Revised Edition

Lawrence Watt-Evans

Wittke tapped Gunnison on the shoulder—the shoulder that wasn’t leaning against the outer wall of the installation. The astronomer looked up from his book, startled.

“Come on,” Wittke said. “It’s time to go. The others are already inside.”

Gunnison closed the paperback and slipped it into one of the pockets of his protective suit. He picked up his helmet and followed Wittke to the airlock door.

“I don’t understand how you can stand there and read science fiction at a time like this,” Wittke said, as signaled to the control booth operator. “This is about as exciting as real science is ever likely to get, and a hell of a lot moreso than most of those silly novels—how can you think about anything else?”

Gunnison shrugged, then lifted his helmet into place. He didn’t bother to say anything; if Dr. Wittke didn’t understand, Gunnison didn’t know how to explain it. Wittke was right, of course, that the mission was exciting, incredibly so—but it hadn’t started yet. Most of the others had still had last-minute things to do, circuits to test, connections to check, but Gunnison had finished all his preparations, so what else was there to do but stand around and read?

And it was science fiction that had gotten him into astronomy in the first place, or any kind of science—he had wanted to know what all those places were that the heroes were going to. Astronomy seemed like a good way to get involved in the future.

So was this project, of course, which was probably why Wittke couldn’t understand why he was reading.

One reason was that reading kept him from getting as nervous—poor Wittke had chewed off half his fingernails. Gunnison hadn’t done anything like that.

He had occasionally read the same page three or four times, though. Not that that was any big deal, since the book was an old favorite, not anything new—it was H. Robert Carter’s classic Five Minutes to Annihilation, and Gunnison had read it a dozen times before.

It was a real shame Carter wasn’t here to see the Hole; Gunnison thought he would have been fascinated by it. Maybe he could be invited for a visit later, when things were further along—if he could handle it. Gunnison knew that Carter had been badly hurt in an auto accident back in ’82 and hadn’t written a word since, but he wasn’t sure just what Carter’s condition was, whether the man could still travel at all.

Gunnison checked the helmet seal, then looked around. If anything went wrong this might be his last look at his native world, so he took his time about it. He wasn’t a very sentimental sort, but this was special.

He remembered Carter’s frequent paeans to the beauties of Earth delivered through his characters, especially in the classic story, “Memories of Terra.” Gunnison loved that story. He wasn’t going to be flying off in the final fleeing spaceship, like Carter’s hero, but he was leaving, and he knew he had to take that final look.

Not that this was exactly the most scenic spot on Earth. The installation stood on sloping gray cracked asphalt, surrounded by quickly-erected chain-link fence; just beyond the lower side of the ring of fence, a low row of bushes separated the old parking lot from the sidewalk. Beyond that traffic rumbled past on Route 4, largely oblivious to the careful preparations and growing excitement at the site.

Reporters and TV cameras stared through the fence from various angles, thirty or forty of them in all, but Gunnison ignored them. They weren’t anything he would ever miss.

Up at the top of the slope the headquarters building still had the Holiday Inn sign over the door, but a sheet of plywood with the word Closed painted sloppily on it in bright green had been nailed across the front windows. The big sign out by the road had been knocked over by one of the equipment-hauling trucks, allegedly by accident, and the broken pieces were still strewn across the pavement.

The installation itself was a big off-white box, maybe fifteen meters on a side, assembled quickly out of pre-fab pieces; dozens of cables trailed from it, some snaking across the parking lot, others hanging in great tangled masses from improvised poles or draping heavily between the main box and the modified construction trailer that served as a control room. Several technicians were milling about by the trailer.

None of this was much like the scenery Carter had described in “Memories of Terra.” Everything here was ugly, obviously thrown together in a hurry—but then, no one had known that the Hole was going to appear. No one had expected it; no one knew what had caused it; no one knew how long it would last. No one even knew for certain how long the Hole had been there before anyone realized it was something more than an optical illusion—anyone, that is, other than those unfortunates who happened to walk or drive into it.

Gunnison wondered idly how many people had vanished forever before the fences went up; the statistics and documentation people had six cases they were sure of, four they rated as highly probable, and they guessed, off the record, that there could have been any number of others.

Nobody knew where they had gone, whether any of them were still alive; there were theories, some crazier than anything any science fiction writer had ever devised, but nobody knew—and Gunnison was about to follow those missing people.

Except he and Wittke and the others were going in deliberately, and they intended to come back, and if possible bring back something that would make further trips worthwhile. These days people expected science to pay for itself.

If the tether didn’t work, then they’d be a dozen more statistics—but Al Miller had made it back safely, and nobody saw any reason that a dozen people sharing a tether couldn’t do just as well as Miller had solo.

Even so, Gunnison still wondered if this might be his last look at his own Earth.

It really was like a scene from one of Carter’s stories.

Wittke was inside the airlock, beckoning to him; Gunnison hoisted his pack and stepped into the chamber. The door closed behind him, cutting off his view of the parking lot and the highway and the gray-blue autumn sky. He slung his pack into place as Wittke checked his oxygen line.

Gunnison wondered whether the theories about the air that vanished into the Hole were correct, and whether that might be a danger to the exploration team. If there really were a universe on the other side of the Hole—or several of them—where the Earth didn’t exist, where air was spilling out into empty space, wouldn’t that create wind that would tend to pull them all out into that vacuum? The suits they were wearing weren’t meant for that; they weren’t full-fledged spacesuits, just high-altitude suits. NASA hadn’t wanted to cooperate with the hastily-organized NSF Hole team, and the brass had decided to skip the battles over political turf and make do with what they could buy openly.

But there couldn’t be much of a wind, or the Hole would have been found sooner.

The inner door opened, and Gunnison followed Wittke into the inner sanctum, the airtight shelter around the Hole itself.

The rest of the team was waiting for them, lined up around the edge, already hooked to the multiple cables of the tether, staying well clear of the railings that marked the end of the safe area. Cameras, microphones, recorders of every sort, and miles more of the ubiquitous cables stood or hung on every side.

Gunnison didn’t notice any of it; he was looking at the Hole itself, hanging there unsupported, an inch or two above the pavement.

The Hole—a gateway to other worlds, at least in theory, just like the panchronion in Carter’s Worlds Within Worlds. Gunnison stared.

The box around the Hole had no windows, but bright, clear sunlight shone through its five-meter and illuminated the entire interior. Gunnison could see blue sky, could make out the vague outlines of greenish shapes he thought might be trees—but everything he saw was indistinct and distorted.

Closing one eye helped slightly, but the images remained blurred and out of focus. And there were things flickering, things that popped up and then vanished too quickly to be seen clearly.

The problem was that the human eye could not focus down finely enough to see only one of the infinite number of alternate realities that the Hole apparently touched.

The light from the Hole seemed unnaturally bright; Gunnison wondered if that had anything to do with the thinned air in the chamber, or was simply by contrast with the rather gloomy day outside in his own world. The weather in the world he saw, wherever and whatever it was, looked much sunnier.

“Tether up,” Corcoran, the team leader, called, his voice distant and muffled by the helmet. Gunnison saw that Wittke was already strapping himself onto the elaborate umbilical, and he reached for his own connections.

A moment later the twelve of them were all connected, with lines carrying air, water, and every imaginable kind of signal, lines that would ensure that they could return to their own world, and not just some close approximation.

“Ready?” Corcoran asked, his voice tinny but intimate over the helmet radio, sounding right in Gunnison’s ear.

A chorus of mumbled agreement answered him.

“Let’s go, then.” He stepped forward, into the Hole.

He didn’t look any different so far as Gunnison could see; he didn’t blur, didn’t change at all.

Then Corcoran turned back, and stepped forward—but instead of emerging from the Hole, he vanished.

“Son of a bitch,” Corcoran’s voice said in Gunnison’s headphones.

Lewis was next on the tether; he stepped forward, almost involuntarily, as the tether was pulled tight. Gunnison could see the cables going into the Hole, then twisting, and then...

And then they weren’t there, somehow, as if they went around a corner that wasn’t there. Lewis followed them to that corner, and then Gunnison heard him say, “Oh, there you are!”

Someone laughed nervously, just as Lewis vanished.

Belyukny went next; then Moreno, and the others, one by one, until at last Wittke, too, stepped in, turned, and was gone.

For an instant Gunnison considered uncoupling himself and running for it, but then he took a deep breath and another step, and he was in the Hole.

Reality blurred about him; at the slightest movement everything he saw changed totally, and he could make no sense of any of it, it was all patterns of light and darkness, occasional flashes of sky-blue or sunshine-yellow or midnight-black. He closed his eyes and followed the tether.

“That’s everyone,” Corcoran said, and Gunnison opened his eyes again.

They were all standing in the parking lot of the Holiday Inn, inside a ring of sawhorses. Gunnison blinked.

He wasn’t sure what he had expected, but it wasn’t this. Al Miller had reported emerging into a forest, surrounded by gigantic trees, with no sign that human beings had ever been there; Gunnison had been imagining that they would arrive in a forest, or a plain, or something else, some bizarre landscape out of a Carter novel, not a parking lot just like the one they had left.

It was a great disappointment.

It took a minute, therefore, for him to realize that this place was definitely not the same parking lot where they had entered the Hole. The gray asphalt was the same, the low bushes and the sidewalk and the traffic on Route Four just as he remembered, but the Hole installation was gone. There was no box, no airlock, no control room; the Holiday Inn appeared to still be open for business as a hotel, and a score of ordinary cars were parked up the slope from the Hole.

The Hole itself was still there, though, looking very much as it always had, perhaps an inch or so higher off the pavement but otherwise unchanged, hanging in open air. The people here obviously knew it existed, to judge by the sawhorses, but they didn’t seem to care.

Gunnison wondered if they had realized it was leaking air into some other cosmos—if it was, here. This place looked a lot more parallel than the parallel universe Al Miller had visited, but it had some differences, and the physics of the Hole wasn’t understood all that well. Maybe some worlds leaked and some didn’t.

“We’re through,” Corcoran said, presumably for the edification of the folks back home, listening in over the tether’s communications links. “We’re all here, all twelve of us, so at least the tether worked that well.” Belyukny was scanning the area with his video camera, holding it for a moment on the hotel entrance. Lewis was fiddling with something on his helmet.

Gunnison noticed cars slowing down as their drivers stared, and in a sudden fit of self-consciousness he realized that they were staring at him, not at the Hole—at him and the others in their silly pressure suits.

“Now what?” Gunnison demanded.

“Now we determine what sort of a world this is,” Corcoran said.

“It looks a hell of a lot like ours,” Scheinmann remarked.

“And how do we determine anything about it?” Gunnison aske.

“If you’d been paying more attention in training, Gunnison...” Wittke began.

“I paid attention,” Gunnison said, cutting him off. “I heard how you needed me along to check the night sky, see if the constellations were the same, and how the rest of you would want to search for signs of human habitation, and study the wildlife to see if there were any new species. I don’t remember anything about checking out the Holiday Inn up there. I mean, if this place is close enough to our own world that there’s that same hotel, what the hell are we supposed to check?”

“All right,” Corcoran said, “so it’s more familiar than we expected—it’s still not the same world, Dr. Gunnison. I’d say we should see about finding out just what the differences are.”

“How?” Scheinmann asked.

“I don’t think Dr. Moreno’s going to learn much from leaf samples,” Gunnison added.

“Hey, I...” the botanist began, but Corcoran cut him off.

“I agree, Dr. Gunnison,” the team leader said. “I think our original plans are superseded by events. Dr. Lewis, how’s the air?”

Lewis responded by pulling off his helmet. “It’s just the same as our own,” he said. He waved at their surroundings. “Of course.”

Gunnison snorted, and began working at the fastenings of his own helmet.

Twenty minutes later eight of the twelve walked into the lobby of the Holiday Inn; the other four stayed near the Hole, guarding the discarded pressure suits and backpacks. Gunnison had taken the time to retrieve Five Minutes to Annihilation and had it in his hand as they marched in.

After a moment’s hesitation, Corcoran strode up to the desk; the clerk took in the team leader’s slacks and T-shirt and asked, “May I help you, sir?”

“Yeah,” Corcoran said. “We just...we just came out of the Hole.”

The clerk smiled warily and blinked at him, but said nothing.

“The hole out front, in your parking lot, I mean,” Corcoran explained.

“You hit a pothole, sir?”

“No, damn it—we just came here from another universe! Out of that hole out there surrounded by sawhorses!”

“Oh,” the clerk said. He looked past Corcoran at the others, and then out through the glass doors, then back at Corcoran. “Did you want a room, sir?”

“No! We just came here from another world!”

The clerk sighed. “Listen, mister,” he said, “I’m just a desk clerk; what do you want me to do about it? I rent rooms, and I tell people who’s playing in our lounge on Fridays, and where they can get postcards or make a phone call, and I sell them newspapers to read over breakfast, and that’s about it; I don’t have anything to do with that psychic phenomenon or whatever it is out there, except to warn people to stay away from it.”

“But...” Corcoran stopped, frustrated, and after a moment of clenching fists uselessly he turned away from the counter.

“Now what?” Scheinmann asked.

“Now we find someone in authority,” Wittke said. “Ask the clerk who’s running things—who’s in charge of the Hole?”

“Maybe we should do a little research first,” Scheinmann said. “Maybe we don’t want anything to do with the people running this place.”

Wittke hesitated.

“I’m not interested in winding up prisoners anywhere,” Gunnison said. “Not in the local jail, or the local loony bin, or even in some laboratory somewhere.”

“I think a little scouting might be a good idea before we draw attention to ourselves,” Scheinmann said. He pointed to a stack of newspapers at one end of the counter; the headline on top read, Quayle Refuses Spy Ring Pardon.

“I think,” Corcoran said slowly, “that you’re right; we had better find out just how different this world is before we make any official contacts.” He turned back to the desk clerk and asked, “Where’s the nearest library?”

“No,” Wittke said, “where’s the nearest good library? A neighborhood reading room isn’t going to help us very much.”

Corcoran accepted the correction, and listened carefully as the clerk struggled to recall just how to get to the city’s main library.

He had gotten as far as turning right onto Main Street when Gunnison pointed out, “We don’t have a car. Have him call us a cab.”

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Fortunately, the cab driver accepted the twenty-dollar bill Gunnison offered him; any differences in the local currency were apparently not obvious.

The six of them—all they had been able to squeeze into the taxi—took a moment to look around, then trooped up the steps.

“It looks just like ours,” Lewis remarked.

No one disagreed.

Inside, they fanned out; Corcoran headed for the reference room, Wittke for the newspaper racks, Lewis for the magazines, Scheinmann for science, Belyukny for history.

Gunnison hesitated, then headed for fiction.

He couldn’t imagine the stars being any different in a world so obviously similar, where not only was Earth in the same place, but the same species had evolved, the same languages developed, and most of the same history had occurred. He had been included in the cab ride mostly because he was the only one carrying a significant quantity of cash, not because an astronomer would be of much use at the library.

And he only had had his wallet by accident; he’d never bothered to put it anywhere.

Still, here he was, and his specialty was of no use, so he decided he might as well see if he could find something to read. If all else failed, he could find a copy of Five Minutes to Annihilation and pick up where he had left off; he’d left his own copy back in the hotel parking lot.

He ran a finger along the shelf, scanning titles and authors’ names.

There was Anderson, and Asimov, and Carter, Worlds Within Worlds, Ships of Flame, The Cold and the Dark—all the old favorites.

They had A Stone in the Sky under the original serial title, Flying Thunder—was that a difference between worlds? Gunnison hadn’t really expected to find any here.

If it was a difference, it was a pretty trivial one.

Doorways of the Night, The Seed of Jericho...

Cool Crystal Glitter?

He didn’t remember Carter writing a novel called Cool Crystal Glitter. Was it another retitled one? Shards of the Moon, perhaps?

He pulled the book from the shelf and opened it at random.

The text didn’t look familiar; it was definitely Carter, the style was unmistakable, but Gunnison didn’t remember ever seeing such a scene, and he’d thought he’d read everything Carter had published. He flipped to the copyright page, and almost dropped the book.

Copyright 1993.

But Carter had stopped writing in 1982!

It had to be a typo for 1983, or 1973, some book that had appeared under another title here. He turned to the dust flap.

“H. Robert Carter’s first new novel in five years demonstrates beyond question that the old master has not lost his touch,” he read. “Incorporating elements of the cyberpunk world while remaining always true to his own warmly human vision, Carter gives us the story of a young woman’s coming of age in a computer-enhanced, streamlined, data-rich, high-tech future...”

Cyberpunk.

Nobody had used the word “cyberpunk “ on dustjackets in 1983, had they? Gunnison thought that had started in ’84 or ’85.

And...first new novel in five years?

But Doorways of the Night had come out in ’81, when Gunnison was in high school. If the 1993 was a typo for 1983, then the blurb was wrong, too.

And if the copyright date was accurate, then another book must have come out in 1988.

And it all must mean that in this world, H. Robert Carter was not crippled in 1982, or at least hadn’t stopped writing. He had written more. He might even still be writing!

And Gunnison was holding a new H. Robert Carter novel!

He had to blink several times and brace himself against the shelves.

When he was upright and steady again, he hurried to the desk.

“I’d like to apply for a library card,” he said.

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“It’s not bad,” Corcoran said. “There are differences, but it’s all pretty minor—a few presidential elections went differently, the Soviet coup lasted a year instead of three days, but there’s nothing major.”

Gunnison nodded. “I found a couple of minor differences at the library,” he said. “Bibliographic stuff, nothing important.” He had no intention of mentioning the Carter book until he’d had a chance to read it himself.

So far, he had just glanced through it, but he had already discovered something wonderful. According to the list of “Other Books By H. Robert Carter,” there were three more titles that had not existed back home. The library didn’t have them in just now, but...three more!

“So what do we do now?” Scheinmann asked. “Who do we call?”

“Maybe we should call Dr. Corcoran,” Lewis suggested. “This world’s Dr. Corcoran.”

Gunnison felt a sudden chill at the idea.

They could probably do it; another Stan Corcoran probably existed here, and another Bill Scheinmann, and Chester Lewis—and Jack Gunnison.

Corcoran didn’t seem to like the notion, either.

“No, I think we’ve done enough,” he said. “Time for some of us to go back and report in, and see what the brass wants us to do.”

“Some of us?” Moreno asked.

“Well, no reason we all should; we’ve found another world here, just the way we were supposed to, and we want to keep the link open, right?”

After a muttered chorus of agreement, Scheinmann asked, “So who goes back?”

“Any volunteers?”

Gunnison thought for a moment; if he stayed here, who knew when he might get the chance to read Cool Crystal Glitter? And there wasn’t any need for an astronomer, not when Earth was so similar.

“I’ll go,” he said.

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He didn’t get to read his book for several days.

He had misjudged the excitement, the attention he would receive, as the man who came back from the Other Earth, as the news media called it. He was interviewed, photographed, debriefed, interviewed again, invited to speak, solicited for talk shows and testimonials; his life was a constant barrage of questions and cameras.

He answered as best he could, describing the Hole, the Other Earth, the rest of the expedition’s personnel; he talked about his own hopes and dreams, his childhood, his family, his plans for the future; he explained astronomy, parallel-world theory, and a dozen less-relevant disciplines.

And all the time that copy of Cool Crystal Glitter stayed in his pack, waiting to be read.

By the fourth day most of the other members of the expedition had returned; some had then gone through the Hole again, and others had joined them. Corcoran had made contact with the locals, and satisfied them that he was genuine, not a madman. There was talk of trade possibilities.

But Gunnison was still the first man back, still the subject of media blitz. He wasn’t going back to Other Earth—there was nothing there for an astronomer. He was doing talk shows and chatting with politicians.

It wasn’t until the ninth day, as he sat in a hotel room in Los Angeles an hour or so past midnight, that he finally pulled out his borrowed book and began reading.

And it was almost dawn when he finally closed the cover with a sigh.

Carter had gotten even better after the accident, Gunnison thought.

Then he smiled wryly at himself. This Carter probably hadn’t been in the accident at all.

He tucked the book away carefully, then turned out the light and fell quickly asleep.

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Trade turned out to not be worth much initially; the two worlds were too similar, produced the same goods at the same price. The political repercussions were nastier than expected, as well—the administration of the Hole became a hotly-contested issue, and people everywhere began to use comparisons between the two worlds as a debating tool, sometimes triggering violent reactions. Certain world leaders did not appreciate the existence of a demonstration that their opponents, who were in power on the other Earth, had not ruined any economies or brought about the Apocalypse.

Within weeks a consensus began to emerge—the Hole was a scientific curiosity, of little practical value, and it should be left to scientists, to the boring academic journals and the tedious historians.

Gunnison’s value to talk shows and lecture circuits began to decline rapidly as the public lost interest. The publisher who had approached him about a ghostwritten autobiography stopped returning his calls, and the contracts never appeared.

And he never had a chance to go back through the Hole, to return the book he had borrowed and find Carter’s others.

He re-read Cool Crystal Glitter several times, though, and one day, when a reporter came for an interview, the first in over a month, he left it lying out on the coffee table.

They chatted for a few moments, and then Gunnison went to the kitchen to get coffee; he figured that would give the reporter time to set up his recorder and organize his notes.

When he came back the reporter was sitting hunched over on the couch, reading Cool Crystal Glitter.

Gunnison set the coffee on the table and cleared his throat.

The reporter looked up. “Where’d you get this?” he asked.

“The library,” Gunnison replied, annoyed.

“Oh, but... Listen, I know Carter’s work, I interviewed him once—he didn’t write this. Not in our world.”

Gunnison hesitated.

“What did you say your name was?”

“Wes Milburn,” the reporter said. “About this book...”

Gunnison considered. He hadn’t done anything illegal, or even immoral, so far as he could see. The book was overdue, but he hadn’t been able to get back to the library to return it, and he only owed maybe ten bucks on it, at most. Why not admit it?

“You’re right,” he said. “It’s from the other Earth; I checked it out when I was there.”

“But that’s great,” Milburn said. “Don’t you see? People have been looking for some way to make money off the Hole, and Other Earth, and they hadn’t found any—but now we have! We can publish this here!”

Gunnison blinked. “But that’s plagiarism,” he said.

“Not under our names, Dr. Gunnison,” the reporter explained. “I mean, we can take this to Carter’s publisher, and explain where it came from, and the publisher can arrange something with Carter himself—we’ll be the agents, that’s all, take ten percent. We could split it fifty-fifty, five for you, five for me. And remember that Doorways of the Night earned something like four million dollars.”

“We’d just be agents?” Gunnison asked.

“Right. We’d be representing H. Robert Carter.”

Gunnison smiled wryly. “Which one?” he asked.

Milburn hesitated. He looked down at the book in his lap, then up at Gunnison.

“Ah...well, after all, the one on Other Earth wrote it...”

“I’d say we better talk to both of them,” Gunnison said.

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Reaching the H. Robert Carter of First Earth was easy—Milburn still had his address and phone number. Gunnison listened attentively to Milburn’s side of the conversation, to the apologies for bothering him, to the explanation of the discovery of Cool Crystal Glitter.

Then, after a pause, Milburn said, “We thought you’d want to know.”

A pause.

“Oh, yes, it’s excellent—as good as anything else you wrote.”

Gunnison winced at that—this Carter hadn’t written it.

“Well, yes, we did plan to publish...”

Gunnison could hear the shout from the other end, though he couldn’t make out words. Milburn tried to reply, tried to apologize, tried to get a word in; at last he covered the mouthpiece and turned to Gunnison.

“He says he’ll sue us.”

“Tell him... oh, give me the phone.”

Milburn obliged.

“Mr. Carter?” Gunnison said quickly, “This is Jack Gunnison, with the National Science Foundation’s Hole team. Before you do anything, could we talk to you in person? All of us?”

“What, all?” Carter asked. His voice was a querulous old man’s voice, which was somehow not what Gunnison had expected. “Who’s all?”

“Me, my partner Mr. Milburn, and H. Robert Carter.”

For a moment the phone was silent; then Carter said, “You mean my doppelganger?”

“Yes, sir.”

“I can’t pass up a chance like that; bring ’em on.”

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It wasn’t hard for Gunnison to have letters smuggled through the Hole and into a mailbox near the Holiday Inn; he had plenty of friends on the contact team, and for that matter was technically still on the team himself, though in practice he’d been shunted aside to the P.R. department. He wrote out an explanation of the situation, then sent copies to Carter’s publisher, taking the address off Cool Crystal Glitter; to the analog of Carter’s agent; and to the address Carter used on First Earth. He figured one or the other should get through.

A week later a reply arrived at the contact team’s mail drop. That was the easy part.

Getting permission for Other Carter, as Gunnison thought of him, to come through to First Earth was a bit trickier. The original tether had been replaced by a six-foot plastic-and-steel tunnel, so there weren’t any technical problems involved, but the Customs Department and the Immigration & Naturalization people had taken an interest in just who and what came through the Hole. No one had found much of anything worth smuggling, but the customs people didn’t entirely believe that, and INS was wary of criminals seeking refuge.

Gunnison had to call in some favors, but at last Other Carter stepped out of the tunnel and looked around at the inside of the cube.

Gunnison, watching on one of the video monitors, recognized him immediately from photos on book jackets; he waited impatiently as Carter was escorted through the airlock to the recently-added Customs building, where bored-looking men in uniform frisked Carter and checked his identification.

Finally he emerged, to find Gunnison and Milburn waiting eagerly, rushing to shake his hand and welcome him to First Earth.

Gunnison was holding his precious copy of Cool Crystal Glitter, and wanted to gush about how much he had always loved Carter’s work, but Carter was having none of it. He snatched the book away.

“Let’s get on with it,” he said. “Where’s the car?”

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The two old men stared at each other—the one standing straight and tall, his face tanned and deeply lined, hair sun-bleached; the other in his wheelchair, bent and fat and pale, hair darker and thinning.

“Jesus,” the standing Carter said.

The crippled Carter stared silently up at his counterpart for a moment, then gestured and said, “Sit down.”

Other Carter placed the copy of Cool Crystal Glitter on an end-table and sank into a nearby chair.

Gunnison and Milburn watched as the two faced each other, a few feet apart—the faces superficially different, but eerily similar under the tan, under the pasty fat.

“They tell me you want to publish a book I didn’t write,” the crippled Carter said. “That it?” He nodded at the end-table.

“I don’t know what you’ve written,” the healthy Carter said, “but yeah, that’s it. These guys want to market Cool Crystal Glitter. They say it’s never appeared over here.”

“I remember coming up with the title, but I never got much past that,” the cripple said. “You wrote it?”

Other Carter nodded.

“It sold well?”

“About a quarter-million copies in hardcover, a million in paper. Made the Times list.”

“Think it’d do that well here?”

The tanned Carter shrugged.

“It should do better,” Gunnison interjected. “There’s a lot of pent-up demand.”

“And the Other Earth angle will probably help, too,” Milburn suggested.

“You planning to split the profits with me?” the man in the wheelchair asked.

“Why should I?” his counterpart asked. “You didn’t write it; I did.”

“But this is my world,” the First Earth Carter said. “I’m H. Robert Carter here. I’m the one who’s been collecting royalties on Doorways and the rest.”

“But you wrote those—has anyone checked to see if they’re the same, by the way? It’s hard to believe we’re as identical as all that.”

Neither Gunnison nor Milburn had an answer for that.

“All right, so I wrote those, and I didn’t write this one, because that son of a bitch ran the red light and broadsided me—I would have written it.”

“But you didn’t. I did.”

“Fine. You publish it, I’ll sue.”

“On what grounds?”

“On the grounds that I’m H. Robert Carter, and you’re trying to defraud my readers by selling a book under my name that I didn’t write.”

“But I’m H. Robert Carter, too!”

“Not here, you ain’t.”

“Maybe,” Gunnison suggested, “we could use a different name—H. Robert Carter II, or Harold R. Carter.”

“Not Harold,” both Carters protested in unison.

“Harry, maybe,” Other Carter amended.

“I was never called Harry in my life!” the wheelchair-bound Carter objected.

“I was,” the other replied. “By this snow-bunny in Aspen, about three years ago—she said her ex-boyfriend was named Bob.”

“Maybe Other Carter,” Gunnison suggested, as the crippled version glared angrily at his duplicate.

“I’ll still sue,” Carter said.

“Why?” Gunnison asked, baffled.

“Because maybe I don’t want the book published at all.”

“Why not?” Milburn said, shocked. “I’m sure we can make some kind of a deal to split the money...”

“Your readers,” Gunnison protested. “Don’t you owe it...”

Both Carters cut him off. “I don’t owe the readers a damn thing!” They glared at each other, then the crippled version said, “Go ahead; you tell them.”

“I don’t owe the readers anything,” Carter explained. “They buy the books, they get a story, and that’s it. I don’t owe them a damn thing beyond that. They paid a few bucks, they got some entertainment, and that’s the whole goddamn transaction. I can’t let it go any farther than that if I want to have any kind of a life at all.”

“But the money...” Milburn began.

“I don’t need...” the two began in unison.

“Your turn,” the healthy one said.

“I don’t need the money,” the cripple said. “My other books are still selling, I’ve got my investments, there’s insurance covers the medical bills—it’s a damn good thing the guy that hit me was covered for the up-front costs.”

“But then why don’t you want it published?” Milburn asked, baffled.

“It’s not just jealousy,” the healthy Carter said. “At first I thought it might be, when I saw the shape you’re in, but it isn’t that, is it?”

“That’s part of it, maybe,” the one in the wheelchair admitted.

“The beginning, maybe,” the other said thoughtfully. “Should I tell them, or just go?”

Gunnison listened, puzzled; even though the two Carters had just met, they seemed to understand each other so well that they could skip large chunks of conversation.

But then, they were the same man, more or less.

“Tell them, or they’ll come back again later, or some other bozo will,” the man in the wheelchair said.

“You don’t want your place usurped,” Other Carter said. “You can’t compete with me, but you’ve got a place you’ve earned, and you don’t want me taking it over, getting the glory, doing the talk shows, while you rot away here, forgotten.”

The cripple nodded.

“As I said,” he said, “this is my world.”

Gunnison suddenly understood, and wished he’d never met Milburn, never left the book out—but he didn’t wish he hadn’t found it and brought it home.

The healthy one stared at him for a moment, then asked, “Why’d you stop writing? You seem pretty alert—no brain damage, is there?”

“Nope,” the cripple replied. “My head didn’t hit anything hard. The fingers on my left hand got crushed between the steering wheel and the doorpost, though, and there’s nerve damage other places. I can’t type. And there’s a lot of pain, and when I’m on the painkillers I can’t think to write, and when I’m not on them, who wants to bother? I don’t need the money.”

“You could dictate.”

“Why bother? I’d have to have someone around all the time, and...why bother?”

“Because...oh, hell, you know why as well as I do, and if it’s not enough, it’s not enough.”

“It’s not enough.”

“I think I did some pretty good work after ’83.”

The man in the wheelchair shrugged.

“If you’re going to resign from the human race maybe I should go ahead and publish, and let you sue me,” Other Carter said.

Gunnison and Milburn looked worriedly at each other.

“You think you could afford it?” the crippled Carter answered. “Listen, I remember what I was like before the accident, and I see what you’re like, with your talk about snow bunnies—you don’t know anything yet. You don’t know what it’s like to live with pain, you don’t know what it’s like to fight your own body. You couldn’t beat me, in the courts or anywhere else.”

“No? Maybe not in the courts, but I can out-write you.” He gestured at the copy of Cool Crystal Glitter.

“Ha! You know as well as I do that it’s life experience that counts in writing, and what do you know of that, with your bunnies and your goddamn tan?” He reached out a clawlike hand and snatched up the book from the end-table. “This is probably a bunch of adolescent crap! That’s why I didn’t bother writing it!”

“You think so? Then prove it! You write something better! And if you don’t, I’ll publish that here!”

“Go ahead and publish! I will write a better one, and it’ll fucking outsell you two to one!” He turned to Milburn. “You, can you get me someone who’ll take dictation? Hell, can you take dictation? You and me, we’re going to show this twerp how to write!”

“I...” Milburn began.

“The computer’s downstairs,” Carter said. “I always thought I might get back to writing someday.”

“And today’s the day, huh?” the other Carter sneered.

“Damn right! You, get out of here, and take him with you!” He pointed at Gunnison.

The healthy Carter got to his feet, and he and Gunnison left.

The last Gunnison saw of Milburn, the reporter was looking pleadingly at Gunnison and the departing Carter. Gunnison ignored the look.

In the cab to the airport, Carter remarked, “I left that copy of Crystal there—think he’ll read it?”

“I don’t know,” Gunnison said.

“I think he might’ve started writing again pretty soon anyway, but I’m glad I was able to give him a push,” Carter said.

“You think you did?” Gunnison asked, a bit dazed.

“Oh, yeah, of course—he wants to defend his life, same as I would. You did good, getting me out here—I sold my version of that house years ago, you know. He talked about life experience, and he’s right, of course—he’s me, of course we agree—but this stuff about pain... He’s been holed up in his cave licking his wounds, and I’ve been out seeing the world. He’s going to write again, but it’ll probably suck, at least at first.”

“You think so?”

“Oh, sure.”

For a moment, they rode on in silence, but as the cab drew up to the terminal, Carter said, “But I think you might want to get some good lawyers on retainer. I can see where we might have some plagiarism suits coming up.”

\* \* \*

The bookstore window held a big symmetrical display—on the left a stack of Transit Strike, by Harry R. Carter, and on the right a stack of Gloria Monday, by H. Robert Carter. One title was red on black, the other black on red.

In the center, a little white card on a stand read, “Portions of these novels are substantially identical—compare, and choose the version you prefer!”

Gunnison sighed. However it turned out, either Bob or Harry was going to be pissed. If it was Bob, Wes Milburn would go through hell for a few days; if it was Harry, then Gunnison himself would be getting an earful about how unfair it was that Bob got the original by-line, and how he had the sympathy vote locked up.

And if by some miracle sales were identical, they would both be pissed.

Sometimes he thought about giving up his job and going back to astronomy. The other Jack Gunnison was still an astronomer, and seemed pretty satisfied. Nobody ever yelled at astronomers. Astronomers didn’t spend hours every week in conference with lawyers. And it wasn’t as if he had planned to be a literary agent, especially not one specializing in transuniversal clients.

On the other hand, agenting did pay a lot better. They’d been on the verge of shutting down the Hole project completely, and then the money from the books had started coming in...

He walked past the bookstore window and on into the lobby, then rode the elevator up to his office; as he unlocked the door he could hear the phone ringing.

Coat still on, standing by the receptionist’s desk, he picked up the receiver and said, “Hello?”

“Hi, Jack? This is Stan, at the Hole. Listen, we’ve got the tunnel through to Earth Four now, and I thought you’d want to know right away—Shirley Temple starred in The Wizard of Oz there! You want me to see about the theatrical rights, or do you think it should go straight to video?”

Gunnison sighed and got to work.