

Age of Miracles

John Brunner

No time to stand around brooding, he told himself. He had to get this prize off Grady's Ground, and not later than tonight. It should be in a proper government lab. All the aliens' scrap and rubbish should go to a proper lab!

He needed a crate. What could he pack the stuff into?

On the verge of turning to peer under a bench for suitable containers—he was sure he had some lying around—he checked, startled. Was something happening to the... device?

He stared. Yes! From the small glowing ovoid, the pattern of light was now *oozing*—permeating the bowl-like base, spreading into the larger ovoid, infecting the three objects piled above!

"Oh my God!" Bennett whispered.

For the process was not stopping when it reached the limits of the alien substance. It was spreading still further—staining the very air with radiance and taking on the shape of something as incomprehensible, as majestic and as fearful as the place from which its scattered parts had come. He gasped... and the inhalation drew with it some of the stained and colored air.

There was a sensation like a blow delivered to—not his physical brain, but—his abstract mind, and he collapsed on the floor without another sound.

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AGE OF MIRACLES

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Chapter One

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Like needles thrust into a wax doll, images stabbed him.

During the summer there was plenty to eat. The fox avoided the place where his world was being invaded: the clanking mysteries, the smoky smells, the bellowing bipeds. Summer ended. For a while there was mud. Rain soaked his coat and sharpened the edge of the wind. By frost there was a hard place and a succession of stinking roars and flashes. The fox turned aside, slinking back into the long grass and the bushes. The grass became dry and yellow, the bushes stood out bare as an engraving against the sky.

Snow brought scarcity.

The fox grew resigned to the new thing in his world. It was not a change he understood, but neither could he control it. Printing his traces in the snow, breaking through the thin frozen crust although lack of food was lightening him daily, he came to the borderline and paused—not for reflection, but because a complex balance of instinctual drives was seesawing between *hunger here* and *unknown there*.

A roar began. Automatically the fox ran forward. It was his last action but one.

Afterwards, when they had cleared away the wreckage and the bodies—including the fox's—men came with guns and searched the area. His vixen and his last litter of cubs were shot. On the new road cars went cautiously as winter spread the concrete with a glaze of ice.

He moaned in darkness. Wet, clammy, unpleasant, something slimy on his face, his chest, the front of his legs. Lying in the dirt he battled ghosts.

The man—something familiar about him—in a place lit by candles, windowless,

the door locked and barred against intruders... working. But pausing every few

seconds to look around him nervously.

We know very little about them. A sardonic curl of the lip, here. We know beyond a doubt that they can set off fissionables at an indefinite distance because we learned that the hard way.

(No, it wasn't funny.)

Another nervous glance, and back to work. Knowledge, is the first weapon.

People generally say we're fighting in the dark, but you can't call it fighting when you don't know what your enemy is or even whether he regards you as his (?) enemy.

We must find that out!

(Was that a noise? A footfall? Nothing to be seen... of course.)

After a petrified pause, the conclusion that it was a trick of overactive imagination. Something found now, something to claim all attention and generate pulse-pounding excitement. Could it possibly... ?

He lay alone in the darkness, soaked with thin wet mud, and writhed as violently as if the blow had been physical in this instant of time.

Blasphemy! The howl came, the blow followed, then the laughs of triumph.

(Shalt not suffer a witch to live.) Seek to probe the secrets of what is hidden not in knowledge but in faith! Blasphemer!

Spittle on his face. Like maddened animals all around. A snag-toothed mouth grown to enormous size, stretching from horizon to horizon and speaking the dogmas. If you would enter the holy city among the shining angels go in humility not arrogance, blasphemer and upstart!

After that, boots: kicking again and again.

He tried to crawl away, and his eyes opened. For a little he could not see and

thought he must be blind. Then he rolled over, the mud plopping; its sour taste was in his mouth. Man the crown of creation (irony) lying in dirt like a hog in its wallow. Anger burst out and bloomed in him like a fireball, lighting the landscape of his mind with a beautiful and deadly brilliance. Who put him here in the dirt? Who threw him down in a ditch like a dead dog? *He* did.

The man began to pick himself up, clawing at the sides of the trench for a purchase. He felt the horrible clay fill the space between his nails and his fingertips, foul as feces. His limbs were like wooden rods, uncontrollable. He was about three-quarters dead, but his mind was alive with hate.

Dark—night—dark—night...

Over the lip of the ditch he saw lights and thought of lights he had seen before. He desired to go towards them. Clawing, scrabbling, thrusting, he tried to force himself up and out. Failed, and fell back. Like a man handcuffed in a cell awaiting the torturers' return, he railed against the slippery clay, his weak body, his powerlessness. White-hot, the hate crumbled his humanity as lava can crumble a peasant's hut on the slopes of Etna.

Inhuman, he found neither time nor space so impassable a barrier as the sides of this deep trench.

When the figure appeared in the restaurant, everything stopped. Only for one moment was a man's high-pitched voice raised into the appalling silence, closing a bargain with a woman for the night. And then nothing. The remembered sound of chattering and music hung in the air like dust.

His mere presence was a slap in the face. To look at him was to realize what he was, and recall that all humanity had been disgustingly insulted. Not the mask of the Red Death, not Naaman white with leprosy, could have chilled the company as

this man did.

Ripped, his clothes hung from him like the bannered rags on a scarecrow made of poles. Dirty brown mud glistened wet on his face, chest and legs. He left smeared footprints as he lurched across the restaurant's floor.

Seconds passed. There were a few half-hearted screams, but it was clear from the focused intensity of the man's burning glare, from the straight-line course he was following, that he was concentrated on one individual among those present. For what? Vengeance? You could not be sure. In this Age of Miracles, you could not be sure of anything.

He's after someone, Den Radcliffe thought. It seemed a vaguely silly idea, like the delusive insights of a dream full of surreal absurdities. *Me. He's coming directly towards me.*

The tick-tock of heartbeats told him that time was passing; so did the foot-dragging approach of the stranger. Nothing else did. As though sunk in a block of transparent plastic he sat rigid beside his companions at the table. The width of the table, at least, was between himself and the intruder.

The distance narrowed to twelve paces, ten, eight. Suddenly the girl on his left—he knew her only as Maura—screamed and leaped to her feet, and others imitated her. The spell broke. Den Radcliffe could move, do something to drive away this horror, break it, smash it, this obscenity walking like a man!

He snatched up what his hand encountered on the table: a heavy glass pitcher full of water. He hurled it, and it struck the man's shoulder, making him check his stride for a second while its contents slopped some of the mud from his cheek.

A bottle, caught around the neck for a club. On his feet now, Den Radcliffe felt all his nerves sing back to life, stinging as a limb stings when circulation returns

after tourniquet-like cramp. Bottle raised, liquor spouting from its neck and

flowing down his sleeve, he waited in the vain hope of help.

The man spoke. His nauseous screeching voice filled the room like air rushing into a punctured vacuum. "Damn you!" he howled. "Damn you damn you *damn* you! You did this to me, you bastard!"

Superstition, against his will, shattered the self-control which Radcliffe had already weakened with drink. He swung the bottle and let it go. It broke on the man's forehead, gashing the skin, scattering with a tinkle across the floor, and then there was the long-repressed panic.

Chairs crashed over, tableclothes were dragged unheeded by scrambling fighting crazy-milling men and women, shedding cutlery and plates ringing and breaking. The waiters went with the rest; so did the musicians from the band, using their instruments as clubs, and a hundred people were rushing the yard-wide exit door before the manager turned on the ceiling panic sprays and oblivion came sifting down like snow.

Still the ghastly figure stood facing Radcliffe. He hurled things at it like wooden balls at a cockshy—bottles, glasses, what his hands chanced on. The tableknives would not throw; their handles were too heavy. A plate caught the air and swung aside, like a badly aimed discus.

He heard the hissing of the panic sprays, and terror seized him. For all he knew, the *other* confronting him might not breathe, might now draw in air and be immobilized by the anesthetic. He snatched his own last lungful before the gas came down, hooked his hands under the table's edge and lifted it with insane violence from the floor. As it came up, he somehow got another purchase on its underside so that he leaned forward into it and turned it, brought it slamming

down on the impassive, hate-auraed figure, and fell forward, triumph coloring his

slide into unconsciousness. After him tumbled and clattered his past and his hopes

for the future.

Chapter Two

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“The history of the last years of the twentieth century,” Waldron said under his breath, “is going to be the story of how nothing happened.”

“What was that?” Across the desk Canfield—suspicious, touchy—stiffened, sure he was being snidely insulted.

“Nothing,” Waldron said. “Go on.”

That is, he added without even moving his lips, *if anyone bothers to write history again.*

Canfield was still glaring at him, his dark face full of hostility. Abruptly unable to bear that scowl any longer, Waldron snapped, “Go on, damn it! You came to give a report, so spit it out.”

Canfield grunted and turned back the leaves of his notebook. He said, “I took a crew down to the City of Angels as soon as the call came. It was a shambles, but the manager had turned on the panic sprays. According to him, the weirdo just appeared, on the dais inside the entrance by the hat-check booth, and walked straight across the room towards one particular table. He watched it happening from a sealed armor-glass compartment on the—”

“I know the City of Angels,” interrupted Waldron. And, as he saw self-righteous disapproval gather in Canfield’s mind, added, “I go there all the time! When I can afford to, anyhow.”

He made no attempt to interpret Canfield’s reaction in words, but the latter pursed his lips hard for several seconds, as though forcibly blocking off a sharp retort, before he continued.

“Of course, it’s ridiculous to say that the weirdo just *appeared*. I brought in the

doorman and the bouncer, naturally, and questioned them on the way—they missed

most of the gas because they were right next to the exit. Either they're lying or they panicked and don't want to admit it."

Leaning back in his chair and closing his eyes, Waldron said, "What state was this weirdo in when you picked him out from under the table?"

His train of thought broken, Canfield hesitated. "Filthy," he said at last.

"Smearred with wet mud, ragged, bruised—but some of that was due to things being thrown at him, I guess."

"A man in that state wouldn't be let into the City of Angels through the main entrance," Waldron said. "I'm not asking you to speculate. Just tell me what you found when you arrived."

Canfield shut his notebook and rose to his feet, his mouth working, his Adam's apple bobbing on his stringy neck. He said, "What the hell are you trying to do—make me angry enough to give you an excuse for throwing me off the force?"

"Shut up and sit down," Waldron said. "Or if you don't want to go on, give me your notebook and I'll pick the details out of it myself."

Canfield took another few heartbeats to boil over. Then he threw the notebook on the desk in front of his chief—it made a noise like an open-handed slap—and strode out, slamming the door. The ill-fitting windows rattled in their frames; the pencils on the desk rattled against each other.

It seemed suddenly very dark in the room, although the high swinging lightbulb was new and free of dust. Waldron sat a while without moving, looking at the black cover of the notebook.

The story of how nothing happened...

That was what was going to break James Arnott Waldron: the hysterical pretense

that it was still the same old world. One day he was going to scream at some idiot

like Canfield and say, “How the hell dare you claim that you are Man, the lord of creation? You’re a rat, you’re an insect, you’re a dirty little crawling louse scavenging after the angels—a dung-beetle butting at your ball of muck and fooling yourself that you’re trundling the sun!”

Why do I hang on here? What’s the point? Why don’t I simply quit?

His eyes drifted from the oblong of the notebook to the oblong of a map on the wall—not the city map, the hemisphere map. That bore handmade additions and amendments; you couldn’t buy a commercial or even a government-issue map which showed the world as it really was. Consequently he was not altogether certain his was accurate. But it was as truthful as he could make it. Not from masochism, as Canfield and so many other of his colleagues seemed to think. From honesty.

Why can’t they understand it’s necessary?

The pockmark gaps in the neat mesh of human symbols—the devastated areas, the fallout zones, into which the lines of highways and railroads led like footsteps over precipices—*had* to be included on the printed map; it would be beyond anybody’s powers of self-deception pretend that Omaha, for instance, still existed. (Though of course you didn’t have to keep stating aloud that the city had gone.) But the heavy black border isolating a tongue-shaped area in the center of North America, the other similar border surrounding a kidney-shaped zone in Western Brazil, and the patches of silver foil like distorted pentagrams which indicated the alien cities—those, Waldron had applied himself the day after he grew tired of the popular fiction that governments in Washington and Ottawa still held sway over the whole of their former territories.

“One day,” Waldron declared to the uncaring air, “I’ll wire up a hell and some

flashing lights and stick a sign under the map saying DON'T KID YOURSELF. And

fix it so it comes on when the door is opened.”

But he knew he wouldn't go that far. It was all very well to insist that people must face the facts; it would take more than words, whether written or spoken, to bring the result about.

He was as scared as anybody else. He was as ready to hide from reality as anybody else. All he had as margin was a kind of shame. He could easily lose it.

Maintaining its original force was straining his nerves. Otherwise he wouldn't have snapped at Canfield.

He drove himself to pick up the notebook at last and flip through its pages, seeing the familiar shorthand it was filled with, as clear and as easy to read once you had the context as ordinary print.

Is that symptomatic? So many of us now seem to need to do small things perfectly, as though we're resigned to giving up the big things... for good and all.

He hoped not. He thought of his own laborious attempts to perfect Beethoven's Opus III, first without a wrong note or shaky time-value, then without a flaw of expression. He didn't want to write that off as mere compulsiveness.

All right! The symbols danced on the page. He froze them by an effort of will. At the City of Angels—the name was a gesture of timid defiance, of course, on a par with a boy thumbing his nose at an adult whose back was turned—there had been this extraordinary intrusion. Words like “extraordinary” were losing their force.

Lately you didn't even hear people say as they had used, “The Age of Miracles is not past.” Now they said, with a wry shrug, “A of M!”—and that was its own explanation.

Canfield had arrived and found people jammed, physically jammed, in the exit

doorway, and sprawled all over the low dais leading to it, dropped where the panic sprays caught them. And crushed under a table, the weirdo. And on top of the table, the man the manager believed to have been the target of the weirdo's interest. And on the floor nearby two girls and a man who had completed this particular party.

The man lying on the upturned table was called Dennis Radcliffe.

Waldron frowned. The name rang a distant bell. But he couldn't place it immediately. He wasted no time trying to puzzle it out—he could have the records checked easily enough.

The manager said Radcliffe had gone wild and started to hurl things: bottles, knives, crockery. But he hadn't seen what happened after that because of the rush for the exit and the need to turn on his gas-sprays.

So Canfield had closed out the place, of course, and taken all the hundred and forty names of clients and waiters and other staff by a slow process of searching pockets and purses for identity papers, and had brought here the people most directly involved: the manager, the bouncer and doorkeeper he suspected of lying, Radcliffe and the rest of his party, the weirdo himself, and half a dozen people picked at random to give corroborative evidence. A thorough job. Now it was three-ten A.M., and Waldron felt his vitality at such a low ebb he hated the prospect of sifting through the data Canfield had meticulously assembled.

But it was going to have to be done.

Where the hell do you start on a thing like this?

He shut the notebook and thumbed switches on his desk intercom in the hope that it might have started working again by itself. It hadn't, and no one would be in to fix it before nine. He repressed the urge to throw it at the wall and got out of his chair.

The basement, white-tiled and forbidding, always put him in mind of a public toilet. There was something of the same stench about it, too, when the cells were full. Under harsh lights some of those arrested tonight moaned in their sleep; others, thinking even trying to sleep was futile, sat on hard benches and stared at nothing, eyes rimmed red with weariness. The people from the City of Angels were still unconscious for the most part, and lay like morgue-delivered corpses on the benches and floors in the end three cells.

At Waldron's appearance the men at the desk facing the cells glanced up. There were Rodriguez, the duty sergeant, Dr. Morello, one of the regular police surgeons, and Canfield, who glowered and bared his teeth.

Controlling his movements deliberately, Waldron descended the last few steps and held out the notebook. "I'm sorry I snapped at you, Canfield," he said. "Tired, I guess." He planted an elbow on the corner of the desk.

Canfield accepted the notebook and said nothing.

"Well, doc?" Waldron went on, his voice brittle. "What brings you here—the City of Angels affair, is it?"

Morello, whose eyelids were puffy and whose hair was uncombed, was writing out a report with the stylo chained to the desk in front of Rodriguez, and the chain was hampering. After favoring it with a muttered curse, he said, "Sure, they dragged me out to look at this weirdo. Could have waited until morning. Any fool could have seen he was dead."

"Did you say 'any fool'?" Canfield inquired in a tone as light as a caress. And when the doctor didn't respond, he went on, "I did what the regulations say! If you don't like being woken at two A.M., you don't have to have a police card. Want us to revoke it?"

Morello grimaced. “What the hell difference does it make if I get my patients from the police or pick ‘em up off the street?” he said sourly. “Same color blood, same broken bones whichever way.” Completing the last line of his scribbled report, he signed with a flourish and pushed the paper towards Rodriguez.

“Anybody got a cigarette?” he added. “I forgot mine.”

“Here.” Waldron proffered a pack. “I didn’t realize the weirdo was dead, by the way.”

“He wasn’t when we brought him here,” Canfield supplied. “He died about ten minutes before I came to see you. I’d have told you if I’d had the chance.”

Ignoring the gibe, Waldron turned to Morello. “So what killed him? The things Radcliffe threw? The table falling on him?”

The doctor shrugged. “Contributory, maybe.” He drew on his cigarette, closing his eyes momentarily as though to drown consciousness in the smoke. “But I doubt if you have a murder charge. Cerebral hemorrhage, far as I can tell. A whole slew of ruptured blood-vessels. His eyes are like cherries. My guess when they open up the skull at the autopsy, his brain will look like it’s been stirred with an eggbeater.” He uttered the similes with gloomy relish.

Uncomfortable, Waldron noticed that a woman in the cell directly opposite the desk was listening, her mouth slack, her eyes wide, and that now she was shuddering and licking her lips like a spectator at a *grand guignol* show. He decided not to look at her again.

“O.K.,” he said. “Who was he? Anything known?”

“No papers on him,” Canfield said. “Nothing. Wearing rags. Looked like he’d been through hell.”

“No tattoo marks or anything like that, either.” Morello spoke through a yawn.

“Body covered in contusions a day or two old, plus fresh ones probably due to what got thrown at him. No major scars.”

“Take his prints, then,” Waldron said. “Have him cosmeticized and get some as-in-life pictures. Any hope of photographing the retinal patterns, doc?”

“Take the retinas out at the autopsy,” Morello said. “His eyes are too messy to do a proper job through the corneas. I told you—they’re like cherries.”

“A lot of trouble,” Rodriguez grumbled. “For a weirdo!”

Waldron didn’t comment.

“Shouldn’t be too much sweat.” Morello yawned again, more widely. “Got one unusual thing about him. Mirror-image lay-out. Heart on the wrong side, large lobe of the liver on the wrong side, all the way down the line. Shouldn’t be surprised if he’s one of a pair of identical twins.”

“Ah-hah!” Waldron said. “Got that, Chico?”

“It’s in the report,” Rodriguez grunted.

“So that’s finish for me,” Morello said. He picked up his bag from beside the desk. “Don’t bother me too early in the morning. He’s in freeze, he won’t rot before the afternoon. And I’m short on sleep.”

When his footsteps had died away on the echoing staircase, Waldron beckoned Canfield and walked over to the cells where the unconscious people from the City of Angels were lying.

“Which is Radcliffe?” he asked.

“That’s him.” Canfield pointed out a dark-haired man in very expensive clothes. Even in his drugged stupor his rather swarthy face wore a look of remembered terror. Waldron spoke to avoid thinking about the reason for that expression.

“We know something about him, don’t we? I’m sure I’ve heard the name before.”

“Could be, but not because we ever booked him here. He’s the famous Den

Radcliffe. Not a nice guy. Free trader, spends most of his time over with Governor Grady. They told us from the West Coast he’d been seen out of Grady’s territory. Maybe you spotted the name on the teletype.”

Not a nice guy! Hell of a mealy-mouthed way to put it! And anyway, what right did a Canfield have to dismiss such a man as his inferior? More gutsy than a Canfield, at least: not content to be down in the shelter of the universal cheap pretenses...

“Want we should start with him?” Canfield proposed—eager, perhaps, to shift this living reminder of the plight of the world from under the roof they presently shared. Waldron had intended to leave Radcliffe until later anyway; hearing Canfield’s tone, he felt the decision gilded with a veneer of malicious pleasure.

“No, I’ll start with the manager and his staff, and the people you picked up for corrobs. I’ll have Radcliffe and the party who were with him after I’ve got the general picture from the ones who weren’t directly involved.”

For a moment he thought Canfield was going to raise objections. But he merely shrugged and called Rodriguez to open the first cell.

Chapter Three

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Appeared out of thin air. Looked around and spotted Radcliffe. Walked straight towards him—no, more kind of *plodded*, like he had weights tied to his ankles. Said something. Things were thrown. Panic. And oblivion. No, never saw him before. No idea who he might have been. Anyway, how to tell when his face was plastered with mud?

By the time he had picked through a dozen substantially identical stories, Waldron was regretting his petty desire to extend Canfield like a man on the rack. When Radcliffe was finally shown into the office he studied him with unconcealed curiosity. Radcliffe returned it with interest, his gaze lingering a long while on the hand-altered map pinned to the wall before he obeyed Waldron's invitation to come and sit down.

"You're Dennis W. Radcliffe, that right?" Waldron said.

"Right." Radcliffe crossed his legs. "Mind if I smoke?"

"Go ahead." Waldron turned the pedestal mike on the desk a little more towards the other's mouth. "This interview is being—"

"Recorded and may subsequently be used in evidence," Radcliffe interrupted wearily. "I've been through this sort of drill before."

"Have you had the full treatment?" Waldron countered. "The man you threw the table at is dead."

For a moment a wary flicker showed in Radcliffe's face. It vanished, and he was shrugging. "So? The panic sprays were on. Between inhalation and unconsciousness there's a period when a man isn't necessarily responsible for his actions."

Neat. Waldron took a cigarette for himself, wondering what set a Radcliffe so far

apart from a Canfield.

“Are you making a charge?” Radcliffe added.

“Not yet. Do you wish legal representation?”

“Why should I, before you make a charge?”

“Yes or no, please!”

“Not yet—and I quote.” Radcliffe grinned without mirth.

Waldron let it go at that. “Particulars, then. Age, birthplace, current address, permanent domicile, profession.”

“Born Minneapolis. Age forty.” Waldron had imagined him five years younger.

“Hotel White Condor, suite 215. And I’m a free trader with a permanent domicile just outside Gradyville, but I don’t believe you recognize the existence of such a place.”

Defiance flavored the last words. Waldron extended his hand. “Documents?”

“They impounded them downstairs.”

Waldron cursed inwardly. But Rodriguez must have done that to save time in compiling the written report; he couldn’t complain.

“Right, let’s go straight to the point. What’s your version of this affair?”

It dovetailed exactly with the other accounts he had heard, but included one significant addition.

“He spoke to me,” Radcliffe said. “He sounded crazy-mad. He said something like, ‘Damn you, you did this to me!’ I concluded he was insane and obviously dangerous.”

“Are you qualified to pass judgment on people’s sanity?”

“I deal with a wide and varied cross-section of the public in my profession,”

Radcliffe answered, without the bat of an eye.

“Go on.”

“He made a move towards me which after his *seemingly* insane verbal attack I interpreted as hostile. To forestall an actual assault I threw a water-jug at him.”

A pause. “Is that all?” Waldron pressed.

“When he kept coming, I threw something else—I forget what, because it was about then that the panic sprays came on. I made to raise the table as a barrier between us, I recall that, but I lost consciousness while doing so. I woke up on being revived in the cell downstairs.”

Waldron probed further, but Radcliffe was too cagy to qualify what he had said.

He switched the line of his approach.

“Who was this man? Had you seen him before?”

“Not to my knowledge. Of course, he was a weirdo, so—”

“What makes you so sure?”

“Jesus! I’ll lay a bet that people in the restaurant who’d never before been within a hundred miles of one pegged him as soon as they laid eyes on him. And me, I’ve seen plenty.”

Waldron hesitated. He said, “You describe yourself as a free trader. Define the term.”

Oddly ill at ease for a moment, Radcliffe said, “I buy and sell—uh—rare artifacts.”

“In the vicinity of the so-called alien city?”

Radcliffe lifted his chin half an inch. “Yes.”

“That’s where you’ve seen so many weirdos?”

“Of course.” Radcliffe had apparently expected the questioning to turn overtly hostile; recognizing he was wrong, he sounded puzzled. “That’s why I say I hadn’t

seen this character before to my knowledge. I didn't recognize him, I don't know his

name or anything about him, but conceivably he may have seen me—uh—”

“On Grady's Ground?” Waldron suggested softly. His superiors wouldn't like that in the official record, but the hell with them. “What were you supposed to have done to him?”

“Heaven knows.”

“You don't recall offending a weirdo lately, maybe?”

“I wouldn't even know how to go about it. They kind of lose touch with the world everyone else lives in, you know. Most of them are harmless, but some aren't. So I keep my distance from them.”

“I see. So you'd never consciously met the guy, you don't know and won't guess what grudge he had against you, he made a crazy-sounding verbal attack on you which you thought was about to turn physical, and you were trying to drive him back when the panic sprays went on and you fell on him with the table. That correct?”

“That's the size of it.”

Waldron studied the other for a few seconds, then gave a noncommittal grunt.

“How about the other people at your table? Who were they?”

“The man's called Terry Hyson. A business contact of mine. I don't know anything about the girls except the blonde is called Sue and the brunette is called Maura. Terry provided them for the evening. I guess he had them from a supply agency.”

“They charge?”

“Two-fifty.” Radcliffe shrugged.

They would, of course. Someone like Radcliffe wasn't apt to get it any other way

outside his home ground. As though Grady's dirt, rather than his own guts, were the

significant thing. Abruptly Waldron found himself feeling angry on Radcliffe's behalf. He said, "O.K., I guess that's enough. If we want you again we'll trace you through Hyson or at your hotel. When do you plan to leave the city?"

"Not before the weekend, as things stand." If Radcliffe was surprised the interview had been so easy, he didn't show it.

"Fine. You can go." Waldron moved pencils randomly on his desk.

But Radcliffe didn't make to leave at once. His gaze roamed the office, coming to rest on the hemisphere map, at which he jerked a thumb.

"You haven't got it quite right."

"What do you mean?"

"This." Radcliffe rose and approached the map, laying his finger on the western edge of the black tongue-shaped outline defining Grady's Ground. "Goes forty-fifty miles further west here."

"Thanks for the information," Waldron muttered.

"You been out that way?" Radcliffe cocked his head.

"No."

"You should." He gave a crooked smile. "Some time when you get sick of making phony gestures in this smelly little room, come out and see me. I'm not hard to track down."

How the hell did he know? For a short eternity Waldron saw nothing but

Radcliffe's eyes, and then he heard himself say, "I guess—yes, maybe I will. Maybe I will."

When the door closed, Waldron found he was sweating. His teeth were going to chatter if he didn't set his jaw hard. He looked towards the window. Dawn was

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