

*Sean McMullen recently adapted a 1958 play called *The Matriarchy of Renok* by the pioneer Australian SF author Norma Hemming. It's slated for performance at the World SF Convention in Melbourne this September. He says it is quite a classic space opera.*

*"The Precedent" found its inspiration one evening when a documentary about global warming was followed by another about war trials and then capped off by the movie *The Seventh Seal*. As you might expect for a story with such roots, this story is not alight and airy read, but it is a potent speculation about what our future might hold.*

# The Precedent

*By Sean McMullen*

**E**VEN WHEN THE CLIMATE crime is so serious that death is not punishment enough, one still gets an audit. We were being taken to a mine

in the desert to be audited, and a third of the tippers who had begun the journey had already died. Their bodies had been staked out by the roadside to desiccate. We pulled wagons that were loaded with our water and food, wagons that were SUVs stripped of their engines, doors, and seats. No fuel resources could be consumed on our journey.

There was no clear pattern to the deaths in our grisly and geriatric column. Some fat tippers died within the first ten miles, but others just got thinner and survived. I was quite fit to begin with, so I was better prepared than most. Red sand made the ground look red hot, and magnified my unending thirst. The surface of the road was appalling, but nobody tried to repair it. A good road would make it easier for us, and we were meant to be stressed. If some of us died, so much the better.

In the Midsouth Consolidation, they practiced desiccation. Once dead, the tippers were flayed open and left to dry in the sun. When there

was only bone and dried flesh left, their remains were brought to the mines and buried. Thus the carbon of the guilty was returned to the Earth, rather than stressing the atmosphere.

At nightfall we stopped where we were, shuffled to the roadside, and fell asleep. Each night I had the same visitor. He was just a denser patch of darkness in the gloom with a pale oval for a face, yet his voice was perfectly clear.

"So you survived to the mine," he said.

"Not there yet," I replied, sitting up.

"You arrive tomorrow. The odds favor you."

"You talk as if this is good."

"What is wrong with being alive?"

"It's 2035 and vengeance is upon us, is that good? We tippers were born before the Millennium Year, and so are guilty until pardoned. Is that good? I was born in 1955, so I'm guilty. For me, that's bad."

"You could plead guilty, then appeal for a merciful death."

"I intend to beat the audit."

"The Audit of Midsouth has a perfect record for tipper convictions."

"I'm used to standing alone."

Those of us who reached the mine had to camp in a vast holding ground of red sand, awaiting our turn to be audited. Some had been there a long time. These were the borderlines, those tippers who had difficult audits and were holding up the executions. Every execution meant a lessening of the burden on the ecosphere, so large numbers were important. Meantime the borderlines were assigned to service, where they did the flaying, the desiccation, and the dropping of bodies down the mine shaft.

The miners were too guilty to die. They were lowered into the mine, there to live out what remained of their lives dragging corpses away from the drop shaft and packing them into the abandoned tunnels. Miners first class had no light, their only food was what they could gnaw from the corpses, and they had to drink the artesian water that seeped into the tunnels. It was a poor alternative to death.

Because those pending audit were already considered guilty, we were

made to assist with disposals after executions. This began the day we arrived. Hot, parched, weary, and coated with red dust, we simply dropped our harnesses and joined the execution parade. The first convicted man was my age, and I was eighty. The executioner had been chosen by ballot from the pool of wardens. She was about twenty, and was lean and muscular. Her recreation was probably fitness, which was very climatically correct.

"What's your charges?" asked an older borderline as we shuffled along.

"Squandering and display," I replied mechanically.

"Yeah? Me, I got greed. The audit went for death, second class, but I got adjourned. Name's Chaz."

"I'm Jason, my audit's tomorrow."

The wardens did not care if we tippers talked among ourselves. What we said was no longer important to anyone but us. The condemned man was walking with his hands tied behind his back. He turned as he heard us.

"I got denial, squandering, and greed," he announced proudly. "Death second class on all three."

"What was your line?" I asked.

"Morels."

"As in the mushrooms?"

"Yeah, and I was good, too. Hunted them for a living, back in the States. I just loved the wilderness. Used to teach folk the tricks, like how to get 'eyes on' in snow and burned pine forest, then to look for the 'pop-out' effect. That's when the morels suddenly start jumping out at you."

I was to hear that sort of spiel depressingly often in the fortnight to come. Tippers often tried to leave a little of their art or passion to those who might survive them. How to tune a motor, ways to score in a nightclub, tricks to beat the trend in a share market, or even the art of arranging Christmas lights. But there were no more gasoline motors, nightclubs and share markets had ceased to exist, and proof that you had ever displayed Christmas lights would get you death, second class.

"How does a mushroom hunter get denial, squandering, and greed?" asked Chaz.

"I drove an SUV to reach the best spots."

Denial, because he said he loved the wilderness yet drove an SUV.

Squandering merely because he drove an SUV. Greed, because he took from nature without giving back. Death, death, and death. Having spoken, he looked more relaxed, perhaps because he had left something of himself in our memories. Shepherded by the executioner, he walked out onto the tipping plank. The gallows were built of timber even though the old mine site was littered with steel pipes and beams. That was climatic symbolism. The Auditor General stood waiting.

"James Francis Harrington, you have been found guilty of denial, squandering, and greed," she declared. "For this you are sentenced to death by merciful means. As you did take from the Earth, so now you must give what remains to you back to the Earth. This by my tally, the Twenty-Fifth day of March, 2035. Wardens, reclaim his carbon."

The executioner arranged the noose to snap Harrington's neck as he stood on the tipping plank. This was a length of pinewood that extended out over the drop. The other end was held down by a pile of coal. Now a procession of wardens filed past. Each took a lump of coal from the pile. The plank began to teeter. I counted fifteen seconds of teetering, during which Harrington's dignity and composure fled. He began to scream as the tipping point approached; he pissed his pants to try to lighten himself and gain a few more moments of life.

Relentlessly the hands removed coal from the pile, as relentlessly as coal had once been dug out of the Earth and burned. Abruptly the tipping point was reached, and a shower of coal catapulted over Harrington as he fell. The gallows creaked. The wardens applauded.

"Now that was a great piece of work," said Chaz. "Harrington didn't want to give the scream of repentance, but they got it out of him."

A long line of condemned tippers was waiting as we took the body down. A woman began to shriek and struggle. She was next. Her executioner was a youth of about seventeen, and he looked nervous. Nervous about killing someone, or nervous about screwing up? The wardens collected the coal and piled it back onto the tipping plank.

The executions went on for a long time. The lumps of coal became coated with red sand, so that they seemed to glow hot. I was made to brush them, to keep the symbolism clear.

"So what were you?" asked one of the few friendly wardens as we were finally led away.

"I was a climatologist," I replied.

"A climate change denialist?" she gasped, as if I had just admitted to being the devil himself.

"No, I was actually one of the first to warn about climate change, back in the 1980s."

She thought about this for a moment, then shook her head.

"Why would a climatologist get audited?" she asked.

"Every tipper gets audited," I replied.

This was the flaw that underlaid the World Audit. Was any tipper innocent? Up to a point the answer was easy. Everyone who had squandered resources for recreation or greed was guilty, but what about those who burned fossil fuels for a living? Not quite so clear, because these included cab drivers, airline pilots, and the like. Such cases were adjudicated, but the backlog of marginal offenders was becoming quite a burden worldwide. Just what did make a tipper a climate criminal? A standard was needed.

"What was your line?" I asked the warden.

"Name's Olivia, wanna do some climatically correct recreational sex?"

I put a hand to my face and shook my head.

"I meant your job before you became a warden."

"Computers, systems administration. Then I got audited."

She lifted her kilt to show the brand on one thigh: "S" for squandering.

"It hurt like hell, but I deserved it."

I noticed Chaz staring at her thigh with as much admiration as someone in his seventies could manage.

"To me that's squandering a mighty fine leg," he said, and the three of us laughed.

Sometimes survival was who you knew, and Chaz went out of his way to be liked by the right people.

"Not many tippers beat the audit," I said.

"I was born in 2001, so I'm not a tipper," she explained.

"Ah, a victim."

"Yeah. We get leniency for climate crimes."

"What did you do?"

"I was two-sixty pounds back in 2023, can you believe it?"

"And you got squandering, not gluttony?"

"I wasn't greedy, just a slog living on Coke, turkey stuffing, and fries. Now I'm under one-thirty pounds. That's why I got just branded second class. I was lucky. The Retributor wanted service, first class."

**T**

HAT NIGHT I lay on my back, looking at the stars and thinking about how rapidly the world had changed. The victim riots had caught the authorities by surprise, but trends could grow exponentially thanks to the Internet. Going lateral was another movement that began on the Internet. The lateralists worked out that they could actually live way better by detaching themselves from the economic systems of derivatives, leverage, optionality and toxic assets. In just months the lateralists ranks swelled from thousands, to millions, to hundreds of millions. This generated a crisis in confidence that triggered the biggest financial collapse in history, and very soon the people who had formerly worked at generating meaningless wealth were out looking for real jobs. By then it was too late because the climate was severely screwed, there were famines in Western democracies, the trillions of dollars based on derivatives and options were fast becoming meaningless, and economic growth was considered about as healthy as cancer.

Democracies did particularly badly against lateralism, because their politicians were working to very short agendas. They did nothing decisive to save the ecosphere, as everything had to be balanced to appease competing interests. Lateralism ignored wealth. Soon there were only guards, goods, and obscenely rich people left in conventional economies. Dictatorships did not last long when entire populations became lateralist terrorists. What did citizens have to lose? They were starving and the world seemed to be ending anyway. As the surviving nobles of Europe found out when the Black Death swept across their estates in the fourteenth century, however, you need peons as the foundation of any economy.

"You summoned me?" asked a familiar voice.

"I never summon you," I muttered.

"Of course you do. Enjoying the night sky?"

"The end of the world is close, the sky is all that's worth looking at."

"Not the end of *the* world, but *your* world," said my visitor. "The world will go on, but your world has been unsustainable for a long time."

"Funny, I thought the police and armies would hold things together for longer," I admitted.

"The World Audit promised order and organization, so the police and soldiers signed up very quickly. They annihilated the armed urban gangs and survivalist warlords. That earned a lot of support, almost as much as auditing and executing the rich."

"So, Death is an auditor?"

"No, but an auditor is Death."

"That makes no sense."

"It will, soon."

The most annoying thing about Death was that I kept catching myself agreeing with him. We seemed to have a lot in common. Did he want to be friends? I drifted into a proper sleep.

Our audit consisted of eight auditors and an Auditor General. They sat on a bench, each shaded by an umbrella held by a borderline. The Retributor, Advocate, and Wardens all wore top hats. This was highly symbolic. The indulgence generations had gloried in being casual and individual. Now was the age of formality, unity, and sacrifice. Black robes and black cloaks were the uniform. Black hats were for the important people, and black cowls for the really important. The latter were the auditors. Just three decades ago it would have looked ludicrous, but three decades ago the Earth was three degrees cooler. The black robes were uncomfortable to wear in the merciless heat, and symbolized the suffering that had been caused by the tippers who had burned too much fossil carbon.

We tippers sat exposed to the sun, whose effect we had enhanced so much. There were nine circles of tippers. Nine circles of hell. Nine degrees of warming that were predicted by 2100. We had been heating the world during a natural cooling cycle. When the next warming cycle kicked in, things went straight to hell in every sense.

The audits began as the sun's disk rose clear of the horizon. We were meant to suffer.

"Audit of Jason Hall, climatologist," the Clerk of the Audit announced.

There was a quota of audits for each day, so no more than minutes could be given to any one. For most, it was the work of less than a minute to confirm guilt and pass sentence. I was escorted to the dais by a warden as the Retributor climbed the three steps to the lectern. Without using notes he began.

"Worthy victims, I have records, confirmed by the defendant while wired to a veritor, proving that he squandered the resources of the Earth to acquire a second doctorate. I maintain that he did this for sheer vanity, and so is guilty of display and squandering."

"Defendant?" asked the Auditor General.

"I did my second doctorate in history to get credibility. It was not display or squandering," I responded.

"Credibility for what?" the Retributor asked with smug confidence.

"I was studying links between the Little Ice Age and witch burnings from the fifteenth to the eighteenth centuries."

The Retributor opened his mouth to scoff, failed to find suitable words, and closed it again. He had been caught unprepared. A buzz of speculation rippled through the circles of tippers and borderlines, and even the auditors whispered among themselves.

"Ridiculous," said the Retributor, resorting to bluster. "The topic is frivolous."

"Not so: my research showed close parallels with the World Audit before — "

"Moving on to your use of motorcycles — "

"Objection!" called the Advocate. "My honorable colleague has made a statement, but not allowed the defendant to refute it."

"Objection sustained," said the Auditor General. "The honorable Retributor must either withdraw his statement or allow the defendant to address it."

That was the first objection that had been decided in favor of a tipper within anyone's memory. Anger clouded the Retributor's face for a moment, then it cleared.

"I stand at your honor's pleasure," he said.

"Defendant, you will continue," said the Auditor General.

I now had the undivided attention of everyone. This was not just some boring accusation of SUV rallies or ten-kilowatt Christmas light displays.

"During the fifteenth century, around the time that the climatic event known as the Little Ice Age became really severe in Europe, the number of witch trials and burnings suddenly increased. Witches were said to call up storms, cause frosts, and induce other meteorological disasters."

"Point of clarification," said the Auditor General. "Are you suggesting that witches caused the Little Ice Age?"

"Absolutely not, but records show that people believed them to be responsible."

"Point taken. Proceed."

"As bad weather became more frequent and severe, people began to look for someone to blame. Supposed witches were plausible and vulnerable targets."

"Are you suggesting that audits such as yours, here, today, are witch trials?" asked the Auditor General.

"No, your honor."

For a moment my life seemed to hang by a thread as she paused to discomfort me.

"Proceed."

"When I began my second Ph.D. in 1997, I wanted to get credibility as an historian. As an expert in both history and climatology I thought my warnings would be taken more seriously."

"Warnings?"

"Warnings to polluters and squanderers that when human-induced climate change gripped the Earth, their descendants might want revenge. There would be whole generations of old tippers to provide guilty and vulnerable targets."

"Surely the Christian church initiated the medieval witch trials, not the general population?"

"Actually, most witch trials were secular, and at the village level."

"Interesting. That is how the World Audit operates."

"True."

"Then what are you suggesting?"

"I am only relating history, your honor. My Ph.D. was about instances of popular anger in response to severe weather. In the fifteenth century, anger was foolishly directed against witches. Popular anger has now

revived, this time due to induced climate change. I make no judgment about whether it is just or unjust."

"Enough, enough," said the Auditor General. "You have demonstrated to my satisfaction that your second doctorate was in defense of the ecosphere. Retributor, do you have any further accusations?"

"Oh yes, multiple accusations of squandering."

"Then I declare this audit of Jason Hall, climatologist, adjourned. Clerk of the Audit, what is the next audit?"

"Audit of Kieran Harley, who owned and operated a jet ski."

"For recreation?"

"Yes."

"Guilty as charged. Death, second class. Those in favor? Against? Confirmed. Next audit?"

My audit had been adjourned! I was borderline. I would join the ranks of those considered guilty, but too difficult to waste time on. After all, millions of undeniably guilty tippers could be audited and executed easily.

**R**ELIGIOUS SERVICES were not as popular with the tippers and borderlines as one might have expected. Religion had not seriously challenged the World Audit, just as in the mid-twentieth century the major religions had made no effective protests when American and Soviet politicians had threatened the world with thermonuclear annihilation. The World Audit promised action and revenge for what had been done to the planet. Unlike religions, it delivered.

Thus there were services to prepare people for death at the camp, but not much more. There was no shortage of entertainment, however.

Among the borderlines there were tippers who had memorized their favorite movies and television shows, word for word. Over my two weeks in the adjourned backlog I sat in the audience while episodes of *Cheers*, *Star Trek*, *Buffy*, and *Seinfeld* were acted out in the dusk and moonlight. The performances were a little stiff and arthritic, the props were minimal, and the theme music had to be hummed and whistled by an aged orchestra, but the dialogue seemed accurate.

On my second night there was an extravaganza performance, in the form of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*. At the center of the stage space

were the actors, along with those playing the parts of chairs, tables, doors, and a bed. Flanking them was a chorus of singers to the right and an orchestra of hummers to the left. Surrounding all this was the participating audience, who sang, danced, and called responses at the actors. The rest of us merely watched, although some tippers born after 1990 seemed a bit bewildered. The wardens looked on, impassive.

Apparently a suicide wave had been not only planned, but coordinated with the wardens. At the end of the show the audience participators charged the wardens, shouting lines from the show, hurling rocks, and waving walking sticks. Everyone else dropped and flattened themselves against the sand as the wardens' assault rifles chattered into life and bullets whined overhead.

"Don't move," said the man beside me.

"Who's moving?"

"They're tippers facing greenhouse or mines. A bullet is way better than that."

The firing died down to the occasional sharp bark of a pistol shot.

"That's the Inspector of Wardens," said my companion. "He's finishing them off with a Smith and Wesson 1006. Beautiful gun, real classic."

A gun fancier. He was sure to be up for squandering, display, and possibly greed.

"Now, those wardens, do you see what they got?"

The wardens were carrying guns with curved magazines. They were very good at killing people, and that was about as much as I understood.

"Assault rifles?"

"Yeah, and they may be made in China, but they're still AK-47s."

"Er, that's Russian," I said, recalling television news items about terrorists and guerrillas from a lifetime ago.

"That's right, developed in the forties but perfected in nineteen-fifty-nine. The M16, now that was a better gun, the old AK couldn't shoot as fast or far. Mind, AKs could take way worse treatment and keep firing, and were cheap as chicken feed to make."

He kept talking, but my thoughts had already wandered. The AK-47 design was ninety years old, yet it still did the job. It also needed little maintenance and was cheap to build. That symbolized the modern world. Everything was merely good enough, rather than optimized to have a

slight edge. All things being equal, a slightly better range or rate of fire at twice the cost was no advantage because all things were never equal. The victims had new values, and better was seldom desirable. Good enough meant a softer ecological touch. The Chinese-made assault rifles designed in Russia were good enough, so good enough was perfect.

"All stand!"

The inspector's command meant that everyone was dead who was meant to be dead. I was put on a stretcher team, carrying away dead, bullet-riddled men and women painted with fishnet stockings and suspenders.

Hours later I awoke beneath a sky that blazed coldly with stars. For someone who had spent so much of his life studying the atmosphere, I knew surprisingly little about the constellations above it. In desert skies the stars are so numerous and intense that even the most familiar patterns are almost overwhelmed. I sat up and looked around.

Wardens patrolled the perimeter of the camp, no more than deeper shadows in the shadows and moonlight. The snores and wheezes from those nearby had stopped; in fact, all sounds had ceased.

Suddenly he was before me, a figure now in the black robes of a climate penitent. None of the wardens reacted to him; perhaps he had no warmth for their thermal imagers to detect. I thought that I should be visible, but nobody paid me attention either. Perhaps I was not alive when he came to see me.

"Don't try to say I summoned you," I snapped.

"Still, it's true."

"So now what?"

"Come along."

His voice was cold and remote, but free of malice. I fell in beside him as he glided along through the darkness. The audit space was just a long bench for the auditors, a lectern for the speaker, a dais for the accused, and a desk for the clerk. Everyone else sat in the sand, in the nine great circles.

"When does the audit begin?" I asked.

"This is not an audit."

"Then why bring me here?"

"You summoned me."

"I did not!"

"Everyone summons me, eventually."

"Everyone? Then you really are Death?"

"Close, but not quite."

"You keep denying it, but who else could you be?"

"That is for you to discover. Yesterday, how would you have audited James Harrington?"

"He was just a fool who never looked at his carbon footprint."

"But how you would have audited him — as an auditor?"

"Death, second class. He chose to ignore the plight of the wilderness he loved. He was like a doctor fondling a woman's breast, yet not telling her she has breast cancer."

"How would you audit him, this time as Jason Hall?"

"Service, second class, in wilderness restoration."

"What of Ellen Farmer, the woman who followed him onto the tipping gallows?"

"She built a fourteen-room house just to impress her friends, and vacationed on cruise ships three months out of twelve. Guilty, for aggravated display and squandering."

"How would you sentence her — as Jason Hall?"

"Service, first class. Half a lifetime of healing the ecosphere in return for half a lifetime of screwing it."

And so it went. Two hundred people had faced the audit that day and the day before, but only a dozen cases had been adjourned. Mine was one. The specter knew every name, and so did I. I have a very good memory.

"Craig Brand?"

"He built supertuned engines for street racers and was a paid-up Climate Denier. Guilty, death second class."

"Jason Hall?"

"Innocent."

"There is no such verdict. Pardoned is the most lenient."

"Then pardoned."

"You are less severe than the Retributor. Only three deaths in two hundred sentences. Do you feel compassion for them?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Most were fools, not monsters."

"The fool kills just as dead as the monster."

"True, but some fools are harmless. The audit has a perfect record, it's always death or mines for tippers, yet some deserve service, branding, or even pardoning."

"Many audits are adjourned. Yours was."

"And I'm eighty. I will probably die in the borderline backlog."

"Would you abolish the World Audit?"

"No. The Audit is all we have, but it must be seen to be fair, otherwise the auditors will look like a pack of Nazis."

"The auditors think of themselves like the judges in the Nuremberg trials."

"Perhaps, but to them, *everyone* born before 2000 is an eco-Nazi, guilty of climate crimes."

Suddenly I was alone. I felt no chill on the night air, and when I put my hand up, I could see stars through it. I would have been convinced that I was dead, yet I knew I would awake alive.

To everyone's surprise, I was called back to the audit the following morning. The Retributor said that I had commuted on a motorcycle when I could have used public transport. I quoted well-memorized figures proving that my motorcycle had a smaller carbon footprint per passenger mile than the public transport then available. Again my audit was adjourned.

I was put on cart duty after the morning audits. Thirty of us were harnessed to a stripped-out Sports Utility Vehicle and made to draw it out to the north greenhouse fields. Death, first class, was performed here. Sector five was where we were going, but we had to pass through other sectors first. In sector two they were performing executions.

Our team moved slowly. Ahead of us I saw a strong, fit-looking man of about fifty being forced to the ground by the wardens. With the skill of much practice they spread-eagled him on his back and chained him to a wooden frame in the shape of an X. All the while he was shouting about his rights, demanding a retrial, telling the wardens he had right of appeal, and calling for a proper lawyer.

"Your turn will come. You'll pay for this!" he screamed. "This is a concentration camp."

"You helped run the concentration camp called the global economy," replied a warden. "You kept Mother Earth in there until she was a living skeleton."

They took two large glass panels and clamped them over him in a tent shape. We were level with them as they fitted a pair of glass triangles over the ends.

A greenhouse. For causing the greenhouse effect, death by greenhouse. It was a hideous way to die, roasted slowly in a glass oven. The unlucky ones lasted to evening, got the respite of night, then had to face a second day. As we trudged on, straining at our harnesses, we passed the glass tents that had already been set up. There were muffled screams and groans from these, but most were already weakening.

The next sector was at stage two of the greenhouse cycle. Here teams of borderlines were slicing open the skin of the recently executed, so that the sun could evaporate their bodily fluids. We moved on through the sector where bodies were drying out within their little glass tents. In sector five the greenhouses were being dismantled, and bodies stacked in neat piles. We stopped. Service borderlines loaded the desiccated dead into our SUV. The bodies were quite stiff, as if carved out of wood.

As we returned with our load, people began talking at last.

"Remember the old days?" said the man beside me.

"I've only been here two days."

"Yeah? In that case, welcome to hell. I been here since the start. I got service, second class."

"I didn't think tippers ever got off, except to be put in the backlog as a borderline."

"I'm a victim."

"Ah."

"Fifteen years to go."

"Fifteen years of this?" I said, shaking my head.

"It's job security. I'll be fifty when I'm released. Then I'm back to work."

"Back to work. What was your work?"

"Landscape gardening."

"And for that you got service, second class?"

"I drove a big off-roader. I got it free, so it seemed like a good deal back in twenty-nineteen."

"That was after the tipping year. Bad time to be seen in an off-roader."

"Yeah, but I was nineteen and stupid. The audit found that all my work was urban, so I should have driven a fuel-efficient utility."

"You were lucky. Not many people who drove off-roaders get less than death."

"I never drove mine recreationally, that was the trick. I love growing things, so gardening was all I ever did. Big demand for people who grow things now, so I got a future."

We trudged along in silence for a while. He had his sentence; mine was not decided. Because I was guilty until proved worthy of pardoning, I had to do service.

"Do you watch those nostalgia shows?" I asked presently.

"I just attend. All that toxic fast living, never liked it. I only watched renovation and gardening shows, and the environment docos. That counted when the audit examined me."

"I saw a nostalgia show last night. It was bizarre."

"You want a word of advice?"

"I'm listening."

"Go along, but try to look bored. You see, if you don't go, the borderlines will kill you for not being one of them. On the other hand, the wardens watch you too. If you seem to be enjoying the shows, they'll report that to the Retributor. That gets you a verdict of guilty-and-unrepentant. You know what that means?"

"Death, first class?"

"Wrong. Mines, first class. That's way worse than dying."

**E**VERY MORNING the audit would call me up for the first hearing of the day, and I would spend ten minutes refuting a new charge. Normally the accused were made to bear the full force of the sun whose power they had enhanced so very much, but because I had established provisional doubt, I was now permitted to wear a broad wicker hat. This was also the source of much rumor among the borderlines and unaudited tippers.

The second class executions were at noon and just before sunset. Until then there was nothing to do but listen to the Retributor accuse people of taking Sunday afternoon drives, having central heating, using leaf blowers instead of brooms, and flying to Europe for annual vacations. All brought Death. The really severe sentences were for the climate-change deniers. They got mines, first class.

"You beat the Retributor again."

I knew that I was asleep, I was always asleep when Death appeared.

"You must love this place. Do you claim all the souls of the condemned in person?"

"They are already mine."

"Then why are you here?"

"Because you call me, and you are important."

"Me? Important? My life's work was predicting climatic catastrophe — you know, most of China, Australia, and Africa turned into searing deserts, U.S.A. and Europe snap-frozen because the Gulf Stream is screwed, accelerated polar melting, sea level up two feet, and force seven hurricanes. In case you hadn't noticed, that's all happened, so I'm out of a job."

"You are important because you threaten the auditors, Jason Hall. The currency of the century is position and power. You threaten their power."

"Me? Threaten the auditors? Get a life."

"I get a great many lives. Do you know how very rich men used to become rich?"

"By third-level greed and second-level squandering."

"Not so. They just became good at gathering money. You don't have to *earn* money to accumulate it. Some means were legal, but few were ethical."

"So? Thanks to lateralism, wealth and growth are unfashionable."

"The Retributor is good at accumulating convictions, and he has a perfect record getting death or mine sentences. He is the new type of rich man, and the rich like to hold on to their riches."

The audit of Peggy-Anne was over very quickly. Records showing seven hundred thousand dollars in cosmetic surgery and implants were presented. Although in her late nineties she looked less than forty, but

when she moved she was slightly stiff. She was convicted of squander and display, and received a double death sentence, second class. Killing old people had once seemed abhorrent, but now it was considered just. The Earth had gone to the pack, and the victim generations wanted revenge on the squander generations for turning the pack loose.

Peggy-Anne got the tipping-point gallows. As the pile of coal diminished and the plank began to teeter she started to cry. None of the wardens or auditors seemed moved. Moments before the end she began to pray. Hers were not formal prayers, just pleas to her god to end it all and have mercy on her. When the plank finally tipped it was profound relief for me.

"She was a lot of fun," said Chaz as we walked back.

"Nine decades of being a party girl," I observed. "It must have been like being immortal."

Chaz had shared Peggy-Anne's bedding the night before. I tried to tell myself that in a real sense she had stopped living at some time during that night, in the arms of a man she had picked up during the show. The terrified, whimpering shell that had shuffled out onto the plank had not been Peggy-Anne.

There were car races at the camp that evening. Many wheelchairs had accumulated there, now superfluous to the needs of their owners. Names of famous models of cars were written on the sides, along with brand names of long-defunct sponsors. Cardboard clappers were attached to make engine noises against the spokes, and with one man to drive and another to push, they were a faint but distinct echo of the squander decades.

The entire company of tippers and borderlines watched, most tippers cheering and clapping, as the fifteen wheelchairs were driven around an improvised track. There were pit stops for pusher changes, crashes, and even aged cheer squads. A few of us had the sense not to cheer. The wardens looked on, scanning the audience for signs of enthusiasm among borderlines. The wheelchair pack rattled past, raising dust and cheered mightily by the crowd, then a pusher collapsed and fell dead in the dust. There were five such deaths from cardiac arrest during that race. Most participants were probably hoping for death on the raceway, because they were tippers facing serious charges. Dying of a heart attack was vastly preferable to death in the greenhouses or life in the mines.

The race ended with the winner and place getters being presented with double rations of water in bottles that had held champagne decades earlier. This they splashed on each other and the onlookers in a defiant show of squandering, then there was a concert of Jan and Dean driving and surfing songs by various singers and a humming band. It was all pale and tenuous ghosts of cultures past, rude but futile gestures against the victim generations. I concluded that most of these people were actually beyond hope, help, or reason. They were not ashamed of what they had done, and they probably thought it very unreasonable of the Earth for running short of resources and warming so alarmingly fast.

By the end of the second week of my audit I had broken all records for survival. The Retributor had exhausted any scope for finding serious climate crimes in my past, so he was pursuing me for minor neglect.

"Now explain why you did not do more," he said as the sun appeared on the eastern horizon for the fifteenth time.

All he could ask for now was branding, second class. I was holding out for pardoning.

"More relative to what?" I asked.

"More as in driving spikes into logs to be woodchipped, sabotaging oil rigs, smashing car windscreens, or spraying oil on auto race tracks?"

"I believed that such extreme actions alienated the public of the time from the message of climate change. Instead I lived the sort of environmentally correct life that everyone could have managed. I turned off my television, DVD, microwave, stereo, and computer at the wall sockets when I was not using them, installed energy-efficient light globes, used solar cells and rechargeable batteries where I could, had two-minute showers, and washed my clothes in shower water. If everyone had lived like me, resource use would have dropped by sixty percent."

"That would not have saved the Earth."

"Not by itself, but it would have postponed the tipping year."

"You should have publicized what you were doing."

"I did! Whenever I spoke in conferences or to the media about climate change, I always talked about how I was moderating my personal behavior."

My trial was adjourned for the fifteenth time. The Retributor would

check on everything I had said. He would send his research assistants to their solar-powered web portals to twitter, tweet, gryp, snatch, surf, scan, riffle, and drill for old power bills, conference proceedings, and even photographs taken in my apartment. I knew what they would find, so I was not worried.

**T**HOSE WHO DIED while awaiting audit were declared guilty post mortem. There were many such deaths, mostly from exposure. We slept in the open, with blankets made from the discarded clothing of the dead. There was never a shortage of blankets. Aside from the big shows and races, we had to amuse ourselves without gadgets, so singing, storytelling, gossip, and dancing were very popular. By a couple of hours after sunset the activities were reduced to sex, for those who could manage it. The wardens made no attempt to stop any behavior that did not involve trying to escape.

"Way I see it, the woodlands near the coast been gettin' back to normal," said Chaz as we lay looking up at the stars on the moonless fifteenth night.

"They were national parks before the tipping year," I replied blandly, ever wary of saying anything that might incriminate me.

"Full of game, as I hear."

"Probably due to the ban on hunting."

"You know, I saw this coming."

"So did I. I wrote a lot of articles about it."

"No, I mean I prepared. I buried some guns and three thousand rounds in the woods, all wrapped in grease and plastic. Old M16, a couple of Glock pistols, and a great hunting rifle. Figure we could live pretty well in the woods."

"That sort of talk would earn you death first class for greed and squandering."

"So you're not in?"

"I've heard nothing."

"But we'd be free."

"They would hunt us down in a day. Probably less."

"Hey, I'm a bushman. They'd never find us."

"There's no bush! We're in the desert, a thousand miles from the

coast. Besides, the ranger wardens have rifles, image enhancers, acoustic scopes, geopositioning, and satellite feed. Oh, and tracker dogs."

"Those greenie ferals don't cut it."

"Feral animals are great hunters, and they have a nasty bite. Victims still launch satellites and build weaponry gadgets, remember? They just do it with renewable tech."

"I'm serious, and I'm armed. I got a dozen twenty-two rounds, kept 'em up my arse during inspections. With all the metal scrap around here it was a no-brainer to rig up a zip gun and silencer."

"I stay here."

"Listen, this isn't a sus proposition. I got a girl coming with me, that warden with the brand."

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because I want to beat the Retributor."

"What planet are you on? Nobody's ever beaten him."

"Nobody's escaped from here, either. You fight your way, and I'll fight in mine."

He gave up on me around then. I knew he would be gone before dawn.

I awoke to the silky silence of Death's presence, and as I sat up I saw the dark figure before me. I stood up uneasily, for I could never get used to the wardens not being able to see me.

"I thought you would have been away, claiming Chaz," I said as we began to walk between the rows of sleeping bodies.

"I already have him."

That did not surprise me.

"Bushmen are so condescending about their enemies," I said. "They forget that victims also know bushcraft. Where did he try to get out?"

"A greenhouse desiccation field."

"Makes sense. Nobody alive, so no wardens. Was he shot?"

"It was the woman he chose to escape with. She played along with him, then led him into a trap."

"Olivia?" I gasped, remembering how friendly she had seemed.

"Yes. She has been commended for preventing an escape without wasting a bullet. Do you really want to beat the Retributor?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"It will save lives."

"Explain."

"In the last century, the Nazi Holocaust against the Jews was indiscriminate. The genocide of the Hutus against the Tutsis in Rwanda was indiscriminate too. Go back to the seventeen-nineties, and the French Terror guillotined aristocrats just for being what they were. The World Audit claims to be different. Everyone born before the tipping year is guilty, but everyone gets an audit. The problem is that the Retributors want tippers to get death second class even for buying their kid a battery-powered Buzz Lightyear toy. That looks ridiculous, so the case is adjourned and the tippers become borderlines."

"There are millions of borderlines."

"Yes, all of them doing indefinite service. If there were a precedent, many could be pardoned, branded, or at least sentenced to a fixed period of service. I want to be that precedent. My audit has already set precedents for service and branding sentences. Some tippers of good will can be saved, and the Earth needs all the good will it can get."

"You are a hard act to follow, Jason Hall."

"Thank you."

When Death was with me there were no sounds but our voices. The farts and bodily reeks of those around me vanished, fleas and lice no longer bit and itched, and my muscles did not ache with fatigue. There was only the desert night, cloudless, windless, and brilliant with stars. In a way I enjoyed his visits, because I could step out of myself. Suddenly I was thirty years in the past, servicing a remote observing station in the desert, enjoying the serenity of the night.

My companion's face was visible, even though there was nothing to illuminate it. One might have said that it was in daylight, while everything else was smothered in night. Until now it had been indistinct and unfocused, but suddenly it seemed to be resolving into clear lines. I noticed something very familiar about his features.

"You look like me," I remarked.

"Thank you."

It was true. Months ago his face had just been an oval that floated

above a greater blackness. He now defined himself to wear my robes and dust cloak. His manner of speech and tone of voice were even becoming echoes of mine. The transformation should have made him more familiar and agreeable, yet I found it disturbing.

"Do you always take the form of those you are about to claim?"

"No."

"Then why take my form?"

"You have two doctorates. Surely you can work it out."

To me it was not obvious, and I was not in a mood for games.

"The Retributor has no more charges, so tomorrow is the verdict," I said, steering the subject onto my own agenda. "Is that what you're here for?"

"No. You will get pardoned."

Pardoned. Even this word now carried a chill.

"You already know? Then why bother coming for me?"

"I am not here for you."

"Doctor Jason Hall, you are found pardoned of both squandering and display," declared the Auditor General.

For a moment there was no sound at all, then came a huge, collective gasp for air. A mighty cheer rolled over the benches of the auditors, across the greenhouse fields, and into the desert. Chaz had lost, but I had won.

I knew that the Retributor would not appeal. This was the sixteenth day of my audit, which was four times longer than any other since the World Audit itself had begun. To prolong it would attract a charge of squandering to him, and that was a very bad idea. I bowed to the auditors on the bench, then waited to be dismissed.

"You are the standard that your age should have lived by," continued the Auditor General. "You lived as responsibly as an ordinary twentieth-century tipper could have. Had everyone else behaved as you did, minimizing their burden on the ecosphere and teaching others to do so, the world could have pulled back from the Tipping Year. Everyone born before the Millennium must be audited against your example. Members of the Audit, those of you in favor of appointing Doctor Jason Hall to the bench in the new position of Precedent, be upstanding."

The Auditor General got to her feet before my brain caught up with

what was happening. To her right and left the other members of the audit bench were standing up as well. At the extreme left the Advocate stood, and to my surprise, at the other end of the bench, the Retributor was already on his feet by the time I turned.

*I'll never escape!* screamed in my mind.

"Doctor Hall, the bench has voted unanimously in favor of admitting you," the Auditor General concluded.

"But — but surely others are more worthy," I heard myself say. "Many environmental activists were far more extreme and militant."

"Not everyone needs to be a warrior, you have demonstrated that. You set a standard that all those born before the Tipping Year could have met, had they but bothered. In the audits to come in the days, months and years ahead, you will provide the precedent to be met by everyone who stands before us, and even worldwide."

"But what about my work in climatology? Surely the Earth needs climatologists more than auditors."

"The Earth needs both, to heal its wounds and punish the guilty. However, while there are now many climatologists, there are few good twentieth-century role models."

The Retributor was smiling. Now I was in his position. If I refused, I would be guilty of squandering a nonrenewable resource. Myself.

"I am honored to accept," I said, then bowed with my heart sinking.

"The precedents established in your audit have already been applied to all those in the national borderline database. Clerk of the Audit, have you run the program over the backlog of borderline audits as yet?"

"I have, your honor."

"Can you give us a summary of results?"

"Verdicts drawing sentences of death or mines have been returned in ninety-nine and three quarters of a percent of cases."

"Auditor Hall, it seems you are a hard act to follow," said the Auditor General, turning to me with a very sincere smile.

The rest of the day's audits were canceled. Ceremony and procedure were important in this new world, and there were few occasions more important than the appointment of a new auditor. The entire encampment was assembled to watch. The hatred in the eyes of the two thousand

borderline tippers glared hotter than the sun as I stood before them. Only five would get service, branding, or pardoning. Worldwide...my brain shut down when I tried to make an estimate. With a tipper on the bench, the audit became justice for the guilty, rather than mass slaughter.

I was dressed in the black robes of an auditor by the wardens, who also shaved my hair and beard. The Inspector of Wardens presented me with a pair of red leather gloves.

"From this day, the blood of the guilty will be on your hands," he said as he went down on one knee and raised the gloves on his upturned palms.

The Retributor now stood before me, bowed, and gave me a pair of sunshades.

"From this day, there will be no frailty, pity, or mercy in your eyes," he declared.

The Advocate had a staff, which she put into my hand.

"From this day, you will strike down the guilty but spare those tippers who are in truth victims."

*Only one in four hundred* passed through my mind.

Last of all was the Auditor General with my cowl.

"From this day you are an auditor, shielded from the sun because you are without blame for its ravages."

**T**HAT NIGHT I was exhausted at many levels, yet dreading what would come with sleep. I was given a tent in the victims' enclosure, but I could not relax in it. I had slept in the open for too long, so now I went outside to try to sleep. The wardens did not like the idea, but nobody argues with an auditor.

Even lying on the sand beneath the new moon and first stars, I could not sleep. I got up and paced around my tent. At last I had the answer to the many puzzles that my dark visitor had been posing, yet he did not appear. A warden came over and asked if I was all right. It was Olivia.

"Can't sleep," I replied curtly, now suspicious of her smiles and concern.

"I can call a counselor," she suggested.

"No. No, I...I'm just a bit edgy about being on the other side of the audit tomorrow."

"Why not rehearse?"

"Sorry?"

"Others do it. Walk down to the audit bench and sit there for a while. Practice speaking, like you're in a real audit."

"That's a good idea. Thank you."

"I'll make sure you're not disturbed. Just don't wander any farther out."

She escorted me out of the victims' enclosure and away to the audit space. She then left me and walked on to the outer perimeter to make sure that I went no farther. I was an auditor and could go where I liked, but shadows in the wrong place got shot, no matter who they were. The bench was empty and unguarded. I sat down. Out in the glasshouse fields someone was still alive and screaming. A figure in black came walking toward me from the victims' enclosure. As he got closer I could see his face in the weak moonlight. As I expected, it was my face.

"So, do you understand yet?" I asked.

The figure nodded unhappily.

"Death was not coming for me, I was becoming Death," he said.

"True."

"Death will sit among the auditors on the bench tomorrow. Jason Hall is Precedent, the standard by which they will audit. Jason Hall is Death."

"That is what you wanted — "

"No! I didn't realize that being Precedent means providing instant, brutal decisions. Instead of giving borderline tippers a proper hearing, the auditors will just check if they measure up to Jason Hall. Thousands of borderlines who would have died of natural causes will now be re-audited and executed."

"Some will get service, branding or pardoning."

"Handfuls out of thousands. Dozens out of millions. This is not what I wanted. I wanted to give hope to tippers."

"You have done that."

"You told me I was a hard act to follow. Now I understand. Hardly any tippers measure up against what I did. I can already see millions of frightened, desperate, pleading eyes staring at me."

The horned moon touched the western horizon, then sank out of sight. Jason became just a dark shape.

"I can't take it," he said. "I can't live with that."

"Can Death claim himself?" I asked.

"I can, and I will."

I now saw that he was merging with the shadows around him. His voice was becoming faint, and the white patch that was his face had lost focus.

"You fought so hard against the Audit, but now you give up?" I said, suddenly afraid of losing him.

"This world is no place for tippers," said his fading voice. "Even those who are pardoned must kill themselves by abandoning their pasts, values, lifestyles, achievements, attitudes..."

"Wait!" I called. "Without you I will not be human."

There was no reply. He was already gone.

"Sir?"

It was Olivia's voice. I shook my head and looked up.

"Sir, you were asleep. We should get back to the victims' enclosure."

We began to walk through the darkness. Olivia's goggles were enhanced for night vision, so she guided me along the path.

"Did you rehearse well, sir?" she asked.

"Not really. I was thinking about tippers, and the danger that their story might soon be lost and forgotten."

"No bad thing, sir."

"Forgetting what the tippers did to the Earth means forgetting the lessons they left us, warden. We need to remember what not to do, or it could all happen again."

She did not reply. The tippers had not left much to the world that was worthwhile, but they had to be remembered. The thought was not a palatable one, but the alternative was more terrifying than death.

