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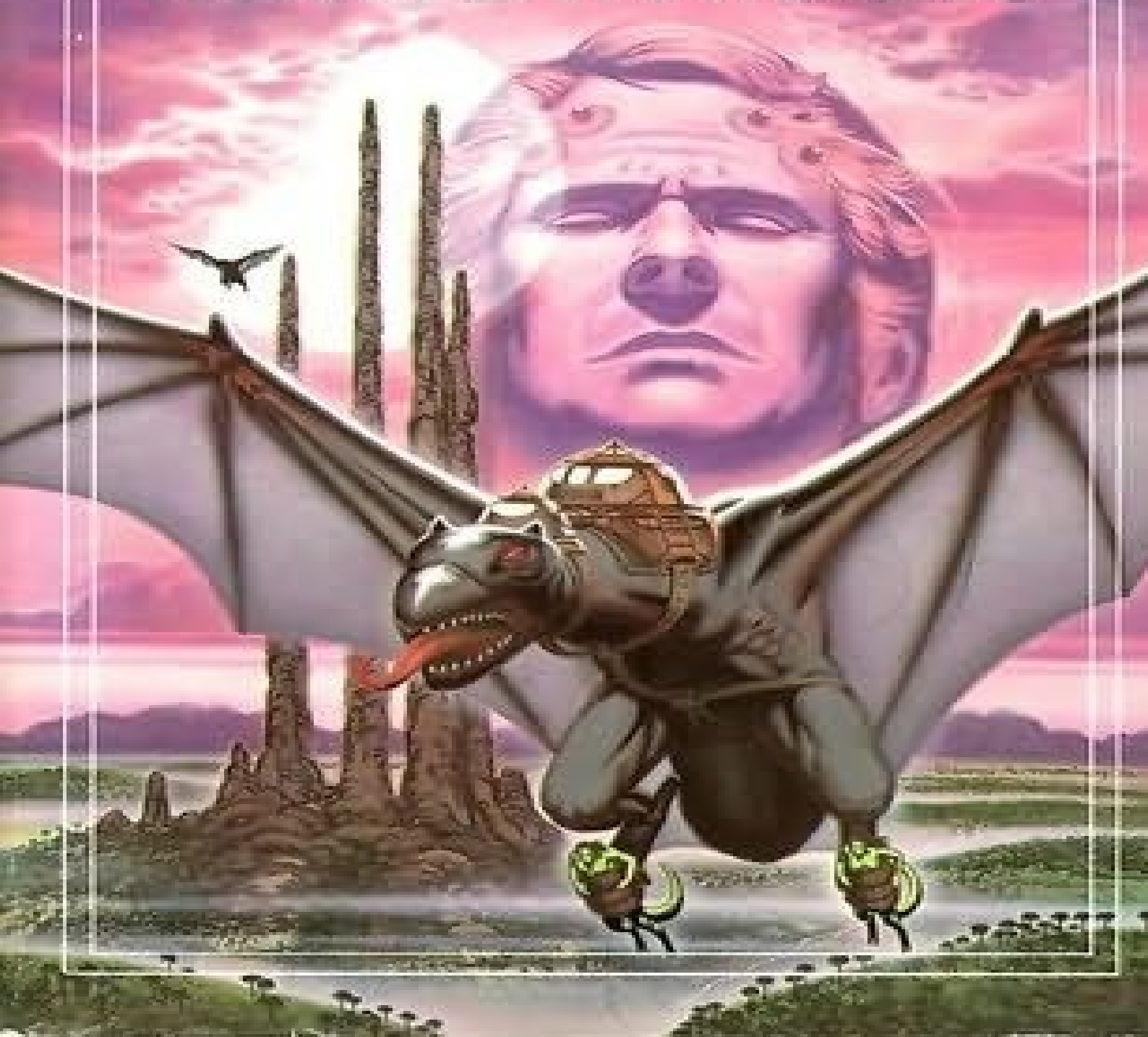
JACK L. CHALKER



Volume Three of
The Four Lords of the Diamond

CHARON

A DRAGON AT THE GATE



ASSIGNMENT: HELLWORLD!

They took the body of Park Lacoche and stripped away his mind, transferring the mind of a top Confederacy operator to his brain. Then they stuck him aboard a spaceship and exiled him to Charon, one of the Worlds of the Warden Diamond, from which no man could ever return. A mysterious organism on those worlds infected everything, making life away from them impossible afterward. Charon was a hell-world in literal fact. It was too near the sun, making it all but unbearable in its hot, steamy atmosphere. Strange beasts roamed its jungles—and stranger still, the group known as the Witchcraft plotted with the Lord in exile to take over the planet.

There, Witchcraft was real—for on Charon, magic worked! The Warden organism could be made to perform almost any feat under the control of a skilled witch or sorcerer—as Park Lacoche discovered when he was transformed into a changeling—a half-beast half-man, with the beast rapidly gaining ascendancy.

After that, his assignment really became difficult ..

Charon:
A Dragon at the Gate

Book Three of
THE FOUR LORDS OF THE DIAMOND

JACK L, CHALKER



A DELL RAY BOOK

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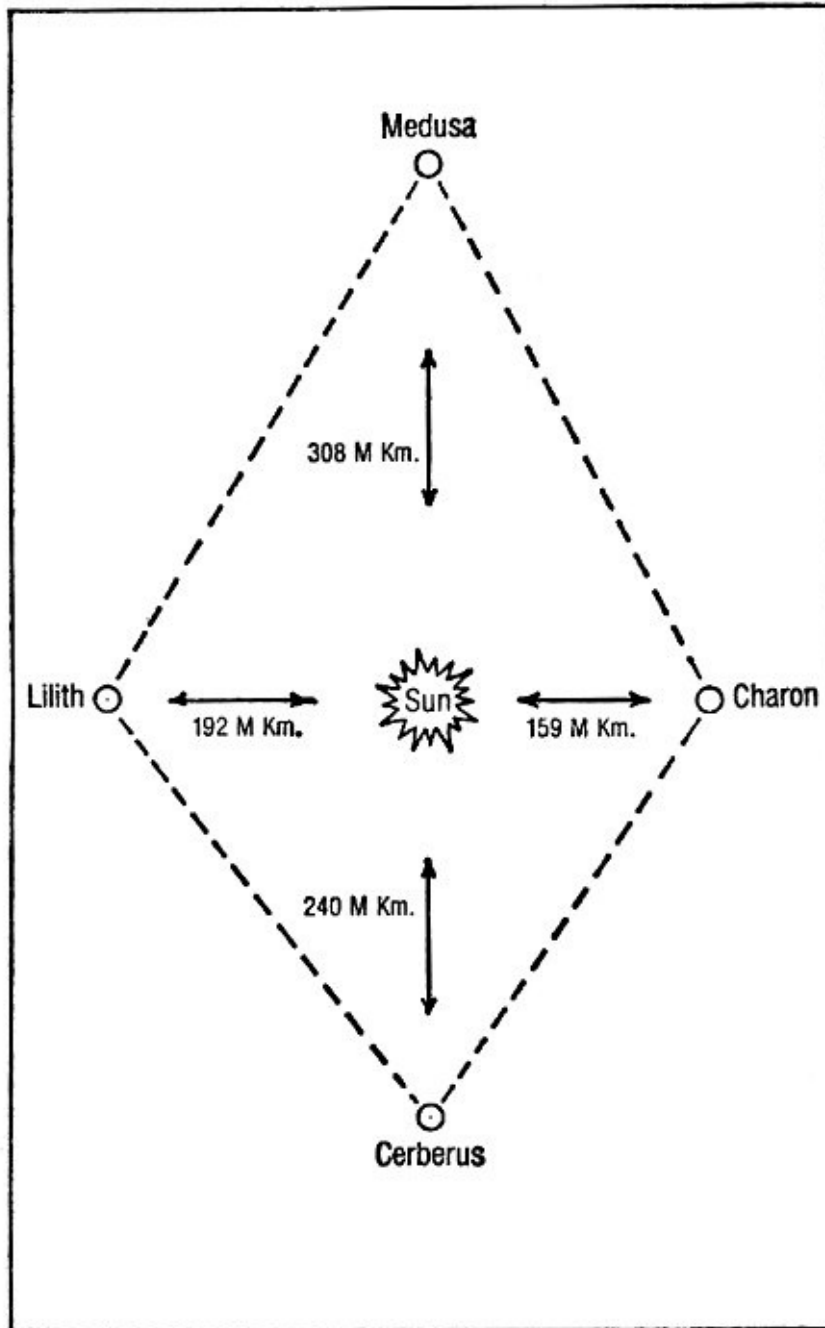
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THE WARDEN DIAMOND



A Del Rey Book

Published by Ballantine Books

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**For Art Saha, longtime member
of First Fandom, anthologist of
exceptional taste and discernment,
and a Good Man**

A Time for Reflection

1

The naril circled and positioned themselves for the kill against the backdrop of the onrushing *al-wind*. Opening their razorlike runners, which squeezed out through slits in their skins, the naril started down.

The man looked around frantically without breaking his desperate run. There was little shelter in the desolate desert landscape, and the cracked desert floor was harder than concrete.

The naril were great creatures of the air, huge, speeding black ovals with great egg-shaped eyes that made up what little face there was, tentacles behind shifting subtly to aid in flight as if a solid tail and rudder. Underneath each black horror were the two curved bony plates, almost like rockers, out of which came the deadly sharp steel-like blades with which it would slash its prey.

The man realized that there was no place left to go and decided to make what stand he could here, in the flat open land. One naril swooped down on him, impossibly fast, but he dropped to the ground and rolled an instant before the sharp blades struck, and the naril almost bit into the hard earth and spilled. No such luck, though, and the man was quickly to his feet once more, cursing that he had delayed so long. Taking a quick check of both naril, he knew that he needed both of them in front of him, not flanking as they now were, so he summoned a reserve only impending death could call up and ran at an angle to the two circling monsters.

The naril were quite intelligent, but also overconfident. They had several square kilometers of open country to play around in and never doubted the final outcome. In the meantime, this was fun.

The man stopped once more and whirled again to face his tormentors. As he had hoped, the pair had joined again and seemed to be almost hovering there in the air, their yellow, expressionless eyes watching him and concealing, he had no doubt, some great amusement.

He knew he had very little time.

From the naril point of view he seemed just to stand there, facing them, eyes closed, hands outstretched. They took this act as a gesture of surrender and submission, and, since this sort of thing was boring, moved in for the kill.

They dropped very low, only a meter or so off the desert floor, and sped toward him, relishing the kill. As they neared their intended victim there was a rumbling sound and the earth itself seemed to rupture. Around the man grew a wall of solid stone as he himself sank down into the earth behind it. The predators were so taken by surprise that each struck an opposite side of the still-growing wall. There was a shower of sparks as their sharp runners ground into the stone, but both had sufficient balance to stay aloft and veer off.

Inside the sudden pit, in the darkness surrounded by four meters of stone wall, the man heard the naril hiss in defiance and frustration. He was nearly spent; he had used up half a day's water. The fort would *have* to hold. He sank down, relishing the cool relief his tiny fortress afforded, and listened.

The naril adjusted quickly to the new conditions and tried to break down the walls, hitting them hard and at careful angles. While they managed to do some damage to the rocky fortress, they did even more damage to themselves, since their blades were of bone. They soon gave up the attempt.

Settling down on top of the structure, they blocked what little light was left to the man. He saw that he had judged the side of the pit well; both were too large to get down the chimneylike opening to flush him.

Ultimately, of course, one of the creatures sat on top of the opening, trailing its long tentacles down into the pit.

Again the man had been exacting in his measurements, although it was terrifying to lie there in the bottom, with all light blocked, and hear those tendrils slapping and searching about just a bit above him. Finally that, too, stopped, and he relaxed a bit. He had come so far, so very far, and although momentarily safe, he felt his reserves nearly gone.

He heard the naril shift again, and then he was subjected to the ultimate indignity. Unable to reach him in any other way, they were trying to flush him out by defecating on him.

There was an angry, frustrated growl from above and then the naril moved off, allowing some light inside. He did not kid himself that they were gone. At least one still lurked outside, waiting for him to come up, while the other was most likely now up and away into whatever clouds there might be, soaking up moisture as only naril could. He would have given anything for some of that moisture in any form other than that he now wallowed in.

Clouds ... He tried to think. What had the sky been like? His attention had been on more immediate stuff. Still, there were always *some* clouds around. High ones, of course, which contained less moisture than he would like, but *some* ...

Concentrate ... concentrate! If only he had the strength! With supreme effort he closed his eyes and attempted to shut out all but his sensitivity to the *wa*, an attempt made doubly difficult by the slimy naril feces being baked even more in the heat of the sun and stinking all the worse for it. He too would bake, he knew, if he did not succeed, for his crude fortress was also a crude but very effective oven.

Think ... think! Think only of the *wa*

He felt the *wa* that built his fort from the start, of course, but those he needed now to shut out. He reached out, *wa* to *wa*, his to those others, and broke free his vision onto the desert floor once more.

Of the naril there was no sign, but there were two bar-bushes nearby that hadn't been there before. Inwardly this made him smile, although he had little to smile about. The naril were intelligent animals, it was true, but barely that.

It would never occur to them that bushes in a place like this were as conspicuous as the naril themselves—which is what the bushes most certainly were.

The fact that both waited, so still and patiently in the heat, confirmed his worst fears about them. Trained and under orders they most certainly were, possibly Yatek Morah's own personal hunters.

He felt the *wa* of the thick desert air around them all, but again he ignored it, reaching up, up, even higher, hoping, praying that somewhere within his range was enough cloud to form what must be made.

It was there, of course, but terribly sparse and high up. He hoped it was enough. It *had* to be enough.

Slowly, carefully, he reached the *wa* of the cloud, of the water molecules, reached and talked to it and carefully guided and cajoled it into patterns, clumps, groups growing thicker and thicker, bringing it together centered on the tiny instant fort far below.

He wasn't sure if he had enough power, but it was all his strength and power could muster. It *had* to be enough. It just *had* to be ...

Now fly, *wa* of the clouds, fly upward, rise toward the sun your nurturer. Rise ... rise ...

The two “bushes” lying in wait outside trembled, shimmered, and were naryl once again. They did not quite understand what was happening, but they saw the shadow on the ground and felt its coolness. Great yellow eyes looked skyward and beheld the clouds gathering together, coalescing at hundreds of times normal speed, growing thicker and darker as they did so. The naryl did not understand why this was happening, but they knew, could smell and sense, that a small but powerful thunderstorm was building just over them most unnaturally, and they felt real fear. For a moment they were poised between their fear and natural instincts and their command to pursue and kill this man, but as thunder boomed out of the strange, unnatural cloud and echoed eerily across the vast desert, fear and instinct won out. They rose into the air and sped away, toward the sunlit desert outside the boundaries of the clouds’ shadow.

The rain came now, falling not heavily but steadily on the small fort and an area of approximately eighty or so meters around it. The man wasted no time in commanding the *wa* of the walls to return to form, and as the walls shrunk, he rose until he stood once more on the desert floor with no sign of structure. The naryl feces still clung to him, and he shed all but his empty water flask and black skin belt, letting the rain wash him. For a minute or two he just stood there enjoying the rain and the cool relief it brought, but he knew he dared not linger. There was not much water up there, and it could give out any time.

The recovered naryl, understanding that their quarry had somehow caused the storm and regaining their confidence, hovered just at the edge of the clouds, waiting for the rain to end.

The parched ground, which had seen rain perhaps two or three human generations ago and not since, could not absorb the water, and this made the hard ground slippery and treacherous going. As the man moved, the center of the storm traveled with him, keeping him in its center, while at the edges the naryl moved at his pace, waiting for the rain to give out. The rain itself would foul the naryl’s delicate membranous wings, invisible in flight or hover, but once the rain stopped they would move on more.

The man prayed the rain would hold, and it almost did, getting him to within a hundred meters of the mountains before it started to give out. All the *wa* in the world could not conjure more rain if there was no more water to use, and he hadn’t time to take the evaporation from behind him and recycle it into the diminishing cloud.

The naryl, wary of more trickery and fearful that he had stopped the rain only to lure them in, heaved back, though, and this extra time gave him the opportunity to run for the rocky outcrops just ahead.

Seeing him sprint, one naryl forgot its caution and, hissing, shot out after him, overtaking him just at the base of the rocks and striking him in the back. He flew against the rocks from the force of the blow and gave a terrible scream, but the naryl had forgotten to extend its blades, and while the blow was crushing, it neither cut nor sliced.

Though dazed, he managed to crawl into a cleft in the rocks and wedge himself in as tightly as possible. Even so, he knew he was done in, out of strength at last, his bag of tricks used up, the cleft far too shallow to protect him from the naryl tentacles. He was done, though; he almost didn’t really care anymore. He passed out there, in the rocks, with a last thought that death at least would give him rest.

“Jatik?”

The voice seemed to come from far away. *Go away!* his mind shouted. *I am dead! Let me have my peace!*

“Jatik, you must listen to my voice,” it said again, closer now, more commanding, harder to ignore.
“Jatik, this is Koril. You must speak to me.”

“I die,” he muttered, almost angrily. “Let me go.”

“Yes, you are dead,” Koril’s voice agreed. “You are beyond my power or anyone’s to save you. Yet while your *wa* still burns and struggles against extinction within you, we may yet communicate. Please, Jatik, you were a brave man and a loyal one. Do not pass until your bravery is given meaning by your words.”

He struggled, tried to remember. The words ... The mission ...

“Where are the others, Jatik?”

Others? “Dead. All dead.”

“Then you are the last. Hurry, Jatik, for time grows short and my power to hold you weaker quickly. I must know. Did you get him? Did you see the meeting?”

Meeting ... what meeting? He struggled. Oh, yes, the meeting. Oh, God! The meeting ...

“I—I saw,” he managed. “The Four Lords at Diamond Rock. The Four Lords and the others. Oh, God! The others!”

“Those others—think, Jatik! Hold on a bit more! The others! What were they like?”

“Horrible ... Monstrous. They wore the cloaks of men but could not hide from us. They are terrible. Koril, terrible to behold. Spawns of some hell beyond man’s imagination. Slobbering, horrible ... Such as they were born in some hellish place far removed from man.”

“The Four Lords—there is an alliance?”

“Yes, yes! Oh, God! You must destroy them, Koril! You must not let them sell man out to such a fate as these! Horrible! You cannot know! I pray to God you never know. Their very sight was enough to drive Latir and Mohar mad.”

“What do they look like, these spawns of hell? Think, Jatik! Hold on!”

“Look like! My mind holds what little it still has by putting that likeness from it. Monstrous ... Pulp ... Slime ... They are evil, Koril! Evil in ways no human can comprehend. They will devour man and then they will devour the Four Lords and us. You must ...”

“*Jatik! Jatik! Hold on! Just a little more! Jatik! Come back! I need to know ... Oh, hell, what’s the use? He’s gone.*”

Koril sighed and shook his head, then got up from beside the dead man and looked around his deserted domain. The bodies of the two naril still twitched nearby where he had slain them.

He spent the better part of an hour restaging the death scene. Sooner or later he knew that some party from Diamond Rock, even now covering the trail of chase and capture, would happen here, and he wanted to make it absolutely certain that any such party would draw the obvious conclusion. Essential to him was that party’s belief that the naril and Jatik had finally finished each other. They would believe it. To get even this far required one of enormous power, and even so, only seeing the dead man’s rainstorm from afar and recognizing it for the signature it was had brought him here. Too late, alas, too late for poor Jatik ...

Still, he had learned much from the dead man. Or, more properly, Jatik had confirmed his worst information and his worst fears. But Koril was old—old and alone now. Power he had in abundance, but there were limits to an old man’s endurance even with the best of powers.

He needed a new Company, he knew, and that would not be easy to assemble, particularly under Matuze’s watchful eye. While she would assume that his messengers had all failed to report, there was

no question that she would recognize the dead for who they were and guess who had sent them.

Still, he knew his course was already set and his resolve was firm. No matter what the odds, it must be done. There was no getting around the shock and revulsion of Jatic's last utterances. Both he and the dead man had been born and raised on worlds far from this one, and both had seen a lot in the universe before being exiled to this hell.

Hell ... That was Charon, true enough. Every horror in the mind of man from the beginning of time to now was here, along with a physical landscape, climate, and plant and animal life appropriate for the worst of Dante's hells.

Koril knew this for a fact, and he knew that Jatic also knew and felt it.

What could a man already in hell see that so frightened him?

What sort of thing could cause a criminal imprisoned in hell with thousands of other criminals to label something unimaginably evil?

What was so monstrous that even the denizens of hell were repulsed and frightened by it?

Jatic had been a sadistic mass murderer without the slightest sense of good and evil. The very concepts had been alien to him. And yet, and yet—even he had now seen something so terrible that he *had* known evil before he died. There was a certain symmetry in that, anyway.

Still, the Four Lords had made a compact with whatever it was here on Charon. Their egos would protect them, Koril reflected sourly. For a while, anyway.

The Four Lords were evil by human standards. They were evil personified to many, including the confederacy itself. But they had not been evil to Jatic, not in the slightest.

Just what *had* Jatic seen? Into what terrible bondage had they sold themselves and mankind on their own egomaniacal delusions of grandeur?

It was almost as hot as a human being could stand there on the hard, desolate desert, yet Koril felt a sudden chill as he turned and walked away from the body of the dead man.

2

The most frustrating thing to a great military force is to discover that it is at war only long after the first blows of the enemy have been struck. Even more frustrating is when, even after the discovery of enemy action, you simply can't find the enemy.

The Confederacy was the culmination of all human history and culture. In the distant past, man had determined that expansion to the stars was the most interesting and preferable means of advancing civilization without racial suicide. Somehow the sporting instinct overrode all else in the human condition when the proposition was put correctly. National competition was something all people, regardless of background or ideology, could understand. They could work for, root for, and cheer on their home team against all comers.

As politics became dirtier and more and more irrational in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries and total global annihilation grew more and more certain, man remembered that he had first set foot on the Moon because it had been sold as a sporting wager—a space race. Not that space had been ignored since—in fact, every country had been involved—but it had been a slow technocratic and military growth that sputtered here and there for lack of popular participation and support. Anybody with the spirit could try the Oregon Trail in the nineteenth century, or carve a city out of frozen Siberian tundra in the late twentieth, but the very people who were the pioneers of ancient times were excluded from this new frontier, no matter how limitless it was. The poor, the destitute, and the

refugee as well as idealistic dreamers had settled and tamed the old frontiers, but they couldn't even get a ticket to the Moon in the age of space. Only the highly skilled specialist was able to get into space—or the very rich. The masses of Earth, even if they wanted to go, could not, nor did the dull and plodding development of space offer the same excitement that the space race had generated in the early explorer.

The governments of Earth came to understand this, and also saw a world of ever-increasing population and incredibly diminishing resources grow more and more apathetic toward life in general. A steady decline in living standards worldwide was something that every computer forecast as inevitable, and each group's demand that *its* country not be the one in decline put tremendous pressures on even the most totalitarian regimes and increased the pressure for total war.

Technology, however, offered a way out, a way that the various nations took reluctantly but with the realization that there was little else to do. Researchers had ultimately done the impossible and broken the universal speed limit. It was complex, and involved physics that did not contradict Einstein so much as deal in totally different areas where he was simply not relevant. The stars were open to exploration. Not that the distances were shrunk to nothing: within the first century, there were still many new places to go over such vast distances that it still took more than three years subjectively to travel from one end of man's domain to the edge of the frontier. This was still a far smaller price to pay than the generations such trips would otherwise have taken. It had, after all, taken some of the early American pioneers four to six months to reach California. But this new system had another big advantage. Building the ships and great engines needed took a lot of capital, but once built, they cost very little to operate, and size was not a factor in cost beyond air and food.

Only one world in a thousand was even terraformable, but there were *still* a lot of habitable worlds out there, and the nations of the world began to compete for them instead of for more tufts of worn-out Earth—and colonizing with incentives, so the poor and the dreamers finally got to go. It took the pressure off and provided a new spark to humanity. There was excitement and discovery in the air once more and all could be a part of it, and the resources were infinite.

But as generations were born on new worlds, generations who had never seen Earth and had only an abstract concept of what a Russia or an America or a Brazil or a Ghana was, the old concepts of nationality began to blur. Three generations later they were no longer Americans or Soviets or Brazilians but were natives of their own worlds, the only worlds they knew. Nor did the distances between worlds and the burgeoning numbers of worlds lend themselves to effective colonial government from afar. Fearful now less of destroying one another than of being left behind, cast off by the new populations on alien worlds, the old governments began to cooperate more than compete to merge, over little more than another century, into what was in effect a single ruling instrumentality—the Confederacy, with a bureaucracy dominated by those old powers but presiding over a congress where each new world was represented.

The pooled resources and ever-expanding technology remade world after world, many into great paradises of which the people of old Earth had barely dreamed. Many diseases were wiped out; genetic manipulation made man and woman beautiful and nearly perfect. Careful genetic and cultural nudging produced a population each of whom had an equal but large slice of a very huge pie. People were bred and raised to do specific jobs, and they were the best people to do those jobs, too. It was a civilization without tension or fear—nearly a paradise. Worlds that reached such perfection were called the civilized worlds. Though wonderful places to live and work, these worlds were spiritually and culturally dead—totally stagnant.

Obviously the Confederacy could have totally controlled population and settled into this stasis, but they were the heirs to all of Earth's own history. Humanity might last in paradise for a million years

but once the spark of excitement and creativity was extinguished, it was dead, an extinct race. The answer, of course, was never to stop. Scouts would continue to be dispatched, scouts that would discover more and more worlds to settle, tame, and remake by the oddballs and misfits that even the civilized worlds occasionally created. The frontier became not merely the edge of expansion but religion, an article of faith among the Confederacy, something that could never be allowed to stop because it alone provided the safety valve, the creativity, the spark, the purpose to human existence.

As man filled up almost a quarter of his galaxy, he ran into some alien races. Not too many—and not nearly the number many had expected—but some. There were ones that inhabited worlds that no human could ever use, and these were simply watched for signs of future threat and generally ignored. Others used the same sorts of material as man, and these were treated in an age-old way. Those that could be modified and adapted to the Confederacy's way of doing things were welcomed into the system, whether or not they wanted to come. Those that could not be culturally assimilated for one reason or another were ruthlessly eliminated, as many of the Indian tribes of America and the aborigines of Tasmania had been eliminated in ancient times. Many alien worlds were primitive and some were quite advanced, but all had one thing in common: the Confederacy was bigger and stronger and more ruthless than they were.

Then one day the powers that be in the Confederacy woke up to the fact that the moment they feared had finally arrived—somebody smarter than they were had found them first.

A robot so sophisticated it was beyond the Confederacy's technology—although only by a hair—managed to impersonate a security clerk in Military Systems Command. Managed to impersonate the clerk so well that it fooled the man's friends of many years, his co-workers, and even the very sophisticated security systems in Military Systems Command. It had gotten in, had stolen vital military secrets, and had almost made it out. One tiny slip was all it made, but that was enough. Still, this robot managed to survive two vacuums, crush thirty-centimeter armor-plate walls, shoot up into space and actually attain escape velocity, then to steal a ship in orbit and blast off. Military Systems Command managed to track and finally destroy it after they figured out where it was reporting.

The Warden Diamond.

Even in a society like the Confederacy, there were the superior misfits. For all of humanity's perfections in environment, genetics, and culture, there was always the byproduct of such manipulation—the perfect criminal. They were few, but they existed, and because they could operate even in such societies as the civilized worlds, undetected in many cases for years, they were in fact the best of the best—those with that great spark the Confederacy nurtured and cherished. The petty ones could be “reeducated” or mindwiped and given a new personality. But these master criminals, the geniuses of crime and villainy, were far too valuable to be thus squandered. And yet no civilized prisons could hold them so the frontier would become their unrestricted playground.

Catching them was not the real problem, although some managed to do great damage before they were apprehended. All the Confederacy did was breed a new kind of super cop, a master detective type perfectly matched to the quarry. There were few of them, too—the Confederacy feared them almost as much as the criminals they caught—but they did their jobs well. They and their personally tailored and custom-matched self-aware analytical computers found the politically corrupt, the master crooks, the psychopath, the most dangerous men and women ever produced in human history. But where could these people be put?

The Warden Diamond provided the final answer.

Halden Warden, a legendary space scout even in his own time, discovered the system nearly two hundred years before the robot was discovered in Military Systems Command. Warden disliked

almost everything about the Confederacy, most of all other human beings, but only such an antisocial personality could stand the loneliness, the physical and mental hardships that came with deep-space scouting.

Warden, however, was worse than most. He spent as little time as possible in “civilization,” often just long enough to refuel and reprovision. He flew farther, longer, and more often than any other scout before or since, and his discoveries set all-time records for their sheer volume alone. Unfortunately for *his* bosses, Warden felt that discovery was his *only* purpose. He left just about everything else, including preliminary surveys and reports, to those who would use his beamed coordinates to follow him. Not that he didn’t do the work—he just didn’t send the information back to the Confederacy until he felt like it, often years later.

Thus when the signal “4AW” came in, there was enormous excitement and anticipation—for human-habitable planets in one system! Such a phenomenon was simply unheard of, beyond a statistical probabilities, particularly considering how rare it was to find even one. They waited anxiously to hear the names the laconic scout would give the new worlds and his preliminary descriptions of them.

Then the report came, confirming their worst fears. He followed from, though, closest in to farthest out from the newly discovered sun.

“Charon,” came the first report. “Looks like hell.

“Lilith,” he continued. “Anything that pretty’s got to have a snake in it.

“Cerberus,” he named the third. “Looks like a real dog.”

And, finally, “Medusa. Anybody who lives here would have to have rocks in his head.”

The coordinates followed, along with a code confirming that Warden had done remote but no direct exploration—that is, he hadn’t landed—and a final code, “ZZ,” which filled them with some fear. It meant that there was something very odd about the place, so approach with extreme caution.

They cursed Crazy Warden even as they assembled the maximum-caution expedition. A full-scale science team, with two hundred of the best, most experienced Exploiter Team members aboard, backed up by four heavy cruisers armed to the teeth. They knew that Warden’s reports were almost always right, but you never found out how until it was almost too late.

The huge F-type star had a massive solar system that included eleven gas giants, eight of them ringed spectacularly, as well as large numbers of comets, asteroids, and some large solid planets of no use. But the system had four worlds—four jewels—that stood out from all the rest, four worlds with abundant oxygen, nitrogen, and water.

And when they looked first at those four worlds, they were almost exactly at right angles to one another in their orbits.

The Warden Diamond.

Of course, as the planets were in far different orbits this diamond formation was quite rare. In fact, it has not been precisely duplicated since man first saw it.

Still, there was an uneasy feeling that somehow the Warden Diamond was not a natural thing. The Exploiter Team was suspicious, as Warden himself had been, and doubly cautious.

Charon, the world closest to the sun, was a hot and steamy world. It rained a lot of the time there, and the dominant life seemed to be reptilian, almost dinosaurlike. Seas covered much of the hothouse world, but although the atmosphere was hardly pleasant, man could live on it unaided.

The second world, Lilith, was almost textbook perfect. Slightly smaller than Charon, it was rough

seventy percent water but far more temperate and gentler in the landscape. Mountains were low, and there were broad plains and swamps. Its axial tilt was so slight there were few seasons anywhere on the planet, and while it was warm to hot, it was comfortably warm, almost resort-type warm. It was a blue-green world, rich in plant life that was different but not *too* different from what man knew elsewhere, and its creatures were insectlike, from almost too small to see up to behemoths that still seemed harmless, perhaps even useful. It was the kind of world that terraformers aimed for and almost never achieved—and not a snake in sight.

Cerberus was harsher, but not much. Although it had great seasonal variations, none were all that unmanageable, and in the large tropical zones there was plenty of room for settlement—or there might have been if there had been some land. The trouble was, the entire world was covered by a great, deep ocean. Still, there was a strange sort of plant life there, which rose up from the ocean floor to break the surface and almost reach for the sky. Giant plant colonies, so huge, strong, and clumped together that they formed large, almost landlike masses. The seas held promise, though, of huge and vicious predators. It would not be an easy world to live on, and they could see why Warden called it a doozy, particularly when compared with Lilith.

Finally, farthest out, there was Medusa, a hard, cold, rocky world with frozen seas, blinding snow, and mountains broken with the only evidence of vulcanism on the four worlds. There were some forests, but mostly tundra and grasslands. It was an ugly place.

But back on old Earth, man had lived and built in lands at least as bad as Medusa. In the temperate zones people, with a lot of hard work and a lot of time, could even build a civilization there. Still, you don't want to go to a place like that and make it your home, well—you had to have rocks in your head.

Four worlds, from steaming hell to frozen tundra. Four worlds that still had temperature extremes that could be borne and air and water that could be used. It was incredible. Fantastic. And it was for real.

Not being crazy, the Exploiter Team chose Lilith as its main base, settling in on a beautiful island in a tropical lagoon. After a week or so of preliminary setup, smaller teams were sent out to the other three from Lilith to set up provisional base camps.

Once down, the Exploiter Teams were placed in strict quarantine from the military and all commerce with the Confederacy. It would take at least a year with the team serving as the guinea pig, poking and probing and testing, before others would set foot on any of the worlds. They had shuttlecraft capable of traveling between the four planets, if need be, and ground and air transportation for their own work, but nothing interstellar. The risk was too great; man had been burned too many times to take any chances.

It took Lilith's snake about six months to size up the newcomers.

Scientists eventually gave it a long, incomprehensible name, but everybody referred to it as the Warden organism—or, often, as the Warden beast. It was a tiny little thing, not really life as we knew it, and so it hadn't been recognized as such until far too late. And yet it was pervasive. It was attached to almost every solid and liquid molecule on Lilith, organic and inorganic, almost as a component of the molecular structure itself. It was not sentient—nothing that small and that elementary could be—but it was omnipresent and it knew what it wanted. It didn't like molecules that didn't have it inside, and it did a very nice job of dissolving almost everything alien to Lilith, leaving all the equipment, even the clothes on the scientists' backs, as so much fine powder. Lilith's little beast could not cope with any synthetic compounds, and almost everything the Exploiter Teams used or wore was in fact synthetic. The scientists themselves, and some of their plants, were non-synthetic carbon-based.

organic stuff, and the Warden organism could cope with that. It quickly invaded every cell and set up housekeeping, ~~modifying each cell to suit itself in a nicely symbiotic relationship.~~ This was scarcely comfort to sixty-two stunned, stark-naked scientists that they never again had to worry about colds and that even minor wounds would heal themselves.

Thanks to the expeditionary bases on the other three worlds, the Warden organism, it was theorized had been carried there by the first to settle. Of course, the three other planets were quite different from Lilith—different gravities, different levels of radiation, different atmospheric balances. The Warden organism could not adapt those whole worlds to its Lilith standard, but the submicroscopic creature had a hell of a survival instinct. On Medusa, for example, it adapted the host organism—the people—and, quickly, the plants and animals—so as to ensure their, and its, survival. On Cerberus and Charon it struck a balance in the hosts that was to its liking, but which produced by-products of physical change not relevant to it but rather resulting from that balance it found most comfortable. The produced strange by-products in the humans so infected.

A cure was sought, but to no avail. The Warden organism, it seemed, so changed the host's body chemistry that the host could no longer live *without* the Wardens there—but the Wardens required more, something else, something not dear. *When* you removed a Warden-infected person from the Warden Diamond, the organisms died—and so did its unfortunate host.

The mutation was so complete that those on one Warden world *could* move from world to world but could not move outside the system—ever. Humans *could* live, work, and build in the Warden Diamond, but once there, they could never leave.

It became the perfect prison for those master criminals.

So first had come the scientists, then the criminal elite. Over two hundred years a large indigenous human population had arisen on the four worlds as well—by far the majority. But the criminal element was the elite and the rulers. They hated the Confederacy for what it had done to them, and thanks to the Wardens within them, no longer felt human but something quite apart, alien, having no loyalty or kinship to the civilized worlds. Quickly they established control over their worlds, and quickly, too, they took advantage of interstellar communications to reestablish contact with their former flung criminal empires and even with the Confederacy itself. They were quick to realize that the Warden Diamond not only kept them *in*, it also kept the Confederacy *out*. They controlled the fate of all sent to the Warden Diamond, and even the best Confederacy agent not only was at their mercy but was also, like them, changed and trapped there forever.

It usually took very little time for such agents to realize on which side their bread was buttered.

Their old cronies Outside in the rest of the Confederacy were quick to note that, except for Lilith, one could steal the *Mono Lisa* and by remote courier could leave it in the Diamond in plain sight—and no one could touch it, let alone recover it. But since the *Mono Lisa* was made of natural pigment and canvas, and was inanimate, it could not “die” should the thief ask for its removal, retrieving it beyond the range of Warden life. The Warden Diamond was the perfect repository, for the cops couldn't even confiscate the evidence.

It became the safe-deposit box for the rulers of the Confederacy, because of its total inaccessibility. Much of the wealth and many of the secrets of the great interstellar empire went through the Warden Diamond, which gained more and more by proving itself reliable and secretive.

To the leaders of each of the worlds—the best of the best, the criminal elite, the top crooks of evolution could produce—accrued tremendous power and wealth that reached to the far limits of the

Confederacy and far exceeded their powers back in the old days. These four leaders of the four Warden worlds were probably the most powerful human beings alive.

The Four Lords of the Diamond.

And yet so much did they hate the Confederacy for their exile that they were prepared to do almost anything to get back at it.

And now an alien race of unknown form and unknown size, power, and intent had discovered humanity before humanity had discovered it. Discovered and poked and probed until that alien race understood the system man had built very well indeed.

Seeing how other alien civilizations had been treated, they knew war was inevitable, but were by no means sure they could win it. And thus had the aliens contacted the Four Lords of the Diamond, and thus had they made a spectacular deal.

They took out a contract on human civilization.

The Four Lords, motivated by revenge and by unknown inducements from the aliens, would have full access to the alien technology and their own far-Sung criminal networks as well as to the experiences of all those exiles on the four Warden worlds. The aliens would remain unknown, unseen while the Four Lords would be so powerful as to be untouchable.

“You have a tough problem,” the young man sympathized. “You don’t have any reliable people on the Warden worlds, and anybody capable of doing what has to be done goes over to the other side. What *can* you do?”

Commander Krega, head of Confederacy Security, nodded in agreement. “Exactly. You see where this puts us.

Now, of course, we *do* have some people down there. None are a hundred percent reliable, and all of them would slit your throat in an instant if doing so was in their best interests. But there are occasional inducements, small payoffs of one sort or another, even a little blackmail on ones with close relatives back in the Confederacy, that give us a little edge. A little, but not much, since the Four Lords are pretty ruthless when it comes to what they perceive as treason. Our only advantage is that the worlds are still fairly new to us and thus relatively sparsely settled. There is no totalitarian control on any of them, but different systems and hierarchies on each.”

The young man nodded. “I have the uneasy feeling that this is leading up to something, but I must remind you of what you told me about past agents, and also that I’d be but one man on one world.”

Commander Krega grinned. “No, it’s not quite like that at all. You’re a damned good detective and you know it. You’ve located people in places nobody else looked twice at you’ve outmaneuvered and outguessed sophisticated computers and some of the best criminal minds ever known, despite the fact that you are still quite young. You are the youngest person with the rank of Inspector in the history of the Confederacy.

“We have two different problems here. One is that we must identify this alien force and trace it back whence it came. We must know who they are and where they are and what their intentions are. Even now it may be too late, but we must act as if it were not. Also, we must neutralize the information conduit, the Four Lords. How would you do it?”

The young man smiled thoughtfully. “Pay the Four Lords more than the aliens are. Put ‘em to work for us.”

“Impossible. We already thought of that,” the commander told him. “No, making a deal is out W

have no cards.”

“Then you need somebody good down there on each world, looking for clues to the aliens. There has to be some sort of direct contact: they have to get their information out and their little playtoys like that fancy robot programmed and in. An agent might turn traitor, but he wouldn’t be motivated by revenge if he were a volunteer, and he’d sure as hell feel closer to humanity than to some aliens of unknown looks and designs.”

“Agreed. And it would have to be the very best for all four. Someone who could survive, even prosper under their conditions while having the ability to collect enough data and get it out. But how do we buy the time we also need?”

The young man grinned. “Easy. At least easy to say—maybe nearly impossible to do. You kill all four Lords. Others would take their places, of course, but in the interim you’d buy months, maybe years.”

“Our thinking exactly,” Krega agreed. “And so we ran it through the computers. Master detective, loyal, willing to volunteer, and with an Assassin’s License. Four needed, plus a coordinator, since they all would have to be put to work simultaneously and would, obviously, have no likely reason or means to contact one another. Plus, of course, spares for insurance who could be sent in if something happened to one or more of the others. We fed in all the attributes and requirements and you popped out.”

The young man chuckled dryly. “I’ll bet. Me and who else?”

“Nobody else. Just you.”

It was an elaborate and complex project—and the most closely guarded secret of the Confederacy. Called the Merton Process, after its inventor, it involved actual personality transfer. It was a rather messy affair, and the new personality not only totally destroyed the old but “took” in only one out of thirty or so cases. The others died, sometimes quite horribly. But the Confederacy had a number of expendables for such purposes and didn’t really think twice about it. Originally conceived of simply as a way of securing immortality for the rulers of the Confederacy and the best and brightest brains they had, the Merton Process was now to be put to a more rigorous test.

One very special man’s entire personality was recorded, digitalized, quantified, and stored in the Merton computers, which would then be used to create four new hims—all with his personality and intellect but in four very different bodies. Meanwhile the original himself would be out there in space in his special module with his complementary computer partner. A tiny organic transmitter implanted in the brains of his counterparts on the Warden worlds would send all that they saw and did back to the module, the raw mass of data going into the computer, then filtered through the original detective’s own mind to form a subjective report. The combination—the objective raw data and the subjective report—would allow dispassionate analysis of all the data gathered by the counterparts below.

The young man was thoughtful for a moment. “And what if I refuse after all this? Or to put it another way, what if I say to go ahead and my, ah, alter egos decide once down not to follow through?”

Krega grinned. “Consider what I’m offering. We have the capacity to make you immortal—if you succeed. If you succeed, no reward would be high enough. You are an atheist. You know that when you go, you go forever—unless you succeed. Then you and, because of the soft imprints, your alter egos will well continue to exist. Continue to live on. I think it’s quite an inducement.”

The young man considered it. “I wonder if *they* will see it that way,” he mused.

Four Lords of the Diamond. Four clever, enormously powerful people to kill. Four keys to an enigma that could well spell the end of humanity. Five problems, five puzzles.

Krega didn't really have to offer a reward. It was irresistible.

3

He reentered his command module from the great picket ship that was always on station near the Warden Diamond, just beyond the life range of the Warden organism. Totally protected, it was a great city in space with all the amenities, offering both comfort and security. Still, none of the thousands aboard the combined research and quarantine enforcement ship knew what the man was doing there, nor could they enter or in any way discover the secrets of the module.

"You have been away more than three days," the computer chided him. "We have had an incoming data report from Charon all this time."

"I know, I know," he grumbled. "I just ... needed some time, that was all. I needed a little contact with the Confederacy and its people." It shamed him a bit to admit that last, even to himself, such a blow was it to his self-image, but he was not the same man who had first entered this module so long ago. The experience he had shared with his counterparts on Lilith and Cerberus had changed him greatly, and he really didn't like it one bit. It wasn't as if he were getting reports from agents down there: hell, those people were *him*.

The sociopathic worlds of the Four Lords were a contradiction of every single principle and belief he'd always held so dear. It wasn't so much seeing the Confederacy and its values the way the criminals did—that was excusable, since he was dealing with psychopaths of one sort or another. But when he himself down there on those worlds began to doubt and finally fractured all those bedrock ideals—well, that was something else again.

The Confederacy did not look so good, so much like paradise, when viewed from outside, and the view was difficult to refute. He feared for his own sanity most of all, and that made him fear another report, another secondhand life, yet another insane challenge to his orderly universe. He knew he understood it, but that didn't help much at all.

The fact was, he most of all didn't like discovering that he was as human as all the others in the human race, subject to the same fears, emotions, and failings. He had always thought himself superior above all that. No more, no more ...

Nor had it escaped him that he was learning too much, knew too much even at this point. He was a tool of the Confederacy, just as a saw, drill, hammer, or—well, computer—was a tool. Useful to get the job done; then, as if such a tool grew, say, radioactive, readily destroyed when the job was over. He wasn't kidding himself. They didn't even have to worry about keeping any sparks alive within him—four of him were already down there, on each of the Warden worlds.

The moment he solved the riddle of the Four Lords of the Diamond he was a dead man. His faithful computer might jettison the module into the sun or explode it, might supercharge it with electricity. The worst part was, he couldn't even opt out now, not even with a mindwipe. They'd just trot out the Merton recording, make another him, have that new him go through the same experiences—and reach the same point he was at right now.

But *he* would have to solve the puzzle first. He and he alone—not even the computer—would decide that terrible moment. It was an ironic, terrible box, and he knew it. The fate of human civilization, perhaps human life, was very much in his hands. Yet he could save them or himself—not both.

His final, agonized decisions were nonetheless a compromise. First solve the puzzle. *Then* decide

what to do with that solution. What troubled him most was the nature of that decision. He suspected even now that the nature of this alien threat was not as good and evil as he had originally believed.

He sat down at the lab screen and thought a moment “Put up a wide scan of the Lilith organism,” he told the computer.

The screen in front of him lit up and showed a strange enlargement. Its closest relative was a virus, yet it was infinitely smaller, an alien abstract design of tiny lines and pits actually able to combine at an atomic level with actual molecules—*molecules!* It wasn’t a real creature but a few extra chemical ingredients on the end of a molecular formula, extras that somehow didn’t really change what the molecule was but nonetheless controlled it. Once organism and molecules were linked, to remove the organism from inorganic molecules was relatively simple—they were always on the end. But with carbon molecules the Warden was not at the end at all but in the middle. Remove the Warden from a carbon chain and the chain fell apart—and so did the individual it helped make up. In much the same way, the synthetics with their odd and unnatural chains attracted the Wardens as carbon molecules did, but while the Wardens wormed their way in, they couldn’t stick. Synthetics disintegrated.

There was an advantage to that, from the Confederacy point of view. It kept the Four Lords and their worlds technologically far behind the Confederacy, and limited their industry to what they could take from their own worlds and from the asteroids and other space junk in the system that the Wardens somehow recognized as “natural.” In fact there were no important heavy metals on any of the Diamond worlds; mines on the asteroids and on the moons of the nearest gas giant, Momrat, provided the raw materials for the Warden worlds that could use *any* machines. Many down there could easily build an interstellar spacecraft, but they didn’t have the materials to do so.

And yet, and yet ...

That *thing* on the screen couldn’t possibly be alive, not in any sense that any biologist understood life. More than that, it didn’t *fit*, not on the Diamond. The four worlds down there were very different, yes, but every one of them—*every one*—was composed of logical, rational, carbon-based life. Most of it wasn’t nearly as exotic as life on most planets *in* and near the Confederacy itself, yet it was consistent and logically there.

But nowhere was there any sign of anything else like the Warden organism. It didn’t belong there, not on those worlds. It had no dear ancestors, no relatives, no dead ends. In fact, it had no place, no reason to evolve down there.

“The remote probes—the ones that preceded the initial landings on all four worlds. Why didn’t those core samples show the Warden?”

“The instruments were not really designed to look for something like it,” the computer replied. “Only after they knew something was there could they find it.”

“Mighty poor procedures,” he noted. “The whole idea of an exploration is to find just such new threats as this.”

“If a question has not been asked it will rarely be answered,” the computer responded philosophically. “In other words, nobody can think of everything. Still, why the interest in the core samples? Surely you don’t think the Warden organism itself can be the aliens?”

“No, of course not. It’s an incredibly odd and alien thing, but even in its collective mode it’s hardly capable of a consciousness. You know, there are worlds in our catalogue where this thing wouldn’t really shock me or any of the scientists one bit—but not here. The thing doesn’t fit here. It’s as if an iceberg were suddenly found on a tropical world—it just doesn’t logically belong there.”

“A number of researchers and theorists have noted as much. Some have even theorized a

interstellar origin—it arrived, perhaps in a meteorite, and set up housekeeping. That is the prevailing theory.”

He nodded. “But why just on Lilith? Or was it just on Lilith? How do we *know* we were the carriers to the other three worlds? Perhaps by the time we found the thing all four had already been contaminated, if they were.”

“It has been postulated that the Wardens existed on all four worlds, too,” the computer told him. “Sampling work was taken from a base ship that was actually beyond the life range of the Warden organism. However, since plant life did not disintegrate in the Warden manner it was simply assumed that the Wardens were not yet there.”

“Assumed ... I wonder. What about the plant samples from Lilith, then?”

“I just checked on that. The fact is, *all* vegetation died in the samples from Lilith, but there were a thousand natural explanations and it was not taken as a terrible sign. It wasn't unusual enough for general surveys of alien worlds, really. Many alien plants are interdependent on organisms and conditions requiring exacting biospheres to survive—a minuscule change in pressure or temperature, for example. Although Lilith's samples died first, all of the samples died within a period of a day or two at most. This is normal and expected. You can't possibly hope to duplicate every exact condition for totally alien forms of life. Still, your proposition is now beyond proof. All four worlds have the Warden organism.”

“Still, it is an interesting speculation.”

“Why? If the alien-spore theory is correct, and it seems most logical, it might easily hit all four worlds. One. That proves nothing.”

“Maybe not,” he murmured to himself. “Maybe ...” He got up and walked forward to the control area. “Who's in?”

“Charon.”

“Too bad. Most of all I want Medusa now, I think. I'm beginning to think the confirmation of many theories must lie there—and perhaps beyond. I suspect that Charon's not going to add any new pieces.”

“You're sure you just aren't trying to avoid the experience?”

He stopped and looked around quizzically. Was he? He *did* dread this new experience, it was true, but was he kidding himself, or the computer?

He sat down in the master command chair and adjusted it for maximum comfort. The computer lowered the small probes, which he carefully placed on his head; then the thinking machine that was part of the module itself administered the measured injections and began the master readout.

For a while he floated in a semihypnotic fog, but slowly the images started forming in his brain, the ones they had before. Only now they seemed more definite, clearer, more like his own thoughts.

The drugs and small neural probes did their job. His own mind and personality receded, replaced by a similar, yet oddly different pattern.

“The agent is commanded to report,” the computer ordered, sending the command deep into his own mind, a mind no longer quite his own.

Recorders clicked on.

Slowly the man in the chair cleared his throat. He mumbled, groaned, and made odd, disjointed words and sounds as his mind received the data and coded, classified, adjusted, and sorted it all out.

Finally the man began to speak.

Rebirth

After Krega's talk and a little preparation to put my own affairs in order—this would be a long one—checked into the Confederacy Security Clinic. I'd been here many times before, of course, but not knowingly for this purpose. Mostly, this was where they programmed you with whatever information you'd need for a mission and where, too, you were "reintegrated." Naturally, the kind of work I did was often extralegal—a term I prefer to "illegal," which implies criminal intent—and much of it was simply too hot ever to be known. To avoid such risks, all agents had their own experience of a mission wiped from their minds whenever it involved sensitive matters.

It may seem like a strange life, going about not knowing where you have been or what you've done, but it has its compensations. Because any potential enemy, military or political, knows you've been wiped, you can live a fairly normal, relaxed life outside of a mission structure. There's no purpose coming after you—you have no knowledge of what you've done or why or for whom. In exchange for these blanks, an agent of the Confederacy lives a life of luxury and ease, with an almost unlimited supply of money and with all the comforts supplied. I bummed around, swam, gambled, ate in the best restaurants, played a little semipro ball or cube—I'm pretty good, and it keeps me in shape. I enjoyed every minute of it, and except for my regular requalification training sessions, four-to-six-week stints that resemble military basic training only nastier and more sadistic, I felt no guilt at my playboy life. The training sessions are to make sure that your body and mind don't stagnate from all that good living. They have sensors in you that they constantly monitor to determine when you need a good refresher.

I often wondered just how sophisticated these sensors were. The notion that a whole security station could see all my debauchery and indiscretions used to worry me, but after a while you learn to ignore it.

The life offered in trade is just too nice. Besides, what could I do about it, anyway? People on most of the civilized worlds these days had such sensors, although hardly to the degree and sophistication of mine. How else could a population so vast and so spread out possibly be kept orderly, progressive, and peaceful?

But when a mission came up it wasn't practical to forgo all that past experience. A wipe without storage simply wouldn't have been a good idea, since a good agent gets better by not repeating his mistakes. So in the Security Clinic they had everything you ever experienced on file, and the first thing you did was get the rest of you put back so you would be whole for whatever mission they dreamed up this time. I was always amazed when I rose from that chair with my past fully restored. Just the clear memories of the things I'd done always surprised me—that *I*, of all people, had done this or that.

The only difference this time, I knew, was that the process would be taken one step further. Not only would the complete me get up from that table, but the same memory pattern would be impressed on other minds, other bodies—as many as needed until a take was achieved.

I wondered what the others would be like, those four versions of myself. Physically different, probably—the offenders they got here didn't normally come from the civilized worlds, where people

had basically been standardized in the name of equality. No, these people would be from the frontier ~~from the traders and miners and freebooters that always existed at the edge of expansion.~~ They were certainly necessary in an expanding culture, since a high degree of individuality, self-reliance, originality, and creativity was required in the dangerous situations in which they lived. A stupid government would have eliminated all such, but a stupid government quickly degenerates and loses its vitality and growth potential by standardization. Utopia was for the masses, of course, but not for everyone—or it wouldn't *be* Utopia very long.

That was the original reason for the Warden Diamond Reserve in the first place. Some of these hard frontier people are so individualistic that they become a threat to the stability of the civilized world. The trouble is, anybody able to crack the fabric that holds our society together is most likely the smartest, nastiest, meanest, cleverest, most original sort of person humanity can produce—and therefore not somebody whose mind should idly be wiped clean. The Diamond, it was felt, would effectively trap people like that forever, yet allow them continued creative opportunities, which when properly monitored might still produce, something of value for the Confederacy.

Of course the felons down there were anxious to please as well, since the alternative was death. Eventually such creative minds made themselves indispensable to the Confederacy and ensured their continued survival. That possibility had been foreseen, but it wasn't altogether unwelcome. Like a criminal organizations in the past, they provided services that people were convinced should be illegal or were unmoral or some such, but that masses of people wanted anyway.

The damned probe hurt like hell. Usually there was just some tingling, then a sensation much like sleep, and you woke up a few minutes later in the chair yourself once again. This time the tingling became a painful physical force that seemed to enter my skull, bounce around, then seize control of my head. It was as if a giant fist had grabbed my brain and squeezed, then released, then squeezed again. Instead of drifting off to sleep, I passed out.

I woke up and groaned slightly. The throbbing was gone, but the memory was still all too current and all too real. It was several minutes, I think, before I found enough strength to sit up.

The old memories flooded back, and again I amazed *myself*, by recalling many of my past exploits. I wondered if my surrogate selves would get similar treatment, considering that they couldn't be wiped after this mission as I could. That caused me to make a mental note that those surrogates would almost certainly have to be killed if they did have my entire memory pattern. Otherwise a lot of secrets would be loose in the Warden Diamond, many in the hands of people who'd know just what sort of use to make of them.

No sooner had I had that thought than I had an odd feeling that something was very wrong. I looked around the small room in which I'd awakened and realized immediately the source of that feeling.

This wasn't the Security Clinic, wasn't anyplace I'd ever seen before. A tiny cubicle, about twelve cubic meters total, including the slightly higher than normal ceiling. In it was a small cot on which I awakened, a small basin and next to it a standard food port, and in the wall, a pulldown toilet. There was it Nothing else—or was there?

I looked around and spotted the most obvious easily. Yes, I couldn't make a move without being visually and probably aurally monitored. The door was almost invisible and there was certainly no way to open it from inside. I knew immediately where I was.

It was a prison cell.

Far worse, I could feel a faint vibration that had no single source. It wasn't irritating; in fact, it was

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