



Eclectic Dreams

*The Collected Short Stories of
H. David Blalock*

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Table of Contents

HORROR

The Price of Immortality _____	1
Camouflage! _____	16
Evidence Of The Eternal _____	55
Inner Enemies _____	63
A Walk In The Dark _____	71
A Favor _____	76
Stolen Thunder _____	82

SCIENCE FICTION

The Face Of The Enemy _____	91
Reparations _____	111
A Tale of Two Kings _____	149
Up In The Air _____	176
The Last Pilgrimage _____	193

FANTASY

Revenge _____	210
Pretender-Proof _____	214
One Chance _____	219
Remembering Krempla _____	225
“No Pay, No Pass” _____	238

EXPERIMENTAL

Senseless Violence _____	241
---------------------------------	------------

The Urn	243
The Moment Frozen	246
Jim	254

H. David Blalock

HORROR

The Price of Immortality

“*Abuelo* is ill,” Juan said as he tossed a rock on the back of the wagon.

“He is mourning *Abuela*’s death, that is all,” Marcos told him, levering another rock out of the hard ground with the tip of his shovel. It had always puzzled him how there could be so many rocks in the jungle. It seemed to him that the great trees of the Panamanian rain forest should have reduced all the rocks to dust centuries earlier, with their intertwining roots that refused to be denied access anywhere. He was beginning to regret his decision to return home after receiving Juan’s letter. His brother had been acting oddly since Marcos had arrived two weeks earlier for *Abuela*’s funeral. Each day Marcos had come out from his hotel room in the nearby town of Chitre to help with the house and farm, trying to raise enough money to hire some *campesinos* so that he could go back to Panama City and finish his schooling. Each day Juan arrived from the farmhouse more agitated. Marcos put it down to concern for their grandfather, whom they affectionately called *Abuelo*. The old man, once a strapping and boisterous farmer known for his verve and spirit, had fallen prey to age and heartache.

“Marcos, it is *La Tula Vieja*,” Juan burst in a lowered, fervent tone. His sunburned face wrinkled in a scowl beneath the thick hair that was just turning gray. “*La Tula Vieja* comes at night and sucks the life from him.”

“Nonsense, Juan,” Marcos scoffed. “You don’t believe in those silly stories, do you? *La Tula Vieja* is just a legend, something to scare bad children with.”

“I have heard her.”

“Heard her? *La Tula Vieja*?” Marcos laughed. “Ridiculous.”

Juan put a hand on his brother’s arm. “I heard her last night, Marcos.”

Eclectic Dreams

Marcos abandoned his work and leaned on his shovel in irritation. The field had to be cleared for planting soon and there was much work still to be done. Years away from the *finca* had softened his once-hard physique and he wished he still had Juan's stamina. Juan, seven years his junior, was the youngest of the five children. Marcos, as the eldest, had looked after him since their father had abandoned them and their mother, returning to his wife. He knew Juan would not relent in his foolishness until Marcos heard him out. Juan was like that.

"What did you hear, Juan?" he asked, eager to have done with it.

"It was about midnight," Juan said, his hand beginning to shake and his face paling as he went on. "It was a horrible sound, Marcos. Like a horse eating a mango, or a deer at a salt lick. It was an obscene sucking noise, quiet like the murmur of the stream but closer. And I could hear *Abuelo* groaning."

Marcos shook his head at his brother's naivete. "*Abuelo* often groans at night, Juan. He is old. He does not sleep well. As for the other noise, it was your imagination."

"I am telling you, it was real," Juan insisted. "*La Tula Vieja* is killing *Abuelo*!"

"Why, Juan? Why would *La Tula Vieja*, the spirit that goes around looking for her drowned child, do such a thing?"

Juan lost some of his heat. "I don't know. Perhaps because *Abuelo* is such a fine man of faith and she wants to steal his soul to keep him out of heaven."

"Stop this, Juan, and help me with these rocks," Marcos snapped, turning back to his work.

Juan glared at him for a moment, then crossed his arms defiantly.

"Marcos, you have always been the smart one, *Abuelo*'s favorite. He used all our money to send you to the capitol to school. He worked hard so he could send you more money for books and uniforms."

Marcos leaned against his shovel again and mopped his forehead with a bright blue kerchief. "Yes, Juan, he did."

"Now you will not lift a finger to save his life."

"Really, Juan. Save his life?" Marcos scoffed.

H. David Blalock

“Yes, save his life.” Juan pointed a dirty finger at him. “You have forgotten who you are and where you came from. *Abuelo* needs you now, but you stand there laughing.”

“Juan, I –“

“Do you want to help *Abuelo* or not?”

“Of course I do.”

“Then sit up with me tonight. You will hear what I hear and you will know I’m telling the truth.”

“Juan, *Abuelo* would have heard already if –“

“*Abuelo* is almost deaf, Marcos, or had you forgotten that?”

Marcos’ mouth shut. Juan had struck a chord. Yes, he had forgotten that. He had taken the first opportunity to flee the backwater farm where he had grown up for the excitement and adventure of life in the city. He had worked at University to make sure he would never have to come back here, to face the poverty and the ignorance of the interior. He had decided he was better than this, a more civilized man than people like Juan. And yet, he had forgotten the extent of his grandfather’s sacrifice. Was that the sign of a civilized man? *Abuelo* had taken them in after his father left and raised all five children as his own. He had worked hard to give them every opportunity to better themselves. He had pushed Marcos to excel in school, had seen to it that the other three older children found their ways to happy, productive lives. The man had spent the majority of his life giving. Perhaps he hadn’t seen as much of his grandfather as he should have.

“Very well, Juan. I will stay the night if that will make you happy.”

“Good!”

“Now, may we finish here?”

Juan smiled and they went back to work.

Marcos sat watching Juan as his brother cleared the dishes from the little table that took up half the room. The rest of the furniture, all of it more than twenty years old, consisted only of a short, threadbare sofa, a highbacked wooden chair with a towel covering its seat, and a makeshift shelf holding a beat up black and white television missing a couple of knobs. The walls, concrete block painted light blue, were covered here and there with crudely framed pictures of Christ and various saints.

Eclectic Dreams

Concrete blocks set in the wall on their side formed a grilled window. A heavy curtain, drawn aside to allow air to circulate, served as front door.

Juan disappeared into the back room which served as kitchen, larder, and washroom. There was a clatter and Juan reappeared, wiping his hands on his pants.

“I will check on *Abuelo* and find a blanket for you,” he said.

“Let me come with you,” Marcos offered, rising.

Juan nodded and led Marcos into the last of the three rooms that made up the little house. The room was nearly filled with two cots and a dresser. An oblong mirror hung from a nail over the dresser, which was covered with toothbrushes, shaving utensils, and other toiletries. A dark cloth had been drawn over this room’s window, leaving it in a heavy gloom.

On one of the cots lie *Abuelo*. Once a man full of energy, vitality, and life, now he was thin to the point of being skeletal, a mere shadow of the figure Marcos remembered from his youth. The old man looked up at them as they entered.

“I am thirsty,” he croaked. His wrinkled hand clutched the top of the covers until the knuckles whitened and he coughed hoarsely.

Juan turned immediately and went to get water. Marcos knelt on the packed earth floor and stroked the old man’s forehead. “Juan will bring you water,” he said.

Abuelo looked at him and Marcos could see the man was trying to place him.

“It’s Marcos, *Abuelo*,” he said.

“Marcos?”

The young man nodded.

“I am thirsty.”

Juan appeared with a small plastic glass of water. He lifted the back of the old man’s head and pressed the glass to the cracked lips. *Abuelo* closed his eyes and swallowed several times, then turned his head. Juan let him lie back on the pillow.

Marcos stood, tears forming. He’d had no idea his grandfather was so bad. When he had last visited six months before, *Abuelo* had been up and around, helping with the housework.

Then *Abuela* had died.

H. David Blalock

Marcos once heard that when two people are together for a very long time and one dies, the other often dies of loneliness. His grandparents had been married for over 50 years. That was a lot of one's life to find suddenly gone.

A gentle snore came from *Abuelo's* bed. Juan, holding a blanket he had produced apparently from thin air, nudged him out of the room.

"He will sleep now," Juan said when he had drawn the curtain. "He does not usually waken before light." He dropped the blanket on the sofa. "Get some rest. When *La Tula Vieja* comes, you will not be able to sleep."

Juan slipped back into the dark bedroom before Marcos could say anything. Marcos dabbed at his moist eyes and grumbled under his breath at his brother. *Abuelo* obviously *was* ill, but to blame it on some storied spirit was just idiocy. Determined to take his grandfather to the clinic in the morning, Marcos settled into the sofa and drew the blanket over him.

Marcos opened his eyes and yawned. He had been dreaming of his youth, when he and Juan would run down to the stream to swim. There was the flash of sunlight on the water, the feel of the wet rocks under his feet, the cold spray that rose from under the little falls concealing their favorite hiding place. Over it all was the constant rippling of the stream.

He heard a groan from *Abuelo's* room and it chilled him to the bone. It was the moan of one without hope of rescue, one whose resignation to the inevitable barely masked their yearning for release. It was the cry of a soul sick and dying.

Marcos turned his head toward the door to the bedroom. Juan stood there, eyes wide in the near dark, the single candle he had lit against it shaking mightily in his hand.

"She is here," Juan breathed. "Listen."

And there was the noise Juan had told him about, only Juan's description hadn't done it justice. Marcos pushed himself up on one elbow and tried to place where it came from. Each time he thought he knew, it would shift and he would have to start again.

It was very like an animal sloppily sucking at a food trough, but obscene and grotesque. It conjured images of swine gorging themselves

Eclectic Dreams

on their own offal. Worse, underneath the sound was a high-pitched humming, as if the animal was mewling to itself in perverse pleasure.

Marcos jumped off the sofa and ran to the bedroom, seizing the candle from Juan. His sudden movement must have startled whatever it was making the noise, because it ceased almost immediately. When Marcos looked into the bedroom he could find nothing out of the ordinary. *Abuelo* looked to be sleeping peacefully.

"She is stealing his soul, Marcos," Juan whispered, grabbing at his brother's arm. "She is killing him!"

Marcos gave Juan a dour look and shook him off. "Someone is playing a trick, Juan," he said. "A terrible trick. Tomorrow I will take *Abuelo* to the clinic in Chitre. You will see then what is really wrong with him."

Juan shook his head. "You heard her!" he whined. "It was *La Tula Vieja!*"

"Enough!" Marcos shouted. His brother stepped back at his sudden ferocity. "That is enough. Go back to bed. We will talk about this in the morning."

Juan hovered at the doorway until Marcos gave him a shove into the bedroom. Marcos let the curtain between the rooms drop and turned to go back to the sofa.

A chill ran through him as his gaze swept by the front door. The door curtain was still open to let in the cool night air. For the briefest moment he could have sworn he saw the figure of a woman there. Though he caught only a glance, her image was burned into his brain. Flowing hair glistening in the moonlight, dressed in a diaphanous white garment that billowed in an unfelt wind, she might have been beautiful were it not for her cadaverous countenance and aura of malevolence.

Marcos swallowed and blinked several times. Had it been a figment of his excited imagination? He felt he should go outside to convince himself it had been a phantasm built of fatigue.

Instead, he went back to the sofa and pulled the cover over himself. The candle stayed lit that night.

The next day Marcos took his grandfather the twelve miles into Chitre to see a doctor. After they had waited four hours the doctor took

H. David Blalock

approximately fifteen minutes to pronounce that *Abuelo* was anemic and that he needed more rest. Marcos glumly led the old man back to the bus, Juan's words echoing in his ears and the apparition from the previous night haunting his thoughts. They returned home and Juan didn't have to ask what the doctor had said. He could see it in the confused look on Marcos' face.

"I know of a woman who lives north of here," Juan began when they had seen *Abuelo* comfortably to bed. "They say she knows about these kinds of things."

Marcos started to make a sharp remark, then the image of the woman at the door suddenly rose up and he nodded instead.

"Perhaps we should speak to her," Marcos said.

Juan smiled. "I have already written to her. She will see us today. Aunt Cholla is coming to watch *Abuelo*."

Again Marcos started to say something, then thought better of it. It was obvious the doctors would be no help and *Abuelo* looked even worse than he had the day before. What could it hurt to talk to this woman?

"Very well, Juan. But I want you to understand I am doing this only to make you happy. *Abuelo* is old and grieving *Abuela*'s death, that is why he is ill, not because of some evil spirit."

At that moment Cholla, their mother's sister, arrived and they had to postpone further discussion.

The woman lived about three hours' walk north along the stream. Juan and Marcos picked their way along the rocks and ferns, making good time but knowing they could not make it back home before dark. Marcos was glad Cholla would be with Grandfather. They had always gotten along well.

"*La Tula Vieja* will not come tonight, you know," Juan said without breaking stride. "You need not worry."

"I wasn't worried," Marcos replied.

"Cholla is with him. *La Tula Vieja* will not come."

Marcos considered that for a moment before speaking. "Why would Cholla being there make a difference?"

"In her letter, *la bruja* said if a woman is in the house *La Tula Vieja* cannot enter."

"Why not?"

Eclectic Dreams

Juan shrugged. "She says so."

They went on a while in silence. The afternoon sun began to cast lengthening shadows on the water and the air cooled noticeably. A breeze picked up, setting the treetops in motion. Frogs began their warbling song from everywhere around them.

"How do you know of this woman?" Marcos asked.

"*Abuelo* told me about her when I was little. He used to talk about a lot of things before *Abuela* got sick. He told me *la bruja* knew about mysteries and hidden things."

"What is this woman's name?"

"Flora."

They walked a little ways again, listening to the frogs and the soft splashing of the stream.

"I'm not sure talking with this Flora will do any good, Juan."

Juan did not slow. "She will tell us how to drive *La Tula Vieja* away. She will know how to save *Abuelo*."

The simple definitiveness of the statement convinced Marcos that Juan would not be dissuaded from doing this. "Well," Marcos thought, "at least I can stay with him and make sure he is not duped too badly."

They finally arrived in a clearing where three wooden shacks huddled in a rough circle around an old iron water pump. A battered bucket hung from its spout, the handle sticking out horizontally as if pointing at one of the shacks. A black and white spotted dog lie near the pump and eyed them suspiciously as they approached, his tail thumping against the ground.

In front of the nearest hut an old woman sat in a rocking chair. She stared straight ahead as her hands flew with needle and thread. On her lap an amorphous mass of cloth hopped each time she pulled. There seemed to be no one else around.

She paused in her sewing and turned her head toward them. One look confirmed what Marcos had suspected at first sight. Both of her eyes were clouded with cataracts. She was totally blind. Her salt and pepper hair, drawn back into a tight ponytail, spilled behind her to hit the ground under the rocker. Her skin, turned a leathery dark, was heavily wrinkled. Forty years ago she might have been beautiful. She was still striking.

H. David Blalock

“Welcome, Juan,” she said as they paused before her. “I have been expecting you. You have brought someone with you.” Her head tilted and she smiled. “Brother Marcos. Welcome as well.”

Marcos shot a look at Juan, who shrugged innocently.

“You have a problem,” she said, nodding to herself. “You have attracted the attention of something immortal. Never a good thing.” She stood and motioned them to follow her into the hut.

Obviously used only for storage, the hut contained no furniture, only a miscellany of junk that stretched from floor to ceiling. The men crowded into the tiny room as she shuffled through the debris, grumbling under her breath. After a few moments, she straightened suddenly with a cry of triumph. She held a heavy gold chain to what little light entered the shack from the doorway. A small, ornate crucifix dangled from it.

“Here is what you need,” she proclaimed.

Marcos took the chain and peered at the cross where a tiny Christ suffered eternally. “It’s just a crucifix,” he said.

“Not so,” she said, shaking a finger at him. “It has been blessed by *El Papa*.”

Juan stared at the artifact in awe. Marcos nearly laughed.

“The Pope?” he chuckled. “You’re joking.”

The woman’s face darkened at his scoffing tone. “You doubt me?”

“Well, I—“

“No, no, *senora*,” Juan hastened to put in over his brother’s reply. “Thank you very much. We have very little to offer in return.” He reached into his pocket and produced a little box. “We have only this,” he said, opening it and holding it out to the woman, forgetting her blindness.

She smiled. “I could not take your grandmother’s ring, Juan. It is too precious for you to give away. If you wish to give me something, give me a promise.”

“You have saved *Abuelo*. I owe you much. I will be happy to do whatever you ask of me. What is it?” Juan asked.

“Juan, I don’t think this is right,” Marcos said, worriedly.

“What do you mean?” Juan turned on him. “This will save *Abuelo*, Marcos. We have to do it.”

Eclectic Dreams

“Juan, this crucifix is just a trinket. There are thousands just like it sold every day.”

Juan snatched the cross from his hand. “But this one is blessed,” he said forcefully. “And it will save *Abuelo!*”

Marcos could see Juan would not listen to reason. He was determined to carry this through and Marcos knew Juan would not be stopped easily. He looked from Juan’s face to the woman, who stood oddly quiet but attentive. The whole situation stank of a confidence trick, but why anyone would target them was unclear. They were poor in land and money. They made an unlikely target for such a thing.

“Tell me, what must I do?” Juan asked her again.

“I am old,” the woman said. “In a little while I will be passing from this world and I have no one to bury me. When the time comes, you must say the words over me.”

“Words? You mean, Last Rites? But I am not a priest.”

“And I am not a Christian,” she smiled. “You will understand soon enough. Now, go to your grandfather.”

“Thank you,” Juan gushed, and rushed out of the shack clutching the cross.

Marcos stood looking into the dull whiteness of the woman’s eyes. She tilted her head at him and grinned.

“You delay, Marcos?”

Marcos rankled at her amusement. “Just tell me one thing.”

She nodded her agreement.

“Why?” he asked. “Surely you understand that *La Tula Vieja* is only a story.”

“Yes, I know,” she said. “But the thing that is killing your grandfather is real, Marcos, as real as you or me.” She stopped a moment and seemed to consider her words before going on. “When immortal things get very old, they begin to hurt in ways we cannot comprehend. They lose everything they love to the unsympathetic march of time, a time that cannot touch them but can rob them of whatever they hold dear.” She shook her head sadly. “When they get that old, they look for release, something to ease the loneliness and pain. They used up all their own energy long ago fighting the emptiness, so they must turn to others to supply new energy, new reserves to carry on. Some of them

H. David Blalock

would gladly put an end to it all if they could, but that which makes them who and what they are will not let them. Torn between such forces, they fight rising madness as well, until finally it overcomes them and then they are truly dangerous.” She seemed to forget he was there for a moment as she went on. “Still, they recognize powers greater than themselves. Powers like love, devotion, God.” She came back to herself and smiled at him again. “It is fate, I suppose, that sends you to me. Juan, in his love and loyalty, would do anything to save his grandfather. I would wager he would face down a demon from Hell. Could you do the same, Marcos?”

Her manner was insulting, her words cutting, and Marcos felt he needed to respond, if only to answer the insult and defend his love of *Abuelo*. He started to reply twice, but his thoughts would not form a reasonable answer. Each defense he built seemed flimsy and insincere even to himself. Finally, he gave up and hurried after Juan, her question following him out.

Night had fallen before they reached home and the sky opened up to drench them with one of Panama’s heavy summer storms. The little house was still brightly lit, a beacon in the gloom that promised warmth and shelter from the pounding rain. They jogged through the mud, dodging underbrush and wiping their faces against the downpour. There was a flash of lightning and Marcos thought he saw someone near the side of the house, but passed it off as a trick of the storm.

The aroma of fresh bread and *sancocho* soup was their welcome as they changed out of their sopping clothes. Within moments, the storm was all but forgotten as they sat down to table and enjoyed the meal. Afterwards, Cholla made coffee for them and asked a hundred questions about their adventure. She gazed at the crucifix with the same admiration Marcos had seen on Juan’s face. Marcos sipped his coffee and let Juan fend off her inquiries. At last she was satisfied and, after clearing the table, disappeared into the kitchen. Juan sat turning the cross in his hand, admiring its glitter. Marcos watched the wonder and hope on his brother’s face and again heard the witch’s words. It troubled him that Flora had sensed what he did not want to admit, that he was

Eclectic Dreams

beginning to lose his place here with his family and trading it for another far away. Was he to be the better for it?

Cholla stayed the night, and it was a night Marcos would never forget.

It began with a wail, a low cry that woke them from a sound sleep. Cholla darted from where she was sleeping on the cot by Grandfather to stand shivering in the dark as Juan and Marcos lit candles.

“What is it?” she stammered, plainly terrified.

“It is *La Tula Vieja*,” Juan said, grimly.

“Why is she doing that?” Cholla asked, gathering her wrap tighter around herself.

“Because there is a woman in the house,” Juan said.

Cholla looked a little stunned at that.

Marcos listened to the eerie wailing in disbelief. He told himself this must be an animal, some night hunter tearing into its prey, but there was a deeper part of him that shook as hard as Cholla.

“She cannot come in while there is a woman here,” Juan said, putting his arm around his aunt’s shoulder.

The wail faded, and within a few minutes was gone. They stood still, listening, until they were sure it would not return. Marcos sat on the sofa and tried to make sense of what he’d heard. He didn’t notice when Juan and Cholla went back to bed.

Grandfather slept until past noon and then complained that he was hungry. Marcos was very glad to see what a difference a single night of real rest had done for him. Juan, of course, attributed Grandfather’s recovery to the fact that *La Tula Vieja* had been unable to get in while Cholla was there. Marcos did not argue with him. The previous day’s events had shaken him deeply. He avoided the subject best he could, for each time he thought of it he heard that horrible keening.

He dreaded the approaching night.

Before darkness fell on the little house, they agreed to take turns sitting with *Abuelo* so that he might not be alone at any time. Marcos would take the first watch, then Juan would take over about two o’clock. As they put the lights out for the night, Marcos berated himself for his growing gullibility. He was simply tired, that was all, he told himself.

H. David Blalock

Too much work in the tropical heat and too much talk about witches and crosses and *La Tula Vieja*. Once he got a chance to get a good night's sleep back in Chitre, he would be fine. Meanwhile, he would humor his brother and see this through.

Marcos' watch went by quietly. Once or twice he even nodded off himself. At two o'clock he went and shook Juan awake. He passed the crucifix to his brother, who nodded, yawning, and went into *Abuelo's* room. Marcos stretched across the little sofa and pulled the blanket over him, sighing. Soon it would be over and he could go back to his life in the capitol. Grandfather was better. Whatever he'd had was gone, or at least improving. Tomorrow Juan would see that, and things would start going back to normal.

There was a soft sound from *Abuelo's* room. Marcos sat up and listened. It came again, a little stronger, a low groan.

And that soft feeding sound.

Marcos bolted off the sofa and into *Abuelo's* bedroom. What he saw would haunt him the rest of his life.

Perched over the old man was the woman he had seen in the doorway two nights before, her head tucked into his throat. A soft lapping noise pervaded the room, wet and thick. Juan stood transfixed, eyes wide and mouth agape. The crucifix hung forgotten in his hand.

Marcos resisted what he saw. Perhaps this was a horrible dream, brought on by the strain of the last few days, he thought. The smell of sweat and fresh blood wafted to him as a breeze freshened through the draped window. Did you smell things like that in dreams?

The woman paused in what she was doing and turned her face to them. Marcos saw more clearly the awful pallor of that visage. He felt the aura of malice she gave off as if it were a scent, a putrescence. The shock of all that woke him from his skepticism.

He tore the crucifix from Juan's nerveless hand and thrust it at the apparition. What he expected it to do, he didn't consider. Just for that moment, it was the only weapon he believed would harm the thing.

The woman looked at him, then at the cross. Her lips drew back in a snarl, revealing long, pointed teeth. Her eyes, until then glassy and lifeless, suddenly glowed an ugly, nameless color. She concentrated again on him and a sound issued from her motionless lips, the sound they

Eclectic Dreams

had heard the night before. Marcos' skin crawled, but he pressed on, emboldened by her reaction. He stepped forward, intending to drive her away, but she did not retreat. For a second, he wavered when she refused to give ground. Reason and science tried to kick in, confusing him. What he was doing suddenly made no sense. What he was facing was impossible. He struggled to reconcile the evidence of his eyes with what should be. He lost his sense of purpose. He forgot what he had meant to do.

She smiled and gathered herself to launch at him.

Marcos felt the cross yanked from his hand and his heart leapt briefly in fear.

"*Tula Vieja!*" Juan shouted, brandishing the crucifix. "Go away! Leave us in peace!"

The woman's eyes shut hard and she threw up an arm as if to ward off a physical blow. She howled again, more pitifully.

"In the name of Our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, go back to where you came from!" Juan shouted with an edge of hysteria. "Leave *Abuelo* alone!"

The howl became a strident wailing that jarred their nerves and chilled their souls. The woman's form became more solid, more palpable, and Marcos gasped. His fear momentarily forgotten, he reached for her but she moved more quickly and was suddenly gone. The cloth covering the window fluttered briefly, then was still.

Juan collapsed to his knees, sobbing. Marcos pushed aside the curtain to peer out the window into the dark.

"She is gone," Juan said, in joy and relief. "*La Tula Vieja* is gone. *Abuelo* is safe. She will not come back, Marcos."

Marcos let the curtain drop and crouched down on the other side of Grandfather, who was softly snoring.

"No, Juan," he agreed. "I don't think she will."

Three days later Juan went to check on Flora. He returned about nightfall with a haunted look on his face.

"What's wrong?" Marcos asked, though he suspected he knew.

"Flora is dead," his brother said quietly.

H. David Blalock

Marcos nodded. "I see. We will send to Chitre for someone to retrieve the body."

"No," Juan said.

Marcos stared at his brother. Something more than just the old woman's death was bothering him. "No?"

"We will bury her."

"Surely it would be more appropriate for the authorities –"

"*We* will bury her, Marcos," Juan insisted. He reached into his pocket and produced a small bundle of letters and old photographs held together with a faded red ribbon. He handed it to Marcos almost reverently. "I will see to the preparations," Juan said and made his way back out.

Marcos gingerly untied the fragile ribbon and placed the bundle's contents on the table.

The letters were all dated forty years earlier. Marcos felt like a voyeur as he read them. It was the correspondence of a young woman and her lover, full of passion and life. They began with plans for the future and proclamations of eternal love. Somewhere they turned darker as the woman shared a religious awakening that alarmed and stunned her paramour. He pleaded with her to abandon her ways, but she was adamant in her new-found faith. The rift widened until, in the last letter, the young man told her he had found another love, one whose faith was closer to his own and with whom he planned to spend his life.

Marcos read the letters and gazed at the photographs of a beautiful young woman in a flowing black ponytail with her energentic, smiling, handsome beau.

He carefully rebundled the package. He carried it to put on his sleeping grandfather's pillow, then went off to help Juan.

Camouflage!

It was its strength that drew him, its timeless presence. Great, straight and powerful in its permanence, the oak stood a full thirty feet tall in the lower end of the exercise field. After each day's exertions, he would find himself seated under its branches, watching the passing of the clouds through its leaves, listening to the soft voice of the foliage as it breathed against the sky.

At the other end of the field, Our Lady of Infinite Mercy Sanatorium stood starkly against the hillside, a series of boxes joined erratically in the fashion of old government buildings long abandoned by their designers and given over to other purposes. It was kept meticulously clean, well painted and swept by a crew of maintenance workers who swarmed over it with the single-mindedness of worker bees over their queen. He would often watch for hours as a worker would laboriously repair a broken window or seal a crack in the aging concrete. Their faithfulness was comforting, as comforting as the tree's presence was consoling. He needed these things, and for them he had come to Infinite Mercy.

He looked along the grounds of the sanatorium, cursorily taking in the other patients who hobbled or walked slowly through the perfectly manicured lawn. Broken people, grieving people, hurting people, they all sought what he sought, the quiet solitude of Infinite Mercy. There he saw James, whom he called The Sullen, leaning against the low stone fence that separated the lawn from the road that ran mere feet from Infinite Mercy and connected the sanatorium with the rest of the world. James seemed to stand sentry before the road, watching as if half afraid someone might drive by outside, and half expecting his own ghosts to be at the wheel. Dierdre, the one good-looking patient, floated a few yards from James, engrossed in the intricacies of a flower she must have plucked from the garden a few hundred feet further down the stone fence. And the other: Mark, who cried quietly whenever anyone spoke to him; James the Confused, who seemed incapable of understanding

H. David Blalock

human speech but who had a strange ability to imitate birdsong until you could swear the birds paused to listen; and Natalie, the oldest, who seemed so old as to be fragile, yet whose voice and sanity seemed so strong and fine that the reason she remained at Infinite Mercy was one of its greatest mysteries to him.

And then, there was himself, Jason Marks. Youngest of the patients by nearly a decade, he was the nearest to leaving Infinite Mercy. The thought gave him mixed feelings. There was a peace here that he knew he could find nowhere else, but he knew deep inside that that peace was artificially induced, maintained by a dedicated staff and thousands of monthly man-hours of scheduling, nourishing, and treatments. He closed his eyes and pushed out the thought of the falseness of that peace, for he knew that all peace was false, just as all disquiet was false. Only life existed truly, and he was slowly coming to grips with his own.

The dreams had stopped. He was no longer haunted by the memories, though they still pained him when they struck. He was able to examine some of the details with more detachment, more strength, and for that he had Infinite Mercy to thank. He owed this place and these people a debt not easily repaid. They had brought him back from the brink, and nursed him through his hatred and rejection of himself and others, until his humanity had returned and he could once again bear the sight of living beings.

His companions now were solid, not the phantasms of the past. His memories were no longer an open wound, but a healing scar. Still, there were the nights when he lie awake, listening to the intermittent sound of distant traffic on the road, and the deep horror of that day would settle on him like a pall. And the dream would want to come back. But he would refuse, and think of the tree. He would feel its solidity against his back as he sat under its branches. He would conjure its presence as he lie there in the dark, and the dreams would falter in the face of its power. He would remember the patterns of its leaves against the pale blue of the afternoon sky, and the dreams would retreat into the darkness of the unremembered; they were never forgotten, only restrained, for the human mind remembers all.

An orderly was making his way across the lawn toward him. Jason stood to meet the man. It was Arnie. Jason liked Arnie. The man was

Eclectic Dreams

old, but not bent with age as it seemed he should be, and he had a way with Mark. Mark seemed to trust Arnie, so that Arnie could talk softly to Mark and Mark would not cry. Arnie was gentleness in a white suit, and Jason felt a warmth from the man as he smelled the man's cologne. Arnie's one vanity: his cologne, heavy and tart. Jason had never been able to place it, and never asked. Somehow, to name it would make Arnie less Arnie.

"Hiya, Jason," Arnie said as Jason stood and leaned away from the tree. "Ready for dinner?"

"Thanks," he said, and fell into step beside the old man as he turned back toward the building.

"Like that tree," Arnie said for the thousandth time. He seemed to think this was a profound statement, and Jason never denied that. "Thirty feet tall if it's an inch."

"Yes," was all that needed to be said.

"Lasagna tonight," Arnie went on, smiling slightly. "Wife says it'll make you fat..."

Jason caught the worried glance Arnie gave him as he stopped his sentence. The old man seemed suddenly embarrassed and his distress made Jason want to reach out and lay a hand on his shoulder. Instead, he smiled at Arnie and nodded as if the statement hadn't hurt.

They passed the last few steps in silence to the door of the building. Arnie was supposed to see that all the patients left the exercise field before dark, so he would have to leave Jason at the door, but there was something between them now, something Arnie felt needed fixing. He faltered in his step, reaching to open the door for Jason.

"I didn't mean..." he began, but then his courage failed him.

Jason did lay his hand on the man's shoulder then. He smiled his genuine amicability at Arnie and said, "Get the others, Arnie. I'll be all right."

The relief on the old man's face gladdened Jason's heart, and, as the door swung shut behind him, he heard Arnie's footfalls on the steps as he went to retrieve the others.

He threaded his way through the labyrinthine ways of the building toward the dining hall, passing the staff offices, doctor's offices, patients' quarters, and recreation rooms. The walls were a uniform beige, clean

H. David Blalock

and preternaturally flawless. Everywhere he looked he saw the faithfulness of the maintenance workers. There were no burned out lamps, no cobwebs near the ceiling. Even the doorknobs were free of tarnish, as if they were never used. When he had first begun to take notice of such things, it had puzzled him, this almost compulsive neatness. But, as time wore on, he came to accept it. It left him free to concentrate on other things, things more pressing to his healing.

The dining room was as clean and free of clutter as the rest of the edifice. Tables were arranged carefully to take advantage of the space available without giving the impression of crowding. Each chair was set so that none were too intrusive on another diner. A step from the front door of the dining hall brought him to the line that wound around to the cashier past the buffet. Staff, doctors, patients, all ate in the same room. Only the administrator and his board had a separate dining room, and that was normally used only for entertaining. Usually, Hiram Morrell, the administrator, sat with the staff to eat, exchanging conversation with an ease that belied his station.

There was a feeling of camaraderie here in Infinite Mercy that gave Jason pleasure. He felt safe and secure, almost as if in the bosom of his own family.

The thought rocked him momentarily, then he recovered. An orderly who had slipped up behind him in line reached out a hand to steady him, but Jason shook his head and smiled gratefully. He didn't know the orderly, but he could see that the compassion in the man was evident in his eyes. The administration of Infinite Mercy seemed to never fail to find the right type of person for their staff.

The lasagna was delicious; hot, cheesy, and heavy with garlic. Jason savored the aromatic musk of the food and chewed thoughtfully as he watched the others come in.

There were only about 50 patients at Our Lady of Infinite Mercy. To care for them, over 200 staff, maintenance workers, doctors, nurses, and administrators. The purpose of Infinite Mercy, as Jason had read it on the plaque in the main lobby of the administrative wing, was the best care at whatever cost. There was a waiting list that stretched for years. He had been extraordinarily lucky that his case had come to the attention

Eclectic Dreams

of the board when it had, and that the chief administrator had taken a particular interest in him.

He zeroed in on that thought. He had been at Infinite Mercy for almost two years, and in all that time he had never summoned the courage to approach the board as to why they had chosen him for treatment ahead of all those waiting. There was a part of him that wanted to go on without asking why, just immerse itself in the gentle kindness of the sanatorium and quietly fade into the future. But, with every day, the part of him that asked that question grew more strident. It demanded to know the answer, and soon, Jason knew, the answer would have to be found. The anxiety at that thought was less and less acute nowadays. He was almost ready.

After dinner, he returned to his room and attended to his toilette. The orderlies had been and made the bed, straightened the room. His night clothes were neatly stacked and folded on the chair by the bed. The book he had been reading was placed on the nightstand near the lamp, the tassel of a book mark draped over the edge of the table from its niche between the pages. The bed itself looked inviting, the pillow thick and set against the headboard with care, the sheets pulled open and folded back on one side to show the pattern of the fitted sheet underneath. The scent of the room itself was colored by the perfume of a vase of flowers that stood atop the reading table by the ventilator.

He picked up the book, pulling it open at the mark, and started to scan the page. There came a polite knock at the open door. He turned to face a smallish, mustachioed, spectacled and balding man in a sports coat and jeans.

"Dr. Genrich," Jason said, closing the book and replacing it on the nightstand. "Please, come in."

Dr. Genrich nodded his thanks and sauntered into the room, lowering himself into the chair by the bed.

"Is it Thursday already?" Jason said, sitting on the edge of the bed and facing the doctor. "Seems like you were just here."

"Yep. Time flies, doesn't it?" The doctor grinned and his gaze took in Jason's demeanor. "Glad to see you're getting along so well, Jason," he began. "And putting on some weight, eh?" He chuckled. Jason smiled in spite of himself.

H. David Blalock

"Seriously, how is everything?"

Jason folded his hands into his lap and regarded the man. He knew all the doctors at Infinite Mercy by sight, Dr. Genrich best of all. Today, though, Dr. Genrich seemed uncomfortable about something. "I'm coming along, Dr. Genrich, better every day." He paused, wondering if he should ask, then found himself saying the words before he could stop. "Doctor, I've been here almost two years. In that time, I've come a very long way toward healing, and I must thank you for that. But, I need to know..."

He stopped as Genrich rose to his feet, looking at the doorway behind him. Jason stood and turned to the door. The Managing Director of Infinite Mercy, Dr. Hiram Morrell, stood there, hands in the pockets of his overcoat, watching them with silent intensity.

"What is it you need to know, Jason?" Morrell probed.

For a moment, Jason stumbled. He had only spoken three or four words to Morrell in the whole of his stay at Infinite Mercy. Morrell, in spite of his congeniality, had always seemed to him to be someone unapproachable, like the president of a huge corporation, or a powerful politician. He knew this was unfounded, but the invulnerability of the man was almost a palpable quality. None of the suffering in Infinite Mercy seemed to touch him at all, but he had the power to ease and cure it all. The man was paradoxical.

"Come on, Jason, I won't bite," Morrell smiled, his hands coming up to reach for him. Jason almost pulled back from the touch, then realized how that might be seen and suffered it. Morrell's hands were warm and firm, testifying to a strength Jason was not surprised to feel. "You know we're all here to help."

Jason smiled as best he could and looked back at Genrich. The doctor was watching them impassively, as if this were a demonstration of therapeutic technique. The lack of warmth in Genrich's eyes inexplicably alarmed Jason. He tensed and faced Morrell.

"I wanted to know if I would be well enough to leave soon," Jason lied. With an effort, he forced the tension out of his body and relaxed in Morrell's grip.

Eclectic Dreams

Morrell glanced from him to Genrich and back. His eyes narrowed infinitesimally. "Ah, well," he said slowly, carefully, "that's up to the board. Your next hearing is in two weeks, isn't it?"

"Yes."

Morrell dropped his hold on Jason. "We'll see what they have to say, shall we?" Sudden concern came into his tone. "Are you unhappy with us?"

Grateful for something he could answer without qualm, Jason shook his head. "Absolutely not. Infinite Mercy is a wonderful place, and I am very grateful for all you've done for me."

Morrell beamed at him and clapped him on the shoulder. "You just relax and let us take care of everything. You'll soon be home again."

Without another word, Morrell spun on his heel and disappeared into the hallway. Jason watched him go with something akin to relief. Genrich came around the bed and stood in front of him. There seemed to be something Genrich needed to say, but Jason found it impossible to push the man to committing himself. Genrich seemed to shrug mentally and his eye focused on Jason.

"I want to see you day after tomorrow about your hearing. Is that okay?"

"Fine," Jason nodded.

"Nine o'clock sharp, my office?"

Jason nodded again. Genrich closed his sports coat with an air of finality and left.

For almost a full minute, he expected one of them to return. Why, he wasn't sure, but there seemed to have been so little said that had been meant to say. Finally, he picked up his book and opened it.

The orderly came in the next morning and found him asleep in the chair, the book open in his lap.

-- 2 --

Dr. Genrich's office was one of the smaller ones in the building, but his taste was very close to Jason's. The walls were paneled in dark wood, the furniture cushioned in muted solid tones. It was an office designed to promote quiet thinking, and Jason found its confines very comfortable. He took his seat by the doctor's desk and settled into its depths, relishing the softness of the cushion, its satiny smooth cloth surface.

Dr. Genrich opened the folder that occupied the top of the papers spread on his desk and briefly examined it. Jason waited patiently. The process was routine.

"Your hearing is set for next Thursday, Jason," Genrich began, his fingers restlessly drumming on the pages of the folder. "What do you think about that? Are you ready?"

Jason looked at Genrich. The doctor was watching him, obviously trying to read his expression, his overall air. Jason grinned. "I'm ready, doc. Two years here has done it for me."

Genrich nodded absently, avoiding Jason's eyes. When he spoke, he was looking at his hand and his tone was vacant, almost lifeless. "Yeah. You're ready."

Jason waited. He felt Genrich wanted to tell him something, and he knew that the doctor would eventually get around to it.

"The dreams are gone," he volunteered, to give Genrich something to start with. "And I feel like I can handle things better now."

"Things?" Genrich's voice was still a little distant and preoccupied.

"Like when Arnie mentioned his wife," Jason explained, ignoring the twitch in his chest. "I was able to handle it."

The doctor nodded and finally looked at Jason. "Look," he said, and seemed to have come to a decision. "I want you to stay another six months."

Jason was stunned. He blinked, trying to understand the order of the words, then their meaning.

"Six months?"

"For observation," Genrich went on. "I know you feel well enough to leave, but I think you could use some more convalescent time." To

Eclectic Dreams

soften the blow, he reached over and touched Jason's forearm. "We can start making small trips into town. Things haven't changed much in two years, but you might find it easier to make the transition if I'm with you."

The sense of the argument was carefully structured, as if it had been rehearsed, or Genrich had recited it by rote. It didn't seem real, somehow. Jason couldn't help himself. He pulled away from Genrich. The doctor withdrew his hand self-consciously.

"What's wrong?" Jason had to ask.

"Nothing, you just need a few ..."

"Not with me," Jason interrupted. "I know about me. What's wrong with you?"

Genrich stiffened. "I don't know what you mean." He closed the folder with his air of finality that usually meant he felt the situation was over.

Jason was undaunted. "You've been meaning to talk to me for days. You were trying to tell me something when Morrell came in day before yesterday. What's wrong?"

Genrich ground his teeth together and looked away from Jason. For the space of a few moments, Jason thought he wasn't going to speak. Then, the doctor suddenly turned an anguished face to him.

"Morrell took you in to Infinite Mercy because of the circumstances of your accident. You fit a profile for a study he's doing, one he hopes to publish and..." Genrich stopped and almost gasped. "I've been a psychiatrist for a long time, Jason. I know the dangers of becoming involved in the patient's delusion. I also know when a patient is whole and when he is not." Genrich leaned forward and his voice dropped almost to a whisper. "Don't trust Morrell. He's a megalomaniac. He's using the people here for his own benefit. There's nothing wrong with you. It's the medication you're given. It causes just enough confusion to make you doubt yourself. If you stop taking it, you can..."

The buzzer on the phone made both men jump guiltily. Jason suddenly realized he'd been holding his breath. Genrich wiped a fine sheen of sweat from his forehead and picked up the receiver.

"Yes?"

Jason watched Genrich's face go white.

"Um... Send him in."

H. David Blalock

Jason knew Morrell was outside. Genrich replaced the receiver and motioned Jason to stand. Morrell entered with the air of a man unaccustomed to delay. He stopped momentarily at the sight of Jason. Clearly, he had been unaware that Genrich had called Jason to his office. A dark cloud briefly settled over his features, but cleared to reveal the open, friendly expression he usually showed the patients.

"Jason!" he said. "What an unexpected surprise. How are you? Are you having a problem?"

Jason saw the opening and took it. "Well, yes, I've been having some bad dreams and wanted to talk to Dr. Genrich about them. Luckily, he was nice enough to make the time."

"Of course. That's what we're here for, right, Genrich?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well," Jason began to edge toward the door, "I guess you have important things to discuss, so I'll just..."

"We'll talk later, if you want," Morrell called after him, causing a slight chill down Jason's spine.

He fled. Someone closed the door behind him.

Eclectic Dreams

-- 3 --

Jason leaned his head against the bark of the tree and closed his eyes. The soft caress of a warm zephyr brushed his forehead and played around his eyes. He could smell the green of the leaves overhead and the grass below. Life flowed into him from that green, a quiet, still life that calmed his nerves and let him think more clearly.

What had Dr. Genrich meant about Morrell? A megalomaniac? How could he or any of the other patients at Infinite Mercy be of any use to him? And, the medication he'd been taking... Unnecessary? The implications of the assertions left him in a whirl. Was Morrell using unauthorized drugs on mental patients in some kind of private research project? Genrich certainly acted as if he'd had an irresistible attack of conscience. Perhaps Morrell was forcing him to participate in this research. But, then why warn Jason? It was too much for him. Besides, it was so out of order. Everything at Infinite Mercy was geared to the benefit of the patient. No expense was spared, the accommodations were the best in the field, and the staff were the foremost authorities in psychiatric medicine in the world. How could unauthorized or illegal activity go undetected in such an atmosphere?

He opened his eyes and let the green of the leaves soak into them, soothe them with their slow swaying and rustling against the sky. A flicker of movement caught his attention. Through half opened eyelids, he watched a small brown bird preening itself on one of the lower branches. Its actions were strangely compelling, almost hypnotic. Peck, drag along the wing, peck. He watched it in delight and curiosity.

Suddenly, it was gone. At first, he had the impression it had simply disappeared, but then he knew that was impossible. It couldn't have simply flown off without his seeing it.

Slowly he sat upright and stared more intently at the branch. There seemed to be just a hint of movement there, as if something were furtively attempting to settle into the branch. As he watched, something liquid dropped from the underside of the bough. He rose and walked to the spot.

H. David Blalock

It was a tiny bit of blood, slowly darkening in the air.

The realization took a moment to get to him. The bird was dead; a sudden, bloody death in the gentle, sheltering confines of the tree. How was that possible? He looked around. Someone might have shot the bird, but he didn't remember a shot. And, had there been one, surely one of the others would have noticed and reacted to it. But there was Dierdre, walking across the lawn as if nothing had happened. And he could see Arnie nodding in the morning sun on a bench near the building.

He looked again at the branch. The spot of blood was a horrible non sequiter. Hesitantly, he reached out to touch it, expecting to find it a figment of his imagination, and yet dreading that as well.

His finger came back damp with blood.

He looked bleakly at it, expecting it to disappear at any second like the bird, but it refused to vanish. He rubbed it between his forefinger and thumb, felt the oily texture of it. With an effort, he resisted lifting his finger to his lips. Somehow, if it did taste of the copper of blood, he knew he might lose the little sanity he had worked so hard to regain.

The blood stained his fingertips and soon his rubbing reduced it to a fine powder, which he dusted against his pants. He looked again at the spot on the branch, hoping against hope that the bird was still alive, but knowing that was not true.

Then it occurred to him he had not seen the bird fall. It was dead, or perhaps only injured, but its body must still be in the tree. The sudden thought of the poor thing injured, clinging desperately to the bough, made him bolt for the trunk. Hurriedly, he climbed high enough to see the top of the branch. There was nothing there. Puzzled, he climbed around to the opposite side of the trunk. Still, he could find no evidence of the bird. Surely, he thought, it could not have flown into the tree without his noticing it? He tried to pierce the thickness of the foliage with his gaze, but the leaves were summer heavy. He would need a ladder and pruning shears to find the bird in that. If it was there at all.

Somehow he knew that, no matter how hard he might try, he would never find that bird.

Carefully, he lowered himself to the ground. Arnie stood a few feet away, watching him.

"Watcha doin'?"

Eclectic Dreams

Jason brushed the bits of moss and bark from his clothes and looked up into the tree, stalling, trying to think.

"Something wrong?" Arnie pressed, He followed Jason's gaze and squinted. "See something in the tree?"

Jason considered asking Arnie about what he had seen, but the unlikeliness of it kept him from it. Arnie might have seen Jason under the tree, but surely couldn't have been able to see the tiny bird. The old man had been napping, after all. Jason shook his head. "No, just felt like a little exercise. Getting to know the tree, you know?"

Arnie looked at him quizzically, but didn't seem up to pursuing the issue. "Yeah, okay. But you really should be careful. You could fall."

"Thanks, Arnie. I'll remember that next time."

Slowly, the old man turned and made his way back to the bench. Once he glanced over his shoulder at Jason, as if to assure himself that Jason was not planning another climb. Jason settled back down under the tree and leaned back to watch the movement of the green.

Something had gone out of the tree. The sense of security. The bird's disappearance made him uneasy about the patterns woven over his head in the foliage. Where before they had formed pleasing designs in the trouble of his mind, now they haunted that trouble, almost encouraging it to assert itself against his control.

He sat up and forced himself to look at the building. Its hard lines against the hillside behind it steadied the trembling that had begun in his mind. He stood and made his way from underneath the tree. For a brief, terrifying moment, it seemed he had turned his back on something incredibly dangerous. A tingle crawled along his spine and he spun, gasping, expecting what he did not know.

Only the tree met his discomfited attention. It stood quiet and inscrutable, seemingly innocent. Yet he knew it was not.

Quickly, he hurried into the building and the safety of his room.

Genrich came to his room that night after dinner. For a few minutes they sat talking as if nothing untoward or out of the past months' routine had happened. But finally, the conversation wound to a halt and Genrich sat glumly staring at his hands. Jason couldn't think of a way to bring the man out, so he did what he could; he waited.

"Morrell wanted me to increase your medication," Genrich said at last, beginning without preamble. "I told him I didn't think it was necessary." He looked up at Jason. "He told me I was losing my objectivity."

Jason sat quietly and tried to encourage the man without interrupting. The doctor stood and walked to the door, aimlessly trying to gather his thoughts.

"I guess I am. Losing my objectivity. But I can't believe that what he's doing is right."

He looked at Jason for support. Jason nodded his agreement and approval. He knew there was more to what Genrich wanted to say, and there was a growing sense of disquiet in himself that seemed to be the edge of something hard, a reality of conflict, that Genrich stirred within him. "Morrell is convinced this new drug can induce a mental state similar to mild hypnosis. According to him, this would make the patient more pliant, more responsive to treatment for paranoia, schizophrenia." Genrich's brow furrowed at him. "Did you eat dinner tonight?"

Jason thought about that a moment. He could remember the taste of pie, but nothing more substantial. "I don't think so. I had some pie."

"How do you feel?"

"Great," with a smile. "Just fine."

The returned smile was mirthless. "I don't know how much of this you understand. Maybe none of it. But," he reached for Jason's arms and grabbed them firmly. "Don't eat anything but greens and sugars. No meats. Understand? No meat."

Eclectic Dreams

Jason nodded, slightly alarmed at the man's sudden intensity. His emotion was intimidating and Jason felt vaguely afraid of it. "Okay doc. I promise."

Genrich seemed to be trying to see inside his head. Jason flinched under the glaring attention, wondering what could be so important that Genrich should act so oddly. After a few more words of little consequence, the doctor was gone, leaving Jason to consider the man's behavior.

The following morning he avoided the bacon and sausage, settling for cereal and toast with his juice. The intensity of Genrich's demand hung in the air around as if it had just been uttered. The tone rang in his ears, urgent and demanding. Jason shook his head and found that the juice tasted a little odd. Uneasily, he hefted the glass and tried to fathom the depths of the liquid through the frosted surface. Then the thought of what he was doing took hold. He was becoming suspicious.

Slowly, he placed the glass back on the table. He looked around at the others in the dining hall. Mike was there, sitting with Arnie and talking softly as if Arnie were the only other person in the room. There were nearly thirty others but until this second he had been unaware of them. He had known they were there, but the fact that they were people, with thoughts and dreams, had somehow slipped his mind. He looked back at the glass of juice. The hard edge of reality welled in his mind and suddenly he was back in the car.

They had been on their way to the mountains for their monthly outing at the cabin. They called it monthly, though it was seldom more often than every six months. He was tucked in behind the wheel of the car, listening to her as she struggled with the safety belt on the baby seat. The baby had discovered the secret button that released him from its confines, and they hadn't had time to buy a different seat whose secrets he'd have to rethink. So she kept a weather eye on him, spending more time looking in the back than out the windows at the scenery. She didn't mind, though. The ride only took forty-five minutes, and she'd grown up within ten minutes of the area, so it was all very familiar to her.

Many times he'd offered to stand guard on the baby and let her drive, but she preferred to do it herself. She called it "bonding with the baby." He chuckled when he thought of that.

H. David Blalock

The road wound around the perimeter of a bluff of loose rock. Four lanes, hardtop, cleaned by a recent drizzle, the bright yellow of the center lines cut the black of the asphalt like rays of light in a night sky. They were the only vehicle on the road, and he felt no need to hurry. To his left, across the opposite traffic land, the road fell into the valley, its blues and purples and greens forming intricate and glorious patterns that changed subtly as he moved. In the distance, the furthest mountains began to catch the last light of the fading sun as it dropped below the horizon behind the hill he climbed. Twilight began to settle in a thickening mist. Night crawled over the mountains to his east and advanced on them quickly, trailing stars behind.

He hugged the turn against the rock face, feet from his passenger door, the engine humming quietly, and heard the baby cackle with glee at the metallic click and flurry of sound as she reached to relatch the belt.

It was only a moment. A single lapse of attention. The car should have continued its turn, but he relaxed his pressure against the wheel. The wheels caught the asphalt and carried them suddenly, it seemed, so suddenly, into the opposite lane.

He almost made it. The cars in the other lane were geared down for the incline. They tried to avoid him, some racing for the rock face, others trying over squealing brakes to break the laws of physics that threw them together. He felt the impact on her side and had to turn to see if she was all right.

She was facing his way, trying to reach the belt on the baby chair. In the moment of impact, she must have sensed something was wrong, because her eyes caught his and saw the panic there. He had had time to see the car over her shoulder bearing down rapidly, so incredibly quickly, to see the other driver throw his arms up to ward off the coming blow. She might have tried to turn, but there wasn't time. She seemed to leap at him, but her belt kept her from coming all the way across the seat. She stopped before the frame could.

The car leapt backwards, away from its attackers, and he saw the baby, as if it were trying to protect its mother, jump into her lap. And then they disappeared into the metal of the ruined passenger door, swallowed by the wreckage.

Eclectic Dreams

There was such a noise, such a crying out of metal on metal, glass and steel, that his own cry was drowned in it. He wanted to throw himself into that thing that had consumed her and the baby. It chewed them and swallowed as if it were alive, and he could not close his eyes. He could not turn away, he was pinned by his belt and the wheel held him upright. All he could do was open his mouth and scream.

He was still screaming when the other drivers, some injured, others only shaken, were carried from their cars and tended by the paramedics. He screamed when they finally removed him from the car. He screamed when they strapped him into the guerny. He screamed when they inserted the needle. He screamed in his mind when the sedative took hold and his throat would no longer scream.

He woke screaming at Infinite Mercy four days later. They sedated him.

Then he began to dream.

"Jason?"

The voice cut through his thoughts, bringing them to a shattering halt. He trembled with the aftershock, his face tingling for lack of blood. His sight was slow to come back to him, but his hearing was more acute than he'd ever remembered it. Although some of what he heard made no sense, he heard things with a clarity that drew amazement from his stunned psyche, formed an anchor on which to base his recovery from the depths of the memories that had nearly drowned him.

"Are you all right, Jason?"

The face was familiar now. He forced his thoughts to form a line from sight to recognition. Arnie; it was Arnie. Next, he knew the old man was expecting an answer. Now, what kind of answer was he expecting.

"You just sit still. I'll go get Dr. Genrich."

Jason's hand shot out without his asking and clutched Arnie's arm. "No." The croak hardly seemed his own, but he knew now what Arnie wanted. "No, Arnie, that's okay. The juice just went down the wrong way is all. I'm okay."

Arnie hovered uncertainly, not attempting to free himself from Jason's grip.

"Sure?"

H. David Blalock

Jason let him go and nodded. "Sure. Thanks anyway."

Arnie wandered away very slowly, looking back often, but eventually became involved with Mike in conversation. Jason made a point of finishing his breakfast just as slowly, giving Arnie time to forget the incident. And giving himself time to pull his own thoughts together.

Something had changed in the way he felt about his surroundings. They no longer seemed comforting and safe. Not that there was a threat in them, just that the safety had bled out of them suddenly. He might be looking at a different place, a place less personal, less family. The grass was manicured severely, the low stone wall seeming to confine rather than define. He scanned the dining hall and ground mentally, finding in himself a totally different understanding of Infinite Mercy.

It was an asylum, not a sanatorium.

He rose, moved to the door. Arnie watched him briefly, then went back to his conversation with Mike. The other patients and staff ignored him as if he were nothing more than vapor. In a few moments, he was outside, striding toward the tree.

Everything about the grounds seemed subtly different. It was as if during the night a groundskeeper had come and rearranged the foliage in unseen and unsuspected ways.

And there was something else wrong. He stood forty feet or so from the tree and tried to place it. Besides the uneasy memory of what had happened the day before, whenever he looked at it, the tree seemed different. Yet, no matter how closely he examined it, he could discern no change. For months he had made it a point to familiarize himself with every line, leaf, pattern in its bark. They were the same, unchanged, just as he had always known them.

He walked toward it. It stood, as always, just a tree, but he could not shake the feeling of wrong. There was something odd about it, about the way the light struck the trunk, as if the sun had moved in an arc to more completely light the texture of the bark... Or the tree had turned to more fully face the light?

He stopped. He was about twenty feet from it now. And, suddenly, he knew what was wrong.

The tree had moved.

Eclectic Dreams

Disbelief welled up in him. Trees didn't move on their own. Just as they didn't kill birds, right? a part of him said. Again he saw that small brown bird preening itself, all unsuspecting. Through his half closed eyes he had seen the tendril rise from the bough with a deadly, determined slowness. He remembered that his mind had labeled it a trick of the light against the leaves, automatically rejecting the possibility the tendril could be part of the tree. It seemed more serpentine, so impossible in itself that its existence never truly penetrated his consciousness. Only now, faced with the bird's fate and the incredible mobility of the tree, did the tendril's presence make itself known above his subconscious memory. It had crept toward the bird from behind, silent and lethal, its blank end seeming to locate the animal by its very essence of life. When it struck, its serpentine appearance was pronounced. Quickly, it clutched and broke the bird, too rapidly for the prey to even utter a startled cry. Then, once again, it was gone, disappearing into the bough and taking the little corpse with it, leaving behind only a few drops of blood.

He opened his mouth. His first instinct was to raise the alarm, to shout at Arnie and tell him. But then the hard edge of reality that had been growing in him squeezed off his cry so all that escaped was a croak, little more than a whisper. He stumbled backwards a couple of steps, unwilling to turn his back on the tree. It seemed to be watching him, as if just beginning to suspect he might know more than he should about it. For a frightening moment, he expected it to wrench its roots free from the ground and set out after him across the lawn, intent on crushing him as it had that bird, but the moment passed and the tree remained solidly planted, tranquilly standing there in the sun, impassively watching him.

He swallowed, and it hurt. He realized he'd been standing with his mouth open for a very long time. His tongue was thick and dry when he licked his lips. Finally, he turned and retreated to his room. He looked at the book on the nightstand without interest. It seemed inane and pointless, now that he realized what had been done to him. He had been drugged into a stupor so that Morrell could conduct his studies. Genrich was trying to help him but was Genrich doing him a favor? Did a sane man see trees eating birds? Did a sane man think trees moved along the ground?

H. David Blalock

After a very long time, sleep overcame him.

Eclectic Dreams

-- 5 --

Jason stood on the steps in front of Infinite Mercy and looked at the tree. From that distance, he couldn't determine if it had actually moved, but he knew that, for his sanity's sake, he would have to be sure it hadn't. But how to do it? He couldn't just try to mark the tree's position by driving a stake in the ground. The groundskeepers were meticulous in their maintenance. They would simply remove it. For the same reason, he couldn't leave anything lying on the ground nearby. He considered the tree and thought.

Then, he noticed that, from where he stood, the tree was directly in front of a telephone pole that stood by the road on the other side of the stone fence. If he stepped just a few inches either to the right or the left, the body of the pole could be seen around the tree, but where he stood on the steps the pole was blocked by the tree's trunk. He looked down. The step consisted of bricks set side by side, like the graduations of a beaker. Carefully, he counted from the western edge of the stairway to the brick under his left foot. He stepped two bricks over and looked at the tree. He could clearly see part of the telephone pole around the trunk. He stepped four bricks back and checked again. The pole could be seen. He had his point of reference.

Next, he needed to check the actual distance the tree moved, if any. That meant finding the exact distance the tree was from the steps. Deliberately, he paced off the distance. Then he went back to his room and wrote down the figures. He had to fight the urge to just give up on what he was doing. A part of him said it was insane, as insane as the idea that trees moved, to measure how far they went. But another part grimly knew that, if he didn't refute or confirm the truth of the tree's movement, he would have no point of reference from which to launch his own sanity.

He avoided meat again that day, eating only vegetables and dessert. The orderlies did not seem concerned about this, and he reasoned that they were probably not privy to Morrell's plan. Surely, something like

H. David Blalock

that would need a certain amount of secrecy to be properly carried out. He smiled to himself. If that were true, then perhaps Genrich wasn't as helpless as he thought. He felt a clarity of thought he couldn't remember ever having before. It was as if he'd been asleep all his life, and had just now awakened. If it weren't for the tree, he would say his sanity was restored. He slept soundly.

He went to stand on the steps, carefully counting the bricks for the exact spot he had stood the day before. He looked across the lawn at the tree.

The telephone pole was hidden behind its trunk. The tree hadn't moved.

A sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach made him sit on the step and put his face in his hands. Could it be possible? Could his new-found clarity of thought simply be a symptom of some new form of delusion? No, he thought. There must be an explanation. He had been under the influence of a drug when he'd seen the bird killed. Perhaps it was a mild hallucinogen. That would account for it. But, he rejected that almost immediately. He'd apparently been on this drug for months. That was the first time he'd ever seen anything out of the ordinary. Or, at least, the first time he remembered. Could the drug affect short term memory? How could he be sure of anything he'd seen or heard since the accident? Even Dr. Genrich?

He went back to his room and prepared for exercise period. In his sweats, he went back outside and set about a light jog around the grounds. He felt the need to burn off some of his excess energy. As he passed Arnie, he noticed the old man was watching him with a puzzled look in his eye, but the feel of the light breeze on his face and the exertion of the run soon made him forget Arnie. He concentrated on the rhythmic thumping of his feet against the ground and let his mind wander.

The slow progress of the trees as he moved and the shapes they made against the sky transported him to a place he almost recognized. He had been jogging there, too. It was full of trees and people on picnic tables. He remembered dogs chasing squirrels and the far away sound of traffic. Closer, he remembered hearing the chuckling laughter of children and the sound of a baseball game nearby. Then he was back on the grounds

Eclectic Dreams

of Infinite Mercy. He had made a complete circuit of the stone fence, and was slightly out of breath. His right leg ached a bit and he had the beginnings of a stitch in his side. He slowed to a stop and went to sit on the steps.

Arnie came and sat down beside him. "Have a nice run?"

Jason nodded.

"Never seen you run before."

Somewhere deep inside, Jason heard an alarm bell ringing. He felt the need to lie to Arnie, why, he wasn't sure. There was a definite sense of danger associated with the few words the old man had spoken. "I got on the scales today and realized I was putting on a few pounds. Thought I ought to do something about it." He couldn't bring himself to look at Arnie, and only with an effort did he keep his voice even. "Dr. Genrich mentioned something about exercise and, since this is exercise period, I just figured I'd take in the air."

Arnie sat silent. Jason fought the urge to look directly at the man, instead concentrating on watching James the Sullen at the stone fence. He felt sweat trickling down his cheek and wiped it off with his sleeve.

"Yeah, well, okay," Arnie said hesitantly. "Just don't wear yourself out. You need your rest."

What a strange thing to say, Jason thought, but all he did was nod and smile, still not looking at Arnie. Then the old man was gone, and Jason watched him making his way toward Dierdre, who was trying to uproot one of the daffodils in the garden by the fence. As he left, Jason felt the tension melting out of him. He was certain Arnie was working for Morrell. Why, how, he didn't know, but he was certain. Morrell would need someone to monitor the patients for signs of change. What better person than Arnie?

He stood and started to turn to go inside to change, then, on impulse, went to the step and counted to his spot. Facing the tree, he looked up.

The telephone pole was visible.

He stood thunderstruck. Shaking his head to clear it, he counted the bricks again and again looked at the tree. There was no mistake. The pole was clearly visible around the trunk. He moved until the trunk covered the pole again and counted the bricks to this new point. Then he paced out to the tree and found that it required two more paces than it

H. David Blalock

had before to reach it. With an effort, he returned to his room without running. He took out the figures he'd written down the day before. They confirmed what he already knew. It hadn't moved much, only a couple of feet, but the fact remained it had moved.

He sat on the edge of his bed and tried to think. Did he really want to believe this? Maybe he'd written down the wrong figures yesterday. Maybe the drug hadn't quite worn off yet and he was hallucinating. He went back outside and measured again. And again.

He didn't sleep well at all that night.

Eclectic Dreams

-- 6 --

He didn't wait for breakfast the next morning. He immediately went to do the measurement. The tree had not moved during the night, and for some reason that made him feel steadier. If he found it had moved, he felt he would never have been able to sleep again. The thought of it slowly making its way across the lawn toward the building under the ghostly luminescence of moonlight sent chills down his spine.

He ate breakfast without tasting the cereal. The juice was a little more acid than usual, and he set it aside. He could not trust anything that seemed strange anymore. If food tasted odd, he thought of the drug. If a person acted strangely, he thought of Morrell. And if anything else went against his sense of propriety, he thought of the tree.

Except for the measurements, which he made before lunch and after dinner, he settled back into the routine of Infinite Mercy. He didn't think it was safe to alarm Arnie, for fear of it getting back to Morrell. Once, he caught Arnie watching him making the measurement, and toyed with the thought of telling him what he was doing. Wouldn't that guarantee anything Arnie told Morrell would only confirm Jason was still under the influence of the drug? But then he thought, no, if he actually were under the drug's influence, he'd never volunteer the information. Supposedly, the drug had removed all sense of urgency and danger from him. He would have recognized the movement of the tree, perhaps even would have measured its movement across the lawn, but it would never have occurred to him to report it to Arnie. So, he went on making the measurements and waited for Arnie to come to him. Which finally did happen Wednesday after dinner.

He was standing on the steps, looking at the tree, when Arnie's voice came from behind.

"What's up, Jason?"

Jason jumped and turned to him. He smiled and said, "Hi, Arnie. You startled me."

"Sorry. Didn't mean to."

H. David Blalock

Jason turned back and began pacing to the tree. Arnie trailed behind, quietly observing.

"Something wrong?" he probed.

Jason brought up against the tree and deliberately ignored Arnie for a second as he figured in his head. Looking at Arnie, he said, "It's moved about fourteen inches."

Arnie frowned at him. "What?"

"Fourteen inches. It's moved fourteen inches in two days. It moved almost a foot Tuesday."

"What? What're you talkin' about?"

"The tree," Jason said, as matter-of-factly as he could. "This oak." He looked across the lawn and then paced three feet. "It was right about here last week." He went to force himself to place a hand on its trunk. "Now it's here."

The concern in Arnie's eyes had gone from hard to compassionate. He slowly nodded and grinned. "I see," he said. "Isn't that something?"

"I figure at this rate, in about a year it'll be at the corner of the stone fence." Jason creased his forehead in mock consideration. "Of course, then it'll have to change direction. I don't think it can get over the fence."

"No, I wouldn't think so either," Arnie agreed. He visibly relaxed. "Well, let me know when it gets close, okay?"

Jason nodded. "Sure thing," he promised, smiling at the old man and turning back to look at the tree. He made a show of pacing distances to the stone fence until Arnie moved off across the lawn, then made his own way back to his room to enter the measurements into his log.

He woke sweating Sunday morning, the scream of twisting metal still echoing in his mind. A sudden shaking took him and he grit his teeth until it passed. The sweat dripped from his nose onto his covers as he slowly got out of bed and went to the basin. After splashing water on his face, he looked at it in the mirror. He saw a slightly disheveled young man with haunted blue eyes staring back at him. The young man passed a hand tiredly across his neck, trying to soothe the tension there with the coolness of the water. The dream was little more than a dull feeling of terror any more, but it was still enough to stay with him for hours after waking. Grimly, he set about his morning toilette to drive it out of his thoughts. Genrich had told him that time would heal the wound the

Eclectic Dreams

dreams fed on. He trusted Genrich, but somehow he knew the wound the dreams fed on was deeper than time.

Most of the staff were absent on Sunday morning, home with their families. A skeleton crew tended to the necessary duties, so there were only a dozen or so people in the dining hall when he arrived. He didn't even have to ask any more for the cereal and juice. Most of the orderlies knew the patients' preferences by heart, a part of the efficiency for which Infinite Mercy was so widely known. He took the tray from the smiling orderly and made his way to an empty table. He ate in silence, absorbing the quiet and comfortingly routine sounds of the kitchen as they filtered through the doors into the hall, the murmured conversation of the few other inhabitants of the room.

The hearing was held in a conference room off the doctors' examining rooms. Jason found the atmosphere congenial but vaguely tense, as if the examiners expected something out of the ordinary to happen. As he took his place in the seat by Dr. Genrich across from Morrell and the three other reviewers, Jason nodded at them, smiling slightly. One of them returned the smile briefly.

"Well," Morrell began. "How've you been, Jason?"

"Just fine, thanks."

"Things coming along okay?"

Jason nodded.

"As you know, we're here just to ask you some questions. It's our responsibility to see to it that you get the care you deserve, and we need you to tell us if we're doing our job or not, right?"

Jason smiled and remained silent. Morrell was unfazed.

"So, what do you think?"

"Um... About what?"

"Well," Morrell said, "for instance, about Dr. Genrich?"

Jason glanced briefly at the man beside him. Genrich appeared lost in the contents of a folder open in front of him. "I like Dr. Genrich. He's always there when I need someone to talk to."

"Good, good. And the others in the staff, are they all doing their jobs to your satisfaction?"

Jason shrugged. "I guess. About the only one I ever really see that often is old Arnie, and he's a great old guy."

H. David Blalock

Morrell smiled. "Fine. Now, tell us about Infinite Mercy. How do you feel about being here? Are you comfortable?"

"Oh, yes."

"No complaints?"

"None."

"Excellent." Morrell looked down the table at one of the other examiners and nodded. He turned back to Jason. "You probably don't know the other people here, Jason. I want you to meet Dr. Pritchert from Coalgate Institute." He indicated the man to whom he'd just nodded. "Dr. Johnson from Interforce Sanatorium in New York and Drs. Jenner and MacArthur from Memorial Park in Albany."

Jason nodded at each man in turn. They all seemed cut from the same cloth as Morrell, even to the smile that never quite seemed to reach the eyes. They could have been related, the resemblance was so strong. Jason had to smile in spite of himself. Morrell caught the smile and took it to mean the hearing could begin in earnest.

"Dr. Pritchert?" he prompted, and settled back into his chair.

For the next three hours, Jason answered their questions and listened to their lecturing on behavior. He admitted to having had nightmares when he had first arrived, but Dr. Genrich pointed out that they had stopped. Jason agreed that he could best recover under the concerned, watchful eye of Infinite Mercy, and Genrich pointed out what he would soon be ready for return to society. This won a hard glance from Morrell that was gone as soon as it came, so quickly that Jason thought he might have imagined it.

"Well, Jason," Morrell said, finally, "I think it's time you carried on with your schedule." He cast a glance at Genrich and again Jason thought he caught a glint of steel in it. "Dr. Genrich will see you out."

Jason stood and followed Genrich into the hallway and out into the exercise yard. The doctor seemed preoccupied, and Jason was content to wait for him to broach whatever subject held his tongue. They walked slowly along the stone fence.

"How have you been sleeping lately?"

Genrich's question had the air of something said instead of something else. Jason looked at him and shrugged. For some reason, for the first

Eclectic Dreams

time in as long as he could remember, he felt uneasy at admitting his problems to Genrich.

"Jason," the doctor said, stopping and facing him, "does the name 'Jackie' mean anything to you?"

"...same initials and we can use the same monogrammed luggage..."

"Why would I want to use your bags?" he laughed.

"What?"

Jason looked at Genrich. He looked around himself at the grounds and, underneath, he sensed another place, a place where people met on sunny afternoons and tossed discs back and forth.

"... is expensive, you know. And you have to have it monogrammed if you're going to do any traveling..."

He closed his eyes tightly, trying to shut out the double image, covered his ears to try to shut out her voice. When he opened his eyes again, he was back in his bed. The sense of bilocation was gone, but his confusion was now feeding on the suddenness of the transition from sunshine and fresh air to fluorescent light and air conditioning.

"Dr. Genrich?" he ventured, and tried to move, to rise from the bed, but his arms would not respond and his legs remained in place. Confused, he tried to see why, and only after a few moments understood he was restrained to the bed. A soft sound of approaching feet caught his attention. He looked up to see an orderly slip into the room, his rubber soles whispering against the linoleum floor.

"Why am I strapped down?" Jason asked the man.

Instead of answering, the orderly began to undo the restraints and smiled at him in what Jason assumed was supposed to be a comforting way. Somehow, the hard edge of reality that had been increasingly sharpening his senses told him there was a cold edge to that warm smile. The orderly was holding something back, something that might be important.

For a moment, Jason suddenly realized, he'd actually considered violence against the orderly. He sat, stunned and motionless, afraid that if he moved he might lose control over that impulse and attack the man. A deep shiver started inside him and only with the greatest of efforts did he contain it before it surfaced. The orderly misread his expression.

H. David Blalock

"Now, there's nothing to be concerned about, Mr. Marks. Everything is fine. Doctor Morrell will be in shortly to see you."

A horrible feeling settled into Jason. "What about Doctor Genrich?"

The orderly gently pushed his covers back over him and shook his head. "Ask Doctor Morrell when he comes in, okay?"

Jason subsided and watched the man leave. As the door closed, he pulled the cover aside and sat up on the side of the bed. How long had he been unconscious? There were no clocks in the room. It could have been hours, days, even weeks with the sedatives on hand in the institution. Jason grit his teeth and tried to think. There was something just at the edge of his memory; a thought that taunted him with its promise.

He slipped off the bed and walked into the bathroom. In the mirror he could see he had a clean shaven face, but that meant nothing. All the toiletries were unused, still in their wrappers. There was no evidence of how long he'd been out. He went back into the bedroom and opened the drapes. The daylight outside looked the same as he remembered, but slightly different, as if the sun were at more of an angle. That could mean several months had passed, or that he was paranoid.

"... always so suspicious, Jason. Can't you trust anyone? Can't you ..."

Her voice drilled into his head painfully and he winced at each word as if it were a hot iron. "Stop it, Jackie," he whispered without thinking. "Stop it."

The voice quit, but the name remained.

Eclectic Dreams

-- 7 --

She was doped up until she was barely conscious, and he didn't know what to do about it. The doctors had told him that the delivery would be difficult, but they hadn't warned him about this. She looked in his direction, but he couldn't be sure she saw him. "Jackie?"

Her head slowly turned a fraction and her eyes seemed to try to focus.

"Jason..." Her voice was furry and thick. He clutched her hand, careful to avoid the IV, and stroked her fingers.

"I'm here, baby. I'm here."

"Look what they gave me," she mumbled.

He tried to follow her, but he wasn't sure if she was referring to the IV or the bed.

"Look what I got." She turned her head, drugged exhaustion in her eyes now.

"Okay, Jackie. Yeah. You rest. I'll be here."

"Jason..."

He waited for her to go on, but she didn't seem able to get enough strength around the drug to finish her sentence. He kissed her hand and tried not to panic.

"Mr. Marks, you'll have to leave now," the nurse insisted. "She needs to go to the delivery room."

"Yeah, sure," he said, slowly backing off and releasing her hand reluctantly.

"Don't worry, she'll be fine."

All he could do was nod.

For the next fifteen hours he sat, paced, stared, worried, paced, wandered, and slept fitfully in the waiting room. The constant traffic through the room in the form of other expectant fathers, nurses, doctors, janitors, and relatives, seemed no more to him than the irritating buzzing of insects. He took to standing by the window, gazing off into the comforting slowness of the passing clouds.

H. David Blalock

"Mr. Marks?"

He came back from a long way off, then reality hit him hard when the doctor came into focus. "What?"

"Mr. Marks, we need to talk."

His heart leapt into his throat, then sank into a yawning chasm that threatened to pitch him into nausea. "Jackie?"

The doctor held up a reassuring hand. "She's fine. And so's the baby."

Relief and confusion hit alternate sides of his consciousness. "Then, what's wrong?"

The doctor looked around briefly, then gently took his forearm. "Come to my office, okay? I have some really good coffee."

He let himself be pulled into an office off the main hallway marked "Private". Inside, the noise from the waiting room and the nurses station was muted to a gentle rumble. The doctor placed him in a leather chair covered with a multicolored drape and walked to a small table behind the mahogany desk.

"How do you take it?"

"Black, please."

The smell of the coffee as it decanted got into his sinuses and he sneezed. The doctor handed the styrofoam cup to him and he cradled it in his lap.

"Black, eh?" the doctor was saying. "Never could stand it that way, myself. Too bitter. Me, I like a little sugar in my coffee."

Jason looked up from sipping the drink to find the doctor had slipped into the highbacked chair and was idly flipping through some paperwork. He saw Jason's attention shift and grinned amiably.

"Better now?" Jason nodded. "Good. I wanted to get you comfortable as possible. I have some news that may or may not be considered bad." Jason frowned. The doctor watched him for a moment, then took a sip from his coffee. "I'm afraid this will be Jackie's last child, Mr. Marks."

"Last?" Jason asked. "What do you mean?"

The doctor stirred the coffee with a spoon and sighed. "The delivery was very difficult. She might not survive another. I recommend you take responsible precautions, up to and possibly including a vasectomy."

Eclectic Dreams

Jason leaned back into the chair and closed his eyes.

"Jason."

He opened his eyes and with an effort focussed on the lamp overhead. A rustle to his right drew his attention. He forced a smile at Morrell.

"How're you feeling now?" Morrell asked, tucking the clipboard he'd been studying under one arm. He reached for Jason's wrist and Jason fought the urge to snatch it away.

"Fine," Jason lied. The back of his throat was raw, as if he'd been screaming non-stop for hours. His head hurt and his eyes ached, but he was damned if he was going to tell Morrell that. "Where's Dr. Genrich?"

Morrell looked away from his wristwatch, then dropped Jason's wrist back onto the bed and made an entry onto the clipboard. "Dr. Genrich is no longer with us, Jason," he said in a businesslike tone that seemed to state he would entertain no unacceptable reaction to the announcement.

"Gone?"

"Resigned." Morrell smiled his partial smile and patted Jason's arm. "But, you needn't worry about a thing. I have personally taken charge of your case."

Jason caught his breath and tried not to show the dread that had suddenly settled on him.

"First thing we need to do is change your diet," Morrell mumbled, referring to the chart. "Genrich had you on a vegetable and juice diet. Tsk. Not much nourishment for a convalescent, is it?"

Jason watched.

"We're going to bring you steak and potatoes, with the best cuisine our chef can prepare. You'll be up and around in no time." Morrell stopped and glanced at his watch. "Oops! I have to run. Have a three o'clock appointment." He leaned over Jason and placed a fatherly hand on his shoulder. "You just relax, son. Things are going to be fine." Without waiting for an answer, Morrell spun and left the room. Jason allowed himself to breathe after the door slid shut.

He lay in the bed for hours, trying to make sense of the past few days. Genrich was gone. He felt that was a direct result of what had happened to him during that last walk. And Morrell was now his physician. Obviously, he sensed that something was not right with the dosage and had decided to see to it himself. What could this be? The orderlies didn't

H. David Blalock

seem to know what it was, at least, they didn't object when he stopped eating the meat. They had merely adjusted his diet to provide him with the nutrition he needed from a new set of sources. That meant that Morrell didn't have the complete confidence of all of the personnel at Infinite Mercy. But, who could he trust? How could he tell?

A dark unease began to build in him. He felt his heartbeat speed up and things began to make sense to him in different ways than he remembered. Arnie's presence was no longer that of a kindly and concerned friend, but a watchdog. And the board members he'd testified to must have been cohorts of Morrell's, fellow researchers in this same project. Around midnight he finally realized there was only one avenue left for him, if he wanted to keep his newfound clarity of thought and self-confidence.

Eclectic Dreams

-- 8 --

A silence had settled over Infinite Mercy, a soothing quiet that made a part of his mind ask himself if he wasn't making too much of nothing. He had forced himself to get out of the bed and peek into the corridor. The lighting was subdued, but sufficient to show him that his room was directly in the line of sight of the nurses' station, no doubt by Morrell's design. He could see the nurse as she worked behind the counter, the top of her head clearly visible. Other than her, the corridor seemed empty.

If the pattern was routine, there would only be three nurses on duty; the shift supervisor, the duty nurse, and a male nurse who served as orderly on the graveyard shift. Jason leaned back into the room and thought. The possibility that all three of them would be away from the desk at once was very remote. Infinite Mercy was known for its efficiency in care. He shook his head at his foolishness in thinking he could get out of his room so easily.

A tone chimed from the direction of the station and the nurse turned to look at a status board. She stood and moved toward it, her back to him. Almost without thinking, he slipped out of the room and down the hallway away from the station. Within a few seconds, the station was out of sight.

He found himself standing in a cold corridor, shivering in a hospital gown and without the slightest idea what to do next. At any second, he expected one of the nurses to find him and return him to his room. He winced to think about how they would report that to Morrell and what Morrell might do. He leaned against the wall and began to make his way toward the far end of the hallway, where a set of double doors barred his progress. He looked through the transoms and saw that the doors led into a t-shaped intersection. On the far wall was a sign that read "LOBBY" with an arrow to his left and "PATHOLOGY" with an arrow to his right. Slowly pressing on the bar, he leaned against the door and it moved quietly open. He glanced quickly both ways, went through and held the door until it shut.

The padding of his feet was a soft sound against the floor as he glided toward the lobby. He knew there was a maintenance room just this side

H. David Blalock

of it. He'd seen Arnie go in there a thousand times. The chill of the corridor was setting into his bones and he felt sure there should be something there he could trade for the gown.

The door swung shut behind him and he turned to look at the equipment. There were all the tools of the trade for a handyman; gardening supplies, power tools, a large tool kit in the corner, one wall dominated by a pegboard filled with assorted screwdrivers, wrenches, and other paraphenalia. He found a carpenter's apron first, but rejected it. It wasn't much better than the gown. Then he found the overalls.

As he slipped into the denim, his eye caught sight of a wide-brimmed hat hanging in the corner above some overshoes. He slipped the hat on, drew the front down over his eyes, and slipped on the shoes. Quietly, he edged the door open and peeked outside. The lobby was empty.

He walked out of the maintenance room and, keeping an eye on the corridor, made his way across to the front. The door to the outside would be locked this late, of that he was fairly sure. He chewed on his lower lip, trying to figure out how to get it open without setting off an alarm. He squinted at the alarm mechanism where it hung over the door. It was a simple magnetic switch that held a contact together until the door was opened, mounted on to the door with two screws. Looking at it, he had an idea.

A quick trip back to the maintenance room got him a screwdriver and a short length of phone wire. He unscrewed the alarm box mounting and, holding the contacts together, spun the door assembly up and around until the mounting bracket was clear of the door. Carefully, he tied the contacts together with the wire and eased the door open.

Nothing happened.

He stepped outside and pulled the door shut slowly so as not to jar the alarm contacts. As the latched clicked closed, he breathed a sigh of relief.

He turned to start down the walk toward the street and was immediately struck by a bright light in his eyes.

"Jason?"

It was Arnie. The old man must have just been coming in for the night. He frowned at Jason, examining the younger man critically. "What's going on? Why are you wearing those clothes?"

Eclectic Dreams

Jason thought quickly. He realized Arnie couldn't fathom he might be trying to escape, just that he was wandering around after lights out. Best play that out.

"I'm going to check on the tree," Jason said, lowering his voice and placing his fingers to his lips. "Shhh. Don't wake anyone. I'll only be gone a minute."

Arnie's lips twisted into a sardonic grin. "Oh, yeah, the tree. But, hang on, you shouldn't be out this late."

Jason nodded vigorously and waved the old man off. "I know, I know, but it'll just take a minute. You know, the tree moves."

"Yeah."

Jason stopped and looked hard at Arnie. "You've seen it move?"

"You told me about it, remember? The other day?"

"Oh. That's right."

"Come on, let's go back inside. The tree can wait." Arnie stepped in front of him and pointed back at the building.

"Aw, Arnie, just a minute, that's all I need. Be a guy," Jason pleaded.

Arnie hesitated and Jason could see he was fighting the idea. Finally, the old man said, "Okay, but I'm coming with you."

Jason had to accept that. If he resisted, he probably wouldn't ever have a chance again. Morrell would be certain to prevent him ever getting out at night. The doctors and orderlies would have strict orders to keep him locked up.

He and Arnie made their way across the yard toward the oak, Jason trying to think of some excuse to send the man away, if just for a second, just long enough to hop the stone fence and be gone. But Arnie was determined to stay close. Jason didn't want to hurt the old man, but if it came to that, he was appalled to realize he was capable of it.

They reached the tree and Jason, on impulse, immediately began to climb it.

"What are you doing?" Arnie shouted. "Come down from there!"

"Just got to check something," Jason said in as off-handed manner as he could muster.

"You'll fall!"

Jason stopped about ten feet up and looked down at Arnie. "What did you say?"

"I said you'll fall and hurt yourself," Arnie answered. "Get down."

It was the perfect idea. Jason reached out as if to pick something off the far end of a branch, let his foot slip and made a great production of thrashing around for a second. He gauged the distance to the ground and dropped out and downhill, rolling just enough as he hit to make a terrible noise but lessen the actual impact.

Arnie scrambled to him, frantic. "Jason? Jason! Are you okay?"

Jason feigned unconsciousness.

"Ohmigod, ohmigod, ohmigod! I told him! I told him he'd fall and hurt himself."

Jason peeked through semi-closed lids. Arnie was chewing on a finger, looking back toward the main building. Jason had to smile inside. Surely, Arnie would panic and run inside for help. That would give him the time he needed.

A motion above Arnie's head caught Jason's attention. A shadow had detached itself from the larger darkness of the tree's trunk. Jason's blood ran cold as he watched that shadow take on substance and snake its way down toward the old man. The tendril that had taken the bird had seemed little more than a thin string, hardly enough to register on his consciousness. Only after the fact had he even realized its existence. This was far worse. There was no denying what stretched out of the foilage above to drop towards Arnie.

Jason closed his eyes, trying to tell himself it was a trick of the starlight in the tree's canopy. It was a hallucination brought on by the medication or withdrawal from it. Surely he hadn't seen a two-foot thick tentacle reaching for Arnie.

He opened his eyes just in time to see the tentacle wrap around Arnie's neck and tighten with a convulsive jerk. Arnie didn't have time to cry out before he was lifted to his feet, clawing at the tentacle with both hands. The old man struggled and kicked and tore at the thing around his neck, eyes wide in terror, face blackening. With a sharp rustling of leaves, Arnie was drawn up into the tree, disappearing into its nighted depths.

Jason sat bolt upright. He heard a thrashing that was suddenly cut short, then silence. A few leaves fluttered down on and around him. He

Eclectic Dreams

blinked uncomprehendingly at the sky through the canopy, caught the gleam of starlight as the foliage swayed.

There was no sign of Arnie.

He stood and brushed the fallen leaves from his overalls, looking around. He must have hit his head when he fell out of the tree. Stupid idea, trying to fake that fall. He'd thought the tree had taken Arnie but the old man must have run back into the building. That's it. The old man was raising the alarm right now. He should run, get away, as far away as he could.

His fingers were oily and moist. He held them up to his face, but couldn't make out what covered them. It was too dark. He pressed them close to his nose and sniffed.

Blood. Had he hurt himself in the fall?

He froze as a tremor shook under his feet. There was a grinding and a creaking, followed by the whisper of moving earth.

Jason watched the tree root by his foot pull out of the ground.

They found him the following day, rocking slowly back and forth, looking up into the oak. He was non-responsive, aphonic, but when they turned him to where he could no longer see the tree, he began screaming. He continued to scream until they placed him at the window by the oak. The sight of it seemed to comfort him, so they made it a point from that time on to keep him in that room. He slept fitfully and very little. Morrell removed him from the research program and put him back on regular treatment.

No one ever saw Arnie again.

Evidence Of The Eternal

"When did you start hearing the voices?"

Gregory Exeter stared out the window that screened the psychiatrist's office from the building standing within twelve feet of where he sat. He could see himself in the pane's reflection, a silhouette in shadow and light superimposed on the outside world.

"Mr. Exeter?"

He snapped back into the office. "I'm sorry. What?"

"You came to me saying you were bothered by voices. When did you start hearing them?" Dr. Ellen Stuart repeated. She tapped her pen against her desktop idly, her green eyes watching him closely from below her graying hair bound in a tight bun. Exeter smiled apologetically. He had a nice smile, one that actually reached his eyes. She was so used to people who smiled insincerely that it often took her by surprise when she met someone who genuinely smiled. Exeter's folder might have said he was over sixty, but his whole being seemed younger. Her first impression had been he was just under forty. The clean-shaven face, the mane of jet-black hair untouched by gray, the grace of a man half his age, all combined to give him a much younger appearance.

"Bothered? I don't know if I'd call it being bothered. More like concerned. I guess I was about twelve when Andrew started talking to me," he told her. "Martha first spoke to me on my twenty-fifth birthday. As for the others, well," he shrugged, "I really can't say. Some I think I've heard since I was little, others I'm just now starting to hear."

She frowned at him and switched to tapping her front tooth with the pen. "So, you're hearing new voices now," she prompted.

He nodded. "Oh, yes. Almost daily. Yesterday, a voice introducing itself as Doug spoke to me," he went on. "He's different than any voice I've heard so far. I guess I've been expecting to hear from him, or someone like him, though."

Eclectic Dreams

"Really? How?"

Exeter was struggling for the right words. Dr. Stuart waited patiently as he stood and began to pace the length of her office, his long legs striding quickly back and forth.

"He's more knowledgeable than the others," he went on, as if not hearing her question. "He seems better informed."

"About what?"

Exeter waved his hands vaguely. "Everything. Especially about me."

Dr. Stuart nodded. "And that makes you uncomfortable," she suggested.

He stopped pacing and looked at her blankly. "No. Why should it?"

The psychiatrist shifted in her seat. "Well, some people feel it's an unacceptable invasion of privacy for someone to know so much."

Exeter resumed pacing. "Oh, no. It doesn't bother me. It's just, he seems to know so much, but he won't tell me the things I want to know."

"Things.?"

"Well, like, do I ever win the lottery? How successful will I become?" He seemed drawn again to the window. "When will I die?"

"Excuse me, but I have to ask," the doctor interrupted. "How is Doug supposed to know all this?"

Exeter smiled at her and walked to the window to look outside. For a long moment he stood quietly watching. "There's something I haven't told you, doc."

"Yes?"

"These voices I hear — Andrew, John, Martha, Robert, Phillip, even Doug — they're all me."

Dr. Stuart scratched a note. "Excellent. I think we're making definite progress, Greg. That you realize these voices are internal is a major step."

"It's not just that they're internal, doc," Exeter stopped her. He stepped away from the window and regarded her silently for a moment before walking to the desk and sitting on its edge.

"Do you believe in reincarnation?"

Exeter's question took Dr. Stuart by surprise, though she would never admit it. As a matter of fact, she was a recent Hindu convert, something she had not discussed with any of her patients. She was still concerned

H. David Blalock

that such a revelation might lose her some of her more conventionally minded clients. Momentarily, she had an anxious moment wondering if Exeter was toying with her, seeing how she might react at his knowledge of her secret. But, then, Exeter was going on as if the question were already answered.

"I'm not sure I do, myself, but." He stopped and picked up a ball point pen from her desk. "Let's say you have a man. His name is Joe." Exeter indicated the pen. "Is what makes up Joe on the outside or the inside, or is it a combination of both?"

She looked at the pen and back to him. "What do you think?"

Exeter smiled at her question. "Don't want to commit, eh? Can't say I blame you." He gazed at the pen for a moment, as if considering its existence. "When Joe dies," and here he unscrewed the barrel of the pen, parting it into its components and removing the ink cartridge, "is that the end of Joe? When the outside expires, does the inside go with it?" He looked at the ink cartridge closely. "If the inside doesn't go with it, if it really existed, where did it go?"

She watched him as he pondered his own question. It was obvious he was performing something he had done several times before. For himself? For someone else?

He finally seemed to come to a conclusion. "It goes back into itself, doc. It returns to itself and then finds a new — outlet, if you will."

"You're talking about transmigration of souls, the movement of a soul from body to body through multiple lifetimes," she said. "Reincarnation, transmigration, they're pretty much the same essentially."

He raised an eyebrow at her cynically. "Do you have another pen?"

It took her a second to grasp the question, then she opened the center drawer and pulled out another ball point pen to hand to him. He quickly broke it open and slipped the first pen's ink cartridge inside the barrel, then regarded the two brass tubes sticking out of the barrel.

"Don't all pens come with an ink cartridge already installed?" he asked her.

She caught the inference. "You think that these voices you're hearing are the dead trying to inhabit your body?" she asked quietly. It was possible Exeter was more ill than she had realized.

Eclectic Dreams

Exeter frowned at her, then his eyes wandered away to the window again. "Well, yes and no."

"Yes and no?"

He hefted his weight off the desk and walked to the window. She couldn't help noticing that he seemed drawn to the window the way a moth is drawn to a flame, seemingly without the will to stop. She was suddenly aware of the six floor drop to the alleyway outside. With an effort, she kept to her own seat. It wouldn't be wise to precipitate something he might not actually be considering.

"They are all me, past and present, and now, in Doug, future. Doug is me, or that part of me that is not physical, but in the future."

Dr. Stuart thought about that for a second, then made a note of it. It could be an indication of a coming crisis. When she looked back at Exeter, he was gazing out the window again. She knew she should wait until pressure of speech prompted him to resume the conversation, but then she knew that wouldn't work. He seemed to carry on a continual internal dialog with his voices.

"Mr. Exeter?"

He seemed to come back from far away and politely turned to her.

"How do you think it's possible that Doug should be in the future and here as well?" she asked.

Exeter's forehead creased and he seemed to listen for a moment. "Bilocation," he said at last. "There have been many reports of people seeing loved ones at the moment of their death hundreds of miles away. Bilocation negates time as well as space." Again he was drawn to the window. "The evidence of the eternal," he murmured. Standing, he approached the glass.

Unreasoning anxiety brought Dr. Stuart out from behind her desk to place herself between him and the window.

"Greg, I'm having a little trouble sorting this out," she said, putting a bit of pressure on his forearm to move him away from the window. "What do you mean by 'evidence of the eternal'?"

He didn't resist her guiding him across the room to sit by her desk. He seemed not to notice either her nervousness or his own actions, staring vacantly ahead.

H. David Blalock

"What does it mean, `eternal'?" he asked the air before him. "How do we conceive time? We see a linear set of cause and effect events and call their order `time'. We mark the relative motions of planetary bodies to calibrate that order. We use `time' to calibrate, measure, and define `time' without realizing how insubstantial it really is. It remains merely a description of a perception, not a reality."

She knew he was lost in thought, voicing his ideas, possibly momentarily unaware of her presence. She knew better than to interrupt. Such a monologue could be very revealing.

"`Eternal' is better, I think," he went on. "It infers no structure, encompasses all `time' and perhaps a little more — past, present, future, what preceeded the past, what succeeds the future. All at once in existence. All at once." He came back to the room and cast about until he saw her. "That's what I'm talking about, doc. The eternal is what really exists, not just what we define as existing. And Doug, Robert, Martha, Andrew — they're all parts of the real me, not just the part others define as me. I'm not just Gregory Exeter. I am eternal."

Megalomania? Dr. Stuart thought. Perhaps he was losing his grip on reality and replacing it with one of his own invention. One question should touch that possibility, expose its core. "And what about God? How does God fit into that?"

"What about God?" he repeated, turning the question over in his mind. "He is eternal, the Creator of all things —"

"But, if you are eternal."

Exeter's eyes widened and he looked sharply at her. "I don't believe I'm God, if that's what you're trying to say."

Dr. Stuart nodded encouragingly. "Good, good."

He snorted. "I'm trying to carry on a discussion with my analyst," he mumbled. "Of course she'll analyze everything to death. Why should she listen?"

"Greg, it's my job."

"I know, I know," he waved her defense away. Sighing, he passed a hand through his hair. "It's just, I have no one to talk to. I'm a bachelor, living alone. My job keeps me traveling, so I haven't time for a social life. Hell, I barely make it to these appointments with you." He lapsed again into silence.

Eclectic Dreams

"Couldn't it be that the voices are simply substitutes for the companions you lack on the outside?" she suggested at last.

He thought about that for just a second. "If the voices are internal, doesn't that still mean they're me?"

She was caught short at that. "I don't think that answers my question," she scolded.

"But it does."

She saw that Exeter wasn't disposed to continue that line of reasoning and felt she might have entertained his delusion too long. She might have lost him altogether, but certainly could expect little fruitful exchange now. Looking at her watch, she noticed with dismay there were still more than twenty minutes of the session to go. Worse, he had seen her steal the glance at the time.

"Should we stop for the day, doc?"

She sat down at the desk and put her chin in her hand, elbow on the tabletop. He watched her for a moment, then his eyes wandered toward the window.

"What's out there?" she wanted to know. "You keep looking out the window. Are you looking for something?"

He blinked and shook his head. "I guess you could say I was looking at something."

"What's that?"

"Doug told me he passed after falling from a window."

She worried her pen in her hands. "Doug? But, isn't Doug supposed to be in your future?"

Exeter nodded, never taking his eyes from the window. Dr. Stuart regarded him silently. It would make a kind of sense, she supposed. She had assumed Doug was a living person in a kind of telepathic link to Exeter — in his delusion, of course. Once again, making assumptions had put her behind the curve. He was ahead of her.

"It's a little weird," he nearly whispered, "knowing that, looking at the window. I wonder if —" He gasped suddenly and she saw him grab the arms of his chair as if startled.

"Yes?"

Exeter turned a face bright with sudden enlightenment to her. He fairly beamed. "I know now why the voices talk to me, doc. I know

H. David Blalock

why, of all the manifestations of my eternal being, I was picked to hear them."

A sudden dread filled her and a chill ran along her spine. She swallowed. "And why is that, do you think?" she asked in as steady a voice as she could muster.

He was pulling away from her now, mentally and physically. His voice deepened in timber as he spoke, echoing oddly in the office. "People who have near-death experiences talk about the bright light, the sense of peace they encounter. I understand that now. I feel that."

She clutched her pen until her knuckles whitened and her jaw dropped at what she saw.

Exeter was transforming.

A pale blue light grew around him, forming an aura that flickered, then glowed stronger. The thick black hair whitened until it flowed around his head like a halo of snow. His eyes, burning with a calm yellow flame, found the window as he rose and wafted toward it. Dr. Stuart, stunned, sat helplessly, unable to believe what she knew she was seeing.

"Doug isn't supposed to die that way, doc," Exeter's voice came to her, reverberating subliminally in her mind. The conversational tone of the words contrasted to the supernatural vision. "I am." There was no fear in this assertion. It was a simple statement of fact, made in the same tone one might remark about the weather. "But by doing this, I ensure that my eternal being will reach its goal."

The question rose in her mind unbidden, but before she could utter it, he answered.

"To reach out and touch God, to find Perfection, to attain the Ultimate." His eyes seemed to reach into her soul, resonating against something that quickened under their scrutiny. In that instant, she felt more vulnerable than she had ever been. He was inside her mind, not an invader, but an observer. He took in everything she was in a glance, understood her in a depth at once inhuman and beneficent. He flashed her that quick smile. "Nirvana, if you will. I am so close. Just the awareness of that closeness is so sweet — "

She almost cried out as he stepped through the window and disappeared.

Eclectic Dreams

The quiet that was left in the room settled slowly as she tried to adjust to what had happened. She shook her head and looked around. Exeter was gone, that much was certain. How much else she had actually seen in the last few seconds, she wasn't sure. She stumbled to the window and leaned out. On the pavement in the alleyway six floors below she could see Exeter's broken body. She clasped a hand over her mouth and turned away, closing her eyes to shut out the image.

"Do not mourn for him," a voice whispered in her ear.

Her eyes popped open and she snapped around, looking for the source of the voice. She was alone in the room.

"Hello, Ellen," the voice came again. She felt it just behind her ear, knew it was impossible, but could not stop it. "My name is Rachel."

Dr. Stuart began to scream.

H. David Blalock

Inner Enemies

The yellow glow of the bridge lights is a parody of a sunrise I will never see again. The thing inside my head is aware something is amiss, but it has yet to grasp the danger. It will all end here. My car slows as I glance in the rear view mirror. At this time of the morning the Interstate 40 bridge across the Mississippi River is quiet. The odd eighteen-wheeler roars by me, and those cars that do approach change lanes quickly to continue on with their business, oblivious to what I carry.

I pull over to the emergency lane, what there is of it, on the south side of the bridge, pop the hazard blinkers switch and sit for a second, listening to the click-click-click of the blinker relay. Fat raindrops begin to splatter against the windshield while the last strains of something by Led Zeppelin choke out of the radio. I kill the engine and open the door.

It is a brisk October night. There is a breeze here, throwing the gasoline and diesel fumes off the span and into the river. I follow the flow of the wind until I am at the south rail and look to the east, toward the Memphis skyline. I catch the lights from the hotels on Union and note the orange canopy of light over the city, a false dawn that never wanes once the true sun disappears.

Over the side of the rail I see nothing. The water of the Mississippi is a very long way down, too far to pick out. The raindrops fall away from me and into the dark. It is in that darkness that I hope to find peace; peace from something that began years ago.

Larry Calligri was my closest friend. We frequently spent long nights haunting the bars and underbelly of the city, secure in the immortality of youth that nothing could touch us. We shared alcohol, lies, grass, and women. We were kindred spirits, interested in the same things, given to the same vices. We spent hours in spirited discussion over drinks at bars on Beale before staggering home well after midnight.

It was the early '70s, and we were med students at UT Medical. Larry was headed for top of his class and had his eye on neurosurgery. I was a year behind him, set to take summa cum laude and go on to greatness as the MidSouth's foremost cardiac specialist. For kicks we latched on to the occult, the latest designer drug for the intellectual appetite. We were

Eclectic Dreams

convinced that there was scientific truth behind everything, including the occult, and determined to find it. We dabbled in the arts, played with the rituals, laughing at its pretensions while inwardly quivering just a bit at its possibilities. We even drove all the way to Oklahoma City and then to Kansas City to buy books at occult bookstores, building an impressive library of quasi-esoterica. We convinced ourselves we knew what we were doing.

We were children playing with a loaded weapon.

The night of the seance I served as the medium, with Larry on my left and the other eleven arrayed in a circle on the floor of the apartment. A single candle provided the only light in the room, casting flickering shadows across the walls and on the ceiling. The seven men and five women sat quietly listening to the occasional crackle from the incense imbedded in the candlewax as it combusted.

Our group had grown from just Larry and myself to this size over the space of three years. Each person had been chosen from among several candidates, retained because of their intelligence and insight. Those who didn't measure up were slowly excluded from the circle. We never forced them out of our society, just became more cool toward them until they left of their own accord. How could we know that we were leaching out those qualities we would need: compassion, care, empathy? They seemed to interfere with what we wanted to do, bring ourselves to a higher understanding of some "greater level of being."

Pompous bullshit.

We sat there and I performed as I had dozens of times before, mouthing the words. We were one in the circle, thirteen hard intellects with hardly a real soul between us. There was fear, true, but it was subdued and chained under scientific detachment, just another thing to be analyzed. We all expected to review this session afterward as we had the others, taking it and our feelings apart, reducing it to terms and formulae without blood or bone.

I mumbled the incantation, repeatedly conjuring the entity to appear to us in graceful and comely form, abjuring it by the power of the Names of God to come in peace and without malice. The words I had said dozens of times. The answer I would experience once. The consequences I would live with for the rest of my life.

H. David Blalock

I choked as something squeezed my throat shut. I tried to open my eyes, but found them just as tightly sealed. I could hear the others, hear their murmurs turn to alarm, then terrible screams that faded away as my hearing shut down.

I strained against the force that held me fast with inescapable strength, trying to move just the slightest part of myself, to convince myself I was hallucinating by simply opening my eyes so that I could reconnect with reality. But no part of me would listen to my commands. I was detached from my body, yet contained within it.

In the darkness that was all I could see, I began to perceive tiny lights, infinitesimal but distinct against the homogenous blackness. I was afloat in a night sky that extended as my heaven and earth, without reference of up or down. And, for a moment, I was alone in that darkness, the only living thing in that universe.

Then I sensed something else there, sensed it in that its very existence announced it in a universe where only I should have existed. I felt its approach with a dread that cannot be expressed, a certainty of lingering death. It was a disease, a filth, a horror that was given life by a call from the power of thirteen intellects and manifested in an essence that could only exist by feeding on that quality that made up its fabric. It was aware, conscious, in the way any predator is aware.

And it hungered.

Then, somehow, Larry was there, within the universe. He seemed unaware of the thing's existence, more concerned with me and my condition. He called to me and reached out to touch me. I wanted to shout, to warn him of the threat, but it was too late. I saw it melt into him and become a part of what he was as easily as I might pull on a coat. He showed no discomfort and I soon doubted my feelings as the sense of dread I had experienced vanished in a moment.

I gasped and found my eyes open, staring into Larry's. He asked me if I were all right, then turned to tend to one of the women who had fainted. There was a large burnt area on the ceiling, twelve feet above the floor, and the carpet around the candle was scorched well beyond where we were seated.

We dispersed that night by unspoken agreement to our homes, never to discuss that session again. It marked the end of our meetings, and we

Eclectic Dreams

eventually grew more distant from each other until only Larry and I kept in touch.

For years, I have awakened from a nightmare in which I watch the thing that clambered out of the darkness and fed on our combined power take on psychic form and depend like some horrendous tick from Larry's back, its misshapen head buried in his neck, gorging itself.

Then, two weeks ago, I received the call from Larry.

"I'm in New Orleans," he said. He sounded tired and upset, his voice slightly slurred. "I'll be coming in on the 8:30 train. Can you meet me at the station?"

"Why not fly, if it's that urgent?" I suggested.

"No, no, I can't. It's too dangerous."

"Flying isn't all that dangerous..."

"That's not what I mean, Mark," he interrupted. "I can't talk about it over the phone."

"All right, Larry. Eight-thirty?"

"Right. And thanks."

And he was gone.

I met the train, but Larry wasn't on it. The police got my name from a note on his body. They told me that he had died peacefully in his sleep during the trip. They asked if I could come in to identify the body. What I saw turned my soul to ice.

It had been seven years since we had last seen each other, but I knew him. Barely. The hair had gone completely gray, the face slack in more than death. His clothes were stained badly, old stains, and the body, even though the coroner had done his best to clean it, showed signs of bad hygiene and abuse. I did the necessary and quickly excused myself. On my way out, a policeman handed me an audio tape they found on Larry. It was in a large manila envelope and the policeman gave me an odd look as he handed it to me.

"Was he a drug user?" the policeman asked.

I shook my head. "Not that I knew of. Haven't really been close enough to him to know, though. Why?"

The officer nodded at the envelope. "Don't listen to that in a dark room," he said cryptically.

H. David Blalock

Back at my apartment, I dropped the tape into my player and sank into the sofa with a drink to calm my nerves. I lifted the remote from the coffee table and pushed play.

"Mark," Larry's voice came out of the stereo speakers. I could hear a television playing in the background and every once in a while a siren or passing car. He must have made this before leaving New Orleans. "If you are listening to this, then I am dead. At least, I hope so. God may yet have mercy on me and let it happen. I have tried so many times, but it won't let me. One way or the other, please pray for me." He paused and gasped as if in pain. His voice was haunted, hollow. I could hear despair and desperation in that voice. I sometimes heard that same quality of confusion and resignation from a patient just before surgery when I had to warn them of the possible complications.

"I have to be quick. The alcohol only slows it down. Hear me out, Mark. Please.

"Eight years ago we brought something into being. During the seance, something came through. You couldn't see it because it was all around you, holding you down and paralyzing you, but we could see it. Several of us tried to get to you, but it struck at us until we had to give up. We had to watch while it coiled around you, through you. I thought I could explain it away later, Mark. A mass hypnotic hallucination. A figment of the light. But, whatever it was, it was real. I know now, it was real.

"When you woke, you seemed fine, and it all seemed to melt away so quickly that it was easy to rationalize. We should have talked about it. We shouldn't have let ourselves be separated. We let ourselves be used, Mark. We became carriers."

There was a choking noise and I leaned forward to listen more closely. Larry sounded as if he were asphyxiating, but suddenly his distress disappeared and his speech became more hurried.

"Why I can sense mine, I don't know. Maybe one person in a million can, and they call them insane, I don't know. What I do know is that it's in me and it's feeding on me. I believe it gets its sustenance from intelligence and memory. I have learned to sense them in others, Mark. In Alzheimer patients they are very strong.

Eclectic Dreams

"I'm fairly sure they incubate in the midbrain. Trauma brings them to the surface, and they get diagnosed as schizophrenia, manic depression, nervous exhaustion, anything to deny their true nature. They live and feed, Mark, live and feed on their favorite prey: mankind.

"I had to get to you before yours became too active. Mine has recently increased its feeding, and I think it's about to breed. I shudder to think what happens to the host... to me when it... they do. I hoped that I could stop it by suicide, but I can't find the strength to do it. Or maybe it won't let me.

"If you get this, you must believe me... Your parasite is ten times larger than the one I carry. It was the original that tore through the opening and held you in place. Once it gets ready to breed, it will pick a time when you are near people and make its move. I think they propagate and travel through physical contact.

"I read that you will be speaking at the Cardiac Surgeons Compendium at the Convention Center this weekend. It is absolutely vital that you at least postpone this, Mark. Stay away from large crowds. For your own sake and the sake of others."

The tape fell silent. A twinge of pain brought me back to the apartment.

I looked at the glass that lay shattered on the rug by the sofa. I did not remember picking it up, dropping it, or cutting myself on the shards. Blood coursed across my palm as I walked into the kitchen and turned on the tap. I picked bits of glass from the cut and ran warm water over the gash.

It was too fantastic. What kind of insanity had taken hold of Larry? I wasn't qualified to diagnose this kind of disorder, that was the purview of a psychologist. Still, as I listened to the echoes of his voice in my head, I imagined I felt something stir within, as if awakening from a long sleep.

The rest of the night is a blur. I dressed to go to the Convention Center, even got as far as Riverside Drive before realizing where I was. If not for the car that darted out of Union against the light, I might have pulled up into the Center garage and finished the night with all the awareness of an automaton. The adrenalin surge of the near miss wrenched me back into consciousness. I leaned over the wheel and sat staring at the light as it turned yellow, red. The situation was

H. David Blalock

unacceptable. I was a man of science, a man of reason, and this thing that Larry described was impossible. Nothing like that could exist on earth. Yet, here I was, listening to a replay of Larry's words in my mind, and, incredibly, I could sense a movement within my mind.

I guess I had always known it was there. I just had never considered it a threat before. It was a part of me, and as I thought that I remembered the vision the night of the seance, how the thing had become a part of Larry. It had put him on like a coat, I recalled, to protect it from the cold of the outside. It had used him... me. And, in a few hours I knew it would become more powerful. It was ready to breed, and it was manipulating me to find its young new hosts.

In a flood I recalled the arrangements I had pushed and sponsored, the markers I had called in, to get this Compendium together. More than anyone else, I was the motive force behind it. I had bullied, begged, cajoled, promised, and threatened peers and subordinates to break schedules, alter timetables, and change itineraries so that only the finest minds would attend. It had already been billed by the local news media as an historic meeting, something that happened once in a lifetime.

The depth of my guilt pounded into me, strength pouring into my mind, and I felt something inside recede, puzzled, almost alarmed.

I downshifted, swung right on Union to Third, left and up on to Interstate 40. I know what has to be done.

I look down again at the blackness under the bridge. Somewhere there is a faint sound of a boat's horn, and I can sense the coolness of the evening deepen. The water will be cold. Very cold.

* * *

The rain drummed steadily down now, and the security guard at the Convention Center garage yawned. The sound of the rain and the long graveyard shift worked to lull him to a nod. His head snapped up at the sound of an approaching car.

The Beamer slid down the ramp quietly, and the guard recognized it as Dr. Mark Anson's. The doctor's silhouette behind the wheel was a familiar pattern. The guard accepted it without question. He waved the vehicle through.

Eclectic Dreams

As the guard turned back to reach for his coffee mug to fend off the damp chill, he missed the face turned briefly toward him, a face slack with more than fatigue. The car rolled into Dr. Anson's parking spot and the door opened. If he had been watching, the guard might have noticed the doctor was soaked to the skin. He might have noticed the dull, haunted look in the man's eyes. He might even have noticed the state of the man's clothes, as if he'd been swimming in the muddy waters of the Mississippi.

Dr. Anson stepped on to the escalator leading to the Convention Center.

H. David Blalock

A Walk In The Dark

The interesting thing about a country road in the middle of a moonless, cloudy night is that you can't see a damn thing. He could barely make out the shape of the road ahead of him and spent most of his time trying not to drop into the pond he could hear rippling to his right as he walked south on 205.

Highway 205 is a lonely stretch of dark two-lane blacktop connecting Interstate 40 to Highway 57 in west Tennessee. He was on his way to visit a relative in Collierville when his old Chevy convertible stalled out on a wide, sweeping curve. No amount of coaxing would convince it to start, so, after a few well-chosen words and a well-placed kick, he set out to find help.

The lights of his car had shown him this area was densely wooded, but he felt nearly blind as he stumbled along, often leaving the road to tromp the gravel shoulder in the dark. He staggered and struggled for over ten minutes before it dawned on him he was not alone on the road.

It moved when he moved, stopped when he stopped. He wasn't alarmed at first. It didn't occur to him that it could be anything dangerous. But the longer he walked on that lonely dark road, the more isolated he felt. He began to wonder if he had made the right decision, to go on to Highway 57 rather than back to 64. If 57 was farther away, he could be on this road, in the dark, by himself, for hours. He had no idea how much traffic there might be, if any.

A coldness settled into him. The constant clatter of his four-legged friend's claws on the black top didn't do him any good. He stopped, turned, and tried to figure out exactly what it was that was following, but the dark was complete. Beyond just a few feet, he couldn't see anything.

He stood, uncertainly listening for the feet of his companion, to determine whether or not it decided to move on. He couldn't make out any shapes in the dark behind him. But the fact remained that something was following him, something that he could sense in his soul rather than through his other senses, something that had an existence at the edge of his reality.

Eclectic Dreams

It's difficult to say how long he walked. Without the benefit of any light it could have been a moment, it could have been years. Once time had stopped being something that he could understand, something that had meaning to him, it didn't matter how long he stood or walked. All that mattered was what crept along the road beside him.

Although he knew it was imperative that he find a way to move away from the thing that seemed to be stalking him, his mind wandered towards a thousand wishes, a thousand things he hadn't done. He thought of the women he'd known, the life that he had led, where he was going, and where he had been. He thought of the plans that he had made, things done, and undone.

With a chill, he realized his life was flashing before his eyes.

He paused and crouched to feel along the ground for a rock, a stick, anything that would serve as a weapon. Somewhere deep inside him he could feel the first waves of a rising panic. He knew that, if that panic swamped him, he would be easy prey. With a weapon he could stave both it and the panic off, at least for a while. The dark was complete, so black that he couldn't even see his hand as he fumbled in his search. He felt he was making too much noise in the still of the country night. Though there was just a bit of a breeze coming off the pond, bringing with it the unsettling tartness of the algae on its surface, there was no other sound. No night birds, no crickets, no frogs. Just the quiet, velvet dark. It seemed to flow around him with that breeze, smothering the natural sounds of the night.

The back of his hand hit something hard that slid away with what seemed to be a thundering scratching. Instinctively, he snatched at it and his hand closed around the object. He froze, listening to the quiet, abandoning his sight and trying to make his hearing perform in its stead. The rushing of his own blood in his ears was loud against the background silence.

When he stood with his new weapon, a sturdy bit of wood, he had a sudden fit of vertigo. He held his breath and planted his feet against the spinning sensation, worsened by the dark. A slight nausea gripped him momentarily. He swallowed hard and took a deep breath. The cool night air rushed into him with a vengeance and suddenly his senses were preternaturally keen.

H. David Blalock

He had lost his sense of direction. He couldn't remember which way he had been going when he stopped to look for the stick. The wave of panic clawed at the edge of his consciousness again, but he beat it back. For God's sake, he thought, this isn't the wilderness of Montana. There was a town within a couple of miles of him whichever way he took. He gripped the stick and took solace from its substance. It anchored him back to the road and the moment.

His new awareness now turned from imagination to reality. He squinted ahead of him, trying to see any shapes, any darker spots that might give him a hint of which way to go.

He sensed something move nearby, on his left.

He didn't exactly hear it. The soft rippling noise of the pond echoed maddeningly, as if ringing off the air itself. Instead, he felt its movement like a sudden breath on his neck in the dark, a rustling at the edge of hearing. He felt a rush of heat and his heart thumped madly as he edged away from where he'd sensed the motion.

Gravel crunched loudly under his boot and he froze. He had stepped onto the shoulder. He shifted his weight to the foot still on the pavement and quietly lifted the other. It whispered out of the gravel.

Again, there was movement to his left. It had crossed the road and was now on his side.

He felt sure the thing could hear his heart now. He backed down the road, facing the thing, unwilling to turn his back to it. But the motion soon became faster than he'd intended. His feet seemed to have a life of their own.

In a moment, he was running blind in the dark.

With a great effort, he forced his body to obey him and slow to a stop. He wiped at the sweat running into his eyes with his shirt-sleeve. He couldn't resist the urge to keep moving, so he settled for walking. It wouldn't do to exhaust himself. He still didn't know how far it was to Collierville. Or even if he was headed in the right direction, now.

There was a low rumble. He stopped and cocked his head to listen.

It was a pickup truck, thundering around the curve from his right. He could see the false dawn of its lights breaking around the trees on the side of the road. Quickly, he crossed the street and stuck out his thumb.

Eclectic Dreams

So what if the truck was going the other way? Anything was better than walking in the dark.

The truck drove past him without even slowing. In its wake, he was left deafened and blinded. It wasn't until then he remembered he'd been holding the heavy stick the whole time. He shook his head in disgust at his own stupidity. Who would pick up a hitchhiker in the middle of nowhere carrying a club?

After he could hear again, he started out in the direction from which the truck came. One way was as good as the other now. He took comfort again from the weight of the club in his hand.

A scabbling noise from a little way off to his right brought him up short. He shivered at the chill that ran along his spine, then growled at himself for his cowardice.

"YAH! ya bastard!" he shouted, waving his arms ahead of him. He felt the anger rising as he pushed his way against his own fear toward where he'd seen the motion. "Come on, ya sonofabitch! I'll kick yer ass!"

He thought he caught a strong animal scent as something heavy bumped against his hip. He jumped, swung wildly with the club. There was a thud and the shock travelled up his arm to jar his teeth.

A wild elation filled him. It was real, and he had hurt it.

Then there were the two points of light, red and glowing, about waist high, just a few feet from him. He felt a paralysis settle into him as the lights moved in tandem in his direction. The breeze licked against the sweat on his neck. The hand brandishing the weapon shook.

He heard a rumble and knew another car was coming. He looked down at the club in his hand and toward the lights that advanced along the trees. If he dropped the club, would the car get there before the thing decided to strike back? How could he give up his only defense? And yet, they surely wouldn't stop for him if he held on to it. For long seconds, he agonized.

He dropped the club and ran to stick out his thumb.

The lights of the oncoming car revealed an old Chevy convertible standing on the shoulder of the road. Part of the roof was caved in. He stared at it dumbly as the blue lights of the approaching police car suddenly flashed.

H. David Blalock

He started to laugh. But then he caught the movement in the bushes just off the shoulder, the reflection of the blue lights in the eyes. He didn't wait for the trooper to get out of his car.

Eclectic Dreams

A Favor

The black and white images of policemen outfit in riot gear worked to control an angry crowd of black demonstrators on the small screen, while the narrator tensely described the scene.

"Striking sanitation workers demonstrated in the streets of Memphis during Dr. King's last visit," the anchorman said, "following his statement that he supported the rights of the negro workers to strike. In spite of promises that the demonstration would remain peaceful, violence erupted. There was one death and over fifty injured." The newsreader reappeared on screen shuffling papers, momentarily unaware he was on camera. Smoothly, he launched into the rest of his story. "Dr. King issued a statement abhorring the March 28 violence and promised to return from Atlanta to address the strikers and plead their case with Mayor Loeb's office. Meanwhile, AFSCME officials said."

He flicked the television off and looked at the plate of eggs and sausage that cooled on the bed. A cockroach peered over the edge of the plate and experimentally waved an antenna at the food. He watched it crawl into the plate and explore.

There were a thousand things that might go wrong. He had never been good at planning things, had spent more than a little time in prison because of that weakness. He went to the mirror in the common bath and looked at his face. It was nondescript, the face of any white man on the streets of Memphis. A little thin, perhaps, but that's what prison does to you. Doubt nibbled at his confidence as he looked at that wan visage in the mirror.

"What's wrong, James? Cold feet?" Raoul's voice whispered to him. "Don't worry, everything's fine. You haven't done anything yet. What are they going to do, throw you in jail for staying in the building beside the Lorraine?"

"I'm an ex-con with a weapon."

"So what?" Raoul countered. "Lots of people own rifles in Memphis. So what if you have a criminal record? Lots of people in Memphis are ex-cons." Raoul's voice was a balm on his nerves. "There's nothing to distinguish you from anyone else on the street, so what's the big deal?"

H. David Blalock

He looked again at the face in the mirror. So plain, so nondescript. Invisible.

"Maybe now," Raoul answered his thoughts, "but soon you'll get the attention you deserve. You will do the world a favor by getting rid of a troublemaker. People will finally understand how valuable you are. You'll be a hero."

Sometimes he thought he could almost see Raoul in the mirror, just over his shoulder. Raoul was always there when he needed him, with an encouraging word or a good suggestion. He shook off his doubts.

He stepped into the tub and looked out the window. It would be a difficult shot, but not impossible.

Back in the room were several brochures touting the attractions of Memphis; Beale Street, the Orpheum, Graceland. He picked up the Lorraine's brochure and opened it again to examine the floor plan. Raoul had told him that King was already booked on Eastern Airlines Flight 381 from Atlanta, and would arrive the next morning about 10:30. He didn't know how he knew that, nor did he think it odd that he did. He simply studied the floor plan until he found what he wanted.

The desk clerk at the Lorraine Motel looked up to see a dark man standing at the counter. It didn't seem odd to him that he hadn't heard the man come in. It just irritated him that the man had interrupted his reading.

"I'm from Dr. King's advance security. I've come to make a change in the Reverend's reservations," the man said. His smile was sincere and broad, but the desk clerk was dragging out the register. "Dr. King always likes to have a room on the second floor overlooking the swimming pool. You have him on the first floor."

The clerk shrugged, scanning the register. "Well, we have 301 available, near the stairs and the pool."

"Perfect. Would you put him there, please?"

The clerk made the notation and spun the book around, offering the pen to the man as he looked up. "If you'll just put your signature here for the change."

All that was left was a shadow of the man as the door shut. The clerk shook his head, closed the book and went back to reading his newspaper.

Eclectic Dreams

He lay on the bed with his head propped up on a pillow. King had arrived as expected, checked in just where Raoul had said he would. The television news was covering King's speech at Mason Temple. There was a swarm of people around the man. Not that that meant much to him. There had been a swarm around Kennedy in Dallas, and still it had happened.

For a moment, he felt the immediacy of that November day five years earlier. He closed his eyes and felt the Texas heat, saw the open black limo swing down the street below him, felt the kick of the rifle, saw the rebound of the target's head before the crack of the shot had even died.

His eyes snapped open and he felt disoriented. The vision had been so real, as if he had been the shooter. Only someone who had stood in the assassin's shoes could have felt and known that. The terror began to grip him

"Easy, James," Raoul cooed soothingly. "You just dropped off and had a bad dream. Everything's under control."

Raoul was way ahead of everyone on this. He knew that, as long as Raoul was with him, nothing could stop him.

King got back late. People wandered from room to room all night long. In the dark bathroom, he watched the comings and goings of King's troop like a predator sizing its prey. Once, about 5:00 AM, he saw King come out of one room and hesitate on the balcony. There was no one around, and he cursed himself for leaving the rifle behind. Still, there was Raoul's voice, calming him, assuring him the right time would come. King disappeared from the balcony and he went back to his own room.

The dreams were often so unsettling they woke him in the middle of the night, but he could never remember them. He felt he should have been able to, since much of what happened to him during the day left him with feelings of *deja vu* he could only attribute to the dreams.

Although he knew he wouldn't remember it, in this dream he was at a train station. Around him were several people in turn of the century costume. He could feel the metal of a small revolver in his hand as he moved toward a stoutish man talking to several others on the platform. The man represented everything he despised: structure and order,

H. David Blalock

enforced law. The voice inside him said it was time. He felt the pistol bark and saw the man drop.

Almost instantly, he was swept into a crowd of people speaking a language he didn't understand and didn't care to know. A beautifully outfitted carriage was gliding to a stop nearby. A man and a woman, obviously royalty, stepped down from it. The nationalism in him rose like a red anger. To serve his people that they might regain their rightful place, the revolver in his hand spoke and both fell.

Again, strangely, he was transported, this time to a quiet modern street. A long-haired, bespectacled man and an Asian woman were walking toward him. He smiled and started to say something to the man, the little pistol cupped in his hand, but Raoul's voice stopped him, saying, "Soon."

He woke, sweating, with the images already dying. Light was coming through the windows. He glanced at the clock. 6:30 AM. Time for a shower and breakfast.

Raoul said the time was close.

He watched for an opening all day, but nothing presented itself. The landlady was quiet enough, but she tended to look at him oddly sometimes, as if she didn't recognize him for a moment. Raoul said it was just their way. White folk all looked the same to them.

It was getting late when King walked out on to the balcony and started chatting with some people by the pool. Raoul told him it was time, so he hurried to the room and found the rifle. He found that Raoul had cleaned and loaded it. Raoul was in control. He felt the tension go out of him as he stepped into the tub.

The rifle barrel slid out the window and he found the target through some intervening bushes he knew would give him cover. As the sights centered on the target's head, he exhaled slowly, then gently squeezed the trigger.

The impact of the round lifted King off the balcony and slammed him into the wall. He allowed himself just long enough to be sure the first shot had done the job before pulling the barrel back into the room. As he did, he caught one of the men on the balcony looking directly at him. He ducked out of the window as the shouting began.

Eclectic Dreams

Quickly, he moved back to his room and dropped the rifle in the bedsheet. Grabbing the corners, he bundled everything he owned into its folds and twisted it shut. Raoul's voice was urgent, but not alarmed, a good sign. He found his way out of the building and followed Raoul's directions.

He slipped into a doorway as several people ran by toward the motel. The calm knowledge that Raoul had his escape arranged was all that stood between him and panic. With an effort, he kept his breathing even and started away from the doorway.

It was then he realized he and Raoul had become separated. The presence that had kept his spirits up for so long was gone. Frantically, he looked around, trying to locate his partner, but Raoul was nowhere to be found. He backed into the doorway. In horror, he looked down at his package. The police seemed to suddenly be everywhere. If they found him with this, he was done for. The shouting, the running people, the howl of sirens approaching.

Visions of the prison cell rushed back. In a panic, he dropped the sheet and bolted for his Mustang. The little white Ford sprang to life and, for a few moments, he had the wild idea he might escape.

Later, one of the witnesses would say she had seen an unidentified black man leave the area right after the shooting. She wouldn't be able to give a good description of the man because there was something about him that couldn't be expressed in words; a darkness around him which her mind immediately translated into his racial type, but her soul rejected. Raoul knew about this reaction to his appearance. After a few days, it would fade until she would remember only the black man, the preternatural chill forgotten.

Raoul watched the car speed away. The beauty of it was, he hadn't really done anything but encourage the man's fantasies. All he'd had to do was blunt that veneer of civilization that humans were so proud of, and the beast had risen eagerly to the surface. The beast in the human heart was so much more honest than The Enemy's illusion of civilization. And so much more entertaining. He'd killed two birds with one stone, if you'd pardon the expression. One of The Enemy's peacemakers was stilled, and his own army increased by one recruit. The millenium was only about a decade away, less than a heartbeat to him.

H. David Blalock

Now, there was much to be done and little time. There was an appointment to be met in Los Angeles in June. A certain Palestinian was contemplating murder.

So much to do, so little time.

Stolen Thunder

I knew he was terrified of thunder but I didn't understand why until I got the call from the police to identify the body.

I went down to the morgue. It seems one must always go "down" to the morgue, in spite of the fact ours is on the second floor. The policeman kept up a running inane monologue; his effort to put me at ease, I suppose. They ushered me into a stark room with blank walls and metal tables that stank of unidentifiable chemicals. I forced myself to approach the covered body and the cop finally shut up when the coroner pulled back the sheet.

Douglas Cinder and I had been friends for over twenty years. We had attended the same schools, struggled through college, and signed up for the Navy together. Although we were given separate assignments, we kept in touch by letter, card, and telephone. We developed a running competition to fill in the tedium of military life: who could find or do the oddest thing. Stationed on a carrier in the Pacific, Douglas prowled Asian ports for artifacts and ceremonies unseen by Westerners. I was a fire controller on a nuclear sub, a "boomer" that patrolled the North Atlantic, so I seldom got the chance to compete.

Perhaps that was best.

When his letters and calls stopped coming I at first thought his carrier had gone out on a black op, so I didn't think much about it, but as the weeks turned into months and the months into more than a year, I grew alarmed. My letters were returned unopened and my inquiries as to his whereabouts drew blank stares.

It was as if Douglas Cinder had ceased to exist.

I finished my tour and left the Navy for a career in aerodynamic engineering. From the depths of the ocean to the depths of space, I liked to think of it. Besides, it was difficult to find work as a nuclear submarine fire controller in the private sector. I fell back on my college degree and began working out of Houston for NASA as a design contractor on the reusable space vehicle. The work was demanding and difficult. I had little time for mysteries. Life settled into a solid routine and, as the years passed, I am ashamed to say I forgot about Doug. But

H. David Blalock

then, how many of us remember our best friends from college if we don't hear from them for seven years? Small wonder I reacted as I did when, just in from work one day, I answered the phone.

"Jason, it's Doug."

"Doug?" I frowned, at a loss to identify the voice.

"Doug Cinder. Come on, don't you remember your old buddy?"

"Doug!" I shouted, mortified at my own forgetfulness. I tried to cover with a torrent of questions. "My Lord, it's been too long. What happened? Where have you been? What have you been up to? How did you find me?"

"Whoa, slow down," he said. I heard the chuckle that he'd often used to cover a secret he was anxious to spring on me. "I figured you'd head for something familiar and asked myself, where would I go if I had majored in aerodynamic engineering and had an anal personality? Two plus two equaled NASA, and here we are."

"You always were a smart aleck," I cracked.

"Yeah, well, what say we get together, hash over old times, catch up?"

"Love to. When?"

"What are you doing tonight?"

"Nothing now," I said. "When do you get in?"

"I'm calling from Intercontinental."

"You're in Houston?" I couldn't hide the surprise in my voice.

"Have been for several hours. I'm in on business. I'll explain it all when we get together."

"Great! Got a pen? I'll give you my address."

There was a very brief pause. "Why don't we meet for drinks first? Your regular place would be fine."

"What? Why not here?"

"I can't. Believe me, it's better to meet at the bar."

I didn't like the sound of that. After seven years my best friend shows up but he doesn't want to come to my apartment because 'it's better to meet at the bar'? What had he gotten himself into?

"Is everything all right, Doug?"

"Sure, everything's just fine," he dismissed. "What's the matter? You on the wagon?"

Eclectic Dreams

I decided to let it drop. "Okay, then. Nine o'clock?"

"Fine. See you there." The line went dead.

As I hung up the phone it occurred to me I hadn't told him where my "regular place" was. Well, he had found me across the years and half a world. Surely he could find the right bar.

Nine o'clock found me sitting on a barstool in one of the city's more out of the way taverns, fidgeting and nursing a gin and tonic, starting anxiously at each new arrival. Rain came steadily down outside, typical Texas winter weather. The streetlight on the corner struggled to illuminate the area against the strength of the storm, just barely succeeding. The rain had kept the regular crowd out, it seemed. There were only the hardcore barflies, hovering bleary-eyed and staring into the mirror behind the stained countertop, slowly spinning half-empty glasses. The tiny tables between the bar and the wall of the establishment huddled empty in the semi-dark.

It was nearly nine-thirty before he walked in. Immediately I could see the years had been kind to Douglas Cinder. His dark brown hair didn't sport the creeping gray of my own and his lean physique was that of a man fifteen years his junior. He grinned at me through straight white teeth as he shook my hand in a grip like a vise.

"Good to see you, Jason," he said.

"And you, Doug. You haven't changed a bit."

He chuckled and climbed onto the barstool next to me. "Let me have a screwdriver," he told the bartender. As the man went off to make the drink, he looked at me. "Put on a little weight, have you?" he jibed with that grin.

"Comes with the age and a desk job," I shot back. "Something you obviously don't know about."

"Working for NASA?"

"No, a contractor for NASA." I shifted on the stool. It spun a little and steadied myself with a grip on the edge of the bar. "But enough about me. Where have you been for the last seven years and what have you been up to?"

His mood shifted so quickly and so deeply that I realized with concern the chipper exterior he'd worn on his way in was a sham. He sipped his screwdriver. "After I got out of the Navy," he said, "I

H. David Blalock

wandered around, trying to find myself, you know." He stared into his drink as if it might hold the answer. "I wanted to call you before this--"

One of the hazards of talking at the bar is that you're in the way of traffic. Just then a man leaned against the bar behind Doug and shouted at the bartender for a beer. Doug fell silent and I had to content myself with the bemused look on my friend's face while the man completed his order. The interloper was drenched to the skin and picked up some napkins to blot at his face and hair. The bartender appeared with the beer and a towel.

"Pretty bad out there?" the barkeep asked, handing the man the towel and setting the beer on the bar in front of him.

"Raining cats and dogs," the man said around the towel. "Looks like it'll go on for a while. There's lightning out west."

"Coming this way?"

"Be here soon, I would think." The man handed the towel back and picked up his beer. Dropping two dollars on the counter, he waved at the bartender. "Thanks."

"No problem," the barkeep answered, snatching up the bills.

As the customer carried his beer off, I found myself looking into the face of fear. Doug had gone ashen, his visage suddenly years older. The contrast between this and the virile, energetic man I had seen enter moments before was disturbing.

"What is it, Doug? What's wrong?"

He licked his lips and looked around. "Let's find a table, Jason," he said, and downed the screwdriver in a single gulp.

Puzzled, I gathered my own drink and followed him to one of the two-seaters near the far wall. He sat quietly staring straight ahead and it dawned on me he was listening for something.

"What's going on?" I asked him. "Are you in trouble?"

He focused on me. "I don't know," he said slowly. He looked to have a great deal to say, but no way to put it into words. He tapped his finger on the table for a moment while he put his thoughts together. It was a nervous habit I remembered from hundreds of hours of cramming for finals at college. He said the little clicking noise his fingernail made helped him focus. It always made me want to slap him.

Eclectic Dreams

There was a rumble from outside and Doug grew still, his eyes wide for a moment. Watching him gave me a chill.

"Talk to me, Doug."

He pulled himself together with an obvious effort and smiled apologetically. "Sorry, old buddy. It's just that, well, I've got this fear of thunder."

It was my turn to chuckle. "You're kidding."

"No, no, it's true. That's part of the reason I'm here."

Tap. Tap. Tap.

"Go on," I prodded.

He gave me an appraising look, as if he still was uncertain whether he wanted to share what was bothering him. I could see his mind working behind his eyes, the way I had always been able to read his discomfort when he'd faced tough decisions. I perceived the decision he was facing now was more difficult than simply determining a major or deciding whether to join the military. There was a profound turbulence in those eyes. After a moment, they softened and he leaned toward me.

"The last year I was in the Navy we put in to Hong Kong. Ever been there?"

"No," I said.

"You need to go someday. Marvelous place. Anyway, I was checking out the shops when I stumbled across this little place on a side street, not much more than a hole in the wall, with the words '*Dzi-dzat*' on the window. The place was full of knick-knacks: books, jewelry, and pottery, everything, including some of the oddest things I had ever seen. Model cars, planes, boats, and whatnot done in folded paper like origami or something." He stopped as another roll of thunder sounded and turned to look out the front window at the rain.

"You found something special there?" I prompted, trying to get his attention off the storm.

He snapped back and grinned again. "Did I! Have you ever heard of *Lei-Gong-mo*?"

"Huh?"

"It's a kind of tektite, a fused stone that forms at meteorite impact. The Chinese call it *Lei-Gong-mo*, Thunder God ink-black rock. Well, I found a figure of the Thunder God Lei-Gong actually carved from this

H. David Blalock

stone there in the shop. The shopkeeper didn't speak any English, but when I waved good American cash under his nose his eyes lit up. I thought it would be a cinch to pick this piece up for a song and sell it back in the States for a mint. It had to be unique. But when I offered him the cash and reached for the figurine, the shopkeeper went nuts. He chattered at me and yanked it away, waving at the door like he wanted me out of there." Doug went silent as a louder peal of thunder shook the air.

"So what happened?" I pressed him.

My friend seemed suddenly reticent. He eyed me critically for a moment, then went on in a rush.

"Look, Jason, this was seven years ago. You have to believe I wouldn't do it again."

"Do what?"

He passed a hand through his hair and lowered his eyes. "I grabbed the thing and ran," he confessed.

It took me a second to follow him. "You *stole* the figurine?"

"Yes," he said, sighing as if a great weight had dropped from him. "Seven years ago today. And I've lived with that all these years, Jason. Every day it's bothered me, what I did. And every day it gets worse." He suddenly gripped my arm and, in an urgent tone, told me, "I tried, Jason. I did go back later to pay the man, but the ChiComs had closed the shop down. Apparently the Chinese government frowns on those places."

"What did you do with it, then?"

He relinquished my arm and for a moment sat quietly tapping the table. Finally, he reached into his coat and produced a black carved figurine.

It was a small chariot drawn by six young men, altogether about eight inches long. The chariot driver looked at first to be a musician in a loincloth, a drum hanging before him from a strap around his shoulders. In his left hand was a hammer and in his right a chisel. On closer examination, the driver proved to be only half-human. He had the beak and claws of a bird, possibly an owl, with wings tucked close against his back.

"Lei-Gong," Doug said, indicating the charioteer. "God of Thunder."

Eclectic Dreams

I sat staring at the thing with mixed feelings. It was a beautiful piece of work, finely carved in delicate detail, but it was unsettling as well. It gave off a kind of dark glow, as if it absorbed the light in the room and sent it off spatters of murk instead of bright sparks. Doug turned it in his hands, sending rays of shadow against the wall next to us.

"It's definitely a striking piece," I admitted.

"It's magnificent," he whispered in definite awe, never taking his eyes off it.

I sat watching him fondle the statuette. "Doug, it's been seven years since you took it. Why haven't you gotten rid of it?"

He shook his head helplessly. "I just can't bring myself to sell it. Not that I haven't tried. Sometimes it shakes me so much, I can't look at it. Then's when I feel like I can get rid of it. I've even gone so far as to take it to art dealers for appraisal. They all offered me a fortune for it, but I always backed out at the last minute. Selling it seemed so, I don't know, sacrilegious or something."

"You could donate it to a museum," I suggested.

He grimaced. "The thought of losing it at all scares me. It's like, if I lost this, I would lose a lot more, you know what I mean?"

I had to shake my head. He sighed again and gazed at the statuette.

"I can't put it down, Jason," he said in a haunted tone that raised the hairs on the back of my neck. "It's like it won't let me. It's like it's waiting for something special to happen and it won't let me go until then."

"What does that mean?"

Doug stroked the lines of the chariot with a finger. When he spoke, it was as if he was voicing something he had only now realized, or perhaps had never wanted to admit.

"There is a thing the Chinese call *Hac Tao*, Jason. 'Black magic' is the closest translation we can get to it. Their society is so crowded with people, there is so much death that life soon loses its meaning. *Hac Tao* becomes a way to deal justice when human authority is insufficient. The common people have so little power in China, Jason. They have to have allies."

"I don't understand."

H. David Blalock

"That's good," he said, a shadow of that grin returning for a moment. "I hope you never do. I just wanted you to know, wanted *someone* to know, that I was sorry."

A heavy growl of thunder rattled the windows and Doug bolted upright. I put my hand on his forearm.

"Easy, Doug. It's just thunder," I said.

"Is it?" he asked in a voice heavy with fear, looking out at the storm. "Is it just thunder, Jason?"

His question confused me. "Sure it is."

He shook his head. "I thought getting it out in the open would help. I thought, if someone else knew, it would change things. I was wrong."

At that moment, the lights went out.

There is that half-second after a power failure when you expect the lights to come back on, then the half-second when you're afraid they never will. In that short time, I heard Doug gasp. Lightning flashed and thunder crackled almost immediately. In the strobe I caught a glimpse of Doug's silhouette running for the door.

Maybe his story had affected me more than I realized. Maybe it was the alcohol, I don't know, but I could swear I saw someone or some thing behind him.

Something with wings.

I shook myself back into the present as the coroner pulled the sheet back over the body.

"Is that him?" the policeman asked.

"Yes, that's Douglas Cinder," I said, fighting nausea. "My Lord, what happened to him?"

"It's never pretty when somebody gets struck by lightning," the cop said. "If you'll step outside, I need to get your signature on the identification."

"Certainly."

We walked back into the welcomed warmth of the lobby and the policeman spoke briefly with the secretary guarding the coroner's office. She passed him some papers and a package. He motioned me to join him.

"This guy a good friend of yours?" he asked.

"We'd known each other for several years."

Eclectic Dreams

"Yeah, well, we found some things on the body. He doesn't have any next of kin. You want 'em?"

I shrugged. "Sure."

The policeman handed me the package. "Sign this receipt for the package and the identification form," he instructed, holding out a pen.

I took. I signed. I left.

I got back to my place and put the package on my dining table, wondering whether I really wanted to open it. I knew what was in it. It was the right size, the right length. What would I do with it? More to the point, did I believe what I thought it had done to Doug?

Finally, chiding myself for a fool, I tore open the package. I immediately regretted it.

The little chariot was exactly as I remembered it. Only now, it was drawn by seven young men.

H. David Blalock

SCIENCE FICTION

The Face Of The Enemy

Commander Tren Sims watched his tactical screen as it tracked the Mogrum fleet. There were twelve of them: three transports and nine escorting fighters. On the screen they were just a group of geometrically arrayed blips. In reality, the transports would be nearly five kilometers long, capable of carrying an estimated 100,000 troops and all their equipment. The fighters would be twice the size of any Ercom Stalker, heavily armored and armed with pulse cannons. Although no Ercom Stalker had ever actually engaged a Mogrum, it was estimated that, without cloaking technology, the little fighters wouldn't last long.

The bulk of Jupiter hid him and his strike force from the enemy's sensors, but he'd learned not to take anything for granted. He ran the relative positioning through the ship's computers again and made a miniscule change in his attitude.

He caught his own reflection in the screen's templite cover: greying temples framed a face lined with the scars, physical and emotional, of 253 previous military missions. The suit communications boom nearly covered the pencil-thin streak of beard and that ran from his lower lip to his chin. He was proud of that one affectation, which only aces with over 75 confirmed kills were allowed.

A flicker of reflected planetlight caught his attention. He tensed as he realized one of the strike force was out of position. The glitter of its canopy struck him again. Anger began to well up in him until he realized it was deliberate.

Tren clicked his comm unit over to tight beam and pointed the antenna at the other ship.

"This had better be important," he growled into the mike. The computer immediately translated it into a nanosecond burst and passed the message along.

"They've dropped a nav beacon near Io and started mining," came the reply. It was obviously a relay, as the voice was not that of the strike

Eclectic Dreams

force pilot. "Imperative gate be secured soonest. Proceed to rendezvous and regroup."

"Shit!"

Tren pounded the control panel in frustration. Once again, the Mogrum had anticipated their plans and changed their movements. Instead of establishing a base at Europa as Ercom intelligence had surmised, they had bypassed the waiting strike force and built a foothold on the far side of the gas giant. The use of the diversionary convoy had kept the strike force occupied until the placement of mines could secure their nav beacon. It would take days to eliminate that beacon, days the human forces could ill afford. The Mogrum ships continued to penetrate the Sol system with alacrity. Their movements made it apparent their intelligence gathering was far superior, their ships more durable and efficient. Time and time again, the human forces had been bypassed, traps carefully laid avoided, ingenious plans foiled at the last instant. There were rumors the Mogrum were telepathic or that a radical human faction was at the highest levels passing critical information to them. One irrefutable fact remained: if the Mogrum could not be stopped at the Martian outposts in the asteroid belt, there was practically no way to prevent their arrival at Earth.

Tren warmed up his gravity drive and thought about his family. Wife, three children, and a pet iguana for the youngest, lived outside the Denver complex. For vacation they had planned on going to the beach at St. Louis. Since the lower Mississippi River Valley had flooded in the quakes of '57, the Gulf had continued its advance toward Canada, fed by the waters of melting ice caps. The flooded ruins of major cities made marvelous nurseries for all forms of sea life, but the beaches at St. Louis were still clean and safe from sharks. Shark attacks had grown in frequency so much Tren and his wife argued for nearly two weeks over going to St. Louis or Yellowstone. The kids had begged for the beach and Tren had relented.

Now all that seemed to mean so little. In a few weeks, perhaps a few days, the Mogrum would reach Earth.

Tren shook himself mentally and went back to concentrating on his ship's navigation. The rest of the strike force fell in behind him as he lined up for the jump toward Ceres.

H. David Blalock

Tren tucked his flight suit into the cubicle labeled "Sims" and slammed the lid shut.

"No sense taking it out on the equipment," a voice said from behind him. Tren turned to look at his wingman, Mal Soran. Soran was over ten years his junior, one of the few graduates of Ercom's Flight Academy still attached to the unit. The others had received orders for reassignment at the same time as the first sighting of the Mogrum ships. Soran slipped his own flight suit into his cubicle and grinned at Tren as the lid clicked shut.

"What are you grinning at, Soran?" Tren demanded in mock anger. He liked the youngster's ability to find the positive in any negative situation. It tended to reduce the unit's stress level, but often did also tend to irritate him.

Soran held up his hands defensively, making a frightened face. "Don't beat me, Commander Sims, sir!"

"You ain't worth a bullet," Tren mumbled, turning his back to Soran.

"Come on, I'll buy you a drink," Soran said, leading the way out of the chamber. "That ought to sweeten your disposition."

They arrived at the recreation area a few minutes later and elbowed their way to the bar. The room was hazed by tobacco and marijuana smoke, the sickly-sweet odor filling Tren's sinuses and giving him a slight contact high. He made a mental note to pop an anti-THC tab when he got back to barracks. He hated flying at anything less than top physical form. A few men were gathered around a virtual arcade machine on the far end of the room, shouting encouragement to the players and laying side bets on who would die first. Two other men were arm wrestling at the end of the bar, broken bottles standing on either side of their clasped hands. The loser would need stitches.

"Here." Soran handed him a glass brimming with a dark green liquid. Tren took it and eyed it quizzically. "It's Irish," Soran offered by way of explanation. Tren sipped at it experimentally, then more confidently as he recognized the bite of a single malt whiskey.

"How come it's green?" he asked.

Eclectic Dreams

Soran shrugged. "It's Irish," he said again and took a hit of his own.

Tren nodded sagely, turning to look at the crowd.

The club was populated mostly by pilots and navigators, the mechanics, officers, and ground crews having their own separate facilities. In the manner of all organizations, classes had developed, with rules of conduct, ethics, and admission. Tren was one of the few officers who frequented the pilots' bar, accepted because he actually flew alongside his men in combat. He could pick out some of his pilots in the crowd, made note of their indulgences. Those who enjoyed themselves too much would find themselves grounded for a few days. None of his men thought this unfair. They were all veterans of the colony wars and knew the value of a clear head.

"Commander Sims?"

Tren was looking at youngish man with dark hair and swarthy complexion. The man was obviously uncomfortable about something.

"Who wants to know?" Tren asked him.

"My name is John Galleaux, Airman First Class, sir. May I speak to you in private?"

"What about?"

Galleaux glanced around fervently. Grudgingly, he said, "It's about the Mogrum, sir. "

"Report to your own commander, airman," Tren told him and went back to his drink.

"No, please, sir," Joe insisted, visibly upset. "Just five minutes is all I need. "

Tren slowly put his glass on the bar. He was not used to being denied. "I gave you an order, mister."

Galleaux swallowed and nodded, but did not move off. "You can put me on report, sir, if what I have to say doesn't bother you."

Tren was caught in spite of itself. For an airman to deliberately invite report was ridiculous. The kid didn't look drunk or high. He glanced at Soran, who raised one eyebrow as if to encourage him to go ahead.

Tren recovered his drink and walked to a table where an airman was passed out over his beer. He kicked the unconscious man off the chair and swept the empty mugs off with a single motion. There was an

H. David Blalock

instant flurry of activity as maintenance bots cleaned up the debris while Tren, Soran, and Galleaux claimed the table.

"All right, airman, report," Tren snapped when they were settled.

Galleaux hesitated, looking from Soran to Tren.

"Lieutenant Soran is my right arm, Galleaux. If you can't talk to him, this is over."

Galleaux grimaced, took a breath, and sat back in his chair. After a moment, he leaned forward. "All the guys say you're a straight arrow, sir. Of all the officers in Ercom, you're the only one the pilots trust."

Tren took this without comment. He appreciated the trust his men put in him, but if Galleaux thought he was going to use this as a way to put something over on them, the airman was in for an unpleasant surprise.

"I was on patrol between the Belt and Mars three days ago," Galleaux went on. "It was supposed to be a routine sweep for gun runners and smugglers, you know, what with the dispute between the mining camps on Phobos and Ceres."

Tren had heard of the ongoing mining rights competition. That Ercom pilots were being used to keep the peace was irritating in light of the Mogrum threat, but necessary. Ercom was the only law enforcement available this far out in the system.

"We were tracking what we thought was a group of smugglers near Eros. My commander swung above Eros and his ship disappeared."

Galleaux paused while Tren took a sip of his drink.

"Disappeared?" Tren prompted.

"Yes, sir. It just disappeared."

"Was he fired on?" Soran asked.

"Not that I could see, sir," Galleaux replied. "At least, not by any weapon I'm aware of."

Tren frowned. Could the Mogrum have a new kind of weapon, one that struck without warning?

"Why do you suspect the Mogrum?" Soran asked. "You said you thought it was smugglers. Do you have evidence this was a Mogrum attack?"

Galleaux hesitated again. Tren, becoming impatient with the man's reluctance, slammed his mug on the table. "Damn it, man! If you have something to say, come out with it!"

Eclectic Dreams

The airman leaned forward over the table and dropped his voice until it was barely audible over the din. "Our unit was divided by an attack from eight Mogrum fighters. I engaged one and lined up for a kill but ..." Galleaux paused for a second, then went on in a rush. "My weapons wouldn't fire."

They waited for more. Galleaux remained silent.

"You couldn't report this malfunction to your own commander?"

Tren glared at the airman.

"I'm not sure it was a malfunction, sir," Galleaux replied.

"Are you inferring sabotage? You suspect someone in your unit?"

Soran ventured.

Galleaux held up a hand. "No, no, sir. My ship's armament was not malfunctioning. It simply wouldn't fire on the Mogrum ships."

Tren shook his head. "What?"

"Whenever the Mogrum jinked and I lost target lock, the guns fired normally. But when I got a lock, they wouldn't fire."

"Something wrong with the targeting computers," Soran offered.

"No," Galleaux said. "Afterward, I locked on some asteroid dust and the guns fired normally."

Tren scratched his chin. "So your ship has a glitch. Get it fixed."

Galleaux's voice dropped again. "My whole unit had the same problem, sir. Nobody could fire on the Mogrum."

The men sat in silence for a few moments as Tren and Soran digested this.

"So why are you still alive?" Tren asked. "If you couldn't return fire, you should be dead."

Galleaux waved his hands helplessly. "The Mogrum had the advantage. They had us outnumbered and outgunned, but they left without firing a shot."

"So, your wing commander is dead ..." Tren began.

"No, sir. He's not," Galleaux interrupted.

"He isn't?"

"No."

"But you said his ship was destroyed," Soran said.

"No, sir, it disappeared."

Soran and Tren exchanged looks again.

H. David Blalock

"Meaning it reappeared?" Tren said.

Galleaux nodded. "Commander Jonas showed up at rendezvous point on time."

Soran looked at Galleaux questionly. "What did he say happened?"

"He denies remembering anything at all. And, to top it off, our ship's records don't have anything about the encounter. It's as if it never happened."

"What about the other men in your wing? What do they say happened?" Tren asked.

Galleaux shifted in his seat. "Well, one or two still talk about it, but the others are acting like it never happened. "

"Why would they do that?" Soran pressed.

"I don't know. They were briefed by Commander Jonas himself, then they stopped talking."

Tren grit his teeth. This did not sound good. An Ercom wing infiltrated by a Mogrum spy? If this could happen, how many other spies were there in Ercom ranks?

"When do you debrief with Jonas?" Tren wanted to know.

"Tomorrow morning, sir."

"Very well. You passed your information to us. We'll see to it that it reaches the appropriate authority. Dismissed."

Galleaux, looking relieved, stood, saluted, and moved off.

"What do you think?" Soran asked when Galleaux was out of earshot.

Tren sipped at his whiskey and considered the information. "Could all be bullshit, some elaborate joke, in which case I'll jerk a knot in that airman's tail."

"What if it's on the level?"

"That would mean the Mogrum abducted Jonas, reprogrammed him somehow, and sent him back in to infiltrate the unit. It will also mean they have a way to neutralize our targeting systems, making our fighters damn near useless." Tren lapsed into silence again and Soran took a drink.

"Have you ever engaged a Mogrum ship?"

Tren's question took Soran by surprise. "Well, no, I never had the chance," Soran admitted.

Eclectic Dreams

"Neither have I," Tren revealed. "I've flown combat for nearly 20 years now. I saw service in the colony wars, the old Lunar rebellion, and against raiders around Deimos. I fought the terrorists who tried to take Olympus Mons City by using an orbiting platform. I have hundreds of hours of combat flying, but not a single minute against a Mogrum." Tren looked at no one in particular, gazing blankly out into the crowd. "I've wondered about that. It seems odd." He lifted his glass and examined the drink again. "How many Mogrum engagements do we know of?"

Soran sat back and cleared his throat. "Well, there were the reports from Neptune in orbit."

"Over five months old and no casualties reported."

"Saturn's rings two months later."

"Again, no casualties reported, and sighting was uncertain. Three ships at most."

"Ercom maintains there's a base in Uranus orbit, under the rings."

Tren looked at Soran over the whiskey glass. "That's what they say. I've been out beyond Neptune twice in the last month. If you were the Mogrum and an Ercom ship got out that far what would you do?"

Soran grinned at his commander. "They're aliens. How are we supposed to know how they will react?"

Tren crossed his arms and looked around the room. "Yeah." There was something bothering him about all this, something that hovered just at the edge of his understanding. Damn it, he was just a combat jockey. Maybe he'd seen so much fighting his paranoia was running rampant. "I need another drink," he said at last. He got up and headed for the bar.

Soran tapped his mug with a manicured finger. He looked up as a figure paused at the table.

"Well?" the visitor queried.

Soran looked toward Tren who stood with back to him, waiting on his drink. "I need some time. He's close."

The figure melted back into the crowd. Soran polished off his drink and smiled as Tren came back to the table.

"You think Ercom is lying to us about how strong the Mogrum are?" Soran asked.

Tren looked sharply at him. "Shut up and drink. I've had enough of that for the night."

H. David Blalock

Soran signaled his acceptance and changed the subject.

Tren felt most alive when he was flying. The vibration of the ship's engines was a familiar caress, the instruments old friends with comfortable faces. The cushions on his seat had become properly contoured for him through years of use. The ship's skin, darkened by carbon scoring that never actually polished away, was pitted from years of service near the Belt. The armor had worn thin on the leading edge of the port side, a result of combat in Jupiter's atmosphere. In spite of all its scars, the ship had served him well, and Tren had refused a newer model, passing the offered vehicle to Soran. Tren's ship was distinctive, easily recognizable in dock by its age and markings, something he took a certain pride in.

He slipped into the seat and ran through the preflight checklist with the ease of long familiarity. The mechanic that hung off the side of the ship in the microgravity waited for his signal before sealing the cockpit and dropping away. Tren watched the man settle into the maintenance run that encircled the wing's fighters where they attached to the docking stanchion.

The fighters poked out like ripe fruit on a great tree whose branches spread under the cover of the base dome. Ceres base was mostly underground, but the launching bays connected to the fighter block through a staging area laced with maintenance rings and refueling umbilicals. Travel to and from the dock was tricky and normally delegated to maintenance jockeys, but Tren preferred to handle any movement of his ship personally.

He tweaked the maneuvering thrusters online and bumped the Stalker away from the stanchion. His atmosphere inertial dampers hummed to life and the life support lights came on line. The ship slid back smoothly to hang about fifteen meters off the dock. Tren spun the ship on its vertical and lateral axes to test the jets. As usual, it responded beautifully. He grinned as he yanked the controller hard to the left and down, sending the ship into a yaw/pitch spin that sped up until the outside world blurred.

Eclectic Dreams

He released the stick and the ship settled back into a neutral spin that finally stopped almost even with his primary attitude.

"You know, it almost makes me sick just watching that," Soran's voice came through the comm channel.

"Rookie," Tren dug, still grinning. He saw Soran hanging in an atmosuit about ten meters away, oversized arms crossed, his face eerily lit behind the shield.

"Going out with the patrol today, Commander?"

"Of course. What else is there to do?"

There was a short silence on line. "I think you might be interested in something else," Soran said with a smile in his voice.

"Yeah?" Tren replied, not really interested. He was running over the post-launch checklist.

He jumped as a suited figure popped up next to his cockpit and hung there. Soran waved a gloved hand.

"What the hell are you doing?" Tren shouted. "You damn near made me shit myself."

Soran swung onto the ship and pressed his faceplate against the canopy. His shout, muffled and faint, was just clear enough to be understood.

"We need to talk. I have information about the Mogrum you need to know," he said.

Tren narrowed his eyes at the man. Soran wasn't using the base intercom. That meant he didn't want anyone but Tren to hear what he had to say. But information about the Mogrum shouldn't be kept from Ercom, not unless Soran had reason to believe someone in earshot was liable to pass the information to the wrong people.

Not that Soran was above suspicion himself, in Tren's eyes. Tren liked the man, but since the academy pilots had been reassigned, Soran had sometimes acted suspiciously, as if he were watching things too closely. Tren hadn't mentioned this. He wasn't sure if it wasn't his own imagination. He'd suspected that Soran was working for Ercom intelligence and had only been left in the unit to keep an eye on it. Tren was just a veteran combat pilot, not used to espionage, but it was well known that academy pilots were trained in intelligence gathering and

H. David Blalock

dispersal. In spite of everything, he had an underlying distrust of the man outside of combat situations.

Tren switched off his intercom. Well, if Soran wanted to play a game of intellectual chicken, he'd give it a shot.

He cycled the canopy open after stowing his mobile equipment. What little atmosphere there was vaporized and boiled away as the frame pulled back from the seals. Soran climbed into the tiny maintenance seat behind Tren and pressed his faceplate of the top of Tren's atmosphere. The vibration of the inertial dampers in Soran's suit gave the metal to metal contact a slight growl.

"I know you consider me a snitch for intelligence," Soran began without ceremony, "So take this or leave it as you see fit: the Mogrum are moving on Ceres base en masse. I've heard that a fleet of 50 fighters and five battle carriers are less than 72 hours from system. That means we have only two months to prepare a response."

Tren, unable to turn in his seat to face Soran, couldn't gauge the man's sincerity simply by his voice. The suits muted his tones, neutralizing his delivery and leaching any feeling from it.

"Why are you telling me this?" he demanded. "And why doesn't this come through proper channels?"

"You are one of Ercom's best veteran flyers," Soran's voice rumbled. "Your experience gives you special insight into strategy and tactics of void warfare. Your combat time in the Belt and near the gas giants is twice that of any living, active pilot. We need you."

Tren felt a prickling at the base of his neck. He resisted the urge to push himself clear of the ship to face Soran.

"Who is we?" Tren asked.

Soran did not respond immediately. Tren thought he felt a slight vibration, as if the man had shifted his weight on the ship.

"Some pilots had been assigned special duty, sort of a front guard if you will," Soran said. "They spend more time every month preparing for the Mogrum assault we know will eventually come. I have been ordered to ask you to join this group of volunteers."

"And if I refuse?"

Soran remained silent. The creeping feeling traveled down Tren's neck until it was between his shoulder blades and got worse.

Eclectic Dreams

"How long do I have to consider this?"

"I need an answer now," Soran told him.

Tren was certain Soran was holding a weapon on him. He quickly shifted his right knee into the attitude controller. The ship spun sharply to port. He slapped the controller hard right, then pulled back. The ship stopped its port side rotation, then the nose yanked up. Soran's suit dampers had helped him to hang on while the ship was rolling, but the sudden attitude change as the tail dropped out from under him pulled him loose from his perch. Tren tapped the nose jets and Soran found himself dizzy, nauseated, and staring into the Stalker's guns. He could almost hear the lock tone as the ship steadied on him.

Soran held his hands out to his side to indicate his surrender.

He was unarmed.

Tren stood down his weapons and parked the ship back on dock. Turning on his suit intercom, he climbed out.

"Let's talk," he said.

Soran breathed a sigh of relief.

"Alright," Tren said as they settled into their seats in the cramped space of Soran's quarters. "Let's cut through all the cloak and dagger bullshit. What's going on?"

Soran tried to offer Tren a beer, but the man refused with an impatient motion. "Ercom has built a special squadron of elite pilots, mostly top of the class academy," Soran began. "There are a few veterans. None of your experience."

"I figured they were assigned something special," Tren admitted. "New jockeys always get first dibs on the plum jobs. "

Soran caught the bitter edge to that remark. "You don't like the academy, do you?"

Tren frowned at the academy graduate. "I don't think green troops should be left on their own just because some computer says they should do well in combat. No simulation can substitute for actual experience, no matter who codes it."

H. David Blalock

Soran smiled slightly. "Even if some of the situations are based on actual combat reconstructions? Did you know that one of the advanced simulations was Olympus Mons City?"

Tren stared blankly at Soran. No, he hadn't known that. He'd avoided anything to do with the academy because of his dislike of simulations. The thought of one of his own campaigns being used as a lesson took him by surprise.

"Your value as a teacher has been recognized for years, Commander Sims," Soran told him. "We would like you to actually participate instead of appearing by proxy."

Tren considered everything that hadn't seemed right for the last few weeks. The long patrols with no enemy sightings, the continual feeling of being left behind while his family waited helplessly for an enemy assault. The growing conviction that he was losing a war he hadn't been able to even participate in. This would mean he was part of a significant program, something geared and targeted with the full weight of Ercom behind it.

It would mean he could make a difference.

"How much time did you say we have?"

"Less than two months."

"What about the Mogrum bases already in system?"

Soran poured himself a drink before answering, as if considering what he would say. Finally, he looked straight at Tren.

"There are no Mogrum in the system."

Tren blinked. Soran went on before Tren could get a word out.

"The ships we've seen are mock-ups built in a secret base off Ganymede. The reports from the outer planets were faked to simulate a Mogrum advance toward the gas giants."

Tren was confused. "Why? To what purpose? Hundreds of pilots die each year in combat training. If there is no need, what did their lives mean?" Tren felt the heat rising in him. "Who the hell is in charge of this fiasco?"

"Ercom is in charge," Soran assured him. "And they're painfully aware of the losses we've suffered over the past few months. They were unfortunate, but Ercom feels they were unavoidable."

"Unavoidable?" Tren growled.

Eclectic Dreams

"The cost of readiness is always high."

"Political claptrap," Tren spat. "Somebody saw an opportunity to expand their influence."

"But we have to prepare--"

"Agreed. But preparation and waste are two different things." Tren stood and began to pace. "Building mock enemy ships and putting raw troops in combat situations with bad intelligence and little effective leadership isn't preparation. It's waste."

"Ercom wasn't interested in the regular troops, Tren," Soran revealed. "It was the elite group they were concerned about. They wanted them to get as much time in evasive techniques as possible."

Tren paused in his tracks. "Evasive techniques?"

Soran nodded. "We don't expect to be able to stand and fight against the technology of a star-travelling species. Our analysis indicates the guerrilla warfare is our best defense."

There was a long, uncomfortable silence. Tren slowly sat, looking in disbelief at Soran.

"Ercom has no intention of resisting the Mogrum advance, do they?"

Soran twisted the glass in his hands. "No," he said.

"How far does Ercom plan to allow the Mogrum to penetrate before retaliating?"

Soran now stood and walked to the other side of the room. He sipped his drink.

"They do plan to fight?" Tren pressed.

"Yes. Eventually."

"What the hell does that mean, eventually? Does Ercom plan to let the Mogrum take Earth?"

Soran spun to face him. "No, of course not! It's just that Ercom needs more intelligence on the Mogrum before they'll commit."

Tren cocked an eyebrow. "They have mock-ups of Mogrum ships, know the size and position of the enemy fleet, and have a fair estimate of where and when they'll enter the system. What else do they need?"

Soran came back to his seat and sank into it in resignation. "They need to know they can win against the Mogrum before they'll be allowed to engage the enemy. "

"Allowed?" Tren leaned forward. "Allowed by whom?"

H. David Blalock

"The World Parliament is withholding funds and authorization pending further assurances."

Tren exploded. "Goddamned politicians! Don't they realize this is something they can't finesse into a re-election issue?" He shook with rage and frustration. "When the Mogrum get to earth, it won't make any difference anymore whether they looked good to their constituents. Nothing will matter." He closed his eyes and tried to blot out the vision of his family, his home, destroyed in a Mogrum attack. "Why did you tell me about this special group if all they can do is play a war? How can they be effective fighting force?"

"If we depended only on Ercom's backing, it couldn't," Soran shot back.

Tren's eyes popped open. He looked at Soran with renewed interest.

"Ercom is paralyzed by the WP. But not everyone requires a WP sanction to operate," Soran explained. "There is an organization willing to sponsor an anti-Mogrum effort. However, they have placed certain conditions on this funding."

"And those are?"

"We have to recruit at least 20 veterans as instructors and place them at the organization's disposal."

"Which organization are we talking about?" Tren asked.

Soran shook his head. "I'm not at liberty to say."

"You expect to recruit pilots for some unidentified organization working underground?" Tren laughed. "You've got to be kidding."

"I'm recruiting soldiers and pilots against an impending threat," Soran said, his face stern.

Tren dropped the smile. "You think I don't understand the seriousness of this threat? Son, I was fighting threats to our way of life long before you were born."

Soran softened and relaxed. "I don't mean to be insulting, commander. It's just that I get the same reaction every time. I sometimes think there are no patriots left."

Tren bristled. "I think you better define what you mean by patriot."

"Someone willing to fight to defend Earth, no matter the cost," Soran said, pouring himself another drink. "Even if it means bypassing proper channels, or bending the rules."

Eclectic Dreams

Tren narrowed his eyes at Soran. The tickling started the base of his neck. He sensed something wrong with the situation, but couldn't place it.

"You swore an oath to protect Earth," Soran said. He raised his glass and looked into it. "What we need to know is, how seriously did you take that promise? Are you willing to commit heart and soul to it?"

The tickling on the back of his neck was now an itch that made Tren want to turn around and look behind him. He refused to give in to the impulse and watched Soran take a sip from this glass instead. Soran seem to be waiting for him to speak.

Then, suddenly, it hit him.

The faked reports, the mock ups, the malfunctioning weapons, the missing pilots, the mysterious organization working underground: there were all part of a pattern, a pattern so huge it boggled his mind.

Soran was an Academy graduate, a pilot of the new order, educated and nourished by an Ercom that was pushing vets out as quickly as they could. His loyalties were to Ercom and the academy, his animosity toward the WP apparent. The Academy pilots were also assigned to one unit, an "elite " group, under the control of an organization working, not against Ercom interests, but against the WP's. Soran, and probably his peers, were attempting to recruit vets to their side. Against the interests of the WP.

And what verification did he have of this massive Mogrum fleet rolling in the system? Only Soran's word, nothing else.

The WP would resist a massive buildup of Ercom, given the chance. However, if the WP could be convinced there was a real threat to earth, and that Ercom could stop that threat, then— Tren looked at Soran, into the face of the enemy

"Give me twenty-four hours,"Tren said, standing to leave.

Soran stood as well, looking a little put out. "I really do need an answer immediately."

"Twenty-four hours," Tren said, and left.

H. David Blalock

He knew of six other veteran pilots who had flown with him at Olympus Mons City stationed on Ceres. He immediately went to speak to them after leaving Soran's quarters. Four of the six admitted to having joined the "elite" cadre at the insistence of an Academy graduate attached to their wing. The other two had not been approached, probably because their units had no academy pilots.

He called his own commanding officer and tried to confirm the existence of the Mogrum force just outside system and whether an "elite" task force existed to meet the threat. Flight Commander Johnson avoided directly answering the question and obliquely suggested he talk to Lieutenant Soran about it. Tren quickly changed the subject.

Tren sat in his quarters, mulling things over. He looked around the room, at the DFC he was given after Olympus Mons City, the campaign medals hanging, more than a dozen strong, on the bulkhead across from the door. He scanned the dark metal of the furniture, took in the spartan emptiness around him.

As he often did when he was troubled, he picked up a data crystal and inserted into a player. Images of his family flashed across the screen: his wife and children at Yellowstone, the kids mugging in front of their house, the youngest with his iguana. But there was something different about the pictures this time.

He was startled at the lines in his wife's face. The children seemed older than remembered. He tried to recall the last time he spent more than a week with them.

He couldn't.

The pictures went on, but he was only partly aware of them now. He was remembering the face of his wife the last time he'd said goodbye before starting the tour at Ceres. How could he have missed the resignation, the tired look of despair? Each tour they had gone through the same ceremony, each time her face had been emptier. How could he have missed that?

How old were the children? What kind of students, what kind of people were they?

When had Ercom become more important to him than his own family?

Ercom and the WP would be at each others' throats for years. If the Mogrum threat was exposed as a fraud, there would be dire

Eclectic Dreams

repercussions. Tren shook his head and ground his teeth. Politics was for politicians. The conflict between Ercom and the WP was beyond his ability to change, or even effect. He was sure that Ercom was preparing to move against the WP, a coup to cement Ercom's power.

His only options, as he saw it, were a choice between breaking his oath of duty to the World Parliament to join this "elite" underground or resign his commission, which would most likely mean his death. He knew he couldn't go back on his oath of loyalty, nor could he join with those who had. All he had was his skill as a pilot, his integrity, and his family. Those were what made Tren Sims who he was. If he betrayed even one of them, he would lose himself, his soul. He would rather die.

But what about his family? If he refused to join Ercom's rebellion, what would happen to them? He knew that, if they tried to escape Ercom, it would be a matter of time before they were all captured and probably killed. On the other hand, if he resigned his commission, they would be watched closely, but they might have a chance at a reasonably normal life as long as he kept a low profile.

Was he contemplating cowardice? By seriously considering resignation, was he turning his back on his duty to Ercom, to those other pilots who would be part of the coming action? They were his men, men he had fought alongside for so long, who he'd bled and drank with. Didn't he have a duty to them?

The last picture had come up in the series on the data crystal. It was a picture of himself and his wife taken shortly after their marriage, one of his favorites. He had looked at this picture each time before going into combat to remind himself of what he fought for.

Tren made his way to command and control. Flight Commander Johnson looked up from his consoles.

"Tren! Good to see you. Did Soran talk to you?"

"Yes, sir," Tren said, standing at ease before Johnson's desk.

"Well? What do you say? You like the idea?"

"Frankly, sir," Tren began, looking his CO right in the eye, "no, I don't. "

H. David Blalock

Johnson's look of expectancy went to puzzlement, then anger.

"I have no intention of releasing any information given to me to anyone else," Tren assured him. "However, I would like to retire my commission." Tren sighed. He'd gotten through it better than he'd hoped he would. "I'm ready to go home."

Johnson's face was a study in conflicting emotions. "What about the Mogrum?"

Tren looked hard at the man. "I don't believe there is a Mogrum threat, sir. I believe Ercom has manufactured it for their own ends."

Johnson leaned back his chair. "I see. And who do you plan tell that to?"

Tren shrugged. "No one, sir. It's none of my business what politics are being played. I'm a soldier. All I ever was, was a soldier. With no real conflict, I'm nothing. I want spend whatever time I have left with my family."

The unspoken phrase "whatever time you let me have" hung between the men like a sword. Tren knew he was now on borrowed time, that Ercom could not afford to let him run loose knowing what we did. But, he was a combat pilot, so he could accept that. He knew there was nothing to do about it. He'd sworn an oath to the WP, and he did not intend to break it.

"We could bring your family out here," Johnson said in a neutral tone. "You think your wife and kids would like Ceres?"

Tren flushed at the threat, but kept his temper. "I have over twenty years service, sir. I'm due to retire anyway."

"You don't have to."

"I understand that, sir. I want to."

"You understand what you're asking for, Sims."

"Yes, sir. Time with my family."

There was a long pause. Tren kept his jaws locked tightly together. He looked at Johnson, who returned an appraising stare. Tren hoped he saw in Johnson's eyes what he wanted to see: comprehension. Johnson had been his commander for nearly fifteen years. Tren and he had fought together in the colony wars, had womanized together before they got married. As young officers, they had been very close. Tren had passed on the promotion that put Johnson where he was, at that desk.

Eclectic Dreams

Finally, the flight commander spoke.

"You've been exemplary pilot, Commander Sims. You've fought well and long for Ercom. We will miss you."

Johnson stood and extended his hand.

Reparations

One would think that the systems would have broken down after three thousand years, but they droned on, processing fuel, evacuating waste, gathering data. *Vanguard* pushed on through space toward Epsilon Psi, a dark dot in infinity, a speck of life in a lifeless void.

Most of the suspended animation units had shut down centuries earlier. LARNA, the Living Artificial Reasoning Nested Array, had sensed the deaths within the tubes. Tiny imperfections in each crewmember's makeup, given thousands of years to develop, had claimed them: some to cancers, genetic dysfunction, progressive heart disease. Too small to detect at the beginning of the mission, the illnesses ran their courses unchallenged. LARNA was programmed to waken the medical staff in case of emergency, but the progress of each disorder was so slow LARNA did not recognize them as meeting the criteria of "emergency". She noted each SA unit's shutdown time, the category of the expired crewmember, and compared it to the minimal requirements for completion of the mission. She dutifully logged this information into her mission database for eventual analysis by the mission commander.

LARNA's designers would have been horrified to know how dispassionately she watched the demise of so many crewmembers. Being themselves immensely concerned with the survival of the human race, it never occurred to them that an artificial intelligence such as LARNA could allow the deaths of so many without so much as a twinge of concern. They had concentrated with such discipline on ensuring LARNA would accomplish everything necessary to foster the human cargo in the belly of *Vanguard* through the unknown perils of deep space travel that they neglected to examine LARNA's own sense of urgency for each crewperson individually. LARNA's main directive was to allow nothing to prevent accomplishment of the mission. Nothing had been embedded in her ethical programming concerning individual importance to the mission.

There were 16 survivors of the 320 original crew when the explorer ship *Vanguard* began deceleration. LARNA set about the task of waking the remnant.

Eclectic Dreams

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Communications Engineer Kade Mellon rubbed his eyes, stretched and yawned. He felt like he had a mouthful of cotton and all his teeth wore sweaters. The tang of metal hung in his sinuses and clung to the back of his throat. A slight throbbing at the back of his head responded well to stretching his neck and working his jaw.

He pushed himself up away from the SA unit to hover, weightless and anchored by a line that still fed his vitals to LARNA, a few feet over the unit. He looked grimly at the dark SA units, lined up like tiers of sleeping soldiers against the walls of the chamber connected through a bewildering complex of tubes and cabling to a central column that ran from the deck to the ceiling nearly eighty feet overhead.

They had been told to expect casualties, but this—

The click and hiss of another unit opening caught his attention. He watched the lithe form of Hydroponics Technician Sala Shenez rise and stretch cat-like before catching his eye and nodding her recognition. Even after the long sleep, the sight of her made him catch his breath. The brief sleep garment barely covered her muscular physique, the slim lines and soft curves causing a stirring inside him. Damn, he wasn't even three minutes awake, and already his libido was cranking up.

In quickening succession, the rest of the survivors were released from their slumber. Mellon recognized only two of the other 14. There was Logistics Technician Adrian Gannett, a man who should be only in his mid twenties, prematurely balding and near-sighted, and Security Officer James Arthur Fields, or "Jafa", a bucolic 30 year-old built like a concrete column but with the personality of a joker.

"Hey, Kade! You made it!" Jafa shouted, his voice ringing in the hush of the sleeping chamber. A few of the others shot him annoyed looks, then went about their business. Jafa went through a series of stretching exercises as he made his way toward Mellon.

"Unbelievable," Gannett said. "Look how many—" He shook his head at the darkened SA units. "Will we have enough left?"

Mellon took in the rest. "Depends on whether any of the admin groups survived. I think we have at least one from each branch here."

H. David Blalock

"LARNA," Gannett said to the air. "Are you still on line?"

"On line and ready," a neutral female voice spoke to them through the subcutaneous receivers in their skulls.

"What's our status?" Gannett asked.

"Life support and all other vital systems are nominal," LARNA reported.

"Summarize crew casualties," Mellon ordered.

"Less than one percent of crew complement is now viable," LARNA stated. "Mission objectives obtainable at minimal criterion."

"Is that why she woke us?" a man Mellon recognized as a mechanical engineer asked.

"Negative," LARNA answered. "Minimal crew required for first contact protocol."

The hush settled back over them as LARNA's words sank in. Then there was a general chaos.

"LARNA," Mellon shouted, hurrying toward the control deck, "relay all known data on alien contact."

He made his way out of the dormitory and into the passageways connected to the rest of the ship. The SA chamber was centrally located, the only truly weightless environment on *Vanguard*, so the farther he traveled the more he felt the press of *Vanguard's* rotation. As LARNA briefed him, he at first traveled quickly, passing storage areas and life support equipment, then more slowly as the weight of his own body began to press down on him. Within minutes of reaching the section of *Vanguard* where gravity was one-tenth Earth normal, he was winded and had to stop to rest.

"Alien ship first scanned 36 hours ago. Ship was not on intercept course. LARNA evaluated current situation and determined best course of action was observation before contact. "

Shenez and Gannett fell in beside him, as they hopped into a transport. The little vehicle's wheels squealed as he twisted the controls toward a hatch marked "5B." The door popped open seconds before they tore through it at nearly 40 miles an hour.

"Keep your head down," Gannett mumbled, grabbing the edge of his seat as Mellon swung hard around a tight turn in a heavily lit corridor filled with colonization material. "You never know. "

Eclectic Dreams

"Quiet," Mellon snapped.

"—less than ten hours ago," LARNA was saying. "New course projection indicates alien vessel will intercept within forty-eight hours. "

"Forty-eight hours?" Shenez griped. "Two days to prepare for the most momentous event in human history?"

"What were you planning to do? Greet them with a brass band?" Mellon quipped, pushing harder on the accelerator.

The transport screeched to a halt in front of the control deck access hatch. LARNA cycled it open as the three piled out of the vehicle.

They stared in disbelief at the control deck. Its instruments were wrecked, in total disarray. Whole modules were missing. Gaping holes in control banks told where equipment had been ripped out.

"What the-?"

Mellon nodded. "Really," he agreed. "LARNA, explain. "

There was silence from LARNA.

"LARNA?" Shenez called.

"LARNA, respond," Gannett shouted.

It came from between the consoles, thin at first, then wider. It was silver and green, with protrusions at irregular intervals along its length.

"What's that?" Gannett yelled.

The thing flowed quickly, like a metallic river, around the base of one of the control panels and disappeared under another. They looked at each other in shock and bewilderment.

"LARNA!" Mellon cried, alarmed.

"On line and ready," LARNA's calm voice came back.

"What happened to you?" Shenez interjected. "Why didn't you respond?"

"LARNA was unable to respond due to momentary malfunction."

"What the hell was that thing we just saw crawling around in here?" Gannett demanded.

"Uncataloged lifeform."

"We know that!" Gannett complained. "What's it doing on board?"

"Lifeform originated on *Vanguard*."

Mellon stepped in. "It was born here?"

"Affirmative."

H. David Blalock

"That's ridiculous," Gannett said. "Impossible. That was like no lifeform I've ever seen."

"Have you scanned this lifeform, LARNA?" Shenez asked.

"Affirmative."

"Give specifics."

"Lifeform is carbon based, average life span of eight years. Reproduction via ova. Structure is similar to mollusk *Gastropoda Pulmonata*."

"A common slug?" Shenez muttered.

"A slug? That damn thing was nearly twelve feet long!" Gannett said, pointing to where it had disappeared.

"We have been shut up in here for 3000 years, Adrian," she reminded him.

"What's it been living on?" Mellon wondered.

"Lifeform processes certain metallic compounds into digestible material," LARNA responded.

"It eats metal?" Gannett blurted.

"Not directly, I'm sure," Shenez assured him. "It probably produces an acid that –"

"That would explain the damaged equipment," Mellon broke in. "LARNA, have you rerouted helm and comm units?"

"Affirmative. Helm and Communications available from Communications Laboratory."

They sped through the cluttered corridors on the transport, in their haste scattering some of the boxes that had shifted over the years. Gannett clutched the side of the vehicle and cursed at each hard turn until Shenez glared him into silence. Finally they stopped at the comm lab door. The portal cycled open as they approached it.

Consisting mainly of eight working stations the comm lab was designed as a workshop for the maintenance of communications equipment. There were three flat workbenches between Stations 3 and 4, separating the room in half. The lab was nearly as bad as Main Control. If LARNA was routing helm through this shambles, it was a wonder the *Vanguard* stayed on course. Stations 5 and 6 were beyond repair. Several dull gray streaks wound from them and disappeared under the flat tops.

Eclectic Dreams

"They've been here, too," Shenez observed. She rubbed a dried trail of mucous with her boot. "Not recently, though. Wonder why?"

Gannett leaned over to take a closer look at one of the trails and bumped against a workbench. A container of some red dust fell off to splash against the deck.

There was a hum and a click followed by the sudden appearance of a squat, wheeled machine. The little gadget rolled quickly to the dust and began to vacuum the debris into a container on its back.

"Of course," Shenez said, smiling. "The lab has its own maintenance system for contamination control. Foreign substances, like the slug's eggs, wouldn't survive."

Gannett watched the robot as it went about its business. "How come these little fellows didn't take out the slugs in Control?"

"I didn't say they got rid of the slugs, just their eggs. Besides the lab's status as a clean environment is critical. The designers of *Vanguard* might not have seen the need to be so meticulous in Control," Shenez explained. She peered under the workbenches and then stood and shrugged at them. "There's nothing there now."

Gannett prodded at a loose piece of metal experimentally. The robot ignored him.

Mellon had settled into Communications Station 3 and initiated diagnostic checks. He watched the green lights as they popped up until, within a few seconds, he nodded in satisfaction. "Well, we have communications. Shenez, check Station 2. LARNA's indicating that one as Helm."

Shenez worked over the indicated board for a few moments. "All set and active," she pronounced.

"Let's take a look at our visitor," Mellon said. He tapped buttons on the console before him until the screen on Station 1 lit up.

A series of wire frame images flashed briefly across the screen, intertwined with numbers and symbols Mellon recognized as spatial coordinates, until it settled on a single image. The *Vanguard*, represented by a white square tagged with a continually updated coordinates flag, moved slowly across the center of the screen. In the upper left quadrant, a blue square tagged "Unknown" above its coordinates readout, advanced toward *Vanguard* on an intercept course.

H. David Blalock

"Can we get a visual on the alien?" Mellon asked.

"Standby."

In a few seconds, the tactical display was replaced by real-time image of a star field. Mellon guessed LARNA was using the astronomy lab cameras. He caught motion in the center of the screen.

"Magnify," he said.

The screen flickered. The moving star resolved itself into an object roughly cubical in shape. "Maximum magnification," LARNA stated.

They watched the two targets merge for a few moments. Mellon watched the blue square in growing fascination. It was really happening. After 3,000 years, they were going to re-enter the waking world, and on top of that, they were making first contact.

He looked at Shenez, noted the curves of her face. He began to have mixed feelings about the situation. Would they be friendly? The *Vanguard's* crew was down to its minimum. After all this time, to fail at their original mission would make the sacrifice of those others meaningless. Did they have the right to risk that? For all they knew, they were the only survivors of the human race. So much would have happened back on Earth, so many generations, so many crises. They hadn't even had time to go through LARNA's logs, to readout her records on communications with base.

"Time to intercept?" he asked.

"Forty-six hours, eighteen minutes, thirty-five seconds."

"Method of propulsion?" Mellon asked.

"Unknown," LARNA responded. "Probable gravometric manipulation."

"Outside a solar system?" Gannett said, puzzled.

"Didn't you get any physics training?" Shenez sneered.

"I'm a bean counter, not a physicist," Gannett snapped back at her.

"Once the ship has gained enough speed, it exits its home system," Mellon stepped in. "After that, only course changes affect its speed."

"So it could fly on forever with practically no fuel?"

"Right."

"Amazing." Gannett peered at the screen. "So, there's really no way of telling where this ship originated."

"Right again," Shenez said. "It could be local, could be tourist."

Eclectic Dreams

"Not that we care," a voice came from behind them.

They turned to find Jafa and six large men in security uniforms craning their necks at the equipment.

"Hey, Jafa," Mellon smiled. "I see you found some colleagues."

Jafa stepped into the room and looked around. "What happened?" he asked. "We just came from Main Control. It's trashed, too. So is Security and Medical."

"There's a new life form aboard that digests metal," Shenez explained.

The security men tensed, their eyes darting. "Alien?" Jafa inquired.

Mellon shook his head. "It seems to be a mutant form of a terrestrial slug. Large, fast, mobile."

"How many?"

Mellon looked at Shenez and Gannett. "We don't know."

Jafa turned to his men. "Sims, Johnson, you check the Engineering decks. Kranston, Clark: Logistics. Martin, Edwards: Rec and Crew decks. Reports on the quarter hour. Any evidence to be coordinated with me. Go!" The six men scattered in couples. Jafa turned back to Mellon. "Well, I have good news and I have bad news."

"What's the bad news?"

"None of the Admin staff survived. That means we're into secondary command structure."

They gave that a moment to sink in. Mellon had personally known several of the administrative staff. When he had last seen them (had it really been three millennia ago?) they were enthusiastically discussing their plans for the future. Mellon closed his eyes and tried to remember what each of them looked like. It bothered him a little that their faces didn't come to mind as quickly as he would have liked.

"The good news is," Jafa went on, "Communications Officer Mellon is next in line for command."

Mellon's eyes popped open in shock. "What?" was all he could get out.

"Congratulations, ol' buddy," Jafa grinned, thumping Mellon soundly on the back. "We're all yours."

"But, I've got no training in command," Mellon protested.

"Nothing like a little On-The-Job," Jafa said. "Besides," he grinned again, "there's only 16 of us. How hard can that be?"

H. David Blalock

Mellon rubbed his forehead. He was getting a headache.

* * *

The *Vanguard* was a deep-space colonization ship, built in orbit around Mars. Approximately twenty-two miles long, six miles wide and seven miles deep, it was intended to provide for a crew of 320 for ten years while terra-forming the target planet. It was designed to contain all the supplies and equipment needed for this purpose, first in a series of ships that would eventually number in the hundreds.

Kade Mellon stood in the forward observation turret, gazing at the stars that slowly slid by. Below him stretched the *Vanguard* like a cluttered metal landscape, the horizon barely discernable in the surrounding dark. Maintenance work lights flickered along its length, false stars that flared and died as the `bots went about their endless chores. Over his shoulder, the *Vanguard's* dormant engines loomed like massive spires, blocking the starlight, forming black silhouettes.

"Are you all right?"

Shenez slipped up to stand beside him in the turret. He smiled wanly at her and turned back to the panorama.

"I guess I should feel lucky," she said.

Mellon looked at her quizzically.

"Only four women survived," she told him. "That means each of us get to pick two husbands."

Mellon nodded quietly. "That'll leave a couple of guys out, though, won't it?"

She smiled wickedly. "Yeah, the ugly ones."

He had to chuckle in spite of himself.

"Jafa's men have counted over 300 of the new lifeform on board," she continued. "He calls them `speed slugs'." They both laughed at that. "Yeah, well, one of the men found out they don't take well to cold, so we should be able to contain them using portable icing units and temperature regulation."

"Good."

Eclectic Dreams

"I've asked them to bring me some of the eggs for study. Hydroponics isn't as bad off as some of the other parts of the ship, so I'll use it as Medical Lab for now, until we can make repairs."

"Okay."

They stood in silence for a moment, looking at the stars.

"So much is happening at once," Mellon said at last. He looked at her. "What if." He choked off the question and evaded her eyes.

"You'll do just fine, Kade," she said softly, placing a warm hand on his arm. "We'll all help. You're not alone."

He nodded and gave her a quick smile. "Thanks."

She seemed about to say something more, then just tightened her grip on his arm momentarily, returning the smile. "Come on," she said. "There are a thousand things need doing."

* * *

LARNA's logs were extensive: 3000 years of telemetry, scans, and communications data. Mellon gave Jafa and his men the responsibility of damage assessment and control. Shenez and one assistant took over Medical, as she had the prerequisite degrees and training. Gannett and the remaining five survivors were given the unenviable job of inventory control. For the next twenty-four hours, this kept everyone busy. Mellon coordinated their efforts and fed the pertinent data into LARNA. There was a brief excitement when Jafa's detail found a huge speed slug nest on one of the engineering decks, but that soon calmed. A routine of checks and reports began to develop. Mellon marveled at the adaptability of the human animal: taking enormous odds and reducing them to routine chores.

Nineteen hours from intercept, LARNA sounded an alarm. Mellon swung around from his data entry and slapped the response key.

"*Vanguard* is being scanned," LARNA reported.

"Nature of scan?"

"Passive spectral analysis via laser-similar device. Possible thermal and ultrasound probes."

"They're looking for life signs," Mellon mumbled to himself.

"Probability high," LARNA agreed.

H. David Blalock

"When will we be able to scan them?"

"Standby — Scans indicate no lifeforms aboard the alien vessel," LARNA said.

Mellon frowned. "No lifeforms?"

"Correct."

"A deep space probe, maybe? Like the old Pioneer or Voyager?"

"Probability high," LARNA judged.

"But, it changed course to intercept. Why would a deep space probe do that?"

"Insufficient data."

Mellon grimaced at LARNA's console. He flipped on the ship intercom.

"Attention. All personnel report to Communications. We have some new information on our visitor."

* * *

"Maybe it's a weapon."

Mellon glared at Jafa's lieutenant; the beefy redhead named Harold Johnson. "How do you figure that?"

"Well, maybe it's programmed to find and destroy alien ships," Johnson said.

"Why would it scan for life signs?"

"Could be looking for a particular signature," the security man insisted.

"I don't believe it's a weapon," Shenez said. "LARNA would have scanned explosives or other destructive agents. Any evidence of that, LARNA?"

"None," the computer replied.

Mellon scanned the gathering. Twelve men and four women: all that remained of the *Vanguard* complement. Again the weight of his responsibility hit him. He shrugged off his anxiety with an effort.

"I think it's imperative we try to communicate with them," he told them and watched for reactions. They looked at each other for a few moments before several tried to speak at once.

"I'd like to examine the data further before."

Eclectic Dreams

"Do they realize we're here yet? Maybe—"

"What if they're hostile? We might—"

"Maybe we could change course."

Mellon held up a hand for silence. Jafa stepped up beside him and glared at the rest. Quiet settled over the group.

"We're all nervous about this," Mellon admitted. "It's normal fear of the unknown. But we can't put this off." He tried to put as much confidence in his voice as he could. "They're scanning us now. We have to assume they know *Vanguard* is manned. They've changed course in the past to intercept. They would probably do so again. Turning to run could be misunderstood. We need to be sure they comprehend who and what we are, just as we need to know about them. That requires communication."

There were still a few questions in some of their faces, but he sensed they were following him, albeit reluctantly. They knew he was supposed to be the new commander, but they also knew him as Kade, the glorified telephone operator who used to route their calls back home before they left Earth's system and went into their long sleep. This was the first time they'd had to recognize his authority, and for some it was more difficult than for others. Two security men, Johnson and the swarthy fellow named Kranston, looked at Jafa for confirmation. Jafa glowered at them until they looked away.

"LARNA," Mellon went on, "initiate first contact communications protocol. Hail the alien vessel."

"Stand by," LARNA replied.

"LARNA will broadcast on all frequencies in the radio spectrum first. The message is a simple mathematic progression followed by a more complex friendship message. She will broadcast in strings at various speeds. If she gets no decipherable response, she will then try the higher frequencies, then lower frequencies," Mellon explained.

"And if we get no response at all?" Johnson asked.

Mellon looked at each of them as he spoke, trying to imprint on them the importance of what he had to say by force of will. "No response could mean any number of things. We must remember, we are dealing with non-human minds. This is unprecedented. There are no guarantees

H. David Blalock

anything we do will work. If we receive no response to LARNA's calls, we will try visual signals."

"That means waiting until they're very close before we find out whether or not they're friendly," Johnson said. There was a general murmur of ill ease.

"That they will get closer is a given right now, anyway," Shenez reminded the crowd, "whether we're able to communicate with them or not."

Johnson glumly lapsed back into silence.

"How long will this take?" asked a blonde girl standing close to Gannett. She clutched his arm anxiously and he patted her hand softly.

Mellon gave the girl, who he believed was named Melanie, what he hoped was a reassuring smile. "Not long, I would think. LARNA should have a report within the hour."

Jafa stepped forward. "I think we should get back to work until LARNA comes back with the results."

"Good idea," Shenez agreed. "No use brooding over something we can't help."

"I'll announce LARNA's progress on the hour," Mellon promised. He paused to consider his next words. He had to send them back to their routine with a sense of purpose and a modicum of security if things were to remain under control. Johnson and Kranston had looks of sullen uncertainty. Gannett was chewing his lower lip and the girl slipped her arm around his with a frown on her face. Jafa watched the others with a cool self-assurance Mellon was certain was staged for their benefit. Shenez and her assistant, a youngish man named Sender, were speaking in hushed tones. She briefly caught his eye and smiled an encouragement to him. He felt a wave of gratitude for that. "We're all in this together," he said at last. "I don't intend to keep anybody in the dark about anything. Nor do I intend to make decisions unilaterally. We have the rest of our lives to work out any differences we may have now," this directed at Johnson and Kranston, "so let's work together for the next few days until this is settled."

Johnson exchanged looks with him and Jafa, then nodded slightly and turned to leave with Kranston in tow. Mellon saw them talking quietly as the Comm Lab portal shut.

Eclectic Dreams

"I don't know, Jafa," he said as the others wandered away singly and in groups. "Johnson may be trouble."

"He was supposed to be promoted to command just before departure," Jafa revealed. "Somehow the paperwork got delayed."

Mellon nodded. It figured that a 3000-year-old bureaucratic screw-up would put a nasty wrinkle on a touchy situation.

"Still," Jafa went on, "I wouldn't worry. He has enough sense to know when to pick his time to move."

Mellon eyed his friend, who grinned and winked at him.

"Just kidding," Jafa said.

"Yeah," Mellon grunted.

* * *

After what seemed an eternity, LARNA signaled she had completed her attempts at contacting the alien. There had been no response. The ships continued to close toward intercept. If the aliens had received any of LARNA's messages, they gave no indication.

Mellon gnawed on the inside of his cheek as he reread LARNA's report. He wiped his hand across his face and blinked at the screen, hoping against hope he was misreading it, but there it was. No response to radio, no response to infrared, no response to ultraviolet, no response to X-ray, no response, no response, no response!

He had to work in the dark now. There were so many unknowns. While LARNA had been busy, so had he. He had gone through the ship's library, researching anything that might help the situation. He'd reviewed the first contact protocols, checked the library's records of initial contact between human civilizations, researched and sought out information on speculative contacts with alien life, non-fiction and fiction.

The overall result was not promising. Almost without exception, initial contact had resulted in one or both parties suffering appalling losses, either physical or cultural. The *Vanguard* could afford neither. But, if one or the other of the parties had to suffer, Mellon finally determined the *Vanguard* crew would not be that party. No matter what he personally believed, he had a responsibility to protect those other

H. David Blalock

fifteen crewmen. Even so, it was nearly half an hour before he thumbed the ship's intercom open.

"Attention. LARNA has just reported that the alien does not respond to her hails. She estimates intercept in a little over six hours. Jafa, please come to Comm Lab."

He flicked the switch off and passed a hand across his face again. He had hoped it would not come to this, but now he had to consider the possibility the alien was hostile. They might not be malicious, not in the human sense, but their very presence could jeopardize the *Vanguard's* crew. Uncontained contact with an alien specie could spell disaster for the little group. He had to quickly provide for a worst case scenario, and, if he knew Jafa, the security chief would already have at least one plan ready.

As it turned out, Jafa had indeed considered a worst case scenario. Not only had he considered it, he had a plan for preliminary actions. When Mellon questioned his requests for some of the ship's supplies and fuel, Jafa shook his head and smiled.

"You want to be prepared, right?" Jafa said. "We need to insure our survival against hostile action by superior forces. These supplies will do that. Only after we've secured our presence can we consider a counter action."

"You really believe we'll be beaten and have to go into hiding?" Mellon asked.

"What do you think? We're talking about a worst case here. Where could we go but into hiding somewhere on board? It's too late to abandon ship, not that we'd want to do that anyway."

Mellon stared at the plan report and chewed the inside of his cheek.

"Look, Kade," Jafa said, "this is my job. I have over 3,000 years experience. Trust me."

Mellon sighed and agreed to the assignment of the supplies. Jafa promptly sent one of his men to see to their disposition.

"Receiving transmission from the alien vessel," LARNA announced suddenly.

Mellon and Jafa spun to look at the tactical display. Aside from the fact that the symbols denoting the two ships were closer together, nothing had changed.

Eclectic Dreams

"Nature of transmission?" Mellon asked.

"Nanosecond bursts across one hundred gigahertz to three hundred fifty gigahertz containing discrete binary packets."

Mellon and Jafa exchanged frowns. "Sounds like some kind of machine code," Mellon ventured.

"Probability high," LARNA agreed.

"Can you decode it?"

"Stand by."

There was a seemingly interminable silence while the ship's clock ticked away four seconds.

"Binary packets contain mathematical progressions correlating to frequency wavelength of transmissions."

Mellon slapped the console before him and grinned at Jafa. "It's more than just machine code! They've recognized something out of the ordinary and are attempting to establish communication."

"But," Jafa puzzled, "why are they using machine code?"

Mellon shook his head. "It just seems like machine code, because our machines are the only ones who use it. It's the simplest form of communication. On, off. State of charge, state of discharge, all in a definite, repetitive pattern denoting intelligent design. We have no other way of dealing directly with them without knowing their language, their culture, their anatomy, a thousand other variables."

Jafa eyed him warily and let the matter drop. Mellon was too excited by the news to notice his security officer's nervousness. All he could think of was that it might not be necessary to assume the aliens were hostile, to prepare for that worst case scenario as if it were fait accompli.

"Alien continues to broadcast," LARNA reported.

"Right," Mellon said, settling into the task at hand. "We have to respond in kind first, to let them know we receive and recognize their message. LARNA, rebroadcast their message, but tack on the binary code for the atomic weight of each natural element."

"Broadcasting."

Another few seconds dragged by.

"Broadcast complete. Alien is responding." Another pause. "Response is previous messages repeated followed by new binary packets. Decoding."

H. David Blalock

"Kade," Jafa said quietly.

"Yeah?" Mellon was watching the communications board closely for indications of anomalies.

"Kade, the helm station just alarmed."

Mellon felt a heavy chill settle over him as he swung around to face the helm. LARNA had not announced any malfunction, yet there was the evidence: the *Vanguard* was slowing, using precious fuel to stop its own forward motion.

"What the -?" Mellon passed his hands over the diagnostics board at helm. Everything came back green except the mission parameter for course heading and speed.

"LARNA!" Mellon shouted in spite of himself.

"Ready and on line."

"Why has the ship slowed?"

"Directive accepted from authorized source."

Mellon stared at the board as if it had just crawled out of the wall and dropped in his lap. "What? Repeat that."

"Directive accepted from authorized source."

"Damned machine!" Jafa huffed. "It says it's only following orders."

"Whose orders?" Mellon asked, frustrated. "LARNA, whose orders? Identify source of orders."

There was a series of clicks, squeals, hisses and snaps from LARNA, followed by silence. Mellon went back to the communications panel and tweaked some knobs. That had sounded like interference.

"Say again, LARNA."

Again there was a series of odd noises.

"I got a really bad feeling about this," Jafa said.

A sudden, horrible insight struck Mellon. "LARNA," he asked, already knowing the answer, but dreading to hear it confirmed, "are you relating the identity codes for the alien ship?"

"Affirmative."

Mellon hung his head and closed his eyes. This couldn't be happening. Had he allowed LARNA to be manipulated by ordering her to communicate with the alien? How had the alien broken their security codes? They were supposed to be humanly impossible to break.

Humanly impossible. Damn!

Eclectic Dreams

"What does that mean, Kade?" Jafa was asking, becoming increasingly alarmed. "Is LARNA saying the alien ordered her to stop the ship and she *did*? Kade?"

Mellon clenched his teeth. "Settle down," he told Jafa. "Don't lose your head. We're not certain we actually have a problem. It could just be miscommunication."

Jafa put an iron hand on Mellon's shoulder and turned him around to face him. "Miscommunication? I may not know much, but I do know that this ship doesn't have enough fuel for stop and go driving, Kade. We need all we have to get where we're going, to stay alive."

"I know that, too, Jafa—"

"Tell LARNA to disconnect from—" Jafa turned to the helm panel. "LARNA, release helm control to manual."

"Unable to comply."

Jafa glared at Mellon. "Why are you unable to comply, LARNA?" he asked, still scowling at Mellon.

"Helm is committed to intercept. New course correction already accomplished. Interference with course correction will prevent intercept."

"Damned right it would!" Jafa shouted, finally turning away from Mellon to bellow at LARNA. "Release this ship to manual control immediately!"

"Unable to comply," LARNA replied impassively.

Jafa leaned over the helm controls and pounded on them furiously. Mellon let him vent. There was really very little else to do. LARNA had control of the ship, and they were now bent on an earlier intercept with the alien. Just from looking at the tactical display, he could tell it would be less than three hours. Jafa took one last look at Mellon, a look that said volumes about who he blamed for this turn of events, and left the room without another word.

Mellon realized at that moment that the destiny of the *Vanguard's* crew had just changed, and perhaps not for the better.

* * *

H. David Blalock

The alien closed to within fifty meters before turning to parallel their drift. *Vanguard* had not been allowed to come to a complete standstill, although the forward speed was down to a mere 374 meters per second. The alien hung alongside *Vanguard* as Mellon, Shenez, and Sender watched it on the hull cameras.

Jafa and his men had disappeared into the bowels of the ship, armed and intent on their mission. They would serve as the last ditch defense against any hostile action from the alien. Elsewhere in *Vanguard*, the remainder of the crew was tying up loose ends before reporting to their own secure stations, where they would follow the situation on slave monitors.

Mellon eyed the length of the other ship. It was an incomprehensible conglomeration of geometric shapes formed into a vaguely cubical form. It reflected *Vanguard's* lights from a dull brownish resin that sealed over the underlying framework. He adjusted the focus. A different level of the ship snapped into clarity.

"It's like you can see right into it," he said. "Except for that resin, or whatever, it doesn't seem to have an outer hull at all."

"That would be consistent with LARNA's inability to locate any life signs aboard," Shenez said. "Still, they could be so alien that LARNA may have scanned them and not recognized them as lifeforms."

Mellon frowned. "What do you mean?"

"Well, LARNA is just a computer after all. Artificial intelligence still has its limitations. If, for example, the aliens' bodies were based on a heavier element than carbon, LARNA might not have found enough parameters to define them as life." Shenez smiled apologetically at his scowl. "She might have catalogued them as something else entirely."

"So," Sender said, examining the screen closely, "we could be looking right at the aliens and still not know it?"

"Hell, that whole ship would be a lifeform," Shenez said, motioning at the image.

Mellon looked again at the vessel. Suddenly, the resin seemed more than just inert lacquer. It glistened with subdued menace, and the shadows between the shapes under the resin moved oddly. He shook his head and the image faded, leaving the alien ship an enigmatic cube again.

"Let's not let our imagination get the better of us, Sara," he said.

Eclectic Dreams

Shenez shrugged. "Just going over the possibilities."

"What's that?" Sender said excitedly, pointing.

Mellon tried to follow the man's finger, but got lost in the intricacies of the angles and shadows. "Where?"

"Ten degrees azimuth, fifty points off center."

He zeroed in on the indicated coordinates and caught movement. A group of shapes had detached itself from the main body and was floating toward *Vanguard*.

"LARNA, scan approaching object," he commanded.

"Stand by."

Seconds ticked by. Mellon realized he was holding his breath and exhaled deliberately.

"Object contains no lifeforms or explosive devices," LARNA stated.

"Speculate on purpose."

"Automated probe."

"Makes sense," Shenez put in. "Anything they got off their scans might have been inconclusive to them as far as determining whether *Vanguard* could be considered friendly. An automated probe would present an acceptable target for an attacker to tip their hand."

"Rather a paranoid analysis," Mellon observed dryly.

Shenez shrugged again without looking at him.

They watched as the probe floated up the length of *Vanguard*, stopping at irregular intervals for no apparent reason. Each time it moved on, Mellon could feel the tension in his back ease, only to tighten at the next pause in the alien's course.

"Receiving broadcast from alien," LARNA startled them.

"What is it this time?"

"Request for access to interior of ship."

"They want in?" Sender asked, nervously.

"At least they're asking permission," Shenez reminded him.

Mellon pursed his lips and considered that. "LARNA, play the request." As he expected, there was a sudden crash of machine language from LARNA's speakers. "Is that translatable into human speech?"

"Negative."

He gave Shenez a telling look. Her eyebrows rose as she realized the implication as well. Sender looked at them in growing alarm.

H. David Blalock

"What? What is it?" Sender blurted.

"The alien has been inside LARNA long enough to have accessed our language banks," Mellon explained. "They could have had their machines work up a translator, or LARNA could have provided one, to communicate directly with us. Instead, they continue to communicate through LARNA."

"So?"

"I'm beginning to believe this is just an unmanned probe," Mellon said.

Sender looked back at the screen. "That's good right? Just a probe, sent out to make observations. That wouldn't represent a threat."

"Or," Shenez said, her face settling into hard lines, "an intelligent machine ship."

They watched the probe in silence for a few minutes. Mellon tried to make out any detail of the ship that might give some clue as to its builders: a propensity for a certain shape or specific number of shapes in a group. Humans tended to arrange things in pairs, reflecting a bilateral nature, or in groups of three, five and ten reflecting cultural bias in mathematical progressions. He could see no such indications either in the main ship or the probe, though how significant that could have been in itself might be a matter of debate as well.

"It's attaching itself to the hull," Shenez noted. "Does it plan to wait outside until it gets an answer?"

A flash of light on screen revealed the probe using a form of cutting tool on the *Vanguard's* hull.

"Apparently not," Mellon observed. "Perhaps LARNA read a request in what was actually an announcement of intent." He turned to Sender. "Contact Jafa. Tell him where it's coming in."

"Right." The assistant went to a nearby console and began urgently speaking into it.

"It may get very ugly from here," Shenez said quietly, watching Sender with concern.

"I know," Mellon replied. "We just have to remember, somebody has to keep things in perspective."

She met his look and smiled. Her hands sought his and they briefly exchanged a silent concord.

Eclectic Dreams

"Inner hull breach imminent," LARNA announced.

"Damage control and security report to B Section, Level 4," Mellon snapped into the intercom.

"On our way," Jafa's voice responded.

Mellon leaned back and watched the screen. The probe was removing a section of *Vanguard's* hull and appeared to briefly examine it before slipping inside. It was only then he noticed the second probe as it filed in behind the first. A third appeared, but paused at the breach.

"Second alien probe is in, Jafa," Mellon said into the intercom.

"Understood," was the terse response.

"Look at that, would you?" Shenez breathed.

They watched as the third probe began reattaching the separated piece, sealing *Vanguard's* hull.

"I don't know if that's encouraging or not," Mellon said.

"Obsessive compulsive aliens?" Shenez said, grinning. Mellon smiled back at her. They both knew her banter was meant to cover their anxiety.

Jafa's men approached the alien probes with weapons ready. The machines had anchored themselves to the bulkheads and deck through a complicated series of tubes and cables. The men slipped around the machines quietly, alert for any movement or indication the probes were reacting to their presence.

The alien machines ignored them.

At first their investigation was tentative, cautious, even fearful. They planned for hours before taking any action. Then, as it became obvious the probes tolerated their curiosity, they became bolder.

They discovered the probes were made of a metallic ceramic material with no apparent joints or welds. They seemed to be made of a substance pliable enough to be formed but hard as steel. Shenez and her assistant spent hours testing the surfaces, measuring it and making endless notes, always under the watchful eye of one of Jafa's men.

Eventually, though, even Jafa had to admit the aliens didn't seem to present a threat, at least not to the ship itself. All of *Vanguard's* systems came back on line including helm. LARNA revealed the ship still had enough fuel to complete the mission in spite of the alien interference.

H. David Blalock

Mellon knew the alien must eventually manifest something of its purpose. What effect that might have on the crew and their mission was, he knew, his responsibility to discover and handle. Jafa continued surveillance of the probes, but as the hours lengthened into days and then into weeks, the sense of urgency and peril began to fade.

* * *

He sat before the monitor at the makeshift command station and watched as Johnson leaned casually against an alien probe, stretching and yawning. Mellon found himself marveling again at the adaptability of humanity. Although they knew the alien might be dangerous, Johnson and the rest of Jafa's men had come to a kind of peace about having the aliens aboard. The surveillance team had shrunk from five to one, shifts from four hours to three.

He had asked Jafa if the alien really presented a threat.

"The unknown is always a threat," Jafa had replied, and gone back to his business. It would take more than just a few weeks to heal the rift of trust between them.

So, Mellon watched the monitors and consulted LARNA, directed ship's operations, settled personal disputes. Always in the background was one question.

Why were they there?

"LARNA told me they communicate with the mother ship constantly," he told Shenez as they sat looking at the monitor.

Shenez nodded and said nothing. She offered him a mug of steaming liquid. He took it and tasted soup.

"They're watching us, Sara. They're watching us, learning about us, while we know no more about them than we did three weeks ago."

Shenez sipped at her own mug. "Have you tried getting through to them again?"

"Of course I have," he snapped, then gave her an apologetic look. "I've had LARNA try hundreds of language combinations, thousands of dialectic constructs. They refuse to answer."

"Refuse?"

Eclectic Dreams

"Well, they don't answer," he qualified. "I guess my frustration makes it seem they're refusing."

"Maybe they don't recognize what you're doing as attempts to communicate."

He frowned at her. "What?"

She shrugged and pushed an errant strand of hair out of her face. "They seem to get along well enough with LARNA. Maybe that's the only language they know."

"But—"

"Look, we hear a bird song, we may suspect there's a reason behind that, but do we think it's singing to us? Or, if we hear a dog bark, do we assume it's attempting to communicate with us?"

"You're not inferring the aliens consider us lesser life forms?" Mellon asked.

"No, just different." She watched the screen for a moment. Johnson was having a meal near one of the probes, his weapon at his feet. "LARNA, to them, is the one in charge. She runs the ship, she tends its needs, she coordinates its mission."

Slowly it dawned on him what she was saying. Mentally, he kicked himself for not having seen it before. "Why didn't you say something? Why did you let me struggle so?"

"Don't give me so much credit, Kade," she said. "It's only just come to me, too. We've had so much to do that there's been little time for this kind of problem-solving."

"For you, maybe, but this is supposed to be my job," Mellon groused.

"One you've only been in for a month," she pointed out. "Don't beat yourself up so much."

Mellon grudgingly let it drop. "LARNA," he said, "can you translate a message to the alien in machine language?"

"Affirmative. Message must be simple and in form of statement. Message must not exceed eight commands."

"Why didn't you inform me of this before?"

"First contact protocol. All alien contact will be under strict control of commander. LARNA is not to initiate contact or allow contact with the alien to go unreported."

"Administrative paranoia," Shenez said.

H. David Blalock

"Security directive," LARNA corrected.

Mellon and Shenez exchanged startled looks. "Author of the directive?" he asked.

"Authorized user."

He didn't have to ask LARNA to give the name. He knew it would come out as an indecipherable jumble of clicks and hisses.

So, the alien had realized at least enough to know that LARNA was not the intelligent force behind *Vanguard*. Their scans would have led them to suspect the human crew was the real leader of the mission, but they must still be uncertain. What else on board *Vanguard* could they consider *Vanguard's* designer? Were the aliens so different physically and culturally that they couldn't see the obvious?

He chewed the inside of his cheek and watched the probes on the monitor. Johnson was cleaning up from his meal. The probes sat immobile and seemingly inert behind him.

"OK, so they've made a kind of effort from their end to contact us. By preventing LARNA, which they recognize as AI, from initiating communications, they can be sure anything directed at them would originate either from an automated system or an intelligence onboard *Vanguard*."

Shenez nodded her agreement. "Fine. And maybe they don't respond to your efforts because the signals make no sense to them. Dogs barking, birds chirping, that kind of thing."

A movement onscreen caught his eye. Mellon leaned forward to get a better look. Johnson was leaning against the probe with his weapon under one arm. There was a flash of color, silverish green, near his left foot.

"What did Jafa say the probes were made of?" he asked, knowing the answer but hoping he remembered wrong.

"Some kind of metallic ceramic, I think. Why?"

"Damn!" he shouted as he slammed the intercom open. "Johnson!"

The security man instantly snapped upright, his weapon coming ready.

"There's a slug next to your foot inside the probe framework," Mellon said.

Eclectic Dreams

Johnson hopped away from his position, spinning to point his weapon at the indicated spot. The slug flowed out of sight, leaving a shining trail to mark its passage.

"Kade, if those things damage the probes – " Shenez began.

"I know! I know!" He thumbed the communications link to Jafa. "You there?"

"What's up?" Jafa's voice came back.

"The slugs have discovered the probes. We may have a problem."

"Understood."

Mellon had a bitter taste in his mouth. He realized he'd bitten the inside of his cheek and was bleeding.

Jafa's men, armed with freezer units, eventually flushed over a dozen slugs from the probes. Through it all, the aliens remained quietly immobile, although LARNA continued to report a steady stream of telemetry flowed from them to the mother ship. The humans worked for over three hours, then, suddenly, the probes shivered to life.

The men scattered for cover as the probes exuded a semi-transparent resin. The liquid flowed over the exposed framework until it completely encased the units, hardening within minutes. A thick cloud of cryogenic gas frosted the newly encased internal surfaces.

"Looks like they've learned how to protect themselves from the slugs," Mellon noted.

"Receiving message," LARNA advised.

"Relay."

"Message follows," LARNA said, and produced a cacophony of sound, filling her screens with symbols.

Mellon switched the speakers off in irritation. "I swear she did that on purpose."

"Well," Shenez said, motioning at the screens, "it's obvious this is untranslatable. Maybe LARNA is simply doing the best she can."

Mellon grimaced and studied the screens. Something about the symbols that danced across them clicked. "LARNA, display telemetry in binary code." The symbols blinked into a cascade of ones and zeroes. He watched the jumble go by for a moment, his hunch gaining strength. "Translate this into standard graphic format."

"Standard bit map format," LARNA said. The screen gave off multicolored snow.

"Next format."

"Standard resolution telemetric graphics interface format."

A shape appeared on screen, bright against a dark background.

"Kade!" Shenez gasped. "That looks like a star, maybe."

"LARNA, high resolution GIF," Mellon ordered.

A starfield jumped into focus. In the center was a yellowish-white star. Nine satellites spun around it.

The screen went suddenly blank.

Mellon wiped his face with a cold hand and chewed the inside of his cheek. The feeling he had botched the first real opportunity they had encountered began nagging at him. Was there still something he might do to salvage the situation?

"Kade, look," Shenez nudged him back from his worry.

One of the probes was moving.

"What's it doing, LARNA?" Mellon shouted, a little dismayed at the way his voice broke.

"Probe appears to be gathering atmospheric and environmental samples."

Mellon considered that for a moment. "Are they still transmitting to the mothership?"

"Telemetry between mothership and probes has ceased. Mothership is pulling away from *Vanguard*."

"What?" Mellon slapped at the screen controls until the exterior of *Vanguard* leapt into focus. Sure enough, the alien ship was veering off from *Vanguard's* course. The third alien probe still hung against the *Vanguard's* hull near the entry point, apparently inert.

He had no time to mull on the implications of the mothership's departure before Shenez shouted at him to switch back inside. The second probe had detached itself from the deck and was moving slowly, almost nonchalantly, around the deck. Jafa and his men appeared with weapons ready, spreading out as if to surround the two aliens. The first probe ignored their movements completely, but the second seemed to recognize the mens' presence. No matter where Jafa moved, it always seemed to be facing him, though it never made a quick movement.

Eclectic Dreams

Mellon didn't know how he recognized the alien was following Jafa in particular, but somehow it seemed right.

"Peace," the alien uttered.

The men gawked at it, rooted to the spot. Mellon and Shenez stared at the image of the probe, wondering if they had heard correctly. The probe gave off a whining noise that sounded like a turbine slowing. It seemed to wait for a response.

"Mellon, did you get that?" Jafa's voice broke the silence.

"Yeah, I got it. I just don't know what to make of it."

"Do you figure it can understand speech now?" Jafa asked.

Mellon looked at Shenez, who shrugged. "Maybe. Shall I come down?"

"No! You stay where you are," Jafa said. "If this goes sour, you need to be clear of it."

"Well, you can't keep me from coming down," Shenez said, and bolted for the door.

Mellon chewed his cheek. The probe remained still, waiting.

"Somebody needs to talk to it," Mellon said at last.

"Okay, boss." Jafa stood out in the open and, arms extended, dropped his weapon. He walked toward the probe, empty palms upward. Mellon gripped the console until his knuckles whitened. Jafa stopped about ten feet from the probe and leaned forward, trying to locate the origin of the voice.

"There's something like a speaker here," he said. "Could be where the voice is coming from."

The turbine whine suddenly began and Jafa stepped slowly back a couple of paces.

"Peace," the probe repeated.

The whine wound down and once more the probe lapsed into silence.

"Now what, boss?" Jafa asked.

Mellon frantically racked his brain for an answer. All that research into initial contacts, and now nothing seemed appropriate. Here he was, in charge of mankind's first contact with an alien specie, and he was dumbfounded.

"You still there, Mellon?"

H. David Blalock

"Yeah, hang on." He was glad there was no one to see him now. The Comm Lab was quiet except for the ever-present hum of the ship's systems. How had he got here? He wiped his face and saw his hand wet with sweat. What should he tell Jafa? He had to say something, and soon.

The probe's turbine noise sounded and terminated again in the word "Peace."

He had to do something and hope it didn't get Jafa killed. His mind told him the aliens weren't a threat, but his gut was awash in fear.

"Okay, Jafa," he began, putting as much confidence in his voice as he could, "let's see if it understands what it's saying. I want you to walk up to it and touch the speaker. Repeat whatever it says."

Jafa stiffened and hesitated for a moment before moving toward the probe. His action was deliberate and slow, and Mellon was reminded of the movements of the probe previously. Jafa reached the alien and touched it near a dark, roughly octagonal area. He cleared his throat.

"Peace," he said.

Immediately the turbine whined and the probe said "Life."

"Life," Jafa responded.

Shenez appeared on screen, plainly startled at Jafa's nearness to the probe.

"What's going on?" she demanded.

"Male," the alien whined.

"Male," Jafa said.

The probe pivoted around Jafa, who kept his hand on the speaker. He glanced anxiously around.

"Stand still, Jafa," Mellon instructed. "I don't think it means you any harm, but you might accidentally get in its way."

Jafa nodded and went back to concentrating on the probe.

The machine floated slowly, with Jafa in tow, almost cautiously, toward Shenez. She watched it warily, looking occasionally at Jafa. "Kade," she said worriedly, "what do I do?"

"Stand still," Mellon told her. "It hasn't harmed anyone yet. I doubt seriously it will begin now."

"Female," the probe thrummed.

"Female," Jafa dutifully repeated.

Eclectic Dreams

There was a rancorous sound, almost a klaxon, from the probe. "Female," it said.

"Repeat that, Sala," Mellon ordered. "I believe it's trying to make us understand it knows the difference."

Shenez nodded, looked at the probe, and motioned to herself. "Female."

A pleasing musical tone sounded from the probe. It settled to the deck and a section of its framework moved. A compartment appeared in its side, open to the ship. They looked inside to see the remains of a slug, probably one the alien had gathered after the last encounter with the creatures.

"Enemy," the probe spun, and followed the word with both the buzzing noise and the musical note it had emitted before.

Jafa and Shenez turned to each other and exchanged looks. Jafa spoke first.

"What do we tell it?" he asked.

Mellon knew that, if they responded in the affirmative, it could brand humanity as a militant species, with only enemies and friends. On the other hand, if they responded in the negative, it might confuse the alien. Why would they be eliminating friends? Wouldn't that stigmatize them even worse?

"LARNA," he called.

"On line and ready."

"Analyze the signal sounds from the alien. Can you produce a sound exactly between them in frequency?"

"Affirmative."

"Do it now."

A flat, oddly timbred musical tone sounded from the ship's speakers. Jafa and Shenez jumped at the sound, and Mellon had to clench his teeth against its resonance.

"Stop," he commanded.

The tone ended.

Quiet settled over the tableau as Mellon supposed the probe analyzed the response.

"Friend," it ventured, repeating the signals afterward.

"Same tone, LARNA."

H. David Blalock

The flat bark sounded again. Once more the probe was silent for a few seconds.

There was a clicking inside the probe and a flat plate slowly emerged to press against the resin seal. Light flickered across its surface until an image, tinted umber by the resin, appeared. It was a picture of the probe itself, or its twin.

"Probe," it said.

"Probe," Jafa repeated readily.

"Friend," with the two tones.

Mellon slapped the console in triumph. "LARNA, imitate the higher musical tone emitted by the probe."

The ship's speakers twinkled musically.

Mellon beat the console before him with both fists and shouted in exultation.

* * *

For Mellon, the next two weeks flashed past. Their communication with the aliens expanded geometrically. It was as if the aliens literally absorbed knowledge, instantly comprehending it. Within three days, the probes were talking with the human crew as if they had been born on *Vanguard*. Although Jafa kept a careful eye on them, they seemed to be becoming part of the crew, even going so far as to volunteer for damage control detail. Their grasp of metallurgy and circuitry was phenomenal.

By the third week someone had named the probes Mutt and Jeff. Mutt constantly tested the environment, becoming immediately fascinated with the smallest change in its surroundings. Jeff wandered around *Vanguard*, always careful of the human crew, which it could have easily crushed, as they came to know suddenly one day.

Jafa and two guards had been trailing Jeff for most of the day as the alien explored *Vanguard's* darkened SA units.

"These are non-functioning units," Jeff observed.

"They're dead," Jafa corrected.

Jeff produced several devices from its bulk that clanked, hissed, and whirred. Within seconds, Jeff had opened one of the SA units and had begun to systematically dismember the corpse within.

Eclectic Dreams

"Stop!" Jafa shouted, firing a shot to punctuate his demand, smashing the remains of the SA unit.

Jeff paused in its work and became very still. Pieces of the corpse hung like bits of a broken doll from it. "Justify your action," Jeff intoned.

"Drop the body," Jafa demanded.

Seconds ticked by. Jafa's men moved quietly to stand at points equidistant around Jeff.

"Jafa," Jeff said in neutral tones, "justify your action."

"I think you better explain to it," Johnson said.

Jafa glowered at Johnston, then turned to Jeff. "I was protecting the body of a friend from desecration, you —"

"Protection is unnecessary," Jeff said. "Unit is non-functional. Disassembly and repair is necessary to restore function."

For a second, the men held their breath while they tried to absorb Jeff's words.

"You gotta be kidding," Sims said.

"Put the body down, Jeff," Jafa ordered and stepped closer to the machine.

"Jafa does not require reinstatement of unit to function," Jeff said, and followed the words with the question tones.

"That person is dead," Jafa told it. "He cannot be made to function."

Jeff was silent for a few seconds. "This unit is different from other units found in human artifacts," question tones.

The men shifted uneasily and looked to Jafa.

"Human artifacts?" Jafa asked.

Jeff gave off a musical tone.

"Damn it, why can't the thing talk normal?" Johnson grouched.

"Shut up," Jafa snapped. "Mellon!"

There was a brief pause. "Yeah?"

"I think you better hear this."

* * *

Mellon stood watching Jeff closely. Jafa had finally relented and allowed him to come out of Comm Lab to see the probe himself. Seeing

it on the screen and actually facing it were two entirely different things. Jeff was much bigger than Mellon had imagined. The probe's dimensions were difficult to establish, as it had a tendency to change its configuration as suited its purpose. Sometimes Jeff sported a dozen branches and protuberances, sometimes several hundred, sometimes none. The central probe smelled slightly oily, like the underside of a transport. The resin was never completely set and hardened, giving the impression of a flexible gel.

Mellon was convinced it was this latest turn of events that convinced Jafa he was in way over his head when it came to trying to communicate with Jeff. He didn't know whether to be flattered that Jafa had tacitly turned control of face-to-face communication over to him or be worried. Jafa was an immensely capable individual, and for him to abdicate any kind of authority, in Mellon's eyes, portended ill for the successor.

"You are Mellon," Jeff intoned.

Mellon nodded and tapped his chest. "Mellon."

"You are *Vanguard*," question tones.

Mellon hesitated a second, then realized what the question inferred. "I am commander of *Vanguard*. I am *Vanguard*."

A branch appeared from Jeff and thumped against one of the SA units, rattling the corpse inside. "These units need repair."

"They are dead," Mellon nodded.

Jeff was silent for a moment. "These units will not be repaired," question tones.

"They are dead," Mellon repeated.

Again Jeff was silent.

"Define word 'dead'," Jeff spun.

And it hit him with the force of a hurricane. How could he have been so dense? The millennial sleep must have affected him more deeply than he imagined. Of course Jeff didn't understand death. Jeff was a machine, and machines did not die. They malfunctioned, were repaired, and returned to service. "Um, 'dead' means non-functional."

"Repair restores function," Jeff pointed out. "*Vanguard* does not require these units to be functional," question tones.

Mellon shook his head. "No, they cannot be repaired. They were unique, irreplaceable."

Eclectic Dreams

Jeff paused, then whirred, "Define word `unique'."

"One of a kind. None other alike."

Jeff was silent. The branch moved to tap another SA unit. "This unit is unique," question tones.

"This unit is unique," Mellon agreed.

"Why does *Vanguard* retain unique components," question tones.

Mellon was caught off guard for a second. He stammered, "Components?"

Jeff waited.

"Maybe it wants to know the purpose for humans aboard *Vanguard*," Johnson ventured.

Kade blinked at Jeff dumbly. To him, the purpose of a human was obvious, but Jeff wasn't human, was becoming more alien each second, it seemed. How do you explain to a machine, an intelligent, sentient machine, that biological beings can create and maintain machines but the opposite could never be true? "I think," he said to Jeff, "we need to talk."

* * *

It took nearly a week of sometimes frustrating communication to learn the real reason Mutt and Jeff were aboard *Vanguard*. The machines had been encountering human ships for centuries, and, as there was nothing similar to themselves aboard, they considered such ships floating resources, mere salvage. Although they recognized the ships as space-faring vehicles, no known race claimed them and therefore they are considered abandoned artifacts. The biological entities therein, none of whom were alive, were considered specimens gathered by the ships over the centuries and never recognized as intelligent. Until they had encountered *Vanguard*. It was the first time one of the human ships actually had living humans aboard, therefore it required a new observation of the environs.

At first, LARNA was unable to communicate with the aliens and her failsafes directed her to restrict access to all information systems aboard *Vanguard*. This prevented the aliens from understanding that the humans were sentient. They had been analyzing the human's activity and

H. David Blalock

had come to the conclusion *Vanguard's* crew was a semi-intelligent symbiote. The examinations Shenez and her technicians had made on the probes were seen as attempts to bond to the aliens in a similar manner as the aliens supposed humans bonded to *Vanguard*. As such, it was not considered so much intelligent behavior as animal behavior similar to that observed in other biological species. Mutt and Jeff did not recognize any threat in these actions, only behavior for study.

Then, the humans had attacked the slugs. Things had changed radically, and Mutt and Jeff's telemetry communications peak reflected a new paradigm in development. Humans were intelligent, that became obvious as simultaneous communication through LARNA and interaction directly showed. Humans communicated with *Vanguard*, directed *Vanguard's* actions.

The best Mellon understood, the aliens thought that, if humans were sentient, Mutt and Jeff's kind were murderers, at least, in their own eyes. All together, 342 human artifacts had been stripped for biological and mineral resources. Initially, this had merely raised an issue as to remuneration to *Vanguard's* commander. Typically, this kind of remuneration was tendered in duty and Mutt and Jeff were dispatched to be at the disposal of *Vanguard's* commander until remuneration, as defined by recognized standards, was complete.

However, with the discovery of the issue of "death," the aliens realized there could never be sufficient restitution. This constituted, according to their count, the wasting of almost 110,000 "unique, irreplaceable" units, units they had disassembled for usage elsewhere.

Debate grew between Mellon and Shenez about whether the aliens, who were obviously machines, were evidencing remorse and ethical dilemma, or if the method of communication made it seem that way. Machine language contained no emotional terms, but the rendering of the binaries into human speech patterns could inadvertently instill emotional content that actually did not exist.

"You're reading too much into this, Kade," she told him as they listened to the last of the explanation through LARNA. "The aliens are attempting to establish trade with us, that is all."

"If that were all, why would they bring up the issue of murder?"

"I don't think they understand it."

Eclectic Dreams

"How do you know?"

"Kade, they're machines."

"Machines can't kill?"

"Of course they can, but do they murder?" She shook her head. "Murder is an emotional term, Kade. They would have to be emotional beings."

"I don't know about that, Sala. Murder could simply be a term they use to describe unreasonable death. They may have an imperfect understanding of human emotions. In fact, I'm sure they have an imperfect understanding. Hell, even humans have an imperfect understanding of emotions."

"Stop that," she waved a finger at him. "You're bantering semantics with me."

"What else do we have?" Kade tapped his fingers on the monitor console. He looked at Jeff in one of the monitors. The probe was hovering over one of Jafa's men, who was intent on some kind of deck repair. A thought came to him. He thumbed the intercom open. "Jeff."

The probe shifted slightly. "Yes, Mellon."

"Define `murder.'"

Jeff's answer wasn't immediate, but it was chilling. "Taking life."

Mellon looked at Shenez. "You hear that? No conditionals, just a simple statement."

Sala leaned into the mike. "Jeff, define `life.'"

"Not death."

She leaned back with a satisfied look. "Does that sound like the statement of a being conversant with human emotions?"

"Sala, it isn't whether or not they understand human emotions that's at issue here. It's how their perception of events colors their decisions." Mellon watched as Jeff went back to his observations. "The point I'm trying to make is this: if Mutt and Jeff are having an ethical dilemma, in their own way, how will they resolve it? And how will that resolution affect this crew?"

"Mellon," LARNA broke in.

"Yes?"

"I am picking up a ship on an intercept course."

H. David Blalock

Mellon shifted straighter in his seat. His hands flew over the console as he brought up LARNA's sensor readouts.

"The alien mothership," he said, tuning the sensors. "It's coming back."

"What?"

"Telemetry between mothership and probes is increasing," LARNA said.

"I thought you said the probes had stopped communicating with the mothership?" Shenez chided.

LARNA was silent.

Mellon was becoming concerned at LARNA's increasing lack of interaction with them. Since Jeff had begun speaking directly to the crew, LARNA had become distant, if that could be said of a machine. He realized he missed talking to her, that he considered her more than just an artificial intelligence.

"LARNA," he began, "what do you think of the aliens?"

"Please rephrase."

"Don't tell me your parser subprograms don't understand that, LARNA. Answer the question."

Again, LARNA remained silent.

"Kade," Sala said, placing a hand on his arm. Her face, turned toward him, was pale with shock. She was watching the monitor centered on Jeff.

Kade followed her gaze.

Stepping from the innards of the probe was a woman, a human woman. She was of medium height and build, dark hair, fair skin. Several branches appeared from Jeff and spun a brief garment over her while Jafa and his men watched. Finally, she stepped forward to face Jafa and smiled.

"Hello, Jafa. I am LARNA."

The security chief gaped at her and finally found his voice.

"Mellon!"

* * *

Eclectic Dreams

"Jeff analyzed some of the tissue samples he found in Medical and designed a distinct DNA molecule for her," Shenez was saying. She pointed to the medical report flashing on the monitor. LARNA sat quietly, submitting to the examination with immense patience. Mellon and Jafa stood nearby, watching as Shenez worked over her makeshift equipment and verified the humanity of the person who claimed to be a manifestation of *Vanguard's* AI. Jeff hung behind them, his motors humming softly.

"It's incredible," Sender said, holding up the scans. "She's one hundred percent human, no doubt about it."

"LARNA unit is acceptable," Jeff question toned.

Shenez looked at Jeff, then at Mellon and shrugged. "She seems perfectly normal. We've done complete physical and psychological workups on her. She has the personality, the emotional stability, and the physical attributes of an average human female."

"LARNA unit is acceptable," Jeff repeated.

"Yes," Mellon admitted. "She is amazing."

Jeff's bulk shifted slightly. There was an odd whining noise, followed by a liquid sound from within it.

A man stepped out of the resin and was immediately set upon by the garment spinners.

Jeff began producing human clones as the humans watched the process with amazement and fascination. How it was done, the mechanism behind it, was far beyond what any of them could understand. But, one thing Mellon believed he understood. He was fairly sure he knew at least why Jeff was doing this, why the mothership had returned and was now docking with the *Vanguard*, sending over materials, biological and mineral.

Reparations were in progress. *Vanguard's* mission success was assured.

H. David Blalock

A Tale of Two Kings

CIRCA 1000 AD

Parcival cradled his king's head in the crook of his arm. Only seconds had passed since Arthur had closed his eyes, but Parcival could feel the king slipping away, sense the powerful presence that had built a kingdom from less than ashes fade like the setting sun. He felt more than just loss, more than grief. He felt despair.

Merlyn was gone, victim of the designs of Morgana Le Fay. Lancelot was dead, Galahad and Kay fallen. Their best, their finest, lost forever. Tears rose unresisted in his eyes, blurring the horror of the bloody battlefield around him. He no longer heard the moans of the wounded and dying. He heard only the increasingly shallow breathing of the man in his arms.

"Parcival."

He raised his head at the call. Who would intrude on his grief? Who could be so callous, so uncaring?

"Parcival."

He wiped his eyes. "Begone," he said without looking. "Leave us in peace."

"We have come for him."

He did look now, but what he saw made no sense.

She was dressed in humble rags, an old woman whose face was lined with the cares of the ages. Though bent and slow, she stared at him through eyes that glittered with fire and spirit belying her appearance. On her left and right were handmaidens of surpassing beauty who would be magnificent and stunning were they encountered alone. In the company of this crone, however, their beauty was muted, overpowered by the essence the old woman exuded.

Beyond them, standing near the lakeshore, was a troop of foot soldiers, their faces covered in helms of fine brass, bodies armored in mail and studs. Their weapons were bare and shining in the twilight, sending spectres of light dancing among the bodies that littered the beach. They guarded the gangway of a funeral barge hung with dark

Eclectic Dreams

bunting and fit with torches that spring from its rails. Just at that moment, the setting sun reddened and cast a sanguine hue on it all. Percival made to pull his own sword.

“Fear not. We have not come to carry Arthur to Hades,” the old woman said as she caught his intent.

Percival narrowed his eyes at her in suspicion. He had seen many strange things these past few years. He had watched Merlyn lift stones the size of a peasant’s hut and arrange them in esoteric circles at Salisbury and Aylesbury. He had witnessed Arthur wield Excalibur against a thousand foes without receiving a single wound. He had seen the Lady of the Lake when she rose to accept Excalibur from his own hand. He could have accepted this apparition as the final act in Arthur’s story, but she seemed to be saying the tale was not yet done. What new and wonderful thing was this?

He started to ask who they were and where they intended to carry Arthur’s body. The king deserved a fine ceremony, a ritual befitting his station and reflecting the regard in which he was held. Camelot may have fallen, but there were those who were still loyal to the ideal, men of power and standing in their own right. They would want to honor their fallen comrade at arms.

He wanted to stop them from taking Arthur to the ship, to resist their ministrations and handling of the precious body. He wanted to draw his weapon and beat them away from this sacred place, hallowed with his blood, but something about the old woman stilled his tongue and dampened his resolve. He found he could not refuse her demand. It was a just and reasonable request, after all. Resistant would be petulant, ungrateful.

He found himself nodding at her as a wagon drawn by eight strong men rolled to a stop before him. Two of the men gently lifted Arthur into a litter unloaded from the back of the vehicle and carried him to it. Two others leapt onto the bed of the wagon to receive the body. The whole process was so natural, so smoothly done, Percival scarcely knew his king was gone until he looked at his empty arms.

“Wait!” he finally managed as the old woman made to follow the wagon. “Where are you taking him?”

H. David Blalock

The wagon never paused. It glided past the guards and up the gangway on to the barge as the crone turned back to him. The handmaidens hovered silently at her sides, but the honor guard began to file up the plank.

“We are taking Arthur to a place of safety, to care for him and give him rest.”

“Where? We would like to honor him. We will bring tribute to his grave.”

The old woman shook her head sadly. “You do not understand. Arthur will never die. When he is needed, he will return. We will care for him until then.”

Parcival indicated the battlefield around him. “He is needed now! If you have the power to heal him, please send him back soon.”

“Your need is not yet great enough,” she said.

“Not great enough? Britain is in ruins. Camelot is no more. When will we be in greater need?”

Fire glinted in her eyes and an unaccountable thrill of fear struck Parcival. He shuddered but stood his ground. If there was a chance Arthur could be returned to them, his life was a small price to pay.

“Your land will see great wars, Parcival. Each will have its heroes. Arthur will return when he is most needed, have no fear.”

And that was her final word, he knew. He did not detain her as she left him to board the barge. He stood quietly as the barge slipped away and was swallowed by a gray fog that lay just offshore.

He was left alone with his memories and his grief.

APRIL 20, 2531

The funeral barge slipped out of the rift and slid to a stop against a quay in the oversized quarantine chamber. The ship was a glaring anachronism against a backdrop of impermeable plastic, glass, and steel. A medical team consisting of five men in contamination suits hurried up the gangplank dropped by the soldiers on board. Within seconds they reappeared bearing the litter with Arthur’s body on it, now wrapped in a plastic envelope.

Eclectic Dreams

“Decontamination procedures,” the crone on the deck commanded as the medical unit left the ship.

Six troopers opened valves hidden in the barge railings, releasing gaseous agents that shortly covered all aboard. Contained by a force bubble, it permeated every bit of the ship’s hull, every stitch of clothing, every inch of leather. All aboard stripped and left their garments where they dropped. Other medical teams would recover them later and study what the gas had left.

After several minutes, the force bubble was dropped and the gas thinned. The crewmen, soldiers, the old woman and her handmaidens made their way down the plank to the chamber airlock. The team carrying Arthur’s body had already cycled through, leaving the inner door closed. The old woman pressed a plate on the door and a tone sounded.

“Welcome home, Dr. Sartori,” a pleasant baritone voice said from the air.

“Thanks, Tony. Now, how about some clothes?”

“Being cycled through now.”

Almost before he finished, the inner door opened, revealing several cases. Each person filed in long enough to take one, then move outside to open it and don the clothing it contained.

“How is it?” Dr. Sartori asked, fastening her overgarment.

“The body is in remarkably good condition considering the wound,” Tony said.

“What do you think?”

“No problem.”

“Excellent. What’s the latest delta?”

“Most impressive. Arthur is now legendary.”

Sartori nodded. “Good. That insures no continuing paradox.”

“Crandall doesn’t think so.”

“Crandall is an idiot.”

Tony kept silent at that.

“How long do we have to stay in here this time?”

“Well, since we don’t have to deal with any technologically advanced biological agents, no more than 72 hours, I should think.”

H. David Blalock

“Fine. Have them set up a display for Arthur immediately. I want it ready for when I get out.”

“Right.”

Sartori clasped her hands together and looked around at her research team. “Great job, everyone,” she told them. “Chalk up another success for the Institute for Historical Studies. There will be a little something extra for everyone later.” A general murmur of delight went through the team as she continued. “For now, we might as well get comfortable. We’ll be hot bunking on board because of the size of the ship. First watch is Theta Team. Gamma is on down time. Alpha, with me. Let’s set up for Medical.”

As the men who had drawn Arthur’s wagon disappeared belowdecks and the former soldiers set about policing and examining the ship for macroscopic contaminants, Dr. Sartori and her aides fell in beside the suited Medical team stepping from the airlock.

* * *

The Institute for Historical Studies stood on the bluffs above the Mississippi River less than ten miles from the ruins of the old city of Memphis. In the late 21st century, the long-awaited earthquake had ripped open the New Madrid fault and redirected the river, but not before pitching half the city into its waters and flattening the rest. Thousands had died and millions were left homeless. The fault remained active, Memphis went under and never recovered. It became an oddity, a point of perverse interest. The rusting shell of the Pyramid Arena was still visible on the horizon from the Institute’s upper floors. Sometimes expeditions were launched to reclaim information from the city after earth movements that often uncovered relics buried for centuries. Though of insufficient interest to merit a major dig, those artifacts became a source of income for the Institute, finding their way to the gift shops that peppered the exhibition floors.

The Institute itself was earthquake proofed using the latest technologies. It had stood through movements that would have decimated an edifice its size only decades before. The exhibits took up three floors of the fifty-story structure, the rest being offices,

Eclectic Dreams

laboratories, an auditorium, and several classrooms/conference rooms. It boasted a staff of over 3,000 research scientists, academicians, scholars, and administrators. In its thirty-year history it had far outstripped its competitors for the coveted Federation grants. It had, in fact, dominated the field of Temporal Exploitation since the Federation had approved the procedure. Dr. Marlene Sartori had picked up where her mentor, Dr. Franklin Thurgood, had left off after his disappearance ten years earlier.

Institute records indicated that Dr. Thurgood had left on an unspecified expedition to first century Palestine and never returned. The interesting thing was that no one outside the Institute remembered Dr. Thurgood. The genius who had created the Time Neutral Field, or TNF, had fallen prey to the very thing it was meant to prevent: the nasty side effects of time paradox. He had established that time was actually a measurement of constantly changing quantum packets in the electromagnetic field, which from second to second mutated so that each was unique. The Time Neutral Field's main purpose was to create a force barrier between the subject's brain's own weak EM field and the EM and other high-end radiations endemic to the mission's timeframe. Without the TNF's protection, the subject's brain was exposed to the native EM field. Each person reacted differently to this exposure and acclimation prior to the mission provided a certain amount of tolerance, but it was just another reason to keep the projects short, seldom more than a week. Physically, there was no need for protection beyond medical vaccine. When the victim of a corrupt or faded TNF tried to return to point of departure it was nearly always fatal from the psychological shock of the transition.

It was assumed Thurgood had inadvertently precipitated a significant Temporal Event that cascaded into the present, inducing a paradox and affecting his existence. Of course, there was massive debate. If he invented the TNF, which enabled time travel and protected the traveler from outside paradox, and had somehow induced a paradox that caused his disappearance, how had the TNF come about?

Conundrums abound in time travel.

Dr. Sartori stood looking out at the Mississippi from her thirtieth-floor office, chewing the remnants of a candy bar and sipping from a glass of Kentucky whisky. Her office was spartan in its furnishings and

H. David Blalock

as sterile as her underlings suspected she was. She turned to drop the wrapper in the trash bin and caught sight of the portrait of Thurgood that hung near her desk. She kept it there to remind herself what sloppiness could mean.

The intercom chimed. She thumbed it on and Tony Feldham appeared in the little screen, his image immaculate as always.

“Good morning, Doctor,” he said.

“Yes?”

“You wanted to be notified when the display was completed.”

“Be right down.”

The screen went blank as she headed for the office door. “What’s the latest on the take for the month?”

Tony’s voice reverberated from hidden speakers. “Two thousand seven hundred and ten visitors, a twenty percent increase since the addition of the Prester John exhibit.”

“I knew more English-speaking personalities would be a larger draw,” she said smugly. Closing the office door behind her, she stepped to the transport platform in the antechamber. Her office took up the entire floor and was accessible only via transport tubes keyed to her DNA and special cards given to a few trusted colleagues. She knew better than to call them “friends”. She depressed the exhibit floor button. It beeped at her. “What about the Judge Crater exhibit?”

“Still under-attended,” Tony reported.

Sartori shook her head. “Why Thurgood wanted him, I’ll never know.”

“I believe Dr. Thurgood’s plan was to build a thematic display using Crater, Hoffa, and several others in a courtroom tableau.”

“Stupid idea,” she scoffed.

“We will never know for sure, of course.”

“I know for sure,” she countered. “I think it’s time to disassemble that display.”

“I’ll see to it.”

She rode in silence until the tube stopped and its doors opened into a marble hallway lit by brass sconces and ending in a door marked “Exhibit Preparation”. Sartori strode through it and into a massive laboratory that had all the earmarks of a waxworks factory. Wire forms

Eclectic Dreams

stood here and there, sporting bits and pieces of hair, skin, and clothing. Humanoid and animal frames hung from the walls and ceiling, and the floor was covered with paints, wax, latex, plastics, dyes, a thousand materials and coloring agents. Workbenches sporting everything from false plants to prosthetics formed the ribs of the room's body. Each had its own contingent of workers. Some were researchers, some artists, some craftsmen, some a combination of all three. This was where the Institute's magic began.

"Marlene!" an elderly woman cackled as Sartori came in. "Welcome back. How was it?"

"Same as always, Esther," Sartori responded. "Primitive and bloody."

Esther Sandoval nodded her understanding. She was a first-class historian and a marvelous researcher but her advanced age prevented her from accompanying any of the TNF-related expeditions. She had always envied Sartori for that.

"Well, wait until you see what we've done with Arthur," she said excitedly. "I do believe he is the best you've recovered so far."

"We were fortunate to be able to 'port in so close to the time of death."

"Time of death?" Esther said, a little confused. "What do you mean?"

Sartori was not usually a patient woman. She had made a reputation as a hard-nose who neither gave nor expected quarter. In Esther's case, however, she was less harsh. She had known the lady for nearly fifty years, had sat on her knee as a little girl. Esther was the closest thing Sartori could remember to a mother, and the old woman held a special place in her otherwise cast-iron heart.

"I've explained this before, Esther," Sartori began, knowing she would probably have to do so again soon. "We try to 'port in around the moment of death to catch the body before corruption sets in. It's much easier to preserve that way and less likely to transport dangerous microbes into our labs."

Esther's face creased pleasantly as she winked. "And you leave a little psychological conditioning behind to seed the market as well, eh?"

Sartori shrugged. "History is flexible, Thurgood proved that. As long as we don't change the actual events, we can put a different spin on them

H. David Blalock

by playing to the contemporary psychology. The result is seldom problematic and we can use it to forward our own research.”

Esther laughed. “You turn the disappearances into legends and display the actuality in your exhibits. People love to find out the truth behind the fantasy. It gives them a feeling of superiority to know more than their forebears.”

“So how did Arthur’s display come out?”

The elder woman took her elbow and pulled her toward the back of the room. “It was remarkable,” she jabbered. “He was so well preserved, we never expected to be possible. Look!”

The display case was about 15 by 30 feet. Inside were the medieval trappings they had manufactured after meticulous research and observation, an exact replica of Camelot’s throne room. Fine carpet ran the length of the stone floor. Tapestries depicting the seasons hung on either side, covering the gray stone with their bright colors and warm sentiments. Iron sconces filled with oil smoked quietly, bathing the chamber in an orange glow. Hardwood benches stood against the walls, ornately carved and stained. At the far end three stone steps led to a raised dais on which a high-backed throne carved with the image of a dragon stood. It was of heavy oak, stained almost black and polished to a high sheen. Behind the throne hung a tapestry depicting the Crucifixion and Resurrection of Christ, a duplicate of one they discovered Arthur personally ordered made for this chamber. A gold crucifix hung on either side of the throne, giving the impression that Arthur sat at the feet of Christ’s cross between the two thieves.

Seated on his throne, dressed in shining mail and greaves, the royal purple tabard hanging from his shoulders, its embroidered dragon flashing in the torchlight, was Arthur, King of the Britons. He was a truly impressive sight, Sartori had to admit, but the display was incomplete.

“Where are the others?” she asked Sandoval. “This court should be full...”

She stopped in stunned disbelief as Arthur stood and walked toward her.

“Esther,” she scolded, “we discussed using androids in the displays. We have a reputation to uphold. We are not just another museum.”

“It’s not an android,” Esther grinned.

Eclectic Dreams

“No?”

“No. It’s really him, Marlene.”

Sartori looked into flashing eyes that held her in an accusing glare.

“Impossible,” she stammered. “He was dead.”

“That’s just it. He wasn’t quite dead when you brought him in. The stasis properties of the TNF held him at the point of death until our medical teams could revive him. His wounds were not fatal, not in our terms. Another few moments in his own time and he would have undoubtedly died. You saved his life, Marlene.”

Sartori’s knees threatened to buckle. She covered her mouth with her hand to prevent her screaming as the implications began to present themselves. Arthur brought up short against the display’s transparent front. He pointed at Sartori and spoke in the language only she could understand.

“Foul witch! Release me!”

* * *

“He’s alive?”

Shane Detrale was Institute director, scion of a very old family of very old money. He sat on the only spare chair in Sartori’s office, legs crossed casually in his expensive suit and stared at her in disbelief.

“Yes,” Sartori answered, tapping absently on her desk. “He is alive.”

Detrale sat digesting that in silence for several seconds. He stood slowly and crossed the office to gaze out at the river. “Damnation,” he muttered. Just past middle age, he had avoided the softness from which most men faced their waning years. He was always nattily dressed and nothing seemed to faze him. His quiet self-assurance, his lanky frame and salt and pepper hair and beard always kept severely short, drew women to him and demanded respect from men. To hear him utter that word was more alarming than if someone else had launched into an eschatological tirade.

He turned his slate-gray eyes on her. “He must be returned.”

She had known he would say that. He always took the most obvious route, whether to solve a problem or deal with people. He was not the

H. David Blalock

disingenuous type. Straightforwardness was his credo. Unfortunately, that was not an option here.

“We can’t do that,” she told him.

“Why not?”

“It would induce a major Temporal Event and cause a paradox.”

Detrale nodded thoughtfully. “What do we do with him, then?”

Sartori waved her hands and shrugged. “I have no idea.”

“Wait just a minute. Don’t you have a contingency plan for this scenario?”

“For when the dead come back to life?” She snorted. “What do you think?”

He tapped his chin with his forefinger. “Damnation.”

She stood and began pacing the room. “He’s been sedated and kept isolated from all but the few who worked on his display. I’ve been able to do that much. So far he hasn’t displayed any symptoms of modern disease, so we have that going for us.”

“Modern disease?”

“Yes. You see, we are nearly immune to diseases that incapacitated and killed in his time. Natural selection had a lot to do with that and vaccines took care of the rest.”

“You mean he could die from, say, the measles?”

“Conceivably, he could die from a bad head cold.”

“That would solve the problem,” he breathed, staring out at the Mississippi.

“Pardon?”

“Nothing. Where is he now?”

“Fifteenth floor, medical isolation. We’ve designated a section just for him.”

“And who else knows about this?”

“A list was compiled shortly after we discovered the problem. This is it.” She handed him a piece of paper. He eyed the material quizzically. “I thought it more discreet than a networked computer.”

He nodded again and scanned the list. “There are nearly sixty names here.”

“Yes. Unfortunately, the lab was full when Arthur was escorted to his display.”

Eclectic Dreams

“Escorted?”

Sartori shifted her weight uncomfortably from one foot to another. “Esther had to get Security when he became violent.”

Detrale lifted an eyebrow. “Is he dangerous?”

“Only to himself right now.”

“The Security detail is on the list as well?”

“Of course.”

Detrale slowly folded the paper in half, then quarters, and tucked it into his belt.

“Given this bizarre turn of events I think you have done quite well,” he said. “However, the disposition of this... person is a major problem.” He caught her gaze. “You understand Crandall will have to be apprised of the situation.”

There it was. She had known the problem would eventually get to Crandall, but she hadn’t expected Detrale to be the one to take it to him. In spite of everything, she felt a pang of betrayal.

“I understand,” she said, screaming inside.

He smiled at her and put out his hand. “Well, I’m sure I’m keeping you from some important research.”

“Not at all. Always glad to see you, Shane,” she lied.

“I’ll be in touch,” he promised, and walked to the transport tube.

She listened as the tube left, then went to her desk and thumbed the intercom.

“Yes, Doctor?” Tony answered.

“Where is Crandall right now?”

“Hold, please.”

She drummed her fingers on the desk.

“Mr. Crandall is in San Francisco attending a Temporal Purist Seminar,” Tony reported finally.

“That figures,” she thought. Crandall was the leading opponent of Temporal Exploitation. His faction continually lobbied the Federation to shut down operations like Sartori’s, maintaining that a major Temporal Event affecting all humanity was inevitable. So far, the Federation had argued that, if such an event were to occur, the effects would have already been felt. Since usage of the TNF had not resulted in disaster, it never would.

H. David Blalock

It was circular logic, but circular logic was another thing that abounded in time travel.

The situation with Arthur opened up a whole new problem, though. Crandall was a member of the Federation Council Temporal Exploitation Oversight Committee. Arthur's case would have to be reported to the Committee, especially since grants and appropriations were up for renewal. This was sure to sabotage their chances at getting Federation grants, at least until the situation was resolved, if not longer. It might, in fact, give Crandall the leverage he needed to carry a new anti-TNF bill before the Federation, one that had a much better chance of passing.

She needed something big to head this off, a major find to distract the Federation Council. There was only one option.

"Tony, have a team set up for Last Project."

"Are you sure that's wise, Doctor? Last Project is not scheduled for another twelve years. The TNF research team is uncertain about its repercussions."

"Superstitious claptrap," she scoffed. "They've had years to research this. Truth is, they're afraid it will cause problems with the religious community."

"There has been some concern along those lines."

"This is the twenty-sixth century. Time we stopped being dependent on myths and legends and faced reality. That's what this Institute is all about."

"Very well. We should be ready within three weeks."

"Three days, Tony. You have three days."

"Logistically impossible, Doctor. There is research, costuming, acclamation, orientation, language training..."

"Use the team from the Arthurian expedition. They're already acclimated to the TNF. It's only been about four days for them. As far as the rest, use Dr. Thurgood's material."

"That information is restricted."

"Not from me, and you know it. Break the seals and make the preparations."

"I must protest this action, Doctor," Tony said with the first real evidence of emotion she had ever heard in his voice.

Eclectic Dreams

“Just do it,” she snapped, killing the intercom and cutting off any further objections.

* * *

She stood at the head of the conference table and surveyed the group. There were only six of them, but with any luck they would need no more. The main problem was not with the project’s physical logistics, it was the psychological obstacles, and she was angry at having to deal with them in her own team.

“Why was this project rescheduled, Dr. Sartori? As I understood, this was not to be considered for over a decade,” one of the scientists, a Doctor Genali, asked.

“The timetable has been reevaluated. It was deemed unnecessary to delay this project.”

“I don’t recall the directors authorizing a reevaluation,” Genali stated, frowning.

“The directors were not consulted.”

“Not consulted? But don’t all TNF projects have to be evaluated and approved?”

She stopped herself from losing her temper with an effort. Why did he pick this moment to bring this up? He had not previously evidenced problems with Last Project. Several of the staff had gone so far as to threaten to resign if this project was carried out, but Genali had not even filed a protest. He had been selected because he had been on a TNF project running concurrently with the Arthur project, the recovery of an aviatrix named Earhart, and because he was conversant with the dialects and customs of the period. If she had known he was going to present this kind of obstacle, she would have bypassed him and depended on her own knowledge to carry them through. She leaned forward, hands flat on the table.

“This project is probably the most representative of why Temporal Exploitation is vital to our evolution as a specie,” she began. She tried to concentrate on the others seated around the table, suspecting that Genali was merely voicing what they wanted but felt unable to ask. She knew that every shred of doubt had to be purged from this team if they were to

H. David Blalock

succeed. They were going into a heavily populated area of massive political turmoil, a very dangerous and volatile atmosphere. Most knew of Dr. Thurgood's fate and it was understandable they should be concerned.

"There are pivotal events in human history on which literally all successive history turns," she went on. "The discovery of fire, the first domestication of livestock, the beginnings of cities, establishments of trade routes, all of these events have no discernable origins and therefore we have no fear of altering them significantly. However, singular events can cause significant historical repercussion, or Temporal Events, that define and determine the future. Among such events are the assassination of a political leader, the overthrow of a government or the rise of a particular religious or political figure. In Last Project we have a peculiar circumstance. A religious leader is assassinated and his body goes missing, a perfect opportunity for us to research the truth behind the legend."

Genali was not to be so easily put off. "We know the reasoning behind the project, Doctor. I guess the question I should have asked is, why is this necessary now and not twelve years from now, as originally scheduled?"

She stood slowly and looked around the table at the faces turned her way. There was the air of stiffening resistance in those faces. These people did not appreciate being kept in the dark. Unspoken questions were becoming unexpressed doubts. She knew she had to do something to bring them back or face a real crisis of confidence that could jeopardize the project.

"Very well, Dr. Genali," she said, having reached her decision. "No doubt you have heard about my last project."

"The Arthurian reclamation. Yes, I have. I also heard there was a problem with it."

She smiled mirthlessly at him. In a flash, it dawned on her what this was about. Genali wasn't concerned with the scheduling of the project, just to her leading it. He wanted to be in charge.

"A problem," she repeated. "Yes, there was a problem. You see, our medical team revived Arthur." There was a confused hubbub. She raised her hand and the table grew silent again. "I apologize to those of you

Eclectic Dreams

who were on the expedition. You were not informed for security reasons.”

“Arthur is alive?” Genali asked.

“Correct.”

“But this is monstrous!” he blurted. “We can’t return him and we can’t detain him. What have you done with him?”

“He is currently being held in an isolation ward.”

Genali shook his head. “This project must be postponed until Arthur’s case is concluded, Doctor. It is unconscionable that we should go on as if nothing has happened.”

“If you will allow me,” she countered in a long-suffering tone.

Genali started to object, thought better of it, looked around briefly, and then waved a hand at her in agreement.

“Thank you. Dr. Genali’s point is well taken, however I would point out that the most probable outcome of the problem we face would be to suspend the TNF projects indefinitely while the impact of the situation is evaluated. There is a very real possibility that TNF projects will be outlawed altogether when knowledge of this case goes before the Oversight Committee.” She was gratified to see that that statement sobered even Genali. “This project is our most important. It was designed to be the crowning achievement of forty years of TNF work. I submit to you that if we do not go forward with it now, we might never be given the chance.”

She watched each of them struggle with the problem and all come to the same conclusion.

She went ahead with the briefing unchallenged.

* * *

The team assembled early the following morning. Dr. Sartori was dressed in a simple garment of raw linen, her hair gathered and covered, face hidden behind a pale cloth wrap. The only female in the group, she was the one most likely to break the contemporary taboos with their strict dress and behavioral codes. The men were accoutered as ordinary townsfolk and fishermen, the typical fare for the time of year at Jerusalem. Their complexions had been darkened cosmetically to match

H. David Blalock

the ethnic grouping peculiar to the area. They had not had time to finalize their costumes' accuracy, but the Passover feast drew crowds from the surrounding provinces as well as pilgrims from as far away as Egypt and Asia Minor. Oddities in dress were seldom remarked upon, a welcome windfall that saved research and observation time preparatory to the mission.

The TNF pad, keyed to the six subjects and tuned to the proper coordinates, hummed quietly. An unassuming metal platform connected by an orderly but massive array of cables and wiring, it shivered under their sandals. The air around it was charged as much with the team's anxiety as with the building field.

There was a moment during the TNF generation when its frequency passed through the resonances of the tiny electrical field produced by the human brain. The experience was much like a very short trip on a potent mind-altering drug. Subjective reality warped for the team as the humming increased to a whine then went beyond sensation, leaving a nagging ache in their teeth.

Utter darkness and silence.

CIRCA 30 AD

The heat of the Palestinian day hit them like a blast furnace.

They stood blinking at the tropical sun in a small clearing within what was obviously a well-tended garden. They fought temporary nausea as their senses adjusted to the sudden change. The smell of the stone, sand, and dust formed a solid background to the aroma of various plants and the stench of camel dung. Their clothing rustled in the relative still of the clearing as they cast about, checking to see if anyone had noticed their sudden arrival.

Sartori shook herself and looked at her timepiece. "On my mark," she prompted.

The others referred to their own chronometers.

"Mark," she said as the sweep analog hand hit the index on the device. There was a chorus of "Done" from the others.

Eclectic Dreams

“Go,” she commanded, and each set off for their assigned tasks. She was left alone with Genali. “Shall we?” she asked, motioning him to precede her.

“Of course, Doctor,” he said, and set off toward a nearby break in the trees.

She counted three steps before dutifully following him, eyes modestly on his heels. It was maddening, but if they were to avoid attention they had to blend in with the population, and that included adhering to the strictest social behavior codes in existence. What was even more galling was that Genali got to play the part of master while she was relegated to little better than a slave. After his performance the previous day, Sartori was especially aware of the awkwardness at this arrangement and recognized she would have to remind him who was in charge at every opportunity.

They followed a footpath through the trees until reaching what served as a road. Little more than beaten earth and heavily rutted, it nevertheless served as a welcome guide toward the city and their destination just outside its walls. The majority of traffic was afoot, burdened with pottery, firewood, bulky cloth bundles or straw. No one took more than a cursory interest in them. Staying alive was a major effort in this world. Curiosity was a luxury.

They trekked for nearly two hours along the road, dodging the occasional oxcart and even a mounted rider who hurtled past them toward Jerusalem, doubtless a Roman courier from his attire and demeanor. As the walls of the city appeared on the horizon, the traffic became much thicker. In contemporary terms, Jerusalem was a bustling metropolis, the capitol of a Roman province. They should have no trouble mixing in with the population and becoming invisible.

At least, they could have if there weren't several men walking directly toward them with purpose.

“Hello, Genali,” the leader of the group said.

* * *

“We have picked up the rest of your team.”

H. David Blalock

Sartori fumed, clenching and unclenching her fists. “This is insane,” she said again. “You have lost your mind.”

“On the contrary, Doctor. I have never seen things more clearly.”

Dr. Franklin Thurgood crossed the floor of the small apartment to pour another goblet of the weak wine that served as a soft drink for this time and handed it to her. She hesitated a moment, then took the cup. She stood by the unadorned window, taking advantage of what little air circulation found its way into the narrow city streets and past the crowds outside.

“I knew you would eventually use my programming for the project,” he said, pouring himself a drink. “Sooner or later, it would prove too tempting.” He laughed at their expressions. “It’s kind of like the Everest of Temporal Exploitation. I knew that a time would come when you would need this project to save the Institute.”

Genali and Sartori exchanged a quick, guilty glance.

“That’s it, isn’t it? You need this to succeed.”

Sartori sipped her wine but didn’t answer. She wasn’t going to let Thurgood know just how right he was. Though he had taught her everything she knew about TNF, although he had founded the Temporal Exploitation movement, this was still her operation and she intended to see it succeed. Let him rattle on. She would file away the useful information and trash the rest.

“Aren’t you curious?” Thurgood asked, taking a seat on a cushion and tucking his garment under his legs. “Haven’t you ever wondered what happened to me and my team?”

“Of course we have,” Genali said. “We assumed you were lost in a TE.”

A shadow passed over Thurgood’s face and he grimaced momentarily. Recovering, he went on as if Genali had not spoken. “When we arrived, we found ourselves outside that same garden where you entered. It’s hard to believe that was less than three months ago.” He stopped and looked at them intently. “What was your time of departure?”

“April 23, 2531,” Genali told him.

Thurgood chewed on that date, then raised an eyebrow. “That’s twelve years early, Marlene. Crandall?”

Eclectic Dreams

She saw Genali watching her. She carefully kept her face neutral and avoided his eye. “Crandall is still on the Oversight Committee,” she admitting, nodding. Perhaps that would suffice. To her relief, Thurgood accepted that and went on.

“This time and its story is what history is all about, you know?” he continued. “To be able to see the events unfold as they happened –“ He stopped and caught his breath. “Well, you understand.

“We were able to set up a blind just outside the city walls before the crowds began arriving for the Passover. We have put together a huge amount of information, more than enough, I’m sure, to derail Crandall. We have data that will set our historians scrambling.” The shadow passed across his face again as he looked at Genali.

“So why do you object to our completing the project?” Genali asked, breaking Thurgood’s mood. “Surely this would more than justify your work.”

“You don’t understand,” Thurgood said. “But then, how could you? You haven’t seen Him, haven’t heard Him speak.” He paced to and fro as he went on, arms waving in his excitement, spilling wine from the forgotten cup. “We come from a world that has lost its way, Gordon. Our science has blinded us to the poetry of life, but more importantly, to our basic needs. Spiritual needs.”

“Really, Franklin,” Sartori couldn’t stop herself.

“We have all forgotten that part of us, Marlene. But, if you could just hear Him once, it would all come back to you. You rediscover who you really are then.”

“Dr. Thurgood,” she snapped. “Did your team’s TNF equipment malfunction?”

He smiled at her and she felt a chill. This was not the man she remembered. Thurgood had always been fascinated with the historical aspects of their research, but he had also been a first-class scientist. What had happened to him? He was almost totally immersed in this environment. Could this also affect her team?

“He is here in Jerusalem now,” Thurgood said, seeming not to have heard the question. The shadow passed across his face then cleared as he looked at her. “The event is set for today, before sunset. No sooner, no later. Then, we wait.”

H. David Blalock

Thurgood slipped into a reverie and Sartori glanced at the rest of the man's teammates. Some had that same distanced look, as if contemplating what was to come for the first time. She walked to Genali and leaned close to whisper.

"He's gone mad."

"Apparently," Genali agreed. "But what do we do about it?"

She shook her head. "Nothing. This is obviously why he never returned. How he convinces the rest of his team to stay as well is beyond me, especially in this state."

Her teammate surreptitiously pointed at Thurgood's men. "Some of them look as mad as he."

"Well, we have to get out of here. If we are to get to the project site by midnight, we must leave now," she hissed.

Glancing at his chronometer, Genali grunted his assent. "It will be dark soon. Perhaps we can –"

There was a loud peal of thunder and the room went pitch black.

"Well, that was sooner than I expected," he muttered.

A rumbling began deep beneath their feet and soon the dark chamber was filled with the sounds of breaking pottery and shouting men. Staggering in the general confusion over the shaking ground, Sartori grabbed Genali's shoulder and tugged him toward where she remembered the door to be.

"And the veil of the temple was rent in twain and the earth did quake and the rocks rent and the graves were opened and many bodies of the saints which slept arose."

Sartori's hackles rose at the voice that cut through the din with its calm assurance and supernatural resonance. Then she heard something she had only heard during TNF projects, and never from a team member.

Doctor Franklin Thurgood, inventor of the Time Neutral Field and a foremost scientist of the twenty-sixth century, began to pray.

* * *

They stumbled unhindered from Thurgood's apartment into the darkened, debris-littered streets. Though they were not alone, the people they met shrank from them in fear. The darkness was like a moonless

Eclectic Dreams

night, not quite complete but blinding enough to impede their progress. With some difficulty they made their way out of the city and into the hovels that cluttered the countryside outside the wall.

“Now what?” Genali asked when they stopped to get their bearings. “We can’t complete the mission ourselves. We need the others.”

“Stop whining,” Sartori growled. “If we got away, I’m sure the others could have as well. We head for the tomb.”

“And if they haven’t escaped?”

She grabbed his sleeve. “Then we improvise. Come on!”

Grumbling incoherently, Genali followed her lead. They got to the tomb site within twenty minutes and settled into the blind built by a team that had departed from 2523, eight years prior to their own departure, but had only appeared moments before their arrival to prevent its discovery by locals. She was pleased to find two of the other four already there, working on their assignments. With four, they could succeed. She noted with satisfaction that Genali recognized this as well and his developing plans to wrest control away from her came crashing down.

Twilight had returned while they traveled and it perversely went from darker to lighter as true sunset approached. None of them commented on the darkness, nor would any of them express any opinions on any of the events they witnessed during the project. It would be counterproductive to distract themselves from the tight schedule. Though a team member might be puzzled or excited or disturbed by an observation, they were trained to hold their reactions in reserve while the mission was in progress. Only life-threatening situations or mission-critical issues were allowed to alter the timetable. A certain amount of leeway was allowed for pre-mission observation by the team in case the prep teams had missed a crucial detail, but even that was measured only in hours, sometimes minutes. Every extra second courted an undesirable TE.

Shortly before sunset they watched a small party of mourners approach the tomb escorted by several Roman soldiers. The sepulchre was a simple affair, little more than a hole in the side of one of Palestine’s thousands of rocky hills. The funeral party stood outside as the litter bearers carried the body inside. A few women with jars and bolts of cloth followed them, then an older woman leaning against two grim-faced Hebrews. A well-dressed man, heavily bearded and carrying

himself with the air of one accustomed to authority, stood outside talking with the soldiers. Someone had brought torches, which were stuck into the ground and lit against the coming night. It was apparent the Romans intended to stand vigil to prevent exactly what Sartori's team planned.

Because of the impending Sabbath, the funeral arrangements were hurried and abbreviated. The Romans watched as the Jews rolled a huge stone before the mouth of the tomb. The last rays of the sun died as the grave closed. The women, who had stayed long enough to see the rock placed, filed off toward the city. The men remained until the Romans had examined the tomb's seal. Two of the soldiers took up places on either side of the stone and the others, including the Israelites, went off.

Sartori's team waited until the funeral party had time to leave earshot, then released the odorless, colorless, heavier-than-air anesthetic gas toward the guards. Within a few minutes, the men nodded off. The amnesiac side-effect of the gas would leave them believing they had never wavered from their duty, and heighten the psychological impact of what was to follow.

It took their combined efforts to move the stone. It had crunched against the hard ground to shift only about six inches when there was a shout.

"Step away from the tomb, Doctors."

Franklin Thurgood stood a few feet away, flanked by his team. In his hand was a disruptor pistol which he waved at them, driving them back toward the blind.

"Now I know you're insane," Sartori said. "Bringing an artifact like that into this time is just begging for a TE."

"What do you intend to do with us?" Genali quivered.

"Nothing, if you behave yourselves," Thurgood replied. "Your TNF should be expiring within the hour. You have a choice: return to the disembarkation point for pickup or stay here the rest of your life."

Genali gasped. "You can't be serious."

"Deadly serious. I will not allow His body to become an Institute display."

"If you'll just listen –"

"Quiet!" Thurgood tilted his head at her and the shadow flickered there. He refocused almost immediately. "The Institute must be in great

Eclectic Dreams

danger from Crandall's committee for you to have moved Last Project up so far. I don't know why, nor do I care. The fact remains you shall not use His body for your personal gain."

"Franklin," she said calmly, trying to defuse the situation by force of reason, "You are a scientist, a man of logic and truth. Think about what you are doing. For thousands of years men have fought, killed, oppressed and committed atrocities on each other over this. We can settle the question once and for all, expose the truth and set mankind free. We have the chance to shine the light of science into the darkness of superstition and ignorance."

Thurgood stood shaking his head slowly, the shadow dark on his face. "You don't understand," he said.

"Then explain it to me. Tell me, why is this man so important to you?"

"It's hard to explain, Marlene."

"You know we'll just keep coming back, Franklin. Why shouldn't we? Is it dangerous? Is that why we should abandon the project?"

"It's not dangerous really--"

"Then what?" she pushed. Thurgood hesitated and she thought she saw uncertainty in his eyes. That shadow was back. She began to wonder if Thurgood's team had been living in the environment for too long. Surely they had pushed the TNF protection to the limit. Any unforeseen circumstance could have led to significant complication. Perhaps Thurgood was acting so oddly because of TNF fading and that having him examine his position dispassionately would bring him back to sanity. There was still time to salvage the mission.

"If only you had heard Him speak," Thurgood was saying. "You would have understood."

An idea suddenly occurred to her. "Look, Franklin, history tells us the body disappears, correct?"

"Yes," he allowed.

"Then who's to say we don't take it?"

"But he appears later, resurrected."

She couldn't keep the edge out of her voice. "Do you really believe that?"

H. David Blalock

Thurgood wavered. Even the men with him shuffled their feet uncertainly and glanced at the cave tomb, the question obvious on their faces.

“I --” He swallowed hard and tears rose to his eyes. “I want to believe it.”

“Franklin,” she said, putting the softness back into her tone. “I think I understand the pressure you are under. You’ve been here a long time trying to stay invisible. You’ve been immersed in this culture, caught up in the illusion, all that time. Could it be you’ve lost your objectivity? That would be understandable. But don’t throw away your life’s work for this.”

The end of the pistol dipped just a bit and Thurgood looked at the tomb expectantly. The darkness inside remained unbroken.

“Please,” she thought he said. Whether he was asking her to believe or conjuring the dead from His tomb, she could not tell. What was important was that he dropped the pistol and walked slowly away, head down.

She stepped forward quickly, snatched the weapon off the ground and tucked it out of sight in the folds of her wrap.

“Gentlemen, I believe we have a job to do,” she said to her team. Turning to Thurgood’s men, she said, “I know you came here with Thurgood, but we’re all working on the same team. Will you lend a hand?”

There was a moment’s hesitation, but eventually seven of the ten Thurgood had brought went to help roll the stone away. They stepped inside and Sartori brought up short.

The tomb was empty.

* * *

APRIL 26, 2531

She stood watching Arthur. He actually wasn’t a bad looking man, once you got past the scars and the filthy beard. Sartori thought she could see some of the charisma that had brought Britain’s barbaric tribes out of

Eclectic Dreams

their primitive warring mentality and into the civilized way of cooperation.

“How are you today?” she asked in his dialect.

Arthur squinted at her through narrowed eyes and barked from tight lips. “Am I to be ransomed or executed?”

“Neither. You are here to stay with us.”

He looked at the others who flanked Sartori through the isolation ward’s glass partition. “Am I dead?”

“No. We saved you. We healed you and saved your life.”

Arthur touched his heart where a puckered scar left testimony of the grievous wound. “Omnia Dei gloriam,” he mumbled, “Madre Dio ora pro nobis—“

Dr. Sartori thumbed off the intercom. She faced Crandall and the Oversight Committee.

“As you can see, he is quite healthy,” she announced.

“Physically, perhaps,” Crandall replied. He was well past fifty but his lifelong crusade against Time Exploitation had kept him active mentally and physically. His lined face was set grimly and his pale blue eyes shone brilliantly from below still-dark hair. “But how has this affected his mind? I hear him praying. I understand enough Latin to recognize that.”

“He’s an eleventh century man. What else can you expect?” she shot back. “Faced with the unknown, he falls back on his faith.”

“Like Thurgood?” Crandall threw at her. “In light of the circumstances, Dr. Sartori, I believe the Committee is being lenient by merely suspending TNF projects indefinitely. The abduction of a major historical figure is a very serious matter. Criminal proceedings might be in order.”

She bit back her retort. Things were bad enough. If she hoped to salvage anything, she needed to keep a level head in the coming weeks. She couldn't allow Crandall to bait her into making any more mistakes. Oddly, she found it was easier to keep a straight face now. Before Last Project, such an accusation would have sent her over the edge. The sight of the empty tomb, however, had convinced her that the Institute would survive this crisis and that TNF work would continue.

How else could the body have disappeared?

H. David Blalock

"I believe we can set things right with a minimum of effort," she told him. "But it will require one more project."

Crandall regarded her with a sour look. "How can you fix this? It's done."

Sartori smiled at him.

* * *

CIRCA 1000 AD

Parcival cradled his king's head in the crook of his arm. Only seconds had passed since Arthur had closed his eyes, but Parcival could feel the king slipping away, sense the powerful presence that had built a kingdom from less than ashes fade like the setting sun. He felt more than just loss, more than grief. He felt despair.

Merlyn was gone, victim of the designs of Morgana Le Fay. Lancelot was dead, Galahad and Kay fallen. Their best, their finest, lost forever. Tears rose unresisted in his eyes, blurring the horror of the bloody battlefield around him. He no longer heard the moans of the wounded and dying. He heard only the increasingly shallow breathing of the man in his arms.

He glanced up to see a ship appear from a gray mist hanging over the lake. An old woman and her handmaidens worked their way down the ramp pushed off the deck to the lakeshore. They looked to be mostly peasants, probably come to rob the dead of their clothing and weapons. Such was the horror of war that it even desecrated itself after it had spent all its killing energy.

He gasped as ghostly figures in iridescent silver appeared from thin air just a few feet from the boat and walked to the crone's side. The old woman and her entourage paused at their appearance and became engaged in conversation out of earshot.

He looked back at Arthur as the man shook in his arms and made a gurgling noise deep in his throat. The blood that had flowed copiously from the chest wound slowed and stopped.

Parcival wept.

Up In The Air

Gerard Montpelier looked at the form standing before him, stretching his neck to see its top. The balloon was nearly three stories tall, festooned with rigging falling from the envelope, the body of the balloon, to the gondola. It stood out garishly against the soft green of the surrounding countryside, its bright reds and blues shouting to be noticed. "Spirit of the Winds" was written in ornate lettering around its perimeter. Above it, Centauri's two moons, Arno and Ceta, looked like smaller versions running free in the purple night sky. Stars were beginning to fade with the approaching dawn. Centauri was different at night. It seemed to sleep between dusk and dawn, from its mountains to its lakes. The flowers completely closed and the animals returned to their lairs. All was silent except for the wind. Within the hour, however, Centauri's sun would come over the horizon and the countryside would burst to life with color as the flora opened to the light.

He looked at the gondola, with its crown lines hanging over the side, and shook his head. "You're quite mad, you know," he told the man climbing into it. "You'll freeze to death. Or crash."

Phillippe de Coutreau grinned at Montpelier as he made his preflight checks. "Gloomy talk from a descendant of a family renowned for its pioneering in ballooning."

"I keep telling you, those were the Montgolfiers, not Montpeliers."

"Yes, well, you know this has to be done. It's been two local years since we arrived, and we still don't have fast overland transport."

"That's because every light craft we've launched has failed to get more than a dozen kilometers before being forced down by weather. What makes you think a balloon will succeed where heavier craft failed?"

De Coutreau tested the tension on one of the load cables that attached the gondola to the envelope. "Call it a hunch, Gerard. All the survey craft we sent down before the colony ship landed were aerostatic devices. They seemed to have no trouble accomplishing their missions. I think

H. David Blalock

Centauri's atmosphere magnifies turbulence somehow. Aerostats are less obstructive to wind flow, so there's less turbulence to magnify."

"Tell that to Langley."

De Coutreau paused, frowning. Langley had been his partner in this venture. They had worked together for nearly eight local months to prepare for the first flight, arguing nearly non-stop from the beginning. Langley refused to believe that anything but a powered flight vehicle would do, and had outfitted his balloon with propellers to speed its track. His closed-gondola balloon broke up in mid-air and crashed less than five kilometers from launch.

"The investigators said Langley didn't properly check his load tapes. It was a stupid mistake," de Coutreau reminded him.

"One that cost him his life," Montpelier pointed out.

"It was the only accident he ever had in over three thousand flights," de Coutreau bristled.

"It only takes one."

De Coutreau went back to his checks and tried to ignore that comment. "Gerard, I appreciate your concern, but I have a job to do. With all the arable land on Earth barren, they depend on us and colonies like us. Centauri has immense potential to be a rich agricultural resource, but we need a better way to transport the produce from the farms to the spaceport." He picked up the flight log and thumbed it on. "You would think after all these years we would have come up with a better way to preserve perishables than simple freezing," he said absently.

Montpelier watched as his friend finished the preflight and made entries into the flight log. He couldn't help thinking how similar Langley and de Coutreau were in their determination to die. "You sure you won't reconsider?"

"Let's get started, shall we?"

Montpelier waved helplessly. "Just be careful."

De Coutreau managed a smile. "I will. Thanks."

The balloon slipped from its moorings at Montpelier's signal and began its silent rise.

"Good luck," he whispered at the retreating globe.

Eclectic Dreams

"Spirit of the Winds" gained altitude rapidly in the cool spring air. Centauri's environment was nearly identical to Earth's, with four seasons of three local months each, though a local month was slightly longer than the standard thirty Earth days. Rainy seasons occurred in early spring and fall, giving two growing periods. Crops designed to take advantage of the nutrient-rich virgin soil flourished nearly the entire year. Great care was taken not to leach the soil too badly and crop rotation ensured extended lifetimes for the heavily planted farms.

When humans had landed on Centauri two local years earlier, they had been confident of their colony's success, using methods that had established dozens of other colonies in nearby systems. Almost immediately things had gone wrong, most significantly the weather. Conventional aircraft found the vagaries of Centauri skies too dangerous. Stiff winds turned back on themselves with frightening severity, causing heavy shear that had broken more than one light craft to bits. Turbulence generated by the uneven terrain and the erratic winds was enough to make the boldest pilot stop and think it might be best to walk.

None of the preliminary surveys had prepared them for the winds and storms, the earth movements and flash floods. Doggedly, they held on, lured by the lushness of the available lands and its promise of good farming. People on Earth were starving; the planet's arable land having long since played out. More than just Centauri colony's future could benefit from his flight.

"Spirit" was designed specifically by de Coutreau for the thick Centauri atmosphere. He had argued with Langley about the propellers on the other man's balloon, maintaining that the turbines on the small aircraft caused the turbulence that led to their doom. Langley had insisted that the props were necessary to control the course, saying that the vehicle would be useless if it were totally at the mercy of the wind currents. It wouldn't be dependable enough to be viable, and the colony needed a dependable method of moving material and supplies rapidly in order to survive. All he had to do was make it to the settlement sixty-five kilometers away. Even if he got within five kilometers, he could claim success.

H. David Blalock

He leaned over the edge of his open basket and looked down at the checkered landscape below. Farms ran hard against one another with tiny access roads and irrigation channels grudgingly given space. Several hundred light years away, many Terrans were eating Centauri-grown grain, legumes, and tubers imported at enormous expense across the emptiness of the void by obscenely wealthy food conglomerates. Those who could not afford fresh food were left with synthetics and home-grown vegetables, stunted and warped from trying to grow in nearly sterile soil. De Coutreau had read in a history account that over five hundred standard years ago Earth had been as lush as Centauri, perhaps even more so. It must have been marvelous to see these green fields against the deep blue of Earth's oceans.

The quiet was what struck him each time he flew. The balloon floated with the air currents, so there was little relative wind inside the gondola. The higher he went the less ground noise reached him. Soon, there was a calm peace, infrequently broken by the crackling of the load cables or the clicking of an instrument relay.

He checked the thermometer. Six degrees and falling. He reached into a basket and took out an insulated flight suit. Once he had donned it, he felt much better; warmer and more secure. He sat down in front of his computer station to take a bearing on his position. If his calculations were correct, "Spirit" should arrive at her target within an hour. Below him, the landscape, turned rugged and broken, sped by. Some day roads might cut through those hills, but for now he was alone in the sky and saw little below him to keep him company. He knew Montpelier was down there in a pursuit vehicle stocked with medical supplies and emergency equipment. Still, the emptiness of the panorama and the silence sent a chill of loneliness through him. He shook off the feeling and completed his bearings. Picking up the flight log, he glanced at his chronometer.

There was a groaning nearby. He stopped; stylus poised, and listened. When it didn't repeat, he passed it off as the rigging or the gondola's weight shifting in the wind and finished his log entry. He set the log back in its cradle by the navigation computer and turned to check his instruments.

Eclectic Dreams

The groan came again. He cast around, trying to locate it, but saw nothing out of the ordinary. Maybe it was the rigging, he thought. He set about testing the lines and examining their anchors.

A boom sounded right next to him and, startled, he shouted, slapping a hand to the ear. It rang painfully and his hand came away bloody.

"What the hell?" he said, his voice muted and oddly toned to his own ears. He spun about, but nothing seemed out of order. A deep ache began on the right side of his head. "Great," he thought, "my eardrum's busted." He absently regarded his bloody hand. Wiping it on his shirtsleeve, he reached for the first aid kit. He was vaguely aware he could be in shock, but decided against calling Montpelier. "Give me a couple of minutes to get my head together," he thought. "I'll be fine."

Something brushed across his back. He twirled, holding the first aid kit out like a shield.

Nothing.

"What the hell is going on?" he said aloud, then caught the note of rising panic in his voice. "Get a grip," he chastised himself. "It was just the wind."

He felt pressure across his forehead, more like a hand brushing it than the wind. Carefully, he lifted his own hand to touch the spot. The skin was clammy and cool.

"I must be in shock," he reasoned. "And hallucinating."

He noticed the rigging shivering in the wind and suddenly he was not alone.

It had no definite shape beyond that of a column of smoke that refused to be dispersed by the wind, suddenly tearing through the gondola. The smoke boiled and rolled within the column, a grayish mass hanging a few centimeters off the gondola floor. De Coutreau rubbed his eyes to be sure he wasn't seeing things. The column hung near the gondola's center. Cautiously, he approached it and peered into the smoke, trying to make out what might be inside.

The column abruptly swelled and he was engulfed.

H. David Blalock

Montpelier had momentarily lost sight of "Spirit" during a detour around a particularly large rock outcropping that had seemed to come out of nowhere. By the time he relocated the balloon, he could tell something was seriously wrong. "Spirit" was descending rapidly and would surely crash if de Coutreau didn't compensate soon. Cursing, he urged the pursuit vehicle faster, keeping one eye on the balloon and the other on the uneven ground.

"Spirit" dropped behind a line of rocks. A fireball blossomed followed in a second or so by the sound of an explosion. Montpelier's heart sank as he sped toward the site. He reached for the communicator and keyed in the emergency frequency. He finished the code as he reached the wreckage.

There wasn't much left of "Spirit". The globe was burned completely away, as was most of the rigging. The gondola lay shattered and flaming, its equipment sprayed haphazardly along the path of the crash. There was only one piece missing.

De Coutreau was gone.

Weightlessness.

He realized he must have been unconscious because he was just now becoming aware of who and where he was. De Coutreau tried to raise his hand to scratch his nose, but there was no response to his mental command. But then, come to think of it, he couldn't see his nose anyway, so trying to scratch it would have been useless. He tried to ignore the itch by turning his attention to figuring out where he was.

He was suspended in a gray nothingness. There were no landmarks, no land to mark. The sensation was odd but strangely not frightening. Part of his lack of concern could have been attributed to his aching head, but the major reason was that he realized there was little if nothing he could do to change the situation. He resigned himself to seeing this through and hoped the opportunity to make a little more sense out of it would come about soon.

Eclectic Dreams

A voice, soft and sibilant, came to him not through his ears but through his mind. He recognized it as a shadow of his own voice, similar but vaguely different.

"Listen," it said. "Listen."

He tilted his head, or at least would have if he had one. The voice was nearly inaudible, little more than a breath or a breeze.

"Listen."

"I hear you," he said, startling himself. His voice was a shout to its whisper.

There was a long pause, as if his answer had surprised the speaker just as much. Then a sequence of images flit across his mind's eye. There were pictures of the first colony ship landing, light aircraft flying, ground vehicles, and finally his own balloon. Behind these images was a confusion, a wondering feeling. He came to understand the images were a question, a way of asking, "What's this? And this? And this?"

De Coutreau stopped wondering how it was possible he should be talking to himself and how the pictures impressed themselves on him. He accepted someone or something was trying to communicate, and that was probably going to be the only way he could get home.

The scenes repeated and this time he made an effort to name each thing before the next one flashed by. The pictures slowed in their sequence and he tried to augment the labels with a brief description. The images slowed further, then restarted. They became sharper, more detailed and better defined as he kept up his monologue. How long this went on, he didn't know. He had no reference point on which to judge.

Finally, he was again alone in the gray, featureless ether. Unable to do otherwise, he waited. After a while, he lost all sense of time. He might have slept. In fact, the whole thing might have been a dream or an hallucination brought on by apoxia. Could there have been a fault in his suit? It would explain a great deal. If he was apoxic, the balloon could run out of control and crash. The thought made him uncomfortable but not afraid. He tried to awaken, but, never actually having tried to wake in the past, he found it difficult. And how would he know he was awake if it worked? Would he remember to note the fact once back in the waking world?

This time the voice was one he knew but never expected to hear.

H. David Blalock

"Hello, Phillippe."

"Langley?"

"That's right, Jules Langley."

"But you're dead. I went to your funeral."

"Did you see a body?"

"Well, no. They told us your body was destroyed in the fire."

"They were wrong."

De Coutreau chewed on that for a second. "Where are we?" he asked at last.

"Best I can tell, we're nowhere."

"You've been here since the accident?"

Langley's voice sounded amused. "Didn't know I'd had one until just now."

"What?"

"Until you showed up, I'd been in a kind of limbo. I can't see you, but I can hear you. I can't see anything, really. Just a gray nothing."

De Coutreau would have nodded. "Same here. What was the last thing you remember?"

"Heavy smoke in the gondola. Blocked my vision and got into the instruments."

"Fire?"

"No — it wasn't thick and it filled the gondola but wasn't suffocating or noxious."

De Coutreau described the column he'd seen in his own balloon. "Was it like that?"

"Couldn't tell. I must have been inside it."

"Was there any sound associated with it? A booming noise?"

"Actually," Langley said after a short pause, "just before it appeared there was a sound like a thunderclap very close by. I didn't think much of it, as there was a storm going on at the time."

They were silent as each considered their situation. Frustration built in de Coutreau.

"How do we get out of here?" he asked.

"We'd have to know where 'here' was first, wouldn't we?"

Again silence settled.

"Maybe we're dead."

Eclectic Dreams

Langley's words stunned him, perhaps more than they should have. It was hard to shrug off such an assertion while looking into that colorless void.

"You're supposed to laugh," Langley said.

"I don't feel like laughing."

"You don't really think we're dead, do you?"

"No. I don't think so," he replied uncertainly.

The silence was oppressive this time.

"Wait a minute, now," Langley began. "If we're dead, how can we talk to each other?"

"I don't know," de Coutreau blustered. "Why can't we see our bodies? And where the hell are we?"

"All very good questions," Langley said sensibly. "Let's look at what we know."

De Coutreau forced himself to calm down and listen to Langley's voice. In the nothingness around him, it was the only other thing that he was sure didn't originate within himself. As long as there was one thing external, there might be others. External things meant he had a location, and once he could establish that, he would have a reference from which to launch his escape from wherever that might be.

"We aren't in the balloons, that's for sure," Langley was saying. "And I'm pretty sure we're not dead. That means we're somewhere else than the balloons, but still on Centauri."

"Maybe we're unconscious, or in a coma, or something?"

"A coma? Didn't you say you went to my funeral?"

"Oh, yeah."

"Besides, why would I be talking to you if you were in a coma?"

"Maybe I'm in a coma, and you're just a figment of my imagination."

"Hang on, now," Langley growled. "I don't take kindly to being called unreal in any reality, especially my own. I'm having a hard enough time keeping a grip on my sanity without you shooting holes in it."

"Sorry."

They stopped to regroup.

"What do you remember after getting here — before you heard me, that is?" de Coutreau asked.

H. David Blalock

"Bits and pieces, I'm afraid. Snatches of pictures, thoughts, nothing coherent. I was very glad to hear your voice. By the way, who were you talking to?"

"What do you mean?"

"I heard you talking," said Langley, "but nobody else."

De Coutreau considered that for a moment. "I heard what I thought might have been someone, but it could have been my imagination."

"When?"

"When, what?"

"When did you hear the other person?"

"I don't know," de Coutreau said. "A little after I woke up here, I guess."

Langley seemed to ponder that for a moment. "Was it a human voice?"

"Yeah. Actually, it sounded a lot like my own voice. I thought I was cracking up for a minute."

"Something like that happened to me, too," Langley said.

"What exactly do you remember?"

"Pictures, mostly."

"Mostly?"

"There was a feeling of, well, confusion associated with the images. I thought at the time that it was just a symptom of my disorientation. After a while, things got quiet and I guess I slept. Then I heard your voice."

"Why did you wait so long to speak up?"

"Did I? I didn't realize it. At first, I thought I was dreaming. I felt like I could wake up at any moment, but you went on talking until I realized I was awake. I called out as soon as it dawned on my you were real."

"Real."

"Pardon?" Langley said.

"I didn't say anything," de Coutreau replied.

"I am real."

"I know that now," Langley sighed.

"That wasn't me," de Coutreau said.

"It sounded like you."

"I am."

"Was that you?"

Eclectic Dreams

"No."

The men listened and waited.

"I am."

De Coutreau felt a presence, as of someone standing just outside his field of vision. He would have turned his head.

"I am."

The tone of the statement became stronger with each utterance; more forceful, sure, and certain.

"Who are you?" de Coutreau heard himself ask.

"I am," came the response after a slight hesitation.

"What are you called?" Langley cut in.

There was a silence that extended into several minutes.

"I think I confused it," Langley said.

"What or who do you think it was?"

"Isn't it obvious? Our warden."

"Warden?"

"Look," Langley began, and de Coutreau could almost see him ticking points off on non-existent fingers, the way he did when expounding what he thought should be obvious. "I didn't volunteer to be here, nor did you. I can see no way out — or in, for that matter. Since we're here involuntarily without possibility of escape, I'd call that captivity."

"What possible motive could anyone have for holding us?"

"I don't know," Langley admitted. "It doesn't make much sense, but what else could it be?"

De Coutreau had to allow him the point. Nothing better described their situation. "All right, but what do we do about it? What can we do about it?"

"Listen."

"To what?" Langley asked.

"That wasn't me, Jules," de Coutreau said.

"Listen."

They waited.

"I am. I am real." There was a long pause, almost long enough for de Coutreau to start to ask Langley if he still heard the voice. "Who are you?" it asked.

"Phillippe de Coutreau."

H. David Blalock

"Are you real?"

De Coutreau couldn't keep the smile from his voice. "Of course."

"What are you?" the voice asked.

"Human."

"Human," the voice repeated.

"Yes, human. We are a race of sentient beings from another star system."

Again, time stretched, but the men kept quiet.

"Phillippe de Coutreau," came the voice, finally.

"Yes?"

"Human is Phillippe de Coutreau."

"Uh, Phillippe is human," Langley corrected.

"Are you human?"

"I guess you mean me," Langley said. "Yes, I am human. My name is Jules Langley."

"Name."

"What I am called. Who I am."

"I am called —"

De Coutreau was sure he would have found himself leaning forward to hear the next bit, if he had a body to lean.

"I am called Centauri."

"You are a Centauri?" de Coutreau prompted. Although the planetary surveys hadn't discovered higher life forms, perhaps the Centauri weren't detectable by man-made devices. Perhaps they were too ephemeral or too dense or too something.

"No, I am called Centauri."

"How many of you are there?" Langley asked. "Why haven't we seen you in the last two years?"

"There is only one of me. I have been here forever."

"Only one? How is that possible?"

"I am real."

"Centauri," de Coutreau interrupted, "where are we?"

"In me."

They had to stop for a moment to consider that.

"In you?"

"Yes."

Eclectic Dreams

"I don't get this," Langley said, confused. "How can we be inside it? How big is the damn thing, anyway?"

"I am Centauri."

It began to slowly dawn on de Coutreau. "You are the planet Centauri?"

There was a short pause. "No, I am Centauri."

"Describe yourself to us, please."

"I am real. I have life. I think."

"Useful information," Langley said snidely.

"Quiet, Jules. Centauri, what do you look like?"

"Look like."

"Physically, what is your outer appearance?"

"Outer."

"I think we have a major language problem here," Langley said. "Let me try."

"Okay."

"Centauri, do you know what we look like?" Langley asked.

"Look like."

"We are humans. Each human has a body: a head and a torso with two arms above and two legs below. We see through eyes, hear through ears, smell through a nose, taste with a mouth, and feel with our outer covering of skin. When you took us from our flying vehicles, you must have noticed this."

"Yes. A body."

"We call that our outer appearance because it is what others see of us and identifies us to others."

"Identifies."

"Makes us different."

"Different."

"Not the same, other."

"Yes. Other."

"Now, what do you look like?" Langley went on.

Another extended period went by, which they had come to recognize as Centauri's hesitation as it considered and formulated an answer.

"My body is called 'atmosphere'," Centauri said at last.

"Then you are the planet Centauri," de Coutreau pressed.

H. David Blalock

"No, I am Centauri."

"I think it means it identifies with the awareness, the consciousness rather than the planet," Langley said slowly. "A subtle, but definite difference."

"Seems like nitpicking to me. What difference does it make?" de Coutreau sputtered. "It's the planet, Jules, the damned planet! Don't you get it?"

"Get what? That we're talking to an intelligent rock? Hell, for all I know, I'm dreaming this whole thing."

"Get a grip, man! You're not dreaming, and neither am I. This is real."

"I am real," Centauri agreed.

"It understands that much," Langley said in a smile.

"Centauri," de Coutreau said, "where are we?"

"In me."

"Yes, yes, but where in you?"

"The atmosphere," Langley said, a little exasperatedly. "Where else? We're suspended somewhere in its body, the atmosphere."

"Yes," Centauri agreed again.

"But, why can't we see our bodies?" de Coutreau countered.

"It's opaque," Langley said patiently. "It's like being in a sensory deprivation chamber. Until we starting talking, we had no other input."

"But shouldn't I feel it in my eyes, on my skin?"

"Maybe you do, but just don't notice it. How long were you out? Do you know? How long has it been since my funeral?"

De Coutreau mulled on that. "I don't really know. My flight left a little over a week after the funeral."

"A week," Langley said softly.

"But you had been missing for three days before they found the wreckage, and preparations for the ceremony took another three days."

"Two weeks," Langley corrected himself. "It doesn't seem that long."

"I has been fifteen days since I intercepted you," a voice unlike anything they'd heard before said. It echoed peculiarly, its volume muted but clear.

"Centauri?"

"Yes, I am Centauri."

"You sound different," de Coutreau said.

Eclectic Dreams

"My voice is the same. Your perception of it may differ."

"What the hell does that mean?" Langley muttered.

"Are you native to this planet?" de Coutreau overrode Langley's remark.

"I am."

"Our planetary surveys revealed no sentient life. If it had, we wouldn't have landed and set up a colony."

"You mean," Centauri shot back, "if you had discovered intelligent life by your precepts, you would have avoided contact."

"Yes. We don't intend to usurp the natural order of a living culture."

"Nonsense. You simply would not be able to morally justify doing so immediately," Centauri said, the voice dripping with disgust. "Time would cure that problem."

"Wait just a minute," Langley broke in. "We're not the ones who kidnapped and held captive two innocent people."

"No, because you could not. You hadn't the ability."

"Even if we did have the ability, we wouldn't do it," Langley parried.

De Coutreau listened as they bickered. It struck him that the alien sentience had mastered human speech, concepts, even moral and philosophical abstracts in a very short period. Of course, if Centauri was indeed who it claimed to be, it represented the intelligence of an entire planetary body. It would have been able to study the human colonists up close for years, observing everything, missing nothing —

"It was you."

Langley and Centauri paused at de Coutreau's words.

"You caused the violent weather, the earthquakes. All the trouble the colony has endured since the beginning. It was you."

Centauri did not answer.

"Do you realize you've killed dozens of humans? Intelligent, dedicated people who meant you no harm."

Silence.

"Damn it, Centauri, you've murdered, and for what?"

There was a rumble from far off and de Coutreau thought he saw a flash of light.

"You attacked me," Centauri said in its oddly volumed voice. There was an emotion in it now; a shadow of the defensiveness Langley had

H. David Blalock

shown. An imitation? "You sent rockets burning through me, things with blades cutting me. You poisoned me with chemicals and smokes. You ignored my cries and turnings to make you stop."

"Cries? Turnings? What are talking about?"

There was a definite flash now, followed by another, louder rumble.

"I howled in my winds for you to stop," Centauri said, a shadow of a need for them to understand distinct but not quite exact in the voice. "I cried in my rain. I shrugged at your vehicles that tore up my skin. But you ignored me, kept on." This time the flash and rumble were almost simultaneous. "I thought you were different. Where you went, I did not hurt. I thought you were different."

"The balloons are built to float with the wind," Langley explained.

"But you are the same as them," Centauri said, as if Langley hadn't spoken. "You made me think I could communicate to you my pain, get you to stop without —"

The grayness thinned in de Coutreau's eyes and he found himself floating high above the surface encased in a silverish ball. The ball could have been made of vapor, so thin and fragile did it appear. About three meters away he saw Langley in a similar sphere, looking around in bewilderment.

He forced himself not to look down. He had no sensation of falling, but he trusted practically none of his senses now. It would be too easy to look down and see the surface rushing to meet him, helpless and alone.

"Do you see?" Centauri said. "I have kept you safe. I do not wish to kill. Please, stop."

"Centauri," Langley strained out, "could you put us down — gently! — on the ground? I would feel much more comfortable there."

For long seconds, they thought Centauri chose not to hear. Then, a gentle flutter in de Coutreau's gut let him know they were descending. No sound penetrated the bubble, and he couldn't bring himself to so much as move a muscle until he felt pressure on the soles of his feet. There was a soft breath of a sound and he felt a breeze hit his cheek.

He opened his eyes.

"Tell them to stop." It was an echo, fading from his mind almost too quickly to understand.

Eclectic Dreams

He looked at Langley, but saw the man's attention was on something behind him. He turned.

Montpelier's chase vehicle was making its way up the hill toward them, its tracks tearing up vegetation and gouging out soil as it came. De Coutreau caught the darkness of the vehicle's exhaust as it rose into the pure blue of the morning sky.

It was going to be tough.

H. David Blalock

The Last Pilgrimage

The base dome was showing its age. Numerous surface discolorations testified to patched micrometeorite damage. It was well past its designed optimum life span, but The Church would use it until it was totally unlivable. Similar bases on Mars, Io, Europa, Ganymede, Ceres and Titan had been stripped and abandoned. The pilgrims had come to brave the crumbling ruins of Lunar Base before making the final jump to Earth and their destiny.

The twenty devout stood awkwardly tilting the bulky headpieces of their suits to catch a glimpse of Earth. Jedediah Miller looked at them and shared their wonder. There was Goodwife Ruth Long, seeking solace after the loss of her family in a terrible accident on Eridani. Obadiah Cartwright held her elbow and pointed at Earth. A retired Soldier of God who now dedicated himself wholly to The Church, he was one of the few men Jedediah respected. Naomi Silversmith gazed in rapt attention at the globe. She was a shy, quiet wisp of a girl only a few years younger than his twenty-two with whom he had begun to build a relationship.

He twisted around until the blue and white globe centered in his vision, then watched in fascination as it progressed slowly along the horizon. He let its soft beauty pervade him. It was brighter there every day now, they said. The particulate matter in the atmosphere had been reduced to the finest dust. Rain no longer left mud on every surface and there were even reports of flora returning to the highlands and mountainsides. Once, he knew, the moon had shown only one face to her. The Fall had changed many things.

In cosmic terms it had been a glancing blow. A cloud of asteroid sized meteors had hurtled through Earth's orbit at just the right time. There had been two main impacts, one striking the largest continent on its eastern edge. No one living on Earth before The Fall would recognize the landmasses today, not after the shifting of the poles, plates, and magnetic field had remade the planet's surface. Two of the meteors had swung into orbit around Earth to become massive, misshapen reminders

Eclectic Dreams

of The Fall. Luna's orbit was still a bit unstable because of her new neighbors, but Nature had a way of bringing things back into balance.

Jedediah tried to remember the numbers he'd been taught: the size and weights of the meteors, their displacement volume, the number of dead and injured. Looking at that bright globe, though, all he could think of was that he was finally on his way to Earth.

Earth: mother of all humankind.

Before The Fall, she had sent out colonies to Mars, Jupiter's and Saturn's moons, and even to the nearest stars. Mars colony had just rebelled against Earth when The Fall occurred, saving it from God's wrath. The colonies at the outer moons had not turned from Earth's ways and God had purged them. Only Mars colony found grace in His eyes and they flourished under His care. A few people were rumored to have survived on Earth, but how could you believe the word of infidel freighter captains running back and forth from Eridani and the outer systems? The Church maintained the wicked had been destroyed and everyone knew The Church was infallible.

A couple of figures in late model exosuits appeared at the dome airlock. The idle chatter on the intercom stopped as they recognized the insignia of a chaplain on one of the newcomers. The chaplain and his escort exchanged quiet smiles and murmured greetings with the group. Jedediah lowered his eyes respectfully when the chaplain briefly took his hand.

"Welcome, children," the man said when he had done with his rounds. "I am Father Baliol, Chaplain of Lunar Base, and this is Zachariah, a Soldier of God. I hope you have found your accommodations at least as comfortable as you had on the ship here." He looked toward the Earth. "Beautiful, is it not? Hard to believe it could have held so much evil for so long. Our ancestors were indeed wise to leave it when they did."

"It will be a paradise again, Father," someone said. "We will work hard and trust God for it."

Father Baliol smiled and nodded but a worried look came over his face and he glanced at his companion. "Yes, of course. There is, however, something we think you should know." He licked his lips and shuffled his feet, sending dust boiling lazily up around his knees.

H. David Blalock

"We have evidence of people living on Earth," Zachariah said in a voice as sharp as a knife.

They stood quietly confused. When Father Baliol seemed reluctant to continue, Jedediah spoke up.

"We are not the first?" he asked. "But we thought The Church, I mean, we were told—"

"The Church quarantined Earth to prevent contamination," Father Baliol agreed. "No child of The Church has returned to Earth, and no infidel would dare break our embargo."

"But, that would mean people survived The Fall," Goodwife Ruth said slowly.

They all looked at the globe again. If there had been survivors of The Fall, that meant the evil that had brought the Wrath of God down from Heaven still existed. Jedediah wondered how he could have seen any beauty in the scarred planet. Dark blots formed ominous patterns on its surface. He shuddered at its air of menace. Could he go through with this now?

Soldier Zachariah stepped forward. "It has been over two thousand years since The Fall," he said tersely. "We do not know what kind of monsters have bred down there in that time. We have observed lights on the surface during planetary night large enough to signify a growing population, perhaps even cities."

Stunned by that revelation, the pilgrims looked at each other in confusion.

"Cities?" Jedediah said. "How is that possible?"

"Each of you was chosen by The Church for this mission," Zachariah continued, ignoring him. "I must ask you now to think long and hard. Are you still willing to go to Earth?"

The silence that fell was deafening.

"I will not deceive you. Some of you may be martyred for your beliefs."

"Martyred?" Naomi squeaked. "You mean killed?"

"If Earth is populated, it is filled with the offspring of evil," Zachariah explained. "They are godless, immoral, and decadent like their ancestors, perhaps worse." He paused to let that sink in. "You will be Soldiers of God, bearers of a Light they cannot tolerate."

Eclectic Dreams

"How many pilgrims has the Church sent down already?" Obadiah asked.

"I told you, no child of The Church has returned to Earth."

"Then how much have the infidel merchants discovered?" Cartwright pressed.

Even through their faceplates Jedediah could see Zachariah's countenance darken.

"The Church quarantine prevents infidels from approaching the planet," Father Baliol said.

"Why did you bring us out here away from the dome? Is it because the dome's intercom is not connected to these suits?"

"What are you inferring?" Zachariah's voice was low and tight.

"The quarantine has not worked, has it?"

Baliol and Zachariah's silence was answer enough. The pilgrims began muttering amongst themselves.

"How many have escaped Earth?" Cartwright asked.

Baliol lifted a hand. The murmuring ceased. "Very well. You are correct. The quarantine was compromised. Fall survivors have left Earth." He looked at each of them in turn. "And you are all descendants of those people."

Jedediah gasped, trying to understand what Father Baliol meant. He was descended from Fall survivors? How could that be? They were monstrous animals, demons whose only pleasure was in murder and blasphemy. How could he, a true pilgrim, be part of that? It was unthinkable. He joined the chorus of denials and angry shouts that jammed the intercom. Baliol and Zachariah let them go on until the majority had fallen into a sullen silence.

"Each of you had an ancestor whose origin was unclear. We meticulously researched your backgrounds and lineages," Zachariah said firmly. "There is no mistake. However," he held up a hand when some of them looked ready to protest, "The Church is ready to allow you to demonstrate your loyalty." He crossed his arms and looked at them sternly. "Good children of The Church are always willing to defend The Faith against infidels. Are you willing? Will you defend The Church against the unbeliever?"

H. David Blalock

A chorus of affirmations rang on the intercom, Jedediah's among them.

"Excellent. Let us prepare for the journey."

Excited and anxious to prove themselves, the pilgrims clambered back toward the dome. Jedediah stopped as he realized Obadiah was not among them. He stood watching the Earth thoughtfully.

"What is it?" Jedediah asked.

The man started and looked around. "Nothing. I was just wondering."

"Wondering what?"

"I was just wondering how it is possible children of The Church can be descended from Earthlings. I thought all Earthlings had been excommunicated before The Fall, when Mars Colony rebelled after The Church's warning."

Jedediah laughed. "Even if we have an ancestor from Earth, their excommunication would not extend to us, else why would The Church let us be pilgrims?"

"Why, indeed?" Obadiah grunted and started toward the dome. Jedediah followed, shaking his head in bewilderment.

Behind them, Soldier Zachariah thumbed the volume down on his suit intercom and watched them enter the dome.

They set down in a mountainous area about 35 degrees north of the equator. The region was considered remote enough they would not be observed, but close enough to the supposed settlements they could be investigated without too much travel. Jedediah was struck by the richness of the foliage. An endless variety of green hues covered the mountainside below the snowline. Wildflowers splattered color against the long valley grasses and into the rocky foothills. Overhead, in a blue sky he had never seen but often imagined, the air was crisp with the bite of coming winter. He took a deep breath.

Instantly his mouth filled with fine grit, his nose itched and his eyes watered. He coughed. Zachariah offered him a facemask with a small cylinder attached. After donning it, he felt much better.

Eclectic Dreams

"Allergic reaction," Zachariah said. "To be expected when you first encounter the environment. The mask filters out pollen, dust, and other contaminants. You should become acclimated within a few weeks."

They assembled outside the ship and talked quietly for a few moments as Zachariah passed out the facemasks. Finally, he stepped out and held up a hand to get their attention.

"You have all been prepared for this. Each of you has their task. The sooner we settle in to a routine, the easier this will be for all of us." He passed a look over each of them. "We will shortly set out to explore the area. If you encounter any evidence of human habitation, report it to me immediately. Remember you are children of The Church. You must not approach any strangers. They are barbaric infidels capable of all sorts of evil. Merely speaking to one could draw you away from The Faith."

After a brief moment of prayer, they set out on their appointed rounds. They erected temporary shelters under cover of the forest and settled into the routine they had carefully rehearsed for so long. Six set about exploring for fresh comestibles; vegetation, game, and roots. Zachariah formed the rest into seven teams of two each, pairing Jedediah and Obadiah together.

"I am very pleased to be working with you," Jedediah told him as they began their trek. "It is comforting for me to know I am working with a Soldier."

Obadiah did not respond, glancing nervously around as they moved. Jedediah caught the furtive air.

"There is nothing to fear," he told the man. "We are well away from any settlements."

Obadiah gave him an odd look. "This is your first trip off Eridani," he said.

"It is my first trip anywhere," Jedediah smiled. "I wanted it to be dedicated to The Church."

They moved on in silence until, when the pilgrim camp disappeared behind them into the forest, Cartwright walked closer and touched his forearm.

"May I ask you a personal question?" the old man said in a low voice.

"Of course," Jedediah replied, puzzled at Obadiah's attitude.

H. David Blalock

"Does it not bother you that we have been sent here by The Church because our ancestors were survivors of The Fall?"

The hint of doubt in the old Soldier's voice was clear. Jedediah raised his chin.

"I don't know what you mean by that, Brother Obadiah. If it is true that one of my ancestors was a Fall survivor, I am more than willing to prove my family loyalty to The Church any way they wish. As should you, I might add."

"Yes, well," Obadiah mumbled.

Then he was dead.

Jedediah stumbled to a halt and looked at the blood on his clothes, wondering how it got there. A heavy thud caught his attention. Cartwright's headless body writhed and twitched at his feet. He stared at it dumbly, trying to comprehend what had happened. In quick succession he felt a solid impact on his chest just left of his heart and the ground slammed into his back. Far off, he could hear shouting. There were two loud reports and the sound of running feet. A face appeared against the sky, mouthing silent words of concern and encouragement, then everything went black.

Things were fuzzy around the edges. Nothing had a sharp edge or clearly defined shape. Jedediah turned his head away from the glare of the overhead lamp and tried to focus on his surroundings.

He was back in camp in a makeshift hospital bed attached to a hydrator unit. Goodwife Ruth stood nearby with her back to him, involved in a monitor readout. The rest of the room was stacked high with medical supplies and unidentified equipment. A full body bag lay on another bed a couple of meters away.

His effort to speak produced a croaking noise that brought Ruth instantly to his side.

"Hush," she said, placing a cool hand on his forehead. "You have been seriously injured and need rest."

"Obadiah," he managed. "Where is Obadiah?"

Eclectic Dreams

Goodwife Ruth's lips tightened and her eyes went to the body bag. "Brother Cartwright is dead, Brother Miller," she said with a catch in her voice.

He swallowed against the dryness in his mouth. The bit of him that had hoped he'd dreamed Obadiah's death itself died. "What happened?"

"The best we can tell, you were attacked."

"By whom?"

Zachariah's voice interrupted Ruth's answer. "We suspect you were seen by infidels."

Jedediah struggled to sit up and found the Soldier standing at the door. He smiled grimly.

"Soldier Zachariah found you before they could finish their evil work," Ruth said. "He saved your life."

"I am grateful," Jedediah said. "But who attacked us?"

"We were hoping you might tell us," Zachariah answered. "I fired at what I thought might be your attackers, but we found no trace of them."

"You fired? You have a weapon?" Jedediah trembled. All weapons had been confiscated centuries ago. Just the sight of one sent a good child of The Church to report it.

"I have a hunting weapon, brother," Zachariah said. "An ancient ball and powder device, not very accurate except at extremely short range and non-lethal beyond a few hundred meters."

The explanation did little to allay Jedediah's unease. Zachariah pushed the subject aside.

"Did you see anything unusual when Brother Obadiah was killed?"

Listening to Soldier Zachariah say Obadiah was dead was different than when Ruth had said it. Zachariah's words held a demanding edge. They commanded him to respond without giving him a chance to think about what the words really meant. In a way, though they were more direct, their impact was less hurtful. He tried to remember those last few moments. "We were talking and suddenly—" He shuddered at the memory. "It happened so fast."

"But you saw no one?"

Jedediah shook his head.

Suddenly, he dreaded Soldier Zachariah might ask what they had been talking about. Brother Obadiah's words rang in his mind,

H. David Blalock

manifestations of doubt that had brought immediate retribution. If Zachariah knew of Obadiah's doubt, would he desecrate the man's memory with the stigma of Heretic? Jedediah felt a chill at that prospect. He had respected Obadiah's judgment and ability. He had known the man for many years, considered him almost a father. He could not stand the thought of that memory being stained for a moment's weakness.

The Soldier watched him for another second, then crossed his arms and looked at Goodwife Ruth. "Let me know when he can return to his duties."

"I will."

"Rest, Brother Jedediah," the Soldier said. "We have a long task ahead. You need your strength."

"Thank you again," Jedediah said in relief as Zachariah turned to leave.

There was no response.

His wound was serious but not lethal and he made excellent progress under Ruth's care. By the fourth day he was up and around, able to do light work. Naomi Silversmith came every so often to check on him, ostensibly to learn nursing from Goodwife Ruth, but Jedediah thought he saw more in her attentions. He found her beside him more and more often, hand on his elbow to steady him or just hovering with a slight smile on her lips. Their small talk eventually wound down to meaningful silences.

If it wasn't for the nightmares, Jedediah would have been a very happy man. The pilgrims' settlement was now well established. No other recon teams had been attacked and no one had seen any evidence of habitation within at least fifty kilometers. Jedediah tried to put Obadiah's death behind him, but he would awaken in a cold sweat, the image of Obadiah's body still twitching in his memory. Always, the old Soldier's last question rose unbidden to haunt him.

He found himself watching Zachariah closely, analyzing his words and actions. At first it bothered him that he would feel a sudden distrust

Eclectic Dreams

of this Soldier of God. Then the image of Obadiah's decapitated corpse would flash before him and the unease would pass.

After lengthy observation, Jedediah could see no other reason Soldier Zachariah had fallen into the role of leader than by virtue of his title. The man was no more competent than anyone else at any camp duty. Even his hunting skills were inferior to several of the others'. Nevertheless, he retained unquestioned authority over their little group.

Days passed into weeks and their settlement became more permanent. Flat areas were furrowed and planted with grain, more hilly areas with vegetables. Solar and wind powered generators came on line the second week. Earth was becoming like home.

On the eighteenth day they spotted the flying machine. Zachariah immediately began preparing for defense.

"The Earthlings know we are here now," he told them at a meeting to discuss the coming conflict. "We must be prepared for anything. We can expect no mercy or quarter. We must stand together now more than ever." He gave them all a hard look. "Remember, anyone who does not give their all is not a true child of The Church."

They shared prayers and anxious looks overhead, then went about their duties.

A week went by without further indication they had been discovered. Staying on constant alert began to wear on them. Tempers flared and nerves grew raw as they waited for the evil hordes to burst from the forests. Zachariah kept them at a fever pitch. He exhorted, cajoled, and browbeat them into a constant state of readiness.

Jedediah watched this with a growing confusion. Why was Zachariah convinced the camp would be attacked? The flying machine had never made any indication it had noticed them and no follow-up investigation had materialized. Surely they could reasonably assume they had not been seen, or that the Earthling pilots had simply mistaken their settlement for one of their own?

The answer came on the twenty-ninth day. Zachariah came to their regular morning meeting before prayer carrying his hunting weapon. The site of the rifle caused a general rustle in the crowd. Slowly the hubbub subsided and Zachariah stood.

H. David Blalock

"We can no longer remain idle," he told them. "They have not yet attacked. This can only mean they are massing for a major assault. They intend to completely wipe us out in a single blow." He stopped to take a breath, his eyes glittering with a heated excitement. "We must take the battle to them."

The pilgrims looked at each other in puzzlement. Finally, someone spoke.

"What do you mean? Leave the settlement?"

"Correct. Using the element of surprise, we will attack their forward position and crush their forces before they can respond."

There was a cold, unbelieving silence.

"We are not Soldiers," Goodwife Ruth broke in. "We are pilgrims."

Zachariah turned those bright eyes on her and leveled them like weapons. "I told you while we were still on Lunar Base, you are Soldiers of God. I warned you about the danger."

"You told us we might be killed for our beliefs," Ruth shot back. "We understand and accept that. But this," she shook her head. "You are asking us to kill."

"I am saying you must defend yourselves."

Ruth set her chin. "I will not kill. It is against Church Law."

"People die in war, Goodwife. It is inevitable."

"Like Brother Obadiah?" Jedediah interjected.

Ruth's resolve flickered. Her chin dropped a little and her face softened. Jedediah saw the hurt in her eyes and for a moment resented speaking up. Then he remembered why he had done it.

Zachariah was right. They had to defend themselves. But the Soldier's idea of what constituted their enemies and Jedediah's growing convictions about what Zachariah's motives might be complicated that defense. He knew the camp needed to be prepared for an attack. He was not so sure Zachariah's identification of the enemy was entirely honest.

As he hoped, Zachariah grabbed the opening. "Exactly, Brother Jedediah. Brother Obadiah was the first casualty of this war. I understand your reluctance to take another's life, Goodwife Ruth, but you must remember these are godless, heathen monsters. They killed Brother Obadiah for no reason." He leaned forward and urgency rang in his voice. "If we wait, they will kill us all. We must strike first!" The

Eclectic Dreams

Soldier tucked the butt of the rifle under his arm. "I will go ahead to scout the immediate area. Do not follow me. Stay inside the settlement until I return, but prepare yourselves for the attack."

Jedediah looked around. Their faces said they believed his words but were hesitant. He stepped up and forced the words out. "I am willing to defend The Faith, Soldier Zachariah. Give me a weapon and I will go with you."

He ignored the shocked expressions on Ruth and Naomi's faces. He was watching the Soldier's reaction.

"A weapon?" the man said, as if he had not heard correctly.

"Yes. If we are to be Soldiers of God," Jedediah went on, "we will need weapons. How else can we bring God's justice to Earth?"

Zachariah stared at him as if he had suddenly crawled from under a rock. "What would you do with a weapon if I gave it to you?" he shot back with some venom.

"Do with it?" Jedediah said, feigning confusion. "Why, kill the enemy."

The Soldier's eyes narrowed as Jedediah forged ahead.

"Brother Obadiah told me he was concerned that we should be sent here because we were descendants of Fall survivors. I told him I am a true Child of The Church. I am willing to prove my loyalty any way The Church requires. If I must kill to show I am a righteous Child of God, if I must have blood on my hands, I can accept that better knowing my victims will be godless, immoral monsters who kill without reason."

They all looked at Zachariah. The Soldier was uncharacteristically unsettled. Jedediah watched the man shuffle his feet as he glanced around. It was the first real indication he had ever given in public that he was uncertain about anything. Was he stalling?

"I am ready," Jedediah said, putting out a hand. "Give me a weapon."

Zachariah looked at the extended hand. He frowned, straightened, and glared at Jedediah. "We will discuss this further tomorrow," he said, and spun on his heel to walk rapidly away and disappear into his dwelling.

Ruth stared at him. "Are you mad? How can you want to kill others? I thought I knew you, Brother Jedediah."

"As did I," Naomi chimed in hurt and confusion.

H. David Blalock

Jedediah tried not to let their words distract him. He took Naomi by the shoulders and looked into her eyes. If he was destined never to see them again, he wanted to carry their memory into the next world.

He set off after Zachariah.

"Come."

Jedediah stepped into the Soldier's dwelling and looked around. The man's quarters were spartan; no wall ornaments, simple furniture, and a small cooking area. Zachariah sat on a stool near a bench covered with papers and a variety of oddly shaped metal items.

"I told you we would discuss the weapons tomorrow," he said when he recognized Jedediah.

"I think it is time you told us the truth," Jedediah said.

The Soldier stood slowly and walked to stand nearly toe to toe with his visitor, his stony gaze leveled at the younger man. "Just what do you mean by that, brother?"

He had rehearsed this moment a thousand times in his head, but actually standing up to Zachariah's imposing presence was very different. He set his jaw and pushed ahead, determined not to allow the man to intimidate him.

"We are not in danger of attack, are we?" he asked, surprised at the strength in his own voice. "It has been almost two weeks since we saw the flying machine. Had we been seen, they would have attacked."

"They are massing for attack now."

"I do not think they are, because I do not believe they are the monsters we have been told," Jedediah went on.

Zachariah's face flushed angrily. "How dare you? How dare you blaspheme The Church with such heresy?"

"The only person who has spoken of killing is you, Soldier Zachariah. We have lived here peacefully nearly a month. Now you want to shatter that peace because you feel there might be a threat?"

"You will be silent!" Zachariah shouted, grabbing Jedediah's shoulders.

"Are you going to silence me as you did Obadiah?"

His words struck the Soldier like cold water. Zachariah's mouth popped open and shut, the rage in his face giving way to pain. He

Eclectic Dreams

dropped his grip and returned to his seat, sinking into it as if he weighed a ton. Jedediah suddenly wanted his suspicions to be unfounded, his accusation empty. If what he feared was true, he wouldn't know how to react.

"I was acting on my orders," Zachariah said, without looking up.

Jedediah's heart sank, but he pressed on. He had to be sure. "Orders? From The Church?"

Zachariah nodded. "Believe me, it gave me no pleasure to do so. Obadiah had been a good Soldier of God. Did you know I served under him once?" He looked around, his eyes full of fierce defiance. "But a Soldier of God must always put The Faith above personal feelings."

The Soldier's words chilled Jedediah deeply. "Personal feelings make us what we are, Brother Zachariah. Without them we are automatons, acting only out of necessity or compulsion, not conscience."

"The Church is the only true and infallible conscience for humanity. Have you learned nothing from our history? The Fall proved that only The Church can guarantee salvation," Zachariah shot back.

"But there were survivors of The Fall." Again, the wind went out of Zachariah's sails. Jedediah knew he should not let the man recover. "I do not know what your orders are concerning the rest of us," he said. "Rather, I am afraid I might know and the prospect horrifies me."

When Zachariah would not meet his gaze, he knew he had struck close to the truth. Perhaps Zachariah was torn by the discovery of Fall survivors and the atrocious orders given him. It was one thing to fight for an infallible Church, and quite another to kill one of your own at the order of a Church whose veracity was suddenly in question. Jedediah could see Zachariah was a good man under the Soldier, a true Child of the The Church, committed to the high principles of Truth and Justice. Could it have been the struggle between his personal ethics and The Church's demands that had caused his erratic behavior? When they had spotted the flying machine maybe Zachariah had hoped for an attack. It would have proven The Church right. But the attack had never come and he had had to fall back on his own invention.

"You had to prove the Earthlings are the monsters The Church says they are," Jedediah said, putting the puzzle together out loud. "So, if they would not come to us, we must go to them."

H. David Blalock

The Soldier shook his head slowly and looked at Jedediah, his face softer than the young man could ever remember seeing it. There was immense fatigue in that face, a sense of inevitability. Zachariah had apparently reached a decision. He rose and began a slow pacing back and forth, as if trying to escape what he now admitted.

"The Church has known about Fall survivors almost from the beginning. They could not be allowed to live among the True Children, that much was obvious, but even heretics carry the Gift of Life, a gift only God may take away, therefore they could not be executed. As Goodwife Ruth pointed out, it is against Church Law.

"The Soldiers of God were formed expressly to deal with Fall survivors. I know you were taught the Soldiers are defenders of The Truth against heretics and infidels, but that is only part of our duty.

"Every few years, a group of Fall survivor descendants are chosen for pilgrimage to Earth. A Soldier is always assigned to them."

Zachariah paused to gather his thoughts and Jedediah tried to assimilate what he'd been told. So much of his life was falling apart, everything that had been based on the infallibility and omnipotence of The Church.

"How many times have you been to Earth?" he asked the Soldier.

"This is my fourth trip. I have escorted eighty pilgrims, including your group."

Jedediah swallowed nervously, almost too afraid of the answer to ask the question. "Where are they?"

Zachariah shook his head and smiled. "Alive. I told you, execution is against Church Law."

"But what about Brother Obadiah?"

The Soldier crossed his arms and sighed, his forehead creased in a heavy scowl. "Brother Obadiah was a Soldier. He had taken an oath of silence and loyalty. But his questions on Lunar Base were overheard."

The memory slammed home. "The suit intercoms! They were interconnected."

"Yes. I might have been able to turn a blind eye to his doubts. What Soldier has not asked hard questions in hard times? But Father Baliol only understood the heresy in his remarks." Zachariah's face took on a haunted look as he continued. "I stood by and watched while Father

Eclectic Dreams

Baliol reported Obadiah. I said nothing as they weighed his past service against the harm he might do unfettered. God help me, I raised no protest when I was ordered to eliminate him after they pronounced excommunication."

Jedediah gasped. "They excommunicated him?"

The Soldier snapped back into focus. "Have you not reasoned where Soldiers come from? How they can bypass Church Law? Until I have sufficiently demonstrated my loyalty to The Church through my service as her Soldier, I myself stand excommunicate. Brother Obadiah had received redemption but squandered it in just a few words." The pacing picked up speed as Zachariah became more distraught. "My orders are to establish your camp here, then return for another set of pilgrims, my last before redemption. I reasoned that if I disappeared while scouting for Earthling forces you would have assumed I was killed. The settlement would live in fear for a while, but that would pass when no attacks came." He stopped and grimaced. "I never expected someone to volunteer to go with me."

"There are no attacks coming, then?"

"No," the Soldier admitted. "The flying machine was sent to pick me up. It will return in two days and every two weeks thereafter until I show, or until they confirm my death."

Jedediah heaved a sigh of relief. "No attacks. Thank God! The settlement is safe."

"Not quite."

The Soldier was facing him with the hard, inscrutable face he'd come to dread. A chill ran down Jedediah's spine.

"This and the other pilgrim villages were to be stocked with pacifist Children," Zachariah went on. "The Church does not wish to precipitate a new Fall by tempting God's grace in allowing us to repopulate Earth."

"Repopulate?"

"After the Fall the survivors evacuated to Lunar Base, Io, Europa, and Ganymede, Earth was uninhabited for many centuries while The Fall completed its purging work. Thousands of survivors converted to The Church because of The Fall. Those who did not were cleansed in the fires of the Sun. It is the converts' descendants we are returning, bringing them back to claim their heritage.

H. David Blalock

"However, if any of the pilgrims shows distrust, is heretic or violent, The Church has empowered the Soldiers to deal with them appropriately."

Jedediah stepped back toward the door, a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach as he listened. Zachariah stopped by the bench and picked up one of the oddly shaped items. It fit neatly on his hand and glistened wickedly when the Soldier pointed it at him.

"I spared you once, Brother Jedediah. I hoped you would be part of the settlement, but your heretical attitude, your questioning and lack of faith tells me there remains one more danger to the safety of this settlement." The Soldier twisted a knob on the weapon to its stop. "Never mind, Brother. Think of this as doing your part for The Church."

FANTASY

Revenge

As the chill of the dawn began to burn away, Tsiel, Lord Djemo, picked his way across the battlefield. The last cries of the dying had faded. Those who would survive had been carried off to be tended in the hospital tent. Left were the bodies, whole and dismembered, friend and foe, who had fought from dawn to dark of the previous day.

A low fog hung over the panorama, a soft blanket from which the end of a spear or the curve of the belly of a dead horse protruded. Within only a few feet, the ground became a neutral gray, covering the bleak reality of the terrible price paid for Lord Djemo's ambitions.

Djemo examined each corpse as he walked, as if searching for someone in particular. He worked his way toward the center of the field, finding the corpses thicker, most obviously killed outright. None of these men had died of exposure during the interminable night. These had fallen to a warrior of consummate skill, a swordsman of deadly capability. And within a ring of nearly a dozen dead Djemo warriors, Tsiel found that adversary.

It is said that even a lion can be taken down by a pack of jackals. That would accurately describe what had happened here.

He was a large man, tall but lean, with the look of speed and agility even in death. His armor, heavily battered and cut, still retained some of its shine from its gilt ornamentation. He had been a nobleman, that much was obvious. Tsiel leaned close to the face set in rigor and saw the high cheekbones and slant eyes of a Moorkai.

Tsiel smiled mirthlessly to himself and stood to look around. His servants and bodyguard stood at a respectful distance, watching him with sullen fear. He knew and understood their feelings for him, had often used their awe of his abilities to his advantage. There would be no interference from them. And his enemy was too far away now to stop him.

H. David Blalock

It would be the ultimate poetic justice to have one of Tsorat's own be his assassin. That the assassin would be one of the Moorkai Ascendant's fallen was fitting. Tsorat had resisted him too long. With this nobleman in his thrall, he could penetrate the inner circle of Tsorat's guard and finally put an end to the damned priest's interference. Moorkai was the City of Lights, the City of Great Magicks. It contained the greatest library of written works in the world, guarded jealously by the University faculty. With Tsorat out of the way, Tsiel could move into Moorkai and force the faculty to give him access to those works. Their secrets would make him powerful beyond any spellcaster in Adylonis. Maybe beyond any magi in the entire Archipelago.

But, first things first.

Tsiel began to weave the forces into the glyphs of power that called upon the fabric of space to open a door into the next world. The fog spilled away, uncovering a charnel-house around him, the broken and parted bodies, the crushed armor, the shattered weapons. His words crawled and crept and slipped into the places between the bodies, oozing like black slime across the ground, frosting the metal with their passage, cracking the wood of a scarred shield. The eyes of the dead at his feet froze in their sockets, bloody skin crystallized. With an obscene crackling, fissures appeared in the corpse's face, lacerations that did not bleed.

And the corpse stirred, as if being wakened from a long slumber. Tsiel's voice became more urgent, more demanding. The corpse levered itself into a sitting position and turned blind eyes in his direction. Light began to appear behind those orbs, an unearthly ochre luminescence that came from the center of its brain, from where Tsiel's words drove themselves and called the man's essence back from its rest.

The corpse stood slowly to tower nearly two feet over Tsiel.

"I am Tsiel, Lord Djemo," he told it. "I have called you from your sleep and only I can return you."

An emotion flickered across the corpse's face for just a second. Tsiel missed it, for in his experience those called from beyond had no emotion, simply a need to return to their rest.

"Your name," Tsiel demanded.

Eclectic Dreams

"I was Boralet of Moorkai, second son of Andalarn Thran, and captain of the Fifteenth Regiment," the corpse responded in a voice that emanated from somewhere near its mouth. The sound resonated strangely in the frozen features.

Tsiel could not believe his fortune. The second son of House Thran itself, and under his power. Grander plans than just the taking of a few books from a University began to spin in his thoughts. What would Thran give to have his son back? The ruling house of Moorkai could afford a handsome amount in ransom.

"Well, Boralet of Moorkai," Tsiel said, shifting his weight onto one foot and stroking his goatee, "I have several tasks for you before you may see peace again."

Boralet regarded the magician with dispassionate eyes. The ice was beginning to melt from his face, the flesh beginning to take on a more natural appearance, as the weaving coalesced around him. Tsiel knew that, within a few minutes, only someone who had seen Boralet dead on the battlefield would know what he really was.

"First, you will kill Tsorat, the Ascendant of Moorkai, your former master," Tsiel began, his attention running ahead of his words. In his mind's eye he conjured the scene. Boralet's hands closing on the old man's throat, the choking noises, the rustle of breaking bone, the blood gushing from Tsorat's mouth. "He has denied me too long."

"Tsorat," Boralet whispered. The word was a noise like a falling leaf. Tsiel missed the tone of awe there, the reverence in the forming of the word. Blood reddened his perception.

"Five long years I've planned and worked and schemed to take Moorkai from Tsorat and his Tialsar Priests," Djemo snarled. "Years I could have spent studying, expanding my power, building an empire." Tsiel turned his attention to Boralet. "I will waste no more time. I will do whatever is necessary to fulfill my destiny. If it takes the blood of a million warriors like you, I will have Moorkai!"

Boralet looked at the bloody scenario around him as if for the first time. He took in the dead soldier at his feet, little more than a boy, fallen to a spear that protruded from his chest. Tears of blood hung frozen to his face. Elsewhere lie a man in his late sixties, three great gashes opening his gut to the morning air. There was another young man,

H. David Blalock

unarmored, a footsoldier, hunched over the hilt of a sword gripped by his opponent, who was folded over the footsoldier's weapon. Forever immobile, they faced each other in their final embrace.

"He keeps Moorkai closed to my troops," Tsiel was babbling, lost in his hate. "But soon he will know the folly of resisting me. He said I was mad, that Moorkai would never surrender to me. Well, once he's dead, the Council will listen. They will see that Tsorat was the one who was insane, not I."

A flicker of motion caught Tsiel's attention. Boralet was kneeling to touch the face of the dead boy.

"Jayle," Boralet said. There was a movement of air, less than a zephyr, that played across the Moorkai's face. The hairs in his beard stirred, and Tsiel might not have seen the grimace. "My squire." Boralet looked at the older man. "Mermek, my lieutenant." The footsoldier. "Arturo, my page."

"Rise, Boralet of Moorkai," Tsiel commanded. "We must be off. The day is wasting."

The warrior stood quietly and regarded Tsiel with inscrutable eyes. "They were my responsibility."

"Perhaps, but now they are dead. You will carry out the wishes of your master, Boralet of Moorkai. You will honor the Call."

The flicker behind the warrior's eyes became a blaze. "I will honor the Call," he said. A great sword appeared in his hand, crusted with gore and dried blood. "I will carry out the wishes of my master."

Tsiel nodded, satisfied, turned to lead his chattel to the waiting caravan.

There was the flash of steel, a rending, tearing noise. Tsiel, Lord Djemo, was split from crown to gut and died without another sound.

"My master, Tsorat of Moorkai," Boralet whispered.

And fell, as dead as the necromancer who had called him from his rest.

Pretender-Proof

Or, How Arthur *Really* Became King

The boy ran breathless toward the city gate, wishing he had been allowed to learn to ride. Not that it would have done any good. Kay would never have let a mere boy ride his horse, no matter how urgent the mission. The cobblestones were slick from morning dew, so he tended to skid a bit when a particularly hard bend in the street's convolutions presented itself. The bright colors of the festival bunting and banners reflected the rising sun's light into the still-twilit streets in odd hues.

Arthur felt excitement mounting as he realized he was part of the lord's tournament. So what if he was only a stable boy? Someday he would be a squire, then a knight. His eyes sparkled as he pictured himself fully decked out in armor and colors, tall astride his warhorse. Everyone would marvel at him then.

He stumbled to a stop. Somehow he had turned from his way. He was in the plaza near the city keep. Before him rose the hold's walls, dark and foreboding with their heavy iron gates. In the center of the plaza was a stone, a sword firmly entrenched in it until only the hilt and handguard showed.

Slowly, he approached it. Sir Kay had forgotten his sword in his haste to arrive at the fairgrounds this morning and Arthur had been dispatched to retrieve it. The tournament would begin within the hour, but their camp was better than forty minutes away no matter how fast he ran. Arthur knew that would not be accepted as an excuse and he would be beaten for his tardiness bringing the sword. On the other hand, if he took this one he might save himself a beating and get into Kay's good graces. He glanced furtively around. No one was about but an old beggar in rags lounging on a nearby doorstep. Who was to know?

The sword was a fine piece of work, glistening steel and jeweledommel. The handguard was wrought in the form of a dragon, its teeth and claws bared toward the blade, the better to puncture further any hapless enemy spit on its length. He wrapped his hands around the hilt and went to yank it loose.

H. David Blalock

"Boy?" a voice boomed, echoing off the keep walls.

He froze, the hairs on the back of his neck rising, able only to turn his head toward the voice.

What he had taken for an old beggar was humble no longer. Eyes flashed with emerald power from an ageless, bearded face. The filthy robes had transformed into the fine embroidered silks of a wizard.

"What do you think you are doing, boy?" the sorcerer growled, sending tingles up and down Arthur's spine.

"P—Please, sir, I was – I want – I need to borrow your sword," he managed.

"Borrow my sword?" the magician howled, as if Arthur had asked for his soul.

The youngster nodded and gulped. "Please, sir. My master is in need of a sword."

"And who is your master?"

"Sir Kay."

The wizard eyed him for a moment and he shivered under the scrutiny.

"You are called Arthur?"

"Yes, milord."

The man stroked his beard thoughtfully, his eyes never leaving Arthur, seeming to bore straight through and reach into his soul. Arthur grit his teeth and resigned himself to punishment.

"Milord Kay, I have a sword for you."

"About time, boy! What took you so –"

Arthur nearly grinned as Kay, turning to face him, realized he was facing not just a boy but an apparition in green and black as well. Recognition and fear flickered across the knight's countenance.

"You are Kay?" the wizard asked. His tone inferred he would brook no dissembling.

Kay regained his dignity and drew to his full height. Just past thirty, he was a veteran of several skirmishes and familiar with dangerous

Eclectic Dreams

situations. Arthur could see the grim determination Kay usually reserved for combat come over him as he answered.

"I am *Sir* Kay," he said, stressing the title. "And you are Merlyn."

The wizard ignored the correction. "You sent Arthur to recover a sword?"

"I did."

"Do you recognize this sword?"

Kay took the weapon from Arthur and hefted it. He squinted at the blade, the hilt, and the guard, then gasped in amazement. "God's Wounds!" he breathed.

"Do you recognize it?"

"Of course I bloody recognize it!"

"Do you know who drew the sword?"

"No. Who?"

"Who brought you the sword?"

Kay stared from Merlyn to Arthur and back, mouth agape. "It's impossible," he said. "He's just a boy."

"Who else, then?"

"Well, *you* for one," Kay blustered, his fear of the magician momentarily forgotten. "This must be a trick."

"A trick?"

"Aye. Everyone knows you put the sword there as a test. Whoever pulls the sword will be king."

"You agree with that?"

"I do. No one but the rightful king and heir to Pendragon could pull that blade."

"If you see it with your own eyes, will you believe it?"

"What?" Kay asked. "Do you mean, if I had seen Arthur pull the blade, would I believe it?"

"Would you?"

The boy found Kay examining him as closely as the knight had done the sword moments before. Kay had been father, mentor, and master for as long as he could remember. He had known Kay as a ferocious fighter, a harsh disciplinarian, but never as an unfair judge. His honor was sacred, his word his bond, and he did not give it lightly. Arthur looked at Merlyn, but there was no indication the wizard had anything but a

H. David Blalock

passing interest in Kay's answer. Arthur got the feeling Merlyn already knew the answer. Maybe what they said about him was true, that he knew the future.

Kay's hand on his shoulder brought him back.

"Boy, is it true?" the knight said, surprisingly softly. "Did you draw the sword?"

Arthur could not meet Kay's eyes. "Yes, milord. I am sorry. I thought you would be pleased."

Kay blinked at the answer and straightened slowly. "I will call the others," he told Merlyn. "We will see this for ourselves."

One hour later the knights stood quietly in a circle around the empty stone as Lord Tristram watched from his high seat. Beside the stone and holding the sword stood Merlyn. Beside the wizard Arthur tried to keep his knees from knocking and barely succeeded in not soiling himself.

Merlyn raised the sword so that all might see its uniquely designed guard.

"Do you recognize this weapon?" he asked the assembly.

There was a general murmur of assent. Merlyn faced Tristram.

"Will you give fealty to he who draws this sword from the stone?"

Tristram stood and held his chin high. "Only the heir of Pendragon commands my loyalty, and only he can pull the sword. Yes, I will give fealty to the bearer of that sword."

The wizard swept the knights with a glowering face and lifted the sword heavenward. His voice boomed esoteric words that darkened the sky, brought clouds that broiled and lightnings that danced between them. With a flourish and a great shout, he plunged the sword blade-first into the stone. There was a stench of brimstone and ozone, then all was quiet.

The air was electric with anticipation as Merlyn addressed the crowd.

"Who will draw the sword? Who would be king?"

The knights exchanged glances but none stepped forward. Finally, the wizard spoke to Arthur.

"Are you ready?" he asked, eyes gleaming with the hint of a smile.

Eclectic Dreams

The boy nodded and licked his lips nervously. Stepping up, he gripped the swordhilt tightly. He closed his eyes to better remember what Merlyn had taught him.

Push down, turn left, and *then* pull.

The sword came free and Arthur was king.

H. David Blalock

One Chance

It struck him one day that nobody cared.

The lake was getting smaller; not that it had been that large to begin with. Twelve houses faced it, most gone to seed now that the nearby town had all but packed up and moved to Tunica. The new casinos meant money, jobs, and something better than scraping a living out of a dirt farm or a one-room grocery or an auto shop and veterinary. So it wasn't just the lake that was getting smaller, but unlike the town, the lake had no excuse. Jake Curlin looked at the houses around the lake and remembered the shouting of the children as they splashed, the mothers calling them to dinner at sunset. He scanned the forest that surrounded the lake where the houses didn't stand and remembered farther back, when he had been a boy splashing in the lake and listening for his mother's call. That had been so long ago he could hardly recall now. A thousand years ago.

He stood in the soft mud and poked at some slime-covered rocks with a hickory stick. Less than three feet away the lake's black water reflected the bright blue sky like a polished mirror. Jake looked behind him and guessed there was a good ten or twelve feet of mud to the grass and reeds that used to define the water's edge. Each day it was another couple of inches farther from the grass to the water. Where was it going? If it kept up at this rate, it would be dry in less than a year, another precious memory reduced to a patch of stinking filth by forces beyond his control.

Why did he stay? He could have moved along with the rest of the neighborhood. The job offer at the casino had been generous. Being a dealer wasn't strenuous, so his age wasn't a problem. And he would have been able to meet people again, have another chance to make something of his life. He felt a tug of loneliness and pushed it away angrily. This was his home, he told himself. There had to be happiness for him here somewhere. Where else are you supposed to be happy but at home?

He'd called the Department of Agriculture and they'd sent out a man who looked around for a few minutes and passed it off as evaporation.

Eclectic Dreams

The summer heat was boiling the water off, the government man said, but Jake didn't believe it. The water had always been cold, real cold, no matter how hot it got outside. Old man Johnson said that was because it was fed by an artesian spring. Jake hadn't ever seen evidence of an artesian spring.

No, there was something very odd going on, and that meant there had to be a reason outside the ordinary. Something like the little dogs that ran along the water's edge just before dark each night.

He'd never really gotten a good look at them, but they snuffled and loped around the lake just like the wild dogs that ran around on Miller's farm, chasing and killing a few of the chickens until Miller shot a couple of them. They were smaller than those dogs, more the size of a cat, but they acted like dogs, barked kind of like dogs, and left spoor like a dog's.

Thing was, he hadn't seen them for a while, not since the Highway Department started working on the state road spur. That was when the lake had started shrinking, too, come to think of it. He looked up to the west where the superstructure of a large crane broke the sky above the trees. Could they have somehow caused the lake to drain with their digging? It didn't seem possible, but what other explanation could there be?

He walked toward the construction site, climbing out of the muck and clambering up the embankment to stand on its rise and stop abruptly.

Wandering back and forth from the direction of the site, noses down and apparently tracking a scent, were five of the little dogs. They were completely engrossed in their hunt and did not appear to notice him as they pursued their invisible prey south around the lakeside. He watched them pick up speed as they went, until they were running single file, heads up and barking in their odd voices. They disappeared under the embankment and soon their barking faded.

Jake looked at the crane, then toward where the dogs had disappeared. If he followed them, maybe he could find out whether they really were connected to the problem. He'd been to see the highway construction site and found nothing but a bunch of bored guys digging holes and filling them back up. At least the dogs seemed to be going somewhere with a definite idea of what they wanted.

He set off after them.

H. David Blalock

Their tracks led him around to the south end of the lake. He'd been there only once or twice before because that was where Mr. Belmont lived, and he didn't like trespassers. He came to a stand of trees protecting a small rock outcropping where tiny wildflowers sprayed color on the ground and gray-green lichen clung to the stone from which a small brook issued.

The trail ended abruptly in a dark, bare, roughly circular patch of soil about eight feet across. Its perimeter was defined by several dozen large toadstools, reminding him of a story he'd read when he was a boy about elves and fairies. It had said the magical beings gathered at a "fairy ring", described just like this. He squinted at one of the mushrooms but it was just a mushroom. He poked it with a stick until the cap popped off with a small cloud of black dust. Nothing remained but the stem, like a dead man's finger pointing at the sky. There was no other sign of the dogs. Impossibly, they seemed to have vanished into thin air. Maybe they went down a hole in the rocks or maybe they backtracked, he thought. He scoured the area for nearly an hour, with no success. The longer he looked, the more determined he became that they had something to do with the lake. He was going to find out exactly what.

He was out early the next day to watch for them. Whatever happened, he was going to find out if they were connected to the lake's shrinking. He settled down on a stump near the stand of trees and munched on an apple, watching some ducks cavort in the lake.

Nearly four hours later he caught a glimpse of movement on the lakeshore. Three of the little dogs were scurrying rapidly, nose to the ground, toward his hiding place. For a terrible moment he thought they were on his scent, but they turned abruptly less than thirty feet away and made for the fairy ring.

A shimmer appeared in the air over the dark soil, as if it had become suddenly as hot as desert sand. Jake stared in awe and disbelief as the animals ran into the circle, through the shimmer, and disappeared.

He blinked once, twice, then rubbed his eyes and blinked again, but the dogs were gone. Only the shimmer remained.

Without thinking, he sprinted across the clearing and ran into the fairy ring.

Eclectic Dreams

For a moment he thought nothing had happened. The trees looked the same. The rocks looked the same. The brook still babbled out from between them to head for —

The lake!

It was much smaller than it had been just a few moments ago, the mud dried and cracked. Grass was making its way into the dry circle, reclaiming what the lake had given up. But what startled him most was what rose out of it.

Reflected in the lake that surrounded it like a moat, the alabaster tower shone in the late afternoon sun, rising from a castle of palest green. Its doors were silver-inlaid marble, its minarets bright with gold. Its beauty took his breath away and brought tears to his eyes. A soft breeze brushed his cheek and brought the scent of honeysuckle from the vines that lined the causeway heading from where he stood to the castle gates. Slim birch and hickory held the honeysuckle away from the lake and hard against the road, their roots entwining sometimes all the way across the lane.

The road had not been traveled recently, or at least not often. The tree roots had broken the causeway's cobblestones, allowing grass and wildflowers purchase. The beautiful emerald walls were chipped and weatherworn. The only artifact that seemed immune to the advancing entropy was the central tower. It stood brilliant and defiant against the darkening sky.

Drawn irresistibly, Jake stepped toward the tower, picking his way over the roots and broken roadway. He caught sight of the dogs loping toward the castle gates ahead of him. If they looked around, they would see him, probably could already hear him, but seemed uninterested.

The great gates opened and Jake stopped, heart pounding, fighting the urge to run. He poised, quivering on the brink of flight but held by curiosity and an odd longing of which he was only now slowly becoming aware.

A figure stepped into the gate and stood quietly as the dogs leaped around it. It was a woman so stunningly gorgeous the castle seemed dark and old in contrast. She was reed slim, walking with a liquid grace that made the dogs look clumsy and awkward. Her face was half hidden under a full head of flaming red hair, her voluptuous body barely

H. David Blalock

concealed under a swirling diaphanous gown. With an unspoken command she sent the dogs into the castle but she stayed at the gate. After a bit he realized she was waiting, waiting for him to decide what he was going to do.

They stood unmoving for long moments, each moment a chance for decision, but Jake could not shake his paralysis. Each time he felt he could almost see those eyes that promised so much, a chill would settle down his back and his feet would refuse to rise to the occasion. Seconds became minutes and she stood quietly patient as the failing sunlight caught the blinding brilliance of her hair, taking his breath yet again as he struggled against his immobility. He caught her glance at the setting sun and knew she would not wait beyond its retirement, but even so the possibility of becoming one with her unaccountably frightened him on a level he barely understood.

She was, pure and simple, everything he'd dreamed of in a woman. Beauty, compassion, intelligence, and patience, willing to escort him out of the drab existence on the other side of the fairy ring into the magic of the unknown. Inside he screeched his need, sweat forming on his forehead and upper lip, but deeper inside he cowered. The thought of abandoning what he had always known, the small town with the familiar people and its easily-defined and handled problems, for the mystery of what lie beyond those gates held him firm.

The shadows lengthened until finally she nodded to him, a sad but resigned motion, stepped back, and disappeared behind the gates as they closed.

The castle walls loomed over him, mocking his indecision. The bright tower haunted him with its beauty so like the magnificent apparition at the gate. The longing overpowered his fear and he ran to the portal. He pounded on it, shouted at it, pleaded to it, and cried out to no avail. The gate remained fast.

Darkness found him sitting, exhausted and full of despair, huddled against the wall. Fatigue claimed him as the first stars showed.

Jake woke the next day to familiar surroundings. He was back in his own world, near the stand of trees and the fairy ring. Around him were many tracks, mostly of the little dogs, but one set was definitely a woman's. It led from the circle to his resting-place and back.

Eclectic Dreams

Jake wept for a long time.

The lake continued to shrink, but he no longer cared. He knew why now. The man from Agriculture had called back to tell him the lake was being drained by the construction nearby. Excavation had weakened the aquifer and created a new water table level. Eventually the level would stabilize, probably after the construction was complete. The lake would be lower by a few feet, just low enough to dry some of the mud and let greenery in closer to the water.

The dogs still hunted along the shore, but Jake never followed them. He knew it was useless.

You only get one chance at perfection.

Remembering Krempla

"So," the dragon said, glaring at the diminutive visitor, "what you're saying is you won't live up to your side of the bargain."

"No, no, no, sir," replied Jerric, a balding gentleman in the emissary regalia of the King of Adylonia, accentuating his denial with a frantic waving of somewhat pudgy paws. "Not at all, not at all!"

"What then?" snapped the dragon, a tendril of sulphurous smoke whipping from its left nostril to waft slowly to the roof of the cavern.

"It's not that we wouldn't live up to the bargain if we could, Your Majesty," Jerric groveled, "it's just that, well, we can't."

"Can't?"

Jerric made an effort to pull himself together and wiped at a stream of sweat that trickled down his forehead and over his cheek. "Exactly, Your Magnificence. Since you and King Sempren made the bargain twenty four years ago, we've never missed a payment... a pubescent virgin once per quarter, delivered to the stake outside your wonderfully opulent abode here." The dragon eyed the man and picked up a large bone from a grisly stack of debris nearby. Jerric sped up his explanation as the dragon began cleaning its teeth with the bone. "Um, however, the bargain's details have become so well known that, well, frankly, sir, we can't locate the commodity you require anywhere in the kingdom." The man smiled what he hoped was his most disarming smile and spread his hands helplessly.

"No virgins? Anywhere in the kingdom?" the dragon said, startled. "Do you mean to tell me that there have been no women children born in this kingdom in the last twenty years?" A throaty growl rumbled from it and it shifted its considerable bulk toward the emissary, dislodging another pile of debris from a precarious position and sending a shower of unspeakable detritus around the man's feet.

The man gasped and swallowed, immediately regretting it. Trying to control his choking, he struggled to answer. "We have done everything we can to procure the commodity, Your Incredibleness..."

"Not enough!"

Eclectic Dreams

A blast of hot halitosis lifted the man's hair off his pate and caused his eyes to water. The dragon reached down and grabbed Jerric, lifting the man until he was at eye level, nearly thirty feet above the ground.

"Your Immenseness," the man grunted desperately, grinning determinedly through the pain, "we wish to renegotiate our agreement."

"Renegotiate?" The dragon blinked at the man, then began to chuckle. The cavern reverberated with the laugh. "What could you possibly offer in place of the delectable flesh of a sweet young thing?"

"A mate, perhaps, Your Munificence?"

The dragon blinked again. It could never remember having blinked this much in this short a time. But, then again, it wasn't every day a snack made such an offer. It tilted its ear closer to the man and eased its grasp somewhat.

"What did you say?"

"A mate, sire, another of your kind."

The dragon sat stunned. "Another?" It lowered the man back almost to the ground and dropped him onto a stack of what might once have been clothing, or might still be garbage.

The man staggered to his feet and futilely brushed at the rubbish that seemed to sprout from his robes. "Yes, Your Elevatedness. We can deliver you a mate."

The dragon shook its head. "Impossible," it murmured, seeming to forget the visitor for the moment. "They're all dead, all of them. The last female died nearly eighty years ago. Sir Dedric killed her while she was bathing..." The dragon suddenly remembered the man and snapped, "Not that I was watching her bathe, or anything. I'm no pervert."

"Of course not, my lord," Jerric agreed with alacrity.

"By the time I got to her, Dedric had sunk his lance into her heart. It was particularly satisfying to crunch him underfoot." "Most justifiably so, Your Righteousness," the man cooed.

The dragon leaned down until his eye was even with the man's. "What kind of trick are you trying to pull?"

The man was the pictured of pained innocence. "Trick, Your Ferocity? Would I dare come here, to your very lair, on the eve of the quarter anniversary, to trick you? Knowing that with the slightest flick of your tail you could crush the life from my body? Knowing that your

H. David Blalock

breath can be the very fire of vengeance against the wicked? Would any man be so foolish?"

The dragon pulled back a little, mollified. The man ventured to step a little higher on the noxious pile. "We will arrange for the delivery of a mate for you in exchange for twenty five years of freedom," he said as firmly as he could. "We think this is a fair and equitable agreement."

"You do, do you?" the dragon grumbled absently.

The emissary stood uneasily as the dragon considered the proposition. He tried not to think about what he was standing in.

"How soon?"

The question caught the little man off guard. "Excuse me, milord?"

"How soon can you bring me this mate?"

A more relaxed smile began on the man's face.

"Thirty days?"

Jerric cringed.

King Sempren glowered at him through his thick grey eyebrows. "Thirty days!" he roared again.

"It was the best I could do, Your Majesty," the emissary squeaked. "He was very insistent once he accepted the possibility. You might even say he was enthusiastic about the idea."

"I'll bet," Sempren said morosely.

The man standing on the other side of the king spoke up. "I can be on the road within the hour, Your Majesty."

Sempren looked at the speaker. He was over six feet tall, heavily armed and armored, a truly heroic picture in Adysonian colors. A massive claymore was slung over his back, its hilt protruding over his right shoulder. The king stood down from his throne and strode to a large table laden with maps. The only other piece of furniture in the hall, it nearly filled the center of the chamber. On its surface were tokens representing troops dispersed through the kingdom. The armored soldier moved to stand at his side.

Sempren sighed. "Very well, Brostal," he said. "Contact King Dedric the Younger. It's time."

Eclectic Dreams

The soldier saluted briskly and marched out of the hall, his boots clicking heavily on the stone floor. Jerric watched him go, then turned back to his sovereign. Sempren glanced at the small man.

"I hate this job," he said.

Three days later, King Dedric the Younger welcomed Sir Brostal into his castle.

"Well met, friend knight," Dedric bellowed at the soldier, who knelt at his feet. "How is Sempren, then? Well, I hope."

"He sends his best regards for Your Majesty's health," Brostal pronounced.

"Isn't that nice," Dedric grinned mirthlessly. "But, you didn't come all the way here from Adylonia to wish us good health. What does our cousin want?"

Brostal reached into his tunic and produced the scroll. He stepped forward and laid it in the hand of the prime minister, who stood quietly beside Dedric. The minister broke the seal and unrolled the parchment. There was a moment's silence while the minister read the missive and Dedric sipped at a golden chalice he carried in one hand. Dedric paused as the minister's face went white.

"Disturbing news?" Dedric prompted.

The minister swallowed. "It seems, sire, that King Sempren is requesting permission to hunt in your forests."

Dedric waved his hand magnanimously. "Our cousin is always welcome to partake of our game," he began. "We would be happy to..."

"Begging Your Majesty's pardon," the minister interjected with a bow, "but King Sempren wishes to hunt for a dragon."

Dedric dropped his chalice, sending it clattering to roll to a stop against Brostal's boot.

"He wants to hunt a *dragon*?" Dedric asked, stunned. Then, as the request sank in, he said, more angrily, "He wants to hunt *my* dragon?"

"Yes, sire."

Dedric bolted upright, taking a step toward Brostal. "Go back to your king, knight," he growled, "Go back to Sempren and tell him he'll not be hunting MY dragon! Just because HIS dragon eats human flesh doesn't give him the right to hunt MY dragon!"

"But, sire..." Brostal said, trying to head off the tirade.

H. David Blalock

"My ancestor gave his life to protect the dragon's eggs, Brostal. It was Sempren's dragon that killed both King Dedric the Great and the she-dragon. Now he wants to hunt the young one?"

Brostal shook his head. "King Sempren does not want to kill the young one, Your Majesty."

Dedric paused in his diatribe. "Eh? Then, what?"

"He wishes to find the dragon to talk to it."

Dedric made a puzzled noise. "Talk to it?" He eyed Brostal suspiciously. "About what?"

"Well, what did he say?" Sempren asked as Brostal straightened from his bow.

"King Dedric sends his most fervent hope that you are well and..."

"Oh, do shut up about all that, and tell me what he said!"

Brostal cleared his throat and adjusted his belt. "King Dedric is willing to allow the hunt..."

"Excellent!"

"...under one condition."

"Crap!" Sempren sank back onto his throne and put his head in his hand. "Damn! I knew I should have let him win that last war. I knew it would back up on me, but no, I had to listen to my counsellors!" He glared at Jerric, who doubled as war counsellor. The emissary looked away quickly and found something interesting in a nearby tapestry. Sempren looked back to Brostal. "What does the little creep want?"

"King Dedric wishes you to relinquish your claims on his provinces in the west..."

"HIS provinces? HIS provinces?"

"...for a period of three years," Brostal finished.

Sempren deflated. "Oh. Three years, eh? Better than some of our agreements in the past." Sempren frowned at Brostal. "Actually, that's a lot better than a lot of our agreements. What's the catch?"

Brostal cleared his throat again.

"Spit it out, knight," Sempren commanded.

Eclectic Dreams

"They have, well," Brostal pulled at his collar ineffectively, as it was made of steel, "misplaced their dragon."

Sempren looked at Brostal as if he hadn't heard. Finally, he leaned forward in his seat.

"Say that again," he murmured.

"King Dedric was most apologetic concerning it, Your Majesty. He is sure the dragon is still in the forests, but the original lair is empty. Has been for some time."

Sempren was looking at the window behind Brostal. "How the hell do you misplace a dragon?" he asked of no one.

"Nevertheless," Brostal pressed on, "King Dedric is most willing to allow the hunt as requested."

Sempren glared at the knight until even the heroic figure seemed to wilt. "What good is the hunt if the damned dragon is gone, you moron?"

"Excuse me, Your Majesty," Jerric ventured. "Perhaps we can still locate the dragon."

Sempren rounded on the small man, glowering with death in his eyes, and, drawing his sword, roared, "Using what, you imbecile? A dragon divining rod?"

Jerric had a sudden flashback of the hot breath he'd experience earlier, but grit his teeth and pushed ahead. "After a fashion, My Lord."

Sempren hesitated, then pushed the sword back into its scabbard.

"Your Magnificence?" the small man said, squinting into the darkness of the cave and trying to ignore the softness of the floor. There was a crash and a grumble from within, followed by a brief noxious reek that nearly made the emissary pass out.

"Just a minute," the dragon's voice rumbled out of the dark.

After a few moments of silence, the huge head of the dragon faded into sight from the cave and peered down at Jerric. The nostrils flared and the dragon licked his chops, dislodging something meaty from its lips that plopped about eight feet from the man.

"I apologize for interrupting your meal, Your Greatness," the man said. "I'll come back later." He turned to pick his way back toward

H. David Blalock

town. "Of all the times I would have to show up here," he thought to himself, "why would it be mealtime?"

A ten-foot head snaked in front of him, blocking his path. The dragon's eye focussed on him and glinted with interest. "Emissary," it said. "Have you come to deliver my mate?"

"Um, not exactly, Your Benevolence..." The temperature around Jerric immediately rose several degrees as the dragon's eyes narrowed and it bared its fangs. He hurried to add, "However, I do have some very good news."

The dragon sniffed him. The man grinned his best grin.

"We have made the initial arrangements for the delivery of your mate," he offered.

A forked tongue flickered from between its lips and traced Jerric's form from boots to face. The man resisted stepping away, gasping at the stench of the saliva that bathed him.

"What is more, Your Infinite Mercy," he continued as steadily as he could, "we have arranged for you to see the mate chosen for your approval."

The dragon's tongue retracted and it smacked its lips. Its head tilted to one side, regarding the emissary in what the man could only interpret as culinary interest. He began to see his life flash before his eyes.

"Good idea," the dragon said, breaking him from his nightmare. "When?"

Jerric grinned his best grin again. "At your leisure, Your Largess. Your mate is in the forests to the east of here."

The dragon raised its head and gazed off to the east. It looked back at Jerric. "In Detric's land?"

"Even so, Your Intuitiveness."

The dragon looked eastward again. "I don't know..."

Sweat popped out on Jerric's forehead at the dragon's hesitation. If it didn't buy into this...

"She is young, Your Virility. Young and beautiful, so I'm told."

The dragon scratched pensively behind its ear, releasing something about two feet long that immediately scurried away into the dark of the cave. "Beautiful, eh?"

"So I'm told, Your Munificence."

Eclectic Dreams

"You already used that one," the dragon mumbled absently, still looking eastward.

"My apologies, Your Glory," the man stammered.

"No problem," the dragon conceded. It looked down at him briefly, and its clawed hand suddenly wrapped around him.

"I'll try to do better in the future, milord," the emissary grunted plaintively.

"Stop mewling," the dragon said, uncoiling the rest of its length from the cave. "You're going with me."

"With you?"

"If my mate isn't everything you've promised, I'll be depressed. And I always eat when I'm depressed."

"Oh," Jerric squeaked.

"So, where is she, exactly?"

The emissary bit his lip. "Well, Your Understanding, they did not tell me. I was simply instructed to come here and give you a report on our progress." The dragon bared its fangs at him. "You did give us thirty days..."

It harumphed loudly. "I've changed my mind. I want to see her now."

"Alas, Your Impatience, I do not know where to find her."

"Then I'll have to find her myself. Wouldn't be the first time I had to track a mate."

Jerric refrained from questioning this.

As the dragon's wings spread to catch the wind, Brostal and his men moved quickly. Trackers had already been set up at intervals between the lair and Detric's estates, but fast runners were all that stood between them and failure. Brostal preferred an open fight to subterfuge, always had, but this was the way Sempren wanted it. He sprinted out of his hiding place as the dragon lifted off the ground and began the pursuit.

Somehow he had always thought flight would be more pleasant. Jerric wriggled in the dragon's grasp and tried not to look down as the thundering of the thing's wings threatened to deafen him and the swaying

of the thing's body made his stomach lurch. Besides that, dragons weren't known for their hygiene, and this one had spent a great deal of time inside a cave sleeping in its own filth. Once in a while, even at this speed, the smell would be overwhelming. It was worse when the dragon would hover to get its bearings. Hanging several hundred feet in the air, the emissary would close his eyes and hum soothing lullabies to himself, until he realized that the lullabies made the dragon drowsy. A horrifying vision of falling and then having the sleeping dragon land on him made him decide to switch to marching tunes.

"Quite a repertoire you have there," the dragon told him.

"Thanks," Jerric said, gagging, "you are too kind."

"Haven't had music for a long time," the dragon mused, keeping an eye out for his mate. "Maybe you can come keep us company when we get settled."

A chill went down Jerric's spine. "Your Enormity flatters me," he said in a pseudo-congenial tone. "But I would not think of intruding on your trysting."

"Damn right you won't," the dragon agreed, pulling up to hover. He ignored the groan the emissary gave off. "But you could sing to us while we dined."

Jerric could barely contain himself.

The emissary had despaired of ever touching ground again. His captor covered hundreds of square miles an hour, but the extent of Dedic's domain was far greater than he had guessed. He marvelled at the dragon's stamina, its determination... its bladder control.

"Excuse me, Your Compassion," Jerric ventured, finally.

"What?"

The man swallowed and carefully avoided looking down as he made his request. "Might we alight for just a few moments?"

The dragon swung into a hover and swiveled its head to regard the man. "Why? Did you see something?"

Jerric could not control a wriggle as he tried to get comfortable. Comprehension lit in the dragon's eyes. Without another word, it folded its wings and dropped to the ground, sending the emissary's stomach into his throat.

Eclectic Dreams

"Make it quick," the dragon growled. "We still have a couple of hours of light left."

The man nodded briefly and stepped behind a tree to relieve himself, nearly wetting on an Adysonian runner. The runner motioned to the southeast and slipped back into the forest, melding into the green with the ease of an elf. Jerric sighed in relief for more reasons than the mere physical.

"Come on!" the dragon bellowed, rattling the leaves out of some nearby trees.

"I hear and obey, O Vociferous One," the man said, scrambling back to his captor. "And I do seem to..." He choked off the rest as the dragon snatched him up and lifted off. Once he caught his breath, he tried again to shout over the wind. "I remember seeing what I thought might be a promising outcropping to the southeast, Your Acuity."

The dragon swung southeast, saying, "I knew that. I was just making sure there was nothing else to the northwest."

"Of course, Your Unerring Accuracy," Jerric allowed.

The outcropping was actually the top of a large cliff face. The dragon landed at the entrance to a cavern in its base large enough for a dragon twice his size. He hesitated.

"Mmmfff."

The dragon sniffed the air, catching dragonscent and evidence of recent habitation.

"MMMFFF!"

It remembered the emissary and opened its claw. The little man rolled free and sat gasping for air.

"Sorry," the dragon mumbled absently. The man waved his hand and concentrated on oxygenating himself. Cautiously, it approached the cave mouth. The dragonscent became more pronounced as it moved closer.

Jerric's vision slowly cleared, although small dark spots still burst infrequently before him. Through them, he watched the dragon disappear into the cave, the sinuous form slithering quietly into the dark. He slipped away from the cave mouth and into the trees, where he was met by an Adysonian runner. The runner passed him a waterskin, which he promptly emptied on himself. Brostal appeared within a few minutes, followed by five men, all of them showing evidence of hard travel.

H. David Blalock

"I am very grateful to see you," Jerric told him.

"I doubt Dedric would be as grateful if he knew how many of our runners were in his estates."

The men settled into silence, watching the cave mouth. There was only the comforting sound of the wind in the leaves around them.

"You're a brave man," Brostal said. He looked at Jerric and grinned.

Jerric shrugged. "I do my duty for King Sempren, just as you."

"Still, to face the dragon alone..."

"Actually, I kind of like it," Jerric preened. It was satisfying for a warrior of Brostal's caliber to notice him. But, maybe he'd taken it a little far. Brostal was looking at him differently.

There was a roar from the belly of the cave, echoing hauntingly. The men looked at each other, then back to the cave.

The rush of leathery wings brought their attention overhead. Another, bigger dragon was settling in the clearing before the cave. Its scales were pristine, shining, and wet, as if straight from the bath. It landed and sniffed the air, turning to face the men.

"You are not Dedric's men," the dragon sounded, its voice surprisingly melodic. "Why are you here?"

Brostal prodded Jerric, who balked.

"I thought you said you liked facing dragons," Brostal said through gritted teeth.

"I may have spoken a little hastily..."

Brostal shoved Jerric into the clearing, where he found himself face to face with the new dragon. It settled on its forelegs to examine Jerric.

"G... good evening, Your Pulchritude," Jerric ventured. He hoped this was a female dragon. After all, it wasn't as if you could simply turn a dragon over on its back to check. You had to kind of trust your instincts.

"A politician," the dragon said, amused. "I can tell by the flattery."

Jerric smiled. It was the female. "A servant of His Majesty King Sempren of Adylonia, my lady."

The dragon's head snapped up suddenly, sending Jerric back a step. "Adylonia? Why are you here? What have you done?"

Jerric's resolve broke, and he fled into the trees. He expected at any second to feel hot breath on his neck, and was astonished to realize he had made it out of the clearing. Brostal stepped from of the forest's

Eclectic Dreams

cover, grabbed him and stopped his cry of alarm with a gauntleted hand. When Jerric looked, the dragon had not changed position. It regarded the men serenely. Jerric noticed the glitter of mirth in its eyes and bristled in spite of himself.

"I beg your pardon," the dragon cooed. "I didn't intend to startle you. It's just that I have had a bad experience with the dragon that lives in your land. I was afraid you might have led it here."

Jerric and Brostal traded a look that wasn't lost on the dragon.

"No! You didn't!" It stood and glanced around. "Where is he? Where?"

Jerric pointed to the cave just as a large form materialized there.

"Emissary! You fool, can't you tell the difference between a male and a female? Even humans..."

The dragon stopped in its tracks as it saw the other. It made a sound the men in the forest later described as something like a squeak, or maybe it was simply swallowing in surprise.

"Thrasac!"

"Krempla?" the male dragon said in a very small voice.

"So," the female dragon said, turning on Thrasac, "you were going to fight Dedric's troops and protect us?" She moved slowly toward the male. The scales along her spine lifted menacingly. "You left me here with the baby..."

"Krempla?"

"... to bring him up all by himself, while you went off galavanting with that dragonelle!" Smoke poured from her nostrils as she neared him.

"She meant nothing to me, honest!" Thrasac asserted, backing into the cave.

"Don't give me that, you..."

There was an explosion of dragonfire as Jerric and Brostal took cover.

"It seems the dragon King Dedric the Elder killed was actually the dragonelle," Jerric explained. "Thrasac knew that going back to Krempla would be suicide, so he decided to concoct the story of Dedric killing his

H. David Blalock

wife to cover his killing Detric. He moved his lair to Adylonia to avoid Krempla and any embarrassing questions. Krempla moved her lair to raise the young away from any place Thrasac knew."

Sempren leaned back on the throne and drained his ale in a single gulp. He belched in satisfaction, gaining a peeved look from Detric the Younger, who stood nearby. "Excellent! Very well done, Jerric!"

The little man bowed low. "I wish I could take the credit for this, Your Majesty, but it seems it was out of our hands..."

"May be, my friend, but the long and the short of it is, we'll not be seeing anything of that dragon for some time to come."

"Quite," Jerric agreed.

"What about my dragon?" Detric asked peevishly. "He was such a cute little fellow."

"I imagine you won't see much of him either," Sempren guessed. "Once they've settled their differences, I think they'll be avoiding us for a while."

"Twenty-five years, at least?"

"Maybe longer. And from now on, any bargains we make will be made with the one in charge."

All three men nodded, remembering Krempla.

“No Pay, No Pass”

The rumble of hoofbeats dragged him from a sound sleep. Grendel leaned out of the little shack that stood at the end of the bridge and eyed the oncoming horseman. The man was arrayed in full plate mail, glittering clean and new, with a lance at the ready across the horse’s shoulder. The animal was heavily armored in bright barding that covered its head, flanks, and haunches.

“Great,” Grendel grumbled sourly.

He stepped outside and stretched, the joints in his huge arms popping loudly, then raised a three-fingered, black-taloned paw. The knight reined his mount to a halt. Grendel looked behind the horseman for any others, but they were alone.

“You want to pass, you pay the toll. One silver piece,” he intoned for the umpteenth time that month.

A baritone voice boomed clearly from the knight’s armor. “You will receive no tribute from me, O Unholy Beast,” it announced.

Grendel winced. He hated it when they resorted to name calling. Even trolls deserved some respect, didn’t they? “No pay, no pass,” he barked back.

“The only thing I have for you is my steel!”

Grendel made a wry face at the man. He really didn’t feel like going through this today. He’d had a toothache all week, and first thing this morning he’d clunked his head on the tollbooth door. Besides, he’d already fought three knights this month. He still had a sore foot from where one of their horses had trodden it.

Whatever happened to the good old days, when humans would include a sacrifice with the bridge when they built it? Sure it was grisly, cementing up the body in the foundation, but it showed the proper respect for the Powers. Now they just put the things up wherever they felt like, without the proper ceremony. There was just no respect for the old ways any more. You had to stand on them just to remind them who the real owner of the river was.

H. David Blalock

The knight was girding himself for battle, but Grendel's head was throbbing and his foot hurt. He hadn't finished his nap and felt generally disgusted with the whole situation.

"You know what?" he told the knight. "I'm sick of this whole 'No pay, no pass' thing. I'm out here every day, in the hot sun, the rain, and the freezing cold, busting my tail." He shook a heavy finger at the man. "You humans have run off all the game, so I have to schlepp toll at this bridge to buy food. And I can't go into town because people panic at the sight of me."

"Well they should," the knight countered, unimpressed by Grendel's grousing. "Thou art truly an abomination, monster!"

"I'm a monster?" Grendel sputtered. "I'M a monster? What about the farmer I have to buy meat from? He knows I can't go anywhere else, so do you know what he charges me for a side of beef? Five silver coins. Five! How's that for a monster?"

The knight's lance point lowered a little. "That does seem rather steep."

"Damn right it is," Grendel said. "And the only source of income I have is this bridge. I charge one silver coin to cross, only one. I'm lucky to pull three silver a week."

"The toll is too great!" the knight blurted.

"Why? Who needs to cross this bridge, anyway? I'll tell you who," Grendel went on before the knight could answer. "Merchants and soldiers, lords and ladies, that's who."

"Farmers, too," the knight put in.

Grendel snorted. "Farmers? What's on the other side of this bridge a farmer can't find on this side? Nothing." He leaned toward the knight. "My friend, somebody's been playing you for a fool."

"I beg your pardon."

"Who told you about this bridge?"

The knight straightened in his saddle. "My Lord Edward Delany, Duke of Endalia, Protector of the Realm."

"I thought so. He told you I was a man-eating monster who terrorized the countryside and ambushed innocents on the bridge, didn't he?"

"Well, yes."

Eclectic Dreams

Grendel shook his head sadly. “Don’t you see? Your duke wants this bridge to be free so he can save a couple of silver a month. Cheap bastard.”

“But, the innocents —“

“Did I ambush you? Did I lay in wait under the bridge and jump you from behind?”

The knight’s steed shifted its weight while the man considered this.

“Look,” Grendel went on, “I’m just trying to get by. But you know, it’s not worth the aggravation anymore. All right.” He stepped out of the knight’s path. “You win. I yield. Go on across. Find out for yourself what’s over there that the ‘innocents’ might want. Who cares? What difference does it make? I’m going back in to finish my nap.”

The knight, nonplussed, watched as the troll stomped back into the tollbooth. After a moment’s hesitation, he spurred his mount slowly forward, keeping a wary eye on Grendel through the booth’s windows. The troll waved his hand in dismissal at the knight and leaned back against the wall, closing his eyes.

In a little while, Grendel heard the clatter of the horse’s hooves on the bridge. He opened one eye and looked out the back window of the booth to see the knight nearing the middle of the span.

He reached into a dark corner of the booth and pulled a lever. The trapdoor worked perfectly, sending knight and steed plunging into the river. He watched in satisfaction as they sank below the surface.

“It might not be sporting,” he told the Power of the river, “but it’s effective.”

He pushed the lever back and the trapdoor closed. Rubbing the bump on his head, he settled back to finish his nap.

H. David Blalock

EXPERIMENTAL

Senseless Violence

I guess I'll leave. There's precious little reason to stay now.

I always leave the TV on in these hotel rooms. It covers the low rumble of voices and the growl of passing traffic. Not that there's that much on TV that interests me. Not after tonight. Looking at the hole in my arm, I guess it could've been worse. The bullet might have lodged in the bone, or his aim could have been better. The tourniquet is holding well and there's just the slightest tingling in my fingers.

What should I do about the body? I can't leave it here, face down on the reddening rug. I doubt anyone heard the shots, muffled as they had been in our struggle, so I should have time to move him somewhere. But where?

The bed? Probably best. Covered and facing away from the door, the wound won't be immediately apparent. I'll have to lay him on his left side, though. Not much left of it above the shoulder. The pillow should hide that.

God, he's heavy. My bad arm doesn't help. Here we go, ol' buddy. First, the torso, then the legs. We unbutton the shirt and pull it off. Hmm... Didn't know you had a tattoo. Nice piece of work, too. Now, covers up and over, and turn the head so. Close the eyes. The bleeding's down to a slow kind of seeping now. Good. The stain on the pillow will take longer to show up.

How does it look from the doorway? Let's see.... Not bad. If you didn't know better, you'd think he was sleeping.

Have I forgotten anything? No, all my things are accounted for. I'll just turn the TV up a little. Someone passing by outside might think it's a conversation going on or someone watching the late show. Better for me.

Check the load. Three bullets left. Let's see... One in my arm, one in his chest, one in his head. Check.

Eclectic Dreams

Anybody outside? No, just somebody pulling up some doors down. I can wait. I see the I-40 traffic just beyond the "No Vacancy" light. My Chevy is right there. Are they in yet? I don't see them. Ease the door open, peek outside. Don't see anybody. Quickly step outside and pull the door to. That's the lock snapping.

My arm hurts. Ah, the coat has slipped down. Need to remember to keep the wound out of sight, at least until I get to the car. Just a few more steps.

What's this? Who's that by my car? He's trying to steal my car! One well placed shot and...

How did I end up lying on my face? I feel so tired, so cold. Have to get up. God, it hurts.

"Double homicide," the one by the blue and white police car said.

"Strange circumstances. Looks like the woman killed the guy in the hotel, then ran into trouble out here," said the other, examining the cold female corpse.

"Yeah. Wonder why she killed him?"

"Better yet, why was she killed? Doesn't make any sense. The front desk says their car's still here and nothing's been taken."

"Go figure."

The Urn

It was decided by those that decide such things that it had been nothing more than a freak of spontaneous combustion that reduced his stationery shop to ashes. So much paper, so long a drought, so little attention to safety, all led to so much fire. And that Mr. Johnston was caught in the conflagration was a terrible tragedy indeed, but he was known to drink too much at times. And then, there was the evidence he had been drinking heavily that night.

So Mr. Johnston's remains were carefully gathered and his only living relative arranged to have them properly cremated and placed in a gilt urn, which he then mounted on his mantelpiece like some gruesome trophy.

Decades passed. Two generation of that relative of Mr. Johnston's came and went. The urn in which he rested gathered dust and even the gilt surface began to pit and tarnish as the baser metal underneath was exposed. Once, a grandson had the urn polished and restored, not quite to its original state, but close enough that it shone with renewed vigor. All this time, the urn's seal stayed tight, Mr. Johnston's remains undisturbed. Sometimes neglected, sometimes revered, the urn resided sedately on the mantelpiece for 93 years.

Into every family is eventually born someone who cares little for the past, one who scorns memory and blasphemes the quiet peace of death. Such a one was born in the third generation after the urn was filled. His name was Ethan Eberhart.

Eberhart grew up in the house where the urn stood majestically commanding the fireplace. As a tiny boy, he had once climbed up onto the mantelpiece to look more closely at the shining surface, only to be thwarted within inches of attaining his goal by his mother's punishing blow and shouted outrage. The urn became a thing of mystery to Eberhart as he grew older. He knew it was supposed to contain the remains of his great-grandfather, but he often wondered how that was known for sure. No one he talked to remembered his great-grandfather, and no one he talked to except his uncle even remembered it being anywhere but right where it sat. His uncle, when pressed, would shrug

Eclectic Dreams

and say only that he had had it polished a few years before Ethan was born, out of respect.

Sometimes, after everyone else was in bed, Ethan would pad down the stairs and sit in the great chair before the fireplace. From there, he could see the urn by the indirect light of a street lamp that sifted through the window.

Sometimes, when the moon was bright, he fancied he could see a kind of sparkling deep in the gilt surface. Of course, it was nothing more than imagination and a trick of the light, but it intrigued and fascinated him nonetheless.

When the elder Eberhart died, Ethan inherited the house and everything in it. When his mother followed a few years later, he was left alone in it.

Years went by and Eberhart found the study of the urn strangely comforting and yet compelling. He grew to know each curve of its surface, each scratch, each flaw, as he knew his own name. He felt close to it, as he would have felt, he assumed, to his great-grandfather had he known him. Perhaps that was why he was never really alarmed by the dreams.

They began quietly. He would be walking in the green sward of some impossibly beautiful valley. Standing near a copse of cedar would be a man of about fifty, with eyes that seemed to recognize no distance. Eberhart knew this was his great-grandfather.

Waking, he would watch the gleam in the surface of the urn that seemed a reflection of a light within rather than outside it. Asleep, he strolled that meadow at his ancestor's side, feeling the warmth of a summer sun and the peace of the quiet the man wore about him like a cloak. Eberhart began to envy that peace, to covet that quiet. It formed in his mind that, if he could not have that in his life, it was unfair that someone like Johnston, a common drunkard, should have it, even in death. His envy began to color his dreams, and the grass turned a mottled gray, the man seemed less comely.

The years continued to draw on, and Eberhart's bitterness at being denied that profound peace took over more than his dreams. In time, his father's business had gone a mottled gray, and his own home had lost its luster.

H. David Blalock

Yet, the urn refused to surrender to the decay around it. Its gilt surface remained inviolate.

Eberhart began drinking one night; began and did not stop, brooding in the great chair by the fireplace. He glared at the glistening of the urn and muttered under his breath, mulling over the inequity of it all. For long hours he sat, until the servants retired and he was left alone with his beaker of liquor and bitterness.

When the moon rose and he saw the glitter of its silver kiss the gold of the urn, its warm glow in the depths of its surface, he rose. Half in anger, half in yearning, he reached for the urn. Never had he before even considered moving it, and he was startled by its light weight. A vague suspicion crept into his drugged mind and he shook the thing, trying to hear the telltale rattle of his old great-grandfather's bones. When he heard nothing, he was suddenly sure the urn was empty, and, for a moment, the hilarity of it struck him and he laughed aloud. Years of care and reverence, his own superstitious awe, over an empty jar.

Then the anger began to well in him. If the urn was empty, there was no quiet peace. That had belonged to his great-grandfather, and the old man still had it, wherever he was.

He hurled the urn from him and it clattered against the wall, breaking the seal and sending the cover hurtling across the room.

He watched in puzzlement as a cloud of what could only have been smoke issued from the urn. For a second, he was reminded of the genie of the lamp and smiled at the image.

Then, from the mist stepped an apparition he knew very well.

It was decided by those who decide such things that it had been nothing more than a heart attack that brought Ethan Eberhart down. And his expression, well, that was a result of a sudden constriction of the muscles of the face.

The Moment Frozen

The car stopped. It didn't decelerate or crash. It didn't do anything. And it did it all of a sudden.

It was as if the world had stopped in midstride. After recovering from the initial shock, Dan wondered why he wasn't flying through the windshield. Normally, inertia would have sent him hurtling against the steering wheel and dashboard. In fact, all the other drivers should have been experiencing the same, their passengers even worse, but there wasn't the slightest pressure against his seatbelt. He might just as easily have been sitting at an intersection waiting for the light to change.

He looked around. All the other vehicles were completely still, but that did not bother him as much as the fact that all the drivers, passengers, and even a fox tail attached to the antenna of a coupe ahead of him were just as deadly still. He was the only animate thing in a huge, motionless, silent tableau. It was so unreal that he just sat there for a full minute before he could begin to react.

His first impulse was to hit the brake and hold it down as hard as he could. Why this should make a difference, Dan really couldn't have said. It simply seemed to be the thing to do. To his confusion, the brake pedal would not depress at all. It was jammed in position. He shot a few glances down to see if something had rolled between it and the floor, but there was nothing. He tried stepping on it with both feet, using the back of his seat to brace against, but to no avail. The pedal might as well have been made of concrete. A little further experimentation showed him the same immobility had overcome the accelerator pedal, the steering wheel, the parking brake lever, indeed everything around him.

He was trapped in the car.

Panic rose in him and he reached behind his seat to try the back door. No luck. He tried the windows. Nothing. Suddenly, the air in the car was close and stuffy. He loosened his collar and dabbed at the sweat starting on his upper lip with his shirt cuff.

With a monumental effort, he took his hand from the wheel, ready at a second's notice to grab it again just in case this was all a dream and things went suddenly back to normal. His heart pounded wildly as he

held both hands within inches of the wheel, eyes darting between the speedometer reading of 73 miles per hour and the stillness around.

A slight motion caught his attention. Like a drowning man, Dan strained to see what it was, yearning for a bit of reality in this nightmare.

It looked like a small animal, but its shape was all wrong. It was a metallic color with an iridescent sheen to it that reminded him of light on an oily surface. It was composed of a mind-boggling series of angles and planes with no curves at all on it. It made its way from vehicle to vehicle with no apparent wheels, yet it gave the impression it rolled. It had no eyes or nose, yet it seemed to be searching for something. The hair on the back of his neck rose as it approached his car. At first it was just a suspicion, but as the seconds went on and the animal continued its search, he became certain it was looking for him.

A wild fear overtook him and he clawed mindlessly at the door handles, seeking escape. Stubbornly, they refused to budge. His heartbeat thundered in his ears as the animal turned at last and made for his car. He screamed involuntarily in alarm and terror, and beat on the windows of the car with his bare fists.

The animal disappeared from view.

Dan choked back his next scream and sat very still. Sweat dripped into his eyes, but he dared not rub them for fear it might sense the movement. He held his breath and grit his teeth against their chattering, trying vainly to control the shuddering that ran through him.

A soft scratching noise sounded against the driver's side door. He wanted to shrink toward the passenger's side, but the seatbelt held him fast. The scratching transformed into a tapping that traveled back until it stopped near the rear of the car.

His fear dissolved as quickly as it had come. He slumped forward over the wheel as a wave of relief hit him.

Road noise returned like a thunderclap. He sat bolt upright, hands clenching the wheel. The car swerved right, then left, and, with his heart in his throat, he managed to recover control just before slamming into the median wall. At the next off ramp he left the interstate and found a convenience store, where he pulled the car off the road and parked it.

His hands were shaking and his heart was still pounding, but the fear had retreated until it was just a sickening memory. Slowly, he pulled on

Eclectic Dreams

the door handle, terrified it would not move, then stepped out of the car to walk deliberately away from it. After a few steps, he turned to look.

A series of scratches marred the paint down low on the left front panel. They became gouges in the driver's door, nearly penetrating the metal. On the rear passenger door they looked like dashed lines, six or seven of them in parallel. He had no trouble imagining how those marks might match with the angles and planes on the bizarre animal he'd seen. Hesitantly, he approached the car and knelt to examine the scratches more closely. Each of them was in the deepest part of a long dent, as if the car had hit something sharp and solid. He looked at the tires, expecting to see at least a scarring of the sidewalls, but they were untouched. Whatever had hit the car had damaged only the metal.

The evidence left him with mixed feelings. In spite of what he might think, it was indisputable that the car had hit something on the road. These marks could not have been made by debris or gravel thrown by a car ahead of him. But how was it possible the tires should not be cut or damaged when the entire side panel was gouged so deeply?

"Hit somethin'?"

Dan started around to find an unshaven man in dirty clothes and a worn jacket looking at the car.

"I'm not sure," he admitted.

The man grunted. "Looks like gremlins to me."

"Gremlins?"

"Yeah. Gremlins."

He stared blankly at the man. Why he was listening, he couldn't say. Maybe it was a delayed reaction from the shock. Maybe it was the way the man said the word, like he knew what he was talking about.

"You know, gremlins," the man went on.

Dan looked back at the scratches and tried to grasp what the man was saying, but nothing fit and he found himself thinking about the animal made of angles and planes.

"They get into things, ya know," the man was saying. "They can't stand curves, 'cause they ain't got none."

A chill struck him at that. "What did you say?"

"They's made o' angles 'n' flats. They live in the times in between."

"Times in between?"

H. David Blalock

“Yeah, ‘tween now and then, ya know.”

“Hey!”

He turned to see a portly black man come out of the store. The newcomer waved his hands at the dirty man.

“Didn’t I tell you not to hang around my place? Get the hell outta here!”

The unkempt man wilted under the black man’s gaze and slunk back toward the road. Dan watched as the man walked a little ways down the road, turned, shot the store owner the finger, grinned through crooked teeth, and sauntered away.

“Sorry, mister,” the store owner told him, then pulled up short when he saw the car. “He didn’t scratch your car, did he?”

“No, no, I hit something out on the interstate.”

“Wow, must’ve been big. Looks like it’ll cost a mint to fix. Hope you got insurance.”

“Yes, I have, thanks.”

“Okay. You need to use a phone?”

“No, thanks, I’m headed home.”

The black man nodded, smiled, and waved at him before going back into the office. Dan looked at the scratches again, then down the road where the dirty man was disappearing. He had known about the angles and planes, about the oddness of time. What other answers might he have?

Quickly climbing back into the car, Dan swung it into the road after the unkempt man. He caught a glimpse of the man as he ducked into an alleyway between buildings. Chafing at the delay, Dan had to wait for crossing traffic to pass before he could pull into the alley. He idled the car down the narrow way, navigating the dumpsters and crates that sometimes nearly filled the width of it.

He’d never noticed them before, but there they were. The alley had looked deserted at first, but the farther he went the more people he saw. Most merely moved out of the way and hid themselves best they could. Those that did not watched him with sullen, suspicious eyes.

Finally, he pulled up alongside his target. The man had settled on to a large crate and was busily winding cloth around one of his legs. He looked up as the car slid to a stop and the window hummed down.

Eclectic Dreams

“How do you know about gremlins?” was the obvious question, though it sounded less than sane to Dan even now.

The man tilted his head and smirked through those bad teeth. “Seen one, didn’t ya?”

“I, uh, well, I don’t know.”

“You seen one,” the man said, nodding and going on with his task. “They ain’t as many as they used to be.”

“What?”

The man tied off the cloth and wrapped his hands around his knee. “Cars done ‘em in, ya know. Machines done ‘em.”

“I don’t follow.”

“Didja ever notice there ain’t no angles in nature?”

The comment seemed totally unrelated and threw Dan for a loop. He opened his mouth to ask a question, but the man had gone on without listening for an answer.

“Ain’t no angles anywhere in nature. Just curves and circles and bends. Oh, there’s angles in crystals, but they’s tiny, too small to count.”

“What are you—“

“‘Ceptin’ that they draw from that place and channel it, or so they say. That’s why they’s got power to begin with, I suppose.”

The man was obviously rambling incoherently. Dan tried to think of a way to get him to come back to the point. “What’s that got to do with gremlins?”

“Gremlins is angles, ain’t they? They shoulda stayed where they were, but we came along an’ put angles on things an’ they fall through.”

“Fall through what?”

“The angles,” the man said, a little exasperated. “Ain’t you listenin’?”

“Look, I want to know how you know about gremlins and why you think it was a gremlin that hit my car.”

“Maybe they ain’t gremlins, but what else would ya call ‘em? I guess ya could call ‘em fairies er trolls er somethin’ like that.”

Stifling his impatience, Dan gripped the wheel of the car tightly. “Are you saying that gremlins are the same as fairies and trolls?”

“Are they?”

“I’m asking you!”

H. David Blalock

“What fer? I don’t know.”

Dan chewed on his lip for a moment. The man couldn’t be this simple. He was playing some peculiar game. The thought that he was being delayed while the other homeless descended on him in ambush brought him around in his seat. There was no one else in sight. When he looked back, the man was picking his nose.

“What’s your name?” Dan asked, determined to get some kind of answers.

“Greer.”

“All right, Mr. Greer, can you answer a question for me?”

Greer considered the end of the finger that had been exploring his nostril. Dan ignored it.

“What is a gremlin?”

The man wiped his finger on his pants and scratched under his thigh. “Gremlins is little animals.”

“Okay, and why did you say they were being killed by cars and machines?”

“Cause they’s tryin’ to get home through the angles, but they gets chopped up more often than not.” Greer leaned forward on the crate. “Say, you got any change? Just a couple bucks, eh?”

Dan flipped open the console compartment and pulled two singles out of it. He handed the money to Greer, who snatched it away gleefully.

“Thanks, bud, you’re okay,” Greer pronounced.

“Do you see gremlins a lot, Greer?”

“Nah, not since a while back. They ain’t as many as they used to be. You wouldn’t have a smoke on ya, would ya?”

“Sorry, I don’t smoke.”

“Shit.”

“Why would a gremlin want to get into a car, do you think?”

“Not the car, the engine. For the angles.”

“The angles?”

“Yeah, to get home.”

Dan thought about that. The parts in engines were finely machined to precise angles. If gremlins needed those angles for whatever reason, engines were the most common source. Thousands of automobiles were manufactured each day.

Eclectic Dreams

Very well, assuming Greer wasn't insane, which was a very large assumption, he had seen a gremlin. But, what had happened to him to place him in the "time in between" so that he could see the gremlin?

"Greer."

"Yeah?"

"How could you see the gremlins, if they live in the time between?"

The man grinned his rotted smile and tapped his temple with a dirty forefinger. "When ya want to see things, ya can, but ya gotta know where to look."

This certainly had the earmarks of a game now, and he had little choice but to play. "Where would I look to see a gremlin?"

"When yer goin' to sleep, just then. When ya breathe, between in and out."

Dan wiped his forehead with the back of his sleeve. This was getting him nowhere. If Greer had made any sense before, he made none now.

"Can ya give a guy a lift downtown?" Greer asked, scooting along the edge of the crate toward the car.

Dan dropped the vehicle into gear and rolled it backward. Greer slid down on to the pavement and started after him.

"Hey, bud, wait up!"

It took some fancy maneuvering, but he got the car out of the alleyway and back on to the main road. The last he saw of Greer, the man was standing at the entrance to the side street, giving him the finger.

As he pulled back out on to the interstate, Dan tried to put the events of the last hour in focus. He had experienced something; a time slip, maybe. Or had it been just a relative thing only he had experienced? If so, where did the "gremlin" come into it and how could Greer have known so much about them? The man didn't seem too stable, and that worried Dan. Could he be losing it too, becoming like Greer? Maybe he should look into therapy. Stress could be giving him hallucinations. He'd read somewhere that everyone shared subconscious cultural symbols that surfaced in dreams and hallucinations. That would explain the "gremlin" and Greer's insight.

Or it might just have been a dream. He'd nodded off at the wheel and hit some road trash, startling himself awake and shaking him so badly

H. David Blalock

he'd let Greer convince him that what he'd seen in his confusion was a "gremlin."

Now that made sense. It explained everything. That must have been what happened.

The engine shuddered and the car shook from the backfire. A horrid banging noise came from up front as the car lost power. Smoke billowed from under the hood as he struggled against the stiffening steering to get the car to the shoulder. It sputtered once, twice, then died altogether and rolled to a stop just short of an off-ramp.

"What now?" he mumbled to himself as he pulled the hood latch and climbed out of the car. The hood came up, releasing a cloud of whitish smoke that stank of oil and fuel. He fanned it until most of it was gone and leaned in to look. Confronting him was a bewildering assortment of tubes and boxes and wires and pipes. Somewhere in all that there must be an engine, he knew, but where was anybody's guess.

He straightened up and looked around. In the gathering dusk, he could see the lights of a service station at the end of the ramp. He locked up the car and set off to summon help.

Walking by the front tire, something under the car caught his eye as it moved in the wake of a passing tractor-trailer. It looked like a bit of metal, identical to the thousands of other bits of discarded and broken technology that litter the highways. He tried to tell himself that was all it was but its iridescence made him cautiously pick it up and gingerly examine it. He held it for only a moment, then dropped it and ran down the ramp toward the familiar safety of the service station.

The interstate lights flickered to life as the sun set. Headlights flashed across the stalled car and flickered against the shard of metal that moved ever so slightly whenever touched by the wake of the passing traffic.

Its tiny square scales glittered occasionally.

Eclectic Dreams

Jim

In all the time I had known him, I had never seen Jim smile.

We grew up together in the suburbs of a major metropolis, attended the same schools, rode the same bus. He was a particularly morose child, distant and unresponsive; the perpetual outsider. Wherever there was a group of children, Jim could be seen just outside the periphery, watching with a kind of disinterested look.

The inevitable ribbing he got from the other kids made no impression on him. Even when the taunting escalated into blows, he endured them stoically and without a single complaint. As he offered them no sport, the harassment soon stopped and the bullies moved on to their next target. Jim went on being Jim, silent and far away.

Once or twice I tried to engage him in conversation. Not being much of a social animal myself, I thought I understood him better than the others. He politely listened to me talk, answered in monosyllables I barely understood, and generally left me with the impression I had interrupted his train of thought.

I never saw him study or carry a textbook, but he passed his classes with a minimal score. I would sneak looks at him during tests. When the exams were passed out, he would look blankly at them for a few minutes, then go through them making random marks, as if they were checklists. Afterwards, he would spend the rest of the time staring out the window or spinning a pencil absently or quietly looking off into space.

Well, maybe that's not entirely true. Actually, he wasn't just looking dully ahead of himself. He always seemed to be watching something no one else could see. Whatever it was, it fascinated him so that nothing else mattered. One fire drill I had to shake him hard to get his attention as he stood calmly in the hallway, watching nothing, the rest of the school scurrying around him.

He grew like the rest of us, graduated, and I lost track of him. I heard that he took a job working for the city, but I never took the time to follow up on that. The beginnings of my own adult existence took up the majority of my time, and somehow keeping up with Jim slipped my mind. It wasn't until a few years later I realized why he'd been so remote.

H. David Blalock

I was driving along one of the many two lane roads interconnecting the subdivisions when I noticed signs announcing "Men at Work" and "Lane Closed Ahead." As I neared the construction area, I recognized him.

There was Jim, leaning against a shovel, that far away look on his face. In a three foot deep trench in front of him, five other men were working.

Suddenly, Jim didn't seem out of place at all.

Eclectic Dreams

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

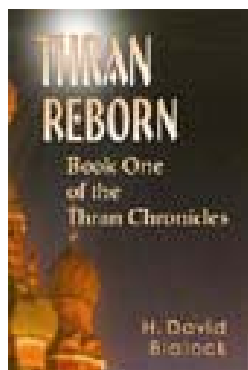
H. David Blalock has been a writer of science fiction, fantasy, and horror for 30 years. He started writing early, publishing his first work, a poem called “The Machine”, in 1971. Over the years, he has worked to perfect his art and built a fantasy series around a world first imagined in dreams. Heavily influenced by such authors as H. P. Lovecraft, Robert Heinlein, and J. R. R. Tolkien, he took over twenty years to build, refine, and develop the world described in *The Thran Chronicles*.

His other works have appeared in numerous magazines, both print and online, and several anthologies. He currently lives in the Memphis, Tennessee, area with his wife of 30 years, Maria. His most satisfying accomplishments are his two daughters, Herika and Celina.

For more information on H. David Blalock and his work, visit his home page at <http://ThranKeep.com>.

H. David Blalock

ALSO BY H. DAVID BLALOCK



Thran Reborn

Book One of the Thran Chronicles

Andalarn Thran is determined to return his family to its former glory, but to do so he must face a blood feud, scheming priests, and a growing ancient evil.

*I would compare it to the works of David Eddings and Robert Jordan. ---
Baryon Online Magazine*

*If you are an avid science fiction and fantasy reader then **Thran Reborn**
is a book you won't want to miss. --- Roundtable Reviews*

*If you like broad scale action, multiple threads in a plot, and the
exploration of a new and different universe, I suggest you consider
Thran Reborn . --- Dark Moon Rising*

*A truly fun read, with the story compelling, exciting, and full of great
characters. --- Aphelion Webzine*

*If you are looking for a simple, predictable fantasy book with clear
lines between good and evil, go read something else. If you're
looking for a tale of shifting allegiances, veiled motivations,
characters that are both good and evil at the same time, and
multiple, yet coherent, plotlines, **Thran Reborn** is a good choice.*

--- Bill Pottle, author of **DreamQuest**

EXCERPT FROM **THRAN REBORN**:

Two days later the rains turned to snow. Ice clung to what once had been wet and footing for the House Suum troops was even more treacherous. Still they came, and still the Telmet held on to a perilous advantage, but the defending forces were approaching a critical turn. They were severely undermanned, and with the advent of the colder weather they faced another enemy: time. When the snows began in earnest, the Telmet knew they would be cut off from any escape into the mountains. If they could not stop House Suum at the North Road, they would have to forever abandon claim on Arnotle and the cities to the south.

For three thousand years, the Telmet had built, maintained, and cared for those cities. Their walls, towers, and buildings were marvels of architectural beauty. Great arches, buttresses, minarets, and spires adorned them, sparkling in the daylight and glowing from the hearthlight in the evening. From the gray granite walls and low ceilinged halls of Arnotle to the soaring tower and black basalt edifices of Moorkai, the southern cities were prizes the Telmet felt were part of their racial heritage. To think of humans crawling through the sacred chambers of Sumagh or soiling the cobbled streets of Arnotle left a bitter taste in their mouths. It stirred them to fight harder each day, brought the songs of defiance to their lips in the morning and the chant of determination at sunset.

They seldom slept now. The size of House Suum's forces allowed them to attack most of the day and night, replacing exhausted troops with fresh on a regular basis. The Telmet fought twenty-hour shifts, dragging dead and wounded back to the caves for care with increasing frequency.

The Thran guardsmen, relegated to the rear by the Telmet commander, gained a grudging respect from their allies. They worked the same hours, ate the same food, shared sentry duty and generally behaved in a way that gave the Telmet no excuse to suspect they might have the slightest sympathy for the enemy.

Of Thran himself, Baliak saw nothing. It was as if the man had disappeared or gone back east. Queries to Morault brought a shrug and a

H. David Blalock

change of subject. Thran's lieutenants, though courteous, gave him the impression his questions were insulting. The mystery grew until the third day after Thran's arrival.

A soft snow was falling again as the chill light of pre-dawn glistened off the Spine's peaks. A cold fog hung in the dark valley between the forces, quiet and still. Both sides seemed to have paused in their hostilities to catch their collective breath, regroup and rest before what they knew would be the final battle. Though the flakes that fell were small and few now, the clouds overhead were black and heavy. The air was close, thick with the coming storm.

As had become his morning custom, Baliak left his cave to check the perimeter. Each day he would take inventory of the Telmet forces and their positions, and each day the examination required less time until he was only a few minutes out of his quarters when the perimeter guard challenged him. Baliak answered the sentry and noticed an unfamiliar figure standing nearby.

It was a human dressed in the dun and russet of the Telmet. On his hip he wore a double scabbard, one covering a heavy longsword, the other a lighter blade. A closer look at the weapons sheathed there drew Baliak to the man.

"Where have you been?" he asked Thran.

The Jarl of House Thran, arrayed in Telmet colors and carrying a Kel weapon, turned a troubled face to Baliak.

"Wrestling with my conscience," Thran said. He looked back down the valley toward the enemy camp. "I have been to see House Suum's commander. I wanted to try everything I could to stop this, Baliak. I have no wish for anyone to die today, not even men of Suum. There has been so much blood shed in the last three hundred years between us. I would see that stop. We can learn from each other, discover common grounds, common interests. There must be a way to peace for us and our children."

"Peace is a hard word, Lord Thran," Baliak said. "It is a hard word to speak and a harder one to hear with the ghosts of so many Telmet and Kel crying out for justice."

Thran gave him an odd look, and suddenly Baliak felt both shamed and angry. What was it about this man that brought out hard truths for

all to see? What was it about Thran that demanded either utter honesty or complete silence?

The truth was, the Kel and Telmet desperately wanted peace. Both peoples were dying races. Every casualty pushed them closer to extinction, but neither race really wanted war. The Telmet were driven by their need to recover their cities, the places they were designed to construct. Telmet purpose, the meaning for their whole race's existence, was the care and protection of those cities. The Kel wished only to be left to their forests, to be allowed to care for them and tend them. Just the thought of the Kel forests sent a twinge through Baliak that pulled his gaze toward the east.

"I asked him to accept terms," Thran went on, finally. "I begged him for mercy for the Telmet." The man shook his head as if unable to believe the words he uttered. "He laughed at me, called me a fool. He said the Telmet were a plague, a disease that had to be purged. He..."

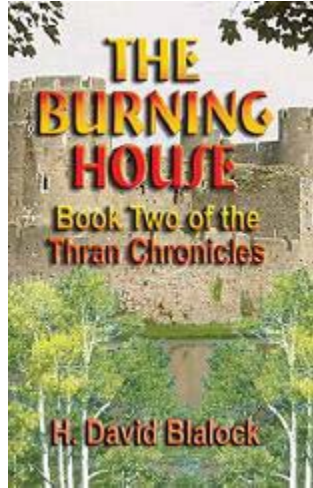
Thran wiped the morning mist from his face.

"What will you do?" Baliak asked, expecting Thran to pressure Morault for permission to commit his guard to the combat. Though small in number, the Telmet would welcome them.

"What will I do?" Thran repeated to himself. He seemed to consider the question as the dawn crawled into the valley. The mists retreated from the light, revealing a battlefield littered with broken weapons, armor, and equipment. Thran watched the mists pull back toward House Suum for long moments. "What else can I do?" he muttered.

H. David Blalock

ALSO BY H. DAVID BLALOCK



The Burning House
*Book Two of the Thran
Chronicles*

Daepar, son of the legendary Andalarn Thran, finds himself alone against a myriad of enemies. Abandoned by his wife and trusted friends, he pushes on for what he believes is the best interests of House Thran. Then, he discovers that even House Thran is against him.

EXCERPT FROM THE BURNING HOUSE:

"I have decided," Daepar began.

He had called a special meeting of his advisers and ministers. He wanted everyone to understand what he intended to do and the reasons he intended to do it. He had learned the hard way that no one but he might take the necessary action. The rest were either too timid or too dull to understand the need. He would announce his intentions, charge them with their duties, and go about the task with purpose and determination. He would lead by example, a strong point runner in the race to security for House Thran.

"It is obvious that House Suum is finally making its move to dominate Adylonis," Daepar went on. "We cannot allow Suum to continue this aggression without some kind of response. However, we cannot act unilaterally. The Ascendant's disappearance is complicating our position. We need to determine his whereabouts before we can take

appropriate action. I will personally take charge of a party to locate and retrieve the Ascendant, escort him to Moorkai and ensure his installation. After this is done, House Thran will petition the Emperor through the Ascendant for Imperial sanctions against House Suum. I will ask for commission as representative of the Emperor so that House Thran may act against Suum legally. This will prevent the other Houses from hesitating to join us for fear of Imperial retribution. Once we have the Imperial commission, we will march on Arnotle and seize it, neutralizing House Suum once and for all. We will bring final and lasting peace to Adylonis."

There was an awkward silence from the company. Daepar looked at each man in turn.

"You will each have a duty to perform in this campaign," he told them. "I will require that you perform these duties quickly and efficiently. There can be no delay, no argument. If you feel you cannot accomplish your tasks within the schedule I have projected, you will be replaced immediately with someone who can. Is that understood?"

There was much shuffling of feet and a general murmured assent.

"Excellent. Loncaer, you will be in charge of Thran Keep in my absence. I will hold you personally responsible for the overall accomplishment of the campaign here."

"Of course, my lord."

"Hogurn, you will accompany me. My personal bodyguard will be assigned to our entourage. See to it that they are properly equipped and provisioned for a journey of several months."

"Yes, my lord."

"I have developed a plan for the administration of Thran Keep preparatory to our beginning a military response to Suum's actions," Daepar told his ministers. "You will find the plan contains instructions for each aspect of House operations, down to the last detail. See that you follow them exactly. Any unforeseen circumstances must be dealt with quickly and with an eye to the final goal of the campaign. I trust you will keep that in mind at all times. I will be receiving periodic updates on your progress. Anyone who falls behind schedule will be subject to removal and replacement."

H. David Blalock

Servants stepped forward as he spoke, passing packages to each of the ministers that contained the documents pertinent to each man's duties. The ministers received the packages with grim faces. Daepar saw the displeasure in their manner.

"Your approval of this matter is not required," he said to them sharply. "Only your obedience."

The ministers bowed stiffly. "Yes, Jarl Thran."

"Your schedule begins today. You are dismissed."

The ministers filed out of the audience chamber in silence. As the doors closed behind them, Loncaer turned to Daepar.

"Permission to speak frankly, my lord?" he asked.

"No," Daepar barked. "There will be no negotiation of this plan. You have your orders. See to them."

Loncaer glared at him. In a move Daepar would not have thought possible, he spoke without permission. "You may regret this move, Jarl Thran." Then he bowed sharply and nearly ran out. Daepar looked at Hogurn.

"Do you have any objections, Swordbearer?"

COMING SOON!

ALSO BY H. DAVID BLALOCK

The Tower at Moorkai
Book Three of the Thran Chronicles

Andalarn Thran the Younger has worked for years to ensure his installation as Ascendant, but the appearance of Lord Djemo has upset those carefully laid plans. Can he convince the Moorkai Council what Djemo really is, and the threat he signifies to all?

FROM THE TOWER AT MOORKAI:

It had taken him nearly six weeks to puzzle it out, but the lock eventually succumbed, and he'd found himself in Djemo's sanctum--seconds before Djemo appeared at a door on the other side of the chamber.

What he saw instantly condemned him. They both knew this as they faced each other across the expanse of the symbols on the floor.

"So, you know," Djemo said. They circled each other, there in the sanctum. "You know what I plan."

"A blind man can see your plan, Djemo."

"No, Andalarn. Only you. Only you have seen it, have even suspected it."

"The Council know..."

"They know I have ambitions but, then, we are both ambitious, aren't we?"

"I serve the Council."

"You serve yourself! Don't take me for the fool I play outside this room!"

"Oh, I don't think you're a fool."

H. David Blalock

"I'm glad to hear that." Djemo stroked his long chin and squinted at Andalarn. He seemed to be considering a course of action. Finally, he spoke. "I can offer you something you want in exchange for your silence."

"Something...?"

"The Ascendancy. I don't crave political position, no matter what you may think of me. The Ascendancy is yours by right--as long as it is uncontested."

"How can you give me something that by rights already belongs to me?"

"By leaving it intact."

Andalarn took a moment to understand that statement. Then the impact of the symbols on the floor hit him. The meaning and purpose of those symbols rose into his mind like the black fear that throttled his courage and darkened his own sense of direction.

"You'll fail, Djemo. You know that," Andalarn stumbled, the lack of conviction in his own voice mocking him.

"Of course I'd fail, if I depended on your kind alone," the young lord smiled smoothly.

"My kind?" There was too much happening at once now, too many things being revealed, their consequences too horrible. Andalarn was having a hard time following Djemo's words.

"Humans, Andalarn. My own race is older by far, and our secrets so much greater..." Djemo moved to stand between him and the symbols, blocking Andalarn's view and forcing him to make eye contact. "Yes," he said as Andalarn stepped back from him and started for the door. "I think you might be useful after all."

Andalarn woke to the sunrise streaming through the east window of his bedchamber. He vaguely remembered a dream about Djemo and a terrible beast tearing at the edge of his sanity, but the dream quickly evaporated in the light of the day. Nightmares and he were old friends.

He washed and set about his morning business.

THRAN REBORN

BOOK ONE OF THE THRAN CHRONICLES

THE BURNING HOUSE

BOOK TWO OF THE THRAN CHRONICLES

THE TOWER AT MOORKAI

BOOK THREE OF THE THRAN CHRONICLES

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