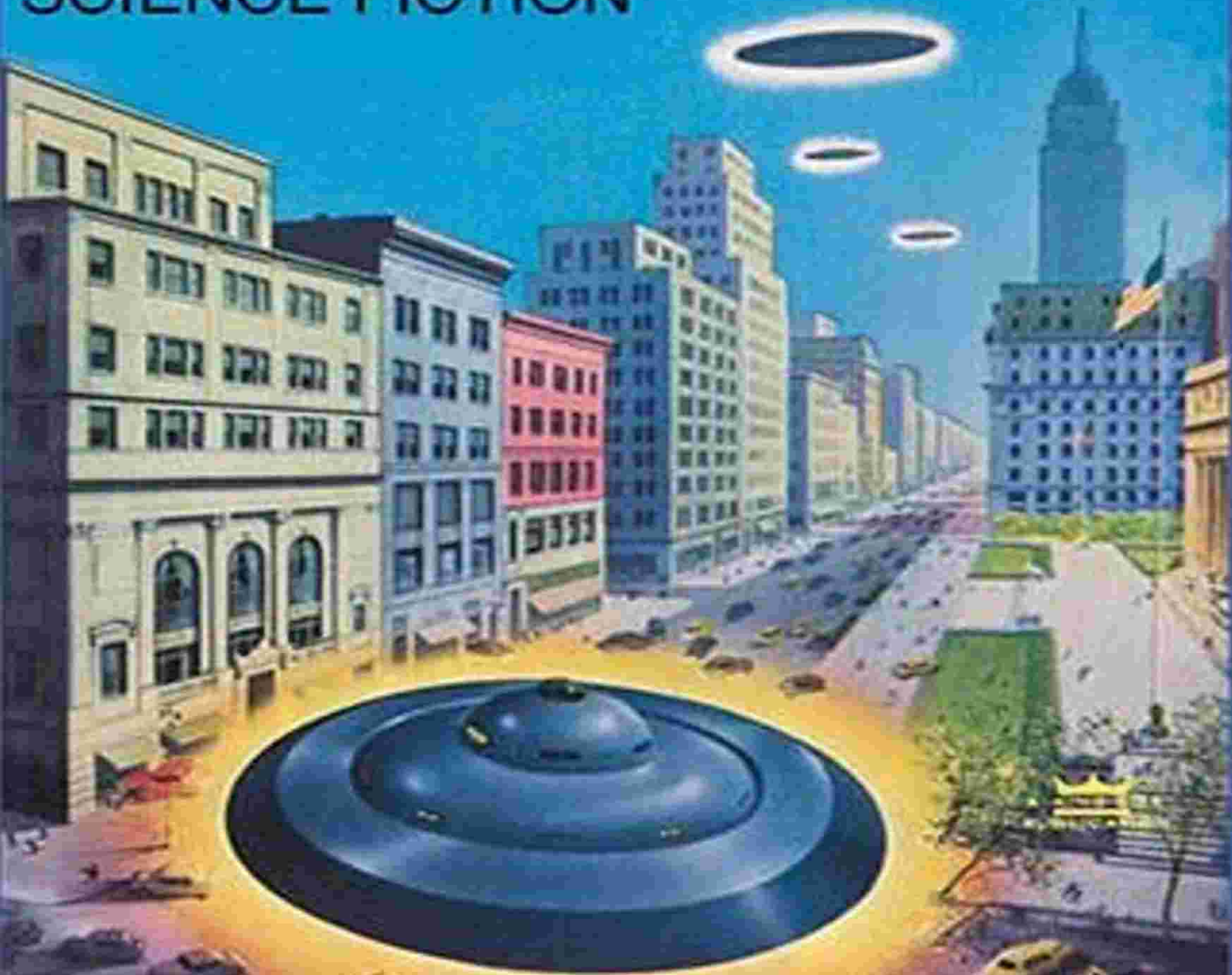


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CELESTIAL BLUEPRINT \*\*\*



# The Celestial Blueprint

By Philip José Farmer

The great Vincelleo liked being an artist. It gave him an excuse to turn the universe topsy turvy.

*Apocalyptic flights of fancy are not unusual in science fiction. But when a writer with Philip José Farmer's gift of laughter embarks on one the outcome may be impossible to predict. He may turn your comfortable world of breakfast, lunch and dinner into some incredible rabbit warren in space, where you'll be served vitamin pills by March hares which would have made Alice blush. Or you may simply meet the great Vincelleo himself.*

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The arrogance with which B. T. Revanche strode through the outer office of Bioid Electronic was enough to convince anyone that he was a V.V.I.P. His weasel eyes straying neither to left nor right, long fat cigar stabbed straight ahead, quill-like hair bristling in all directions, he was a stout little porcupine of a man. And like that spear-backed creature, he knew that no one would stop him. If they did, they'd regret it—so help them!

Very few people ever paced so fearlessly through the waiting rooms of Bioid. Most persons sat a long time on the "heel-cooling" chairs, and when they were summoned to enter the Sanctum Sanctorum, they were seldom escorted by a Bioid treacher.

But B. T. Revanche—contrary to rumor, the initials did not stand for Blood Thirsty—walked into the skyscraper that overlooked the free city of Messina, and did not bother to announce himself. Taking it for granted that he'd be recognized wherever he went, he did not even switch off his personal anti-espionage field.

Such a gesture of simple courtesy would have seemed to him an affront to his prestige.

He brushed aside those who looked as if they might get in his way, stepped into an anti-gravity elevator, and was whisked up fifty stories to the immense suit of Bioid's GHQ. There a gold-plated treacher picked him up and preceded him, barking out his name with flattering precision.

"Make way for Signor Revanche! One side or a leg off, please! Lo, he cometh!"

Revanche frowned, and bit down on his cigar. He didn't like the slightest suspicion of levity in regard to himself.

Despite a twinge of annoyance, however, he was impressed by the offices. Blazing slogans hung along the walls: *Bioid is more than skin deep! Our trinity: Art & Science & Da Vincello! Perfect both inside and out! For the Gods—and Da Vincello!*

Diagrams and sketches of the great Messinan's works hung here and there—drawings of the human body in various positions, along with pictures of Bioid robots in corresponding postures.

Poised on plastiglass were germanium brains, startlingly life-like statues that breathed, and a mounted gorilla, last of his species, shot by the great Da Vincello himself. If you stepped on a plate set in the floor while admiring it, it would reach out for you—reach out and roar loud enough to scare the shorts off you.

B. T. Revanche paused for an instant before one of the statues, and manipulated a dial at its base. It was that of an attractive woman clothed in a simple tunic of green-gold gauze, her limbs gazelle-slender in the glare.

"Speak to me, baby," he said, rather coarsely.

The plastiskin woman spoke, her lips arching in a seductive smile. "Good afternoon, man of culture. I am not alive, but there is grace and beauty in all of Da Vincello's creations, and when you look at them you forget that you have come here to pass an idle hour.

"The veils of the artificial are stripped away, and for a moment you gaze upon beauty naked and unadorned. Would you not like to take me into your arms?"

"I sure would, baby!" Revanche whispered.

He knew, of course, that the statue could not hear him. But by timing his questions to correspond with its disk-recorded utterances an illusion of conversation could be maintained. To imagine even for a brief instant that he could bend so lovely a creature to his will brought out all of the latent sadism in his nature.

"I'm not interested in you as a work of art, baby," he said. "I guess you know that."

"Pass on, man of culture," the statue said. "You linger too long here. If you look about you, you will find others more beautiful than I!"

Abruptly the illusion snapped. Scowling, feeling outrageously cheated, Revanche swung about, and resumed his arrogant stride.

There were many vivoil paintings of scenes that gave the illusion, if you looked at them obliquely, of leaves fluttering, birds flying, women walking, and water flowing. All were signed with the name of the famed poet-scientist-financier-engineer-architect-painter-sculptor-cyberneticist and

lover of the Second Italian Renaissance—Benangelo Michelardo Da Vincelleo.

There was only one man on Earth who was more widely known, more powerful. It was a measure of B. T. Revanche's importance that no practical jokes were played on *him*.

---

Da Vincelleo was famous for his complicated, rubegoldbergish, and sometimes morbid sense of humor. Visitors had to have strong nerves if they cared to see him—and survive.

It was not unusual for trap-doors to open beneath their feet and drop them, kicking and screaming, down a two-story shaft before they were eased by anti-grav to a slow stop. Or for a visitor to find the doorknob to the master's office had turned into a shriveled plastic head. Or to step into what he thought was the office, and find himself neck-deep in water, or some less acceptable fluid.

If the enraged victim stalked off, Da Vincelleo howled with glee. And if a lawsuit followed, he had ways of scaring the unhappy wretch into withdrawing it.

The office help—including the thirty vice-presidents—earned big salaries largely because they boasted iron nerves and ulcer-resistant stomachs. After their initiation into Da Vincelleo's extraordinary humor, many of them became quite sedate about the embarrassing noises and odors they seemingly made when they sat down on their chairs.

They even regarded with the classic calm of the clam's eye the lightbulbs that exploded and flew apart, the mechanical mice, the cockroaches that jumped out of opened drawers, and the water-faucets that straightened out, and squirted them in the face. The few who couldn't take it ceased drawing fabulous salaries, and retired to rest homes.

As it was, none of these disturbing things interfered with Revanche's progress. He didn't even pause on entering the Sanctum Sanctorum itself.

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## II

Da Vincelleo was sitting behind a large desk with a Cellini-exquisite reading lamp at his elbow. He was clad only in a pair of businessman's electric-blue shorts, and a scarlet beret. His forehead was lofty and square, a beautifully sculptured Greek temple dedicated to Thought. But the face that hung beneath was a fox's, and the eyes were twin furnaces, red-rimmed and smouldering. Sometimes beauty burned phoenix-like in them—more often, dollar bills.

Da Vincelleo barely had time to swing the tape-thrower back into its cabinet. He had just finished reviewing a case history of Revanche's life. His agents had done a superb job on Revanche. He knew more about the great financier than that complex man himself, for included in the report were the opinions of ten top-flight psychiatrists. Despite the fact that each of the reports was contradictory, the master of Bioid felt he had an excellent looksee into his rival's psyche.

The Messinan had painstakingly studied Revanche's psych index as a child. He knew that the formative years counted most, for the child was father to the man. Understanding what kind of youngster Revanche had been gave him an advantage from the start.

Therefore, when the magnate bounced bristling into his office, he remained seated, sure that he had the upper hand.

B. T. faced him for a moment without greeting him, giving him the famous "once-over," the scanning that had made strong men shake. His eyes were as hard as a Bioid's. His nose had been heavily powdered, so that the tiny line which circled its tip would be concealed. The cleavage betrayed the artificiality of the tip, which was made of plastiskin.

Revanche let his eyes crawl up and down his host like measuring worms. Then, abruptly, frankly, he came to the point of his visit. His request, and the whirlwind fury with which he thrust it, shook Da Vincelleo out of his sureness, brought him to his feet with a gasp.

"Di', man!" he muttered hoarsely. "What're you saying? That could only mean...."

"Da Vincelleo!" barked Revanche. "Da Vincelleo's genius in its full flowering!" He coughed the words out of the side of his mouth, without removing his cigar.

"My agents report you're hard as eternalloy," he went on, without giving the other a chance to reply. "They say you have the artistic genius of a Buonarotti, the ruthless ambition of a Borgia, and the depraved humor of a Caligula!"

The Messinan did not flinch. He looked pleased, as well he might, for Revanche meant the epithets as compliments.

"You'll stop at nothing to get what you want," the financier emphasized. "It was your remorseless drive and executive ability that made you build Bioid with only a servoshoeshiner as a start. And you know as well as I do that you stole the money to buy the servo from your blind and penniless mother!"

Da Vincelleo blinked. He had thought no one had known about that. But after all, what did he care? His mother had been paid back. He had buried her in a beautifully designed gold coffin.

"My psychologists say one of your ambitions is to become the richest, most powerful man in the System. Unfortunately, I'm in your way. Well, if you'll do as I ask I'm prepared to turn over my entire holdings to you!"

Da Vincelleo's rusty-brown eyes flaked with red desire. "How could I?" he countered. "If I tried it, I'd have to get out of the System. Every free city, every planet would band together to attack me. The universe would howl for my blood. What's wrong with you, Revanche, that you can't see that? Are you seriously trying to get me killed—or is it your contempt for the creative intellect which prevents you from realizing how the dogs would howl?"

"Let them howl!" Revanche countered. "I'll sign over my entire fortune to you. I'll make you president and owner of my company. We'll draw up a contract which will make me head of Bioid. That way, I'll bear all the responsibility. All, do you hear? You'll actually be directing operations, but you'll be legally blameless. Do you understand? Immediately after the job is finished, Bioid reverts to you."

"And you, Revanche. What are *you* going to do?"

"As soon as my revenge is satisfied, I'll take my yacht to the newly-discovered planet of Alpha Draconis. I'll be beyond extradition there. I'll start business all over again. It's a raw planet that offers a challenge to me this tame System has lost."

"Well, I don't know. I'll need time to think."

Revanche growled, then barked: "My agents say you're famous for making electronicfast decisions. Tell me right now—or I go to your competitor."

"Think, man," he went on quickly. "You're an engineer, and an artist. It will be the culmination, the masterpiece of your career. Historically speaking, Buonarotti or Nero won't be able to hold a candle to you. And you'll also be the richest man under the sun."

Da Vincelleo's eyes swiveled back and forth. Revanche could see the tubes glowing, the switches clickclacking on the tremendous grey board, inside that Greek temple of a forehead. But, he reflected, somewhat hypocritically, it was a temple that needed a whip to drive out the moneychangers.

The Messinan made up his mind suddenly. "Done! I'll get my lawyers, and we'll make the transfer at once. I'll conduct operations sub rosa. That's best."

He sat down at his desk, and ran his fingers over several electronic "eyes" and said, "Your hometown is a free city, isn't it?"

"Yes, it has no contracts with the other cities. No alliances. It's a non-co-op all the way. It exists by its smug self-righteous little self!"

"And it refuses to use modern-day mechanisms. Right?"

"Yes. It has reverted back to the horse-and-buggy days. Claims machines take the soul out of a man. Yet, and get this—here's the irony of their set-up. Despising machinery, they're still run by the most mechanical religion, and the most mechanical state, politically-speaking, imaginable. They think the devil invented the steam engine!

"Yet each soul in Dafess City is destined from birth to a certain rank in society. Destined to a certain job, a certain mate, and a certain place in Heaven! They've got a book which they call the Celestial Blueprint. It outlines the future in veiled, allegorical terms. But the Dafesses take every word literally, the letter being their spirit."

"Dafesses?" asked the artist, pretending ignorance.

"After Multum Bonum Dafess, founder and prophet. Anyway, the Blueprint foretells the end of the world, when the inhabitants of Dafess will be saved, and the rest of the world will go to a nice little place reserved for them, called Rejectus.

"Rejectus is furnished with all the comforts of home—with hot water, baked meats, specially-built furniture, highly-trained personal attendants. You get me. Only the Dafesses, the Truncated, will be left untouched after the Day of Judgment. The Untruncated will go to Rejectus."

Da Vincelleo shifted uncomfortably in his chair. When he was a boy, his loving mother had described just such a place as his ultimate destination—if he didn't mend his ways. And, though he had scoffed, his unconscious knew how to pitchfork certain obscure uncalled-for figments into his conscious mind.

"You really hate them, don't you?" he glibed.

"I hate them because they're so hateful," Revanche replied. "You would, too, if you were destined to be looked down on all your life by people you knew were stupid. Or if you fell in love, and you were forbidden to marry because the girl wasn't slated by the Elders to be your mate. Or if you were forced to marry some fat cow with the brains of a magpie because the Elders interpreted a certain passage in the Blueprint as referring to you."

His voice grew strained. "That's not all! When I ran away, and made my pile, and could have any woman I wanted, I found I couldn't endure any woman not from my hometown. Do you want to know why?" He touched his artificial nosetip, his voice soaring in a new scream.

"I'll tell you why! From infancy I was drilled in the idea that only women with truncated noses were pure, glorious and beautiful. Until I ran away, I never saw a woman with a normal nose. Never! And now, even though I've disguised the mark of my native community, and know, rationally, that untruncated women *are* beautiful, my nerves, my stomach, won't admit it. I think Miss Solar System of 2052 is ugly!

"I could have her anytime, anywhere, understand? But I can't endure her, or any of her sisters. They all look misshapen. And you know what, Da Vincelleo? Despite all my money, I can't get a single beautiful woman in the

System to cut off the tip of her nose for me. Not one! And I've met plenty who've said they loved me, and would die for me. But they don't love me enough to snip off the tips of their money-sniffing little noses. Oh, no!"

For an instant there was mute agony in his stare. "Just why do you think I've fought my way up until I'm sitting on top of Sol? So I can take it easy, and play golf or go staryachting? Not B. T. Revanche!

"It's because I hate the guts of every soul in Dafess, every beakcut heaven-elected who won't touch a machine because it might spot him with unholy oil, yet is himself a machine of the lowest type! I'm going to give them the most ironic justification of their creed.

"Funny thing, though," Revanche added, as if it were still puzzling him. "A *statue* of a beautiful woman without a truncated nose does seem to stir me a little. Like that one in the slogan corridor. It shows my basic instincts are still biologically normal."

Da Vincelleo sighed in mock sympathy and began running his fingers over the "eyes" that would summon the chiefs of his staffs. He knew that what he had in mind was going to be his masterwork. The secret excavation beneath Dafess would in itself tax his resources. As he blocked in the calls, his gaze fell upon a romantic historical novel on the desk before him, *Renfrew Rides Again For The Mounted*.

His rocketing brain must have collided with a humorous thought, for his foxlike lips turned up even more. So Revanche wanted irony, did he? And poetic justice?

He looked at the financier but Revanche failed to notice the smile. He was still raving.

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### III

A month later, the noonday sun above Dafess City began dimming. In less than five minutes it became a completely black ball, and remained that somber, and terrifying unnatural hue until it sank below the horizon.

In due course the stars rose in their appointed courses. Then suddenly, without warning, many fell, hurtling across the sky, and disappearing into the bottomless throat of space.

The full moon bounded up. Just as it cleared the horizon, it was struck by a large red star. Wounded, the moon dripped blood.

All these signs were accompanied, outwardly, at least, by great rejoicing in Dafess. The Celestial Blueprint was fulfilling itself. The Time had come. The Truncated were about to get their just reward.

They took purification baths for the first time in their lives. They put on immaculate white robes. Then, en masse, they marched to the great open square in the center of the city, and waited.

Meanwhile, all the Untruncated dwelling in Dafess had been cast out, and all intercourse with the outside had been cut off. Inasmuch as they used no radios, they had only to close the gates of their high-walled city to become incommunicado.

As soon as that was done, and the citizens were collected together to receive their long prophesied payment for holiness, they turned their short snouts upward to await further developments. Nor were they at all disappointed.

As predicted, the sky rolled up like a scroll. It did so with enough thunder to shake the bones and rattle the teeth of even the most hardened, and secretly sceptical.

With the thunder came a blaze of light which revealed a Titanic forge, a cosmic smithy where brawny angels with soot blackening their robes, and smudging their halos stood beating plowshares into swords and spears.

Flame leaped. Bellows pumped by a cherubic host wheezed like asthmatic Prometheuses. Hammers as large as hills clanged on white-hot weaponheads the size of skyscrapers held on anvils large as mountains. Fire and smoke puffed out in a great cloud that threatened to envelop the city, and a clamor beat upon their ears, and bounced from the heavens to the ground and back again.

Then, the sky snapped shut. It clicked like a camera-eye, and the tremendous vision was gone.

But the assembled Truncated were transported with joy. Had they not seen the swords prepared for the smiting of the heathen? All as foretold by the Celestial Blueprint?

An exultant buzz rose from the crowd. It was, however, stilled at once, for, across the blackened sky, lightning flashed, and twisted itself into words that seared the eyes of the multitude. Everyone, watched spellbound above them.

YOU HAVE BEEN CHOSEN.

A vast murmur of pleasure ascended from the crowd. Many of them, it might have been noticed, looked relieved. They wiped sweat off their brows, and glanced furtively at their companions to see if they had noticed the doubt on their faces.

The Elders of the Truncated, gathered upon a raised platform in the center of the square, lifted their arms and began the ritual whose words would start the gears of the final minutes of the Day into spinning.

As Blueprinted, the sky paled and became its normal afternoon azure. The citizens stood hushed, gazing expectantly upwards. After a tense two minutes, the sky suddenly turned black again. This time, however, streaks of blue appeared between the black clots. In a moment, it was seen that the sable hue had been caused by a host of figures, so many they had almost blotted out the blue.

It was as if the sky were an upside-down sea out of which dived a thousand bodies, plunging earthward head foremost.

A shout of rapture swelled from the ground to meet them. The dead Truncated were descending from Heaven to crown the faithful living!

But there was one man who did not scream with joy. He was B. T. Revanche, clad in a white robe and showing a nose from which the plastiflesh had been removed. He was there because he had insisted to Da Vincelleo that he could not get his money's worth unless he actually participated.

"You can't taste blood over a TV set," he had growled.

So it was that he was the only one of the throng who did not at the next moment fall silent in an amazed numbness. For the falling figures did not carry laurels with which to crown the faithful on the ground. Far from it. They held swords before them—long and broad two-edged blades that flashed ominously in the bright sunlight.

A scream of mingled outrage and terror tore the air into tatters. Something was wrong! Somebody had thrown a monkey wrench into the celestial gears! The Blueprint had said nothing about this!

The figures swelled in size as they came closer. They slowed their headlong rush, uprighted themselves, and floated feet first to earth. There they paused a minute, glaring about, until the entire army had descended.

The multitude looked at the swordsmen, who were close enough to be discerned in detail. They breathed out one marveling and shocked syllable: "X!"

Yes, each one of the thousands of descended beings was a replica of X, the entity known in other lands and other tongues by a thousand other names. X was one of his signs, and it was the one chosen by the prophet Dafess to designate the entity because X was an unknown quantity to the pagans.

It was X, so wrote the prophet, who had visited Dafess in person and assured that man of wisdom that he alone was being given the monopoly of the sacred teachings. Nor did it matter to the prophet that hundreds of others had made prior claims. He, Dafess, was sure that only his descendants were to be X's heirs on earth until such time as the entity returned.

To prove it, they had marched into the wilderness and built this city, and had then written a thousand books to bolster the tradition.

"I will carry a sword," X had promised.

The Dafesses believed this, but they had been assured by their Elders, who were skilled in reading between the lines, that the sword would be for the Untruncated. The peace would be the Truncateds'.

Now X, as foretold, had returned to their city. He brought a sword, and if he also carried peace with him, it was a peace that passed understanding. And his name, in this place and time, had suddenly become Legion.

Each one of the horde was X, but such an X as had never been dreamed of. He was eight feet tall, and made of eternalloy over which plastiskin had been stretched to simulate flesh. So clever was the craftsmanship that only one who knew beforehand, like Revanche, that the creature was begotten in the factory could have told that here was not a living X.

The artistry extended to the magnificent body, which had broad shoulders that tapered to slim hips and long, panther-muscled legs. The delicate feet were shod in brass, as the gods of old Egypt were reputed to be shod.

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#### IV

Revanche, who was seeing for the first time the Messinan's work, scrutinized with cynical elation the creature who had landed closest to him. Awed despite himself, he saw that a fast-whirling halo hovered perhaps a foot above the noble head. Every five seconds the luminous ring changed color.

Even as he watched it, it changed color. From gold it dissolved into a bloody red, and then into a gangrenous green. Next it became a bruise purple, a witching hour black and finally shifted back to gold.

The aspect that startled Revanche most, however, was the face. The false flesh-mask stretched over the metal skull was a grotesque representation of the features of X as seen in the paintings of the Spanish and Italian masters.

There was the somewhat narrow and bearded face with the "sensitive" full-lipped mouth and the gentle nose that poised between straightness and aquilinity. There were the same eyes—flowing and compassionate.

But on the mask those conventional features had been slightly altered, or, as it were, "pulled." Though the lips had been cast with meekness and love on their curves, the smile had been lengthened, and subtly twisted until it had passed over the boundary of a smile and became a snarl.

Whatever fearsome hand had fashioned that mask had known that a snarl is an elongated smile, just as a smile is a modified snarl. The hand had perceived that it was the snarl of the ape that had become the smile of the

man, perceived too that, the process of evolution continuing, the smile of the man had passed into the ultra-tender mouth-curving of X.

And now, that smile which was the apex of Nature's efforts, had been remolded, recast, rehammered, and returned into a caricature of itself.

Da Vincello was not only a scientist, he was an artist supreme. In that mask he had shown the people of Dafess a reflection of themselves. And he made them see what they had done to X, how they had twisted the face of universal love into an inverted image of their true nature—that of self-love.

The mask was the face of X—*reductio ad absurdum*.

The gentle curve of nostrils had been expanded into derision, and an almost savage fierceness. The glowing compassion of the eyes had become intense with a flame so hot it made the onlookers wonder how the lashes and brows resisted melting, and running into the cavernous eyesockets.

Yet, though fiery, the lineaments combined into a chilling sight. And as there were thousands of the masks, they contributed to a geometrical progression of terror.

Revanche, though he was safe, felt struck with fear and guilt that had been instilled into him when he was a child.

At that moment an Elder who had been eyeing the nearest X, afraid to go into the ritualistic embrace with it because of its fearsome aspect, suddenly ran to it. He threw himself at its feet, clasped its legs, and howled: "Mercy!"

A deep powerful voice that sounded more like the roar of a motor than anything else answered, "Justice!"

Justice was what the Elder had prayed for all of his life. Now he got it.

The automaton lifted the sword, and brought it down with great violence on the Elder's chicken-skinny neck.

"Chuck!" rasped the blade.

"Bump!" replied the head.

The white-bearded ball rolled on the pavement until it stopped against the curb. Upside down, it looked at everything from a new and possibly

revelatory viewpoint, for its expression was not only bewildered and hurt but, for the first time, educated.

Dafess City became bedlam, pandemonium, terror on a cataclysmic scale. The white body of the Truncated broke into fifty thousand fragments that fled here and there, circled, whirled, zig-zagged, leaped, crawled, bounded, darted, and lunged.

The legion of X stalked after them. They moved jerkily but swiftly. Above all, they moved relentlessly.

When a cornered person could not get by the awesome figure, he or she would go down on his or her knees and clasp his hands and howl, "Mercy! Mercy!"

"Justice!" roared the immobile lips of the mask.

"Slush!" smacked the lips of the blade.

"Thud!" echoed the head.

Though many skulls rolled, a more or less objective observer, such as Revanche, would have noticed that many more were spared.

They were unharmed for a reason, however, for always the flailing swords forced the mob in a general direction.

They were being herded towards the Temple of the Righteous, a truncated pyramid not far off the square and one which also housed the First Dafess Sacred-Secular Bank and Finance Corporation. Peculiarly enough, the latter institution had grown to such proportions that it had crowded out the former and now occupied the center of the building. The Dafesses had accepted what seemed to them to be the will of X and had moved the holy section to one corner.

Through the huge marble doors the multitude was forced. They had no place else to go, for, wherever they turned, the blazing eye and the flashing sword headed them off.

B. T. Revanche allowed himself to be borne along with the current. Once inside the pyramid, however, he separated himself from the crowd, and ran down a side-passage. The main body was being forced into the open door of

the vault. He did not wish to go with them. He had persuaded Da Vincello to prepare a private entrance for him.

He ran with all the speed his short legs could muster, puffing hard. When he rounded a corner, he stopped short. His heart, which had been pounding only moderately now suddenly went into the Walpurgisnacht terror music of Moussorgsky's *Night on Bare Mountain*. A Bioid X was stationed down the hall, exactly in front of the mural that concealed the secret door!

He paused, sucked in oxygen and courage, and then walked briskly up to the thing, confident that the electronic "interferer" he wore strapped to his belt would neutralize it.

But when he got up to it his suppressed doubt and suspicion were translated into action. The flame-eyed X lifted its sword, and lashed out at him.

"You have been chosen!" the frozen lips roared.

The keen tip missed by a spiderweb taking Revanche's Adam's apple out in one neat chunk.

Appalled, the financier turned and fled.

While he ran, he turned his head and shrilled back, "You are making a mistake!" It was a futile thing to scream out, for the plastiskin ears were deaf to meaning, if not to noise.

Revanche's hand fumbled on the interferer's switch, and clicked it back and forth. It seemed to be working; it was warm and humming. What then was the matter?

He cursed Da Vincello for a strictly third-rate artisan—a bungler, botcher, and bonehead.

Suddenly he was running down another empty corridor, his hard soles bouncing echoes off the faraway walls. *Slap! Slap! Puff! Wheeze!* There was an open window at the distant end of the hall. If only he could make that...!

Again he stopped short. Half hidden in the shadows stood an X on guard. It turned its head, and tiger-bright eyes flamed.

Revanche choked off a scream, and whirled. He expected to see the other destroyer behind him, but it was not in sight. When he reached the junction

of the two corridors, he saw it standing there, sword held out before it in satiric salute.

There was but one way for Revanche to go—straight back to the bank's vault.

For the first time he realized that he himself, B. T. Revanche, was being herded!

He spun around again to face the oncoming terrors. Frantically, his fingers flicked the switch.

"Stop! Stop! I am your master! I am Revanche! I own you!"

"You are the chosen!" they bellowed.

He whirled, and began running again.

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When he reached the vault, he found the X's lined up in a double row, like the guards at a royal reception. They stood facing each other with eyes blazing at eyes, swords held straight out before them and legs widespread above gleaming shoes of brass.

Revanche did not stop but sped down between the guard of honor as if he were afraid they would all begin chopping at once. He had a vision of tiny fragments of meat swimming in a pool of blood, like protozoa jerking in a drop of water beneath a microscope.

When he came to the huge steel door of the vault, he stopped and looked within. The floor immediately before him had raised up to form a wall. Beneath it was a round hole that acted as the entrance to a large, metallic, and greasy tube.

Down that funnel had slid the entire population, screaming, wailing, weeping, clutching at one another for support, striking out in a burst of maniacal fury.

Down they had gone notwithstanding, with a gnashing of teeth and tongues, and frantic clawings at the smooth and slippery sides in a desperate attempt to keep from hurtling to the doom they knew awaited them.

How well they knew it! This tube was exactly that which had been foretold in the Celestial Blueprint as the passageway for the heathen when they fell headlong to Rejectus!

Revanche had planned to slip down his private stairway to the little balcony that would overlook the other end of the tube. There he would have watched the doomed spilling out in a white and frenzied flood. There he would have lapped up revenge as a placated Greek ghost would have lapped blood at a Trojan hecatomb.

Instead, trembling, and bursting with terror, he turned and faced the X's. "You haven't got me yet!" he screamed at them.

He kicked the little wheel, that closed the vault from the inside. Once the two-hundred-ton door clanged shut, it could not be opened as long as the inside wheel remained locked in place. It was an anti-robbery device that he was well aware of, having in his youth once planned to plunder the bank in order to get a start in business.

The huge door swung shut swiftly.

Revanche shook his fist at the onrushing horde, then jerked around, and leaped into the tube. The thunder of brass shoes filled the vault walls. Just before he slid out of view Revanche twisted his head for one last look.

A Bioid was leaping through the air in a desperate endeavor to sacrifice itself by stopping the door with its hard and almost indestructible eternalloy body.

The financier did not see whether or not the Bioid made it, for he dropped abruptly into blackness.

---

## V

Normally, he would have shot down the smooth funnel, inclined at thirty-five degrees, at a terrific speed. But he had not become the most resourceful financier of the solar system for nothing. No wizard in an emergency, he yet liked to be prepared.

So it was that he flicked the switch of the anti-grav unit around his waist, and quickly slowed to a half-speed. He had wanted to wear a full power machine, but it would have been too bulky to conceal beneath the loose folds of his garments. He had to be content with a moderate rate of descent.

After twenty seconds of sliding, he slipped out of the mouth of the funnel. It was as he had hoped. His checked speed enabled him to drop onto a granite ledge beneath the opening. Even so, he fell close to the very edge. A little more velocity, and he would have gone completely over.

Shuddering, he clutched the rim of rock until he'd regained some of his composure. After a while, he inched forward until his head hung over the lip of the precipice, and he could gaze downward into the abyss.

Below, seemingly a thousand feet down, though he knew the distance must be an illusion fabricated by Da Vincello, was a lake of molten lava rising in great billows, then sinking into deep valleys, and releasing gigantic bubbles that rose and burst, and loosed a stench of sulfur that almost suffocated him. Smoke spiralled up past his head, and collected against the roof far above. The heat that ascended was strong enough to crisp his face if he had looked long into it.

Nowhere was there a sign of Dafess's inhabitants. All had been dissolved in the roaring sea of lava, in the hell that had been prophesied for all their enemies.

Quailing, Revanche looked to left and right along the narrow ledge for an avenue of escape. There was none. Both ends tapered off into the rock.

Straight across, perhaps a hundred feet away, was the balcony from which he had hoped to see the show. If he had the guts, he thought, he could step up his anti-grav past the danger point and, almost weightless for a second, could leap to the balcony.

If the pack didn't burn out while he was in midair. If he didn't misgauge and miss the balcony ... if the hellish blast from below didn't crisp him before he completed the jump ... if....

---

He stood up, and by the glow thrown up from the bright ocean, he peered up the slide. Another *if*. What if he could brace his legs against the sides of the *O*, and painfully work his way back up?

At that moment a figure shot out of the shadows of the tunnel, a figure that approached at express-train speed and quickly loomed larger and larger. Its blood-colored halo, the mask with the snarl of tenderness, the furnace-door eyes, and the dripping sword—all could be made out in frightening detail.

Like the lost soul he believed he was, Revanche screamed and dropped flat to the ledge, crushing his snapped nose into the granite. He moaned, and waited for the clang of armor and the final whistle of the blade through the air before it thudded into his neck.

Above him something dark and monstrous shot out of the *O* and roared by.

Whoosh!

It missed the ledge by many feet, and fell into the lava ocean.

A train of shadows flickered over Revanche. The air was disturbed by the constant passage of flying elephantine bodies.

Whoosh!

Whoosh!

Whoosh!

One by one, like living shells exploded out of a circus cannon, they projected over their intended prey. By the thousands they meteored over him, eyeballs matching the glare of the lava below, swords automatically slashing out even as they spun and turned over and over, and splashed into the liquid rock.

Whish! Brrr! Whoosh! Splash!

Suddenly—silence.

Slowly, Revanche rose. He could not believe it. He looked over the ledge. Only the bare and boiling sea. He turned and glanced up the tube. Silence and shadows, and the gleaming greasy symbol for zero.

Understanding melted the glacier on his brain. He broke into a wild dance, wept tears for gladness, whistled three times, and shouted, "I've won!"

Revanche has won! And I've beat them!"

*Clippety-clop! Clippety-clop!*

The unbelievable ring of iron horseshoes jumped out of the tube's mouth.

Revanche froze in a pirouette, stood poised, then seemed to collapse into a strange loose creature that shambled over to the funnel and leaned backward to look up, like a dazed and stiffnecked Neanderthal.

The liquid film of joy glazed over his mind again, grew white and cold and lumpy.

A mount and its rider were coming out of the darkness and into the brimstone glare. The horse was a nightmare black, its eyeballs burning tiger-yellow bright. It stretched back cruel and foaming lips, and revealed teeth sharp enough to rend him.

A ghost horse, it cried for blood while its magnetic shoes clung briefly to the metal floor before lifting again.

*Clippety-clop* rang its hooves.

Then it stopped and hung its head down over the tube's lip and fixed Revanche with one demon's eye while its rider dismounted. It remained in that attitude, and did not move even when its master dropped gently onto the ledge to face Revanche.

The financier felt his bulging eyes threaten to leave his head, like balloons tugging at their moorings.

His eyes understood before his brain did.

They took in a face that was a compound of two persons, a masterly paradox of features and traits: compassionate and merciless, sensitive and coarse, loving and hating. It was a hybrid of X, and of *himself*.

It was not that contradictory face that told him so much, that explained why his interferer had failed to work, even why he had been "herded," and was now facing this fantastic and vengeful creation.

It was something else that told him that not only Dafess City but he, Revanche, had been the victim of a Caligulan sense of humor, the butt of the most colossal practical joke the Messinan had ever played.

That something else he had been too shocked to think about. Why had the Bioids, who carried full-power anti-gravs within their bodies, fallen over the ledge? It was because Da Vincelleo had deliberately destroyed them to raise his hopes. And then had brought out this—this thing—this *joke*! Not satisfied to make Revanche squirm, he had wanted him to sweat blood.

The creature that was drawing a saber from its scabbard, was dressed in a uniform now long dead, but easily recognizable because it had been resurrected recently in many of the romantic historical novels that enjoyed a Solarwide vogue.

It wore the rugged active-service boots, the dun-colored trousers, and the stiff abbreviated jacket of a twentieth century foot soldier of officer caste. It was singing softly from a rigid mouth.

"Death to the enemy."

It was plain whom the enemy was to be.

Revanche fell to his knees.

"Mercy!"

Its saber lifted. The immobile lips roared.

"Justice!"

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## EPILOGUE

Da Vincelleo, hovering far above Dafess in a spaceship, watched the final scene upon the TV screen before him. Then, sighing because it hurt him to destroy his greatest work of art, he pressed a red button. And he saw the city of Dafess disappear in the old and familiar, but still terrible, mushroom.

"That fool Revanche!" he said. "Did he really think I'd massacre an entire city and take a million to one chance of escaping retribution from the Solar Police?"

He did not think of his being punished for such a deed as being justice. Anything he did was right; retaliation from others would have been

vengeance, not justice.

He sighed again. The Project: Dafess, had been enormous. But the worst problem had been Dafess's citizens themselves. Even while an exact replica of the city was being constructed in a Canadian wilderness, far from the real Dafess, his staff was tackling the necessary research, of which the hardest part had been both historical and technological. One, finding out exactly what each citizen looked and acted and talked like. Two, building Bioids that looked, acted, and talked like the original.

Of course, the whole illusion had been designed to fool only one man and had had to be kept in existence less than ten hours.

A minor, though fascinating problem had been that of getting blood to spout from the severed heads and concealing the springs and wires inside the wrecked bodies.

At that moment Revanche, very much alive in his star yacht poised just above the stratosphere, pressed a button. The screen on his desk showed him a blur that was the missile he'd just launched and the target, Da Vincelleo's ship. Then there was incandescence, followed by the old familiar mushroom.

Revanche growled, "That fool!" and he turned away from the screen. His face was smug as a porcupine's that has loaded up on tender and vitamin rich birch-bark. He felt exceedingly satisfied. Why not? Watching the destruction of the synthetic citizens of the synthetic city of Dafess had been almost as rewarding as seeing the real city delivered to judgment. The process had been a type of psycho-drama that any good psychiatrist would have recommended for emotional catharsis.

For the financier trusted no man, and though Da Vincelleo had thought his double-crossing project was a secret, he could not hide it from the richest and most inquisitive human in the system. Nor had he guessed that Revanche would then employ Bioid's competitor to fashion an electronic proxy of himself.

Revanche had suffered—long distance—as his plastiskin counterpart had seemed to suffer. Its terror-stricken face was his, and when it had yelled with frustration and screamed for mercy, he had done so also.

But when he saw the terrible parody of himself lop off his proxy's head with a saber, he had felt as if he'd been killed and then come to life again.

He'd been seized with a laughter that forced him to grip his chair to keep from falling to the floor. And now, very much calmed and smoking a new cigar, he felt wonderful about his mockup's death.

He no longer had a barely suppressed fear of being hurled by his deity into the molten ocean of Rejectus. It was as if he had paid for his own sins through the mechanical scapegoat and now could live on with an untroubled conscience.

He took the cigar from his mouth and chortled.

And a third mushroom suddenly sprouted.

Revanche and his star yacht went back to the elements in its white heart, far hotter than the flames of Rejectus.

Da Vincello had been a thorough man, as suspicious as Revanche himself. Shortly after he had made his deal with the financier, he had had a machine built which keyed in to the personal pattern of his *kappa* brain-waves. If that pattern disappeared, quit radiating, a circuit was activated which sent a "bloodhound" missile soaring up into the air from a buried pit in the city of Messina, a missile whose electromagnetic nose sniffed for the scent of Revanche's *kappa* brain-waves and would not stop until it homed in on its target.

Thus, if the financier had paused long enough to light up his cigar *before* pressing the button that disposed of his enemy, he would have finished smoking it and many more after it.

For Da Vincello had been convinced that Revanche had perished with the false city of Dafess, and he was just reaching out to flick the bloodhound's de-activation stud when Revanche's missile interrupted him forever.



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