

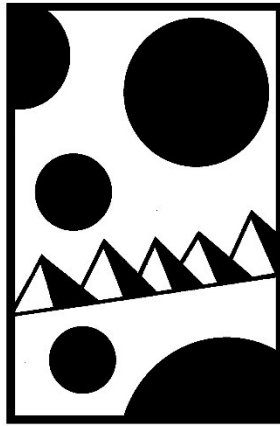
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by Michael D. Smith

Sortmind Press, 2023



Art by Michael D. Smith: "Last Page of the Last Journal," 1984

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Chapter 1. Jupiter

“It’s certain,” Ming said, looking at the instruments they’d gotten from the ship and hauled into the tiny shelter. “We passed directly through the worst of Jupiter’s radiation belts. No wonder our minds are short-circuiting. We may have only hours left. Maybe even less.”

“God, how do you know?” Billy whispered. His voice came through the intercom speaker by Ming’s ears in perfectly modulated stereo, just like listening to the FM.

“Jupiter’s radiation belts have 400,000 times the lethal dose for a human being, that’s how I know,” Ming replied. “And you *have* to admit, our minds are the first things that are going.”

“I know. I feel *altered* ... weird ...” Billy said in awe.

Ming saw himself reflected in Billy’s mirrored visor. Ming wore a suit identical to Billy’s except for the blue helmet that marked him as an Administrator. Billy wore the bright red helmet of Astronaut. Ming chuckled.

“Huh? What’s so funny?”

Ming laughed. “Damn, this is exactly like listening to the radio! You sound like some sort of disc jockey!”

“Really? Is that so funny?”

“No, what I was actually laughing at was how quickly your training has evaporated under the stress here,” Ming said. “*You* should be telling *me* about the nature of Jupiter’s radiation field. I just picked that one figure out of my memory. *You* knew when we were thrown into the belts what the rad level would be.”

“Huh, I guess you’re right. Still, I can’t be expected to be on top of it all the time.”

Ming smiled, then realized that Billy couldn’t see the smile and so the communication was useless. The whole thing *was* like the radio, or talking on the phone. Ming looked around. Even now the instruments were showing a dangerously high level of radiation. Somehow Billy had sighted and tracked a small chunk of rock not half a kilometer long that was tracing an unstable polar orbit around Jupiter, most likely some asteroid fragment captured by the planet’s immense gravity. They were so close to Jupiter that they could clearly see the most minute details of the wind-whipped cloud patterns on the surface. Jupiter filled the entire sky. There was nothing but Jupiter. When Ming shut his eyes, the brilliance even through the visor was so overpowering that the effect was like standing on earth at noon on a cloudless day, drenched in sunlight and blue sky. Everything was blue.

Billy had chosen the rock for a landing--or perhaps more accurately, to tether the ship to, as either of them could leap right off this moonlet into the void with little difficulty--both to rest the overheated engines and to hopefully secure some more of the metals and ore that the Synthesizer ran on. “We could probably take off any time,” he said. “Wanna give it a try?”

Ming shrugged. “Sure. Any time.” He opened his eyes, squinted, and took in the painfully overexposed but somehow welcome light blast from the planet below. “On the other hand, we could sit here in the tent for a while.”

Billy’s red helmet swung around to survey the tiny little tent made of plastic and aluminum tubing that was supposed to shield them from the radiation sleet but which was doing no good, Ming knew. “What do you mean ... for a little while?”

“I mean, why not just wait here to die?” This Billy was so dimwitted at times.

“Huh,” Billy replied. “I’m not so sure but that I wouldn’t like to try to make a run for it.”

“We can, if you want,” Ming said. “But we both know we won’t get far. Too much radiation, Billy. We both know it.”

“That’s true.”

“We could sort of think of this rock as our home. Our special place. This is a magnificent place, really.”

“I know, I was thinking the same thing, you know.” Billy paused. “You know, Ming, I wouldn’t normally say this to an Administrator, but--”

“Forget it,” Ming said. “I’m not really an Administrator. Not really.”

“I ... I know what you mean. I’m not really an Astronaut. I mean, I’ve been doing it for years now, but ... you know?”

“I know.”

“Damn, I can really *talk* to you, man! You *listen*. That’s amazing!”

“Yeah. So what were you about to say?”

“Well, I mean, I hardly know you, man, and I want to apologize. I mean, when they first assigned you to my ship, I thought: God, this guy’s gonna be the *death* of me. I mean, I felt from the beginning we wouldn’t get along.”

“And we didn’t, not at first. It took us *weeks* to get used to the other.”

“That’s right,” Billy said. “Well, I can hardly imagine how it happened, but I suppose I’ve always known I would end up ... here, dying, here. Or rather: *living* here, I’m *alive*. That’s all that matters.”

“I know. I feel the same way. This experience--this entire experience. To be *so cut off*--from *everything*.”

“Even though we know we could blast off in the *Shepherd* at any time.”

“Right! But instead, deep down inside, we both realize we want to just sit here and *take everything in*.”

Billy leaned back and swiveled his helmet at Jupiter. “Yeah! *We take everything in!*”

“And--and this becomes--the high point--the absolute *peak* of our lives!” Ming cried, so overcome with emotion that he reached out and patted Billy’s oxygen pack.

“I *knew* you were going to say that! But it’s true!” Billy said. “It’s true! *This* is the sum of everything we’ve ever lived for! *This* vista! *This* realization! The very *thoughts* we’re *thinking* are *dangerous*, but we’ve been brought here to *think* them!”

“We are fundamentally, forever *changed*, Billy! *Consider* that!”

“We’re *altered*. This is the end of everything! God, it’s an *honor* to share this with you, Ming!”

“Billy, you will always be my closest and deepest friend ... forever.”

“I know ... I know ...” Billy choked. “The same goes for me. I can’t believe it. God, Ming, we’re going telepathic. It’s amazing. I see *so much* in you.”

“I know. I see it in you as well.” But Ming had to pull back for a moment. Billy was slumped on his back, helmet lolling. Ming could easily read the disrupted patterns of Billy’s brain. The patterns Billy had accumulated throughout his life were indeed breaking down, but did that imply mere insanity? Or was Billy closer to the truth than he’d ever been? It had to be the latter, for Ming himself was closer to the truth than *he* had ever been, and he knew Billy was sharing the experience fully. Ming threw his head back and took in the full blaze of Jupiter and its streaming clouds. The asteroid must have entered a zone of higher radiation, because Ming felt his mental patterns slashing recklessly apart. The entire structure of his brain was coming apart. Jupiter was coming apart. He shared it all with Billy.

Billy was moaning and rocking on the hard rock so violently that Ming, fearing that Billy might inadvertently reach escape velocity, put a fat silver paw out and steadied the disintegrating

astronaut. “Ming--” Billy gasped. “You’re right. This changes *us--forever--fundamentally*.” Billy coughed, and then stopped moving.

“And you will be changed fundamentally when you awake as well,” Ming said, settling back in the tent, heart surging with excitement and love for his own life, his own record of experience in this universe. And now Ming had to prepare himself to go under, to go underground, to enter the tunnel on faith alone, faith alone that the process of dissolution would in fact lead to a completely new awakening and a climbing out of the tunnel. For deep underground the tunnel widens into a plaza with grottoes and archways and vaults filled with indescribable and kind beings, and they exist to teach us the meaning of trust. All children discover this when they learn how to go to sleep.

Chapter 2. Vee-Dub Class

“Well, I figure that none of you is even going to understand what a tune-up *is* unless you have some sort of idea how the whole engine is put together,” Billy said, his huge forearm resting on the VW engine mounted on a stand in the center of the garage. “So, although the goal of this class isn’t to make you experts on engine overhaul but just to show you how to tune up your own Volkswagen, we’re gonna overhaul this engine here during the next few weeks to give you a real foundation for tune-ups.” He looked around and caught Sheila’s eye. “Uh, so what I’ll have you all do first is grab some of these thirteen-millimeter wrenches here and start getting all the sheet metal off. Come on, step up, you can all take turns.” Billy motioned the class forward.

“Damn, are we really gonna take this thing *apart*?” said Walter, a tall awkward guy with a mustache. “I can’t believe it!”

“Wow,” said a girl working at a 13 mm nut on the air-cooling shrouding. “This is amazing. I’ve never taken an engine apart before.”

Sheila came forward but held her hands at her sides. “C’mon, take a wrench,” Billy said.

“Well, I don’t know if I want to get my hands oily,” Sheila said.

Billy laughed. “Listen to this!” he teased. “How do you think you’ll get through an engine overhaul without getting a little dirty?”

Several members of the class laughed. Sheila just smiled. “Well, I just didn’t think we’d actually start in on the engine so soon. I guess I’m not dressed for it.”

Billy looked down at her breasts for the fifth or sixth time this evening. He looked away, then down to the engine, tried to laugh, then managed: “Well, it’s the second class, after all.”

“I know, but ...” She’d worn the transparent blouse for Billy this evening. She hadn’t been able to believe last week, at the first class at Billy’s garage, that the instructor would be so magnetic. She was totally intrigued at the difference in size: Billy was huge, about six-one and two hundred pounds of muscle. Sheila was five-five, and petite overall except for her full round breasts. She was especially proud of her breasts, the way her nipples popped out of the sheer lacy bra under the practically nonexistent blouse. She’d watched Billy latch onto her chest the moment she walked in here tonight. It was incredible to feel so sexy in this old dim garage. She’d enrolled in this course just to be able to tune up her 1968 VW. She had known the work would start getting dirty tonight, but suddenly her thoughts were on a completely different course. She could tell that Billy was a passion man. She after all was a passion woman. Sheila had long believed that for most people sex, even eroticism, really was just an indoor sport, or like eating a watermelon or watching a good movie on TV. Something that came up, was a need, but was never given serious thought or attention. It was just *run through*, and then attention was returned to the trivial matters of life. This

was the case even with a whole class of people for whom sex and eroticism were all-consuming obsessions. For them, even the obsession was trivial. They lit their fires for entertainment.

Then there were the passion people. You could tell them fairly quickly. Billy was one. Sheila had known it from the moment she saw him, getting up from his cluttered desk in the corner and welcoming the Continuing Education students from the junior college to his garage. Sheila knew that for Billy, sex was central and holy, just as it was for her. It wasn't entertainment. When Sheila made love, the fate of the universe seemed to hang in the balance, the outcome dependent on her courage, her sensitivity (and weren't those two really the same?), her willingness to march down the center hallway of her passion--not be passively led down the hallway as the trivial sexers wanted to be. Sheila knew that Billy would willingly march to the core of his passion as well. She could see it in his eyes, see it even in his absurd surface shyness, his embarrassment whenever she caught him staring at her breasts or her small ass in her tight jeans. Even now, as Billy tried to keep his mind on instructing the students as to how to remove the fan housing, she knew that they were drawing together. She stood next to him, leaning in and gently rubbing her shoulder to his as he reached across her to twist a nut off or loosen a wire. She kept asking questions so that he could first look into her eyes, then down at her chest. Billy kept getting more and more nervous, finally having a hell of a time working at a cylinder head and trying to explain to the puzzled students what the hell he was doing, when Sheila leaned in and firmly pressed her breast against his bicep. Billy took a breath and relaxed. Sheila smiled. He'd finally realized that everything was all right, that she was his for the asking.

Forty-five minutes later they were all staring into the empty crankcase of the flat-four VW engine as Billy lifted out the crankshaft dripping with oil and laid it on a bench with all the other parts of the engine--connecting rods, pistons, pushrods, cylinder heads, valves, rocker arm assemblies, carburetor, distributor, and all the wires and hoses and oddly shaped pieces of shrouding. "God, I can't believe it!" said Walter for the hundredth time. "You drive a VW for years, and you never understand *why* it moves! And then you understand *why*! It's--it's *all* these *parts*. They work together! You think it's so mystical, and then you *realize*--"

"That it *is* mystical," Billy laughed. "Yeah, I've had the same feeling myself." He smiled at Sheila.

Sheila held up her hands. "Well, at least I got my hands a little oily."

Fred, who wore an army jacket, held up his forearms covered with grime. His face was smudged as well. "We'll make *you* put it back together," he said.

Billy laughed. "Well, next week we'll overhaul the carburetor and distributor. I'm gonna have to send that one head with the burned valve off for grinding, so it'll be a while before we get this back together." He looked at his watch. "It's about 9:30, gang, so we'll just leave this engine sitting right here until next Tuesday, okay?"

"Far out," Walter the Mystic mumbled. "I just *cannot* believe it."

Billy led the students over to the sink where he kept an array of cleansers. The group spent a few minutes in small talk and cleaning up, and began to drift out the garage door to their cars, mostly old VW Beetles. Sheila's heart was pounding. Several glances with Billy convinced her that his was as well. She came up to him as the last two students were leaving and said: "I have some questions about my registration form." They both knew full well that any such questions went to the Registrar's office at the junior college, but Billy just nodded and said:

"OK, come into my office. I'll just get the main door closed and I'll let you out the front door later."

They sat in his office, he behind the desk, she in a chair to its side. "So ... the registration ... form?" Billy muttered.

"I ... I'm afraid I forgot it," Sheila said, looking through her purse.

Billy stood up. She found herself staring at the hard bulge in his pants. "Sheila, is it ...?"

She nodded, unable to speak. "Billy ... you ..."

Then he was kissing her, his tongue came instantly into her mouth, and they stood next to the desk rocking and moaning.

"Where ...?" Billy finally moaned.

"On the floor is nice," Sheila whispered.

Chapter 3. The Business Partners

"Sheila ... c'mon, hon, wake up ... Sheila!" Billy whispered, shivering in the cold dark grass. Sheila opened her eyes.

"Hey ..." she smiled. Billy shuddered. It had seemed like such a good idea at the time, this walk at 3 AM through the deserted warehouse district which had been frozen to always appear to be in the year 1910. In fact, nothing had been done at all to this part of town since 1910. It was a monument to 1910. Not a single windowpane, section of plumbing, brick, or shingle had been tampered with. It had all been allowed to rot, including the Methodist church with its two-foot-high grass. Sheila pushed a layer of grass down and said: "Where are we?"

"1910 ..." Billy whispered. It had seemed like such a good idea at the time. Yet they'd wound up in the grass in a mediocre fuck at three in the morning. Billy was only now realizing what danger they were in. Surely Sheila had heard the stories, no, the *true legends*, of all the 1910 assholes and derelicts who preyed on anyone stupid enough to wander into 1910.

"I'm cold," Sheila said. "C'mere, honey ..."

Billy tugged at his huge black overcoat. It was freezing out here. "C'mon. Wrap yourself up. We've got to get out of here."

"Just like a man. You have your fun, then you're sick of me."

"No, it's not that. It's ..." Billy crouched in the grass, peering over the lacy white tops of the flowering grass in the moonlight. "It's ..." He paused. Hell, maybe Sheila was right. This whole thing with her ... didn't feel right. Billy didn't know how to express it otherwise. An orgasm with Sheila in forty-degree weather at 3 AM in the 1910 churchyard just didn't feel right. What else could he say? She was pretty, she was smart--so what? Or maybe it was because he hated himself for going along with her. Going along with her in everything she wanted. Never bothering to ask himself what *he* wanted. He tried to remember which of them had suggested the walk through 1910, though. Maybe it had been him after all, out of his head with big stiff prick for pretty, erotic little Sheila. On the other hand, it could've been her suggestion. Billy was horrified to realize that he not only couldn't remember whose idea it was to come here, he couldn't remember how they'd gotten here, when they'd gotten here, or anything that had happened to them tonight.

"What's the matter, Billy?" Sheila said, sitting up, gazing at Billy in sleepy concern. She tucked in her shirt and zipped her winter coat up.

"It's ... I mean, do you remember how we got here?"

"You *wanted* me. You said you wanted to make love to me in the churchyard."

"Funny, I thought *you* suggested it."

"Not me. I'd *never* come here if I didn't have someone like you along. I never even knew this place existed."

Billy fought back the urge to tell her that he himself would like to have a bodyguard two and a half times his own size here in 1910. “Well, we’re here,” he finally said. “Doesn’t matter how we got here, I guess.” He stood up. “We’ve got to get *out* of here.” He pulled Sheila to her feet and they stood in the tall dead grass. “How did it get so *cold*?”

“It’s January,” Sheila replied. “What do you expect?”

Billy nodded. It was useless to disagree. Nevertheless, Billy could have sworn it was September and warm in the South. Then he relaxed. “Of course. We’re not in Cuxlacjs anymore. We’re in ...”

“1910,” Sheila finished. “How did we get here?”

“I guess we both must’ve wanted to come.” Billy looked around at the huge black hunks of old warehouses with the quarter moon and the stars showing between the narrow alleys and along the rain gutters. “Sheila--Jesus ...”

“What? What’s the matter?”

“I just remembered. The church was the only noncommercial building in the entire warehouse district, and it was located almost at the center of 1910.”

“So?” Sheila huddled in her coat, suddenly realizing the cold and starting to shiver.

“Sheila, 1910 is over fifty miles wide! It’s *all* abandoned! So we’ve got maybe twenty-five miles of walking to do just to hit the open country!” The open country ... he could picture it now, the rolling fields, the huge rolls of baled hay in the moonlight, the smooth tar highway heading to new hills, and civilization hundreds of miles away. Warm civilization, decent human beings, commerce and culture ...

“Well, let’s start walking,” Sheila said. “We shouldn’t be here.”

“That’s exactly what I’ve been trying to tell you all along! We’re in danger here! From assholes!”

Billy led her away from the churchyard. He took a glance back at the huge holes in the walls of the church. “What sort of--of assholes?” Sheila said.

“All these bums ... drunks, drug addicts ... pure shitheads. They’ll rip off anyone who comes in here. And when no one comes in, they’ll rip each other off. I’ve heard about some of the 1910 gang wars. Believe me, it’s not a good idea to be here.”

“I didn’t *want* to come here.”

“Neither did I! So stop blaming me!”

“*You* stop blaming me! You’re trying to make it sound like I wanted to come here! Well, this place sucks! Anybody who’d bring his girl *here* has got to be out of his head!”

“*You* must’ve wanted to come here too!” Billy shouted. “We both wanted to come! Okay, let’s admit we’re here and make the best of it!”

“I never said we weren’t here!” Sheila screamed back.

Billy heard their shouts echoing off the brick walls all around them. “Shhh!” he whispered. “They’ll hear!”

“Bullshit! Don’t you dare shush me!”

“Sheila, please--”

“Bullshit! I’m not gonna take it! Now cut out the *bullshit* and let’s get out of here!”

“That’s what I’m--”

Billy’s heart froze at the sound of a bottle clinking, as if it had fallen from a ledge.

“God!” Sheila cried. “They’re here! Billy--”

“Dammit, I *told* you--”

They remained motionless for a few minutes, trying to ascertain what had made the sound.

“Maybe ... it was a rat or something,” Billy said.

“No one’s called out to us, that’s true ...”

“Of course, somebody might be stalking us ...”

Sheila stopped, for the first time focusing on Billy with real fear. “Stalking us ...”

“That’s right ...” They moved down a wide street in the darkness. Billy’s fingers and toes were numb with the cold. He wondered what on earth had possessed them to come out here in this weather. He wondered what on earth had possessed him to get involved with Sheila. It was *crazy*. They had absolutely nothing in common except a common wavelength of lust. It was impossible to talk to Sheila. Here they were, hurrying in panic down this ancient thoroughfare, its old iron lamps creaking in the winter wind, both fully aware that someone or something might be stalking them--Billy wondered if the legends of the 1910 mountain lions were in fact true--and they didn’t have a thing to say to each other. There wasn’t enough light for the eye-contact flirting that they did so well. Not enough light for him to be fascinated by a transparent blouse. There wasn’t enough warmth for his fingers to cruise the contours of her body, to steady her nerves and avert the need to talk. Above them were thousands of warehouse windows rising from three to five stories in the air. There could be hungry men with guns up there right now, ready to pick them off. The men would be experts at seeing in the dark, firing and reloading and firing at the target until they hit their meat. God, how did they ever think they could outwit these vermin that generations of evolution had refined into such efficient survivors?

“Sheila ...” Billy gasped, aware of how stupid his voice sounded. “Listen ... I have to say something. This thing between us ... it’s not working out.”

Sheila kept her stride, staying distant from Billy but still close enough to be enclosed within his protective biofield against the enemies. “Well, we both knew when we started ... that might be the case.”

“Right ...”

“So ... if that’s how you feel ...”

“Well, I don’t know if that *is* how I feel, but ...”

“Okay with me ...” They went through a cross street and found themselves on a wide plaza, unusual for such a business-minded place as 1910 had once been. Billy tried to picture it as some sort of open-air marketplace where vendors could park their wagons, set up tents or stands, sell their produce or their animals. Under the stars it looked like a courtyard where traitors to the regime were executed by firing squad. Every step they made on the stone echoed crisply in the cold air.

“Sheila, I’m sorry,” Billy said. “But my life ... I don’t know what’s happened to it. I’m coming apart, it seems.”

Sheila shrugged, ignoring what for Billy felt like a good, true, solid, real statement. “Will you see me out of this place at least?”

“Of course ... of course I’ll see you out of here. Maybe ... maybe there are some buses or something that can pick you up at the edges of the city. Sheila, I’m *really sorry*.” He tried another tack. “How about you? Are you happy these days?”

“I ... I can’t talk about it.”

Billy looked away. He realized that he and Sheila had collided like two fire tracks at an intersection, and that there was nothing to be done about it. Beneath her superficial inability to talk or really be with him, there was suffering and sadness and tragedy. He’d always assumed, in the absence of communication, that she had something within her exactly like his something-within-him. But somehow he’d never taken that inner life seriously, had assumed it was like a comic book to be digested and forgotten. He realized with shock that just as he’d assumed her inner life was a

quantity to be shuffled around, so had he treated his own inner life the same way. They both had. And yet he was seeing now that both of them did have honorable inner lives worth sharing. Only now, after the fire trucks had destroyed each other.

“Sheila, look ... maybe ...” Then he realized he was just doing damage and boring them both by talking. 1910 had meanwhile begun to seem less dangerous. Billy realized that they’d been walking for a long, long time, and that far to the east, the sky was showing a thin line of undifferentiated russet. With the coming of light, Billy would be able to see the derelicts and the killers before they got to him and Sheila. With the coming of light, the day would warm up, ease the pain in those toes. They kept walking east, into the growing redness.

Now the bleakness of 1910 became more and more apparent. And in addition to the large warehouses, shacks and what appeared to be long rows of former saloons and shops made their appearance. The wood was black and rotted away. The cobblestone or brick streets--in some cases wooden streets--were filled with dried mud and grass. Most of the windows were gone and the few that remained were solid gray with grime. Everywhere they looked ungainly shapes towered above them, took the cold thin morning sun and allowed a faint sheen of red to mock the attempt to breathe life into the old warehouse district.

“Billy!” Sheila cried, the first word either had said in a couple hours and abruptly making Billy feel that he’d been totally wrong ever to mention his doubts about their relationship. Her whole tone had brought back the feeling that they needed each other. It didn’t matter if it was only sexual. The need was still there.

“Billy!” Sheila said again, breaking Billy’s daze. “There’s someone up there!” She pointed. Far ahead a young man in a beard and old, paint-spattered clothes was standing directly in the middle of the street, hands in his pockets. He was staring directly at them, waiting for them to come. “Billy, let’s turn off--”

“No,” Billy said. “They’ve set this up. I’m sure they have all the escape routes blocked. Let’s see what he wants.”

“That’s *crazy*--”

A new confidence was working in Billy now. “No, it’s our only hope for survival. Come on.” His tone was enough to convince her to follow.

They came up to the young man and stood in front of him. “We--we’re lost,” Billy spoke. “We need to get out of here.”

The young man looked mean and scruffy, but perhaps only out of force of habit; he screwed his weathered face up into what was supposed to pass for a grimace of compassion and folded his arms across his chest. The gesture was unmistakably that of holding Billy and Sheila where they were. “My name’s Ming,” the derelict said. “I live about a block from here. I’ll let you use my phone. Come on.”

“Your--*phone*?” Billy gasped. “You have a *phone*?”

“Come on--both of you.”

Sheila looked at Billy. What Billy saw there was by no means any indication that inner lives could ever mesh. Instead he saw mere relief at reunion with civilization. Billy had ceased to exist for her. Well, perhaps that was the best way back to sanity. They followed the derelict down a cross street. They passed a rusted-out 1940s-era automobile and Billy was amazed that a 1940s automobile had ever made it to 1910. Ming seemed to read his mind, for he said:

“Yeah, all sorts of people tried to drive through here for years. We even get late-model cars in here. But they don’t last long.”

“Huh. I repair cars,” Billy said. “Maybe I could ... you know, in exchange for ...” But that was a stupid trade, car repair for a phone call. Billy realized that he was talking out of pure nervousness, mainly because they’d walked several blocks already, following all sorts of crazy turns until he was completely lost.

“I repair cars too. Me and my partner Al. But they don’t last long here.”

“You--your name’s Ming?” Billy said, with an attempt at a chuckle. “That’s funny. I have a cat named Ming--Siamese.”

Ming led them down yet another alley past overturned trash cans and a pile of rusted bicycles. “Don’t see many cats here. Don’t last too long here.”

“Huh,” Billy said. Knowing the excellent survival characteristics of cats, he realized what the fate of cats entering 1910 was. Maybe the same fate as wandering humans, Billy suddenly realized. He saw that Sheila had gotten the message as well. An image of himself and Sheila winding up beneath Ming’s knife and fork--and this Al guy, whoever he was--hit Billy hard. Why were they walking so complacently? Answer: because they were lost, and freezing. Oddly, the cold didn’t appear to bother Ming, who wore only short sleeves underneath his paint-smearred overalls.

Ming finally led them up a flight of wooden stairs to a second-story dwelling atop an empty gaping garage about thirty feet wide. He unlocked the door and they stepped into blasting heat and overwhelming dimness. Finally Billy was able to see that it was just one big room up here, the same size as the empty garage below. It had only two windows, both covered with thick curtains that only barely showed the outline of morning sunlight striking from the outside. There were several leather armchairs with deep slits and scars and stuffing coming out. There were two beds in a far corner. There were paint cans everywhere, old magazines underfoot, several toolboxes, and other miscellaneous debris including three or four baseball bats, pillowcases and several pairs of boots. Billy was astonished to note a huge white modern refrigerator against the wall next to a gas range. So there *was* civilization here, albeit crude.

“Well, can I use your phone?” Billy finally asked Ming, who stood with his thumbs tucked into the front of his overalls watching Sheila and Billy peer into the gloom and the details of the place.

“Ain’t got no phone,” Ming said.

“Uh, I thought you said ... I mean, you said you had a phone.”

“I know I said I had a phone. But I don’t have a phone. Got a nice refrigerator there, though.” He pointed. Sheila nodded in terror.

“Uh, nice,” Billy said. “Nice refrigerator ...” He knew he was thrust into the role of protector of Sheila now. “Okay, you said you had a phone. Now if you don’t, and you can’t help us, we’ll just be on our way.”

“I didn’t say I couldn’t help you. I just said I had a phone because I knew you’d understand that.”

“Huh?”

“I knew you’d think if I said I had a phone I could help you,” Ming drawled. “I knew you’d think of ‘phone’ as ‘help.’ Fact is, we can help you a whole lot better without a phone.”

“Billy, let’s go,” Sheila said. When Billy didn’t move, she repeated: “Billy, we are leaving. *Now*. This guy can’t help us.”

“I can’t help you,” Ming said. “But Al could, when he gets here. That lazy asshole! Where the hell *is* he?” He walked to the door, opened it, and yelled out: “Al! Al!” Then he came back inside, slamming the door in disgust. “Al!” he yelled viciously. “You goddamned asshole! Al!”

“Jesus--” Billy said. “Sheila, let’s go--”

“What the *fuck*’s goin’ on?” came someone’s voice from the back of the room. Billy froze. A dim shape was thrashing in one of the beds in the corner, under a steeply sloping section of roof. “Jesus, Ming, what the *fuck* ...”

“He’s here! He’s been here all the time!” Ming cried. “Wake up! Wake up, Al, we’ve got company!”

“Aw, shit ...” the guy in the bed muttered, scowling. “*Shit.*” He sat up, the grimy blanket showing a skinny chest and all his ribs. His hair was ludicrously warped by sleep. Suddenly he threw the blanket off and stood up. He was a short, little guy, with a face that looked like someone had carved every ounce of the nonessential off it, but he had the largest penis Billy had ever seen on a man. It was a good six inches long and an inch and a half wide limp, and flopped around as he wandered over to Billy and Sheila. “So ... these people need their engine rebuilt, Ming? Is that it?”

“Yeah,” Ming said. “Blew a valve, valve holed a piston, whole engine seized up.”

“That’ll be seven hundred,” Al snarled. “Cash on the barrel, my friends.” He stared into Billy’s eyes. Blue eyes--totally insane. He caught sight of Sheila, fastened her with a vampire look, shrugged, then went back to his bed, pulled out a pair of overalls from under the bed, and stepped into them. He wandered back past Billy and Sheila, and opened the refrigerator. Billy was made even more incapable of speech as the light from inside the refrigerator blazed into the room. Al took a can of beer and left the door wide open as he shuffled back to Ming. “Shit, gotta wear *pants* for Chrissake,” he muttered to Ming. “Lady in the room and all.”

“Sorry, Al,” Ming said. “These guys are having a lot of trouble, and I took it on myself to invite ’em up”

“Shit, shit, it’s all right,” Al waved his beer at Billy and Sheila. “Care for a beer?”

“Uh ... no,” Billy replied. He was mesmerized by the light from the refrigerator, its quiet humming and all the cans of beer, heads of lettuce, and rows of white eggs in there.

“No--no thanks,” Sheila said. “We really have to be going. Billy, come on.”

“Hey, it’s dangerous out there,” Ming said. “You guys really aren’t gonna make it, you know.”

“*What?*” Billy said angrily. He suddenly realized that these two guys were just twerps. Billy was bigger than both of them put together. “Is that a threat, man? Are you threatening us? Are you threatening us with *death*, is that it?”

Ming shrugged. “No, Billy, I’m just saying that the two of you aren’t gonna make it, that’s all.”

“He means ...” Sheila said. “That we don’t belong together.”

“That’s right,” Al said. “She’d be a lot better off with me, you know.” He gave her a screwy little smile.

“All right, turd-head!” Billy raged. “You both can just fuck right off right now! I’m sick of all this bullshit!”

“Bullshit?” Al shouted back. “Why you asshole! You call me a turd-head! Well, fuck you, shithead, I’ll show you!”

“Now, Al, don’t get all riled up,” Ming said.

“Fuck it! I’ll show these shits! I’ll show ’em!”

To Billy’s alarm Al leaped to the stove next to the refrigerator and, seizing a box of matches, lit the gas stove and got a high blue flame going. “All right! All right! I’m gonna do it!” he shouted. “You jerks insult me like this, well, so be it!” Billy couldn’t move. Sheila came to his side. Billy knew they were both paralyzed by Al. He couldn’t explain why. Meanwhile Al ripped a huge iron skillet out of a cupboard and clanged it down hard atop the blue flame. Billy watched him move

in front of the dazzlingly lighted refrigerator, its chilliness now beginning to penetrate the warm room. Al reached for a jar of clear golden fluid and poured half of it into the skillet. He turned to Billy and Sheila and cried: "Okay, you're gonna get it now, you dreamfuckers!"

"Dreamfuckers?" Billy gasped.

"Dreamfuckers," Ming intoned with finality. "Ask no more questions."

"Billy," Sheila whispered. "These guys are ... I mean, they don't ... I mean, they're *weird*."

"Silence!" Al cried. "Assholes!" He opened the freezer atop the refrigerator and dragged out a huge bag. He turned to the stove and dumped the entire contents into the skillet. Billy saw hundreds of small white oblong strips plop into the heated ... oil ... the heated oil! Billy craned. French fries!

"Back away--back away--" Al cried, pulling a stool over and setting it in front of the skillet. He rushed to the back of the room and wheeled out a tremendous black box that was taller than he was and apparently four times as heavy. Billy kept staring at the thing--the fabric on the front, the dials, the heavy black cords. He watched Al plug a cord into a wall socket, and then realized what it was. Al switched the amplifier on and turned the volume all the way up, so that the low feedback hum was almost deafening. Al returned from the dark corner once more with a heavy red electric guitar. Billy could see that it was covered with all sorts of grimy spatters and deposits. Al balanced it horizontally on the stool in front of the stove, in the unearthly light from the refrigerator.

He plugged the guitar in with an awesome screech of feedback from the amp. Then the humming resumed. But now ...

"Okay ... all fucking right," Al whispered. "Everyone back."

They all stepped back--from the light on the guitar, from the French fries popping in the hot oil. Golden fries baked in the oil, in the light from the beer cans, the lettuce and the eggs. Billy opened his mouth in astonishment. Hundreds and hundreds of soft subtle musical notes were issuing from the amplifier. Hundreds and hundreds of tiny globules of hot oil were tracing parabolas, illuminated by the lettuce light, from the skillet to the strings and pick-ups of the guitar. Billy and Sheila listened spellbound, as the eerie, gentle music threaded countless dimensions together ... thousands and thousands of different notes ... different structures ...

"God ..." Billy gasped. "What ... what *are* you people?"

Ming stepped forward. "I'm just an Administrator," he said. "But Al is a *sorcerer*. No one else can make the music of the French fries. No one else can see into your souls the way he does. Now be silent and be healed--not that either of you will have the sense to do either, of course, but all in all, this may do you some good."

So they listened. The popping and the parabolas and the music went on forever ...

Chapter 4. The First Evening of Delusion

Billy had his second beer gazing at the sunset over the Carnation Plaza filled with green globes of light, darkening trees, and fading reddish light on the concrete. Clouds gathered south of downtown. From nine stories up, he had a good view of the town of Sfuurr across the river.

"Well, Deacon McFarland," came an old man's voice behind him. "Fancy *you* drinking that stuff?" Billy turned. It was Bishop Cruxx, holding a can of Budweiser.

"Well, hello, Bishop," Billy said, extending his hand.

"Hello, hello. Fine party you Cuxlacjsians put on here. Fine party."

"Thanks. Father Durgard wanted a special one for the Convention."

“He’s done fine ... fine,” Cruxx said. “A party throughout all nine floors! Just imagine it! I didn’t know you Cuxlacjsians were so rich!”

Billy sighed. “Well, we do all right, I guess.”

“You sure do. Tell me, how long have you been a deacon here at Cuxlacjs?”

“About a year, sir. There was a position open, so ...”

“Durgard made a wise choice in you, son. He even brings your name up at meetings. Ever considered going into the ministry, getting ordained?”

“Well, to tell you the truth, not really.” Billy was on friendly terms with the bishop, not only because he’d accompanied Durgard to the Bishop’s Headquarters in One-West on business several times, but also because Billy McFarland Volkswagen Repair had recently gotten the contract to service the bishop’s personal fleet of VW buses. Although Billy was not the type of person to be awed by rank and position, he was uncomfortable when he considered that both Cruxx and Durgard hoped he would go into the ministry and someday take Durgard’s place as minister of the downtown Cuxlacjs Carnationist Church. “Well,” Billy added. “it’s just that I’m not sure.”

“Well, perhaps one day you’ll receive the Call,” Cruxx smiled. “I can tell you’re quite interested and involved in the church as it is. I hope you’ll consider the matter further. Durgard and I both hope so.” He drained his Budweiser and looked behind him. Through the glass windows they could both see the crowd on the ninth floor, swimming in golden light. “Uh-oh, there’s the Delegation,” Cruxx smiled. “They’ll be looking for me. Catch you later, my boy.” Cruxx pulled open a heavy glass door and almost collided with Brenda Connell, the church secretary who came out onto the balcony also holding a beer.

“I didn’t know you were on such good terms with the bishop,” Brenda laughed.

Billy smiled. “Me either. Greatness has been thrust upon me.” He looked back to see the bishop intersect with the fifteen or twenty members of his Delegation from Bishop’s Headquarters. It was funny how those strange, withdrawn men seemed to travel in a clump, constantly clinging to each other and seeking the bishop as if needing an energy transfusion from him. Albert Cruxx was himself a hearty and outgoing man, but the Delegation seemed to belong to another world, dwelling in Vatican secrecy and inwardness, and Billy was always disturbed by the presence of its members.

“A strange crew,” Brenda said, following Billy’s glance. The two of them were alone out on the huge stone balcony. It was a perfect summer evening, and Billy enjoyed being out here, away from the golden party flowing through all nine floors of the Church Cube, as everyone called it. “So ...” she went on. “Why are you hiding from everyone out here?”

“Hey, I’m not hiding. I love the party. I just decided to be away from it for a sec. See that sunset?”

“Wow.” The sky to the west was turquoise and thin. The green globes of the Plaza lamps parceled the sunset out into the darkening human territory of downtown Cuxlacjs. Billy watched her eyes light up at the sunset. It was like watching her soul come out and stand right in front of him. Brenda was one of Billy’s best friends. She was one of the few people Billy thought was really trying, really reaching, trying to grow. And not in that asinine way that Billy had overheard a while ago on the fifth floor: the two women who were so infatuated with the idea of having a heavy discussion that they didn’t realize they weren’t making any sense.

“I realized that it was time for *me* to make a commitment to *me*. *Me* with a capital M.”

“And yes, I can really relate to the *deep feeling* I hear when you say that. It sounds as if you’re really ready to *get on* with *your life*.”

“I am. Just last week I had to decide which *house* to buy. And I finally decided to buy the house that was *me*. The other house was probably more practical, but, in the end, I had to make that commitment. The commitment to *me*, and my own *feelings*.”

“And when you commit yourself to your *feelings*, then you are finally able to *become yourself*.”

Well, what did it matter? They were the spiritual descendants of Polonius, amphetamine freaks unable to shut their mouths. Whereas Brenda was one of the precious few who was really trying. She belonged out here on the balcony, savoring the evening breeze, the jewel sunset light, the sweet air, the odd relaxation of downtown after hours.

“Yeah ...” Billy found himself saying. “If I don’t relax I’m going to go crazy.”

“You too, huh?” Brenda said. “Believe me, I know. I decided I’d had enough with trying to keep this insane church bureaucracy in order. You ought to take it easy yourself. That crap with Johnson nearly wiped you out.”

“Shit, I don’t want to think about it.”

“Christ, Billy, you already have a full-time job. This church stuff is totally volunteer.”

“I know you’re right, but ... God, I just can’t stand to see the whole thing go to hell because of that whole bunch of turdy incompetents.”

Brenda nodded. The syllables “Johnson” took in the entire history of a whole group of people who’d almost destroyed Carnationism in Cuxlacjs. “Look, I’m getting paid for my work, and even I can’t keep up with it forty hours a week. And I’ve reached my limit with the bullshit. If Johnson wants pure insanity, let him hire three more people to keep up with the paperwork it requires.”

“Well, at least Father Durgard is on our side. And Cruxx too.” Billy paused. “I guess I’ve been sitting out here thinking about whether I should go into the ministry.”

“Are you kidding? To correct a political problem here at--”

“I know it sounds insane, but ... God, how can I stand by and watch all this go to *waste*?”

They stood gazing at the darkening sunset. The best time of it was already over, but the feeling of magnificence remained.

“You know,” Billy said, “if I don’t *do something*, I’m gonna start feeling pretty damn empty. And that’s the worst thing in the world.”

“There’s one thing worse. Which is to be empty and convince yourself you’re doing all right. That way you’ll never change. If you *know* you’re empty, and you know it hurts, then you’ll change. And I see you getting deeper into this minister shit as just covering up the emptiness, not solving it.”

Billy laughed. “The minister *shit*?”

Brenda laughed too. “Exactly.” She finished her beer. “Hey, do you need another one?”

Billy looked down. “Yeah, sure could use one.”

“I’ll run get us a couple. You can stay here and finish off the sunset. I’ll be right back.”

Billy watched her go back into the Cube. He turned back to the last light in the West. It was so easy to be out here, even the fear of emptiness was an easy fear to deal with in this mood. Maybe it was the alcohol, but at least it was *transcendent* alcohol. Billy sensed that something big was coming up in his life. He had the oddest sensation that this was a time of ease and calm right before some terrible war. And even odder was the fact that Billy looked forward to the war, to every horrible act of it. The summer, the calm, the sunset, the transcendent alcohol, all made him feel the desire for war, for the killing, for the conquering of a few square yards of blasted dirt in exchange for the deaths of all his friends. What was that opening sentence from that great war

novel? The opening words from *The University of Mord* that ran: “It was at that sunset that I forgot who I was, even while remembering every detail completely.” Billy shuddered.

It was the *remembering* that would be the chief horror of the war to come.

*

“Johnson--he’s back by the elevator--no, I don’t know what happened.”

Billy pushed past the confused, frightened, and very drunk Chief Church Cook, went down the aisles between all the stainless-steel tables and storage closets in the great kitchen on the back side of the ninth floor. All sorts of people were starting to wander back here now. Billy abruptly turned around and shouted: “All right, everybody back! If you come back into the kitchen you’ll just get in the way when the ambulance arrives.”

“What happened?” Betty Travels, an associate deacon, called out.

“We don’t know. They’ve called an ambulance, that’s what they tell me,” Billy said. “Probably some minor kitchen accident. Now just--” Billy waved people back.

Brenda was there. “What’s going on?”

“We’ve got to get back to the elevator.” The kitchen was so huge that although they stood in its approximate middle, the supply elevator was about a hundred feet away around a corner. Billy and Brenda began making their way past the steel tables filled with punch bowls, cakes, and plates of meat.

“James came to get me,” Billy explained. “Said Johnson wanted me. Said there’d been an accident. That’s all I know. God, I am so *drunk*, Brenda. I just can’t handle this!”

“Me too. I can barely *see*. I spilled a whole can on my *dress*.” Billy looked down; Brenda’s red dress was soggy.

They rounded the corner. Johnson stood there, six-foot-six in his thin black suit, surrounded by some kitchen help and a few curious members of the Delegation. Johnson glared at Billy, arms folded across his chest, mustached upper lip wrinkling slightly.

“What the hell?” Billy said, realizing he was reacting to Johnson’s arrogance and not the kitchen accident, whatever it was, also realizing that no one was ever supposed to say “What the hell?” to Max Johnson.

Johnson pointed to the elevator. “About time you got here, McFarland. There’s been a terrible accident. All because of this party. I *told* you about the party.”

Billy shook his head. He realized he was completely drunk and that it would show. Well, so what. “Okay, you didn’t want the party. But--” He followed Johnson’s pointing. The elevator door was open. In fact, there was brick wall inside. Billy stepped forward. “*What?*”

“The kitchen staff had already noticed that the elevator wasn’t running tonight,” Johnson said. “Occasionally the doors would open at random. But nobody suspected the car was stuck in the basement.” He stepped forward and shone his flashlight down the hole. Billy followed and peered down. In the circle of dim light he could see a body nine stories down, impaled on something atop the elevator car. Billy grabbed for support.

“Evidently he got drunk and wandered into the elevator shaft, thinking he’d take a ride,” Johnson sneered. “You were in favor of this party, McFarland. See where it’s gotten you.” He paused. “We’re pretty sure it’s Durgard.”

Billy nodded. Durgard had been wearing a crimson suit tonight. So was the body in the elevator shaft.

“Jesus Christ ... oh my God,” Brenda said. “Are you sure?”

“The kitchen staff saw him back here a few minutes ago. You know how he liked to nose around the kitchen. Well, look what it got him.”

“Fuck you, Johnson,” Billy said, grabbing the flashlight out of his hand and shining it down the hole. “You don’t talk of the dead that ...” He focused. It was Father Durgard, all right.

“You’re drunk, McFarland. And way out of line.”

Billy continued to shine the flashlight and peer into the hole. He noted the grimy brickwork and the girders all down the sides. “Fuck you, Johnson, why don’t you give *me* a shove as well?” He turned back and glared at Johnson. Johnson raised his eyebrows.

“Are you implying, McFarland, that *I* pushed Durgard through this door?” Johnson said. “That’s totally insane. You’re stinking drunk. Unfit to be a deacon here.”

“We heard some shouting,” said one of the kitchen helpers. “We thought a fight was going on.” Billy eyed the door marked “Stairwell” next to the elevator.

Johnson motioned for the man to shut up. “The police will be here in a few minutes. You can give your disposition then.”

“I can’t believe it,” Brenda said. “I saw him just a couple minutes ago! He wasn’t drunk! He’d had a couple beers, but ...”

“He was drunk,” Johnson said. “Filthy drunk.”

“An autopsy would prove--” Billy said.

“Shut up!” Johnson shouted.

“You asshole!”

“I am Father Johnson to you!” Johnson screamed. “And I will have you removed for this!”

Billy looked at the four members of the Delegation. They gazed around themselves with the mild curiosity of Japanese businessmen. Billy tried to comprehend them.

God, they were Observers! he thought. Then he tried to understand what that last thought had meant. They just stood there *observing*.

“Johnson, you’re an asshole,” Billy raged. “You won’t get away with this!”

“Father Durgard died like a stinking drunk!” Johnson shouted. “It was an accident! He fell down the hole! All because you served liquor at this idiotic party, McFarland!”

“Hey, hey, what’s this all about?” came an old man’s voice. Billy turned. It was Bishop Cruxx with the rest of the Delegation.

“Bishop ...” Johnson intoned with a little bow. “Father Durgard has had an unfortunate accident owing to the alcohol served at this party.”

Cruxx frowned and handed his beer can to an aide. He glanced at the elevator shaft.

“He evidently fell down the shaft, thinking the elevator was there. The elevator hadn’t been working.”

Cruxx grimaced and held his hand out for the flashlight Billy still had. “Hold me, my boy, would you?” he said to Billy. Billy steadied the old man as he peered down into the shaft with the flashlight. He straightened up and turned around. “Well, Johnson, why don’t you just push *me* down there as well?”

Johnson came to attention like a German infantry lieutenant. “Sir?”

“You asshole, Johnson.”

“Excuse me, Bishop, but the Rights of the Carnation specifically states that abusive language such as you and Mr. McFarland are using--”

“Fuck you, shithead,” Cruxx said. “You’ll pay for this.”

“Sir! I respectfully--”

“Up your ass, Johnson.” Cruxx pointed to the elevator shaft. “This is *not* the way one advances in the Carnationist Church.”

“Excuse me, Albert,” said a member of the Delegation, the one holding the beer can. His watch was beeping. “We’re due at the airport in ten minutes.”

“Very well, Ted,” Cruxx replied. He turned to Billy and Brenda. “We must be on our way. I’ll leave you two to deal with Mr. Johnson here.”

Chapter 5. Before

Al lay on the dunes in the moonlight. A mile to the south came the sound of the Pacific, the sucking roaring of some vast carburetor connected to the engine of the turning earth. The machine moved. The earth turned, and the full moon moved directly overhead. Events were unfolding along the proper lines. It didn’t especially please Al to know that he was outside this proper unfolding, outside of the retributions that would shortly be visited upon humanity which was, after all, mostly innocent. He didn’t relish the thought of the work which he would shortly be called upon to do. And he knew that even though he was a maverick among the scientists, still he had some responsibility. He just wished that the problem was something simple, like some unexplained massive phenomenon that altered the earth’s tilt in regard to the sun. Something that didn’t imply good/evil dualities and who would pay. He wished it weren’t race suicide.

Al checked his watch, which was connected by radio relay to the main computer onboard his four-wheel drive Corvette parked a few dunes behind him. Three A.M. He smiled. All the events had become packed together with such urgency that his typical notions of time were dissolving. Three A.M. took on a new, edgy quality out here on the desert peninsula. “The Pacific” lost its meaning in his mind and was replaced by “the southern ocean.” The dunes meant something in and of themselves, meant something about the human race. The dunes were far from barren, but their fertility was more like the fertility of the Milky Way down the center of the sky above Al, the galactic hub now partially bleached out by the brilliance of the full moon.

The events had been accurately predicted by one of the scientists in his thesis, *Awesome Beauty of This Earth*, and the necessary counter steps had already been taken by the scientists. The counter steps, however, were not powerful enough to save one innocent child slated for death. And it was no use, Al realized, to pretend that by some twist of logic that even the innocent were guilty of desiring mass destruction, mass suicide, or that they had somehow helped the truly guilty amass enough destructive power for the task at hand. In the end, however, each person that died would truly desire death. All the innocent would be transformed into the guilty.

Again, that Al was personally exempt from the chaos that was to follow was little comfort. To observe the death throes of a race wasn’t much better than participating in it. Al showed some allegiance to his origins, after all. That was why he’d edged out from the circle of scientists.

He heard footsteps behind him in the sand and turned. It was a woman.

“Hello, I’m Paula,” she said.

“It’s about time,” Al said, noting her high heels and low-cut black dress. “I’m Al. Where’d you park? I didn’t hear your car.”

“I walked.” Paula dropped next to him on the dune. “All the way from San Francisco. Took me three weeks.”

Al blinked. “Wow!” he laughed. “In high heels, yet.” He took her in. She looked completely relaxed and unfatigued.

“Everything is ready,” she said. “I saw the signs everywhere. I recorded everything as you told me over the phone.” She pulled out a thin case from her purse. “Two standard disks worth.”

“Fine, I’ll run them through the ship’s computer in a bit.” He sniffed the air. “Damn, the ocean smells fine tonight.”

Paula listened. “I can hear it.” She looked down at Al, who was wearing only a swimsuit lying here on the dunes. His long thin body was covered with suntan lotion, and Al knew that it was bugging her. Hell, he’d even rubbed the lotion into his balding head.

“You’re trying to get a tan under the *moon*?” she asked incredulously.

Al laughed. “No, what do you think I’ve been doing here for three weeks? Just lying here on this dune. Under sun *and* moon. Gotta protect the skin, after all.”

“You’ve been lying here on this one dune?”

“That’s right. I think I’ve moved my arms and legs a few inches back and forth, and turned over every now and then, but that’s all. Have a helluva tan, though.”

“Christ,” Paula said, brushing her long brown hair out of her face. Her hands glittered with huge jewels. She wore a choker collar necklace encrusted with what Al took to be emeralds. When she leaned forward slightly, Al could see down her dress, see almost all of her fine smallish breasts. “I didn’t think you scientists were that crazy.”

Al shrugged. “I escaped from ’em.”

“You don’t even *act* like a scientist.”

“You don’t act much like a witch, either,” Al smiled. Her hand was only a half inch from his on the sand, clearly a subtle violation of body space, clearly some sort of permission ... signal to land or something ...

“Well, I suppose I escaped from *them* the same way that you escaped from the scientists. We all know about you, of course.”

“Really? I knew I’d caused some trouble, that’s for sure, but I didn’t think I was *famous*.”

“Oh, but you are. Even the Administrators follow your actions.”

“Huh. I suppose anyone who defects from anywhere gets a lot of attention. Take that Ming guy, for instance. What a character. He’ll probably survive the holocaust if anyone does.”

“I would think so.”

“Or take you and the witches. I knew I needed a witch for this stuff.” He indicated the disks. “And I knew I could trust someone who’d made some trouble for ’em.”

“Oh, I still have my contacts there,” Paula said. “I haven’t abandoned them by any means.”

“Well, I sure haven’t abandoned the scientists, either. What do you think I’m doing this data collection for?”

Paula sniffed. “You and your data collection. We witches saw all this coming generations ago.”

“I’ll bet you did. But I don’t think you could plot out all its ramifications without data processing and scientific analysis. Believe me, the stuff you collected is gonna help us tremendously.”

Paula shrugged. “How can you be sure? Suppose I got some crappy data? I’m only a stupid witch, after all.”

“You’re not a stupid witch,” Al said. “You’re a gorgeous witch, and I’d trust anything you did.” Al slid over, put an arm around her, and kissed her.

Instantly he was on his back, sliding headfirst down the dune slope. “Hey--what--?”

“What do you think you’re doing?” Paula cried, standing twenty feet above him.

“Jesus Christ!” At the bottom, Al was finally able to stand up and spit some of the sand out of his mouth. “I was only--Jesus--”

“Stay where you are!” Paula commanded from above. Al stood rooted in the sand at the bottom of the dune sine wave. He opened his mouth. The full moon was blazing right above Paula’s head, and its light went right through her black dress, outlining every curve of her body. Al ached.

“Hey, I thought--God, you’re so *beautiful*,” Al gasped. “I just wanted--” He caught his breath. “Paula, come down here.”

She laughed. “You really *aren’t* your average scientist. Surely you know that witches and scientists do not, cannot mate?”

“No,” Al said, “I never heard that one before. You know, kid, there’s always a first time for everything. Don’t stand there and tell me you don’t want me.”

“I don’t want you.”

“Shit ...” Al tried to brush some of the sand off his arms. But to his disgust the tanning lotion that he’d been spreading on for three weeks had thoroughly glued sand to his entire body. He was even brushing it off his face. He felt it in his hair and in his ears. “Christ, toss me that beach towel down from there, will ya? Damn, this damn *sand*.”

She laughed again, clapping her hands. “You look like a *monster!*”

“Throw me the damn towel, bitch!”

“So your real feelings are coming out now, huh?” Paula took up his towel and, to Al’s horror, folded it into a perfectly stiff paper airplane. Then she sailed it smoothly down to him, where it crumpled into a sandy old beach towel again. “I should’ve known. A typical male chauvinist scientist after all. All I can say is that Ming never treated me that way.”

“Ming never slept with you!” Al cried, furiously brushing sand off.

“How do you know?” Paula asked liltingly.

“He told me so!” Al shouted. “He said you were a nothing! No body, no grace, no class, nothing!”

“No ... not Ming. He wouldn’t say that.”

Al grinned. He’d scored a hit. So what if he’d made it up? What Ming had really said was that he and Paula had discussed the matter but that Ming had had to reject it as unworkable.

“You liar!” Paula screamed. “He never said that!”

Al grinned again. “Believe what you want.” But the sand and lotion mixture was sticking to the towel, which was getting soggy and heavier and impossible to use. “Damn,” he muttered. “Where did you learn to *kick* like that?” But he knew full well that she’d never touched him.

“He never said that ...” Paula repeated uncertainly.

“Aw, c’mon,” Al said, climbing up the sand dune. “I’m sorry. He never said that. I was just being mean.”

“Hold it right there!” Paula cried. “I mean it! Don’t come up here with me, or I’ll throw you clear into the ocean!”

“Well, the last throw was worth it. I got a kiss out of the deal, after all. Wonder what I hafta do to get sent all the way into the ocean!” He climbed up.

“Damn you!” Paula cried, and the cry increased in strength until the whole plain of dunes reverberated with it. Al shut his eyes against the force. He fell on his knees and slid down the slope. When he opened his eyes, Paula was gone. Al ran to the top of the dune. Nothing. No one.

“Paula! Paula!” he shouted. Nothing. Al kicked the sand.

“Hey, come on! I was only kidding!” he shouted again, circling his thin but strong arms into the cool desert night.

Ming would never kid like that.

Al jumped. "What? What? Paula, where are you?"

Ming is our friend. And you make up stories about him.

Al gasped. The desert itself was making the words.

I won't have it. Ming is a good Administrator. Probably the best. And we're going to have to work with him.

"Goddammit, I know that!" Al cried to the empty night. "What do you think I'm doing all this fucking computer analysis for? Now I want you back here right now, Paula, and I'm not kidding this time! You haven't been halfway debriefed yet and time's wasting!"

There will be no further contact between us until after the holocaust is underway.

"Are you kidding? Almost the entire race of Administrators is about to commit suicide, one by one, you idiot! Ming might even be one of them for all we know! We've got to work together! Am I supposed to convince this McFarland guy all by myself?"

Goodbye. I haven't enjoyed meeting you.

Al looked around. "Dammit, you might've left me the goddamn fucking disks, bitch!"

Something fell out of the sky and thudded into the sand right behind Al. "Jesus!" He bent down. It was the disk case. He listened for several minutes to the wind blow.

"Ah, man ..." he muttered, marching up and down three gigantic dunes before he came to the silver Corvette parked atop a fourth, lower dune. He opened the door and got in. The passenger seat was entirely occupied by his computer. When Al turned the key to the ignition, the computer booted up with a series of silly beeps. He fed the disks in and waited for the data to process.

About the Author

Michael D. Smith was raised in the Northeast and the Chicago area, then moved to Texas to attend Rice University, where he began developing as a writer and visual artist. His Jack Commer, Supreme Commander science fiction series is published by Sortmind Press. In addition, Sortmind Press has published Smith's literary novels *Sortmind*, *The Soul Institute*, *CommWealth*, *Akard Drearstone*, and *Jump Grenade*.

Smith's website, <https://sortmind.com>, contains further examples of his novels and visual art, and he muses about writing and art processes at <https://blog.sortmind.com>.

Amazon author page

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