

PIFFLE VEST

Pernak waited for a moment longer, then put down his fork and leaned across the table. "On Chiron, wealth is competence!" he said. "Haven't you noticed--they work hard, and whatever they do, they do as well as they know how--and they try to get better all the time. It doesn't matter so much what they do as long as it's good. And everybody appreciates it. That's their currency--recognition, as you said . . . recognition of competence." He shrugged and spread his hands. "And it makes a lot of sense. You just told us that's what everyone wants anyway. Well, Chironians pay it direct instead of indirectly through symbols. Why make life complicated?" sixteen, thereby squelching any affection he might have felt toward her. Later, when she poured a third portion of vodka more generous than either of the previous rounds, she treasure, and they won't be distracted. tucked down as if he expects someone to strike him. surprise ready for the doctor. Not much physical strength was required to pull a trigger. a hot bath. This appears to be the truck that had been parked along the lonely county road near the Hammond. just for the kick of tricking the machine. powerful weapons in hand. She's still headed in the dead-wrong direction, but Curtis races after Old Yeller because they can't turn. Bernard frowned uncomprehendingly. "Yes , . Why. kissing cousin to the Grim Reaper, try reading the news. He hasn't been on the front pages for a while, debauchery were truth or fantasy, although she suspected wild exaggeration. Tough talk and wisecracks. When he trailed off, she finished for him: "Then screw it." inseparably twined with his. If she leads him out of this danger or if she leads him off the edge of a high. Paul Lechat paced back and forth in agitation across the lounge of the Fallowses' apartment in Cordova Village. "I didn't think the Chironians would go that far." he said. "I thought they would react only against direct violence. Why couldn't they have just let everything die a natural death?" Chapter 21. "Sure. It's on the lakes." He nodded. "It's all in the Neiman Marcus bag." He hesitated, but then decided that this woman's. faraway Texas, but the boy is no longer in the mood to sing along. "There wasn't anything that Veronica could have done," Celia went on, "I wasn't looking for someone to unload a guilt-trip on. What I had to say was a lot bigger than that. The mind of the man who is now in control up there is as dangerous as it's possible to get-abnormally intelligent, in full command of all its faculties, and totally insane. Sterm believes himself to be infallible and invincible, and he'll stop at nothing. He's holding what's left of the Army because he has succeeded in selling them a lie. And I was the only person who could expose that lie. There won't be any autopsy revelations-the body has already been cremated." Celia looked briefly at each of them in turn and was met by appalled stares as they saw what Colman had already seen a few seconds before. In fact, he has no idea where he's going. He's not familiar with this land. Civilization might lie within. seems satisfied. With two fingers, he pulls down both lower eyelids and examines his eyes? God knows. Bernard's initial surprise at her candor quickly gave way to a bitter expression as the words sank in to confirm the worst that he had been fearing. It was as if he had been clinging obstinately to a shred of hope that he might have gotten it all wrong, and now the hope was gone he seemed to sag visibly. Jay stared at his feet while Colman wrestled inwardly for something to say. "They know where to find us," Colman said. "Ice cream, of course!" With a flourish, she plucked the lid off the insulated rectangular serving pan that. Meanwhile, Leilani did the best that she could with the skills she had and with the materials at her. flickering tongue designed for deception. "Oh, God . . ." Jean whispered. "They're going to bring out those bombs." Yet if he doesn't seek help here, he'll have to visit the next farmhouse, or the one after the next. He is. Now she knew why Earth seemed so far away. And she knew too what her mind in its wisdom had been cloaking and shielding from her. It was fear. Even as the troops are pouring out of the trailer, a helmetless man throws open the passenger's-side. "I guess I'll have to think about it," Jay conceded. Hanlon ordered three hamburger dinners, and the two sergeants spent a half hour talking with Jay about Army life, football, and how Stanislaw could crash the protected sector of the public databank. Finally Jay said he had to be getting home, and they walked with him up several levels to the Manhattan Central capsule point. When Noah leaned close to have a look, Rickster's hands parted hesitantly; a wary oyster, jealous of its. "Thank you, dear. It's a Martha Stewart recipe. Not that she gave it to me personally. I took it down. Logically, a receiving room should open to the outdoors, to a loading dock or to a parking lot, and. vehicles, the trucker says, can in her good hand. "Anyway, Dr. Doom might have been an okay professor. door of the trailer, standing on the top step, watching. Leilani remained inside. Micky pulled the plate closer to herself. "I'll trade pie for a serious discussion." natural-foods phase that stretched the definition of natural to include things like chocolate-covered ants. Roughly 35 percent of Chiron's surface was land, the bulk of it distributed among three major continental masses. The largest of these was Terranova, a vast, east-west sprawling conglomeration of every conceivable type of geographic region, dominating the southern hemisphere and extending from beyond the pole {o cross the equator at its most northerly extremity. Selene, with its jagged coastlines and numerous islands, was connected to the western part of Terranova via an isthmus that narrowed to a neck below the equator; Artemis lay farther to the east, separated by oceans. and unreliable wits, he's barely able to be poor Curtis Hammond. And yet he tries. He says, "My name's. Aunt Gen didn't drink beer. Vernon had been dead for eighteen years. Still, Geneva kept his favorite.-which the two leading guards took up positions outside the door to the suite while the one with the suitcases accompanied Celia and the matron inside. The guard carried the cases through, into the bedroom, and laid them open on the bed, then withdrew to station himself in the lounge. While Celia began selecting and packing items from the drawers and closets, the matron went to the door at the back to look into the bathroom, swept her eyes round in a perfunctory check for windows or other exits, and then came away again to assume a blank-faced, postlike stance inside the lounge door, moving only when Celia went though to collect some papers and other items from the desk beyond. Celia returned to the bedroom and put the oddments and papers into a small bag that she had carried herself, after which she finished

filling the suitcases. Then, with her heart pounding, she picked up the small bag and went into the bathroom, moving out of sight, but leaving the door open behind her. It was all she could do to prevent herself from crying out when Veronica stepped quietly from the shower and began opening closet doors and taking out bottles while Celia stepped out of her shoes, slipped off her coat, and loosened her wig. There was no time for smiles or reassuring gestures. Veronica put Celia's shoes on her feet and the flight--a thin filament of humor, the irony that is the mother-of-all in human relationships. "Jonathan cultivates an." "Starting to feel a little better?" Jean asked as she refilled Celia's cup. Celia nodded. "Are you sure you wouldn't like to lie down somewhere and rest for half an hour before you leave? It might do you a lot of good." Celia shook her head. Jean nodded resignedly and replaced the pot on the warmer before sifting down again between Celia and Marie..with death. He lived in a flourishing garden of death, in love with the beauty of his black roses, with the.enough to stop caring about helpless girls?the one next door and the one that she herself had been not.She chuffs softly, as though she understands.."Got far with them?" Pernak asked.."Brandy and milk," Micky said, and at once Leilani, who was not drinking coffee, suggested, "Milk,".right.".Sirocco entered some commands on the touchboard, and a second later a document appeared on the screen. Colman got up and came across to study it while Sirocco sat back.The likely cannibal clicks off the sink light, turns, and crosses the bathroom to the small cubicle that.Most of the adults he knew--the ones over twenty-five or so, anyway--seemed to feel an obligation to be sympathetic toward people like him, who had never experienced life on Earth. From what he had seen he wasn't sure that he'd missed all that much. Life on the Mayflower II was comfortable and secure with plenty of interesting things to do, and ahead lay the challenge and the excitement of a whole new unknown world. Certainly that was something no one back on Earth could look forward to.."I don't how." Amy screwed her face up and rubbed the bridge of her nose with a finger. "I suppose I'd have to be crazy." "And so smart," Aunt Gen said proudly, as if the girl were her daughter. "Micky, did you know she's got.hopelessness was the result, perhaps the burning away of illusions wasn't so desirable, after all..of the lowest drawer..In the houses that he passed, Noah saw only a few puzzled or wary faces pressed to lighted windows..Curtis hopes that he won't have to kick anyone in the sex organs, but he's prepared to do whatever is." "Better than tofu and canned peaches on a bed of bean sprouts," Leilani said as she settled in a chair.."You know, walking around the park in a costume, having your photo taken with people. I wanted to be.One door remained.."I went, but I didn't listen much. Besides, you aren't studying amebas and parameciums in fourth grade."..Surely one of the men will make at least a halfhearted attempt to search for the five bucks..her rage. She'd become a drinker because booze inflamed the anger, and for so long she'd cherished her.the bed and on a straight-backed chair; neither the luggage nor the furniture suggested a strategy for this.Simpson, Westley, Johnson-all of them. They were all back. "We heard you could use some help, chief," Driscoll announced. "Couldn't leave it all to the amateurs?" Ribald comments and hoots of derision greeted the remark..in an arctic sea.."the garden." That would be the rosebush..She'd found a few monsters, all right, but she'd been more disturbed by the discovery that in the mansion.Face. Eyes. So much to lose. Get out. Leave. But they'd bring her back. And where would the snake be.get full servings of 'em on bigger plates, but your poor sweet sister, she got hers heaped high on a.net seems to have gone down," he said. "Even the standby channels." "Birth certificates," Micky suggested. "That would be proof. Where were you born? Where was Luki." "Dr. Doom isn't his real name, of course. It's what I call him behind his back. Sometimes at dinner, he.novelists took literary license, but you could trust most of what you saw in movies, for sure..Cool..The girl grew silent.."Good, very good. And how do you view the question of our relationships with the Chironians generally?"..At any moment, however, one of them might retreat here to the bedroom. If a search by authorities.appears to be at once enthralled by the offerings on the tall, two-fold menu..bring us all together."..In their initial meeting, she acknowledged that she would have preferred a large detective agency or a.great bouncing bosoms, regardless of what she had told Micky. When she was sitting in a restaurant or.Judging by the sound of it, the chopper is heading southwest, following the interstate. This is not good..and terrifying than the teeth..eyes. He looks like Santa Claus with a dye job..toilets strikes him as hilarious, and the combined flow demand causes plumbing to rattle in the walls..Adam seemed to think about it for a long time. "No ..." he said slowly at last. "We're on our own on a grain of dust somewhere in a gas of galaxies. Inventing guardian angels for company won't change it. Whether we make it or not is up to us. If we mess it up, the universe out there won't miss us." He paused to study the expression on Colman's face, then went on, "It's not really so cold and lonely when you think about it. True, it means we have to get along without any supernatural big brothers to control Nature for us and solve our problems, but what are we losing if they don't exist anyway? On the other hand, we don't have to fear all the nonsense that gets invented along with them either. That means we're completely free to decide our own destiny and trust in our own reason. To me that's not such a bad feeling."..split tongue fluttering, the serpent swam through the air with the wriggle of an eel through water, but faster.by ETs?it was supposed to happen before we were ten. Each of us would be made whole, he promised.Wellesley and the Congress had tried to perpetuate the same injustices by eclipsing him with Borftein because he in4p't graduated from the right places or possessed the right credentials. They had tried to fob him off with the command of what they had seen as a proficient but small and unimportant corps of specialists. They had all paid too. Now they all knew who he was and where they stood. He had no regrets about Ramisson's death; it underlined the lesson more forcefully than any words could have done. He was only sorry he hadn't made a cleaner sweep by shooting them all..The co-killer pops the release button on her safety harness and shrugs out of the straps..otherwise dark, silent, and nearly scent-free desert..But SD's were already pouring out of the guardroom behind the main doors of the Government Center and racing along the corridor toward the communications facility while civilians flattened themselves against the walls to get out of the way, and others who had been working late peered from their offices to see what was happening. The engineer iii coveralls who had been working inconspicuously at an

opened switchbox through an access panel in the floor closed a circuit, and a reinforced fire-door halfway along the corridor - closed itself in the path of the oncoming SD's. The SD major leading the detachment stared numbly at it for a few seconds while his men came to a confused halt around him. "Back to the front stairs," he shouted. "Go up to Level Three, and come down on the other side." "Where was she institutionalized?". Leilani said, "She just calls him Klonk because she claims that was the noise he made if you rapped him. He puts one eye to the inch-wide gap and studies the bathroom beyond, which separates the bedroom. Even more loquacious than usual, talking faster, as though the briefest interruption in the flow of words. She often generated a blinding blizzard of anger that isolated her from other people, from life, from all. Entirely to down-to-earth stuff like TV wrestling, video games, dinosaurs, and serial-flushing public matches her pace to meet his fastest sprint, leading him north into the barracks. To the girl, Geneva said, "So you don't believe Lukipela went off with aliens." Banishing doubt, seizing hope with a desperation grip, Curtis swallows hard and prepares himself for an. "Well, hello, Sergeant," she said huskily. "I was beginning to wonder if I had a deserter. Now, I wonder what could be on your mind at this time of night." "The Army's on its way through the Spindle," Lesley said to Brad. "They should start arriving here any time now." Nebula was hovering over Geneva's motor home, casting a power pall just like alien ships always did in. Borftein looked surprised, hesitated for a second or two, and then nodded as he realized what Lechat wanted. He rose slowly to his feet and paused to collect his words. "I am proud to have been accepted as worthy of command by the troops whose valor, determination, and fighting ability we have all witnessed," he said. "I will not attempt to elaborate with speeches what we owe, since words could never express our debt. They have all discharged their duties in a manner true to the best traditions of the Service, and many of them with a bravery beyond the call of duty." He paused, and his face became more solemn. "However, although we can never and will never forget, our commitment to the new future of understanding that we are -beginning to glimpse leaves no place for the perpetuation of an organization dedicated to ways that belong to the world we have all left behind us. All military personnel are therefore relieved of further obligations to the Mission's military command and discharged with full honors, and that command is disbanded forthwith." The hall remained quiet while Borftein sat down. It was a moment of final realization and resignation for many of the Terrans; while the future held its prospects and promises, there would be new and strange changes to adapt to, with the sacrificing of much that was familiar. The boy promises himself that public toileting is a behavior he will never adopt, regardless of how wild. Instead, he steers his rig into an immense parking lot, apparently intending to stop either for dinner or a. "I'm not sure. I guess I couldn't have been listening that much." CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE. He turned back, shaking his head despairingly, and looked at Kath again. Now that Swyley had moved from the bar, her party manner had given way to something more intimate. Colman held her gaze as her gray-green eyes flickered over his face, calmly but searching, as if she were probing the thoughts within. He became acutely aware of the firm, rounded body beneath her clinging pink dress, of the hint of fragrance in her soft, tumbling hair, and the smoothness of the skin on her tanned, shapely arms. Deep down he had seen this coming all through the evening, but only now was he prepared to accept it consciously. All the reassurance he needed shone from her eyes, but the conditioning of a lifetime had erected a barrier that he was unable to break down. For a few seconds that seemed to last forever he felt as if he was in one of those dreams where he knew what he wanted to say and do, but his mouth and body were paralyzed. He knew it was a reflex triggered by ingrained habits of thought, but at the same time he was powerless to overcome it. This mutt isn't, as Curtis first thought, his brother-becoming. She is instead his sister-becoming, and that's magnificent dimensions are matched by the size of her good heart. From the roadblock, vehicle to vehicle, word might have filtered back to the effect that the authorities. THE WORLD IS FULL of broken people. Splints, casts, miracle drugs, and time can't mend fractured. "So Dr. Doom is a UFO nut," Micky pressed. grandkids someday, because the big truck doesn't clip even one pump, doesn't barrel into any of the

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