VARIANT

Prit sensed the variant, but could not localise him. He hated the customary blackness in the variant's mind- a diminishing of sensibility, always present when a good one became variant. The variant was trying to reduce radiation, but could not- a usual variant weakness, too.

The road between small town and tiny village was dark. Prit walked quickly, carrying everything in one light case. He had not been here before, but had been drawn by the clouded radiation of Reiusel's mind. His task was simply expressed- find Reiusel, destroy him. But less simply accomplished, he thought. Reiusel had been alert, able, quick- and knew his life hinged on remaining hidden, or on destroying Prit first. Prit partly regretted that Reiusel must die, but a variant could never return, after that subtle, awful change.

Thin rain dripped from roadside trees. Reiusel was trying to hide the dark beacon of his mind, but could not. Investigating momentarily, Prit sensed Reiusel's fear, but also his determination to live, and the undercurrent of violence and crime, so typically variant. Prit closed his mind quickly.

Lights shone far ahead along the road. A car, driven fast, and approaching. The lights went from sight as the road dipped and Prit stepped into the concealment of a field gateway.

The car was coming fast, headlights in the dark. Halfway between it and Prit a shape moved quickly along the roadside. Tall, wide of shoulder and body, outlined against the approaching lights, he wore a long overcoat, a hat, and was almost running.

Car and figure seemed almost to blend, and Prit knew the driver had not seen the dark shape. Braked wheels screamed momentarily, then were released. The car came on, its speed scarcely reduced. Prit glimpsed a young woman, half seen behind a streaming windscreen, lips parted, gaze on the road ahead. Perhaps she had expected an impact, but there was none. Now, she was convincing herself the shape was a trick of rain and shadows.

Prit's muscles tensed. During that moment any ordinary man must have died-- been flung, broken, into the hedge. The form ahead had not! There could be only one explanation- he was Reiusel, nearer at hand than Prit had supposed.

He stood near the field gateway, listening. Beings from the system near Castor could

move silently and Reiusel was no exception. Rain and trees whispered, defeating the ear. But Prit could sense Reiusel's dark mind, though Reiusel strove to conceal it. A variant always lost the ability to shield his mind. Except for that, variants would probably never be found and exterminated, Prit thought.

At length he moved from the gateway. He did not think Reiusel was nearer, and the dark beacon of his mind seemed to grow dim, as with increased distance.

Prit walked on, listening often. Long skid marks testified to the girl's action. The country road was narrow, the grass each side high, overgrown with brambles. A man would walk on the road, and would be difficult to see by someone driving fast in rain.

It was a mile to the village. Prit abandoned the strain of trying to maintain contact with Reiusel's mind. He had at least established that Reiusel was nearby.

The village had one inn, and Prit's ring brought a small, fat man into the corridor by the bar. Prit smiled, removing his hat, resting his small case on a shelf.

" I'm a commercial traveller." He gave explanations before asked, as his immediate superior always advised. "My car broke down, and I left it back in town. I walked out this way to kill time, but it's too wet to go back tonight."

The man evaluated him, keen-eyed for all his rubicundity. In the bar, someone laughed, talking.

Prit took out his note case. "If you've a room, I'1l pay in advance."

Suspicion vanished. The innkeeper nodded. " There's a small one at the back, sir. We don't have much call for rooms."

Prit followed him up steep stairs. The room was narrow, and had a small window over an outhouse roof. He put his case near the bed.

"This will do well."

He paid, refused supper, but said he might go down to the bar later. The innkeeper was friendly, disposed to help. Prit sat down. Perhaps a newcomer, such as Reiusel, would have been noticed. Reiusel had clearly prepared his hiding place and new identity with care, and would not abandon it lightly.

Prit took out a note, folding it pensively. " I'm new to this part. We sell everything for gardens." There were leaflets and literature to prove it, if needed. " Paths, walling, gardenscape improvements, implements, sheds, greenhouses- know anyone who'd be interested ?"

Keen eyes were on the note. The man scratched a fat cheek.

“ Not too much demand for such things round here, sir.” He pondered. “ There’s been a new man up at Hundred House and he’s been making improvements, they say.”

Prit’s interest quickened. “ Hundred House? "

“ A biggish place half a mile back up the road. Changed hands a bit ago. He came in here once or twice- a Mr. Russell, a biggish man."

Prit smiled inwardly. Russell. Reiusel. It was odd how variants always had this blatant weakness. They would make elaborate precautions, but leave clues. This similarity of names was frequent. When a good one went variant, he schemed and planned to remain free and prosper in crime. Yet every variant seemed to defeat himself, to destroy his own chances of escape. There was the clouding, the sudden inability to hide his mind. and this typical weakness for similar names which barely gave anonymity.

"Thanks," Prit said. “ I’ll call on Mr. Russell later ."

Alone, Prit decided he must report to his immediate superior. The rain had stopped and the sky was clear. Stars shone weakly. Somewhere up there was the world from which Reiusel came. An odd race, Prit admitted, and having a strange brilliance of mind. Reiusel had once been among the good ones. Now, his mind was grown dark, and he was a variant, to be caught no matter upon what planet he sought to hide, or how far he went from Castor. Earth, or the remoter planets of distant suns- it was all the same. A variant, a bad one, must be found, rooted out, like any faulty deviation from normal. Odd how some of the most reliable could change, quickly or slowly, until they were variants, Prit thought.

He cleared his mind, adjusting it for contact with his immediate superior. The contact came quickly, vividly, a voluntary giving and receiving that annihilated distance.

“ You have found Reiusel.” It was scarcely a question rather a statement. “ How long until you catch him ?”

"Not long. Tonight, I hope."

“ Do, if you can. There is at least one other new variant on that planet.”

“ Another!” Prit felt astonishment. Variants were not numerous, a handful in millions.

“ Yes. Jhouns, a young man once under me. I’ll give you his description.”

An image floated in Prit's mind-- that of a pleasant looking man, sandy, with a slightly sharp face, and not heavily built.

" I'll go after him when I've finished with Reiusel," Prit agreed.

"Take care."

There was a friendly interchange of minds, then nothing. Prit gazed from the window at the weak stars, drawing in his lips pensively. It was unusual to have two variants to catch at once, like this. But Jhouns was probably half a world away, somewhere else on the planet.

Prit went down to the bar. The hour was early, there was time to spare, and he might learn something.

A youth and girl, obviously dressed for motorcycle or scooter were playing darts. The innkeeper sat near the end of the bar, smoking. A short, dark man occupied a low chair near the spark of fire, a pint at his elbow.

Prit got a drink, chatting, but conversation lagged. He tried a cursory examination of the minds of the four. None of them noticed, and none held anything significant. They had no telepathy, no radiation, no sensitivity or feeling that it was being used.

Prit got another drink, watching the darts. The feeling of another mind began to dawn upon him, gaining strength. The other mind was dark, its impressions chilling. Reiusel, Prit guessed. Reiusel was coming to the inn.

The dark beacon was growing nearer. Prit finished his drink, wished them good night, and went to the stairs door, leaving it an inch open. The dark beacon was closer, unmistakably variant. Prit shivered, though it was warm in the stair passage.

He heard the bar outer door open, silence as the four looked at the newcomer, then a welcome from the innkeeper. The door closed. Prit's sensation of the dark mind was very strong. Voices murmured.

" Looks like clearing up, Mr. Jones," the innkeeper said. " It's lucky you happened along. If you're seeing Mr. Russell tonight, I'd take it as a favour if you told him I'm sending a man to see if there's anything he wants for his garden. Knowing how Mr. Russell is so interested, I thought he'd be pleased."

A shock ran through Prit. He moved a little up the stairs, from where he could bend and look in at the top of the open crack. He pushed with infinite caution, and saw the newcomer half from behind. The single glance was sufficient, then he straightened and

went on silently up the stairs.

It was Jhouns, sandy, sharp-faced, the other variant ! Some freak of chance, or the affinity of dark minds, had brought them together. The innkeeper’s words proved that Jhouns and Reiusel met. They also betrayed that Prit knew who Russell was. Reiusel had undoubtedly sensed that he was followed, in the lane, and little effort was needed to deduce that the follower had been someone sent to track him down, destroy him, because he was variant.

The situation had abruptly grown complex and more dangerous, Prit decided as he silently closed his bedroom door. Reiusel and Jhouns both knew they were followed. They also knew that they could never conceal the dark beacon of their minds from the searching of a trained observer. Therefore the observer must be eliminated.

Prit had felt confident, tracing Reiusel. Now, with odds thus doubled, he felt uneasy indeed.

Midnight was early enough to seek Reiusel’s house, Prit decided. He checked his baggage. There was a small inner box containing six spherical crystal objects- highly valuable, and possibly the only ones on the planet, Prit thought, as he put the box in an inner pocket. A variant was not easily eliminated by ordinary means, was too tough and quick to be harmed by most types of physical violence. The way in which Reiusel had escaped the ear substantiated that.

Prit lay on the bed, dressed. A scooter departed, popping. Prit wondered what factors made good ones go variant. Jhouns had had a promising future, apparently. But now, he must not live.

Noises came from below, then silence again. Prit rested, not trying to make his mind reach out to contact Reiusel or Jhoun. He was almost dozing when a tap vibrated the door.

He rose, opening it. The innkeeper looked apologetic.

"Mr. Russell and Mr. Jones want to see you, sir ."

Prit retained his expression of mild interest. "It’s late."

“ So I said, sir. But they seemed very anxious.” The voice dropped confidingly. “ Mr. Russell has spent a lot of money so far at the Hundred House, sir.”

A variant never lacked money, Prit thought. Crime came easily, paid readily. If Russell and Jones were nicely estab lished here under aliases, they might not risk trying to kill him at the inn.

"I’1l see them," he said quietly.

The man went, and soon footfalls came up the stairs. Prit withdrew until his back was at the window.

Reiusel was tall and wide, with a strong, broad face, cold eyes and lips tight and thin. Jhouns, sandy, years younger, looked slight besides him, but had a wiry toughness. They closed the door.

“ You’ve found us sooner than I expected,” Jhouns said with deadly quietness.

Prit smiled. "I like to be efficient."

He opened his mind momentarily to the radiation of the pair, but closed it sharply. There was deadly hatred, fierce anger, a very strong desire to kill him immediately, but a fear that their comfortable haven would then be lost. Prit looked into Reiusel’s cold eyes.

“I believe you’ve been enjoying yourself nicely for some time, Reiusel,” he observed.

Reiusel’s eyes resembled a snake's. "I wish to go on doing so"

"That`s understandable."

Prit’s nerves and muscles were tight. Jhouns moved away from the door, to the bed. He sat down upon it, faking ease, feet tucked in.

“I also like things as they are,” Jhouns said sharply. “From my point of view, everything is excellent- except that you’re following us.”

Therefore you’d like the following to cease! Prit thought. He smiled at Jhouns, though it was dangerous, with the pair now separated across the room.

“I’ve never known a variant not like what’s he’s become,” Prit observed. “ Odd, isn’t it. Ages ago it was hoped a variant could be reformed again. But none ever was. It didn’t work. You’re an off-shoot of the normal. What’s more, you knew you’d be caught, one day, and what would happen then.”

"We’re not easily killed," Reiusal said acidly

His eyes flickered towards the small suitcase, and Prit knew his thoughts. Prit laughed.

"I wouldn’t go so far as to say that!"

Jhoun’s feet were close together, under the edge of the bed taking his weight. His body was a spring, waiting release.

"We’ll see," Reiusal began.

He swept into movement as he spoke, his speed astonishing, projecting himself towards Prit. Simultaneously, as in a practised act, Jhouns sprang across the room towards the door, in the same movement gathered up the case, opened the door, and was gone. Reiusel’s lunge halted, was reversed, and he was out of the door on his companion’s heels.

Prit closed the door carefully, locking it. In one pocket was a soft pouch. He fitted it to a belt round his waist, and transferred the six electronodes from their box to it. Jhouns and Reiusel were welcomed to everything else his case contained !

They had meant to take the electronodes first, kill him second, Prit thought, as he opened the room window silently. They were very determined. Variants always were.

He lowered himself to the outhouse roof, and to the ground A narrow yard joined the road. He listened, opening his mind The dark beacon of Reiusel and Jhouns was receding. Apparently they were sure they had the electronodes in the case, and would not investigate until back at the Hundred House. And that, Prit thought, was the place to go himself.

The Hundred House was old, in its own grounds, rambling, balconied and amid trees. Prit circled it at a good distance. Adjacent buildings might once have been stables. Lights shone in many house windows, but nothing moved.

He crept nearer, following a wall lined with fruit trees. A lit window was directly in view, almost ahead. Keeping to one side, Prit looked in.

A chair before a desk was occupied by a broad, heavily built man. Prit opened his mind, and sensed Reiusel near, for the moment submerging the dark, dimmer beacon of Jhoun’s mind. Thus might one die, easily, Prit thought. He felt in the pouch, taking out an electronode. He found a stone, and with it broke the glass, simultaneously tossing the crystal globe inside, directly under the chair.

The hollow sphere erupted with electronic fire, rising swiftly, surrounding chair and figure with flickering blue. Almost at once the leaping current was gone, spent. Watching, tension stabbed at Prit’s nerves. The chair and figure remained. The chair should, but not Reiusel ! An electronode that close was invariable fatal, swiftly and finally.

There was an explanation, and the force of it struck Prit physically. The figure was a dummy. He had wasted one electronode ! Reiusel and Jhouns had anticipated he would come.

Somewhere the dark beacon of Reiusel's mind expressed triumph. Prit ducked, dodging back along the wall and through a barred door into the stables. A car stood under the high roof. Wasted hay was near steps rising to a loft, and he mounted quickly. A high door, once used to take hay into the loft, but now closed against birds by strong wire mesh, faced the house. Prit looked out, extremely cautious.

Everything was still. He could sense Reiusel and Jhouns, now, but not very near. The sensation had no directivity, and strain as he would Prit could see no one in the dim starlight.

Minutes drifted. The minds of the pair had a queer, distorted triumph, sinister, suppressed, yet fierce. Prit shivered, wishing he had not wasted an electronode.

Below, something slammed. Prit remembered the stout door. If locked outside, he could not open it. A confused crackling began, and red danced at the step ladder opening. Someone had ignited the old hay.

The fire spread as among tinder, sending up choking dense smoke. Prit felt terror. He tugged at the wire netting, but it was of strong expanded steel mesh, stapled securely outside.

Coughing, he ran the length of the hayloft. The smoke was unendurable, but the flames below showed there were no windows except spaces in the brickwork only as large as a man's arm. He recalled how the car stood near the waste hay. The stables would be an inferno within minutes.

Coughing, eyes smarting, he backed again from the netting. Flames were roaring through the stair opening as up a blast furnace chimney. He opened the pouch, and lobbed an electronode at the foot of the mesh. The sphere erupted in electrical fire, heat running up the metal. The mesh glowed red hot, but the electronode faded out, and the mesh was cooling visibly. Biting his lips. Prit lobbed another. The mesh was again licked by electrical energy, glowed red, white, and a piece in the middle dribbled down, melted. Prit ran for the opening, breath held, and jumped through it, landing heavily amid soft, wet rubbish. He was up instantly, running round the building, streaking for the part of the garden near the wall, where cover was better.

He had only three electronodes left. There was no other practicable way of eliminating a variant. These beings from near Castor were tough. The native planet was impossible, by Earth standards. To survive, they were quick, very strong, and could

take knocks which would kill a human. He had seen a bullet pass through one as if through a sack of potatoes, and with no greater vital damage.

The stable roof fell with a crash, sparks and flames leaping high. An explosion added more fury, as the car petrol tank went. The Hundred House was no longer dark outside, but lit by red, fitful colour. Prit was glad that he had reported back to his immediate superior. If he failed personally, others would come to find Reiusel and Jhouns.

He retreated among the trees, circled, and approached the house from the opposite side. A french window was a few inches open- too obviously. He passed it at a distance, and finally discovered a small side window which he could unfasten.

The stable fire crackled, and rooms that side were lit intermittently. When he made his mind receptive the blackness of the pair assailed him. They had seen him leave the stable loft.

He went quietly upstairs, along a corridor, and found a glass door that opened to the balcony. There, he kept in shadows, listening.

A form crept from bushes near the garden wall. Jhouns. He was very cautious, but not looking up towards the balcony. Prit stealthily removed an electronode from his pouch, judging the distance, waiting.

Jhouns was only a few paces away, moving to go below, when Prit lobbed the electronode towards his feet. Simultaneously, some inner warning made Jhouns look up. One hand shot out in a flicker of blurred movement, catching the crystal sphere, and Jhouns sprang under the balcony, from view.

Perspiration beaded Prit’s brow. Now, he had only two electronodes- and Jhouns had one ! It merely needed throwing carefully to crack at one’s feet, Prit thought, shivering.

He moved hastily along the balcony. The first fury of the stable blaze was spent, but flames rose high from the destroyed building. Prit stepped into a room, waiting.

The black beacon of other minds was very fierce, with a new undertone of triumph. Prit could gather nothing to help him. But he sensed that Jhouns was looking at the balcony from a higher level, instead of from below. Neither of the pair could blanket his mind, but the impressions were fragmentary, unhelpful to a person not familiar with the house. Reiusel had once been quite important among the good ones, Prit remembered. It was strange how he had lost the power to blanket his mind, when he became variant. Prit had an inner curtain to block off his consciousness from outside appraisal. But no variant retained that ability, and Reiusel’s mind radiated fear, hope,

anger, determination.

An iron escape stairway was level with the end of the balcony. Prit went up it quickly, and in at a narrow window. He felt nearer to Jhouns. The room was unlocked, and a dark passage led to other rooms. The door of one was closing, showing a decreasing crack of reflected red light from the stables. Prit sped to it, tugging out an electronode, opened it, and saw Jhouns with one foot upon a second narrow iron stair as he looked down cautiously at the balcony. The electronode sped from Prit's hand with a continued movement, landed at Jhoun's feet, and broke.

Electronic fire leapt up, covering Jhouns. Prit stepped back, shielding himself just beyond the door. There was no sound, no heat, only a surge of released current. It should abruptly double in intensity, as the electronode Jhouns had caught was ignited.

It did not, but faded, and was gone. Prit did not look into the room again. Jhouns was finished. But the pair had foreseen the danger of losing their advantage, and Jhouns had undoubtedly handed the electronode to Reiusel. There was no other explanation of the single release of energy.

Prit went along the passage, listening, trying to get some directive bearing on Reiusel. He watched the balcony from a window, but saw nothing. The fire was dying to a steady redness.

He descended the stairs quietly, reaching the ground floor. The corridor off the stairs was flagged stone and very dark. He moved along it cautiously, passed a table, and became aware of a quiet rustling. He halted, and the rustling ceased. He thought he could hear breathing.

"Puts us on equal terms, don't you think," a cold voice said.

Prit's first impulse was to lob the crystal electronode ahead, but he did not. The voice had an echoing, muffled quality, as if Reiusel stood behind an open door. If so, and the electronode discharged uselessly, terms would no longer be equal.

Prit withdrew, moving to the opposite side of the corridor. Reiusel dare not throw the electronode until he was sure it would find its mark- dare not have it waste on the paved corridor.

"Jhouns is finished," Prit said warningly, very uneasy.

" I know." The voice had changed position slightly. "He had an element of carelessness which I lack."

Prit tried to estimate the distance and bearing. " That's not quite the whole story," he

pointed out.

"No?"

“ A variant cannot keep his mind undetected. I can. When I leave here, I can keep trace of you, but you can’t find my mind when I don’t wish-”

"If you leave," Reiusel corrected.

There was silence. Prit wondered if he should contact his immediate superior at once, telling of the situation. His superior could come into rapport immediately, if Prit wished. But it would be difficult to anticipate any move Reiusel might make, with his mind open for contact with his superior, Prit decided.

“ You variants all have the same weakness,” Prit argued, perspiring, hoping Reiusel would talk longer next time. “ You can’t close your minds. I see your mind. So can my superior. You can never close it.”

"I've done well enough."

It was stalemate, but Reiusel had the advantage of a complete knowledge of the house. That knowledge must not be used, Prit decided.

He began to feel stealthily back along the corridor. It was not wide, and he had passed a table against one wall. He found it again, and felt rapidly over its surface.

There was a heavy book, a telephone. Prit removed the phone silently, propping the book against the wall to hold the cradle down. He placed the phone on the paving against the opposite wall, drew its cord loosely across and made a curve in the flex at the table edge. On the loop, very near the edge, he rested the last electronode.

He withdrew until the corridor end pressed his back. He estimated that Reiusel had heard his retreat, but not his detailed actions.

"Why not give up, Reiusel?" he said quietly

“ Why? No variant ever does. We know what would happen to us.”

The voice was louder, as if Reiusel was approaching. This was Reiusel’s chance, Prit thought, sweating. Reiusel would know the length of the corridor, the position of its doors, and could judge if it was safe to risk throwing the electronode in the dark. If he did, that would be the end.

Stealthy movements grew louder. Prit held his breath, trying to make Reuisel

uncertain that he was still there, so that he would not risk wasting the electronode.

A long silence dragged, then more sounds of movement, nearer. Very close the table position, Prit thought. There was a light scraping sound, a thin plop, and abruptly the corridor was full of electric fire, leaping up Reiusel's body like lightning up a conductor, and followed by a second similar flash.

It was all over. Prit did not switch on the light to look, but went out of the corridor, and put on the lights in the adjoining room.

He felt weak, exhausted from the tension. He would rest a little before contacting his immediate superior, he decided.

He walked through the house, putting on lights. It was an imposing place, nicely furnished. Reiusel and Jhouns had done well for themselves. Variants always did, he thought absently. Being a variant had its points. This planet was pure bliss, compared with the inhospitable world on which Reiusel, Jhouns, and he himself had been born.

He went through some of the bedrooms. Very comfortable, Prit thought. It would be nice to stay here a bit, now Reiusel and Jhouns were finished.

He walked slowly on, musing. It was a pity their home world near Castor was so harsh. He had no desire to return to it, or to begin another hazardous expedition, perhaps to some unpleasant planet, perhaps to find variants even more dangerous that Reiusel and Jhouns.

His own people were tough, Prit thought. A hardy race, on an inhospitable world, they managed. Here, on this easy planet, life would be paradise !

He went down again, and found Reiusel and Jhouns had prepared food and drink, presumably before alarmed. Sitting down, he ate ravenously.

A pity to give up all this at once, Prit thought. It would be easy to stay here. He would call himself Pritchard, telling the innkeeper he had retired, had bought the house from Russell.

Sitting there, musing on it all, he did not notice how the protective curtain dissolved in his mind. Pritchard was a good name, he thought. As Mr. Pritchard, of Hundred House, he would do well . . . He did not feel his immediate superior's investigation or dismay. Yes, it was pleasant to be Mr. Pritchard of Hundred House, Prit decided.