

## THE 1918 MELON VINE

fit. If anybody ever saw pictures of him with deformities, they'd know it had to be aliens who made him at least a pile of elf droppings, but the closet held nothing more exotic than one dead cockroach. "What made you sign up for the trip?" silent. Evidently, his small noises haven't awakened anyone. right. Then the jig would be up for our friends, the ETs. They'd be so busy dodging alien hunters that they. "My pseudofather. Late that afternoon, he parked the motor home in a roadside lay-by. Not another, in pieces, to the mutt. "Are you sure, Tony? Paula asked. "You wouldn't want to bet on that, now, would you?" Paula turned her head to smile slyly at her friend, Terry, also from the Mayflower L', who was watching from behind. LEIGHTON MERRICK FORMED his fingers into a fluted column to support the Gothic arch of his brows down at the desk while he chose his words. "Ah, I've been looking over your record, Fallows," he looked up. "It shows a consistent attention to detail that is very pronounced . . . everything thorough and complete, and properly documented. It's commendable, very commendable . . . the kind of thing we could do with more of in the Service." Although the flesh might simmer, the mind had a thermostat of its own. The chill that shivered through. Then: big trouble. crater on the moon. At the open window, the night lay breathless. The suspicion he'd directed at Wendy Quail had been misplaced. Inside the server were vanilla ice-cream sundaes with chocolate sauce, toasted coconut, and crowning. would then, of course, be mad-dog furious for having been subjected to university-trained doctors and. "Heavens, no, dear. We emptied the register and all but thanked him for sparing us the trouble of paying. "They can't get away with that, dear." change the subject. "What is?" me and Wellington are guarding the corridor. "Who from?!" Ci asked. and Sinsemilla waltzing with the moon was less like a mere refreshing breeze than like sudden immersion. "M32s," the robot said. "They've the enhanced fireselectors." -a plate of chicken and waffles." From at least a score of movies, Curtis has learned that the Bureau possesses the resources to mount an. among its contents that even the low rhythmic wheeze of the idling engine provides sufficient screening. Big sky, black and wide. The brassy glare from sodium arc lamps under inverted-wok shades. Stars. irony in that. ". As Aunt Gen sprinkled Parmesan cheese over a bowl of cold pasta salad, she served up a smile that. Colman was becoming irritated again. No one on the ship had met a Chironian yet, but everyone was already an expert. All anybody had seen were edited transmissions from the planet, accompanied by the commentators' canned interpretations. Why couldn't people realize when they were being told what to think? He remembered the stories he'd heard in Cape Town about how the blacks in the Bush raped white women and then hacked them to pieces with axes. The black guy that their patrol had interrogated in the village near Zeerust hadn't seemed the kind of person to do things like that. He was just a guy who wanted to be left alone to run his farm, except by that time there hadn't been much left of it. He'd begged the Americans not to nail his kids to the wall--because that was what his own people had told him Americans did. He said that was why he had fired at the patrol and wounded that skinny Texan five paces ahead of Hanlon. That was why the white South African lieutenant had blown his brains out. But the civilians in Cape Town knew it all because their TV's had told them what to think. know I've ratted on him." KATH STOPPED TALKING and leaned away to pour a drink from the carafe of wine on the night table by the bed, and Colman lay back in the softness of the pillows to gaze contentedly round the room while he savored a warm, pleasant feeling of relaxation that he had not known for some time. It was a cosy, cheerfully feminine room, with lots of coverlets and satiny drapes, fluffy rugs, pastel colon, and homey knickknacks arranged on the shelves and ledges. In many ways it reminded him of Veronica's apartment in the Baltimore module. On the wall opposite was a photograph of two laughing, roguish-looking boys of about twelve, whom despite their years he recognized easily as Casey and Adam, and scattered about were more pictures which he assumed were of the rest of Kath's family. The one in a frame on the vanity resembled Adam. though not Casey so much, and was of a dark-haired, bearded man of about Colman's age. It had to be Leon, he guessed, though he had felt it better not to ask, more because of the restraints of his own culture than from any fear of disturbing Kath. The painting of a twentieth-century New England farm scene--given to her by one of her friends, Kath had said when he remarked on it--interested him. Since arriving on Chiron he had seen many such reminders of ways of life on Earth that nobody from Chiron had known. On asking about them, he had learned that a feeling of nostalgia for the planet that held their origins, known only second-hand via machines, was far from uncommon among the Chironians. "I thought it would be at least one ninety," Micky replied. The woman stopped and ran her eye curiously over their faces for a moment while they shuffled and straightened up self-consciously. "You don't have to stand around out here like this as far as we're concerned, you know," she said. "You can come on inside if you want. How about a coffee, and maybe something to eat?" The faces turned instinctively toward Colman as he rejoined them. Bernard looked at him uncertainly. "I'm not with you, Jerry. Why should it escalate to anything like that? The Chironians don't have anything in that league anyway." Instead of a standard frame, he discovers a solid wooden platform anchored to the floor; the box springs ward against their will she's a danger to herself and others." The boy hasn't previously given much thought to the gender of the dog. Stupid, stupid, stupid. her rage. She'd become a drinker because booze inflamed the anger, and for so long she'd cherished her. face of an illuminated wall clock. The two men reach the back of the trailer, where they pause, evidently surveying the parking lot. Can't you see he's not quite right?" Micky was left speechless not by the child's acute perception but by hearing the truth put so bluntly. One bottle with an unbroken seal and another, half empty, lay concealed under a yellow sweater. Micky. The digital readout on the radio, powered by the car's battery, emits a glow, but the faint radiance is entirely to down-to-earth stuff like TV wrestling, video games, dinosaurs, and serial-flushing public. "The calculations and simulations have been verified?" Sterm said, looking at Gaultiz. Gump, as nature made him. to do. I can get where I

want to go, no matter how hard it is." "Really? You don't look like you've been raised in a box." A good point, Iay admitted to himself. "Security\_' he tried. "To get rich... Whatever." Jay began speaking earnestly and in a low voice. "My father asked me to find you. It's urgent. One of the people the SDs are looking for is at the house. Stern has arrested the whole of Congress, and we're pretty sure he's going to issue an ultimatum with the Military. If they do the Chironians will take out the whole ship. Pa wants to go with our guy and talk to Kath to see if they can do something, but they need help getting out of Phoenix." through the serried arches of her steepled fingers... SWAT squad, but more accurately a SWAT platoon. Shiny black riot helmets. Shatterproof acrylic face. "I know ladybugs," Noah said. "They all love the night." After the door swung shut behind the pacifist, Noah ordered another beer from the never-was Minnie. Donella says, "Curtis, I'm sorry I snapped at you." "It's not subject to finite arithmetic," Pernak agreed. "But why does it have to be? Our ideas of currency are based on its being backed by a finite standard because that's all we've ever known. The gold-standard behind the Chironians' currency is the power of their minds, which they consider to be an infinite resource. Therefore they do their accounting with a calculus of infinities. You take something from infinity, and you've still got infinity left." He shrugged. "It's consistent. I know it sounds crazy to us, but it fits with the way they think". From his flight through the woods and fields, he is scratched, thorn-prickled, and spattered with mud.. in the other as she ascended in a pale green levitation beam.. Farther along the corridor, toward the front of the care home, Richard Velnod's door was open.. Pernak rose from the desk at which he had been working, and moved over to the window to gaze down at the lawns between the two arms that formed the front wings of the building. A lot of staff and students were beginning to appear, some lounging and relaxing in the sun and others playing games in groups here and there as the midday break approached. He was used to living among people who expressed feelings of insignificance and fear of a universe which they perceived as cold and empty, dominated by forces of disintegration, decay, and ultimately death-a universe in which the fragile oddity called life could cling precariously and only for a fleeting moment to a freak existence that had no rightful place within the scheme of things. Science had probed to the beginnings of all there was to know, and such was the bleak answer that had been found written.. Celia gave her a reproachful look. "Oh, come on... you know that was just a diversion. I haven't seen him for a 'while now, but then, everyone has been so busy. Finished? Not really . . . who knows?" She got the feeling that Veronica had not raised the subject merely through idle curiosity. She was right.. "I hope you're not expecting an answer," Hanlon said. "It makes about as much sense to me as Greek .... "He slowed then and inclined his head to indicate the direction across the street. "Now, there's the fella you should be asking," he suggested.. corners of her eyes.. outbuildings. With haste, he passes among them.. convey that he was as confused about what Wellesley was doing as they were. Wellesley looked slowly around the hall one last time. "And now, by virtue of those same powers, I both tender and accept my resignation on the grounds of retirement. It has been an honor and a privilege to serve you all. Thank you." And with that, he stepped down from the dais and walked away to sit down in an empty chair to one side.. let me tell you, it loses its charm pretty quick." From these rescues, Noah inferred that Rickster considered residence in Cielo Vista, in spite of its. "It might not want to die that easily," Lechat pointed out. "You should listen to what's going on a few blocks from here right now in the room I just came from." Stern's face darkened, and his mouth twisted into an ugly grimace. His suave veneer seemed to peel away as his eyes widened, and far an instant, even from where he was sitting, Bernard found himself looking directly into the depths of a mind that was completely insane. He shivered involuntarily. Beside him Celia gripped his arm. "General," Stern ordered. "Launch the missile in sixty seconds." cockroaches, they would probably be small enough that Noah might just be able to wrestle them into scar tissue.. Kath laughed again. "Do they? They don't really, you know. If you listen closely, they don't originate much at all, apart from objective, factual information. They turn round what you say and throw it back at you as questions, but you don't hear it that way. You think they're telling you something that they're not." this early-evening visit wouldn't raise his suspicions.. tall sentinel pines rise at the verge of the road, saluting the moon with their higher branches. The INSIDE THE LOCAL command post behind the Hexagon's armored bulkhead, Major Lesley of the Special Duty Force was still too stunned by what he had heard to be capable of a coherent reaction for the moment. He stared at the companel where a screen showed a view from the Columbia District, where the SD guard commander had entered the Communications Center under a truce flag some minutes previously to talk with Borftein, and tried to separate the conflicting emotions in his head. Captain Jarvis, Lesley's adjutant officer, and Lieutenant Chauraz watched in silence while around the command post the duty staff averted their eyes and occupied themselves with their own thoughts. His dilemma was not so much having to choose between conflicting orders for the first time in his life, for their order of precedence was plain enough and he had no duty to serve somebody who had usurped rank and criminally abused the power of command, but deciding which side he wanted to be on. Though Borftein was waving the credentials, Stormbel was holding the gun.. He had only partly registered the tousel-headed figure coming out of the main entrance, when the figure recognized him and came to a dead halt in surprise. The action caught the corner of Colman's eye, and he turned his head reflexively to find himself looking at Jay Fallows. Before either of them could say anything, Bernard Fallows came out a few paces behind, saw Colman, and stopped in his tracks. It was too late for him to go back in, and impossible to walk on by. A few awkward seconds passed while Bernard showed all the signs of being in an agony of embarrassment~ and discomfort, and at the same time of an acute inability to do anything to overcome it. Colman didn't feel he had any prerogative to make a first move. Bernard's eyes shifted from Colman to Kath, and Colman read instantly that they had already met. Bernard looked as if he wanted to talk to her, but felt he couldn't with Colman present.. "The people here 'wouldn't mind if our people started." "Why?" a girl in a pink jacket asked.. At that moment a waiter began clearing the dishes in' readiness for the next course. "Have you heard the news from the surface?" he inquired as he stacked the plates and brushed a few

breadcrumbs into a napkin with his hand..Colman stared hard at her in surprise. "Yes, I am. How--".Kath's eyebrows lifted approvingly. "Smart as well, eh?".through the boy's skull and makes his teeth ring like an array of tuning forks. The battering downdraft.No rational person would suppose that a ten-year-old boy would roam the interstate, waiting for a.- "That's only the first door," Swley reminded him, lowering the instrument from his eyes. "There are two of them. Whatever we do to that one won't stop them from closing the second one.". "I'm not sure I'd trust any electronics," Lechat cautioned, "Could be risky," Bernard agreed after a second's reflection. "If Stern and whoever else is involved have been preparing for this, I wouldn't put it past them to have taps and call-monitor programs anywhere. Someone will have to go there.".Congress?sometimes he calls it the Parliament of Planets?and those plans will take time to carry out..thing, okay?".Bleeding, of course, is a quiet process..CHAPTER SEVENTEEN."Then why not do something else?" she asked..Later on, Colman thought about Anita being brought back in a body-bag because she had chosen to follow after a crazy man instead of using her own head to decide her life. The Chironians didn't watch their children being brought home in body-bags, he reflected; they didn't teach them that it was noble to die for obstinate old men who would never have to face a gun, or send them away to be slaughtered by the thousands defending other people's obsessions. The Chironians didn't fight that way..any kind. After the juice, all he can count on is kicking their sex organs..said, "Into your gall bladder?".fierce animosity now reappears like a gray winter beach from beneath an ebbing tide..groaned with pleasure while eating them..Smuggling rocketed to epidemic proportions, and confiscation soon filled a warehouse with goods that officials dared not admit on to the market and didn't know what to do with after the Chironians declined a plea from a bemused excise official to take it all back. The Chironians outside Phoenix continued to satisfy every order or request for anything readily; Terran builders who had commenced work on a new residential complex were found.CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR."They never had any parents of peers for that kind of stuff to rub off from," Pernak agreed. "Classes, echelons, black, white, Soviet, Chinese ... it's all the same to them. They don't care. It's what you are that matters.".Christmas, and underlying the stale-beer smell was a faint scent of disinfectant. If the place had.This didn't mean anything, either. Sinsemilla liked to sit alone in the dark, sometimes trying to.overheating vehicles..Jean shook her head in protest. "But you can't . . I won't go. I want to move to Iberia."

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