

Beachworld  
by Stephen King

FedShip ASN/29 fell out of the sky and crashed. After a while two men slipped from its cloven skull like brains. They walked a little way and then stood, helmets beneath their arms, and looked at where they had finished up.

It was a beach in no need of an ocean -- it was its own ocean, a sculpted sea of sand, a black-and-white-snapshot sea frozen forever in troughs and crests and more troughs and crests.

Dunes.

Shallow ones, steep ones, smooth ones, corrugated ones. Knifecrested dunes, plane-crested dunes, irregularly crested dunes that resembled dunes piled on dunes -- dune-dominoes.

Dunes. But no ocean.

The valleys which were the troughs between these dunes snaked in mazy black rat-runs. If one looked at those twisting lines long enough, they might seem to spell words -- black words hovering over the white dunes.

"Fuck," Shapiro said.

"Bend over," Rand said.

Shapiro started to spit, then thought better of it. Looking at all that sand made him think better of it. This was not the time to go wasting moisture, perhaps. Half-buried in the sand, ASN/29 didn't look like a dying bird anymore; it looked like a gourd that had broken open and disclosed rot inside. There had been a fire. The starboard fuel-pods had all exploded.

"Too bad about Grimes," Shapiro said.

"Yeah." Rand's eyes were still roaming the sand sea, out to the limiting line of the horizon and then coming back again.

It was too bad about Grimes. Grimes was dead. Grimes was now nothing but large chunks and small chunks in the aft storage compartment. Shapiro had looked in and thought: It looks like God decided to eat Grimes, found out he didn't taste good, and sicked him up again. That had been too much for Shapiro's own stomach. That, and the sight of Grimes's teeth scattered across the floor of the storage compartment. Shapiro now waited for Rand to say something intelligent, but Rand was quiet. Rand's eyes tracked over the dunes, traced the clockspring windings of the deep troughs between.

"Hey!" Shapiro said at last. "What do we do? Grimes is dead; you're in command. What do we do?"

"Do?" Rand's eyes moved back and forth, back and forth, over the stillness of the dunes. A dry, steady wind ruffled the rubberized collar of the Environmental Protection suit. "If you don't have a volleyball, I don't know."

"What are you talking about?"

"Isn't that what you're supposed to do on the beach?" Rand asked. "Play volleyball?"

Shapiro had been scared in space many times, and close to panic when the fire broke out; now, looking at Rand, he heard a rumor of fear too large to comprehend.

"It's big," Rand said dreamily, and for one moment Shapiro thought that Rand was speaking of Shapiro's own fear. "One hell of a big beach. Something like this could go on forever. You could walk a hundred miles with your surfboard under your arm and still be where you started, almost, with nothing behind you but six or seven footprints. And if you stood in the same place for five minutes, the last six or seven would be gone, too."

"Did you get a topographical compscan before we came down?" Rand was in shock, he decided. Rand was in shock but Rand was not crazy. He could give Rand a pill if he had to. And if Rand continued to spin his wheels, he could give him a shot. "Did you get a look at -- "

Rand looked at him briefly. "What?"

The green places. That had been what he was going to say. It sounded like a quote from Psalms, and he couldn't say it. The wind made a silver chime in his mouth.

"What?" Rand asked again.

"Compscan! Compscan!" Shapiro screamed. "You ever hear of a compscan, dronehead? What's this place like? Where's the ocean at the end of the fucking beach? Where's the lakes? Where's the nearest greenbelt? Which direction? Where does the beach end?"

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"End? Oh. I grok you. It never ends. No greenbelts, no ice caps. No oceans. This is a beach in search of an ocean, mate. Dunes and dunes and dunes, and they never end."

"But what'll we do for water?"

"Nothing we can do."

"The ship... it's beyond repair!"

"No shit, Sherlock."

Shapiro fell quiet. It was now either be quiet or become hysterical. He had a feeling -- almost a certainty -- that if he became hysterical, Rand would just go on looking at the dunes until Shapiro worked it out, or until he didn't.

What did you call a beach that never ended? Why, you called it a desert! Biggest motherfucking desert in the universe, wasn't that right?

In his head he heard Rand respond: No shit, Sherlock.

Shapiro stood for some time beside Rand, waiting for the man to wake up, to do something. After a while his patience ran out. He began to slide and stumble back down the flank of the dune they had climbed to look around. He could feel the sand sucking against his boots. Want to suck you down, Bill, his mind imagined the sand saying. In his mind it was the dry, arid voice of a woman who was old but still terribly strong. Want to suck you right down here and give you a great... big... hug.

That made him think about how they used to take turns letting the others bury them up to their necks at the beach when he was a kid. Then it had been fun -- now it scared him. So he turned that voice off -- this was no time for memory lane, Christ, no -- and walked through the sand with short, sharp kicking strides, trying unconsciously to mar the symmetrical perfection of its slope and surface.

"Where are you going?" Rand's voice for the first time held a note of awareness and concern.

"The beacon," Shapiro said. "I'm going to turn it on. We were on a mapped lane of travel. It'll be picked up, vectored. It's a question of time. I know the odds are shitty, but maybe somebody will come before -- "

"The beacon's smashed to hell," Rand said. "It happened when we came down."

"Maybe it can be fixed," Shapiro called back over his shoulder. As he ducked through the hatchway he felt better in spite of the smells -- fried wiring and a bitter whiff of Freon gas. He told himself he felt better because he had thought of the beacon. No matter how paltry, the beacon offered some hope. But it wasn't the thought of the beacon that had lifted his spirits; if Rand said it was broken, it was probably most righteously broken. But he could no longer see the dunes -- could no longer see that big, never-ending beach.

That was what made him feel better.

When he got to the top of the first dune again, struggling and panting, his temples pounding with the dry heat, Rand was still there, still staring and staring and staring. An hour had gone by. The sun stood directly above them. Rand's face was wet with perspiration. Jewels of it nestled in his eyebrows. Droplets ran down his cheeks like tears. More droplets ran down the cords of his neck and into the neck of his EP suit like drops of colorless oil running into the guts of a pretty good android.

Dronehead I called him, Shapiro thought with a little shudder. Christ, that's what he looks like -- not an android but a dronehead who just took a neck-shot with a very big needle,

And Rand had been wrong after all.

"Rand?"

No answer.

"The beacon wasn't broken." There was a flicker in Rand's eyes. Then they went blank again, staring out at the mountains of sand. Frozen, Shapiro had first thought them, but he

supposed they moved. The wind was constant. They would move. Over a period of decades and centuries, they would ... well, would walk. Wasn't that what they called dunes on a beach? walking dunes? He seemed to remember that from his childhood. Or school. Or someplace, and what in the hell did it matter?

Now he saw a delicate rill of sand slip down the flank of I one of them. As if it heard

(heard what I was thinking)

Fresh sweat on the back of his neck. All right, he was getting a touch of the whim-whams. Who wouldn't? This was a tight place they were in, very tight. And Rand

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seemed not to know it... or not to care.

"It had some sand in it, and the warbler was cracked, but there must have been sixty of those in Grimes's odds-and-ends box."

Is he even hearing me?

"I don't know how the sand got in it -- it was right where it was supposed to be, in the storage compartment behind the bunk, three closed hatches between it and the outside, but -- "

"Oh, sand spreads. Gets into everything. Remember going to the beach when you were a kid, Bill? You'd come home and your mother would yell at you because there was sand everywhere? Sand in the couch, sand on the kitchen table, sand down the foot of your bed? Beach sand is very..." He gestured vaguely, and then that dreamy, unsettling smile resurfaced. "... ubiquitous."

" -- but it didn't hurt it any," Shapiro continued. "The emergency power output system is ticking over and I plugged the beacon into it. I put on the earphones for a minute and asked for an equivalency reading at fifty parsecs. Sounds like a power saw. It's better than we could have hoped."

"No one's going to come. Not even the Beach Boys. The Beach Boys have all been dead for eight thousand years. Welcome to Surf City, Bill. Surf City sans surf."

Shapiro stared out at the dunes. He wondered how long the sand had been here. A trillion years? A quintillion? Had there been life here once? Maybe even something with intelligence? Rivers? Green places? Oceans to make it a real beach instead of a desert?

Shapiro stood next to Rand and thought about it. The steady wind ruffled his hair. And quite suddenly he was sure all those things had been, and he could picture how they must have ended.

The slow retreat of the cities as their waterways and outlying areas were first speckled, then dusted, finally drifted and choked by the creeping sand.

He could see the shiny brown alluvial fans of mud, sleek as sealskins at first but growing duller and duller in color as they spread further and further out from the mouths of the rivers -- out and out until they met each other. He could see sleek sealskin mud becoming reed-infested swamp, then gray, gritty till, finally shifting white sand.

He could see mountains shortening like sharpened pencils, their snow melting as the rising sand brought warm thermal updrafts against them; he could see the last few crags pointing at the sky like the fingertips of men buried alive; he could see them covered and immediately forgotten by the profoundly idiotic dunes.

What had Rand called them?

Ubiquitous.

If you just had a vision, Billy-boy, it was a pretty goddam dreadful one.

Oh, but no, it wasn't. It wasn't dreadful; it was peaceful. It was as quiet as a nap on a Sunday afternoon. What was more peaceful than the beach?

He shook these thoughts away. It helped to look back toward the ship.

"There isn't going to be any cavalry," Rand said. "The sand will cover us and after a while we'll be the sand and the sand will be us. Surf City with no surf -- can you catch that wave, Bill?"

And Shapiro was scared because he could catch it. You couldn't see all those dunes without getting it.

"Fucking dronehead asshole," he said. He went back to the ship.

And hid from the beach.

Sunset finally came. The time when, at the beach -- any real beach -- you were supposed to put away the volleyball and put on your sweats and get out the weenies and the beer. Not time to start necking yet, but almost. Time to look forward to the necking.

Weenies and beer had not been a part of ASN/29's stores.

Shapiro spent the afternoon carefully bottling all of the ship's water. He used a porta-vac to suck up that which had run out of the ruptured veins in the ship's supply system and puddled on the floor. He got the small bit left in the bottom of the shattered hydraulic system's water tank. He did not overlook even the small cylinder in the guts of the air-purification system which circulated ah- in the storage areas.

Finally, he went into Grimes's cabin.

Grimes had kept goldfish in a circular tank constructed especially for weightless conditions. The tank was built of impact-resistant clear-polymer plastic, and had

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survived the crash easily. The goldfish -- like their owner -- had not been impact-resistant. They floated in a dull orange clump at the top of the ball, which had come to rest under Grimes's bunk, along with three pairs of very dirty underwear and half a dozen porno holograph-cubes.

He held the globe aquarium for a moment, looking fixedly into it. "Alas, poor Yorick, I knew him well," he said suddenly, and laughed a screaming, distracted laugh. Then he got the net Grimes kept in his lockbin and dipped it into the tank. He removed the fish and then wondered what to do with them. After a moment he took them to Grimes's bed and raised his pillow.

There was sand underneath.

He put the fish there regardless, then carefully poured the water into the jemcan he was using as a catcher. It would all have to be purified, but even if the purifiers hadn't been working, he thought that in another couple of days he wouldn't balk at drinking aquarium water just because it might have a few loose scales and a little goldfish shit in it.

He purified the water, divided it, and took Rand's share back up the side of the dune. Rand was right where he had been, as if he had never moved.

"Rand. I brought you your share of the water." He unzipped the pouch on the front of Rand's EP suit and slipped the flat plastic flask inside. He was about to press the zip-strip closed with his thumbnail when Rand brushed his hand away. He took the flask out. Stenciled on the front was ASM/CLASS

SHIP'S SUPPLIES STORAGE FLASK CL. #23196755 STERILE WHEN

SEAL is UNBROKEN The seal was broken now, of course; Shapiro had had to fill the bottle up.

"I purified -- "

Rand opened his fingers. The flask fell into the sand with a soft plop. "Don't want it."

"Don't... Rand, what's wrong with you? Jesus Christ, will you stop it?"

Rand did not reply.

Shapiro bent over and picked up storage flask #23196755. He brushed off the grains of sand clinging to the sides as if they were huge, swollen germs.

"What's wrong with you?" Shapiro repeated. "Is it shock?"

Do you think that's what it is? Because I can give you a pill ...or a shot. But it's getting to me, I don't mind telling you. You just standing out here looking at the next forty miles of nothing! It's sand! Just sand!"

"It's a beach," Rand said dreamily. "Want to make a sand castle?"

"Okay, good," Shapiro said. "I'm going to go get a needle and an amp of Yellowback. If you want to act like a goddam dronehead, I'll treat you like one."

"If you try to inject me with something, you better be quiet when you sneak up behind me," Rand said mildly. "Otherwise, I'll break your arm."

He could do it, too. Shapiro, the astrogator, weighed a hundred and forty pounds and stood five-five. Physical combat was not his specialty. He grunted an oath and turned away, back to the ship, holding Rand's flask.

"I think it's alive," Rand said. "I'm actually pretty sure of it."

Shapiro looked back at him and then out at the dunes. The sunset had given them a gold filigree at their smooth, sweeping caps, a filigree that shaded delicately down to the blackest ebony in the troughs; on the next dune, ebony shaded back to gold. Gold to black. Black to gold. Gold to black and black to gold and gold to -- Shapiro blinked his eyes rapidly, and rubbed a hand over them.

"I have several times felt this particular dune move under my feet," Rand told Shapiro. "It moves very gracefully. It is like feeling the tide. I can smell its smell on the air, and the smell is like salt."

"You're crazy," Shapiro said. He was so terrified that he felt as if his brains had turned to glass.

Rand did not reply. Rand's eyes searched the dunes, which went from gold to black to gold to black in the sunset.

Shapiro went back to the ship.

Rand stayed on the dune all night, and all the next day.

Shapiro looked out and saw him. Rand had taken off his EP suit, and the sand had almost covered it. Only one sleeve stuck out, forlorn and supplicating. The sand above and below it reminded Shapiro of a pair of lips sucking with a toothless greed at a tender morsel. Shapiro felt a crazy desire to pelt up the side of the dune and

rescue Rand's EP suit.

He did not.

He sat in his cabin and waited for the rescue ship. The smell of Freon had dissipated. It was replaced by the even less desirable smell of Grimes decaying.

The rescue ship did not come that day or that night or on the third day.

Sand somehow appeared in Shapiro's cabin, although the hatchway was closed and the seal still appeared perfectly tight. He sucked the little puddles of sand up with the porta-vac as he had sucked up puddles of spilled water on that first day. He was very thirsty all the time. His flask was nearly empty already.

He thought he had begun to smell salt on the air; in his sleep he heard the sound of gulls. And he could hear the sand.

The steady wind was moving the first dune closer to the ship. His cabin was still okay -- thanks to the porta-vac -- but the sand was already taking over the rest. Mini-dunes had reached through the blown locks and laid hold of ASN/29. It sifted in tendrils and membranes through the vents. There was a drift in one of the blown tanks.

Shapiro's face grew gaunt and pebbly with beard shadow. Near sunset of the third day, he climbed up the dune to check on Rand. He thought about taking a hypodermic, then rejected it. It was a lot more than shock; he knew that now. Rand was insane. It would be best if he died quickly. And it looked as if that was exactly what was going to happen.

Shapiro was gaunt; Rand was emaciated. His body was a scrawny stick. His legs, formerly rich and thick with iron-pumper's muscle, were now slack and droopy. The skin hung on them like loose socks that keep falling down. He was wearing only his undershorts, and they were red nylon, and they looked absurdly like a ball-hugger bathing suit. A light beard had begun to grow on his face, fuzzing his hollow cheeks and chin. His beard was the color of beach sand. His hair, formerly a listless brown shade, had bleached out to a near blond. It hung over his forehead. Only his eyes, peering through the fringe of his hair with bright blue intensity, still lived fully. They studied the beach

(the dunes goddammit the DUNES)  
relentlessly.

Now Shapiro saw a bad thing. It was a very bad thing indeed. He saw that Rand's face was turning into a sand dune. His beard and his hair were choking his skin.

"You," Shapiro said, "are going to die. If you don't come down to the ship and drink, you are going to die."

Rand said nothing.

"Is that what you want?"

Nothing. There was the vacuous snuffle of the wind, but no more. Shapiro observed that the creases of Rand's neck were filling up with sand.

"The only thing I want," Rand said in a faint, faraway voice like the wind, "is my Beach Boys tapes. They're in my cabin."

"Fuck you!" Shapiro said furiously. "But do you know what I hope? I hope a ship comes before you die. I want to see you holler and scream when they pull you away from your precious goddam beach. I want to see what happens then!"

"Beach'll get you, too," Rand said. His voice was empty and rattling, like wind inside a split gourd -- a gourd which has been left in a field at the end of October's last harvest. "Take a listen, Bill. Listen to the wave."

Rand cocked his head. His mouth, half-open, revealed his tongue. It was as shriveled as a dry sponge.

Shapiro heard something.

He heard the dunes. They sang songs of Sunday afternoon at the beach -- naps on the beach with no dreams. Long naps. Mindless peace. The sound of crying gulls.

Shifting, thoughtless particles. Walking dunes. He heard... and was drawn. Drawn toward the dunes.

"You hear it," Rand said.

Shapiro reached into his nose and dug with two fingers until it bled. Then he could close his eyes; his thoughts came slowly and clumsily together. His heart was racing.

/ was almost like Rand. Jesus!... it almost had me!

He opened his eyes again and saw that Rand had become a conch shell on a long deserted beach, straining forward toward all the mysteries of an undead sea, staring out at the dunes and the dunes and the dunes.

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No more, Shapiro moaned inside himself.

Oh, but listen to this wave, the dunes whispered back.

Against his better judgment, Shapiro listened.

Then his better judgment ceased to exist.

Shapiro thought: / could hear better if I sat down.

He sat down at Rand's feet and put his heels on his thighs like a Yaqui Indian and listened.

He heard the Beach Boys and the Beach Boys were singing about fun, fun, fun. He heard them singing that the girls on the beach were all within reach. He heard -- -- a hollow sighing of the wind, not in his ear but in the canyon between right brain and left brain -- he heard that sighing somewhere in the blackness which is spanned only by the suspension bridge of the corpus callosum, which connects conscious thought to the infinite. He felt no hunger, no thirst, no heat, no fear. He heard only the voice in the emptiness.

And a ship came.

It came swooping out of the sky, afterburners scratching a long orange track from right to left. Thunder belted the delta-wave topography, and several dunes collapsed like bullet-path brain damage. The thunder ripped Billy Shapiro's head open and for a moment he was torn both ways, ripped, torn down the middle -- Then he was up on his feet.

"Ship!" he screamed. "Holy fuck! Ship! Ship! SHIP!"

It was a belt trader, dirty and buggered by five hundred -- or five thousand -- years of clan service. It surfed through the air, banged crudely upright, skidded. The captain blew jets and fused sand into black glass. Shapiro cheered the wound. Rand looked around like a man awaking from a deep dream.

"Tell it to go away, Billy."

"You don't understand." Shapiro was shambling around, shaking his fists in the air.

"You'll be all right -- "

He broke toward the dirty trader in big, leaping strides, like a kangaroo running from a ground fire. The sand clutched at him. Shapiro kicked it away. Fuck you, sand. I got a honey back in Hansonville. Sand never had no honey. Beach never had no hard-on.

The trader's hull split. A gangplank popped out like a tongue. A man strode down it behind three sampler androids and a guy built into treads that was surely the captain. He wore a beret with a clan symbol on it, anyway.

One of the androids waved a sampler wand at him. Shapiro batted it away. He fell on his knees in front of the captain and embraced the treads which had replaced the captain's dead legs.

"The dunes... Rand... no water... alive... hypnotized him... dronehead world... I... thank God..."

A steel tentacle whipped around Shapiro and yanked him away on his gut. Dry sand whispered underneath him like laughter.

"It's okay," the captain said. "Bey-at shell Me! Me! Gat!"

The android dropped Shapiro and backed away, clittering distractedly to itself.

"All this way for a fucking Fed!" the captain exclaimed bitterly.

Shapiro wept. It hurt, not just in his head, but in his liver.

"Dud! Gee-yat! Gat! Water-for-him-Cry!"

The man who had been in the lead tossed him a nipples low-grav bottle. Shapiro upended it and sucked greedily, spilling crystal-cold water into his mouth, down his chin, in dribbles that darkened his tunic, which had bleached to the color of bone. He choked, vomited, then drank again.

Dud and the captain watched him closely. The androids clittered.

At last Shapiro wiped his mouth and sat up. He felt both sick and well.

"You Shapiro?" the captain asked.

Shapiro nodded.

"Clan affiliation?"

"None."

"ASN number?"

"29."

"Crew?"

"Three. One dead. The other -- Rand -- up there." He pointed but did not look.

The captain's face did not change. Dud's face did.

"The beach got him," Shapiro said. He saw their questioning, veiled looks. "Shock..."

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maybe. He seems hypnotized. He keeps talking about the... the Beach Boys... never mind, you wouldn't know. He wouldn't drink or eat. He's bad off."

"Dud. Take one of the andies and get him down from there." He shook his head. "Fed ship, Christ. No salvage."

Dud nodded. A few moments later he was scrambling up the side of the dune with one of the andies. The andy looked like a twenty-year-old surfer who might make dope money on the side servicing bored widows, but his stride gave him away even more than the segmented tentacles which grew from his armpits. The stride, common to all androids, was the slow, reflective, almost painful stride of an aging English butler with hemorrhoids.

There was a buzz from the captain's dashboard.

"I'm here."

"This is Gomez, Cap. We got a situation here. Compscan and surface telemetry show us a very unstable surface. There's no bedrock that we can targ. We're resting on our own burn, and right now that may be the hardest thing on the whole planet. Trouble is, the burn itself is starting to settle."

"Recommendation?"

"We ought to get out."

"When?"

"Five minutes ago."

"You're a laugh riot, Gomez."

The captain punched a button and the communicator went out.

Shapiro's eyes were rolling. "Look, never mind Rand. He's had it."

"I'm taking you both back," the captain said. "I got no salvage, but the Federation ought to pay something for the two of you... not that either of you are worth much, as far as I can see. He's crazy and you're chickenshit."

"No... you don't understand. You -- "

The captain's cunning yellow eyes gleamed.

"You got any contra?" he asked.

"Captain... look... please -- "

"Because if you do, there's no sense just leaving it here. Tell me what it is and where it is. I'll split seventy-thirty. Standard salvor's fee. Couldn't do any better than that, hey? You -- "

The burn suddenly tilted beneath them. Quite noticeably tilted. A horn somewhere inside the trader began to blat with muffled regularity. The communicator on the captain's dashboard went off again.

"There!" Shapiro screamed. "There, do you see what you're up against? You want to talk about contraband now? WE HAVE GOT TO GET THE FUCK OUT OF HERE!"

"Shut up, handsome, or I'll have one of these guys sedate you," the captain said. His voice was serene but his eyes had changed. He thumbed the communicator.

"Cap, I got ten degrees of tilt and we're getting more. The elevator's going down, but it's going on an angle. We've still got time, but not much. The ship's going to fall over."

"The struts will hold her."

"No, sir. Begging the captain's pardon, they won't."

"Start firing sequences, Gomez."

"Thank you, sir." The relief in Gomez's voice was unmistakable.

Dud and the android were coming back down the flank of the dune. Rand wasn't with them. The andy fell further and further behind. And now a strange thing happened. The andy fell over on its face. The captain frowned. It did not fall as an andy is supposed to fall -- which is to say, like a human being, more or less. It was as if someone had pushed over a mannequin in a department store. It fell over like that. Thump, and a little tan cloud of sand puffed up from around it.

Dud went back and knelt by it. The andy's legs were still moving as if it dreamed, in the 1.5 million Freon-cooled micro-circuits that made up its mind, that it still walked. But the leg movements were slow and cracking. They stopped. Smoke began to come out of its pores and its tentacles shivered in the sand. It was gruesomely like watching a human die. A deep grinding came from inside it: Graaaagggg!

"Full of sand," Shapiro whispered. "It's got Beach Boys religion."

The captain glanced at him impatiently. "Don't be ridiculous, man. That thing could walk through a sandstorm and not get a grain inside it."

"Not on this world."

The burn settled again. The trader was now clearly canted. There was a low groan as

the struts took more weight.

"Leave it!" the captain bawled at Dud. "Leave it, leave it! Gee-yat! Come-me-for-Cry!"

Dud came, leaving the andy to walk face-down in the sand.

"What a balls-up," the captain muttered.

He and Dud engaged in a conversation spoken entirely in a rapid pidgin dialect which Shapiro was able to follow to some degree. Dud told the captain that Rand had refused to come. The andy had tried to grab Rand, but with no force. Even then it was moving jerkily, and strange grating sounds were coming from inside it. Also, it had begun to recite a combination of galactic strip-mining coordinates and a catalogue of the captain's folk-music tapes. Dud himself had then closed with Rand. They had struggled briefly. The captain told Dud that if Dud had allowed a man who had been standing three days in the hot sun to get the better of him, that maybe he ought to get another First.

Dud's face darkened with embarrassment, but his grave, concerned look never faltered. He slowly turned his head, revealing four deep furrows in his cheek. They were welling slowly.

"Him-gat big indies," Dud said. "Strong-far-Cry. Himgat for umby."

"Umby-him far-Cry?" The captain was looking at Dud sternly.

Dud nodded. "Umby. Beyat-shel. Umby-for-Cry."

Shapiro had been frowning, conning his tired, frightened mind for that word. Now it came. Umby. It meant crazy. He's strong, for Christ's sake. Strong because he's crazy. He's got big ways, big force. Because he's crazy.

Big ways... or maybe it meant big waves. He wasn't sure. Either way it came to the same.

Umby.

The ground shifted underneath them again, and sand blew across Shapiro's boots. From behind them came the hollow ka-thud, ka-thud, kathud of the breather-tubes opening. Shapiro thought it one of the loveliest sounds he had ever heard in his life.

The captain sat deep in thought, a weird centaur whose lower half was treads and plates instead of horse. Then he looked up and thumbed the communicator.

"Gomez, send Excellent Montoya down here with a tranquilizer gun."

"Acknowledged."

The captain looked at Shapiro. "Now, on top of everything else, I've lost an android worth your salary for the next ten years. I'm pissed off. I mean to have your buddy."

"Captain." Shapiro could not help licking his lips. He knew this was a very ill-chosen thing to do. He did not want to appear mad, hysterical, or craven, and the captain had apparently decided he was all three. Licking his lips like that would only add to the impression... but he simply couldn't help himself. "Captain, I cannot impress on you too strongly the need to get off this world as soon as poss --"

"Can it, dronehead," the captain said, not unkindly.

A thin scream rose from the top of the nearest dune.

"Don't touch me! Don't come near me! Leave me alone! All of you!"

"Big indies gat umby," Dud said gravely.

"Ma-him, yeah-mon," the captain returned, and then turned to Shapiro. "He really is bad off, isn't he?"

Shapiro shuddered. "You don't know. You just --"

The burn settled again. The struts were groaning louder than ever. The communicator crackled. Gomez's voice was thin, a little unsteady.

"We have to get out of here right now, Cap!"

"All right." A brown man appeared on the gangway. He held a long pistol in one gloved hand. The captain pointed at Rand. "Ma-him, for-Cry. Can?"

Excellent Montoya, unperturbed by the tilting earth that was not earth but only sand fused to glass (and there were deep cracks running through it now, Shapiro saw), unbothered by the groaning struts or the eerie sight of an android that now appeared to be digging its own grave with its feet, studied Rand's thin figure for a moment.

"Can," he said.

"Gat! Gat-for-Cry!" The captain spat to one side. "Shoot his pecker off, I don't care," he said. "Just as long as he's still breathing when we ship."

Excellent Montoya raised the pistol. The gesture was apparently two-thirds casual



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and one-third careless, but Shapiro, even in his state of near-panic, noted the way Montoya's head tilted to one side as he lined the barrel up. Like many in the clans, the gun would be nearly a part of him, like pointing his own finger. There was a hollow fooh! as he squeezed the trigger and the tranquilizer dart blew out of the barrel.

A hand reached out of the dune and clawed it down.

It was a large brown hand, wavery, made of sand. It simply reached up, in defiance of the wind, and smothered the momentary glitter of the dart. Then the sand fell back with a heavy thrrrrap. No hand. Impossible to believe there had been. But they had all seen it.

"Giddy-hump," the captain said in an almost conversational voice.

Excellent Montoya fell on his knees. "Aidy-May-for-Cry, bit-gat come! Saw-hoh got belly-gat-for-Cry! -- "

Numbly, Shapiro realized Montoya was saying a rosary in pidgin.

Up on the dune, Rand was jumping up and down, shaking his fists at the sky, screeching thinly in triumph.

A hand. It was a HAND. He's right; it's alive, alive, alive --

"Indie!" the captain said sharply to Montoya. "Cannit! Gat!"

Montoya shut up. His eyes touched on the capering figure of Rand and then he looked away. His face was full of superstitious horror nearly medieval in quality.

"Okay," the captain said. "I've had enough. I quit. We're going."

He shoved two buttons on his dashboard. The motor that should have swiveled him neatly around so he faced up the gangplank again did not hum; it squealed and grated. The captain cursed. The burn shifted again.

"Captain!" Gomez. In a panic.

The captain slammed in another button and the treads began to move backward up the gangplank.

"Guide me," the captain said to Shapiro. "I got no fucking rearview mirror. It was a hand, wasn't it?"

"Yes."

"I want to get out of here," the captain said. "It's been fourteen years since I had a cock, but right now I feel like I'm pissing myself."

Thrrap! A dune suddenly collapsed over the gangway. Only it wasn't a dune; it was an arm.

"Fuck, oh fuck," the captain said.

On his dune, Rand capered and screeched.

Now the threads of the captain's lower half began to grind. The mini-tank of which the captain's head and shoulders were the turret now began to judder backward.

"what -- "

The treads locked. Sand splurged out from between them.

"Pick me up!" the captain bawled to the two remaining androids. "'Now! RIGHT NOW!'" Their tentacles curled around the tread sprockets as they picked him up -- he looked ridiculously like a faculty member about to be tossed in a blanket by a bunch of roughhousing fraternity boys. He was thumbing the communicator.

"Gomez! Final firing sequence! Now! Now!"

The dune at the foot of the gangplank shifted. Became a hand. A large brown hand that began to scrabble up the incline.

Shrieking, Shapiro bolted from that hand.

Cursing, the captain was carried away from it.

The gangplank was pulled up. The hand fell off and became sand again. The hatchway rise closed. The engines howled. No time for a couch; no time for anything like that. Shapiro dropped into a crash-fold position on the bulkhead and was promptly smashed flat by the acceleration. Before unconsciousness washed over him, it seemed he could feel sand grasping at the trader with muscular brown arms, straining to hold them down --

Then they were up and away.

Rand watched them go. He was sitting down. When the track of the trader's jets was at last gone from the sky, he turned his eyes out to the placid endlessness of the dunes.

"We got a '34 wagon and we call it a woody," he croaked to the empty, moving sand.

"It ain't very cherry; it's an oldy but a goody."

Slowly, reflectively, he began to cram handful after handful of sand into his mouth. He swallowed... swallowed... swallowed. Soon his belly was a swollen barrel and sand

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began to drift over his legs.