

Discovery of the Ghooric Zone - novelette by Richard A Lupoff

Discovery of the Ghooric Zone
a novelette by Richard A Lupoff
Foreword

This story was first published in 1977 in *Chrysalis*, edited by Roy Torgeson. It was reprinted in the 1990 edition of *Tales of the Cthulhu Mythos*, edited by the late Jim Turner. Torn between modesty and pride, rather than comment on the story in my own words I'll quote what Jim said about it:

"'Discovery of the Ghooric Zone' is not just a distinguished Mythos tale; it is the only Mythos tale I have ever encountered by an author other than Lovecraft that conveys some sense of the iconoclastic audacity that attended the initial publication of Lovecraft's work and that so outraged the contemporary readership of *Astounding Stories*. In this brilliant narrative Lupoff has managed to include not only the requisite Mythos terminology but also the essential ambiance of cosmic wonder, and then additionally has re-created some of the mind-blasting excitement of those original Mythos stories."

'Discovery of the Ghooric Zone' is reprinted in *Claremont Tales* by Richard A Lupoff, published in April 2001 by Golden Gryphon Press.

Discovery of the Ghooric Zone

They were having sex when the warning gong sounded, Gomati and Njord and Shoten. The shimmering, fading Sound indicated first long-range contact with the remote object, the long-suspected but never-before-visited tenth planet that circled far beyond the eccentric orbit of Pluto, rolling about its distant primary with irrational speed, its huge mass bathed in eternal darkness and incredible cold some sixteen billion kilometers from the remote, almost invisible sun.

Gomati was the female member of the ship's crew. She was tall, nearly two meters from the top of her satiny smooth scalp to the tips of her glittering tin-alloy toenails. When the gong sounded she burst into a cascade of rippling laughter, high-pitched and mirthful, at the incongruity of the cosmic event's impingement upon the fleshly. The ship had launched from Pluto even though at this point in Pluto's orbit it was less distant from the sun than was Neptune. Fabricated in the nearly null-gravity conditions of Neptune's tiny moon Nereid, the ship had been ferried back, segment by segment, for assembly, for the cyborging of its scores of tiny biotic brains, on-loading of its three-member crew and its launch from the cratered rock surface of Pluto.

Njord, the male crew member, cursed, distracted by the radar gong, angered

by Gomati's inattention, humiliated by her amusement and by her drawing away from himself and Shoten. Njord felt his organ grow flaccid at the distraction, and for the moment he regretted the decision he had made prior to the cyborging operations of his adolescence, to retain his organic phallus and gonads. A cyborged capability might have proven

more

potently enduring in the circumstances but Njord's pubescent pride had denied the possibility of his ever facing inconvenient detumescence. Flung from rocky Pluto as the planet swung toward the ecliptic on its nearly 18-degree zoom, the ship was virtually catapulted away from the sun; it swung around Neptune, paid passing salute to the satellite of

its

birth with course-correcting emissions, then fled, a dart from the gravitic sling, into the black unknown.

And Shoten, most extensively cyborged of the crew members, flicked a mental command. Hooking into the ship's sensors, Shoten homed the consciousness of the navigational biotic brains onto the remote

readouts

that spelled the location of the distant object. The readouts confirmed suspected information about the object: its great mass, its incredible distance beyond even the aphelion of the orbit of Pluto some eight

billion

kilometers from the sun -- the distant object circled its primary at a distance twice as great as Pluto's farthest departure from the solar epicenter.

The ship -- named Khons in honor of an ancient celestial deity -- held life-support supplies for the three crew members and fuel and power reserves for the complete outward journey, the planned landing on the distant object, the return takeoff and journey and final landing not on Pluto -- which by the time of Khons's return would be far above the

solar

ecliptic and beyond the orbit of Neptune -- but on Neptune's larger

moon

Triton where a reception base had been readied before Khons ever had launched on its journey of exploration.

As for Njord, he grumbled under his breath, wishing almost irrelevantly that he knew the original gender of Shoten Binayakya before the

latter's

cyborging. Njord Freyr, born in the Laddino Imperium of Earth, had retained his masculinity even as he had undergone the customary implantations, excisions and modifications of pubescent cyborging. Sri Gomati, of Khmeric Gondwanaland, had similarly retained her female primary characteristics in function and conformation even though she

had

opted for the substitution of metallic labia and clitoris, which replacement Njord Freyr found at times irritating.

But Shoten, Shoten Binayakya, fitted with multiply-configurable genitalia, remained enigmatic, ambiguous as to his or her own origin: Earth-born,

or

claiming so, yet giving allegiance neither to the Laddino Imperium governed by Yamm Kerit ben Chibcha as did Njord Freyr nor to Khmeric Gondwanaland, ruled by Nrisimha, the Little Lion, where lay the loyalty

of

Sri Gomati.

"So," Njord grated. "So, the great planet thus announces its presence."

He

grimaced as automatic materials reclamation servos skittered futilely

seeking recoverable proteoids from the aborted congress.
Sri Gomati, enigmatic silvered cyber-optics glittering, turned to face
the
disgruntled Njord, the ambiguous Shoten. "Can you see it yet?" she
asked.

"Can you get a visual fix?"
Shoten Binayakya reached a cyberclaw, tapped a visual extensor control.
Biotic brains keyed to obey any crew member activated the extensor,
guided
it toward one glittering optic. The shimmering field crept aside; input
receptacles opened, ready for the insertion of fiber-optic conductors.
A click, silence.

D68/Y37/C23//FLASH
Yamm Kerit ben Chibcha's coronation was splendid. Never before had the
South Polar Jerusalem seen such pomp, such display of pageantry and
power.

Thousands of slaves, naked and gilded and draped in jewelry and
feathers,
paraded up the wide boulevard before the Imperial Palace. They drew, by
ropes of woven gold and weizmannium, glittering juggernauts. Fountains
sprayed scented wine. Chamberlains threw fistfuls of xanthic shekels to
cheering crowds.

The climax of the spectacle was the march of the anthrocyberphants,
resplendent mutated elephants whose cerebellums had been surgically
removed at birth and replaced with spheres of human brain material
cultured from clone-cells donated (involuntarily in some cases) by the
greatest scientists, scholars and intellectuals in Yamm Kerit ben
Chibcha's realm. When the anthrocyberphants were well grown and into
their

adolescence, their gonads were surgically removed and replaced with a
variety of electronic implants including inertial guidance computers,
magnetic compass-gyroscopes, neural transceivers.

The anthrocyberphants pranced and tumbled down the grand boulevard
before

the Imperial Palace, trumpeting melodies from Wagner, Mendelssohn,
Bach,

Mozart, vain self-portraiture by Richard Strauss, erotic fantasies by
Scriabin, extended lines from Britten, discordant percussives by Edgar
Varese, all in perfect orchestral harmony, all punctuated by the sounds
of

tympani, timbales, kettle-drums and cymbals held in writhing flexible
tentacles that grew from nodes at the marchers' shoulders.

Upon the silken-draped and jewel-encrusted balcony of the Imperial
Palace,

the Ultimate Monarch of Laddino Imperium smiled and waved, bowed,
applauded, turned to turbaned chamberlains and grasped fistfuls of
commemorative favors to toss graciously upon the marchers and the
cheering

crowds come to celebrate the grand ceremonial.

The Laddino Imperium included all of the grand Antarctic domain of the
former Israel-in-Exile and the expanded territory of Greater Hai Brasil
that had extended to claim hegemony over all of the Americas, from
Hudson's Bay to Patagonia, before falling under sway of the South Polar
nation. The Ultimate Monarch, Yamm Kerit ben Chibcha, bowed, waved,
tossed

favors to the crowd. Deep in the bowels of the Earth beneath
once-frozen

plains and mountains, huge gyroscopes throbbed into life.

The axis of the Earth began to shift through a lengthy and carefully

computed cycle. None but the servants and advisors of the Ultimate Monarch had been consulted, and none but the will of Yamm Kerit ben Chibcha, the Ultimate Monarch, was considered. The ambition of Yamm Kerit ben Chibcha was to give every citizen of the planet Earth, every square meter of territory, a fair and equitable access to the wealth, the beauty, the joy, the light, the warmth of the sun. As the huge gyroscopes whirled their massive flywheels the Earth shifted its ancient tilt.

The fanatic hordes of Nrisimha, the Little Lion, poured from the city of Medina in the ancient Arabian desert, conquering all before them in the holy name of the Little Lion of God. The forces of Novum Romanum, the empire built by Fortuna Pales, and of the New Khmer Domain, created a century before by Vidya Devi, slaughtered the followers of the Little Lion Nrisimha by the hundreds of thousands, then by the millions. How could Nrisimha continue to replace the decimated armies? How many soldiers could the single city of Medina produce? What was the secret of the fanatical hordes? No one knew. But they poured forth, fearless, unstoppable, unslowable, unturnable.

All that the forces of resistance could do was slaughter them by the million, and they fell, they fell, but their fellows only marched across their very bodies, their strange bodies that did not putrefy like the corpses of normal soldiers but seemed instead to turn to an amorphous gel and then to sink into the Earth itself leaving behind no sign of their presence, not even uniforms or weapons or equipment, but only, in the wake of their passage, fields of strange flowers and fruits that bloomed gorgeously into towering pillars and petals and berries the size of melons, that produced sweet narcotic fumes and brought to those who harvested and ate them dreams of haunting beauty and incomparable weirdness.

Strange messengers sped across the sands of the deserts of Africa and Asia bearing the word that the Little Lion Nrisimha had come to bring peace and glory and splendor to a new Empire, to Khmeric Gondwanaland, an absolute dictatorship of unparalleled benevolence that would stretch from Siberia to Ireland and from the Arctic Circle to the Cape of Good Hope. It took remarkably few years for the followers of the Little Lion Nrisimha to complete their conquest, and few more for the establishment of an efficient infrastructure and the appointment of regional satrapies under the absolute command of Nrisimha.

Khmeric Gondwanaland was a roaring success.

It was less than a century from the complete triumph of Yamm Kerit ben Chibcha throughout the Laddino Imperium and that of Nrisimha the Little Lion in Khmeric Gondwanaland, the two great empires were driven into union by the eruption of attacking batrachian forces from beneath the seas of the planet. How long these strange, frog-like intelligences had lived in their deep and gloomy metropoli hundreds of meters beneath the surface of the Earth's oceans, will remain forever imponderable. What stimulated them to rise and attack the land-dwelling nations of the Earth is also unknown, although in all likelihood the steady shifting of the Earth's axis brought about by the gargantuan subterranean gyroscopes of Yamm Kerit ben Chibcha were in fact the cause of the attacks. The Deep Ones emerged and waded ashore in all regions at once. They wore only strangely crafted bangles and ornaments of uncorroded metal. They carried weapons resembling the barbed tridents of marine legendry. They dragged behind them terrible stone statues of indescribably extramundane monstrosities before which they conducted rites of blasphemous abandon and unmentionable perversion. The Laddino Imperium and Khmeric Gondwanaland combined their respective might to deal with the menace, to drive the strange Deep Ones back into the murky realms from which they had emerged. By the year 2337 a unified Earth lay once more tranquil and prosperous beneath a glowing and benevolent sun. The menace of the Deep Ones, at least for the time, was over. And billions of kilometers from Earth, humanity renewed its heroic thrust toward the outermost regions of the solar system.

MARCH 15, 2337

"Not yet," Shoten Binayakya's voice clattered.
"Soon," Gomati countered. She hooked into Khons's radar sensor, letting cyborged biots convert incoming pulses into pseudo-visuals. "Look!" she exclaimed, "It's a whole system!"
Njord Freyr stirred, determined to pull his attention away from frustration, direct it toward a topic that would involve. "There, there," he heard Gomati's voice, not sure whether it was organic or synthesized, "Shift your input to ultra-v!"
Njord, hooking into Khons's external sensors, complied.
"Astounding!"
"Yet so."
"Not unprecedented. On the contrary," Shoten Binayakya interjected.
"All the giants have complex systems of moons. Jupiter. Saturn. Uranus. Search your memory banks if you don't recall."
Surlily, Njord sped unnecessary inquiry to an implanted cyberbiot.

"Mmh,"
he grunted. "So. Almost thirty significant satellites among them. Plus
the
trash. So." He nodded.
"And this new giant -- ?"
"Not new," Njord corrected. "It's been there all along, as long as any
of
the others. You know the old Laplace notion of elder planets and
younger
planets was abandoned about the same time as the solid atom and the
flat
Earth."
"Good work, Freyr," Shoten shot sarcastically.
"Well then?"
Sri Gomati said, "Clearly, Njord, Shoten meant newly discovered." She
paused for a fraction of a second. "And about to be newly visited."
Njord breathed a sigh of annoyance. "Well. And that old European,
what's-his-name, Galapagos saw the major moons of Jupiter seven hundred
years ago. All the others followed as soon as the optical telescope was
developed. They didn't even need radiation sensors, no less probes to
find
them. Seven hundred years."
"Seven hundred twenty-seven, Njord." Sri Gomati petted him gently on
his
genitals.
"You and your obsession with ancient history! I don't see how you
qualified for this mission, Gomati, always chasing after obscure
theorizers and writers!"
"It's hardly an obsession. Galileo was one of the key figures in the
history of science. And he found the four big Jovian moons in 1610.
It's
simple arithmetic to subtract that from 2337 and get seven-two-seven. I
didn't even have to call on a cyberbiot to compute that, Njord dear."
"Argh!" The flesh remnants in Njord's face grew hot.
Shoten Binayakya interrupted the argument. "There it comes into visual
range!" he exclaimed. "After these centuries, the perturbations of
Uranus
and Neptune solved at last. Planet X!"
Njord sneered. "You have a great predilection for the melodramatic,
Shoten! Planet X indeed!"
"Why," Shoten laughed, the sound fully synthesized, "it's a happy
coincidence, Njord dear. Lowell applied the term to his mystery planet,
meaning X the unknown. Until Tombaugh found it and named it Pluto. But
now
it is not only X the unknown but also X the tenth planet as well. Very
neat!"
Njord began a reply but paused as the distant planet became visible
through Khons's sensors. It was indeed a system like those of the inner
giant planets, and radar sensings pouring through Khons's external
devices, filtered and processed by cyberbiotic brains, overwhelmed his
own
consciousness.
A great, dark body swam through the blackness, reflecting almost no
light
from the distant sun but glowing darkly, menacingly, pulsating in slow,
heartbeat-like waves, with a low crimson radiance that pained Njord
subliminally even through the ship's mechanisms and the processing of
the
cyberbiots. Fascinated yet repelled, Njord stared at the glowing,
pulsing

globe.

About its obscene oblateness whirled a family of smaller bodies, themselves apparently dim and lifeless, yet illuminated by the raking sinister tone of their parent.

"Yuggoth," Sri Gomati's low whisper jolted Njord from his reverie.

"Yuggoth," and again, "Yuggoth!"

Njord snapped, "What's that?"

"Yuggoth," repeated Sri Gomati.

The male hissed in annoyance, watched the great pulsating bulk loom

larger

in Khons's external sensors, watched its family of moons, themselves behaving like toy planets in orbit around the glowing body's miniature

sun.

"The great world must be Yuggoth," Sri Gomati crooned. "And the lessen ones Nithon, Zaman; the whirling pair -- see them, see! -- Thog and its twin Thok with the foul lake where puffed shoggoths splash."

"Do you know what she is raving about?" Njord demanded of Shoten Binayakya, but Shoten only shook that ambivalent satiny head, two

silvery

eyes shimmering, stainless steel upper and lower monodonts revealed by drawn-back organic lips.

Khons's remote sensors had accumulated enough data now, the ship's cyberbiots computed and reduced the inputs, to provide a set of

readouts

on the new planetary grouping's characteristics. Shoten raised a telescoping cyber-implant and pointed toward a glowing screen where

data

crept slowly from top to bottom.

"See," the ambiguous, synthesized voice purred, "the planet's mass is gigantic. Double that of Jupiter. As great as six hundred Earths! More oblate even than Jupiter also -- what is its spin?" Shoten paused while more lines of information crept onto the screen. "Its rotation is even shorter than Jupiter's. Its surface speed must be -- " He paused and

sent

a command through the ship's neurocyber network, grinned at the

response

that appeared on the screen.

"Think of resting on the surface of that planet and whirling about at eighty thousand kilometers an hour!"

Njord Freyr rose from his nest-couch. In fact the least extensively cyborged of the three, he retained three of his original organic limbs.

He

pulled himself around, using Khons's interior free-fall handholds to steady himself, hooked his strongly servomeched arm through two

handholds

and gestured angrily from Shoten to Sri Gomati.

"We can all read the screens. I asked what this Eurasian bitch was babbling about!"

"Now, dear," Shoten Binayakya purred ambiguously.

Sri Gomati's shimmering silvery eyes seemed for once not totally

masked,

but fixed on some distant vision. Her hands -- one fitted with an array

of

scientific and mechanical implements, the other implanted with a

multitude

of flexible cartilaginous organs equally suited for technical

manipulation

and erotic excesses -- wove and fluttered before her face. She spoke,

as

much to herself or to some absent, invisible entity, as to Njord Freyr
or
Shoten Binayakya. It was as if she instructed the batches of
cyberbiotic
brains that populated the electronic network of the ship.
"March 15, 2337, Earth standard time," she crooned. "It would please
him.
It would please him to know that he is remembered. That he was right in
his own day. But how, I wonder, could he have known? Did he merely
guess?
Was he in contact with entities from beyond? Beings from this strange,
gray world past the starry void, this pale, shadowy land?
"Dead four hundred years this day, Howard, does your dust lie in
ancient
ground still? Could some later Curwen not have raised your essential
salts?"
"Madness!" Njord Freyr broke in. With his organic hand he struck
Gomati's
face, his palm rebounding from the hard bone and the harder metal
implanted beneath her flesh.
Her glittering eyes aflash, she jerked her head away, at the same time
twisting to fix him with her angry glare. A circuit of tension sprang
into
being between them, lips of both writhing, faces animated in mute
quarrel.
Beyond this, neither moved.
Only the interruption of Shoten Binayakya's commanding speech broke the
tense immobility. "While you carried out your spat, dears, I had the
cyberbiots plot our orbit through the new system."
"The system of Yuggoth," Gomati reiterated.
"As you wish."
The data screen went to abstract blobs for fractions of a second, then
it
was filled with a glowing diagram of the new system: the oblate,
pulsating
planet, its scabrous surface features whirling in the center of the
screen; the smaller, rocky moons revolving rapidly about their master.
"We can land only once," Shoten purred. "We must carefully select our
touchdown point. Then later expeditions may explore further. But if we
choose poorly, the worlds may abandon this Yuggoth" -- Gomati's name
for
the great planet was spoken sardonically -- "forever." Shoten's
cyborged
head nodded in self-affirmation, then the synthesized words were
repeated,
"Yes, forever."

15032137 -- READOUT
The Asia-Pacific Co-prosperity Sphere continued to evolve.
It was, beyond question, the center of world power, economic
development,
political leadership. It was also a gigantic realm sprawling across
continents and oceans, including scores of great cities and billions of
citizens.
Its first city was Peking. Secondary centers of authority were
established
in Lhasa, Bombay, Mandalay, Quezon City, Adelaide, Christchurch, Santa
Ana.
The first great leader of the Sphere, Vo Tran Quoc, had become a figure
of

legendary proportions within a century of his death. Schools contended as to his true identity. He was not Vietnamese despite his name. That much was known. One group of scholars held that he was Maori. Another, that he was Ainu. A third, that he was a Bengali woman, the product of rape during the war of independence of Bangladesh from Pakistan, posing as a man (or possibly having undergone a sex-change operation involving the grafting of a donated penis and testes). At any rate, Vo Tran Quoc died. In the wake of his death a struggle broke out. Some who contended for the power of the dead leader did so on the basis of purely personal ambition. Others, from ideological conviction. The great ideological dispute of the year 2137 dealt with the proper interpretation of an ancient political dictum. The ancient political dictum was: Just as there is not a single thing in the world without a dual nature, so imperialism and all reactionaries have a dual nature -- they are real tigers and paper tigers at the same time. While political theorists in Peking quarreled over the meaning of this political dictum, a new force arose with its center in the eldritch city of Angkor Wat deep in the jungles of old Cambodia. The new political force brought about a world feminist order. Its leader, following the example of Vo Tran Quoc, took the name of a mythic personage from another culture than her own. She proclaimed a New Khmer Empire stretching from the Urals to the Rockies. She took the name Vidya Devi. This means goddess of wisdom. The former Slavic domain and the Maghreb suffered rivalry that led, after a century, to convergence and ultimate amalgamation. The old Roman Empire was reborn. It included all of Europe, the Near East, Africa, and North America from the Atlantic to the Pacific. (Niagara Falls now poured its waters directly into the ocean; the former west bank of the Hudson River was choice seashore property. The Rockies overlooked pounding waves that stretched to the Asian shore. The empire was ruled by an absolute monarch under the tutelage of the world feminist order. She was known as the Empress Fortuna Pales I. Latin America, from Tierra del Fuego to the southern bank of the Rio Grande (but excluding Baja), was the greater Hai Brasil. The empress claimed pure Bourbon ancestry. Her name was Astrud do Muisco. In the Antarctic a great land reclamation project had been undertaken. Geothermal power was used to melt the ice in a circle centered on the South Pole. The cleared area measured 1.5 million square kilometers. The soil was found to be incredibly rich in minerals. It was hugely fertile.

The scenic beauty of the region was incomparable. There were mountains, lakes, glaciers to shame New Zealand or Switzerland or Tibet. Forests were planted and grew rapidly and fecundly. Imported wildlife thrived. The few native species -- penguins, amphibious mammals, a strange variety of bird newly discovered and named the tekili-li -- were protected. The new country was called Yisroel Diaspora. Its leader under the feminist world order was Tanit Shadrappa. This name means The Healer Ishtar. The feminist world order promoted scientific research, largely from bases in Yisroel Diaspora. Space exploration, long abandoned except for the development of orbiting weapons systems, was resumed. Bases were established on the planet Mars and among the asteroids. A crewed ship orbited Venus making close observations and sending robot monitors and samplers to the surface of the planet. Venus was found to be a worthless and inhospitable piece of real estate. A landing was attempted on the surface of Mercury. The expedition was an ambitious undertaking. The lander was to touch down just on the dark side of the planetary terminator, thence to be carried into the night. During the Mercurian night it would burrow beneath the surface. By the time the terminator was reached and the ship entered the day side, it would be safely entombed and would, in effect, estivate through the searing Mercurian day. Something went wrong. The ship landed. Excavation work began. Then, almost as if the planet were eating the ship and its crew, all disappeared beneath the surface. They were never contacted again.

On Earth the dominant art form was something called cheomnaury. This involved a blending and transformation of sensory inputs. The most favored sensory combinations were sound, odor and flavor. The greatest cheomnaunist in the world was an Ecuadorian dwarf who found her way to the capital of Hai Brasil and obtained personal audience with Astrud do Muiscos herself. The dwarf began her performance with a presentation involving the sound of surf pounding upon the rocks of the Pacific Coast where Andean granite plunges hundreds of feet into icy foam. This was blended with the warm, rich odor of roasting chestnuts over a charcoal brazier. To this the dwarf added the subtle flavor of ground coriander. Astrud do Muiscos was pleased. The dwarf proceeded to offer a blend of a synthesized voice such as might come from a living volcano, to which she added a scent of natron and olive unknown outside the secret embalming chamber of Egyptian temples six thousand years old, to which was added the flavor of the spithrus locusta. The spithrus locusta is a marine arachnid the flavor of whose meat is

to

that of ordinary broiled lobster, as is that of the lobster to a common crab louse.

Astrud do Muiscos was very pleased.

The triumph of the dwarf was a combination of white noise in the ordinary

range of audibility with subtle sub- and supersonics, mixed with the odor

of a quintessential coca extract and the flavor of concentrated formic acid drawn from Amazonian driver ants.

Astrud do Muiscos named the dwarf her successor to the throne of Hai Brasil.

The religion of the day, as appropriate to the climate of political realities, was a mutated form of the ancient Ishtar cult, with local variations as Ashtoroth, Astarte, and Aphrodite. There was even a sort of universal Mamacy, with its seat in ancient but restored Babylon.

MARCH 15, 2337

"I don't see why it's taken so long to get here, anyway," Njord Freyr snapped.

"You mean from Pluto?" Shoten responded. "But we are on course. We are in

free fall. Look." The cyberbiots superimposed a small box of course data

beside the whirling diagram of the Yuggoth system.

"Not from Pluto!" Njord spat. "From Earth! Why has it taken until 2337 to

reach -- Yuggoth? When space flight began almost as long ago as the era Sri Gomati babbles about. The first extraterrestrial landings took

place in 1969. Mars thirty years later. Remember the stirring political slogan

that we all learned as children, as children studying the history of our

era? Persons will set foot on another planet before the century ends! That

was the twentieth century, remember?"

"Every schoolchild knows," Shoten affirmed wearily.

Gomati, recovered from the shock of Njord's blow, spoke; "We could have been here two hundred years ago, Njord Freyr. But fools on Earth lost heart. They began, and lost heart. They began again -- and lost heart again. And again. Four times they set out, exploring the planets. Each time they lost heart, lost courage, lost interest. Were distracted by wars. Turned resources to nobler purposes.

"Humankind reached Mars as promised. And lost heart. Started once more under Shahar Shalim of the old New Maghreb. Reached Venus and Mercury. And

lost heart. Reached the asteroid belt and the gas giants under Tanit Shadrappa of Ugarit. And lost heart.

"And now. At last. We are here." She gestured with her flowing, waving tentacles toward the diagram that glowed against the ship's dull fittings.

"What course, Shoten Binayakya?" she asked brusquely.

The whirling bodies on the screen were marked in red, the pulsing red of

Yuggoth's inner flames, the beating, reflected red of the madly dashing moons. A contrasting object appeared on the screen, the flattened cone-shape of the ship Khons, trailing in its wake as it wove among the

bodies a line to show the course of its passage. Shortly the line had woven past, circled about, curved beyond each body in the diagram, leaving the stylized representation of Khons in perturbed circular orbit about the entire system.

"So," purred Shoten Binayakya. And Sri Gomati and Njord Freyr in turn. "So." "So."

Shoten Binayakya flicked a pressure plate with some limb, some tool.

Khons bucked, slithered through a complex course correction. Shoten slapped another plate and the full exterior optics of Khons were activated; to the three members of the crew, hooked into the cyberbiotic system of the ship, it was as if they fell freely through the distantly star-sprayed night. Fell, fell toward red, glowing, pulsating Yuggoth and its family of gray dancing servants.

Khons, inserted into its new flight path, sped first past the outermost of Yuggoth's moons: a world of significant size. The ship's sensors and cyberbiots reported on the body: in mass and diameter not far from the dimensions of the familiar rock-and-water satellites of the outer planets.

Close to five thousand kilometers through its center and marked with the nearly universal cratering of every solid world from Mercury to Pluto. The twins, dubbed Thog and Thok by Gomati, whirled at the opposite extremes of their interwoven orbits, so Khons flitted past the innermost of the four moons, another apparent replica of the familiar Ganymede-Callisto-Titan-Triton model, then dropped into equatorial orbit about the dully glowing, oblate Yuggoth.

Njord, Gomati, Shoten Binayakya fell silent. The sounds of Khons's automatic systems, the low hiss of recirculating air, the occasional hum or click of a servo, the slow breathing of Njord Freyr, of Sri Gomati, were the only sounds. (Shoten Binayakya's lungs had been cybermeched, whirred softly, steadily within the metal torso.)

Once more a limb flicked at a pressure plate, moved this time by feel alone. The ship, fully visible to any hypothetical viewer outside its hull, was for practical purposes totally transparent to its crew. A circuit warmed instantly to life. Radiation sensors picked up the electrical field of the planet, converted it to audio range, broadcast it within Khons: a howl, a moan. With each pulsation of the planet's ruddy illumination the sound modulated through an obscene parody of some despairing sigh.

"If only Holst had known!" the synthesized voice of Shoten whispered.

"If only he had known."

Yuggoth's surface sped beneath the ship, its terrible velocity of rotation making features slip away as others rushed toward the viewers, flashed beneath and dropped away, disappearing across the sprawling horizon into interstellar blackness. Great viscous plates of darkly glowing, semi-solid

rock hundreds of kilometers across rolled and crashed majestically.
Between them red-hot magma glowed balefully, great tongues of liquid
rock
licking upward between the pounding solid plates, the heat and
brightness
of the magma growing and lessening in a slow, steady rhythm that
Khons's
cyberbiots and audio-scanners converted into a contrabass
throb-throb-throb-throb.
"There can be no life there," Njord Freyr announced. "Nothing could
live
in that environment. Nothing could ever have lived there."
After a silence Sri Gomati challenged him. "The planet itself, Njord
Freyr. Could it be a single organism? The sounds, the movement, the
energy." She raised her organic hand to her brow, ran scores of
writhing
digits from the brow-line above her glittering silver eyes, across her
satiny naked skull to the base of her neck.
"It could be a nascent sun," Shoten Binayakya whispered. "Were Jupiter
larger, more energetic -- you know it has been suggested that Jupiter is
a
failed attempt at the creation of a partner for Sol, that our own solar
system is an unsuccessful venture at the formation of a double star."
"And Yuggoth?" Gomati dropped her tentacular hand to her lap.
Njord Freyr's voice contained only a tincture of sarcasm. "Sent by some
remote godling to undo Jupiter's failure, hey? How do we know that it's
always been here? Before now we knew it existed at all only through
courtesy of Neptune's and Pluto's perturbations. How do we know this
Yuggoth isn't a new arrival in the system? Nobody knew that Neptune or
Pluto existed until a few centuries ago!"
"Or perhaps," purred Shoten, "perhaps our system is a failed triple
star.
of
Ah, think of the show if we had three suns to light our worlds instead
of
one!"
Again Shoten Binayakya flicked at a pressure plate. Once more Khons
shifted, jounced. There was a steady acceleration and the ship slid
from
its orbit around the ruddy, pulsating planet, fell away from Yuggoth
and
toward the spinning worldlets that occupied the central orbit around
the
planet.
"They must be," Gomati crooned softly, "they must be. Thog and Thok,
Thog
and Thok. How could he know, centuries past? Let some Curwen find the
salts and let him tell!"
"You're babbling again!" Njord almost shouted. "I thought we were
selected
for stability for this mission. How did you ever get past the
screening?"
Distracted, Sri Gomati slowly dragged her fascinated gaze from the
spinning moons, turned silver eyes toward Njord Freyr.
"Somehow he knew," she mumbled. Her lips drew back in a slow smile,
showing her bright steel monodonts. "And somehow we will find the
Ghooric
zone where the fungi blossom!"
As if in a trance she turned slowly away, leaned forward, eyes
glittering
metallically, leaned and reached her hands, the cyborged and the

genetically custom-formed, as if to touch the two red-gray worldlets. "He wrote horror stories," Gomati said, her voice dead-level as if trance-ridden. "He wrote of an unknown outer planet that he called Yuggoth, and of others -- Nithon, Zaman, Thog and Thok -- and of horrid, puffy beasts called shoggoths that splashed obscenely in the pools of the Ghooric zone. "He died four hundred years ago today, Howard did. But first he wrote of one Curwen who could restore the dead if only he could obtain their essential salts. What he called their essential salts." She paused and giggled. "Maybe he had a prevision of cloning!"

MAR 15, 2037 -- A VIDEOTAPE
Open with a logo recognizable as representing world politics. The old century ended with a definite shift of world power. The westward movement of two millennia continued. Mesopotamia, Hellas, Italia, Franco-Germania, England, America. Now the power in America shifted from an Atlantic to a Pacific orientation. The new powers to contend with were Japan, China, Soviet Asia. Western Europe and the eastern United States lapsed into terminal decadence as loci of civilization. Europe from the Danube to the Urals passed from Habsburg and Romanoff glitter to a brief democratic flicker to a drab gray dusk as Soviet Europe and then into Slavic night. Like its predecessor of fifteen centuries, the Soviet Empire split in half; like the western half of the predecessor, the Western Soviet Empire was overrun by barbarians. But it did not fall to the barbarians. Not really. It fell to its own internal rot. And like the eastern half of the predecessor, the Eastern Soviet Empire throve. By the hundredth anniversary of that death in the Jane Brown Memorial Hospital, the land mass of the Earth eastward from the Urals to the Rockies came under unified government. It included dozens of half-forgotten countries. Tibet. Afghanistan. India. Laos. Australia. Tonga. The Philippines. Manchuria. Mongolia. California. Baja. It was called the Asia-Pacific Co-prosperity Sphere. Europe from the Urals to the English Channel became a peninsula of forests and farms. What small vigor remained was concentrated in the region from the Danube to the Urals. Slavic influence, walled off in the East by the great and burgeoning Asian renaissance, spread northward and westward. After a pause at the limits of a region running from the Scandinavian Peninsula to the Iberian, the Slavic Empire launched its rude invasion fleet. It crossed the English Channel. There was little resistance. The few defenders of British sovereignty, under the leadership of a fellow called Harald, were defeated at a place called Runnymede. The next westward hop was to America. It took the Slavs a while to prepare themselves for that. But when they made their move they were greeted with flowers and flags. They did not have to conquer. They had only to occupy

and administer.

The third power of the world in this time took form to the south of the Slavic domain. Arab leaders, gluttoned with petrobux, bought arms and hired

mercenaries. Governments could not achieve unity but a shadowy group known

by the cryptic name of opec did. The governments as such withered. The shadowy opec exercised more and more power. It did so more and more openly.

Slowly the influence of opec spread westward and southward until all of the old Near East and Africa were under its sway.

Then was proclaimed the New Maghreb.

Cut to logo representing heroic leadership.

The most powerful person in the world was the Chairperson of the Asia-Pacific Co-prosperity sphere, Vo Tran Quoc.

The leader of the second power, the Slavic Empire, was called Svarozits Perun. This name means Thunderbolt of God.

The head of opec and de facto ruler of the New Maghreb was called Shahr

Shalim. This name means Dawn of Peace.

Cut to logo representing sex.

The major sexual attitude of the time was androgyny, rivaled but not equaled by the cult of pan-sexuality. Androgyny implies recognition of the

full sexual potential of each individual. Former distinctions were abandoned. It was no longer regarded as improper to pursue a relationship

of male to male or female to female; nor was it required to have two partners in a relationship. Practices ranging from onanism to mass interplay became acceptable.

The pan-sexualists held that androgyny was needlessly limiting in scope.

If one could relate to any man or woman -- why not to a giraffe? A condor?

A cabbage? A bowl of sand? A machine?

The ocean?

The sky?

To the cosmos?

To God?

Cut to logo representing music.

The most popular musical composition as of Mar 15, 2037, was ironically a

hundred-year-old tune, complete with lyrics. Searches of nearly forgotten

records revealed the names of the composer and lyricist. An old 78-rpm shellac-disk rendition of the tune was discovered in a water-tight vault

beneath a flooded city. The sound was transcribed and released once again

to the world.

The original lyrics had been written by one Jacob Jacobs. A second version, in English, was used on the shellac disk. These words were by Sammy Cahn and Saul Chaplin. The music was by Sholom Secunda. The singers

were Patti, Maxine and Laverne Andrews. The song was "Bei Mir bist du Schön."

Cut to logo representing geodynamics.

The latter years of the twentieth century and the early decades of the twenty-first were marked by changes in weather patterns and geodynamics.

Accustomed to the reliable round of winter and summer, rainy season and dry season, the flow of rivers and the currents and tides of the oceans,

Man had come to look upon the Earth as a stable and dependable home. He was mistaken.

A trivial shift in air patterns, a minor trembling of the planetary mantle, a minute increase or diminution of the sun's warmth received by the planet, and the mighty works of Man crumbled like sand castles in the surf.

An example. Earthquakes were more or less expected in certain regions: the

Pacific Coast of North America, Japan and eastern China, a Eurasian belt

running from Yugoslavia through Greece and Turkey to Iran. Tragedies were

masked with heroism, fear hidden behind the false-face of humor. "When California falls into the ocean this piece of Arizona desert will be choice waterfront property."

Nobody expected New England and maritime Canada to crumble, but when the

big quake hit, they did. From the St. Lawrence to the Hudson. It started

with a tremor and rumble, grew to a scream and smash, ended with a gurgle

and then the soft, even lapping of the Atlantic's waters.

Among the bits of real estate that wound up on the ocean floor -- a very

minor bit -- was a chunk of old Providence-Plantations known as Swan Point

Cemetery. Now the Deep Ones indeed swam over the single stone marker of the Lovecraft family plot. Winfield, Susan, Howard, the marker was inscribed. Currents could flow all the way from Devil's Reef and

Innsmouth

Harbor to far Ponape in the Pacific and the Deep Ones visited Swan Point.

In the field of religion, there was a revival of the ancient cults of the

sea-gods, especially that of Dagon.

MARCH 15, 2337

Khons slithered through another correction, took up a complex orbit that

circled one moon, crossed to the other, circled, returned, describing over

and over the conventional sign for the infinite.

Shoten tapped a plate and the large viewing screen inside Khons glowed once more, seeming to stand unsupported against the background of the

two

moons and the distant star-sprayed blackness. Every now and again the progress of the two whirling moons and Khons's orbit around and between them would bring Yuggoth itself swinging across the view of the three

crew

members so that one or both of the worldlets and the ship's data screen swept opaquely across the dark, pulsating oblateness.

Shoten commanded and cyberbiots magnified the surface features of the

moons on the data screen. The omnipresent craters sprang up but then,
as the magnification increased, it became obvious that they were not the
sharp-edged features of the typical airless satellite but the
shortened,
rounded curves typical of weathering. Shoten gestured and the focus
slid
across the surface of the nearer body. Above the horizon distant stars
faded and twinkled.
"Air!" Shoten declared.
And Njord and Gomati, agreeing: "Air."
"Air."
Shoten Binayakya dropped Khons into a lower orbit, circling only one of
the twin moons, that which Gomati had arbitrarily named as Thog. Again
the
magnification of the screen increased. In the center of a crater
outlines
appeared, forms of structures reared ages before by purposeful
intelligence.
Amazed, Njord Freyr asked, "Could there be life?"
Shoten turned a metallic face toward him, shook slowly that ambiguous
head. "Not now. No movement, no radiation, no energy output. But
once...."
There was a silence. Breathing, whirring, the soft clicks and hums of
Khons. "But once..." Shoten Binayakya said again in that cold,
synthesized
voice.
Sri Gomati gestured. "This is where we must land. After all the
explorations of the planets and their moons, even the futile picking
among
the rubbish of the asteroid belt by the great Astrud do Muiscos -- to
find
signs of life at last! This is where we must land!"
Shoten Binayakya nodded agreement without waiting even for the assent
of
Njord Freyr. A limb flicked out, tapped. Khons bucked and started
circling
downward toward the reticulated patterns on the surface of Thog.
With a jolt and a shudder Khons settled onto the surface of the moon,
well
within the weathered walls of the crater and within a kilometer or less
of
the structured protuberances. Shoten quiesced the cyberbiots to mere
maintenance level of Khons, leaving only the receptors and telemeters
warm, then asked the others to prepare to exit.
Njord Freyr and Sri Gomati slipped breathers over their heads and
shoulders. Shoten ordered a variety of internal filtration
modifications
within the recirculation system that provided life support. They took
readings from Khons's external sensors, slid back hatches, made their
way
from Khons, stood facing what, it was now obvious, were relics of
incredible antiquity.
Abreast, the three moved toward the ruins: Njord on motorized,
gyrostabilized cyborged wheel assemblies; Shoten Binayakya rumbling on
tread-laying gear, stable, efficient; Sri Gomati striding left foot,
right
foot, organic legs encased in puff-jointed pressure suit like some
anachronistic caricature of a Bipolar Technocompetitive Era spaceman.
They halted a few meters from the first row of structures. Like the

crater

 rims, the walls, columns, arches were weather-rounded, tumbled, softened.

 A metallic-telescoping tentacle whiplashed out from the hub of one of Njord's cyborg-wheels. A crumbled cube of some now-soft stone-like material fell away to ashes, to dust.

 Njord turned bleak silver eyes to the others. "Once, perhaps..."

 "Come along," Gomati urged, "let's get to exploring these ruins!"

 Excitement colored her voice. "There's no telling what evidence they

may

 contain of their builders. We may learn whether these worlds and their inhabitants originated in our own system or whether they came from -- elsewhere."

 At Gomati's final word she turned her face skyward, and the others followed suit. It was the worldlet Thog's high noon or the equivalent thereof. The sun was so remote -- sixteen billion kilometers, twice as

far

 as it was from Pluto at the latter's aphelion and 120 times as distant

as

 it was from Earth -- that to the three standing on the surface of Thog,

it

 was utterly lost in the star-dotted blackness.

 But Yuggoth itself hung directly overhead, obscenely bloated and

oblate,

 its surface filling the heavens, looking as if it were about to crash shockingly upon Khons and the three explorers, and all the time

pulsing,

 pulsing, pulsing like an atrocious heart, throbbing, throbbing. And now Thog's twin worldlet, dubbed Thok by the female crew member, swept in stygian silhouette across the tumultuous face of Yuggoth, Thok's black roundness varied by the crater-rims casting their deep shadows on the pale, pink-pulsating gray rocks of Thog.

 The blackness enveloped first Khons, then sped across the face of Thog, swept over the three explorers, blotting out the pulsing ruddiness of Yuggoth and plunging them into utter blackness.

 Gomati's fascination was broken by the purring synthetic voice of

Shoten

 Binayakya. "An interesting occultation," Shoten said, "but come, we

have

 our mission to perform. Khons is taking automatic measurements and telemetering information back to Neptune. And here," the silvery eyes seemed to flicker in distant starlight as a cybernetic extensor

adjusted

 devices on the mechanical carapace, "my own recording and telemetering devices will send data back to the ship."

MARCH 15, 1937 -- A SNAPSHOT

 Dr. Dustin stood by the bed. The patient was semi-conscious. His lips moved but no one could hear what he said. Two old women sat by the bed. One was his Aunt Annie. The other was Annie's dear friend Edna, present

as

 much to comfort the grieving aunt as her dying nephew.

 Dr. Dustin leaned over the bed. He checked the patient's condition. He stood for a while trying to understand the patient's words but he could not. From time to time the patient moved his hand feebly. It looked as

if

 he was trying to slap something.

 The old woman named Annie had tears on her face. She reached into a

worn

 black purse for her handkerchief and wiped the tears away as best she

could. She grasped Dr. Dustin's hand and held it between her own. She asked him, "Is there any hope? Any?"

The doctor shook his head. "I'm sorry, Mrs. Gamwell." And to the other woman, "Miss Lewis."

"I'm sorry," the doctor said again.

The old woman named Annie released the doctor's hand. The other old woman,

Edna, reached toward Annie. They sat facing each other. They embraced clumsily, as people must when sitting face to face. Each old woman tried

to comfort the other.

The doctor sighed and walked to the window. He looked outside. It was early morning. The sun had risen but it was visible only as a pale, watery

glow in the east. The sky was gray with clouds. The ground was covered with patches of snow, ice, slush. More snow was falling.

The doctor wondered why it seemed that he lost patients only in winter, or

during rain storms, or at night. Never on a bright spring or summer day.

He knew that that was not really true. Patients died when they died.

When

their fatal condition, whatever it was, completed its course. Still it seemed always to happen in the dark of the night or in the dark of the year.

He heard someone whistling.

He turned and saw two young residents passing the doorway. One of them was

whistling, he was whistling a popular tune that the doctor had heard on the radio. He couldn't remember what program he had heard it on.

Possibly

the program was The Kate Smith Show, or Your Hit Parade. The tune was very

catchy even though the words were in some language that eluded Dr. Dustin's ear. The song was called "Bei Mir bist du Schön."

Three thousand miles away, the Spanish were engaged in a confusing civil

war. The old king had abdicated years before and a republic had been proclaimed. But after the direction of the new government became clear,

a

colonel serving in the Spanish colonial forces in Africa returned with his

troops -- largely Berbers and Rifs -- to change things.

He would overthrow the republic. He would end the nonsense of democracy,

atheism, lewdness that the republic tolerated. He would restore discipline, piety, modesty. He would reinstitute the monarchy.

At the moment it appeared that the Republican forces were winning. They had just recaptured the cities of Trijuque and Guadalajara. They had taken

rebel prisoners. These included Spanish monarchists. They included African

troops as well. Strangely, some of the prisoners spoke only Italian. They

said they were volunteers. They said they had been ordered to volunteer.

And they always obeyed their orders.

In China, forces of the Imperial Japanese Army were having easy going.

Their opposition was weak. The Chinese were divided. They had been engaged in a civil war. It was not much like the one in Spain. It had been going on much longer. It had begun with the death of President Sun Yat-sen in 1924. The Japanese were not the only foreign power to intervene in China.

Germany had owned trading concessions in China until the Treaty of Versailles ended them. Germany was burgeoning now and had ambitions to regain her lost privileges.

Other countries had felt their interests threatened by the Chinese civil war. England had sent troops. France had used her influence. France was worried that she might lose her valuable colonies in Indo-China. Russia had tried to influence China's internal politics. There had been grave danger of war between Russia and China. Especially when the Chinese sacked

the Russian Embassy in Peking and beheaded six of its staff. The United States had intervened. American gunboats plied Chinese waterways. The gunboat Panay was sunk by aerial gunfire and bombing.

The Panay was on the Yangtze River when this happened. The Yangtze is a Chinese river. But the Panay was sunk by Japanese forces. This pleased China. Japan apologized and paid compensation.

Joe Louis and Joe DiMaggio, two young athletes, were in training. Both of them had very good years in 1937.

A wealthy daredevil pilot named Howard Hughes flew across the United States in seven hours and twenty-eight minutes. This set off a new wave of excitement and "air-mindedness." In Santa Monica, California, the Douglas Aircraft Company was completing its new airliner. This would carry forty passengers. It had four engines. It would be capable of speeds up to 237 miles per hour.

More conservative people felt that the Zeppelin would never yield to the airplane. The great airship Hindenberg was on the Atlantic run. It was huge. It was beautiful. There was a piano in its cocktail lounge. The European terminus of its flights was Tempelhof Airdrome in Germany. The American terminus of its flights was Lakehurst, New Jersey. On the morning of March 15, Rabbi Louis I. Newman found eleven large orange swastikas painted on the walls of Temple Rodeph Sholom, 7 West

83rd Street, New York. This was the third such incident at Temple Rodeph Sholom. Rabbi Newman suspected that the swastikas were painted in retaliation for Secretary of State Hull's protests against abusive statements in the German press. At Turn Hall, Lexington Avenue and 85th Street, the head of the Silver Shirts of New York replied. His name was George L. Raftort. He said the swastikas were painted by Jewish trouble-makers. He knew this because the arms of the eleven swastikas pointed backwards. He said, "This is a mistake no Nazi would make."

In Providence, Rhode Island, the snow continued to fall. The city's hills were slippery. There were accident cases in the hospitals.

In the Jane Brown Memorial Hospital on College Hill, Howard Lovecraft opened his eyes. No one knew what he saw. Certainly Dr. Dustin did not. Howard slapped the coverlet of his bed. He moved his lips. A sound emerged. He might have said, "Father." He might have said, "Father you look just like a young man."

MARCH 15, 2337

They rolled, clanked, strode forward a few meters more, halted once again at the very edge of the ancient ruins. Shoten Binayakya sent two core samplers downward from mechanized instrumentation compartments, one to sample soil, the other to clip some material from the ruins themselves. Carbon dating would proceed automatically within Shoten's cyborged componentry. Sri Gomati gazed at the ruins. They had the appearance, in the faint distant starlight, of stairs and terraces walled with marble balustrades. Gomati ran her optical sensors to maximum image amplification to obtain meaningful sight in the darkness of the occultation of Yuggoth. And then -- it is highly doubtful that the discovery would have been made by the single brief expedition, working in the ruddy, pulsating light of Yuggoth; it was surely that planet's occultation by Thok that must receive credit for the find -- Gomati turned at the gasp of Njord Freyr. Her eyes followed the path of his pointing, armor-gauntleted hand. From some opening deep under the rubble before them a dim but baleful light emerged, pulsating obscenely. But unlike the crimson pulsations of Yuggoth above the explorers, this light beneath their feet was of some shocking, awful green. Without speaking the three surged forward, picking their way through the ruined and crumbled remnants of whatever ancient city had once flung faulted towers and fluted columns into the black sky above the tiny world. They reached the source of the radiance barely in time, for as the disk sped across the face of Yuggoth the black shadow that blanketed the landing site of the ship Khons and the ruins where the crew poked and studied, fled across the pale gray face of Thog leaving them standing once more in the red, pulsating glare of the giant planet. In that obscene half-daylight, the hideous, metallic glare of bronze-green was overwhelmed and disappeared into the general throbbing ruddiness. But by now Shoten Binayakya had shot a telescoping core-probe into the opening from which the light emerged, and with mechanical levers pried back the marble-like slab whose cracked and chipped corner had permitted the emergence of the glow. Servos revved, the stone slab crashed aside. Steps led away, into the bowels of the worldlet Thog. In the dark, shadowy recess the red, pulsating light of giant Yuggoth and the baleful metallic green fought and shifted distressingly. "The Ghooric Zone," Sri Gomati whispered to herself, "the Ghooric Zone." They advanced down the stairs, leaving behind the baleful pulsations of

Yuggoth, lowering themselves meter by meter into the bronze-green lighted depths of Thog. The track-laying cybermech of Shoten Binayakya took the strangely proportioned stairway with a sort of clumsy grace. Njord Freyr, his wheeled undercarriage superbly mobile on the level surface of Thog, now clutched desperately to the fluted carapace of Shoten. Sri Gomati walked with ease, gazing out over the subsurface world of Thog. Seemingly kilometers below their entry a maze of dome on dome and tower on tower lay beside -- she shook her head, adjusted metallic optics. There seemed to be a subterranean sea here within the depths of tiny Thog, a sea whose dark and oily waters lapped and gurgled obscenely at a black and gritty beach. At the edge of that sea, that body which must be little more than a lake by earthly standards, on that black and grainy beach, great terrible creatures rolled and gamboled shockingly. "Shoggoths!" Sri Gomati ran ahead of the others, almost tumbling from the unbalustraded stairway. "Shoggoths! Exactly as he said, splashing beside a foul lake! Shoggoths!" Exalted, she reached the end of the stairway, ran through towering columns past walls of sprawling bas-relief that showed hideous deities destroying intruders upon their shrines while awful acolytes crept away toward enigmatic vehicles in search of morsels to appease their obscene gods. Gomati heard the grinding, clanking sounds of Shoten Binayakya following her, the steady whir of Njord Freyr's undercarriage. She turned and faced them. "This is the year 2337," she shouted, "the four hundredth anniversary of his death! How could he know? How could he ever have known?" And she ran down hallways beneath vaulted gambrel roofs, ran past more carvings and paintings showing strange, rugose, cone-shaped beings and terrible, tentacle-faced obscenities that loomed frighteningly above cowering prey. Then Gomati came to another hallway, one lit with black tapers that flared and guttered terribly. The air in the room was utterly still, the shadows of fluted columns solemn against walls carved and lettered in a script whose obscene significance had been forgotten before Earth's own races were young. And in the center of the room, meter-tall tapers of stygian gloom marking its four extremities, stood a catafalque, and on the catafalque, skin as white as a grave-worm's, eyes shut, angular features in somber repose, lay the black-draped figure of a man. Sri Gomati raced to the foot of the catafalque, stood gazing into the flickering darkness of the hall, then advanced to stand beside the cadaver's head. Her silvery eyes shimmered and she began to laugh, to giggle and titter obscenely, and yet to weep at the same time, for some cyber-surgeon long before had seen fit to leave those glands and ducts intact. And Sri Gomati stood tittering and snuffling until Njord Freyr rolled

beside her on his cyborged power-wheels and the ambiguous Shoten
Binayakya
ground and clanked beside her on tread-laying undercarriage, and they
took
her to return to the spaceship Khons.
But strangest of all is this. The stairway by which they attempted to
return to the surface of the worldlet Thog and the safety of their
spaceship Khons had crumbled away under the weight of untold eons and
that
of the cybermechanisms of the exploration party, and when they tried to
climb those crumbling stairs they found themselves trapped in the
Ghooric
Zone kilometers beneath the surface of the worldlet Thog.
And there, beside the oily, lapping sea, the foul lake where puffed
shoggoths splash, they remained, the three, forever.

© Richard A Lupoff 1977, 2001

This story was first published in 1977 in Chrysalis, edited by Roy
Torgeson, and is reprinted in Lupoff's new collection, Claremont Tales,
published in 2001 by Golden Gryphon Press.

Elsewhere in infinity plus:

Nick
non-fiction - Behind the Face-paint: Richard Lupoff interviewed by
Gevers; Claremont Tales reviewed.
other stuff - find out about Golden Gryphon Press, publishers of
Claremont Tales.
contact - e-mail Richard Lupoff.

Let us know what you think of infinity plus - e-mail us at:

sf@infinityplus.co.uk

support this site - buy books through these links:

A+ Books: an insider's view of sf, fantasy and horror
amazon.com (US) | Internet Bookshop (UK)

top of page

[home page | fiction | non-fiction | other stuff | A to Z]
[infinity plus bookshop | search infinity plus]