

Marlowe Stephen

Think Yourself to Death



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If you've never read a Johnny Mayhem story before, you are in for a treat. Johnny, who wears different bodies the way ordinary people wear clothes, is one of the most fascinating series characters in science fiction

When he reached Ophiuchus, Johnny Mayhem was wearing the body of an elderly Sirian gentleman.

Nothing could have been more incongruous. The Sirian wore a pince-nez, a dignified two-piece jumper in a charcoal color, sedate two-tone boots and a black string-tie.

The loiterers in the street near the Galactic Observer's building looked, and pointed, and laughed. Using the dignity of the dead Sirian, whose body he wore like other people wear clothing, Johnny Mayhem ignored them. They had a point, of course. It was hot and humid on Ophiuchus IX. The loiterers in the dusty, evil-smelling streets wore nothing but loin cloths.

Mayhem went inside the building, which was air-conditioned. Probably it was the only air-conditioned structure on the entire planet. Mayhem dabbed at his Sirian forehead gratefully, mopping at sweat. As near as he could figure, his life expectancy in this body was down to three days, Earth style. He wondered fleetingly why the Galactic League had sent him here to Ophiuchus. He shrugged, knowing he would find out soon enough.

The Galactic Observer on Ophiuchus IX, a middle-aged Indian from Bombay named Kovandaswamy, wore an immaculate white linen loin cloth on his plump body and a relieved smile on his worried face when Mayhem entered his office. The two men shook hands.

"So you're Mayhem?" Kovandaswamy said in English. "They told me to expect you, sir. Pardon my staring, but I've never been face to face with a legend before. I'm impressed."

Mayhem laughed. "You'll get over it."

"Well, at least as a Sirian gentleman, you're not very prepossessing. That helps."

"It wasn't my idea. It never is."

"I know. I know that, sir." Kovandaswamy got up nervously from his desk and paced across the room. "Do you know anything about Ophiuchus IX, Mayhem?"

"Not much. It's one of the Forgotten Worlds, isn't it?"

"Precisely, sir. Ophiuchus IX is one of scores of interstellar worlds colonized in the first great outflux from Earth."

"You mean during the population pressure of the 24th century?"

"Exactly. Then Ophiuchus IX, like the other Forgotten Worlds, was all but forgotten. As you know, Mayhem, the first flux of colonization receded like a wave, inertia set in, and the so-called Forgotten Worlds became isolated from the rest of the galaxy for generations. Only in the past fifty years are we finding them again, one by one. Ophiuchus IX is typical, isolated from the galaxy at large by a dust cloud that – "

"I know. I came through it."

"It was colonized originally with Indians from southern and eastern India, on Earth. That's why the Galactic League appointed me Observer. I'm an Indian. These people – well, they're what my people might have developed into if they'd lived for hundreds of years in perfect isolation."

"What's the trouble?"

Kovandaswamy answered with a question of his own. "You are aware of the Galactic League's chief aim?"

"Sure. To see that no outworld, however small or distant, is left in isolation. Is that what you mean?"

"Yes," agreed Kovandaswamy. "Their reason is obvious. For almost a thousand years now the human race has outpaced its social and moral development with development in the physical sciences. For almost a thousand years mankind has had the power to destroy itself. In isolation this is possible. With mutual interchange of ideas, it is extremely unlikely. Thus, in the interests of human survival, the Galactic League tries to thwart isolated development. So far, the Forgotten Worlds have cooperated. But Ophiuchus IX is an exception."

"And the League wants me to find out why?"

"Precisely."

"How are they thwarting – "

Kovandaswamy was sweating despite the air-conditioning, despite his almost-naked state. "You have the right to turn this mission down, of course. The League told me that."

"I'm here," Mayhem said simply.

"Very well, sir. Sooner or later, every outworlder who ventures out among the Ophiuchans kills himself."

"I guess I didn't hear you. Did you say kills himself?"

"Suicide, Mayhem. Exactly."

"But how can you blame – "

"Like their ancestors from the Earthian sub-continent of India, Mayhem, the Ophiuchans are mystics. The trance, the holy man who sits in contemplation of his navel, the World Spirit – these are the things of their culture most important to them. Mayhem, did you ever see a hundred holy men of India working together?"

"Usually they don't work together."

"Precisely, sir. Precisely. Here on Ophiuchus, they do. And not merely a hundred. All of them. Virtually all of them. Working together, their minds in trance, unified, seeking their World Spirit, they can do amazing things."

"Like mentally forcing the outworlders to kill themselves?"

"Yes, sir. Legally, they are innocent. Morally, they do not recognize the outworlders as equals of themselves. The League wants to know what they are trying to hide. It could be a threat to peace and – existence."

"You have a body for me?" Johnny would be ready with that provided.

If anyone but Johnny Mayhem had asked that question, Kovandaswamy would not have known what he was talking about, or would have thought him insane, or both. But Johnny Mayhem was, of course, the legendary Man Without a Body. How many corporeal shells had he inhabited in the past half dozen years? He shrugged, not remembering. He couldn't remain in one body more than a month: it would mean the final death of his *elan*, his bodiless sentience. So far he had avoided that death.

The Galactic League would help him if it could. Every world which had a human population and a Galactic League post, however small, must have a body in cold storage, waiting for Johnny Mayhem if his services were required. But no one knew exactly under what circumstances the Galactic League Council, operating from the hub of the Galaxy, might summon Mayhem. And only a very few people, including those at the Hub and the Galactic League Firstmen on civilized worlds and Observers on primitive worlds, knew the precise mechanism of Mayhem's coming. To others it was a weird mystery.

Johnny Mayhem, bodiless sentience. Mayhem – Johnny Marlow then – who had been chased from Earth, a pariah and a criminal, almost seven years ago, who had been mortally wounded on a wild planet deep within the Saggitarian Swarm, whose life had been saved – after a fashion – by the white magic of the planet. Mayhem, doomed now to possible immortality as a bodiless sentience, an *elan*, which could occupy and activate a fresh corpse or one which had been frozen properly ...

an *elan* doomed to wander eternally because it could not remain in one body for more than a month without body and *elan* perishing. Mayhem, who had dedicated his strange, lonely life to the service of the Galactic League because a normal life and normal social relations were not possible for him...

"Then you'll do it?" Kovandaswamy asked on Ophiuchus IX. "Even though you realize we can give you no official help not only because the Galactic League approves of your work unofficially but can't sanction it officially, but because an outworlder can't set his foot outside this building for long or off the spacefield without risking death..."

"By suicide?"

"Yes. I'm practically a prisoner in Galactic League Headquarters, as is my staff. You see – "

"What about the body?"

Kovandaswamy looked at him nervously. "A native, Mayhem. A native won't be molested, you see."

"That figures. What kind of native?"

"In top shape, sir. Healthy, young, in the prime of life you might say."

"Then what's bothering you?"

"Nothing. Nothing, sir."

"Your technicians are ready?"

"Yes, sir. And vowed to secrecy."

Mayhem found a tiny capsule in the pocket of his Sirian jumper, and popped it in his mouth.

"What – what's that?" Kovandaswamy asked.

Mayhem swallowed. "Curare," he said.

"Curare! A poison!"

"Paralysis," said Mayhem quickly. "Muscular paralysis. You die because you stop breathing. Painless ... and..."

"But – "

"Call your technicians ... new body ... ready..." Gasping, the Sirian gentleman, hardly Johnny Mayhem now, fell to the floor.

Trembling, Kovandaswamy pressed a button on his desk. A few moments later, two white-coated technicians entered the office.

"Project M," Kovandaswamy said.

Grimly the technicians went to work.

Mayhem awoke.

Ordinarily it was his *elan* alone which journeyed between the worlds, his *elan* which was fed the information it would need in hypno-sleep while the frozen body was thawed out. Sometimes, however, he came the normal way in a body which still had some of its thirty days left, as he had come to Ophiuchus IX in the Sirian gentleman.

Darkness. The body felt young and healthy. Mayhem wondered vaguely how it had died, then decided it did not really matter. For the next thirty days the body would live again, as Johnny Mayhem.

Recessed lighting glowed at the juncture of walls and ceiling. Mayhem was reclining on a cot. A loin cloth and a large shawl had been laid out for him. On the far wall of the room was a tinted mirror. Mayhem got up and went over there.

What his new body looked like hardly mattered, he told himself. Youth, health, strength – these were important. He could sense them internally. He could...

He stared at the image in the mirror. His face turned beet red. He went for the shawl and the loin cloth and put them on. Cursing, he went to find Kovandaswamy.

"Is this supposed to be a joke?" Mayhem demanded.

"You never asked what the – " Kovandaswamy began.

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