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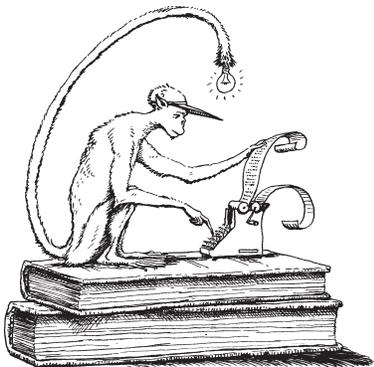
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Editorial

Gentle Readers:

Another *CLS* so soon? What is the world coming to?

In this issue another installment of *Dragonchaser*, which is what's keeping the *CLS* alive and kicking right now, since no other contributors have been forthcoming.

Also, while I'm thinking of which unpublished novel of mine is 'Vancean' enough to warrant inclusion in the *CLS*, here's an old story of mine (dating back about ten years). Since it is 'contemporary' and includes 'available technology', this one requires periodic rewriting to make it line up with existing computer technology. The basic elements of the story, however, have remained constant: a twisted boy-genius, a teen love-affair, jealousy and revenge, and for good measure a bit of pseudo-science and waffle about randomness and 'hidden variables'.

I'm not really very good at short stories, as this one evidences. It started off about one third the length it is now, and then quickly grew to its current size; which almost makes it into a novelette. Still, it's one of the very few things I've written from a first-person p.o.v.

Happy reading.

Till Noever

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Dragonchaser

by Tim Stretton

Chapter 4

The next morning Mirko sent a brief note to 'N' explaining his progress to date. No doubt she would soon be keen to see him, and almost certainly provide more money. It was also the day of the Hanspar Regatta, the first big test of the racing season for *Sapphire Light* under Mirko's tutelage.

Mirko made his way to Urmalest, Bartazan's private barracks on the outskirts of the Old Town. Cascais was already present, and Fenneker soon appeared to shackle the slaves.

"Fenneker!" called Mirko with some asperity. "There will be no shackling today! The crew will march down to the docks as close to free men as we can contrive it."

Fenneker flushed red, and not simply from the already powerful morning sun. "As long as I can use the *snib*."

"You only demean yourself by beating the men. I want to see none of it today."

"It's the overseer who's blamed if they row badly."

"Beating them doesn't make them row any better."

Cascais strolled across. "Gentlemen, gentlemen!" he said lightly. "Can you not set aside your philosophical differences for today?"

Fenneker merely spat into the sand of the compound. Mirko shook his head in seeming wonder.

"You two," said Mirko. "Go down to the dock and check that the hands are setting the galley up correctly. I'll bring the crew down myself."

Cascais and Fenneker set off with ill grace, Fenneker appearing particularly vexed. Mirko leaped onto a refectory table.

"Men!" he called out to the assembled crew. "Today you row in an important race. Bartazan, Fenneker, Cascais, myself: we can do nothing. The performance of *Sapphire Light* today is down to you! There will be no shackles today, and I expect to see less beating. In arranging such conditions I have tried to safeguard your welfare; if you row badly, you make a fool of me, and

make it easier for them to shackle you next time. Row well, even if you don't win, and the concessions we have achieved will be renewed."

One of the slaves, a one-eyed rogue named Ortazek, called out:

"Why should we care? We're slaves and we'll die slaves! What do we care who wins?"

"Here's one reason," replied Mirko. "*Sapphire Light* will soon be a top galley. Those of you who don't row with enthusiasm will find Bartazan sells you to less liberal owners, or puts you in his smelting room. Neither prospect should be appealing to you."

Another man, a captured Garganet officer called Florio, also had objections. "Why should we listen to you, Ascalon? You were stripped of your rank at home, and should never have charge of seamen again! We don't want to row for you and we don't want to row for Bartazan."

"Florio, we are in Paladria now. We are a racing galley, not a warship. All we have is our pride in our performance. We're racing for ourselves, not Bartazan."

The men muttered among themselves. Those who had been born slaves—very much a minority—seemed puzzled by their unshackling. The former free men appeared, by and large, to stand taller with their irons off. Mirko was cautiously optimistic.

"Quartermen!" he called. "Form your quarters, and follow me to the dock. We've a regatta to win!"

Privately Mirko's opinion as he walked to the dock was that victory was in fact out of the question. The men still had not recovered their strength, despite the improved diet and training. More importantly, Fenneker remained an appalling overseer, with brutality his only recourse. So far Bartazan had refused to replace him, but sooner or later he would need to do so. Cascais, while willing enough, lacked the instincts of a truly sound helm. His replacement was not so urgent as Fenneker's; however an experienced helm would surely add to *Sapphire Light's* competitiveness.

These reflections occupied Mirko all the way to the docks. The approach to the galley was already thronged with an enthusiastic crowd. The most popular boat was clearly *Dragonchaser*, with many of the crowd waving red and gold flags, or curious effigies of Drallenkoop. *Fanar's Glory* was popular, reasonably enough, among the eccentrically dressed acolytes of the sea-god Fanar. Mirko was surprised to see a sizeable group in

the bedecked in the Azure chanting the name of *Sapphire Light*. What would they be like if she started winning? Mirko wondered whether Bartazan employed retainers to cheer *Sapphire Light* on.

Away from the main throng was an enclosure raised on stilts affording a prime view of the bay. This was where the dignitaries watched the races. At the very summit was the Peremptor's Box, and today it seemed Peremptor Medina was in residence. Mirko didn't know whether the Peremptor was an aficionado of the races; as ruler of Paladria, by custom he did not maintain a galley.

Mirko made his way over towards the enclosure; he had not had the chance to discuss progress with Bartazan in recent days and was keen to play down the Elector's expectations of the race.

Bartazan was at the steps at the foot of the enclosure, in keen conversation with a florid man of early middle age. Bartazan shook hands with the man and then caught sight of Mirko.

"Captain Ascalon! A grand day for a race!"

"Good day, my lord! The conditions do appear promising. I hope *Sapphire Light* performs creditably."

"Hope?" said Bartazan with a frown. "Hope is for those who lack any more rational basis for success. I have heard of your new training measures and have high expectations!"

"It might be prudent, my lord, to remember that it is early in the season, and *Sapphire Light* does not start from a position of strength. My aims are focused on the Margariad; a good performance today would be a welcome bonus."

"Since you have just seen me place 100 valut on *Sapphire Light* to win at odds of twelve to one, my expectations run rather higher than 'a good performance'."

Mirko was saved from further hectoring by the arrival of Carnazan and Larien to take their places in Bartazan's box. They exchanged formal if not cordial greetings with their uncle; both seemed in elevated spirits, especially Larien, who surreptitiously squeezed Mirko's arm.

"Ascalon!" she cried. "You cannot imagine how much I adore these days—the sun, the crowds, the galleys! *Sapphire Light* looks so smart in the Azure, and look at *Dragonchaser*—how hard she will be to beat! And they say *Excelsior* has been training well too!"

"Enough!" laughed Carnazan. "Ascalon will need to compose his wits before the race, not listen to your prattle! I take it you'll be aboard today?"

"Oh yes," said Mirko. "Strictly there's no need for me, but Fenneker is even worse when I'm not there, and I hope to steady Cascais's judgement a little. And of course, I'll learn more on the water than on the quay."

"We won't keep you then," he said. "The galleys will be moving out soon."

Mirko made his way through to the jetty, moving past the rival boats as he did so. *Excelsior*, purple and silver, was first, with an unfavourable inside draw which meant she would need to fight her way past the other boats to get a clear run. He nodded a greeting to Raidis and Haidis as they superintended their slaves.

He also recognised *Morvellos Devil* with her distinctive orange and lilac livery, with a mermaid pennon streaming from her stern; *Kestrel*, privately owned and helmed by Dandret, a wealthy merchant; and of course *Dragonchaser*, also handicapped by an unfavourable draw. Drallenkoop, already aboard, did not look worried. His white pantaloons made a contrast with his sun-tanned torso as he lounged at the helm. His overseer, Mengippu, appeared no more concerned. Alone of all the boats, *Dragonchaser* faced the race with seemingly no trepidation. Drallenkoop raised his arm to Mirko in airy salute and called out something he did not hear against the cheers of the crowd; Mirko simply waved back.

The penultimate galley on the quay was *Sapphire Light*, making an exceptionally favourable draw. The Hanspar was in no sense a tactical race; the galleys pulled out against a strong current for ten minutes or so until they reached the Hanspar Rock; rounding the rock, they then pulled for the finish line, largely with the current. A boat with a good draw, such as *Sapphire Light* or *Fanar's Glory*, was in a strong position, since the other boats had to pass the leader against the current. Mirko's tactics were simple; he intended to run flat out into the current from the base of his favourable draw; *Dragonchaser* and *Excelsior* had a lot of ground to make up, and if he could get to the Rock ahead of them, they might never close the gap.

Mirko surveyed his own crew. Cascais was pale and sweating; this was real racing. Fenneker's jaw was clenched, determination oozing from every pore. Jenx, the slave-drummer, chewed on what Mirko suspected was a narcotic weed; he needed to have an absolute

sense of rhythm, and if it took *falcx* to achieve sufficient detachment, Mirko wasn't going to complain.

A great gong sounded and the crowd redoubled their cheers. *Sapphire Light* started to move away, Jenx beating the rhythm 'Seven'.

"Fenneker!" called down Mirko from the observation platform, "beat Nine!"

Fenneker nodded and mouthed an order to Jenx, who increased his rhythm. *Sapphire Light* perceptibly gained speed. Cascais pulled the helm around to starboard to bring her dangerously close to *Fanar's Glory*, who had had the most favourable draw. The manoeuvre appeared to unsettle *Fanar's Glory*, who attempted to pick up her rhythm. The result was a clash of oars which cost momentum, and *Sapphire Light* streaked past. The race was thirty seconds old, and *Sapphire Light* was in the lead!

Fanar's Glory had been badly affected by her fouling, and slewed round to the port side, blocking the boats in third and fourth. Mirko could not believe their luck; *Sapphire Light* was in the lead and all the pursuing boats would have to move around the now virtually stationary *Fanar's Glory*.

"Fenneker! Keep Nine!" he called. The greater the lead *Sapphire Light* could open up now, the more disheartened the pursuit would become.

The crew, he noted, seemed comfortable enough with Nine—not a rate to maintain for a long race, but for a well-trained crew with good morale, sustainable in the short term. Fenneker shouted out periodic curses but no more; Cascais was required to do nothing more than steer in a straight line; and Mirko was able to draw breath, and enjoy the steady *pull-pull-pull* from the crew.

Soon Mirko sensed from the crew that Nine was unsustainable and pulled the rhythm back down to Eight. There was no point in overstretching the crew at this stage. He looked back over his shoulder, and to his dismay saw that *Dragonchaser* was the second-placed galley, with *Excelsior* in third. These skilful and well-trained crews had found it easiest to get around *Fanar's Glory*, now way back down the field.

Mirko counted *Dragonchaser's* strokes; it looked as though she was sustaining Nine. This was hardly surprising; *Dragonchaser* was the best for very good reasons, her crew strong, fit and well-nourished. At this rate, though, *Sapphire Light* would reach the Rock first.

Cascais and Fenneker had noticed *Dragonchaser* making ground. Fenneker looked up, expecting the call for Nine, but Mirko simply shook his head. He called down to Cascais: "Prepare to turn!" and Cascais nodded grimly.

The crew of *Dragonchaser* had set up a great howl, a plangent tone which raised the hackles on Mirko's neck. If it was meant to unsettle, it was certainly effective.

"Cascais, careful now! Steady turn, you have time!"

Cascais had not judged the approach well. *Sapphire Light* was moving towards the Rock on too flat a trajectory, making a shorter line, but requiring a tighter, more technical turn. The crew, their backs to the direction of the galley, maintained their rhythm. Cascais realised that his approach was too close, but rather than pulling wider and losing a little time, gambled on being able to make the turn smartly enough to whip around.

It was a manoeuvre that would have taxed an experienced helm, and it was too much for Cascais. *Grrrch!* The lead starboard oar caught the rock, snapped clean in half; the hull followed with an alarming thud.

"Starboard oars! Push off! Push off!" cried Mirko. "Cascais—hard to port, hard to port!"

Cascais waved the helm ineffectually while the crew did what they could to push *Sapphire Light* back away from the rock. Fenneker liberally applied the *snib*, despite Mirko's instructions to the contrary.

Eventually *Sapphire Light* was back in the main stream, albeit virtually stationary. *Dragonchaser*, who had executed the turn perfectly, slid past at Nine, and while *Sapphire Light* was realigning herself *Excelsior* moved past too, Raidis giving a cheery wave.

Sapphire Light, with one starboard oar broken and another badly cracked, and the hull leaking, was in no position to make up the ground, even if Fenneker had applied himself to encouragement rather than brutality. Fortunately the current was now in her favour, and while *Dragonchaser* and *Excelsior* streaked away, only *Morvellos Devil* made serious inroads into the remainder of the gap.

Fenneker affected not to hear Mirko's calls from the observation platform, and instructed Jenx to set a ludicrous Nine rhythm. Given the speed at which she had rowed the first leg, and the damage she had sustained, this was the height of optimism. Inevitably several of the crew fell short of the rhythm, leading to fouling and erratic course. Cascais, a dejected figure in his

Azure livery, was unable to correct such veering. Fenneker became steadily more enraged, roaming the deck beating any rower who dropped below the Nine.

Morvellos Devil, rowing Eight but with a full complement of oars and a more sustainable rhythm, passed *Sapphire Light* with a great cheer just before the finish line. Zigzagging wildly, *Sapphire Light* crossed the line in fourth place to a good ovation. Mirko would have settled for the result beforehand, but the race should have been won. Both Cascais and Fenneker had revealed significant defects.

Fenneker appeared to place the blame elsewhere. He dragged Walisse, the unlucky oarsman who had been snapped on the Rock, from his seat as *Sapphire Light* moved alongside the jetty.

"You cost us the race! You cost us the race! If we'd gone round the Rock first we'd have won!"

"How could I tell? I was facing backwards!" replied Walisse with some spirit.

"Bastard slave-son of a pox-whore!" yelled Fenneker. "No slave talks back to me!"

He struck Walisse full in the face with the *snib*, opening a wound from cheek to jaw. Walisse fell senseless to the deck, which was insufficient to check Fenneker's rage. Again and again he beat the prone figure.

Mirko leaped from the platform. "Fenneker!" he said, voice quiet but eyes blazing. "Stop that—now!"

Fenneker simply looked up and spat, then raised his arm for another strike at Walisse. At the top of his stroke, Mirko held his wrist and took the *snib*, which he then brought down on Fenneker's shoulders. Fenneker toppled over in sheer astonishment. Mirko hauled him up by his Azure blouse, which he then ripped off. He then administered three smart blows to Fenneker's bare back. Fenneker, too stunned to respond, simply stared. Mirko grasped Fenneker's waistband firmly.

"Fenneker," he said loudly enough for the whole galley to hear. "You are a disgrace, not just to the position of overseer, but to the condition of man. Consider yourself discharged—on the instant!"

With this Mirko pitched Fenneker over the side of *Sapphire Light* and into the dock in front of the watching masses. After some ineffectual splashing, a dockhand held out a long pole and Fenneker was hauled to safety.

The crowd, at first stunned into silence, set up a great chant. "*Sapphire! Sapphire! Sapphire!*" If part of Mirko's job was to boost Bartazan's popularity with the masses, it seemed he had earned his money today.

He jumped nimbly off the galley and walked off into the crowd. A woman in black bumped against him, and Mirko turned to apologise. It was 'N'. "I imagine Bartazan will want to talk to you tonight. So do I. Come to the Waterside when you're through with the Elector," she said, and was gone.

Bartazan proved elusive, and it was not until early that evening that Mirko found him. The Peremptor traditionally held a banquet at his grace and favour palace Coverciano after the major regattas, to which Electors, gentlefolk and crew were invited; naturally the guest-list did not include the slaves.

Coverciano was a palace in some contrast to Formello; it occupied sprawling grounds on the outskirts of the city, a two-storey structure of white stone, surrounded by luxuriant gardens concealing artfully concealed grottoes, groves and glades. It was a place designed for warfare covert rather than overt.

Mirko presented himself at the main entrance, where Constables in Peremptor's black scrutinised his credentials before conducting him to a cool high chamber. Immediately Mirko saw Bartazan in conversation with another Elector, one of those who had been present on his visit to Formello. Before he could make his presence known, Carnazan approached him with a bound.

"Mirko! Good to see you! You were unlucky today."

Mirko gave a grim smile. "Hello, Carnazan. I hope your uncle takes the same view, although as I caught him wagering on the result beforehand, somehow I doubt it."

Carnazan shrugged as if really it were all the same. "My prototype is coming along nicely—with any luck we will have a trial next week. Can you come along?"

"No doubt that will depend on your uncle's humour. Something tells me we will be spending a lot of time at sea over the next week."

Before Carnazan could respond, two voices called out:

"Mirko!"

"Ascalon!"

The first was Larien, and Mirko responded with a cheery wave; before registering that the second voice was Bartazan's. He immediately set his countenance to gloomy.

"When you have finished ogling my niece, captain, perhaps I might have a word?"

"Of course, my lord." Mirko could not repress the image of Bartazan's ankles chasing Ansifer and Locapeste round his bedchamber and failed in his attempt to subdue a smirk.

"I fail to see the source of your amusement, captain. *Sapphire Light*, or should I say you, threw away the best chance of victory I have had for two years. Join me immediately in the ante-chamber!" said Bartazan, indicating the adjoining room.

Unfortunately the room was already occupied by Raidis and Haidis of *Excelsior*; they were engaged in earnest conversation with the hapless Cascais, who appeared not to have borne his error with fortitude. His flushed face, dishevelled garments and inane smirk indicated an excessive acquaintance with Coverciano's wine, at the very least.

Bartazan bowed without warmth to Raidis and Haidis. Raidis grinned back with something marginally short of insolence. "My lord."

"Gentlemen, would you be so good as to give us privacy? I am keen to discuss events with Ascalon and Cascais."

Raidis uttered a hoot of laughter. "No doubt you are, my lord. My only surprise is that overseer Fenneker is not here to add his own contribution—perhaps with the *snib*."

Bartazan sniffed with probably unaffected hauteur. "Be that as it may, I require the use of this chamber. You will oblige me by quitting it immediately."

"I'm sure I would," said Raidis, "if my intent were to oblige you in the first place. Since I feel no such urge, I think I will remain here. What do you say, Haidis?"

"Yes."

Bartazan glowered. Neither by temperament nor by station was he a man who brooked insolence or dissent.

"Ascalon! Cascais! Leave the room to these louts. If we must transact our business outside we shall."

"Well said, my lord!" cried Cascais, only to be silenced by a terrible frown.

Mirko and Cascais followed Bartazan through an archway into a pleasant garden, where liveried footmen served spiced red wine and piquant savoury larks. Cascais reached out for a goblet, but desisted when Mirko shook his head. Mirko felt that the interview would prove difficult enough, without Cascais any drunker than he already was.

"Well, Captain Ascalon," said Bartazan as he seated himself on a bench. "I would be interested to hear your observations on the race and its immediate aftermath."

"All in all, my lord," began Mirko. "I detected cautious grounds for encouragement. The crew's physical strength has clearly improved, and under more sympathetic oversight, the raggedness which marred the latter part of the race could have been avoided."

"You apportion the blame for the fiasco solely to the absent Fenneker, then?" asked Bartazan as he crunched into a lark.

"I would not use the term 'fiasco' at all," said Mirko. "Certainly not in the context of a fourth-placed finish which exceeded all expectations."

"Enough!" cried Bartazan in rising displeasure, nearly choking on his lark. "Approaching the Rock you had the race won! From here, fourth place is a travesty, an abortion, a—"

Mirko interjected smoothly, "Approaching the Rock we were under considerable pressure from *Dragonchaser*, a galley plainly able to sustain a higher tempo. Our only hope of winning was to go round ahead, and Cascais took a gamble to see we did. It failed, but a more conservative approach would have been no more successful, I think."

Bartazan looked some way short of convinced by Mirko's analysis.

"You might also care to explain the somewhat unorthodox circumstances under which my overseer disembarked *Sapphire Light*."

"The situation is essentially straightforward," said Mirko as he took a sip of his wine, nodding in appreciation. "You will remember that I had previously alluded to significant defects in Fenneker's performance: in the event these defects became even more manifest that I had suspected, and I was left with no recourse but to discharge him on the spot. Since his abilities were so negligible, I can only assume you had employed him as a favour to friend or creditor; and I apologise for any embarrassment arising."

For the first time in their acquaintance, Bartazan was speechless. While he attempted to formulate a suitable reply, a figure crashed through the undergrowth: Fenneker, if possible even drunker than Cascais.

"I hear you, Ascalon!" he cried. "'Discharged!' I was employed by my lord Bartazan, and only he can discharge me!"

"Fenneker!" said Cascais placatingly. "Perhaps we can discuss this under less fraught circumstances."

In a single movement Fenneker turned and landed a flawless punch on Cascais's nose, with a consequent eruption of blood. Cascais lay on his back in the flowerbed, looking stupidly up at his assailant.

Fenneker stood over him, veins standing out from his forehead, alcoholic fumes reeking from his person. "If it wasn't for you, pansy-boy, none of this would have happened! If you'd only managed to get round the Rock, I'd not have had to push the slaves so hard. And then that whorson Ascalon would—"

"That's enough, Fenneker," said Mirko, guiding him away from Cascais, whose efforts to rise were proving ineffectual.

Fenneker shook off Mirko's arm and squared up to him. "You caught me off guard today, pimp. Perhaps now we'll see who's the better man—if you dare."

Mirko laughed in open contempt. Fenneker was taller and broader, but while the drink might dull his pain, it would also have destroyed his reflexes. And he doubted strongly that Fenneker was used to fighting anyone who might hit back.

Goaded, Fenneker launched a long right hand at Mirko's chin. Mirko swayed out of the way, feinted with his right hand, and tripped Fenneker into the flowerbed, where he sprawled alongside Cascais, with no greater dignity.

Crawling to his feet, he rose to face Bartazan, who had been watching the proceedings in stunned silence, a lark halfway to his mouth.

"My lord," said Fenneker. "I am your loyal overseer. I do not take orders from Ascalon, and most certainly he does not discharge me."

Mirko said: "For once Fenneker and I agree. He does not take orders from me—in fact he disobeyed my order to go to Tempo Eight this afternoon. And, regrettably, neither do I discharge him. You have a choice to make, my lord."

Bartazan's pale blue eyes were cold. Mirko did not think he was a sentimental man.

"Constables!" he called, and two Peremptor's men appeared with amazing facility. "Escort the Gentle Fenneker from the premises if you please. He no longer carries the status of overseer, and as such represents a gatecrasher."

Fenneker gave an incoherent bellow as the two guards frog-marched him from the scene. Looking

back over his shoulder, he called: "I won't forget this—either of you!"

Mirko had already turned away. He gave his hand to Cascais and pulled him upright from his botanical bed. "Go home, Cascais," he said. "We'll talk tomorrow."

Dabbing at his nose, Cascais left with what dignity he could manage. At least, thought Mirko, he was leaving without an involuntary escort.

Bartazan and Mirko were alone in the garden.

"Let's get something clear, Ascalon," said Bartazan. "In effect you gave me an ultimatum over Fenneker. Remember who is the Elector here."

"My lord," said Mirko. "It had become essential that Fenneker be discharged; plainly you had reached the same conclusion, or you would not have done so. If you want to moralise after the event, of course you may. The fact is that you've greatly helped your chances today."

Bartazan sniffed. "You now have the problem of finding a new overseer."

"I intend to take on the role myself."

"Can you handle slaves?" Bartazan asked sceptically.

"I can handle seamen. Two of the crew are Garganet officers. I can hardly do worse than Fenneker, at any rate."

Bartazan pursed his lips. "What next? Don't expect me to get rid of Cascais too."

"We both know Cascais isn't up to the job. The Hanspar isn't a difficult race to steer; it only has one turn and he botched that."

"Cascais' father is a client of mine. He's also the Elector Nool Vavar, on whose vote I will depend in the election. I can hardly dispense with his son under those circumstances."

"I thought if you won the Margariad you didn't need to worry about cheeseparing votes."

"Ha! There you have me!" barked Bartazan with an unexpected laugh. "If you could guarantee me victory with the right helm, of course Cascais would be out on his ear."

"I can guarantee you victory under those circumstances," said Mirko with a slight smile. Bartazan looked around sharply.

"It's simple," said Mirko. "Get me Drallenkoop, and I'll win you the Margariad!"

"You never know when to stop, Ascalon! Since I assume you have no constructive suggestions to make on

this score, Cascais remains. Presumably you can teach him some of the rudiments of steering.”

Mirko shrugged, emptying his goblet. “What I can’t teach him is how not to panic when *Dragonchaser’s* coming up on his outside. The best he can aspire to is competence; élan will always be beyond him.”

Bartazan had no answer. After a pause, he said: “Be honest, Ascalon. How did we really do today? Might we have won?”

Mirko paused and turned to face Bartazan. “We did better than I thought we would; but we had all the luck going and still came fourth. We had a good draw when *Dragonchaser* and *Excelsior* didn’t; and *Fanar’s Glory* blocked the field so effectively that we should have been away and clear. And it wasn’t enough. Make no mistake, even if we’d got round the Rock first, *Dragonchaser* would still have caught us. We’d have held off *Morvellos Devil* and maybe *Excelsior*. For this early in the season, we didn’t do too badly; but we are nowhere near *Dragonchaser*.”

Bartazan nodded slowly. “Thank you for your honesty,” he said. “If you’ll excuse me, there are several Electors I need to flatter.”

He turned and walked back towards the palace. Mirko waited a few minutes, and then set off to find Larien.



Chapter 5

By the time Mirko had returned to the banqueting hall, Larien was nowhere to be seen. Instead, he was surprised to find himself approached by Drallenkoop. Mirko inclined his head. “Well raced today, sir.”

Drallenkoop waved the compliment away. “It was no sort of race at all. *Fanar’s Glory* ruined it as a spectacle; Essikant should be suspended for such idiocy.”

“If you thought Fanar’s helmsman was bad . . .”

Drallenkoop laughed, reaching for a goblet of firewine. “Admittedly Cascais did not enjoy the best of races—an event which can hardly have surprised you.”

“It’s hard to helm a tired crew, especially under pressure from a faster boat. Cascais was not as culpable as they make out.”

“You hardly need to spar with me, Ascalon. I know a helming error when I see one; I’ve even made a few myself. You didn’t race badly today, though.”

“Candidly, *Sapphire Light* performed above expectations; given certain reforms I want to implement, we may yet be competitive this season.”

“Well said, Mirko!” cried Larien, who had approached from some place of concealment. “I enjoyed the race today. I’m sure we’ll see better performances later in the season—maybe even in the Margariad!”

Mirko smiled. “You are too kind, my lady. I hope *Sapphire Light* can repay your faith—and of course your uncle’s.”

Drallenkoop drained his goblet with a flourish. He was the kind of man, thought Mirko, who would hold his drink well. “I’ll bid you good night—my father has promised his friends I will be on hand to recount the day’s story. My lady; Ascalon.” He bowed and went on his way.

Mirko found himself alone with Larien, a state which excited conflicting emotions. ‘N’, for whatever purposes of her own, had enjoined him to make the most of Larien’s company; and for a fact he felt his heart beating a little faster.

Larien took his arm. “Shall we take a turn around the gardens, Mirko? Coverciano has many secret places to enjoy.”

“I’d be delighted, my lady.”

“Mirko, as a Garganet there is no compulsion on you to refer to me as ‘my lady’. An Elector’s niece is only important to a Paladrian. It would be so much nicer if you called me ‘Larien’.”

Mirko couldn’t remember ever inviting to Larien to use his first name; it was hardly something he felt inclined to object to.

As they walked through a secluded bower away from the main hall, Mirko appraised Larien from the corner of his eye. What was it Cascais had said before his first visit to Formello? ‘Women rather comelier than you are accustomed to’? He might have been a disastrous helm, but it seemed he had a hidden talent for understatement.

“I’m sure you’re thinking what a terrible frump I look,” said Larien. “Men as quiet as you are usually thinking something to my detriment.”

“If they are so quiet, how do you know what they are thinking?”

Larien laughed her clear high laugh. “All I do is fish harmlessly for a compliment, and you tyrannise my speech.”

"If you'd wanted to know what I thought of your gown, you need only have asked," smiled Mirko. "I will volunteer my opinion that the sublime quality of the fabric is matched only by the beauty of its wearer."

Larien laughed again and touched her throat. "So you are a courtier after all! Cascais could not have summoned such aplomb."

"In truth," said Mirko, "it is a skill I have had little opportunity to develop or practice. I find that your person . . . inspires . . . such flights."

"I begin to think, Mirko," she said with a widening smile, "that there is rather more to you than meets the eye. You have even managed to hold your own with my uncle so far."

"Bartazan's aims are simple and straightforward, if largely unrealistic. Dealing with such transparent motivations is by no means difficult. I confess to more perplexity when called upon to entertain a charming and beautiful woman of mysterious potentials."

"Why Mirko! I believe you are making love to me!"

Mirko flushed. Larien was far too mercurial to be dealt with safely. Not for the first time, he wished 'N' had told him everything she knew.

"I am simply practising the skills that it seems are such an important part of Paladrian society."

Larien leaned into him, and Mirko caught a delicate scent of perfume. "So you do not in fact find me the most fascinating woman of your acquaintance?"

"I . . . I don't recall making any such —"

"Oh, Mirko, you showed so much promise in the ways of the courtier. I had hoped to be able to discuss fine fabrics and puppies, as I do with Cascais. But it seems you are just not suited to such things; evidently I will have to find some other use for you."

Mirko felt that he did well to suppress a leer at this point. "My talents are by and large limited to nautical matters—and even in that area they are finite."

Larien looked up into his eyes, her cheeks flushed with the wine. "You raced well today, Mirko. Cascais and Fenneker are worse than useless. Given such clods you did well."

Mirko shrugged. "We win or lose together—except Fenneker, in the future."

"You will do very well this year—as long as you don't think you can beat Drallenkoop."

Mirko turned sharply. "I thought you were supposed to be encouraging me."

Larien slipped her arm into his as they walked. "And so I am, dear Mirko. *Dragonchaser* is far and away the best galley that has ever raced: Drallenkoop is a peerless helm, and he has good, strong slaves. If you measure your success against *Dragonchaser*, you will always be disappointed. Accept that your goals must be more modest, and you can still take satisfaction from the year."

"Your uncle has employed me specifically to win the Margariad. Much of my reward is dependent on doing so. And what kind of man would I be to accept defeat after two races of the season?"

"Mirko, please believe me when I say I am thinking of you. I'd happily see my uncle come in last every race this year—but I am wishing for you do well. Just don't set your sights too high; it will only end in cruel disappointment for you."

"Are we still talking about galleys?"

Larien disengaged her arm and turned away, looking down. "We shouldn't be having this conversation. I need to find my brother. I will see you soon."

With that she was gone, leaving Mirko staring into the manzipar trees in the middle distance.



Mirko found that he had little further appetite for the Peremptor's Regatta Banquet; in addition he remembered that he was supposed to meet 'N' at the Waterside. Without so much as a glance at the other guests, he walked back out through the main hall and set off for the Old Town.

At the Waterside nothing had changed. 'N' was nowhere to be seen; even taking into account her remarkable powers of concealment, it seemed that he had been stood up. He grimaced; he had enough good information to expect a decent pouch of coin.

"Panduletta," he called, "a mug of beer, if you please."

"On the house," she said as she filled a battered pewter vessel. "Your fame has brought a lot of customers in tonight."

"We only came fourth."

"Not that—you thrashed Fenneker! In this part of town you need never pay for a drink again. Twice a month he's down on the docks, going with the girls and never paying—and rough with it. Thinking about it, it's not just drinks you don't need to pay for . . ."

Mirko laughed.

"Don't get too cosy, hero," said a voice in his ear. It was, of course, 'N'. She had timed her arrival with exactitude. Tonight she wore a long black cloak completely covering all her other garments, although the night was by no means cold. "Get me some beer; I'll be in the corner."

Panduletta filled another mug. "Too snooty for you," she said.

"If she was 'for me' I'd agree with you," replied Mirko. "She's just someone I'm doing some business with." He passed over a coin to pay for 'N's beer.

By the time Mirko reached the corner booth 'N' had arranged herself artfully in the maximum shadow. Her dark eyes were all but invisible.

"Do you have anything for me?"

Mirko reached out the letter he had concealed on his person. "You'll find this is what you want—and I've learned more."

He outlined the previous evening's events, giving full weight to Bartazan's bedchamber lubricities. 'N' laughed in unaffected mirth; this was a new 'N' he had not seen before.

"You've done very well," she said. "I don't know who the man reporting to Bartazan was; the evidence would suggest a member of Medina's household. Now if we could find out who that conspirator was, we'd have yet another lever."

She swigged at her beer and threw her hood back. Her hair was clean and seemingly scented. "And what about the lovely Larien? I was right about her, wasn't I?"

"Up to a point," admitted Mirko. "She has been cordial—much more than cordial—both yesterday and today. How much is play and how much real I wouldn't care to speculate."

'N' smiled. "Why speculate at all? Just take events at face value."

"It's not quite that simple. Tonight I seemed to go too far, although I don't entirely know what I did. She is profoundly—disorienting, I suppose."

"It may be that the word you're looking for is 'female'. Do you like her?"

Mirko sighed and took a long swill of beer. "'Like' doesn't seem to come into it. She doesn't inspire such commonplace emotions. She is fascinating, alluring, beautiful of course; but I get no sense of her as a person. She loves galley racing and her brother; she

appears to hate her uncle. Other than that, her preferences are wholly inscrutable."

"It sounds to me like she's hooked you. She'll have you drooling like Cascais at this rate."

"It's not like that at all with Cascais!" said Mirko heatedly. "She thinks he's a—"

'N' laughed. "Mirko! I am joking—sort of, anyway. It does no harm to flirt with her a bit, you know. As long as you're careful."

To Mirko the observation admitted of more than one interpretation. This time he decided to let it pass.

"I suppose you want paying," she said.

"That is the basis of our arrangement."

'N' reached a pouch out of her cloak. "There'll be more next time. By the way, I assume your remark about a bonus for not winning the Margariad was a jocularity."

"Why should it be? You want me to stop *Sapphire Light* winning; in doing so I lose 12,000 valut—an amount which would set me up for life."

'N' leaned back in her hard seat and laughed. "The fact that you cannot win is neither here nor there, I suppose?"

"What makes you think I can't? I've got rid of Fenneker, which is a good start."

"If there's one thing I know about, it's galley racing—it's in my blood. *Sapphire Light* has no chance at all of winning the Margariad. Your slaves are weaker than Drallenkoop's, and Cascais is not a competent helm. Add in Drallenkoop's peerless knowledge of the tides and currents, and you are not in the same race."

Mirko frowned, although the analysis substantially coincided with his own. "In that case, 'N', why are you bothering to pay me at all?"

"I really don't need to tell you anything."

"I tend to work better when I'm trusted."

"You're hired help."

Mirko flinched. "I'm a Garganet officer, not some periwigged waiter."

"Were a Garganet officer; there's a distinction."

Mirko stood up angrily. "Tell me what you like, as long as you pay me. Nothing could reinforce my degraded estate more than having to take insolence from you."

'N' reached out and held Mirko's wrist; her small hand was cool and dry. "I'm sorry, Ascalon. I really shouldn't have said that. I meant no disrespect."

Mirko sat down heavily. "One day perhaps you'll tell me about—why you left Garganet," she said.

"I can't imagine you don't know," snapped Mirko. "I thought you did your homework."

'N' brushed a stray hair out of her eye with a characteristic gesture. "Please," she said. "I don't want to quarrel. You have undertaken your assignments very effectively so far. Sometimes I just get a little edgy."

Shrugging his shoulders, Mirko said: "I can't imagine your job is very easy—or why you do it."

"Look," she said, leaning forward, "I'll tell you a little of the background, so you can see why I need you."

"Go on."

"It won't surprise you to know that a large number of people don't want Bartazan to win the election. That starts with Medina, the current Peremptor, of course; takes in those factions among the Electors who could expect to be suppressed, such as Drallenkoop's father Koopendrall; those loyal by interest to Medina such as Sarindorp; but also comprises various vested interests in the city. Suppose you held the tax-collection monopoly like Dambuzor? You wouldn't be keen to see Bartazan come to power and redistribute the monopolies."

"True."

"Let's just say that I work for someone who would be materially inconvenienced by 'Peremptor Bartazan'. Bartazan's hopes of victory depend on one of two contingencies. The first, and essentially least problematical, is to win the Margariad. His popularity in the city would soar; many of the Electors are swayed by such things; others would be genuinely impressed if *Sapphire Light* won. In what promises to be a close election, a victory in the Margariad would swing things. Surely you knew that?"

"Yes, Bartazan and others have made the same point."

"I've explained that *Dragonchaser's* eminence makes such a strategy impractical, although he loses nothing by trying it."

"I am surprised Bartazan does not consider sabotaging *Dragonchaser*."

"The ploy would be somewhat transparent; neither would it work. He would simply lose to *Excelsior* or *Morvellos Devil* instead. So that leaves the political angle. Bartazan's 'secret source' appears to believe that Medina currently holds a majority; an analysis with which I concur. He will attempt to bribe, flatter or otherwise

suborn the remaining votes. I need you to keep an eye on what he's doing. As *Sapphire Light's* trainer, and a foreigner, you are both close to the centre of events and above—or rather beneath—suspicion."

"Thank you," said Mirko. "If you'd told me all that at the beginning we need never have quarrelled."

'N' smiled and drained her mug. "Get me another of these," she said, "and we're friends again. Keep your eyes open, and soon I may have another job for you."



Chapter 6

The next morning was market day in the Old Town. Mirko found himself with the unusual luxury of gold in his purse, and decided to repair various deficiencies in his attire before attending to training in the afternoon. A breakfast of hot fried whelks bought from a seafront stall made his mood even sunnier. Around the docks many people nodded cordially: galley-racers were always popular, and one who had so roundly trounced his overseer as Mirko was something of a celebrity.

Galley-racing seemed to involve an inordinate amount of banqueting, and Mirko was keen that neither his own lustre nor that of *Sapphire Light* should be tarnished by shabby garments. Larien, too, would no doubt prefer to see him in rather more modish garb.

The booth of Enoxifer, "Apparelister to the Electors", seemed to offer the most satisfactory range of stuffs, although prices were by no means economical.

"Sir, may I help you?" asked an elderly man with a wig which would have appeared unwise on a courtier many years younger.

"I am looking—at relatively modest expense—to create a wardrobe which will allow me to mix in decent society without embarrassment."

"Since I am Enoxifer, you have begun your programme the right way. First, we must establish two essential parameters: what you consider to be 'decent society'; and a quantitative assessment of 'modest expense'."

Mirko flipped the last whelk from his portion into the air and caught it in his mouth. "My two most recent social functions were a soirée at Formello and last night's banquet at Coverciano. 'Modest expense' com-

prehends a sum which prevents me from pitching you into the docks, as I did to my overseer yesterday.”

Enoxifer’s eyebrows advanced a little up his forehead. “You must, then, be the gallant Captain Ascalon!”

“I no longer use the term ‘captain’, but essentially you are correct.”

“You can be assured of my best attention, sir,” said Enoxifer as he flapped away two assistants who had descended in competitive obsequiousness.

Mirko had not realised quite how much was involved in selecting a new wardrobe. Enoxifer provided a ready fund of advice, but his tastes ran towards the flamboyant, and Mirko was frequently obliged to check his enthusiasm.

“We will save time,” said Mirko, “if we rule out of consideration immediately all shoes with curled toes. Frills, ruffs and fancies of all sorts can also be disregarded. I am not excessively vain, and require a style of address which implies sober, respectable competence rather than giddy preening.”

Enoxifer pursed his lips, absentmindedly adjusting his wig which had slipped from the level. “Your views are unorthodox. In good society one does not generally wish to convey the impression of having arrived straight from the plough or the docks.”

“I did not notice Drallenkoop in pumps or glitter-britches last night.”

Enoxifer sniffed disdainfully, an effect somewhat undermined by the hawking cough which followed. “My lord Drallenkoop achieves his success in society through his racing prowess. Were he judged on the quality of his wardrobe no doubt his status would be very different.”

“Enoxifer, I do not imagine that my own status will ever rest on my garments. Simply array me in good quality apparel which emphasises timelessness over modishness.”

With a sigh Enoxifer pulled out a measure and began to chart Mirko’s dimensions. Some while later Mirko left with Enoxifer having drawn up the patterns for a suite of garments which largely met his requirements: two pairs of good leather boots, two pairs of breeches (one black and one white), a scarlet frock coat with gold frogging (about which Mirko retained considerable reservations), a more sober plum and umber coat, and another which cleverly represented the Azure of Bartazan House. Enoxifer had also provided a range of somewhat extravagant neckerchiefs as well as some

honest white blouses. Mirko had drawn the line at perfumed white gloves despite Enoxifer’s blandishments. Haggling had been minimal; a further reference to Feneker had been sufficient to extract what seemed a competitive price.

Time was limited for patronage of the other stalls. Mirko invested in a moderately expensive bracelet for Larien and, on a capricious impulse, a pewter mug for ‘N’ since she seemed to enjoy drinking at his expense. He also bought a Neidel dagger, the black hilt exquisitely chased with golden filigree.

Mirko had time only to snatch a half-loaf of bread and a mug of beer for his lunch before setting off for afternoon training at the Urmalest barracks. He arrived to find the slaves lounging around under the negligent supervision of a temporary overseer from Bartazan’s household. Cascais, no doubt nursing his injuries or a hangover, was not in evidence.

Mirko discharged Bartazan’s functionary and addressed the men on the sandy drill compound.

“You will notice that neither Feneker nor Cascais is among us today. Following an incident at Coverciano last night, I can confirm that Feneker has been discharged and no longer represents the House of Bartazan in any capacity. Cascais sustained an injury at the same function and has been excused duty today.”

A cheer went up from the majority of the men; discharging Feneker could not be seen as anything but a welcome reform. Mirko noticed that neither of the Garganets, Florio and Damiano, joined in with the general applause. Whatever Mirko did, he would always be a renegade with these two. It was an unsatisfactory situation; both were good rowers and influential among the crew.

Damiano called out: “Who is our new overseer?”

“The post is currently vacant. In the interim I will undertake the duties of the post myself. Ortazek, you will put the men through the physical routines this afternoon; I will be watching to ensure that no slackness is permitted. Walisse, Florio, Damiano, Jenx: you are excused training this afternoon, since I wish to discuss race tactics with you.”

The four slaves in question raised themselves with little enthusiasm.

“Walisse,” called Mirko. “How long is it since you drank good beer?”

Walisse considered for a moment. “Five years or so, I’d say. My lord Bartazan decreed a festival when the

Lady Inuela fell pregnant—not that it did any good, of course.”

“Today, then, is your lucky day. We will wander into the Old Town and ponder over a mug or two.”

Walissee and Jenx appeared heartened by this news; although in the case of Jenx this was purely relative, since the *falcx* he had taken yesterday had the effect of depressing his spirits today. Neither Florio nor Damiano appeared seduced by the prospect of beer. Sullenly they pulled on their Azure blouses and set off for the town.

Their moods improved a little as they walked unshackled through the Old Town. By the time they had arrived at the Waterside they were at least no longer displaying overt hostility.

“Panduletta!” called Mirko on entering the tavern. “Five mugs of Widdershins, if you please.” Panduletta’s young son, who answered to no name more grandiose than ‘Boy’ brought the mugs over, and Mirko said nothing while the crewmen quaffed their first draughts. Even Florio and Damiano appeared impressed.

“There are things we need to discuss,” said Mirko after a decent pause. “The four of you are the most influential crewmen, both on and off the boat. If we’re going to win the Margariad, I need your help; both to establish a winning strategy, and to carry the rest of them along.”

Damiano smilingly shook his head. “Do you seriously believe we can win?”

“Of course. What can Drallenkoop do that we can’t?”

Florio raised a didactic finger. “Firstly, he can steer accurately. Secondly, draw on the experience of winning. Thirdly, call on the complete loyalty of his crew. None of those observations applies to *Sapphire Light*.”

Damiano smirked; Walissee and Jenx concentrated on their beer.

Mirko signalled for more beer. “Let’s leave aside the question of helmsmanship for now. If only experienced winners could ever win, *Dragonchaser* would win the Margariad for the next thousand years; a contingency I find remote. If we race better than *Dragonchaser*, we will beat her.”

Florio shrugged. “That leaves point three.”

“You suggest that Bartazan fails to command the same commitment from his crew as Drallenkoop?”

“Not just Bartazan. The crew are no more keen to row for you; while *Dragonchaser*’s overseer Mengippu is popular among the men.”

“The crew seemed happy enough when I discharged Fenneker yesterday. The only ones who don’t want to row for me are you and Damiano. The others recognise the better and fairer treatment they’ve had since I’ve been involved.”

“If that was so obvious,” said Damiano, “you wouldn’t be needing to belabour the point now.”

“Walissee, Jenx: your views would be of interest here.”

Jenx, feeling the unaccustomed effect of beer piled upon yesterday’s *falcx*, exclaimed aloud. “For a fact Fenneker was a miserable bastard. But all I do is beat the rhythm. I can do that for you or for Fenneker.”

“Walissee?”

Walissee was not by and large the most electric of intellects. He spoke rarely, but his opinion was generally respected.

“Here’s how it is for me, captain,” he said, as Mirko, Florio and Damiano all winced at his use of the title. “You’ve treated us very much more fairly since you’ve come aboard. We’ve had better food, better rest, better conditions; and last night they were fairly singing your praises for the way you dealt with Fenneker. But when it comes down to it, suppose we really do improve, pull it off, win the Margariad: who benefits? Me? No, I just get to carry on rowing, the same as ever, until I get too old. Then it’s general service or the smelter. You? You’ll probably get some kind of bonus, enough for you to go off and do your own thing. But it’s Bartazan who really wins: he’ll be Peremptor, he’ll have won the Margariad, and he’ll think it’s all down to him. It won’t help any of us. Deep down, sir, the men would rather Drallenkoop won the race than Bartazan.”

“Thank you, Walissee. I respect your honesty. Do the rest of you agree?”

“I don’t care,” said Jenx.

Florio said, “Drallenkoop’s a slave-owner just as much as Bartazan. He doesn’t deserve to win any more than anyone else. They say he treats his slaves humanely; well, he shouldn’t have slaves in the first place, so it’s no great credit. Naturally I hate Bartazan, a man who claims he owns me; and it’s no secret that it’s a dishonour for me to serve under you.”

“Damiano?”

Damiano looked at the ceiling. “Florio perhaps puts it more strongly than I would have, but essentially our views are the same.”

Mirko drained his mug and called for some pickled herring.

“Our goals would not appear to coincide,” he said. “I am employed by Bartazan to win the Margariad, an objective you seem to consider at best trivial, at worst misguided. I have a small number of options. One is that I say to Bartazan: ‘This crew is intractable; no matter how I drill them they lack the will to improve. In all honour I must resign my post and allow you to select a new candidate.’ The other option is that I convince you, by whatever means, that your better interests are served by making a serious effort. Does this seem a reasonable analysis?”

Damiano nodded.

“The first option is the one that occasions me the least inconvenience. I lose some of my fee, but I am saved the vexations of working with clay. For you, however, I suspect it is the least satisfactory outcome. Who will Bartazan select to superintend affairs? It’s unlikely to be someone with views as liberal as mine: inevitably you will be tyrannised and your condition will be as bad, or worse, as before I took over.”

Florio shook his head. “So we stick with you so that our servitude will be a more comfortable indignity.”

“Essentially so.”

“The analysis is not entirely persuasive.”

“The four of you, unanimously, must decide here and now that you will back me. Otherwise I go to Bartazan this evening; tomorrow you may find Fenneker your overseer.”

Walissee spoke. “I’ll row for you.”

Jenx: “I’ll beat for you.”

Florio and Damiano were silent. Finally Damiano said:

“After the race—can you get a message to Garganet? To say where we are.”

“I guarantee it.”

“Then I’m with you. I have to believe my family would get me out if they knew I was here.”

“Florio: it’s all down to you.”

Florio spat on the floor, attracting a scowl from Pan-duletta.

“I will row with full vigour; I will not intrigue against you; but my heart’s core remains my own. That’s my best offer.”

Mirko sighed. It would have to do. “That’s good enough for me, Florio. I know you will keep your word. Now, I have prepared some charts . . .”

It was rather later in the afternoon that Mirko and the crew emerged into the sunlight. Unusually for so late in the day, the market-place was still crowded. On the dais in the plaza normally reserved for political addresses stood a commanding figure in purple robes: a Public Declamator.

“—and I present to you the following information, warranted accurate by the Elector Koopendrall! The following letter was sent by the Elector Bartazan to the Elector Chiess-Vervario:

Under the Grand Seal of Bartazan

At Formello

The 14th Day of May, Second Peremptorate of Medina,
Fourth Year

My Lord Chiess-Vervario,

I am pleased to report that the person who has so vexed you has been apprehended. . . .

Mirko stopped listening at this point, since he knew full well what was coming next. His companions, however, were rapt, along with the crowd. The Public Declamator continued in his well-modulated tones. When he had finished the letter, he paused briefly.

“The Elector Koopendrall appends a commentary to this information, which I read as follows:

The foregoing correspondence shows a very great conspiracy against the state of Paladria. Bartazan, an Elector who aspires to the August Office, has immured in his private dungeons at Formello the person of Gambar Inisse, the lover of the Elector Chiess-Vervario’s daughter Ratzendila; in so doing he hopes to secure Chiess-Vervario’s vote in the forthcoming Election. People of Paladria, I, Koopendrall ask you: can this be tolerated?”

The crowd was silent while it digested the information, the significance of which was largely lost on Mirko. As he looked quizzically at Florio, the crowd erupted into chants of ‘No!’, ‘Down with Bartazan!’, ‘Koopendrall for Peremptor’ and the like.

Florio said: “Gambar Inisse used to helm *Fanar’s Glory*; at the same time he romanced the Elector Chiess-Vervario’s daughter—a circumstance which

made Inisse tremendously popular with the crowd and Chiess-Vervario something of a laughing stock among the Electors, since Inisse was of no great pedigree. Then Inisse disappeared and —

“Florio!” called Walisse in alarm. The crowd around them had started to look suspiciously.

“Azure! Azure! They’re Bartazan’s men!” cried one of the mob. Mirko realised that in their distinctive liveries their allegiance was clearly identifiable. “Get them! Give ’em a beating!”

“Run!” shouted Jenx, setting off at a canter. Any chance of talking their way out of this one was gone as the crowd surged after Jenx.

“Make for the Urmalest!” cried Mirko. “They’ll kill us if they catch us!”

Mirko was fortunate that his knowledge of the Old Town’s byways was extensive. Quickly he plunged down a side alley, whose narrowness encumbered the pursuing mass. They seemed all but clear when Walisse, not the nimblest of men, stumbled over a pail of night-soil, sending a foul stinking mass across the street. The mob was on Walisse before he could rise. Mirko was grateful for the dagger he had bought that morning; drawing quickly, he stabbed the first assailant in the side. The man gave a sigh and sank to the ground. The mob stepped back when they saw what had happened.

Damiano and Florio stepped up to Mirko’s shoulder, followed by Jenx. Walisse leapt to his feet and joined his comrades.

“The first man to step forward dies!” called Mirko. “We are going about our business in peace; turn and go!”

The mob suffered from a lack of any real leadership. Now it was forced to think, indecision was the result. Mirko began to hope. From the crowd a man stepped forward, poorly nourished but with wild eyes.

“There are five of you!” he shouted. “There are five hundred of us!”

“You have only one life to waste, fellow! I promise you will die first!”

Mirko felt this advice should have proved placatory, but the man let out a great roar. “Die, Bartazan dogs!” and he surged forward, followed by his peers.

Mirko lashed out once with his knife and the man fell; Walisse buffeted the next and stunned him; Florio dragged down a rope which had been supporting laundry, which confused the mob as the leaders became entangled in sheets and underwear.

“Run!” called Florio and once again they were off; but the Urmalest was far away.

“Make for the tavern!” called Mirko, and with pursuit hot on their heels they emerged onto the dock-front. From an upper window at the Waterside a bow sang and the lead pursuer fell, an arrow in his throat. Too quick for thought the bow was redrawn and another man fell dead. The mob stopped; Mirko and his comrades gained the sanctuary of the tavern. Panduletta immediately barred the door.

“Mirko!” she said. “Are you alright?”

“Yes—for now,” said Mirko with a reasonable approximation of calm.

“I’ve sent Boy to fetch the Peremptor’s Constables—they’ll disperse the crowd.”

“Good work! Who’s the archer? He’s a deadly shot.”

“He’ is your lady friend—the snooty one. She told me she could shoot, and I didn’t believe her. And I still don’t know how she knew she’d have to.”

Mirko laughed. “There isn’t much she doesn’t know about. Now, while we wait, how about a few mugs of Widdershins?”

Panduletta brought over the beer while the company waited for the Constables to arrive. “You were brave today,” said Damiano to Mirko.

“I used to skipper a Garganet galley,” sighed Mirko. “Whatever you think, that’s no job for a coward or a weakling.”

“Maybe there’s more to it all than meets the eye,” said Damiano. Florio ostentatiously looked away; Walisse and Jenx appeared uninterested.

“Maybe there is, Damiano. Or maybe we can just forget about it.”

Damiano shrugged. “When do we get to meet our rescuer?”

Mirko called over to Panduletta. “Where is our friend?”

“She gave instructions that you go up and see her once you remembered to ask about her—alone.”

“That sounds like her,” smiled Mirko. “Gentlemen, if you’ll excuse me.”

Mirko made his way up a deeply unsafe set of stairs, narrow and uneven. He knocked at the room where he judged ‘N’ must be and entered without waiting for an answer.

‘N’ stood by the window, a small bow negligently held in one hand. She turned at Mirko’s approach and

her dark eyes were sparkling. "Ascalon," she said. "You had a narrow escape."

"I noticed. You're pretty good with that bow."

"We all have hidden talents; and I practise."

Mirko sat on the grimy pallet which passed for the bed. "Thank you, by the way. I'm not sure we would have got out."

'N' made an airy gesture. "I got you into trouble in the first place; anyone wandering about in the Azure when that letter came out was likely to be unpopular. I just made sure I knew where you were when the Public Declamator started."

"That's almost sentimental of you, 'N'"

'N' laughed. "Don't flatter yourself—I've invested a lot of my time and somebody else's money to get you where you are. I'd hate to start again. Add in the fact that you're shaping up very promisingly—well, it's simple self-interest."

"I'm glad we understand that," said Mirko, suppressing a grin. "And what about this 'somebody else'? Sooner or later I'm going to find out who. Right now, Koopendrall looks a pretty good bet."

"You still have a lot to learn," said 'N'. "Just because Koopendrall laid a deposition with the Public Declamator doesn't mean I work for him. Koopendrall doesn't mind having his name associated with a statement like that—but that need not suggest he was behind the espionage."

"What about Gambar Inisse?"

"I wouldn't give a price on him surviving the night. He was a useful hostage, securing Chiess-Vervario's vote. Now that his presence is known, Bartazan has no need to keep him alive."

"You don't seem very worried."

"People die. He should have known better."

"Better than what?"

'N' coloured. "Than sleeping with an Elector's daughter, if you really want to know. There are some things you don't do."

"You're encouraging me to sleep with an Elector's niece."

"That's different—you're getting paid to, for a start."

Mirko shook his head. "Sometimes I start to like you, 'N'; and then you say something like that."

'N' flushed still further. "Grow up, Ascalon. You're getting paid—twice, in fact. You don't care who's

paying you to spy on Bartazan; you're hardly in a position to moralise to me."

"Is that what you think?" demanded Mirko, nettled. "You really needn't have bothered saving my life if I'm so mercenary. I'm finished with you, 'N'. Keep your gold; I'm going back to *Sapphire Light* and we're going to win the Margariad. And before then I'm going to surprise you."

"Mirko! Don't be such a—"

But Mirko was already on his way down the stairs.

"Florio! Damiano! Walisse! Jenx! We have work to do! Panduletta, get us some old clothes, if you please."

"What is this?" asked Florio.

"I'll tell you on the way," said Mirko. "It's a long story."



Don't Mess With Lenny Ragg!

by Till Noever

Lenny's face was distorted with suppressed fury as he glared at us.

"So this is why!" he hissed. "All those years you pretended to be my friend—and all the time you did . . . this . . . behind my back!"

He turned away and stalked to the door. We didn't say anything; partially because he wasn't wrong. We had indeed done 'this' behind his back. Behind everybody's back in fact. For a long time.

Lenny opened the door and turned around to face us. His countenance, now drained of all emotion, sent a frisson of unease down my back.

"I'm going to destroy you, Jack." His voice was terribly calm and even. As if nothing had happened. With the indifference of a newsreader announcing the massacre of thousands of innocents in an obscure and irrelevant place on the other side of the world.

No threat. Just a prediction. "You and that . . . bitch." He spat it out, but he was speaking to me only, pointedly ignoring Dana, who was standing right beside me.

"And there is nothing," he hissed, "you hear me . . . *nothing* . . . you can do about that! You know what I can do!"

Then he walked out of our lives.

We both knew what he meant; and what we knew was scary enough to spoil the prom for both of us.

I'd known Lenny most of my life. Our parents were friends. Our fathers worked for the same insurance company. The mothers shared a common interest in quilting. When the husbands were out fishing or at baseball and hockey games the women went off to the local quilting group and sewed—and, I suppose, talked—until the cows came home. An ideal arrangement for happy, if dull, marriages in suburbia.

Lenny and I got to know each other when we were both five or thereabouts; shortly after his father joined the company where dad had worked for years. The men

got to know each other and an invitation for a barbecue at Lenny's place followed soon after. The mothers took to each other like fish to water. Lenny and I were duly introduced and, after some careful mutual sizing up, decided that we should be able to tolerate each other, and started to play out in the garden in the little hut his father had built for him—or maybe he'd bought it; who knows?—the previous summer. Our relationship was consolidated when Lenny and I ended up in the same kindergarten.

The other kids—and, come to think about it, the adults as well—seemed to have it in for Lenny for as long as I can remember back. He was ridiculed by my contemporaries and attracted an undue amount of attention from the caretakers and teachers alike. Why, I didn't figure out until I was much older. At the tender age of five or six it was just one of the world's mysteries.

A lot of factors could have played a role in Lenny's troubles. Maybe it was the fact that he always had this smell about him—no matter how often he washed. Something vaguely fishy that you never really got quite used to. Or maybe there was some truth in the accusations from the girls that he fondled them where he shouldn't have. I really don't know. I'm not a girl, and I never witnessed any of the 'incidents' that were occasionally mentioned.

I stuck with Lenny, because I felt *somebody* had to. That wasn't always easy, because by aligning myself with him some of the social stigma adhering to him rubbed off. Still, it was bearable. People liked me, and so I could afford to take Lenny as he was. His tendency to monopolize me was a bit a nuisance, and occasionally degenerated into fits of jealous rage; but, I suppose, he must have told himself that if he didn't have me he wouldn't have anybody on his social calendar, and so he eventually learned to live with the thought that I was not entirely his domain.

Apart from the jealousy I had other problems with him, too. Even as a five-year old it registered with me that he wasn't quite your average boy—in more ways than one. For one thing he talked funny, and used words which, at that time, were just so much gibberish to me. I didn't even think then that they were real words, but that he'd made them up. Terms like 'probability' and 'prime numbers'. He talked about 'atoms', and 'quanta' and 'rest-mass' when I thought that 'mass' was something you went to church for and a 'rest-mass'

had to be a mass where you rested; possibly because it was boring.

Heaven knows where Lenny got all those words from. Science shows on TV probably. Lenny just loved them. Science shows, Daffy Duck, and *Playboy* magazine.

Playboy? Hell, at that age I didn't even really understand what those funny dangling things between my legs were for; let alone why all those big breasted women displayed themselves in such grotesque fashions in the pages of the magazine. I might as well have been looking at *Heavy Metal* comics for all the effect they had on me. But Lenny leered at them and made smacking noises with his lips, and his little pink tongue stuck out and danced about as if it just couldn't wait to get into the action.

So, what are we talking about here? A precocious, sexually premature, theoretical physicist who smelled and liked to stick his hands up little girls skirts?

It wasn't that far off the mark. Mind you, few people paid any attention to his unusual interest in matters scientific. I suppose nobody expects a libidinous little monster and a scientific genius to inhabit the same brain—and what one sees is usually the creep; not the genius. Lenny's parents, who of course believed none of the disgusting rumors about their precious boy, didn't notice either, because they were simply just too dense. Out of loyalty, if nothing else, I chose not to admit it either and to look the other way.

About a year after I'd gotten to know Lenny, he acquired a baby brother.

At about the same time our family acquired Dana.

Lenny's baby brother, John Ferdinand, was a cute little creature, all flailing limbs and squirming torso, with a pink skin and lots of little rolls of baby fat. Everybody ohh-ed and ahh-ed and there was great back-slapping for the father from his friends and colleagues, and clucking attention from other women for the mother. Lenny's feelings toward baby John were ambivalent; leaning heavily toward the negative side of things. He made a token effort to relate to his brother, but soon gave up when nothing sensible emerged from the little worm. It didn't help that John diverted a lot of parental—especially maternal—attention away from Lenny. It's not easy being an only child for seven years and then being faced with the unpleasant reality of some squirming little mother-monopolizing interloper.

My own mother wasn't all that enthused about baby John's arrival either, but she tried to hide the sentiment for the sake of her friendship with Lenny's mother. The problem was that only months before *she* had found out that she could *not* have any more kids; and I think she really wanted to. Her jealousy, however, was muted by a sudden tragedy which befell her only sibling. Uncle Charlie and his wife—who lived in Cincinnati and whom we visited just about every Christmas—became the victims of a drunk driver.

Uncle Charlie and auntie Meg left behind Meg's child from a former marriage, Dana, who, after some brief legal to-ing and fro-ing, was duly integrated into our little family; first as a foster child, and then, after another year of more legal wrangling by overpaid lawyers, as an adopted daughter.

I had known Dana for a long time. Uncle Charlie married Meg when I was only two, and Dana and I had been playmates for at least a couple of weeks every year. We always got along and I suspect that this was because we actually genuinely *liked* each other; and had done so from the first moment we met. Soul mates, even as children. Dana was the main reason why I always looked forward to the Christmas visits with Uncle Charlie. She was an earnest kind of girl with friendly hazel eyes, long dark hair—which she steadfastly refused to have cut back—and a figure that was a bit on the pudgy side, but which shaped up very nicely as she grew up. We fought only rarely, and if we did it was usually because adults were watching and we wanted to give them a run for their money. No point in having adults around if you can't annoy them.

Dana and I resolved early on in our relationship to 'get married' to each other as soon as we could. We didn't talk to the adults about it because we suspected that they'd either laugh at us or else tell us not to be so silly. It had always been our big little secret, and now, that she became a part of our family, it became an even bigger little secret. We spoke about it only once, shortly after she moved in with us, and agreed that it was such a big secret that we shouldn't even talk to each other about it any more because they'd absolutely *kill* us if they ever found out. After all, she was now my sister; and brother and sister can't marry, can they? We didn't really know how to deal with all that, and so we temporarily swept the matter under the carpet.

Apart from that little snag, having Dana around was sheer pleasure. Of course, now that we saw each other

every day, we fought considerably more. But it was over little things which didn't really matter, and the scraps never lasted longer than a few heated minutes. We kept up the for-adult-benefit-only fights though; if for no other reason but to reassure them that we really didn't like each other all that much.

Lenny's initial reaction to my announcement that Dana was coming to live with us was unfavorable.

"A girl?" he said scornfully. "She'll spoil *everything*. Always nagging and fussing. She'll want to *play* with us!" The ultimate nightmare!

I shook my head. "She's really nice!" I insisted.

Wrong move! He turned away and gave me the cold shoulder for the rest of the day. I guess my skills at handling situations like this with the required delicacy hadn't developed yet.

Lenny's attitude changed completely when he finally met Dana. There is no doubt in my mind that he became instantly—and, as it turned out permanently—infatuated with her. Dana in turn reacted to Lenny with uncharacteristic diffidence. She shook his hand, made an effort not to wrinkle her nose at his ever-present B.O.—about which I had kindly warned her in advance—and thereafter kept her distance from him as much as possible: discreetly so, because she was a tactful girl; but Lenny noticed anyway. Still, in Dana's case that was not a turn-off. Quite the contrary.

I, of course, was blissfully unaware of the whole thing. I may have wondered idly why Dana avoided playing with Lenny if she possibly could—and why, if she did play with him, it was always in my presence. I also completely missed the significance of her total avoidance of physical contact with him. I think that she knew instinctively that to romp with Lenny the way she did with me would be to send all the wrong signals and only cause trouble.

Dana's avoidance of him did not discourage Lenny in the slightest, though it must have hurt and angered him. But Dana was a special case. He had marked her for his own the day he first met her, and he was willing to bide his time until he made his move.

Three events serve to highlight Lenny's development between the ages of seven to about twelve. There was the sudden and tragic death of John Ferdinand Ragg at the tender age of three; Mr. McNally's equally sudden demise; and the walking-home-Dana incident.

Little John died in the fire that swept through the Ragg house one hot July Sunday when Lenny was supposed to be looking after him for just a couple of hours. The parents had gone off to a store some distance away to purchase a new bargain appliance. Why they did not take the kids with them is unclear, but the fact is that they didn't. They also thought—if they *thought* anything!—that Lenny, at the age of eleven, was old and responsible enough to be left in temporary charge of house and brother.

Nobody ever figured out how it happened that little John ended up in his room with a disposable lighter that should have been on an upper shelf in a kitchen cupboard, and why Lenny was outside on the deck playing computer games on his portable, instead of keeping an eye on his brother. Lenny was very unforthcoming with information, and the investigation ended with the coroner pronouncing the whole affair to be a death by accidental misadventure. The parents escaped an indictment for involuntary manslaughter by neglect only because of a legal technicality.

Lenny's reaction to the whole affair was muted. He showed no emotion and never shed a tear that I know of. The only comment he made—months later when the subject came up again—was that he thought things were as they should be. I didn't know then what he meant by that. But that's the way it was, and Lenny was Lenny, and life went on.

Not for Mrs. Ragg, of course, who committed suicide before the end of the same year by taking an overdose of sleeping pills. She left a rambling note which shocked everybody who read it. Though I was never privy to its contents, I was told, years later, that it included a statement about how she could not go on living in hatred for her surviving child, whom she wholly blamed for the death of her 'baby'.

If Lenny had known about his mother's feelings for him he didn't show it. Lenny never showed any emotion. He had developed the practice of wearing a mask into a high skill. People thought him devoid of emotion, because he never seemed to grieve over any of the tragedies which had struck in such quick succession. But I—and Dana—knew better. Underneath the mask of equanimity there roiled and churned emotions just as strong—if not stronger—than those possessing any of us. After the death of his mother the mask became even stiffer and more protective of what lay underneath. Sometimes you wondered where the person

underneath had gone to. Or if he was ever fully there. Or *what* it was that lurked underneath.

After the death of his wife Lenny's father fell apart. He drank too much and started smoking. My own father confessed over the dinner table that he found it difficult to figure out what to do with him.

He looked at me. "How's Lenny coping with it all?"

I glanced at Dana across the table from me. She returned the quick look and gave the slightest negative twitch of her head.

I took the hint and said as little as I could. "He'll cope. Lenny copes very well with situations like this."

He did. I'm not sure it was a sane way of coping though.

My father nodded. "Yeah. He seems almost too collected and cool. I just don't understand the boy."

Who did?

Mr. Ragg and son moved into an apartment in a new complex not too far away from us. To all appearances things stayed pretty much the way they had always been.

Mr. McNally, our science teacher, and Lenny didn't get along. Nothing unusual about that, of course. Lenny didn't get along with any teacher. He considered them inferior to himself—just the same as everybody else; only maybe worse because they had the misfortune of being teachers.

"They know nothing," he confided to me.

Not a healthy attitude to come to school with. But Lenny *did* go to school, and didn't miss a day. I've often wondered why he didn't put up more of a resistance. But with Lenny you just didn't know. Lenny did what he did 'because'.

Mr. McNally irked Lenny more than most teachers. He was our science teacher for that year, and science was something that Lenny *lived* for. He breathed it like the rest of us mortals breathe air. By the age of eleven he knew maths that we didn't even know existed. He knew biology and physics, chemistry and astronomy. Computers were extensions to his being. He wrote programs in abstract languages when the rest of us were still playing with He-Man and GI-Joe action figures. He brought home books from the library full of arcane symbols and formulae and gobbled them up with the casual ease of a proper swallowing guppies.

The funny thing was that he never let on. No exhibition of genius in class. No participation in science con-

tests. No striving for scholarships, or special classes or anything. I tried to convince him that it would help if he let somebody know. He could get a better education that way. Maybe even get to go to college part-time.

But Lenny would have none of it. "And don't you dare tell them either," he hissed.

"But why not, Lenny? You could do this stuff in your sleep."

He shrugged. "I know. But I don't want them to know. Why do you think I read my books only when dad isn't looking? I just don't want to become one of them."

"One of who?" I asked ungrammatically.

He gave a derogatory sneer and jerked his head at a group of teachers standing talking at the other end of the hall.

"Them. They'll just try to make me to be just the same."

I shook my head.

"They're the enemy!" he whispered conspiratorially. "Especially McNally. He thinks he's a kind of scientist or something, and that this makes him really clever. Well, he's an idiot! Most scientists are idiots . . ."

"I thought you liked science?" I asked perplexedly.

"I do, but there's so much they've got all wrong! So much they just don't understand."

I just could not help myself. "And I suppose you do?"

He stared hard at me for a moment. He must have been wondering if I was asking a serious question or mocking him. Finally he chose to give me the benefit of the doubt.

"I do, actually," he said.

Lenny's way of showing his genius in class was an indirect one. It was also one designed to maximize the amount of vexation he could cause for Mr. McNally.

For most of the time he pretended complete disinterest in anything the teacher had to say. Instead he made a point of sitting there doodling, or throwing darts around the room, or whispering to whoever sat beside him. If he didn't do that he asked an occasional question; in a tone that was invariably supercilious and designed to annoy the teacher. Since, at the same time, the question was always carefully aimed to expose McNally's ignorance, this only served to heighten the irritation.

In any other case such delinquent behavior would have led to severe reprimands. Lenny avoided those by

carefully dosing his insolence, and always drawing back just before an incipient explosion—and by invariably getting top marks for anything he did. He was a slipper as an eel and they couldn't lay a hand on him. Besides, the recent tragedies in his life had led the school to extend special consideration to him. His minor aberrations and peccadilloes were therefore duly overlooked, and he carefully avoided doing anything sufficiently obnoxious to warrant serious disciplinary measures.

Lenny knew how to work the system . . .

Mr. McNally *really* got up Lenny's nose—and Lenny was not one to sit still and suffer such things for extended lengths of time without some remedial action. Taunts and teases have a certain attraction, but the novelty wears off after a while. As it happens Mr. McNally was going to supply us with enough novelty to provide a topic for conversation of a long time to come.

The whole thing took ten, maybe fifteen seconds.

One day Mr. McNally entered the class. He stood surveying us sternly over his pretentious granny glasses for a moment before walking across to his desk. He reached out a hand to pull out the chair. He touched the back of the chair and froze. He began to twitch and jerk uncontrollably. Books and notes fell from his hands and landed in untidy heaps on the floor. His mouth opened and closed spasmodically in the manner of a dying fish. The eyes turned up until you could see only the whites. Then the legs went flaccid and he collapsed into a unsightly pile of inert meat and bone.

The class sat in shock and horror. We just couldn't believe what we had just witnessed. All but Lenny, that is. He jumped up out of his chair, ran to the front of the class, straightened out Mr. McNally's contorted figure, loosened his tie, and did all the right things. He looked up and shouted for someone to go and fetch a teacher from the class next door. About a dozen of us complied and departed the classroom to spread the news. I remained where I was, watching the whole affair with an odd feeling of detachment.

A few kids ran to help Lenny with whatever he was doing to Mr. McNally. When Lenny saw them he desisted from his efforts, stood up and did something rather odd. He raised his foot and surreptitiously shoved Mr. McNally's chair out of the way. As the others crowded around the prone body Lenny bent down. I couldn't see what he did, because others hid him from sight. When he emerged into view again it

looked as if he was putting something into the pocket of his jeans.

At the time the whole thing did not really register as terribly peculiar, but now, that I've read Lenny's journals, it's a different matter. But even then, the facts were all there. Like that there was an electrical outlet set into the floor under the desk, and that the chair had a chrome metal frame which could easily be connected to outlet by a single strand of wire. A wire which wouldn't have taken more than a minute to put in place—and only a couple of seconds to remove. And Lenny hadn't met me outside the gate that morning, but had already been in the class when I arrived, quite possibly long enough before any of the other pupils arrived.

But how could I suspect my friend of such a monstrous deed?

'Friend'? Yes, I still called him that, and I suppose, at that time were still were friends. It might not have stayed that way had I known about the walking-home-Dana incident. But Dana never told me—not until much later. When I asked her why, she pointed out that at the time it would have upset me greatly.

"Damned right, it would have! So what?"

"You were sick at the time."

"I had a 'flu! I could have stood the shock . . ."

About the 'incident'. I was sick that day; one of my few days off school. Vomiting and diarrhea. A one-day flu which had knocked me out for the count. Dana, sweet soul that she was, wanted to stay home and nurse me—and avoid school for the day, all in one fell swoop. Our parents were going out to work that day and it seemed a like a sensible idea. But mum and dad were having none of it and so I was left behind in my misery, rushing from my bed to the toilet and back again, while Dana spent her usual day at school.

In hindsight it seems as if Lenny, never one to miss an opportunity, thought this too good a chance to miss, and decided to make a serious grab for her attention. Literally.

I wonder what had given him the idea that this kind of approach would be in any way effective—but then again, who knew what gave Lenny his ideas? Anyway, he tried; after school when they both took the school bus to our place, ostensibly in order to give him a chance to visit sick little me. They got off and started

walking toward the house and then around it, heading for the back door—which is our usual way of getting in.

Lenny made his move somewhere in between the spot where you can't be seen from the road and you're not within sight from the kitchen window either. The details are lost in the mists of time, but according to Dana there were some quite outré, inappropriate, and even ludicrous suggestions and propositions; followed by some physical action—all of which was brought to an abrupt halt when Dana kned him in the groin and ran for the back door.

All I actually remember of the whole episode is Dana coming into my bedroom white as a sheet and looking even sicker than I felt. Lenny was nowhere in sight. He must have slunk off home when the whole thing collapsed around his ears.

I was still too sick to fully appreciate Dana's distressed condition; though I remember that she came to the bed and hugged me fiercely. At the time I thought she was just glad to see me and that I was alright. Well, I suppose, she was glad to see me!

Later on that night we did talk about Lenny in some context or other. I forgot what it was, but I know that Dana still didn't say anything. She might have been more subdued than usual, but, as I said, I was too sick and miserable to notice.

A couple of days later back at school however it was as if nothing had happened. Dana kept her usual distance from Lenny. Lenny may have been a bit more taciturn than usual, but nothing really stood out like a sore thumb for me to notice.

So, that was Lenny by the age of twelve. He didn't repeat the performance. Ever. But that did not mean that he was going to give up on her! Lenny's dogged persistence was in a class all of its own. In some aspects he was highly adaptable and took being rejected in such an unequivocal fashion in his stride—no matter how much it must have galled him. Biding his time, which he just knew must surely come.

Our relationship continued muddling along, if for no other reason that I was too much of a loyal sucker to ditch him, even though a lot of things told me that I should have. Besides, he had nobody else. His mildly to gravely dysfunctional personality continued to develop along predictable lines. His social life, apart from myself, was virtually non-existent. He spent most of

his spare time behind his computers, doing things I didn't even begin to comprehend. No games for Lenny! He was doing serious stuff. . .

His father became a peripheral issue in Lenny's life. I suppose it always had been that way, but now it was even more so. Not that the father cared one way or the other. He was an emotional wreck, well on his way to a premature grave. He held his job at the insurance company, but advanced very little. His relationship with my own father spiraled toward rapid extinction. There was nothing the two men had to say to each other any more. Nothing to do. Nothing to share. Dad directed his attention to other friends and left Mr. Ragg to his fate.

I refused to do the same with Lenny. It didn't matter that I was the only one who seemed to like him. A friend's a friend, even if he's weird.

As the years went on and school progressed toward its inevitable conclusion, Lenny actually exerted some sort of formative influence on me. I finally persuaded my parents to buy me a Macintosh and made an effort to get interested in computing. Initially it was just curiosity about what it was that turned Lenny on when he sat behind a keyboard and 'programmed'. I soon became sufficiently hooked on the subject to decide and study computer science after leaving high school. Of course, I still didn't understand what Lenny was doing, but I found my own little niche in the grand scheme of things. I even began to comprehend *some* of the things he was talking about! Not that I necessarily agreed—but I finally had an inkling of what was going on in his convoluted and occasionally twisted mind.

You see, Lenny had this thing about randomness and chance. To put it plainly, he didn't believe in it, and he was contemptuous of anybody who did. As far as he was concerned the universe was completely predictable, and all that stood in our way of comprehending it was its complexity and our inability to cope with it.

Of course, I argued the point with him. By that time we were sixteen and I thought that I had finally caught up with quite a bit of science. Nothing at Lenny's level, but I fancied that I understood the basics. Statistical mechanics and electromagnetism, relativity and quantum theory. The strange world of the subatomic. I'd read up on them in my spare time, if for no other reason that it irked me to have Lenny look down on me as if I was some kind of imbecile.

But from what I'd read it seemed to me as if the randomness of the subatomic world was an established fact.

Not to Lenny—but arguing with Lenny was like arguing with a deity. There was no way to get through. He knew what he knew and you didn't. Period.

"You simply don't understand!" 'You' meaning the whole damn human race; not just me.

"Then climb down far enough from your high horse to explain it!" I shouted at him. "Do you think you can do that?"

Lenny shrugged indifferently. "It's not something that can be easily explained."

I snorted contemptuously. "Bullshit. You're just hiding behind mathematics and jargon!"

Lenny regarded me haughtily. "No need to be offensive—just because you don't understand it."

I shook my head and headed for the door. "I think you're full of shit. I think you don't really believe any of this crap yourself, and that you couldn't explain it if you tried."

I opened the door.

"Where you going?" he called after me. "No need to get pissed off!"

"I'm not pissed off. Just tired of you being such a snob. Besides, I've got to pick up Dana from netball practice. I've got to get the car from home, and if I don't hurry she'll be left waiting."

I turned to leave.

"Tell her that she hasn't got much time to ask me to be her prom date!" he called after me.

That stopped me in my tracks. For a moment there I really didn't believe that I'd heard right. Lenny making a joke? Was the world about to end?

I stared at him. The world was not about to end. Lenny was serious!

That was even worse.

I stared at him for a few seconds, trying to find the right words to cover the situation. All that came out was "I'll tell her."

Lenny nodded placidly. "Good."

I just couldn't help it. "You really think she'll ask you?"

A crease wrinkled his smooth, high forehead. His baby-blue eyes evidenced puzzlement at me asking such an obviously silly question. "Of course. She has to."

"She 'has to'?" I asked perplexedly. "She didn't ask you for the Junior Prom!"

Lenny nodded and gave me the kind of tolerant smile reserved for psychiatrists dealing with asylum inmates.

"Sooner or later she'll realize the truth," he said softly.

"The truth?" I echoed.

His smile became ineffably condescending. "That she and I will eventually be joined," he replied.

I really didn't know what to say. What could *anybody* say? If there was one thing more certain than night following day it was that Dana would never be 'joined' with Lenny Ragg.

"This is as it must be," Lenny said with a rapturous certainty that left me breathless.

My turn to play psychiatrist. Then I high-tailed my way out of there.

Mum still had the car and so I had to walk the two miles to my home. Undignified process, walking; but in this case inevitable. No way was I going to pay for a cab.

The walk gave me time to think.

Think, Jack! How are you going to handle this one? Now it's not only mum and dad to worry about, but Lenny, too. Well, actually it seemed as if it had always been that way, but somehow I—and Dana—had overlooked my eerie and slightly monomaniacal friend completely. I guess we just didn't want to know.

The problem was, of course, that our 'big little' secret wasn't so little any more.

Not an easy situation for either of us. To live under one roof, in adjacent rooms, had always been a source of some mischief. When we were little we occasionally snuck into each others rooms—and beds. All completely innocent and harmless at the time. Luckily we were never caught, though there were a few close calls. When we reached an age where our games might not have been so harmless anymore, we both realized it and, by some unspoken agreement stopped playing them. For a while we made a token effort to put some distance between each other, but that was like trying to stop a charging rhino by pretending it wasn't there. After a year or so we stopped trying. Ever since then we had been growing closer; and now that we had both reached the age of consent and were rapidly reaching adulthood it really was only a question of time before the whole thing blew up in everybody's faces.

Mum and dad might accept the status quo eventually. Lenny, as I now realized with some dismay, never would.

Mum was dressed to kill. "Could you get your own dinner?" she asked, handing me the car keys. "I'm going

to pick up dad from work and then we're going out to dinner with the Beltons."

I hugged her. "We might just grab a pizza," I said.

"Just drive carefully!" she admonished me.

Mothers . . .

Dana and I sat opposite each other in a Mellow Mushroom, waiting for our pizza, sipping Pepsi and nibbling hot pretzels sprinkled with Parmesan cheese. We had been lucky to find a strategically positioned table where we could play footsie without being seen by everybody. Dana's head rested in her cupped hands and she was looking at me with the kind of expression that makes my knees go weak and gives me excruciatingly delicious butterflies in my solar plexus area. One lock of her, now shoulder-length, hair was dangling into her face. She blew it out of the way. Her right foot was working its way up the left leg of my jeans. My right foot rested on her seat between her thighs, where it was doing things it shouldn't be doing. All under the table and out of sight, because we would have never dared to touch each other when there was anybody around to witness it.

The pizza, our ostensible reason for being here, finally came. We disengaged our limbs just before the waitress came into a position where she could not possibly have missed seeing what we were doing.

The pizza was vegetarian. Dana's thing. She doesn't like eating animals. Says it is neither right nor necessary. She may have a point.

"We have a new problem," I said after I'd had my first bite of the pizza. Half of it—*my* half—was laced with anchovies. I cannot stand pizzas without anchovies. I guess we all have out little quirks.

"Oh yes?" she replied, in between chews. "What was the old problem?"

"You know . . ."

She stopped chewing and looked at me. "What's the new one?"

"Lenny."

She shrugged and bit off another piece. "That's not a new problem."

"You might say it's gained an additional dimension."

"Like what?"

"Like Lenny thinks that you and him—and I quote—'will eventually be joined'."

"He *what*?" She almost dropped the pizza.

I shrugged. "Those were his words."

"The . . ." Dana lost for words? Wow!

"How *dare* he?" she finally managed.

"Lenny's a law unto his own," I pointed out. "He wouldn't think of it as 'daring' anything. He's serenely confident that you'll realize the 'truth' sooner or later. In fact, he went so far as to suggest that you should not wait too long to ask him to be your prom date."

She almost choked on her food and quickly reached for her glass to wash down the offending bite.

"He's crazy."

"You know that. I know that. But I doubt Lenny does."

"I have no intention of asking him!"

"I know."

We looked at each other.

"Who are you going to ask?"

"You know who I *want* to ask."

We continued with our mutual adoration and temporarily kind of lost track of things. Pizza, conversation, maybe even breathing. Finally I put my piece of pizza down and—damn them all!—reached across and took her free hand.

"What would happen if we did go together?" I said.

She gave me a wry grin, but her eyes were troubled. "Trouble would happen."

"Or maybe not—if we did it right."

"What do you mean?"

"We've got . . . how long? A month? Maybe five weeks. I think if we make the right noises and spread the right rumors and sort of break it to them slowly, we might just get away with it without anybody thinking the worst of us."

"Except for Lenny . . ."

"Yeah!" I'd conveniently forgotten about Lenny.

"You know, Jack, I'm scared of him."

"Why? He's never done anything."

"Hasn't he?"

That's when she told me about the walking-home-Dana incident.

I stared at her dumbfounded.

"Why didn't you tell me this before?"

"It would've upset you."

"Damned right, it would have! So what?"

"You were sick at the time."

"I had a 'flu! I could have stood the shock . . ."

I shook my head. "Besides, that was years ago. I'm sure you could have fitted it in somewhere!"

"He's your friend, Jack! It wouldn't have been right. I was upset, but not upset enough to want to ruin a friendship. Which is what it would have done."

"Then why tell me now?"

"Because now I'm scared of him. It was alright when he was a little boy, but now . . ."

I knew what she meant. "I'm sorry," I said.

She shook her head. "No, *I* am sorry. You're right. I should have told you ages ago. We never had any secrets between us, and Lenny just simply isn't worth it."

I was inclined to agree. Not that I had any idea what I was going to do about it all, but somehow we were reaching a point where Lenny and my ways were about to part. I could feel it in the air, and the sensation was tinged with foreboding.

We finished the pizza and sat for another while, talking and making plans; trying to figure out how we could finagle getting each other as dates for the senior prom without letting on what was happening. We considered several stratagems of varying degrees of complexity and implausibility, until we finally settled on an approach that should at least keep our peers and our parents off our backs. It didn't solve the Lenny problem—but you can't win them all.

We drove home and went inside. The house was empty and mum and dad weren't going to be back for a while yet. I suddenly realized that this was a situation we hadn't been in for a long time. Somehow there always had been someone else around . . .

We stood there. My heart was pounding in my ears. I took her hands and she came closer until our faces were just inches apart.

"We shouldn't be doing this," she whispered.

"I know," I whispered back.

"But we are, aren't we?"

I was just able to think clearly enough. "Technical problems, I'm afraid," I said regretfully. "I'm not exactly prepared for something like this."

"*I* am . . ."

"What?!"

"I've been on the pill for months."

"What?!" Was I beginning to repeat myself or what?

Dana shrugged her slender shoulders. She smiled at me. Her head tilted sideways. The lock fell across her face again. I reached up and brushed it aside so I could see her eyes.

"Just in case . . ."

Her lips brushed against mine; soft but urgent. "We might not have a lot of time," she whispered, pulling away slightly.

We were really going to go for it . . .

But then the damned phone rang.

"Don't take it!" Dana whispered. She put her arms tightly around my neck and jumped up to wrap her legs around my waist.

I marched to the phone with her straddling me like that. She laughed and her hair tickled my nose.

"Hello?"

"Jack. It's me."

Lenny? Screw you Lenny!

"What do you want?" I asked impatiently.

"Who is it?" Dana whispered.

I covered the mouthpiece. "Lenny."

"What?!"

I shrugged; not an easy feat with a girl wrapped around me like that.

"What's he want?"

Lenny had been saying something, but I had yet to perfect the art of listening to two people simultaneously.

"What did you say?"

"I said I've found a way to explain everything."

I was holding the receiver so that Dana could hear it too. She pulled a funny face and rolled up her eyes.

"That's nice," I replied.

"Well, do you want to hear it?"

"Hear what?"

"My explanation!"

"Now?"

"Yeah. Come on over. I'll tell you all about it."

Dana stuck out her tongue.

"Do you know what time it is?"

"Do you want to know or don't you?"

"Lenny, this will have to wait until tomorrow!"

"You said I couldn't do it—and now when I can prove to you that I can you aren't even willing to listen!"

"To tell you the honest truth, I'm going to bed."

Dana grinned and tightened her legs around my waist. I, who make it a principle not to lie if the truth will do, could safely claim that, in this instance, I was adhering to my maxims.

"At nine thirty?!" he said incredulously.

There was a lovely girl in my arms and a pain in the ass on the phone. What would you have done?

"Good night, Lenny." He was still talking when I hung up.

"Are you going to make it upstairs with me like that?" Dana whispered.

I placed my hands where they would support her weight.

"Is the Pope Catholic?"

Our parents came back two hours later. Far too late to make any difference to anything. Dana and I were downstairs watching a late show on TV, munching popcorn and sipping orange juice. We greeted them with the indifference accorded by teenagers the world over to their parents. They popped their heads into the door, advised us to go to bed soon, said good night, went up to bed, and left us to our own devices.

We heaved sighs of relief. I'm still amazed they didn't notice. We must have been *glowing* . . .

Dana saw Lenny and gave my arm a quick squeeze. "See you later." She veered off toward the chem lab. I was about to blow her a kiss when I remembered where we were. So I just waved at her.

"Lunchtime?"

"Right here," she called out.

"See you!"

She made off in a hurry, leaving me to face the music.

Not that I cared. I was still walking on clouds.

Lenny's face was a study in carefully concealed fury.

"Who do you think you are?"

"What do you mean?" I asked with fake perplexity.

"How dare you hang up on me like that?"

I sighed. There wasn't any point arguing with Lenny. There never was.

As I saw it I had two options. I could either confront him with some old business—meaning the 'incident'—here and now, and break off the relationship for good. Or I could apologize for my *faux pas* on the phone last night and get back into his good graces.

The prevaricator won. "Look I'm sorry about last night. I just wasn't feeling on tops. You know, I did go to bed early!"

Great stuff, telling the truth.

Lenny stared at me for a few seconds, but then decided to be gracious and accept my gesture of submission.

"Right," he rumbled. "But don't ever do that to me again."

I let that go. We started walking toward our first period classroom.

"Quantum events: randomness or hidden variables?" he asked me.

I glanced sideways at him. You never knew what went on in Lenny's head!

I shrugged. "Don't know." But then I remembered something I'd read. "I didn't think there was any way to tell?" God, was I proud of myself. Lucky, too, I guess, that he'd picked something I'd gleaned from a recent *Scientific American*.

His head bobbed up and down. "Right."

I finally latched onto his meaning. "Has this got to do with what you wanted to explain to me last night?"

Lenny nodded. "I haven't got time to talk about it now," he said, looking at his watch. "Lunchtime, huh?"

"Umm . . . actually I was meeting Dana for lunch. We have some . . . business to attend to."

Lenny's mental context shifted instantly. "Did you tell her?"

"Tell her what?"

"About the prom."

Oh, that—

"Uh, yes. I did, actually."

"So, when is she going to ask me?"

"She didn't say."

Lenny made a little vexed sound. "She must know. Why doesn't she admit it to herself?"

I was glad that we had reached the classroom and I was spared the need for a reply.

At lunchtime I told Dana about Lenny's latest escapades.

"He's nuts!" she stormed. "I'm going to go and tell him that he's out of his mind!"

I pulled her back down onto the bench. "Calm down," I said softly. "People are looking."

She sat, breathing heavily. I wanted to hug her—as well as do other things—but this place here was kind of exposed.

"I don't think that would be wise," I said instead. "He'd either simply not believe you—or else he might just believe you and kill you instead."

She gave me a quick look to see if I was earnest. Deciding that I wasn't she gave me a tentative smile. I smiled back and everything was kind of alright again—

with the possible exception maybe that I was not entirely sure that I had been joking.

Afternoon came. School finished. We went home. I went to see Lenny. I didn't want to see Lenny, but I had to. I had promised him that I would. Besides, he might actually have something interesting to tell me.

"About hidden variables," Lenny began. "I suppose you don't know much about them."

"No," I admitted, "but I've got a feeling I will in a moment."

He nodded, satisfied. First point to Lenny. Lenny *loved* scoring these little points. The highlights of his social calendar. I considered revoking my statement, given that it wasn't entirely accurate. I wasn't *completely* ignorant of them. However, it was a sure bet that Lenny knew much more.

"The great debate of quantum physics," Lenny orated. "Randomness or just our ignorance of what makes things really tick?" Lenny wearing his philosopher's hat. Lenny thought deep thoughts.

"If randomness rules," he continued, "we're screwed. But what if it doesn't? What if there's a more fundamental, non-random structure behind it all? We just can't detect it because we don't have the tools to do it?"

I shrugged. "What's your point? That random events are just . . . pseudo-random?"

Lenny nodded. "Close enough. Of course, it isn't as simple as that but that's the essence of it. The point is that we just didn't have the maths to tell the difference between a deterministic system and a random one."

A dramatic pause. I almost heard the next words before they came out of his mouth.

"Until now."

Goody for you, Lenny!

"So?"

"So?" he echoed me. "Don't you get it?"

I shook my head. "So what if it is. We'll never know, will we? Bells' Theorem—something like that."

"Bell Schmel! I just told you that we *can* know! And it *does* make a difference . . ."

"To what?"

"To what we can *do*. You see, in a deterministic world we can manipulate things. Even what seem like random events—because they're *not*! If we could only get at the hidden variables . . . there'd be *nothing* we couldn't do."

He sat back and blew out his cheeks, very happy with himself.

"But we can't," I pointed out, being unreasonable, since he's already told me that we could. But with the weighty wisdom of thousands of theoreticians, geniuses, and mainstream physics to back me up I felt on reasonably safe ground here.

Lenny chuckled. Triumphant. With an air of that ineffable superiority reserved for those who 'know' things. Zealots. People who are willing to kill and die for what they believe in. And for Lenny Ragg.

"Yes, we can," he reiterated. "I can. And I've done it."

Score two for Lenny. Up yours, Lenny! Why do you have to be such a prick?

"You have?" Lenny was prone to the odd overstatement. This, no doubt, was one of them.

He leaned forward intently. "Yeah . . . like I can actually *do* stuff."

"What do you mean? 'Do stuff' . . ."

That expression of ineffable superiority illuminated his face again. His cheeks positively glowed.

"I had to solve two problems," Lenny pontificated to his audience of one. "First, how do you find a way to interact directly with the hidden variables, which exist in a space I've called 'substrate space'? Next, how to manage substrate space complexity?"

He pointed at a small box, the kind you buy at Fry's for housing prototype electronics, on his desk. A cable from it led into the back of Lenny's PowerBook.

"The stuff inside there," he said with some pride, "Solves the first problem."

"What's in it?"

Lenny grinned conspiratorially. "Now that would be telling, wouldn't it? That's my little secret, and it's gonna stay that way. All *you* need to know is that it allows me to read the coordinate values of certain hidden variables in their substrate subspaces." He paused for dramatic effect. "And to control them, of course," he concluded.

"Control?" Suddenly he had my full attention.

He nodded. "Yep." He patted the side of the PowerBook. "The complexity issue is dealt with in here."

Lenny moved over and I pulled my chair closer to his desk and studied the laptop's screen.

It was rapidly dawning on me that this wasn't just a joke, or one of Lenny's flights of fancy. That maybe

there was something serious here. I still didn't understand it, but . . .

"Wait till I show you this!"

He punched a few keys. The colors of the rectangular pattern on the screen—which, I was advised by Lenny, was a highly compressed representation of the coordinates of some of substrate space—slowly changed. A small section in the top right was slowly engulfed by a spreading orange blotch. This changed to a dark red and then black.

Lenny pointed at a small ball bearing lying on the desk beside the computer. "Watch this!"

It flickered, became transparent—and disappeared.

My mouth hung open. I think. I'm not sure I remember all of this too well. 'Dazed' is a description that leaps to mind.

Lenny did something on the keyboard again and the ball bearing reappeared. The pattern on the screen had returned to a random (dare I use that word again—ever?) sprinkle of multi-colored pixels.

"Shit!"

"Good, huh?"

"What did you do?"

"To stay with our simplistic model," (score: Lenny, three; Jack, nil) "I set critical substrate space coordinates to zero. Presto! The thing has ceased to exist. But now watch: I reset the values to their previous states!"

As he spoke, the ball bearing vanished and reappeared once more.

"Shit!" My vocabulary was becoming impoverished.

I was beginning to feel very uneasy.

"What else can you do with this thing?" I asked to cover my disquiet.

Lenny shrugged, almost apologetically. "So far not much more. It takes weeks for the computer to sort itself through the substrate space of even the smallest physical objects before it locates correlated sequences. That ball bearing has taken *months* to compute. The equations have too many free parameters. It's all numerical approximations, and trial and error.

"Though"—and here he paused reflectively—"the initial search takes the longest. The calculations become much simpler and faster once they lock on to an object and correlations become evident. And once I've got it in here," he patted the laptop affectionately, "it's *in!* There is nowhere that ball-bearing can go and get out of my grasp. You could send it to Mars or into the

Andromeda galaxy and I could still do whatever I want with it. You could smash it to a million pieces and they'd still all be in here."

He paused and cogitated. "Well, most of them anyway. Mind you, making it disappear is relatively easy. What I'd *really* like to be able to do is change its shape—or composition, or the constituent elements. But that's much more complex and I'm still kind of finding my way with those kinds of things."

Thank you, God!

Lenny paused again, and then sighed wistfully.

"A kingdom for a supercomputer! The things I could do . . ."

Yeah . . .

This time the pit in my stomach area felt hollow and sick.

Mum and dad were watching Letterman when I got home. I plonked down on a chair and joined them for a few minutes before he got on my nerves. I didn't even know his current guest. Maybe some football dude . . .

"Where's Dana?" I asked into a lull.

"Upstairs in her room," mum replied. "Studying, I think."

"She must be unusually keen—or panicky," dad noted dryly.

Mum shook her head in that peculiarly motherly way. "She works too hard. Between that, her music, and her netball she doesn't seem to have time for any decent social life. The girl hasn't been out for an evening for weeks and weeks!"

She looked at me. "Do you know what's the matter with her? Is she having some kind of social problems at school? Something we should know about?"

"We went for a pizza last night!" I said brightly.

Mum sighed. "Hardly what I'd call entertainment."

It was for us.

"Everything's fine," I said. "She just wants to do well."

"What about a prom date?" mum asked. "Has she got a prom date yet? I haven't dared ask her . . ."

I shook my head. "Not that I know of."

"Give the kid a chance," dad said.

"She'll be left without a date!" mum objected, as if that was one of the great unsolved problems of the world.

She turned to me again. "Do you know if there's anybody in particular she'd like to ask?"

Do I know?

"I have no idea. You'll have to talk to her."

"If nobody wants me, I can always ask Jack."

Dana had appeared at the door. She grinned, making it all seem like a joke.

"You'd go with me, won't you?" she said sprightly.

I shrugged. "If you ask me soon," I replied, playing her game. "Else I'd have to stick to my other date—if I had one, that is . . ."

Mum sputtered. "Jack's your brother! What will the others say . . ."

"Do *you* have a date yet?" dad asked me.

I shook my head. "I haven't really thought about it."

"Well, both of you had better do some serious thinking," said mum. "Soon. Otherwise you'll be left out."

Dana and I carefully avoided looking at each other for fear of giving the game away. This whole conversation was on very dangerous ground. We hadn't rehearsed this and if we weren't careful things could rapidly get out of hand.

The games people play . . .

"I think Dana's idea isn't that bad," I said. "To be honest, I'd rather go with her than my other current options."

Mum gave me a quick curious look. "It doesn't make a great deal of difference anyway," I pointed out. "It's just a prom date. You got to have a prom date, but that's all. You end up socializing with everybody else anyway. It's only different for those who actually go with their girl or boyfriends."

When in doubt, attack. (Chinese proverb? I don't know. If it isn't, it should be.)

"Brothers and sisters don't date each other to the prom," mum insisted stubbornly. "It just isn't done."

"Everybody knows we're not real siblings," Dana pointed out. "So that should not be an issue."

"It might raise some other questions," dad said. We now had his full, undivided—and undesirable!—attention.

The game was in serious trouble.

Neither of us bothered to feign ignorance.

"So?" Dana let the question hang in mid-air.

Mum and dad stared at us.

"Look," I said. "Let's face it; we're more comfortable with each other than with most people. Everybody knows it. We don't exactly make a secret of it. We meet for lunch at least twice a week. I pick up Dana from netball. We go to the movies together. We go on holi-

days with you. We go horse-riding together. Last night we went out and had a pizza. Still—I haven't heard any strange whispers!"

I looked at Dana, who was still standing near the door.

"Anybody ever say anything to you?"

She shook her head.

"See?" I said. "It's nothing scandalous. Certainly, it's insignificant compared to what's being said behind my back—and sometimes to my face—because I hang around with Lenny Ragg!"

They still looked dubious. The ploy of introducing Lenny into the debate was a stroke of genius and I was proud of it. Taking a leaf out of mum's book, so to speak.

But dad was not fooled. He'd lived with mum for many years and he had experience with divagations like that.

"If you two go to the prom together there *will* be talk," he noted firmly.

"Maybe," Dana said. "But at least you can be sure that we'll both get home safely."

"There's that," he agreed. He had a curious expression on his face and looked as if he wanted to say something else. But he swallowed whatever it was and I could see him think as he considered the situation. I suspected that he suddenly knew exactly what was going on—and I'll respect him forever for not putting us on the spot then. Why he didn't, I don't know. Maybe because he saw something in our faces that told him that this was more than juvenile mischief. Maybe he just didn't want to interfere. Maybe he just trusted us. For that alone I am eternally grateful. I don't think I ever felt as close to him as I did then.

"It was just a thought," Dana said soothingly. "But if we haven't found ourselves a date we might just have to consider it."

Mum sighed and got up. "I'm going to bed. You two work it out between you. I'm sure you'll do the right thing."

She blew me a kiss and hugged Dana on her way out.

Dad got up as well. "See you in the morning."

He stopped at the door. "Do they really give you a hard time because you're Lenny's friend?"

I nodded. "Some of them do."

"Lenny's a strange guy," dad noted thoughtfully. "I never could make him out."

"I don't think anybody can," I replied. My current worries and concerns about Lenny surfaced again.

Dad nodded. "Good night, you two." Dana gave him a quick, affectionate peck on the cheek. "Good night, dad."

He regarded her fondly.

"Thanks," he said to her.

"For what?"

"For calling me 'dad.'" He turned and left us alone in the lounge.

Dana and I looked at each other but we didn't move until we were sure that they had gone into their bedroom.

"Do you think they . . ." she whispered.

"Dad might have."

"He didn't say anything."

"He didn't have to."

The Lenny-thing bubbled to the surface again. I took Dana's hand and pulled her to the couch. "We have to talk."

She smiled. "Just talk?"

I didn't smile back and she realized that something was amiss. She made as if to pull her hand out of mine.

"It's got nothing to do with this," I said to her, divining her thoughts. Her hand relaxed. We sat down on the sofa.

"It's about Lenny."

She rolled up her eyes. "Not that again!"

"Not that," I said. "Worse." I told her all about it.

She wouldn't believe it at first.

"This can't be for real," she said when I was finished.

"I thought so, too."

She took her lower lip between her teeth; meaning that she was thinking very hard indeed.

"What're you going to do about it?"

The question caught me by surprise. I had never thought about it in those terms.

"What *can* I do?"

"You've got to do *something!*"

She was right. I did. But we didn't figure it out that night. We had slipped closer to each other during our conversation—until our proximity actually seriously interfered with our ability to think clearly. One thing soon led to another—and Lenny simply vanished from our thoughts.

He came back much later, just before I was about to drop off to sleep. I came wide awake again, and didn't

actually manage to find rest until daylight began to nudge the night out of the way.

I was careful not to spend any more time with Lenny during the next weeks than I would have under normal circumstances. I was dying to find out more about his gadgetry, but Lenny was a the kind of guy who would have instantly noticed deviations in the pattern of my visits. Especially if it happened so soon after he had divulged what must have been a major secret. I wondered if he actually regretted his volubility that evening.

Life went on in 'normal' mode for a while. Dana and I made a decision that we would take the plunge and date each other for the prom. Damn the consequences. I saw Lenny at his place two or three times a week, as per usual, and found out more about his theories. He remained cagey about the device he called the 'interface', but otherwise seemed happy to tell everything I wanted to know—and more. Come to think about it, he probably told me because he thought that I wouldn't understand anyway.

But I did, and as time went on the whole thing became very troublesome indeed. What had been an inkling developed into a profound appreciation of the genius that was Lenny Ragg. A pity that the genius was housed in the same mind as the rest of him.

The topic of Dana's prom date surfaced with increasing frequency. I continued to feign ignorance. Lenny, despite his previous serenity and apparent certainty, began to fidget and his enquiries became more pressing. However, when I suggested that he speak to Dana himself, he pulled back.

"I can't do that. She must come to me."

"Why is that?"

"You wouldn't understand."

He was right. I didn't.

Dana didn't either. "You might as well tell him what we've decided."

"I can't do that. I want to leave this till the last possible opportunity."

"Why drag it out?"

"Because he'll never speak to me again. And if he doesn't I won't know where this thing of his is going."

"Oh, that! Have you figured out what to do about it?"

"There is nothing I *can* do. I mean, short of killing him . . ."

"There's got to be something! We cannot just leave something like this in the hands of a . . ." she was looking for suitable descriptors.

"A socially dysfunctional, emotionally disturbed, monomaniacal teenager?" I helped out.

Dana nodded. "Something like that."

"Well, what would you suggest?" I asked her.

"Oh, I don't know . . ."

"See?"

Things weren't getting any better.

Explosion minus one day.

"Something's funny," Lenny muttered.

He was hunched over his G4, one of those snazzy cubes, connected to a fancy flat-screen display. It had replaced whatever was the latest and greatest before. Lenny believed in staying at the leading edge of technology. A equally brand-new laptop stood at one side, hooked up to the interface. An ethernet cable linked the two machines. Lenny had explained to me that he didn't do the computations on the PowerBook any more.

"Too slow. I'll never get anywhere. I'm using the PowerBook to run the interface and make substrate maps, and transmit them to the desktop. That takes a shitload of work off the CPU."

How did Lenny get the money to buy this kind of stuff? Well, Lenny was an insomniac. He worked until three or four in the morning and somehow survived on an average of three hours, or less, sleep a day. He put all that time to good use. In the last two years he had produced contract software, and also written two sophisticated games, the license to which he had sold for a very handy sum. I don't know exactly how much, but we were talking well into the five figures.

Yep. Lenny could afford all that hardware. And in between making money he also somehow did all his assignments and passed all tests with flying colors. Except English, of course. Lenny had never done too well in English.

"The access statistics are definitely changing."

"What are you talking about?"

He stared at columns of numbers on his spreadsheet and then produced a graph.

"Here, see? The amount of correction required is decreasing. I don't understand . . ."

Lenny's nightmares: not understanding things.

"What exactly is it that worries you?"

"It's got to mean something!" he said excitedly. "Nothing happens without meaning. Everything points at something else. You've just got to look. Nothing ever just *is*."

"This here," he pointed at the graphs, "means that my computations require much less corrections from the interface. But I haven't changed the algorithms, and I still have to search exactly the same state spaces. It's almost as if . . ." He stared at the screen.

". . . as if," he continued, "the computational process itself did its own interfacing—or part of it anyway."

He shook his head. "Wow!"

I felt like the dope I was. "Wow what?"

"This is incredible," he muttered.

His eyes kind of glazed over as he pondered Lenny's universe.

"I think this is it," he said when he emerged from his brief trance.

"Yes!" He hit the armrest of his chair with a fist. "If it goes on like this, then, in a year or so, I won't *need* the damned interface anymore."

His eyes shone. "The computation itself is becoming an interface of sorts! I wonder . . . Maybe it's bypassing the real interface!"

He shook his head. "I wonder if that means . . ."

Going off into his cerebral never-never land again.

"Yes?" I said, probably with more than a hint of irritation.

Lenny looked at me with a frown. "Don't you get it? Substrate space is actually in resonance with the fundamental patterns of the computation—and as long as the state of the model doesn't deviate too much from that of the substrate the correlations are actually maintained."

He sat back, stunned by his revelation. "I'll probably still need the interface for a while," he mused. "Gotta make sure the deviations stay within the permissible limits. But give it time—maybe a year or two—and it won't matter anymore."

His big, baby-blue eyes fixed on mine. "In case I wasn't clear, Jack, what that means is that eventually substrate space will correlate perfectly with my computational model. Think of it as a variation on Shel-drake's 'morphic resonance'. With the model in resonance with what it models—the map becoming the territory, so to speak—if I tweak the model, I change substrate space, and therefore the state of the physical universe. Neat, huh?"

He shook his head regretfully. "A kingdom for a supercomputer! I could do it all in a few months. Just imagine . . ."

No thanks, I'd rather not.

Lenny grinned. "But maybe . . . Well . . . With the computing power in today's machines . . . All I need is a network of processors to do the same job. Actually, I've been working on alternatives."

"You're going to buy more computers?"

Lenny shook his head. "There are cheaper ways."

"Like?"

"Look what SETI did! Millions of machines churning away in their service."

"With their owners' consent," I felt compelled to point out.

Lenny chuckled. "Who gives a shit? They don't have to know."

"Eh?"

And then it clicked.

"A virus?" I said. "You're going to write a virus?"

Lenny was staring at his screen. "Yeah. And it's going to make the Love-bug look like an idiot's creation. Except that nobody's gonna know about *this* one."

"They've got protection against that kind of thing nowadays," I said.

Lenny chortled and bent over his keyboard. The screen illuminated his face and made him look like a mad wizard from a medieval farce.

"Protection? What protection?" He glanced at me. "Man, I know at least a dozen ways into Microsoft's imbecilic operating systems, and almost as many into Apple's abortion of Unix. Swiss cheese!"

He turned back to his keyboard. "Protection?" he muttered. "Don't make me laugh. It breaks my concentration."

He started to bang away on the keys.

I took the hint and dismissed myself.

I knew too much about Lenny to dismiss this latest flight of fancy as a bagatelle, no matter how outlandish this whole thing was beginning to sound. I had this image of Lenny, like some maniacal professor, hovering over a keyboard and making models of the universe in his computer. When it was all to his liking he hit a button and, presto, so it was.

Scary, huh? Especially if it was Lenny hovering over the keyboard. Come to think about it, it was scary to think of *anybody* with that kind of power!

It was all a delusion by someone—meaning me!—rapidly going around the twist. Right? It just had to be. The only alternative was that I had been dumped right into the middle of the Twilight Zone.

I looked around me and breathed in the utter normality, the dull everyday routine, of the world around me. Cars moving along an overcrowded road. Shoppers filing in and out of the supermarket. A mother chastising her child. The wind gusting through the trees. A few torn clouds in the sky. The smell of fried food wafting across from one of the many eating places in the shopping center across the road. The roar of a truck spewing diesel fumes from its stack.

The contrast to the wizard's den I had just left behind . . .

I understood something then. Something about the preciousness of normality. Of how it supports all our endeavors, and how, though we often come to hate it and may even find it oppressive, it is our ultimate frame of reference from which everything else—even our most outrageous endeavors—are measured. Whatever we are, we are with reference to the 'normality' of everything else.

Troublesome thoughts for an almost-eighteen year-old. The kinds of thoughts that rattle and shake and wake you to what actually matters. Like Dana. Nothing was more important to me just then. If there was even a remote chance that this mad wizard in his lair was going to interfere seriously with this precious reality of mine, I really couldn't just stand by and watch. Things would have to be done.

The problem, as always, was that I had not the slightest idea how to go about it.

How do you stop a maniac from destroying your world? Without destroying the maniac in the process that is? An alternative which I refused to consider seriously. It was simply too monstrous. That it entered my mind at all was symptomatic of my rather desperate state.

Saturday. Blowup day.

Mum and dad were gone for the day and most of the next. Some 'seminar' in a resort down the coast. A bring-your-spouses kind of thing. Stay at the Hilton and listen to some speakers pontificating on business matters, before going to the beach and having an absolutely terrible time. Managers' perks and all that.

Fine with Dana and me. The whole house to ourselves for more than a day! The things . . . never mind.

Dad looked at me with a twinkle in his eye which told me that he knew damned well what was going through my head.

"Look after the house," he said before they set off in the early hours of the morning.

"Don't be worried about anything," I assured him.

"I'm not," he replied. "Not with you two."

"We'll make sure everything's in order." Were we still talking about the house?

Dad nodded. "Take care."

"You too."

Off they went.

Dana looked up and down the tree-lined street. Seeing nobody watching she put an arm around my waist. "We'd better give them a few minutes, huh? Just in case."

I grinned. "Just in case . . ."

We spent the next hour making and eating breakfast and enjoying just being around each other. It was a funny feeling, being alone in the house like that. No hurry about anything. We had both decided to give our usual Saturday morning commitments a miss. Screw them!

Just a lazy day together.

Already it was warm with not a cloud in the sky. A definite promise of turning into a scorcher. We had the windows wide open and the breeze wafted through the house. Franz, the cat, had arranged himself right in the middle of the big rug in the living room, taking full advantage of the airflow. From several houses away we heard a lawn mower start up. A subtle scent of cut grass floated into the kitchen.

Breakfast was just a displacement activity, designed to keep our hands off each other until we could be sure that mum and dad weren't going to return because they'd forgotten something totally ludicrous and insignificant—or maybe just to check up on us! That stratagem was not entirely effective. It's never taken me so long to prepare and consume a breakfast as that morning. With the day being so warm neither of us wore more than what was absolutely necessary and it was just too much being close like that and *not* doing what was becoming like a second nature to us.

But we did finish 'breakfast' eventually. We even cleaned up a bit and placed the dishes into the dishwasher. We looked at the oven clock, and then at each

other. Great minds think alike. Dana smiled mischievously. I picked her up, and she squealed and wrapped her arms around my neck and, as she was whispering devastating things into my ear, I took our combined weights up the stairs and into her room and deposited both of us onto her bed. I don't remember how the rest of our clothes came off. Or where we threw them, for that matter.

We ignored the phone and let the answering machine handle the traffic. Whoever it was, it just couldn't be important enough. Mum and dad would conclude that we were out. Anybody else: screw them! Well, sort of . . .

Afternoon came and with it a pleasant languor induced by prolonged vigorous exercise, exposure to high hormone levels in the blood stream, as well as by the outside temperature, which was well into the hundreds. We had lost a lot of body fluids in the course of our activities.

Perspiration, of course. As I said, it was hot.

We had our second shower for that day and dressed in something suitably modest; just enough to be able to step outside and expose ourselves to possible neighborly inspection. Then we went downstairs to attend to the needs of our digestive system.

Four p.m. already! Time does fly . . .

The phone rang again. This time I picked it up. It was dad.

"Just wanted to let you know that we've arrived safely."

"Good! Hope you have a really productive seminar."

Dad laughed. "Sure—and you two behave yourselves."

"Would we do anything else?"

He coughed discreetly. "See you tomorrow."

"Bye, dad."

I had held the receiver so Dana could listen to the conversation. She giggled when I hung up.

"'Would we do anything else?'" she mimicked me.

I pulled her close to me. She got very serious.

"I love you, Jack," she said softly.

"And I love you."

We'd done a lot of things with and to each other, but we had never actually said it before. It was a very special moment that would never come again, and we wanted to savor it for as long as we could. I don't know for how long we stood there, kissing and doing the

kinds of things lovers do when they're lost in each other.

Too lost to notice him standing there, at the other end of the hallway, watching us.

When we played back the answering machine later there were three calls from Lenny. One to tell me that he had been right about the progressive obsolescence of the interface, and would I call him. Another to remind me to call him; and a third to enquire, in a testy tone, whether I intended to call him within the next few weeks.

I suppose he just got fed up and decided to do something he hadn't done for years—not since, in fact, that 'incident'. What made him do it we'll never know. Maybe he thought this would be a good time to elicit an invitation from Dana.

Whatever—we had left the backdoor open, because it was such a warm day and he walked into the house without so much as a by-your-leave.

He caught us in mid-act. Watched in sickened fascination as Dana and I whispered sweet nothings in each others' ears and stroked each other in all the important places. By the time she happened to glance in his direction, spied his lurking shape, and uttered a little outcry of shock, it was all too late. The dissembling was at an end. Our position with regard to each other was pretty unambiguous.

Lenny face was distorted with suppressed fury as he glared at us.

"So this is why!" he hissed.

"All those years you pretended to be my friend—and all the time you did . . . this . . . behind my back!"

He turned away and stalked to the door. He looked back at us.

"I'm going to destroy you, Jack.

"You and that . . . bitch." He was speaking to me only, pointedly ignoring Dana who was standing right beside me.

"And there is nothing," he hissed, "you hear me? . . . *nothing* . . . you can do about that! You know what I can do!"

The door slammed behind him.

"Shit!" I said when he was gone.

"It had to happen, Jack," Dana said quietly, though she, too, had been visibly shaken by Lenny's fury.

"I know," I said, "but I wished it could have happened a few days later. Now I can do nothing about that damned thing of his any more!"

"You really think it's that serious, huh?"

"I think I'm stuck in some paranoid thriller: that's what I think. With an insane professor who can destroy the universe and might just enjoy doing it. And I'm the only one who can stop him, because I'm the only one who really knows what's going on. But I have no idea what I should do, and the end of the world is coming closer and time's running out."

"Maybe we should talk to somebody else about this."

"Oh yeah? Who's going to believe this shit?"

"We could try dad," Dana suggested in that quiet tone she always uses when she knows that she's right about something.

The thought had never occurred to me. Dad was the manager of the local branch of a large insurance company. Not exactly a scientist but a bureaucrat. Nice man. Good father. Very intelligent. But not someone to appreciate Lenny's aberrations.

Or was I maybe being just a bit arrogant here? Lenny rubbing off.

"Maybe you're right," I agreed. "Let's talk to him tomorrow when he gets back."

Dad didn't get much of a break after driving two hundred miles. While Dana occupied mum I took him aside.

"We have to talk."

He regarded me strangely. "Anything happened while we were away?" he asked suspiciously.

I shook my head. "No, it's nothing like that. But it's serious. Terribly serious."

I saw what was going through his mind and I shook my head again. "It isn't that either, It's got to do with Lenny."

"Lenny?"

So we sat down and I told him the whole story. About Lenny and Dana, about Lenny the genius, about Lenny the mad scientist. Dad, to his credit, listened without major interruption.

When I was finished and leaned back, saying "And that's it," he stared at me for a while.

"Why haven't you told me this before?" he finally asked.

"Because . . ." I really wasn't sure. "Because until yesterday I still had him under observation, so to speak.

I could still talk to him, maybe do something to divert him.

"I don't know. I thought that maybe I could handle it by myself. Besides, it's such an incredible story—I still feel kind of stupid telling it to you now. Who would believe such a thing?"

"What happened yesterday?" he asked.

I'd forgotten about that! How could I put it delicately?

"Lenny came around and found out that Dana wasn't going to the prom with him."

Dad nodded. "He found out that she was going with you," he noted dryly.

I felt myself ears getting hot.

"Yes—that, too," I admitted.

"And he didn't take it very well."

"No. In fact he told me that he was, and I quote, 'going to destroy' me. Actually, both of us."

"I see."

"He meant it, dad. I know Lenny. He meant every word. And he walked out thinking that he could actually do it."

Dad cogitated silently for a while and I did not interrupt him.

"Be honest with me, Jack," he finally said. "I'm not a scientist and I haven't got the foggiest idea what's what. So you tell me: is this quite as serious as you make it out?"

I considered my reply carefully. "I've seen what I've seen. I have no doubt that what I saw was real. The theory makes total sense once you accept its basic premises. And when you have an object disappear in front of your eyes—and then come back again. . . ."

"I know it sounds weird. I know it's like something out of some stupid movie. I feel like that myself sometimes. When I go out on the street, you know, and everything looks so totally normal. Then I suddenly ask myself if I'm nuts, because this is just so crazy. But then I think of Lenny and his computers and his box and the ball bearing—and I *know* that it's real. This guy is a real-life genius and he has discovered something that's terribly dangerous. More dangerous than all the nuclear or biological weapons of the world taken together. . . ."

Dad leaned back. "Shit!" It's not often that I catch my father uttering profanities.

"What can I do? What can anybody do? We can't just walk in there and take his stuff away from him!

"I'm scared, dad. Dana is scared. The world should be scared. . . ."

"Sounds like it," my father muttered darkly.

He stood up. "Not a word of this to your mother. I really don't want to worry her with something like this."

I shook my head. "I ain't telling."

"Give me a few days to think about it," he said. "I'm sure we'll figure out something. . . ."

I touched his sleeve. "I'm sorry for keeping this from you, but. . . ."

"It's OK," he said. "I wouldn't have acted any differently. As you said, the whole thing sounds so totally crazy."

Monday Lenny didn't show up at school. Rumor had it that he was sick. My personal opinion was that he was at home hacking away for all it was worth; working on his fiendish devices and schemes.

Dana and I finally let the cat out of the bag about the prom. The response was mixed, but encouragingly low key. There were a few crude jokes from the other guys—and, according to Dana, some even cruder ones from the girls—but it was nothing to really worry about. By finishing time all was basically back to normal. The peer groups didn't seem too worried. The only long faces were those of the guys who'd had their eye on Dana. Dana didn't mention anything about girls being peeved about missing out on me. My ego was a bit deflated over the implied disinterest, but I thought it wise not to ask her about the matter.

Tuesday Lenny remained conspicuous by his absence. Still, it was rumored, too sick. Neither did he show for the rest of the week. In a way I was glad. I really don't know how I could possibly have faced him. However, the thought of what the mad wizard might be doing in his den unsettled me immensely. Dana didn't appear quite as affected. But then again, she hides things better.

Saturday came and went. Dad had come up with nothing sensible. It was comforting and disturbing at the same time that he seemed to be as much at a loss for suggestions as I was.

Sunday lunchtime Joe Goldstein called. Joe was in my physics class. He also happened to have been in Aaron's Bagel Eatery earlier that day. As had Lenny, who was just finishing off his breakfast at one of the tables. Lenny *loved* bagels. Aaron's was a temple of

sorts. For Lenny, breakfast at Aaron's on Sundays had the quality of a religious ritual.

As Joe waited in line to be served Lenny got up and left. Less than a minute later there was a screeching of tires outside as a pickup truck plowed into Lenny and threw him clear across the road, thus conclusively putting an end to all of Lenny's ambitions and dreams in one fell swoop.

I'd be lying if I said that I felt anything but an incredible sense of relief. After I'd told the others I went out into the back yard to have a moment alone. The sun felt so good on my face I could have cried.

Maybe somebody up there was on our side after all.

The funeral was set for Wednesday. The day before I called Mr. Ragg. There was unfinished business to be taken care of. Whatever Lenny had left behind had to be destroyed.

"This is Jack."

"Hello, Jack." I never knew what it meant for a voice to be 'dead' until I heard Mr. Ragg over the phone that day.

I explained (I lied) that Lenny and I had been working on a project together and that Lenny had some of my notes and stuff around his room, and if it was OK if I came and picked them up.

"Of course," he said. "Come over anytime. I haven't touched anything in his room . . ." His voice broke up and I felt like a bastard for lying like that.

But what was I supposed to say to him? "Your son was about to destroy the world and I'm just glad he's dead before he got around to it . . ."

Not likely.

Dad had promised that he'd write me a sick note for the day so I could get on with what I felt I had to do. In particular, to destroy all traces of what Lenny had been working on. We both agreed that there was really no other way. It may sound like we were Luddites, standing in the way of scientific progress, and all that—but we felt we were doing the world a favor.

I asked Dana to come and help me, but she declined the invitation. "Please, don't make me do this, Jack! I just couldn't. The guy gave me the creeps when he was alive. To rummage through his leftovers would be even worse."

I took one of our cars and went over there. Mr. Ragg, looking like he sounded, and smelling of stale sweat, smoke, and alcohol, let me in. It was pathetic to see the

man. His life had fallen apart over the period of one decade. The things he had held precious had been taken from him one by one. His youngest son. His wife. His eldest. Never mind that Lenny had considered his father only slightly less repugnant than a cockroach. I doubt Mr. Ragg would have noticed. And now the last thing which mattered had been taken from him, and I had this horrid sensation that I was looking at a dead man, whose body just didn't know that the mind had already preceded it into the netherworld.

"Help yourself to whatever you need," he said. "If you want you can take his computers, you're welcome to them. You'd be doing me a favor. I wouldn't know what to do with them. I'm moving out of here. Got to get away . . ."

I forbore to ask for details and made some meaningless soothing noises. He shuffled off and left me to my own devices.

I went into Lenny's room and looked around. It felt strange without him in it. He had always been in it, and there was a void on his chair that was almost a physical presence. The room was painfully neat, as it had always been. Lenny didn't believe in messes like the rest of us. Everything was organized, classified, and arranged at right angles to everything else. Books weren't just left lying around but were arranged according to types and sorted alphabetically within each group. The bed was made with fastidious care. A notepad and a ball-point pen lay beside the PowerMac. The one concession to disorganization. The note read 'check 1961!'. Doubly underlined. Whatever '1961' was, it must have been important. The pen was not aligned neatly with the side of the pad, which suggested that Lenny jotted the note down and then something had distracted him. Before he had a chance to complete the task, a pickup running the lights had terminated his short career in science in particular and life in general.

The G4, I noticed, had been shut off. The PowerBook beside it was still hooked up to the interface box. The screen was folded open. Apart from the power cord there was only one other line, connecting into a nearby phone jack. I touched the keyboard. The hard drive started whirring softly and the screen came alive.

Still running. But, I noticed, it wasn't 'the' program. I checked the active task list. Just one task except for the system's. A program called 'IFCom'. Whatever that was.

I turned my attention from the computer to scan the rest of the room. My original intention had been to steal the interface and smash it with a hammer, and to wipe all traces of Lenny's work from the hard disks of the machines. But now, as I looked around me I wondered. Had Lenny left other traces? Anything that allowed reconstruction of his labors had to go. It occurred to me that a fire would probably be the best thing.

Battling with the feeling that I was desecrating something I began a systematic search of Lenny's room. On his bookshelf, beside his school notes, I found a journal. Under his bed I found a small wooden chest with another forty eight journals of assorted sizes, dating back ten years. It seemed that Lenny had started keeping these things as soon as he was able to write. A testimony to man's pervading need to communicate and share his innermost thoughts and desires, even if it was only to a blank page in an exercise book.

The first entries were comparatively terse and clumsy. Written by someone who was still learning to spell and phrase things. A spidery sort of script, done mostly in pencil with many erasures and corrections. As the years went on the writing had become more elaborate. Daily entries were frequent, sometime stretching over several pages.

The contents ranged from Lenny's daily doings, to his thoughts and reflections on the world and its inhabitants. In later years he had used them to keep meticulous notes on his theories and experiments. Pages and pages of equations and often incomprehensible neologisms. Records of his experiments. Pasted scraps of printouts with graphs and tables of statistics.

Oh, yes, and pictures of Dana . . .

Lots of them. The first ones appeared in the older journals, dated maybe a few weeks after he'd first met her. God only knows where he got them from! Some looked as if they had been shot with a primitive camera and out of hiding places. There were a couple of ancient pictures from the bunch at kindergarten. Class photos from school. A few clippings from a now-defunct school newsletter. More recent photos; much better quality, but obviously taken without the knowledge of the subject. What you might call 'candid' shots. Paparazzi kind of stuff. Lenny graduating from Instamatics to Canons with zoom lenses.

The commentary accompanying some of the pictures made me blush just reading it. Even as a small boy of

eight Lenny had a very lively imagination and the thoughts he entrusted to his journals were blunt and to the point. I skimmed over most of it, since some of it almost made me physically ill. At a later stage there were drawings of Dana in the nude, as Lenny had imagined her to look. The first ones were crude and clumsy, but as time went on and his drawing skills increased they assumed a frighteningly realistic air.

The notes accompanying the pictures were even more grotesque.

'She is mine. She is the one. I am the one. Beware all those who dare to stand in the way.' From a ten-year-old.

'She had her hair cut short. Why didn't she ask me? I would have told her not to. How could she do this to me?' That was at age thirteen.

The more recent stuff was really scary. The entries for the last week of his life, after that fateful Sunday, blistered with hatred.

To describe Lenny as 'sick' was understating the case. That he appeared only 'odd' on the surface was a testimony to his incredible ability to dissemble and hide his true feelings about the world and its inhabitants.

Yet other passages were pathetic and sad beyond compare. Lenny's pain and loneliness must have been excruciating. He adored his mother and despised his father who, he thought, was not worthy of her. His mother's suicide was a devastating blow. His grasp on reality definitely slipped after that.

He had detested his brother (whom he had code-named 'maggot' in his journals) with a loathing that hit me like a physical blow. It got worse when I found out, some pages later just how the fire had started . . .

I put the journal down, fighting an urge to be sick right there and then. Dark thoughts welled up from my subconscious. I searched for the journal covering the time of Mr. McNally's sudden demise.

'I'm going to teach that stupid idiot a lesson.' Followed by a description of exactly how he was going to do it.

I threw the journal back into the wooden chest and sat on the floor, breathing heavily to dispel my dizziness. I felt drained and shattered.

A 'beep' attracted my attention. The PowerBook's screen had come alive. A dialog appeared. '#2187 connecting. . . ' it said. Then: 'communicating. . . '—'requesting Array Data . . . '—'reading Array

Data . . .’—‘#2187 disconnecting . . .’ The dialog disappeared. Another beep.

What was going on?

It seemed as if something or somebody had dialed in.

Dialed into what?

‘IFCom’: InterFace Communication?

I turned on the G4. One thing you had to say about Lenny. He was a lot of things, but he wasn’t paranoid. There were no access restrictions on his machine. Just like there had been no lock on the chest with all those journals. Like Lenny had this supreme confidence that nobody would even dream of invading his privacy.

I searched the computer and found several programming projects, including one called ‘IFCom’. So, that was one of Lenny’s hacks!

There also was a major programming project, called ‘ComVirus!’. When I saw that something clicked. I flipped through his most recent journal and found what I was looking for. Thank you, Lenny for being so methodical!

Knowing what I knew now, however, I could not take the easy way out and just wipe the disks and burn the journals. Instead I asked Mr. Ragg if I could take the computer and some ‘notes’ that Lenny had left behind and take them home for a few days. I also asked him if he could leave the PowerBook as it was, and not to turn it off. I didn’t even have to contrive any excuses. He just waved his assent and I carted the stuff out of there.

“I’m going to move out of here in a couple of weeks or so,” he reminded me. “if you need anything out of Lenny’s stuff, you’d better get it by then.”

I nodded and thanked him. Then I shook his hand, muttered my condolences again, and promised to be at the funeral. As I drove off I saw him standing there in my rear-vision mirror; small and pathetic and almost dead.

When Dana came back home from school, Lenny’s computer stood on my desk and I was deeply immersed in his code.

Fascinating stuff, reading someone else’s programs. It’s like looking into a person’s soul. A snapshot of how he interacts with that particular aspect of the world the program is designed to handle. Flaws and strengths of thought and conceptualization stand out a mile. Differences in thought processes between the programmer’s and your own are openly displayed for inspection. A program also reveals precisely just what is actually

supposed to happen. It may be difficult to actually come to grips with it, but in principle it’s all there, and all you have to do is find it.

If Lenny’s programs were like his thoughts I must admit that the latter must indeed have been brilliant. Everywhere: clear signs of a precise mind, combined with a genius for putting abstract concepts into the most concise and limpid algorithmic form. I could actually read this stuff and understand a great deal of it without too much trouble. The purpose of some of the subroutines remained obscure, but I knew that I’d get to grips with them in due course.

If Lenny had functioned at a similarly lucid level in his everyday life this whole mess would never have come about.

Yeah, well . . .

Dana came bouncing into the room.

“Hi, Jack, how . . .”

She came to an abrupt halt as she surveyed the mess. “What’s going on? What’s all this?”

“Lenny’s,” I replied laconically.

“What’s it doing here? I thought you were just going to wipe the disks!”

“It’s not going to be a simple as that, I’m afraid.”

Her eyes grew round. “What happened?”

“I’m afraid Lenny wasn’t content with his current equipment. He decided he needed more computing power.”

“So?”

“So he fabricated a virus and spread it over the Internet. Right now there are over two thousand machines happily doing the dirty work for him. The only thing he’s contributing—posthumously—is a dial-in facility so all of those machines can make use of that infernal interface device of his. I suppose they’ll also send him the results when they’re done, just like SETI.”

“And you’ve shut it all down, of course.”

I shook my head.

“I don’t think that’s such a good idea.”

“Why ever not?”

“Because I don’t know what those machines are doing. Since several of them have our names attached to them this isn’t just an academic exercise either!”

“What do you mean: ‘our names?’”

I picked up Lenny’s latest journal and flicked through it until I came to the right page.

"Here. 436—Dana. Task: find correlation and lock.
1298—Dana. Task: find correlation and lock.
1866—Jack. Task: find correlation and lock.
2250—Dana. Task: find correlation and lock.
2311—Dana. Task: find correlation and lock.
2431—Jack. Task: find correlation and lock. . .

"There are several more like that."

"But what does it *mean*?"

"It's Lenny-speak for 'find out how to tweak their buttons'."

"To do what?"

"I'd rather not think about it. Considering how he felt about us when we last saw him. . ."

Dana spied the chest on my bed.

"The world of Lenny Ragg," I told her. "As seen and recorded by Lenny Ragg in excruciating and often sickening detail for almost ten years."

She opened the lid and stared.

"I wouldn't if I were you," I said.

She looked at me with wide eyes.

"It's not nice reading," I said. "Especially the bits that concern you."

"Me?"

"You're everywhere in there. To say that he was obsessed with you is putting it mildly."

Dana gingerly picked up one of the older journals and opened it at random (at least I would have said she did—but if Lenny was right. . .). She read a few lines, flicked over a few pages, came across one of her pictures. She read another few lines and made a strangled sound. She looked up at me. All color had drained out of her face.

I quickly got up, went over to her, gently took the journal out of her hands, dropped it back in the chest, and closed the lid. I took her face in my hands and made her look at me.

"Please don't," I said. "Don't let him do this to you. Especially not now. Not after he's dead."

"I'm scared," she whispered. Understandably. When you realize that you've been the object of the intense attention of a serious psychopath for much of your life without knowing it: that can be frightening indeed.

"Get those things out of here," she whispered. "Please! I don't want to be even close to them. Burn them! Burn them now!"

I knew what she meant.

But. . . "I can't."

"Why not?"

"Because I've got to know exactly what he was planning to do, and how he was planning to do it. Then I have to deactivate all those programs in all those machines, because as long as they go on working—even without the interface—there's a possibility that one of them will eventually lock-in with its correlate—meaning quite possibly you and me!—and then the shit will really hit the fan."

She looked at me with an exasperated expression. "English, please!"

"It could kill us!" I shouted. "Will that do? Make us disappear maybe. Just like that ball bearing. Is that English enough for you?"

She was taken aback by my sudden vehemence. I was quite nonplussed myself.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to. . ." I pulled her to me and she felt soft and warm, and I realized that she was going to be my bridge to sanity in what was yet to come.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I didn't mean to shout at you. I'm just rattled."

She hugged me fiercely. "What're you going to do?"

"I'm going to figure out what kind of response from the interface those programs need. Then I'm going to substitute Lenny's program with a modified version which fakes the data. Hopefully that will throw the simulations so far off track that there's no way they lock into any correlation. After that I'll have to try and write another program that goes to the same machines that now run Lenny's programs and destroy them one at a time.

"Mr. Ragg is quitting the apartment. We'll have to have his phone number re-assigned to us. I'll hook up the interface machine from here and hopefully in a few weeks all the connected viruses will be completely confused.

"I promise, eventually it'll all be dead and gone—and Lenny's legacy will be buried along with him."

Promises. . .

That was two years ago. After studying Lenny's notes and algorithms for a long time, I finally figured out what had to be done. As I said, an algorithm is a look deep into the soul of the process it is meant to simulate. And no algorithm is flawless. Not even when coming from a genius the caliber of Lenny. You can never cope with all the possible states of a machine, and the human mind—even that of a genius—has a

limited capacity to consider all possible sources of error. But I ran my own simulations of the simulation, and finally found the program's Achilles heel. It so happened that there was one particular configuration of interface readings—which would probably never have occurred unless they were simulated—which actually caused Lenny's original viruses to crash. A simple divide-by-zero error which he'd never considered and had not protected himself against. Once the programs crashed they were almost certain to be discovered by the host operating systems and the various virus detectors around. My hope was that this kind of attrition would eventually wipe them all out of existence; that and the fact that Lenny wasn't around to keep mutating and redistributing his viral program.

Actually I don't even want to *think* about what might have been.

I mean, how lucky can you get? And, let's face it, that's all it was: luck. If Lenny hadn't so conveniently run in front of a truck . . .

The driver would never know that he had saved the world. Maybe I should do something about the man's guilt-feeling, if he harbored any such. All I know for certain is that I would never have had the guts to do what had to be done to stop Lenny. And by now we all could be puppets dancing to Lenny's mad tunes.

A week ago we burned Lenny's journals and the interface box in a solemn ceremony on a bonfire. It was a family affair. Mum and dad, Dana and I. We had finally told mum the whole story and she had been a tower of strength throughout that last year. I'm sorry we ever doubted her. She did panic a bit in the beginning, but when she recovered she did her best to help.

The day before the burning I had taken a sledgehammer to the G4. It had dominated my life for too long. Lenny on my desk, and I'd had enough of it.

The PowerBook, however, is still hooked up to one of the phone-lines into our parents' place; just in case one of those viruses still lurks somewhere and dials in to get some more data. I doubt that will happen, but in this instance paranoia appears appropriate.

I've also decided that I don't want to do computer science anymore. It's lost all its appeal. All I ever want to use a computer for nowadays is as a word-processor. Dana approves. She suggested that I should study English and useless subjects like anthropology and history, and become a writer. We'll live in a small house by the

sea, and earn our living by doing something optimally unproductive and yet profitable.

I'm open to suggestions.

The day after the burning the whole family drove several hundred miles west because in our state they don't allow marriages between brother and sister—not even when they're unrelated by blood. Mum and dad watched as Dana and I stood in a small registry office and vowed to love and cherish each other for the rest of our lives. The witnesses we had dragged in from the street.

Mum cried. Dad just cleared his throat.

By the way, when mum found out what had been going on between Dana and me she declared that she'd known this was going to happen 'for years'.

Mothers . . .

A happy ending I suppose—but for one little snag. A tiny one, really. Nothing serious, but I think I ought to mention it.

It's about a promise *not* kept. A promise I cannot keep; unless I kill myself right now—which, of course, I have no intention of doing.

I had promised Dana—and myself—that in the end it would all be 'dead and gone'. That nothing would remain of Lenny Ragg but an unpleasant memory that would fade into the mists of time and life.

That would have been nice. But it just ain't so.

I had to live with Lenny's stuff for almost two years. In order to do with it what I wanted to, I had to go over every line of his code and understand why it was there. By the time I was done I knew what Lenny had known. Every bit of it. I read his journals and pored over his tables and diagrams. I understood how he'd got there and what it could lead to. I have a full and explicit appreciation of the potential power which got Lenny so intoxicated.

Lenny may be dead, the disks erased, the interface and journals burned to a crisp. But it's all still in my head, and I know that it's not going to go away. A part of Lenny Ragg lurks in currently inactive circuits and connections in my brain and it will be that way until the day I die.

Right now it's easy to resist the temptation of a glittering jewel of power. The memory of Lenny and the scare he put into us all is still strong. But people forget, and I know it's going to become more difficult as time goes on. Because it wasn't all bad, you see? Noth-

ing's ever all bad. It's just too much to let loose on the world. We aren't ready for the power to twiddle a knob, or push a button on a keyboard, and have things happen that must look like miracles.

In the right hands this knowledge could solve the world's ills in one fell swoop. But in the wrong ones . . .

And if there's one thing that life has already firmly implanted in my impressionable mind, it's that there are always 'wrong ones'.

Dana seems confident that I can keep my hands off this stuff. One of the reasons why she would like me to become a writer: to live by the ocean and watch the play of the sun on the water; or the gales howling across the cat's-paws; to write tales of the things that really matter. Cautionary tales, maybe. Not the future I had planned, but what the heck? A lot of things didn't go the way I had planned. Probably this one won't either.

Sometimes I'm get quite bitter about being forced into compressing decades of growing up into the mere blink of an eye. At losing two precious years of my life that should have been spent in the heady frivolity of my late teenage years—when my main concerns should have been with dating and what college to go to and how to get my grades into order. Simple things like that.

But saving the world kind of messes up your mind, and afterwards you're never quite the same again. I know I'm not—and neither is Dana. But Dana is much wiser than I'll ever be. She is strangely serene about it all, and seems to take it all in her stride. I, on the other hand, keep on wondering what's going to happen next. Or when. Because *something's* got to happen. There's got to be more to the rest of my life than guarding Lenny Ragg's memes from ever getting out into the world again!

One evening, during our short honeymoon, Dana and I sat close together on a deserted Oregon beach, looking out across the Pacific. The waves pounded the sand. The sun had set in a layer of clouds far off above the horizon. The fire in the western sky was gradually dying down.

The breeze from the ocean carried the first hints of a chill. Dana hooked her arm under mine and moved even closer. A brief gust blew her hair across my face.

It felt good.

"And I'm going to be the guardian's guardian," she said.

"Promise?"

"Promise."

Yeah . . . promises . . .

