

King Solomon's Ring



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by Roger Zelazny

King Solomon had a ring, and so did the guy I have to tell you about. Solomon's was a big iron thing with a pentagram for a face, but Billy Scarle's was invisible because he wore it around his mind. The two rings did serve similar purposes though.

Legend has it Solomon's enabled him to understand the language of beasts. Scarle as you may remember, also had the gift of tongues. I suppose that was the reason for his peculiar susceptibilities.

I am writing this letter, Lisa, because you are the one who managed to recruit him, and I think he was in love with you. Maybe I am wrong. If so, I can only ask pardon for the intrusion and trust to your sense of humor to put things in perspective.

Last night (I think it was last night) I was having dinner/s with Dr. Hale, whom you have never met. He is a big panda of a man -- white boots (generally), wide black trousers (always), white shirt (always), black tie (ditto), and black on top (mostly). He has the feral eyes, too, and he listens to the world through a pair of puffed teacups (he used to be a light-heavyweight -- a pretty good one), and he has a nose like the old Eiffel Tower, and bent, and he manages to get by with less couchside blather than other complex-pushers I've met. He claims his record as a therapeutic Svengali is based on the fact that his patients tend to feel sorry for him on first sight, but I sometimes

wonder. Once he turns on that snow machine of his, his fat face sort of melts until it seems you are staring at a portrait of Machiavelli in retirement.

He is not retired though, and he has a very professional manner with steaks ...

Between mouthfuls: "What about Billy Scarle?"

"You're the doctor. You tell me."

"I value your opinion."

"In that case, you're losing your touch. I don't have one."

"Then manufacture one, because I want it."

I bit into a roll, buying myself thirty seconds' mulling time, and proceeded to mull.

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Scarle's early career had been a success mainly because it was a minimum-personnel operation. He did not trust too many people, so everyone aboard his ship was a close-mouthed specialist in many things. What puzzled the Guard for a long time was the fact that he was very unconventional in disposing of the fruits of his piracies. Dozens of the worlds on the Exploratory Perimeter are no more than encyclopedia entries followed by a couple sentences, but there are many excellent trading centers among them. Language is a genuine barrier though, and there just aren't that many interpreters, especially for bootlegging operations.

What it took you a long time to figure out was something that Scarle

was barely aware of himself. He just thought he had mastered galactic sign language and that the hybrid patois of Fenster, his home world, was sufficient to fill in the gaps. Bear in mind, Lisa, that while he was clever, he was only nominally educated in a Slumschule and was quite naive in many matters. Still, it took the Circle of Solomon to tip off the Guard as to what they were dealing with.

After his apprehension on Martin VIII, it was his ratty luck to be shipped Earthward in the custody of an old Guardsman ready for retirement. As you know, the cop decided along the way that the arrest had been out of jurisdiction, and he also decided he did not want a black mark on his record at that stage in the game. So he changed a couple log entries and elected himself judge, jury, and executioner -- as you may not know. He never said a word while he made the preparations, but of course Scarle knew.

I suppose it would be interesting to tell you the details of the cop's not being able to pull the trigger and Scarle's smashing him to pieces with his arm collars, but I'd rather not be that interesting. I've heard the story too many times.

When you picked him up in that bar on Kimberly, he was beginning to suspect what he was, but he was too busy vacationing to do much experimenting. He was lying low and feeling high, and shopping around for a new rig, that night you sat down across from his whisky-and-fleat and offered to tell his fortune.

Naturally he said yes, because you are beautiful.

"The thirteenth card of the Major Arcana," you told him, "is the Bony Reaper. He signifies Death, often only on metaphysical levels, but a death, nevertheless. Your life is going to change."

And he smiled and agreed and asked if you wanted to help change

it, and you smiled and agreed, sort of. It took about a week of his being puzzled (because he could not anticipate you the way he could other people), before you knew he was ready for The Bet. (Did you have that Tarot up your sleeve? He wondered that on several occasions, so I thought I would ask.) It was well managed, I gather, and of course the prediction turned out to be quite true.

For the wagered price of one cruiser, he agreed to be your quarry. You managed to convince him that you were rich (which was also true, now I think of it) and looking for kicks (which might have held an incidental truth, at that). He could not back down, not that he wanted to, because he had boasted too much beforehand. And he did have a high survival potential also, as it was only by accident that I managed to kill him when I finally had to.

Three days for him to hide himself in the jungles of Kimberly, and a week in which he had to stay hidden, despite your trackers, your mechanical spiders, and your electronic B.O. detectors, and he did it. I remember the night you told me about it. It was on Liliith, with a sky full of moons and a fine, tangy sea breeze assaulting the smells of roast Sossevogel and Liliith-mosel (that pagan Liebfraumilch!) -- do you recall the name of the place? I seem to forget it now, but I remember the balcony quite vividly, and you were wearing something dark blue ... Oh, well.

It took three days to find his trail, you said, and six hours to close in on him. Then he escaped when you approached his campsite. This happened a couple times, until you had flushed him onto the higher ground near the Gila Range. Remember now? The spiders stopped coming back, and you started finding them smashed to bits, until you were out of spiders. But then it became apparent that he was mounted, because he started moving very fast and the broken spiders showed hoof-marks. After the fifth day the trackers gave up, without admitting it, and the "dogs" grew interested in other matters.

At the end of the week he walked into your camp, all smiles, and aware of his power. He had won The Bet by destroying the mechanical hunters, circling around behind your party, and "eavesdropping" on your hunting beasts. Then he managed to "talk" them out of following him. He followed along behind you until the seven days were up, and then he walked in on you, clean-shaven, and thinking he had won. The poor sucker! He had been initiated into the most exclusive club in the galaxy and therewith reduced his life expectancy by ninety or a hundred years. Excuse me, dear, I'm not being bitter, but I liked the guy. If the Guard had gotten him to Earth alive, he would have been recruited anyhow.

King Solomon had a ring, you told him -- while you were on that month's frolic about Earth and the Inworlds -- a ring that enabled him to understand all the tongues of life. And you, Billy Scarle, you also have a ring. You wear it around your mind like an introverted chastity belt, and whenever anything is going to speak, you know what it is going to say before it says it, and whenever you want to say something, and want to strongly enough, others know what you are going to say before you say it. You are a fractional telepath and a potential paralinguist. You would probably flunk first semester French, which is an easy Orthotongue, but with the proper training you could be a two-way on-the-spot interpreter for any two languages without knowing either.

And he wanted to know if there was money in it! Do you remember him now? He was about five-ten, with that premature frost on his hair that comes of pushing poorly shielded cruisers too far; nervous fingers, light eyes, a preference for nondescript clothing; and when he talked, all his sentences seemed like one long word. At first glance, I guess he just did not give the impression of being much of a criminal. Rather, perhaps (and quite correctly), he seemed a person who would have had a hard time enjoying Mardi Gras time on

Centuvo. Hale thinks this was the key to his talent, cast long ago on the streets of Fenster.

You offered him full Circleship, if he could pass the training, emphasizing its retroactive civil immunity as much as its high pay, so what else could he do? He realized you were his superior in nearly everything. He wanted to even things up, and his pride was always an amazing thing to behold -- right up until the end it made him equal to almost any task. I remember how he sweated over Chomsky's book (which did not mean much in the long run, because the Thing Applied was all sedation and sound cycles), but it furnished him with broad concepts, and things like concepts help smooth down rough edges. And as for the law -- well, he did want an out.

He joined, and you kept in touch: beautiful, witty, sophisticated, what shall I say? -- polemics? -- until he drew his first assignment and went incommunicado. What then, Lisa?

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"I'll tell you, Doc," I said to Hale, " I was thinking of his first assignment. It was to that world called Malmson. You weren't along that trip, which is too bad. He felt we wrecked the whole society there, and it sort of got to him. I think he felt more responsible for it than one man has a right to feel."

"For what? What happened?"

"Oh, nothing out-and-out crushing. We didn't hook the population with narcotics or send their females to brothels, as we've often been accused of doing. We couldn't have done much physical exploitation if we'd wanted to -- they were all about three feet tall and looked sort of like kiwis with arms. But Scarle really didn't know what he was doing yet. He thought it was all setting up the hum-box, taking a shot,

and filling out the Omniform. Of course, it doesn't stop with that."

"And?"

"He found out, after the Omni was Staff Evaluated and Malmson's borox deposits were deemed significant. A report was submitted, and we left. A year later he went back for a visit -- they should never let a paraling revisit one of his X-worlds ... The industry we were imposing had already begun disrupting the culture's value systems -- and because Scarle was a paraling, he translated feelings as well as words when he talked with the creatures that second time. The deposed grow bitter, the young lose their roots -- you know the story. Scarle had already had a couple other X's by then, but he came away unsure after that visit. He claimed we had no right to make aliens over into our image. He said he wanted to quit."

"What did the Circle say?"

"Nothing, officially. But he was subsequently visited by the woman who had recruited him, and she persuaded him to accept another assignment."

"This last one?"

"Right. Mack 997-IV, the world they call the Butcher. His recruiter explained to him that the first assignments were also in the nature of training, and she proceeded to reveal the rest of the significance of the Ring."

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"What was your second assignment like?" you asked him.

He told you that it had been to a brutal and nasty place, with a smelly

reptilian culture he had hated. Then you told him that it, also, would be changed as a result of his visit. It would be more congenial, by human standards, because of it. You then told him the full story of King Solomon's Ring -- how it had been a divine gift to the Temple Builder, granting him the power to compel obedience from every demon in existence. Neither were all of the demons obnoxious, you assured him; some were useful and some were not. Those of particular malice were forced into bottles, to be stoppered with the ring's unbreakable seal, and cast into the seas to drift forever. The useful ones were put to work building the Temple. And you, Billy Scarle, wear the Ring of Solomon around your mind, and communication is not its only function. You are the Builder -- you are enlisting every variety of aid for the construction of the interstellar Temple of Earth. It is the most godlike of all human responsibilities, and there are few of us, very few, capable of furthering this end. You have passed all your tests now, and you are an extremely gifted paralinguist. So gifted, in fact, that we wish to entrust you with the most difficult assignment in our files ...

"He bought it, of course," I finished, with a sip of Danzel coffee. "She could sell igloos on Mercury if she wanted."

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The day was bright, the sky was yellow, and Scarle set down his hum-box.

"What is it?" I asked him.

"They won't talk today," he answered. "They just wanted to observe us. They'll be back in about forty hours. They're leaving now."

"Where are they?"

"Behind those bushes." He gestured toward a thicket of reddish, spiky-looking shrubs. "They'll go request permission to talk with us."

"From whom?"

"I don't know."

"How do you know that much? None of the equipment is operating."

"I got a partial impression a minute ago. They're telepathic themselves, and they were talking."

"What do they look like?"

"I don't know. Some sort of big insect, I think. I may be prejudiced by the reports from X1 and X2, though. I feel they're a slave-class creature."

"How come they've taken a week to make up their minds?" I asked him.

He shrugged negatively.

So we walked down to the river and went for a swim, because we had been ordered not to and the captain had no right to give such an order to S-personnel. The shaly ground had a pinholed complexion, the water was warmish, and a grudging breeze fanned us to near-comfort. It was easy to float in the waters of Mack the Knife, as we had nicknamed the Butcher, and there was nothing dangerous lurking below (nothing non-dangerous either -- Mack had very little in the way of marine life).

"You scared?" I asked.

"No," he said.

"Why not?"

He did not answer.

"How sure are you of your stability?"

"Certain," he yawned. "Paralings are slightly prescient when it comes to organic actions. I'd know in advance if that horsefly that's going to land on your nose were going to bite mine."

I heard a buzz.

I slapped my nose with the flat of my hand, but there was no horsefly. Just a horselaugh.

"Reflex betrayed you," he said. "There are no flies on the Butcher."

I rolled quickly, hoping to dunk him good, but he was not there. His laughter came from a spot about forty feet away on the bank, where he sat smoking.

" 'Certain,' " he repeated.

I rubbed my nose.

"Very funny. When you find a tarantula in your bunk tonight, you'll know who ..."

"Come off it," he called. "I had a point to prove. You were relaxed -- ears near water level -- background splashes -- I didn't say a word. Admit you thought I was beside you. Admit I'm deceptive, cunning, and nasty."

"You know what's on my mind."

"Yes," he said, "you're worried the same thing will happen as before."

"Twice," I added. "Why the devil those bureaucrats couldn't send more than one paraling I ..."

"One had always been sufficient elsewhere. It will be the same way this time."

"This is a real challenge for you, isn't it?" I snapped. "Whoever talked to you must have put it in a very missionary way."

"So what? An X is an X. I can make it."

"You're just a personnel problem for me," I said, "but the last two paralings to X here are still in the bughouse, with EEG readings pretty as horizons."

"There is an old Ortho parable," he told me, "about a guy who asked a computer when he was going to die."

I waited.

"Well, what happened?"

"Nothing," he answered. "End of parable. It didn't know."

"Implication being -- ?"

"My chances of coming back have been calculated as pretty good. There are a lot fewer variables involved this time, because we have the reports of the first two expeditions. This problem could be programmed -- so who are you to judge, off the cuff?"

I did not say anything. I just thought hard.

But he laughed again, because he had been born on Fenster and he knew the whole Dictionary of Galactic Profanity without having to look anything up.

When we reported back to the ship later, I felt he also knew I did not have any spare tarantulas along.

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It was two days before the creatures returned, and it was gray and raining when they appeared in the clearing. An open-sided field tent was quickly erected, and we donned slickers and sloughed off through the dark mud.

Scarle set the hum-box on a toweled-down table, and I studied our welcome committee ...

Three of them ... Antlike, with the greenish cast of venerable bronze to their steel-hard hides; about the size of German Shepherds -- but, I daresay, many times stronger; and eyes blank as Dorn's pink moons, of which they reminded me -- sightless seeming, but watching with a disconcerting fixity -- and it might be they could see anything. (Do you remember Dorn?)

Scarle mouthed some words, turning on the recorder, and the reply came in a clock-click, th-th-th, bittle-bittle-bittle series of sounds. He pressed the INVESTIGATE button and took the black snap-case from his pocket. The red Insufficiency Light came on just as he finished assembling his hypodermic. He turned to the creatures and recited a sonnet by Shelley. It did not fit in with the day, but they responded with more noise, and he pressed RECORD again. He jabbed the hypo into an ampule containing a mild sedative and gave himself an injection while they continued ticking.

They seemed to understand what he wanted, because they kept it up for a full four minutes this time. He thumbed the INVESTIGATE button once more, and I looked out beyond the tent flaps and through the rain.

The Butcher could easily be a treasure trove. The preliminary Geo reports had indicated untapped mineral resources and possible climatological suitability for raising the staples that underspaced Mother Earth found dwindling within her cities; on her shore-to-shore plains of steel and concrete the dirt Agcities showed as acne rather than beautymarks. But amid the steel pores of Earth, wheat the interloper still meant bread. The Butcher might become a Baker.

The green light glowed -- Tentative Inflectional Patterning Established. Patterns, not meanings. There ain't no box can take click-click, th-th, bittle-bittle in one end, cold, and give you "Good morning, it's raining like hell, isn't it?" out of the other. A completely unfamiliar body of significant sounds has no meaning to a stranger, man or machine, until a referent or two are picked up. Grammar and vocabulary take too long to obtain in times like these, and there were no telepaths good enough for total X then. But all languages have patterns of inflection. The hum-box separated and established these patterns. It did not know whether they were interrogative, argumentative, repetitive, or what have you, but it sifted them.

The rest was up to Scarle and the hum.

The speakers were placed in their magic circle about the bugs; then another around us. Scarle, the peaceful-looking conductor, eyes at half mast and a drunken smile below, began to concert.

The two-channel inflectional humming began as he poked the unit to life. Marginal audibility was present on our side of things, and the INVESTIGATE had guessed at the ants' auditory threshold on the

basis of their recorded vocal range.

Transmission. Scarle spoke under his breath, staring at nothing. Each of the ninety-seven questions of the Omni, with its optional subsections, lurked, script-like, in his mind. The thing, as you know it, Lisa, is carefully planned. I here detail you that Known, because I have things to say about it which will bear directly upon my subject.

The scoffers first called it a sneaky way to dignify a seance, but all's quiet on that front these days. The dope, plus the occupation of the consciousness with the format of the Omni, is sufficient to conjure our ghosts -- the thought-ghosts, which jump the gap between the consciousness of the Queried to that buried point in the mind of the Questioner from whence they hitch a ride upward on waves of post-query curiosity, pouring into the wordless sentences of the half-heard hum. With a good paraling like Scarle, the ghosts visit us too, if we keep our minds quiet. His steno was a ling-journeyman who had never made it in transmission.

WORD BODY ONE (FULL RANGE INFLECT CYCLES): Good morning/afternoon/evening. We greet you in the name of Earth and bid you good hunting/fishing/harvests/fertile cattle/victories. We are warm-blooded, omnivorous, patriarchal, highly intelligent creatures. We need many things. We have many things to offer others, whether the others are like or different. What are you? What do you/have you/need you?

And question for question, each completes an Omni on the other. Theoretically, that places each in an equal position of knowledge and appraises bargaining power on an above-the-board basis. Actually, since we designed it, along with the stock answers, and have refined the Staff Evaluation procedure from an art down to a science, we always come out on top. Equity is a pretty concept, but depth psychology, followed by military analysis and augmented by power

on any level -- from religious through economic -- gives us our small advantages without disturbing the senates.

Like a bad connection on hyperphone came the ambisexual answers:

Good morning. We are servants. We serve. Our owners/rulers lay eggs. We are omnivorous. We are intelligent. We do not need anything. Our owners/rulers give us all. What do you want?

And on it rolled. To all our key questions: We do not do that/know that/need that. Our owners/rulers do that/know that/do not need that.

They told us all about themselves. A dedicated entomologist would have been in a Moslem paradise of the mind over the interview, as was our dedicated entomologist, Dave Bolton.

"Please," said he, "ask them if they see this polaroid flash -- "

"Shh!" said I, who supervised. "Later."

Was I detecting a beartrap in the flowerbed of their cooperation? -- We want to be helpful, but darn it! sir, we just do not know the answer to that one. Etc.

Do not suggest, I wrote on a slip of paper, that we speak with their masters. Wait and see if they offer.

I placed the note before Scarle, hoping that the act of reading it would keep him from transmitting the thought. I waited to see.

They offered.

Scarle turned to me.

"Tell them we must confer," I answered. "Ask where the masters are, what they are like, why they did not come themselves -- and ask if they suggested we send you."

"Me?"

"You."

He asked, and they told us they would have to confer.

Yes, they finally acknowledged, as a matter of fact their rulers (who lived in eternal night) had mentioned that we could send them our only paraling if anything needed clarification. Did we care to?

"Tell them yes," I said, "but not today. We need to confer some more."

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That afternoon we Staff Evaluated a very sketchy Omni.

We decided, after an intrepid imaginative foray, that the rulers were similar to ant queens and did not like to leave the nest. Our mission was to get an Omni on the Butcher, evaluate it, and write a recommendation, so we had to go see them if they would not come to us. We wanted to set up safeguards, though, so Scarle spent the night learning the depressive neuroses Hale said he could retreat into to protect his sanity if the going got rough.

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"Quite against the rules, we also armed ourselves to the teeth," I said to Hale, "and then armed our teeth with the little glass capsules I

almost got to taste. You didn't know about those."

"I had guessed, of course," he snorted. "There was nothing wrong with my neuroses, though. I gave him the best ones I had in stock."

"I'm sure he appreciated that," I answered, pouring him a drink. "Do you believe the legend of King Solomon's ring?"

"Well, archetypically -- "

"Archetypes, hell! Do you believe the story?"

"Yes, it has many levels of non-conscious meaning."

"Well, step over to my level for a minute and answer the question. Forget the psych-structure stuff. Can one intelligence control another by non-physical means?"

"Charisma," he stated, "is a peculiar phenomenon. Many factors are generally operative."

"Have another drink and swallow your charisma along with it. I'm talking about parapsych stuff. If a paraling can send and receive thoughts and feelings, why not more than that?"

"Commands?" he asked. "Parahypnotics? That can be accomplished, under special circumstances."

"I was thinking more along the lines of a lightning bolt fusing sand in its own image."

I started to pour again.

"No," he declined it, "psychologists just get drunk, but psychiatrists get drunk and break things. What are you driving at with all this?"

"The Ring works both ways."

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It does, Lisa. More than just translation. That first dim day in the caves Scarle ended a thirty-second exchange, and the steno threw down his transcriber.

"I cannot record," he said.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"The hum-box isn't working right. I'm not getting voices, or even concepts."

"What are you getting?"

"A very beautiful humming sound -- it's like a piece of music -- an emotional synopsis of something. Don't ask me what."

I didn't. I asked Scarle. Angry at having been lulled into a pleasant lethargy myself, I shook off the spell and called out.

"What's going on?"

"Shh!"

I groped for his shoulder in the murk, but his whisper had no direction, and he was nowhere near the machine.

"Lights!" I called. But before I called it, I thought it.

There was a sound like someone scrubbing concrete with a hard-bristled brush, and our beams exploded in all directions.

We humans were alone, and Scarle. He leaned against the wall of the tunnel about ten feet in advance of our party, and he was smiling. I repeated my question.

"Nothing," he answered. "Nothing's going on now. I wish you hadn't turned on the lights. You broke the agreement."

"I was not anxious to become anything's breakfast," I told him. "What were you doing?"

"I was telling her how I looted the Moonstone in mid-flight."

"You pulled that one."

"I did."

"Why were you telling them about it?"

"Because I was asked. It was in my memory, and a fuller explanation of the principle of illicit appropriation was desired."

I remember that I whistled then -- in order to keep myself from doing anything else.

"That is not exactly Omni material," I said softly.

"No, but I was asked ..."

"Why?"

"She was curious as to the pleasure linked with the thoughts."

"She?"

"Yes, a female. You were right about queens."

"An ant?"

"I guess so."

"Why won't she let us see her?"

"I believe the light bothers her eyes."

"The whole thing smells. I want a full report on this X after we get back to the ship, but let's get back fast. I don't like it here."

He smiled and shrugged, and I checked the ampule, but he had not taken an overdose.

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Later, I asked him again.

"They want to know how to loot a spaceship?"

"No." He leaned back in a recliner, blowing smoke rings. "She only wondered about the pleasure associations."

"So what did you tell her?"

"Nothing. I just let her look at my mind."

"Then what did she say?"

"Nothing, she seemed satisfied."

"Why were the pleasure associations there?"

He smiled slightly.

"I enjoy stealing. Especially when I can get away with it."

"Unfortunately," I replied, "that tells me more about you than it does about the ants."

"You asked me a question. I answered it."

"What came next?"

"That's all. You turned on the lights."

"That's not much."

"I didn't turn on the lights."

"Okay," I growled. "How come Brown couldn't record?"

"We were using a form of mental shorthand."

"Where did you learn it?"

"I just sort of fell into it today. They're natural paralings."

"That, in itself, is a valuable commodity. We'll have to investigate it, along with the Omni stuff."

"I agree. Next time don't turn on the lights, though."

"All right, mister. But no more professional advice on space piracy."

"No more," he promised.

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So we went back into the underground cities of the Butcher, guided

by belt sonar and five-watt flicker buttons, to mine the minds of the ants.

Brown was still unable to record anything; under hypnosis he could recall the transmission sensations, but nothing else. We had to rely on Scarle for the reports, and after about a week and a half I was no longer sure we were getting them.

"Scarle, have you been editing your reports?"

"No."

"Would you care to verify that under drugs?"

"You calling me a liar?"

"Perhaps."

"Okay, give me some drugs," he laughed.

Then the thought occurred to me (maybe he had sent it when he laughed) that the drugs would not prove anything. He had built up a resistance to most of the hypnotics while in training; they just made his mind shift gears.

"Forget it," I told him.

"I already have," he agreed.

What we really needed was another paraling to check on the paraling we already had.

Scarle's reports showed us the picture of a giant ant-colony ruled in the classic monolithic manner. Its structure seemed one of low workers, middle workers, upper workers, warriors, consorts, and

queens. It was an agrarian culture which had never developed a single tool, relying rather upon classes of physically specialized individuals for the accomplishment of work. It was based on a matriarchal concept which permeated its religion in a manner similar (I think) to the old Egyptian notion of the Pharoahs' divine descendency.

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I emptied the little coffee pot into the tiny cups, motioned to the waiter to bring us another, and looked out across the sunken gardens of Luna at the mossy ball shaping the Americas above the great dome: Europe rolling away, Andalusia teasing memories from my mind, and the Gulf beginning to drip salt on sore places, Lisa. By the way, by the time you receive this billy-do, my dear, I will no longer be here, but there, and winging guess where?

"Both ways?" Hale asked me, a perplexed expression dodging about the Eiffel Tower.

I turned back, nodding.

"Yes, I suspected it after Scarle's reports started sounding as if I were reading the same report over and over. I asked myself what he could possibly be covering up, or stalling for. Then I decided maybe he wasn't."

"That's why you wanted to X it yourself?"

"Correct," I acknowledged. "Which is why I requisitioned a paraling drug kit from your cabin."

"Which is why our pinochle game got interrupted by a bellyache."

"Yes, I paid the comm man to get sick."

"An unsupervised X by a non-p.l. is never without its dangers."

"So I'd heard, but that's why Personnel is full of ex-Guardsmen -- to sponge up the puddles of trouble before someone steps in them."

"Or turn them into lakes," he reflected. "So what about Scarle? What did happen?"

"Like the report says, he went off his rocker and tried to kill us all. I had to shoot him in self-defense."

"Do you remember doing it?"

"Sort of ... Anyway, that's what the report says."

He surrounded me.

"You were inside his mind." Each word weighed equal to its neighbor.

"Yes, it's all in the report."

"And you were with him at the time he became unbalanced."

"That's right."

"And you came away thinking you were Scarle, after you had killed him."

"That also is correct. The report said it was a neurotic identification brought on because I was cathecting at the onset of trauma."

"I know; I wrote it. But I'm seldom happy just to stick a label on

something, and that's what I did. It's been over two months now, and I may not see you again for a long while. I'd like to reexamine my diagnosis before we say good-bye."

"Okay, we're both in a condition where I can tell you what really happened and blame it on the drinks if you ever ask me again."

* * * * *

So I told him. Do you remember that water cruise we took a couple of years ago, on Jansen, and that one island we stopped at, the one where you talked me into playing a limbo game with the kids? I was bending over backwards to please, and I fell flat on my backside in the process, but I made a more memorable impression than if I had succeeded. I know Hale did not believe the entire story -- I could hear his gears grinding -- but he was impressed. More than I had anticipated.

I told him how I had accompanied Scarle back into the lands beneath the land that day, swinging along to a monomaniac Guard marching tune calculated to assure mental privacy. I had washed out of Circle training in the second month myself, because of a concept-blurring tendency. I am sure you are not aware that I had even attempted it (I probably did it because of the name), and I could see Hale recalling my personnel record and seizing upon it as an explanation for my story -- an explanation for what had really saved me. He was wrong, but it did not matter. He still believed much of what I said.

Nearly anybody can achieve a percentage of X under optimum conditions; I always can, and it is higher than average. This time it was sufficient.

The nimbus of our flicker-lights was not a far-reaching thing, consequently the Queried (?), as always, remained a part of the

darkness. Like a shaded Medusa, she hovered before us, and we could feel her presence and sense her exchanges with Scarle. The voices of winds and grasses and the sounds of cellars and the cries of high cables and the monotonous commenting of seashells buzzed at the bottom of our auditory threshold and worked occasional fractured multiwords, without genuine context. An illicit and indefinable feeling of not being wanted crept through me as I prepared the injection.

"... Not take ... les nourritures (?) ... sadly ... and stealing, Romany (?) ... go ... all things-pause-corpus meum ... why? Brigand from the stars ... perhaps -- "

And my head swam and I was inside and no one had noticed and the night was cool.

I stood there feeling like a photographic negative of Scarle. Object rained upon subject, a plethora of stimuli waterfall upon my mind, but I kept my mind quiet. Perhaps it was the intensity of the communication that caused them to overlook my presence. I eased into Scarle's mind and read there the fascination with what is impossible.

Whatever it was in the tunnel, it was not a giant ant in Scarle's mind/my mind. We were talking with a lovely, yellow-tressed young lady who reminded me of yourself, Lisa, and she was obviously fascinated with our person. We were linked with a host of criminal concepts only recently learned in the society of the tunnels and never before encountered on an intimate basis. She was in love with Scarle/me/us, and her sadness was great.

"I cannot do to you," she said, "what I did with the others; and you, more than any of them, are that which threatens us. If Earth prevails here, as it has on Malmson, Bareth, and the other worlds you have

visited, we will be as doomed as they. Yet, you have lived by their principle of thievery, and I cannot hate you for it. Let us talk of other things and postpone our final conflict. Tell me again of your looting days ..."

It was not then that the part of Scarle that was me suddenly got the shakes and was noticed. It was a moment later, when my nervous introspecting revealed that we/I(?) returned the creature's sentiments. Then it was all over in a surrealistic kaleidoscope that I watched through more eyes than I care to count.

The Ring works both ways. Or Rings. She wore the stronger one. Ours was a candybox imitation.

Communication was an incidental virtue of Solomon's ring, remember? Its main function was the controlling of malevolent entities, of bending their actions to the wearer's will, of impressing their wills with commands like hot irons ...

She seized Scarle's/my/our mixed emotions, backing the assault.

"Kill them all!" came the order.

I guess Brown was the first to sense what was happening, because he flicked on a light beam.

And she stood there, flinching at the light -- a gigantic, rainbow-winged gargoyle, with antennae like black seaweed surfaced on a stormlit ocean crest.

That is doubtless what saved us all. Despite the command, Scarle and I were frozen by the shock of seeing -- of seeing the truth that your symbol had concealed, as the music was torn from our mind by the light, and the order roaring again after the flash, like a thunder-clap:

"Kill them!"

That was when we went mad. I saw Scarle through my eyes and the cathedral windows of her eyes, and myself through that same colored glass and Scarle's eyes, and I/we saw her, both, and we obeyed the command.

There was gunfire, and I dropped down the pipe of a titanic organ, vibrating to something that I might have been able to recognize if I had had the time to listen.

The time passed, and one day I could hear again.

The command had worked divisively. Although Scarle and I had been one in mind, the ordered "Kill them!" had affected two separate nervous systems, and I beat him to the draw. It was that simple, although I do not remember doing it.

I collapsed from the psychic drain before I could kill anyone else; or possibly it had been the light that slowed her, or the sudden death of Scarle. She lost her control, retreated; and the crew retreated, both bearing their casualties.

* * * * *

In that brief time when our mind(s) were flooded, refuge for sanity was found in the mental foxholes Hale had dug. I crouched beneath neurotic breakwalls, communicating with Oedipus of things long ago and far away in the streets of Fenster. I was alternately depressed or elated as my fathers beat me or bought me candy, and always resentful, and always Scarle, and always wanting to know what they were thinking so I could know which way to jump, and always wanting to make them like me even though I hated their guts, and always,

Lisa, I remembered mother and the thirteenth card of the Major Arcana -- the Bony Reaper, Death -- whom I feared most of all but had to challenge every day in order to be big and not need anybody, and he was the navigator of the Steel Eel, but I was the captain.

It took more than a month for me to begin being myself again, but differently. Scarle, the man who had enjoyed stealing whenever he could get away with it, would have been pleased with his last theft. He had stolen part of my mind and left me a portion of his, in passing. He took with him a measure of my devotion to the policies of the Circle, and he left me with a calculated, antisocial quality which I have decided is a virtue.

I/we feel that the ant queen was right, that I/we were right after Malmson, and that the Temple is being maintained upon a foundation of spurious principles, the walls shored up at an inconceivably dear cost -- the racial integrity of a thousand alien peoples. For this reason, I have decided to rebel. The transference left me the means of doing so. I am now a paraling in my own right, and the encounter with your image on the world called the Butcher left me with the full range of the Ring's powers. I, too, can compel actions, alter thoughts, require affections.

* * * * *

Hale said to me: "Do you feel like Scarle anymore?"

And I said: "I am Billy Scarle."

And then I said: "It may well be that he imprinted -- " Right in step with the same words as they emerged from Hale's mouth.

The Machiavelli eyes, like black circles painted on ice cubes, sought my own for an explanation.

"I am Billy Scarle," I repeated, "as well as myself. He lurks at the bottom of my mind and jeers at the facade of morality with which the Circle masks the piracies of Earth. He indicates, too, that he was almost executed for similar acts on a small scale."

"I don't give a hoot about politics and policies," said Hale, "but you are a psychiatric curiosity. Once in a lifetime -- something like this -- a parapsych transference of personality traits and abilities! We are going to write a paper!"

"We are going to eat dinner," I said.

"But we've already eaten -- "

"In the lighter gravitation of Luna, two meals set as easily as one -- and we're big people, with stomach for lots of things, aren't we?"

"What are you trying to say?"

"King Solomon had a ring," I told him, "and communication was not its only end. It could be used to compel the obedience of every demon in existence, and I, Billy Scarle, wear that ring around my mind like an emotional chastity belt. You are on the side of the demons, Hale. Not all of the demons are malevolent, though, and many can be put to work building the Temple properly. I am recruiting you to spread the dogma of Many Mansions, and to fill them with an interstellar brotherhood. I am going to steal your philosophy, like a magpie, and leave you another in its place."

The Seal of Solomon became a hot scalpel in my mind, and after awhile I said, "What are we going to have for dinner?" and he said, "How about steaks?"

That, Lisa, is the story of my dinner/s last night (I think it was last night; I am not back on the Earth time-scale yet). I left Dr. Hale assured of my complete recovery from the Scarle-neurosis, and I caught the next shuttle for Earth. Earth fills the viewport while I write these lines, my darling, as my mind fills with double memories of you. I believe that Scarle loved you, as much as he was capable of loving anything, and I know that I always have. I shall know in a few hours which of us (if either) may have evoked similar feelings in you -- that, when we talk of the past in the wordless pentagrams of our profession. I wish to enlist you in my crusade, also -- I say "enlist," not "induct." I believe that I have almost a century of productive time before me. With your able assistance I could use that time changing the minds of the men who are the mind of Earth and the soul of its policies. If you decline, it shall only cost you an hour out of your memory. You were such a fine recruiter, and there is something to what Hale says about charisma.

If I try to go it on my own, I may trip up soon -- but either way, I will have a go at it -- and I have prepared this lengthy proposal and invitation (which I shall post after landing) in order to apprise you of the circumstances which have brought me here, as well as my feelings for you. I probably overestimate the time that will be allotted me; the choice, though, of a short and magnificent life selling igloos on Mercury has its appeal. I believe that you, also, are fascinated by impossibilities. (And remember what happened to Troy?)

Therefore, I shall time the solid postal transmissions in a few moments and transport myself accordingly. By the time you have read this far I shall be but moments away.

Please consider the future, and please be afraid. In a few moments you too shall meet the Butcher. He is probably outside now, with a

ring for you.

Open the door and let him in.

Love and kisses,

Solomon/Scarle