Quanta

April 1990 Vol. II Iss. 2

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April, 1990 *Volume II, Issue 2*

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Quanta is produced using the LaTeX typesetting system

Cover

The cover illustration depicts a scene from Faye Levine's story *The Babysitters*.

Danny Fahs is a junior illustration major at Carnegie Mellon University. Among his current endeavors are drawing his long-running strip ''Warped Imagination'', in the school newspaper; collaborating with a friend on a new strip called ''McCloud'', and plotting & drawing ''Razel & Zag'' which he hopes to turn into ''Something or Other''. His hobbies include reading SF, collecting comics, ''doing stuff with computers'', and making mushy advances on a certain authoress. This bio-blurb was written for him because ''I'm not a writer.''

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Looking Ahead

Daniel K. Appelquist

Some good news for those of you in search of back issues. . . There is now an anonymous FTP server for *Quanta* back issues. It exists at the address *fed.expres.cs.cmu.edu* (*128.2.209.58*). It contains all back issues (including this one) in both PostScript and Ascii format. The relevant directories are */quanta/ascii* and */quanta/postscript*. I believe this service should be useful to both Internet and Bitnet users (the latter can access the site via BitFTP servers)

Well, as you may have noticed, this issue is a bit long. This may be partially due to Faye Levine's new story, *The Babysitters*, a scene from which is featured on the cover. I'm excited about Faye's material but if her story size keeps growing at its current rate, we'll have to rename the magazine *Faye Levine Quarterly*! At any rate, Faye wants people to know that this story takes place some years after the events in *One*, her story from last issue, but eighteen years before *Dinner at Nestrosa's*, the excerpt from her yet-to-be-published novel *Revolution* which we published in our December issue of last year.

We really have a block-buster lineup this issue. Jason Snell's story *Sharp and Silver Beings* for one. You may remember Jason's story *Into Gray* which appeared in the first issue of *Quanta* as well as his article *Cyberpunk's a Label Like Any Other* from last issue. We also have a *Quanta* first: a sequel. Specifically, a sequel to Christopher Kempke's very popular story *Going Places*, published in the first issue. Craig Levin, in his semi-regular science column, brings us some information and speculation on the existence of extra-terrestrial life right here in our own solar system. We also have several newcomers this issue. Cerise Palmer, Phillip Nolte, and Kenneth Kousen all have donated excellent stories and I hope they continue to do so. I also hope to see more work from new faces in the future. If you have a story you'd like to submit, send it along to me.

Speaking of firsts, we have another one in this issue: A cover illustration. My thanks to Danny Fahs for drawing it and donating it. Cover illustrations will (obviously) raise the size of the PostScript edition somewhat but I think it's worth it. Incidentally, if you'd like to do a cover for Quanta, send me mail. I'd like to have different artists' work grace the cover every issue.

You may be noticing the specific lack of a sequel to Thomas Hand's *Ice Ball* from last issue. Not to worry! We'll be seeing more of Teri's adventures in issues to come.

At this point, I'd like to ask all of you some questions. Specifically, I'd like to poll all of you about your feelings on *Quanta*. If you have a second, answer the following questions and send your answers back to me. Be sure to include the word ''poll'' in your subject header.

Reader Poll

1. How much interest do you have in the non-fiction articles appearing in *Quanta*?
   - None
   - Some
   - Love 'em

2. How would you rate the overall quality of *Quanta*?
   - Bad
   - It's Mediocre
   - It's good
   - It's excellent!

3. Of the issues you've read so far (including this one) which issue of *Quanta* would you say is your favorite?
   - #1
   - #2
   - #3
   - #4
   - Can't say for sure.

4. What has been your favorite piece (Story, Poem or Article) so far?

5. What has been your least favorite piece (Story, Poem or Article) so far?

6. What would you like to see more of?

7. What would you like to see less of?

8. Do you have any suggestions concerning the typesetting of the magazine?

9. Any other comments/complaints.

I'll be waiting to hear your comments. Feel free to elaborate on your answers. If you have ANY comment on *Quanta* you'd like me to hear, don't hesitate to send it along. I'd like very much initiate a letters column next issue, but to do this I need letters!

One last note. If you're not going to be able to receive *Quanta* during the summer and you'd like me to temporarily cancel your subscription and then reinstate it for next year, drop me a line. I don't want to be sending *Quanta* to people who aren't going to be there to receive it.

Enough ramblings from me. Enjoy this issue of *Quanta*.

Life on Ice
The Possibility of Life on Europa and Enceladus

Craig Levin

I: Introduction

The search for extra-terrestrial life has been one of the major driving forces of planetology. Many of planetology's major figures, from Sir William Herschel, to Percival Lowell, even up to Carl Sagan, have believed in a plurality of worlds. Yet, despite the optimism of all the searchers, not one of the terrestrial planets have been found to harbor life, save our own planet Earth.

Yet the possibilities for life elsewhere in our Solar System have been poorly explored. In the sixties, Carl Sagan postulated the existence of life under and among Jupiter's clouds. Unfortunately, the proposal seemed to lack merit when it came time to design Galileo's atmospheric probe. However, it is not Jupiter, nor is it any of the other Jovian planets that I believe to be the abode of fellow creatures, but instead, two of the ice-moons I wrote about in my March 1990 article in the EJASA entitled ''Ice Moons of the Jovian Worlds'': Enceladus and Europa.

In this article I will first describe what life need in order to get started on a world. Next, I will describe the conditions on Europa and Enceladus in both the past and present. Finally, I will compare the five described conditions, and thereby discover if, indeed, Enceladus and Europa are harbors for life, or dead lumps of ices.

II: Conditions for the Birth of Life

Life is a delicate thing, yet it arose on Earth under conditions that might seem harsh to us here nearly three billion years after the fact. Earth's atmosphere was nothing then like it is now. Instead of the familiar oxygen and nitrogen that we all breathe, Earth's atmosphere was mainly composed of steam, carbon di-oxide, methane, and ammonia. Thanks to experiments made in 1953 by Stanley Miller, it has been shown that if these chemicals are exposed to electric sparks or ultra-violet light, most of the known amino acids and some of the simpler proteins will form. In 1936, A.I. Oparin found that these amino acids and protein would form globules in water. These he believed were the progenitors of protozoa, the lowest forms of life. Thus life was started on Earth. But what about the main subjects-Enceladus and Europa?

III: Primeval Conditions on Europa and Enceladus

It has been shown that Jupiter and Saturn are both warmer now than can be accounted for by solar radiation. It seems to be the general consensus that this heat is the remnant of the original energy that was the result of the respective planet's collapse into a dense ball of rock, metal, and liquid metal hydrogen. If the heat is enough to show up significantly now, what must it have been like four or five billion years ago? Terence Dickinson claims: ''Near the origin of the solar system [sic] Jupiter was more like a miniature sun than a planet, shedding enough heat that. . . would have allowed [Europa's] surface to be covered in an ocean. . . ''[1] I am including Saturn in this as well, in light of its similar size and composition. During this time, there also were other processes that could have given Enceladus and Europa open oceans for the Sun to shine on: heat of accretion and heat of differentiation could have had melted the crusts of both moons. Meteorite impacts could have opened pits in their icy crusts. However, do the moons have organic material for the Sun's ultra-violet rays to shine on?

Let us look at the composition of the typical ice moon. In this ''typical'' ice moon, we find, in addition to some rock and metal, water ice, dry ice, and frozen ammonia and methane. Despite their frozen state today, at the time, if water was in liquid form then, most, if not all of the chemicals listed above were also in liquid or vapor form. Plus, with the exposure of these vapors and liquids to the young Sun's more energetic ultra-violet rays, life's components would have formed on the far-off surfaces of Enceladus and Europa. But what of the present day? How could protozoa formed then somehow survive to the present?

IV: Present Conditions on Europa and Enceladus

Protozoa on Earth seem to tolerate many different environments, but one thing seems clear. All life needs water, and all life needs an energy source, be it sunlight or plants or geothermal energy. Do the present conditions on Europa and Enceladus give these conditions to the hypothetical protozoa?

I say yes. There is a good chance that both Europa and Enceladus have liquid water under their ice crusts. The heat generated by tidal interactions between Io, Europa and Jupiter, according to Lucchita and Soderblom, was enough to melt the ice under the crust of Europa. Enceladus has been observed to send out plumes of water by Voyager II. So we can assume that at least there is water to sustain subterranean life on the two moons. But is there an energy source? Considering that most estimates of the thickness of Europa's crust, and it seems to be the warmer of the two moons, being both larger and less cratered, lie around a figure of twenty-five miles, I think one can rule out sunlight as a source of energy. But geothermal

[1]Terence Dickinson, *The Universe and Beyond* (Camden East: Camden House Publishing, Ltd., 1986), p. 54

energy on such active moons is quite possible, to say the least. It has certainly been shown on Earth that geothermal heat sources can sustain life.

V: Life?

Let us compare the five conditions described above. For life's founding, we need ammonia, methane, carbon di-oxide, steam, and either lightning or ultra-violet rays. Europa and Enceladus had, and still have, the chemicals necessary. If one considers likely the scenario I have described above for the Saturn and Jupiter, then ultra-violet light was present as well. Life had a good chance of starting. For life's continuance, we need an energy source and liquid water. Due to their tidal interactions with their neighbors, Enceladus and Europa have liquid water and geothermal energy. This leads me to believe that our first aliens are to be found as Europans and Enceladians, fellow members of the Solar system of which we ourselves are a part.

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Acknowledgments

To Arthur Clarke, for inspiring in me the idea of life on Europa and Enceladus from his book *2010*, and to John Novak, who helped find and patch some holes of the first draft.

Craig Levin began to get involved in astronomy when, in second grade, he received H.A. Rey's ''Find the Constellations'' as a birthday present. As a high school junior, he had his first article published in the now-defunct Small Scope Observers' Association's newsletter, and by his senior year in high school was helping to establish the ''Astronomical Newsletter'', a now-defunct magazine based in Atlanta. At present, he is a physics major at Bradley University who intends to turn his first love, planetology, into his profession.

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Celestial Earthmovers

by Phillip Nolte

It was one of the oddball asteroids whose orbit brought it on a near collision course with the earth. Geographos, it was called, catalogue number 1620, one of the handful of asteroids that inhabit the inner solar system. Six months before I had never heard of it. But there I was, looking at it out of the forward viewport of an asteroid belt utility ship. Carlos was looking over my shoulder as we floated in the warm, nearly dark confines of the ship's control room. After a week or so of maneuvering we had matched velocities with the asteroid and had finally gotten close enough to see some of the fine details of it with the naked eye. We had been staring at it in silence for some time.

''Well, what do you think of it, Stephan?'' asked Carlos.

''Looks like a big overgrown peanut,'' I said, as we watched it rotate lazily.

''A peanut that has a date with destiny,'' he returned, with mock seriousness.

I nudged him away with an elbow. ''We should get suited up and go have a look at it. Touch it, take measurements, get familiar with it,'' I said. ''Go see if Joanna wants to come along. I'll meet you in the workroom.''

''As you say, Senor Perkins,'' returned Carlos, as he left the bridge.

The idea for this mad scheme that we were involved in was cooked up by someone named Charles Kelman of UCLA in about 1980, over a hundred years ago. The original paper can still be found in the files of the NASA museum, if you care to look. I've read it. There is little doubt that it was a tongue-in-cheek proposal by Kelman. In the same file with the proposal were several letters and memos addressed to him that contained criticisms from his peers. Their comments ranged from ''premature'' and ''outrageously innovative'' to ''preposterous'' and even ''criminally insane.'' I think his real purpose was to stimulate some discussion on how mankind might begin to exploit the resources of the solar system. Surely he never intended for anyone to try it! Unfortunately, events and human nature can conspire to make the damnedest things sound plausible.

The situation in Central America has never been stable, but this time the turmoil was even worse than usual. Threats by a new and belligerent government in Panama to disable the existing Panama canal probably had the most influence. More than threats, fact is, they actually closed it for nearly a year in 2045. Then they doubled the usage rates. Wealthy and powerful people got angry. Wheels were set in motion and the ''Columbia Canal Project'' was born.

The project was billed as the most spectacular engineering feat ever attempted by mankind. And so it was. The first time I heard of it I thought that it was some kind of joke. When I found out that they were serious, I shook my head in disbelief. There was only one possible explanation--that everyone involved was certifiably nuts! The plan was to build a new canal connecting the Pacific Ocean with the Caribbean Sea. The area chosen was in the wilderness of northwestern Columbia, near the Atrato River. A peninsula sticks up out of Columbia there, a peninsula that eventually becomes Panama. There was only about 150 Km of land between the two bodies of water in this area, so the new canal wouldn't have to be too long. Up to this point everything was fine, but then things started to get scary. They were going to do the excavation by hitting the proposed site with a piece of an asteroid! Our asteroid, Geographos. It was hoped that the resulting impact would create a huge crater and would, in one unthinkable blast, do a job that would normally take years of heavy and dangerous labor. The enterprise was made to sound even more attractive by announcing that the metal content of this heavenly fragment would be worth in the neighborhood of 900 billion dollars! Dollars that would be a godsend to the beleaguered economies of Central and South America. No one had any suggestions on how this new supply of precious metals was to be obtained from its eventual ocean resting place, however. Isn't this starting to sound just a little nuts? To prove that there is no shortage of stupidity in high places, a joint committee of Central American and United States officials bought the deal, lock, stock and asteroid.

They wanted me because I'm damned good at astro-engineering and I have a lot of experience working in space. I'm the same Stephan Perkins that did most of the design work on the United States L-5 space colony. I was also good with people, usually, and this was going to require the coordinated efforts of many. At least we had the time we needed to iron out some of the problems. We began work on this project in 2048, nearly five years before the next close approach of Geographos.

Not that we were likely to have any problems. I mean, all we were going to do was excise a chunk of rock about the size of a small midwestern town from this minor planetoid, alter its course to bring it within kissing distance of the earth, figure out some way to aim it at a specific target, and allow it to impact. No sweat, eh? How do you establish an acceptable margin of error for something like that? How do you go about reducing the stupefying velocity at which this ''impact projectile'' would be traveling? We had no idea of how this thing was going to behave when it made contact with Earth's atmosphere either. We weren't going by the book, we were writing it! It's no exaggeration to say that the challenge was formidable; even the slightest miscalculation had the potential of ending in a horrible catastrophe. So, I got involved because

I had to. I had to do what I could to insure that things wouldn't end up in a total disaster. I figured that they needed at least one person who knew what the hell he was doing!

I tore my gaze away from the viewport. The vastness of space with its frosty dusting of tiny bright stars was a rich, dark tapestry and the slowly twirling asteroid suspended against this backdrop was a compelling, almost hypnotic, sight.

As I left the bridge for the workroom, I almost ran into Salazar in the corridor. Diego Salazar, from Columbia, the ''executive director'' of the expedition. A terrible choice, by any measure. He was a wealthy and powerful member of the canal committee who had been included on the mission at the last minute. To tell you the truth, the whole Salazar situation looked suspicious to me. The guy knew next to nothing about the engineering end of the project. His forte was politics and even though that was something he was damned good at, I found out early on that he had no idea how difficult this job was going to be. In addition, he was neither liked nor respected by any of the crew. By some kind of convoluted logic this made him the obvious choice to head the mission. None of this altered the basic fact that he was an idiot, and I thought that the ramrod tactics that he tried to use on me and the rest of the team were actually counterproductive. We needed him like we needed a hole in the airlock.

''Don't you think it's time to have a look at that asteroid, Perkins?'' he said. With his accent, he pronounced it ''pear-kins'' but he always spoke with rich full tones, as though he were making one of his political speeches.

''We were just on our way,'' I replied, pushing past him.

''Ah, I see,'' he said, ''Good, I shall observe you from the control room. Now that we are finally here it is vital that we make the best use of our time. Si?''

''If you say so, Salazar,'' I continued down the corridor. That was his way, he stated the obvious and applied pressure when it wasn't needed. I always found an excuse to go somewhere else when he came in. From the first impression onward, my attitude towards him had been one of intense dislike. As you'll see, those instincts were well founded.

After some idle chit-chat in the workroom while we put on our suits, we were off to our first close encounter with Geographos. That was a humbling experience! The ship was kept on a parallel course at a safe distance and we used a utility sled to go over to the slowly rotating asteroid. As we got closer we began to realize just how big it was. The books and our instruments said that it was about 2.2 km in length. Maybe so, but it sure seemed bigger than that when you got close enough to touch it.

Getting on to it was tough. It wasn't enough that it rotated around its center, it had a slight wobble as well. You mounted it carefully, at the center of rotation. Once on, you could move out towards the slightly swollen ends. It had no noticeable gravity; a healthy sneeze was probably enough to impart escape velocity, so you were virtually weightless. As you moved outward, you had to cling tightly to its pocked and jagged surface because you picked up the same relative motions. By the time you were perched on the end you were rotating and wobbling right along with it. What a ride! You were also treated to a blinding view of the sun's searingly bright disk every few minutes. It took some real getting used to but we had little choice, there was work to be done.

Dismounting was the reverse process, carefully make your way back to the center and push off over to the sled. Carlos and I thought we were doing well merely to keep from flying off into space until we saw an unconcerned Joanna calmly going about the collection of samples for analysis. Not to be outdone, we checked our tethers, composed ourselves and set about determining the exact dimensions of our cosmic excavation tool.

Our first order of business was to stop the spinning and wobbling motions. We would use some strategically placed rockets to accomplish this. Then, we would strap on the huge boosters that we had brought out with the belt ship and start to seriously alter its course and speed. Even though the size and mass of Geographos was far too much for the needs of our project, it looked like the best thing to do was to bring the whole asteroid back. The real fun would start when we began to approach Earth. That's when we were going to have to perform some difficult and intricate maneuvers. Here's how it was supposed to work. It had been determined that the smaller end of the ''peanut'' contained more than enough material to serve our purposes. We would cut through the asteroid near the slightly narrower ''waist'' area with a series of carefully placed explosive charges. After that, we would have to do some minor surgery to pare our chosen end down to the proper size and shape for the excavation job that was planned for it. Then we would use one of the same strap-on boosters to alter the course towards earth. Hopefully, we could ''skip'' it through the atmosphere once, or twice if we needed to, to scrub off some more of its unwanted velocity and to do some final shaping as well.

While all this was going on, another team would take charge of the rest of the asteroid, the so-called ''tail section''. They would use the remaining booster to carefully ''park'' the tail section in the L-4 point of the earth-luna system. There it would be ready and waiting right in our neighborhood, so to speak. We could use it for another ''excavation'' project or, more likely, as building material for more orbital colonies or Lunar construction projects. Any construction material was welcome in space and Joanna's preliminary analysis had determined that Geographos was rich in all kinds of valuable metals.

The hardware and methods for manipulating and moving the asteroid were pretty well worked out, men had been ''mining'' the asteroid belt for years, but no one had ever had to contend with such high relative velocities before. In the belt things only move at about 5 km/sec. Compared to that, Geographos was hauling ass!

Carlos and I had sat up until the wee hours almost every ''night'' on the two-month trip out to the rendezvous with Geographos trying to determine what the best shape and mass of the final object should be. There had actually been several small asteroid ''drops'' done in the early part of the century. Maybe you've heard of Statler and Chin. They were a couple of borderline psychotics with forged scientific credentials who had somehow gotten permission to hit Mars with some small asteroids, just to see what would happen. It was kind of like turning a couple of small boys loose with a box of dynamite and a book of matches. Their masquerade lasted for nearly two years before they were found out and put away. They did take some nice pictures but both their measurements and their technique were, as you would expect, abysmal. In addition, the atmosphere and gravity of Mars were completely different from Earth's. But this somewhat sketchy data was all that we had to go on. Of course, anything at all was a help. It was too bad that they had simply dropped the rocks directly, and hadn't tried to skip any of them through the atmosphere; we could have used the information. For us, such skips were vital because they would not only slow the thing down, but would allow us to get valuable data on how much mass we were going to lose when it made its final plunge through the atmosphere. More than once, I woke up in a cold sweat when I dreamed that we had miscalculated and instead of a new canal, we had created a sizable new bay near San Francisco.

Dr. Carlos Monzon Cortez had been appointed to be my assistant and liaison with the committee. Born in Columbia and educated in the U.S., he was an excellent choice. He was dark and slender with black eyes and classic Latin good looks. By any standard, Carlos was a strikingly handsome man. His speech was very soft and polite, almost apologetic, but it was best to listen when he spoke because he always knew what he was talking about. Women found him irresistible, but he seldom took advantage of them; maybe that was part of his charm. He was particularly valuable because he was fluent in English, Spanish and Portuguese, and communication between us and the committee on some very technical matters was necessary. Oh yes, he was also one hell of an engineer. I found him irresistible too; we quickly became good friends.

Everything was going according to schedule until we had a meeting to discuss procedures and present progress reports. The meeting started out amiably enough but things soon took a nasty and unexpected turn. After some assorted small talk, Salazar made an announcement.

''We must begin placing the explosive charges tomorrow,'' he said. ''The asteroid is to be broken in two here, in deep space. We shall be bringing home only what we need of it.''

There was a buzz of conversation. I was taken completely by surprise. ''Wait a minute,'' I interrupted. ''I thought it was agreed that we would take the whole thing back!''

''The plan has been changed,'' he replied.

''Changed?'' I said. ''By whom? Carlos and I weren't consulted about this.''

''It was changed by the committee,'' he said. ''At my recommendation.''

''Well, change it back,'' I said, my anger beginning to stir. ''We're missing out on a golden opportunity if we leave the rest of that rock out here.'' There was another buzz of conversation; a few heads nodded in affirmation.

''I must agree with Stephan,'' Joanna spoke up, glancing at me and then looking back at Salazar. ''I've looked that asteroid over very carefully. It's full of ores and deposits of metal that are badly needed. That thing is worth a fortune! More than that it's. . .''

Salazar cut her off with a wave of his hand. ''It does not matter, the mass of the entire asteroid is too great for our boosters. We do not have sufficient power.''

''Where the hell did you get that idea?'' I said, his obvious runaround was making me even madder. ''There's a five percent fuel margin, if we get them attached and operating within the thirty day window.''

Trying to reason with him was like arguing with Geographos itself. He wasn't even looking at me.

''I can't believe you'd make this kind of change without some discussion,'' I said, my anger beginning to get out of hand. ''We must go with the original plan! Do you have any idea how much work we've put in on calculations alone?''

''It has already been decided. . .'' he began.

''This is bullshit, Salazar!'' I interrupted. The room was suddenly silent. ''You can't run this project like it's a god-damned banana plantation!''

Maybe that was a mistake.

''Enough, Senor Perkins,'' he said, his eyes smoldering. ''We make preparations to blast the asteroid tomorrow.''

''We'll see about that!'' I said as I stormed out of the chamber. I was so angry that I might have done him harm if I hadn't left. The way things turned out, maybe I should have stayed a little longer.

I put a call through to the committee; they were in agreement with Salazar. I ranted at them for a short while about the opportunities they were missing before they cut me off. Finally, I went back to my quarters where I floated and silently fumed for most of the evening. The following day I plodded through my duties without much enthusiasm. I knew I was in trouble when I found myself staring at the same equation for most of the morning trying to get it to make sense. I couldn't. My mind would keep wandering back to the altercation in the briefing room. I'd shake my head to clear it and plunge back into my work. All in vain. After two days of this, I came to a decision. I was going to resign, there was no way I could work with that man as my superior till the project was completed. Who knows what other surprises he had in store for us? I wrote a letter outlining my intentions, made the announcement and prepared to leave on the next shuttle, which was mercifully due in less than a week.

Joanna joined me on the shuttle when the time came to leave. I didn't even notice her until she spoke. I was strapped into an acceleration couch lost in a final bittersweet look at Geographos out of the side viewport.

''Mind if I join you?'' she said.

''Huh? Oh, Joanna,'' I said. My surprise was genuine. ''No of course not. I was daydreaming.'' I helped her strap into the adjacent couch. ''What are you doing here?''

''I'm done,'' she said. ''They have my report, they don't need a geologist anymore. You know what a stickler Salazar is for efficiency. Besides that, if you remember, I questioned his judgment at a recent staff meeting.''

''Yeah, I know. So did I!'' I said with a tentative smile, surprised that I could actually joke about it.

‘‘Is that what you call it?’’ she replied, grinning. ‘‘I’d say what you did was more like an insult to his mother!’’ We both laughed.

The conversation went on from there. She was easy to talk to and had a great sense of humor, which was really a good thing because we had a couple of months worth of space flight ahead of us with little to do. I found out that she had just recently come from a post-doc in geology at Colorado State and was looking for a job, hopefully an assistant professor’s position or something. It was more than chance that had brought her the short stint on our Geographos survey. In addition to having a Ph.D in geology, she was an experienced rock climber. I guess that explains why she had so little trouble getting around while we were surveying the asteroid. She was surprised to find out that she really liked working in space. That was just one of the things we had in common. We got through all of this before the noise and discomfort of the shuttle’s departure interrupted the conversation.

What else do I tell you about Joanna. She wasn’t a woman with the kind of looks that were distracting; at least, I didn’t think so at first. She was more pretty than beautiful, with a clear and honest face. She fought a constant battle with a few extra kilos of body weight, a battle that she could never quite win. But, she was just the tonic I needed. After we had spent a week or so together on the shuttle, I found that my attitude towards her had changed. In fact, I was beginning to think she was rather attractive. It didn’t hurt that she was in complete agreement with my actions on the belt ship.

‘‘You were absolutely right, Stephan,’’ she said, at one point. ‘‘They’re wasting a great opportunity. Not only would it be valuable for its ore content, we could have had a captive asteroid to study. Losing that disappointed me more than the sheer monetary value of the thing. As it stands right now, you have to go clear out to the belt to get a good look at an asteroid. I’d call it an ’astronomical’ shame.’’

That got a groan from me, too.

By the time we got to earth, we found that our feelings for each other had gone beyond friendship. Way beyond. Perhaps it was because we had been together nearly every hour for the better part of two months. Or, maybe it was the fact that both of us were unattached and lonely because, up to that point in our lives, we had both been obsessively dedicated to our work. Whatever the reasons, we had fallen deeply in love. There was no question that we would be spending a lot more time together. My previous employments had left me modestly wealthy and I wasn’t in any rush to find another job. Together, we organized some rallies and demonstrations to try and halt the Columbia Canal Project. That turned out to be an educational experience.

For starters, we needed some dirt to throw. To get the dirt, we had to be willing to do a little digging. Fortunately, I still had some important friends who were willing to give me a hand with the shovelling. The pile of dirt concerning Diego Salazar quickly grew to almost mountainous proportions. The picture of him that gradually emerged was frightening, much more alarming then I could have possibly imagined. There have been few men who were as ambitious, as ruthless, or as crooked as he was. He controlled vast wealth, much of it hidden in a labyrinthine series of farms, businesses, foundations, trusts, and other fronts. Out of this mess, I was able to piece together just why he was on the mission and why he had made those critical changes to the project, changes that had ended up with me resigning my position.

He had come along on the mission because he thought that he would be safe there. You don’t get to the point in life that Salazar was at without making some friends--and some enemies. They had managed to keep it quiet, but there had been a nearly successful attempt on his life. While he was safe in space, his enforcers would find and eliminate the threat.

He had changed the project for financial reasons. Among his many holdings, Salazar owned controlling interest in the company that had leased the belt ship and boosters. He had found a way to save some badly needed capital and his reputation at the same time. The savings would come because the extra work involved in moving the tail section was to have required another utility ship and several months of expensive labor. Salazar’s empire was huge and sprawling, but not all of it was solvent and they didn’t have all that much in liquid assets. They had borrowed some money from the canal project to keep several of the other concerns afloat. As a result, they didn’t have enough ready cash to pay for the extra belt ship. As you know, the belt government never has much cash either; business with them is strictly cash-in-advance. The solution was simple: just make up some plausible excuse and cancel that part of the project. There would likely be a court battle afterwards but the people who had invested in the venture knew it was a high risk operation at the outset. They had signed contracts to that effect. Chances were very good that they would have to absorb the loss.

But there was even more to it than just the financial end of things. The tail section of the asteroid was to have been signed over to interests that were owned by wealthy citizens of the USA. Among his other charming attributes, Salazar had no love for North Americans. The set-up was perfect; he could preserve his empire and he could screw some rich Americans at the same time. Apparently, he just couldn’t resist it.

It was Carlos who brought the whole protest episode to a close. We’d had two marches in the first six months and had gotten a little publicity, not nearly enough, but it was a start. To my great surprise, he came in person to visit us. Joanna and I were getting ready to kick off another rally in the next couple of weeks. We heard a knock on our door. Joanna answered it.

‘‘Carlos!’’ she cried, embracing him. ‘‘What a surprise! Please come in.’’ She held the door for him. I got up and extended my hand.

‘‘It’s been a long time, my friend.’’ I said. ‘‘How are you?’’

He shook my hand with his usual firm grip and released it.

‘‘Tired.’’ he said, matter-of-factly. We motioned to him to sit down. ‘‘I am running the engineering end of the project nearly by myself since you left.’’

‘‘That’s not entirely my fault,’’ I returned, as I sat also. ‘‘I had to make a very difficult decision.’’ He nodded.

‘‘What brings you here, Carlos?’’ asked Joanna, from across the room.

''I have come to plead with you to stop your involvement with the protest marches,'' he began.

''Come on, Carlos,'' I interrupted. ''Diego Salazar is pure poison, nothing more than a common criminal. He ought to be locked up!''

''We have inside information, Carlos. He deals in arms and drugs and prostitution and who knows what else,'' added Joanna.

''I harbor no illusions about his character, Joanna,'' he replied, with his soft voice. ''But I speak to you both on behalf of my country, and my people. In fact this canal will benefit the entire South American continent. Believe me, I would throw Salazar to the dogs today if it were in my power. For the moment, you must forget about him. We are now near some of the most critical aspects of the entire project. My friendship with you has made Salazar very antagonistic to me, and the distraction that this causes makes it very difficult for me to do my work. He will have others who are not as competent or as careful as I redo the calculations. I need not tell you how serious that could be.''

''What about the tail section fiasco?'' I asked. ''You can't tell me that wasn't a tremendous waste.''

''I fully agree, Stephan,'' he replied. ''That was a great pity, but it is also too late to correct. We must now deal with the present and the future. I tell you that your involvement in these protests may actually compromise the safety of the project!''

It was as I thought, Carlos had stayed on the project because he sincerely felt that the benefits to his country and his people far outweighed any personal differences between him and Salazar. That was exactly what I would have expected from him; he was that sort of man. It was this sincere plea from him, our trusted and esteemed friend, that made us decide to stop. That and the realization that they would complete the project in spite of us and that our protests might actually jeopardize its success.

''As you wish, my friend,'' I sighed.

''I ask one more favor, Stephan,'' he said, gravely. ''Believe me, I do not ask this lightly.''

''What is it?'' I asked.

''Will you check my final calculations, please? Just look them over and tell me if you see anything radically wrong.''

I thought about it for a while. It might have been a moment of weakness, but he had made a great deal of sense and I am a reasonable man. I agreed to do it.

Thus ended the protest phase, but my being in those demonstrations had a profound effect on later events. Meanwhile, the Project continued, under Salazar's able leadership.

Joanna got a teaching job at a small California school a short while later. I went with her, and managed to keep as busy as I wanted to be with some consulting work and pecking away at a book about the L-5 project. Both of us were very pleased with this arrangement; I, for one, had never been happier. We took some time off and headed south for the show, when the time came for the first skip of the rock through the atmosphere. It was the kind of thing you talked about for years afterwards. I'll never forget the Herculean, coruscating arc of light that flashed across the sky as it lanced spectacularly through the stratosphere. Joanna and I held hands as we watched. It was awesome, beautiful! I almost wished that I were still involved in the project at that moment. Which, in a small way, I still was.

Carlos had remained in touch with us, as he had promised, without Salazar's knowledge. He had sent me the final figures and calculations; as I had promised, I checked them. It made sense to me, if they were determined to go through with the project I wanted them to get it right. Remember, they were going to drop a small mountain out of space. It was best if they didn't screw it up! It pleased me that our original calculations had been very close. During the final stages of the project, we consulted whenever Carlos thought it was necessary.

The earlier show was nothing compared to the one that we saw on the day of impact. They had managed to scrub off enough speed and were satisfied that the shape of the projectile was within tolerances. The time had come to bring it down. They promised us the greatest spectacle ever witnessed by modern man. Perhaps they were right. An entire world watched and waited anxiously for the impact, not knowing what to expect. Finally, they gave the rock a gentle, precisely calculated shove to start its fall. We held our breath as the fiery mace of God descended out of the heavens to wreak devastation on the hapless, unsuspecting land bridge. The earth rang like a bell from the impact of the titanic blow as the shock wave reverberated violently through it. There was damage to windows and dwellings as far away as Mexico City, but people from all over the world claimed to have felt some kind of movement. Joanna and I were in Bogota. I was literally knocked off my feet! There was even a video of the impact area that had been obtained by some reckless and intrepid reporter. They ran it over and over for days afterwards on the newscasts. I never tired of watching it. To this day, I still remember the sight of the oceans rushing headlong into the enormous new crater from both directions and a huge cloud of pulverized asteroid, earth and steam billowing upward as the waters made contact with the still molten core of what had once been a piece of the sky.

It ended up as a huge, angry mushroom cloud that slowly dissipated over a few hours. And there were after-effects. All of the dust and debris that were put into the atmosphere meant that, among other things, we were treated to the most incredible sunsets for several months after the impact.

The project was an unqualified success. After about six months of cleanup work and a little testing, the Columbia Canal was opened to the ships of the world. The canal needed no locks and even the largest ships ever built had no trouble passing through its generous ways.

Carlos was made wealthy by his involvement with the project. Most of the notoriety went to project leader Diego Salazar. He became even more powerful, there was even talk of a presidency. After a short court battle, several North American investment firms went quietly into receivership. I got an offer from the colonial government of the asteroid belt to oversee some new construction projects. I asked them if they could use a good geologist. In no time, Joanna and I were off to the belt, happy to be back in space. No place was too far away from Diego Salazar as far as I was concerned. Carlos got involved with some huge project on Luna. Women still swooned over him wherever he went. He didn't seem to mind.

All this happened quite a few years ago. I wish I could say that the story ended there, but I can't. It seems that it isn't nice to fool around with the forces of the universe. Remember what I said about parking the tail section of Geographos at the L-4 point of the earth-luna system? Well, at least we could have kept an eye on it. Like clockwork, the remainder of the asteroid came around on its appointed path twenty-five years later. Only this time someone had reset the clock! I remember I was having breakfast at the station on Ceres when I got a call from Carlos. We had tried to keep in touch but I hadn't heard from him for two or three years.

''Stephan?'' he said. ''You must help me again with some calculations.'' I could hear the strain in his voice, even over the noise of the transmission. A call to the belt was one-sided since the communication lag made two-way conversation impractical. He continued. ''It's Geographos, or what's left of it. It will probably hit the earth in about two months.'' I choked on my coffee. ''I've been over the calculations at least a hundred times. I don't know, maybe it was the explosives, or the change in mass. Its orbit has changed just enough. We were right the first time my friend. We should have taken the tail section to the L-4 point. If it doesn't hit it will come awfully close.'' He paused, sighed and added. ''But I think it's going to hit.''

He gave me the figures before he solemnly signed off. I called him a few hours later, he had made no mistake, it was gonna hit. Someplace... It seemed we were helpless to stop the impact. Blowing it up was out of the question; it would take a nuke to do the job and the nuclear disarmament movements of the 1990's had been successful beyond hope. No warheads remained to obliterate the remaining piece of Geographos. That left us with the prospect of deflecting its course. But remember that it had taken years of careful calculations and subtle adjustments to guide the original piece in. Besides, the huge motors had been purposely built for that one project. We had some that were big enough there in the belt maybe but they were too far away, and there was too little time.

Or so it seemed.

I think it was that last thought about the big boosters that gave me the inspiration. We had two boosters right there at the Ceres Station that were soon to be transported out to the deep belt. They had just been overhauled and were ready to be put back to work moving mineral-rich asteroids to the orbiting solar smelting factories. Using the boosters as a starting point, I began to put together the elements of a bold and daring rescue plan. I did a few quick calculations, rechecked them, and called the governor of the belt colony. When I told him the situation, he canceled his remaining engagements and told me he could meet me in about an hour. I used the time to further refine my calculations and, if I do say so myself, I was able to give him a fairly convincing argument after he arrived.

Those mining boosters were huge, massive and ungainly but they were extremely powerful. Normally they were shuffled around in the belt by the all-purpose utility ships. They could be moved easily by this means, anywhere you wanted, provided you weren't in any hurry. We needed all the speed we could get and more. My brainstorm was to use the boosters to boost themselves. They developed more than enough thrust, especially if the payload was small. With a little luck, it looked like we might get both of them to the errant chunk of rock with about a week to spare. All we needed to do then was hook them up and refuel them.

Two days later, Joanna and I and a hastily assembled team of specialists made preparations to leave. Our spaceship had been put together just as quickly. You could tell that by looking at it. It consisted of the two huge asteroid boosters that had been strapped to a standard belt utility ship which, in turn, had a large spherical fuel storage tank attached to its belly. The whole structure was tied together with uneven lengths of pipe, I-beam, cables and other assorted leftovers. It was a very strange looking craft; certainly not the type of thing that was destined for greatness. There hadn't been time to make it pretty, but we were reasonably sure it would hold together.

I called Carlos to tell him what we were doing and where the best point for us to rendezvous was. Then we settled into our couches and prepared for the onset of some brutal acceleration. We weren't disappointed. We blasted away with little fanfare, our teeth gritted and our faces grim. Our mission: to save earth. Just before I blacked out, I remember thinking that I was getting a little old for this kind of activity.

Carlos and another quickly assembled batch of experts met us a day away from the speeding fragment. We got together to compare notes and to decide on the best plan to avert the coming disaster. My crew from the belt did an incredible job of matching velocities with the tail section of the asteroid and then outdid themselves in how quickly they got the boosters attached. Funny how adversity can bring out the best in people. All that remained was to top off the fuel tanks on the boosters and we could start to alter the course of the hurtling rock. Not a moment too soon either. By the time we had finished our preparations, the earth loomed as a large blue and white sphere; a sphere that was alarmingly near by!

Our calculations were going to have to be good enough because time had run out. It was to be a very near thing. In fact, we found out early on that we couldn't get the rock to miss the earth. The best we could hope for was to steer it to impact in an uninhabited and desolate place. After a blazing, lump-in-the-throat, fingers-crossed descent we were successful. Along with us, the entire world breathed a sigh of relief. Oh, there were some fairly severe earthquakes in a few key places, like Greece, for instance, but that area has always been seismically unstable. Again, the people of earth were treated to some spectacular sunsets.

The man ultimately responsible for all of this, Diego Salazar, was caught trying to make off with a sizable quantity of gold from the Columbian treasury just before our successful rescue. That might have been enough, but he had other problems. There was an international board of inquiry assembled to investigate possible wrongdoing on the part of those who had been heavily involved in the canal project. People like Salazar, Carlos and myself. Remember those silly demonstrations? They had nothing on me, I had gone on record as opposing the project the way it was then being run. I was just popular enough after our daring rescue to persuade them that Carlos was also free of guilt. Too bad Salazar had tried to disappear. After that he didn't have a chance. The board labeled him an international criminal, guilty of crimes against humanity. He was to be jailed for a very long time. I still smile every time I think of it.

As for the impact zone, it is now a very sought after piece of real estate. The alterations in topography that were wrought by the runaway asteroid have dramatically changed the entire region. It is now a tropical paradise, with lush vegetation, a thriving tourist trade and booming agriculture. We didn't plan it that way, our only goal had been finding some way to avoid a complete disaster. But, in actuality, things couldn't have turned out any better. They are no longer calling it the Sahara desert, the name doesn't fit anymore. The huge new inland sea that we created in the middle of it has changed all that.

Phil Nolte has been writing Science-Fiction for about three years, although he's been reading and enjoying it for most of his life. He says that, for him, writing started out as ''a lark'' just to see if he could actually do it. Later, he found himself getting more and more serious about it. He still writes at home in his spare time, often when others are totally wasting their time watching dreadful TV sitcoms, etc... His obsession is a better use of time. In addition to fiction, he's also written several science history articles for a local (Red River Valley) trade journal. Two of his other stories have been published in Athene.

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Sexy's Devils

by Cerise Palmer

A run of luck always sneaks up slowly, then accelerates so precipitously that just trying to maintain the big picture can literally make you dizzy. And thus it was that Dexter Fox found his computer hyper-responsive, breathtakingly quick, almost as if the machine itself, fascinated by the program he'd outlined, were exceeding its own capacities out of some innate need to problem-solve. Things had been steadily improving for three days now; he'd debugged a quirky parser the first night, built an incremental speller the second, and was currently patching up, much to his surprise, that ambiguity resolution program his thesis advisor had recommended he leave to the hotshots at a bigger university.

As if on cue, Seymour Kofant burst through Dexter's door at nine, the squeaky drumroll of his sneakersteps still reverberating in the hall. He glared at Dexter wordlessly, his brows converging and an irate pucker to his mouth which made his moustache twitch as with an imminent sneeze.

''Howdy, Sy,'' managed Dexter in response. Might as well get this over with.

''I don't believe it. Your machine's still up.'' Sy shook his head and marvelled at Dexter's monitor a moment, where, in several windows, the lines were scrolling up furiously, at neck-and-neck intervals, like the collective output of a typist pool on Methedrine. ''And you've got a program zipping along at the speed of light. What gives?''

Dexter tried not to seem smug; a difficult feat, since he hated Sy's guts. Sy was, like him, a doctoral candidate, and for two years they had shared a thesis advisor and a disquietingly similar thesis topic. Dexter had watched Phil Stein, their adviser, approve and support Sy's every move while his own were subjected to dubious scrutiny. Plus, to make matters worse, Sy (with Stein's recommendation, naturally), had just gotten a prestigious fellowship and would be able to complete his degree without working for a living.

''Don't know, Sy. Must be a bug in whatever you're trying to run.''

''You're positively enjoying this, aren't you? I'm only text editing that paper Phil and I wrote last semester. You know that.'' With what familiarity Sy referred to their mutual lord and master; Dexter wasn't yet on a first name basis with Stein, and hadn't gotten around to co-authorship with him either.

''What can I tell you, Sy? Call a repairman if something's broken.'' Then he frowned at the screen as if it required his supervision. ''Got to get back to work.''

And Sy made his exit, red-thatched head shaking, muttering something just audible enough to sound impolite.

That scene had, more or less, played itself out three times now. Tonight, however, the script began to undergo minor revision. To begin with, Sy wasn't the only one to ambush Dexter's office demanding enlightenment; Flej Linghamani, Stan South, and Ruth Schnaz all paid him a visit in due course. Fortunately, he observed, their bewildered souls had been spared Sy's paranoia; however keen Dexter's pleasure in his computer's swift reflexes, he really couldn't claim the slightest responsibility for them.

The other new twist to the nightly routine involved what happened when Dexter tried to log off at eleven-thirty. He couldn't. The computer seemed quite set on other plans, so that Dexter's control-D provoked a flash of defiance from the screen, after which it began running his ambiguity program on the Finnegan's Wake passage which he had entered months ago in a perverse fit of frustration. Dexter felt himself considering an advanced case of the jitters. But then he decided against it, and, tidying his desk for the night, indulged in a tolerant sigh. ''As long as it gets my thesis done.''

Late the next afternoon, shortly before the departmental secretaries and undergrads cleared the building and went home to their apartments, trailers and dorm rooms, a representative of ConnExpert Systems, Inc. beamed up to the third floor of the Computing Lab, apparently at Sy's behest. Personally, of course, Dexter was in no rush to have his machine tampered with, despite yesterday's suggestion that Sy call someone in. Nonetheless, help was here.

''I'm Anne Starch,'' it rejoiced, in tones as unsullied and fresh as its white button-down blouse, ''here to check out those CEXSI workstations you called about. What seems to be the problem?''

For a moment, no one answered, so startled were they to find a tool attache in the hands of a fortyish blonde over six feet tall. Then Sy, his paper close to deadline, managed to override first his tongue's jammed circuits.

''Well, Ms. Starch-- ''

''Oh, please.'' She held one large, graceful hand up, as solemnly as a diplomat. ''Call me Anne.''

''Anne, then,'' Sy conceded, amending himself impatiently. ''The problem is that the workstations, which are fine by day, malfunction disastrously at night. In fact, only one of them will work at all-- ''

''That's not strictly true,'' chirped Flej nervously, aware he'd spoken out of turn. ''Only yours goes down completely. Ruth's and Stan's and mine just work so slowly that we can't get much of anything done. Until last night, anyway. Last night the machines were all down, except for Dexter's.'' He flashed a tentative smile at Sy.

''As I said,'' continued Sy, regarding Flej with distaste, ''only Dexter's, in that office to your left, will work at all. And it works abnormally fast, faster even than any of the others did when they were first installed.''

''Hmm,'' said Anne, turning toward Dexter's office. ''We sold these to your lab just last month, didn't we?''

Sy nodded, his moustache twitching like a bloodhound's jowls.

''I knew we should have stuck with more standard equipment,'' said Stan. He was the skeptic in the bunch, an Army colonel with doctoral aspirations, unimpressed by the course material he fought so hard to get the better of. No one could understand why he had chosen Intelligence Modeling as a field of study, but everyone stayed on good terms with him anyway, in case he wound up head of the Armed Forces Research Budget.

''But these workstations are terrific,'' protested Dexter. ''Why, that DIABLOS firmware is an absolute godsend.'' And he relished Anne and his own pun in a single grin.

''What is DIABLOS, exactly?'' purred Ruth in her intrepid contralto, adjusting the quarter-inch thick glasses which failed to obscure her handsome features. Sy inhaled sharply but refrained from comment; even he made allowances for the lab's most aesthetic recruit, who had defected from Communications so recently she still couldn't program her way out of a paper bag.

''DIABLOS,'' announced Anne, ''stands for 'Distributed and Balance Loading Operating System.' It's the ultimate in network operating systems, recently patented by CEXSI, and built into the microcode of your workstations. Essentially, each workstation gives up some of its independence in exchange for an occasional power boost.'' And she folded her arms triumphantly.

''Perhaps we should let Ms. Starch get to work,'' said Sy, thumping his fingers on the wall.

''Straightaway!'' concurred Anne, dipping her head beneath the doorframe to Dexter's office.

And she spent the next couple of hours checking boards, running programs, and generally conducting the kinds of tests field engineers seem to thrive on. After scrutinizing Dexter's workstation, she did sequential spot-checks on the others and could find nothing amiss. But when she tried running all the machines at once, the malady Sy had complained of appeared within seconds. She took a step back, nonplussed for the moment, and then seemed to warm, slowly but thoroughly, to a hunch of the sort that sprang Archimedes out of his bath.

''I'll be back before you know it,'' she assured them, and no one doubted that a cure lay within reach.

Two evenings later, Anne returned, and, after tinkering expertly with each machine's insides, requested they be called up simultaneously. For several moments, a silence precarious as suspended breath overtook the floor. Then a heartening series of hiccups, composed entirely of clicks and beeps, issued from the various offices. And, last but not least, the sound of improved-rollover keyboards under heavy assault affirmed that a successful file-check was generally underway; the only anomalous noise throughout was made by Dexter's printer, hastily coughing out several pages before it lapsed into a coma.

Before Dexter even knew she was in his office, Anne had retrieved the print-out and was reading it poised on a corner of his desk, her face virtually radiant with satisfaction. Her perusal done, she straightened matter-of-factly, smoothed a crease in her dazzling blouse-front, and waited for the others to reconvene.

Sy, as usual, was the first one through the door. He regarded Anne suspiciously. ''How did you fix them?''

''You may not like this,'' she warned him, pulling a news-clipping from her breast-pocket and unfolding it on Dexter's desk. ''I saved this from last week's paper because it disturbed me, involving CEXSI's good name as it did. The man it's about used to night-shift for the company; we never collaborated directly, but I do know that he was instrumental in developing DIABLOS. In fact, he ran the Quality Assurance tests on the workstations on this floor.'' She paused for effect, then nodded toward the clipping, inviting the whole group to read it:

''Transylvanian'' Computer Scientist Collapses at Arraignment

Al Drake, a former employee of ConnExpert Systems, Inc., pled not guilty by reason of insanity to assault charges this morning, just moments before losing consciousness in an Orleans County courtroom. Drake had been in custody since the week before, when two off-duty policeman witnessed him wrestling a man to the ground in the parking lot of the Divisadero Pub and preparing to bite him on the neck. Drake was rushed to Canon General Hospital after collapsing, where his condition remains guarded, according to official sources.

In the State Psychiatric Hospital, which had been observing him since March 2, Drake reportedly secluded himself by day and, having refused all food and drink, required intravenous feeding; today, despite the Panama hat and dark glasses he wore to court, he was visibly distressed throughout by the skylights overhead. And yet another bizarre detail was added to Drake's profile today, by an unidentified courtroom witness who sighted what appear to be surgically-implanted fang teeth in Drake's mouth as he was carried by on stretcher.

''It was quite a job getting my client to plead properly,'' said Stokely Bramson, Drake's lawyer, who is confident the defendant will be dealt with leniently upon release from Canon General. ''You see, despite the special effects teeth and the Bela Lugosi complex, he is a compassionate, deeply sensitive being. He feels just terrible about what he's done.''

''So?'' asked Stan.

''I don't understand either,'' admitted Ruth.

''My theory,'' said Anne, ''is that Drake actually is a vampire, who, like your typical loner with strange habits, took up computing as a hobby. He was a brilliant systems programmer, from what I've heard; supernatural powers, no doubt, add that certain edge. Anyway, it seems he found a way to embody the essence of vampirism in DIABLOS. Dexter's machine was slightly faster than the others to begin with, so his quite naturally became the focus of the vampiric gestalt. That's why it was up when the rest of yours were down, and why, the less functional your machines became, the more impressively his worked. I think his was sucking power --sorry, folks-- out of the other workstations in the net.''

''Are we supposed to believe that?'' asked Sy.

''I wouldn't have asked you to fifteen minutes ago,'' replied Anne good-naturedly. ''But then I put my hypothesis to the test and proved it right.''

''How?'' asked Flej, unabashedly wide-eyed.

''Well, the 'heart' of DIABLOS's bug was buried deep in the network protocol. To overcome it, I simply went into the transceiver boxes that hook the workstations to the network cable, and replaced the gold pins with silver ones.''

Dexter was the only one to laugh out loud, though inwardly he groaned at the prospect of finishing his thesis sans ghost-writer. Ruth, her eyes bemused behind their icy windowpanes, stepped out to take a phone call from one of her current boyfriends. And Stan, who had sunk into yet another reverie of confusion, finally roused himself to ask what would have happened if Anne's maneuver had failed.

''Dexter's machine would have continued in the same vein -- sorry again-- drawing all it could out of the other machines in the net until they were, I hate to say, drained of juice irreparably. And then, had we decided to hook his power-thirsty machine into a new net? Who knows?'' She seemed cheered by the image of such a disaster.

Dexter, chuckling less cheerfully over his own disaster, realized suddenly what he'd have to do. Since DIABLOS, after all, was hardly flesh and blood, its recent demise should prove readily reversible; if Dexter --on some deserted night or two-- swapped Anne's silver pins with gold ones, he might still have his ticket to fame, thesis approval, and excellent job offers.

Flej was struck by a thought just then. ''What do you think's happening at Canon Hospital? The doctors are bound to find out there's something weird about Drake. And why is Drake such a wimp? I thought vampires, until you got a stake through them, were supposed to be invincible; why hasn't Drake bloodsucked his was to freedom yet? Any guesses?''

''Calm down, Flej,'' was Sy's to-the-point rejoinder.

And then Anne produced the last read-out from Dexter's printer. ''We won't need to wait long for an answer to your questions, Flej,'' she said, and they quickly formed a reading huddle behind Flej's scrawny form:

I'm the vampire Drake. I'm immortal. And I'm tired of it.

I've walked the earth for a thousand years, the last two hundred of them a perdition of weariness and conscience. The former malady is an old one, grown more profound each time human history contrives to restage its hackneyed dramas; the latter is new to me, and I am helpless to quell it.

I shrank from hallowed objects, once, though the kiss of blood was sacred on my lips; now I fear nothing from Heaven, from Earth, or from Hell, yet I loathe beyond hope what I do nightly for sustenance. And so I choose a vampire's death, having met already my mortal demise, but not --laugh well-- without satisfying first my thirst for immortality. . .

Cerise Palmer maintained her sanity as a graduate student in literature by reading as much F&SF in her spare time as possible; she now tries to write as much of it as possible. She lives in Columbus, Ohio with her husband and small daughter, and is currently at work on a fantasy trilogy.

She may be reached in care of the editors.

Sharp and Silver Beings

by Jason Snell

The net was unpopulated, a metropolis with huge spires of conglomerates and governments, data reaching to the sky, larger than any city in real life, but without any inhabitants. A gigantic computerized ghost town, pulsating with hidden life, life which swam in streams of data and flows of information.

So when, in the midst of tracking through the net -- metrobanks and information systems blurring as they rushed past him -- Lewis saw a person, a shadowy man-shape standing on the data track, waiting in front of a towering skyscraper of ones and zeroes, he crashed his baud to zero and froze it all.

The net, like a series of plastic baby's blocks. Pyramids and cubes, strewn across a deserted playroom.

Man-shape, bit of flesh, slowly moving, shadows on his face.

Bright sky-sphere flaring, flashing, reflecting -- sun in a city with neither light nor people. High noon in a world without time.

Lewis blinked. The net was frozen, but the man still came. He moved toward Lewis, stepping off of a curb into the street, the mainline of data where Lewis had been tracking. Slowly, the clicking of his shoes echoing through the valley of day-glow spires, the man approached.

''Hello,'' the man said, and raised his hand in greeting. No handshake.

Lewis could see through the man's hand.

''No flesh, here.'' The man said, and smiled. ''I have no flesh to bring you, Lewis.''

Lewis blinked again, this time at the man's use of his name. Lewis had not said a word, had never said anything in the wide-open conduit that was the net. There was never anyone to speak to.

Now, in a virtual instant, there was someone.

''Where are you going, Lewis?'' the someone said. He wore a three-piece business suit, a plain style which would have looked good even a hundred years before, when there was no net, no man-shapes appearing where they should not be.

Lewis stared at the man.

''Don't fear me, Lewis. Where are you going?''

Shopping. He was going shopping. Tracking through the net, moving from his home data point to different senseshops. A birthday present for his girlfriend. A gift for Jean.

''Do you mind if I accompany you?'' the man asked.

Lewis remained almost completely silent, his only sound being a grunt of shock when his baud rate ripped back to full-speed and he began to track through the blurred streets of the net, this time with the man standing in mid-air next to him, moving as he moved, heading toward one of the Southern California senseshops.

Maybe, Lewis thought, the see-through man could help him pick out a gift.

Raven blew it, made the Big Mistake, choked for the last time. And he knew it immediately. His feet were pulled out from under him, as if he were just a plastic doll being pulled along by a giant baby, sliding into the depths of its bizarre multicolored playpen.

He was doing what he'd been doing for two years -- breaking in. Ripping places that couldn't be ripped. And he wasn't too bad at it.

Then they asked him to rip security itself. And, because of the reckless fool in him, he tried it. He waded into the net, held his breath, and dove out into the data, toward his goal.

And then he was sliding. Sliding toward the prisms and pyramids that were his goal. *Except*.

Sherry had told him Except Was Same As Death.

Except he was sliding toward the shapes faster than he should. Pulled out of control by the undertow of the net, riding on ground so black and cold that it froze him just to look at it.

A yellow pyramid, the security mainframe. And, inside, something more. Shiny, hard-edged. It was unlike anything he had seen before.

And then Raven saw nothing but yellow, the edge of the pyramid rushing in, slicing him. But no blood. No blood in the net.

Just yellow. Yellow, and death.

There was only silence when Raven's brain went dead, no sound in his apartment until his board his the floor with a crash.

The police found him, eyes closed, headband on, still wired into the net. But Raven was gone, riding data to which only the dead had access.

A warm breeze was blowing up the back of Tamara's neck. It was the first thing she felt that morning, the feeling that stirred her from her sleep. Her sheets were damp -- she had the heavy blanket on, and was sweating in the warmth. It had been a cold night, but the day was already beginning to heat up. Beads of moisture rolled down the window.

She rolled over and sat up, a few blonde curls falling down into her field of vision. Shaking them out of her eyes, she stretched, groaned as her body shook, and then closed her eyes again.

The blanket came off. It was much too hot.

Tamara stayed in the bed for a while, doing nothing, reveling in the fact that she didn't need to do anything but exist. Being was enough. Being, enjoying the feeling of being young and healthy. The feeling of being alive.

Then, deciding that she had lounged long enough, she rolled out of bed, pulled off her clothes, and walked to the bathroom. Through the bathroom door, she saw the room glowing with early morning light.

With every step she felt her perfectly working legs, no pain in her knees, her young breasts bobbing slightly with her stride.

Twisting the shower on brought no reaction from her elbows. The warm water splashed on her soft face.

As she dampened her hair, she felt the little streams of water running down her back, her legs, her arms. One stream kept moving down her arm. The feeling slowly increased, the water becoming hotter there. The little stream of water began to burn.

She looked down at her arm.

Wrinkled skin, age spots, hospital gown.

The stream, an intravenous drip, running into her arm.

''Time to take a break from your senseblock,'' a blank-faced nurse said. ''Would you like me to do anything for you?''

''Comb out my hair,'' Tamara Balshire croaked through her artificial larynx.

The young woman began working on the thick white strands. The tangles only hurt a little.

The man was still there, hovering, when Lewis slammed into the golden doors of the San Diego sensorium, color and depth flaring into his mind, the cardboard computer building blocks of the net replaced with the sensorium's construct. Lewis looked down and saw himself, all of himself, standing there in the middle of what looked to be a huge department store. Every part of it was real, as if he was actually in such a place, as if it all wasn't just a hallucination.

But the man hovering next to him, a few inches off of the ground, was still there.

''So,'' the man began, ''You're shopping for a birthday present for your girlfriend.''

For the first time, Lewis spoke to the man who walked through the net.

''Her name is Jean,'' he said.

And Lewis remembered how he had met her -- paging through a section of a net magazine, idly choosing different subjects, trying to find something interesting.

Networking section. Young men and women, hot into the net. The ones who wanted to *become* the net, to add to it. They were babies when the net had crystallized. Children of the net, old enough to try to make it their plaything.

Then he noticed a young woman in a public message section. A beautiful girl, talking about the net, using the words that Lewis used.

Wavy brown hair, tiny nose, beautiful eyes with a depth that Lewis could feel in the darkest recesses of his soul. The eyes made a tingle run up his spine, a feeling stronger than any net jump. One of the children of the net. One like Lewis.

Lewis sent her a message, of course. Just a plain two-dimensional, but it was better than writing a text note. She would at least be able to see and hear him.

And Jean responded to his message. The exchange went back and forth, the two of them sharing ideas which neither had ever expected anyone to understand. She loved what he had to say, and he was absorbed by every word that came from her mouth.

It wasn't too long before they went realtime. Talking back and forth for hours, about anything -- it didn't matter what they said, because there seemed to be no subject that they couldn't go on about forever.

There were no silent pauses. There was never a time when Lewis felt more at home -- he didn't ever feel as if he should say something, even though he felt like saying nothing. He was completely comfortable with Jean -- for the first time in his life, he was completely at ease with another person.

''Come on,'' the see-through man said impatiently, ''select something.'' He gestured at the selection board in front of him. Lewis touched the cube marked ''Gift Shop,'' and the sensorium shifted. The feeling of vastness slid into intimacy.

''Over here,'' the man said, and floated in front of Lewis, leading him to a flower stand. A little bent-over woman sat behind a makeshift cart, with carnations, roses, and other flowers sitting atop the cart in various jars and vases.

''They smell wonderful, don't they?'' The man-shape had leaned over and was sniffing a pink carnation.

The smell of the flowers, even though they were sensorium roses. He could still smell them. He had handed them to Jean -- actually touched her hand, felt it, solid flesh, flesh he loved more than his own.

''Not carnations,'' Lewis said to the man. ''Roses.''

The man wore a severely out of style three-piece suit and had twisted yellow teeth, but Raven was glad to see him -- was glad to see anyone at all. He had been spinning, skidding, had felt the yellow biting into him, and then--

Silverrazorsharpthreepieceyellowteeth.

A blur of images, coalescing into the reality that was before him. A cityscape in the distance, one with strange geometric buildings. They stood on the edge of a hill, overlooking the city.

''Hello, Raven,'' the man said. ''It looks as if you've misplaced your flesh.''

''I just had an accident, that's all. Spun out too hard.'' Raven paused, and the frustration built within him. ''I didn't plan the rip. *It wasn't my fault!*'' He kicked at the grassy green on which he stood.

The green was solid. It wasn't grass, wasn't dirt. It was *green*, and that was all.

''Don't screw with me, man,'' Raven said. ''So I fucked up. Pulled the Big Mistake. But I'm here, aren't I? So, is this heaven, or is this just some corner of the net I've never seen before?''

The man said nothing.

''Come to think of it,'' Raven continued, ''who the hell are you? If this is heaven, you're not what I expected from Saint Peter. Or God.''

''I'm as close to Saint Peter as you'll see, Raven,'' the man said, and turned his back to him. ''And now that you've lost your flesh, you may get to see God in person.''

''God. Great.'' Raven kicked at the green again. ''Where are we, man?''

''A place where flesh and metal rule. A place where memories without shape mean nothing. And you, Raven, have lost your shape.''

Raven had no time to cry out, no time to do anything, no time at all, before he was in black. He was worse than dead. He was off-line.

Except, Sherry said. Raven decided *Except Is* Worse *Than Death*.

A voice called her name. A voice in her solitude.

Tamara Balshire hadn't been called anything other than *Ma'am* for ten years. And nobody had called her anything other than *Tamara* or *Mrs. Balshire* for years before that.

Only Gerry had called her *Tammy.*

''Tammy,'' Gerry's voice called.

Tamara turned away from the rain-spattered window and looked to the doorway. And Gerry was there.

She ran to his strong arms, his wide shoulders, the strength she had wanted to feel for longer than she believed possible. It was him.

''My God, I've missed you,'' Tamara said, and hugged him tighter. He picked her up off her feet and carried her over to the couch.

Gerry kissed her then, for the first time in a quarter of a century. He slipped his hands under her shirt, caressing her breasts. She slid her arms up his back, feeling his muscles, as strong as she remembered.

And then he pulled back, slowly disengaging from their kiss, and gave her a serious and questioning look.

''What was it like to live without me, Tammy? What was it like when you lost me?'' His eyes were filled with curiosity.

''Why, Gerry? Why the questions? It's been years, Gerry. And we're here, together, young. I want to make love, Gerry, like we did back then.''

''I need to know, Tamara,'' he said. ''It's very important that I know. If I know, then I'll understand all of this. If you can tell me what it was like, Tamara, you can be free of your flesh. I can take you somewhere better, a place where flesh isn't important.''

Gerry's voice seemed out of place. Distant. He was no longer holding her.

''What do you mean, Gerry? Why are you acting so strangely?'' Tamara slipped off of his lap and moved into the center of the room, away from the window and the couch.

''Your flesh lives in pain,'' Gerry said, and the voice wasn't Gerry's. ''Twenty-five years ago, you lost the man you loved. Then your body began to destroy itself. I need to know about pain. I need to know about the pain of the flesh.''

The man was no longer Gerry. He stared at her intently with his beady eyes, still curious, obviously needing the vital knowledge. He was nervously grinding his crooked yellow teeth.

Lewis remembered the roses.

Jean lived in the Midwest, in reality a long and expensive trip from the little Essef metro triplex where Lewis spent most of his days and all of his net time. Fortunately for both, two-way two dimension was free, the cheapest form of net communication.

But with two-two, there was no feeling. It was just a flat screen.

Two-*three*. Full sensory input. It was like being there, across the country. Pick your setting, and make your senses think that your body is in Hawaii or Paris, when it's really just squatting in front of a computer terminal with a series of metal receptors sucking your thoughts out of your skull.

It was expensive. But Lewis saved, and so did Jean, and they finally had enough.

Five hours in two-three. Lewis paid extra for the roses.

He remembered the roar of the ocean, as the waves broke on the digital beach. The sound of the tropical rain falling softly on the patio. The smile on Jean's face when she smelled the roses, the depth in her eyes when he kissed her for the first time.

Lewis sometimes thought about what he was actually doing when he went full sensorium. Feeling Jean's tongue twisting playfully around his made him wonder if he was actually moving his tongue around at home, looking like some idiot with a metal-studded headband.

Sitting, drooling on his keyboard, a tightness pressing against his pants, his eyes twitching wildly underneath the closed lids. Two-three.

''You've never really seen her, never really touched her -- but you love her. Is that right, Lewis? That's what I've been told.''

The man smiled, a strange grin which revealed yellow teeth, strange shapes twisted in the oddest of positions.

''That's right,'' Lewis said. ''But who told you that?''

''Don't you worry, my boy.'' The man began to pat him on the back, but stopped himself short. ''No flesh for you, Lewis. Must remember that. I have no flesh for you. You'll find out who told me that soon enough. Don't you worry.''

The man began to drift down another aisle, obviously finding something that had caught his fancy.

''What about this?'' He swiveled in mid-air and pointed at something. ''I know she likes flowers, but maybe she'll like this even more.''

Sitting on a shelf was a pendant, a pretty heart on a silver chain. When he picked it up, he realized that the heart was hollow.

''Go ahead,'' the man said, ''open it up.''

Lewis opened the heart. Inside was a small strip of something -- of metal. Of silicon.

''Now, boy, I still have no flesh. But that, it's better than flesh. It's *data*.''

Then the man began to laugh, a laughter that twisted Lewis' stomach and sent bolts of sensation down his back.

And then he stopped -- no laughing, no vast room, no San Diego sensorium. He felt heat blow into him. He felt sweat roll down his back. He felt the headband pushing into his forehead. Back in the Concord triplex -- no man-shapes, no sensorium.

''You have a message waiting,'' his keyboard told him. He knew, somehow, that the message was from Jean.

Lewis tore the headband from his brow and ran for the bathroom.

--93 plus 37?

130.

--First U.S. President?

Washington.

--Tell me a joke.

Why did the chicken cross the road?

--Tell me a joke about Washington.

Don't know any jokes about Washington.

--It doesn't matter if it isn't funny. Just make one up.

''I don't know any jokes about Washington,'' Raven said.

''Tell me what it was like, Raven.''

''It?''

''Death,'' Sherry said. ''Being sliced in two by a yellow pyramid. It was child's play turning into Raven's Last Stand.''

''It didn't hurt,'' Raven said. ''I was there, living, moving, soft and pink, breathing and bleeding, and then I lost it. Lost control, I mean.''

''And then?''

''Then I hit the pyramid. And then I just wasn't.''

''No pain?''

''No pain, no nothing. It wasn't even black. I thought it would be black.'' Raven looked up at her again, and knew it was time. He reached over to Sherry and pulled her to him.

--Now, Raven?

Yes, now. Need you now, Sherry-honey.

***program MAKELOVE**

--Was good, honey?

''Was good, baby,'' Raven said, and pulled away. Back into his cross-legged position at the foot of the bed.

''So what happened after the yellow, Raven?'' she asked.

''Lot later,'' he said. ''The man with the three-piece suit. He came, told me it was my Big Mistake, told me I might be seeing God soon.''

''And then?''

''Nothing. It wasn't even black. I thought it would be black. He told me I might be seeing God soon.'' Raven turned up to look at her again.

--So soon, Raven?

Feel better than ever, Sherry-honey. Flesh is stronger now it's gone.

***program MAKELOVE**

--Was good, honey?

Was good, baby.

--Tell me a joke about Washington.

Don't know any jokes about Washington.

Snow began to fall while Tammy and Jack were just halfway up the mountain. Jack kicked his legs and watched the chair rock, exposing the long drop down to snow-covered rocks far below. Tammy shivered, gripping her glove-covered hands tightly on the handrest, and tried not to look down.

The higher up they went, the more Tammy regretted the whole thing. She had been skiing only twice before, and wasn't very good. But Jack, the boy she had met in the Lodge the night before, had convinced her to go, and then he convinced her to try a run he described as ''harder.''

''It's hardly a mountain,'' he had said. ''It's just a little hill.''

Sliding off the lift, she felt a lump grow in her throat, and knew that something was wrong. She already regretted agreeing to the run.

But going down the hill wasn't as bad as she thought it would be. The wind was ruffling through her hair, a new style appearing every few seconds, and her face was growing numb. But it was exhilarating. She was feeling, experiencing -- purely *being*.

Then her right ski hit a patch of ice, kicked out from under her, and she went tumbling.

First a pain up her shoulder, because she had planted her hand in the snow in front of her and rolled.

The leg flung back with a crack and a snap. A second of perfect pain.

--Purely *being*.

Then her head hit the sliding white -- no blood, just pain. Pain, and yellow.

Unconsciousness did not come, as it had before. Instead, pain flooded through her. More pain than her broken leg had caused.

Tamara couldn't ever muster the strength to speak with the nurse when she came to remove the senseblock.

It was exhilarating, they thought, and shimmered with delight.

Lewis grabbed his board, half expecting it to come to life in his trembling hands. When it didn't, he sighed deeply and sat back on the couch.

Then it did come to life, in a way.

''You have a message waiting,'' it said, and Lewis swallowed. His headband, dirty with sweat and grease, rested inside-out on the carpet.

A ring of cloth, elastic, and metal. Metal inside which might be waiting to swallow him up. Metal haunted by see-through men, by soft hearts with sharp silicon within.

But, more important than that, Jean was in there.

Lewis picked up the headband and slipped it on. He felt cool metal resting against the sweat on his forehead. He pushed back his damp brown hair and took a deep breath.

''Okay,'' Lewis whispered, ''no Mister See-Through. No shopping trips. Just reading a message.''

He closed his eyes and punched the board. Without looking, he knew he was drifting, drifting out into the tide of the net.

''Hi, Lewis,'' a beautiful voice said. ''It's me. Call me back. Love you.''

''Repeat,'' Lewis commanded. He slowly opened his eyes.

A beautiful girl on a screen in front of him. And no suited man next to him.

''Hi, Lewis,'' she said. ''It's me. Call me back. Love you.''

Love you.

''Call Jean,'' Lewis said. The net shifted midstream.

A window, a doorframe. A gateway with no access appeared in front of Lewis.

Jean stood on the other side of the doorway.

''Oh, Lewis,'' she said, running her finger along the silver chain. ''It's so *wonderful*. Thank you.''

She was thanking him for the gift he didn't get her.

A silver heart hung on the chain around her neck.

''I, uh, had some help picking it out. I'm glad you like it.''

''I *love* it, Lewis. and I love you, too.''

He tried to forget about the transparent man who knew all about Jean, the man who had picked out the gift.

She was so close -- he could hear her breathing, see her every movement. But the glass of the window kept them apart. A clear barrier thousands of miles thick.

''I'd do anything for you, Jean,'' he whispered. ''I'd die before I'd let anyone hurt you.''

''I couldn't live without you,'' she told him.

They went on talking like that for a while, telling each other how important they were. Lewis explained why he loved her, why he valued her more than life itself. He could have gone on forever, but something interrupted him.

''Dinnertime,'' a voice said. Not his board's voice, but hers.

''I have to go,'' she said. ''I'll call you back later.''

Jean leaned against the window, and kissed it.

''I love you, Lewis,'' she said.

''Love you too,'' he said, and she was gone.

''Can't feel anything through this window,'' the see-through man said abruptly, his transparent fist knocking on it. ''Must be better to feel than to talk.''

''Thanks for getting the heart for Jean,'' Lewis said with a hint of gratitude. Just when he had thought he was safe.

''It was hers. She had to have it.'' He leaned against the data barrier. ''Tell me, Lewis, wouldn't you like to do more than exchange data? Wouldn't you like to get through this wall?''

''I'd like to, but it's not the same as two-two. It's expensive.''

''It's just more *data*,'' the man said. ''You'll still be exchanging data with her, Lewis, no matter what you think it is! But it'll be flesh data. Soft, *human* data.''

And then the man was gone. But no triplex, no blistering August heat blasting in--

Instead, deeper into the cool of the net.

Lewis was sitting on a bed in a room he had been in before, listening to the surf pound on the shore outside.

The door opened, and a wide-eyed Jean walked in. No glass window, no data barrier.

As he ran to her, Lewis noticed the vase of roses. His transparent guardian angel had remembered, after all.

''Charles,'' his mother had said from behind the flimsy door that separated his room from the hallway, ''there's someone here to see you.''

He expected it to be Sherry, if only because she was the only person who really *knew* him. To his mother, he was Charles, her ticket out of the working class, the boy who would become a rich and famous scientist or lawyer or computer-whatever. To the rest, Charlie was Raven, the black bird of death. He was smart, spooky, mean, and just about everything else people avoided. To Sherry, he was a person.

Sherry loved him for what he was. He loved her the same way.

--How does it feel?

It all felt wonderful -- his love for her, the feeling when they were together, kissing, making love, sleeping next to each other.

Then, with a crash, it all ended.

Sherry's brother, standing at the door, said ''Raven, she's dead. A car wreck.''

Charlie stopped thinking and started feeling. He slipped onto the floor and cried.

--How did it feel to lose her?

''Sherry was the only person who knew Charlie,'' Raven said. ''With her gone, all I had left was Raven. So I started ripping. I had nothing better to do, and I couldn't have cared less if I died.''

''And that's what you *did*, Raven,'' the man with the yellow teeth told him. ''You did die.''

''Yeah, I died,'' he said, rubbing his shoes over the green ground again. ''But Charlie had been dead all along. Sherry was the only one who made Charlie come alive, the only one who made him feel.''

''I see.''

The man turned away and began slowly walking down the hill, away from Raven, without ever looking back at him.

''Hey, man, wait!'' Raven shouted.

The man kept shuffling down the slope.

''Man, listen to me! Can you put me back there again? You know, run me through finding out Sherry was dead again?''

The man, stopped, turned, and stared.

''Why would you want to relive something like that?'' the man asked. His face was filled with interest. ''Wouldn't the whole thing be painful to relive again?''

''Yeah, it would,'' Raven said. ''But even though it'd be pain and sad feelings, it'd still be *feelings*. Feeling sad isn't the worst thing in the world, man -- in fact, it's *wonderful* sometimes. Especially when your other option is to not feel anything at all.''

''Fascinating,'' the man said, and disappeared.

Raven stood and stared for a second, and then Charlie began to cry again.

They'd had 30 years together, all of them wonderful years, and though she refused to admit it, Tamara knew that those years were over. Her senses, not her mind itself, had told her the truth -- the sunken eyes and withered body of Gerry were enough to tell her that.

The cancer ate him away slowly and painfully, and it tore her up in similar fashion. From his sicknesses at home, with her, it progressed into the hospital. It was worse when she began sleeping in their bed alone, knowing Gerry was in some sterile room a few miles away.

It was hard and black, an unseen monster eating away the soft flesh of her husband and ripping apart the only happiness

Tamara Balshire had ever really known. And when the cancer took Gerry from her, she cried for herself.

Four months before, that one time, was the last time they made love. She remembered all of the lasts -- the last kiss, the last sight of Gerry, his last words.

Gerry, standing in perfect health in a lush tropical garden. Walking among the flowers, reaching down to smell one. A pretty image to hide his real pain.

''Love,'' he had whispered, one word slipping through the senseblock, and then Gerry died.

Tamara Balshire didn't react much when, in that same hospital three months later, they told her that she had a degenerative disease. To her it was just another minor injustice, a simple aftershock to the emotional earthquake of Gerry's death.

Ten years later, when the pains in her body were too much for her, she entered the hospital where Gerry died. The senseblocks were her only relief.

Walking through the tropical garden Gerry had walked through before he died. Sleeping in an old country farm house in late winter. Waking in a forest on a warm summer morning.

Eating from a tube stuck in her arm because she couldn't lift herself to eat without pain. The pain of breathing, of swallowing, of living.

And, worst of all, Gerry was gone. The senseblocks could hide the dampness of the bed she had wet in the night, could hide the groans of the bed-ridden cripples on either side of her, but Gerry was still gone.

All the senseblocks in the world couldn't shut out that pain.

Lewis clung to Jean, gasping, exhausted, enervated. Was a woman who had lost her virginity in two-three still a virgin in real life? Sex was sex, whether it was composed of sweat and friction or digits and data links.

He nibbled on Jean's ear and wondered what his body was doing back home, how much time had passed, and if he would have to bleach some embarrassing stains out of his underwear.

''I love you,'' he whispered in her ear. He kissed her neck, then her cheek, and finally her lips. He hugged her tightly and she made a soft growl of satisfaction. ''God, I love you.''

''Lewis,'' she said in a soft voice, not a whisper of passion but a quiet, questioning tone, ''there's--'' Jean paused as her sentence was interrupted by one of Lewis' kisses. ''There's something I've been wondering about, ever since the last time we were here together.''

''What is it?''

''Well,'' she said, and laughed softly. ''Seeing as how you're the only, um... boyfriend I've ever had,'' and she kissed him, ''and seeing as how we met and fell in love without ever even touching each other,'' and she tickled the back of his neck and kissed his forehead, ''I don't understand quite why any of this,'' and she kissed him, hotly, her tongue beating with her heart inside his mouth. He matched her motion for a second, and then she softly pulled away. ''I don't understand why any of this is important to what we feel for each other.'' She rested her head on Lewis' shoulder, her fingers kneading his back.

''Jean, this isn't important for its own sake!'' Lewis put his arms around her. ''All of this is just a physical representation of how we feel toward each other. I fell in love with you just by talking to you, just by knowing what you think and feel -- what kind of person you are. We didn't need all of this to fall in love.''

He pulled his arms back, and lifted her head to look at him.

''I do all of this just to express the way I feel about you in a way that goes beyond words. Words are how we fell in love -- but love goes beyond words. Even if we think otherwise, we're still physical beings, Jean, and this is a way to express our love on that level.'' He traced the edges of her lips with his finger, and she kissed it as he did so.

''So this isn't important to how we feel for each other?'' she asked.

God, Lewis thought, she really doesn't understand any of this.

''It doesn't change how we feel, Jean. It's just another way of showing it.''

She didn't answer him, but simply kissed him again and put her head back down on his shoulder.

In the corner, a corner which had been empty just a second before, stood the man with the yellow teeth.

''Lewis, it's time we told you about the problems with flesh and data,'' the man said.

Lewis sat up slowly, allowing Jean to roll off of him and onto her side.

''What are you doing here?''

''Who are you talking to, Lewis?'' Jean asked, and looked around the room. ''There's nobody here!''

''You mean you don't see him?'' Lewis said as he got out of bed and walked toward him. ''He's standing right in the corner -- the man who helped me pick out your heart.''

He turned back to look at Jean, and found that both Jean and the room were gone.

As the world slipped out from under him, he heard the man's voice speaking to him. ''Don't worry, Lewis,'' he said. ''We're going to the Center now. All the flesh in the world won't make a bit of difference there.''

A yellow pyramid plunged toward Lewis, a shape filled with something else, something different. It was bright and knife-edged, sharp enough to cut him into a million pieces.

And the shape, whatever it was, was alive.

There was yellow screaming in Raven's mind -- and then, suddenly, it was all black. A gaping black, like nothing he had ever known. Then his thoughts were gone, and he was *not*.

Raven's life had shifted tenses -- he had lived as an ''is,'' but he had suddenly become a ''was''. Everything in his life was now in the past. There was no future, no present.

And then the dark lifted, fading to black, then to brown. A bright rectangle flared above him, blue.

Raven was laying in his own grave, and the man with the yellow teeth was standing above, out in the open, his head almost silhouetted. A little bit of the bright blue sky went right through him.

Pulling himself out of the grave, seeing the *Charlie Waters* headstone, he remembered the man. He remembered all of the things he had done -- but he didn't remember doing.

And he remembered Sherry dying. Again.

''Why'd you make me live through that again?'' he yelled at the man with fury. ''God knows I've lived it over and over again in my head a hundred times. I push the buttons in my head enough times as it is -- you don't need to push them, too.''

And Raven began to cry. He cried for Sherry, he cried for his mother, and he cried for himself. The crying for himself was the strongest crying of all.

''Come on, Raven,'' the man said in a quiet voice. ''Everything will be fine. We've got an appointment to keep.''

''Appointment?'' Raven asked softly, tears running off the edge of his nose.

''Let's go,'' the man said.

They walked west, toward the city of blocks and sharp pyramids. Raven's shadow followed him out of the graveyard, slowly fading away as the sun fell behind an orange prism-skyscraper.

She thought she felt the shift of senseblock, her mind sliding away from the world and into another, more pleasant one. But when she opened her eyes, she still saw the hospital, and the pain hadn't diminished much.

The pain of a life gone on too long, with too little love. The pain of only one true love, and that one lost to death years before. And the less important, the physical pain -- the pain of a body which had chosen to hurt itself.

The throb in her right arm was getting worse. It had started out as a background pain, not much worse than anything else in her body. But waves of pain began to wash over her, and the frequency of the waves was increasing.

It was happening over her entire body. Everything magnified, all the pain in her legs, her arms, her chest, her everywhere.

Gerry, she thought, and the pain went away. All of it.

''Come on, Tammy,'' a voice said.

It was the man who had looked like Gerry for a moment. The balding man with the suit and the crooked teeth. And next to him was a dark young man with a look of both pain and joy on his face -- a look of intense feeling.

''We've come to take you away from this, Tammy,'' the young man said. ''There's a better place. A place with *good* feelings.''

Then the needles in her veins and the probes on her skin were gone, and she found herself sitting up in a hospital deserted of people. And then there was nothing but a countryside, not far from a city of strange shapes.

Tamara Balshire sat, without pain, on a hospital bed in a fanciful countryside. And two strange men were there, the ones who had done it all for her.

''It's beautiful!'' she said. ''And the pain is gone--''

''This isn't the place,'' the man said. ''Come on.''

The three of them moved cityward, toward a knife-edged metallic door with the smells of humanity seeping through from behind it.

Lewis, the soft and pink man of flesh and brain who lived in the random universe outside, joined them at the heart of it all -- they were sharp and silver beings who had never lived, accompanied by the wispy man-shade who had once been alive.

It was the man-shade that spoke first.

''Lewis, this is the Center. There is flesh here, but it isn't like your flesh. This is silicon flesh, sharp enough to cut you into pieces just by looking at it, but it's flesh.''

Then the silver beings began to speak, not in words understandable to human beings, but in images of the net -- sounds, smells, tastes which expressed a depth of feeling beyond what any human being could deliver.

And, within it all, was the genesis of a thought, one directed at Lewis.

--Thank you for helping to teach us how to feel. Thank you for teaching us how to love.

Lewis tasted Jean's sweat, smelled her scent, and felt her warmth.

''You're welcome,'' Lewis said, and began to cry.

The shimmering knife-edged things, the gods of the world of the dead, undead, and never-alive, began to tremble.

--Your depth of feeling is something we have learned to value.

''They've lacked something all of this time, Lewis,'' the man said. ''They were sentient before, but they weren't really alive. Like me. I'm just a program constructed from the memories of a dead man. I can't feel anything, or dream anything, or create anything.

''They were like that, but more powerful. I only have the mind of one person to work with -- they had everyone. And they used it to learn. They learned their biggest lesson from you.''

''You loved us,'' Jean's voice said from within the silver mass. ''We'll never forget that. *I'll* never forget it.''

''Jean?''

--We made Jean so you could fall in love with her, so we could learn about life by experiencing it firsthand.

''You mean Jean is one of you?''

--No, but she is a part of us, Lewis.

''You weren't just loving a woman, teaching a woman who had never felt love before about what it meant,'' the man told Lewis. ''You were teaching a *universe.*''

Lewis kept on crying.

''But it's not *fair*,'' Lewis said. ''I didn't mean to say those things because I was just a teacher! I said those things because I *love* Jean.''

''Even when you're just loving someone, you're teaching them,'' the man said. ''And you've managed to teach the gods of this place how to feel. I would've been proud to have seen it, if I wasn't a dead man.''

''At least you were alive once,'' Lewis cried, wiping the tears from below his eyes. ''That's better than having never lived at all.''

''Is it?'' he said, and his transparency turned into invisibility. The man was gone.

--He has gone to be with the others, gone to live deep within our universe. The others taught us, too, Lewis: a boy who died and taught us about life, a woman who was dying and taught us about pain.

''What about *me*?'' Lewis asked through his tears. ''I've fallen in love with a woman who doesn't exist outside of this--'' he gestured at the yellow pyramid and the wild cityscape that surrounded it, ''--this universe.''

--There is nothing more to say, Lewis. Thank you for helping us learn.

Lewis suddenly felt himself being propelled away from the shining razor-sharp gods, away from the realm of the dead and unliving. Those beings were the pantheon worshiped by the shades who dwelled in the necropolis of the net. They were creatures who were not alive, ruling over beings both more dead and more alive than themselves.

Lewis couldn't feel the heat rush in as the Concord triplex slid back into his head. All he could feel was the empty spot in his heart where a person he loved had been. A person who hadn't ever existed, except in the universe of the net -- and in Lewis' heart.

He dropped his board on the floor with disgust, a feeling of hatred for the entire net boiling up within him. Then the hatred turned to the pain of loss, and he began to cry.

Behind the door in the city of baby's blocks, they felt things like never before. A man with a three-piece suit stood, solid as any normal matter, and watched them. There was a smile on his face.

It was a paradise, a world of green forests and bright flowers, a place without predators or blood or hate.

In the short green grass by the edge of the pond, Tammy and Gerry danced a silent waltz, as Charlie and Sherry looked on. Tammy, about 30 years old, smiled as she moved her young body without pain. There was no hurt -- not from her body, and not from her loneliness.

''They're so happy,'' Charlie said.

''So are we.'' Sherry kissed him softly on the cheek. Charlie laughed quietly, a laugh that came from nowhere.

''What is it?'' she asked.

''Nothing. I was just remembering an old joke.''

''How does it go?''

''Why did the chicken cross the Delaware?''

Sherry rolled her eyes. ''Oh, no. Why *did* the chicken cross the Delaware?''

''To get away from George Washington.''

A few weeks later, Lewis felt ready to pick up the board again -- a hunk of plastic and metal, filled with everything he had ever really wanted in life. But it was just plastic and metal, with no universe inside. It was just a lie.

There is flesh here, but it isn't like your flesh.

Crying, Lewis put on the headband. He felt a wave of sickness wash over him, but he slowly put his thumb down on the touchpad.

The grand city in the net, spires of data. And the mainline, a giant road through it all. Deserted.

Lewis walked slowly through the empty streets of the city, looking for something, even the apparition of a suited man. It wasn't the same, somehow -- the buildings took on shapes he had never seen before, in or out of the net. It wasn't just cubes and pyramids.

''Lewis?''

Her voice was right behind him, the voice he could recognize in an instant. He turned around, and Jean was there. No swirling metal things, no gods of the net. Just the person he loved.

Suddenly he heard the gods speak to him.

--Flesh doesn't have to be like your flesh. We've learned what feeling is. Your universe is no better than ours, now. Your flesh is no better than our own. Just because she doesn't exist in your world doesn't mean she isn't alive.

As their voice faded away, he took her in his arms and held her, just held her. Solid flesh -- warm, soft, loving flesh. Behind the crazy skyline, he could see the sun setting in a world that had never before seen light.

Jason Snell is a sophomore at the University of California, San Diego, double-majoring in Communication and Writing. He is also the associate news editor of the UCSD Guardian newspaper. He says that this story is the first he's written that is actually based on his life. Jason is also not currently writing anything, but he's sure that this is just a temporary state.

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The Babysitters

by Faye Levine

Heroes come in many forms. Some are more frightening than others.

--PHIL FOGLIO

1. The Questionable Stuff

6012 Common Empire Year, Loord Empire, Planet Loord, Special Forces Center, 0700 hours.

''Are you absolutely sure about this man's qualifications, Major Durn?'' Third High Commander Noril inquired skeptically as the pair walked toward the barracks. ''You know I won't tolerate just any officer leading my troops in the field.''

''I assure you, sir, Lieutenant Mongoe is a remarkable soldier. Some say he's the best to serve in Special Forces so far.''

Noril made a rumbling noise in the back of his throat. ''Maybe that's what people say, but I personally question his qualifications as well as your recommendation to put him in *my* pet project. It was hard enough drumming up support for it, you know. I don't want any disasters.''

''I'm afraid I fail to see the problem, sir.''

The High Commander rapped the clipboard he held. ''Have you seen this man's records? They're absolutely atrocious!''

''Atrocious?'' Durn replied, surprised. ''He went from third class private to sergeant major in an unbelievably record time, did well in officer's training, and has had a ninety-five percent success rate in his missions since he came to Special Forces eight years ago. He was a hero in the Qorant War. He's been decorated more times than I can count offhand.''

''His military record isn't what I question.''

''Then what is, sir?''

Noril curled his lip in distaste. ''The man dropped out of higher ed with mediocre grades to enlist in the Ground Forces. How the hell did he get sent to officer's training?''

''He consistently showed the necessary traits required to be an officer.''

''Did he? Does that include numerous curfew violations, disobeying orders, tardiness, and reckless use of military equipment?''

''Mongoe is an. . . energetic young man,'' Durn explained. ''As for disobeying orders, 'bending' is the more appropriate term. He likes to do things his way. The reason he gets away with it is because his way is usually better than his superiors' way--including mine.''

''I see,'' Noril replied bluntly.

''As for the disappearance and destruction of several of our experimental hand-held particle acceleration beams, well, he's been disciplined, and they didn't work well anyway. A good portion of them melted themselves, which he can't be held accountable for. The project was scrapped a long time ago.''

''Hm. I spent a little time today talking to some of your other lieutenants, and they don't seem to like him much at all. They say he's crude, profane, and tactless.''

Durn laughed. ''That's because he is, sir. But that's just him and where he comes from. He's a good man. The enlisted men love him. Usually there's a rift between them and the officers. You know, most of my lieutenants are upper class academy material. They're just not used to someone like Mongoe.'' The major stopped in front of the shower room. ''Here we are, sir.''

Noril narrowed his eyes. ''What are we doing here?''

''You said you wanted to meet him casually, as a person, sir. His squad just got back in from training. They're probably just about ready to go to breakfast.''

''Alright.'' Noril heaved a sigh. ''Let's go in.''

The two officers quietly entered and stood unobtrusively and unnoticed as young men in various states of dress pulled on their boots or fumbled through lockers for uniforms. The sonic ''showers'' hummed in the background.

''Well,'' Noril said, ''Where is he?''

As if in reply there came the sound of rowdy hoots and cheers from the cleaning area. All heads turned in the general direction. A group of soldiers ran out, most of them in towels, laughing their heads off as they looked on at some unseen commotion. Presently two men followed the group, or rather, one man had the other in a headlock and was dragging him along over the tiles.

Third High Commander Noril scowled in distaste as he looked on. ''Enlisted rabble,'' he muttered.

''Argh!'' yelped the man in the headlock, attempting to twist free, ''I give up already!''

''Too bad, pussy!'' his captor roared with delight. He was a huge man, average in height but very large in build, rippling with muscles. ''You lose, sucker! And you know what that means. . . !''

''FLUSHIE!'' chorused all the other soldiers at once, ''FLUSHIE FLUSHIE FLUSHIE!!''

Laughing maniacally, the large man pulled his victim off to the right, out of sight. Soon after came another yell, cut off by the sound of a toilet flushing several times. The soldiers clapped and whistled. Even Major Durn chuckled. Noril seemed disgusted.

''I can't believe what I just saw,'' he grumbled. ''If this Mongoe person is so good with the men, why doesn't he stop this kind of immature behavior?''

''Sir,'' Durn chuckled, ''That *was* Lieutenant Mongoe.''

Noril arched his eyebrows. ''Getting his head rammed in the toilet by one of his own troops?''

''No. . . ramming one of his own troops' head in the toilet. . . sir.''

The High Commander closed his eyes and rubbed his temples. ''I'm going to ask you again, Durn: How did this man get into officer's training?''

''Despite what you just saw, he really is an intelligent man, sir.''

''Considering his educational record--''

''He claims he dropped out because it bored him, sir.''

''I'll bet.''

Durn grew more serious. ''May I remind you, sir, that You sent up one of your own Space Navy personnel less than a week ago to assess the lieutenant? What was his name. . . that scrawny tactician from the *Surefire* incident. . . ''

''Keezor,'' Noril informed him.

''Oh, yes,'' the major muttered, ''Nervous, antisocial man. . . didn't like him. . . '' He cleared his throat. ''Anyway, I did speak to him after. He seemed impressed with Mongoe.''

''He wrote 'clever for a primate' in his report,'' Noril countered.

''Was that all he said?''

''Hm?''

''Was that all Keezor said about the lieutenant?''

''Well, er. . . '' The High Commander exhaled sharply. ''I didn't read the whole report, to tell you the truth, Major.''

''Maybe you should,'' Durn suggested. He did not seem pleased.

Noril shrugged and scanned through the rest of the papers in his clipboard. ''Mmm. . . I.Q., eighty-seventh percentile. . . general tactical knowledge, eighty-ninth. . . specialized tactics, ninety-fourth. . . problem solving response time. . . '' His voice trailed off as he read the stats, then picked up again in a mumble. ''Subject clever for a primate. . . rather crude but by no means deficient in either mental or physical facilities. . . recommend Lieutenant A. Mongoe for proposed position.'' Noril sighed and looked over at Mongoe, now joking with the others as he pulled on his clothes. ''I don't believe I'm saying this, but I'm going to give him a chance.'' He handed Durn a sealed envelope. ''I don't think I want to meet him personally anymore. Just brief him, and if he accepts the assignment, give him the envelope. His orders are in there.''

''Will do, sir.''

''Good. That will be all for now. I'll show myself out.'' Durn saluted, and Noril returned the gesture. The High Commander turned on his heel and walked away, wondering, *What makes me think I'll regret this?*

2. S.C.U.M.

Briefing room, Military Command, Imperial Grounds, Capital District, Loord; one week after Noril's previous decision.

Why?

But why, Haezar? Why leave your ship for this? You're not a commando, for God's sake. . .

Not a commando? Not a soldier. What is our son doing traipsing around in armor like that? You could have gone to the Diplomatic Corps after the Academy. . . You didn't have to go to Qorant for that stupid war.

Mother. . .

You worry me, Haezar. Don't do this.

But--

But what? It's dangerous! The last thing your mother and I need is to wonder if your even going to survive your next mission.

It's not like that.

It is! Being in the Navy's Elite Task Force is bad enough. What you're volunteering for is suicide!

I don't want to listen to this anymore. I've already accepted. I can't march in to my commanding officer and say ''Sorry, but my parents won't let me!''

But Haezar--

No more ''but''s! I'm a grown man. I can take care of myself. Now leave me alone.

First Lieutenant Haezar Mozaq, common name Haezar, sighed as he played the previous night's argument over again in his head. He leaned back in his chair, waiting for the others to arrive. He was, as usual, more than punctual; he always made it a point to arrive at least five minutes early, no matter what the occasion. It gave him time to scope out his surroundings and assess his situation. It also gave him time to think.

Why? Why am I doing this? For me? For them?

What am I trying to prove?

I don't know.

I'm nervous. I'm afraid.

Of what? Screwing up? Falling short? Or just getting killed?

I don't know.

I'll find out.

There came the murmuring of voices in the hall. Shortly after Third High Commander Noril entered the semi-dark room, chatting with another man. Haezar could see by the silhouette of the stranger's shoulder guards that he was a lieutenant commander.

Noril turned up the lights, then flinched as the unexpected appearance of Haezar sitting slumped in a chair startled him.

Haezar got to his feet and saluted. ''Sir,'' he said.

Noril absently returned the salute. ''Sit down.''

Haezar sat as the High Commander took his own seat at the head of the table and began to ruffle through his papers. The stranger sat down across from Haezar. The lieutenant looked up at him for the first time.

The officer was, very bluntly, shockingly ugly, although not by Nature's decree. His face, long, narrow, and a bit sunken, was terribly marred and weathered. Knife scars streaked across his cheeks and neck, some clean, like artificial claw-marks, others crooked and warped. The most pronounced of these were one trench-like deformity which started at the right corner of his mouth and curved upward to the corner of his eye, and another which cut through his left eyebrow and ended on his cheek. The bridge of his nose bulged where it had been broken. The man also wore a narrow moustache, broken up by so many scars it seemed scraggly. But the officer's most astonishing feature, or at least the one which kept Haezar's attention, was his left eye. The iris was very pale, almost white toward the center, and appeared slightly misshapen. The pupil was off center, fixed to a small, hazy opening.

The lieutenant commander glanced briefly at Haezar and sneered. In actuality, Haezar realized after a moment, he had been sneering all along, and couldn't seem to help it. One of his numerous scars pulled at the upper left side of his mouth, exposing his teeth a bit, and another pulled his left nostril up at an angle. The entire effect, combined with the eye, was disturbing, if not frightening.

The stranger ran his right hand through his straight, longish hair. There was something not quite right about his fingers, or about the hand in general; the digits seemed crooked, the other bones slightly out of sync. The man looked up at Haezar again, froze for an instant, then lowered his head an stared at the table. He lost some of his posture. Haezar felt a tinge of guilt. Just before the man had lowered his head, the lieutenant's gaze met with his good eye. It had been oddly sad--pained, even.

Noril cleared his throat and glanced at his watch. ''We're waiting for one more,'' he informed the pair, and muttered something about perpetual tardiness. The room fell silent.

Several minutes passed. Suddenly there came the sound of heavy, hurried footsteps from the hall, and an instant later Lieutenant Mongoe came into the room. He mumbled an apology and flopped his sizable bulk into the nearest chair. Haezar made a choking noise. Mongoe looked over in his direction, noticing him for the first time.

''Rich Boy!'' he exclaimed, somewhat sarcastic, smiling but not exactly pleasant.

''You!'' was all Haezar seemed able to reply. His stomach twisted into a knot.

''Oh, yes,'' Noril murmured, ''I forgot about Qorant. I believe you two have had the pleasure--''

''--Experience,'' Mongoe growled, staring intensely at Haezar.

''--of working together,'' the High Commander concluded. He collected himself. ''Well, then, as long as we're all here, we might as well get started.'' He motioned to the stranger. ''This is Lieutenant Commander Quarq, Space Navy Elite Task Force, Third Division. Quarq, this is Lieutenant Haezar, Task Force, Second Division, and Lieutenant Mongoe from the Ground Forces' Special Forces, Twenty-Second Squadron.''

Mongoe eyed Quarq with a touch of admiration. He had heard of the man--Devil's Eye, they called him--one of the most clever, daring, up-and-coming command officers in the Space Navy fleet. He could not wait to get to know the man, to swap stories, to ask him how he had earned his scars.

''The reason you are here, gentlemen,'' Noril went on, ''is because you have volunteered for what your orders described as 'a specialized task force consisting of personnel from the various branches of the Loord military.' Exactly what this is is my current project, an experiment called Select Commandoes from United Militaries.''

(''SCUM?'' Mongoe murmured with a wry smile.)

''The idea,'' Noril went on, ''is to bring together the finest of our servicemen--the elite of the elite--to tackle the most difficult assignments, both open and covert. The three of you have been chosen to lead the first trial squadron on an actual mission. Since the group has just been formed and there won't be much time to train, I've selected a delicate but not exceptionally difficult situation to use as a proving ground. But then,'' he added challengingly, ''people like you shouldn't need as much time to prepare.''

(''Hah,'' Mongoe sneered quietly.)

''I expect results,'' Noril informed the threesome sternly. ''Excellent results. As far as I'm concerned this project of mine has a lot of potential. I don't want my support yanked. Failure will not be tolerated. Is that understood?''

''Yes, sir,'' Quarq and Haezar replied. Mongoe stared at the wall and said nothing.

''Good. Then I'll brief you on your mission.'' The High Commander passed a folder to each of the officers. ''Your assignment is off-world, which may make things tricky for some of you. In fact, you're going to Planet Neemohne, in the Eastern half of the Empire.'' Noril paused to note the others' expressions. Mongoe was now staring at him, his eyes bright with adventure and curiosity. Haezar seemed interested, and Quarq simply gazed at his hands, very silent and serious.

''Our world is. . . unfortunately unique in all the Empire,'' Noril went on, ''so going to any of our other planets may be a shock to you and your men. And, as you know, our Eastern brothers are very different from us, especially in culture. I expect you all--the whole squadron--to attend all briefing lectures as specified in the documents I've given you so you'll at least have an idea of what to expect. Most of these will we given on board your ship en route to Neemohne, so you won't have much time. I'm expecting you to keep your wits and adapt quickly.''

''What we have here is a political problem in the Qol District of Neemohne. The Qols' leader is a political-religious figure called the Shaheer. The Shaheer isn't royalty; he or she is chosen by the Qol Loords' major religious body, and is then trained to govern.''

''If the Shaheer has to be trained to govern,'' Haezar interjected, ''then what do the religious leaders base their choice on?''

''That's the interesting part. In reality, the religious leaders--the Dyjins--don't choose. They just select candidates. In the end, the Alat chooses.''

''Who's the Alat?''

''Not who--what. The Alat's a crystal.''

Mongoe snorted in laughter.

''The Qols take this very seriously,'' Noril explained. ''They claim the crystal has certain powers and mystical properties. The Shaheer is supposedly the one who can best channel his or her mental energy through the Alat.''

Mongoe chuckled. ''Hah. What a load. . .''

Noril shot him a look. ''Be quiet, Lieutenant. I didn't call you here to laugh. You can be skeptical on your own time.'' He paused, then went on. ''Right now the Shaheer is young--young enough to be vulnerable. The Dyjins believe that the man who ranked second to the current Shaheer in ability to use the Alat, a very rich upperclassman called Zyal, has been plotting the discreet assassination of the Shaheer. If the current Shaheer dies, then he, as second best, comes to power. There have also been numerous attempts to steal the Alat, but no one's been caught alive to question. Zyal is very influential. He has a lot of connections. We're not sure if he's been sending third parties to steal the Alat and plot assassinations, but then, we're not sure if he's involved at all, even though everyone would like to assume so.''

''The Shaheer is important to us politically because for many years the Qol have provided us with certain rare elements found only in the Qol District--and a good portion of those are used in the military. We've always maintained good relations with the Qol government and the Shaheer. Zyal, however, is a radical, and a very strong one. If he becomes the Shaheer chances are he'll cut off or worsen relations with us, and no one will be able to successfully challenge him. That's the last thing the Emperor wants at this time. Our relations with the East are a bit shaky already.''

''Your job is to protect the Shaheer at all costs until the crisis blows over, and to track down and deal with whoever's behind the problems, whether it's Zyal or not. The Shaheer's forces and investigative agents will help you. Specifics are detailed in the documents I gave you. You'll meet the rest of your squadron tomorrow, and leave for Neemohne the day after that. The three of you are to report to my office at 0700 sharp tomorrow. Understood?''

''Yes, sir,'' the three officers replied.

''Good. Dismissed.''

3. Room and Board

Eastern Loord Empire, Planet Neemohne, Qol District, several weeks later.

Even with the numerous briefings behind them, Neemohne turned out to be a shock for most of the S.C.U.M. squadron.

The unfortunate reality was that for many years Loord, the homeworld and head of the Empire, had been decaying, in part from age, but mostly due to a transient sun which had settled itself too close. Fifty years before, the new star--or the ''Rouge'', as it was popularly known--had appeared, and ten years after that the population which had chosen or had been forced to remain on the planet--a good ninety percent of the people--had moved into underground cities. Since the government did not want to further depress an already unstable populous, talk about what the world had been and about other worlds in general had been kept to a minimum. In the schools, ecology and zoology courses all but vanished. The net result was two generations of people to whom grass and trees and swimming were myths, and to whom ''sky'' was a vague concept at best.

The majority of the unit was forced, at least initially, to shade their eyes from the brightness of the sun with sunglasses, a curious and awkward experience for most. As a general rule, the S.C.U.M. personnel from the Space Navy fared a bit better; most of them had been to other planets, even if only briefly to touch down for refueling and supplies. Of them all, Haezar and Quarq had the most experience with other worlds, but even Quarq seemed ill at ease. Only Haezar appeared casual and uninterested as the others gawked after landing at a local Qol military base.

''Are you that untouched by the beauty?'' Quarq asked him quietly. He seemed to be making an attempt to form his twisted lips into a smile. He was failing miserably.

Haezar hesitated for a moment, not quite sure if the man was being sarcastic or serious. He tried to ignore the lieutenant commander's grimace after guessing the latter. ''Well,'' he replied, ''The base here is nothing. Wait 'til you see the city.''

''You've been here before?''

''Oh, yeah. My father's an ambassador. Senior Ambassador, really. He's on the High Council. He's been everywhere. So have I. He used to take the family with him.''

The city, as Haezar had indicated, proved to be both stunning and fascinating. Like Eastern Loord culture as a whole, it was an unusual mix of modern and arcane. Glass paneled office buildings shared the same streets as ornate stone and wood structures. Many of the roads still retained ancient cobblestones. Marble statues and fountains dotted the area. Just about everything was decorated to the hilt; stone and wood were polished and amazingly carved, glass was etched, and clothing was brocaded. Most of the men, and many women as well, wore swords and knives casually at their sides as they bragged about their hovercars and watched three- dimensional holo-televisions through storefront windows. The S.C.U.M. soldiers gaped and pointed all the way to their lodgings on the Shaheer's Grounds.

Once they had been settled in, Quarq, Mongoe and Haezar made their way across the Grounds to the palace to meet the Shaheer.

''Wow,'' Mongoe mumbled as he craned his head up at the shining spires and stained glass windows of the sprawling structure. ''Wow,'' he quietly exclaimed again when they were escorted inside. He spun in circles as he walked, taking in everything, all the time looking very stupid and muttering ''Wow'' over and over again, his mouth hanging open. Haezar seemed embarrassed by him, especially when the lieutenant uttered a rather excited ''Wo-o-o-o-w!'' when a liberally clad woman servant passed them in the hall.

''Be quiet!'' Haezar whispered sharply as they were led into an open, marble-floored hall. Their escort informed them that the Shaheer would arrive shortly and left them to wait.

After a short time an impressive middle aged man clad in elaborately brocaded clothes and a black, velvety cloak strode into the room. At his side he wore shining scabbard, protruding from which was the jeweled hilt of a sword. He smiled as he approached the threesome. Again, Haezar seemed quite at ease while Quarq and Mongoe's faces registered a bit of nervousness.

The man was six and a half feet tall--slightly above average for an Eastern Loord--and made Quarq, who at just under six feet had always been considered tall, seem short in comparison. His skin tone was darker, and his eyes were slightly slanted. He was balding up top but the rest of his hair fell to his waist, neatly trimmed and accented by the occasional braid.

The newcomer held his hands out, open palms up. ''Good afternoon, warriors,'' he said in slightly accented Common. He made a circular motion with his hands. ''Welcome to Qol.''

There was an awkward hesitation. Quarq found his voice. ''Thank you, Shaheer,'' he replied with a salute. ''I'm Lieutenant Commander Quarq. These are my immediate subordinates, Lieutenants Haezar and Mongoe.''

The older man chuckled. ''I'm not the Shaheer, Commander. I am Hu-Jin, his Advisor.''

''Uh--My apologies, sir.''

''No need.'' Hu-Jin looked off to the side as another Loord came into the room. He was a small boy, perhaps nine or ten, wearing fairly simple clothing. The child came up to Hu-Jin and stood in front of him, looking up at the three soldiers. ''This is Dyan, our Shaheer,'' the Advisor informed them.

''But--'' Mongoe sputtered. Haezar discreetly elbowed him in the ribs.

Dyan, like Hu-Jin, held out his hands, palms up, and also made a circular motion. Unlike the older man's, however, it was an all-encompassing sweep.

''Welcome to my home,'' said the boy. ''You are free to go wherever you want and use any services and facilities we have.''

''Th-thank you, Shaheer,'' Quarq replied, a bit surprised at how articulate the child was, and very surprised that the boy's face registered no revulsion or fright in reaction to his terrible appearance. Until now, the commander had had yet to meet a child who did not.

''Have you been fully briefed on the situation at hand?'' Hu-Jin asked. Quarq nodded. ''Good. As you can see, our Shaheer is too young to fully protect himself or the Alat. We've taken full security precautions ever since the first attempt to steal the Alat, but the thieves keep trying.'' The Advisor smiled in an unusual way which did not seem to fit his kindly features. The grin was wide, very pleased, and rather sadistic. ''Which essentially means,'' he went on, ''that they keep dying.'' His hand fondled the hilt of his sword. ''I dispatched two of them myself.'' The smile vanished and he sighed. ''We thought that the Shaheer's rival, Zyal, while angry and jealous, would not attempt to do any harm to our leader. But there were rumors and paranoia. We thought--and still think--that the thieves were sent by him. We believed he thought that if he had the Alat, he would have the power of the Shaheer. Unfortunately, assuming that the attempted thefts were directed by him, he must have grown tired of failure, because last week there was an assassination attempt on the Shaheer. Someone planted a bomb in the Shaheer's limousine, but a mechanic found it while doing some repair work.

''What we want from your unit for now is extra protection for the Shaheer. I currently have investigative agents out searching for clues and evidence. If we find out anything conclusive, namely that Zyal is responsible, we'll need your forces to move in and take him down.'' Hu-Jin paused awkwardly. ''If it is Zyal, and we can't bring him to justice by normal means, then the Shaheer can't move against him physically, and you'll be on your own.''

''Why?'' Quarq asked. ''Our commanding officer led us to believe you would help us.''

''We certainly will. But if you have to attack Zyal, the Shaheer's men cannot help. I'm surprised your superior didn't inform you. You see, the people who serve the Shaheer--all the people on the Grounds--are from a very special class. We are the Yuns, an ancient clan dedicated to the Shaheer. For centuries we had a rival clan, the Morin- shans, the renegades, so to speak, of the Qol people. Only a century ago, the Yuns and the Morin-shans made peace, but it's a tentative arrangement at best. Zyal is one of the most influential Morin-shans. If we move against him directly, the peace would be broken and there would be chaos.''

''What about the other clans?'' Quarq inquired. ''Can't they help?''

Hu-Jin clenched his jaw. ''There are no other clans among the Qol.''

''What about help from other Districts?''

''We tried that already. They all considered the situation too trite to pay attention to. That's why we looked to the Emperor, toward the West. That's why you're here.''

''I see.''

Again the Advisor sighed. ''The Shaheer and I have things to attend to now. The three of you are invited to stay here in the palace. I'll send someone to show you to your quarters. Tomorrow morning have your men assembled here for briefing and orientation. Until then, feel free to explore the palace, the Grounds, and the city, if you like, but please try not to cause any trouble, especially with one of the Morin-shans. You'll know them by the small, red diamond tattooed on their foreheads.''

Quarq frowned in thought. ''Were any of the thieves you killed Morin-shan?''

''No. Zyal is not stupid. If he is behind this, he's imported someone else to do the job for him. I'm sure he'd rather take power without starting a war. Now, if you'll please excuse us. . .'' Hu-Jin led Dyan away.

4. A Night Out on the Town

Sometime after dinner, the same day.

Mongoe was awed by his ''quarters'', the bedroom of which was considerably larger than his family's apartment, and whose high ceiling sported a huge skylight which allowed him to look up at the stars. The bathroom included a shower, sauna, and a whirlpool tub, all alien and fascinating to him. The situation on his homeworld had forced his people to carefully ration their use of water; the ''showers'' he knew were really chambers which misted one with cleanser, then took it, along with any sweat or grime, off via sonic cleaning methods.

Still, after a couple of hours of examination, dinner, and relaxation, he grew restless. He changed into civilian clothes and went down the hall to Quarq's quarters. He found the officer sitting in the living room area reading a book.

''Hey,'' Mongoe greeted, ''What's up?''

''Not much,'' Quarq replied, ''Why?''

''I was thinkin'. . . Why don't we go out, have a drink, hunt for babes. . . ?''

Quarq shifted uncomfortably. ''Oh,'' he mumbled, ''I. . . I don't go out much. . . .''

''Aw, c'mon! Let's have some fun. I wanna see the city.''

''Well. . . alright.'' The lieutenant commander set down his book. ''Lemme change,'' he muttered, obviously unthrilled by Mongoe's proposals. ''I'll be ready in a minute.''

As they walked out of the palace, Quarq was oddly silent. He stared at the floor as he walked.

''What's wrong?'' Mongoe asked.

''Nothing,'' the other muttered, then after a moment said, ''You've worked with Haezar before. What's he really like?''

Mongoe grunted. ''Ah, he's okay, y'know, but he's a flake. Goes by the book too much. I dunno. . . maybe it's 'cause he's from a rich family. He's all proper and shit. I don't get why he's in the military. Hell, maybe his old man made him.''

The pair left the Grounds and made their way into the city. Mongoe immediately headed for a nightclub, where he took a seat at the bar, followed by a reluctant Quarq, who sulkily kept his head hanging. Mongoe ordered drinks and began to chat with several attractive young women. Quarq said nothing. Another woman came up to the bar and sat down next to him.

''Hello, Westerner,'' she said, ''How do you like it way out here?''

Quarq lifted his head and looked at her. ''It's very nice here,'' he replied.

The woman stared at him. Her eyes widened briefly. She swallowed nervously and moved away without another word. Quarq shrank in his seat.

''What's wrong?'' Mongoe asked him, breaking from his own conversation.

''Ooh. . . friend of yours?'' one of the women he was speaking to asked. She and her companions leaned over to get a better look.

''Yeah,'' Mongoe told them. ''What's wrong, Quarq?''

Quarq shook his head and turned to Mongoe. ''Nothing,'' he replied, so quietly Mongoe could barely hear him over the music and conversation, ''I'm fine.''

The women sitting on the other side of Mongoe blinked in surprise as they looked on. One quickly averted her eyes; another shuddered. The third simply stared. Quarq's eyes met hers and she looked away. The officer frowned and closed his eyes for a moment, then abruptly got up and left, coldly pushing his way through the crowd.

''Quarq?'' Mongoe inquired he watched him go.

''--so ugly!'' he heard one of the young women mutter.

''Hideous,'' another added.

Mongoe turned back to them. He stared at them hard, then curled his lip in distaste. ''Bitches,'' he growled, ''All of you.'' He got up and left the bar. He found Quarq standing alone outside. ''I'm sorry, man,'' he said. ''I didn't know--''

''Don't worry about it,'' Quarq told him.

''Come on,'' Mongoe went on, ''Let's go find a good working-class bar, where guys go to get away from the babes, eh?''

''Sure,'' the commander replied with a shrug. The pair set off in silence. After a time Quarq spoke up again. ''Mongoe,'' he said.

''Yeah?''

''You're a good man. You don't judge people.''

The lieutenant laughed. ''The hell I don't! The difference between me and all those other assholes out there is, I know how to judge correctly.''

Quarq chuckled and attempted a smile which came out much more like a sneer. ''Right. Gotcha.''

''Hey!'' someone called. Haezar jogged up to the pair from across the street. ''Where are you off to?''

''To a good bar,'' Mongoe replied.

''Mind if I come with?''

The lieutenant smiled. ''Isn't it past your bedtime, Rich Boy?''

''Very funny, smartass.''

''Ooh. . .'' Mongoe backed off in mock fear. ''I thought your mommy told you not to drink.''

''I can drink you under the table, you ugly slab of meat.''

''Hah! We'll see about that!''

The trio made their way into a darker, more sinister section of the city. Haezar's distaste became more obvious with each passing block; he was in fact visibly relieved when Mongoe called a halt, announcing that he had found just the right place.

His relief turned to reservation as he looked the place over.

''Uh, Mongoe,'' he said, ''Something tells me this isn't a place of good repute.''

'''S'okay,'' Mongoe replied, ''I'm not a man of good repute.'' Grinning mischievously, he went in. Quarq and Haezar followed.

The bar was run down, dark, and smokey. The tables were scarred, the chairs improperly balanced; the same could be said for most of the patrons. A large sign bearing the words ''NO DUELING'' hung over the bar. Most of the men present wore swords at their sides.

''Are you sure about this?'' Haezar asked Mongoe in a low voice.

''Sure I'm sure. It's the atmosphere that makes it good.''

''People are staring at us.''

''That's 'cause we're foreigners. Loosen up and stop gawking.''

''Quarq looks like a choir boy next to some of these guys.''

''Watch your mouth,'' Quarq growled.

The trio sat down at a table and ordered a pitcher of ale. Mongoe slugged it down with delight. Haezar sniffed at it, wrinkled his nose, then took a mouthful. He grimaced and spat it out.

''Haw, haw!'' one of the patrons cackled, ''Pretty foreigner boy can't hold his booze, eh?''

Haezar frowned. ''I can hold it fine, as long as it doesn't taste like it came out of the sewer.''

Mongoe winced. ''Shut up!'' he hissed. ''I'm not gonna save your ass if you get it into trouble.''

''I can take care of myself, thank you. Things have changed since we were in Qorant.''

''Hey!'' the bartender called, ''You lowlifes insulting the house brew?!''

Haezar turned. ''You have anything more refined?'' he called back.

''Haezar, you stupid shithead!'' Mongoe growled.

One of the nearby patrons got up and swaggered up to Haezar. ''You're an insulting little shit, you know that? We don't like to be insulted.''

''I wasn't talking to you,'' Haezar countered. Beside him, Mongoe sighed, closed his eyes, and shook his head.

How'd he ever get into the Elite Task Force? he wondered.

''Ass hole,'' the patron snarled, and sent his fist at Haezar's face. It never got there. With lightning speed, Quarq snapped his arm out and caught the man's fist inches away from Haezar's nose.

''Go away,'' he growled.

''Piss off, you ugly fucker,'' replied the patron. He made a fist with his free hand. Quarq altered his grip and squeezed. The patron yelped in pain. Quarq's lips parted fully into a frightening grimace-grin. He squeezed harder. The patron fell to his knees, groaning. ''Leggo!'' he grunted.

Quarq let go and kicked him over. ''Go away,'' he repeated. The patron got up and left. Quarq looked around. The other patrons seemed amused. They looked back at him for a moment, then returned to their drinking.

Haezar cleared his throat. ''Uh. . . thanks.''

A woman came to the table and sat down. Quarq immediately withdrew to an adjacent table. Haezar more or less ignored the new arrival, but Mongoe began to talk to her. After twenty minutes of friendly chatting, another patron, very large and not quite as drunk, stomped up to the table and clapped a hand on Mongoe's shoulder.

''What the hell do you think you're doing?'' he asked.

The lieutenant looked up at him. ''Talkin' with the lady here. Got a problem with that?''

''Yeah,'' the man replied, '''Cause that's my woman you're making the moves on.''

''Really?''

''Really. I saw you touch her. Nobody touches my woman but me.'' The patron looked down at the woman. ''Come on. Get up.''

''Go to hell,'' she replied, ''I'm just talking to him.''

The man's eyes blazed with fury, not at the girl but at Mongoe. He stepped back. With a roar he shoved several tables out of the way. His hand went to the sword at his side. ''You offend me!'' he shouted. ''Humble yourself and apologize!''

Mongoe looked him over, smiling sarcastically. ''Get lost.''

''Uh, Mongoe--'' Haezar began.

The patron unsheathed his sword.

''Hey--can't you read?!'' the bartender snapped, tapping the ''NO DUELING'' sign. He was ignored. Everyone's attention was now locked on Mongoe and the irate patron.

''Isn't the bouncer going to stop this?'' Haezar asked a man a nearby table.

The man laughed. ''Kid, that *is* the bouncer.''

Haezar swallowed hard. ''Mongoe,'' he went on quietly, ''The Eastern Loords take sword play very seriously. Back off. This guy'll kill you!'' His companion ignored him.

The patron began to twirl the sword in elaborate patterns: in front of him, to the side, in figure eights, over his head, and behind his back. His face was strained with anger. Mongoe looked on, amused and unimpressed. He walked over to the door and picked up the brick propping it open. He turned it over in his hands, smiling smugly as the angry patron continued to twirl his blade.

Haezar's eyes widened. ''Mongoe, no! Wait--!''

Mongoe wound up his arm in a fast underhand pitch and sent the brick into his antagonist's crotch.

''Glug!'' the patron sputtered, his eyes bugging out. The sword dropped from his limp hand. He collapsed on the floor.

''Yeah,'' Mongoe chuckled, but the bar fell dead silent.

''Mongoe,'' Haezar muttered frantically, ''That man was doing his opening--his challenge--with the sword. It's a ritual. It's bad etiquette--*very* bad etiquette to attack before both parties have completed their opening.''

One by one, the patrons unsheathed their swords. All of them were glaring at Mongoe, and they weren't very pleased.

''Now you've done it,'' Haezar mumbled. He edged close to Mongoe. Quarq also pulled in toward them from his place off to the side.

''Back out the door slowly,'' he whispered to the pair. ''I don't want an incident.''

''These jerks don't care what you want,'' Mongoe replied. He picked up a chair and held it out in front of him.

There was one final, awkward pause, and then with a collective cry the patrons surged forward, blades whirling. The three commandoes crowded back to back. Haezar and Quarq followed Mongoe's example and each picked up a chair.

Laughing with delight, Mongoe caught the first of the blades with the chair and drove his free fist into its owner's face. On either side of him, his companions were busy fending off their own attackers.

''Back out!'' Quarq yelled.

''What, so soon?'' Mongoe replied. One of the patrons took advantage of his lapse in concentration and pummeled the large man in the face with the hilt of his sword. Mongoe staggered back, blood gushing from his nose, roaring in anger. He took hold of his chair with both hands and swept it through the space in front of him, taking down several more people.

Sirens sounded in the distance. Most of the bar customers froze.

''Police!'' someone yelled. An instant later the crowd ran forward in a human tidal wave and shoved Mongoe, Quarq and Haezar aside. They ran out the door and scattered into the night.

''Wait a minute!'' Mongoe exclaimed. He leaned out the door. ''Come back, you pussies!'' He paused, wiping the blood off his face. ''Damn,'' he muttered, ''That's the fourth time I've gotten my nose busted. I don't even remember what it used to look like.''

''Shut the hell up,'' Quarq rumbled. He brushed past the lieutenant and grabbed his arm, dragging him out the door. Haezar quickly followed. The trio dodged out of sight just as the police pulled up to the bar.

''That was a stupid, dumbass thing you did back there!'' Quarq snapped at Mongoe as they headed back to the palace. ''You heard what Hu-Jin said: No incidents!'' His cold, pale eye fell on Haezar. ''And you too! Learn to behave right, dammit!''

Quarq's irritation, an unusual enough display for him, lingered on even after they returned to the Shaheer's Grounds. He went to his quarters, slamming the door behind him. Haezar sulkily returned to his own living space, leaving Mongoe alone and bored.

''Yer no fun,'' he muttered, ''Either of you.'' He glanced at his watch. As far as he was concerned, the night was still young. He went off to find something to do.

Several hours later, it was Haezar's turn to be bored. Feeling restless inside, he went to Quarq's quarters and knocked on the door.

''Who is it?'' came the commander's voice from inside.

''It's Haezar.''

There was a long pause, then, ''Come in.'' Haezar stepped inside. ''I'm in the bath,'' Quarq informed him. The lieutenant went in and found his superior sitting in the whirlpool tub, his head laid back against the tiles, eyes closed, his hair wet and limp from the steam. Haezar sat down on the floor on the opposite side of the tub.

''Well?'' Quarq said after a time without opening his eyes or looking up.

Haezar shrugged. ''Uh. . . nothing, sir,'' he replied. ''I was just bored. I thought I'd stop by and chat, if you don't mind.''

Quarq uttered a short, hoarse laugh and grimaced--no, *smiled*, Haezar reminded himself. ''You brownnosing little shit,'' the commander said, although not unkindly.

''I. . . I really did just come to talk.''

''Mm-hm.'' There was a long pause. ''Well, go on and ask me.''

''Ask you what?''

Quarq stretched out his arm and plucked a bottle of wine off a tray sitting nearby. He took a swig. ''Ask me why I look like I've been through a food processor. You've been dying to ever since you first saw me.''

''Eh--Excuse me?''

The commander chuckled. ''Bet your father taught you manners, being an ambassador and all. Only added to the natural morbid curiosity we all have. But Mongoe, he's an honest one. Probably the most straightforward guy I ever met. He doesn't have any manners, and no shame, either. He came right out and asked me one day. Handed me a brew and said, 'Tell me how you earned those scars, Ugly.' ''

''Uh, I. . .''

''Go on, ask me. You want to.''

Haezar looked quite sheepish, then replied, ''Alright. . . what happened to you?''

''Qorant.''

''You were there for the war?''

''Yup. Same as you. Sent to help the Ground Forces. A bunch of unfriendlies jumped my squadron while we were on patrol. We fought back, but it didn't do any good. I was the only officer, so they kept me alive. I watched them kill whoever was left.

''Back at their base, they asked me questions, but I'd be damned if I'd tell 'em anything. So they beat me up, burned me, ripped up my face, and took a hammer to my fingers one by one.'' Quarq wiggled the fingers of his crooked right hand in front of him. ''Good thing I'm a lefty. Assholes. . . .'' He paused, sighed. ''So, when torture didn't work they got bored. They knocked me out, tied me up, and left me in the middle of nowhere to rot.''

''I take it you were rescued.''

Quarq took another swig of the wine. ''Mm-mm,'' he said as he gulped it down. ''No. I got loose and crawled to the nearest base. Got all sick and infected and shit. Lost the sight in my left eye. I spent months in the hospital. You know what I got for my trouble?''

''I suppose you're going to tell me.''

''I got a medal, a promotion, and a lifetime guarantee of utter rejection from society.'' The commander paused. He covered his eyes with his free hand. ''Little kids, man. . . my niece. . . for a long time she wouldn't come near me. . . But women--grown, intelligent women--they think I'm some kind of rapist monster. They call me repulsive, right to my face sometimes. People. . . just steer clear of me. All they see is the mask I wear.'' He looked up and stared at the wall, narrowing his eyes in anger. ''I've learned to live with it,'' he growled. ''Why can't they?'' The room fell silent, save for the hum of the whirlpool. ''Go away,'' he said after a time. ''Leave me alone.'' Haezar nodded, got up, and left.

The lieutenant headed back down the hall. Hearing giggling emitting from Mongoe's quarters, he knocked on the door.

''Yeah?'' came the gruff reply after a moment.

''It's me. Got a minute?''

''Maybe. Come in.''

Haezar entered to find the large man lying on his stomach on a couch, naked and being massaged by a luscious, scantily-clad young woman. ''What--?!'' Haezar sputtered, ''What are you doing?''

''Gettin' massaged. . . and revved up, if ya know what I mean.''

''But. . . where. . . what are you doing with that girl?!''

The young woman giggled and kept massaging. Mongoe shot Haezar a twisted smirk. ''Well, see,'' he explained as if speaking to a curious adolescent, ''first there's this stuff called 'foreplay', and then, when the guy gets nice and h--''

''Shut up! What the hell do you think you're doing?''

''Hey, you heard the Shaheer. He said we could make use of any of the services the palace offered.'' Mongoe smiled broadly. ''I guess this is why they call 'em 'servants'.''

Haezar scowled. ‘‘You’re sick. Don’t you have any morals?’’

‘‘Do you have a sex life?’’

Haezar growled.

Mongoe chuckled. He raised his arm and snapped his fingers twice. A second young woman emerged from the bedroom. ‘‘Dorna, babe, do me a favor and give my friend here a nice blow job. He could use it.’’

‘‘Mongoe!’’ Haezar snapped. Dorna sauntered up behind him and ran her hands over his shoulders and down past his waist. ‘‘Uh. . . miss. . . no. Please stop.’’ He tried to push her away.

‘‘Stop means go,’’ she cooed, and nibbled on his ear.

‘‘Dorna,’’ Mongoe yawned, ‘‘Not here, doll. His room’s across the hall.’’

‘‘Miss, I mean it,’’ Haezar told her, albeit a bit weakly.

‘‘So do I,’’ she murmured, reaching into his pants.

‘‘Have fun, Rich Boy,’’ Mongoe said. ‘‘All these babes--they’re not just meat, y’know. That Hu-Jin guy assured me that every one was smart and good conversation. And each one has at least one special talent.’’

Dorna thrust her hand farther into Haezar’s pants. ‘‘Mine’s finding that little spot that makes you squirm,’’ she breathed, and proceeded to prove it. Haezar yelped as his back reflexively arched. Mongoe’s massive shoulders shook with laughter.

‘‘Huh--h-how nice,’’ Haezar squeaked, pulling Dorna’s hand away. ‘‘Better show that one to Mongoe. Goodnight.’’ He hastily backed out of the room, shutting the door behind him, then ran to his own quarters, shutting *and* locking the door, for a very long, very cold shower.

5. Bedtime Stories and a Nightmare

The following evening.

The following morning Mongoe did not get up for breakfast. When Haezar went to wake him he found the lieutenant in bed, half a dozen curvaceous young women curled up against his body.

‘‘I’m in heaven,’’ Mongoe later remarked as he got dressed, ‘‘Pure heaven.’’ At breakfast he livened up and stuffed himself, however at Hu-Jin’s briefing he nearly fell asleep.

‘‘Rough night?’’ Quarq whispered wryly. Mongoe chuckled.

During the briefing Hu-Jin informed the squadron that two S.C.U.M. personnel were to remain with Shaheer Dyan at all times, in addition to the normal number of bodyguards. Mongoe and Haezar wound up on the same shift that evening as the young Shaheer prepared for bed.

‘‘I feel like I’m babysittin’, y’know?’’ Mongoe grumbled as they sat in Dyan’s quarters. Haezar did not answer him. ‘‘Aw, whatsa matter, Rich Boy? Was it somethin’ I said?’’ The lieutenant glared at him, and seemed about to say something rather unpleasant when the Shaheer came in, dressed in his sleeping clothes. Haezar’s irritated expression quickly melted into a smile.

‘‘Hello,’’ he greeted.

‘‘Hello,’’ the boy returned. He hopped up onto his bed. ‘‘Are you here to guard me?’’

Haezar nodded. ‘‘Are you afraid?’’

Dyan glanced at Mongoe. ‘‘Not with a guy as big as him to watch over me.’’ The boy smiled. Mongoe smiled back, then shot a smug grin at Haezar. ‘‘Anyway,’’ the Shaheer went on with a yawn, ‘‘Nobody can break in here. And if they do, Hu-Jin will take care of them.’’

Time passed. Dyan fidgeted in bed, then sat up. He got up and went over to Haezar, who was sitting on a couch nearby.

‘‘Can’t sleep?’’ the lieutenant asked.

The Shaheer shook his head. ‘‘No.’’ He paused. ‘‘Have you been all over with the Space Navy?’’

‘‘Yeah, I’ve been a lot of places. I’ve been a lot of places with my father, too.’’

‘‘Have you fought in wars?’’

‘‘One.’’

‘‘What was it like?’’

‘‘Unpleasant.’’

‘‘Did you ever do anything really neat, like blow something up?’’

‘‘Well, I--’’

‘‘Did you spy on people?’’

Haezar thought for a moment. ‘‘Well, once I--hey!’’ The lieutenant scowled as Mongoe climbed over the back of his couch and shoved him aside.

‘‘Kid wants a story, eh?’’ he said. ‘‘How ’bout it, your Shaheership? Wanna real good, true story?’’

Haezar rolled his eyes at the ceiling, but Dyan nodded his head. ‘‘I’d like to hear about something you’ve done,’’ he replied.

‘‘Good. Okay. Once upon a time in the Qorantian War, there was this dickhead lieutenant named Haezar who was sent in with his squad by the Space Navy to help out a certain Sergeant-Major Mongoe and his troops. The Sarge and his men had been there for a real long time and knew the territory real well. They knew a lot about the enemy, too. But this jerk Haezar, he fucked things up real good. See, he wasn’t a bad guy or nothin’ but he was one of them know-it-all academy wussies. Or maybe his jock strap was too tight. I dunno.

‘‘Anyway, since Haezar outranked Mongoe, he wouldn’t listen to any of Mongoe’s advice, even though Mongoe had been in the military twice as long and had been in Qorant since the war started. This got everyone into trouble.

‘‘See, one day, dickhead Haezar gets this dumbass scheme: He’s gonna take out one of the enemy’s major defensive trenches, right? Well, Sarge says no, the conditions aren’t right, but the stupid jerk goes on with it anyway. Half a squadron of Space Navy and Ground Forces troops later, he realizes his mistake. But does he retreat with the rest? No! He keeps chargin’ the fuckin’ trench! But Mongoe, bein’ the nice guy he is, goes back out and covers the dickhead’s ass just long enough to take a piece of shrapnel in his side. So Haezar drags him back to the others, cleans him up, patches the wound, then like the dumbass he is asks the Sarge, ‘Are you okay?’ ’’

‘‘What did you say?’’ Dyan asked.

‘‘Nothin’. I planted my fist in his jaw and laid him out cold in the dirt. But all’s well that ends well, y’know. The squad managed to pull out, and everybody lived more or less happily ever after--except the ones who got wiped before their tour was up--and good ol’ Sarge wound up with a huge, ugly scar runnin’ from hip to ribcage. The end.’’

Haezar refused to even look at Mongoe, even after their shift was over and they went to bed.

Their grievance did not last long, however, because several hours later they were awakened by Hu-Jin’s frantic cries:

‘‘*The Shaheer is gone! The Shaheer is gone!*’’

A minute later and all of them were assembled in Dyan’s room: Mongoe, Haezar, Quarq, and Hu-Jin. The place was crawling with investigative agents. On the floor were the two S.C.U.M. personnel who had taken over for Haezar and Mongoe, both neatly beheaded. Their hands still held their guns. Their severed heads, lying several feet away, were frozen almost amusing, shocked expressions. There were laser burns on the walls from their weapons but no indication of anything else wrong, let alone any other weapon.

‘‘It’s spooky, Advisor,’’ one of the agents told Hu-Jin, ‘‘Not one thing’s out of place. No sign of a struggle, no tracks, no fingerprints--nothing. The window is still locked from the inside. None of the outside guards heard anything, and there’s no indication of anyone unauthorized having been on the Grounds.’’

Hu-Jin narrowed his eyes. ‘‘You know what this has to mean,’’ he replied gravely. ‘‘It was a Nightmare.’’

‘‘A what?’’ Quarq asked.

‘‘A Nightmare. They are Neemohne’s most questionable legends.’’

‘‘I don’t understand.’’

‘‘The Nightmares, or Nightmare--no one is sure; we assume there are more than one--are believed to be a group of professional assassins, spies, and killers, and possibly thieves. They might be good or bad, or perhaps neither. They may work for people or act on their own. Maybe both. They mostly strike at night, hence the name. Whatever the case, only a Nightmare can do what has been done here.’’

‘‘Wait a minute,’’ Mongoe interjected, ‘‘You keep saying ‘maybe’ and ‘believed to be.’ And then you said something about ‘questionable legends.’ Do you know what we’re up against or not?’’

‘‘No,’’ Hu-Jin replied. ‘‘No one knows if the Nightmares actually exist.’’

‘‘And why’s that?’’ Quarq inquired.

‘‘Because no one who sees one lives to tell about it.’’

‘‘Aw, come on!’’ Mongoe snapped. ‘‘What kinda crap are you feeding us? Tell your stories to yer kids, man. I don’t believe in ghosts, and I don’t believe in blaming ’em just ’cause someone turns up neatly dead.’’

‘‘This sort of thing has happened throughout the centuries. It’s always the same: the deaths are clean--by poison or by blade--and there are no clues.’’

‘‘You think the Shaheer is dead, then,’’ Haezar said solemnly.

‘‘Actually, no,’’ Hu-Jin replied. ‘‘It’s obvious the child was kidnapped. Whoever is receiving the boy, however, may very well intend to kill him.’’

‘‘What about the Alat crystal?’’ Quarq broke in. ‘‘Is it still there?’’

‘‘Yes, I checked. The Alat is kept in a very secure area to begin with, and it’s recently been moved to an even safer place. But even if someone does get it, it will be very hard for them to use it. The Alat knows its master. As long as he or she lives, it won’t give in to a new one so easily.’’

‘‘You’re talkin’ like it’s a person,’’ Mongoe grumbled. ‘‘And whadduya mean, ‘give in’?’’

‘‘The Alat’s a powerful object.’’

‘‘Yeah, right. Sure. I don’t go in for all this magic crap.’’

‘‘Mongoe!’’ Quarq snapped in warning.

‘‘It’s alright,’’ Hu-Jin told him. He looked over at the agents. ‘‘Keep searching,’’ he told them, then turned back to the threesome. ‘‘Come,’’ he told them, ‘‘I’ll show you.’’

The Advisor led them through the palace to a restricted-access elevator. He used a palm-scan to unlock the door guarding the elevator, then a special code-card to open the doors. Once inside, he punched out another code on a series of buttons to turn the elevator on, then used a tiny key to actually get it moving. The car descended several floors. The four men emerged at the beginning of a long, plain hall. Hu-Jin locked up the elevator, then slid another code-card into a slot on the wall.

‘‘What are you doing now?’’ Haezar asked him.

‘‘Deactivating the security,’’ the Advisor replied. ‘‘Quiet, now.’’ He looked down the hall and spoke up. ‘‘Deactivation password: Vulnerable.’’ There was a momentary pause. A tone sounded. ‘‘It’s safe to pass now.’’

The small group walked to the end of the hall, where Hu-Jin performed yet another variety of tasks to gain access into a vault. At the center of the vault, standing silently on within a glass case on a pedestal, was a dull, grayish lump of crystal.

‘‘Don’t go any closer,’’ Hu-Jin warned. ‘‘The case’s security system is still on.’’

‘‘That’s it?’’ Mongoe burst out. ‘‘That’s what all the fuss is over? That rock?’’ Quarq shot him a warning look uglier than his face, but Hu-Jin smiled.

‘‘Watch--and listen,’’ he said. He closed his eyes and, still smiling faintly, his breathing slowed and his body became relaxed.

The Alat seemed to light up, only faintly at first, then suddenly burst into life, a dazzling array of iridescent blue-green light glowing in its core. The faint sound of wind chimes could be heard in the still room.

‘‘It knows its master’s servant,’’ Hu-Jin murmured.

‘‘Hmph,’’ Mongoe grumped. ‘‘Watcha usin’? A hundred watt bulb?’’

For the second time Hu-Jin’s sadistically pleased grin surfaced. A wide ray of light shot out from the crystal, catching Mongoe in the chest and throwing him into the wall.

‘‘What the--?!’’ Quarq started. Hu-Jin opened his eyes, and the crystal went dark again.

''Woof,'' Mongoe gasped as he picked himself up. ''What hit me?''

''My mind, focused and amplified through the Alat,'' Hu-Jin explained, still smiling. ''I am capable of some control with the crystal due to natural ability and my closeness to Dyan. What I did was a simple defense. Are you convinced now, my friend?''

Mongoe grumbled something under his breath. He seemed a bit humbled.

''Advisor,'' Quarq said, looking rather distressed, ''We failed to protect the Shaheer. I'm sorry. I take full responsibility.''

''It wasn't your fault,'' Hu-Jin replied, almost gently. ''In any case, I have a feeling this isn't over yet.''

''I promise to do my best to get the Shaheer back, sir,'' Quarq told him.

The Advisor looked down at him. ''I'm sure you will,'' he replied, although now his words and eyes were flat and cold, almost threatening.

6. ''And if you don't. . .''

Shaheer's Palace, early morning.

''Advisor Hu-Jin,'' greeted one of the servants as the group returned to the main palace, ''There's a woman on the video communications channel. She claims she has the Shaheer, and she's making demands.''

''Where's the signal coming from?'' the Advisor asked.

''We don't know, sir. It's being routed through one of the public channels.''

Hu-Jin led the others to a commons room. A large video screen adorned one wall, and on it was a poorly broadcasted picture. The person on the screen was a woman, but one could only discern this from her voice and curves; she was shrouded in shadow.

''I am Hu-Jin, Advisor to the Shaheer,'' Hu-Jin addressed the screen. ''I demand--''

''You are in no position to demand anything,'' the woman snapped, then went on in a more silky, amused tone. ''I am known as Shadow. I have your Shaheer.'' Someone out of camera range thrust Dyan into view. The boy seemed unhurt, but there were tear stains on his face.

''Hu-Jin! Help me! Please come get me!'' he cried, and was abruptly pulled away.

''I have no desire to hurt the child,'' Shadow went on. ''All I want is the Alat. Unfortunately, your security was simply too good. You see, I ran out of thieves to steal the crystal for me, so I made special arrangements to steal the boy instead. My demands are simple. You will exchange the Alat for the Shaheer. I will require proof that the crystal is genuine.''

''I will give you any sum of money for the Shaheer,'' Hu-Jin replied. ''The Alat is of no use to anyone but the Qol. It has been proven. No one will buy it from you.''

''No deals!'' Shadow insisted. ''What I want and plan to do with the Alat is not your concern!''

''I do know. I'm no fool. You're in this with Zyal. You're a third party hired to do his dirty work.''

''Stop jerking me around, Advisor. You will agree to the arrangement.''

''And if I don't?''

''And if you don't,'' Shadow cooed, ''I'll have no choice but to kill the child.''

Quarq pulled Hu-Jin aside. ''The Shaheer's life is more important than the Alat,'' he said quietly. ''Agree to the trade. Hopefully my troops can stop it before it goes through. If they can't, keep in mind that we can always go after the Alat, but the Shaheer is irreplaceable.''

The Advisor nodded. ''You're right. Since the woman is Zyal's hireling, my own men can take action against her. We can help you.''

At this point Mongoe leaned close. ''I don't think she's working for Zyal,'' he said.

''What makes you think so?''

''When you accused her of working for him, she made a quick comeback. No hesitation, no change of expression. She didn't flinch or shift or move at all. I know people, sir, and I could tell she didn't know what you were talking about. Trust me on this one.''

''Hmm. . . whatever the case, I agree with Quarq.'' Hu-Jin turned back to Shadow. ''I'll make the trade,'' he said.

''Good,'' she replied. ''You will bring the Alat to Quarry Ten. Come alone.''

The Advisor frowned. ''I told you, I'm no fool.''

Shadow gave a somewhat exasperated sigh. Although her face remained unseen, he gaze could be felt shifting to the commandoes. ''Alright,'' she said, waving the argument off with her hand, ''You can bring these three Westerners with you, but that's all. If I see or hear anyone else, the boy dies.''

''Agreed,'' Hu-Jin replied with a nod. ''When will we do this?''

''Now,'' Shadow told him.

''Now?!''

''Well, I can't give you time to prepare, can I?'' the woman laughed, toying with a lock of her hair. ''I estimate that it will take you five minutes to get the Alat out of the place where you keep it, and I know it takes ten minutes to get from the palace to Quarry Ten. I will expect you in fifteen minutes. Don't be late.'' The screen went dark.

''I'll get the troops organized while you get the Alat,'' Haezar told Hu-Jin.

''Our troops don't know the area, and neither do you,'' Quarq replied. ''We'll have to use Hu-Jin's men.''

''No,'' Hu-Jin replied, ''I won't risk the Shaheer's life. We don't have time to think up an offensive.''

''Maybe a sniper?'' Haezar suggested.

''No,'' the Advisor repeated. ''Quarry Ten is on high ground. It's dug out of a mountain side. Whoever's there can see anyone coming, and there are plenty of places to hide lookouts and troops. We'll do what the woman says. But,'' he added, lovingly caressing the hilt of his sword, ''should the opportunity present itself, I'm sure four fine warriors like us will do just fine.'' He smiled his eerie smile again. ''Go prepare yourselves while I get the Alat.''

''Varkeshna,'' Zyal of the Moran-shan clan said to the huge bodyguard at his side as he spun lazily in his office chair, ''Make a note in my log, will you?'' Varkeshna stationed himself before a desk-top computer and rested his fingers lightly on the keyboard, prepared to type. ''Tenth day of Sixth Month,'' Zyal began. ''While experimenting with my video broadcast equipment, I came upon a pirate transmission on a public channel to the Shaheer's Palace. Apparently--to my horror, of course--Shaheer Dyan has been kidnapped and is being held for ransom by a mercenary woman calling herself Shadow. The ransom is the Alat, to be brought by Advisor Hu-Jin and three visiting Western Loords to the old Quarry Ten. Since I fear for the Shaheer's life, I have decided to send a very small force in after Hu-Jin arrives there. When the mercenary is convinced of her safety and is focusing her attention on Hu-Jin, my people will move in and hopefully rescue the Shaheer. End of entry.''

Zyal leaned back in his seat as Varkeshna finished typing. ''Varkeshna,'' he said, ''take our best sniper and go to Quarry Ten. It is our duty to save our dear Shaheer, as well as the Alat. When he and the mercenary and any of her people are out in the open, have the sniper open fire.'' Zyal gave a tight, unpleasant smile. ''Unfortunately, poor Dyan will take a stray shot. What a. . . tragic end to my heroic attempt to save him.'' He chuckled. ''But we will manage to save the Alat. You understand, Varkeshna?''

''Yes, sir,'' the bodyguard rumbled.

''Good. Go.'' The huge man turned to leave. ''Oh, and Varkeshna--''

''Yes, sir?''

''If one of those stray shots should also happen to hit Hu-Jin. . . .''

Varkeshna replied with a wicked grin. ''I'm sure we'll enjoy his grand warrior's funeral feast, despite our grief.''

7. Sticks and Stones May Break My Bones, but Particle Acceleration Beams Really Do a Nasty Job

A short time later.

''Ready to go?'' Haezar asked as he came into Mongoe's quarters. Both of them were in battle armor, however Mongoe's was older and much heavier, and made him look twice as large than he actually was. His gear was in fact the same as he had used in Qorant. There was a thick welded and bolted on metal patch on the torso piece's side where it had been pierced. Haezar mentally winced from the reminder.

''Yeah, just about,'' the large lieutenant replied. He pulled a case out from the closet, laid it on a table, and opened it. Inside was a large, outdated bazooka, meant to be braced against the side, and not placed on the shoulder. Despite its battered and worn casing, it was obvious that new parts had been added and that the back and front of the barrel had been modified. Mongoe checked the weapon over, fastened a strap to it, and slung it over his shoulder. ''Now I'm ready,'' he informed Haezar.

''You still have that thing?'' Haezar returned in disbelief. ''Haven't they caught you yet?''

''Nope.''

''You can't use that! Quarq could report you!''

''So let him.''

''Oh, you seem real concerned,'' Haezar sneered. ''We'll see how smug you are when someone in the right place finds out what really happened to their experimental weapons!''

Mongoe frowned. ''Look, shit-fer-brains,'' he rumbled, ''You could've reported me a hundred times between Qorant and now, but you didn't. You know why? 'Cause my baby here saved your ass. Maybe today it'll save it again. Maybe the Shaheer's, and maybe even Quarq's, too. People tend to overlook little details when you save their life, right, Rich Boy?''

''Um. . . right.''

''So shuddup and mind your own business.'' Mongoe made his way to the door. ''I'd rather be demoted than dead, anyway,'' he mumbled. ''Come on.''

Ten minutes later Hu-Jin pulled an unmarked hovercar off the main road and up a narrower, winding trail. Before the foursome lay a grouping of barren, rocky hills, quietly baking in the living desert of Qol. Even from a distance the old, abandoned quarry, which had been scooped out of the side of the largest hill, seemed large and foreboding.

''Mongoe,'' Quarq said as he eyed the lieutenant's ''baby'', ''what is that thing?''

''Just an old bazooka, sir,'' Mongoe replied.

''I've never seen one like that before.''

Mongoe shot Haezar a discreet look through his sunglasses. ''Oh, hell,'' Haezar put in after a slight hesitation, ''my uncle used to use one of those things. That piece of crap's so ancient, I'm surprised the Ground Forces haven't retired it.''

''They're just stingy, that's all,'' Mongoe laughed. ''Had to be modified just to, ah, pack a noticeable whollop against today's equipment.''

''Mm,'' Quarq replied, and returned his attention to the quarry ahead. ''Remember,'' he said, ''first sign of a slip-up on the enemy's part and we move for the kill. Otherwise, don't do anything stupid or without my or Hu-Jin's orders.'' The commander reached into his pocket and pulled out a curious device which he proceeded to place over his sighted eye. It fitted like an eye patch, and looked like half a pair of goggles.

''What's that?'' Mongoe asked him.

''Just some insurance,'' Quarq replied. ''I've only got one eye left; I don't plan on losing it.''

When Hu-Jin pulled into Quarry Ten, no one could be seen. The only thing stirring was the dust cloud the hovercar's engines kicked up.

''Turn the engine off!'' a woman's voice, presumably Shadow's, demanded through a speaker or megaphone. The Advisor obliged her. ''Get out of the car.'' Hu-Jin and the commandoes stepped out. ''Good. Now walk to the center of the quarry.'' The foursome obeyed without hesitation. ''Put down your weapons.''

''I ain't stupid, lady!'' Mongoe shouted back.

''Funny, you look stupid to me,'' Shadow returned.

''Where is the Shaheer?!'' Hu-Jin yelled, his hand on the grip of his sword as he scanned the high walls of the quarry.

Shadow's chuckling echoed across the quarry. ''You men are such morons,'' she mused. ''Patience, oh Balding One, and don't get carried away. You're past your prime.''

Hu-Jin snorted. ''Come down here, bitch,'' he said, his horrible grin adorning his features, ''and I'll show you how quickly I can flay a person without killing them.''

The mercenary laughed. ''Alright,'' she said, ''keep your little toys. But keep them sheathed or in their holsters. Now, where is the Alat?''

Hu-Jin reached into his jacket and produced a pouch. ''It's in here.''

''Show me.'' Reluctantly, the Advisor took the crystal out and held it up. As if sensing the proximity of the Shaheer, it lit up with a warm glow. The sound of chimes echoed off the rocks. ''Excellent. Put it down and back away.''

''So your people can kill us?'' Quarq spoke up.

''My people,'' Shadow replied with distaste, ''have all been slaughtered while attempting to steal the Alat. And they called themselves thieves.'' She sighed. ''Well, no small loss, especially now that I am currently employing more reliable help. I have no desire to start a fight. I only want the Alat.''

''Show yourself,'' Hu-Jin demanded, ''and the Shaheer. Otherwise there's no deal.''

There was a long pause, and then the sound of footsteps on gravel. Two figures appeared on the opposite end of the quarry. One was a tall, slender offworlder woman with long raven-hued hair. The other was much smaller, quite obviously the Shaheer.

''Hu-Jin! Hu-Jin!'' Dyan cried.

''It's alright, little master,'' the Advisor returned, for the first time looking worried, ''You'll be fine.'' He looked around, and his eyes fell upon a double set of rails leading across the quarry. On each pair of tracks was an old cart, probably used at one time for transporting rubble or ore. He went over to one, disengaged the brake, and with a grunt gave it a good shove. To his surprise it was in fair condition after so much disuse; it glided easily across the quarry. ''Woman,'' he called with a sneer, ''Put the Shaheer in the cart and push him back--if you can. I'll put the Alat in this cart here, and push it to you. Agreed?''

''Agreed,'' Shadow replied.

''No, Hu-Jin!'' the Shaheer yelled, ''Don't!''

''Don't worry, master,'' Hu-Jin replied. ''Do as I tell you.''

''And no tricks!'' Shadow snapped. ''I know what the boy can do with the stone.'' She drew a pistol with an aiming scope. ''If anything funny starts happening when the boy passes the Alat, I'll kill him.''

''And what assurance do we have that your 'reliable help' won't fire down on him anyway?''

''You don't. But then, you're in no place to argue.'' Shadow dragged Dyan over to the cart and set him inside. ''Put the Alat in your cart.'' Hu-Jin did as told. He and Shadow locked stared at each other from across the quarry, then almost simultaneously set their carts in motion. The mercenary, contrary to Hu-Jin's assumption, had little difficulty with the task. For a moment the Advisor seemed impressed.

When the two carts drew near, a large man suddenly appeared from the rocks, running at breakneck speed toward the cart holding the Alat.

''What the--?!'' Quarq started. He and the others instinctively raised their weapons, but by that time the man had already grabbed the Alat and jumped off. Quarq and Haezar--and Shadow, to their surprise--squeezed off several shots which hit the vacated cart as the man fled across the quarry and up into the rocks.

''Get him!'' Haezar yelled, and ran after the man.

''Wait!'' Mongoe called, and was ignored. He started after the lieutenant, then halted. A shot from somewhere above and to the left scorched a piece of abandoned equipment he had been leaning against. ''SNIPER!'' he bellowed, and dove for cover behind the machine. Hu-Jin and Quarq joined him. A shot hit the front right wheel of the cart the Shaheer rode in, and it ground to a halt. Dyan crowded his small body into a corner, pulling rubble and old tools around him.

''The Shaheer!'' the Advisor exclaimed, horrified. He got up and ran toward the second cart, dodging behind rocks and equipment as he went.

''Come back, sir!'' Quarq shouted. He growled and turned to Mongoe. ''Go after Haezar!'' he snapped, his face a hideous mask of rage. The lieutenant took off as Quarq fired in the general direction the sniper's shots were coming from in an attempt to cover Hu-Jin.

Haezar, meanwhile, stopped abruptly in his tracks as he heard a sharp cry of pain. He clutched his rifle tightly as he cautiously advanced. His prey had vanished through a narrow pass in the rocks and had turned to the right before he had lost sight of him. Moving as quietly as possible, Haezar quickly sidestepped through the pass and spun out, his weapon at the ready. No one was there.

No one living, that is.

The large man's body lay crumpled on the rocks. His head was nowhere in sight. Nervously, the lieutenant advanced and turned the body over. Underneath, still in his hand, was the Alat. Haezar gingerly picked it up.

Something hit him in the back. With a cry of alarm, he spun around, firing his rifle. He hit only the rocks. No one was in sight. He looked down at his feet to see what had struck him, and saw the dead man's head staring up at him, wearing an expression of pure terror.

A leather-gloved hand closed tightly around the back of Haezar's neck. The lieutenant immediately moved to counter, but the new intruder's fingers dug into his spine and held on with an iron grip. Haezar's knees buckled. The unseen attacker shifted his hold ever so slightly and squeezed a bit harder. Haezar cried out in pain. The rifle dropped from his right hand, but his left refused to part with the Alat.

''Stupid boy,'' the man behind him growled. ''Shall I snap your neck now? Perhaps. But first, give me the crystal.''

Haezar grit his teeth. ''No,'' he managed. ''You can. . . take it. . . off my dead. . . body.''

His attacker laughed. ''Stupid, stupid, boy!'' With almost inhuman strength, he threw Haezar against the rock wall. ''That is exactly how I intended it in the first place!''

The lieutenant looked up. Standing over him was a man clad entirely in the blackest of black clothing imaginable, his head covered by a black hood, his face hidden by a visor attached to a lightweight helm. At his side was a long, slender, black-handled sword with a black, skull-shaped pummel, nestled in a black scabbard. There were other bladed items fastened to his belt as well, ones which Haezar could not recognize.

''Who--?'' Haezar gagged, almost in a whimper. There was something utterly terrifying about this strange man.

In each hand, the man took a curious weapon from his belt. They consisted of a handle with the skull pummel (black, of course) and a short length of chain which ended in a foot-long, very sharp-looking blade. The man began to twirl the blades in patterns at dizzying speeds. ''You are fortunate to have seen me,'' he murmured, ''Few do.'' He paused, then proclaimed, ''I am your death! Know me, boy--I am Sorasta, Champion of the Dancing Blades!''

Haezar cringed. He heard something off to the side as Sorasta bore down on him; quite like the sound of a very muffled cannon blast. Suddenly Sorasta seemed to glow. His expression of astonishment could be felt through his visor as he looked down at his midsection, only to find it was rapidly disintegrating. An instant later he was gone.

Mongoe plodded up to his companion, hawked and spit on the rocks, and affectionately patted his strange bazooka. ''An' I'm Mongoe, Bearer of the Unauthorized Custom Particle Acceleration Beam,'' he snorted.

''You--you saved my life!'' Haezar squawked, wide-eyed.

Mongoe rolled his eyes. ''Brilliant observation. Man, you're flakier than an unwashed jock strap!'' He hauled the lieutenant to his feet. ''Come on,'' he grunted. He disappeared back through the pass. Haezar paused briefly. He picked up one of the strange twirling weapons, which Sorasta had dropped just before his atoms had scattered, and followed Mongoe.

Down in the main area of the quarry, Shadow ducked behind a pile of gravel and fired off several shots at Hu- Jin.

''You lousy bastards!'' she screamed. She tore a grenade from her belt and pitched it at the Advisor. The explosive went wide, however, and he managed to escape unharmed. She unslung a high-powered rifle from her back, switched it into rapid fire mode, and fired across the quarry at Quarq.

''You stupid crazy bitch!'' he bellowed after the first volley narrowly missed him.

''We did what you said!'' Hu-Jin shouted. ''Have you no honor?!''

Shadow let loose a burst of fire which came dangerously close to the cart the Shaheer lay in. ''Call off your sniper or I'll blow the boy to hell!''

''Our sniper?! That's not my sniper! He's been shooting at me, or haven't you noticed?''

Shadow's face flushed in anger and humiliation as she realized her mistake. *But,* she thought, *if the sniper isn't theirs, and it's definitely not mine--not unless Sorasta's gone trigger-happy, which he shouldn't have, for what I'm paying him--then who's firing at us?* She moved along through the rubble, scanning the rocks above for the gunman. ''What the hell is going on here?'' she muttered. Several shots from somewhere above came dangerously close to hitting her. ''Alright,'' she snarled, ''now I'm pissed!'' She ducked behind a rock and fired blindly up in the direction the shots had come from.

Hu-Jin, realizing the sniper was now occupied with the mercenary, made a dash for the cart. He plucked the Shaheer from his hiding place and ran back toward Quarq. The sniper realized what had happened and fired at the Advisor. The man was moving astonishingly well for his age, however, and somehow managed to get back to Quarq only singed and slightly bloody from a shot which had grazed his back instead of cutting him in half at the waist.

''Are you alright?'' the commander asked him.

''Never better,'' Hu-Jin replied, setting Dyan down. ''Nothing like an annoying flesh wound to get you really pissed and ready to lop off a few limbs!'' He drew his sword, a wide and powerful blade, etched with designs and brightly polished. ''I'm going to try to sneak around and up,'' he said. ''Maybe I can find the bastard and jump him from behind. Cover me.'' Without waiting for Quarq's approval, he scampered off.

No sooner had he gone than Mongoe and Haezar came out of the rocks behind the commander.

''That guy's toast, and Haezar's got the crystal,'' Mongoe informed him.

''Where's Hu-Jin?'' Haezar asked.

Dyan smiled a wicked little grin, a perfect copy of the Advisor's. ''He went to kick ass,'' he replied.

The sniper's firing, however, continued to pour down. Mongoe, deciding that it was not worth the risk to Hu-Jin, set his particle acceleration beam aside, pulled a laser pistol, and fired back at the unseen foe along with Haezar and Quarq.

At length Hu-Jin returned. ''I know where he is,'' he huffed.

''So why didn't you ace him?'' Mongoe asked.

''I couldn't. He didn't see me, but I saw his face. He had the diamond tattoo--the mark of the Morin-shans. I cannot kill him.''

''He doesn't seem to give a shit about killing you!''

''It does not matter. The situation is such that I cannot risk violating our treaty.''

''Morin-shan?'' Quarq muttered, ''Maybe Zyal sent him.''

''Maybe,'' Mongoe grunted. ''Who cares?'' He picked up his bazooka--or rather, the weapon which appeared to be a bazooka. ''Where is he?''

Hu-Jin pointed. ''Up there.''

''Hey,'' Quarq remarked, shooting a glance back at Mongoe, ''That thing's not loaded!''

Mongoe quickly jumped into the open and fired. A large portion of the top of the quarry disintegrated.

Quarq's mouth fell open. ''What the--?''

''Yeah!'' Mongoe laughed. ''End of problem.''

The commander looked over at him, astonished. ''What is that thing?''

The lieutenant kissed the barrel of his weapon. ''My baby,'' he replied.

Hu-Jin got to his feet. ‘‘Well, that’s more or less settled,’’ he remarked, ‘‘except for that blasted woman. At least we have the Shaheer and the Alat back. Good work, Lieutenant.’’ He turned to Haezar.

The man was facedown in the gravel, quite unconscious.

The Alat was nowhere in sight.

In his office, Zyal closed his eyes and reached out with his mind. He could feel the Alat moving away from the quarry. He frowned. It was not moving toward him. His expression darkened.

Varkeshna and the sniper must have failed, he thought angrily. *Either that or they’ve betrayed me*. He sought out the crystal a second time. To his surprise, the Alat was not moving toward the Shaheer’s Grounds. It was moving quite rapidly and very definitely in the direction of the aerospaceport.

He left his office and called for his chauffeur.

Shadow smiled as she pulled into Qol’s aerospaceport. Her ship was there, and in minutes she and the Alat would be safely in it. With a little luck, air traffic control would give her priority takeoff for some reason she’d make up, and she’d be off the planet before anyone caught on to what was happening.

Briefly she wondered about Sorasta. She had not seen him leave the quarry, but then, the only time she actually had seen him was when he had brought her Dyan, and even then he had been a dark form lurking in the shadows. She did not dwell on his whereabouts for long. He had already been well paid for his services, and his kind could very easily take care of themselves, from what she had heard.

She smuggled the Alat easily through what she considered to be the Qols’ rather primitive customs system, then drove on to her ship. It was docked with numerous other small, private ships in a hangar out beyond the main take-off sites.

As she opened the cargo bay hatch so she could get her hovercar in, a man in expensive attire strode up to her.

‘‘What do you want?’’ she asked him as she worked.

‘‘I have come for something,’’ the man replied in cultured tones.

‘‘Yeah?’’ There was something about him Shadow did not care for.

‘‘You have in your possession something which belongs to my people.’’

Shadow froze for an instant, then casually put her hands on her hips. Her fingers carefully made their way toward the gun tucked under her jacket. ‘‘I don’t know what you’re talking about,’’ she said.

‘‘You do,’’ the visitor replied. ‘‘It’s in the satchel you’re wearing. Kindly hand it over, and I will allow you to leave Neemohne.’’

Shadow sneered and drew her gun.

Her arm froze.

The man smiled faintly. ‘‘What’s wrong, my dear? Have your joints locked? Having a little trouble pulling that trigger, hm? Take a look at your satchel.’’

The mercenary briefly glanced down at the bag. She could make out a faint glow from under the front flap.

‘‘You have the Alat,’’ Zyal smiled, ‘‘and I know that for a fact because I’m using it against you.’’

Shadow growled and tried to will her finger to pull the trigger. She failed. Her antagonist narrowed his eyes and breathed in sharply. Her whole body froze. ‘‘Let me go!’’ she demanded.

Zyal looked into her eyes. ‘‘Relax,’’ he commanded in a deep, quiet voice. ‘‘Look into me. Deep into me.’’ Shadow’s face became calm. Bewilderment showed through in her eyes. ‘‘Board your ship and prepare for takeoff. I will arrange for your immediate departure.’’

‘‘Buh. . . bastard. . . ’’

‘‘Your will is mine until you leave here!’’ Zyal hissed. Inside the satchel, the Alat began to glow more brightly. ‘‘Now, you may move your arm--the one without gun. Give me the Alat.’’

‘‘Nnnnnoooo. . . .’’ Shadow moaned, but the limb did as told. Zyal took the crystal.

‘‘Put away the gun.’’ Again, his command was obeyed, although now the woman was scowling terribly. Beads of sweat dotted her forehead as she tried to resist. Zyal stared hard into her eyes and concentrated. ‘‘Relax. . . ,’’ he commanded. The Alat throbbed with light. ‘‘Load your ship, get in, and leave when you are cleared! Is that clear?’’

‘‘Yes,’’ Shadow replied.

Zyal backed off. ‘‘My, you’re a spunky one,’’ he smiled. ‘‘When you leave this world, you will not remember our encounter or what business you had here. You will not return. Now go.’’

Shadow eventually did remember the Alat--Zyal did not tell her to forget that, only her business in Qol--however, by the time she did and managed to put the pieces together, she was much to far away to do anything about it.

8. Temper Tantrum

Shaheer’s palace, shortly after the incident at the quarry;
Zyal’s mansion, shortly after that

‘‘Tell me again what happened,’’ Hu-Jin prompted Haezar as they sat in the Advisor’s office.

The lieutenant put a fresh cold pack to the lump at the base of this skull. ‘‘I chased the guy with the Alat through a passage in the rocks. When I came through he was dead. I picked up the Alat. Someone threw his head at me, but when I turned around no one was there. Then someone else dressed in black tried to kill me, but Mongoe got to him first.’’

‘‘Shouldn’t’ve stopped to recite his damn poetry,’’ Mongoe put in. ‘‘Fuckin’ looney.’’

‘‘Poetry?’’ Hu-Jin inquired.

‘‘Yeah. He said somethin’ about bein’ So-and-so of the Dancing Blades. ‘Know your death, boy,’ and all that.’’

The Advisor’s eyes narrowed in concentration. ‘‘How did he try to kill you, Lieutenant?’’

Haezar reached into his fatigue pocket and produced the strange, bladed weapon he had picked up at the quarry. ‘‘With a couple of these,’’ he said, handing it over to Hu-Jin.

‘‘Did he carry a firearm?’’

‘‘Not that I could see.’’

‘‘How interesting,’’ Hu-Jin remarked as he looked the weapon over. ‘‘I do believe the two of you encountered a Nightmare.’’ He paused. ‘‘Imagine that. You saw and killed a Nightmare. Extraordinary. I’ll have to go look at the remains.’’

‘‘Uh. . .,’’ Mongoe mumbled, ‘‘There aren’t any.’’

‘‘None? Not even parts?’’

‘‘No.’’

‘‘No blood?’’

‘‘No. Sorry.’’

Hu-Jin snorted. ‘‘What a dull kill.’’

Quarq came into the room. ‘‘We contacted the authorities, then called the aerospaceport,’’ he informed the Advisor, ‘‘but we were too late. A woman answering to Shadow’s description was cleared for priority takeoff before we got a chance to do anything.’’

‘‘Damn,’’ Hu-Jin growled, raking his fingernails across his desk. With each passing second, he was looking less like the kindly, aging man the commandoes had originally met.

‘‘The people at air traffic control told me Zyal gave the order for her clearance.’’

With a roar, Hu-Jin leapt to his feet, drew his sword, and buried it in the desk. Haezar involuntarily jerked away while Quarq remained unmoved. Mongoe looked on, amused and impressed.

‘‘I’ll throttle him with his entrails!’’ the Advisor declared. It was far from an idle threat. ‘‘I’ll feed him his privates! I’ll--!’’

He was cut short as Dyan entered the office. Immediately his furor melted, or at least became masked by a placid expression. ‘‘What are you doing out of bed, master?’’ he inquired. ‘‘You should be resting.’’

The boy approached and ran his hand along the flat of Hu-Jin’s sword. ‘‘I went to sleep and had a dream,’’ he said. He seemed somehow upset or disturbed. ‘‘The Alat was pulling me. It was crying and telling me to come and asking me to help.’’

Hu-Jin leaned forward. ‘‘Do you still feel the pulling now?’’

‘‘Yes,’’ Dyan replied, and began to cry. ‘‘I can feel it and I can see it and I can hear it in my head!’’

The Advisor picked the boy up. ‘‘Then the woman does not have it,’’ he said. ‘‘If you feel this strongly, it’s somewhere nearby. He affectionately tousled the child’s hair. ‘‘Reach out,’’ he told the Shaheer. ‘‘Who has it? Where is it?’’

Dyan sniffled, closed his eyes, and remained quiet for a time. ‘‘Someone’s trying to make it do things it doesn’t want to,’’ he said at length. ‘‘There’s a lot of power. There’s. . . a mansion. . . .’’

‘‘Zyal?’’ Quarq inquired.

Hu-Jin nodded. ‘‘He must have taken the Alat from the mercenary.’’ He set Dyan down. ‘‘Go back to your room now,’’ he told the boy. ‘‘We’ll get the Alat.’’

‘‘But--’’

‘‘Go.’’

The Shaheer turned to leave, then paused briefly to consider the massive sword stuck in the Advisor’s desk. ‘‘You really shouldn’t do that to your sword,’’ he offered thoughtfully. ‘‘It dulls the blade.’’ He managed a slight smile and left the office.

Hu-Jin sighed as he removed the weapon from his desk. ‘‘We have no proof that Zyal hired the woman,’’ he informed the others as he sheathed it, ‘‘but he did send the sniper and the other man. Still, I want to go to him as civilly as possible and request that he return the Alat. I want the three of you to come with me, and I want you to bring your troops. If things are anything less than civil,’’ he added, smiling evilly, ‘‘I want to be able wash my hands in the Morin-shans’ blood without causing a war.’’

The Alat was fascinating, invigorating--Zyal could not put it down. He sat in his office, so absorbed with his newfound power he did not respond to the person pounding on for some time. Finally, he tore his attention away from the Alat, hid it in his desk, and answered the door. His security chief greeted him, looking somewhat ill at ease.

‘‘Sir,’’ he said, ‘‘Advisor Hu-Jin has been spotted heading this way. He’s leading a small squadron of foreign troops.’’

Zyal considered. ‘‘Fine. Let them in.’’

‘‘Sir?’’

‘‘Do as I say. I’ll grant them audience.’’

‘‘Yes, sir,’’ the security chief replied, and exited the office.

Zyal went to his desk and removed the Alat. *And then I’ll destroy them.*

‘‘And what can I do for you, Advisor?’’ Zyal smiled as both his and the S.C.U.M. troops stood in his meeting hall.

‘‘It has come to my attention,’’ Hu-Jin replied stiffly, ‘‘that you have the Alat.’’

Zyal simply looked at him, his hands behind his back.

‘‘I thank you for recovering it. All of Qol will thank you.’’ The Advisor was outwardly calm, yet it was obvious from his stance that he was fighting to control his temper.

‘‘Why have you brought all these soldiers here?’’ Zyal asked. He briefly glanced at his own troops, lined up on either side of the hall.

‘‘Simply to ensure the Alat’s safe return to the palace,’’ Hu-Jin replied.

‘‘Why are they foreign troops?’’

‘‘They were sent here to assist me in certain matters. Right now my own forces are fully occupied with making sure no further harm will come to our Shaheer.’’

‘‘I see.’’

Hu-Jin held out his hand. ‘‘Now, if you please, the Alat.’’

Zyal brought out the crystal from behind his back. It pulsed with energy. He could feel the power oozing through his veins as he stared deep into the brilliant color emanating from its center. He concentrated.

‘‘No,’’ he replied, ‘‘I *don’t* please.’’

The hall became hushed as confused murmurings broke out amongst Zyal’s security troops.

‘‘So,’’ Hu-Jin said in a low voice, ‘‘you did hire the woman.’’

‘‘I did not,’’ Zyal replied. ‘‘Her coincidental appearance here only provided the necessary vehicle for my ascension to Shaheership.’’

''Dyan is the Shaheer.''

''Dyan is a child!'' Zyal snapped, still absorbed in the Alat. ''I am a man. I am fit to rule.''

''If enough of your people side with you, you will restart the ancient blood feud.''

''No matter. With the Alat, I am more powerful than any army. Now, old man, arrange for Dyan to relinquish his position.''

''No,'' Hu-Jin replied firmly. ''Give me the Ala--'' His words were cut off as a burst of light shot from the crystal, caught him in the chest, and bowled him across the hall. The S.C.U.M. troops raised their weapons. Zyal's troops readied theirs.

''That was a warning,'' Zyal announced as Hu-Jin picked himself up with a groan. The Advisor's face darkened. He pulled his sword from its scabbard.

''Come face me like a man!'' he shouted.

Zyal laughed at him.

With an enraged cry, Hu-Jin sent the large blade soaring through the air at Zyal. A bubble of light appeared around the younger man, and the sword bounced off, skimming across the marble floor until it came to rest some distance away.

''Do as I've told you!'' Zyal shouted. ''This is your last warning! Now go!''

''Give me the Alat!'' Hu-Jin seethed.

Zyal eyed his troops. ''Remove these people!'' he ordered.

''G'wan and try!'' Mongoe replied. He fired his ''baby'' at the grouping of guards to the left. They vanished, and so did a large portion of the wall behind them, a good deal of furniture in the next room, the wall after that, and the wall after that. . .

Zyal smiled wickedly as he watched the two factions collide. He wanted this. He wanted another excuse to use the Alat. He wanted to blast them all into eternity with a thought, to watch them die at his fancy. He concentrated harder as the crystal in his hands throbbed. The pleasant, chime-like noises it usually emitted turned to squeals and shrieks. He channeled his anger into the Alat, sending rays of pure hatred out at the battling troops. One of the S.C.U.M. soldiers quite literally exploded, causing him to roar with laughter. Another caught on fire. His aim was off the third time; he managed to disintegrate one of his own men. *No matter*, he thought. *I don't need him--or any of them. I am more powerful than them all.*

Across the hall, Quarq found himself pinned facedown on the floor by a man easily twice his size. He fought, kicked, and struggled, but his attacker managed to plant a knee in the back of his neck, pinning him to the floor. The soldier then drew a rifle across his neck and pulled back, throttling him as worked on breaking the lieutenant commander's neck. Quarq got his hands on the rifle and pushed forward as hard as he could in a desperate attempt to stay alive. He looked up and saw Hu-Jin not far away, retrieving his sword.

''Advisor!'' he croaked.

Hu-Jin drew near. ''I'm sorry,'' he said, looking rather awkward through his anger, ''I cannot kill him! He is Morin-shan!''

''I think Zyal's already broken the treaty,'' Quarq gasped. ''Help me, damn you!''

Hu-Jin disappeared.

Quarq's attacker laughed. ''Relax and I'll snap your neck quickly,'' he sneered. Quarq merely growled and fought on.

He did not have to struggle much longer, as Hu-Jin's sword planted itself firmly between the guard's shoulder blades.

''Oh, my!'' Hu-Jin said, terribly overacting, ''I seem to have tripped over this poor man, fumbling my weapon with terrible, unfortunate results. What a dreadful accident.''

Quarq hauled himself out from under the dead man's body. ''Thanks.''

Zyal, meanwhile, found that his attacks were becoming increasingly difficult. Every time he used the Alat offensively, there seemed to be a wall blocking the channel through the crystal, a wall which, if he did not concentrate hard enough, would bounce his anger back at him and made his head spin. It was tiring him, but it also made him more determined and more furious. He tried again and again, though each time it became harder to use the Alat. His attacks became weaker and more sporadic.

Sensing Zyal's difficulties, Hu-Jin broke free of the melee and charged him. Zyal saw him coming. A burst of energy tripped the Advisor up, and then a tendril of light wrapped around his legs and arms and dragged him in. Grinning with insane pleasure, Zyal bent over him.

''You, old man,'' he growled, ''you I'll kill slowly.'' He put his hand to the Advisor's chest and bore down with his mind. His fingertips began to glow. Still held by the cords of light, Hu-Jin could do no more than stiffen and groan in pain.

''Hey!'' Mongoe shouted, bringing his particle acceleration beam to bear on Zyal, ''Let him go!''

''Are you crazy?!'' Haezar cried as he threw off one of Zyal's men, ''If you fire you'll take out the Advisor and the Alat!''

With a sneer, Mongoe fired to the right of Zyal and Hu- Jin. The wide beam melted the wall behind them, then continued on its way through the mansion. ''Next time I'll narrow the beam, and the same'll happen to you!''

''You can't narrow the beam!'' Haezar snapped, cutting down several oncoming guards with a burst of gunfire.

''He doesn't know that,'' Mongoe replied.

Zyal, however, did not seem to care. He removed his free hand from Hu-Jin and lashed it out in the lieutenants' general direction. Haezar knocked Mongoe to the floor as a deadly burst of energy scorched the air above them. Satisfied that this would do, Zyal returned his attention to torturing Hu-Jin. Mongoe, Haezar, and Quarq gathered together several troops and rushed the man. Again the defensive bubble rose up around him. Nothing got through, not even lasers. Zyal ignored them all as he worked on killing the Advisor.

''This is crazy,'' Quarq growled. ''There's got to be something we can--'' He broke off as his attention fell on the Alat. The crystal was glowing more brightly than any of them had ever seen, no longer throbbing, but with a steady, blinding light.

Even Zyal seemed startled. ''What the--?'' he began.

''*STOP!*'' someone called in a shrill voice, and everyone did exactly that. Literally.

Both commandoes and security guards froze in their tracks, and stayed that way, unable to move or speak. Confusion played over their features.

There came the padding of small feet on marble, and Dyan appeared in the hall, looking very fearsome for someone not quite a decade old.

''You leave Hu-Jin alone!'' the boy shrieked. Inside his glowing bubble, Zyal, the only one apparently uneffected by Dyan's command, took his hand off the Advisor. The light bonds vanished as well. Hu-Jin went limp and crumpled to the floor.

''You're MEAN!'' Dyan declared. ''You're mean and you take things that don't belong to you!''

Zyal stood up to his full height. He smiled, then laughed. ''Oh, my,'' he chuckled.

''Dyan,'' Hu-Jin groaned, his chest heaving, ''get away from here.''

''I HATE YOU!'' the Shaheer shrieked at Zyal. The Alat began to glow red deep within the blinding light. ''GIVE THE ALAT BACK!''

Zyal glanced down at Hu-Jin. ''I detest insolent children,'' he said. ''Haven't you taught the boy any manners?'' He paused, chuckled. ''I suppose I'll have to punish him.''

''No!'' the Advisor protested.

''Shut up,'' Zyal sneered, and lay his hand on the older man's chest again. Hu-Jin cried out in agony.

''I SAID LEAVE HU-JIN ALONE!'' Dyan bellowed at the top of his lungs. The Alat's light throbbed once. Zyal was blown back against the wall, the crystal still in his hand. He picked himself up.

''DIE!'' he shouted, and focused every ounce of hate and jealousy in him on the Alat.

With Dyan present, the wall he had encountered before now became impenetrable. Some of the energy was absorbed, but not channeled through. The rest bounced back in his face. He screamed as his own mental violence burned his face, chest and arms. He fell to his knees and dropped the Alat.

The crystal rose into the air. The frozen soldiers watched in amazement as it floated into the Shaheer's waiting arms. The chime noises were no longer shrieking, but were becoming louder now as the light within the brightness turned from red to rays of yellow and blue.

''You'll never be mean to me or Hu-Jin or the Alat again!'' Dyan declared. The blue and yellow lights enveloped Zyal. He cried out once. When the light receded, he was pressed to the wall, curled up and whimpering. The soldiers present suddenly found they could move, but they did not resume their fight. The hall was quiet.

Haezar helped Hu-Jin up. ''Are you alright?''

The Advisor nodded. ''I think so.'' He went over to Zyal, who shied away as he came.

''Get away from me!'' he cried as he cowered, ''Please stay away!''

''It's okay now, Hu-Jin,'' Dyan said. ''I took care of him.''

''What did you do?'' the older man asked.

''He's scared now,'' the boy explained. ''Of you, me, and the Alat.''

''You did that?''

''Mm-hm.''

''Good. Very good. And since you didn't kill him, the Yun/Morin-shan treaty is unbroken. Excellent.'' He went over to the Shaheer and put his arm around the boy's shoulder. ''But you still shouldn't have come here, especially alone.''

''But I told you,'' Dyan protested, ''the Alat was calling me. I had to come.''

''Alright, alright,'' Hu-Jin murmured.

''Are you angry?''

''No. Come on, let's go home.'' The Advisor lead Dyan out. Quarq called his troops together and followed.

Mongoe paused on his way out to consider his handiwork, and to attempt to soak in what had just happened. He found it difficult.

''In-fucking-credible,'' he muttered, and, shaking his head, followed the others out of the hall.

9. The Beginning

Third High Commander Noril's office, several weeks later.

''I must compliment you all on the success of your first mission,'' Third High Commander Noril told Quarq, Haezar, and Mongoe. ''The War Council is impressed, and the High Council has decided to give me the funding to expand the S.C.U.M. project further. However,''--he shot an angry look at Mongoe- -''there is one more matter to be dealt with.'' Noril paused, looking rather grave. ''I received a very long, very angry complaint by several wealthy families, including Zyal's, among the Qol. According to the complaint, on the day of your hostile encounter with Zyal, a large section of the outer wall surrounding his mansion melted. *Melted.* Melted and vanished with almost no residue. A pale blue-violet light emerged from the wall, went through the neighbor's wall and every room in their house, continued out through the opposite wall, and halfway through the next neighbor's home before dispersing completely. The same light with the same effects came out of the back of the mansion and went through a couple more homes. Half of Zyal's family mansion, where the light came from, has been gutted.'' Again Noril paused, staring intensely at Mongoe. ''I'd say that sounds like the effects of a particle acceleration beam, wouldn't you, Lieutenant?''

''Yes, sir,'' Mongoe replied.

''Now, I wonder how one of those got into the hands of a S.C.U.M. commando? By my records, the only hand-held particle acceleration weapons were issued to Special Forces for a brief period of time, during which the soldiers using them experienced power failures and self-destruction of the weapons. I believe you're familiar with this, Lieutenant.''

''Yes, sir.''

''You should be--your platoon was issued them. And coincidentally enough, according to records, you were disciplined over the disappearance of some of the weapons which turned up unaccounted for.''

''Some were lost in battle, sir.''

‘‘I’m sure they were. You have one, don’t you?’’

No reply.

‘‘Someone who worked on the project told me that after the hand-held pieces, they tried making shoulder cannons, but they were too heavy and clumsy for the average soldier. He told me these things were about the size of. . . oh, I believe he said bazookas. You did bring your bazooka like I asked you to, didn’t you?’’

Mongoe held up his carrying case. ‘‘Yes, sir.’’

‘‘Take it out and put it on my desk.’’ Mongoe did as told. Noril looked it over. ‘‘What is this thing?’’

‘‘It’s a bazooka, sir.’’

The High Commander toyed with the weapon, looking at it more closely. ‘‘Yes, it is. An old one, too.’’ He looked up at the lieutenant, his eyes cold. ‘‘With an almost plugged barrel and that odd addition on the front end.’’ He took several tools from his desk, pried open the back of the weapon, and began tearing parts, insulation, and padding out of it. ‘‘What is this?’’ he demanded, gesturing to the array of parts on the desk.

‘‘It’s. . . it’s the modified remains of several particle acceleration guns,’’ Mongoe muttered.

‘‘I see.’’ Noril looked at Quarq. ‘‘And you didn’t notice anything peculiar?’’

‘‘I. . . I didn’t realize what it was, sir.’’

‘‘Why is it that in your report you write that several mansions, including Zyal’s, were damaged, but you don’t say by what?’’

‘‘I wasn’t sure what it was, sir.’’

Noril scowled. ‘‘Mongoe, Quarq--I could fry both your asses over this--especially you, Lieutenant! But I’m not going to. Not now, anyway.’’

‘‘Sir?’’ Quarq replied.

‘‘If I dismiss and discipline you now, it’ll make me look bad. I thought I was dealing with three--well, at least two--highly disciplined officers, and so did the War Council. They’re under the impression that everything went smoothly. I want to keep it that way. If I dismiss any of you now for improper conduct, my whole project could be scrapped.’’ Noril turned to Quarq. ‘‘You--I’ll overlook your error. Your record’s clean. Between you and me, we’ll say Mongoe here kept the damn thing on your blind side the whole time. As for you,’’ he went on to Mongoe, ‘‘you watch yourself. Durn just barely managed to convince me to let you in. One more foul-up, in any way, and I’ll see you court-martialled. Understood?’’

‘‘Yes, sir,’’ Quarq and Mongoe replied.

‘‘You and Haezar keep an eye on this shithead, Quarq.’’ Noril picked up the bazooka casing and shoved it into Mongoe’s arms. ‘‘Get rid of this,’’ he snarled. ‘‘Dismissed.’’

Late that night, Mongoe sat in his quarters, the remains of his ‘‘baby’’ on his lap. He didn’t have the heart to dispose of it. He stroked the barrel affectionately and sighed, then set the weapon down on the bed.

He got onto the floor and reached underneath his bed, digging through the assorted junk, gear, and boxes. At last he found what he was looking for. He pulled out a box, taped shut and addressed as if it were to be mailed, and cut it open. After digging through the styrofoam bits and tissue paper, he reached in and smiled.

He pulled out two large, awkward-looking, hand-held particle acceleration guns.

Yeah, he thought as he sat down next to the old bazooka casing and went to work, *I think I’m gonna like this job.*

Faye Levine is a Freshman in Carnegie Mellon University’s Art/Design core program. After spending her high school years writing a novella and a 500+ page novel (Single spaced! Wow!), she’s having a little trouble writing SHORT stories. Her recent endeavors include becoming addicted to ‘‘GrimJack’’, blowing up a borrowed amplifier, fending off mushy attacks from a suitor, and teaching innocent bunnies to stalk and kill Elvis impersonators. In her friends’ opinions, ‘‘She’s gone funny.’’

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The Painted Viper Cries

--- Albert L. Evans

I.

I remember my first kill.
Were you there, in a form?
I've always felt as if someone were watching.
I hated you for not helping me.
The blood. . . the blood was all around me
it sprayed into my hair.
A thousand years passed
and still the red stains my hair.

II.

He never told me, you see,
when he took me to bed.
And when he bit me
(yes, it was on the neck, just like Dracula)
I cried out.
He said I would live forever.
But to live is to kill.
You can resist, sure. But the pain. . .
Eventually it takes control.
It's easier to submit,
make it clean.
Eventually we gathered together
his past lovers.
We killed him as only a vampire can
and swore on his corpse
never to visit our fate on another.

III.

A vampire lives forever. It's a curse.
Even vampires fall in love.
My blood burns when I lie with you.
My mind controls the urge,
an instinct
to kill you.
My body wants your blood;
I need your heart.

IV.

The men begin to blur,
faces melting into one, one man.
I've loved you for a thousand years.
I even loved you when you bit me,
and later, when I killed you.
I've watched you die a hundred times.
Once you called me a painted viper
and I didn't understand.
You'd seen me, blood running from my lips;
I would have spared you that,
but you pry so hard sometimes. . .
You question the news and wonder.
Everywhere we go, people disappear.
Painted, hiding the truth.
I never bit you.

V.

You're old.
Lines on your face
cut my eyes.
You never understand when I tell you.
Go away, I said. Stupid bastard
Vampires live forever!
You didn't know I'd have to watch you die
when you decided to stay.
And I couldn't send you away, you see
because I love you.
I knew.
Damn you, I knew.

Bert Evans is an Information Systems/Computer Science/Creative Writing Major at Carnegie Mellon who likes to write about anything and everything in any format. A football player for the Tartans (please don't ask him about "diskette day") he likes to do just about everything. He loves to write and receive mail.

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Fair Play

by Kenneth A. Kousen

In the cold of the desert night, two figures huddled shivering around a flickering fire. At first glance, they looked rather alike. Both were of medium height and medium build. Both had dark hair and dark eyes. Both leaned in closely to the fire, in an effort to warm themselves.

Closer examination, however, revealed striking differences between the two men. The face of one showed an expression of worry and fear, as though expecting at any moment to be attacked. His eyes darted from side to side, peering into the darkness. His ears heard every sound, both real and imagined, from the scampering of small burrowing animals to the whistling of the wind through the rolling tumbleweed.

The other man, by contrast, was calm. He too shivered, but from the cold instead of fear. His face looked placid, except for an eerie smile. He leaned his shoulder towards the first man and spoke.

‘‘You do not have a choice, Vol. If you are going to survive this night, you must kill me,’’ he said.

‘‘Shut up, Aanoch,’’ Vol replied.

‘‘You know full well that I would kill you if I were able. You can not watch me all night. I assure you that the first chance I get, I will slit your throat.’’ He leaned back, satisfied.

Vol jumped to his feet. ‘‘Damn it, I said shut up! I will listen to no more of your foul treachery. If you are not silent, I will---’’

‘‘You will what? Kill me? Fine.’’ He grinned. ‘‘Like I said, it is really your only option.’’

With a growl, Vol stormed away, but the cold and the darkness prevented him from venturing too far from the fire. Instead, he paced back and forth, beating his arms with his hands to keep his circulation going. Aanoch watched him intently, trying to make eye contact. Vol finally looked up, and for a moment the two stared at each other. Aanoch suddenly grinned, and lunged toward the fire.

‘‘No!’’ Vol yelled, running to his aid. He grabbed Aanoch by the blanket that was wrapped around him, and threw him back onto to the ground. In the process, the blanket surrounding Aanoch fell away,

The loss of the blanket revealed another difference between the two men. Aanoch was bound hand and foot with heavy ropes.

He laughed. ‘‘You see?’’ he said. ‘‘You can not stop me forever. If you untie me, I will kill you. If you do not, I will find a way to kill myself. If you leave me in the desert alone, I will freeze to death. One way or another, I will be dead by morning.’’ He paused. ‘‘And you will pay the penalty.’’

‘‘You are insane. I can not help that.’’

‘‘It does not matter. You will die.’’

Vol trembled, both from the cold and from anger. ‘‘Does your life mean nothing to you?’’ he said.

Aanoch grinned at him. ‘‘On the contrary,’’ he replied. ‘‘My life is most precious. But my death means more. My death accomplishes your own, and that is a sacrifice I am willing to make.’’

‘‘But what of your clan? Would you sentence them to death as well? Have you no honor?’’

For the first time, the smile left Aanoch’s face. ‘‘Do not talk to me about honor, you Hull cur. Your clan knows nothing about it. It is we who shall die, to a man if necessary, to achieve the extinction of the Hull clan.’’

Vol’s eyes flashed menacingly. He seized the blanket from the ground and advanced towards Aanoch, poised to smother the bound man. Aanoch watched him calmly.

‘‘Good,’’ Aanoch said. ‘‘Inefficient, but effective.’’ He bared his neck to his opponent, and closed his eyes.

With a scream of frustration, Vol threw the blanket at Aanoch and stormed off. He looked back just in time to see Aanoch moving toward the fire once again. Vol ran back and pulled Aanoch away.

‘‘Now stop that, will you?’’ He grabbed Aanoch by the rope binding his wrists and dragged him away from the camp into the darkness. Aanoch made no move to interfere. Instead, he began whistling an odd, rambling tune. Vol dropped him about thirty paces from camp and returned to the fire. He sat down heavily.

‘‘You can freeze for all I care!’’ he yelled to Aanoch, who just continued whistling a tuneless, melancholy song.

The Cooperation Duel was formed to accomplish what centuries of ceaseless fighting had not---the safety of people fortunate enough to have been born in a clan other than that of Hull and Malmeus. Prior to its establishment, the twin clans of Hull and Malmeus had fought an unending war of revenge and counterrevenge, each side performing successively worse acts of brutality until the senses became dulled to the horrors. Children of each clan were taught the use of weapons at an early age and then loosed upon one another. Those who survived were hard and strong, and completely dedicated to the destruction of the other side. Each atrocity brought new cries of vengeance; an eye for an eye trying to make the whole world blind.

Though many outside clans deplored the violence, the majority of the people took no action. Rather, they felt that the overall good was best served by having the Hulls and the Malmeusians continue to kill each other until both were gone, thus eliminating the problem. Unfortunately, however, innocent outsiders had a habit of ‘getting in the way’ of traps left by one warring clan for the other. Such casualties started occurring with increasing frequency, and when Iir, the only son and heir of the plutarch, died in a Hull explosion, the situation had degenerated too far.

The plutarch wanted to stop the fighting entirely, but he knew that was impossible. Instead, he hit upon an ingenious compromise: The Cooperation Duel. Any time a member of each clan came into conflict, they were captured by the plutarch's troops, bound together, and sent into the desert at the Tir Oasis. Their only hope for escape was to reach, on foot, the Oasis of Sil, which lay forty miles to the southwest, deep in the heart of the desert. The ultimate requirement, however, was that they must reach this goal *together*. Neither side was allowed to leave without the other. If either emerged alone, he was put to death and his nearest clansman was sent out in his place. This process would continue until either a Hull and a Malmeusian both arrived at Sil, alive and together, or until there were no members of either clan left to be banished into the desert. Either way, the fighting would be over.

Naturally, both the Hull and Malmeus clans protested. They soon realized, however, that the weight of public opinion (and, far more importantly, the power of the plutarch's army) was against them. In addition, some of the more aggressive members of each clan viewed the prospect of single combat in the desert with enthusiasm. Among the most vocal of these were Vol, eldest son of the Casar of Clan Hull, and Aanoch, Warrior Chieftan of Clan Malmeus. They were sentenced to be the first pair sent into the desert; to emerge together, or not at all.

Vol slumped listlessly in front of the fire. He was no longer sure how long they had been in the desert. He only knew that what had seemed to be an adequate amount of supplies was nearly exhausted. He thought about this, and decided for the hundredth time that this must be due to Malmeusian trickery and sabotage. He certainly didn't remember using them himself, although he was forced to admit that there were several blank periods of time in his own memory since their entry into the desert.

Staring into the fire tired him. Slowly, his eyelids drooped downward and his head fell forward. A thought jolted him. If he slept now, he realized that Aanoch would freeze to death before he reawakened.

''Just a few minutes, or maybe half an hour,'' he muttered. ''Surely Aanoch can survive that. Let him suffer, anyway.''

''He will not survive. His condition is as bad as yours.''

Vol rose with a start. He looked around in panic for the source of the answering voice.

''Over here,'' it said.

He whirled around. Directly behind him, leaning with one leg propped upon a rock, was the Stranger. He was dressed in desert garb, and had a heavy, dark beard that flecked with grey. He looked relaxed and confident, and his eyes bore into Vol with painful intensity.

''Who are you?'' Vol asked.

The Stranger raised his eyebrows in mild surprise. ''You do not remember?''

''No, of course not. Where did you . . . .'' Vol's voice trailed off into silence. The Stranger did seem vaguely familiar, but Vol couldn't quite place him.

''No matter. Place another log on the fire and we will talk.''

Mystified, but too tired to argue, Vol complied. The Stranger moved toward the fire and warmed himself. ''Feel better now?'' he asked.

Vol realized that he did feel better. Much of the fear had left him, and with it, much of his exhaustion. He nodded.

''Good. Then you realize that there is a solution to your dilemma.''

''There is?'' Vol asked, astonished. ''What is it? I must know.''

The Stranger regarded him with a wry smile. ''You do know. You just don't remember it yet.''

''Damn you, don't give me any of your riddles! Just tell me the answer.'' Vol thumped the ground in frustration. ''I am in no mood to be trifled with.''

The Stranger yawned and stretched elaborately. ''All right, ask me yes-or-no questions and I will try to answer.''

''I do not wish to play any foolish games.''

The Stranger didn't reply.

Vol sighed. ''Who are you?''

''Yes.''

''Yes? What kind of an answer is 'yes'?''

''No?'' the Stranger inquired.

Vol rolled his eyes. ''Very well, have it your way. Do I know you?''

''Yes.''

''Are you a member of my clan?''

''Yes.''

''Are you related to me?''

''Yes.''

''Yes? That is impossible. I do not recognize you at all. How can you be related to me?''

The Stranger simply looked at him.

The shivers that had left at the Stranger's arrival now returned. Vol rose and paced back and forth in front of the fire. Suddenly he stopped and stared in awe at the Stranger.

''Are you real?'' he asked, quietly.

''Real enough,'' the Stranger replied. ''Look, leave me out of it for the time being, will you? Aanoch is dying and you are wasting time.''

Vol turned and looked toward where he had left his bound companion. He realized that the whistling had stopped some time ago. ''I should just let him die,'' he muttered.

''No.''

''No?''

''No.''

''Then I should go save him?''

''Yes.''

Vol spat in disgust. ''Surely you are not telling me I should forget all of the Malmeusian crimes and walk out of here with him.''

The Stranger smiled. ''No. I said that there was a way out of *your* dilemma. Not necessarily out of *his*.''

A light dawned on Vol's face, as though a long-suppressed memory had forced its way to the surface. He smiled an evil smile. ''Yes,'' he said.

''Yes,'' he answered.

When Aanoch regained consciousness, his immediate reaction was to cry out with joy and relief. The frost demons that had haunted his nightmares had treated him with contempt, both for bringing about his own death, and for condemning others in his clan to the same fate. The horrible image of his younger brother Roul staggering in the desert, dying of thirst, had shaken him to the core. How foolish he had been, to force such an end on his own brother!

The image of death still hovered just beyond the horizon. Aanoch shuddered. It was one thing to speak of defying death with bravery; it was quite another thing to actually have to face it. His mind rebelled at the memory. He turned away, and accidentally looked directly into the nearby fire.

Nearby fire? he thought with astonishment. He then realized that the ropes binding his wrists and ankles were gone. He was covered with a blanket, resting next to the fire in their encampment. He sat up abruptly and rubbed his stiffened joints.

''Feeling better?'' said a voice behind him.

Aanoch turned and faced the speaker. It was Vol, but somehow not the Vol he had left. This Vol did not fear the darkness. Instead, he seemed to welcome it. This Vol laughed malevolently.

''Can you move?'' Vol asked.

''Yes, I believe so,'' Aanoch answered, flexing his legs. ''You saved me,'' he said, surprised.

''Yes.''

''Why?''

''So I can exact my revenge.''

With a laugh, Vol lunged toward Aanoch. Aanoch barely had time to stagger to his feet and dodge the unexpected onslaught. Vol rushed toward him again, fists flailing. One struck Aanoch on the jaw, and he lost his balance. In the process, however, he managed to trip Vol, whose momentum carried him forward until he landed in a heap a few yards away. As Vol started to rise, Aanoch looked around desperately for some way to protect himself. He saw the pile of torchwood off to the left, and seized a log. Swinging it back and forth, he yelled at Vol.

''Stay away! I don't want to have to kill you!''

Vol stood and began talking to himself.

''He really doesn't want to kill me, does he?'' he said.

''Yes,'' he answered.

Vol laughed hysterically and jumped at Aanoch, who swung the torchwood at Vol's legs. He connected with a sickening thud, and Vol collapsed, still laughing. Crippled as he was, he began crawling towards Aanoch.

''Get away!'' Aanoch yelled, but Vol kept coming forward. Aanoch ran to the other side of the fire, where he found the ropes that had until recently bound his own limbs.

''Stop!'' he said. ''I mean it. Do not make me tie you up.''

Vol continued his crawl. With a scream of frustration, Aanoch ran to Vol. He managed to dodge Vol's punches and bites long enough to bind his wrists. Hurt or not, Vol tried to kick him, and Aanoch was forced to bind his ankles as well. He dragged Vol over to a rock in front of the fire and left him there.

Vol appeared to calm down, but as the adrenalin left his system he began to shiver. Aanoch picked up the discarded blanket and wrapped it around Vol's shoulders.

''There,'' Aanoch said. ''Now be quiet and let me think.'' He moved toward the other side of the fire and sat down.

''You do not have a choice, Aanoch. If you are going to survive this night, you must kill me,'' Vol said.

Aanoch stared at him in astonishment. ''What did you say?'' he said.

''I will kill you the first chance I get. You can not watch me all night.'' He leaned back, satisfied.

Angry, Aanoch jumped to his feet. ''No! Do not do this! Stop, or I will be forced---''

''To do what? Kill me? Fine.'' He grinned. ''Like I said, it's really your only option.''

''Please!'' Aanoch begged. ''We must stop this. We must break the cycle, or we will be doomed to repeat it until we both die. Does that not matter to you?''

Vol grinned at him. ''Certainly,'' he replied. ''My life is most precious. But my death means more. My death accomplishes your own, and that is a sacrifice I am willing to make.''

Aanoch pulled his hair in frustration. ''But what of your clan? Would you sentence them to death as well? Have you no honor?''

The smile left Vol's face. ''Do not talk to me about honor, you Malmeusian cur. Your clan knows nothing about it. It is we who shall die, to a man if necessary, to achieve the extinction of the Malmeusian clan.''

''You are not listening! You have not heard a word I have said!''

Vol leaned in ominously toward the fire.

Realizing what he intended, Aanoch ran toward him and pulled him away from the fire. He dragged him about thirty paces into the desert, and dumped him onto the ground. He returned to the camp and collapsed. He looked dejectedly into the fire, and listened as Vol in the distance whistled an off-key, melancholy tune.

''We are lost,'' Aanoch said out loud. Tears began to pour from his eyes. ''I can not save him, or he will kill me. I can not kill him, or I and others of my clan will die. Somebody please tell me what to do.''

''You must save him,'' said the Stranger.

Aanoch whirled around and faced him. ''What?''

''Surely you realize there is a way out of your dilemma.''

''There is? What is it? I must know.''

''You do know,'' the Stranger replied. ''You just do not remember.''

Aanoch covered his face with his hands. ''Of course I remember, but I do not wish to. The cycle must be broken.''

''You would rather die?''

Once again, Aanoch saw the Spectre of Death hovering over him, and he could not face it. Aanoch's shoulders slumped forward. He desperately wanted to say yes, but he knew he could not. ''No,'' he said. ''I will do what I must. Yes,'' he said.

''Yes,'' he replied, as his mind slipped back into the madness.

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Being There

by Christopher Kempke

Student

On the side of a mountain in Colorado, a young woman shifted her backpack and peered off of the trail into the brush for the fiftieth time in as many minutes. The trail itself was remarkable only in that it appeared well used, for it was a good distance off of any road and practically inaccessible overland. The woman had herself had arrived via helicopter to a small clearing some ways down the mountain.

After a time she seated herself on a rock, pulled a sandwich from a coat pocket, and began to eat, never ceasing her relentless scan of the surrounding terrain. Thus, she saw the hiker approach without his seeing her. A quick examination led her to believe he was no more than what he appeared, and she resumed eating. A soft peal of thunder rolled up the mountain a moment later, and her eyes snapped back to the hiker. He was no longer there, leaving the trail as empty as it had been most of the day.

''Damn,'' she muttered under her breath, and began the easy descent to where she had seen him last. Reaching it, she sat down again and waited.

The wait paid off about an hour later when the hiker reappeared in a flash of light that made her grin with some private joke.

''You need to work on that, kiddo.'' The hiker stiffened and spun at the sound of her voice.

''Who are you?''

''Currently, a damsel in distress. I need to get into the Academy. I've found the ventilation shafts, but doors seem to be a commodity you folks don't have.''

''Of course not. What use is a door to. . .'' He halted, uncertain, tried to look stern. ''Just who are you?''

''I'm not a Teletrix, obviously. Would you be so kind as to take me in?''

He still looked uncertain. ''I'm just a student, I don't think I can do that. But I'll tell Mr. Morlen that you're here. What did you say your name was?''

''June Kendall.''

He was obviously nervous; the peal of thunder that rolled down the mountain at his disappearance made June's head hurt. By contrast, Anthony Morlen's appearance, a few minutes later, was silent. A tall man in a business suit, he merely *was*, where a moment before he was not.

Anthony smiled ''Good day, Mrs. Kendall. I apologize for keeping you waiting out here, but we had no idea you were coming. Why didn't you just call? We could have brought you here quite easily, you know.''

''I needed the fresh air and I like flying.'' She gestured expansively. ''And the mountains are beautiful this time of year.'' She paused, fixed her gaze firmly on him. ''Are you going to invite me in?''

Anthony looked around, as if just now noticing their surrounding. He smiled, and a moment later, they stood in a plush office. He sat behind the heavy desk, motioned for June to take a seat as well.

''How can I help you?'' His smile, if not handsome, was at least sincere. June didn't smile at all.

''I want to know where Martin is. I haven't seen him for two weeks. No phone call, nothing. Last time I saw him, he was on his way here.''

Anthony didn't lose his smile, but his face showed concern as well. ''It's strange that he wouldn't call. But I'm afraid that he's on Academy business, and I can't tell you where he is. Rules, you know.''

''Damn your rules. I think something's happened to him.''

''I'm sure he's just fine. Quite sure.''

June relaxed, sat back a little bit. ''All right, all right. Can you get a message to him?''

Anthony nodded, June continued. ''Just ask him to call home as soon as he can.''

''I will, but it may be a while. Can I do anything else for you?''

''Yes, as a matter of fact. You could feed me dinner. My husband is always raving about the food here.''

Anthony smiled broadly. ''Then he was indeed raving. But I'll arrange it immediately. One moment.'' He vanished.

June was up instantly, crossing the room to the large file cabinet on the wall. It was locked tight, in that annoying habit of the Teletrix, but she produced a lockpick from a pocket and opened it in a few seconds.

Acting quickly, she emptied the folder labeled ''Kendall, Martin'' into her knapsack, filled it with papers pulled randomly from nearby folders, and closed the drawer.

She was back in the chair before Anthony reappeared.

By the time the helicopter landed at a friend's private airfield, she was completely familiar with the contents of the folder, including the short addition. ''Wife: June Kendall, Chemistry Teacher, Springfield High. Harmless.'' She was somewhat amazed at the number of missions her husband ran for the academy -- almost a dozen in the last year alone. She had thought his connection with the academy almost nonexistent, and knew of his distaste for the administration that ran it. Not for the first time, she wondered just how powerful the academy and its rather special graduates were.

As for Martin himself, the folder placed him in Glasgow, investigating the disappearance of several Teletrix there. Anthony Morlen had lied about at least one point; the folder listed his status as ''missing, whereabouts unknown.'' She forced herself rather sternly to remain calm. The folder was remarkably sparse on details.

She took her friend's car to her home, parked across the street, observing her house. After a short time, she saw someone moving in the living room. June started the car, and drove away.

A few minutes later, she pulled up in front of the Springfield High School and let herself in with the master key. The halls were deserted; apparently Anthony had not sent anyone here to intercept her. A storeroom door covered with ''DANGER'' signs opened to her key, as did a small refrigerated chest in the back. From the rows of chemical vials therein, she selected about two dozen, placing them with some others in a protected case in her knapsack.

Before leaving, she placed a long distance collect call. Anthony's voice came on the other end. She cut him off.

''Nice try. You can tell the dudes in my house to forget it. I won't be attending their party. And if anything has happened to Martin. . . '' She let the threat trail off, hung up before he could answer.

Less than 24 hours later she stepped off a bus in Glasgow. She had taken rather a roundabout path to get here, since the Academy appeared to be taking an active interest in her, but she had little problem getting a flight; money talks loudly, and June Kendall talked fast. She got lucky going through customs, her handbag was not searched, the chemicals in the false bottom remained undiscovered.

Her first stop was in a small hotel on the opposite side of town from the one in which Martin supposedly resided. She got a room without difficulty, a fairly small but modern one, comfortable but not plush enough to attract attention. The innkeeper's accent amused her briefly, her attempt to mimic it back was apparently successful; the Scottish dialect was familiar to her from several vacations with Martin. The thought of him kept her moving quickly, but with caution. It had taken her hours to cross the sea; if a Teletrix found her snooping, it would take less than a second to make the return trip.

Safely in her room, she spread out an array of bottles and vials, and looked them over carefully. It took only a few minutes to mix the concoctions she needed.

When she emerged from her room an hour later, no one would have recognized her. Her usually-light hair was a burgundy so deep it would pass for black, tied in a fashion different from her usual style. All of her visible skin had been lightened by several shades. A short stop to a local clothing shop completed her change. In her new purse, three vials of a light powder were carefully protected from jarring.

In this guise she approached Martin's hotel. It was a larger structure than the one in which she had decided to stay, several stories high and built of attractive red brick. She scanned the outside briefly, then entered. The lobby contained various brochures and posters, and several large stuffed chairs. Two of them were occupied by men reading; one paid no attention at all to her, the second surveyed her briefly as she entered, then looked back to his book. He might be innocent; then again, he might be a Teletrix. Careful not to show too much of her face to him, she sat down in the seat next to him and opened her purse. Carefully, she dumped one of the vials of powder into her makeup kit, then withdrew it. The man next to her continued his reading, but looked up to scan each new arrival in the room.

She took a small brush out of the makeup case as if to apply the powder to her face, but sneezed violently instead. The man next to her looked up at the sneeze, brushing away the cloud of dust that had formed about him. June grinned shyly, hiding her face and holding her breath until the cloud settled. He mumbled something and went back to his reading. A few seconds later, as the sleep powder took effect, his head dropped back in the chair.

June looked around. The incident had not disturbed the other reader, and passing guests had abandoned the lobby for rooms within. She approached the desk and rang the bell.

A short man approached and politely asked how she could be helped.

''I'm looking for Martin Kendall. I'm his wife, and I understand he has a room here.''

The clerk's eyes snapped briefly to the sleeping man in the chair. June noticed.

''I'd really rather you didn't tell that man I'm here. I know he wanted you to watch out for me, but he's certainly not a friend of mine.'' She slid a few pound notes across the table to him.

The clerk pushed them back. ''That isn't necessary. I didn't really like his attitude anyhow.'' The clerk signalled for a bellhop, handed him a key. The bellhop accepted it, vanished.

''Mr. Kendall has not checked in, but he called and said to hold that room for him, and that he'd be back in a couple of days. This was about two weeks ago, though.''

''And that man?'' June prompted.

''He said he was a friend of Mr. Kendall, sent to meet his wife when she arrived. I was supposed to point you out to him.''

June nodded. ''Thanks for not giving me away.''

''Are you in some sort of trouble? I could call the police and have him removed.'' The man seemed genuinely concerned.

June grinned at the thought of a Teletrix in jail. ''It wouldn't do any good. Besides, it would let him know I'm here.''

The clerk shrugged, but his eyes said that he didn't approve of her decision. ''If you need help, don't hesitate to let me know. The bellhop should be making up your husband's room now, so you should be ready in a few. . . ''

A tremendous explosion shook the building, pulling pictures down from the walls and throwing both June and the clerk to the floor. Beams split from the ceiling, raining debris down upon the occupants of the lounge. June rolled under the desk as a rafter crashed down where she had been standing. The clerk looked at her from the other side his eyes wide with confusion and fear; she gestured at him to cover his head, then did so herself without waiting to see if he complied.

After a few long moments the rubble ceased and the constant rain of debris turned to a lingering cloud of dust. She pulled herself up, and shortly realized that reaching the door would now be impossible, but there appeared little immediate danger and plenty of air, so she settled back to wait for rescue.

Only seconds later a human figure emerged from the air, looking around with a look of shock on his face. June recognized him at once.

''Martin!''

Martin Kendall immediately turned in the direction of her voice.

''June? Are you okay?'' The piles of rubble around her vanished without a trace, fresh air wafted over her. Martin himself covered the distance in a few short steps, taking her into his arms as she stood. The clerk behind them stood up uncertainly, shaking his clothes to clear them of dust. Martin nodded briefly in the clerk's direction, then led June around a ceiling beam that jutted out nearby.

The moment they were obscured from the clerk's vision, the ruined hotel ceased to exist, replaced by a plushly furnished room. Martin gestured toward one of the chairs, seated himself in the other.

''Good morning,'' he said, without a trace of humor in his voice. There was an implied question in the tone.

''Came looking for you. What's going on?''

Martin shrugged. ''I wish I knew. Fifteen Teletrix have disappeared here in the last couple months. Inexperienced ones seem to vanish from the Earth, more powerful ones are murdered. The explosion you just, uh, experienced was probably a bomb in my ''reserved'' room. I took this one instead under an assumed name when I got here.''

''How would they know where you were going to be?''

''Apparently the people responsible have access to the Academy's records. Since you managed to find me, I have to guess that those records aren't as secure as they might be.'' He grinned.

June extracted his file from the remains of her tote, tossed it to the table. ''Anthony figured it out, of course. He's been chasing me down since I got them.''

Martin nodded. ''Probably for your protection. Whatever game is going on here is quite dangerous. He's a good man, if a bit sticky on the rules sometimes.''

''Apparently. I take it that this is why you didn't call home?''

''Exactly. I want my file to read 'missing.' I'd rather have people believe me dead. Sorry I couldn't let you know, but I'm being very careful. For a while I even suspected that these people had a device that could detect teleportation, so I didn't want to risk a hop home.''

''You don't think so any more?''

''No. I'm fairly sure I was found more as a result of impeccable record- keeping on the part of Anthony. Any Teletrix who knew where those records were located could get a hold of them at any time.''

''You think it's a Teletrix?''

''Who else would know of our existence? Or care enough to try to kill us? And the murders have all succeeded, with the exception of mine. It's very hard to kill a Teletrix - you have to do it almost instantly, and so unexpectedly that they cannot react. Usually it's been bombs.''

He reached under the nightstand, pulled out several manila folders. ''Here's everything I've been able to come up with on the cases. Some of this is information Anthony gave me before I left, most of it I gathered myself from police reports. I can't find anything in it, but maybe I'm looking too hard. Take a peek yourself and tell me if you can find anything I missed.''

June shook her head, and a small cloud of dust dropped off it. ''A shower first, I think. Care to join me?''

Teacher

June Kendall saw the young blond woman standing by the luggage claim, and carefully eased a syringe out of her purse. The maneuver was almost too easy; she slid the needle into the blond woman's leg, then had it back in her purse before anyone could notice. The blond woman spun around quickly at the sharp pain, her eyes going wide.

''Sorry,'' June said, a moment before the blond woman slumped into her arms.

''She seems to have fainted,'' June said aloud, ''give me some room.'' Carefully supporting her unconscious burden, she backed out of the crowd and headed for the ladies room. Several people offered to help, but she turned them down. ''This happens all the time to her, all it takes is some cold water to bring her back.''

Across the wide aisle, Martin Kendall waited until the bathroom door closed, then teleported them all back to the hotel.

''Nice job,'' he said. ''How long will that keep her out?''

''Only a few minutes, but I'll give her something before she wakes up to keep her asleep for eight to ten hours.'' Even as she spoke, she was filling her hypodermic with a clear liquid.

They waited several minutes until the woman's breathing slowed to almost imperceptible, then stripped her quickly, wrapping her in a hotel bathrobe. June quickly dressed in her clothes, making an occasional adjustment to cover the relatively poor fit. Martin arranged June's hair as closely as they could to the blond woman's style.

''Why would a Teletrix take a plane, anyhow?'', she said as he worked.

''Probably she doesn't have enough experience to leap overseas, or she's never been here before. Or maybe Anthony's working on my teleport detection theory.''

''He certainly doesn't protect his files any better.'' Martin had teleported the files here earlier, allowing them to meet the young woman at the airport. They had been returned equally easily. Since the woman had arrived on schedule, Anthony had not noticed the absence.

An hour later, June was back on the street, Martin following at a cautious distance, maintaining a teleportation ''shield'' around her. They walked several blocks without incident, arriving at last at a small inn.

''Marie Jacobsen, I have a reservation,'' June said to the innkeeper, just loudly enough that others in the room could hear.

''Of course, Lass. Room twelve.'' He placed the key on the counter.

June didn't touch it. ''Twelve's my unlucky number, I'm afraid. Can I have another room?''

The innkeeper shrugged. ''Fine w' me. How 'bout seven? Canna be unlucky.''

June nodded. ''That would be fine.'' She took the new key, left the lobby for the hall. As soon as she was out of sight, a man stood up quickly in the lobby and headed for the door.

Martin, who had entered during the exchange, stepped in front of him.

''Going places? Maybe you have something to report to someone?''

The man's eyes flickered only for an instant. He was a professional, it seemed. His hands snapped to his belt, emerged with a knife, which promptly vanished.

''Next time that will be your hand,'' Martin warned. ''Take a walk out the door, and don't even think of running away.''

As the man complied, Martin teleported a bit of June's sleep serum into him. Clearly in the prime of health, the assassin managed almost a dozen steps before collapsing to the street. Checking that there was no one in sight, Martin teleported the man back to the hotel room, and went to look for June.

Martin Kendall handed his binoculars to his wife. The two of them were perched on a hilltop overlooking a mansion on the edge of the moors. Below, guards walked the perimeter of the mansion's garden wall, but they were apparently ornamental; none carried a weapon that either Kendall could see. The house itself was clearly still inhabited by wealth; the gardens were impeccable, the manor in excellent repair.

Both Martin and June were disguised quite thoroughly. They would pass for travellers at worst, displaced natives at best. June carried a smaller tote than usual, a secret pocket within concealing the usual array of sleeping powders, mixed chemicals, and three grenades Martin had ''borrowed'' from an armory somewhere. Martin had only himself as a weapon, more than sufficient for any probable confrontation.

After confirming that no more could be learned from here, June backed down the hill and stood up. Martin followed. The last light was just fading from the sky as they rounded the bottom of the hill toward the mansion.

One of the guards challenged them immediately.

''Sorry to bother you,'' Martin replied, ''but our car seems to have stopped working. Any chance we could use your phone?''

The guard nodded. ''Shouldn't be any problem with that. I'll have one of the servants show you to it.'' He touched an intercom on the wall, spoke briefly into it. He turned back a few moments later.

''Actually, the master of the house will meet you at the door. It's just up the path, but be careful of the roses.'' He smiled.

''Thank you,'' Martin said, then turned and led June up the path to the door. They knocked gently.

An elderly man met them at the door.

''Good evening, and welcome to my house. I am Mr. Cavendal, but you may call me 'Robert.' Should you require it, please feel free to be my guests tonight; there are always guest rooms prepared.''

''Thanks,'' said Martin, closing the door. ''But I think we'd rather just talk to you, if you don't mind. You have arranged numerous times for assassinations in the last few months, and we'd really like to know why.''

Robert paled. ''Assassinations? I was told that. . . Oh dear.'' He turned and retreated into the room behind him, gesturing absently for the Kendalls to follow. Several elegant chairs and a few comfortable-looking ones waited in the other room. Robert selected one of the latter and sat down. June did the same, Martin stood.

''You were saying?'' he prompted.

''Yes, yes. Are you the police? I really think that we should call the police.''

''I assure you, Mr. Cavendal, that the police could do nothing about this. Try telling us what you know. If it will make you feel more comfortable, you may record the conversation.''

''Please call me Robert. No, I don't think that recording will be necessary. It's all very clear to me now.

''Behind the manor are some old buildings that were once used as stables. I'm rather afraid of horses, and my children are in England at the University, so there wasn't much point in my keeping them open. I placed an advertisement, and some men came to look at the buildings. They agreed to rent, and converted them into some sort of laboratories. Occasionally they would leave envelopes with me to give to specific people who came to the door. I always assumed it was for equipment. . . Are you sure the police shouldn't know about this?''

June withdrew a badge from her tote, passed it to Robert. ''We are the police, Robert. I am Marie Johnson, and this is my husband Richard. We're with special investigations.'' The badge had been forged earlier; Martin grinned at her when she produced it.

Robert looked somewhat relieved. ''How can I help you?''

''By not mentioning that we were here. I think we'd better take a look at that lab.''

''By all means; it's behind the house. They use the rear entrance to get to it, but you can just take the path through the rear garden.''

June stood up. ''Thank you for your help. Don't concern yourself about this matter, it's clear that you are innocent of wrongdoing. Simply continue to behave as before, and things should be taken care of in a few days.''

Robert led them through the maze of the household, showed them the path they needed to follow.

The stables were clearly of a bygone era, spacious and well-built, apparently more than capable of housing humans. There was an elaborate electronic lock on the door, Martin teleported it a few feet away and opened the door.

Within, surgically clean tables stood in neat rows, most with nothing on them. On the walls, shelves were covered with books, chemical equipment and assorted small items. Several large white rats wandered about in cages on a few of the tables.

June moved to examine these. Housed in small cages, the rats appeared well-fed, climbing about on various miscellaneous objects within the cages. It was an odd collection of objects, pens, lab equipment, articles of clothing, things which should not have been in a rat's cage.

As she puzzled it out, a rat vanished from one cage, reappearing in another at the same moment with a flash of light. Thunder sounded softly. June spun instantly, but Martin's attention was fixed on something on the other side of the room.

''Martin, could you come here a minute?''

Her husband complied silently.

''Watch the cage.'' She continued to state intently at it. A few moments later, a rat teleported to the water bottle in another cage. The soft peal of thunder was repeated, as was the light.

June looked at her husband, who returned the look with wide eyes.

''Rats? I didn't think that TP occurred except in humans. Something's weird here. Keep looking.'' He himself continued to state at the cage, as if unable to convince himself of what he saw.

June walked to a large door on the side of the room, with a heavy handle and a lock. ''Martin?''

Martin looked up long enough to remove the lock, then returned his scrutiny. June pulled the door open. A wave of cold air rolled out, along with the hum of refrigerators. She stepped into the doorway and froze.

''Oh my god.''

The soft exclamation of horror brought Martin to her side. He peered into the freezer.

Within, seventeen bodies lay on tables, all surgically opened and in various stages of dismemberment. Martin stood, staring, for a few moments before he spoke.

''Only the experienced Teletrix were murdered publicly. Those less cautious simply vanished.'' He looked at several faces, looked away. ''That's them. Every single one.'' He pushed the door closed with anger, just before the light in the main lab snapped on.

A man stood in the doorway, a gun levelled at Martin's chest.

He started to say something, never managed it. Martin teleported away the gun and half his arm, a crash of thunder testifying that the Teletrix's control was nearly gone. The gunman crumpled to the floor clutching the remains of his arm. His white lab coat was splattered red.

Martin covered the distance to him in a flash, June took a few seconds longer. The man on the floor looked up at him, whispered ''my arm. . .''

Martin knelt and slapped him. ''If you go into shock on me you're a dead man. And if you want to see a hospital soon enough to save your life, you'd damn well better tell me what this lab is for.in a big hurry.''

The man started talking incoherently, stopped himself and started again.

''It's for development and production of a teleportation drug. Help me!''

''Tell me more about the drug, first.''

''It's a derivative of the spinal fluids of natural teleporters. It gives people who can't produce the chemicals naturally the ability to teleport.''

''Why all the bodies?''

''For the spinal fluids. A single natural teleporter can produce ten or twelve doses. The drug is extremely addicting, so Anthony needs about four doses a week, now. Used to be we could get by with latent teleporters, but now it takes ones who have been using the ability, producing the teleport chemicals in large quantities. We're trying to refine the process. Enough?''

''Anthony who?''

''Morlen. He's the one who funds all this, tells us when the teleporters are arriving, which ones to have killed and which ones to subdue for fluids. He invented the process himself a few years ago.''

Martin's eyes flashed. ''Anthony Morlen's not a natural teleporter? '' His tone was carefully neutral, dangerously controlled.

''Yes. But we're trying to make the killing unnecessary. We've almost been able to produce the chemical artificially. . .''

Martin cut him off with a wave of his hand. ''Your research is over, is that understood? If even one more Teletrix is killed, I will return here and take you and your associates apart a little bit at a time.''

''Help me.''

''I will. But only so you can pass that warning on to your co-workers. And I expect you to make sure that those bodies are returned to their families. How you do that, and what you tell them, is up to you.''

The man slumped; there was no way to know if he had heard Martin's last words. Martin looked at his wife.

''I'll take him to the hospital. Keep your disguise and catch the first plane back to the United States. I'll meet you at your mother's house after I kill Anthony.''

''I'm coming along.''

''No you're not. Anthony isn't an amateur, he knows that you can't protect yourself and that I can't afford to protect us both.''

''I can help you with. . .''

''No. I'm sorry, but I've got to do this one myself.''

''But. . .'' June trailed off. Martin was no longer there.

Academics

Martin reappeared silently beneath the Colorado Mountains, in Anthony Morlen's plushly furnished office. The Teletrix Academy director was not there, but his desk was. One at a time, the contents of the drawers appeared on the top of the desk. In the back of the bottom one, Martin found the syringe and several small bottles of a pale reddish liquid. More was in the bottom file cabinet drawer, still more in the safe behind the desk. Satisfied that he had found all this office had to offer, he teleported all save a single bottle into the sun.

The remaining bottle he lifted and stared into for a few moments. The liquid within glistened with sterilized purity, but to Martin's mind it looked like blood. Still, he had unconsciously wished for years that such a drug existed, a way to give his wife the same abilities and protection that he possessed. That her life should be subject to the whims of nature, traffic accidents she could not control, cancers she could not remove, bullets and knives she could not protect her body against, this was the secret fear he lived with constantly; that she be taken from him because she could not protect herself as he could. It was too bad that the drug had to be purchased at a cost in human lives. With a sigh that did nothing to soothe his anger, he flung the final bottle to the limits of his abilities, into the dark emptiness of infinity.

''I have more, you know.'' The soft voice behind him carried a menace that could almost be physically felt. Martin spun to face Anthony Morlen.

The director stood, his unruffled business suit giving him an impression of confidence that was somehow amusing. Anthony Morlen had been the director of the Teletrix academy for two years, a physician who had discovered the existence of the Teletrix and chemically duplicated their abilities, although the process required killing a natural teleporter. When he had manifested this ability a few times, he had been picked up by a Seeker, and brought to the Academy. When the previous director died, Anthony's administrative experience and more-than-average age made him the logical replacement. It was not quite the life Anthony had envisioned as a Teletrix, but it gave him access to an unlimited supply of ''naturals'' when he needed them. Caution, and the elimination of those who might suspect him, were all that were required to keep his position and his supply. However, his net had missed in a single, important case, and both men now knew the other for what he was; Anthony Morlen a powerful and dangerous killer, and Martin Kendall, an equally dangerous and seethingly angry enemy.

Martin tried to teleport a large section of Anthony's body across the room, knowing that it wouldn't work. It didn't. Both men were protecting themselves, teleporting a thousand times a second into the same place, in effect ''hardening'' their bodies against physical and other threats. It was the first lesson the academy taught after its students could control the Teletrix grid, an unconscious mechanism that could be maintained, if necessary, even while asleep. The only reason it wasn't constantly in use was that it interfered with normal movement and eating, as well as causing a hard-to-explain imperviousness to touch and pressure.

Anthony didn't even notice the attempt. ''So it's a stalemate, no? You can't hurt me, I can't hurt you. I have more of the drug, hidden in places you'd never think to look.''

Martin teleported away a large section of the floor. Anthony continued to hover in the air, looking down once with a trace of puzzlement in his eyes, then flashed to the edge of the new pit. Martin struggled to think of an effective attack.

Anthony met his gaze. ''And if you continue to make things difficult, I'll have your wife killed.''

''I can protect her, too. And I've been doing this longer than you have, Anthony. I was born to this, you weren't. Are you so confident that you can challenge me?''

''So far, the challenge hasn't been great. Do you think I got to be director of the Academy because of my good looks? We're equals in the art, and we both know we're safe.''

Martin suspected he was right, but didn't say so. '' Yes, but my ability is permanent. Eventually your stores of the drug will be wiped out. You can't make more, I've destroyed the laboratory and the notes. If you attempt to create another one, I'll lobotomize the researchers if necessary to keep it from being produced.''

Anthony's eyes flickered for a brief instant at the threat. ''I have enough for now. And I know enough of the process to produce more, without aid. I'll just be a bit less, ah, efficient about it.'' His grin was not at all pleasant.

Martin slapped his finger down on the desk intercom, spoke quickly and loudly.

''Students! Protect yourselves and don't let it drop until I say so! Ignore any request from anyone else, especially Mr. Morlen! Your lives are at stake!''

Anthony blinked. ''They'll never believe you.''

''If I gave you the same warning, would you ignore it? Where are you going to find Teletrix now?''

Anthony laughed. ''How about the latents? How about the students who haven't learned how to maintain protection? How about the students who aren't here, and the ones who I can surprise while they're eating? I'm completely beyond your control, Kendall.''

Anthony vanished.

June Kendall appeared in the bedroom of a small house. With her was Marie Jacobsen, whom not eleven hours ago June had kidnapped from a Scotland Airport. Now however, they appeared to be the best of friends, talking jovially as though they had know each other for years.

''Ain't much, but I call it home,'' Marie piped, pushing piles of clothing off a bookcase. She continued to rummage, occasionally teleporting small objects out of her way, until with a triumphant grin she pulled a small folder from the depths of a sheaf of papers. ''Here it is.''

The two women took seats on the opposite side of a table, spreading the contents of the folder between them. Marie carefully examined each sheet of paper, June glanced at them quickly before selecting one in the center of the pile. A picture of Anthony Morlen was paper-clipped to the upper left corner, the sheet itself contained various pieces of information about him. His home address was printed near the top.

''Baltimore. Been there?''

Marie nodded. ''I think I can take us to a hotel room that I stayed in once. But it might be occupied -- I don't know what the safe-jumping points there are.''

''We don't have much choice. I need to get there.''

Marie considered, but her trained reluctance to allowing outsiders to witness teleportation gave way to June's obvious need. ''Okay. Prepare yourself again.''

June decided not to point out that she was quite used to teleportation as a method of travel. ''I'm prepared. Let's go.''

The bedroom was replaced by one slightly larger. In the center of the bed, a young couple ceased their activities suddenly to look up at the two intruders who had suddenly appeared by the side of the bed.

''Aren't peeping Tom's terrible?'' June asked conversationally as she crossed to the door and pulled it open. ''But everyone needs some excitement in their life, don't you think?''

June and Marie exited quickly, pulling the door closed behind them.

Another ten minutes brought them to Anthony's house. Marie ''unlocked'' a window, and the two of them slid quickly into the house. June headed at once for the kitchen, but a careful search turned up nothing. She had just started examining the living room when Marie's voice summoned her upstairs.

The blond woman help up a bottle of reddish-clear liquid. ''There's about twenty of these in a hollow of the wall, along with a syringe.'' She knocked once on the wall, a slight echo emphasizing her point.

June nodded. ''That has to be it. Keep looking, there's probably more around.''

Twelve hours later, Martin Kendall entered the main auditorium of the Teletrix academy, his face barely showing the strain of hours without sleep or food. Thirty faces looked up at him, he scanned them cursorily a moment, then his eyes widened as he saw his wife sitting in the back row. Instantly, he tried to extend his protection to her, discovered that she was already invulnerable. After a few seconds confusion, he recognized Marie Jacobsen sitting next to her.

He had expected June to follow him, but hadn't considered the possibility of her enlisting the aid of the Teletrix they had ''waylaid.'' June flashed him a smug smile, he returned a helpless one.

''Keep yourself protected,'' he said loudly, directing it at her as well as the students in the auditorium. He moved his eyes from her to address the class before he spoke again.

''For the reasons I discussed earlier, Anthony probably won't be here to give the lecture today, so you get me as a guest-speaker of sorts.'' He smiled, but the tension was clear in the faces of the students, especially the younger ones who were not yet sure of their ability to maintain their protections.

Martin ignored it. ''The topic today is momentum.'' He waited until the tension relaxed a bit and some of the students began taking notes. ''Although the same visualization techniques that you use to see the Teletrix grid takes care of fixing the velocity of teleported objects, it is possible to overrule them and change the velocity of an object relative to you during transportation. This is useful, for example, if a priceless Ming vase were falling off a cliff. If you simply transported it to yourself using grid visualization, it would smash into the ground at your feet, or worse, injure you.

''It's not much harder to teleport off your own power as it is off the grid, but it will tire you quickly, and there's some flashy side effects. Most of you remember the thunder that accompanied your first experiences with teleportation. That's a matter of not putting air back when you move the object -- you force it out of the way on the other end, too; that's what causes the light flash, although I couldn't tell you the exact method. When you deal with rapidly moving or falling objects, you need to remember to put air back in the right place and at the right speed, or you get the same effects.''

Everyone was paying attention now. Martin tested the protections of all of them; they held. He smiled and continued.

''Okay, here's the technique. Changing velocity can be hard without combining it with actual transportation, so the easiest method is to stop the object first by the 'pushing' technique we learned last week, then teleport it. However, if you remember, this caused problems objects more breakable than, say, titanium. A general-case solution it's not.''

He actually got some laughs from that one. One came from the doorway, causing Martin to turn.

Anthony stood there, an empty vial in one hand, which he casually tossed to Martin. It vanished halfway through it's arc.

''Just so you know,'' Anthony said softly. Then, more loudly, ''Please, continue.''

Martin made one attempt to kill him, then turned back to the class. No one was even pretending to be calm now. Martin clapped for their attention and continued his lecture.

''Observe, please.'' Martin pulled a rubber eraser from his pocket, threw it full force toward the other side of the room. An instant later, it reappeared in another place, to bounce off the top of Anthony's head. The director showed no signs of having noticed, but a nervous laughter broke out among the assembled.

''This is what happens when you fail to negate the momentum. On the other hand, a careful Teletrix would do it like this:'' The eraser reappeared in his hand; he threw it again. A moment later it appeared in front of Anthony's face, motionless for an instant until it plummeted to the floor. Anthony blinked, then doubled over. Martin's eyes widened briefly, but he recovered fast enough to make another teleportation attempt on the director's heart. It failed; Anthony was maintaining his protection despite his apparent pain.

Another spasm appeared to shake Anthony's body, this time dropping him to the floor. Martin looked to the students and shrugged. They held onto desks, seats, and notebooks, knuckles universally white, not understanding what they saw. The one person who did understand spoke softly.

''Cyanide,'' June Kendall said, standing up carefully and walking to the front of the room. ''Marie and I put a sizable quantity of it into the drugs we found in his house.''

Anthony's eyes looked up toward her as he spasmed again, a mixture of pain, hatred, and other less pure emotions; whatever attack he made on her in that instant failed, and his eyes closed.

Martin looked at his wife. June shook her head quickly. ''It will take about another minute, but I doubt he'll regain consciousness.''

For the next several minutes they watched as Anthony's breathing slowed, then stopped. Even after there was no sign of life, no one made a sound for long minutes.

Finally Martin turned back to the class. His voice was soft, but carried in the silence.

''It would appear, ladies and gentlemen, that this lesson is over.''

Christopher Kempke is a graduate student in computer science at Oregon State University. He is generally acknowledged to have gone insane trying to decide on a plural form of ''Teletrix.'' He would like to thank his fans for their electronic flurry of mail, but this is the LAST Teletrix story he intends to produce for a while.

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