



# **The Green Brain**

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He looked pretty much like the bastard offspring of a Guarani Indio and some backwoods farmer's daughter, some sertanista who'd tried to forget her enslavement to the encomendero system by "eating the iron" -- which is what they call lovemaking through the grill of a consel gate.

The type-look was almost perfect except when he forgot himself while passing through one of the deeper jungle glades.

His skin tended to shade down to green then, fading him into the background of leaves and vines, giving a ghostly disembodiment to the mud-gray shirt and ragged trousers, the inevitable frayed straw hat and rawhide sandals soled with pieces cut from worn tires.

Such lapses grew less and less frequent the farther he emerged from the Parana headwaters, the sertao hinterland of Goyaz where men with his bang-cut black hair and glittering dark eyes were common.

By the time he reached bandeirantes country, he had achieved almost perfect control over the chameleon effect.

Now, he was out of the wilder jungle growth and into the brown dirt tracks that separated the parceled farms of the resettlement plan. In his own way, he knew he was approaching one of the bandeirante checkpoints, and with an almost human gesture he fingered the cedula de gracias al sacar, the certificate of white blood, tucked safely beneath his shirt. Now and again, when humans were not near, he practiced aloud the name that had been chosen for him -- "Antonio Raposo Tavares."

The sound emerged a bit strident, harsh on the edges, but he knew it would pass. It already had. Goyaz Indios were notorious for the strange inflections of their speech. The farm folk who'd given him a roof and food the previous night had said as much.

When their questions had become pressing, he'd squatted on their doorstep and played

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his flute, the qena of the Andes Indian, which he carried in a leather purse hung from his shoulder. The gesture of the flute was a symbol of the region. When a Guarani put flute to nose and began playing, that said words were ended.

The farm folk had shrugged and retired.

His trudging progress, the difficult and carefully mastered articulation of legs, had brought him now into an area of many humans. He could see red-brown rooftops ahead and the white crystal shimmering of a bandeirante tower with its aircars alighting and departing. The scene held an odd hive-look.

Momentarily, he found himself overcome by the touch of instincts that he knew he must master. These instincts could make him fail the ordeal to come. He stepped off the dirt track, out of the path of passing humans, and went through the regimen that united his mental identity. The resultant thought penetrated to the smallest and most remote units of his person: We are greenslaves subservient to the greater whole.

He resumed his way toward the bandeirante checkpoint. The unifying thought lent him an air of servility that was like a shield against the stares of humans trudging past all around. His kind knew many human mannerisms. They had learned early that servility was a form of concealment.

Presently, the dirt track gave way to a two-lane paved market road with footpaths in the ditches on both sides. This, in turn, curved alongside a four-deck commercial transport highway where even the footpaths were paved. Now there were groundcars and aircars in greater numbers, and the flow of foot traffic increased.

Thus far he'd attracted no dangerous attention. The occasional snickering side-glance from natives of the area could be safely ignored. He watched for probing stares. These could hold peril, but he detected none.

Servility shielded him.

The sun stood well along toward mid-morning and the day's heat had begun to press down on the earth, raising a moist hothouse stink from the dirt beside the pathway, mingling it with the perspiration odors of humanity around him. There was a sourness

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to the smell that made every part of him long for the sweetly familiar odors of the hinterland. And the lowland smells carried another harmonic that filled him with an inaudible humming of unease. Here were greater and greater concentrations of insect poisons.

Humans were all around him now, close and pressing, moving slower and slower as they approached the checkpoint bottleneck.

The forward motion stopped.

Progress resolved itself into shuffle and stop, shuffle and stop. . . .

Here was the critical test and no avoiding it. He waited with something akin to an Indian's stoic patience. His breathing had grown deeper to compensate for the heat. He adjusted it to match that of the humans around him, suffering the temperature rise for the sake of blending into his surroundings. Andes Indians didn't breathe deeply here in the lowlands.

Shuffle and stop.

Shuffle and stop.

Now he could see the checkpoint.

Fastidious bandeirantes in sealed white cloaks with plastic helmets, gloves and boots stood in a double row within a shaded brick corridor leading into the town. He could see sunlight hot on the street beyond the corridor, people hurrying away there after passing this gantlet.

The sight of that free area beyond the corridor sent an ache of longing through all the parts of him. The suppression warning flashed out instantly on the heels of that instinctive reaching-emotion.

No distraction could be permitted here. Every element of him had to be alert to

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withstand the pain.

Shuffle and . . . he was into the hands of the first bandeirante, a hulking blond fellow with pink skin and blue eyes.

"Step along now! Lively now!" the fellow said.

A gloved hand propelled him toward two bandeirantes standing on the right side of the line.

"Name?" That was a voice behind him.

"Antonio Raposo Tavares," he rasped.

"District?"

"Goyaz."

"Give that one an extra treatment," the blond giant called. "He's from the upcountry for certain."

The two waiting bandeirantes had him now, one jamming a breather mask over his face, the other dropping a plastic bag over him. A tube trailed from the bag and out toward the sound of machinery somewhere in the street beyond the corridor.

"Double shot!" one of the bandeirantes called.

Fuming blue gas puffed out the bag around him, and he inhaled a sharp, gasping breath through the mask, astonished at that unanimous demand for poison-free air.

Agony!

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The gas drove through every multiple linkage of his being with needles of pain.

We must not weaken, he thought. Hold fast.

But it was a deadly pain, killing. Linkages began to weaken.

"Okay on this one," the bag handler called.

The bag was slipped off, breather mask pulled away. Hands propelled him down the corridor toward the sunlight.

"Lively now! Don't hold up the line."

The stink of the poison gas lay all around him. It was a new one -- a dissembler. They hadn't prepared him for this poison. He'd been ready for the radiations and the sonics and the old chemicals . . . but not for this.

Sunlight beat down on him as he emerged from the corridor into a street. He veered left through a passage lined by fruit stalls, merchants bartering with customers or standing fat and watchful behind their displays. In his extremity, the fruit beckoned with the promise of sanctuary for a few parts of him, but the integrating totality of him knew the emptiness of that thought. He fought off the lure, shuffled fast as he dared, dodging past customers, through the knots of idlers.

"You like to buy fresh oranges?"

An oily dark hand thrust two oranges into his face.

"Fresh oranges from the green country. Never been a bug near these."

He avoided the hand, but the odor of the oranges came near to overpowering him.

Now he was clear of the stalls, around a corner down a narrow side street. Another

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corner and he saw far away to his left the lure of greenery in open country, the free area beyond the town.

He turned toward the green, increased his speed, measuring out the time still available to him. He knew it would be a near thing. Poison clung to his clothing, but clean air filtered through the fabric -- and the thought of possible victory was like an antidote.

We can make it yet!

The green drew closer and closer -- trees and ferns beside a river bank. He heard running water, smelled wet soil. There was a bridge thronging with foot traffic from converging streets.

No help for it -- he joined the throng, avoided contact where possible. His leg and back linkages were beginning to slip, and he knew the wrong kind of blow, a chance collision, could dislodge whole segments.

The bridge ordeal ended and he saw a dirt track leading off the path to the right and down toward the river. He turned toward it, stumbled against one of two men carrying a pig in a net slung between them. Part of the skin simulation on his right upper leg gave way. He could feel it begin to slip down inside his trousers.

The man he'd hit took two backward steps, almost dropped the pig.

"Careful!" the man shouted.

The man's companion said, "Damn drunks."

The pig set up a squirming, squealing distraction.

In this moment, he slipped past the men onto the dirt track, shuffled toward the river. He could see water down there now boiling with aeration from the barrier filters, the foam of sonic disruption on its surface.

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Behind him, one of the pig carriers said, "I don't think he was drunk, Carlos. His skin felt dry and hot. Maybe he was sick."

He heard and understood, tried to increase his speed. The lost segment of skin simulation had slipped halfway down his leg. A disruptive loosening of shoulder and back muscles threatened his balance.

The track turned around an embankment of raw dirt dark brown with dampness and dipped into a tunnel through ferns and bushes. The men with the pig no longer could see him, he knew. He grabbed at his trousers where the leg surface was slipping, scurried through the green tunnel.

Where the tunnel ended he caught sight of his first mutated bee. It was dead, having entered this barrier vibration area without any protection against that deadline. The bee was one of the butterfly type with iridescent yellow and orange wings. It lay in the cup of a green leaf at the center of a shaft of sunlight.

He shuffled past, having recorded the bee's shape and color. His kind had considered the bees as a possible way, but there were serious drawbacks. A bee could not reason with humans. And humans had to listen to reason soon, else all life would end.

There came the sound of someone hurrying down the path behind him. Heavy footsteps pounded the earth.

Pursuit?

Why would they pursue? Have I been discovered?

A sensation akin to panic fluttered through him, lent his parts a burst of energy. But he was reduced to slow shuffling and soon it would be only a crawling progress. Every eye he could use searched the greenery for a place of concealment.

A thin break darkened the fern wall on his left. Tiny human footprints led into it -- children. He forced his way through the ferns there, found himself on a low narrow path along the embankment. Two toy aircars, red and blue, lay abandoned on the path. His



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staggering foot pressed into the dirt.

The low path led close to a wall of black dirt festooned with creepers. It turned sharply as the dirt wall turned and emerged onto the lip of a shallow cave. More toys lay in the green gloom at the cave's mouth.

He knelt, crawled over the toys into the blessed dankness, lay there waiting.

Presently, the pounding footsteps hurried past a few meters below. Voices reached up to him.

"He was headed for the river. Think he was going to jump in?"

"Who knows? But I think me for sure he was sick."

"Here! Down this way; somebody's been down this way."

The voices grew indistinct, blended with the bubbling sound of water.

The men were going on down the path. They had missed his hiding place. But why had they pursued? He hadn't seriously injured that man. Surely they didn't suspect.

But speculation had to wait.

Slowly, he steeled himself for what had to be done, brought his specialized parts into play and began burrowing into the earth of the cave. Deeper and deeper he burrowed, thrusting the excess dirt behind and out to make it appear the cave had collapsed.

Ten meters in he went before stopping. His store of energy contained just enough reserve for the next stage. He turned onto his back, scattering the dead parts of legs and back, exposing the queen and her guard cluster to the dirt beneath his chitinous spine. Orifices opened at his thigh, exuded the cocoon foam, the soothing green cover that would harden into a protective shell.

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This was victory; the essential parts had survived.

Time was the thing now -- some twenty days to gather new energy, go through the metamorphosis and disperse. Soon there'd be thousands of him -- each with its carefully mimicked clothing and identification papers, each with this appearance of humanity.

Identical -- each of them.

There'd be other checkpoints, but not as severe; other barriers -- lesser ones.

This human copy had proved to be a good one. The supreme integration of his kind had chosen well. They'd learned much from study of scattered captives in the sertao. But it was so difficult to understand the human creature. Even when they were permitted a limited freedom, it was almost impossible to reason with them. Their supreme integration eluded all attempts at contact.

And always the primary question remained: How could any supreme integration permit the disaster that was overtaking this entire planet?

Difficult humans -- their slavery to the planet would have to be proved to them . . . dramatically, perhaps.

The queen stirred near the cool dirt, prodded into action by her guards. Unifying communication went out to all the body parts, seeking the survivors, assessing strengths. They'd learned new things this time about escaping notice from humans. All the subsequent colony clusters would share that knowledge. One of them at least would get through to the city by the Amazon "River Sea" where the death-for-all appeared to originate.

One of them had to get through.

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## II

Pastel smokes drifted on the cabaret's air. Each smoke, the signature of a table, wafted upward from a table's central vent -- here a pale mauve, across the way a pink as delicate as baby skin, there a green that brought to mind Indian gauze woven of pampas grass. It had just turned 9:00 P.M. and the Cabaret A'Chigua, Bahia's finest, had begun its nightly entertainment. Tinkling bell music set a sensuous rhythm for a troupe of dancers posturing in stylized ant costumes. Their fake antennae and mandibles waved through the smokes.

A'Chigua's patrons occupied low divans. The women were a sprinkling of tropical color as rich as jungle flowers arranged against men in white linen and, here and there like punctuation marks, the glistening white smocks of bandeirantes. This was the Green area, where bandeirantes could relax and play after duty in the Red jungle or at the barriers.

Shoptalk and smalltalk in a dozen languages flowed through the room --

"Tonight I take a pink table for luck. It is the color of a woman's breast, no?" "So I laid down a blanket of foamal and we went in and cleaned out the whole nest -- mutated ants like they had in the Piratininga. Must've been ten, twenty billion of them right there."

Dr. Rhin Kelly had listened to the room for twenty minutes, her attention drawn more and more to the tension undercurrents here.

"The new poisons work -- yes." That was a bandeirante at the table behind her

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answering the problem of survivors -- resistant strains. The mop-up is going to be brutal handwork, just like China. They had to get down there and kill the last bugs by hand."

Rhin sensed her companion stirring, and thought: He heard. She glanced up from their table's amber smoke, met her escort's almond eyes. He smiled and she thought as she had many times before what a distinguished personage was this Dr. Travis Huntington Chen-Lhu. He was tall with the deep, square face of North China topped by close-cropped hair that was still jet black at sixty. He leaned toward her and whispered, "Nowhere do we escape rumors, eh?"

She shook her head, wondering for perhaps the tenth time why the distinguished Dr. Chen-Lhu, district director for the International Ecological Organization, had insisted she come here tonight, her first night in Bahia. She had no illusions at all about why he'd ordered her to come down from Dublin: he obviously had a problem which required action by the IEO's espionage arm. As usual, the problem would turn out to involve a man who must be manipulated. Chen-Lhu had hinted as much during the day's "general briefing." But he had yet to name the man upon whom she must ply her wiles.

"They say certain plants are dying out from lack of pollenization." That was a woman at the table behind her, and Rhin stiffened. Dangerous conversation, that.

But the bandeirante directly behind her said, "Back off, doll. You sound like that dame they picked up in Itabuna."

"What dame?"

"She was distributing Carsonite literature right there in the village behind the barrier. Police grabbed her before she'd gotten rid of twenty pieces. They got most of it back, but you know how that stuff is, especially up there near the Red."

A disturbance erupted at A'Chigua's entrance, cries of "Johnny! You, Johnny! You lucky dog, Joao!"

Rhin joined the rest of A'Chigua's patrons in turning to stare toward the sound, noting that Chen-Lhu pretended indifference. She saw that seven bandeirantes had stopped just inside the room as though blocked by the barrage of words.

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At their head stood a bandeirante with a group leader's golden butterfly insignia at his lapel. Rhin studied him with sudden suspicion, seeing a man of medium height, swarthy skin, wavy black hair; stocky, but when he moved there was grace. His body radiated strength. The face was a contrast, narrow and patrician, dominated by a slim nose with pronounced hook. There were senhores de engenho in his ancestry -- obviously.

Rhin described him to herself as "brutally handsome." Again, she noted Chen-Lhu's pose of disinterest, and thought: So this is why we're here.

The thought made her oddly aware of her own body. She underwent a momentary revulsion at her role, thinking: I've done many things and sold many bits of myself to be here in this moment. And what is there left for myself? No one wanted the services of Dr. Rhin Kelly, entomologist. But Rhin Kelly, Irish beauty, a woman who took pleasure in her other duties -- this Rhin Kelly was much in demand.

If I didn't enjoy the work, perhaps then I wouldn't hate it, she thought

She knew how she must appear in this room of lush, dark-skinned women. She was red-haired, green-eyed, delicate complexion -- freckles at shoulders, forehead and bridge of nose. In this room -- wearing a low gown to match her eyes, a small golden IEO badge at her breast -- in this room, she was the exotic one.

"Who is that man at the door?" she asked.

A smile like the ripple from a faint breeze washed over Chen-Lhu's chisled features. He glanced toward the entrance.

"Which man, my dear? There appear to be . . . seven there."

"Drop the pose, Travis."

Almond eyes probed at her, swung back to the group at the entrance. "That is Joao Martinho, Jefe of the Irmandades and son of Gabriel Martinho."

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"Joao Martinho," she said. "He's the one you said should've had full credit for clearing the Piratininga."

"He got the cash, my dear. For Johnny Martinho, that's quite enough."

"How much?"

"Ah, the practical woman," he said. "They shared five hundred thousand cruzados." Chen-Lhu settled back on the divan, sniffed the pungent incense arising with the smoke from their table's vent. And he thought: Five hundred thousand! That'll be enough to destroy Johnny Martinho -- if I can make my case against him. And with Rhin, how can I fail? This branco de Bahia will be only too happy to accept a woman as fair as Rhin. Yes. We'll have our scapegoat soon: Johnny Martinho, the capitalisto, the gran senhor who was trained by the Yankees.

"The grapevine in Dublin mentions Joao Martinho," Rhin said.

"Ahh", the grapevine," he said. "What has it said?"

"The trouble in the Piratininga -- his name and that of his father are mentioned."

"Ahhh, I see."

"There are strange rumors," she said.

"And you find them sinister."

"No -- just odd."

Odd, he thought. The word struck him with a momentary sinking sensation because it echoed the courier message from his homeland that had moved him to send for Rhin. "Your odd slowness in solving our problem is causing very disturbing questions to be

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raised." The sentence and the word had leaped out of the message. Chen-Lhu understood the impatience that framed those words: discovery of the looming catastrophe in China could come at any moment. And he knew there were those who didn't trust him because of the cursed white men in his ancestry.

He lowered his voice, said, "Odd is not quite the word to describe bandeirantes reinvesting the Green areas."

"I heard some rather wild stories," she murmured. "Secret bandeirante laboratories -- illegal mutation experiments . . ."

"You'll note, Rhin, that most reports of strange, giant insects come from bandeirantes. There's your only oddity."

"Logical," she said. "Bandeirantes're out in the front line where such things might occur."

"Surely you, an entomologist, don't believe such wild stories," he said.

She shrugged, feeling oddly perverse. He was right, of course; had to be.

"Logic," Chen-Lhu said. "The use of wild rumors to foment superstitious fear among the yokel tabareus, this is the only logic I see."

"So you wish me to work on this bandeirante chief," she said. "What am I supposed to find?"

You're supposed to find what I tell you to find, Chen-Lhu thought. But he said, "Why're you so certain this Martinho is your target? Is that what the grapevine said?"

"Ohhh," she said, wondering at the anger that lurked within her. "You had no special purpose in sending for me. My own charming self was reason enough!"

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"I couldn't have said it better," he said. He turned, beckoned a waiter who approached, bent to listen. Presently, the waiter wove a path to the group at the entrance, spoke to Joao Martinho.

The bandeirante studied Rhin with a brief flicker, shifted to meet Chen-Lhu's eyes. Chen-Lhu nodded.

Several woman like gauze butterflies had joined Martinho's group. Eye makeup made them appear to be staring from faceted pits. Martinho disengaged himself, headed for the table of amber smoke. He stopped across from Rhin, bowed to Chen-Lhu. "Dr. Chen-Lhu, I presume," he said. "What a delight. How can the IEO spare its district director for such dalliance?" The wave of an arm encompassed A'Chigua's frenetic tensions.

And Martinho thought: There -- I've spoken my thoughts in a way this devious man will understand.

"I indulge myself," Chen-Lhu said. "A small bit of relaxation to welcome a newcomer to our staff." He arose from the divan, looked down at Rhin. "Rhin, I'd like you to meet Senhor Joao Martinho. Johnny, this is Dr. Rhin Kelly, late of Dublin, a new entomologist in our office."

And Chen-Lhu thought: This is the enemy. Make no mistake. This is the enemy. This is the enemy. This is the enemy.

Martinho bowed from the hips. "Charmed."

"It's an honor to meet you, Senhor Martinho," she said. "I've heard of your exploits . . . even in Dublin."

"Even in Dublin," he murmured. "I was favored, but never so much favored as in this instant." He stared at her with disconcerting intensity, wondering what special duties this woman might have. Was she Chen-Lhu's mistress?

Into the sudden silence came the voice of a woman at the table behind Rhin: "Snakes



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and rodents are increasing their pressures on civilization. It says so in the . . ."

Someone shushed her.

Martinho said, "Travis, I do not understand it. How can one call such a beautiful woman Doctor?"

Chen-Lhu forced a chuckle. "Careful, Johnny. Dr. Kelly is my new field director."

"A roving director, I hope," Martinho said.

Rhin stared at him coolly, but it was an assumed coolness. She found his directness exciting and frightening. "I've been warned about Latin blandishments," she said. "You've all hidden a piece of the blarney stone in your family trees, so I've been told."

Her voice had taken on a rich throatiness which made Chen-Lhu smile to himself. Remember -- this is the enemy, he thought. "Will you join us, Johnny?" he asked.

"You save me from forcing myself upon you," Martinho said. "But you know I've some of my Irmandades with me?"

"They appear to be occupied," Chen-Lhu said. He nodded toward the entrance, where a cluster of the gauzy women had enfolded all but one of Martinho's companions. Women and bandeirantes were rinding seats at a large blue-vent table in a corner.

The lone holdout shifted his attention from Martinho to his companions at the table, back to Martinho.

Rhin studied the man: ash-gray hair, a long young-old face marred by an acid scar on the left cheek. He reminded her of the sexton in her Wexford church.

"Ah, that is Vierho," Martinho said. "We call him the Padre. At the moment, he is undecided who to protect -- our brothers of the Irmandades over there or myself. Me, I

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think I need him most." He beckoned to Vierho, turned, sat down beside Rhin.

A waiter appeared, slipped a translucent bulb containing a golden drink onto the table in front of him. A glass tube protruded from the bulb. He ignored it, stared at Rhin.

"Are the Irish ready to join us?" he asked.

"Join you?"

"In realignment of the world's insects."

She glanced at Chen-Lhu, whose face betrayed no reaction to the question, returned her attention to Martinho. "The Irish share the reluctance of the Canadians and the North Americans of the United States. The Irish will wait a bit yet."

The answer appeared to annoy him. "But . . . I mean Ireland surely understands the advantages," he said. "You've no snakes. That must. . ."

"That's something God did by the hand of St. Patrick," she said. "I don't fancy the bandeirantes as cast in the same mold." She'd spoken in quick anger and regretted it immediately.

"I should've warned you, Johnny," Chen-Lhu said. "She has an Irish temper." And he thought: He's putting on an act for my benefit -- devious little man.

"I see," Martinho said. "If God didn't see fit to rid us of insects, perhaps we're wrong in trying to do this for ourselves."

Rhin glared at him in dismay.

Chen-Lhu suppressed a surge of pure rage. That devious Latin maneuvered Rhin into this position! Deliberately!

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"My government doesn't recognize the existence of God," Chen-Lhu said. "Perhaps if God were to initiate an exchange of embassies . . ." He patted Rhin's arm, noted that she was trembling, "However, the IEO believes we'll be extending the fight north of the Rio Grande Line within ten years."

"The IEO believes this? Or is it China's belief?"

"Both," Chen-Lhu said.

"Even if the North Americans object?"

"They are expected to see the light of reason."

"And the Irish?"

Rhin managed a smile. "The Irish," she said, "have always been notoriously unreasonable." She reached for her drink, hesitated as her attention was caught by a white-clad bandeirante standing across the table -- Vierho.

Martinho bounced to his feet, bowed once more to Rhin. "Doctor Kelly, allow me to introduce one of my brothers of the Irmandades, Padre Vierho." He turned back to Rhin. "This lovely one, my esteemed Padre, is a field director of the IEO."

Vierho gave her a tight little nod, sat down stiffly at the limit of the divan beyond Chen-Lhu. "Charmed," he murmured.

"My Irmandades, they are shy," Martinho said. He resumed his seat beside Rhin. "They'd rather be out killing ants."

"Johnny, how is your father?" Chen-Lhu asked.

Martinho spoke without looking away from Rhin. "The affairs of the Mato Grosso keep him much occupied." He paused. "You have lovely eyes."

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Again, Rhin found herself disconcerted by his directness. She picked up the golden bulb of his drink, said, "What is this?"

"Ah, that is flierce, the Brazilian mead. Take it for yourself. There are little points of light in your eyes to match the gold of the drink."

She suppressed a quick retort, lifted the drink to sip it, genuinely curious. She stopped with the glass tube almost at her lips as she caught Vierho staring at her hair.

"Is it really that color?" he asked.

Martinho laughed, a surprised and oddly affectionate sound. "Ahh, Padre," he said.

Rhin sipped the drink to cover a feeling of confusion, found the liquid softly sweet, filled with the memory of many flowers, and with a sharp bite beneath the sugar.

"But is it that color?" Vierho insisted.

Chen-Lhu leaned forward. "Many Irish colleens have such red hair, Vierho. It's supposed to signify a wild temper."

Rhin returned the drink to the table, wondering at her own emotions. She sensed a camaraderie between Vierho and his chief and resented the fact that she couldn't share it.

"Where next, Johnny?" Chen-Lhu asked.

Martinho darted a glance at his brother Irmandade, returned a hard stare to Chen-Lhu. Why does this official of the IEO ask such a question here and now? he wondered. Chen-Lhu must know where next. It could not be otherwise.

"I'm surprised you hadn't heard," Martinho said. "This afternoon I bid-in the Serra Dos Parecis."

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"By the great bug of the Mambuca," Vierho muttered.

Anger showed in the sudden darkening of Martinho's face. "Vierho!" he snapped.

Rhin stared from one to the other. A strange silence had settled over the table. She felt it as a tingling along her arms and shoulders. There was something about it that was fearful, even sexual . . . and profoundly disturbing. She recognized the reaction of her body, hated it, knew she could not place its source with any precision this time. All she could say to herself was: This is why Chen-Lhu sent for me -- to attract this Joao Martinho and manipulate him. I'll do it, but what I'll hate most is the fact that I'll enjoy it.

"But, Jefe," Vierho said. "You know yourself what was said about . . ."

"I know!" Martinho barked. "Yes!"

Vierho nodded, a look of pain on his face. "They said it was . . ."

"There are mutants, we know that," Martinho said. And he thought: Why did Chen-Lhu force this disclosure now? To see me argue with one of my men?

"Mutants?" Chen-Lhu asked.

"We have seen what we have seen," Vierho said.

"But the description of this thing is a physical impossibility," Martinho said. "It has to be a product of someone's superstition. That I know."

"Do you, Jefe?"

"Anything that's there we can face," Martinho said.

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"What are you talking about?" Rhin asked.

Chen-Lhu cleared his throat. Let her see now the extremes to which our enemy will go, he thought. Let her see the perfidy of these bandeirantes. Then, when I tell her what she must do, she'll do it willingly.

"There is a story, Rhin," Chen-Lhu said.

"Story!" Martinho sneered.

"Rumor, then," Chen-Lhu said. "Some of the bandeirantes of Diogo Alvarez say they saw a mantidae three meters tall in the Serra Dos Parecis."

Vierho leaned toward Chen-Lhu, face tense. The acid scar was pale on the bandeirante's cheek. "Alvarez lost six men before he gave up the Serra. You know that, Senhor? Six men! And he . . ."

Vierho broke off at the arrival of a squat, dark-skinned man in a stained bandeirante working smock. The man was round faced, with Indian eyes. He stopped almost behind Martinho, stood there waiting.

The newcomer bent close to Martinho, whispered.

Rhin could catch only a few of his words -- they were very low and in some barbarous interlands dialect -- something about the Plaza, the central square . . . crowds.

Martinho pursed his lips, said, "When?"

Ramon straightened, spoke somewhat louder. "Just now, Jefe."

"In the Plaza?"

"Yes -- less than a block from here."

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"What is it?" Chen-Lhu asked.

"A namesake of this cabaret," Martinho said.

"A chigger?"

"So they say."

"But this area's Green," Rhin said. And she wondered at her sudden feelings of dismay.

Martinho pushed himself up and away from the divan.

Chen-Lhu's face betrayed a strange watchfulness as he looked up at the bandeirante Jefe.

"You will excuse me, please, Rhin Kelly?" Martinho asked.

"Where are you going?" she asked.

"There is work."

"One chigger?" Chen-Lhu asked. "Are you sure it isn't a mistake?"

"No mistake, senhor," Ramon said.

"Is there no facility for taking care of such accidents, then?" Rhin asked. "Obviously we've a stowaway that's come into the Green on some sort of cargo or . . ."

"Perhaps not," Martinho said. He nodded to Vierho. "Get the men. I will need especially Thome for the truck and Lon to manage the lights."

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"At once, Jefe." Vierho bounced up and headed across the room toward the other Irmandades.

"What do you mean -- perhaps not?" Chen-Lhu asked.

"This is one of the new ones about which you refuse to believe," Martinho said. He turned to Ramon. "Go with Vierho, please."

"Yes, Jefe."

Ramon turned with an almost military precision, strode in Vierho's wake.

"You will explain, please?" Chen-Lhu said.

"This is described as an acid-shooter and almost a half meter long," Martinho said.

"Impossible!" Chen-Lhu snorted.

Rhin shook her head. "No chigger could possibly . . ."

"This is a bandeirante joke," Chen-Lhu said.

"As you wish, senhor," Martinho said. "You have seen the acid scar on Vierho's cheek? This too was produced by such a joke." He turned, bowed to Rhin. "Your forgiveness, Senhorita?"

Rhin stood up. A chigger almost half a meter long!

The odd rumors she'd heard half a world away reached out and touched her now, filling her with a sense of unreality. There were physical limits. Such a thing could not be. Or could it? She was all entomologist now. Logic and training took over. This was a matter which might be proved or disproved in just a few minutes. Less than a block away, the man had said. In the Plaza. And certainly Chen-Lhu wouldn't want her to



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