

Gambling Device

Frank Herbert, 1973

Scanned by Anaerobic

"Desert Rest Hotel -- No Gambling"

The blue and white sign, scraggly alkali sedge clustering around its supports, stood by itself at the edge of the lonely road.

Hal Remsen read it aloud, stopped his convertible at the hotel drive and glanced down at his bride of six hours. The heavy floral scent of her corsage wafted up to him. He smiled, the action bringing his thin dark features into vivid aliveness.

Ruth Remsen's short blond hair had been tangled by the long drive in the open car. Her disarrayed hair, backlit now by a crimson sunset, accented a piquant doll quality in her small features.

"Well?" he said.

"Hal, I don't like the looks of that place," she said. Her eyes narrowed. "It looks like a prison. Let's try farther on."

She suddenly shivered, staring across her husband at the blocky structure nestled in dry sand hills to their left. The hotel's shadowed portico gaped like a trap at the end of the dark surfaced driveway.

Hal shrugged, grinned. It gave him the sudden look of a small boy about to admit who stole the cookies.

"I have a confession," he said. "Your husband, the irreplaceable trouble shooter of Fowler Electronics, Inc., is lost." He hesitated. "That left turn at Meridian ... "

"I still don't like the looks of that place," she said. Her face sobered. "Darling, it's our wedding night."

He turned away from her to look at the hotel.

"It's just the way the sunset's lighting it," he said. "It makes those windows look like big red eyes."

Ruth chewed her lower lip, continued to stare at the building in the parched hills. Rays of the setting sun, reflected off mineral sands, painted red streaks across the structure, gleamed like fire on the windows and their metal frames.

"Well ... " She allowed her voice to trail off.

Hal put the car in gear, turned into the drive.

"It'll be dark soon," he said. "There's no dusk on the desert. We'd better take this while we can."

He stopped the car in the gloom of the portico.

An ancient bellboy with a leathery mask of a face, and wearing a green uniform, came down the two steps at their right. Yellow lobby lights pouring through the double doors behind him silhouetted his stick-like frame.

Without speaking, he opened the car door for Ruth.

Hal slid across the seat after her, nodded toward the rear. "Those two bags on the seat," he said. "We'll just be staying the night."

He left the keys in the car.

The lobby held a cool stillness after the desert's heat. The tapping of their heels echoed across the tile floor. Hal was struck by the curious absence of plants, furniture and people. The quiet held an eerie, waiting quality.

They crossed to a marble topped semi-circular desk at the far side. Hal pushed a call button on the desk. He heard a double click behind him, turned to see the bellboy putting down then luggage.

If he were a woman, they'd call him a 'crone', thought Hal. The word 'warlock' popped into his mind.

The man moved around behind the desk with a kind of slithering, shambling walk. He pushed register and pen toward Hal.

Ruth looked at the register, glanced at Hal.

Suddenly conscious of his newly married status, Hal cleared his throat

"Po you have a suite?" he asked.

"You have room 417 in the northwest corner," said the man.

"Is that all you have?" asked Hal. He glanced down at Ruth, took a deep breath to overcome an abrupt feeling of disquiet. He looked back at the man across the desk.

"That's your room, sir," said the man. He touched the edge of the register.

"Oh, take it," said Ruth. "It's just for tonight."

Hal shrugged, took up the pen, signed, "Mr. and Mrs. Harold B. Remsen, Sonoma, California" with an overdone flourish.

The man took the pen from Hal, put it in the fold of the register. He came back around the desk, still with that peculiar shambling gait -- an almost mechanical motion.

"This way, please," he said, taking up the luggage.

They went diagonally across the lobby, into an elevator that hummed faintly as the bellboy closed the door, sent the machine upward.

Ruth took hold of Hal's arm, gripped it tightly. He patted her hand, feeling a tremor of skin as he touched her. He stared at the back of the bellboy's green uniform. Irregular radial wrinkles stretched downward from the neck. Hal coughed.

"We turned left on what we thought was Route 25 back there at Meridian," he said. "We're headed for Carson City."

The bellboy remained silent

"Was that a wrong turn?" asked Ruth. Her voice came out high pitched, strained.

"There is no such thing as a *wrong* turn," said the bellboy. He spoke without turning, brought the elevator to a stop, opened the door, took up their bags. "This way, please."

Hal looked down at his bride. She raised her eyebrows, shrugged.

"A philosopher," he whispered.

The hall seemed to stretch out endlessly, like a dark cave with a barred window at

the end. Through the window they could see night sweeping suddenly over the desert, bright stars clustering along the horizon. A silvery glow shimmered from the corners of the ceiling, illuminating the soft maroon carpet underfoot.

At the end of the hall, the bellboy opened a door, reached in, turned on a light. He stepped aside, waited for Hal and Ruth to enter.

Hal paused in the yellow light of the threshold, smiled down at his bride. He made a lifting motion with his hands. She blushed, shook her head, stepped firmly into the room. He chuckled, followed her into the room.

It was a low ceilinged oblong space. A double bed stood at the far end, a metal dresser to their right flanked by two partly open doors. Through one door they could see the tile gleam of a bathroom. The other door showed the empty darkness of a closet. The room gave an impression of cell-like austerity. Windows by the bed looked out on the purple of the desert night.

Ruth went to the dresser mirror, began unpinning her corsage. The bellboy put their bags on a stand near the bed. Hal could see Ruth watching the man in the mirror.

"What did you mean 'no such thing as a *wrong* turn'?" she asked.

The bellboy straightened. His green uniform settled into a new pattern of wrinkles. "All roads lead somewhere," he said. He turned, headed for the door.

Hal brought his hand from his pocket with a tip. The man ignored him, marched out, closing the door behind him.

"Well, I'll be ... "

"Hal!" Ruth put a hand to her mouth, staring at the door.

He jerked around, feeling the panic in her voice.

"There's no door handle on the inside!" she said.

He looked at the blank inner surface of the door. "Probably a hidden button or an electric eye," he said. He went to the door, felt its surface, explored the wall on both sides.

Ruth came up behind him, clutched his arm. He could feel her trembling.

"Hal, I'm deathly afraid," she said. "Let's get out of here and ... "

From somewhere, a deep rumbling voice interrupted her. "Please do not be alarmed."

Hal straightened, turned, trying to locate the source of the voice. He could feel Ruth's fingernails biting into his arm.

"You are now residents of the Desert Rest Hotel," said the voice. "Your stay need not be unpleasant as long as you observe our one rule: No gambling. You will not be permitted to gamble in any way. All gambling devices will be removed if you attempt to disobey."

"I want to leave here," quavered Ruth. The nightmare quality of the scene struck Hal. He seriously considered for a brief second that he might be dreaming. But there was too much reality here: Ruth trembling beside him, the solid door, the grey wall. "Some crackpot fanatic," he muttered.

"You may decide to leave," said the voice, "but you have no choice of where you will go, in what manner or when. Free choice beyond the immediate decision is a

gamble. Here, nothing is left to chance. Here, you have the absolute security of pre-determination."

"What the hell is this?" demanded Hal. "You have heard the rule," said the voice, "You decided to come here. The die is cast."

What have I gotten us into? wondered Hal. *I should have listened to Ruth when she wanted to go on.*

Ruth was trembling so sharply that she shook his arm; he fought down a panic of his own. "Hal, let's get out of here," she said.

"Careful," he said. "Something's very wrong." He patted her hand with what he hoped was some reassurance. "Let's ... go ... down ... to ... the ... lobby," he said, spacing his words evenly. He squeezed her hand. She took a shuddering breath. "Yes, I want to go." *And how are we going to do it?* he wondered. *No handle on the door.* He looked to the windows and the night beyond them. *Four stories down.* "You have decided to go to the lobby?" asked the voice. "Yes," said Hal.

"Your decision has been entered," said the voice. "Time was allotted when you entered."

Time allotted, he thought. *Ruth had it pegged: A prison.*

"What's going to happen to us?" she asked. She turned, buried her face against him. "Darling, don't let anything happen to us."

He held her tightly, looking around the room.

The hall door swung inward.

"The door just opened," he said. "Be calm. Don't let go of my arm."

He led the way out of the room and to the elevator. No operator in the elevator, but the door closed as soon as they entered. The car descended, came to a smooth stop; the door opened.

People!

The change in the lobby hit them as soon as they left the elevator.

The lobby thronged with people. Silent, watchful people -- strolling singly, in couples, in groups.

"I saw you come in and decided at that moment to speak to you." It was a woman's voice: old, quavering.

Hal and Ruth turned to their left toward the voice. The speaker was grey-haired with a narrow, seamed face. She wore a blue dress of old fashioned cut that hung loosely about her body as though she had withered away from it.

Hal tried to speak, found with sudden panic that he could not utter a sound.

"I imagine several of us made the same decision," said the old woman. Her eyes glittered as she stared at them. "This time fell to me." She nodded. "Presumably you will not be able to talk to me because you haven't placed a decision and it does seem somewhat chancey. No matter."

She shook her grey head. "I know your questions. You're strays by the look of you. Newlyweds, too, I'd guess. More's the pity."

Again, Hal tried to speak, couldn't. He felt a strange stillness in Ruth beside him. He looked down at her. Ruth's face had a strained, bloodless appearance.

"We can give you a pretty educated guess as to what this hotel is," said the old woman. "It's a kind of a hospital from some far off place. Why it's located here we don't know. But we're pretty certain of what it's supposed to do: it's supposed to cure the gambling habit."

Again the old woman nodded as though at some inner thought.

"I had the habit myself," she said. "We think the hotel has an aura that attracts gamblers when they come within range. Sometimes it picks up strays like yourselves. But it's a machine and can't refine its selection. It considers the strangest things to be gambling!"

Hal remembered the rumbling voice in the room: "No Gambling!"

Behind the woman, in the center of the lobby, a short man in a high necked collar and suit that had been fashionable in the mid-twenties abruptly clutched his throat. He fell to the floor without a sound, lay there like a mound of soiled laundry.

The nightmare feeling returned to Hal.

From somewhere, the ancient bellboy appeared on the scene, hurried across the lobby, dragged the fallen man from sight around a corner.

"Someone just died," said the old woman. "I can see it in your eyes. The time of your death is chosen the moment you enter this place. Even the way you'll die." She shuddered. "Some of the ways are not pleasant."

Coldness clutched at Hal.

The old woman sighed. "You'll want to know if there's hope of escape." She shrugged. "Perhaps. Some just disappear. But maybe that's another ... way."

With an abrupt wrenching sensation, Hal found his voice. It startled him so that all he could say was: "I can speak." His voice came out flat and expressionless. Then: "There must be some choice."

The old woman shook her head. "No. The moment for you to speak -- alone or in company -- was set when you came in that front door."

Hal took two quick deep breaths, fought for the power to reason in spite of fear. He gripped Ruth's arm, not daring to look at her, not wanting the distraction. There had to be a way out of this place. An ace trouble shooter for an electronics instruments factory should be the one to find that way.

"What would happen if I tried to gamble?" he asked.

The old woman shuddered. "The device you chose for gambling would be removed," she said. "That's the reason you two mustn't ... " she hesitated " ... sleep together."

Hal took a coin from his pocket, flipped it into the air. "Call it and it's yours," he said.

The coin failed to come down.

"You're being shown the power of this place," said the old woman. "You mustn't gamble ... the instrument of chance is always removed."

An abrupt thought washed through Hal's mind. *Would it ...* He wet his lips with his tongue, fought to keep his face expressionless. *It's crazy,* he thought *But no crazier than this nightmare.*

Slowly, he took another coin from his pocket.

"My wife and I are going to gamble again," he said. "We are going to gamble, using the hotel *and* this coin as the gambling device. The moment of interference is the thing upon which we are gambling."

He felt an intensification of the silence in the lobby, was extremely conscious of Ruth's fingers digging into his arm, the curious questioning look on the old woman's face.

"We are gambling upon the moment when the hotel will remove my coin or *if* it will remove my coin," he said. "We will make one of several decisions dependent upon the moment of interference or the lack of interference."

A deep grinding rumble shook the hotel.

He flipped the coin.

Hal and Ruth found themselves standing alone on a sand dune, moonlight painting the desert a ghostly silver around them. They could see the dark shape of their car on another dune.

Ruth threw herself into his arms, clung to him, sobbing.

He stroked her shoulder.

"I hope they all heard me," he said. "That hotel is a robot. It has to remove *itself* when it becomes a gambling device."