## Angel, Dark Angel

Roger Zelazny

*Yet another variation on the way stories come into being... Back when Fred Pohl was editing* Galaxy, Worlds of Tomorrow *and* Worlds of If *magazines he used to encourage artists by buying pieces they’d painted to use as covers. These days, the contents of a magazine tend to come first, the cover subsequently commissioned to illustrate something within. But I can’t complain about the old order of things, which paid a number of bills. Fred would send a reproduction of such a cover to a writer and request a story to go behind it One of my better short stories—"The Man Who Loved the Faioli"—came about in such a fashion. (Also, my absolute worst, but never mind...) This one showed an extended, black-gloved hand, a strange little creature with a near-human face standing on the palm. All right...*

He entered the kiosk and escalated down to the deck that stood beside the rumbling strip. He was fifty-five years of age and he bore a briefcase in his right hand.

As he crossed toward the conveyor belt, a dozen heads turned in his direction because of the flash of light that occurred immediately before him.

For one bright instant, a dark figure stood in his path.

Then there came the *crack* of imploding air, as the figure vanished and the man fell to the deck.

Later that day, the death record read, “Natural causes.”

Which was true. Quite, quite true.

###### \* \* \*

It slithered along the moist tunnel, heading toward the river.

It knew that its life had ended the moment that the blaze occurred; and the facets of its eyes held sixty-four images of the tall, leather-masked figure, garbed all in black, with its hard, dark hand upraised.

The hand extended toward it, offering that which it could not refuse. The gift was thunder and pain, and the medical record prepared later that day said, “Natural causes.”

Putting down his champagne glass, he unfastened her negligee and pushed it back over her shoulders. His hands molded her, described her sex, drew her down onto the bed. She sighed as he raised himself onto an elbow and touched her lips.

She felt him stiffen, in the glare that came from the corner of the suite. She screamed within the thunderclap that followed, having glimpsed the Angel of Death for a single, dark moment as she felt her lover stop his loving, forever.

This, too, was the result of natural causes.

###### \* \* \*

The man called Stain was in his greenhouse, where he had spent some part of almost every day for the past two years, plucking dead leaves and taking cuttings.

He was slightly under six feet in height, and his eyes were iodine dark within his sharp-cornered, sunbaked face beneath black hair salted lightly at the temples.

His left shoulder brushed against an earthenware pot on the shelf at his back, and he felt its movement and departure.

Turning, he caught it at waist level and replaced it on the shelf.

He began repotting a geranium, and then the instrument strapped to his left wrist buzzed and he pressed a button on its side and said, “Yes?”

“Stain,” said the voice, which could have been coming from the red flowers in his hand, “do you love the human races and all other living things within the universe?”

“Of course,” he replied, recognizing the crackling sibilance that was the voice of Morgenguard.

“Then please prepare yourself for a journey of some duration and report to your old cubicle in Shadowhall.”

“But I am retired, and there must be many others whose speed now exceeds my own.”

“Your last medical report shows that your speed is undiminished. You are still one of the ten best. You were retired at the proper age because it is your right to enjoy the rest of your days as you see fit. You are not ordered to do the thing I now say. You are requested to do it. So you may refuse if you see fit. Should you accept, however, you will be compensated, and you will have served the things you profess to love.”

“What would you have of me?”

“Come not in uniform, but in civil garb. Bring with you your gauntlets and your daily requirements in all things, save nourishment, for a period of approximately two weeks.”

“Very well. I will attend directly.”

The communication ended, and he finished potting the geranium and returned to his quarters.

To his knowledge, none such as himself had ever been recalled from retirement, nor was his knowledge inaccurate.

###### \* \* \*

Her name is Galatea, and she has red hair and stands to slightly over five and a half feet in height. Her eyes are green and her complexion pale, and men call her lovely but generally avoid her company. She lives in a big, old house which she has remodeled, on the outskirts of Cyborg, an ancient city on Ankus in the Ceti System. She keeps to herself and runs up large bills with the Cyborg Power Co.

She lives alone, save for mechanical servants. She favors dark colors in her garb and her surroundings. She occasionally plays tennis or else fences at the local sports center. She always wins. She orders large quantities of chemicals from local wholesalers. Men who have dated her say that she is stupid, brilliant, oversexed, a prude, fascinated with her deathwish, full of *joie de vivre,* an alcoholic, a teetotaler and a wonderful dancer. She has had many dates/few friends/no suitors, and her lovers be unknown. It is suggested that she maintains a laboratory and perhaps engages in unknown researches.

“We do not know the answer,” said Simule. “There is no defense against him, save here. I cannot remain here if I am to serve my function. Therefore, I must leave soon, and secretly.”

“Wait,” she said. “You are not yet ready to survive on your own. Another month, perhaps...”

“Too long, too long, we fear,” Simule replied.

“Do you doubt my power to protect you?”

Simule paused, as if to consider, then, “No. You can save this body, but the question, ‘Is it worth it?’ comes forth. Is it worth it? Preserve yourself, lady. We love you. There remains yet more that you may do.”

“We shall see,” she said. “But for now, you remain.”

She replaced him, upon the reading stand in her library, and she left him there with *Lear.*

###### \* \* \*

His name was Stain, and he came to her door one day and announced himself, saying, “Stain, of Iceborg.”

After a time, the door let him in.

She appeared and asked, “Yes?”

“My name is Stain,” he replied, “and I have heard that you play tennis, and are very good. I am looking for a partner in the Cyborg Open Mixed Doubles. I am good. Will you play with me?”

“How good?” she asked him.

“They don’t come much better.”

“Catch,” she said, and picked up a marble figurine from off an inlaid table and hurled it toward him.

He caught it, fumbling, and set it on the ledge at his side.

“Your reflexes are good,” she replied. “Very well, I’ll play with you.”

“Will you have dinner with me tonight?”

“Why?”

“Why not? I don’t know anyone here.”

“All right. Eight o'clock.”

“I’ll pick you up then.”

“Till then.”

“Till then.”

He turned, and headed back toward the town and his hotel.

Of course, they took the tournament. They won hands down. And Stain and Galatea danced that night and drank champagne, and she asked him as he held her, both of them all in black, “What do you do, Stain?”

“Nothing but enjoy myself,” he said. “I’m retired.”

“In your thirties?”

“Thirty-two.”

She sighed and softened within his arms.

“What do *you* do?” he asked.

“I, too, am retired. I enjoy my hobbies. I do as I would.”

“What does that come to?”

“Whatever I please.”

“I’ve brought you a Hylagian orchid to wear in your hair, or anywhere else you may choose. I’ll give it to you when we return to the table.”

“They’re very expensive,” she said.

“Not so if you raise them yourself.”

“And you do?”

“*My* hobby,” he replied.

At their table, they finished their champagne and smoked and she studied the flower and her companion. The club was done all in silver and black, and the music was soft—and as the dancers seated themselves it lost all semblance of a theme. Her smile was the candle of their table, and he ordered them a dessert and liqueurs to accompany it, and she said, “Your poise defies description.”

“Thank you, but yours is superior.”

“What did you do, before you retired?”

“I was a paymaster. What of yourself?”

“I dealt in accounts receivable, for a large concern.”

“Then we have something else almost in common.”

“So it would seem. What will you do now?”

“I’d like to continue seeing you, for so long as I am in town.”

“How long might that be?”

“For so long as I might wish, or you desire.”

“Then let us finish our sherbet; and since you wish me to have the trophy, we will take it home.”

He brushed the back of her hand, lightly, and for an instant their eyes met, and a spark that might have been electric leapt between them and they smiled at precisely the same instant.

After a time, he took her home.

###### \* \* \*

The bat-thing quivered and dipped, on the way to the council of its people.

As it passed by a mountaintop, there came a flash of light. Though its speed was virtually inconceivable and its movement unpredictable, it knew that it would fall in an instant; and it did, as the thunder roared above it.

He held her very closely and their lips met. They stood in the foyer of her big old remodeled house on the outskirts of Cyborg City on Ankus, of the Ceti System, and one of her mechanical servants had taken their cloaks and another the double-handled golden tennis trophy, and the front door had closed behind them and the night lights had come on dim as they had entered.

“You’ll stay awhile,” she said.

“Fine.”

And she led him into a long, sunken living room filled with soft furniture, with a fresco upon one wall. They faced it as he seated himself on the green divan, and he stared at the wall as he lit two cigarettes and she handed him a final drink and joined him there.

“Lovely,” he said.

“You like my fresco?”

“I hadn’t noticed it.”

“... And you haven’t tasted your drink.”

“I know.”

Her hand came to rest upon his arm, and he put his drink aside and drew her to him once again, just as she put hers to rest.

“You are quite different from most men,” she said.

“... And you from most women.”

“Is it growing warm in here?”

“Very,” he said.

Somewhere it is raining. Controlled or artificial—somewhere it is always raining, any time you care to think about it. Always remember that, if you can.

###### \* \* \*

A dozen days had passed since the finale of the Cyborg City Mixed Open. Every day Stain and Galatea moved together somewhere. His hand upon her elbow or about her waist, she showed him Cyborg City. They laughed often, and the sky was pink and the winds were gentle and in the distance the cliffs of Ankus wore haloes of fog prismatic and crowns of snow and ice.

Then he asked her of the fresco as they sat in her living room.

“It represents the progress of human thought,” she said. “That figure—fax to the left, contemplating the birds in flight—is Leonardo da Vinci, deciding that man might do likewise. High at the top and somewhat to the left, the two figures ascending the ziggurat toward the rose are Dante and Virgil, the Classic and the Christian, joined together and departing the Middle Ages of Earth into a new freedom—the place where Leonardo might contemplate. That man off to the right is John Locke. That’s the social contract in his hand. That man near the middle—the little man clutching the figure eight—is Albert Einstein.”

“Who is the blinded man far to the left, with the burning city at his back?”

“That is Homer.”

“And *that* one?”

“Job, on a heap of rubble.”

“Why are they all here?”

“Because they represent that which must never be forgotten.”

“I do not understand. I have not forgotten them.”

“Yet the final five feet to the right are blank.”

“Why?”

“There is nothing to put there. Not in a century has there been anything worth adding. Everything now is planned, prescribed, directed—”

“And no ill comes of it, and the worlds are managed well. Do not tell me how fine were the days of glorious discontent, days through which you never lived yourself. The work done then has not gone to waste. Everything is appreciated, used.”

“But what new things have been added?”

“Size, and ease of operation within it. Do not preach to me of progress. Change is not desirable for its own sake, but only if it offers improvement. I could complete your fresco for you—”

“With a gigantic machine guarded by the Angel of Death! I know!”

“You are wrong. It would end with the Garden of Eden.”

She laughed.

“Now you know the story of my fresco.”

###### \* \* \*

He took her hand. “You may be right,” he said. “I don’t really know. I was only talking about how things seem to me.”

“And *you* may be right,” she said. “I don’t really know... I just feel there should be something to counterbalance that wonderfully flexible mechanism which guides us so superbly that we are becoming the vegetables in that garden you would draw me.”

“Have you any suggestions?”

“Have you read any of my papers?”

“I’m afraid not. I fool around with my own garden and I play tennis. That’s about it.”

“I have proposed the thesis that man’s intelligence, extruded into the inanimate, has lost all that is human. Could you repair the machine that mixes our drinks, if it ceased to function?”

“Then you are very unusual. Most people would call in a robot which specializes in small-appliance repairs.”

Stain shrugged.

“Not only have we given up this function of intelligent manipulation—but divorced from us and existing elsewhere, it turns and seeks to suppress what remains of it within ourselves.”

“What do you mean?”

“Why has life become a horizontal line, rather than an upward curve? One reason is that men of genius die young.”

“This I cannot believe.”

“I purposely published my most important papers recently and I was visited by the Angel of Death. This proved it to me.”

He smiled.

“You still live, so this could not be so.”

She returned his smile, and he lit two cigarettes and said, “On what subjects were the papers?”

“The Preservation of Sensibility.”

“An innocuous-seeming subject.”

“Perhaps.”

“What do you mean 'perhaps'? Perhaps I misunderstand you.”

“It would seem that you do. Sensibility is a form of esthetic consciousness cultivated by intelligence. This is lacking today and I proposed a method whereby it might be preserved. The fruits of my work were then threatened.”

“And what may these be?”

###### \* \* \*

She tilted her head slightly, studied his face, then, “Come with me, and I will show you,” she said, and she rose and led him into her library. As he followed her, he removed from an inner pocket his black gauntlets and drew them onto his hands. Then he jammed his hands into his side pockets to cover them and entered the room at her back.

“Simule,” she called out, and the tiny creature that sat before a reading machine upon her desk leapt into her extended hand, ran up her right arm and sat upon her shoulder.

“What is it?” he questioned.

“The answer,” she said. “Pure, mechanistic intelligence can be countered by an infinitely mobile and easily concealed organic preserver of sensibility. This is Simule. He and others like him came to life in my laboratory.”

“Others?”

“There are many, upon many worlds already. They share a mass mind. They learn constantly. They have no personal ambition. They wish only to learn and to instruct any who wish to learn from them. They do not fear the death of their bodies, for they continue to exist thereafter as a part of the mind they all share. They—or it—are—or is—lacking in any other personal passion. The Simule could never represent a threat to the human races. I know this, for I am their mother. Take Simule into your hand, consider him, ask him anything. Simule, this is Stain; Stain, this is Simule.”

Stain extended his right hand, and the Simule leaped into it. Stain studied the tiny, six-legged creature, with its disquietingly near-human face. Near. Yet not quite. It was unmarked by the physical conversions of those abstract passion-producers men call good and evil, which show in some form upon every human countenance. Its ears were large, doubtless for purposes of eavesdropping, and its two antennae quivered upon its hairless head and it raised a frail limb as if to shake hands. An eternal smile played upon its lips, and Stain smiled back. “Hello,” he said, and the Simule replied in a soft, but surprisingly rich voice, “The pleasure is mine, sir.”

Stain said, “What is so rare as a day in June?” and the Simule replied, “Why, the lady Galatea, of course, to whom I now return,” and leaped and was upon her suddenly extended palm.

She clutched the Simule to her breast and said, “Those gauntlets—!”

“I put them on because I did not know what sort of creature the Simule might be. I feared it might bite. Please give him back that I might question him further—”

“You fool!” she said. “Point your hands in another direction, unless you wish to die! Do you not know who I am.”

Then Stain knew.

“I did not know...” he said.

###### \* \* \*

In Shadowhall in Morgenguard the Angel of Death stands within ten thousand transport cubicles. Morgenguard, who controls the destinies of all civilized worlds, briefs his agents for anything from ten seconds to a minute and a half—and then, with a clap of thunder, dispatches them. A second later—generally—there is a flash of light and a brief report, which is the word “Done,” and there then follows another briefing and another mission.

The Angel of Death is, at any given moment, any one of ten thousand anonymous individuals whose bodies bear the mark of Morgenguard, after this fashion:

Selected before birth because of a genetic heritage that includes heightened perception and rapid reflexes, certain individuals of the homo sapiens variety are given a deadly powerful education under force-fed conditions. This compensates for its brevity. At age fourteen, they may or may not accept employment in the service of Morgenguard, the city-sized machine created by the mutual efforts of all civilized peoples over a period of fifteen years and empowered to manage their worlds for them. Should any decline, these individuals generally proceed to excel in their chosen professions. Should they accept, a two-year period of specialized training follows. At the end of this time, their bodies have built into them an arsenal of weapons and numerous protective devices and their reflexes have been surgically and chemically stimulated to a point of thoughtlike rapidity.

They work an eight-hour day, five days a week, with two daily coffee breaks and an hour for lunch. They receive two vacations a year and they work for fourteen years and are retired on full salary at age thirty, when their reflexes begin to slow. At any given moment, there are always at least ten thousand on duty.

On any given workday, they stand in the transport cubicles in Shadowhall in Morgenguard, receive instructions, are transported to the worlds and into the presence of the individuals who have become superfluous, dispatch these individuals and depart.

He is the Angel of Death. Life lasts long, save for him; populations would rise up like tidal waves and inundate worlds, save for him; criminals would require trials and sentencing, save for him; and of course history might reflect unnecessary twistings and turnings, save for the Angel of Death.

One dark form might walk the streets of a city and leave that city empty of life at its back. Coming in lightning and departing in thunder, no world is foreign, no face unfamiliar, and the wearer of the black gauntlets is legend, folklore and myth; for, to a hundred billion people, he is but one being with a single personality.

All of which is true. Quite, quite true.

And the Dark Angel cannot die.

Should the near-impossible occur, should some being with speed and intrepidity be standing accidentally armed at the moment his name on the roll yonder and up is being shouted, then the remains of the stricken Dark Angel vanish as, with a simultaneous lightning-and-thunder effect, another takes his place, rising, as it were, out of ashes.

The few times that this has occurred, the second has always finished the job.

But this time things were different; and what little remained of seven agents of Morgenguard had lain in cubicles, smoldered, bled, been dead.

###### \* \* \*

“You are the Dark Angel, the Sword of Morgenguard,” she said. “I did not mean to love you.”

“Nor I you, Galatea, and were you only a mortal woman, rather than a retired Angel yourself—the only being whose body would throw back the charge upon me and destroy me, as it did the others—please believe that I would not raise my hand against you.”

“I would like to believe that, Stain.”

“I am going now. You have nothing to fear of me.”

He turned and headed toward the door. “Where are you going?” she asked him. “Back to my hotel. I will be returning soon, to give a report.”

“What will it say?”

He shook his head and left.

But he knew.

###### \* \* \*

He stood in Shadowhall within the thing called Morgenguard. He was the Angel of Death, Emeritus, and when the old familiar voice crackled over the loudspeaker and said, “Report!” he did not say, “Done.” He said, “Extremely confidential,” for he knew what that meant.

There came a flash of lightning, and he stood in a larger hall before a ten-story console, and he advanced toward it and heard the order repeated once more.

“One question, Morgenguard,” he said, as he halted and folded his arms upon his breast. “Is it true that you were fifteen years in the building?”

“Fifteen years, three months, two weeks, four days, eight hours, fourteen minutes and eleven seconds,” Morgenguard replied.

Then Stain unclasped his arms, and his hands came together upon his breast.

Morgenguard may have realized in that instant what he was doing; but then, an Angel’s body has built into it an arsenal of weapons and numerous protective devices and his reflexes have been surgically and chemically stimulated to a point of thoughtlike rapidity; also, Stain had been recalled from retirement because he was one of the ten fastest who had ever served Morgenguard.

The effect was instantaneous. The clap of thunder was not Morgenguard’s doing, for he did not remove Stain in time.

The Dark Angel might never strike itself. The seven who had approached the lady Galatea had suffered from a recoil-effect from her own defense system. Never before had the power of the Dark Angel been turned upon himself, and never in the person of one. Stain had worked it out, though.

Death and destruction meeting automatic defense meeting recoil meeting defense recoil defense recoil breakthrough, and a tremendous fireball blooming like an incandescent rose rose within the heart of the city-sized machine Morgenguard.

*Right or wrong. Simule will have some years to grow,* he knew, in that instant, and—

—And somewhere the sun is shining, and its heart is the mobius burn of the Phoenix Action/Reaction. Somewhere the sun is always shining, any time you care to think about it. Try to remember that, if you can. It is very important.

She remembers. Her name is Galatea. And we remember.

We always remember...