

Star Performer

Robert Shea

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Star Performer

By ROBERT J. SHEA

Illustrated by DICK FRANCIS

Blue Boy's rating was high and his fans were loyal to the death—anyone's death!

G

avir gingerly fitted the round opening in the bottom of the silvery globe over the top of his hairless blue skull. He pulled the globe down until he felt tiny filaments touching his scalp. The tips of the wires were cold.

The moderator then said, "*Dreaming Through the Universe* tonight brings you the first native Martian to appear on the dreamwaves—Gavir of the Desert Men. With him is his guardian, Dr. Malcomb Rice, the noted anthropologist."

Then the moderator questioned Malcomb, while Gavir nervously awaited the moment when his thoughts would be transmitted to millions of Earthmen. Malcomb told how he had been struck by Gavir's intelligence and missionary-taught ability to speak Earth's language, and had decided to bring Gavir to Earth.

The moderator turned to Gavir. "Are you anxious to get back to Mars?"

No! Gavir thought. Back behind the Preserve Barrier that killed you instantly if you stepped too close to it? Back to the constant fear of being seized by MDC guards for a labor pool, to wind up in the MDC mines?

Mars was where Gavir's father had been pinned, bayonets through his hands and feet, to the wall of a shack just the other side of the Barrier, to die slowly, out of Gavir's reach. Father James told Gavir that the head of MDC himself had ordered the killing, because Gavir's father had tried to organize resistance to the

Corporation. Mars was where the magic powers of the Earthmen and the helplessness of the Martian tribes would always protect the head of MDC from Gavir's vengeance.

Back to that world of hopeless fear and hatred? *I never want to go back to Mars! I want to stay here!*

But that wasn't what he was supposed to think. Quickly he said, "I will be happy to return to my people."

A movement caught his eye. The producer, reclining on a divan in a far corner of the small studio, was making some kind of signal by beating his fist against his forehead.

"Well, enough of that!" the moderator said briskly. "How about singing one of your tribal songs for us?"

Gavir said, "I will sing the *Song of Going to Hunt*." He heaved himself up from the divan, and, feet planted wide apart, threw back his head and began to howl.

He was considered a poor singer in his tribe, and he was not surprised that Malcomb and the moderator winced. But Malcomb had told him that it wouldn't matter. The dreamees receiving the dreamcast would hear the song as it *should* sound, as Gavir heard it in his mind. Everything that Gavir saw and heard and felt in his mind, the dreamees could see and hear and feel....

It was cold, bitter cold, on the plain. The hunter stood at the edge of the camp as the shriveled Martian sun struck the tops of the Shakam hills. The hunter hefted the long, balanced narvoon, the throwing knife, in his hand. He had faith in the knife, and in his skill with it.

The hunter filled his lungs, the cold air reaching deep into his chest. He shouted out his throat-bursting hunting cry. He began to run across the plain.

Crouching behind crumbling red rocks, racing over flat expanses of orange sand, the hunter sought traces of the seegee, the great slow desert beast whose body provided his tribe with all the essentials of existence. At last he saw tracks. He mounted a dune. Out on the plain before him a great brown seegee lumbered patiently, unaware of its danger.

The hunter was about to strike out after it, when a dark form leaped at him.

The hunter saw it out of the corner of his eye at the last moment. His startled sidestep saved him from the neck-breaking snap of the great jaws.

The drock's long body was armored with black scales. Curving fangs protruded from its upper jaw. Its hand-like forepaws ended in hooked claws, to grasp and tear its prey. It was larger, stronger, faster than the hunter. The thin Martian air carried weirdly high-pitched cries which proclaimed its craving to sink its fangs into the hunter's body. The drock's huge hind legs coiled back on their triple joints, and it sprang.

The hunter thrust the gleaming knife out before him, so that the dark body would land on its gleaming blade. The drock twisted in mid-air and landed to one side of the hunter.

Now, before it could gather itself for another spring, there was time for one cast of the blade. It had to be done at once. It had to be perfect. If it failed, the knife would be lost and the drock would have its kill. The hunter grasped the weapon by the blade, drew his arm back, and snapped it forward.

The blade struck deep into the throat of the drock.

The drock screamed eerily and jumped clumsily. The hunter threw himself at the great, dark body and retrieved the knife. He struck with it again and again into the gray twitching belly. Colorless blood ran out over the hard, tightly-stretched skin.

The drock fell, gave a last convulsion, and lay still. The hunter plunged the blade into the red sand to clean it. He threw back his head and bellowed his hunting cry. There was great glory in killing the drock, for it showed that the Desert Man and not the drock, was lord of the red waste....



G

avir sat down on the divan, exhausted, his song finished. He didn't hear the moderator winding up the dreamcast. Then the producer of the program was upon him.

He began shouting even before Gavir removed his headset. "What kind of a fool are you? Before you started that song, you dreamed things about the Martian Development Corporation that were libelous! I got the whole thing—the Barrier, the guards, the labor pools and mines, the father crucified. It was awful! MDC is one of our biggest sponsors."

Malcomb said, "You can't expect an untrained young Martian to control his very thoughts. And may I point out that your tone is hostile?"

At this a sudden change came over the producer. The standard Earth expression—invincible benignity—took control of his face. "I apologize for having spoken sharply, but dreamcasting is a nerve-wracking business. If it weren't for Ethical Conditioning, I don't know how I'd control my aggressive impulses. The Suppression of Aggression is the Foundation of Civilization, eh?"

Malcomb smiled. "Ethical Conditioning Keeps Society from Fissioning." He shook hands with the producer.

"Come around tomorrow at 1300 and collect your fee," said the producer. "Good night, gentlemen."

As they left the Global Dreamcasting System building, Gavir said to Malcomb, "Can we go to a bookstore tonight?"

"Tomorrow. I'm taking you to your hotel and then I'm going back to my apartment. We both need sleep. And don't forget, you've been warned not to go prowling around the city by yourself...."

As soon as Gavir was sure that Malcomb was out of the hotel and well on his way home, he left his room and went out into the city.

In a pitifully few days he would be back in the Preserve, back with the fear of MDC, with hunger and the hopeless desire to find and kill the man who had ordered his father's death.

Now he had an opportunity to learn more about the universe of the Earthmen. Despite Malcomb's orders, he was going to find a seller of books.

During a reading class at the mission school, Father James had said, "In books there is power. All that you call magic in our Earth civilization is explained in books." Gavir wanted to learn. It was his only hope to find an alternative to the short, fear-ridden, impoverished life he foresaw for himself.

A river of force carried him, along with thousands of Earthmen—godlike beings in their perfect health and their impregnable benignity—through the streets of the city. Platforms of force raised and lowered him through the city's multiple levels....

And, as has always happened to outlanders in cities, he became lost.

H

e was in a quarter where furtive red and violet lights danced in the shadows of hunched buildings. A half-dozen Earthmen approached him, stopped and stared. Gavir stared back.

The Earthmen wore black garments and furs and metal ornaments. The biggest of them wore a black suit, a long black cape, and a broad-brimmed black hat. He carried a coiled whip in one hand. The Earthmen turned to one another.

"A Martian."

"Let's give pain and death to the Martian! It will be a new experience—one to savor."

"Take pain, Martian!"

The Earthman with the black hat raised his arm, and the long heavy lash fell on Gavir. He felt a savage sting in the arm he had thrown up to protect his eyes.

Gavir leaped at the Earthmen. He clubbed the man with the whip across the face. As the others rushed in, Gavir flailed about him with long arms and heavy fists.

He began to enjoy it. It was rare that a Martian had an opportunity to knock Earthmen down. The mood of the *Song of Going to Hunt* came over him. He sprang free of his attackers and drew his glittering narvoon.

The man with the whip yelled. They looked at his knife, and then all at once turned and ran. Gavir drew back his arm and threw the knife with a practiced catapult-snap of shoulder, elbow, and wrist. To his surprise, the blade clattered to the street far short of his retreating enemies. Then he remembered: you couldn't throw far in the gravity of Earth.

The Earthmen disappeared into a lift-force field. Gavir decided not to pursue them. He walked forward and picked up his narvoon, and saw that the street on which it lay was solid black pavement, not a force-field. He must be in the lowest level of the city. He didn't know his way around; he might meet more enemies. He forgot about the books he'd wanted, and began to search for his hotel.

W

hen he got back to his room, he went immediately to bed. He slept late.

Malcomb woke him at 1100. Gavir told Malcomb about the strangely-dressed men who had tried to kill him.

"I told you not to wander around alone."

"But you did not tell me that Earthmen might try to kill me. You have told me that Earthmen are good and peace-loving, that there have been no acts of violence on Earth for many decades. You have told me that only the MDC men are exceptions, because they are living off Earth, and this somehow makes them different."

"Well, those people you ran into are another exception."

"Why?"

"You know about the Regeneration and Rejuvenation treatment we have here on Earth. A variation of it was given you to acclimate you to Earth's gravity and atmosphere. Well, since the R&R treatment was developed, we Earthmen have a life-expectancy of about one hundred fifty years. Those people who attacked you were Century-Plus. They are over a hundred years old, but as healthy, physically, as ever."

"What is wrong with them?"

"They seem to have outgrown their Ethical Conditioning. They live wildly. Violently. It's a problem without precedent, and we don't know what to do with them. The fact is, Senile Delinquency is our number one problem."

"Why not punish them?" said Gavir.

"They're too powerful. They are often people who've pursued successful careers and acquired a good deal of property and position. And there are getting to be more of them all the time. But come on. You and I have to go over to Global Dreamcasting and collect our fee."

T

he impeccably affable producer of *Dreaming Through the Universe* gave Malcomb a check and then asked them to follow him.

"Mr. Davery wants to see you. Mr. *Hoppy* Davery, executive vice-president in charge of production. Scion of one of Earth's oldest communications media families!"

They went with the producer to the upper reaches of the Global Dreamcasting building. There they were ushered into a huge office.

They found Mr. Hoppy Davery lounging on a divan the size of a space-port. He was youthful in appearance, as were all Earthmen, but a soft plumpness and a receding hairline made him look slightly older than average.

He pointed a rigid finger at Malcomb and Gavir. "I want you two to hear a condensed recording of statements taken from calls we received last night."

Gavir stiffened. They *had* gotten into trouble because of his thoughts about MDC.

A voice boomed out of the ceiling.

"That Martian boy has power. That song was a fist in the jaw. More!"

A woman's voice followed:

"If you let that boy go back to Mars I'll never dream a Global program again."

More voices:

"Enormous!"

"Potent!"

"That hunting song drove me mad. I *like* being mad!"

"Keep him on Earth."

Hoppy Davery pressed a button in the control panel on his divan, and the voices fell silent.

"Those callers that admitted their age were all Century-Plus. The boy appeals to the Century-Plus mentality. I want to try him again. This time on a really big dream-show, not just an educational 'cast. Got a spot on next week's Farfel Flisket Show. If he gets the right response, we talk about a contract. Okay?"

Malcomb said, "His visa expires—"

"We'll take care of his visa."

Gavir trembled with joy. Hoppy Davery pressed another button and a secretary entered with papers. She was followed by another woman.

The second woman was dark-haired and slender. She wore leather boots and tight brown breeches. She was bare from the waist up and her breasts were young and full. A jewelled clip fastened a scarlet cape at her neck. Her lips were a disconcertingly vivid red, apparently an artificial color. She kissed Hoppy Davery on the forehead, leaving red blotches on his pink dome. He wiped his forehead and looked at his hand.

"Do you have to wear that barbaric face-paint?" Hoppy turned sad eyes on Gavir and Malcomb. "Gentlemen, my mother, Sylvie Davery."

A Senile Delinquent! thought Gavir. She looked like Davery's younger sister. Malcomb stared at her apprehensively, and Gavir wondered if she were somehow going to attack them.

She looked at Gavir. "Mmm. What a body, what gorgeous blue skin. How tall are you, Blue Boy?"

"He's approximately seven feet tall, Sylvie," said Hoppy, "and what do you want here, anyway?"

"Just came up to see Blue Boy. One of the crowd dreamed him last night. Positively manic about him. I found out he'd be with you."

"See?" said Hoppy to Gavir. "The Century-Plus mentality. You've got something they go for. Undoubtedly because you're—forgive me—such a complete barbarian. That's what they're all trying to be."

"Spare me another lecture on Senile Delinquency, Our Number One Problem." She walked to the door and Gavir watched her all the way. She turned with a swirl of scarlet and a dramatic display of healthy young flesh. "See you again, Blue Boy."

After Sylvie left, Hoppy Davery said, "That might be a good professional name—Blue Boy. Gavir doesn't *mean* anything. Now what kind of a song could you do for the Farfel Flisket show?"

Gavir thought. "Perhaps you would like the *Song of Creation*."

"It's part of a fertility rite," Malcomb explained.

"Great! Give the Senile Delinquents another workout. It's not quite ethical, but its good for us. But for heaven's sake, Blue Boy, keep your mind off MDC!"



T

he following week, Gavir sang the *Song of Creation* on the Farfel Flisket show, and transmitted the images which it brought up in his mind to his audience. A jubilant Hoppy Davery called him at his hotel next morning.

"Best response I've ever seen! The Century-Plussers have been rioting and throwing mass orgies ever since you sang. But they take time out to call us up and beg for more. I've got a sponsor and a two-year contract lined up for you."

The sponsor was pacing back and forth in Hoppy Davery's office when Malcomb and Gavir arrived. Hoppy introduced him proudly. "Mr. Jarvis Spurling, president of the Martian Development Corporation."

Gavir's hand leaped at the narvoon under his doublet.

Then he stopped himself. He turned the gesture into the proffer of a handshake. "How do you do?" he said quietly. In his mind he congratulated himself. He had learned emotional control from the Earthmen. Here was the man who had

ordered his father crucified! Yet he had managed to hide his instant desire to strike, to kill, to carry out the oath of the blood feud then and there.

Jarvis Spurling ignored Gavir's hand and stared coldly at him. There was not a trace of the usual Earthman's kindness in his square, battered face. "I'm told you got talent. Okay, but a Blueie is a Blueie. I'll pay you because a Blueie on Dreamvision is good publicity for MDC products. But one slip like on your first 'cast and you go back to the Preserve."

"Mr. Spurling!" said Malcomb. "Your tone is hostile!"

"Damn right. That Ethical Conditioning slop doesn't work on me. I've lived too long on the frontier. And I know Blueies."

I

will sign the contract," said Gavir.

As he drew his signature pictograph on the contract, Sylvie Davery sauntered in. She held a white tube between her painted lips. The end of the tube was glowing and giving off clouds of smoke. Hoppy Davery coughed and Sylvie winked at Gavir. Gavir straightened up, and she took a long look at his seven feet.

"All finished, Blue Boy? Come on, let's go have a drink at Lucifer Grotto."

Caution told Gavir to refuse. But before he could speak Spurling snapped, "Disgusting! An Earth woman and a Blueie! If you were on Mars, lady, we'd deport you so fast your tail would burn. And God help the Blueie!"

Sylvie blew a cloud of smoke at Spurling. "You're not on Mars, Jack. You're back in civilization where we do what we damned well please."

Spurling laughed. "I've heard about you Century-Plussers. You're all sick."

"You can't claim any monopoly on mental health. Not with that concentration camp you run on Mars. Coming, Gavir?"

Gavir grinned at Spurling. "The contract, I believe, does not cover my private life."

Hoppy Davery said, "Sylvie, I don't think this is wise."

Sylvie uttered a short, sharp obscenity, linked arms with Gavir, and strolled out.

"You screwball Senile Delinquent," Spurling yelled after Sylvie, "you oughtta be locked up!"

L

Lucifer Grotto was in that same quarter in which Gavir had been attacked. Sylvie told him it was *the* hangout for wealthier New York Century-Plussers. Gavir told her about the attack, and she laughed. "It won't happen again. You're a hero to the Senile Delinquents now. By the way, the big fellow with the broad-brimmed hat, he's one of the most prominent Senile Delinquents of our day. He's president of the biggest privately-owned space line, but he likes to call himself the Hat Rat. You must be one of the few people who ever got away from him alive."

"He seemed happy to get away from me," said Gavir.

An arrangement of force-planes and 3V projections made the front of Lucifer Grotto appear to be a curtain of flames. Gavir hung back, but Sylvie inserted a tiny gold pitchfork into a small aperture in the glowing, rippling surface. The flames swept aside, revealing a doorway. A bearded man in black tights escorted them through a luridly-lit bar to a private room. When they were alone, Sylvie dropped her cape to the floor, sat on the edge of a huge, pink divan, and smiled at Gavir.

Gavir contemplated her. That she was over a hundred years old was a little frightening. But the skin of her face and her bare upper body was a warm color, and tautly filled. She had lashed out at Spurling, and he liked her for that. But in one way she was like Spurling. She didn't fit into the bland, non-violent world of Malcomb and Hoppy.

He shook his head. He said, "Sylvie, why—well, why are you the way you are? Why—and how—have you broken away from Ethical Conditioning?"

Sylvie frowned. She spoke a few words into the air, ordering drinks. She said, "I didn't do it deliberately. When I reached the age of about a hundred it stopped working for me. I suddenly wanted to do what *I* wanted to do. And then I found

out that I didn't *know* what I wanted to do. It was Ethical Conditioning or nothing, so I picked nothing. And here I am, chasing nothing."

"How do you chase nothing?"

She set fire to a white tube. "This, for instance. They used to do it before they found out it caused cancer. Now there's no more cancer, but even if there were, I'd still smoke. That's the attitude I have. You try things. You live in the past, if you're inclined, adopt the costumes and manners of some more colorful time. You try ridiculous things, disgusting things, vicious things. You know they're all nothing, but you have to do something, so you go on doing nothing, elaborately and violently."

A tray of drinks rose through the floor. Sylvie frowned as she noticed a folded paper tucked between the glasses. She picked it up and read it, chuckled, and read it again, aloud.

"Sir: I beg you to forgive the presumption of my recent attack on you. Since then you have captured my imagination. I now hold you to be the noblest savage of them all. Henceforward please consider me, Your obedient servant, Hat Rat."

"You've impressed him," said Sylvie. "But you impress me even more. Come here."

She held out slim arms to him. He had no wish to refuse her. She was not like a Martian woman, but he found the differences exciting and attractive. He went to her, and he forgot entirely that she was over a hundred years old.

I

In the months that followed, Gavir's fame spread over Earth. By spring, the rating computers credited him with an audience of eight hundred million—ninety-five percent of whom were Century-Plussers. Davery doubled Gavir's salary.

Gavir toured the world with Sylvie, mobbed everywhere by worshipful Century-Plussers. Male Century-Plussers by the millions adopted blue doublets and blue kilts in honor of their hero.

Blue-dyed hair was now *de rigueur* among the ladies of Lucifer Grotto. The Hat

Rat himself, who often appeared at a respectful distance in crowds around Gavir, now wore a wide-brimmed hat of brightest blue.

Then there came the dreamcast on which Gavir sang the *Song of Complaint*.

It was an ancient song, a Desert Man's outcry against injustice, enemies, false friends and callous leaders. It was a protest against sufferings that could neither be borne nor prevented. At the climax of the song Gavir pictured a tribal chief who refused to make fair division of the spoils of a hunt with his warriors. Gradually he allowed this image to turn into a picture of Hoppy Davery withholding bundles of money from a starving Gavir. Then he ended the song.

Hoppy sent for him next morning.

"Why did you do that?" he said. "Listen to this."

A recorded voice boomed: "This is Hat Rat. Pay the Blue Boy what he deserves, or I will give you death. It will be a personal thing between you and me. I will besprinkle you with corrosive acids; I will burn out your eyes; I will—"

Hoppy cut the voice off. Gavir saw that he was sweating. "There were *dozens* like that. If you want more money, I'll *give* you more money. Say something nice about me on your next dreamcast, for heaven's sake!"

Gavir spread his big blue hands. "I am sorry. I don't want more money. I cannot always control the pictures I make. These images come into my mind even though they have nothing to do with me."

Hoppy shook his head. "That's because you haven't had Ethical Conditioning. We don't have this trouble with our other performers. You just must remember that dreamvision is the most potent communications medium ever devised. Be *careful*."

"I will," said Gavir.

O

in his next dreamcast Gavir sang the *Song of the Blood Feud*. He pictured a Desert Man whose father had been killed by a drock.

The Desert Man ran over the red sand, and he found the drock. He did not throw his knife. That would not have satisfied his hatred. He fell upon the drock and stabbed and stabbed.

The Desert Man howled his hunting-cry over the body of his enemy, and spat into its face.

And the fanged face of the drock turned into the square, battered face of Jarvis Spurling. Gavir held the image in his mind for a long moment.

When the dreamcast was over, a studio page ran up to Gavir. "Mr. Spurling wants to see you at once, at his office."

"Let him come and find me," said Gavir. "Let us go, Sylvie."

They went to Lucifer Grotto, where Gavir's wealthiest admirers among the Senile Delinquents were giving a party for him in the Pandemonium Room. The only prominent person missing, as Sylvie remarked after surveying the crowd, was the Hat Rat. They wondered about it, but no one knew where he was.

Sheets of flame illuminated the wild features and strange garments of over a hundred Century-Plus ladies and gentlemen. Gouts of flame leaped from the walls to light antique-style cigarettes. Drinks were refilled from nozzles of molded fire.

An hour passed from the time of Gavir's arrival.

Then Jarvis Spurling joined the party. There was a heavy frontier sonic pistol strapped at his waist. A protesting Malcomb was behind him.

Jarvis Spurling's square face was dark with anger. "You deliberately put my face on that animal! You want to make the public hate me. I pay your salary and keep you here on Earth, and this is what I get for it. All right. A Bluie is a Bluie, and I'll treat you like a Bluie should be treated." He unsnapped his holster and drew the square, heavy pistol out and pointed it at Gavir.

Gavir stood up. His right hand plucked at his doublet.

"You're itching to go for that throwing knife," said Spurling. "Go on! Take it out and get ready to throw it. I'll give you that much chance. Let's make a game out of this. We'll make like we're back on Mars, Bluie, and you're out hunting a drock. And you find one, only this drock has a gun. How about that, Bluie?"

Gavir took out the narvoon, grasped the blade, and drew his arm back.

"Gavir!"

It was the Hat Rat. He stood between pillars of flame in the doorway of the Pandemonium Room of Lucifer Grotto, and there was a peculiar contrivance of dark brown wood and black metal tubing cradled in his arm. "This ancient shotgun I dedicate to your blood feud. I shall hunt down your enemy, Gavir!"

Spurling turned. The Hat Rat saw him.

"The enemy!" the Hat Rat shouted.

The shotgun exploded.

Spurling's body was thrown back against Gavir. Gavir saw a huge ragged red caved-in place in Spurling's chest. Spurling's body sagged to the floor and lay there face up, eyes open. The Senile Delinquents of Lucifer Grotto leaned forward to grin at the tattered body.

Still holding the narvoon, Gavir stood over his dead enemy. He threw back his head and howled out the hunting cry of the Desert Men. Then he looked down and spat in Jarvis Spurling's dead face.

END

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