Ren's throat.

"Shall I tell you, merchant, the real purpose of your visit? You're an agent of the Tyrene trying to cause dissension and to divert my attention. You want to get your ships up the Aprillo while I turn my back to watch Thirdhill for the rising of a few slaves. Well, you've not succeeded. I've been watching your wily tricks too long. I know you—and I know you're out there waiting for the chance to strike. Do you take me for a fool?"

REN retreated uneasily before the big man's advance. He was not sure but the fellow's derangement might extend to his doing actual physical damage. And Ren did not dare to draw his blaster—circumstances might force him to use it. He could kill Di Guaard in self-defense, but the political repercussions would certainly end the company's tenure on Roget. He continued his protests while the madman stalked him with a grim and ferocious amusement.

Finally he realized that flight was the only sensible expedient. Gauging his distance carefully, he ran for the door and slammed it behind him. Something heavy and ceramic shattered to pieces against the wood inside the room. From the insane laughter that followed he deduced that Di Guaard was unlikely to continue in pursuit, but for Ren the incident was a humiliating failure. He was not going to gain from Di Guaard the support he needed.

In an alcove at the head of the stair Ren found Sonel Taw ostensibly waiting to escort him out of the establishment. Ren thought it more than probable that Taw had been listening at Di Guaard's door and had been surprised by the sudden emergence of the visitor. Since the castellan would probably be called upon to account for why he had allowed a Tyrene spy to enter his master's presence, Ren did not blame the man for seeking information in order to prepare his lies in advance. The life of a castellan in the service of Di Guaard could certainly be no sinecure.

This conjecture, however, was not an idle thought. If Sonel Taw took the trouble to keep himself fully informed of everything that

took place in the castle he could probably be of more use to the company's cause than Di Guaard himself. Ren decided to test the truth of this proposition. When they were safely out of the keep and crossing the inner bailey he turned to Taw meaningfully.

"The Lord Di Guaard is plentifully supplied with information regarding the whereabouts and movements of pirates. I find this odd, since common consent has it that the pirates are no more."

The castellan looked past him carefully.

"It could be," he said, "that common consent is wrong, Agent Ren. Di Guaard has many spies. They report frequently and are rewarded with coin. It has been suggested that many of the things they tell are more than the truth, since they are well paid for what they say. But there's another who tells much and yet asks nothing in return."

"Specifically who?" asked Ren.

"Your friend the *Imaiz.*" Taw was craftily watching the agent out of the corners of his eyes. "He claims to keep watch over the inland waters and brings special reports regularly to Lord Di Guaard. Di Guaard is always much pleased to see him, and the wizard quiets his tantrums considerably. With so much impressive support for the existence of pirates, do you think it wise for you or me to disbelieve?"

The castellan was purposely mocking his own words, hinting at the existence of a conspiracy—a development Ren had already deduced for himself. If Di Guaard was mad enough to believe that the Tyrene plunderers still functioned others could gainfully manufacture evidence in support of that belief. For some the incentive was obvious—a purse full of money. For others, such as Sonel Taw and members of the castle household, support of the myth probably meant the continuance of their livelihood and possibly their lives. But what had Dion-daizen to gain from the charade?

"Do you know why I came to see Di Guaard today?"

SONEL TAW shrugged. His wizened old face wrinkled with guile. "Anharitte is full of the news that you and the *Imaiz* have joined in feud. It's reasonable to assume that you came here looking for an ally."

"A fair assumption." Ren looked at him searchingly. "But I didn't find one. At least not in Delph Di Guaard. But now I ask myself about you."

"To help you in a feud against the *Imaiz?*" Sonel Taw was obviously worried by the suggestion.

"Not actively, of course," Ren reassured him. "But I need information about Dion-daizan. I need to know why he humors Di Guaard and what he might gain from such a curious association. I'd like to be informed of when he visits Castle Di Guaard—at what hour he's likely to return from such visits and what routes he'll most probably use. In short, I need to know anything about Dion-daizan that might conceivably be turned to his disadvantage. And if your ear is as well affixed to locks as it appears to be you'll already know that the company has an excellent history of rewarding its friends for their time and vigilance."

"I've often heard as much," said Sonel Taw. "And that's the type of friendship a man could learn to appreciate. But if someone made this information available to you—would it be certain that no news of it ever got back to Di Guaard?"

"All information is treated in the strictest confidence. Nothing can ever be traced back to its source through me. Nor do I keep records of what moneys have been paid. Or to whom."

"Then I think you may have gained another friend," said Taw. "Not that I would hold any man of Di Guaard's household capable of subversion—but should a messenger be received claiming to have been sent by me, it would seem reasonable that he might be believed. And if a friend might bless my savings so that they multiply I should not, through humility, be offended."

"I'll bear that in mind," Ren said. "I'm a believer in humility's achieving its just rewards. You know, talking with you has been an education. I'm sure my knowledge of events in Castle Di Guaard will improve."

They had passed from the inner bailey to the outer during this conversation and were now entering one of the two formidable gatehouses that gave access to the town. Upon Sonel Taw's approach the guard sprang meticulously into action. Taw had merely to wave his hand to initiate the raising of the portcullis. In the roof of the gate tunnel were slits through which all kinds of merciless fire and bolts could be discharged. Beyond it, the gate of heavy wood plated with iron lay between the overseeing flanking-towers. Farther still the outward path was confronted by the outworks of a barbican tower.

Ren made a mental note that nobody could enter or leave without Sonel Taw's permission and the cooperation of the guards. By a mental inversion he decided that the walls and gates, being im-

pregnable to all save modern technological assault, not only formed a rare defense position—but would also make a very secure prison. He had no immediate use for this information, but he stored it in his mind for future reference. There were some advantages in being an outworlder—it gave him a unique perspective on installations traditionally designed for specific local purposes. Ren felt that his tenure in Anharitte, as elsewhere, was bound to generate some new values and he was determined to be the first not only to recognize but also to apply these altered truths to the company's and his own advantage.

## X

AS HE walked back past the wayward, half-timbered houses of the quaint alleys and streets, Ren's speculations were soon eclipsed by a more immediate concern. His recent conversation with Alek Hardun had shaken him severely. Hardun had been introduced as a professional trouble shooter. Ren now felt that Hardun's real function was that of a professional trouble-maker. The equipment in the space-going laboratory that was the battle crusier was directed primarily to one end—the sophisticated extermination of people.

For all his merchant-acumen and ambition, Ren still had reservations about the deliberate taking of life. His worldliness had inured him to the fact that some extremes of provocation could only be resolved by bloodshed. In self-defense or fair fighting, losers were apt to have to pay the irrevocable penalty. This was a fact of life and Ren accepted it, but Hardun's projected subtle poisoning of dozens—if not hundreds—of people who would be mainly unaware that they were the subjects of an attack stuck in Ren's throat. This he regarded as an atrocity, a treatment suitable for the extermination of lice and vermin but not to be confused with the humane waging of a battle.

Alek Hardun had chided Ren for expressing these sentiments.

"You're confusing the issues, Tito," he had said. "You were born several centuries too late. We know the ancients used to impose rules on warfare, presumably to prolong the enjoyment of the game. But the brutal fact is that we're not here to fight—we're here to win. I've offered you a dozen virtually foolproof ways of winning and you've rejected them all because of some romantic notion that the enemy deserves a chance.

"Do you think the bowmen stood a chance when the cannon was invented? Do you think the artillery stood a chance against the in-

troduction of nuclear weapons? Within the whole spectrum of devices for furthering man's inhumanity to man, *you* have the temerity to stop at some arbitrary point and say: 'Death devices on the left are sporting and humane while those on the right aren't.' Such a stand is neither logical nor intelligent. And if you can't bring yourself to do the job you've started to do I'm damned if I won't finish it for you."

There had been more, a lot more. Ren had become increasingly angry and Hardun had become more professionally cruel and taunting. He had effectively dismantled Ren's plans to conduct a campaign against the *Imaiz* and had produced alternative suggestions which Ren could only regard with horror. The effect of that conversation had lingered a long time in Ren's mind and he was determined to compare the strength of his convictions with those of the director. Vestevaal, unfortunately, had been away for several days, making a tour of company trading installations, and Ren had been left with the question festering in his mind.

When Ren reached his office chambers the director still had not returned. Ren found instead that his computer printout terminal had been busy. In it lay the precious list of slaves carefully culled from reconstructed histories to show those who could most possibly be agents of the *Imaiz*. He scanned the list anxiously, but the names meant nothing to him. For Catuul Gras, who knew everyone and everything in Anharitte, the situation would be different. Ren stuffed the list into his pocket and hastened to the Lodge of the Society of Pointed Tails.

AS USUAL, the senior scribe was expecting him. Ren speculated that there must be very few movements of importance of which the Pointed Tails were unaware, such was the superlative nature of their spy web in Anharitte. He laid the list before Catuul, who examined it carefully. For some unstated reason his enthusiasm was not apparent.

"I'll have our slave masters investigate this without delay—but discreetly. No word of it must get out until we're sure. If the suspects became suspicious it would be easy for them to desert back to Magda."

"I'll leave it to you," said Ren. "But it's still action only in a negative sense. It's a defensive move. What I must have from you is some scheme with a positive effect."

"And you'll have it, friend Tito. I promised you a scheme of feud and harassment against Dion-daizan

and this has now been prepared. To your outworld eyes it may seem a little superficial—but believe me, in terms of effectiveness in Anharitte its cumulative value is equivalent to a major disaster."

"I'll accept that you know what you're doing. But time's becoming critical, Catuul. I'm under pressure to destroy the influence of the *Imaiz* and to do it fast. If your scheme can't produce results quickly we'll be forced into taking a more direct line and attacking Dion-daizan himself."

"What sort of time-scale did you have in mind?"

"I think a couple of weeks only. Hardun is already campaigning with the Freetrade Council for permission to take a tougher line. I think I can stall them for a while, but we mustn't miss any opportunity to hit Dion hard."

"You're worried about something, aren't you, friend Tito?" The scribe was suddenly questioning.

"Yes, I am. I've come to have a great deal of respect for your culture, Catuul. As a company man I can't afford to risk losing access to the spaceport, but outside of that proviso I believe you've a right to settle your problems in your own way and without your society's becoming unduly contaminated by outworld interference. But I'm afraid that if you don't settle the *Imaiz* soon a more ruthless faction among the Freetraders will bring such pressures to bear that Anharitte will never be the same place after."

"I'm aware of the situation," said Catuul gravely. "I've seen what the coming of the spaceport has done to us unwittingly. Thus I've no doubt of what would be the outcome of more deliberate manipulation. Frankly, that's why we opted to work with you. You've an appreciation of what a separate identity means both to an individual and to a culture. That's something rare in an outworlder."

"You can thank the director. I guess I caught my attitude from him."

"Well, here's our proposal. Dion-daizan maintains many large estates and farms in Magda province. The value of the produce is a major source of Magda's income."

"More than the spaceport revenue?" Ren was learning something new.

"Certainly much more. But the point I wish to make is that the *Imaiz'* success in his estate policy depends on close coordination of the various estates and markets. If we destroy that coordination, his growing and marketing schemes will fall apart. Prices will rise, setting popular sysmpathy against

him—and he will soon acquire huge stocks of surplus. He will also find himself with excess manpower and will be forced to start selling slaves on a massive scale. A disaster of such consequence will smash his myth of omnipotence as nothing else will."

"How could you bring this about?" asked Ren.

"Dion operates a schedule of runners who daily travel between the various marketing centers and estates. We could stop a high proportion of these runners getting through—and in some cases substitute false messages of our own."

Ren was enthusiastic. "When an organization as large and as dispersed as that hits communications trouble, things can come wildly unstuck. How long would it take to show real effect?"

"Many weeks, I'm afraid. But the main harvests are nearly due. If Dion were left with those on his hands he'd be in real trouble both with his estates and with the populations he normally supplies. Of course, he'll send out armed patrols to try and prevent our interference—but the clansmen were born to the game and Dion doesn't have anything like the army he'd need to stop us."

"So all you really require to bring the *Imaiz* to his knees is sufficient time?"

"Time and money. I want to bring in some of the provincial societies, because the area to be covered is immense. Though we shall start hurting the *Imaiz* immediately, the effect won't be apparent in the markets for some weeks. Therefore you've got to hold off the Freetraders while we do it our way."

"I don't have that much influence myself, but I'll try to make the director see the sense of it. In the meantime, muster your forces and make a start. If we can get a good scheme under way we'll have a sure method of resisting those who want to do it the rough way."

VESTEVAAL, on his return, gravely heard out Ren's problems.

"I wasn't aware that Hardun was here in any capacity other than a technical backup for you. I know he has an allegiance to Rence, but this is our fight. You've every right to complain if he's contemplating any actions other than those specifically agreed to by you. I respect your judgment on this issue. Tito, and I'm damned if I'm going to see you pressured into making a mistake."

"I've seen his copy of the Freetrade security subcommittee directive giving him power to act on

Roget. And that battle cruiser of his is a fully equipped civil murder weapon. So I want a plain answer, Director—am I in charge here or has Hardun the right of unilateral action? Because I want no part of some of the ideas he's outlined to me."

"You say you've seen his directive? Can you recall who signed it?"

"Po Cresado, as I remember."

"Damn! I thought as much. The merchant-world pressure lobby. You can take it from me, Tito, that his directive doesn't have the consent of the full council. Unfortunately the merchant worlds do predominate on the security subcommittee. It looks as though the internal political battles of the council have become extended to include affairs on Roget."

"Are you going to let them get away with it?"

"Of course not. But it'll take a full council session to settle the issue. I'm afraid I'll have to return there to get the matter straight. Do you think you can contain things until I get back?"

"I'll try, but I've no jurisdiction over Hardun in the face of that directive. And if he thinks you're out to stop him, he's likely to move fast."

"Then try pretending to work with him for a while. It might just be that he'll actually do the job for you—and at a fraction of the price. Though I fear that even our friend Alek may not find the project as easy as he thinks."

"Can you explain that to me?"

"I mean the *Imaiz* himself is under no doubts about Hardun or his infernal space machine."

"How could you possibly know that?"

"My dear Ren, what do you think Zinder and I talked about while we were waiting to register her bond? She gave me Dion's ultimatum—either I remove Hardun and the battle cruiser or Dion-daizan will do the job himself. Until now I've had reservations. But from what you've just told me I can see the justification. I'll set out to have Hardun and his ship removed—but don't feel surprised if somebody does the job for me."

"I've told Catuul to go ahead with his plan to cause disruption of Dion-daizan's estate-management policies. That will at least give me a lever I can use to slow Hardun down. But it will be difficult to stop him if he does want to try a decisive strike of his own."

"Then play it carefully, Tito. Take advantage of his successes and don't become implicated in his failures. That way you stay on top and the name of the company stays clean."

"You've just expressed a philosophy," said Ren, "that makes me appreciate why you have so much influence in the Freetrade Council. You never lose, do you?"

"I can't afford to lose," said Magno Vestevaal seriously. "And believe me, I've a few tricks up my sleeve the rest of the council haven't even thought of yet. If all goes well at the council meeting, I'll probably go on to Terra before returning here. I've been developing a few thoughts of my own about how to deal with the *Imaiz*—and if I can get acceptance of my ideas on Terra I can assure you that Alek Hardun won't be rated as any serious sort of competition."

## XI

FOLLOWING through on the next part of his campaign to seek influence with the Anharitte nobility. Ren had dispatched a message to Krist Di Rode requesting an audience the following morning. The reply was favorable. Before he retired, however, Ren took advantage of the caution offered by Di Irons—he posted a guard on his chambers lest the *Imaiz* should feel inclined to take the initiative. An attempted assassination did not seem likely, but Ren had been an agent long enough to learn that warnings from an indigenous source were better not disregarded. Fortunately the night passed without incident and, at the appointed hour the next day, Ren traveled to the most eastern point of Firsthill and presented himself at Castle Di Rode.

The contrasts between this establishment and that of Di Guaard made him realize what a fortune Di Guaard must spend on useless defense projects. Di Rode was a prodigious spender, but his considerable income from spaceport revenues had not been wasted. Castle Di Rode was bathed in an atmosphere of opulence and splendor.

Though the castle was slightly smaller than that of Di Guaard, it differed in none of its essential features except that the walls and mural towers of Di Rode displayed none of the former's austerity of outline. Here the masonry was fully overgrown with a magnificent wealth of copper-burnished creeping vines, which garnished the old stone like an overlay of finely wrought metal. Expenditure on the guard was nominal, and mainly slaves and serving-men in splendid costumes tended the gatehouses and the trim gardens.

Everywhere Ren sensed the hand of a connoisseur of gracious living, not the least extravagance being the maintenance of the gardens and the

beautiful decoration of the halls. Di Rode was obviously an intellectual and an artist, possessed of an unerring sense of the overall unity of his establishment as an aesthetic whole. The numerous slaves were well tended and nourished and probably chosen for their clean, straight limbs and physical fitness. In the whole castle he discerned not one slave whose back bore the telltale scars of whip or wire. The whole atmosphere was one of serenity and quietude. This, thought Ren, was the way money was intended to be spent.

The keep of Castle Di Rode was built into the southeast extremity of the inner bailey. It held a commanding view over the Aprillo river and across the shipping lanes that connected with the inland waterways. The keep itself was no longer a simple structure. Later buildings along the walls of the inner bailey had crept around the base of the round-tower and risen to a height equal to the walls themselves. Thus the entrance to the keep was no longer gained by crossing a sterile courtyard, but rather through a delightfully random series of halls, libraries, galleries, corridors and sweeping staircases.

As Ren followed his young slave-caste guide he found himself, unaccountabley at first, becoming increasingly discomforted. This feeling was in part associated with the increasing richness of the perfumes and incense with which the air was saturated, but this was only a factor and not the prime cause of his unease. A gradual analysis of his feelings made him conscious of the fact that the rooms through which he passed were in a careful sequence of ascending extravagance and descending taste, and had already attained a level where the lavish dissipation of resources made nonsense both of the function and the intrinsic value of the items involved. This was so extreme a contrast with the exterior of the castle and the earlier rooms, that the only answer that suggested itself to Ren was that Di Rode, like Delph Di Guaard, was beset by advancing madness.

Ren's senses protested the wrongness they recorded. When he reached the confines of the keep itself his feelings heightened to revulsion despite his efforts to contain them. Here was monumental waste with neither art nor comfort to commend it. Even the occasional alcoves were lit by candelabra mounted on the heads and shoulders of undraped slaves who stood with statuesque patience, performing a function no more important than could have been achieved by an iron pin driven into the wall.

THIS final debasement of living humanity caused Ren as acute a pain as he had experienced on seeing the degraded labor force at Castle Di Guaard. Profitable exploitation of others was a human weakness Ren could comprehend. To waste members of the species by forcing them to fill functions usually performed by inanimate objects was, in his view, irrational and completely indefensible. Fortunately he regained both his outward composure and his objectivity before he turned the final corner to come face-to-face with Krist Di Rode himself.

He needed all his resources to contain his amazement. He had been shown into a bare cell, whose stone walls were as stark and undressed as had been the human candelabra he had passed. A high, square window without glazing looked out only to the blankness of an empty sky, and the shaped wooden bench on which the Lord Di Rode reclined offered no possible aspect of comfort. The floor of stone flags was unrelieved by carpet and the ceilings of arched stone had neither light nor beauty.

Di Rode himself was also a shock to Ren. He had imagined an older, more sophisticated type of man, perhaps one trying to ward off old age by the frantic pursuit of new experience. Instead, he was confronted by a pallid figure of a man in his early thirties, with a face which epitomized dissipation and overindulgence yet still possessed an undeniable strength. Ren had the feeling that this curious lord had tried and become dissatisfied with almost every aesthetic and sensual experience known to man. The physical dissolution was manifest, but the evidence was that the intellectual and aesthetic interest was yet unquenched. While Di Rode's face held a searching interest and unquestionable intelligence, it was obvious that unrestricted wealth, like absolute power, had wrought a remarkable corrosion on its owner.

With a trader's acumen Ren had summarized this much of the man before he began to speak, subtly modifying his arguments in order to stress aspects of Dion-daizan's activities that might have an effect on Di Rode. The latter listened to him attentively, stopping him occasionally to query some chain of fact that led to Ren's conclusions. Then he remained for a long period in contemplative thought.

"To summarize, Agent Ren, you've presented an excellent case predicting what Dion's policy might take away from me. But you've mentioned nothing about the loss of what I receive from Dion while I remain his friend."

"We have access to the resources of all the known universe," said Ren. "There's nothing that Dion can supply that we can't better. Nothing at all."

"Does that include understanding?" Di Rode was quietly mocking. "Do you have access to some cosmic source of that?"

The unexpectedness of the question fazed Ren momentarily. "I don't follow you."

"Think about it. If you had an unrestricted opportunity to indulge whatever whims you chose—how long would it take you to destroy yourself?"

"I don't know," admitted Ren. "I'd at least have one hell of a fine time finding out."

"Spoken with all the complacency of one who'll never have the opportunity! But what does a man need when he's tasted everything, satiated every appetite and yielded to every conceivable temptation?"

Ren did not answer. The question was beyond the scope of his imagination.

Di Rode continued. "He needs understanding. He needs discipline. He needs a father-figure who can pick up the mess he's become, squeeze out the rot and put back enough self-respect for the man to become a man again. That's what Dion supplies to me—psychological rehabilitation. He picks up the pieces when I've torn myself apart and establishes new values to replace those I've lost. Do you have something better to offer as a replacement for Dion's prowess with people?"

"We have doctors—"

"Doctors are for the sick," said Di Rode cuttingly. "I'm not sick—just unusually privileged. With Dion's aid I can probably crowd the pleasures of a hundred lifetimes into one. So you see, Ren, there's nothing you can offer me in exchange for my allegiance. Wizards don't come in tonnage lots."

Ren was about to make a reply when Di Rode got up from the bench and made as though to call a servant. The agent's gaze did not follow the hedonistic lord, but remained fixed in fascination on the bench from which De Rode had risen. He saw now for the first time that the entire surface was covered with upward-pointing metal spines, like a bed of nails. In an agony of realization his eyes traveled involuntarily to Di Rode's back.

Krist Di Rode was watching his perplexity with some amusement. With a swift movement he dropped the single drape that covered his back and allowed Ren to examine his flesh. There were slight indentations from the pressure of the barbs, but otherwise the skin was

undamaged. In contrast, however, the open weave of the drape had been severely cut. Ren looked again to the sharp spines of the couch and again back to Di Rode. By any normal reasoning, Di Rode's back should have been lacerated to an extremely serious extent. Instead, the young lord was laughing and the main discomfort was Ren's.

"Well, Agent Ren—do you still think you can do better than Dion-daizan?"

Ren shook his head, not trusting himself to speak. He suspected, not for the first time, that he was fighting a battle quite impossible for him to win. With Dion's influence removed, Delph Di Guaard would go berserk and Krist Di Rode would destroy himself. With such powerful nobility removed, the social structure of the three hills, undermined as it was, would slowly begin to disintegrate as surely as if the *Imaiz* were still pushing it. Dion-daizan had raised a social conscience and all the old forces of tradition would be hard-pressed to put that evolving creature back to bed.

AS REN came to the square of the fruit market he could see Catuul Gras waiting for him on the steps of his office chambers. He hastened over and the scribe followed him to safety behind closed doors before he would reveal the nature of his concern.

"Something's gone wrong." Catuul's face was grave. "The list of slaves you gave us—it was incorrect."

"What do you mean?"

"We took the slaves whose names were on the list. It didn't seem right, because most of them were well trusted and known to us. But even under pressure they gave us absolutely nothing. Most of them claimed never to have been with the *Imaiz.*"

"Surely that's no more than you'd have expected them to say?"

"True. But on further examination we found their statements to be correct. Dr. Hardun has given us a list of our own sympathizers—and none of Dion's men at all."

"Ridiculous!"

"It's all here." Catual Gras laid a sheaf of papers on the table. "Check for yourself. No man on that list has ever spent more than thirty-six hours in Magda and most of them haven't been there at all."

Scowling, Ren reached for the microwave communicator and called the spaceport. Alek Hardun was a long time answering.

"Tito? What's eating you?"

"What in hell are you trying to do, Alek? That list of slaves you

sent was the diametric opposite of what it was supposed to represent."

"Now don't run off the spool, Tito! You asked me to reconstruct histories for a selected group of slaves and to notify you of those who'd served bond with the *Imaiz* for a year or longer. That's exactly what I've done."

"Correction. That's exactly what you've not done." Catuul tells me no slave on that list has spent longer than two days in Magada."

"Hold it! That wasn't an automatic computer printout you received. We verified that list before it went on transmission. There's no possibility of an error in the data we sent you."

"Yet I'm assured the list is one hundred per cent wrong. What the hell's going on?"

"Let's check first that you have the right list. Watch your computer terminal and I'll give it to you again."

Ren watched as the computer printout began to spit forth names. When it had finished, he compared it with the papers Catuul had given to him. "How's that?" asked Hardun.

"It agrees with the first set exactly. There's not an error in the pack."

"Yet you insist they're *not* the names you want?"

"The names you've given me are also on the select list of Pointed Tails least probable suspects."

"I see!" Hardun was serious. "How many names appear on your list, Tito?"

"Seventeen. You should know —you've transmitted it."

"Not on your life. My list contained seventeen names, but I transmitted only sixteen of them."

"What?"

"I said sixteen, Tito. All of whom I can guarantee have been at Magda for at least three years and most much longer. If you've just received a list of seventeen names, there's only one conclusion—the list you're receiving is not the one I'm transmitting. Somebody else has access to your terminal line. They're intercepting what I'm sending and substituting a list of their own."

"Damn!" Ren considered the enormity of the prospect. Most of the company's business transactions were reported via his terminal to the spaceport computers for processing and onward transmission via the FTL radio links. The director's reports on the state of the feud with Dion-daizan went out over the same channel. The thought of unauthorized access to the terminal linkage made his blood run cold. With a chill creeping up his spine, he turned the instrument off.

"Can you spare me some linesmen, Alek? My terminal is on a wired circuit with the spaceport. I can only assume it's been tapped."

"Not only tapped," said Hardun. "I'd suspect that it's being consistently monitored by an on-line computing complex compatible with that at the spaceport. The insertion of a substitute list at that juncture is no mean feat of technology. What the hell have they got up there at Magda?"

"I wish I knew. All the signs now are that they've a modern technological workshop that can match anything we can produce. This has to put a new face on how we approach the attack on the *Imaiz* —but I'll take the matter up with you personally. I don't even trust this microwave voice link now."

"That's wise," said Hardun. "But before I sign off I'll read you the list of names you should have received."

He did so. Ren copied them faithfully and handed the results to Catuul Gras. The scribe compared them with another list and shook his head concernedly.

"The names you've given me match the list of slaves who've escaped in the last two days. We presume they've gone to Magda, though the evidence isn't clear. It would seem the devil has recalled his own."

FINDING the actual position of the line tap was difficult. Because Anharitte had no telephone and no electric services the customary array of available poles was absent from the landscape. When Ren had decided to bring his office into the fruit market in Anharitte proper he had found it neccessary to arrange for his wire link with the spaceport to be laid across private land wherever he could purchase the goodwill. The line now took a circuitous route across roofs, under eaves, around gables and dormer windows, and generally progressed in a most unorthodox manner until it ran free of the town and came to the western slopes of Firsthill. From there it ran across the country on company-owned poles parallel to the Provincial Route that skirted the spaceport.

Despite the apparent opportunity for interference with the line in the town itself it was, curiously enough, on one of the poles on the open stretch of road that the tap was eventually found. The line had been split and both ends coupled into a neat black cable that ran unobtrusively down the pole and disappeared deep into the sandy soil of the provincial plain. Attempts to trace the path of the unauthorized cable proved tiresome and expensive and they were finally abandoned. Its general direction

was, as Ren had known it would be, toward Magda. The depth and security of its lodgment showed it to have been buried at about the same time as Ren's own cable had been installed.

This latter fact alone made the agent squirm. A great volume of confidential company business had been fed into the line over the past few years. Had the *Imaiz* been operating for a trade competitor the company could have suffered extreme losses as the result of this unanticipated leakage of information. There was no evidence that the knowledge the *Imaiz* must have gained had been used to the company's disadvantage—but it was a late time to realize that one's commercial future lay in the hands of a sworn enemy.

Nor was Ren's temper improved by a further consideration.

From his terminal, by means of signature codes, he had access not only to company computer data banks at the spaceport, but also to the spaceport's common computer banks. With the right sort of intercept equipment the *Imaiz*, too, would have had similar access to the same data banks and, by extrapolation there would scarcely seem to have been a commercial transaction on Roget of which the master of Magda need have remained unaware.

As a commercial blunder the situation was without parallel. The only mitigating factor for those involved was that no one could reasonably have suspected that on a relatively undeveloped planet like Roget there existed either the equipment or the technology to make this sophisticated form of espionage a fact. The strength of Dion-daizan lay as much in what he concealed as in what he revealed. Wryly Ren wondered how many other surprises the *Imaiz* still had up his sleeve.

## XII

DESPITE his growing antipathy for Alek Hardun, Ren was now forced to visit the spaceport in order to continue the company's business transactions. This was because he suspected he could trust the security of neither the wire circuit nor the microwave link. Although he tried to stay out of Hardun's way, it was inevitable that the latter would learn of his coming and seek him out.

"You wouldn't be trying to avoid me, would you, Tito?"

"Why should I?" Ren's answer was couched in a frame of aggrieved innocence. "I've been very busy, that's all."

"I just wondered." Hardun was probing. "I mean, we've not yet

completed our little chat on ways of removing the *Imaiz*. And they tell me Director Vestevaal has made a hurried trip back to Freetrade Central. I naturally wondered what was brewing."

"I wouldn't know. The director mentioned something to me about visiting Terra, but I'm not exactly in his confidence."

This was so patent a lie that Hardun did not even pretend to believe it.

"Very well, Tito! If you want to play it close to the chest that's your affair. Rance Intelligence will give me all the answers I need, so don't let the director think he's acting too cleverly."

"I don't see how you'd know," Ren said critically. "You're scarcely in his class."

For a moment a spear of anger burned in Hardun's eyes. Then, with amazing composure, he turned the expression of malice aside and overlaid it with a veneer of genial charm.

"Look, Tito—I know we have our differences on the way the job's to be done, but we're still here for a common purpose. We mustn't forget the *Imaiz* is a very clever enemy. Nothing could suit him better than to have us divided. Let's not play into his hands. How's your campaign going?"

"Slowly, but I think we've got it made. The Pointed Tails have produced a scheme for disrupting Dion's holdings right through Magda Province. I've been into it in detail and I don't see how they can fail. Given nine months we'll have the *Imaiz* begging for alms in the streets."

"Nine months!" The veneer of geniality was stretched taut. "And Vestevaal settled for that? It shouldn't take nine days to settle a little issue like this. Somebody's going soft."

"That's your view, Alek. But you haven't studied the local conditions as I have. Believe me, we have to play this one very softly."

"I accept that it's your fight, Tito, but I'd like to make one strike just to prove to you that I can do as I say."

"Then make it, Alek. I don't seem to be able to stop you," said Ren unexpectedly. "But I'm not supporting you and I don't wish to be implicated in any way. Furthermore, if you make a hash of it and the whole thing blows up into an interplanetary row I'll set up such a howl for your skin that even Rance'll have to throw you to the wolves. As far as I'm concerned you're a Rance combat unit and nothing to do with legitimate Freetrade at all."

"I can see you've been doing your homework." Hardun's ac-

knowledgment was a grudging acceptance of the terms. "I'll make the strike tonight and guarantee you undisputed access to Castle Magda in the morning. I'll even have a squad of Rance commandos standing by to do any mopping up that may be required. It's about time you tradesmen learned that jobs like this were better left to professionals."

UNDER cover of the early darkness Hardun moved his murder contingent out to the plain. Because the whole episode was highly illegal in terms of Roget law, absolute secrecy was essential. For this reason the most opportune site, that between the Via Arens and the Space Canal, could not be used, for fear of chance observation. The alternative site was situated on the rising banks of the wilder country almost centrally between the Provincial Route and the Old Coast Road. Here there was almost no chance of observation during the hours of darkness, though by day it would have lain under the scrutiny of the watchtowers and the great keep of Castle Di Guaard. The rocket's trajectory thus lay slightly over the northwest corner of Firsthill, but such was the precision of the apparatus that the chance of a premature fallout on the town was negligible.

All day had been spent by Hardun's technicians in calculating the course coordinates and carefully calibrating the equipment to guarantee the pinpoint accuracy necessary to ensure that the deadly black canister was delivered precisely inside the confines of the castle and not dispersed across Thirdhill and its township. The position of the central point of the castle had been determined with micrometers by laser triangulation. A radar lock from the battle cruiser and a second one from a manpack station on the northern slopes of Secondhill gave the necessary references for faultless radio guidance of the missile from its mobile launcher to the castle. All this preparation had been leisurely and time-consuming. Speed was not important, but it was absolutely vital that the payload of sinister cargo fell cleanly inside the castle walls.

The toxin had come from a stockpile of horrifying weapons on Rance. Its rate of diffusion under all conditions of still and moving air were known with great precision. The metering and dispersion could be controlled to a nicety to permit an almost exact spread of effect before destructive oxidation by the atmosphere rendered it not only harmless but virtually undetectable. In a situation such as its release inside an

isolated citadel like Magda the great walls themselves would serve somewhat to contain the dispersion, so that little, if any, chance existed of its affecting anyone outside the castle walls. Inside the walls its potential was conservatively estimated at seven thousand per cent overkill. By morning the best bacteriologists in the universe, while they might have their suspicions, would find it impossible to produce proof of the deliberate nature of the hit-and-run plague whose one and only symptom was immediate death. The dispersion warhead was self-destroying and would leave no incriminating remains.

REN himself had no stomach at all for the project. Fortunately he had retained his resolve and refused to take any part in the venture. To protect the company's name—in the event of any future investigation of the pending atrocity—he had felt it necessary that he should establish an indestructible alibi by being seen in Anharitte at the time the act was committed. He therefore left the spaceport in advance of the murder party and traveled the Via Arena to pick up a crew of stave-bearers for his cushion-craft slightly before dusk.

The garish ligroin flares of the trading stalls around the arena were well in evidence as he passed. Ren stopped and made a few purchases in order to establish his location at that time. The streets, as usual at that hour, were crowded with an aimless, nonchalant throng, none of whom seemed to appreciate any need for a clear and unobstructed highway. Mule carts, loaded to ridiculous heights with straw baskets, seemed eternally to be in his way and it took Ren nearly an hour to negotiate the cushion-craft the two kilometers from the Black Rock to the foot of the Trade Road. Ren bore this ordeal with fortitude, not daring to express his anxiety or his crying need to be in a location where more people would recognize him and be able to vouch for his presence on that particular evening. Fortunately the Trade Road was clearer and the craft was poled easily up the slopes and out to the broad brow of Firsthill.

It was here that he first heard the explosions. In reactive shock he at first thought that the rocket must have misfired on its launcher. A second burst of noise, however, caused him to notice that the origin of the sounds was too far to the left to be coming from the provincial plains and was more probably coming from the guns of Di Guaard. Remembering the formidable chain-throwing cannon that Di Guaard maintained to cover

the Aprillo Delta against the mythical Tyrene, Ren was able to make a guess that Hardun was in trouble. The vicious cannon atop the castle keep were being rapidly deployed against something to the west—a fact he was able to confirm when his position enabled him to see the flashes of the guns themselves. It did not take much further conjecture to appreciate that the only target to be found on the plains at this hour was Hardun and his rocket projector and the deadly rocket with which he intended to wipe out the human—not to mention humane—population of Castle Magda.

Ren reached his office chambers in a state of agonized indecision and suffering from an embarrassing lack of information. He was tempted to try to contact Alek Hardun via the microwave link, but there were dangers that some record of the conversation could implicate both himself and the company. On the face of it, the chances of the mad Delph Di Guaard's guns being able to seek out a target on the dark plain appeared negligible. However, the hand of the *Imaiz* in Castle Di Guaard—and the awful coincidence of the rocket launcher on the plains under the speaking guns—threw up possibilities too haunting to be ignored.

HAVING parked the cushioncraft, Ren made his way to the Lodge of the Pointed Tails, where discreet information was usually available. The lodge was deserted save for a solitary guardian, who appeared to think the clan was already out on Ren's own business and was surprised that the agent had no knowledge of the fact. He, too, had no certain idea of why Di Guaard's guns were firing, but promised to send a runner to contact the clan and to carry news back to Ren as fast as possible. Ren returned to his office and sat waiting for the information.

It was fully an hour before Catuul Gras came to the door.

"We were looking for you earlier, Tito. Sonel Taw sent a messenger for you. When he couldn't find you he had sense enough to come looking for me."

"I was delayed at the spaceport," said Ren. "What was the message?"

"That the *Imaiz* was expected in Castle Di Guaard tonight."

"He is?" This put a new aspect on Hardun's venture with the rocket and Ren could not conceal his surprise. This was one point on which even Alek Hardun had miscalculated.

"I laid plans for an immediate ambush," said Catuul Gras, "but the *Imaiz* slipped through."

"Dion's already there, then?"

"Yes. He must have come around by the Provincial Route or the Old Coast Road. He came up Sidepath and was already in Castle Di Guaard before we got the news."

"Was anyone with him?"

"Only Zinder and Barii, I think."

"Have you any idea what Di Guaard's firing at?"

Catuul smiled. "I suspect the *Imaiz* put him up to it. It's said Dion carries strange tales about the Tyrene to Di Guaard. I'd wager the mad Delph is on top of his tower right now, firing at imaginary pirates and believing himself to be the saviour of Anharitte. Still, it's better that he fires across the plains. There's no one out there to hurt. Safer than firing at the shipping on the river."

Ren felt cold and rather sick. Because of the atrocious nature of the weapon Hardun had taken out into the plain not even the Pointed Tails had been made party to the secret. The presence on Roget of such a potent outworld mass-murder instrument was not something that Ren cared to advertise—nor would the knowledge have helped his liaison with the loyal but native clan whose services he so frequently employed. His one consolation was that without radar and ranging instruments, the mad Di Guaard was unlikely actually to hit the rocket launcher. More probably, Hardun would abandon the venture and retire to the security of the spaceport. However, if Hardun continued his plan and launched the bio-missile into Magda, then he would certainly fail to kill the one man on Roget who could unearth the truth behind the death of the garrison at Magda. The damage the *Imaiz* could do with that truth both on Roget and with the Galactic Federal Council could not only see an end to the freeport but could work against Freetrade right across the galaxy.

The agent became aware that the scribe was watching him curiously.

"What's on your mind, Tito?"

"Nothing," Ren lied. "But so far our feud against the *Imaiz* has been a continuing series of failures. I can't afford more. We know the *Imaiz* is in Castle Di Guaard and that some time he's going to have to come out. I don't care what it costs, Catuul, or how many other societies you need to reinforce your own men, but I want the *Imaiz* ambushed—and I want him killed. I want you to make it a point of honor that he never returns to Magda."

Catuul's intelligent eyes were probing gently, but he made no comment on his conclusions.

"As you wish, Tito. I'll make all the necessary arrangements. We'll

seal Castle Di Guaard like a trap. No matter when Dion-daizan emerges there'll be good shafts and good steel waiting for him. If he ever sees Magda again it'll be solely due to his wizardry."

Because there was nothing else he could usefully do Ren went to bed and tried to sleep. In this he was for many hours unsuccessful because he had no idea at all what pattern of news would greet him the next day. The possibilities ranged from brilliant success to tragic failure, with a range of complex permutations in between, many of which could involve him in being asked some acutely embarrassing questions. Even the certainty of failure would have allowed him to rest more easily, but he was currently immersed in a vacuum containing no answers, from which he dared not emerge to ask questions lest he betray his own foreknowledge. His surest method of defense was to profess complete ignorance of the events that took place that night.

FINALLY, however, he must have slept for a while. He woke again to the first gray of dawn, feeling wretched and compelled by curiosity to contact the spaceport by the microwave radio link. As he dressed and dragged himself downstairs the call alarm of his transreceiver gave a clatter that made him stop in startled shock. It was many seconds before he could bring himself to lift the handset.

"Tito?"

"Alek—what happened?"

"Happened?" Hardun's tone alone foreshadowed the tale of disaster. "Di Guaard's cannon hit the launcher. The toxin dispersion canister went off prematurely and all six of the crew were dead of the plague inside five minutes. There was nothing I could do to help them."

"What about yourself?"

"I was lucky. I was following up in the radio unit truck. Di Guaard wrapped one of his chain-shots around the turret and I stopped to estimate the damage. By the time I got going again the launcher was on its side and the crew was trying to run. I reversed out fast and called out the medical team from the spaceport. They got there in twenty minutes, but when they knew what toxin we had in the canister they refused to go in. It wouldn't have been much use anyway. Once that toxin's out there's no protection against it and only time and exposure can counter it."

"So we've a broken rocket launcher and six bodies out on the plain in full view of Di Guaard's watchtowers when the light gets better. Damn! Di Irons will flay us for this."

"It's still pretty misty out here. I think we're covered until the sun comes over the hill. That gives us an hour yet to remove the mess. I've emergency tenders standing by, but we're trying to delay for as long as possible so that the toxin is fully broken down. We daren't risk losing any more men. What in the name of Jupiter possessed Di Guaard to open fire like that?"

"You don't know the hell of it," said Ren. "Even if you'd succeeded you'd still have been in trouble. The *Imaiz* wasn't at Magda. He was with Di Guaard. I suspect he was directing operations, having first explored the situation for himself. At a guess, he had all your preparations under observation—and you drove straight into a trap."

"That would figure," said Hardun sourly. "We were the victims of good espionage, perfect timing and diabolical ranging accuracy. I had the feeling that if the chain shots hadn't stopped us they would have been followed up by high explosives. As it was, the bombardment stopped shortly after the launcher got into trouble, as though they knew they had hit something vital. What are the chances of their having an infrared ranging camera at Castle Di Guaard?"

"Every chance—with the *Imaiz* behind them."

"Tito, we've got to destroy this man—and fast—or we haven't a hope of retaining Anharitte as a freeport."

"I've got him bottled inside Castle Di Guaard," said Ren. "Catuul's mustering a whole army and we'll keep them in position for as long as may be required. I don't myself think Dion will attempt to come out. I think he'll sit there and wait for us to go away."

"Then this strikes me as an opportune time to try a reconnaissance raid on Magda. I have the commandos assembled, but I'll be too busy on the plain to take the lead. Could you handle it for me, Tito?"

"I've no great objection to a reconnaissance. And it might produce some useful information."

"Good. I'll have the men meet you at Magda Crossing in an hour's time."

"I'll be there," said Ren and went thoughtfully in search of breakfast.

## XIII

THERE was no doubt from close quarters that Castle Magda was the most formidable of all the fortresses on the three hills. It was larger than the installation of Di Guaard, yet planned with the same paranoiac approach—the supposition that all men's hands were against it. The outer walls of

massive granite blocks were probably solid for twenty meters at the base and rose sheer out of the waters of an unwelcoming moat. Even the dark streaks in the granite conspired to give the place an air of unassailable endurance.

Whoever had planned and built Magda had been a genius in his own right. There was not an inch of the wall that was not overlooked by some flanking tower, and all possible angles of approach lay under a dozen points from which a hidden defender might safely fire. It was not even possible to tell if one were being observed, so dark and numerous were the potential defense positions.

Although they were armed, the group of thirty-five Rance commandos with Ren had strict instructions to do no more than test the defenses. They could indulge in a little provocation in order to test the viability of any attack hypothesis, but were to take no main offensive action unless instructed to do so by Ren. The agent had a secondary purpose in leading an open move against Magda—he hoped that news of it would tempt the *Imaiz* to try and break out of Castle Di Guaard. He had sufficient faith in the Pointed Tails to think that Dion-daizan was unlikely to make his homeward journey alive.

Castle Magda was situated on the highest point of Thirdhill, in a situation remote from the attendant township. It stood on a rocky plateau, three parts of the extremities of which gave way to nothing but the slopes of a broken and inhospitable hill. Working beneath the cover of the slopes, the small and wiry commandos were split into three groups, each with a local officer.

Ren alone, a known figure in the territory, felt free to show himself openly. His presence on Thirdhill could not be concealed during daylight and he took advantage of this fact to make the survey he needed to complete the assessments of the high-level photographic data on Magda.

The intention had been that, having completed his open evaluation of Magda's defense potential, he would rejoin the commandos for a mock attack to see what sort of response would be forthcoming from the garrison in the absence of the *Imaiz*. However, as he approached the main gatehouse he was more than a little disturbed to find the drawbridge down and the great gates open and apparently unguarded. Intrigued by this phenomenon, he ventured closer, the thought crossing his mind that in the absence of the master the attitude of the remaining garrison

seemed to be remarkably naive.

Or was it? If the *Imaiz* had left Magda, knowing even a little of the threat on the plains, he might have evacuated his whole garrison to safety. In which case Hardun's murder weapon would have been completely without success even if it had been fired. The idea seemed credible. If the *Imaiz's* strength resided mainly in the super-training of his bondforce it would have been an unthinkable risk for him to have left them in the castle.

The chances were that the garrison was now dispersed around the township of Magda, waiting for the master to come and assure them it was safe to return. Wary of a trap, Ren returned to the commandos behind the ridge and used their radio to contact his own office. His servant took the call and dispatched a runner to contact Catuul Gras. Instead of sending a message, Catuul himself came to answer.

"Did you find anything, Tito?"

"Yes. As near as I can tell, Magda's been evacuated. Not even a token guard is posted. Are you perfectly sure the *Imaiz* is still bottled up in Castle Di Guaard?"

"Quite sure. Not even a rat could have got out of there unnoticed. We've had every inch of the walls under observation since the *Imaiz* went in. What had you in mind?"

"The occupation of Magda. I've some of Hardun's men with me. It would be quite a joke if, tired of waiting for the *Imaiz* to return, the garrison came back to find me in residence."

"Too risky," said Catuul gravely. "It's not like the *Imaiz* to leave the slightest thing to chance."

"He would scarcely have had time to make preparations once he realized what was going on."

"And what *was* going on?"

Ren realized that he had said too much. The Pointed Tails had not been given the probable reason why the *Imaiz* had found it so necessary to visit Di Guaard.

"We tricked him," said Ren obscurely. "That was why he left Magda. Risk it may be, but I'm going to try to get in there. I need to know what sort of facilities he has in Magda—and if we can manage to hold it I think our battle's over. A lord dispossessed of his own castle won't find much following in Anharitte."

"Let me withdraw some Pointed Tails and try to locate the whereabouts of the garrison first."

"No. We don't have the time. And we daren't give the *Imaiz* the opportunity to escape from Di Guaard. You deal with the *Imaiz* and I'll try my luck with Magda. That way either or both of us has the chance to finish the fight for good."

REN explained his proposition to the senior Rance commando. He too had independently formed the opinion that Magda was unoccupied and nodded a ready acceptance of Ren's idea. The men under him were battle-trained professionals, unused to sitting aside while a group of merchants and native warriors did the fighting for them. Whether or not Magda was defended, this was their chance to demonstrate what could uniquely be done by perfectly trained and equipped soldiery.

Ren was warned to take no part in the initial excursion. He saw the wisdom of this as the small, wiry commandos went expertly into action, almost melting into the background as they moved up toward the sinister towers of the castle. Every move they made was one of marvelous precision, each man knowing what area he had to cover with his firepower and what need not concern him until death took his neighbor. With the swift and deceptive mobility of lizards they moved up the main approaches. Some ventured onto the drawbridge, some crossed it, others held careful reserve in the deadland beneath it. Each time they advanced they left nothing to chance. Had any resistance been offered it would at any time have found only a minimum of targets exposed.

Finally the whole force entered the gateway, having assured itself that the entry tunnel was safe. The last one to enter was the senior commando, who signaled to Ren that it was safe for him to follow. Ren moved up quickly, feeling a sudden loneliness and isolation now that the others were no longer visible. The whole affair had this far been conducted in silence, but now he became extraordinarily aware of just how absolute that silence was. He quickened his pace and had entered the long, dark tunnel of the entrance, expecting to find some of the commandos waiting for him and slightly perturbed to find that they were not. A nagging suspicion warned him that it had all been far too easy. He was still telling himself this when the great portcullis gates fell at the ends of the tunnel, trapping him like a wild beast in a cage.

For his commando companions who had passed on into the inner ward the end was swift. A high-level stun bomb burst above their heads. Blastwise its effect was negligible, but its biological shock effect, caught and concentrated between the great walls of stone, was a disaster. All thirty-five Ranch commandoes stiffened like posts and then crumpled to the ground. Those who had not been killed were severely concussed. Some of those

who lived would be deaf for life. Others would have more or less permanent damage to the brain and other organs as a result of the shattering pressure and rarefaction of the stun bomb shockwave.

Caught in his cage, Ren was dealt agony. He held his hands over his screaming ears, thought the blow at the pit of his stomach had been equally severe. Fortunately the narrow entrance to the tunnel and probably the gates themselves had protected him from all but a minor part of the shock. He rolled up and writhed on the dusty floor, oblivious to anything outside himself until some of the pain subsided. Then he climbed to his feet again, shaking his head to try and still the ringing in his ears and dimly thinking of escape. A brief examination of the portcullis, however, told him that his freedom, if gained, was going to have to be given by his captors. He could not arrange it for himself.

THROUGH the heavy fret of the inner portcullis he could see the occupants of Magda beginning to emerge. Some began the task of sorting the dead commandos from the living. Others examined the fabric of the building's walls for any damage that might have resulted from the blast. Ren looked miserably out upon the scene and wondered when and what sort of attention would be paid to himself. He had his blaster under his tunic, but he was aware that to use it now could result only in his being destroyed like an unwanted dog. He might be able to make better use of its bargaining power in response to a more personal approach by his captors, but at this moment its function could be only a catalyst in an untidy and ignoble form of suicide.

Finally what looked like a medical team began directing the careful removal of those who might possibly be saved. No one still paid any attention to Ren and, wondering if they even knew of his existence, he finally shouted to attract attention. Several of the slaves looked up and grinned in his direction. From this he deduced that his situation was known and that his incarceration was deliberate.

It was many hours later that the inner portcullis was raised, and he emerged from the dark recess of the tunnel to come blinking into the rays of the late-afternoon sun. Neither a vicious guard nor a firing squad awaited him. Instead a figure, peacock proud in a wealth of glorious fabrics, held out her hand in a reserved mode of welcome. And this he found equally daunting.

"Welcome to Magda, Agent Ren."

"Zinder—I—"

"You thought I was with Dion in Castle Di Guaard. Isn't that what you were going to say? To tell you the truth, we came back late last night."

"We? Dion-daizan too?" Ren felt impelled to ask the question, though he did not know why he expected an answer. He found her openness very disconcerting.

"And Barii." She was teasing him quietly. "There was quite a party on at Di Guaard last night. But we found it far too noisy. We left early."

"Damn!" Ren looked ruefully at the dust on his shoes. "I must have at least three hundred men posted to stop you from leaving Firsthill. You people win every damn trick in the book. Did you know that was a crack Rance commando team you just destroyed? Competence is a tolerable sin, but omnipotence is a little out of fashion."

Zinder turned her head to survey the scene of the recent carnage in the courtyard.

"Not omnipotence, Agent Ren. Careful planning, good organization, fast communications, a sense of purpose and a modicum of luck. The usual ingredients needed to make a success of any major undertaking. We offer injury to those who try to injure us and ridicule for those who try to make us look ridiculous. We take an eye for a tooth and a life for an eye—and if that seems immoral, remember that the quarrel is not of our choosing."

Ren shrugged. "Then what do you intend to do with me?"

She was slightly amused. "I think we'll give you some supper and set you free again."

"I can't object to the arrangement, but the logic of it escapes me."

"Does it? If you were we, whom would you rather have as an enemy—yourself or the Butcher of Turais?"

"Butcher of Turais?"

"So they didn't tell even you! I'm not surprised. Alias Alek Hardun. He's a specialist in depopulating awkward places. The pogrom of Turais was only one of his accomplishments. It was no accident that he happened to have access to Rance toxin. And that's not a hundredth part of the mass-murder equipment he carries on that bloodwagon of his. Frankly we think that you and Director Vestevaal have been deceived into accepting him so easily. And either you stop him or we'll be forced to stop him ourselves. If Hardun comes out on top even Roget could become another sparsely populated world."

"I can't accept that statement at its face value," said Ren. "But I know the director's worried about

him and is trying to take some action."

"Trying's not enough. We were only able to stop Hardun below Di Guaard last night because we knew who he was and what he was capable of. But if he'd successfully destroyed Magda—who could have stopped him then? Can't you imagine the pattern? Here a lord goes crazy, and there another forgets to wake from his sleep. Mutant rust decimates the harvest and the seat of central government is stricken by history's worst ever plague. Rance drafts in a thousand 'disaster relief experts' and, to shore a crumbling economy, appoints a puppet government. Then it's all over save the persecution and the exploitation."

"How much of this have you told Vestevaal?"

"All of it and more. I think he was convinced. But he has his own job to do also—and this we understand. He's a big man, your director—but I wonder if he's big enough to fight the combined weight of the merchant worlds. Only the Freetraders can contain them, but they're divided and doubtful and prone to manipulation themselves. But come! Dion will explain this far better than I. Though I think you'd better let me have your sword and your blaster before you meet him."

## XIV

IT WAS midnight as Ren started uncertainly back down the twisted Roads of Thirdhill. Zinder had taken his blaster, but had returned his sword at the gate, so that he had no fears for his own protection. His uncertainty arose from the wealth of damaging information Dion-daizan had given him concerning Alek Hardun, the Butcher of Turais.

Ren had come to Magda full of the certainty that he was indeed performing a necessary job. He now felt himself reduced to the status of a dupe and an unwitting accomplice of a trade-world cartel whose methods were becoming infamous throughout the universe. It made him wince to remember the number of times he had mentally applauded the news screen's announcements: *Disaster teams from Combien and Rance have been sent to the planet to offer immediate assistance* . . . Once those teams arrived, he knew now, the disasters multiplied and the need for assistance changed to one of enforced dependence.

On the other side of the coin, however, Hardun had warned Ren that the *Imaiz* would seek to divide his opposition and thereby ensure a continuance of his own schemes. This possible aspect of Dion's

expert lecture had not been lost on Ren, though the documented evidence with which he had been presented was overwhelmingly in favor of the removal of Alek Hardun from the scene. Ren sensed that the *Imaiz* alone stood between Roget and the diabolical hands of Rance and her agents. With this in mind, he was not at all sure that his own plans to damage the *Imaiz* were still justified. He reflected that Vestevaal, having become convinced of the truth of the situation, had travelled immediately offworld to carry the battle directly to the powerful Freetrade Council. Of one thing Ren became certain—if he were again to have the strength of his own convictions Alek Hardun and his murder ship must go.

Ahead of him, among the noises of the night, Ren heard a sound he knew. To the uninitiated it was the call of a nightbird. Ren knew it for the signal of the Pointed Tails. He answered it inexpertly and in a few moments Gras was at his side.

"What happened, Tito?" the scribe asked anxiously. "We had word that things went wrong at Magda and that you were captive."

"I was captive. But Dion-daizan decided to let me go again—I think because he likes the sporting nature of our opposition." Ren's sentence ended in heavy irony.

Catuul Gras looked at him as though transfixed by a blade.

"Dion-daizan in Magda? But he can't be—"

"He's there all right. So are Zinder and Barii. I've just taken supper with the three of them." A sudden anger overtook him. "Are they smaller than mice that they passed your watch at Di Guaard and were waiting to trap me when I arrived?"

In the dim light the scribe's expression was one of puzzlement followed by a sudden relaxation.

"Then you'll admit now that Dion's a wizard. It's not possible for anything to have escaped from Di Guaard without our knowing. Not only did we have the castle and the exits under surveillance, but we also had men on the routes and river crossings. If Dion reached Magda he must have flown like a bird."

The instant absurdity of the suggestion was soon overthrown by a new line of speculation in Ren's mind. "I wonder if you're right, Catuul. He couldn't have flown like a bird, but he could have flown nonetheless. In which direction was the wind last night?"

"There was not much wind, but the breeze persists from the southwest from now until the heavy weather breaks. Does that give you an idea?"

"I have a suspicion. Dion

couldn't have used a conventional aircraft because you'd have heard the noise of engines. But if he'd had some sort of balloon available he could have used it in relative safety after nightfall. The natural wind-drift would have carried them toward Thirdhill or at least into Magda province. And the river lights would have given them an indication of when it was safe to land."

"What's a balloon?" asked Catuul.

"A device that figures almost uniquely in ancient Terran history. It's a bag of gas or hot air—which is lighter than the air in which it floats. A big balloon can carry a basket containing several people. It could have lifted the three of them out of Castle Di Guaard and if you weren't looking for it you'd never have seen it go. That way the *Imaiz* could have escaped all your traps without resorting to wizardry. It only needs the application of a few physical principles and a bit of technical know-how."

"Wizardry or technical know-how, it's all the same to me," said Catuul. "What you call wizardry are the things that are done which are beyond the limits of what your education insists is possible. But the same applies to me. So the difference between our points of view is one of degree, not kind."

"Point taken, Catuul. But so far the *Imaiz* has done nothing beyond the comprehension of the averagely educated outworlder. This makes it reasonably certain that he's not a native of Roget, and various historical associations about his schemes strengthen my belief that he's a Terran."

THE scribe was searching the darkness behind them, looking for something. Occasionally he would answer the low-pitched trade-calls that floated through the darkness. Finally he turned back to Ren and spoke.

"Hardun's men who were with you—weren't they released too?"

"No. All thirty-five were either killed or injured."

"I warned you it was dangerous." The scribe's face was grim. "The *Imaiz* never takes chances. And this fetches a point which we must settle between us, friend Tito. There was nothing in our contract about your carrying the fight using outworld soldiery. Nor about the use of long-range outworld weapons. If we were to place this fact before the Elders of the clans they would relieve the Pointed Tails of any further obligations to you—nor would you obtain clan service elsewhere. The Elders would never consent to a clan's being party to

any outworld scheme of aggression. I'm disappointed in you, Tito. I'd thought you understood us better."

Ren stopped walking and turned to face the scribe squarely.

"I do understand you and I admit I'm in error. But circumstances overtook me. Initially I was mislead as to the reasons Alek Hardun came to Roget. He came under the guise of an advisor, but now appears to have independent operating status. By the time I was aware of this I found I had no power to stop him. The director has gone to the council to have the matter set to rights."

"Yet it was you who took the soldiers to Magda," objected Catuul.

"True. They were available and the exercise was intended purely as a reconnaissance. But when I believed Magda to be abandoned I thought that by one decisive move I might shorten the whole battle. That was a classic blunder that cost Doctor Hardun thirty-five men."

"I'd not have expected the price to be less." The scribe was critical. "Had the *Imaiz* not dealt with them—there are two hundred clansmen from all over the provinces around us now who would have made sure the Rance men never left Thirdhill."

"What?" Ren was aghast. "Do you really feel so strongly about them?"

"We may have our internal disputes in Anharitte, but armed outworld interference transcends any normal act of feud. Were it not so, even Roget could fall under some outworld yoke. Think about it, Tito. You'll see why it has to be so. And your part in this has been a cardinal transgression."

"I can't deny it. It's been a sad error both in judgment and in policy. Hardun's equipment and his tactics have become an embarrassment and were no part of my original intention. And I'm even more unhappy to have broken faith with your society."

"But in the light of today's expedition, how much reliance can we place on your word. Think carefully before you answer—I may yet have to speak for you to the Elders of the clans."

"The Elders must decide as they will. And you, too, Catuul. You know me better than most and must decide for yourself. My rejection of Alek Hardun is a personal inability to support his views on the cheapness of human life. I can't say otherwise even to save the spaceport or my job, which depends on it."

"That's precisely what I wanted to hear," said the scribe. "But I've been less than frank with you. The Elders have already discussed the matter in council. They gave two

decisions. The first is that all society services will be withdrawn from outworlders until Hardun and his ship have been removed—"

"And the second?"

"That you were to be killed unless I personally was satisfied with your intention and your integrity."

"And have you come to that decision?" Ren felt his sword hang heavy at his side.

"Of course." Catuul's smile broadened in the dim light from the night sky. "Or you would have been dead within minutes of leaving Castle Magda. Come, friend Tito, we have your cushion-craft waiting on the far side of the crossing."

"ALL thirty-five men?" Hardun's voice reached the peak of incredulity.

"It wouldn't have mattered if they had been a hundred," said Ren. "The *Imaiz* is more than a match for anything you can put up. Frankly, your tactics have become a liability. I've sent a spacegram to the Freetrade Council expressing the opinion that if you're allowed to remain on Roget the spaceport facility will certainly be lost."

"You did what?" Hardun's new peak of disbelief was suddenly tempered by relief. "Now I know you're joking, Tito. I see copies of every spacegram transmitted from here. I know damn well you've sent no such thing."

"You used to see copies," corrected Ren. "The Freetrade Council has already instructed the spaceport staff not to cooperate with you and they're leaning heavily on Rance to have you pulled out. I know of this because I held a personal conversation with the director at Freetrade Central. And you won't receive a recording of that either. He confirmed everything I'd learned about the Butcher of Turais."

"Turais? That old propaganda line—" Hardun was vehement. "If you'd believe that you'd believe anything."

"I would believe anything about you, Alek. That's why I complained to the council. The urgency of your removal can't be overstressed. They're to hold a debate on it. I imagine the result will be to apply some tough sanctions against Rance until they're forced to order you out. I don't imagine that'll make you very popular with your masters, either. So I'm advising you now to get offworld before the storm really breaks."

"I'll see you in hell first, Tito. I wouldn't dream of moving a centimeter unless I get specific instructions from Rance Politico."

"Very conformative. But I wasn't asking you to go—I was warning

you not to stay. Your departure is imminent. Either you decamp of your own volition or run the very probable risk of being removed, perhaps violently, by someone like the *Imaiz*. And if that happens Rance will be spared much loss of face—so I don't imagine they'll grieve unduely."

"The risk is negligible. It's a complete certainty there's nothing on Roget that can harm an armed battle cruiser at dock."

"I don't share your certainty. The societies have withdrawn all services until your ship has been removed. The *Imaiz* not only has no opposition, but can probably acquire substantial assistance if he requires it. And I don't think Di Irons is going to miss the point for very long—in which case the planetary government will also be involved. So the opposition ranged against you runs from Dion-daizan through the Freetrade Council up to possible intervention by the Galactic Federation. If you get offworld now you might just about save your own skin."

"You're either a brave man or a complete fool," said Hardun savagely. "I've killed men before for offering a whole lot less provocation. Your outlook's so far adrift from the realities of galactic life that you're really too pathetic to be true."

"I've been around, Alek. And wherever I've been I've looked in depth as well as at the surface. It's not a perspective you'd understand, but it means I can back my judgment against yours with a reasonable chance of being right."

Ren turned on his heel and stalked out of the room. It was obvious that his attempt to persuade Hardun to go voluntarily had met with no sort of success. Ren's knowledge of spaceport security measures—and of the detection and defense capabilities of a docked battle cruiser—did not incline him to place much faith in the idea that the *Imaiz* would have a greater success by his own methods. They would probably have to wait until the pressure on Rance brought about an official recall. Ren shuddered. In the meantime Hardun could act without restriction—and if he accepted that his period of opportunity was limited, the next twenty-four hours could be a very crucial time in Anharitte's history.

IT MIGHT have been his imagination affecting his interpretation of the scene or it might have been some social reflection of the societies' decision, but Ren had the distinct impression of unease in the city as he returned. The markets were quiet, almost deserted. The

streets were far less crowded than usual and his own office was deserted and dead. His bond-servants had been withdrawn by the Pointed Tails—whose legal property they were—and the normally busy household was at a standstill. Ren was even forced into the extreme of doing his own shopping when he wished to eat—and the preparation of his solitary meal was a process which caused him to think seriously about his next move.

He could not back down on his stand against Hardun, nor could he reasonably do more than he had done to secure the latter's departure. There appeared to be no basis for any sort of pact with the *Imaiz* that would not be compromising later—and in any case, Ren felt that he had nothing of interest to offer. The best mode of release from the impasse would undoubtedly be the swift intervention by the Freetrade Council acting on Rance. Ren could only hope that the council would successfully act before Di Irons began to examine too closely the reasons behind the Pointed Tails' decision to withdraw their services. If the prefect were to learn the truth about the rocket launcher on the plains he would have no option but to start a chain of protests that must involve the planetary government and ultimately the Galactic Federation itself.

Di Irons, then was the main problem for the moment. Idly Ren speculated on the strategy for a successful pattern of bluff if the prefect's sure nose for trouble should lead him too close to the truth. The answers were not encouraging. He therefore decided that this would be a prudent time to visit some of the more distant of the company's trading installations. By this ruse he could probably delay a confrontation until the removal of Alek Hardun was a accomplished fact. Accordingly he packed in preparation for an early start and retired exhausted to his bed.

AN EXPLOSION—or rather a series of explosions—broke him savagely out of his sleep. He awoke in alarm as multiple flashes of light glared in window-patterned squares of whiteness from the walls of his room. The thunder followed swiftly. Ren leaned back, prepared to listen to the storm—until it slowly filtered into his consciousness that there was no such thing as a storm on Roget.

In an instant of panic he flung himself from his bed and put his head out of the window. The night sky was ringing as yet another great explosion from the direction of the plains shredded the unwilling air.

Without pausing to dress Ren ran downstairs to the microwave communicator. As he turned on the stair the largest explosion yet made the building vibrate. Only the distance in the quality of the sound made him certain that the explosion was at the spaceport. The nature and effect of so violent a blast at that point of origin was something he scarcely dared to consider.

Although he called both on the service and emergency frequencies, he could obtain no reply from the spaceport control. This silence was unprecedented and suggested a state of crisis so acute that even the information backup for the Disaster Center was unobtainable. This convincingly fitted the scale of the catastrophe he had deduced from the intensity of the shockwaves. It was credible that as much as a quarter of the spaceport installation had been destroyed. On an undeveloped world like Roget, where civil emergency services were virtually nonexistent, the entire work of disaster containment and rescue work would have to be handled by the spaceport's own personnel.

Ren dressed hurriedly. He did not even need light in his rooms. The sky, made bright by the angry redness of a major spaceport fire, provided more than adequate illumination. Knowing that his training would enable him to do little in the way of offering practical assistance, his intention on reaching the street door had been merely to walk to the limits of Firsthill in order to gain a better view. As he descended the steps, however, two armed watchmen flung themselves hurriedly across his path.

"Agent Ren, you're not permitted to leave."

"What do you mean?"

"Prefect Di Irons' orders. You're to be confined to your chambers until he's free to deal with you."

"But why the hell? This is no doing of mine."

"That you must discuss with him. But you'd better be convincing. Nights such as this were never known in Anharitte before you made trouble with the *Imaiz.*"

Ren allowed himself to be escorted back into the chambers, where the watchmen maintained an uncommunicative guard. When the light of the morning was well advanced he heard other noises in the house and soon guessed that his bondservants had been returned and were picking up their duties as though no interruption of service had occurred. Shortly his breakfast tray was placed before him. His guards were completely ignored.

By such signs he knew that Alek Hardun had been wrong in his certainty that no force on Roget

was capable of dealing with an armed space cruiser at dock. It was a fair bet that about a third of the spaceport installation had gone with it. By some ingenious piece of wizardry a way had been found through all the alarms and defenses and the *Imaiz* had made good his promise.

AN HOUR after mid-day the unusual echo of horses hoofs clattered to the door of his chambers. The sound was rare because the great horses of Roget, fully as large as the ancient Terran dray-horses, were unpopular beasts on the crowded roads of the city. They had their place at the great provincial estates, but for town work they were used mainly by the civil powers as a symbol of authority. A message from Di Irons required Ren to join the cavalcade to the spaceport. The reins of the great saddled and bridled beast were flung toward him with the instruction that he was to mount.

Ren's riding experience was little and the size of his steed was daunting. He said as much, but his protests were dismissed.

"Then here's your chance to learn, Agent. The prefect won't wait."

Somehow he managed to mount. He sat unhappily astride the great beast whose back seemed as broad and as warm as the bed Ren had vacated during the night. Having mastered the art of staying on top of the moving animal, he next faced the problem of control. He found himself assisted by the fact that the giant horse appeared to know exactly what was required of it in terms of destination and speed. It obediently followed the messenger and two others through the streets of Firsthill, out on to the Trade Road, down the slopes and on to the Via Arena.

The messenger rode hard, without pausing for further explanation. The fact that his escort rode mainly ahead of him led Ren to suspect that his presence was required for a constructive purpose, rather than a punitive one. They soon came in sight of the spaceport, from which, even in daylight, the bright flames from burning fuel tanks showed crimson under the vast columns of smoke.

Ren's initial surprise at being conveyed in so unusual a manner was soon dispelled as he realized that carriage by the giant horses were certainly the fastest means of transport available. Although cushion-craft were able to produce a better turn of speed on the open stretch of the Via Arena, the slower working of the craft in the city gave ample advantage to horses. His present journey was accomplished

in well under half an hour. Bruised and sore, Ren clung frantically to the saddle horns of the mammoth animal and only fell when he attempted to dismount.

## XV

DI IRONS, looking fiercer and sterner than ever, waited for Ren to pick himself out of the dust, then strode away, indicating that the agent should follow. Ren followed painfully, wondering if his encounter with the horse had done something irrevocable to his legs. Their path took them broadly across the spaceport, most of which was obscured by wide trails of drifting smoke. The prefect stopped when finally they neared the number-five landing bowl where the Rance battle cruiser had been.

Ren caught his breath as the scale of the catastrophe became apparent. The tall ship had been totally demolished and the parts further shattered. Even the single components seemed destroyed. Only a very small part of the ship's total mass was still evident. The rest of it had presumably been vaporized or dispersed over many thousands of meters of terrain. Even the nearly indestructible wolframic of the landing bowl was heavily cratered as though from a major war. The picture was one of violence multipled by violence. It was a job most thoroughly done.

"How did it happen?" asked Ren.

Di Irons put on a thunderous scowl. "Pictor Don has a theory that the ship was toppled by an s.h.e. charge placed in the vicinity of one of the ship's stabilizers. Her engines then exploded and that touched off her magazine. Unfortunately she was heavily overarmed and some of the later explosions took away a fair proportion of the spaceport buildings. I've no doubt we'll be receiving a detailed account of the damage from the spaceport Disaster Control center in due course. That's why I wanted you here. You're going to give me an independent view of how it was done, who did it—and why it was necessary."

"Me? But I know nothing about it. I was asleep at the time."

"That's no excuse," said Di Irons. "I'll wager you know a great deal about it. Pretense will save you nothing. Let's be in no doubt as to where you stand. In the past twenty-five hours I've uncovered sufficient facts about you and the activities with which you've been involved to have you declared *persona non grata* on just about every civilized planet in the universe. Not only that, but for default of various laws on Roget under Space Conventions I could encourage our

government to make claim for damages that would not only bankrupt your company but would cripple another half-dozen of their Freetrade associates.

"Having warned you to follow the advice of your society on how to conduct a feud with the *Imaiz*, you have no conceivable defense for you actions. So do you now volunteer to answer my questions or do I have to break both you and the company?"

"What exactly do you want to know?" asked Ren unhappily.

"This battle cruiser—it must have carried enough armaments to start a major war. Was it put here by the Freetrade Council?"

"No. It was donated by Rance, ostensibly as a technical backup facility. I don't think the majority of the council was aware that it was anything else."

"So why did it possess a fully equipped war potential?"

"It was one of Rance's so-called 'disaster ships'—though I've come to suspect that their function is to cause disasters not to alleviate them."

"Didn't you know of this when you asked for it?"

"I didn't ask for it. It just arrived. When I found out what sort of equipment it carried I complained to Director Vestevaal. He went immediately to Freetrade Central to demand its withdrawal."

"Hmm!" Di Irons nodded thoughfully. "And I take it that somebody couldn't wait to see it go peacefully. Your friend the *Imaiz*, perhaps?"

"I've no evidence," said Ren. "But he knew it for what it was and its demolition has a characteristic thoroughness."

"That's agreed," said Di Irons, looking around at the widespread damage. "And in the circumstances I don't think we shall hear much from Rance about her loss, especially if Director Vestevaal's already protesting about it at Freetrade Central. But more than the ship went here. A lot of highly valuable spaceport installation went with it. When the Galactic Spaceports commission learns of it the repercussions are going to be grave. I'm going to be under pressure to produce some good answers. Frankly, I don't have the expertise in outworld technology to produce those answers. But you do. And you've the additional advantage of knowing both the *Imaiz* and the pattern of life in Anharitte, neither of which an outworld investigator would know. Therefore I'm willing to strike a bargain with you."

"What sort of bargain?"

"We both suspect it was the *Imaiz* who destroyed this ship. I want to know how much evidence

against the *Imaiz* could be gathered by an outworld enquiry into the disaster."

"You choose your words most carefully, Prefect."

"In this instance I've a good reason to do so."

"And what have I to gain from the exercise?"

"Give me some good answers, Ren, and I might forget to file any charges against yourself or the company."

"I'll willingly try, though your terms don't give me much option. But I'll need information. How cooperative can I expect to find the spaceport staff?"

"They themselves are in default for permitting an armed warcraft to remain docked at their facility beyond the recognized refueling time. Therefore their careers are equally in my hands. I suspect you'll find them very cooperative indeed."

PICTOR DON, the spaceport's emergency commander spread his hands resignedly.

"I can assure you, Tito, that outside sabotoge is quite out of the question. Nobody could have got through without detection. Because of the permanent danger to personnel around the landing bowls the whole area is monitored by radar. The radar overscan extends well beyond the spaceport perimeter. The computer constantly oversees all activity in the area and throws up alarm signals for any potentially dangerous or unusual event."

"What other defenses have you?"

"Mainly the fences. The first and second fences form a corridor manned by a patrol with guard dogs. Then there's an electified fence inside that and the inner one's a barbed barrier. It would take a very clever person indeed to get through that lot."

"We happen to suspect a very clever person. What I'm trying to establish is—did he indeed get through or was the blast an accident? What about the gates?"

"Only two—both remotely controlled and responding only to the controllers direct orders. He has to satisfy himself by computer verification of ident cards and the vision link that the person asking for admission has the necessary authority to enter."

"And did he give clearance to anyone at a time reasonably close to the blowup?"

"No. There were no admissions for at least four hours before the blowup occured."

"Then it would have to be through the fence. Has the whole perimeter been checked?"

"Electrical checks have been carried out. Nothing was found. Physical examination of all the wire

on the perimeter will take a little time."

"Then let me have the answers as soon as you can," said Ren. "If somebody penetrated that fence I want to know how. Did your radar scan tell you nothing?"

"The watch computer signaled nothing unusual."

"How critical is the watch computer?"

"Sufficient for normal purposes."

"But does it discriminate between different types of radar returns?"

"Necessarily so. Frequently animals from the plains stray near to the outer fence and trigger a minor alert. Also some birds and small animals actually live out on the bowls. The computer has been programed to reject the movement of small creatures and to respond mainly to the approach of something the size of a cushion-craft or one of the tracked tenders."

"Then how does it function for personnel protection on the bowls?"

"It's spectrum filtered to give maximum response to metallic objects while remaining relatively insensitive to organics and nonmetals. Any crews working on the bowls will naturally be wearing thermo-reflective suits and these give a very good radar return."

"So it is possible for an unsuited man to have walked across the bowls without the computer's classifying him as an object to be reported?"

"It's possible, but I see the point as rather academic. Nobody could damage a battle cruiser with less than about a hundred kilos of s.h.e. explosive. I'd seriously doubt that somebody broke the fence and carried that weight across the bowls on foot. Perhaps a trained man might do it—but I don't believe it happened. I think they'd have had to use a vehicle—and if they'd done so the computer would have spotted it and sounded the alarm."

"Nevertheless," said Ren, "I'd like to know if there was anything on the radar scan below the computer's indicating threshold. Do you tape a record?"

"Of course." Pictor Don shrugged his shoulders. "I'll have a replay set up in the operations room. If you want my opinion—it's a waste of time."

"What are you looking for, Ren?" The stern and thoughtful prefect was shadowing Ren closely, listening to every syllable of his investigation. "I'd have thought Don's evidence that there was no penetration of the fence was pretty conclusive."

"Not conclusive enough. If it did happen we need to know now, not have it thrown up during some out-

world inquiry. All defenders and all defense systems have blind spots. If someone has the wit and the ability to figure just where these blind spots are they form a positive advantage to the attacker. A bit of ingenuity coupled with the right know-how should produce a method of attack the defenders won't expect because they know it to be impossible. Our prime suspect in this case is a recognized master of impossible events and is also a considerable technician. I can't see that dogs, a few wire fences and a radar scan need be any deterrent to the *Imaiz.*"

"There's been some talk of rockets," said Di Irons. "Couldn't Dion have used one without having to penetrate the fence?"

"He may well have the capability at Magda, but that wasn't the way it was done. As I see the evidence, the ship was toppled, as you've already said, by an s.h.e. charge placed under a stabilizer. But that couldn't in itself have initiated the entire chain of disasters that followed. Almost certainlv the ship was toppled upon a further line of explosive charges, and the direction of the ship's fall was calculated to insure that those charges would do the maximum damage. It was an exercise in fine mathematics, undertaken by someone who had a very clear idea of the working layout of such a battle cruiser."

"From which you conclude?"

"That the operation was carried out by a competent outworlder—someone familiar with space constructions. And it would have taken time and careful measurement to place those charges accurately. Whoever did it must have worked on the bowl under cover of darkness and had a pretty shrewd idea that he would not be picked up by the radar monitor. That's an assembly of knowledge and skills very difficult to match. I think that Dion must be a well-trained saboteur—in addition to his other talents."

DI IRONS was not yet convinced.

"If I understand Pictor Don correctly it would have taken at least a hundred kilos of explosive just to topple the ship. If you're now saying that further charges were laid—they must add up to a considerable extra weight of explosive. All this had to be moved through the fence and brought across at least half a kilometer of landing bowls—without detection."

"I know very little about explosives," said Ren. "But I'd doubt that less than two hundred kilos of s.h.e. would have done the trick."

"And brought in without using a vehicle? Do you suppose they used

mules or magic?" The prefect was sarcastic.

"I don't know how it was done, but I'm willing to bet we'll find a few answers on the below-threshold level of the radar records."

The radar overscan, untrimmed by the computer, reflected considerable movement of wildlife outside the perimeter fence. The false alarms would have been continual had not spectrum filtering been employed. In contrast, the casual movements of spaceport personnel and vehicles were easily distinguishable by the heightened radar responses to the various metallic substances they carried. It was at about this level of discrimination that the computer operated.

Pictor Don replayed the scan at its original speed for the two hours prior to the blowup. He and Ren concentrated fully on the unedited replay screen, while Di Irons fretted in the background, unable to comprehend the screen's symbolism. All of the first hour of the replay and half of the second passed without producing any information of obvious interest. Suddenly Ren gave a cry.

"Southeast corner—behind the shadow of the freighter on pad eight—something is moving on the bowls."

There was no doubt of the fact. Emerging from the radar shadow of the freighter, already well within the wire, two images sped across the bowls toward the doomed ship. The radar responses were weak, well below the computer's preset threshold. The moving forms gave no clue as to their form or composition. Pictor Don ran marker blips across the screen to measure the velocity of the moving points. He frowned at the resulting calculation.

"Slightly up on fifteen kilometers an hour," he said in puzzlement. "Men running perhaps, but certainly not men carrying two hundred kilos of deadweight."

"Perhaps horses?" asked Di Irons.

Don shook his head. "Not enough mass for horses."

"Is there much metal present?" asked Ren.

"Some, but its not very distinct. More like a grid than a solid. Certainly not enough mass to be a vehicle. The computer wouldn't be able to distinguish between it and the oxide glaze on the bowls themselves."

"Then what the devil can have carried them across the field at a speed like that?"

"Did you ever think of wizardry?" Di Irons had the faintest smile of mischief around his grizzled mouth.

"I don't care for wizardry," said

Ren. "There's a physical explanation for all this. Dion-daizan's no more of a wizard than I am."

In less than three minutes the two dots had moved from the perimeter across the intervening half kilometer to the foot of the threatened Rance ship. Their passage must have been effectively silent—they appeared to make no effort to avoid the lock-watch who would have been aroused by the sound of an approaching vehicle.

"Were they invisible also?" asked Di Irons.

When the dots stopped under the radar shadow of the ship the screen picture became confused by the sheer mass against which the returns were being measured. In less than a minute, however, the dots separated themselves and streaked back toward the perimeter fence, moving even faster than before. Soon they were lost behind the shadow of the freighter on pad eight and the scene closed down to an apparent stillness as the time approached the moment of blowup.

"Well, we still don't know what got in, but at least we know where." said Ren. "Let's go and take a closer look."

ON THE southeast perimeter, where the bulk of the freighter on pad eight stood squarely between them and the damaged radar tower, Ren examined the wire. There was little wonder the break had not been detected before. Had he not had a suspicion of what to look for, he would not have found it for himself. The wires had been cut to a level sufficient to admit something not much larger than a man. Every single strand had subsequently been neatly butt-welded to form a virtually invisible repair. Any competent technician could have done it—given the right equipment and the necessary time.

"But we had guard-dog patrols between the outer fences," objected Pictor Don, when the fact was pointed out.

"Who mans the patrols?" asked Ren.

"One of the socal societies—very reliable."

"Perhaps! But for most of the night there was a withdrawal of society services from all matter affecting outworlders. In effect, there was a period when the *Imaiz* could move unopposed on whatever course he chose. He might even have been able to enlist society aid. I'm reasonably certain that if he chose to cut these wires last night the dogs would have been conventiently elsewhere."

"But why should the Societies cooperate with him in this way." Pictor Don was perplexed.

"Because," said Ren, "Dion's

probably the only force standing between Roget as it is—and eventual domination by Rance. I know this. The societies know it and I suspect my Lord Di Irons knows it also. I may be an outworlder, but I've heard enough about Rance's mailed fist in the universe to know that, given a free choice, I would have been out there last night holding that wire open for Dion to enter."

Ren turned away from the wire and wandered into the scrub edging the surrounding plain. Shortly he came back and addressed Di Irons.

"Well, Prefect, I'm ready to answer your questions."

Di Irons compressed his mouth under his beard. The eyes that met Ren's were full of comprehension, edged with a slight smile.

"What about that radar record?" asked the Prefect.

"What radar record? It must have been destroyed in the blowup."

"And the wire?"

"Could never have been disturbed. Technology on Roget obviously isn't far enough advanced to permit a gas-shielded electric butt-weld to be made."

"And the blowup?"

"Who knows," said Ren. "Accidents can always happen on an overarmed man-of-war. I think the point should be made most strongly to the Spaceports Commission. They must be encouraged to take far greater care of ships when operating on foreign soil. Otherwise it might prove inconvenient to have a spaceport so near Anharitte."

"And we can positively rule out outside intervention?"

"I can think of no way in which a man or perhaps two men with neither beast nor vehicle could travel half a kilometer in three minutes with at least two hundred kilos of dead weight. Such an idea smacks of wizardry."

"Which we all know doesn't exist," said Di Irons. "You know, Tito, I've a feeling I've misjudged you. You've a depth of perception I would not have associated with your mercenary profession. My report will follow the lines of your summary—and you and Pictor Don can sign a testimony to its accuracy. You've proven to me that there could have been no outside intervention. But strictly off the record—and since you don't admit Dion's a wizard—how do you imagine the thing could have been done?"

Ren nodded and turned out towards the brush.

"Come over here. Do you see those marks in the dust? What do you suppose made those?"

"That's very strange. I don't think I've seen the like of them be-

fore. Do you suppose snakes—"

"I imagine they're snake tracks," said Ren, tongue in cheek. "But they bear a strong resemblance to the tracks of a device I once saw used on Terra."

Di Irons straightened as a society runner approached. The man had come around the perimeter from the gate to hand him a message form. The fellow's exertions underscored the urgency with which he had been dispatched. The prefect scanned the paper anxiously and handed it to Pictor Don. Both men seemed tremendously upset.

"Trouble?" asked Ren.

The form was passed to him. With mounting disbelief he read the message.

TRANSGALACTIC NEWSFAX(:) RANCE SPOKESMEN HAVE REVEALED THAT IN ORDER TO CONTAIN WIDESPREAD CIVIL DISORDER ON ROGET ESPECIALLY ANHARITTE THEY ARE DISPATCHING THIRTY DISASTER SHIPS IMMEDIATELY(:) ANHARITTE SPACEPORT HAS ALREADY BEEN ATTACKED BY RIOTERS AND A RANCE GOODWILL SHIP DESTROYED(:) THE CIVIL GOVERNMENT IS NOW REPORTED POWERLESS TO COUNTER INSURRECTION (:) FIRST TASK OF RANCE DISASTER TEAMS WILL BE TO ESTABLISH CIVIL ORDER AND TO REMAIN IN CONTROL UNTIL DEMOCRATIC LIBERTY IS REESTABLISHED (:) MESSAGE ENDS (:)

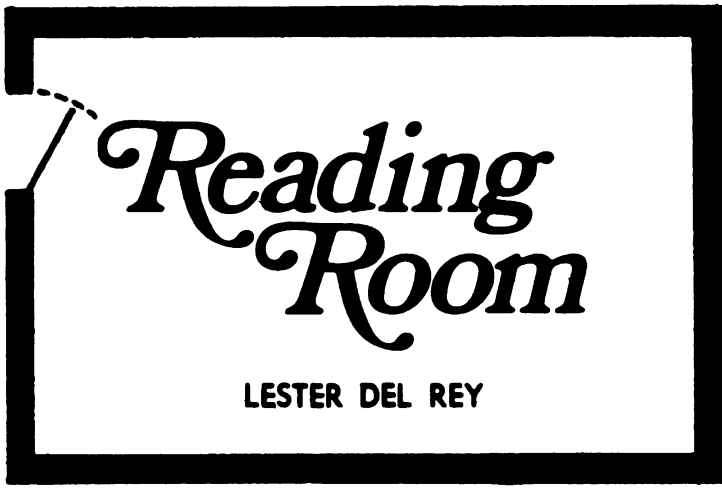
Get me an FTL communications link with Freetrade Central," said Ren angrily when he had absorbed the shock. "I'll get the director to blow this scheme apart right from the top—at Galactic Federation Headquarters if necessary."

"That may not be easy," said Pictor Don unhappily. "Our FTL link to anywhere is routed through the relay terminal on Rance."

"Damn!" Ren looked across the blasted spaceport where even now the smoke trails persisted over the scene of devastation. The enormity of Rance's fabrication made his head spin, but his heart was seized with the cold clamp of fear.

If Alek Hardun's murder wagon had been regarded as a good will vessel Ren hated to think what thirty openly operating disaster ships would bring. Despite his increasing respect for the resourceful Dion-daizan he knew that salvation this time depended on the rapid acquisition of an armed spacefleet. Presumably not even the wizard of Anharitte could produce that. Or could he? At the moment Ren knew only from the trackmarks in the dust that the *Imaiz* possessed at least two bicycles.

TO BE CONCLUDED




WHEN a science-fiction writer runs into the general type of reader the first cliche put to him usually is: "Where do you get your crazy ideas?" This question seems to reflect a recognition of the importance of ideas in the field. The answer I find most satisfactory, incidentally, is that I steal them—which is at least partially true, since we all depend on each other to stir up our own thinking.

It's difficult to say which element has the greater importance in a story—the idea or its execution. Neither can stand wholly by itself. Some of the early science fiction consisted of almost pure idea and featured little in the way of execution. Today many of the books I read seem high on execution and low in ideas. Certainly few demonstrate more than a variation of a common idea.

But good books can be written with an unprecedentedly smooth execution of an old idea. An outstanding book must, however, provide at least a fresh treatment of a good idea and show good execution. Examples of such rare, great books are Ursula Le Guin's *Left Hand of Darkness* and Sturgeon's *More Than Human.*

I've just had the chance to see what happens to one of my ideas when it has been executed by three other writers. The occasion is *The Day The Sun Stood Still*, edited by Robert Silverberg (Thomas Nelson, $5.95; also available shortly from the Science Fiction Book Club for $1.49).

Silverberg asked me to do a two-page idea around which other writers could develop long novel-

ettes. I decided to suggest that a future religious leader might persuade most of the world to pray together for a sign. The sign was vouchsafed: for a night and day (less $1 \times 12^{-4}$ sidereal day) the Earth moved not around the sun, neither did it rotate—no other changes allowed. The question then was: What kind of world might come about if faith were replaced by certain knowledge?

Poul Anderson, Gordon R. Dickson and Robert Silverberg were the writers assigned to handle the question. I was curious as to what such top authors had done with it and began reading eagerly.

Strangely, it seemed to me at first they did very little with the question. They seized as their themes the Joshuan miracle itself rather than the eventual world that might have resulted from it. And nobody made any use of the plant that God (or Whoever) seemed to leave a clue of duodecimal nature.

Anderson's *A Chapter of Revelation* deals with a scientist and an ordinary little man who becomes the leader to start people praying together. He postulates a background of approaching nuclear war. The miracle of the sign halts this—but the aftermath for the two characters is grim and confusing. To Anderson, apparently, the result of a Joshuan miracle is the collapse of all values. In his post-miracle world neither science nor religion seems to be viable.

Silverberg is equally concerned with collapsing values. In his *Thomas the Proclaimer* he deals with the results for the prophet, the man who called for the sign and was answered. Thomas was a disreputable revivalist, egged on by Kraft, his press agent and daemon. While the world about reacts to the shock, Thomas has to turn inward to see himself. And when he does he finds that Kraft is still with him. This is a bitter epic of a soul that can not accept knowledge any more than it earlier could wholly accept faith.

My own personal favorite is Dickson's *Things Which Are Caesar's*. In some ways Dickson threw away more of the original sketch than did either of the others. But in one essential I feel he looked deeper into it. He apparently decided that, given both Joshua and the current leader, the phenomena described were periodic—the sign was not merely given once, but regularly. He chose to have the miracle before the current one appear about a thousand years ago. Then he picked a man who had survived that previous miracle as his major character.

Here the miracle is produced by a leader we do not meet. This doesn't

matter. What matters is the second chance given to his Ranald, the ancient Viking who has been a later Wandering Jew, in effect. Is this to be his redemption? Well, that seems to depend.

Dickson sets it all up in a sort of Woodstock, where people have come to wait for the sign instead of to listen to rock groups. His cast of characters is rich and well integrated—the whole world is resolved in a half-dozen characters who assemble around Ranald's campfire. All at first seem more interesting than the rather detached Ranald—yet Dickson's execution is done surely and well, to leave us with Ranald as our Everyman.

I don't think it's a great book—in fact, I don't think any book by three writers against a similar background can be great. For three men, working with an idea which did not germinate for years in their own minds, to produce three great stories would be asking for another sort of miracle. But I enjoyed the book immensely.

UNHAPPILY I'm much less impressed with Gordon R. Dickson's execution of his own ideas in *The Pritcher Mass* (Doubleday, $4.95). This one deals with various aspects of psi powers. I don't believe in such powers, but I see no reason why they can't be the basis of excellent fiction. However, there does seem a tendency to let the normal rules of tight plotting loosen with such a theme and I'm afraid Dickson's story shows that tendency.

His basic idea is strong. Earth has become so polluted that men cannot survive outside its enclosed cities. Any man left outside is soon destroyed by a fungus growth in his lungs. No remedy has been found for the disease. Sooner or later even the cities will be nonviable. Man's only hope is to get to the stars. He has no physical means to do so, but has developed something called the Pritcher Mass—that is, a projected gathering of psychic energy that supposedly will be able to locate and settle other worlds for mankind. The few people on Earth with provable psychic talents are sent to work on the Pritcher Mass.

Sant is a reject from this program. But after an accident forces him to move through the dreaded outside world he finds his survival possible only by a desperate use of paranormal power. He believes the experience has strengthened his psyche enough to enable him to pass the test and be accepted. But by now he has become enmeshed in a dark plot between a Witchcraft of underground psychics and a crime syndicate that is trying to take over the Pritcher Mass.

So far so good. But from here on things gradually go haywire. Sant does get to the Mass, but finds reason to doubt it can do what it is designed for. Nonetheless he finds ways to use it to escape back to the outlands of Earth.

The narration's logic slips. Coincidence begins to enter rather strongly. The Pritcher Mass turns out to be perfect for solving problems it was not meant to solve. Sant's hopeless situation is eased by a discovery that the outlands are no problem to those with certain lucky psi abilities. (Must psi always degenerate from the specific to the general and become a damned universal panacea?)

At the end everything is sewed up—the witches and the criminals make their moves in steady and predictable patterns. Routine action is stitched together—but at the end I at least felt that the thread had caught somewhere and the seams were all bunched together.

The story begins marvelously, but ultimately my feeling was not a happy one. The execution was far below Dickson's usual high level.

URSULA K. LE GUIN'S handling of her Earthsea novels has been exemplary. The idea behind the series (now consisting of three novels) has proved so good that these books are among the happy list of those written for children that make even better reading for adults. ***The Farthest Shore*** Atheneum $6.25) brings to a conclusion the saga of Ged, the great magician of Earthsea.

In this one, a young man—Arren—comes to the island of the wise magicians to warn that magic is failing in many parts of the world. No one knows why, but the ancient spells no longer work and the magicians are losing the knowledge of the old speech that gave them power. Ged sets out with Arren and discovers that the menace is all too real and that its sphere of influence is rapidly growing.

In a series of happy (for the reader) adventures, Ged begins to realize that a rash action of his own during his youth has loosed a malign influence on the world of Earthsea. And to conquer it his people must go to Selidor, the island where the oldest dragons dwell—and perhaps even beyond to a place from where men rarely return in their own living flesh.

This is, of course, fantasy. But it is fantasy with a logic of execution that is usually found only in science fiction. Only the most hardened fantasy hater should be able to resist it. I highly recommend this novel, as I've recommended the two previous ones. ***The Farthest Shore***

is rich in ideas, color and inventions—and excellently executed.

DAW Books began with an idea, too—Donald A. Wollheim felt that he could begin his own publishing company and find at least four novels each month to publish. It was a rather large concept to come up with in a market already well filled with other publishers and established houses vying for writers. But judging by Wollheim's latest batch of books in his first six months of operation the idea seems to be working.

Of the last four books one is a reprint from hard covers—*Dinosaur Beach*, by Keith Laumer. (The price for this is 95¢, as is true for all the DAW books so far). This is one of Laumer's wealthiest novels as far as ideas are concerned. It involves the fairly ancient idea of a future that is tampering with time to change the viability of that future by changing the past. But nothing is ever simple when Laumer tackles time. Mixed with action during the Jurassic Age are hints of different futures with different goals and the control of some great robotic brain that controls all the multiple threads. It's good, fast-paced adventure without obvious or banal themes.

The second is *The City Machine*, by Louis Trimble. The idea here is basically a familiar one, but handled with some fresh insight. Men live in a great city, the overlords at the top, the technicians in the middle and the workers on the unlovely bottom levels. The scene is not Earth—the city has been built on another planet. The first group to arrive built the level now used by workers. Next an invading group took over and built the upper levels. The interesting variant is that both groups used a machine that could be programed to build a whole city on order. This machine still exists on the somewhat inhospitable planet, but is kept secret by a few who have survived outside the city. They cannot use it, since they cannot read the original instructions. In fact, the city-dwelling technician hero is the only man who can still read the original language—and his knowledge is an imperfect remnant of childhood. The story involves the attempt of a group of rebels to use him to build a new city and free the workers.

The book is free from most clichés and has some nice touches. It makes for pleasant reading.

The third DAW release is *The Stardroppers*, by John Brunner, an expanded and much improved version of an older story. Its idea is so well developed and has been given so much freshness that it isn't fair to call it borrowed, though the

plot opens with a threat caused by communication with "other races" and becomes something else equally familiar. But the transition is cleverly done and the move from one to the other is surprising in concept, if not in its inevitable development.

A security agent is sent to investigate a new invention, an apparently simple little gadget that produces sounds most listeners seem to understand—almost. It's popularity had developed into a craze—and there are signs that many users are becoming psychotic and that the thing may be endangering world stability. These perils are confirmed—even worse, it turns out that some people who have been "stardropping" suddenly disappear. Perhaps this snark is a boojum!

The book is not one of Brunner's stronger literary efforts—it's one of the good adventure stories he turned out in considerable number before his work became more ambitious. But the ideas are sound and the execution is smooth and masterful. I found it a good novel to read for fun.

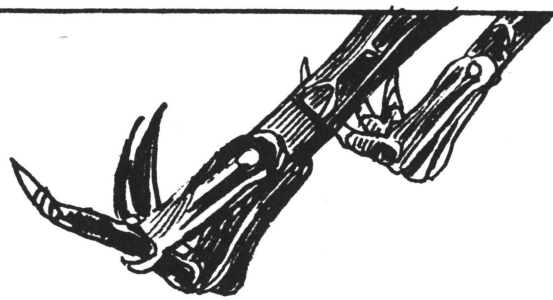
The fourth novel of the current DAW books is a failure, but an interesting publishing coup, nevertheless. *The Return of the Time Machine*, by Egon Friedell, is intended as a sequel to the classic novel by H. G. Wells, done by a German writer and historian before World War II—as detailed in a foreword by Donald A. Wollheim.

The story opens by presenting some (almost certainly suprious) correspondence of the journalist in the original novel with Wells through his secretary. Then it sets about continuing the adventures of the Time Traveler—this time as he sets out for the past.

Friedell lets his story devolve into a bunch of incidents that seem more concerned with German mysticism of the type common in some circles in the 'thirties. There's a touch of an improbable love story, a contact with the future (he never does really get far into the past) in which two Egyptian priests discuss mind power—and a final episode in which all logic vanishes.

Nobody seems to know whether Wells was aware of the original German publication of this book in 1946. This is the first English version. I hope he did not know of the German edition—it would have been a shame for him to have been so insulted.

Still, bad as it is, the book had to be published since it existed—and I can't help admiring Wollheim's ability to ferret it out. Though completely lacking in ideas and badly executed, it has genuine value as a curiosity. ●



# GHOSTS

**Mankind's biggest secret—or, where do baby storks come from?**

**ROBERT F. YOUNG**

WHEN Professor Tom died he left Jenny and Jim the house he had lived in, the old movies he had loved to watch and the workshop where he had tinkered away the final years of his life.

Jenny and Jim buried him high on the valley slope where the woodbine ran wild each spring and the first wildflowers appeared—where

the warm rays of Arcturus struck each springtime morning, heralding the new day. Jim said a few words over the grave and Jenny stood beside him, trying to cry. She couldn't. She had no tears.

"We give to you this man, God," Jim said, "to do with as you must. We give him to you because you are his god. He was ours."

Together they shoveled earth over the crude wooden casket and afterward Jenny placed a handful of spring flowers on the grave. Then she and Jim walked down the slope of the valley and across the fields to where the white prefabricated house stood, the aluminum workshop just behind it.

"Shall we watch a movie tonight?" Jenny asked. "Or do you think it would be disrespectful?"

"I don't think it would be disrespectful," Jim answered. "I don't think Professor Tom would mind."

The movie they decided upon was *Made for Each Other,* starring Carole Lombard and James Stewart. They waited till after the sun went down. Then Jim put the film in the projector, turned out the lights. They sat down on the sofa to watch. They had watched the movie many times with Professor Tom and had hugged and kissed like the actors did, but never when he was looking. They had felt he might disapprove. But it was all right now, not because he was gone, but because they were man and wife. So they sat there on the sofa with their arms around each other, and every time Carole Lombard kissed James Stewart Jenny kissed Jim. And whenever James Stewart kissed Carole Lombard Jim kissed Jenny. Afterward they went outside to sit on the steps and scan the skies. But although they scanned them all night, they saw nothing but stars.

At length morning arrived. Lovely Arcturus rose above the green lip of the valley and songbirds climbed air currents into the sky to drink the nectar of the new day.

Jenny said to Jim, "Maybe we're being in much too much of a hurry—maybe it takes time."

Jim answered, "Maybe it'll come tonight."

JIM had been Professor Tom's gardener and handyman, Jenny his cook and housekeeper. On Earth, before his retirement, Professor Tom had been an engineer in the mechanized-menial field and Jenny and Jim were almost as beautiful as the stars in the old movies. He had loved them both, but it had been Jenny he had loved the most and sometimes tears he did not understand had come into his eyes when he looked at her.

He had said on his deathbed, "I never figured on things coming to

this so soon. I preached humility all my life, but all the while I was just as arrogant as everybody else. I never thought that death would really step on my heels. But you two will be all right. The supply ship will be here within a year and I've left a note to the captain to take good care of you. He's an old friend of mine."

"Will you marry us?" Jenny has asked and Professor Tom had looked at her and blinked.

"You said," Jim pointed out, "that once you were a justice of the peace. That gives you the authority to make us man and wife."

"That was long ago," said Professor Tom, "but yes, I suppose it does. However—"

"Surely," Jenny had interposed, "you wouldn't want us to live in sin. We're madly in love and there's no telling how we'll carry on without you here to chaperone us."

A tear zigzagged down Professor Tom's sere cheek as he said, "Poor child, what do you know about making love—and what good would the knowledge do you if you had it? But if it will make you happy—"

There was no bible in the house, but the professor had made do without it. He had spoken the beautiful words they had heard so often in the old moives. "In sickness and in health . . . Love, honor and obey . . . I now pronounce you man and wife."

LIFE went on much as it had before. Jim worked in Professor Tom's flower garden in daytime, keeping it free from weeds. There was a kitchen garden, too, and Jim cultivated it as faithfully as he had before, although it would serve no useful purpose now. He and Jenny had already thrown out the food that was moldering in the refrigerator. They had turned off the unit and put away the dishes.

Every day Jenny cleaned the house from front to back, dusting furniture and scrubbing floors. Except for fixing meals for Professor Tom her routine was unchanged. Sometimes, while she was working, she would hum songs from the movie she and Jim had watched the night before. And sometimes in the middle of dusting the living room she would drop the cloth and dance the way Ruby Keeler did in *42nd Street*. *42nd Street* was her favorite movie, but *My Blue Heaven* was her favorite song.

Sitting on the sofa in the light reflected from the screen, the automatic projector whirring behind them, they would embrace and kiss and Jim would say, "Did you have a good day, darling?"

She would answer, "Yes, my sweet."

He would kiss her eyes and ears and nose and she would kiss his chin. They would hold each other as tightly as they could, but nothing ever came of their ardor and the skies remained as empty as before.

"Perhaps tomorrow," Jenny would say.

Jim would answer, "Yes, I'm sure tomorrow will be the Big Day."

But the Big Day failed to dawn and Happiness continued to hide in the hills, in the woodbine and the wildflowers—in the green bowers of the trees.

PROFESSOR TOM had stored both their memory banks with generous helpings of information, but for the most part these had to do with electronics, mechanical engineering, horticulture and cookery. It was to the old movies that they were indebted for their practical education. Most of the movies were products of the 1930's, but there some from the 'twenties and a handful from the 'forties and 'fifties. The professor had spent a great many years and a great deal of money collecting them and naturally he had taken them with him when he had retired to Arcturus VI to live out his sunset years in solitude and peace in the isolated valley he had bought "—light-years removed," as he had put it, "from the malicious machinations of mankind."

Sitting with Jenny and Jim in the living room one night, watching *The Bells of St. Mary's,* he had said, "That's the way it was in those days—only that wasn't the way it really was at all."

"But how can something be true and yet not be true at all?" Jenny asked and he had laughed.

"I can see, my dear, that despite the perfection of your computerized thought processes—or even more probably because of it—you're incapable of any non-Aristotelian thinking. Many things can be both true and untrue. The worlds we watch upon that magic screen, my dear, are distorted reflections of reality inhabited by the ghosts of people whose real selves were often hidden from their own eyes. A reality powdered and perfumed and with its vitals eviscerated—a reality tailored for people who hadn't outgrown their need to be told fairy tales before they went to bed." Professor Tom sighed. "But I'll take it any day. For all its pious hypocrisies—for all its omissions and its untrue truths—it's a thousand times better than the reality I lived in all my life and finally left behind. I guess when men grow old they like to hide in caves and watch reflections on the walls."

In addition to the old movies, Professor Tom's collection comprised dozens of animated cartoons. Jenny and Jim found them fascinating. Some featured animals drawn to look like men or men drawn to look like animals. Others featured animals that were really meant to be animals but that talked and sometimes lived like human beings. In one way the cartoons were more educational than the movies, for they threw light on a certain mystery the movies were completely mum about. A mystery Professor Tom's books—most of which were devoted to electronics and mechanical engineering—did not even mention. In fact, if it hadn't been for the cartoons Jenny and Jim would never have learned the Secret of Life.

BUT apparently knowing the Secret of Life was not enough. The valley exchanged its green dress for summer's golden gown. The warm days and nights began parading past the prefabricated house. But although Jenny and Jim sat each evening on the sofa, aping the actions of the shadows on the screen, their embraces and kisses went unrewarded. The dawn of each new day found them sitting disappointed on their doorstep, as lonely as before.

"Maybe it's like that song that Don Ameche sings to Sonja Henie," Jenny said. "You know the one I mean—that only one in a million is lucky in love. Or maybe what we're trying to do is harder than we think."

"Maybe," Jim answered. "And maybe it's because they do things between scenes that we don't know about."

"Do things such as what?"

"Like maybe they take off their clothes and kiss and hug that way."

"Why would they take their clothes off? What difference would their being naked make?"

"I don't know," said Jim, "but it wouldn't hurt to try."

THAT evening before they sat down on the sofa they removed their clothes. Professor Tom had lost interest in sex even before he retired and Jenny's body, although differently shaped, wasn't a great deal different from Jim's. The movie they watched abounded in love scenes, but although they embraced and kissed every time the two main characters did, their efforts went as unrewarded as before.

During one dawn, as they sat disconsolately on their doorstep, Jim said, "I think I know the reason, Jenny—I think I know why for us it doesn't work. We're different—and this world is different, too. We're

going to have to *make* it happen. We've got everything we need to work with, thanks to Professor Tom, and he taught us practically all he knew. Maybe he foresaw a time like this."

They got busy right away. Jim made the blueprint first, after consulting several of Professor Tom's books. Then he made all the parts. Jenny helped him with the assembling. They worked day and night, taking time out only to watch the old movies and to kiss and embrace like the stars. There was hope in them now and they put more and more passion into their kisses.

"I want it to be a boy," Jenny said.

"Yes," Jim answered. "I want a son."

They had begun work in midsummer. Fall was on hand when they finished, and yellow and crimson patterns had begun to show upon the hills. Jim had built a lightweight electric motor to provide the necessary power. He made two light but long-lasting batteries to feed it. Together he and Jenny climbed the valley slope.

"We'll give it all the height we can," he said. "That way it'll have a maximum chance of getting to wherever it has to go and of returning with its bundle."

He turned on the little motor and released the device into the air. Slowly it rose into the sky. It circled the valley once, as he had programed it to do, then sped off toward the south.

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Jenny said, "But suppose the nursery doesn't lie in that direction."

"Then—after it comes back we'll recharge its batteries and send it to the west. And after that, if necessary, to the east and to the north. The nursery *has* to be somewhere."

"Later on, if it's successful, we'll send it for others, won't we?" Jenny said.

"Of course. But first we'll make love—otherwise it won't work."

Hand in hand they walked down the slope and across the fields to the house.

THE captain of the supply ship found them in the living room six months later. They were sitting on the sofa, their bodies covered with dust, their arms around each other, their lips touching in a final kiss. Before them in the shadows an empty screen hung ghostlike on the wall. Behind them stood the automatic projector they had used to project their dreams. The length of copper wire they had used to short themselves out was lying on the floor at their feet.

The captain went all through the house. Professor Tom's note was lying on the bedtable beside his empty bed. The captain read it. Then he returned to the living room and looked once more at the faces of Jenny and Jim. He had known Tom all his life and he had known Tom's longdead wife. In Jenny's face he saw young Tom's beloved bride—in Jim's, he saw young Tom.

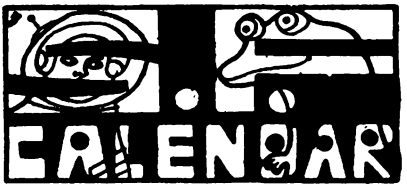
*When he made them I'll bet he didn't even know...*

His first thought was to repair them, to bring them back to life. Then he found the mechanical stork lying in the back yard. One of its canvas wings was broken, its tiny motor was burned out and its power source had given up the ghost after its fourth and final flight. He guessed the truth.

He had his men search the valley for Professor Tom's grave. After they found it he had them carry Jenny and Jim up the slope and bury them beside it. It was only fitting that they should sleep beside their god.

He spoke a few words to his own: "All of us leave ghosts behind of one kind or another. In a way, we're ghosts ourselves. We haunt ourselves our whole lives through because no matter how hard we try we can never fulfill our dreams. We're a lot like Jenny and Jim, which makes them human in a way. Grant them peace."

When spring came back again, the woodbine reached down from the hills and covered the two new graves and wildflowers appeared to welcome the springtime sun. ●




*January 19-21, 1973.* INFINITY CON 73. At Commodore Hotel, New York. Guest-of-Honor: Keith Laumer. Speakers: Isaac Asimov, Donald Wollheim, Hans Stefan Santesson, and others. Membership: $3.00 in advance, $4.50 at the door. For information: Ralph Tripodi, RR 1, Box 50F Longview Avenue, Rocky Point, New York 11778.

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*March 9-11, 1973.* BOSKONE X. At the Sheraton-Boston Hotel, Boston, Massachusetts. Guest-of-Honor: Robert "Doc" Lowndes. Registration: $3.00 in advance (to 3/1), $5.00 at the door. For information: Boskone X, NESFA, Box G, MIT Branch Station, Cambridge, Massachusetts 02139.

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*April 20-22, 1973.* LUNACON. At the Statler-Hilton Hotel, New York City. Guest-of-Honor: Harlan Ellison. Registration: $3.00 in advance, $5.00 at the door. For information: Walt Cole, 1171 East 8th Street, Brooklyn, New York 11230.

*April 20-April 22, 1973.* EQUICON '73. At the International Hotel, Los Angeles Airport. Guest-of-Honor: Theodore Sturgeon. Toastmaster-General: Randall Garret. Featuring appearances by cast and crew members of Star Trek, films from the famed TV series and displays of sets and costumes. Also: star-studded banquet. Membership: $10.00 attending, $5.00 supporting. For information: Frances Tuning, P.O. Box 3781, Santa Barbara, California 93105.

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*June 28-July 1, 1973.* D-CON '73. At the Sheraton-Dallas, Dallas, Texas. Membership: $6.00 (to 4/1), $7.50 at the door. For information: D-Con '73, Box 242, Lewisville, Texas 75067.

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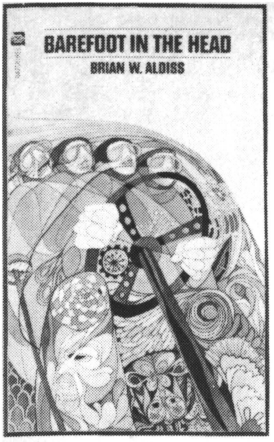
*August 31-September 3, 1973.* TORCON 2—31st World Science Fiction Convention: At Royal York Hotel, Toronto, Canada. Guest-of-Honor: Robert Bloch. Fan Guest-of-Honor: William Rotsler. Toastmaster at Hugo Awards Banquet: Lester del Rey. Membership: $7.00 attending and $4.00 supporting (until 8/1), $10.00 at the door. For information: Torcon 2, Box 4, Station K. Toronto 12, Ontario, Canada.

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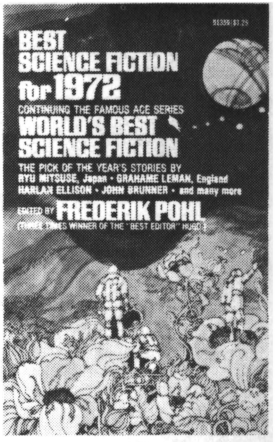



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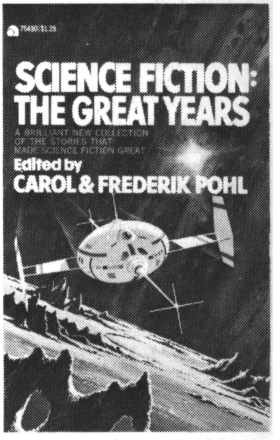


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**TOMORROW LIES IN AMBUSH**—Bob Shaw
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