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Facts Relating To The Arrest Of Dr. Kalugin  
by Kage Baker

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>>>\_...One of the lasting enigmas in the history of the Ross settlement is that of Vasilii Kalugin, the medical officer or feldsher for the colonists. We know nothing of his origins prior to his arrival at Ross in 1831, although it can be guessed that he had some familiarity with botany as well as his obvious medical training ... nor is much known of the circumstances surrounding his arrest within two months after his arrival at the settlement, and still less concerning his apparent pardon and reinstatement ... Finally, his disappearance from the historical record after 1835 ... presents certain problems in light of documents recently discovered in the Sitka archives...\_<<<

-- Badenov's Russian Expansion in the North Pacific, \_Harper/Fantod, 2089

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Oh, dear, that old tale. I'd prefer not to discuss that, if you don't mind. No, really, you'd have nightmares. No? Well, you're an exceptional Immortal, I must say, if you don't. I'm sure the rest of us do. Very well then; the night and the storm will provide atmosphere, and we can't go anywhere until dawn anyway. Shall I tell you what really happened, that night in 1831? Have another glass of tea and poke up the fire. No sneering now, please. This is a true story. Unfortunately.

I was working for two Companies at once, you see. It so happened that my job with Dr. Zeus Inc. required me to assume a mortal identity and join the Russian-American Company, posing as a medico sent out to take care of the settlers in the Californian colony. The real job involved some clandestine salvage operations not far offshore, but they don't enter into this story.

I'd worked hard to prepare a mortal identity, too, I mean besides graying my hair. I had all manner of anecdotes about having been a surgeon in the Imperial Navy and patched up battle wounds. I thought that's what they'd need in California: someone to stitch up grizzly bear bites and slashes from knife brawls. But no sooner had I arrived in Sitka than I was summoned to Baron Von Wrangel's office and informed that I was to be a botanist, if you please! Oh, and a surgeon, too, but when I wasn't amputating limbs I was to spend my every spare moment collecting any local plants with curative powers, interviewing the natives if necessary.

Difficult man, Baron Von Wrangel. A man of science, to be sure, and limitless enthusiasm for exploration and study; but you wouldn't want to work for him. And I wasn't programmed for botany, you see! I'm scarcely able to tell a beet from a cabbage. I've been a Marine Operations Specialist for six centuries now.

Well, before I left Sitka I transmitted a requisition to the Company -- our Company -- for an access code on the healing plants of the Nova Albion region. I'd just received a confirmation on my request when the Buldakov weighed anchor and left Alaska, so off I went to California in fond hopes the access code would catch up with me there.

You've heard of the Ross colony, the Russian outpost north of San Francisco? It was supposed to grow produce to support Russia's Alaskan colonies and turn a tidy profit for the Russian-American Company into the bargain. It lost money, as a matter of fact; but what a charming failure it was! On a headland above the blue Pacific, with beautiful golden mountains sloping up behind it and great dark groves of red pine trees along the skyline, and such a blue sky! Compared to Okhotsk it was a fairytale of eternal summer.

The stockade there was faced with the biggest planks I'd ever seen, enormous those red trees were, but the gates stood open most of the time. Why? Because there was no danger from the local savages. Despite my use of the term they were no fools, politically or otherwise, and they knew that our presence there protected them from the depredations of the Spanish. Therefore, the local chieftains signed a treaty with us; and you may say what you like about my countrymen, but as far as I know the Russians are the only nation ever to keep a treaty with Native Americans.

So it was a calm place, Ross, and I could sit calmly in the orchard outside the stockade. There I liked to work on my field credenza (resembling a calfskin volume of Schiller's poems), and if a naked Indian ambled past with his fishing spear over his shoulder we'd merely wave at each other. On the day the Courier came I had been idling there all morning, typing up my daily report in a desultory way and watching the russet leaves drift down.

"Vasilii Vasilievich!" someone roared, and looking up I beheld Iakov Babin striding through the trees. He was one of the settlers, a peasant who'd worked as a trapper for a time, settled down now with an Indian wife. A tough fellow with a nasty reputation, too, and he looked the part: stocky and muscular, with a wild flowing beard and ferocious tufted eyebrows, and a fixed glare that would have given Ivan the Terrible pause.

"Hey, Vasilii Vasilievich!" he repeated, spurning windfall apples out of his way like so many severed heads as he advanced. I closed my credenza.

"Good afternoon, Babin. How is your wife? Did the salve help?"

"I wouldn't know, Doc, I ain't been home yet. I just come back from the Presidio." He meant the handful of mud huts that would one day be San Francisco. "Jumped off the boat and been five hours on the trail." He loomed over me and fixed both thumbs in his belt. "You know an Englishman by the name of Currier?"

"Currier?" I scanned my memory. "I don't believe so, no. Why?"

"Maybe he's a Yankee. I couldn't tell what the polecat was, nohow, but he comes on board the Polifem at Yerba Buena and says he's looking for Dr. Vasilii Kalugin, which is you. Says he's from some Greek doctor. You ain't sick, are you, Doc?"

"No, certainly not!"

"No, me and the boys reckoned it was pretty unlikely you'd caught something from a whore!" His hard eyes glinted with momentary good humor, and I was uncomfortably aware of the contempt in which he held me. It wasn't personal: but I could read and write and wore clothes made in St. Petersburg, which made me a trifle limp in the wrist as far as he was concerned. "So anyway, he's on his way here now. I got to warn you, Doc, watch out for him."

"Currier," I mused aloud. Then I remembered my requisition. Of course! He must be the courier Dr. Zeus was sending with my access code. I improvised: "You know, I do have a maiden aunt in Minsk who put me in her will. Perhaps she's died. Perhaps that's what he's here about. Not to worry, Babin."

Iakov Dmitrivich shook his bushy head. "He ain't from Minsk, Doc. More likely from Hell! Me and the boys about figured he's a dybbuk."

"Why on earth would you say that?" I frowned. Mortals who can detect the presence of cyborgs are rare, and in any case we're all trained in a thousand little deceptions to avoid notice.

"He ain't right somehow." Babin actually shivered. "The Indians noticed first, and they wouldn't go near him, though he was real friendly when he come on board. But when we had to sit at anchor a couple days, 'cause the captain took his time about leaving, well, he took on about it like a woman! Sat in his cabin and cried! Brighted up some when we finally lifted anchor, but the longer we were on board the crazier he acted. By the time we finally dropped anchor in Port Rumiantsev we was damn glad to be rid of him, I tell you."

"Dear me." I was at a loss. "Well, thank you, Babin. I'll watch out for the fellow. Though if he's bringing me a legacy I don't suppose I'll care whether he's a dybbuk or not, eh?"

Babin snorted at my feeble attempt at humor. "Just you watch him, Doc," he muttered, and departed for the stockade.

I signed off on my credenza and stood, brushing away leaves. Wandering out from the orchard, I looked up at the hills where the trail from Port Rumiantsev came down. Yes, there he was! A pale figure striding along, really rather faster than a mortal would go. Gracious, why hadn't he taken a horse? I squinted my eyes, focusing long-range.

He looked pale because he was wearing a suit of fawn linen, absurd at this season of the year, and tall buff suede boots. The whole cut of his clothing was indeed English; though he had somehow acquired one of our Russian conical fur hats and wore it jauntily on the back of his head. He was bounding down the trail with a traveling-bag slung over his shoulder, looking all about him with an expression of such fascinated delight one felt certain he was about to miss a step and

come tumbling down the steep incline. Had he been a mortal he certainly must have fallen.

I thrust my credenza in a coat pocket and transmitted: \_Quo Vadis?\_

\_Huh?\_ He turned his head sharply in my direction.

\_Are you the courier?\_

\_That's me! Are you Kalugin?\_ He was speaking Cinema Standard.

\_Yes.\_

\_Hey, that's great! I've got an access code for you from Botanist Mendoza! Whyn't you walk up to the road to meet me?\_

\_Very well.\_

He vanished into the great pine trees that grew along the stream and I trudged across the fields, sinking ankle-deep in frequent gopher holes. Long before I was able to reach the trees, he emerged from their green gloom and walked briskly to meet me, with his shadow stretching away across the fields behind him.

"Marine Operations Kalugin?" Grinning he grabbed my hand and shook it heartily. It was a wide grin, he had a wide square jaw with a wide full mouth whose front teeth were slightly gapped. I remember that he had a deep dimple in his chin and greenish eyes. His color was ruddy, his hair thick and curling. None of us look old -- unless we age ourselves cosmetically -- but he looked astonishingly young.

"Boy, I'm glad to see you. You wouldn't believe the trouble I had getting up here," he told me. I concluded that, despite his youthful appearance, he must be one of the truly old operatives. Have you ever noticed that the older ones tend to fall back principally on Cinema Standard when mortals aren't present? I've noticed it, anyway. I suppose they do it because perhaps there wasn't any complex human language back in Paleolithic times when they were made, and so Cinema Standard became the first real language they ever learned, their mother tongue, so to speak.

"Wouldn't they loan you a horse at Port Rumiantsev?" I inquired. He widened his eyes in amazement.

"Were there horses for rent there? Gosh, nobody told me. Hey, that Rumiantsev place, that's Bodega Bay, isn't it? Isn't Hitchcock gonna film \_The Birds\_ there?"

"Some scenes, yes." I smiled. "Tippi Hedrin is first attacked in that harbor. Are you a cinema enthusiast?"

"Well, sure! And, boy, do things look different there now!" He giggled slightly, I suppose aware of the banality of his remark, and swung his bag down from his shoulder. "Well, I guess I'd better give you that access code."

From a narrow compartment he drew out an envelope, neatly addressed to me in Russian using Roman letters. "It's in there." He handed it to me.

"Wonderful." I tore the envelope open and peered inside. Wrapped in a thin sheet of notepaper was the filmy strip of code. I closed it up again carefully and tucked it deep in my pocket.

"And the lady said to tell you -- " his voice and face abruptly altered and I was hearing a woman's voice, speaking smooth Cinema Standard with just the faintest steel of Old Spain: "This study was compiled in 1722 and while I don't \_think\_ any of the species described here have gone extinct since then, he should check with the local Indians. However, I'm quite sure he'll find it comprehensive enough for his needs."

His face resumed its normal appearance and I applauded. "How marvelous! Is that a special subroutine for couriers?"

He looked confused. "\_I'm\_ the Courier," he said.

"Yes, but -- " There was an awkward pause while I tried to fathom what he meant, during which I became aware that a few of the settlers had come out of their huts and were staring at us. The Courier lifted his bag again, shifting from foot to foot.

"Anyway. There's your letter. What are my orders?" he asked me.

"Orders?" I stared at him. "I have no orders for you."

His face went perfectly blank, a greater transformation than the moment previous; no more expression than a wax mannequin.

"You haven't got any orders for me?" he repeated wonderingly. "\"But you have to. Where am I supposed to go next?\"

"I don't know, Mr. -- er, dear me, you haven't told me your name -- "

"Courier," he informed me. Strange; but our etiquette, as you know, frowns on remarking upon a fellow cyborg's personal appellation, so I blundered on:

"Courier. My dear sir, I'm afraid I haven't received any transmissions from Base since I've been here. Clearly there's been some mistake. I'm sure they'll send your orders any day now."

"But what am I supposed to \_do\_?" His knuckles whitened on the handle of his bag.

"Well -- " I looked around uncomfortably. I could understand if he were irritated, but his flat incomprehension baffled me. "Perhaps you'd like to visit the colony here?"

Instantly his face cleared. "Okay!" he said cheerfully. I glanced over at the little crowd of Indians and frontiersmen beginning to gather by the stockade.

"We need to address the question of your cover identity, however. Your choice of clothing is a little unusual for a Russian," I explained delicately. "Are you programmed to speak our language, at all?"

"Sure!" he affirmed. In a flat Kievan accent he inquired: "'Say, Comrade, what time does the boat leave? Where can I catch the diligence for Moscow? Is this the road to the Volga ferry?'"

"Very well ... er ... we'll say you're my late aunt's lawyer's clerk, and you've come all this way to deliver this important letter with news of her demise. You've also brought papers I must review and sign concerning her estate, so I've asked you to be my guest for a day or so."

"Got it." He made a circle with his index finger and thumb. "I'm a clerk. So, let's go! Show me around the place."

He surveyed the view in evident enjoyment as we crossed the headland toward the stockade. Everything pleased him: our villainous-looking Aleuts scraping a sea lion skin, the windmill turning on its low eminence, a field of pumpkins blazing red like harvest moons amid withering vines. "Hey, neat!" He elbowed me, pointing at them. "I guess in a couple of days you'll have some swell jack o'lanterns, huh?"

"If these people had ever heard of Halloween, certainly," I replied. "You must remember, Courier, this is Russian America. And 1831."

"Oh." He looked momentarily confused. "Sure it is. Sorry, I forgot." He glanced down into the cove, where the stream flowed into the sea. "Gosh! What's that down there? Say, is that a shipyard?" He ran to the edge of the bluff to look. "I don't see any ships. Just some kayaks."

"Bidarkas," I corrected him. "We used to build ships. They fell apart. And our wheat gets Wheat Rust due to the winter fogs, and our Aleut hunters have nothing much to do because the sea otters they were brought here to hunt had unfortunately been hunted nearly to extinction by the time this settlement was founded." I shrugged apologetically. "We don't seem to be able to accomplish much here."

"I guess not." He gazed around. "But it's so beautiful."

I felt a glow of friendship toward him. "Exactly, Courier! Look about you. No one is hungry here, because we do manage to raise enough to feed ourselves. Everyone is working together in peace, regardless of race. The climate is mild. Could you ask for a better description of Paradise? If only we weren't supposed to be making a profit!"

But he wasn't listening to me. He was hastening ahead to look at the cemetery.

"I have to see Everything," he shouted over his shoulder.

He was quite serious. He wanted to have the colony explained to him, from the gopher holes and plough-scored rocks to the flag atop the mast in the stockade. Then he wanted to meet everyone. Everyone, I say: he even reached through the bars in the jail to shake hands with poor little Fedor Svinin, the ex-clerk who had embezzled ten years' worth of salary to cover his gambling debts. "You don't say? Poor old guy!" He would have pumped hands with equal enthusiasm with Kostromitinov, the General Manager, had Piotr Stepanovich not been visiting our farm at the river. That was all right: he shook hands with all the local Kashayas he could find, who stared at him in mute incomprehension; he shook hands with every one of our Aleuts, who smiled politely and then wiped their hands on their sealskin shirts. Courier didn't notice; he didn't hold still long enough, leaping away to exclaim over some new feature of the settlement he'd just noticed. Everyone, everything enchanted him.

And really it was delightful, if a bit exhausting, to accompany someone who took such intense pleasure in the smallest details of mundane life. One saw through his eyes and the great trees looked bigger, the Indians more mysterious, the coastline more wild and romantic.

Though I must say I seem to have been the only one who enjoyed his company; Babin had already been talking to the other Russians about my mysterious visitor, and the ones who weren't superstitious drew their own smirking conclusions about this effusive pretty boy. So much for my ever earning their respect.

Courier even approached Babin with his hand out, crying "Pleased to meet you, sir, my name's Courier," before Babin stepped back indignantly.

"By the Black Goat hisself!" he spat. "As if I'd want to touch the likes of him, after the way he cut up on the Polifem!"

Courier lowered his hand, looking hurt and bewildered, as Babin turned and stamped off. "What's wrong with him?" he asked me.

"He, er, formed rather a poor opinion of you, I'm afraid. Apparently. When you were fellow

passengers on the \_Polifem,\_" I explained. "There seems to have been some unfortunate incident -- ?"

"There was?" Courier stared after Babin. "Oh. I guess I didn't recognize him, huh?"

No amount of hinting could prompt him to tell me just what had happened on board the \_Polifem, \_but I thought perhaps he needed a little more briefing on Russian customs before he'd fit in at the officers' table; so when time came for the evening meal I arranged for two plates of venison stew and we carried them to one of the rooms kept ready for visitors. Courier took his tin dish and clambered onto his bunk with it, settling his back against the wall. He sighed in contentment.

"Look at this! This is real frontier living. Look at these bare timber walls. Look at that old oil lamp -- it's burning seal blubber, isn't it? And this is a real wool trade blanket I'll be sleeping under tonight! Gosh. What an experience." He spooned up a mouthful of stew and chewed ecstatically. "Mm-mm! So this is venison, huh? Kind of like beef, isn't it?"

"You mean you've never tasted venison before?" I stopped eating in surprise.

"Not that I know of." He swallowed and washed it down with a big gulp of kvass. "Golly, that's good! Never had that before, either."

"Now that I can believe." I smiled. "I take it, then, you've been primarily posted to cities during your career?"

"Well, sure." He put another spoonful in his mouth.

"Where have you been?"

"Oh, here and there. You know." He waved his spoon vaguely. It occurred to me that he might not be at liberty to reveal previous assignments, and therefore it would be good manners to refrain from further questions. I gave an impromptu talk on Russian manners and mores during the rest of our meal, occasionally interrupted as he noticed yet more picturesque things to exult about, like the tin reflector behind the lamp or the framed print of the Tsar.

When we had dined I took our tableware and made to leave him for the night, but a sudden anxious look came into his eyes and he stopped me.

"My orders," he said. "Have you got them?"

"Why -- no," I told him. "Here. Wait, I'll see if any transmissions have come in yet, shall I? Though I haven't heard the signal -- " I put down the dishes and took out my credenza. "No ... no, not a word. See? I'm sorry."

"But why haven't they sent my orders?" He fidgeted.

"I haven't the slightest idea, my friend. I can transmit an inquiry for you, but we may not get a reply for hours, or even days."

"That's all right, you send it. I know my orders will come." He nodded his head confidently. So I typed in the inquiry, and as I'd suspected the green letters just sat there and glowed. But Courier seemed to have been comforted, and so I bid him Goodnight.

On my way to the kitchen, a figure loomed into view, blocking the corridor, and my heart sank. It was Kostromitinov, the Manager. He did not look pleased with me.

"Kalugin!" he intoned. Oh, dear; he hadn't even taken off his riding boots. "We have a guest, it seems, Vasilii Vasilievich? A stranger? And in my absence you've given him a complete tour of the colony, fortifications and all? Let him count every one of our cannons, I suppose?"

"It's not like that at all, sir," I protested. He was backing me up against the wall. "He's simply a messenger, and I was obliged to offer him hospitality."

"Did that mean you had to show him the armory, you idiot?"

"Sir, you don't understand." I let my lip tremble. "He brought a letter from home. There's, er, been a terrible tragedy in my family -- my dear aunt, my sainted mother's only sister -- she raised me from infancy -- she -- she -- " a tear rolled down my cheek.

"She's died, I suppose?" He took a step back.

"She was run over by a pie wagon!" I broke down and sobbed. Well, it was the first thing that came into my head. Kostromitinov exhaled and folded his arms.

"All right. All right. My condolences. But, Kalugin! This may seem an idle sleepy place, but do I have to remind you that we are on disputed soil? And you know nothing about this Englishman, do you, really? What if he's a spy? What if he murdered your lawyer's clerk and took the letter in order to get an opportunity to study our defenses for his government?"

"He's not an Englishman." I wiped my eyes on my sleeve. "He's from Kiev. He, er, lost his trunk and had to borrow those absurd clothes from a fellow-passenger who happened to be English."

"On the \_Polifem?" Kostromitinov raised his eyebrows. "How interesting. I heard nothing about any foreigners on board. Still, who tells \_me \_anything nowadays? Why should \_I \_receive any directives from the Governor?"

"A-actually I believe it was before he left Siberia, Piotr Stepanovich."

"I see. So the unpleasantness on board the Polifem had nothing to do with your friend losing his trunk?" Kostromitinov thrust his face close to mine.

"No, it -- that is -- was there an unpleasantness on board the Polifem?" I tried to look surprised. "My goodness, he seems such an affable young man."

"Well, Iakov Babin, who as you may be aware is not exactly a holy saint himself, has formed the lowest of opinions of your friend's character. He told me so personally. Waited up to tell me, in fact, so that the first sight to greet me as I returned from a long day of wrestling with the failing economy of the Slavianka farm was Iakov Dmitrivich's scowling face."

"As God is my witness, Piotr Stepanovich, he's no spy," I sniveled. "And what was I to do, after all, when he'd made such a long journey on my family's behalf? Bar the gates against him? Give him a kopeck and tell him to get out? I will stake my life on it he's nothing but a pleasant fool."

Kostromitinov rolled his eyes. "How should you know? Haven't you ever heard that he who plays the greatest fool often lays the deepest plots?" Truer than you know, I thought. "But I suppose there's nothing to be done now, is there? Pull yourself together, Vasili Vasilievich. Why don't you go to the pantry and brace yourself with a shot of vodka? And can you vouch for this desperate character's behavior after I leave again tomorrow?"

"Yes, sir." I replied weakly, and stumbled past him into the kitchen, where I took his advice and had a shot of vodka. In fact, I took his advice three times.

\* \* \* \*

"Kalugin!" My troubled sleep ended with a jolt. It was pitch black in my room, but an apparition at the foot of my bed glowed by infrared like the fires of Hell. I felt an involuntary desire to cross myself. It was only Courier standing there, after all.

"What is it?"

"Have you got my orders?"

"Dear God, what time is it?" I groaned, and checked my internal chronometer. "Courier, it's four o'clock in the morning!"

"Have you got my orders?" he repeated, louder this time.

"Ssh! Let me see if they've come," I grumbled, sitting up and fumbling for my credenza. I opened it and looked for messages. "No, Courier, I'm sorry. I'll look again later. Why don't you go back to bed, now?"

He opened his mouth as if to say something; sighed loudly instead, and went away.

Of course I failed utterly to go back to sleep after that. I wondered, as I tried to beat comfort into my leaden pillow, whether mortals would envy us our infinitely prolonged existence if they knew it meant an infinite number of Four A.M.s like this one.

In any case it was a chilled and bleary-eyed immortal who ordered hot tea and settled down by the fire in the deserted officers' mess to enjoy it. Need I tell you that my pleasure was short-lived? For here came Courier, with his traveling-bag in his hand, pacing toward me like a dog in search of its master.

"Have you got my orders?" he wanted to know.

"Not yet." I sipped my tea.

"You didn't even look!"

"I'd hear the signal if a message came in," I told him. "However, if it will make you feel better -- " I took out the credenza and showed him. After staring at it a moment he sank down on a bench. He looked so miserable it was impossible not to feel sorry for him.

"Would you like any breakfast?" I inquired. "I can order you a bowl of kasha. The cook is awake." He nodded glumly and I went out to fetch it for him. When it arrived he cheered up quite a bit, became pleasant and talkative, praised kasha to the skies for its flavor, its aroma and its obvious nutritive qualities: but when it was gone he fell silent again, with a queer sullenness to his expression I had not noticed previously. He began to beat out a rhythm on the table with his hands. I finished my tea, drew a deep breath and volunteered:

"Well, since it seems you'll be my guest a trifle longer than we'd anticipated, would you like to explore the surrounding countryside today? We can borrow a pair of saddle horses from the stables."

Courier's face smoothed out like untroubled water. He jumped to his feet.

"You bet! Let's go!"

We departed the colony while it was still half-asleep, white smoke curling up from its chimneys and Indian day laborers straggling in across its fields from their village nearby. Courier's horse was skittish and uneasy, but I must say he was a superb rider, controlling with an iron hand an animal that clearly wanted to bolt and run. I myself ride like a sack of flour; there were no Cossacks amongst my mortal gene donors, I fear. My mount looked over its shoulder at me in

what I fancied was pitying contempt. Horses always know.

Courier seemed quite happy to spur his horse splashing along dark streams, in the deep shadow under enormous trees, exclaiming over their vastness. ("Gosh! This looks like where The Return of the Jedi was shot!") Sometimes we'd come down into an open valley and follow a watercourse through willow and alder thickets, near villages where Indians fished for salmon, or we'd skirt wide marshlands where a single egret stood motionless, like a white flame. I played the tour docent and explained as much as I knew of the local natural history, though of course I'd have done better if I'd had a chance to access Mendoza's codes, but Courier didn't seem to mind. He shouted his rapture at encountering a madrone tree scarlet with berries, or a spray of flame-pink maple leaves backlit by a sunbeam against moss green as emeralds.

As the afternoon lengthened I led us back in a loop to the great coastal ridge, and timed our progress up its leeward side so that we came to the crest just as the sun was setting.

"And we're home again." I gestured at the breathtaking view, rather pleased with myself. Across the gleaming Pacific, the red sun was just descending into a bank of purple fog. Far below us, down beyond countless treetops, the Ross settlement looked like a toy village, with its quaint blockhouses and domed and towered chapel. There were still tiny figures moving in the patchwork fields. Mortal places are so beautiful.

I glanced over at Courier to see if he were appreciating the full effect. No. A moment before, his face had been all bright and animated, gleeful as he urged his mount up toward the crest. Now, however, he drooped visibly.

"We're going back there?" he complained.

"Well, of course. It's nearly dark. Wouldn't want to meet with a bear up here, after all, would we?"

"I guess not." He moved restlessly in the saddle. "Have you got my orders?" he demanded. I drew out my credenza at once and checked.

"No, Courier, not yet."

"They'll never come," he cried mournfully. I just shrugged and urged my horse on down the trail. After a moment he followed me, sad and silent, and finally caught up as we crossed the road and neared the stockade.

"Maybe we could eat dinner with the other Russian guys here, tonight, instead of just sitting in that dark room?" he asked.

"You mean dine in the Officers' mess?" I was nonplussed. "Er -- you might find it a little boring." The truth was that I was fairly certain he hadn't paid much attention to my lecture on Russian habits; and as peculiar as he seemed to me, he'd seem even stranger to my fellow officers.

"Oh, no, it'd be neat!" he told me. "Is it anything like that party in Anna Karenina? The one with Greta Garbo?"

I paused in my saddle to access and got a mental image of a vodka-swilling Vronsky (as portrayed by Fredric March) crawling under a table. "Good heavens, no! Dear God, if we carried on like that we'd really lose money here!" I chuckled.

But he insisted, and so that evening we dined at the long table in the Officer's mess. He helped himself to great quantities of salmon, of piroshki and blini and caviar, so I wasn't too surprised when he turned up his nose at the serving of venison stew. He didn't want the kvass again, either, he went straight for the vodka; I was half afraid he'd attempt to reenact the window-ledge scene from War and Peace, but he behaved himself. Perhaps that film wasn't in his internal library. No, he sipped sensibly and stared around him with his usual pleased expression, listening to the amazingly dull mess conversations as though they were fantastic adventure stories.

When the servant had cleared away the plates and small after-dinner cigars had been lit, in strode Iakov Babin. He came frequently for vodka and cigars at our mess, and not merely to enjoy the bachelor atmosphere; rumor had it he was an expert cheat at cards. He glanced over, saw Courier and gave him a fierce glare: then, thank heaven, ignored him as he pulled out a deck and settled down to win inordinate amounts of Company scrip from a junior manager who ought to have known better but didn't want to appear timid. Courier watched in fascination; and when I was momentarily distracted by the clerk who kept the Company store, who buttonholed me to complain about his rheumatism, Courier got up and went over to the card table to have a closer look.

"That looks like fun," he told them hopefully.

"Would you like to join the game?" responded the junior manager, even more hopefully.

"Oh, I don't know how to play," Courier replied, and every head in the room turned toward him. A young man, supposedly a Russian, who didn't play cards in that day and age? How much more conspicuous could he make himself?

"Yes, Andrei Andreivich, that does sound serious." I looked over at Courier, wondering what

on Earth he was doing. "Er -- look here, it sounds to me as though a violent purge is needed. Rid yourself of poisons, you know."

"You've never played \_cards\_?" the junior manager was gaping at Courier.

"A purge!" Andrei backed away a pace or two. "Do you think that's really necessary, Doctor?"

"You never know. Of course he's played cards, gentlemen, but he's from Kiev, after all; he's never learned Frontier Rules." I moved swiftly to the table and addressed Courier. "You play Picquet, I'm sure, and Whist, don't you?" \_Tell them you play Whist, for God's sake!\_

\_Okay.\_ "Yes, I play Whist," he agreed.

"Well, shall we have a game, then?" I pulled out a chair and sat down.

"Whist!" Iakov Dmitrivich exhaled a cloud of noxious blue smoke and bit down on his cigar viciously. "Well, \_I'm\_ out! That ain't no game for me." He folded his cards and threw them on the table, pausing just long enough to chalk his winnings. The junior manager looked relieved, nevertheless.

"Whist, yes, what a grand idea!" he babbled. "Haven't played in ages! Be a bit of a change, won't it? Shall we, ah ... shall we wager?" He must have seen foolish-looking Courier as his chance to repair his losses.

"I'm not certain my friend has much money -- " I began, but Courier smiled and reached into his coat.

"I've got lots of cash! See?" He emptied his purse on the table. Out jingled a collection of Coins of the World; gold pieces from Chile, American dollars, French francs, British half-crowns, Russian rubles and a mongrel mass of small change.

"Looks fine to me." The junior manager shuffled the deck with slightly shaky hands. "Stiva, will you partner me?" His assistant clerk pulled up another chair and Courier sat down too, and the junior manager dealt the cards.

I transmitted the rules of Whist to Courier, who nodded with a shrewd expression and sorted quickly through his hand. We lost the first hand; thereafter he watched the cards keenly, and within a few more hands we began to win, and then win \_every time\_.

I looked up in horror as I realized what he was doing. You've never used your cyborg abilities to win at cards, and neither would I, of course: but it didn't seem to have occurred to Courier that he'd draw attention to himself by memorizing the positions of the cards, and using his knowledge to win. The chalked figures on the table grew higher and higher as we won more sums in scrip from the junior manager, who sat in a veritable pool of sweat. The room grew unpleasantly silent; Iakov Babin, who had been leaning by the fire regaling a small crowd with bloodcurdling tales of an Indian massacre, left off talking and stared across the room at us with an ironical grin. I met his eyes and he nodded as if to say, What did I tell you? \_Dybbuk\_!

\_Courier, for God's sake, what are you doing? Let the mortals win \_some\_ of the time!\_

He looked up at me in puzzlement. \_But I thought the object of the game was to win.\_

Now, it will undoubtedly have dawned on you by this time that there was something wrong with Courier. It had even dawned on me. We aren't made stupid, and yet he was behaving like a perfect ass! And then I had what I thought was a moment of blinding revelation: he was a courier because that was the only job he was \_fit\_ for, running from one place to another with a bag of papers! I looked across at his innocent face and all the old horror stories of early experiments came into my mind, before the Company perfected us, before they had managed to give us immortal \_minds\_ to compare with our immortal bodies. \_Was he one such Golem?\_ Yes, you shiver: imagine how I felt, sitting across the table from him!

"Babin, I declare you've got the Evil Eye!" I tittered. "You've broken our winning streak." And I put down just the wrong card. There was a gasp of relief from the junior manager. Courier started and stared. "But -- " he protested.

\_Enough! There'll be trouble here if you win any more!\_

\_Oh. Okay.\_

"I'm done." I yawned prodigiously. "Gracious, the air's blue in here! Time I went to bed. You'd better turn in too, young man; you'll have a long journey ahead of you once we've got those papers signed."

"Here, now, that's hardly fair," the assistant clerk complained. "We sat out our run of bad luck; you should do the same!"

"He played damned well for somebody who didn't know much about cards," muttered the junior manager. As I sought for the right words to defuse the situation, Courier was scooping up his little bag of coins unconcernedly.

"I'll just take these," he said. "You can have the scrip stuff back; I can't use it anyway." Everyone looked at him, dumfounded.



"Yes, capital idea, all debts canceled!" I cried in false heartiness. "Let's end our evening on a friendly note, shall we?"

The junior manager stared as that sank in and then smiled desperately. "All right! \_All\_ debts canceled, fellows, what do you say?" And as I exited the room, hastily pushing Courier ahead of me, I could hear Babin's roar of denial over the timid chorus of agreement.

"What on Earth possessed you to \_do\_ that?" I exploded, when we were a safe distance down the corridor. "It's all very well for you to be careless of your own cover, but you're endangering mine! I'm obliged to live with those men for the next few years, and what will they think of me?"

His face was so stupidly blank I felt guilty at once. If he were indeed some indestructible simpleton, anger was wasted on him; and I was already thinking \_poor fellow, it's not his fault after all\_ when he opened his mouth to speak.

"Say, have you got my orders yet?"

It was as if he had thrown vodka onto a bonfire. My rage, which had shrunk so rapidly into little blue coals, flared to the ceiling again, and higher than the flames of anger and impatience were those of loathing for the scarecrow, the defective, the \_badly made machine\_ that he was. Bigotry? Yes, I suppose so. Humbling thought, isn't it?

"Fool!" I snapped. "Don't you think if any orders had come in I'd have told you? Here!" I grabbed out my credenza and thrust it at him. "\_You\_ look from now on! Keep it until your damned orders come in, and leave me alone!"

I set off down the corridor to my room, but he followed me swiftly. "Can't we go somewhere else? Isn't there anything else to do around here?" he pleaded.

"No! But here's an order for you, you imbecile!" I turned on him. "\_Go to your room and stay there\_!!!"

His reaction was extraordinary. All the color drained from his face; with a queer frightened look he dodged around me and stumbled down the corridor to his room. I went into my own quarters, feeling guilty again. What could be wrong with the creature? Well, I hadn't made him the way he was, anyway; and surely I'd played host beyond the call of duty. Perhaps he'd let me get a full night's sleep now.

Dawn next day found me creeping from my room, carrying a real volume of Schiller and the envelope containing the access code strip. I left the stockade and descended the steep path into the cove. The old shipyard was still being used for carpentry, and the forge and tannery were down here too; but it was still so early that there was no one about to see me hurry across the footbridge and disappear into the woods on the other side of the stream. I found a clearing under a stand of red pines with a floor of dry brown needles; and there I settled down happily, took out Mendoza's letter, and accessed the code at last.

Instantly my mind was ringing with Latin names and three-dimensional images of growing things and their uses. To my astonishment I realized that acorn meal from \_Quercus agrifolia\_, if left to mold, produced a useful antibiotic. And the leaves of \_Rubus ursinus\_ could be used against dysentery? Really? And, my goodness, what a lot of uses for \_Asclepias speciosa\_, which was nothing more than milkweed!

Oh, well. Doubtless I'd find dozens of interesting little weeds next time I went exploring. For now, however, I intended to stay where I was until Courier got his damned orders and took his much-desired leave. I was thoroughly weary of him. I yawned, stretched out my boots and immersed myself in Schiller's poems.

What a pleasant morning I had. Before long the forge started up, and a breeze brought me the hot smell of charcoal and the bell-note of hammer on anvil. At the bottom of my glade the stream rushed and chattered along, brown as tea. It was a holy stream, I remembered with amusement; not long ago a visiting priest had blessed it, and consecrated it, and now we had an unlimited supply of holy water. How thoughtful of the reverend father! Just what was needed on the frontier.

My idyll was shattered by no end of commotion at the forge. I jumped up and ran to the edge of my clearing, where I beheld Konstantin the smith, hip-deep in the stream, splashing and stumbling in a circle. He was trying to shake off a tiny mongrel dog, which had hold of the seat of his trousers with a positive death-grip and swung by its clamped teeth, growling ferociously. Konstantin sobbed oaths upon the little cur, imploring a whole host of blessed saints to smash it like a cockroach. From the bank of the stream four little naked Indians watched with solemn black eyes.

"What happened?" I ran to them.

"Tsar bit him," replied the tallest of the children.

"Vasilii Vasilievich!" wept the blacksmith. "Help me, in God's Holy Name! \_Get it off me\_!"

"For heaven's sake, man, it's the size of a rat! Why did the doggie bite him?" I turned

again to the boy.

"He came running out here with his pants on fire," the child replied. "It was neat. Then he jumped in the water where we were swimming. We jumped out and Tsar jumped in to bite him. He's a brave dog."

That was when I realized that it wasn't Konstantin's trousers the dog had seized with such energy. No wonder he was crying. I waded hastily into the stream and somehow prised Tsar loose, but he had tasted blood and yapped viciously for more. I held him out at arm's length, squeaking and struggling, as I bent to examine poor Konstantin's backside.

Yes, the seat of the trousers had quite burnt away, and in addition to the dog bite he had a thoroughly ugly second-degree burn on either buttock.

"Tsk! This is a serious burn, my friend," I told him.

"I know that, you idiot!" he groaned. "I mean -- excuse me -- can't you \_do \_something about it? I'm suffering the pains of Hell!"

"Well, er, of course. Sit down in the water again while I determine a course of treatment for you." What a chance to show off my new knowledge of the local healing herbs! I accessed hurriedly. Let's see, what might be growing here that was useful for burns? \_Sambucus canadensis\_, of course! That was the native elderberry tree, wasn't it? Hadn't I seen one growing along the bank near here? I turned and waded ashore, holding out Tsar to his master. The dog's growling subsided like a teakettle taken off the fire.

"Listen to me, children! There's an elder tree growing up there on the bank. Perhaps your mommies use the leaves to make poultices? Yes? No? Well, will you be good children and fetch me some branches so I can make a soothing poultice for this poor man?" I implored. Up on the bluff a small crowd of colonists had gathered, drawn by all the noise.

"Vasilii Vasilievich, I'm dying!" moaned the blacksmith, writhing in the water. "Oh, Holy Saints, oh, Mother of God, why did I ever leave Irkutsk for this savage place?"

"All right," chorused the little Indians, and scampered away bright-eyed with excitement. Konstantin howled and prayed until they returned bearing green branches laden down with tiny blue berries. I gathered them up, confused. What did one \_do\_ with them, exactly? Tsar's master knew an indecisive adult when he saw one, fortunately.

"You pound them up on a rock!" he yelled helpfully. "Want us to do it?" Without waiting for a reply he grabbed up a water-worn cobble and began mashing the berries into a slimy mess on the top of a boulder. The other children crowded around him while Tsar stalked stiff-legged along the bank, snarling at Konstantin.

In no time at all they'd reduced leaves and berries and all to a nasty-looking goo.

"All right, Konstantin Kirillovich," I told him, "please rise from the water. I've got an excellent native salve that'll take the pain away." I scooped up a handful of the muck and prepared to clap it on his seared derriere, while the children looked on expectantly.

And, well, my nerve gave way. How could this horrible stuff help a burn like that? I found myself digging into my coat for the little book of skin repair tissue we field agents carry. Yes, I know it's forbidden! But, you know, the truth is, our medicine works just as well on mortals as it works on us. Stealthily I tore out three or four of the sheets and stuck them on the blacksmith's behind, but he caught a glimpse of what I was doing over his shoulder.

"\_Prayers\_ you're putting on my ass?" he screamed. "Are you crazy?"

"No!" I smeared the elderberry poultice on to disguise what I'd done. "That was merely, um, medical parchment, very useful in forming a base for the compound, you see -- "

"Listen, you big St. Petersburg pansy -- " he grated; then a remarkable expression crossed his face as the drugs in the skin replacement were released into his system. "The pain's gone!" he gasped. He reached behind and felt himself; then crouched down in the water to wash off the salve. By the time he rose, dripping, the synthetic skin had fused with his own and looked fresh and pink as on the day of his birth.

"Hooray!" yelled the children, jumping up and down in triumph, while Tsar went mad with barking.

"It's \_healed,\_ " Konstantin stated in wonderment. Then he stared down at the swirling water. "It must have been this stream! I was here when the little father blessed it! It's a miracle! The holy water has worked a miracle!"

I squelched wearily back up the bank, as his cries brought spectators from the bluff down for a closer look at the Miracle of the Holy Stream. Courier was not among them, at least. Ought I go see if he'd finally got his orders and gone? Perhaps I should go call on the Munin family to see how Andrei Efimovich's leg was mending. Perhaps I should look for specimens of \_Asclepias speciosa\_. \_There were a thousand better things to concern myself with than a difficult fellow operative. I was supposed to be a doctor, wasn't I?

And so I resolutely put Courier out of my mind and spent the rest of the day trudging from hut to house, with the intention of getting to know my patients better. I was not particularly successful; anyone who had the least ache or pain had run down to the Holy Stream and was bathing in its icy waters. Not necessarily bad for business: I might have a few cases of pneumonia by the week's end. But I did lance an abscessed gum for a Kashaya woman, and recommend a salve for a Creole baby's flea bites; so I was of some use to my mortal community.

There was no sign of Courier when I returned to the stockade that evening, through pumpkin fields, with the late red sun throwing long shadows of corn shocks where they stood in bundles. There was no sign of him when I sat down to dinner in the officer's mess, and attempted to join in the general conversation in a pleasant and comradely way. Not that I had much to contribute, with my pocket edition of Schiller, and nobody invited me to play cards with them. I was the recipient of a few distinctly dirty looks, in fact, especially from Iakov Babin.

I took a candle and wandered off to my room, my volume of poetry tucked sadly away in my coat. When I got there, I had the most peculiar feeling that something was somehow not quite right. I held up my candle and looked around.

My bunk, with its blanket, was undisturbed; so was my sea-chest. My Imperial Navy saber still hung in its place of honor on the wall. My little stack of books was where it ought to be. Of course, my credenza wasn't there ... perhaps Courier had left it in the guest room? I decided to wait until morning to look for it. Oh, yes, I know, you'd have gone straight in to see if he really had gone. I simply didn't want to. I lit my lamp and blew out the candle. A plume of greasy smoke curled, pungent, from the snuffed wick.

That was when I heard the growl.

A growl, I say. It wasn't a dog; it wasn't a bear. God only knew what it was, but it had emanated from the other side of the plank wall. From Courier's room. Oh, dear.

I scanned. I couldn't make sense of my readings. Courier seemed to be in the room, and yet -

I lit the candle again and went out into the corridor, where I knocked at Courier's door. There was a scuttling sound. No light showing under the door, or between the planks. What was going on here? I drew a deep breath and pulled open the door.

Darkness, and as the wavering light of my candle moved through the doorway I beheld a tangled mass on the floor. I prodded it with my boot. Strips of something? A trade blanket, torn to shreds. Interspersed with brittle glinting fragments and scraps of paper that had once been a framed picture of the Tsar. Where was Courier?

Cautiously I raised the candle and looked upward.

It was on the ceiling, wedged in an angle of roof and rafters. It was Courier up there clinging to the rafters: or had been.

Any mortal standing there in the dark, gazing up in the light of one shaky candle, would have seen a creature with dead white skin, enormous black insectile eyes, fangs and claws and a general strange misshapen muscularity. That sensible mortal would promptly have fled in terror. I, lumpish immortal, stared in bewilderment.

I saw an immortal in the direst extremity of self-protective fear. Blood had fled from his surface capillaries, leaving his skin pale; the protective lenses over his eyes had hardened and darkened. His gums had receded to give his teeth the maximum amount of cutting surface and his nails had grown out with amazing speed into formidable claws. He looked like nothing so much as Lon Chaney in London After Midnight.

The thing worked bulging jaw muscles and inquired:

"DUCITNE HAEC VIA OSTIA?"

"Courier, for God's sake! What's happened?" I cried.

It turned its head and the black surface of its eyes glittered as it fixed on me. "DA MIHI IUSSUM!" it croaked. What world, what time was it in?

I fell silent, as the horror of the thing sank into me, that one of us could suffer such an alteration. We, perfect mechanisms, in our endless lives see mortal men reduced by every degradation that disease and mischance can impose, skeletal horrors, sore-covered, deformed: but never we. Why had he become this thing?

He dropped on me, screaming.

Think. How many times in your long life have you avoided mortal assault? It's easy, isn't it? One can sidestep a blade or a fist or even a bullet without turning a hair, because mortal sinews are weak, mortal reflexes slow. Poor brutes. But could you ever have dreamed you might have to defend yourself against another immortal? How would you do it?

I tell you that I myself began to change. That writhing horror dove for my throat, and even as I grappled with it I felt an indefinable metamorphosis commencing. I was not frightened,

either, \_me,\_ can you believe that? One split second of vertigo, and then the strangest glee filled my heart. All my senses were sharpened. I fought with the demented thing in that room and it seemed clumsy and blundering to me, though it moved with a speed mortal eyes couldn't have followed. Equals as we were in immortal strength, I had the advantage of sanity. My hideous new wisdom told me how to win and I pulled the creature's head close, in both my hands, to --

To do something; to this day I haven't remembered what I was about to do. In any case I never did it. What happened, you see, was that I looked into the creature's eyes. Black reflecting mirrors, its eyes, and what they showed me was a nightmare thing like the nightmare thing I was fighting! So taloned, so razor-grinned, with just such a glittering stare. A monster in the disintegrating clothing of a Russian gentleman. \_Me.\_

I fell back from it, staring at my hands in horror: my nails had grown with fantastic acceleration into serviceable claws. My horrified cry joined the creature's as it leapt at my face. I rolled away from it, shielding myself as best I could, and burst out through the doorway. Babin and the others, drawn by the commotion, were just arriving at the end of the corridor. I flung myself down, covered my face with my hands and yelled: "A \_dybbuk\_! Run for your lives, it's a \_dybbuk\_!"

My speech was hissed and slurred, but I doubt if anyone noticed, for the thing hesitated only a moment before plunging across the threshold after me. As it tore strips out of the back of my coat, what was I doing? I ask you to believe I was \_biting my nails\_, frantically. I didn't want to be a devil with talons. I was a man, a superior man!

"Run, you fools!" I cried. Yes, yes, I was speaking with a man's voice now, I was changing back.

Babin at least took a step backward, crossing himself, and the others shuffled back behind him. Courier's head snapped about to stare.

"QUANTO COSTA IL BIGLIETTO PER MARSIGLIA?" he demanded. I used the opportunity to open my door and scramble in on my hands and knees. Courier's neck snaked around with the fluid movement of a Harryhausen demon. He snarled and sprang into the room after me.

"Mixaham beravam! Bayad beravam!" he roared, coming for me with talons raised to rake. I scrambled backward, I hit the wall with such force the building shook and the planks of the wall, thick as Bibles, cracked and started. Something was knocked loose. I caught it in midair as it dropped past my face. My Imperial Navy saber. In the same second I had put my boot up to halt Courier's oncoming rush and kicked him in the chest with all my strength. He flew backward and hit the opposite wall, crash, and more planks split. There was a thunder of running steps as the mortals rushed down the hall to look through the doorway.

"LE BATEAU-MOUCHE EST EN RETARD!" Courier cried, in a voice that made the mortals cover their ears. I was desperately trying to shake the scabbard off the saber; something was wrong with the mechanism of my left arm. Blood and oil were drooling from Courier's jaws as he sprang again, straight for me, and my good arm went up and whipped the saber in an arc that passed through his neck. His head flew off, hit the wall and rolled to Iakov Babin's feet.

All my strength left me. I became aware that I was badly damaged. I slid to the floor. Courier's body was already still, having gone into fugue at the moment my blade broke the connection between the Sinclair Chain of his spine and the titanium gimbal of his skull. Already the neck arteries had sealed themselves off and a protective membrane was forming. His head was doing the same. Eyes, ears, nostrils were exuding a thick substance that would seal them against further injury.

"God \_damn\_, Doc!" Babin broke the appalled silence. "That was one fine sword cut! You fought like a man."

I had, by God. "Thank you," I said with difficulty. My lips were split and bruised. The rest of my fleshly parts hurt as well. "You were right, Iakov Dmitrivich. He was a \_dybbuk\_."

"I told you." He stepped into the room cautiously, edging around the body. The other mortals cowered in the doorway. Someone was whimpering hysterically. "I seen devils in this New World just as ornery as any we got in Mother Russia. You ask the Indians. I reckon this one killed that boy, whoever he was, and possessed his body. Are you hurt bad, Doc?"

"I think my arm is broken."

"And some ribs, too, I reckon." He squatted down and peered at me in awe. "God Almighty, Doc, you're beat up black and blue. You sure put up one hell of a fight, though. Wouldn't have thought you'd had it in you. Come on, boys, let's get him up on the bed."

"What are we going to do with \_that\_?" The junior manager pointed with a trembling finger at the body.

"Take it out and bury it at a crossroads?" The farm foreman stepped in and gingerly lifted the head by its hair. "That's what the stories say to do. And put a stake through its heart, or

it'll come back to get us!"

I let them lift me into my bunk, too impaired to protest. Besides, it didn't matter. The moment Courier's head had been severed a distress beacon had been activated, transmitting straight to the nearest Dr. Zeus HQ. Wherever he was buried, a repair crew would retrieve both his parts within hours. He'd be whisked away to a hospital and I hadn't the slightest doubt he'd be good as new within days, assuming they could do something about that nasty psychosis of his. I, on the other hand, would have to heal myself, and my self-diagnostic-and-repair program didn't seem to be working very well.

The body with its head was stuffed into a sack and hustled out by Babin and a party of others. Someone sent a Creole woman up with a basin of water and a rag to tend to my hurts. Her almond eyes widened at the extent of the damage, but she didn't say much; and it would have been rather pleasant to lie there being ministered to, but for Andreev the Assistant Manager rushing in.

"Kalugin! What on earth is this story that you've killed a man?"

"Self-defense," I said in my feeblest voice. "It was the visitor. He went mad, sir ... tried to kill me ... all the men witnessed it..."

Andreev was looking around wildly at the blood and smashed walls. He noticed the saber lying almost at his feet and did a little two-step dance back from it.

"God in Heaven! You killed him with a sword? What will General Manager Kostromitinov say?"

What indeed? I pretended to lapse into unconsciousness. The dybbuk story would sound more convincing if Babin told it, I was certain. Andrei Fedorovich stood there wringing his hands a moment longer, and then ran out of the room. I let myself slide into genuine oblivion...

\* \* \* \*

"Marine Operations Specialist Kalugin?" It was a suave voice speaking cultured Cinema Standard that woke me. I opened my eyes. A man in a neat gray suit of clothes was sitting at the foot of my bed, by the light of my wildly flickering lamp.

"West Coast Facilitator-General Labienus," he introduced himself with a slight inclination from the waist.

"We'll be overheard -- " I tried to rise on one elbow, indicating my open door, but he negated me with a wave of his hand.

"We've activated a Hush Field over the settlement. None of the mortals here can regain consciousness at present. We're recovering Courier -- what's left of him, anyway -- from his grave out there on the road. I'm afraid we owe you something of an explanation."

That took a moment to sink in. I opened my mouth to demand answers, but he held up his hand. "Please. Don't tire yourself. You want to know how one of Us could suffer something like madness when we're all perfect, don't you? It's really quite simple. Courier wasn't -- exactly -- one of us."

I stared. Choosing his words with delicacy, he went on. "I suppose you've heard the old rumors about Flawed Ones, about fantastic creatures produced millennia ago when Dr. Zeus hadn't perfected the immortality process. Well, of course those stories aren't true; but it seems that, back in the early days, one or two individuals were produced who weren't quite up to Company standards." He drew from his inner breast pocket a slim silver case and, opening it, selected a silver-wrapped stick. "Theobromos, by the way?" He offered me the case. I took one gratefully, unwrapping it single-handed. My arm hadn't repaired itself yet. He resumed:

"Now, as you know, Dr. Zeus is a humane organization. Simple termination of the poor creatures was out of the question." Epecially since they were immortal, I thought to myself darkly. I put the Theobromos in my mouth. Oh, welcome bliss. It was highest-quality Guatemalan. Labienus watched my dreamy smile with amusement.

"Of course the Company found places for them. But in Courier's case -- and by now you'll have guessed he was one of these substandard unfortunates -- there were special circumstances that made it a particular challenge.

"It has to do with his autoimmune system, you see. Dr. Zeus had already perfected Hyperfunction, but at that time there was no reason to believe it wouldn't work equally well on all subjects, regardless of personal biochemistry. However, Courier's metabolism presented certain problems.

"What's the simplest way to put this? You could say that his body decided his own RNA was a pathogen, and set about attacking it, breaking it down. The Company stabilized most of his metabolic response, but the spontaneous nature of short-term memory proved beyond them. You're aware that the brain stores memory in RNA molecules? Of course you are.

"I won't confuse you with the details, but the end result is that Courier reacts to memory

as though it were a disease process. Any repeated specific experience and he undergoes an adverse reaction. Consistently repeat a specific sequence of events and paranoid psychosis is the result, with all the attendant physical manifestations you saw."

"You mean spending two nights in his room made him a demon from Hell?"

"Merely the effect of Hyperfunction on the human fight-or-flight reflex," said Labienus dismissively. "It's not his fault, poor creature. And, after all, Dr. Zeus found just the job for him! They made him a long-distance courier. As long as he's traveling, as long as he's constantly exposed to new sights he's never seen before, the adverse RNA reaction can't build up. He can even retrace old journeys, if enough years elapse between visits. Trouble only occurs if he's obliged to stay in one place for more than twenty-four hours, but of course Dr. Zeus has always taken care to ensure that new orders are waiting for him at every destination."

"What happened in this case?"

Labienus looked aside. "A minor clerical blunder. His orders were forwarded to the wrong terminal. The clerk responsible has been disciplined."

"How comforting."

"I'm sure it will never happen again. And we'll fasten on his head and he'll be off on his travels again, to New York or Mazatlan or Warsaw, good as new, with no memory of this unfortunate occurrence. He never remembers anything very long, actually, if it isn't something hard-wired like a language. Except for the plots of films he's seen. Those he retains, for some reason."

"Poor thing," I mused. Very good Theobromos, this.

"Do you think so? I rather envy him, myself. Imagine a life of endless new horizons! Nothing to bore him or dull his palate, no tedious sameness to his experiences. All his friends will be new friends." Labienus smiled wistfully and put his silver case away. "Well. Principally what you need to know is that of course there'll be no disciplinary hearing for you. We quite understand that under the circumstances you had no choice but to badly damage a fellow operative. We would like to know why you didn't contact us sooner -- his psychotic behavior must certainly have been increasingly obvious...."

"Er, well -- I did try -- and then I didn't have access to my credenza, you see." I began to sweat a little. And did I feel just a trace of pain in my fingertips? "I loaned it to him -- "

"Yes; we found it in the rafters. Well, no real harm done, it appears; though I'm afraid you'll have some explaining to do to your mortal authorities. I'm certain you'll follow standard operating procedures this time, though, and acquit yourself with flying colors. Shame I can't give you anything to speed up your self-repair; but then, if you got up tomorrow without a scratch on you after that fight, you'd really have some explaining to do, wouldn't you?" He chuckled and smacked my thigh in a companionable sort of way. It hurt. A short in my femoral wiring finally fixed itself and informed me that I had a massive hematoma there and several torn ligaments. As I was reflecting on this, another immortal appeared in my doorway.

"Sir? Recovery operation completed. All personnel are aboard and ready for departure."

"Then I'm off." Labienus rose, adjusting his coat and shooting his cuffs. "Well, Kalugin. I hope our next meeting takes place under more pleasant circumstances. You will transmit your full report within the next forty-eight hours, I trust? Good. Until next time." He stepped out into the corridor.

"How old is he?" I blurted.

"Who? Courier?" Labienus looked in at me, arching his eyebrows. "Thirty thousand years, I believe." He walked away and then stuck his head back through the doorway for a second. "Oh, by the way -- Happy Halloween." He flashed a smile and was gone.

\* \* \* \*

So that was the end of it, at least as far as Dr. Zeus was concerned. I myself was in a tight spot for a while. As soon as he heard about the incident, Kostromitinov became convinced it was some sort of loathsome crime of homosexual passion, and had me arrested. Fedor Svinin got a few days' holiday, because our jail was only big enough to accommodate one person. He used the time to go fishing and caught pneumonia.

At the inquest it was discovered that my pretty Creole girl had decided to tidy up my room whilst I was unconscious, and had cleaned the blood off the murder weapon and put it back in its sheath. Better still, the victim's body had vanished from its grave and was nowhere to be found when an exhumation order was given. Best of all, I had a roomful of witnesses swearing on their immortal souls that the person I'd beheaded hadn't been a human being at all. Iakov Babin was particularly vehement on my behalf, and his testimony counted for something: he was a man with a lot of experience at beating murder raps.

Thus the case never came to trial, and I was left under a sort of half-hearted house arrest that nobody bothered to enforce. And, you know, the rest of my time there was extraordinarily

happy! I became accepted, respected, liked. Apparently a man who can deliver babies with one hand and kill dybbuks with the other was just what people wanted on the frontier. I stayed on at the Ross colony until it was sold to Mr. Sutter ten years later, though I didn't go home with my fellow Russians right away: but that's another story.

I can't say it's a comfort to think that Courier is still out there on the road somewhere, in endless transit like an orbiting moon. It's likely enough that at some point in the next thirty thousand years our paths will cross again, so I'm grateful he won't remember me.

But, think about it: you may well have seen him yourself. In some city, on some tourist boat or in some railway carriage, there is always a stupid young man in the happy morning of his life, chatting with perfect strangers and exclaiming over the scenery; and he is always alone.

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