

STRINGS



DAVE DUNCAN



Strings

Dave Duncan



~~Below them lay a leprous swamp of rocks and scummy puddles, with scrub and tufty vegetation~~
lurid yellows and browns. Rain was falling, and wind ruffled the more open parts of the pools. Soup
mud bubbled in the tracks left by the wheeled vehicles at the end of the ramp, while right below th
viewers was the largest growth of all, a lumpy thing that instantly squirted upward, extending in
long white ropes to reach over the railing and wrap around Alya, scooping her up high and tearing h
hand from Cedric's grip...

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Windows

□28 March to 12 April,2050
□(Life-bearing words only)

File Name---Nile---Orinoco---Po---Quinto---Rhine---Sask.---Tiber---Usk

March 28-----*-----*-----?-----

March 29-----*-----?-----

March 30-----*-----

March 31-----*-----*-----*-----

April 1-----*-----*-----*-----

April 2-----*-----?-----

April 3-----*-----*-----*-----*-----

April 4-----*-----

April 5-----*-----*-----*-----*-----

April 6-----*-----*-----

April 7-----*-----*-----

April 8-----*-----*-----*-----*-----

April 9-----*-----*-----+-----

April 10-----*-----*-----

April 11-----*-----

April 12-----*-----

+ No further investigation at these coordinates

Acknowledgment

I am grateful to Shelagh Hislop for reading the manuscript and vetting my biology. Any tangles in the particular string, though, are my fault and not hers.

Cainsville, April 6

THERE SEEMED TO be a window in the wall opposite the door, looking out at the landscape beyond the dome. From time to time Wilkins would pause in his restless pacing to stare at that view and shudder. There was no life out there, only gaunt gray granite, forged by ancient fires, clawed in hills by old ice sheets, and cauterized by deadly radiation. Even the misty rain blowing out there was poison. If the Institute's planetologists stumbled on a terrain like that anywhere else in the universe they would slap a Class Four label on it without a second's hesitation and go off to find a more interesting world.

It was not a Class Four world, though, and had not always been quite so barren. The poison rain was a soup of industrial by-products, still falling from their long sojourn in the upper atmosphere. It was so murderously potent on those siliceous hills that even the little gunmetal lakes held no life anymore. The radiation was merely the normal ultraviolet of sunlight, because in these northerly latitudes the ozone layer was too thin to filter it out. And the window was not a window. In fact, Wilkins's cramped quarters were buried deep in the innards of Burton Dome, a long way from that stark exterior.

He was not quite sure why he had called up that view—possibly because it suited his evil mood, possibly as a reminder that there was no escape overland from Cainsville. There would be no pursuit and no rescue. A fugitive could safely be left alone to wander among those tangled crags until he froze, or starved. Certainly he would not live long enough to die of the carcinogenic sunlight.

There was no airport, either, only the lev station, which Security watched always, as a matter of course. If anything went wrong, he would be hopelessly trapped.

There were other ways out of Cainsville, but they led to places far, far worse than even that accursed rocky desert outside.

He had been pacing for a long time, much too long for a man who took no exercise. Wilkins J. S.—short and swarthy, born in 2027 and already going bald. Dr. Wilkins, employed by the Institute as camera-repair technician. Wilkins Jules Smuts, potential traitor.

Without warning his legs began to tremble. He slumped into his chair and scowled at the seeming window. Well—why not? In truth, he had known for some time what his decision was going to be.

“Com mode!”

The comset became a sheet of blank plastic and said, “Proceed.”

Damp-fingered, Wilkins pulled from his pocket a tiny scrap of paper, a secret he had been hoarding for almost two years. It had been slipped into his hand at a party, with a nod and a wink and a chunk of credit to establish goodwill, plus promises of much greater joy if he ever used it in a good cause. He cleared his throat and began to read.

“Code Caesar Columbus Dimanche Einfeuchten...” Thirty-two words in all. His voice quavered to the end, for even to possess an illicit override code was a felony in Cainsville. To use one was worse.

than a crime—it was a blatant challenge to the deadliest security system on earth.

“Code acknowledged. Confirm activation.”

It worked! Some small part of him had perhaps been hoping that it would not...For a moment yet he hesitated, savoring a strange tingling seeping through him, a blend of fear and excitement. It reminded him of the real reason he was taking this risk—Wilkins Jules had a plugin habit, which was becoming very expensive. It had reached the point where his weekly pay transfer would barely cover both food and plugin. Soon he would have to choose between them, and his choice could never be food.

“Confirm activation,” System repeated, impatient of human indecision.

“Activate.” There—he had done it!

“Please wait.” System began to play music at him, which he hated, and the gray plastic again became a window, now overlooking a somber view of water lilies floating on a tree-shadowed pool. To Wilkins Jules such a scene was irrelevant at best, and unattractive anyway. He fretted.

There was no reason why he should not make a call to the outside world—except that he almost never did. Everyone else did, often, but not him. Security called that “pattern breaking,” and System watched for it. And if the override code itself had triggered alarms, then the call would certainly be either blocked or monitored. The illicit code and the record coin in his other pocket—either would make him a dead man. Nowhere in the world could a body be disposed of as easily as in Cainsville. *Nowhere in the world.*

One tune ended and another began. Why so long? He might very well have fallen into a trap. If this was all a fake, a loyalty test that he had now most certainly failed, then the goons were lining up outside the door already. The tingling had faded into an unpleasant full-bladder sensation. He always tended to sweat too much, and at the moment was dribbling like a marathon runner.

Dead man—or rich man?

He had never known a call to take this long. He must be getting through to someone very high up. high up in something.

Then he blinked at sudden brightness, seeing through the comset into a sunlit office. The desk was shiny and empty. If that were real wood, it had cost more money than he would earn in two years. The woman across from him was being masked. She wore an outfit of hard metallic blue, but that was all he could tell. Her face was an anonymous blur, although the rest of the room was as sharp as though he were sitting in it. Whoever her employers were, they could afford a first-class System.

“Report!” Probably her voice was disguised also.

He squirmed like a hooked worm. One-sided! He should have put a bag over his head or something. “You don’t need to know my name...”

The woman drummed a hard fog of fingers on the wood. “I already know your name. I even know you have less than forty hectos left in the bank. Thirty-eight to be exact.”

Wilkins’s heart lurched. He had not expected the bargaining to start so soon.

“Now report,” she repeated. “It had better be good.”

He fumbled in his pocket and pulled out the coin. “I have evidence.”

She seemed to shrug. “Evidence of what?” But he heard a trace more interest in that anonymous voice.

“They lost a team!”

“It happens. How many?”

“Three.”

She waved a vague hand. “People get buttered over the tarmac outside this office all the time, and it’s a poor week we don’t drown a few million somewhere. Losing them on other worlds is a little more exotic, but not much. A hundred hectos.”

She must know he would not have risked using the code unless he had more to offer than that. “One of them was an outsider—a mycologist from Moscow.”

“Mycologist?”

“Expert in fungi. Fungi. They’d been overnighing—but this wasn’t just a broken string. The skiv’s back.”

“Better,” she admitted. “Two hundred. More if you’ve got some good damage pictures.”

“No damage at all,” Wilkins said, starting to enjoy himself at last. “The skiv’s untouched. Two dead men, and the woman’s missing.”

That got her. He heard a hiss of breath. “Tell me about the woman.”

“Name of Gill Adele. Staff ecologist.”

“Age? Looks? Got pix of her?”

He shook his head. “Middle twenties. Said to be a looker.”

“Pity. Any chance she’s still alive?”

Wilkins laughed. “Not a chance in hell—and that’s apt, for sure. Class Three world, code name ‘Nile.’ About two hundred Celsius and over half a bar of CO₂...and she forgot to take her helmet.”

The woman was silent for a minute, then admitted, “Okay! That’s a story. She didn’t just go fishing on a Class Three. Tell me more.”

“Lots of credit.”

The blur nodded. “Lots of credit.”

Wilkins shivered with deep-down joy. And she still had not heard the best of it! “It happened yesterday. They opened the window; got no response. So they brought the skiv back on remote control. There was a hell of a panic. The window was short, and they had no backup team standing by. Real incompetence, all shouting and no action. There’s plenty of dirt here if you want to use it. New window’s not till the ninth.”

The woman leaned forward. Even through the flickering, indistinct masking, her eagerness was showing. “How good’s your clip?”

“Very good. One of the dome cameras malfunctioned. It got sent in for repairs right away. They thought it was the recording, but it was the playback. The recording was fine.” He held up the code again, to tantalize her a little.

“Any confirmation? I don’t put it past the old hag to fake something like this.”

Again Wilkins shivered, but this time for other reasons. He had wondered the same. This was stupendously good—too good to be true, really, for a man with an expensive habit. “Not much. I think there’s more tension about than usual. Nothing you can use. But I don’t think even Hubbard would fake the rest of it.”

“Such as?”

“The great Devlin shouting his head off? Almost having hysterics.”

“Mmm. What’d the two men die of?”

“Head wounds.” Let her suck on that!

“*Head wounds?* The woman killed them?”

Now came the moment he had been dreaming of. “Maybe. But there was a weapon, too.”

“What sort of weapon?”

He played his ace, the trump he had been holding back. “A stone hand ax.”

“No! I don’t believe you!”

He held up the coin without a word.

“Sentience? After all this time?”

Wilkins’s voice became shrill with excitement. He wanted to reach into the coin and thump his fist on that opulent wooden desk. “Two men clubbed to death, a woman missing, the skiv intact, blood on the floor, and a stone ax—also with blood on it! Now, do I have a story?”

“Oh, do you have a story!” the woman said. “Oh, brother, do *I* have a story!” She sounded awed.

“First Contact!” Wilkins was gloating. “Men killed, woman abducted. Eyewitness record. Exclusive story...rich man?”

“You are a very rich man,” she agreed.

Plugin! Lots of lovely plugin! Wilkins could feel his groin starting to glow already.

Banzarak, April 7

THE TROPICAL AFTERNOON was unbearably muggy. The air had died of heat prostration. The water in the bay was shiny-slick like polished lead, and the sky was a white pall, too bright to look at.

Alya had been walking the beach for hours, walking herself to exhaustion. Her sun block must have worn dangerously thin by now, and there were salt sores around the edges of her goggles. Her boots were slime-caked, stinking as bad as the fetid edges of the sea. They dragged like sacks of rocks as she plodded up the battered wooden steps to the Residence—steep stairs, shaded by trees and thick aggressively impenetrable undergrowth. The old, old pictures showed this hillside as a formal garden. Not anymore.

Her body needed a long drink and then sleep, although it would probably agree to accept a shower and a snack somewhere after the drink. Her mind would refuse the sleep—it was churning with incoherent muddled demands like the angry mutterings of a crowd, incomprehensible mumbling ancestral warnings. For two days these forebodings had been tormenting her. She wanted to scream and run, yet she also felt like crawling under a bed somewhere, or climbing a tree. Unable to concentrate on her studies or seek solace in company, she had gone out to walk by the sea.

She thought her pain must be like the pain of an addict deprived of his need. But what was her need except the need for the pain to stop? She knew what was happening, for she had felt it before, but never, never so strong. In a sense she had been waiting for it all her life, yet she had not expected this driving, twisting agony; and the cure, if she could find it, did not bear thinking about.

On the patio at the top of the steps she paused for a moment to catch her breath and wipe sweat across brow. Before her sprawled the Residence, her birthplace and her home; yet it had taken on a grotesque unfamiliarity. She had never thought of it as beautiful—it was a monstrosity of imperial Victorian vulgarity, all wide-eaved verandas and writhing sculptured woodwork, bijou windows and rambling halls—but in the past she had always found its awkward, ill proportions conveyed a warm friendship, like the easy-going, self-deprecating humor of a mongrel dog. Now, suddenly, she saw only a sinister and malevolent deformity which repelled her.

Even her home had been taken from her, then.

Overhead the scarlet flag of Banzarak hung limp in the damp heat, its folds hiding all of the emblems except for a glimpse of the cobra's head. She shivered and turned away, reluctant to enter the menacing shadows of the house, and yet, as she leaned on the rail and gazed out at the ash-gray bay, she was inexplicably seized with a sudden dread that she would never see all this again. The sun would still be there tomorrow, wouldn't it? Wouldn't she?

The water was a flat glare. She had never known it so calm, and she could feel the heat beating off it. Out to sea the line of the reef was barely visible, a subtle change in color and mood. Never since her childhood had she seen any real surf breaking out there. She could no longer bear to don scuba gear

and visit that graveyard.

Landward was worse. The beach had gone completely, and more than half of the Old Town was underwater. On the opposite hill stood the palace, a rococo excrescence of pink and purple stucco. About a century earlier, when the British had left, her great-grandfather had given up most of his royal power and turned the palace over to the government. Now the government was billeted in the Grand Hotel, and the palace was full of refugees. The higher hills beyond were dotted with refugee camps. Banzarak was a very informal kingdom and a very small one—about a golf course and a half, her father had called it—but now many of its people had lost their homes and livelihood. Hundreds of thousands of others had flocked in from elsewhere. Food was a serious problem, and disease worse.

The hibiscuses were dying. Leaning on the half-rotted rail, staring back down the lush slope between the trunks of the higher trees, Alya wondered about the hibiscuses—why them? She would miss their beauty, joyful and transient...

Then footsteps sounded on the platform behind her. She wheeled and saw Kas, and instantly suppressed a frantic desire to rush at him. She turned away quickly.

He paced over to her side, tall and dark and solid as a stone pillar. Something unmoving in a shifting world was Kas, her much-older brother, deep-spoken Kas.

“Little sister?”

“Kas?”

“Is anything wrong?”

“No! I mean...I’m a little worried about the weather—the air’s so dead. Just the weather. Worried about a typhoon.”

“We never get typhoons here.”

She forced her hands to release their death grip on the rail before he could notice. She was not a child, she reminded herself. She had lived on every continent, visited most of the great cities—had made her first trip around the world alone when she was only thirteen. *She was not a child!* She was not going to weep, and she did not need to be hugged by a big brother—that would be ridiculous. A lover, fine...but there was none handy at the moment.

“There was a typhoon here in 1717,” she told the hillside. “It did a lot of damage. Think what you would do now, with no reef to stop it!” She did not look around.

“The forecast is good. Do you feel better on the shore than you do up here?”

Keeping her face as impassive as she could, Alya turned. “What do you mean, Kas?”

He smiled sadly. She noticed with surprise how much gray there was in his beard, how many wrinkles in the dusky face and how deep they were. Even in the tropics he was stupid to come outdoors without sun block and goggles.

“It started on the fifth, didn’t it?” he said. “On Tuesday?”

Alya felt a mighty rush of relief. “You, too? You feel it, too?” She was not alone, not going mad.

“A little. Always I feel it a little. Not like you’re doing.”

So much for inscrutability! Then she did throw herself at Kas, and he squeezed her tight, crushing

all the air out of her, and that was wonderful, just what she had needed. For a time she sniveled mute against his shoulder. And Kas had the sense to say nothing at all.

“It’s never been this bad,” she said. “Never! It gets worse every time. When Omar went it was bad. Tal’s time was worse yet—but not like this.”

“This one is your call. Your kismet. That’s why.”

She had known that, really, but she wailed in horror when he put it into words. “No! No! I won’t leave you. I won’t go!”

He steadied her head with a big, strong hand. “Alya, dear Alya! They all said that at first, every one of them. You’ve been squirming like an eel for days. Don’t fight it.”

She mumbled stubborn refusals, but she could feel her resolution failing already.

“I’ve talked to Nauc,” he said. “I called them on Tuesday.”

“You—*Tuesday*?”

“I feel it, too, remember. You were smiling like an idiot, but you’d turned such a pretty shade of green—”

She pummeled him. “I did not!”

“Turquoise, actually.”

“Swine!”

“Avocado in some lights. Anyway, they say yes.”

“Yes what?” she demanded apprehensively, pulling back.

“They’ve got a whole basketful of candidates. They want your help to—”

“No!” She was aghast. “Suppose I make a mistake? Suppose I’m wrong?”

He shook his head in reproof. “Been bothered by snakebites lately?”

She twisted her face away from him.

“When?” she whispered.

“Alya... Little sister, why not go now?”

“Now? *Today*? But packing...”

“Leave right now,” he said. “You won’t sleep or eat until you start. Long farewells are sad farewells. You can just change and go.”

Panic choked her, and she could only stare. He smiled cheerfully, but his eyes were glistening.

“Moala’s finished your packing. The Air Force is standing by.” That was a family joke, the government’s only plane, an ancestral turbofan that had ferried tourists, back in the days when Banzarak had boasted one of the world’s great beaches.

“By air across to Singapore,” Kas said. “Then super to Nauc. You’ll be there by dark—except it’ll be early morning their time.”

“Oh, you have been busy!” Alya said, struggling to match his counterfeit smile. Her heart was pounding insanely, and her knees wanted to liquefy. “I can’t just rush off—”

“There may not be much time. You know that. Even one day might make much difference—for many people.”

She felt drowned in a sudden flood. “The old man? Is it fair—”

Kas shook his head. “He’s not going.”

“Oh!” Alya bit her lip. All her life Dr. Piridinar Chan had been prime minister of Banzarak. She had no idea how old he was—she suspected she would be shocked to find out. A dear, gentle old man, Piridinar had always headed up the Banzarak delegations to Cainsville.

“Dr. Jar Jathro,” Kas said cautiously. “You know him?”

Alya pulled a face and nodded. “He just divorced his second wife, or was she his third?”

“He’s a very acute politician, which is what matters. Piridinar took him along the last two or three times, so he knows how the negotiations are done. He’ll have a couple of backups with him.”

She nodded. If that was what Kas thought best, then she would not argue; but she wished that Jar Jathro did not always make her think of lizards.

When she said nothing, Kas added, “I didn’t tell you because...”

Because he had not wanted to worry her? But it felt right. Oh, God! How right it felt!

No. She saw that Kas had been testing, making sure, watching her agony grow until there could be no doubt, because this was hellishly important. His eyes were anxious now that she might resent the testing. She grabbed her brother’s beard in both hands and pulled his face down to kiss.

Hard and long.

“Allah and Krishna and Holy Etceteras!” he said afterward. “A sister is not supposed to kiss her brother like that!” But his eyes were gentled by relief that she was not mad at him. She tried to do it again, and he took hold of her wrists. “Wanton!” he said. “Pervert!”

“Why not? You enjoy it, don’t you?”

“Certainly not! I keep wondering what the cabinet would say if they saw us. Besides, I have to keep my eyes open in case I forget who you are.”

“An old family tradition,” she said. Nauc tonight! Cainsville tomorrow, she supposed. What did she have to wear?

“Don’t ever talk about that! You find a good strong pioneer type.”

“Tall, dark, and handsome?” It only hurts when I laugh.

“Well, pick one of the above.”

“Tall, then...Oh, Kas!” Her voice broke in remorse. “Oh Kas, come with me?”

He shook his head in silence. “Your kismet, Alya.”

“Just come to help me choose. Not—” She felt a twist of nausea. “Not all the way. Just come and hold my hand.”

He pulled a face. “And have to come away afterward?”

He was suffering much more than he had admitted, then. Alya squeezed him once more.

She was the last. Brothers, sisters, cousins—ten of them had gone, and now the *buddhi* was calling her, too. And then there would be only Kas, and Thalia. He was much more than a figure-head sultan in spite of what the constitution said, but he would be the last of their generation.

Thalia was a cousin and had the *buddhi*, also. What of their children? Alya wondered. Kani was te

Who would next feel a *satori*? Kas himself? Or would it start in on the youngsters? She shivered.

“I’ll make my choice—and then come back here.”

He smiled sadly. “That might not work. Others might accept it, but what of our own people? They won’t go if you don’t.”

She shivered again, fear of the future looming very big. “How many?”

“As many as possible. You know that.”

Cold, cold terror froze her bones. Thousands of lives! What if she chose wrong? What if they had all chosen wrong, all the others before her? Where could she find the courage to gamble so many human creatures?

“The *buddhi*,” she whispered.

Again he smiled his sad smile. “You were certainly born with it.”

That was another family joke: “You were certainly born with it; you will certainly die with it; and you would certainly die sooner without it.”

“I hate it!” she shouted. “The family curse.”

“The family blessing,” Kas insisted.

High above the royal residence a very faint breeze nudged the limp flag, the bloodred flag Banzarak bearing the national emblem, a cobra entwined with a silken string.

Nauc, April 6—7

HOW DID A caterpillar feel when it opened up in the butterfly business?

Small, Cedric thought.

Lonely.

The hotel room was cramped and dingy, stinking worse than the streets outside. Fungus flourished around the shower pad. The wallpaper looked like beans fried in blood. The single chair was hard and unsteady, and the bed would be too short for him.

For the third time he checked his credit. He had a clear choice: he could either call home to Madge at Meadowdale, or he could eat breakfast in the morning. That was not a hard decision. He pulled the chair closer to the com, but then he got distracted again by the action. God in Heaven! Were they going to... Yes, they were. Again! He squirmed with embarrassment. But he watched. Holo shows Meadowdale had never been like this. And the quality of the image was so good! He could have sworn that he was looking through a window into the next room where a couple was—was doing certain things he had never seen done before. Doing, in fact, some things he had not known were possible. Great Heavens! At Meadowdale the images had been fuzzier, and there had been long periods of focus on one channel or another, with nothing visible at all.

Everything was visible here.

Suddenly he became disgusted at his own reactions. He barked an order, switching to com mode. Two minutes Madge was standing on the other side of the window, smiling at him. Before she even spoke he knew he had erred. He had forgotten the time difference and caught her in the middle of putting youngsters to bed. But she did not complain; she merely smiled and sat down.

“I promised to call,” he said.

“So you did. And you’ve survived your first day in the Big Wide World!” Rosy cheeks and white hair—no one could have looked more motherly than Madge. But when had she grown so small? She could hardly have shrunk since he had left that morning.

“I didn’t buy Brooklyn Bridge, like Ben said I would.”

“Ben didn’t mean that!”

But Ben had meant the other things he had warned about. Cedric might think he owned nothing of value except the camera Gran had given him, Ben had said, but any healthy nineteen-year-old must look out for bodyshoppers, or he would soon discover he was a mindless zombie in one of the dark corners of the vice industry, with every prospect of eventual promotion to a freezerful of spare parts.

“I hired a percy,” Cedric said. “Can you see it?” Madge leaned sideways and looked where he pointed. She said yes, she could. The big metal cylinder stood in a corner, dominating the room—blank, blue, bullet-shaped pillar.

“I buzzed around all over the place like a native,” Cedric said proudly. No one could get knocked o

in a percy, which was why all city dwellers used them.

Percy: Personal Survival Aid.

“Doesn’t look big enough,” Madge said doubtfully.

“It’s okay,” Cedric insisted. “I was lucky. It’s an XL, and they just happened to have it in stock.”

In a percy, the occupant stayed upright, half sitting, half standing. It would have been quite comfortable, had his legs not been so damned long. His neck was still stiff.

“Did you see all the sights?” Madge asked.

He told her about his day, or most of it—his trip on the super, his sightseeing, and how he had tried to go to a ball game, but the new stadium was not complete yet and the old one had finally been abandoned after Hurricane Zelda last fall. He did not describe how he had gaped at the ads for surgical improvements to various body parts, nor did he detail the varieties of chemical and electronic stimulation he had declined, or the educational opportunities both erotic and exotic, some of them even promising real girls. He had not been tempted, and he had had no money anyway.

Nor did he mention that he had gone window shopping, because he had been choosing gifts he was going to give Madge herself, and Ben, and all the others. Of course, he had not been able actually to buy anything, but as soon as he started earning money he was going to send gifts to everyone in Meadowdale. Well, not truly everyone, but all the adults, certainly. Maybe some of the older kids, although all his own group had gone long since. He had been the oldest for almost a year now.

And then he asked if Gavin had used his fishing rod yet, and if Tess had had her pups, and stuff like that.

“Did you eat properly?” Madge asked, mother instincts roused.

“I had a pizza.”

She pouted disapprovingly at the mention of pizza. “I’ll get Ben. He took some of the small fry out to watch a calving.”

But Cedric had just realized that his credit was about to die. The call would end without warning and Madge would guess why, and then she would worry. “I’d better go,” he said. He sent his love to everyone and disconnected. He checked his credit and discovered that he had cut it very fine. He would not even be able to buy a Coke in the morning; but he had his ticket to HQ, and the percy was prepaid, so he was all right.

It was nice to know that Meadowdale was still there. It was the only home he had ever known.

He stayed where he was and watched the holo again for a while, seeming to jump from one bedroom to another—did the audiences never get tired of the same stuff? On an unfamiliar channel he found Dr. Eccles Pandora doing the news. Pandora had always been a Meadowdale favorite, being Garfield’s Glenda’s cousin. And Glenda had certainly been a Cedric favorite.

Cedric abandoned the news halfway through the floodings—Neururb, now, and Thailand. That was after the food riots in Nipurb and before the usual update on the Mexican plague. He found an old Angels Brothers rerun and watched that instead.

Later he stared out for a long time at the shining towers of the city and the streets far below, still

quite busy. He had never seen all this, except in the holo, and he had expected it to look more real than it did. Apparently streets full of racing percies seemed much the same whether one saw them directly or in three-dee image. These streets had more garbage lying around, that was all.

He set his watch alarm for 0800 and went to bed. The bed was not only too short, it was lumpy and smelled wrong.

He had trouble sleeping, and that was another new experience.

He wondered about Madge.

Madge had not wept when he said goodbye. And when he called on the com she had smiled. Madge always wept when someone left. Of course, he was older than the others had been. Of course, he had tried to leave on his own a few times in the past, but he did not think she resented those attempts. Strange that she had smiled and not cried. She had never hinted that she loved him any less than any of the others, so he could not help but be surprised that she had not cried, and surprised that he should care...and surprised that he should be surprised...

He slept.

When the lights came on he blinked at his watch; it registered 0316. Then he rolled over on his back and tried to focus on the gun lens at the end of his nose.

It had to be a gun, although it was as thick as his arm. He could not read the label, but it might very well be a Mitsubishi Hardwave, and one flash from a thing like that would vaporize him and his back and the people downstairs.

He blinked a few times. He wanted to rub his eyes, but moving his hands might be risky. As his vision adjusted, he saw that the room was full of percies, at least five of them. His own was still standing in the corner—doing nothing, bloody nothing, two and a half meters of useless crysteel and whiskerfab.

So much for survival. First time off the farm, and he had crashed already.

On the safe end of the gun was a large, thick person, anonymous inside bulky combat gear that looked as if it were made of black leather. Just possibly it was a bull suit, in which case it would stop anything short of a fusion torch and the limbs would have full power assist. Or it might be only armor—not many could afford a real bull suit, and they took years of practice to manage. Its face was shiny nothing, as noncommittal as the door of an icebox.

“Got you at last!” the intruder said in a voice like the San Andreas. It was male.

“M-M-Me?”

“Harper Peter Olsen!”

“No, sir! I’m Hubbard Cedric Dickson!”

“What kind of sap do you take me for?” the faceless helmet demanded. Actually it was not faceless—its shiny blackness bore a faint reflection of Cedric’s own pale features, distorted into a wide-eyed omelet by the curve of the crysteel and by sheer witless terror. “Three years I’ve waited for this Harper!”

“I’m not Harper!” Cedric shouted. “I’m Hubbard! Hubbard Cedric Dickson. Check my thumb.” He had pulled his hand from under the covers before he remembered that sudden moves were supposed to be unwise.

The intruder did not seem worried—if anything, he was merely more contemptuous. “Thumbprint can be altered.” The gun moved higher, blocking out Cedric’s view of almost everything else. He saw his eyes reflected in the lens.

Cedric had rarely needed ID for anything, but on holo shows they used thumbs, or retinas. Or sniffer. He had not known that thumbs could be changed in the real world. He had no other ID at all.

There was something completely unbelievable about all this.

If the intruder was a thief, then he was going to be sadly disappointed—and therefore, likely, irked. Cedric had the square root of fresh air left in his balance, but theft by enforced credit transfer was a crime for morons anyway. That left ransom, or possibly bodyshopping—and that brought up the curious question of why he had ever been allowed to wake up. But...his first day out in the world and he had spilled the whole bucket.

And yet, oddly, he felt no more scared than he had as a twelve-year-old when Greg and Dwayne had taken him behind the horse barns and explained what they were planning for him. That had been real terror, but although he had endured a nasty experience, he had suffered no real damage. Of course, the intruder’s character was not in the same league as two muddled fifteen-year-olds.

“I’ve got nothing here worth taking, but help yourself,” Cedric said, and was pleasantly surprised how calm he sounded.

“I don’t want your money, Harper. I want to watch you burn.”

Breathe slow, he told himself. “Well I’m not Harper, whoever he is. So either shoot me in error, or go away and let me get back to sleep.”

“Oh...big *brave* man!”

Cedric attempted to shrug. It was tricky while lying flat. “What else can I say, sir? I’m not Harper. Check my thumb.”

The faceless intruder seemed to hesitate. “Thumbs get faked. I’ll check your retinas, then.”

Cedric felt relief in floods. “Go ahead.”

The man barked an order, and one of the percies floated closer to the bed, while the others made way for it. He must have brought four of them with him. They looked very much the same as the ones Cedric had hired at the station, and he could not tell if they were occupied. Bull Suit might be running them himself. The room was not large enough for all that equipment.

“Retina scanner,” the man said, without moving his gun from the end of Cedric’s nose. Something whirred faintly, a small hatch opened, and a binocular device dropped out, hanging on a helical cord. That was no standard percy.

Cedric had watched enough holodramas to know that he was supposed to put the gizmo to his eye and focus on the center marks in the red glow, but he did not expect the sudden bright flash. Ouch!

“Well?” he said as he released the gadget. It whirred back out of sight again, and the percy floated

away. "I'm not Harper." Green afterimages coated everything, and he felt sick. His throat hurt.

"Who?" the man asked.

"Harper—the guy you thought I was."

"Never heard of him. Appendectomy scar?" He whipped off the covers. Cedric yelped, but he was relieved to see that the gun was no longer pointing at him. "Yup," the man agreed. "Appendectomy scar."

"Then you know who I am?"

"Always did. Just like to confirm things." The stranger tipped back his helmet to reveal a completely bald head and a round, jowled face lacking both eyebrows and eyelashes.

"You mean all that crud about Harper..." Cedric's fear began to turn to anger, mostly anger at his own fear. He tried to sit up and was poked flat again by the cold tubular end of the gun. The safety catch was on, but it was a good club.

"Just relax, sonny. Yes, you're Hubbard Cedric. I checked out your pheromones before I opened the door."

"How did you open—"

"Quiet! You've got some explaining to do. Do you know where you are?"

An apology would be nice, Cedric thought. "North American Urban Complex."

The intruder's eyes narrowed.

The lack of hair, and the shiny, unnatural skin—the man's face had been regenerated with dermsyn. That meant a major accident, or perhaps an illness or a bad cancer job. The gravelly voice might mean extensive work on his throat, too. Cedric could not even guess at his age. The man was reptilian—his scalp smooth and shiny and quite hairless, everything below his mouth concealed by the neck ring of his suit, as though his head had sunk into his shoulders, turtle fashion. His eyes were almost invisible, hooded by drooping flaps of skin below craggy overhanging brows. The slivers that did show were blue-gray as winter sky, and no more friendly.

"Nauc's a big place, sonny. Try to be a little more specific."

"The sixteenth floor of the President Lincoln Hotel." Cedric was resenting being exposed there like jam on bread, with only a few grams of cotton between him and total nudity. He groped for the covers and the stranger flipped them out of reach with his gun.

"One more chance."

Damn you! "Well, with a name like that it must be somewhere between the Canadian border and the Mason-Dixon line."

The gun muzzle slammed into Cedric's solar plexus hard enough to double him up in a choking, gasping tangle of limbs. He had never been hit that hard before. He could not have guessed how bad it would feel. For a long age there was only pain and shock and lack of air. He heaved and strained, and there was no air in the world. Black fog and terror...then something seemed to snap, and he sucked one long, shuddering breath, and the black fog began to clear. Agony! His assailant stood in patient silence, waiting as though the force of the impact had been calculated precisely, its effects guaranteed.

to wear off after an exactly predetermined interval.

Finally the man spoke. "Want some more, smartass?"

Speechless, Cedric shook his head.

"Right. You were credited first-class fare on the super and told to fly to HQ at Manchester on Thursday—that's today, now. You took peon class and flew to Norristown on Wednesday."

About to ask how the intruder knew all that, Cedric had an attack of discretion and stayed mute, still breathing through his mouth and fighting a shivering nausea.

"Why, Cedric?"

"I just wanted to see some of the world..." He had planned on adding "sir," and changed his mind.

The man's lip curled in a contemptuous snarl. "Anyone who goes touring in person is nuts. You can put credit in the holo and see it all at home."

Not the same—Cedric just shook his head.

"So what did you see, Cedric?"

"The White House. Capitol Hill. Independence Hall. Ply-mo—"

The man's expression stopped him. Cedric had been told that it was Plymouth Rock, but the original rock must be well out to sea now, and of course it would never have been so close to...He had been gulled. "I asked Ben where the best sightseeing was, and he said hereabouts."

The man raised dermsym where he should have had eyebrows.

"So I got taken?" Cedric muttered. "They're all fakes?"

"Replicas. Some of the originals got moved inland, but you didn't see any of those."

For a moment there was silence. Cedric's belly still throbbed, but now he was partly faking his panting, while he reviewed combat training. What would Gogarty suggest? That gun was being held much too close to him. Murder did not seem to be the intruder's intent, but what mattered was whether his outfit was a real bull suit or only armor. Cedric started to lever himself up on an elbow, and the man moved the gun to push him down again. Cedric slammed his free hand against the barrel and spun both legs around to impact the man at knee level and topple him backward.

The gun did not move one millimeter, and Cedric might as well have rammed his shins into a concrete post. Beyond a glare of pain, he heard the man chuckle. Then came the punishment—the gun was callously slammed into his gut again, and for a long while there was only the familiar black fog of pain and retching, choking agony.

Eventually—bruised, breathless, and half blinded by tears—Cedric was back where he had begun, flat out, staring up impotently at his tormentor with nothing to show for his feeble attempt at heroism except a throbbing monster of pain in his gut. Probably he would not even have a bruise there. The man was an expert.

"Who the hell are you?" Cedric rasped.

"Thought you'd never ask. Name's Bagshaw. I'm with the Institute."

That was much too good to be credible. "How'd you find me?"

Bagshaw snorted in derision. "You think it was hard? Still, that's the best defense you've got—"

you were up to something, you'd never be so stupid. But I've heard it before."

"Me? Up to what?"

"That's what we want to find out. You came to meet someone. Who?"

"No one!" Cedric said, and hoped desperately that he had managed to sound convincing. "I've got no secrets to spill, nothing to sell. What—"

"Why did you come a day early?"

"I'm a free agent."

Bagshaw snorted. "You've never been a free agent in your life. You were livestock in an orphanage."

"Foster home! Not all of us are orphans. Wong Gavin's father's president of—"

The man looked so contemptuous that Cedric half expected him to spit. "All right, a maximum security kindergarten. For rich kids—although by the look of you, fatso, someone hasn't been paying the food bills. Have you ever been out in the real world before?"

"Sure! Lots of times. I took first in the Pacurb junior skeet lasering two years ago. I didn't do that in Madge's kitchen. Cities—"

"Skeet lasering!" Bagshaw chuckled. "Who took you there?"

"Cheaver Ben."

"Have you ever been outside unsupervised?"

"Yes! I took younger kids on camping trips and—"

"And of course you couldn't abandon them when they were in your care?"

"Of course not."

Bagshaw's hairless head shook gently in massive contempt. "So? Ever been out in the real world by yourself? Ever once?"

"Yes."

"The times you went over the wall?" He smirked.

"If you know the answers, why ask?"

The gun's icy muzzle nudged his belly threateningly. "I'll ask what I like, sonny, and you'll answer. Why did you try to break out, anyway?"

Pride! "It was illegal incarceration." Cedric could still feel the old resentment. Keeping kids locked up might be permissible, but he had been eighteen by then. All the guys his age had been called back to their families, yet Gran had kept insisting that he must stay on at Meadowdale.

"Illegal bullshit," Bagshaw said. "You got picked up for vagrancy?"

Cedric nodded miserably. Three times he had skipped. Three times the cops had brought him back like a strayed puppy.

"And you never thought that you were in Meadowdale for a reason? You never thought about kidnapping and extortion?"

"Well...no."

The man shook his bull head pityingly. "So now you're on your way legally. Did the old bag say she had a job for you?"

Cedric hesitated again, and the pressure increased nauseatingly, as though he were about to be impaled. “Yes, sir.”

Bagshaw’s eyes slitted even more, and his face seemed to sink lower inside his suit. He was bare human, a mechanical construct fueled by anger. “So you got hired on by the Institute! Your academic standing must have been remarkable.”

Cedric’s father had been a ranger, his mother a medical doctor. They had died exploring a Class Two world for the Institute, so there was a fallen torch to be picked up. That argument would not likely carry much weight at the moment. Cedric said nothing.

“Most men would peel off their skins to land a job with the Institute, you know? They’d sell it in strips. I worked myself crazy to get mine—eighteen hours a day like a machine for a whole year. They took fifty of us, out of five thousand.” Bagshaw’s plasticized face was turning even redder, little nauseating jabs of the gun barrel emphasizing his words. “I came in forty-eighth—and I’ve had combat experience. I’ve got postdoc degrees in urban survival. But you get hired fresh out of the she. Hot from the oven. Of course, your grandmother is director. Amazing coincidence, that. But then. Ah, but then do you do what you’re told? No, you don’t. You sneak out of the organage a day early and go to a part of Nauc that you’ve got no right to be in. Why, Cedric, why? This is what we need to know, Cedric.”

Cedric’s throat was very dry, and there was a sordid taste in his mouth. “I’ve told you, sir.”

“No, you haven’t. Just because you’re the old broad’s darling grandson doesn’t mean you haven’t been bought.”

Nothing Cedric could say was going to make any difference. He might as well keep quiet and wait until he found out what this hoodlum really wanted. For a moment there was a staring match. The gun muzzle came up to his face again, and he just squinted past it defiantly. Then it vanished and began slithering icily down the center of his chest like a cold steel snail.

He grabbed it with both hands and totally failed to slow its progress at all—as well try to strongarm a truck. It scraped past his navel, mercifully jumped his shorts, and then poked between his legs and stopped. Clutching it still, Cedric looked up to see Bagshaw leering at him. The man pursed thick lips and scratched an ear with one finger of his free gauntlet. There was no doubt who had control, whose health and happiness were at risk.

And then Bagshaw began to move the gun in the opposite direction—slowly and irresistibly. “You can talk easy, sonny, or you can talk hard. But now you’re going to talk.”

“I told you.” Cedric was squeaking. Half sitting, straddling that thick metal cylinder, gripping hard to hold it away from important things, he was being forced inexorably up the bed.

“No, you haven’t. Who did you come to meet?”

“How do I know that you’re from the Institute?”

“You’ll tell me anyway.”

Cedric set his teeth as the knobs on his backbone came into contact with the headboard of the bed. For a moment the pressure was checked—but the barrel was still between his thighs, and he had

nowhere left to go.

“You’re sweating, Cedric. You’ll sweat more soon. Lots more.”

Cedric made a discourteous suggestion, long on historical precedent and short on anatomic plausibility.

“Now that is *really* stupid,” Bagshaw said, shaking his polished head sadly. “In the sort of fix you’re in, you do not say things like that. You beg, you plead, you sing loud. You do not say things like that. Well, get up.” He stepped back and pulled. Cedric, reluctant to let go of the gun, was almost hauled off the bed.

“Up, sonny!”

Cedric dropped his feet to the floor and stood up, slowly and painfully. It hurt to straighten, but pride insisted. Swaying, blinking back tears, he gazed down at his tormentor. The ape was far shorter than Cedric but about four times as thick, and just being vertical did not help greatly. Contrary to first impressions, Bagshaw did have a neck; it just happened to be wider than his head. Even on equal terms, unarmed, he could make coleslaw out of Cedric, who was all reach and no weight.

And at the moment he could not quite stand straight and breathe at the same time. Bagshaw looked at him with open mockery in those curiously hooded eyes. “Want to play some more?”

Cedric was an organage boy. He shrugged. “You decide. You must be enjoying it.”

He might have scored there. Bagshaw grunted softly, and when he spoke it was in command mode. “*Com two: Relay message for Hubbard Cedric Dickson.*” He nodded his head to indicate that Cedric should turn around.

It could be a trap—Cedric did not move until a familiar voice at his back made him whirl. Two people were standing behind him, and one of them was Gran. His first reaction was shame at being caught in his briefs, but comprehension came fast thereafter. It was a holo projection, of course, which was how she could be knee deep in his bed. The man beside her was this same Bagshaw character wearing a standard business suit which amply confirmed his wrestler’s build. He was a human barrel. But he could not be in two places at once, so it was not a live transmission, and in any case the figures had the fixed-eyed look of people dictating. It was certainly Gran—a slim, imperious woman with white hair and enough determination to break rocks. Hubbard Agnes.

“...in every respect. *Com end,*” Gran concluded, and the two images vanished.

“Huh?” Cedric said.

“You heard,” Bagshaw said.

“No, I didn’t. *Com two, repeat that transmission.*”

Nothing happened.

Bagshaw sighed. “Not coded to your voice, sonny. All right, we’ll try again; but I do wish you’d start behaving like a grownup.” He repeated the command, and the two images flashed into existence again in the middle of the bed.

“Cedric, I am informed that you have departed from Meadowdale earlier than instructed. That was extremely foolish of you. I am very concerned for your safety. The man beside me is Dr. Bagshaw.”

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