

# Madness has it's place



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# MADNESS HAS ITS PLACE

A world that had forgotten war did not easily accept the possibility of invading aliens.

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I

A lucky few of us know the good days before they're gone. I remember my eighties. My job kept me in shape and gave me enough variety to keep my mind

occupied. My love life was imperfect but interesting. Modern medicine makes the old fairy tales look insipid; I almost never worried about my health.

Those were the good days, and I knew them. I could remember worse.

I can remember when my memory was better, too. That's what this file is for. I keep it updated for that reason and also to maintain my sense of purpose.

The Monobloc had been a singles bar since the 2320s.

In the 2330s I'd been a regular. I'd found Charlotte there. We held our wedding reception at the Monobloc, then dropped

out for twenty-eight years. My first marriage-hers, too-both in our forties. After the children grew up and moved away, after Charlotte left me, too, I came back.

The place was much changed.

I remembered a couple of hundred bottles in the hologram bar display. Now the display was twice as large and seemed more realistic--better equipment, maybe-but only a score of bottles in the middle were liquors. The rest were flavored or carbonated water, high-energy drinks, electrolytes, a thousand kinds of tea; there was also food to match: raw vegetables and fruits kept fresh by high-tech means, arrayed

with low-cholesterol dips, bran in every conceivable form short of injections.

The Monobloc had swallowed its neighbors. It was bigger, with curtained alcoves and a small gym upstairs for working out or for dating.

Herbert and Tina Schroeder still owned the place. Their marriage had been open in the 2330s. They'd aged since. So had their clientele. Some of us had married or drifted away or died of alcoholism, but word of mouth and the Velvet Net had maintained a continuous tradition. Twenty-eight years later they looked better than ever . . . wrinkled, of course, but lean and muscular, both ready for the

Gray Olympics. Tina let me know before I could ask: she and Herb were lockstepped now.

To me it was like coming home.

For the next twelve years the Monobloc was an intermittent part of my life.

I would find a lady or she would find me, and we'd drop out. Or we'd visit the Monobloc and sometimes trade partners, and one evening we'd go together and leave separately. I was not evading marriage. Every woman I found worth knowing ultimately seemed to want to know someone else.

I was nearly bald even then. Thick white

hair covered my arms and legs and torso, as if my head hairs had migrated. Twelve years of running construction robots had turned me burly. From time to time some muscular lady would look me over and claim me. I had no trouble finding company.

But company never stayed. Had I become dull? The notion struck me as funny.

I had settled myself alone at a table for two early on a Thursday evening in 2375. The Monobloc was half-empty. The earlies were all keeping one eye on the door when Anton Brillov came in.

Anton was shorter than me and much

narrower, with a face like an ax. I hadn't seen him in thirteen years. Still, I'd mentioned the Monobloc once or twice; he must have remembered.

I semaphored my arms. Anton squinted, then came over, exaggeratedly cautious until he saw who it was.

"Jack Strather!"

"Hi, Anton. So you decided to try the place."

"Yah." He sat. "You look good." He looked a moment longer and said, "Relaxed. Placid. How's Charlotte?"

"Left me after I retired. Just under a year



after. There was too much of me around, and I . . . maybe I was too placid? Anyway. How are you?"

"Fine."

Twitchy. Anton looked twitchy. I was amused. "Still with the Holy Office?"

"Only citizens call it that, Jack."

"I'm a citizen now. Still gives me a kick. How's your chemistry?"

Anton knew what I meant and didn't pretend otherwise. "I'm okay. I'm down."

"Kid, you're looking over both shoulders at once."

Anton managed a credible laugh. "I'm not the kid anymore. I'm a weekly."

The ARM had made me a weekly at forty-eight. They couldn't turn me loose at the end of the day anymore because my body chemistry couldn't shift fast enough. So they kept me in the ARM building Monday through Thursday and gave me all of Thursday afternoon to shed the schitz madness. Another twenty years of that and I was even less flexible, so they retired me.

I said, "You do have to remember. When you're in the ARM building, you're a paranoid schizophrenic. You have to be able to file that when you're outside."

"Hah. How can anyone-"

"You get used to the schitz. After I quit, the difference was amazing. No fears, no tension, no ambition."

"No Charlotte?"

"Well . . . I turned boring. And what are you doing here?"

Anton looked around. "Much the same thing you are, I guess. I lack, am I the youngest one here?"

"Maybe." I looked around, double-checking. A woman was distracting me, though I could see only her back and a flash - of a laughing profile. Her back

was slender and strong, and a thick white braid ran down her spine, two and a half feet of clean, thick white hair. She was in an animated conversation with a blond companion of Anton's age plus a few.

But they were at a table for two: they weren't inviting company. I forced my attention back. "We're gray singles, Anton. The young ones tend to get the message quick. We're slower than we used to be. We date. You want to order?"

Alcohol wasn't popular there. Anton must have noticed, but he ordered guava juice and vodka and drank as if he needed it. This looked worse than

Thursday jitters. I let him half finish, then said, "Assuming you can tell me-"

"I don't know anything."

"I know the feeling. What should you know?"

The tension eased behind Anton's eyes. "There was a message from the Angel's Pencil."

"Pencil . . . oh." My mental reflexes had slowed down. The Angel's Pencil had departed twenty years earlier for . . . was it Epsilon Eridani? "Come on, kid, it'll be in the boob cubes before you have quite finished speaking. Anything from deep space is public property."

"Hah! No. It's restricted. I haven't seen it myself. Only a reference, and it must be more than ten years old."

That was peculiar. And if the Belt stations hadn't spread the news through the solar -system, that was peculiar. No wonder Anton was antsy. ARMs react that way to puzzles.

Anton seemed to jerk himself back to the here and now, back to the gray singles regime. "Am I cramping your style?"

"No problem. Nobody hurries in the Monobloc. If you see someone you like -"  
My fingers danced over lighted symbols on the rim of the table. "This gets you a map. Locate where she's

sitting, put the cursor on it. That gets you a display . . . hmm."

I'd set the cursor on the white-haired lady. I liked the readout. "Phoebe Garrison, seventy-nine, eleven or twelve years older than you. Straight. Won a second in the Gray Jumps last year . . . that's the Americas skiing matches for seventy and over. She could kick your tail if you don't watch your manners. It says she's smarter than eve are, too.

"Point is, she can check you out the same way. Or me. And she probably found this place through the Velvet Net, which is the computer network for unlocked lifestyles."

"So. Two males sitting together-"

"Anyone who thinks we're bent can check if she cares enough. Bends don't come to the Monobloc, anyway. But if we want company, we should move to a bigger table."

We did that. I caught Phoebe Garrison's companion's eye. They played with their table controls, discussed, and presently wandered over.

Dinner turned into a carouse. Alcohol was involved, but we'd left the Monobloc by then. When we split up, Anton was with Michiko. I went home with Phoebe.



Phoebe had fine legs, as I'd anticipated, though both knees were Teflon and plastic. Her face was lovely even in morning sunlight. Wrinkled, of course. She was two weeks short of eighty and wincing in anticipation. She ate with a cross-country skier's appetite. We spoke of our lives as we ate.

She'd come to Santa Maria to visit her oldest grandson. In her youth she'd done critical work in nanoengineering. The Board had allowed her four children. (I'd known I was outclassed.) All were married, scattered across the Earth, and so were the grandkids.

My two sons had emigrated to the Belt while still in their twenties. I'd visited

them once during an investigation trip paid for by the United Nations

"You were an ARM? Really? How interesting! Tell me a story..

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if you can."

"That's the problem, all right."

The interesting tales were all classified. The ARM suppresses dangerous technology. What the ARM buries is supposed to stay buried. I remembered a kind of time compressor and a field that would catalyze combustion, both centuries old. Both were first used for

murder. If turned loose or rediscovered, either would generate more interesting tales yet.

I said, "I don't know anything current. They bounced me out when I got too old. Now I run construction robots at various spaceports."

"Interesting?"

"Mostly placid." She wanted a story? Okay. The ARM enforced more than the killer-tech laws, and some of those tales I could tell.

"We don't get many mother hunts these days. This one was wished on us by the Belt." And I told her about a lunie who'd

sired two clones. One he'd raised on the moon, and one he'd left in the, Saturn Conserve. He'd moved to Earth, where one clone is any normal citizen's entire birthright. When we found him, he was arranging to culture a third clone . . .

I dreamed a bloody dream.

It was one of those: I was able to take control, to defeat what had attacked me. In the black of an early Sunday morning the shreds of the dream dissolved before I could touch them, but the sensations remained. I felt strong, balanced, powerful, victorious.

It took me a few minutes to become suspicious of this particular flavor of

wonderful, but I'd had practice. I eased out from under Phoebe's arm and leg and got out of bed. I lurched into the medical alcove, linked myself up, and fell asleep on the table.

Phoebe found me there in the morning. She asked, "Couldn't that wait till after breakfast?"

"I've got four years on you and I'm going for infinity. So I'm careful," I told her. Let her think the tube carried vitamins. It wasn't quite a lie . . . and she didn't quite believe me, either.

On Monday Phoebe went off to let her eldest grandson show her the local museums. I went back to work.

In Death Valley a semicircle of twenty lasers points at an axial array of mirrors. Tracks run across the desert to a platform that looks like strands of spun caramel. Every hour or so a spacecraft trundles along the tracks, poses above the mirrors, and rises into the sky on a blinding, searing pillar of light.

That was where I and three companions and twenty-eight robots worked between emergencies. Emergencies were common enough. From time to time Glenn and Skii and ten or twenty machines had to be shipped off to Outback Field or Baikonur, while I held the fort at Death Valley Field.

All the equipment was old. The original

mirrors had all been

slaved to one system and had been replaced again and again. Newer mirrors were independently mounted and had their own computers, but even they were up to fifty years old and losing their flexibility. The lasers had to be replaced somewhat more often. Nothing was ready to fall apart, quite.

But the mirrors have to adjust their shapes to match distorting air currents all the way up to vacuum, because the distortions themselves must focus the drive beam. A laser at 99.3 percent efficiency is keeping too much energy, getting too hot. At 99.1 percent

something would melt, lost power would blow the laser into shrapnel, and a cargo would not reach orbit.

My team had been replacing mirrors and lasers long before I came on the scene. This circuit was nearly complete. We had already reconfigured some robots to begin replacing track.

The robots worked alone while we entertained ourselves in the monitor room. If the robots ran into anything unfamiliar, they stopped and beeped. Then a story or songfest or poker game would stop just as abruptly.

Usually the beep meant that the robot had found an acute angle, an uneven surface,



a surface not strong enough to bear a loaded robot, a bend in a pipe, a pipe where it shouldn't be . . . a geometric problem. The robots couldn't navigate just anywhere. Sometimes we'd have to unload it and move the load to a cart by hand. Sometimes we had to pick it up with a crane and move it or turn it: Lots of it was muscle work.

Phoebe joined me for dinner Thursday evening.

She'd whipped her grandson at laser tag. They'd gone through the museum at Edwards AFB. They'd skied . . . he needed to get serious about that and maybe get some surgery, too . . .

I listened and smiled and presently tried to tell her about my work. She nodded; her eyes glazed. I tried to tell her how good it was, how restful, after all those years in the ARM.

The ARM: that got her interest back. Stet. I told her about the Henry program.

I'd been saving that. It was an embezzling system good enough to ruin the economy. It made Zachariah Henry rich. He might have stayed rich if he'd quit in time ... and if his system hadn't

been so good, so dangerous, he might have ended in prison. Instead . . . well, let his tongue whisper secrets to the ears in the organ banks.

I could speak of it because they'd changed the system. I didn't say that it had happened twenty years before I'd joined the ARM. But I was still running out of declassified stories. I told her, "If a lot of people know something can be done, somebody'll do it. We can suppress it and suppress it again -"

She pounced. "Like what?"

"Like . . . well, the usual example is the first cold fusion system. They did it with palladium and platinum, but half a dozen other metals work. And organic superconductors: the patents listed a wrong ingredient. Various grad students tried it wrong and still got it. If there's a way to do it, there's probably a lot of

ways."

"That was before there was an ARM. Would you have suppressed superconductors?"

"No. What for?"

"Or cold fusion?"

"No."

"Cold fusion releases neutrons," she said. "Sheathe the generator with spent uranium, what do you get?"

"Plutonium, I think. So?"

"They used to make bombs out of

plutonium."

"Bothers you?"

"Jack, the fission bomb was it in the mass murder department. Like the crossbow. Like the Ayatollah's Asteroid." Phoebe's eyes held mine. Her voice had dropped; we didn't want to broadcast this all over the restaurant. "Don't you ever wonder just how much of human knowledge is lost in that . . . black limbo inside the ARM building? Things that could solve problems, warm the Earth again, ease us through the lightspeed wall."

"We don't suppress inventions unless they're dangerous," I said.

I could have backed out of the argument, but that, too, would have disappointed Phoebe. Phoebe liked a good argument. My problem was that what I gave her wasn't good enough. Maybe I couldn't get angry enough; maybe my most forceful arguments were classified.

Monday morning Phoebe left for Dallas and a granddaughter. There had been no war, no ultimatum, but it felt final.

Thursday evening I was back in the Monobloc.

So was Anton. "I've played it," he said. "Can't talk about it, of course.

He looked mildly bored. His hands

looked like they were trying to break chunks off the edge of the table.

I nodded placidly.

Anton shouldn't have told me about the broadcast from the Angel's Pencil. But he had, and if the ARM had noticed, they'd better hear him mention it again.

Company joined us, sampled, and departed. Anton and I spoke to a pair of ladies who turned out to have other tastes. (Some bends like to bug the straights.) A younger woman joined us for a time. She couldn't have been over thirty and was lovely in the modern style, but hard, sharply defined muscle isn't my sole standard of beauty.

I remarked to Anton, "Sometimes the vibes just aren't right."

"Yeah. Look, Jack, I have carefully concealed a prehistoric Calvados in my apt at Maya. There isn't really enough for four-"

"Sounds nice. Eat first?"

"Stet. There's sixteen restaurants in Maya."

A score of blazing rectangles meandered across the night, washing out the stars. The eye could still find a handful of other space artifacts, particularly around the moon.



Anton flashed the beeper that would summon a taxi. I said, "So you viewed the call. So why so tense?"

Security devices no bigger than a basketball rode the glowing sky, but the casual eye would not find them. One had to assume they were there. Patterns in their monitor chips would match the vision and sound patterns of a mugging, a rape, an injury, a cry for help. Those chips had gigabytes to spare for words and word patterns the ARM might find of interest.

So: no key words.

Anton said, "Jack, they tell a hell of a story. A foreign vehicle pulled alongside

Angela at four-fifths of legal max. It tried to cook them."

I stared. A spacecraft matched course with the Angel's Pencil at eighty percent of lightspeed? Nothing man-built could do that. And warlike? Maybe I'd misinterpreted everything. That can happen when you make up your code as you go along.

But how could the Pencil have escaped? "How did Angela manage to phone home?"

A taxi dropped. Anton said, "She sliced' the bread with the, you know, motor. I said it's a hell of a story."

Anton's apartment was most of the way up the slope of Maya, the pyramidal arcology north of Santa Maria. Old wealth.

Anton led me through great doors, into an elevator, down corridors. He played tour guide: "The Fertility Board was just getting some real power about the time this place went up. It was built to house a million people. It's never been fully occupied."

So?

"So we're en route to the east face. Four restaurants, a dozen little bars. And here we stop."

"This your apt?"

"No. It's empty; it's always been empty. I sweep it for bugs, but the authorities . . . I think they've never noticed."

"Is that your mattress?"

"No. Kids. They've got a club that's two generations old. My son tipped me off to this."

"Could we be interrupted?"

"No. I'm monitoring them. I've got the security system set to let them in, but only when I'm not here. Now I'll set it to recognize you. Don't forget the number: Apt 2 3 309."

"What is the ARM going to think we're doing?"

"Eating. We went to one of the restaurants, then came back and drank Calvados . . . which we will do later. I can fix the records at Buffalo Bill. Just don't argue about the credit charge, stet?"

"But- Yah, stet." Hope you won't be noticed; that's the real defense. I was thinking of bailing out, but curiosity is part of what gets you into the ARM. "Tell your story. You said she sliced the bread with the, you know, motor?"

"Maybe you don't remember. Angel's Pencil isn't your ordinary Bussard

ramjet. The field scoops tip interstellar hydrogen to feed a fusion-pumped laser. The idea was to use it for communications, too. Blast a message halfway across the galaxy with that. A Belter crewman used it to cut the alien ship in half."

"There's a communication you can live without. Anton . . . what they taught us in school. A sapient species doesn't reach space unless the members learn to cooperate. They'll wreck the environment one way or another-war or straight libertarianism or overbreeding . . . remember?"

"Sure."

"So do you believe all this?"

"I think so." He smiled painfully. "Director Bernhardt didn't. He classified the message and attached a memo, too. Six years of flight aboard a ship of limited size, terminal boredom coupled with high intelligence and too much time, elaborate practical jokes, yadda yadda. Director Harms left it classified ... with the cooperation of the Belt. Interesting?"

"But he had to have that."

"But they had to agree. There's been more since. Angel's Pencil sent us hundreds of detailed photos of the alien ship. It's unlikely they could be faked. There are corpses. Big sort of cats,

orange, up to three meters tall, big feet and elaborate hands with thumbs. We're in mucking great trouble if we have to face those."

"Anton, we've had 350 years of peace. We must be doing something right. The odds say we can negotiate."

"You haven't seen them."

It was almost funny. Jack was trying to make me nervous. Twenty years earlier the terror would have been fizzing in my blood. Better living through chemistry! This was all frightening enough, but my fear was a cerebral thing, and I was its master.



I wasn't nervous enough for Anton. "Jack, this isn't just vaporware. A lot of those photos show what's maybe a graviton generator, maybe not. Director Harms set up a lab on the moon to build one for us."

"Funded?"

"Heavy funding. Somebody believes in this. But they're getting results! It works!"

I mulled it over. "Alien contact. As a species we don't seem to handle that too well."

"Maybe this one can't be handled at all."

"What else is being done?"

"Nothing, or damn close. Silly suggestions, career-oriented crap designed to make a bureau bigger . . . Nobody wants to use the magic word. War."

"War. Three hundred fifty years out of practice, we are. Maybe C. Cretemaster will save us." I smiled at Anton's bewilderment. "Look it up in the ARM records. There's supposed to be an alien of sorts living in the cometary halo. He's the force that's been keeping us at peace this past three and a half centuries."

"Very funny."

"Mmm. Well, Anton, this is a lot more real for you than for me. I haven't yet seen anything upsetting."

I hadn't called him a liar. I'd only made him aware that I knew nothing to the contrary. For Anton there might be elaborate proof, but I'd seen nothing and had heard only a scary tale.

Anton reacted gracefully. "Of course. Well, there's still that bottle."

Anton's Calvados was as special as he'd claimed, decades old and unique. He produced cheese and bread. Good thing: I was ready to eat his arm off. We managed to stick to harmless topics and parted friends.

The big catlike aliens had taken up residence in my soul.

Aliens aren't implausible. Once upon a time, maybe. But an ancient ETI in a stasis field had been in the Smithsonian since the opening of the twenty-second century, and a quite different creature-C. Cretemaster's real-life analog-had crashed on Mars before the century had ended.

Two spacecraft matching course at near lightspeed; that was just short of ridiculous. Kinetic energy considerations . . . why, two such 'hips colliding might as well be made of antimatter! Nothing short of a gravity generator could make it work. But Anton

was claiming a gravity generator.

His story was plausible in another sense. Faced with warrior aliens, the ARM would do only what it could not avoid. They Would build a gravity generator because the ARM had to control such a thing. Any further move was a step toward the unthinkable. The ARM took sole credit (and other branches of the United Nations also took sole credit) for the fact that man had left war behind. I shuddered to think what force it would take to turn the ARM toward war.

I would continue to demand proof of Anton's story. Looking for proof was one way to learn more, and I resist seeing

myself as stupid. But I believed him already.

On Thursday we returned to Apt 2 3 309.

"I had to dig deep to find out, but they're not just sitting on their thumbs," he said. "There's a game going in Aristarchus Crater, Belt against flatlander. They're playing peace games."

"Huh?"

"They're making formats for contact and negotiation with hypothetical aliens. The models all have the look of those alien corpses, cats with bald tails, but they all think differently."

"Good." Here was my proof. I could check this claim.

"Good. Sure. Peace games." Anton was brooding. Twitchy. "What about war games?"

"How would you run one? Half your soldiers would be dead at the end . . . unless you're thinking of rifles with paint bullets. War gets more violent than that."

Anton laughed. "Picture every building in Chicago covered with

scarlet paint on one side. A nuclear war game."

"Now what? I mean, for us."

"Yah. Jack, the ARM isn't doing anything to put the human race back on a war footing."

"Maybe they've done something they haven't told you about."

"Jack, I don't think so."

"They haven't let you read all their files, Anton. Two weeks ago you didn't know about peace games in Aristarchus. But okay. What should they be doing?"

"I don't know."

"How's your chemistry?"

Anton grimaced. "How's yours? Forget I



said that. Maybe I'm back to normal and maybe I'm not."

"Yah, but you haven't thought of anything. How about weapons:' Can't have a war without weapons, and the ARM's been suppressing weapons. We should dip into their files and make up a list. It would save some time when and if. I know of an experiment that might have been turned into an inertialess drive if it hadn't been suppressed."

"Date?"

"Early twenty-second. And there was a field projector that would snake things burn, late twenty-third."

"I'll find 'em." Anton's eyes took on a faraway look. "There's the archives. I don't mean just the stuff that was built and then destroyed. The archives reach all the way back to the early twentieth. Stuff that was proposed: tanks, orbital beam weapons, kinetic energy weapons, biologicals-"

"We don't want biologicals."

I thought he hadn't heard. "Picture crowbars six feet long. A short burn takes them out of orbit, and they steer themselves down to anything with the silhouette you want . . . a tank or a submarine or a limousine, say. Primitive stuff now, but at least it would do something." He was really getting into

this. The technical terms he was tossing off were masks for horror. He stopped suddenly, then said, "Why not biologicals?"

"Nasty bacteria tailored for us might not work on warcats. We want their biological weapons, and we don't want them to have ours.

"Stet. Now, here's one for you. How would you adjust a 'doc to snake a normal person into a soldier?"

My head snapped up. I saw the guilt spread across his face. He said, "I had to look up your dossier. Had to, Jack."

"Sure. All right, I'll see what I can find."

I stood up. "The easiest way is to pick schitzies and train them as soldiers. We'd start with the same citizens the ARM has been training since . . . date classified, three hundred years or so. People who need the 'doc to keep their metabolism straight or they'll ram a car into a crowd or strangle -"

"We wouldn't find enough. When you need soldiers, you need thousands. Maybe millions."

"True. It's a rare condition. Well, good night, Anton."

I fell asleep on the 'doc table again.

Dawn poked under my eyelids, and I got

up and moved toward the holophone. Caught a glimpse of myself in a mirror. Rethought. If David saw me looking like this, he'd be booking tickets to attend the funeral. So I took a shower and a cup of coffee first.

My eldest son looked like I had: decidedly rumped. "Dad, can't you read a clock?"

"I'm sorry. Really." These calls are so expensive that there's no point hanging up. "How are things in Aristarchus?"

"Clavius. We've been moved out. We've got half the space we used to, and we'd need twice the space to hold everything we own. Ah, the time change isn't your

fault, Dad; we're all in Clavius now, all but Jennifer. She-" David vanished. A mechanically soothing voice said, "You have impinged on ARM police business. The cost of your call will be refunded."

I looked at the empty space where David's face had been. I was ARM . . . but maybe I'd already heard enough.

My granddaughter Jennifer is a medic. The censor program had reacted to her name in connection with David. David said she wasn't with him. The whole family had been moved out except for Jennifer.

If she'd stayed on in Aristarchus or been kept on . . .

Human medics are needed when something unusual has happened to a human body or brain. Then they study what's going on, with an eye to writing more programs for the 'docs. The bulk of those problems are psychological.

Anton's "peace games" must be stressful as hell.

## II

Anton wasn't at the Monobloc Thursday. That gave me another week to rethink and recheck the programs I'd put on a

dime disk, but I didn't need it.

I came back the next Thursday. Anton Brillov and Phoebe Garrison were holding a table for four.

I paused-backlit in the doorway, knowing my expression was hidden-then moved in. "When did you get back?"

"Saturday before last," Phoebe said gravely.

It felt awkward. Anton felt it, too, but then, he would. I began to wish I didn't ever have to see him on a Thursday night.

I tried tact. "Shall we see if we can



conscript a fourth?"

"It's not like that," Phoebe said. "Anton and I, we're together. We had to tell you."

But I'd never thought . . . I'd never claimed Phoebe. Dreams are private. This was coming from some wild direction. "Together as in?"

Anton said, "Well, not married, not yet, but thinking about it. And we wanted to talk privately."

"Like over dinner?"

"A good suggestion."

"I like Buffalo Bill. Let's go there."

Twenty-odd habitués of the Monobloc must have heard the exchange and watched us leave. Those three long-timers seem friendly enough but too serious . . . and three's an odd number . . .

We didn't talk until we'd reached Apt 23309.

Anton closed the door before he spoke. "She's in, Jack. Everything."

I said, "It's really love, then."

Phoebe smiled. "Jack, don't be offended. Choosing is what humans do."

Trite, I thought, and then: Skip it. "That bit there in the Monobloc seemed overdone. I felt excessively foolish."

"That was for them. My idea," Phoebe said. "After tonight one of us may have to go away. This way we've got an all-purpose excuse. You leave because your best friend and favored lady closed you out. Or Phoebe leaves because she can't bear to ruin a friendship. Or big, burly Jack drives Anton away. See?"

She wasn't just in; she was taking over. Ah, well. "Phoebe, love, do you believe in murderous cats eight feet tall?"

"Do you have doubts, Jack?"

"Not anymore. I called my son. Something secretive is happening in Aristarchus, something that requires a medic."

She only nodded. "What have you got for us?"

I showed them my dime disk. "Took me less than a week. Run it in an autodoc. Ten personality choices. The chemical differences aren't big, but . . . infantry, which means killing on foot and doesn't have anything to do with children . . . where was I? Yah. Infantry isn't at all like logistics, and neither is like espionage, and navy is different yet. We may have lost some of the military vocations over the centuries. We'll have

to reinvent them. This is just a first cut. I wish we had a way to try it out."

Anton set a dime disk next to mine, along with a small projector. "Mine's nearly full. The ARM's stored an incredible range of dangerous devices. We need to think hard about where to store this. I even wondered if one of us should be emigrating, which is why-

"To the Belt? Farther?"

"Jack, if this all adds up, we won't have time to reach another star."

We watched stills and flat motion pictures of weapons and tools in action. Much of it was quite primitive, copied

out of deep archives. We watched rock and landscape being torn, aircraft exploding, machines destroying other machines . . . and imagined flesh shredding.

"I could get more, but T thought I'd better show you this first," Anton said.

I said, "Don't bother."

"What? Jack?"

"It only took us a week! Why risk our necks to do work that can be duplicated that fast?"

Anton looked lost. "We need to do something!"

"Well, maybe we don't. Maybe the ARM is doing it all for us."

Phoebe gripped Anton's wrist hard, and he swallowed some bitter retort. She said, "Maybe we're missing something. Maybe we're not looking at it right."

"What's on your mind?" .

"Let's find a way to look at it differently." She was looking straight at me.

I said, "Stoned? Drunk? Fizzed? Wired?"

Phoebe shook her head. "We need the schitz view."

"Dangerous, love. Also, the chemicals you're talking about are massively illegal. I can't get them, and Anton would be caught for sure." I saw the way she was smiling at me. "Anton, I'll break your scrawny neck."

"Huh? Jack?"

"No, no, he didn't tell me," Phoebe said hastily, "though frankly, I'd think either of you might have trusted me that much, Jack! I remembered you in the 'doc that morning, and Anton coming down from that twitchy state on a Thursday night, and it all clicked."

"Okay."



"You're a schitz, Jack. But it's been a long time, hasn't it?"

"Thirteen years of peace," I said. "They pick us for it, you know. Paranoid schizophrenics, born with our chemistry screwed up, a hair-trigger temper, and a skewed view of the universe. Most schitzies never have to feel that. We use the 'docs more regularly than you do, and that's that. But some of us go into the ARM. Phoebe, your suggestion is still silly. Anton's crazy four days out of the week, just like I used to be. Anton's all you need."

"Phoebe, he's right."

"No. The ARM used to be all schitzies,

right? The genes have thinned out over three hundred years."

Anton nodded. "They'll tell us in training. The ones who could be Hitler or Napoleon or Castro-they're the ones the ARM wants. They're the ones you can send on a mother hunt, the ones with no social sense. But the Fertility Board doesn't let them breed, either, unless they've got something special. Jack, you were special, high intelligence or something-"

"Perfect teeth, and I don't get sick in free fall, and Charlotte's people never develop back problems. That helped. Yah . . . but every century there are less of us. So they hire some Antons, too, and

make you crazy.

"But carefully," Phoebe said. "Anton's not evolved for paranoia, Jack. You are. When they juice Anton up, they don't make him too crazy, just enough to get the viewpoint they want. I bet they leave the top management boringly sane. But you, Jack-"

"I see it." Centuries of ARM tradition were squarely on her side.

"You can go as crazy as you like. It's all natural, and medics have known how to handle it since Only One Earth. We need the schitz viewpoint, and we don't have to steal the chemicals."

"Stet. When do we start?"

Anton looked at Phoebe. Phoebe said, "Now?"

We played Anton's tape all the way through, to a running theme of graveyard humor.

"I took only what I thought we could use," Anton said. "You should have seen some of the rest: Agent Orange, napalm, murder stuff."

Phoebe said, "Isn't this murder?"

That remark might have been unfair. We were watching this bizarre chunky rotary-blade flier. Fire leapt from

underneath it once and again . . .  
weapons of some kind.

Anton said, "Aircraft design isn't the same when you use it for murder. It changes when you expect to be shot at. Here." The picture had changed. "That's another weapons platform. It's not just fast; it's supposed to hide in the sky. Jack, are you all right?"

"I'm scared green. I haven't felt any effects yet."

Phoebe said, "You need to relax. Anton delivers a terrific massage. I never learned."

She wasn't kidding. Anton didn't have

my muscle, but he had big strangler's hands. I relaxed into it, talking as he worked, liking the way my voice wavered as his hands pounded my back.

"It hasn't been that long since a guy like me let his 'doc run out of

beta-damma-something. An indicator light ran out, and he didn't notice. He tried to kill his business partner by bombing his partner's house and got some family members instead."

"We're on watch," Phoebe said. "If you go berserk, we can handle it. Do you want to see more of this?"

"We've missed something. Children, I'm

a registered schitz. If I don't use my 'doc for three days, they'll be trying to find me before I remember I'm the Marsport Strangler."

Anton said, "He's right, love. Jack, give me your door codes. If I can get into your apt, I can fix the records."

"Keep talking. Finish the massage, at least. We might have other problems. Do we want fruit juice? Munchies? Foodlike substances?"

When Anton came back with groceries, Phoebe and I barely noticed.

Were the warcats real? Could we fight them with current tech? How long did

Sol system have? And the other systems, the more sparsely settled colony worlds? Was it enough to make tapes and blueprints of the old murder machines, or did we have to set to building clandestine factories? Phoebe and I were spilling ideas past each other as fast as they came, and I had quite forgotten that I was doing something dangerous.

I noticed myself noticing that I was thinking much faster than thoughts could spill from my lips. I remembered knowing that Phoebe was brighter than I was, and that didn't matter, either. But Anton was losing his Thursday edge.

We slept. The old airbed was a big one.



We woke to fruit and bread and dived back in.

We reinvented the navy, using only what Anton had recorded of seagoing navies. We had to. There had never been space navies; the long peace had fallen first.

I'm not sure when I slid into schitz mode. I'd spent four days out of seven without the 'doc every week for forty-one years, excluding vacations. You'd think I'd remember the feel of my brain chemistry changing. Sometimes I do, but it's the central me that changes, and there's no way to control that.

Anton's machines were long out of date, and none had been developed even for

interplanetary war. Mankind had found peace too soon. Pity. But if the warcats' gravity generators could be copied before the warcats arrived, that alone could save us!

Then again, whatever the cats had for weapons, kinetic energy was likely to be the ultimate weapon however the mass was moved. Energy considerations don't lie . . . I stopped trying to anticipate individual war machines; what I needed was an overview.

Anton was saying very little.

I realized that I had been wasting my time making medical programs. Chemical enhancement was the most

trivial of what we'd need to remake an army. Extensive testing would be needed, and then we might not get soldiers at all unless they retained some civil rights or unless officers killed enough of them to impress the rest. Our limited pool of schitzies had better be trained as our officers. For that matter, we'd better start by taking over the ARM. They had all the brightest schitzies.

As for Anton's work in the ARM archives, the most powerful weapons had been entirely ignored. They were too obvious.

I saw how Phoebe was staring at me, and Anton, too, both gape-jawed.

I tried to explain that our task was nothing less than the reorganization of humanity. Large numbers might have to die before the rest saw the wisdom in following our lead. The warcats would teach that lesson, but if we waited for them, we'd be too late. Time was breathing hot on our necks.

Anton didn't understand. Phoebe was following me, though not well, but Anton's body language was pulling him back and closing him up while his face stayed blank. He feared me worse than he feared warcats.

I began to understand that I might have to kill Anton. I hated him for that.

We did not sleep at all on Friday. By Saturday noon we should have been exhausted. I'd caught catnaps from time to time -- we all had -but I was still blazing with ideas. In my mind the pattern of an interstellar invasion was shaping itself like a vast three-dimensional map.

Earlier I might have killed Anton because he knew too much or too little, because he would steal Phoebe from me. Now I saw that that was foolish. Phoebe wouldn't follow him. He simply didn't have the . . . the internal power. As for knowledge, he was our only access to the ARM!

Saturday evening we ran out of food . . .

and Anton and Phoebe saw the final flaw in their plan.

I found it hugely amusing. My 'doc was halfway across Santa Maria. They had to get me there. Me, a schitz.

We talked it around. Anton and Phoebe wanted to check my conclusions. Fine: we'd give them the schitz treatment. But for that we needed my disk (in my pocket) and my 'doc (at the apt). So we had to go to my apt.

With that in mind, we shaped plans for a farewell bacchanal.

Anton ordered supplies. Phoebe got me into a taxi. When I thought of other

destinations, she was persuasive. And the party was waiting . . .

We were a long time reaching the 'doc. There was beer to be dealt with, and a pizza the size of Arthur's round table. We sang, though Phoebe couldn't hold a tune. We took ourselves to bed. It had been years since my urge to rut had run so high, so deep, backed by a sadness that ran deeper yet and wouldn't go away.

When I was too relaxed to lift a finger, we staggered singing to the 'doe with me hanging limply between them. I produced my dime disk, but Anton took it away. What was this? They moved me onto the table and set it working. I tried

to explain: they had to lie down, put the disk here . . . But the circuitry found my blood loaded with fatigue poisons and put me to sleep.

Sunday noon:

Anton and Phoebe seemed embarrassed in my presence. My own memories were bizarre, embarrassing. I'd been guilty of egotism, arrogance, self-centered lack of consideration. Three dark blue dots on Phoebe's shoulder told me that I'd brushed the edge of violence. But the worst memory was of thinking like some red-handed conqueror, and out loud.

They'd never love me again.



But they could have brought me into the apt and straight to the 'doe. Why didn't they'

While Anton was out of the room, I caught Phoebe's smile in the corner of my eye and saw it fade as I turned. An old suspicion surfaced and has never faded since.

Suppose that the women I love are all attracted to Mad Jack. Somehow they recognize my schitz potential, though they find my sane state dull. There must have been a place for madness throughout most of human history. So men and women seek in each other the capacity for madness . . .

And so what? Schitzies kill. The real Jack Strather is too dangerous to be let loose.

And yet . . . it had been worth doing. From that strange fifty-hour session I remembered one real insight. We spent the rest of Sunday discussing it, making plans, while my central nervous system returned to its accustomed unnatural state. Sane Jack.

Anton Brillov and Phoebe Garrison held their wedding reception in the Monobloc. I stood as best man, bravely cheerful, running over with congratulations, staying carefully sober.

A week later I was among the asteroids.

At the Monobloc they said that Jack Strather had fled Earth after his favored lady had deserted him for his best friend.

### III

Things ran smoother for me because John junior had made a place for himself in Ceres.

Even so, they had to train me. Twenty years earlier I'd spent a week in the Belt. It wasn't enough. Training and a Belt citizen's equipment used up most of my savings and two months of 'my time.

Time had brought me to Mercury, and the lasers, eight years before.

Lightsails are rare in the inner solar system. Between Venus and Mercury there are still lightsail races, an expensive, uncomfortable, and dangerous sport. Cargo craft once sailed throughout the Asteroid Belt, until fusion motors became cheaper and more dependable.

The last refuge of the lightsail is a huge, empty region: the cometary halo, Pluto and beyond. The lightsails are all cargo craft. That far from Sol their thrust must be augmented by lasers, the same Mercury lasers that sometimes hurl an unmanned probe into interstellar space.

These were different from the launch lasers I was familiar with. They were enormously larger. In Mercury's lower gravity, in Mercury's windless environment, they looked like crystals caught in spiderwebs. When the lasers fired, the fragile support structures wavered like a spiderweb in the wind.

Each stood in a wide black pool of solar collector, as if tar paper had been scattered at random. A collector sheet that lost fifty percent of its power was not removed. We would add another sheet but continue to use all the available power.

Their power output is dangerous to the

point of fantasy. For safety's sake the Mercury lasers have to be continuously linked to the rest of the solar system across a lightspeed delay of several hours. The newer solar collectors also pick up broadcasts from space or from the control center in Challenger Crater. Mercury's lasers must never lose contact. A beam that strayed where it wasn't supposed to could do untold damage.

They were spaced all along the planet's equator. They were hundreds of years apart in design, size, technology. They fired while the sun was up and feeding their square miles of collectors, with a few fusion generators for backup. They

flicked from target to target as the horizon moved. When the sun set, it set for thirty-odd Earth days, and that was plenty of time to make repairs

"In general, that is." Kathry Perritt watched my eyes to be sure I was paying attention. I felt like a schoolboy again. "In general we can repair and update each laser station in turn and still keep ahead of the dawn. But come a quake, we work in broad daylight and like it."

"Scary," I said too cheerfully.

She looked at me. "You feel nice and cool? That's a million tons of soil, old man, and a layer cake of mirror sheeting on top of that, and these old heat

exchangers are still the most powerful ever built. Daylight doesn't scare you? You'll get over that." Kathry was a sixth-generation Belter from Mercury, taller than me by seven inches, not very strong, but extremely dexterous. She was my boss. I'd be sharing a room with her . . . and yes, she rapidly let me know that she expected us to be bedmates. '

I was all for that. Two months in Ceres had shown me that Belters respond to social signals I don't know. I had no idea how to seduce anyone.

Sylvia and Myron had been born on Mars in an enclave of arcologists digging out the cities beneath the deserts. Companions from birth, they'd married



at puberty. They were addicted to news broadcasts. News could get them arguing. Otherwise they behaved as if they could read each other's minds; they hardly talked to each other or to anyone else.

We'd sit around the duty room and wait and polish our skills as storytellers. Then one of the lasers would go quiet, and a tractor the size of some old Chicago skyscraper would roll.

Rarely was there much of a hurry. One laser would fill in for another until the Monster Bug arrived. Then the robots, riding the Monster Bug like one of Anton's aircraft carriers, would scatter

ahead of us and set to work.

Two years after my arrival my first quake shook down six lasers in four different locations and ripped a few more loose from the sunlight collectors. Landscape had been shaken into new shapes. The robots had some trouble. Sometimes Kathry could reprogram them. Otherwise her team had to muscle them through, with Kathry to shout orders and me to supply most of the muscle.

Of the six lasers, five survived. They seemed built to survive almost anything. The robots were equipped to spin new support structure and to lift the things into place, with a separate program for

each design.

Maybe John junior hadn't used influence in my behalf. Flatlander muscles were useful when the robots couldn't get over the dust pools or through the broken rock. For that matter, maybe it wasn't some Belt tradition that had made Kathry claim me on sight. Sylvia and Myron were lockstepped, and I might have been female or bend. Maybe she thought she was lucky.

After we'd remounted the lasers that had survived, Kathry said, "They're all obsolete, anyway. They're not being replaced."

:"That's not good," I said.

"Well, good and bad. Lightsail cargo is slow. If the light wasn't almost free, why bother? The interstellar probes haven't sent much back yet, and we might as well wait. At least the Belt Speakers think so."

"Do I gather I've fallen into a kind of a blind alley?"

She glared at me. "You're an immigrant flatlander. Were you expecting to be First Speaker for the Belt? You thinking of moving on?"

"Not really. But if the job's about to fold--"

"Another twenty years, maybe. Jack, I'd

miss you. Those two-

"It's all right, Kathry. I'm not going." I waved both arms at the blazing dead landscape, said "I like it here," and smiled into her bellow of laughter.

I beamed a tape to Anton when I got the chance.

"If I was ever angry, I got over it, as I hope you've forgotten anything I said or did while I was, let's say, running on automatic. I've found another life in deep space, not much different from what I was doing on Earth . . . though that may not last. These lightsail pusher lasers are a blast from the past. Time gets them, the quakes get them, and they're not being

replaced. Kathry says twenty years.

"You said Phoebe left Earth, too. Working with an asteroid mining setup? If you're still trading tapes, tell her I'm all right and I hope she is, too. Her career choice was better than mine, I expect..."

I couldn't think of anything else to do.

Three years after I expected it Kathry asked, "Why did you come out here? It's none of my business, of course-"

Customs differ: I'd been three years in her bed before she had worked up to this. I said, "Time for a change" and "I've got children and grandchildren on

the moon and Ceres and Floating Jupiter."

"Do you miss them?"

I had to say yes. The result was that I took half a year off to bounce around the solar system.

After I visited my lids acid grandkids, I stayed three weeks with Phoebe. She's second in command of a mining setup on a two-kilometer asteroid orbiting beyond Jupiter. They've been refining the metal ores and shaping them into scores of kilometers of electromagnetic mass driver, then running the slag down the mass driver: a rocket with real rocks in it and an arbitrarily high exhaust

velocity, limited only by the length of the mass driver, which they keep extending. The asteroid will reach Ceres as mostly refined metal.

I think Phoebe was bored; she was seriously glad to see me. Still, I came back early. My being away from Mercury made us both antsy.

Another year passed, and once again Kathry wanted to know, "Why Mercury?"

I said, "What I did on Earth was a lot like this. The difference is, on Earth I'm dull. Here-am I dull?"

"You're fascinating. You won't talk



about the ARM, so you're fascinating and mysterious. I can't believe you'd be dull just because of where you are. Why did you leave, really?"

So I said, "There was a woman."

"What was she like?"

"She was smarter than me. I was a little dull for her. So she left, and that would have been okay. But she came back to my best friend." I shifted uncomfortably and said, "Not that they drove me off Earth."

No?

"No. I've got everything I once had

herding construction robots on Earth, plus one thing I wasn't bright enough to miss. I lost my sense of purpose when I left the ARM."

I noticed that Myron was listening. Sylvia was watching the holo walls, the three that showed the face of Mercury: rocks blazing like coals in the fading twilight, with only the robots and the lasers to give the illusion of life. The fourth wall generally carried newscasts. Just then it showed a view up the trunk into the waving branches of the tremendous redwoods they've been growing for three hundred years in Hovestraydt City on the moon.

"These are the good times," I said. "You

have to notice or they'll go right past. We're holding the stars together and having a fine time doing it. Notice how much dancing we do? On Earth I'd be too old and creaky for that-" Sylvia was shaking my shoulder. "Sylvia. what.: I heard it as soon as I stopped talking: "Tombaugh Station relayed this picture, the last broadcast from the Fantasy Prince. Once again, the Fantasy Prince has apparently been - "

Starscape glowed within the fourth holo wall. Something came out of nowhere, moving hellishly fast, and stopped so quickly that it might have been a toy. It was egg-shaped, studded with what my memory said were weapons.

Phoebe won't have made her move yet. The warcats will have to be deep in the solar system before her asteroid mine can be a deterrent. Then one or another warcat ship will find streams of slag sprayed across its path, impacting at comet speeds and higher.

By now Anton must know whether the ARM actually has plans of its own to repel an interstellar invasion.

Me, I've already done my part. I worked on the computer shortly after I first arrived. Nobody's tampered with it since. The dime disk is in place.

We kept the program relatively simple.

Until and unless the warcats destroy something that's being pushed by a laser from Mercury, nothing will happen. The warcats must condemn themselves. Then the affected laser will lock on to the warcat ship . . . and so will every Mercury laser that's getting sunlight. Twenty seconds, then the system goes back to normal until another target disappears.

If the warcats can be persuaded that Sol system is defended, maybe they'll give us time to build defenses.

Asteroid miners dig deep for fear of solar storms and meteors. Phoebe might survive the warcat weapons. We might survive here, too, with shielding built to

block the hellish sun and laser cannon to battle incoming ships. But that's not the way to bet.

We might get one ship.

It might be worth doing.