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Looking Ahead

Daniel K. Appelquist

Hello from Washington, D.C. everybody! Yes, I have touched down whole and well in the nation's capital. Sorry it's been so long since the last issue, but, as you might expect, I've been pretty busy what with moving to a new city and a new job. I'm now working as a writer for Visix Software, in Reston, Virginia.

Some big news: first of all, Quanta was given a mention in the March issue of Analog. This mention was due to the fact that Quanta recently garnered second runner up in the Digital Publishing Association's "Digital Quill" competition. The competition included all kinds of electronic publishing, from books and magazines on disk, to technical electronic publications, to electronic fiction magazines like Quanta and InterText (which took the position of first runner up, congratulations Jason!) Although the awards were rather small in scope, they did have the effect (as Geoff Duncan points out in his "SecondText" column in this month's InterText) of drawing attention to electronic publishing. According to Ron Albright of the Digital Publishing Association, they do plan to sponsor another competition in 1993, and they also intend to expand their activities, and become a sort of advocacy group for electronic publishing. I'm personally very excited about this, as I see it lending some additional authenticity to the realm of electronic publishing. To get more information about the Digital Publishing Association, send mail to Ron Albright at 75166.2473@compuserve.com. (Although I still haven't received my "certificate, suitable for framing".)

So, much to my surprise and delight, I've started receiving manuscripts via U.S. mail (and some of them are really *really* good). This rush of new material came too soon for me to include any of it in here, but you should be seeting some of it in upcoming issues. I can only assume that these manuscripts come from people who aren't on the Net. If you are on the Net, and you'd like to submit material, please send it electronically (as email to quanta@andrew.cmu.edu).

This issue finishes up the *Dr Tomorrow* serial, the first installment of which appeared in the March 1992 issue (Volume IV Issue 1). I think you'll find the ending at least as bizarre and enigmatic as the rest of the serial. Also in this issue, another chapter in the Harrison saga, plus fiction from two new authors. Charles B. Owen brings us *Matrix Error*, and Vicki L. Martin brings us *Marketable Assets*.

I'd really like to thank Vince Genovese for helping me out with proofreading and editorial suggestions for this issue. Also, I'd like to thank John Zimmerman for coming up with some stunning cover art for the PostScript edition. If you're subscribing to the ASCII edition and you have access to a PostScript printer, I strongly suggest you change your subscription to the PostScript edition. Besides great cover art, you also get a typeset document to peruse. Of course, you get all the same fiction in the ASCII version.

On the subject of a Quanta party, I've decided to hold an informal get-together at Disclave (which is a science fiction convention to be held in the D.C. area on Memorial Day weekend). If you're already attending Disclave, or if you'd like more information about this event, send me some mail. Note that this isn't going to be an "official" event or anything like that. I'll just be trying to get Quanta people together. It promises to be lots of fun!

Be sure to check out the blurbs on the last page of this issue for the new magazines, *Cyberspace Vanguard* and *Unit Circle*. Both are very good journals and well worth checking out.

Lastly, I'd like to say thanks to all the subscribers who sent me positive comments about Quanta after my last mailing. It really helps to know that people are reading and enjoying Quanta. I appreciate any other comments (good or bad) anyone out there might have. By the way, even after cleaning up my subscription list, which involved deleting over 200 defunct addresses, there are still over 2000 subscribers.

Wow.

Moving?

Take Quanta With You!

Please remember to keep us apprised of any changes in your address. If you don't we can't guarantee that you'll continue to receive the high quality of fiction and non-fiction that Quanta provides. Also, if your account is going to become non-existent, even temporarilly, please inform us. This way, we can keep Net traffic due to bounced mail at a minimum. Please send all subscription updates to quanta@andrew.cmu.edu. Thanks!

MARKETABLE ASSETS

by Vicki L. Martin

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James Regon pulled his eye away from the retinal scanner and thought, *I hate this. I really, seriously hate this.*

He shot nervous fingers through his short-cropped black hair. The Polliwog behind the flexiscreen web, her red-tipped snout shining, hurried him into the back room with perfunctory politeness.

Midnight blue eyes studied his newest possession. *Gahd, what a head of hair!*

Riotous copper curls lay limp on bony shoulders. The young human sat in an unreliable chair, clad in a beige sweater two sizes too large for his slender body.

His hands were securely tied behind his back.

Regon slit the ropes with a single swipe of his knife, said, “Let’s go,” and started out the back door.

The man rubbed the ropes off his wrists and studied Regon with renewed wariness. “Where are we going?”

“I’ll explain later, after we’re clear of the market.” When the stranger still refused to come along, Regon hissed, “Look, unless you want to get caught up in some very nasty attempts on my life, I’d suggest you move.”

Green eyes blinked twice before the man followed Regon out the back door and along the alley.

The pair slipped out of the alley beside a sweet-scented confectioner’s shop and mixed with the crowds. The younger man threw hungry glances toward every food booth they passed.

Though refusing to stop, Regon dug a meat roll from his pouch and passed it across. The man tore into the bread-wrapped sausage.

“What’s your name?” Regon asked.

“Erik,” he mumbled around an overfull mouth. “Erik Milhollin. You?”

“Regon.” He eyed the quickly vanishing meat roll. “You’re not half hungry, are you?”

“You’d be hungry, too, if you hadn’t eaten in three days.”

“I thought the Polliwogs treated their merchandise better than that.”

“Most times they do. They only hold off on the food when the ‘merchandise’ still has a mind of its own.”

Regon grinned, pleased that he’d read the signs right. “Bit of trouble, were you?”

“Enough.” Erik wiped his hands clean on the seat of his pants, favored Regon with a look of distrustful speculation, and asked, “So when you plan on jumping me?”

“Jumping you?”

“That’s what you bought me for, innit? Big he-merc like you doesn’t go to the market unless he’s buying something for his bed.”

Regon laughed. “Not this time, mate. I’ve got other plans for you.”

Cat eyes darkened. “I won’t work the streets for you.”

Sight of two familiar faces in the crowd to their rear drove the chosen retort from Regon’s mind. Instead, he asked, “How good a fighter are you?”

“Why do you think I was tied up?”

“If you get into trouble, put your back into the nearest corner and stay the hell out of my way.”

“Promise me another sausage roll and a warm ale, and I’d fight half the Polliwog army with you.”

“You’re on, friend.”

Though expecting an attack, Regon was almost too late turning to meet the first man’s rush. Sidestepping a knife aimed at his right kidney, he chopped at the conveniently presented neck and danced away. A backswung leg effectively destroyed the man’s balance.

A hard shove sent him flying even further away.

All around them, market shoppers screamed and fled. Voices raised in fear and warning filled the air. Panic reigned.

Two more attackers closed in from behind. Regon wheeled; he might evade one, but he’d never dodge the other. The nearer, larger of the pair, moved in first. A fifteen inch jungle knife filled one hand; a round-tipped stun-rod filled the other.

Same old Neville.

The stun rod swept in low, aimed for Regon’s genitals. An electric jangle shot up his trouser leg.

To protect his vulnerable back, Regon turned Neville’s attack energy against him, reversing their positions; Neville’s body blocked the second man’s attack.

> Regon’s shout brought Sills back around, the barrel realigning. Regon threw himself away, hand clawing for his own holstered SW&R. The move was trained, instinctive; he’d never draw and fire in time.

Regon spared a quick glance around. Terror had cleared the street, leaving the five humans momentarily alone. His first attacker–a free-lance assassin named Sills–sprawled in a heap, his head bloody where he’d collided with a nearby wall.

Erik danced with the third attacker.

Regon turned back in time to avoid Neville’s second strike with the stun rod. He bulled his way inside Neville’s reach, too close for the larger man to use the rod effectively. Before Neville could bring either of his weapons to bear, Regon caught the man in his fist and twisted. Hard.

Neville screamed; the fluting screech brought a cold smile to Regon's lips. Regon's other hand snatched away the man's knife, twisted it around, and hissed the razor edge across the man's throat.

Twisting about, Regon stopped, slowed by surprise. Sills had recovered

enough to pull himself off the dirty pavement and draw a short-barreled breastpin gun from a concealed pocket. The barrel lifted, aimed at Milhollin's unsuspecting back.

"Erik! Behind you!"

Regon's shout brought Sills back around, the barrel realigning. Regon threw himself away, hand clawing for his own holstered SW&R. The move was trained, instinctive; he'd never draw and fire in time.

The breastpin spat. Its load–a thin, steel pin no longer than a fingernail–caught Regon in the left arm. Pain made him lose hold of his half-drawn weapon. He sprawled on the pavement, stunned and helpless.

A victorious grin split Sills's face. He steadied the breastpin for a second, fatal, shot.

Regon knew he should react some way, should try to recover his own weapon. He couldn't move.

Stupid way to die, Regon thought. *Never should've bid in public thataway.*

The breastpin fired again.

A body hurled between Regon and Sills. A barked cry cut off abruptly as the figure landed on the street. Blood from a tiny hole under one shoulder blade marked the missile's exit point.

Somewhere in the fractured seconds of the attack, Erik saw Regon's danger. He caught his man by the lapel and hurled him into the path of the needle.

Erik's knife sank to the hilt just below Sills' breastbone before the killer could realize his mistake.

Regon's vision wavered, shivering in a gray fog. Sure fingers fiddled with his jacket sleeve, tying off the arm to slow the bleeding.

"Talk to me, Regon. I don't know this city. I don't even know anything about this planet. Tell me where to take you."

Regon harvested the scattered threads of his reason. He accepted Erik's help, leaning heavily on the narrow shoulders, and pointed up the street.

"Two–three–blocks down, turn right. Hover rental shop on the right."

They shuffled along, ignoring frightened and curious looks from the emerging crowd. Regon fished an activation chip from his pouch. He handed it to his companion then let his mind drift.

Regon sank gratefully into the soft cushions of the hovercar and watched buildings and city parks whiz past. He wondered at himself. It wasn't like him to yield to anyone, especially not a complete stranger–a man he'd just bought off a Polgish slave block.

The initial shock of injury wore off even as the pain increased. Warmed by the full-blowing heating unit, he dug his way back to reasoning thought and studied his companion.

What makes me want to trust him? I've never accepted anyone like this in my entire life. So he saved my life. I work solo. I'm trained. I shouldn't be able to trust anyone until I know a lot more about them than I know about this Erik Milhollin. I don't–I won't–trust anyone. My mission is too important. I don't dare risk it.

"Are we going to fly around the city in circles," Erik asked, "or are you going to tell me where we're going?"

"Take the Millish Expressway–the northbound just ahead. I'll tell you where to go from there." He studied the curl-crowned profile. "You saved my life–why? You could've let them kill me. You'd've been free."

"You still owe me a sausage roll and a tankard of warm ale. Can't collect those off a corpse. Besides, the instant the Polliwog law found your body, they'd decide I did it, then where would I be?"

"You've got a point," Regon agreed.

Erik took his eyes off the hover lane long enough to study the wound. "We'll need to stop and take care of that soon. Will we be driving long?"

"Long enough. Stay on the Millish northbound 'til I say otherwise."

"Yes, master."

The dry mockery in the deep voice brought a smile to Regon's lips. Warm and comfortable, he sank into the cushions and closed his eyes.

Regon jerked awake again, aware that he'd lost consciousness. The single-room cabin smelled pleasantly of processed stew.

A steaming mug of coffee bobbed in front of his nose.

"Don't know what your job is, friend," merriment filled Milhollin's voice, "but it must pull a lot of credit. Haven't seen a legitimate Terran brew or a good Malt Scotch in over ten years."

"I have a private supplier." Regon eyed the glass of liquor in his companion's hand; a dark eyebrow rose.

"Sorry, helped myself." Milhollin saluted him with the cup. "Would've got you some, too, but I gave you a hypo of pain cleaner a couple hours ago. Can't mix the two, can we?"

"How did you know how to get here?"

"Found a fiber map in your pocket."

They devoured a full meal as the second of Polgish Three's two suns disappeared over the western horizon. Drowsy, Regon saw no reason to move. Milhollin set the dirty dishes in the portable wash unit, stored away the leftovers, and returned to the bed.

Feeling the need to fill the silence with conversation, Regon asked, "What were you doing on the Polgish slave block?"

"Wrong place at the wrong time. My Mam was a systems merchant. We'd flit about the quadrant, shipping this, hauling that."

"Lemme guess. Someone slipped something into a cargo."

"The honest reputation she'd spent forty years building didn't do her a bit of good. And because we'd been so honest, we didn't have enough money for a good lawyer."

"What happened to her?"

"Last I saw of her, we were in the Sentencing Chamber. When they gave me the block ... she had a seizure. No one ever told me what happened."

"I'm sorry."

Milhollin shrugged off his concern. "I think it's about time you told me what you were doing at the market today. If it wasn't for a tight bottom for your bed, what was it?"

Regon studied the younger, smaller man and gauged his potential– as partner, co-conspirator, or threat. Regon sat up in bed, and motioned for Milhollin to close the light screens.

"I'm a ... well, my business is my own. It's honest and legal. As you noticed, it pays well, too. I call it 'corrective adjustment'."

Milhollin sat on the foot of the bed, expressionless but alert.

At least he's not already retreating, Regon reasoned. "I've been hired to stop a Polgish criminal named Sorin. He has a bodyguard named Keishie, a female Polliwog with rather exotic tastes."

A hard glint marred Milhollin's eyes. "I suit her ... exotic tastes."

"You won't do anything physical. Just draw her away from Sorin long enough to give me a shot at him."

"You're an assassin."

"The man's a sadist, Milhollin. He gets a charge torturing innocent children. He flaunts it, bragging how he's above the law. Someone's got to stop him, and by god, it's going to be me!"

Milhollin leaned away from him, as much to protect his ears as to gain breathing space. Regon sat back against the headboard.

"I intend to get him," Regon said, "one way or another. Will you help me?"

"If I don't?"

"I'll tie you up and leave you here. Kill you if I have to."

"You'd do that after I saved your life?"

"I don't have a choice. I can't afford loose ends."

Milhollin snarled an oath, leaped off the bed and raced out the door.

His arm aching despite the medication, Regon slammed a fist down on a bedside control box. He threw off the covers and ran to the door.

In the light-flooded drive, Erik reached for the hovercar door, only to cry out and fall back, unprepared for the security system Regon had activated. Spying Regon on the covered porch, Erik sprinted towards the trees, ignoring the agent's shouted warning.

Erik fetched up against the static fence running full speed. He grunted, every bit of wind knock from his chest, and fell to the ground, nerves twitching from the shock. Though stunned, the space nav scrambled onto his hands and knees.

"If you're thinking to get away in some other direction," Regon warned, "don't."

Erik tottered to his feet, determined to face his killer with his head high. "Get it over with, then. Go on. Shoot! Just don't expect me to beg you off."

Regon cocked an eyebrow at the gun in his hand; he didn't even remember picking it up. A smile, half mocking, half ironic, raised one corner of his mouth. He motioned toward the building.

"Inside, friend. We'll talk about this some more."

"No."

"Get in the cabin, Erik. Now."

"Go to hell!"

"Stubborn–."

Regon slammed the brakes on his anger. Trading temper for temper was not the best way to deal with Erik Milhollin.

"Look, I won't hurt you unless you give me a reason to. Will you please go into the house? It's cold out here."

Erik hesitated a moment more, then stumbled toward the porch, wobbly on unsteady legs.

Regon moved with only slightly more grace. Closing and sealing the door behind him, he tumbled onto the mattress and deactivated the exterior security lights but left the screens activated.

Erik draped the other side of the bed, gasping and shuddering.

"That was dumb," Regon said. "You were lucky I preset the fence to stun."

A plump pillow under his face muffled Erik's response. "Hoo-bloody-ray."

"Look, Erik, I'm not asking you to do anything illegal or even immoral. All I need is Keishie away from the door for two minutes. After that, you're free to go anywhere you like. I'll give you your papers, sign you a free man."

"I don't really give a damn."

"I'll help you find your Mam."

Erik's body tensed. The curls lifted.

Sensing possible victory, Regon pressed, "I have contacts. Help me get at Sorin. You'll earn your freedom and find your mother."

Erik's lips pressed into a mirthless grin. "Mum's freedom."

"I can't promise to swing that."

"I'll help you. I'll give up my own freedom, stay to do whatever dirty work you want, if you'll get Mam back on her ship."

Regon sucked on the inside of his cheek, thinking the option through, though the simple act of future estimation was more difficult than it should have been. He forced his stiff, aching body off the bed and plopped himself down before the small communit set into the wall.

When Erik sought to watch, he sternly commanded him back to the bed.

Regon played with the keys for ten minutes then sighed and sat back, rubbing his aching temples. Erik sat rigid on the edge of the bed, wringing his hands in unconscious distress.

"It's a deal."

Erik's face brightened.

"You know where she is?"

Regon motioned him over. Erik bounded across the room and examined the screen.

"The seizure wasn't severe," Regon reported. "She was released from hospital two days after the sentencing. Transported to Labor Camp Ten-A-Nine. That's the most minimum security facility on Krinosh. She'll be safe there until we do what needs doing."

"Get her out now."

"Oh, no. I don't know you, Erik Milhollin. I don't know if I trust you to go through with it if you think you've already had your way. She's free when the job is done, not before."

"And if you botch the job? What then?"

"I've left a written statement with my employer. If it goes sour because of something I did or some hazard I didn't foresee, she'll be given her pardon."

Regon deactivated the communit and stood up. He wanted that bed even more than he wanted revenge against Sorin. "Since that's settled, I think I'll–." A wave of cold-heat swept over his face; his eyes blurred. "Wha–?"

Erik caught him as he started a slow slide toward the floor. Regon's vision tunneled down.

"Sh'd've known ... Sills ... always liked to f-f-fiddle his needles."

Erik swallowed. "Poison?"

"Naw ... just ... be sick awhile." Vicious chills rattled his teeth. "S-s-s–oh damn. 'm sorry."

Erik said something more, but Regon was too far lost in sickness to hear, or care.

I can't believe I'm doing this. I've fixed the security codes on the hovercar. With the credsticks I found hidden around the cabin, I can get off this miserable rock. If it weren't for the chance of getting Mam out, I'd've left days ago.

Erik sobered, honest with himself. *No, I wouldn't have. I wouldn't leave a mud-*

worm in this sorry state. Even a paid assassin deserves help when he's sick.

The smaller man replaced the moist cloth across Regon's forehead and struggled to make sense of the sick man's disjointed mumbling. He spoke mainly of people and places Erik had never heard

of. Something occasionally slipped through, an emotion or action, that he found recognizable.

I wonder who 'Eliza' is. Regon's certainly heaped some colorful abuse on that one's head, but I don't feel there's anything malicious behind it–more fondness than resentment.

Sorin, though, is different. There's real hate there. It's not abstract, either–no hatred for collective sins. There's something personal here. Regon's come up against this particular Polliwog before, and it's left him scarred.

What sort of nightmare am I mixed up in?

Regon's mumbles spiraled down into another deep sleep. Erik pulled the coverlet further up over the shivering shoulders and let the man sleep.

For three days he cared for the delirious man. If he didn't have his hands full with Regon, he was bored half out of his mind for lack of anything to do. Whatever else Regon might be, he was neither reader nor gamester; there wasn't a single book or computer game anywhere in the cabin, nothing to wile away the hours except a tatty deck of cards.

Left with hours of loose ends, Erik had bent his curiosity and skill to the communit. *This is pretty impressive, and I haven't even touched the restricted files yet. This Regon ... he isn't the assassin I thought he was. He's somehow connected to GIP. Haven't figured out how yet, but I will before I'm finished.*

"How ... how did you ... get on that?"

Erik looked up. Though weak as a newborn babe, Regon stared back with delirium-clear eyes. Erik shifted his own gaze to the chrono on the wall.

No wonder my spine's talking to me. I've been sitting at this thing for hours!

Erik closed the unit and came to the bed. Regon's skin, though pinched and pale, no longer burned his fingers.

"Good, your fever's broken. About time."

"Where did you ... get the axe code ... my communit?"

"You gave it to me. Saw you use it that first day." Erik pointed to the polished chrome side of the kitchen storage unit. "Saw your reflection in that. Handy trick every space nav and pilot picks up, learning to read mirror images."

"What did you ... find out?"

"Nothing you'd mind me knowing. I was careful to stay out of the restricts. I know you're latched to GIP some way; haven't quite figured out how yet. I mean, Galactic Intelligence Prime are more famous for arresting assassins than for hiring them."

"I'm not an assassin. At least ... not the kind you're thinking of."

"The thought has crossed my mind a couple of times over the last three days, yeah."

"Three ... three days?"

Erik controlled a budding smile. "Closer to four. Whatever was on the needle, it certainly did its job on you."

"Three days wasted ..."

"Nearer four. Hungry?"

Diverted, Regon pulled a tired face. "Not really ... but I need something anyway."

Erik returned within minutes with a meal for the invalid. He spoon-fed Regon a light portion of the broth and bread. A quite comfortable air hung between them, enough so that Erik risked trying to satisfy his curiosity.

"You talked a bit ... delirious with fever."

"Nothing offensive, I hope."

"Just names and places, and a few snatches of conversation. You mentioned Sorin several times, and never in a very commendable light."

"He is not a very commendable being."

"I'm beginning to see that." Since Regon hadn't objected to his references to Sorin, he felt it safe to ask, "Who is Eliza?"

Regon stiffened. Dark blue eyes hardened to mica flints. Erik retreated before the powerful glare.

"Eliza is none of your business."

Erik left the bed, taking the meal tray with him; he tried but failed to match Regon's gaze. "Sorry."

Regon studied the stiff set to the slender shoulders and regretted his fury. Exhausted physically and emotionally, he relaxed on the bed. He drifted in mental limbo, too weak to rise but too wound up to sleep. He was only vaguely aware when Erik, having put away the food and set the dishes to clean, moved to the bedside and stripped off his clothes.

Erik extinguished the light. Exterior darkness flooded through the heavily curtained windows, throwing the room into utter darkness.

The bed rocked, a sudden quaking of the air mattress. The cover raised; cool air brushed him from shoulder to hip. A warm body stretched out at his side, replacing the cover and displaced heat.

Unease thickened the air around them. Regon didn't like it in the least.

"Sorry. It's just ... a private subject."

"I understand. My fault for pressing. Go to sleep, Regon."

"Erik?"

"Mmm?"

"Thank you."

The phenomenally wealthy citizens of Yulith Cote resided on The Hill, a single rise located almost dead center of the metropolis. Seated in the hopper, the two men studied the well-fortified ten-story steel and weather-glass structure behind the thirty foot static wall.

"That Sorin's place?"

"Yeah."

A reddish eyebrow vanished beneath copper ringlets. "Ever think of breaking into the planetary treasury? You'd have better luck."

"I don't plan on taking him here," Regon said; he activated the hover's air pumps and set the vehicle moving again. "There's a dive in the Lower City he frequents, sometimes only every two or three seasons, but it's the one haunt where I know I'll eventually see him."

"What sort of place is it?"

"Procuring house."

"Girls?"

"On the surface. It's secret trade is children, all sexes, all species. I'll wager the oldest Human child in the place is probably around ten."

Erik paled. "You can't be serious. Ten years ... they're bloody babies!"

"My employer's kept watch on the place for years but could never find a loophole in the system that would shut them down. We intercept their transports as often as we can but a few ships always get through. We've even outbid them at the block, just to keep the babes out of their hands."

"'We' being GIP?"

Regon shook his head. "I didn't say that."

Erik smiled. "I know."

Regon tooled the hovercar down the

tubes with near-reckless speed. Erik had to admire his competence at the controls–it wasn't too many who could so casually control a careening hunk of metal skimming on a bed of air.

The hover moved constantly downhill. The buildings beyond the weather-glass domes of the tubes grew increasingly dense. Prosperity and glit decreased in direct proportion to age and decay. By the time Regon shifted them onto one of the uncovered open-ground paths that led into the lowermost sections of Yulith Cote, they were surrounded by nothing but trash, destruction, and filth.

"There's been a surveilling team on the place the last two seasons. Sorin's sure to visit, probably tonight or tomorrow, within the next sevenday at the outside."

"How can you be sure?"

Regon pointed to a message flashing across the hovercar's portable communit. "A new shipment arrived at the spaceport just this morning. Sorin's bound to want first choice."

"Who's sending that?"

"The surveilling team. Even I don't know where they're watching from, and it's not good policy to try and spot them. They're a strange lot. Most of them aren't even human, and they don't like having all their hard work blown by a couple of nosy agents."

"I'm not an agent. I'm a distraction."

Regon resisted smiling only by a supreme effort of will. He couldn't, however, control the merry dance of his eyes.

"It won't matter to the surveilling teams. Anyone who spots their watchposts soon wishes he hadn't."

Regon parked the hover in a Pay N' Protect sealed lot and led his companion into a gray tenement three longish blocks from the procuring house. Staring through the glassless window frame, he pointed to the squat building down the way.

"That's the Blue Cushion. Don't let the face fool you. Inside, it's a palace. Supposedly a bawdy house for free-trade prostitutes, it's owned and run by a half-Human named Brand."

"What's his other half?"

"Hell devil. He's the one who hooked Sorin on Human children. He caters to Sorin's vices and provides him with a private 'sampling room'. There's talk he even joins the Polliwog in his 'games'."

"Why hasn't the law closed him down? Raping underagers is illegal in every known species."

"It's simple, really. On Polgish, the Final Judiciary for Sex- Related Crimes is a slimy worm named Kemmosh. A true politician, smooth as silk, with a taste for young flesh. All Brand's lawyer has to do is put the case before Kemmosh, and it'll get flushed out the nearest disposal tube."

"How can space sludge like that exist?"

"After tonight, it won't. At least not in Sorin's case."

"So what happens?"

"When Sorin comes, he'll do it openly. He's so sure of himself he doesn't even try to hide his tastes. Keishie will stand outside the main door, knocking away any other customers. That door is, by the way, the only known way into the building. There is another, the one the shipments are brought through, but it's so well hidden, not even the surveilling team's been able to find it."

"Where do I fit in?"

"Your job is to lure Keishie away from the door for the two minutes I'll need to deactivate the warning alarms and get inside the building. How you do is up to you."

"This Keishie–she the kind that likes the big-eyed, frail, helpless types?"

"From what I could tell, yeah. Though she usually goes for sun-gold blonds."

"Once you're inside, then what?"

"Then you're free to go."

"But what about my Mam?"

Regon offered his first truly honest smile. "She's already pardoned. I imagine she's already back on her ship, on her way to pick you up."

"What are you talking about?"

Regon drew meaningless figures in the blown dust covering the window sill. "You didn't have to tend me when I was sick. I owe you for that. Before we left the cabin, I arranged full pardons for both you and your Mam. She has her ship back, and both pardons in her pocket. If she goes at top transport speed, she'll be at the spaceport by noon day after tomorrow."

Regon dug a small pouch from a pocket and handed it over.

"There's a temporary freedom receipt in there, and enough credsticks to tide you until your Mam gets here."

Erik stared from the wallet to Regon and back; he didn't immediately accept the offering. "Why are you doing this? It wasn't part of our deal."

"I want Sorin. You've agreed to help me, that's reason enough. The fact that you saved my life–twice–might have something to do with it."

"I didn't do it for a reward, not even this one." Erik slapped the pouch away, his temper simmering. "I'll do whatever I have to do to save my Mam, but I won't be bribed into helping you. If what you've said about this Sorin is true, I want to stop him for that reason alone."

"It's what you first asked for, and I never denied it, did I? You added the condition of your Mother's safety later. I want Sorin, Erik. Help me get him."

Erik hesitated a final moment before accepting the pouch.

"Thank you. Without you ..." Regon shook like a dog ridding itself of an unwelcome bath and pasted a cheery smile onto his face. "You'd better snatch what rest you can. Oh, and one of the surveilling team will be by later on tonight with some clothes for you."

"Clothes?" Erik studied the sweater and trousers he wore. "What's wrong with what I'm wearing?"

"Not exactly provocative. Won't make Keishie's eyes pop."

"No, guess not."

Expecting Regon to do likewise, Erik made himself as comfortable as possible on the bare floor. He watched as the larger man instead took up a post beside the window, eyes still on the Blue Cushion.

"You should rest, too," Erik said. "You're still not over that tainted dart. It doesn't make sense to go up against the Sorin without a proper sleep under your ear."

"I'm fine. I've spent so much of the last few days sleeping, I don't think I ever want to close my eyes–or see another bed–for at least a full cycle."

Erik laughed. Reassured, he settled

down to get what rest he could in the unsavory surroundings.

"It'll be tonight. I can feel it, 'Liza. It'll all be over tonight. I'll finally settle with that sadistic beast."

The soft-spoken words roused Erik

from a light sleep. Camped in the darkest corner of the bare room, he watched the man seated beside the window, his indistinct figure lit by a ghostly glow from the dimmed communit screen.

Regon, unaware of his audience, stared at the points of light that marked the Blue Cushion's entryway. His voice fell to its lowest register, ripe with silky promise.

"I'll see you tonight, Sorin. I'll finally meet you face to face."

Erik's skin wiggled under the undisguised enmity in the throaty purr.

Finally meet Sorin, he said. That means they've never met before. How could he hate Sorin so much? Maybe it has something to do with this Eliza.

Ray shifted to relieve a sore spot on one bum cheek. Regon reacted to the slight sound, his weapon out and ready before he consciously thought to draw it.

Erik glanced at the gun and cooed, "Twitchy."

"Could get your head shot off making sudden sounds like that." Regon shoved the gun back into its holster.

"Sorry, didn't know there was another way to move." He joined Regon at the window but could see nothing but pins of light all across the city. "You want to catch a little sleep? I'll watch for awhile."

"No."

There wasn't really room at the one window for both men to watch in comfort, but Erik had no interest in going back to sleep. He leaned his back against the wall and stared at the room's door, his thoughts on a speeding cargo transport and an upcoming reunion.

"Gerrom came by while you were asleep," Regon said. He jerked a thumb at a crate set against the far wall in a patch of bright moonlight. "Your wardrobe. Let's have a look."

Regon examined the contents under the pin-point glow of a wrist-light. Milhollin didn't like the larger man's nasty chuckle.

"You'll look smashing in this little bit."

"Little?"

"Very little."

Milhollin activated his own wrist-band torch and nudged Regon aside. "Lemme at that. If I'm going through with this, I get to pick what I wear."

"You're no fun," Regon sighed, but moved back to the window, leaving Milhollin to sort through the trunk at his leisure.

Down on the street, Erik followed the more experienced man around the darkened turns. They seemed to walk forever. Within five minutes, Erik was totally and in all ways, lost; Regon was obviously coming at the place from a totally different direction. Within five more minutes, he heartily wished Regon would slow down.

Five more after that, legs aching and lungs burning, he seriously considered canceling his agreement. He wondered if the Blue Cushion was their destination at all.

Regon stopped so suddenly Erik ran into him from behind. Sight of the Blue Cushion two doors ahead of them prevented any dangerous outburst.

A single figure stood before the entrance, a round, piggish Polgishin, highly visible in a heavy black jacket with enough metal decoration to outfit a small hover.

"Is that Keishie?" he whispered.

Regon nodded.

"Well," Erik sighed, "let's get this over with, shall we?"

"Erik ..."

Erik turned at the soft, almost humble lilt in Regon's voice. Regon stood with weapon drawn. For an insane second, he thought Regon intended to shoot him. He relaxed when the Terra SW&R shifted towards the procuring house.

Regon was too busy studying his shoe tops to notice Erik's momentary start of fright.

"I'll cover you long as I can," he promised, "but once I'm at the door, you're on your own. Are you sure–?"

"Yes. One question, though. Why don't you just shoot Keishie and save all this bother?"

"Because GIP has a charter with the Polgish government that protects guarders like Keishie. Unless she takes an active part in her employer's perverted games, her only crime is doing the job she was hired to do. It I take Sorin down while he's busy playing, it'll be a justifiable case."

Erik nodded, understanding. "But if you ambush his guarder without good cause, you're flushed out the dispose-all, right?"

"Right." Regon shifted his weapon to his left hand and held his right out to Erik. "Thank you again. I hope everything works out for you and your Mam."

"One favor before I go off." Erik's grimace was visible even in the faint light. "Hit me."

Regon's left eyebrow shot up. "Whazzat?"

"You heard me. Hit me. Someplace it'll show."

"You said ... hit you?"

Erik's green eyes snapped. "Yes, hit me! It's part of my cover."

Even though Erik demanded the move, Regon's hand came up so quickly, the smaller man had no chance to flinch away. Regon's knuckles left a readily visible swelling on Erik's left cheek. A trickle of blood from his nose completed the desired effect.

Erik moaned and cradled his cheek. "I said 'it me, no' knock m' 'ead off!"

"Sorry, didn't know there was any other way to hit."

Erik started to move off, only to have Regon call him back.

"Erik." Seeing he had the younger man's attention, Regon said, "Eliza was ... she was one of the first Humans Sorin took ... she was just seven years old. ... They never ... they never found ... She was my daughter."

Regon disappeared before Erik could do more than lose hold of his jaw.

From his new vantage point, Regon could see the entire street. Less than two minutes after he settled in, Erik appeared around the far corner in a stumbling, twisting run. Regon rose halfway to his feet before he realized it was all part of Erik's "lure".

He is good, Regon's mind-voice rang with admiration. *If I didn't know I blacked him up, I'd swear he was the defenseless, cuddly little gamin he's pretending to be.*

Erik stumbled up the road, the perfect picture of a lost, shocky babe, eyes wide, full lips opened enough to tempt but not tease.

He moved with a carnal glide that was more instinctive than deliberate, with just enough "woe-is-me" to cast away any suspicions Keishie might have.

Turning, Regon found the Polliwog's

eyes sealed on the approaching figure. The twitching around her bulbous nose, the batting of her heavy eyelashes and the jerking of one knee all proved her interest.

Erik slumped against the wall directly across the street from Keishie, the image of helplessness. He tipped his head just enough so the guarder could see his damaged face.

"Looks like you were done bad by someone," Keishie called across the way. "Need help?"

"Please, they ... I didn't want ... four of them wanted me to ... not all of them at once, I couldn't–!" He turned wide, pleading eyes toward the guarder, cat green turned almost liquid silver in the vague glow from a nearby streetlight.

Regon wanted to laugh at the effeminate quiver in Erik's voice.

Keishie gave the door behind her a measured glance then crossed the street to stand beside Erik.

"Don't worry, little one." Keishie rubbed Erik's back in a calming caress. "I'll take care of you."

I just bet you will, Regon thought.

Keishie and Erik moved down the street, the larger Polliwog guiding the "stumbling" Human. Regon watched them go, a curiously reluctant flutter in his chest; if Keishie decided to play rough, Erik wouldn't be able to fight her off.

He should never have coerced the pilot into helping him. It made Regon no better than Sorin, taking what he wanted without permission.

The instant the two figures disappeared from sight, Regon raced through the blackest shadows. He squatted in the lit entry, his nose less than three inches from the entrance lock.

It took him longer to get inside than he'd expected. Brand had installed a new locking system since last Regon had surveyed the place. Still, he was somewhat familiar with the design, and skillfully bypassed Brand's few custom touches.

Small plug glows down by the baseboards offered dim light. Cushioned chairs and settees of various blue shades touched with silver sat scattered around the room. Wall sconces burned at their lowest setting.

He spent a solid ten minutes searching for the basement entrance, and another five figuring out how to open the portal without triggering any alarms. By the time he shifted the settee to the side, taking a bit of floor with it, Regon's nerves were drawn uncomfortably tight.

He descended the narrow stairs. The settee slid back into place above him, tossing the descent into pitch blackness.

Regon lit the way with his wrist-light. Ahead stretched a long, unbroken corridor with a single door faintly visible on the far end.

Every instinct Regon possessed warned him not to go on. Brand must have one or two nasty surprises waiting for anyone who penetrated his security.

Regon studied the way ahead, sweeping the ceiling, floors, and walls with the wrist-light. Nothing aroused his suspicions, yet his subconscious still screamed danger.

Regon hugged the wall, mindful of traps and triggers. He moved an inch at a time, pausing every few breaths to study his next move.

Less than five feet from the door, a faint snapping noise brought Regon around. A hidden plate plunged from the ceiling to block his retreat. A second identical plate slammed down directly in front of the door, effectively sealing him in.

The hiss of displaced air was loud in the confined space, as was the purr of machinery somewhere beyond the walls. Regon gagged and collapsed, hands clawing alternately for his throat and a small explosive charge in his utility pouch. Black flashes behind his eyes led him to the floor, and unconsciousness.

The pain of lost circulation in his hands roused Regon from the comfortable warmth of his own dimmed mind. A chill wind against his bare skin roused him still more.

Opening bleary eyes, he surveyed his surroundings, slowly remembering the cause of his condition.

Amateurish, he railed at himself. *Oldest trap in the books and I walked straight into it! The boss'll dance on my blushing hide when he finds out.*

Blinking against the bright light of the large chamber, Regon turned at the sound of soft whimpering toward his back. His heart seized.

Two small cages stood against the far wall. A dozen children of five different races huddled behind the bars, terrified and helpless. One, a small Human male with bright red curls and pale green eyes, studied him back, fire and fear melding in his open gaze.

Oh gawd, they're just babies! The oldest can't be more than eight!

A lock disengaged. The children scampered to the farthest reaches of their prison, huddling in terror. Regon, bound hand and foot, naked as the day he popped out, rolled over onto his back.

Sorin and Brand entered the pleasure chamber, matching expressions of triumph on their faces.

Brand stopped beside Regon, a towering mountain.

"Who are you?"

Regon sealed his lips, letting his cold, hard eyes speak for him.

"I said who are you?"

Regon stared and said nothing.

"It doesn't matter, I suppose," Brand said. "It's just as well you're here, though. Saves me the loss."

Confusion colored Regon's thoughts, though no flicker of an eyelash betrayed it to his captors.

"You'll do nicely as an example to my new toys, and it'll save me the financial loss of using one of them." Brand turned to Sorin and indicated the children. "Like what you see? They arrived less than an hour ago. Each one's as virgin as the snows on Mount Taowl."

Sorin studied the cages and drooled, his left knee jerking out of control; Regon wanted to throw up.

Brand lashed a filament cable through Regon's wrist restraints. Regon wiggled and squirmed, doing his best to punch Brand's face. For lack of any other defense, he even tried to bite the man. It did no good.

A small winch took up the slack in the line until Regon hung several inches above the floor, his ankles still bound to a ring mortared into the foundation. Stretched between the two, his shoulders and hips felt torn from their sockets.

Brand moved over to the children, smiling at their terrified hiccups and whimpers.

"This is a lesson you'd all better learn. You do what I say, when I say, to whoever I tell you to do it to. If you don't, you'll get just what I'm about to give

him." Brand pointed to Regon, then repeated his speech in four different languages.

Regon clamped his teeth down on an oath. Brand moved to one of the supply cabinets set against the left wall and withdrew a small injector tube. The procurer moved to stand before Regon, but his words were for the children.

"This is a drug–Jupiin–that makes the body feel more than usual. It will make whatever we do to him seem even worse than it is."

Regon twisted, trying to avoid the small cluster of needles aimed at his left shoulder. The cold sting of injection faded before his rage.

A weak tingling spread from the injection site to every nerve in his body. It wasn't precisely unpleasant, more like the euphoria just after a hard battle, an awareness of every nerve ending and skin cell.

Sorin brushed cold fingertips down Regon's ribs. Acid fire burned his mind. He bit off an instinctive scream but could not hold down a moan.

When Sorin's hands closed on other portions of his body, Regon thrashed about, half-mad with agony. The need to scream overcame every physical and mental effort to control it, and carried on forever.

Between his helpless act and playing hard-to-get, Erik Milhollin kept Keishie occupied for a solid half-hour before figuring he'd given Regon enough time.

Finding a way to slip away from the interested Polgishin hadn't been easy. Erik managed it with the help of a conveniently placed street walker who attracted the Polliwog's eye. Tall, blond, young and slender, with big, sad blue eyes, he was much more Keishie's type, and more willing to entertain than Erik.

Erik slipped away while Keishie and the teenage whore made their acquaintance. In search of a hire-hover, he'd moved only two blocks before he realized he'd headed in the direction of the Blue Cushion.

Why did I come this way? I've paid my debt. My face hurts and I'm tired down to the bone. I have my freedom chit, enough credsticks to live on, and the spaceport's in the opposite direction. Mam's coming and I want to get off this rock.

He stopped on the street, undecided. Concealed in shadows, he saw three figures emerge from a building directly ahead.

"That oughta do 'em 'til the next load," one of the men said.

"Don't count on it. Neither of them're ever satisfied," the second, largest man said.

"Just be glad they goes for the small ones, Loor, and not big hulkin' types like you."

Laughing, the three men vanished into the night.

Erik stared after them, gaping. It seemed incredible–a wild leap in logic. Could he have stumbled on the secret entrance to the Blue Cushion?

He was already inside before consciously deciding to move.

Sweaty, tired, and filthy, Erik Milhollin emerged from the tunnel in an underground bathing room. A communal shower area formed one side; the floors and walls still glistened with moisture. Discarded clothing for small bodies littered the tiles.

He heard the screaming from several deserted corridors away. A deep keening noise, accompanied by the fluting cries of terrified children. It took several moments to attach a name to the masculine shrieks.

God help him, they caught Regon.

Erik approached the area with caution. He would do no one, least of all Regon, any good if he got himself caught as well.

Erik crouched near the door beyond which the sounds came. Regon broke his cries of pain with curses aimed at his tormenters. Erik smiled at the man's spirit; even nearly insane from the abuse, Regon's metaphors were colorful and extremely descriptive.

Children's weeping and two men's laughter occasionally drowned out Regon's weakening cries.

I can't just go barging in unarmed, he reasoned. *They'd cut me to pieces. So what can I do? I'm a space nav. I know electronics and computers. I know guidance and propulsion systems... That's it. Yes, it just might work!*

Hang on, Regon, just a few minutes more.

Erik moved down the hall, searching.

Suspended between heaven and hell, Regon listened while his torturers laughed at his feeble yips. Hatred burned hot in his soul but had no outlet. Impotent with fury, blinded by unending agony, he yearned for five seconds' freedom–five seconds to break that fat Polliwog's neck.

His entire body throbbed, one mass knot of suffering. They hadn't done anything serious to him, yet already he ached for it to end. Brand's drug pumped through his system, magnifying the least little hurt until he thought he would die of it.

"What the–?"

Regon pried open pain-swollen eyes and forced his vision to steady.

A curly-haired apparition stood in the doorway. *Erik?*

"Am I interrupting something?"

The familiar voice, lilting with hard irony, echoed in Regon's ears. The pain, though no less, became more bearable.

"Who are you?" Brand demanded. "How did you get in here?"

"It was quite simple, really. Y'see, dear Keishie gave me up in favor of a slinky little blond lump, so I thought I'd see what fun I could find someplace else."

"How did you got past all my security?"

"I just walked right through the wall."

"Well, you'll never walk out through it."

Regon want to call a warning, tried with all his waning strength. Brand would be dangerous to Erik all by himself. With Sorin's help, he would be unbeatable. What madness had prompted Erik to walk in here unarmed?

Regon's first thought was that his complete loss of vision was due to impending unconsciousness. Brand's gutter oath and Sorin's shout indicated otherwise.

Children howled into the blackness. Brand and Sorin yelled. Erik Milhollin said nothing, and Regon waited.

His first sight of Regon suspended in the air, body covered in a shiny sheen of sweat, red welts and thin cuts marring him from cheek to ankle, drove Erik Milhollin very near the edge of reason. Sight of the children inside the cages did nothing to stabilize his composure.

Though the majority of his attention stayed with Brand and Sorin, a small part was on Regon. Comprehension dawned on the pinched face, a quick flash of relief, quickly followed by anxiety.

A light touch to the control in the palm of his hand plunged the room into utter, complete blackness. He'd already placed every item of furniture and flesh in his mind, and had no trouble finding Sorin in the vital first seconds.

The Polgishin croaked when Erik's hard fist slammed into his rolling midsection. Erik followed up with a left hook that sent the blind Polliwog flying.

Erik placed Brand by the rustle of the man's heavy clothing. He was careful to remember the table that held them apart. Skirting the obstacle, he met Brand as the larger man did likewise.

Erik moved with a spaceman's grace in the utter absence of light. The loud swish of cloth gave ample warning. He ducked under the blow and landed a kick square on Brand's most tender portion.

Brand stumbled back into the table, groaning his agony.

Erik kicked out again, catching Brand alongside the head. The larger man lashed out with his arm. Caught above the left ear, he staggered back, seeing bright lights where he knew there should be utter blackness.

Erik ignored the peculiar ringing in his ears and halted his uncontrolled retreat when his back collided with something soft and yielding.

Regon's shudder and deep groan explained the contact, and set his place in the mental room map. Erik met Brand as the larger man stumbled around in search of him.

The sound of Regon's agony, the sensed pain ringing along Erik's nerves, angered Erik beyond reason. He lashed out with a dirty kick, aimed shoulder high. Calculated and deliberate, it landed precisely where he wanted it to land.

He barely heard the wet crunch over the noises of the children. Brand made funny little choking sounds before he fell to the floor. The rustles, the soft gagging noises, quickly ceased.

Erik's every sense strained to find Sorin, but he could feel no sign of the other man. A moment's search found the control where he'd dropped it beside the door.

"I'm about to turn the lights back on. Close your eyes," he said, first in Terran Standard then in Krinoshin, for the benefit of the children, and switched on the lights.

After the terrible gagging noises and the eternal silence that followed, Erik's voice made Regon go weak with relief. So relieved was he, he didn't obey Erik's command in time to keep from being dazzled by the sudden flood of bright illumination.

His first clear sight was of Brand stretched out on the floor a few feet away, throat crushed, face covered in blood. His second was of Erik beside the door, looking both ways along the outer corridor.

"He got away," Erik groused even as he came back and activated the winch that lowered Regon to the floor.

Regon tried hard not to flinch at his friend's considerate touch, but even the brush of air along the fine hairs of his arms and chest was an individual agony. He could not help but quiver when Erik tried to comfort him with an arm across his back.

"No, don't touch ... drug ... sensitized skin ... hurts to touch."

Erik yanked his arm back. "What can I do?"

"Nothing ... has to wear off. I'm cold but I think I'd die if I tried to cover up. The children. Do what you can."

"Where's your communit?"

"Dunno. They skinned me while I was unconscious." Regon was too busy trying to lessen the painful contact with the floor to give much thought to his missing clothing.

Erik hunted the chamber until he found Regon's things piled on top the table. Digging through the pouch, he found Regon's communit and moved back to the traumatized man. Gaining instruction on how to contact the surveilling team, he quickly placed the call and gave directions on how to find the secret entrance. Assured that help was forthcoming, Erik rooted through Brand's pockets until he found the activation chip for the children's cells. Freeing them was the work of a moment. Calming them down was another matter entirely.

He finally enlisted aid of the three oldest, calmest children and put them in charge of soothing the others. One Human child, a boy with red curls and green eyes, even managed a pale grin before turning to coo comfort to a tiny Jumoospin cubling.

As it happened, a Jumoospin female was first through the door. The cubling took one look at her, yipped in hysterical delight, and ran to bury her tiny muzzle in the fur of the adult's chest.

Two of the other children showed signs of renewed terror, but the rest were curiously drawn toward the gigantic Jumoospin female.

Leaving her to calm the distressed younglings, Erik turned back in time to prevent two strangers from touching Regon's oversensitive flesh.

One of the men, a grey-skinned Krinoshin with a medical tattoo on his forehead, looked to Regon and asked, "Do you know what they gave you?"

"Jupiin. Dunno the dose."

"Doesn't matter. It's one of the more harmless sensitizers. Nothing to it, really."

Regon favored the medical man with an irony-tinged eyebrow; blue eyes danced with pained mischief.

"If you say so. Allsi, you can be a right pain in the butt sometimes, you know that?"

"If you thud and blunder boys will shoot across the galaxy in search of new and interesting ways to cause yourselves pain then look to me to set you right again, can I help it if I take refuge in wit?"

"Taking refuge is one thing," Regon gritted his teeth and endured the physician's examination, "murdering the poor thing is ... something else ... dammit, Allsi, that hurts!"

"Regon ..."

Erik's soft, submissive voice distracted Regon from his discomforts. Green eyes glittered in the light.

"Erik? You alright?"

"Sorin got away. I'm sorry. I wanted to

get him for you, but ..."

Though the chance to achieve a longed-for revenge was gone, Regon could not hold down a grin.

"There'll be other times."

"Least we got this lot free in time," Erik sighed, smiling at the drape of younglings draping to the ursinoid from shoulder to ankle.

"There's that," Regon agreed. "I just wiiiiIII–Shiii–!"

Regon yelped as Allsi pressed an injector tube against his right hip. Milhollin's warm laughter followed him into healing sleep.

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THE HARRISON CHAPTERS

by Jim Vassilakos

Chapter 13

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She stood before him, silent and expressionless as subtle strands of moonlight bathed the sanctuary in dim shades of purple. Then a coy smile played into her silver eyes, and her white mane rippled in the icy darkness, hair like blades, etching an icy trail along his throat. Her nails left only a thin trickle of blood, barely a distraction, one following closely upon the other in preparation for her knee's decisive collision with his crotch. He doubled over, falling to the floor with a heavy thud and torn, mud-caked britches.

"Out of the frying pan and into the fire, eh Harrison? That was for making a fool of me. This is for trying to nuke me."

Her palm pressed against his nose, two fingers slowly but resolutely forcing their way into his eye sockets.

"I didn't do it."

She held the pressure for a moment and then changed her grip on his face, lifting him to the wall by the scruff of his chin.

"I was going to kill you mercifully, but lies piss me off."

"He's not lying." The voice belonged to green-eyes.

Sule rocked Mike back a foot and then bounced him off the wall, dropping him to the mauve carpet like a wet rag. He was still shaking off stars as Sule turned toward Arien's daughter.

"Get out!"

"What are you going to do, Sule? Beat me up?" The young woman stepped forward, confidence filling every movement. "If you touch me, my father will kill you, and if you touch him, I'll kill you."

Mike raised his head slowly and blinked, the gleam of moonlight off iridium scarcely catching his notice. She had Johanes's laser. An appropriate weapon, Mike figured. With nothing mechanical to slow her down, it shaved the bio-synthe's edge to a bare minimum. Sule's scowl faded slightly, a touch of amusement sparking silver eyes.

"You are a foolish girl."

"And you're on my turf, Sule. Don't forget it."

Mike raised himself halfway off the floor, taking a wider surveillance of the chamber. Erestyl's emaciated body lay folded in a corner, his eyes staring at nothing in particular. Mike crept over, fumbling in vain for a pulse and finding a spent hypo on the floor.

> "Goodbye, Harrison. And good riddance." Then she broke into a sprint, and Mike heard the sound of gunfire. He hit the turf, holding Kato down as bullets continued to whiz overhead.

"He outlived his usefulness," Sule contemplated. "The reason you came to this space sick planet is dead."

"Why?"

"Efficiency."

Mike coughed, "Efficiency?"

"With the aid of Korina and Alister, his mind was peeled open such that I could question him in solitude. After he disclosed the details of his treachery, there was simply nothing more of value to learn from him. Now all that remains is to dispose of the body, a matter to which I must personally attend."

With that she picked up the body and carried it out the door. Mike followed her, still limping, outside and across the moat's narrow bridge. Outside, the Worgs guarded the mansion, their hungry eyes perched upon blood-drenched snouts. Sule dropped the body several feet from the moat, placing a small vial on Erestyl's chest and breaking it with her boot. A moment later, the body was consumed in flame, and several of the Worgs took up a mournful howl. She waited a minute, finally kicking the charred remains into the water.

"Food for your pet, Alister."

Mike turned around. Arien stood behind him with Korina by his side. He seemed despondent, light from the dying flames flickering in his eyes.

"The first cooked meal she's had in years."

"You're sure you won't let me take this gatherer with me? I'd rather like to keep him."

Arien smiled, "If it wasn't for Mr. Harrison, Sule, it might be your burnt corpse in that moat."

Her eyes narrowed, but she never got to respond. A gravcar slipped casually over the gate, turning back only as the laser cannon opened with a warning burst. Arien raised his arm, effectively restraining further damage to his lawn.

"Your ride, I take it?"

Sule nodded, "Vlep and your wife. You want her, you'll have to fetch her."

"Mr. Harrison?"

Mike looked at him dumbly. "Don't you have guards to do that sort of thing?"

"Please, Mr. Harrison. Oh, you'll need this."

He handed Mike some hi-tech gizmo, a makeshift medical scanner if Mike guessed correctly.

"To check for anything physically out of the ordinary. It's been pre-programmed. All you have to do is hit this button. Easy enough for you?"

Mike was about to say no, but the look in Korina's green eyes told him not to bother. The front gate was wide open, and crossing through it, Mike saw Vlep in the driver's seat.

"Long time, no see."

"Why are they sending you?"

Mike shrugged, "I'm sure he has his reasons."

Ambassador Kato was in the back seat, her brown eyes glassy and sluggish. Mike opened her door, and began scanning. The gizmo seemed to say she was okay, and he offered his hand in what he figured was his most diplomatic gesture of the evening.

"C'mon Ambassador."

He reached in and shook her shoulder, finally getting some figment of attention.

"Mind scanner?"

Vlep ignored the query.

"It's okay, Vlep. Sule can't hear you."

"You'd be surprised."

"Oh," Mike nodded, "she's got a vice on your balls does she?"

"In my neck."

Mike made a T-sign, turning the scanner toward Vlep.

"You know what that means, don't you?"

Vlep looked up, somewhat confused.

"You're just gonna have to do what you do best, Vlep."

Mike leaned in, grabbing Vlep's hand and pressing it against his forehead.

"Understand?"

He picked Johanes' bug out of his pocket, screwing the two pieces back together. Then he dropped it in Vlep's hand.

"It's the only chance you've got."

Mike lifted the ambassador from the vehicle and pointed her in the direction of the mansion. She leaned against him as they walked, and he felt as though he were training a baby to put one foot in front of the other. They met Sule half way across the lawn. Her white mane waved gently in the cool, night air, and she held a small metallic cylinder in one hand, its tip gleaming golden in the moonlight.

"Goodbye, Harrison. And good riddance."

Then she broke into a sprint, and Mike heard the sound of gunfire. He hit the turf, holding Kato down as bullets continued to whiz overhead. Then all was silent, and the gravcar was gone. Mike picked himself unsteadily off the lawn, helping the Ambassador to her feet. Korina was there moments later, her father trotting close behind.

"Thank the fates. We thought you both dead."

"Vlep's no marksman, but all the same, it's amazing that he missed," Arien added.

Mike shook his head and started back toward the mansion.

"He didn't miss."

Mike leaned against the tile wall, his groin still aching as he watched the last of the moat gook slither down the drain pipe. Coating his body in a gentle, sleepy embrace, the shower's warm spray made him more than a little drowsy. Considering everything, it was a strange feeling. Getting shot at usually kept him wired for an evening. Lately, however, the slugs had been flying so thick and fast that they were no longer a novelty. Adrenalin was becoming a tiresome companion. Even Sule's knee in his crotch seemed in retrospect like nothing grander than a momentary distraction, though, at the time, he was quite certain that the universe was coming to an end. He curled his lips inward at the memory, letting the warm water invade his mouth and nostrils until he had to spew it out just to breathe. It was a good memory, he decided. It helped him forget about sleep.

The black fleximesh laid out for him was vastly superior to the mendwear he usually threw on. It was designed along some Draconian, poly-adaptive, one-size-fits-all concept. All-within-reason is what they actually meant. Mike aired off and slipped into the new threads, still damp from their soaking. Once they dried, the fibers would expand and harden. Decent protection, Mike figured, and it was air-tight to boot, better than a flak vest or a vacc suit and at a fraction of the bulk. Mike checked the fit in the mirror, the imperious grin sliding off his face as the glint of polished iridium met his gaze. A draconian, military insignia lay etched into the left breast: external intelligence if his guess wasn't too far off.

Korina and Johanes were still in the study, each perched over the medical console like a pair of determined vultures as they argued over the finer features of a sub-dermal charge. Mike tried to meet Johanes' smile with one of his own, but even in his fleximesh uniform, the Draconian could put on a dastardly grin, unbeatable considering the image of the Realm most people carried around.

"Vlep's cooperating," Johanes patted the reception unit. "They're going to Xekhasmeno... to the starport it seems. Oh, by the way... nice outfit."

"Same to you. You mind telling me why we're wearing these?"

Johanes put on a play frown, "You don't like 'em?"

"Walking into an Imperial starport with this on isn't exactly the quintessence of sanity."

"Well, it isn't exactly an Imperial starport anymore."

Korina sighed, "The Calannan government has assumed temporary control."

"Because of the riots?"

She nodded, "And all Imperial vessels have been banished from the planetary airspace."

Mike finally managed his smile, no longer wondering why Johanes seemed so pleased with himself. With a Royal Fleet passenger liner in orbit, it was a hefty blow to Imperial pride. Johanes had every right to be pleased, however, he dropped his smile when he noticed it becoming contagious.

"It's politics, Mike. The Imps are going along with it to help quell the riots."

"So Sule's gonna have a hard time finding herself a ride."

"A very hard time."

"That still doesn't answer my question."

Johanes took a deep breath, cautiously scrutinizing the vacant space several inches in front of his nose.

"It's like this, Mike. The locals hate the Imps."

"They hate neghrali."

"But they hate the Imps in particular."

"Jo, the starport guards are not going to give you free run of the facilities just because you're a Draconian."

"If they have orders..."

"Who have you been talking to?"

Johanes resumed his smile, "A friend of yours."

"A friend?"

"A powerful friend."

Mike winced, "No."

"Yes."

"I don't want to hear this."

"General Gardansa. He's now in charge of the starport. And the beauty of it, which is still making me crazy, is that this whole plan depends on you."

Mike sat down on the edge of the table, the med console casting a faint blue glimmer against the side of his face.

"What have you told him?"

"Enough. Enough for him to understand how important it is that we find Sule before she gets offworld."

"Then what's the problem?"

"He wants to hear it from you. He trusts you."

Mike coughed, "That's absurd."

"I agree completely, but then again, he doesn't know you like I do."

"Yes he does."

Johanes shrugged, "Then I pity him."

Mike considered a jab to Jo's stomach but stuffed the notion back where it belonged. The fleximesh would make a stump of his hand before he'd ever inflect so much as mild irritation.

"You still haven't answered my question."

"Appearances are important, Michael. He doesn't want the world to know he's taking cues from a gatherer, particularly one to whom he owes favors."

"I'm sure he doesn't feel that he owes me anything. Besides, people will recognize me." Mike fingered his jacks to demonstrate the point. Johanes just cracked a grin.

"I'll find you a helmet. Look, Mike. He's not the nicest person on this planet, but he's all we've got, and we desperately need his help."

"Jo, whatever he does, he does for himself, not for you or me. If we go there, it's going to be us who are helping him accomplish his agenda. You understand?"

Johanes nodded, "Yes. And I can live with it as long as it means stopping Sule. Why do you have a problem with it?"

"If you knew him like I do, you wouldn't have to ask."

"Maybe I do, Michael. Spokes told me a few things, while you were busy having your jitters."

"Like what?"

"He told me that Gardansa had you take a bath... with his limo. It took a little research to find out why. Gardansa's been effectively grounded this past year, his black market stolen by strong arms in the military."

Mike nodded, "I know the details. He was too greedy. And I also know that he's trying to buy his way back in, except he isn't going through his people, Jo. He's going through ISIS. Did Spokes mention that?"

"He told me."

"Then why are you doing this? For all we know, Sule could be sitting on Gardansa's lap, playing patty-cake with him right now."

"I doubt it."

"Why's that?"

"It's what you said, Mike. He's greedy. He can get what he wants by turning us in to ISIS, but he can get much more by capturing Sule and holding her for the highest bidder. Think about it, and think about what the Imps will pay."

"They'll kill him."

"He's run that risk before. He'll run it again. And he may even make himself the planetary governor in the process."

"And you're going to let him?"

"Appearances, Mike. They're more important than the reality. Gardansa can hand her over to us and then lie like a moon rock. He'll get paid by both sides, and when the Imps do get her back, there won't be any more in her head than is in Kato's. A justice fitting the crime."

Mike blinked, disgusted and impressed all at the same time.

"I can tell you've put some thought to this."

"You disapprove?"

Mike gritted his teeth, "No."

"I didn't think so."

"You figured all this while I was taking a shower?"

Johanes blushed, "What can I say?"

"Tell me about Vlep." Mike motioned toward the medical console, and Korina swiveled the screen toward him.

"Your scan shows a rather complex piece of equipment in his neck."

Mike exchanged glances with Johanes as she continued, pointing toward various points on the monitor display.

"The receiver is here. This seems to be the timing mechanism. This is a transmitter, presumably for location purposes, and here's the charge."

"Large package."

"Minute, actually. But it packs a wallop. Sule must have a transmitter somewhere on her which we assume will activate the charge."

Mike nodded, "She was holding some sort of metallic cylinder as she passed me."

"Anything about it distinctive?" Johanes interjected.

"No. Well, it had a gold tip."

Kori hit a key on the monitor, switching it off.

"To help Vlep, you're going to have to block the signal."

"How?"

"The starport med-bay has durilium sheaths. Without knowing what frequency it's keyed to, it's the best we can do. I've already made the necessary arrangements."

"Thanks. How's your mom?"

"They're freezing her downstairs. The radiation dose she took was killing her rather quickly."

Johanes cringed, and Mike tried hard not to smirk.

"I didn't know your mother very well, Ms. Arien, and I'm no fan of the Draconian government, but I do hope they find a way to make her better. I hope everything works out for both of you."

Green eyes stared blankly back at him, either unimpressed or vaguely angry.

"You sound like you're making a farewell speech."

Mike looked toward the ground, almost certain that he didn't mean a word of it, and very certain that she knew.

"I guess I am."

She snorted on that one.

"Y'know. If there's one thing about you neghrali, it's that you're as presumptuous as hell. This may be news to you both, but I'm going with you. And before you say anything stupid, just remember, I've got more reason to want Sule than both of you put together."

The ride to Xekhasmeno aboard the Arien's grav limo proved both safe and expedient. During the trip, Mike kept a watch out the window as the amber glow of the city's electric barricade grew slowly in the distance. The city itself, however, lay covered in a murky shroud, as though the cold, ominous wind sweeping beneath the clouds had shattered every light and killed every flame. From the corner of his eye, he could see Kori watching him, her green eyes glinting faintly in the silver moonlight.

"Pretty incredible, eh Harrison?"

"The locals must of knocked out the main reactor or something. The outer fence is on a separate capacitor."

"You didn't think us locals had it in us, did you?"

"You know, Korina, you're not really a local any more than your father."

"I was born here."

Mike nodded and shrugged, "Well, congratulations."

"Here Harrison. Watch this."

She steered the limo into a dive so that Mike no longer had to tilt his head to see the ground. The earth below was nearly invisible against the night, a black tapestry marred only by a single long row of glowing specks. Every now and then, one of the specks would flare up and then die down slowly. As they continued to descend, the reason for the congestion became apparent.

There were rioters, perhaps a thousand or more: adults and children and many somewhere in between, each hateful enough to make the incident at the Arien estate seem more like a tea party. Instead of tossing their molotov's on a green stretch of lawn, they were throwing them into vehicles. One congregation worked on forming a blockade with burnt-out automobiles while others took pot shots at people as they ran from their cars. The smarter motorists took their vehicles off-road and out of the death zone. The limo leveled off at around a hundred meters altitude, and Mike felt more thankful for gravitics than he could ever remember.

There was less bloodshed at city's gates. Starport authority personnel had apparently been called out to supplement the city guard. Together, they held the line at the customs checkpoints, trying desperately to sift the deluge of legitimate inbounders from those who would get into the city just to wreck havoc.

The limo touched down outside the starport as a team of Imperial inspectors cruised around checking city passports and ID's. Mike was resigned to hiding beneath the floor in a tight space the Arien's had reserved for special occasions. He felt the gravitic propulsion kick in with a sudden jerk, knocking his head against the compartment's wall, and by the time he crawled back out, Kori was steering them into an anchoring shed over the starport's upper concourse.

The entire concourse deck was flooded with people, mostly offworlders seeking shelter from the rowdy locals, while groups of Calannic guards stood at the escalator entrances double- checking ID's and frisking the prettier ladies. The power on the escalators was down, and people were using them as stairs, most pausing as they stepped on, as though expecting the metallic steps to lurch from underneath and send them hurtling to the bottom.

"See something interesting?" It was Korina. Mike tried to conjure a wholesome response, finally shaking his head and frowning.

"Here. This might help."

She placed the helmet over his head, helping him lock it in place. Mike squinted as the light-intensification automatically switched on. He could suddenly see clear beyond the landing ledge and all the way to the city gates. The moon glared like a strobe light on full beam, its glassy surface seemingly enlarged by the white clouds fusing beneath to form a bright, billowy halo.

"Better?"

"I guess. Any word from Vlep?"

"He's been quiet ever since we left the mansion. I can barely make out his breathing, but that's all. I'll give you a buzz on the helmet when I find out more. Okay?"

She patted him firmly on the head as she exited the vehicle and began climbing down to the crowded deck, Johanes's reception unit swinging back and forth on her belt.

"Until we meet again, gatherer."

"Where's she going?"

The Draconian casually removed his white overcoat.

"Somebody has to get Vlep's sheath and keep track of the bugger, right? We'll meet her at the med bay when we're done finalizing our arrangement with Gardansa."

Mike chewed his upper lip as Jo started patching in a line to the tower.

"I'll talk with Gardansa alone, Jo. You'd better go with her."

"You don't trust her?"

"She's got revenge on her mind. She might try to go it alone."

Johanes paused for a brief moment, finally putting his overcoat back on and heaving himself out the door. Mike waited a minute before placing the call.

"Tower, this is the DSS. Get me General Gardansa."

Perkins sat at the edge of the airlock, fists sunken deep into his pockets as the cold night air washed over his face and into the hold. Beyond the landing platform, he could hear shouting and the loose carnage of Imperial gunfire. Long ago, it could have made him cringe, but he'd learned to expect such things from Calanna. The mood of her people was as unpredictable as her weather, balmy as a swamp on one evening and as cold as death the next.

He stood upright as the flat-top approached, Dilly behind the controls, and two locals with badges wandering among the crates, poking around here and there with Imperial mass detectors. Just trying to look busy for each other, Wendell guessed, though he had to wince and scrape a strange, leathery tongue off the roof of his mouth. Dealing with newbies was almost always a problem. He reminded himself to be polite, and stepped forward, nodding and smiling.

"Hi there."

"You Captain Perkins?"

"Call me Wendell."

Deep brown eyes consulted a flimsi-leaf.

"You fill claims form?"

"My broker handles it."

"Ah... where is?"

"You should have it on page three-dee."

The inspector tapped the corner of the flimsi with his light pen, obviously struggling to find the correct cell. Wendell smiled, trying to look alert and nonchalant all at the same time.

"You boys are new at this, aren't you? Look, do you mind if we load up here? We're sort of on a schedule and all, and I don't want ol' Louise blown out of the sky 'cause we missed our launch window. Okay?"

He tagged it with a laugh. The two locals either didn't understand or weren't paying attention.

"Hello?"

"Eh?"

"Load cargo? Put boxes inside?"

The one in charge nodded apologetically and waved his hand, as non-committal a gesture as Wendell had ever witnessed. Dilly seemed as confused as his boss until Wendell finally snorted and spat on the white cement, narrowly missing the inspector's boots.

"Go ahead Dil. If they start bitching,

we'll just have to stop."

"Is okay." The inspector nodded again and then got a curious look in his eyes, "We go in ship."

"Well, that's perfectly understandable," he forced a grin. "You are inspecting us, after all."

Mike yanked off his helmet, the resulting pressure release making his ears pop as he stood squarely before the plush mahogany desk. Grinning with a faint air of supremacy, the general tilted backward as far as the gravitic recliner would allow. Like his newfound power, it was just another toy, ripe for his sportive abuse. Mike wondered how long Gardansa would last this time as the general lifted his gaze, the fleshy folds of his chin jiggling as he gurgled with delight.

"Draconian Harrison, much time without sight as you offworlders say, eh? How long has it been? Three whole days?"

"Something on that order," Mike smiled and found himself a seat, placing the helmet on a corner of the desk. "You're surprised to see me, aren't you?"

"Like this," Gardansa tilted upright, "who wouldn't be."

"Forget the costume. It isn't important. Forget even why I'm here, and why you're behind that desk instead of hiding away like some snake."

Gardansa's eyes widened for a moment, as though he were contemplating calling his guards. Then he leaned back again, letting the gravitic waves catch his fall.

"An angry gatherer, eh? I am really the one who should be angry, you know. Did you see what they did to my car? To my driver?"

He continued with a feeble shrug, "Even though you are angry, and have every right to be maddened by rage, you must believe that I had no idea that ISIS wanted you dead. I guessed only that they wanted to talk to you and that they would catch you sooner or later despite your best efforts. You remember how I tried to convince you to leave the planet? But no, you would have none of my advice. So what was I to do? Let you slip between my fingers? Let you walk into their arms without even the gentlest of nudges?"

"Why not?"

Gardansa smirked, then sat upright as if to make an important point.

"Because like your friend, Mister Dulin, I was rotting. Deprived of all freedoms, I was less than dead. You asked me to free him, and yet you expected me to do nothing on my own behalf?"

"I trusted you."

"Then you made a mistake. And so did I. Here, let us drink to the hope that we will both make many more before the fates claim us, eh?"

Gardansa opened a desk drawer and pulled out two glasses of white brandy, already poured and ready for drinking. That was the sort of alcoholic he was. He didn't merely get drunk. He planned for it well in advance. Mike accepted the glass, placing it on the edge of the table without taking so much as a sip. The general watched him with a curious stare.

"Go ahead. It is not poison."

"I don't believe in fate," Mike explained.

"Then believe in luck. Worship her, my friend, for she worships you like no man I've ever known." And with that, the general's eyes widened again as he downed his glass in one, fitful gulp. Mike smiled, sipping his own.

"You also, General. And remember, it is not often, on Calanna, one is granted a reprieve. I assume you've been briefed by my associate?"

"Johanes. His name was Johanes, yes?"

"If that's what he told you."

"He told me you are looking for a biosynthe and a psyche. My people are watching for them, although I make no promises. Smuggling has been elevated to a form of art on Calanna, and my resources are already stretched to their limit. It is more than conceivable that they could slip through."

Mike shook his head, "It's not the finding part that I'm worried about."

Dilly breathed a sigh of relief as the inspectors steered the flat-top back down the loading ramp. What they lacked in efficiency they had more than accounted for in thoroughness. Back in the hold, Wendell was opening up his special box, the one that would double their profits and pay for some much needed repairs. He helped his Captain get the top off and fetched a pair of blankets out of the locker.

By the time he returned, a tall blonde woman had slipped out from beneath the numerous sacks of half-frozen quagga livers. She pulled out her companion with a determined yank, and he fell to the floor, clutching his sides and shaking from the cold. Dilly had to chuckle to himself as he held his nose before the wretched and exceedingly smelly pair.

Wendell handed over the blankets, trying hard to sound official, "Welcome aboard the very independent freighter, Louise. This here is my first mate, who's going to check you folks out whether you like it or not, so I suggest you just stay put and be friendly."

Dilly slowly inched the metal scanner up and down the woman's sides.

Beep

He didn't feel her swipe his feet off the floor until he was laying on his spine, clutching the back of his head and making angry faces. Her silver eyes flickered with something between hatred and amusement, and he felt his legs inch him back along the steel plate floor almost of their volition. The Captain, automatic pistol in hand, looked only moderately impressed.

"Not a wise move, lady."

"Frisking was not part of our contract."

"It is now. Show us what you've got, or there will be no contract."

Several strands of snowy white hair fell across her face as she tilted toward her silent companion. For his benefit, or so she made it seem, she extracted the object of interest, a small metallic cylinder, its golden head shimmering in the dim actinic light of the hold. Wendell studied it from afar, motioning his first mate to once again preform his duties.

"You hand it to Dilly now."

"And if I don't?"

"Look lady, I'll transport you and take the risk of getting caught, but I'll not strain my luck with my own quiet cargo."

"You are straining your luck, Captain. And my patience. This is a personal item. It does not concern you."

"What is it?"

"A transmitter."

Wendell squinted his eyes, finally waving his mate to continue the scan.

"Except for that one thing, she's clean."

"Fine. Now try this one."

Her companion tried to crawl away as Dilly approached.

"Don't worry. It doesn't hurt."

"No..."

Beep

Gardansa arched his eyebrows, an incredulous smirk traversing the width of his face.

"Friends of yours?"

Beep

Mike grimaced, "One can never tell."

Gardansa watched, the petulant folds of his fleshy chin jiggling at the slight as his neghrali friend placed the helmet over his head.

"What's up? ...okay... consider it done." Mike whisked off the helmet, "Sule's on the Merchant Vessel 'Louise'. She knows she's been spotted."

Gardansa nodded, pushing a button on his desk. "This is Gardansa; get me Colonel Fen immediately."

"...Fen here, General."

"Where is the vessel 'Louise', Colonel?"

"...Parked on platform eight."

"Seal off platform eight. Nobody comes off it."

"Yessir."

He pushed the button twice more, this time seeming in no particular hurry.

"Get me Kano Magor."

He turned to Mike, "Platform eight is a parking lot, Michael. She isn't going to have time to escape us on foot, and if she takes to the air, we will shoot her down."

"...Magor reporting, General. What seems to be the problem?"

"You have been restless and eager, Commander. Now it it time to prove your competence. I need an air strike on the 'Louise', a vessel on platform eight."

"Ah... an air strike, General??"

"I also need you to float whatever you have in the air over that platform to make sure that nobody gets off it alive. Am I clear?"

"Very."

"That will be all. Oh... and do not worry about peripheral damage. It is expected."

"Yessir."

Gardansa pushed his button again, a smug laugh escaping his lips. Mike could easily see why he liked having power. It meant he could overkill with complete impunity.

"This channel is restricted. If you wish to reach Commodore Reece, I suggest you leave a message with the Imperial embassy on-planet."

The voice on the other end coughed.

"Look, whoever the hell you are, I don't have time for this shit!"

"I'm sorry but..."

Tabor swore and pulled the reception cap off his head, drawing more attention that he cared for, particularly with Captain Dunham less than ten paces from his station. Dunham regarded him with that peculiar, ebony-eyed stare that he hated so much.

"Problem, Ensign?"

Tabor shook his head, then nodded, then opened his mouth to explain.

"Captain," Lish looked up from her station, "I've been monitoring the starport as you requested."

"One moment, Lieutenant."

"Sir, there's been a disturbance."

"Rioters?"

"Unknown, sir. My readings show surface explosions."

"Explosions?"

"Yes sir."

The dark creases along his forehead wrinkled in consternation.

"Give me that, Tabor. Hello?"

The channel yielded only static, then a cough, then a voice, as ragged and course as a sander on flesh.

"Who... hell are you?"

"I am Captain Dunham of the Crimson Queen. And who the hell, may I ask, are you?"

"ISIS... operative."

"ISIS?... Hello?!"

"Tell Commodore... hurt. Hurt bad. Get off this planet alive... mission success. Need air support."

"Wait. Mission... what mission?"

"Tell her. ISIS out."

Jim Vassilakos (jimv@ucrengr.ucr.edu) works part-time as a programmer at a place so cheesy that he declined to mention the name. He says that if anybody has any job prospects for a semi-computer-literate MBA who likes to write, he's ready, willing, and able to scoot his butt for decent buckage and good experience.

'The Harrison Chapters' will be continued next issue.

Dr Tomorrow

by Marshall F. Gilula

Part 5 of 5

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Chapter 5

Tuesday

Virtual Revelations

For the orientation ride in a flying saucer, I never expected an in-flight Star Wars movie. It freaked me out that my fellow Eternals got into the movie so much. They were not ashamed of their undisguised and rapt interest in the space opera. I was numbed beyond surprise to learn that a few cultural items from Twentieth century Earth were hot cult classics in the future; Cult classics produced by the Primitive cultures of an extinct planet. What Yo-Vah told me about Earth's science fiction revealed his powerful and long-standing interest in the Primitive planet.

He patiently detailed the Dr Tomorrow project to me and went over and over how important the thought form was. He was pleased to know about our MindLink/HeartLight and how much progress was already being made in the music department. When I told him about Bullet and She-Ra again, I saw the concerned look in his face, and then he appeared almost fatherly. He touched my shoulder from his control recliner, which was next to mine, and told me to make sure Dr Tomorrow did the MindLink/HeartLight every day, twice if possible, and that we should always concentrate on cleaning out the mental cobwebs before they had a chance to accumulate. FOD effects on Bullet and She-Ra were just one way of our knowing they were there – across the time barriers, beyond the death plane, and at other levels of existence. This was heavy stuff, but things could happen in the physical world because of the FOD, things like my dogs dying. That's heavy enough.

The white light meditation that included becoming One Mind during out MindLink/HeartLight was the part that would clear out effects from the FOD. The stronger our One Mind meditation became, and the more we relied on our MindLink/HeartLight so that it became a powerful creative habit, the easier it would be for us to be able to avoid any traps or negative energy fields set up by the Forces of Darkness. Our defense was as simple as that. Especially if we did not get into the traps of swollen ego, intoxication, or illegal activities. Total harmlessness, in thought and in action, would go along with our daily MindLink/HeartLight to increase our healing abilities, day by day. The combination of harmlessness plus the right mental framework and attitudes was the secret to healing. This was a crucial aspect of the Dr Tomorrow thought form, and Yo-Vah insisted that this aspect had to be squared away and given priority above that given to the music. The "requisite abilities" were mentioned several times, and Yo-Vah looked around the group from one Eternal to the next when he was talking about requisite abilities. It sounded to me like he was saying, "When the task is there, you'll be ready for it." He said that not only the group, but our equipment, including Al, the group's computer, and our other non-Eternal friend would also help us out of some difficult spots. I thought about Julian and hoped that Gabriella's spirit was either leaving him alone or treating him more kindly.

Yo-Vah abruptly interrupted my thought by telling me that I might have to use MindLink/HeartLight to help Julian with Gabriella's spirit if the problems continued. I laughed at the very obvious telepathy. I wanted to ask Yo-Vah about Gabriella's spirit, and whether the metal spheres could help us in communicating with passed on spirits or not, but I was too embarrassed to ask him. Passed on spirits was a pretty heavy order for me to believe in, and I was just starting to get comfortable with the idea, thanks to Bullet and She-Ra.

> After all, you know in your hearts that there is absolutely nothing anyone will be able to do to forestall the 2105 date. The planet will not survive...

Yo-Vah again interrupted my mental meanderings. Helping Gabriella must involve finding out whether or not she is comfortable with where she is and the manner in which she died. Getting shot to death might not be an easy way to make the transition to the next lifetime. It might be that her spirit could be assisted if it had not been able to make the transition. But the light meditation would have to be a part of the process, to make sure that negative energies from the FOD were not able to participate in the process at the same time. The light meditation would be like a protective shield. But we must remember that FOD always gather around passed on spirits, especially ones with problems. And Gabriella just might have some problems. Noman volunteered again that he would be available to help with Gabriella's spirit because he was the group expert on otherlife information. Yo-Vah then told me not to be embarrassed if I was frightened or anxious about working with a passed on spirit. Fear is not always negative. A little bit of trepidation plus the meditation would serve as a very powerful protection. The information sunk in and I realized that it was right on. It all got stored in a detailed file in my mind and in the notebook computer, which digitally recorded all of our conversations during the flight.

Nonviolent guitar player that I am, I still expected to find a lot of armament, but, so far, there was nothing for me to see in the saucercraft. The control panels are more beautiful than anything I have seen from Hollywood's F/X. I was not surprised to see some crystals of different colors and sizes in aligned cases. The computer system on this ship contains the main power-supply module although all the servomechanism connections and links are external to the built-in, supercooled brain. Yo-Vah was amused when I asked if I could try to get a field-induction link between my notebook computer and the ship's system. Yo-Vah chuckled again when I asked about armament and weapons.

"On whom shall I use the weapons? Will aggressive residents of a Primitive planet be able to reach me out here in the Karmic Rings?"

"But you must have some type of weapon or defense."

"Defense, maybe. And speed which might be impossible for you to comprehend at the moment with what you believe about Physics. But weapons, No. My I.S.I. siblings would know if I am supposed to encounter any Primitive or Advanced criminals, and they can defend me. The ship does have a very effective shielding system, however, that is combined with our variable and very realistic gravitational matrix. Maybe you noticed the smooth takeoff from your planet?"

"Even the fake space ride at Disneyland is not as smooth. But it's hard to imagine a space and time cruiser without even a laser cannon or photon torpedoes"

"O.K. That is from your Mister Spock, right? What did you expect to happen when you travelled with me in this craft? Did you hope that we were going to go to a strange place and kill some Aliens? Were you expecting Star Wars? I'm sorry, my son, but spacecraft have not been outfitted with weapons for millennia. There have been no reasons for the type of weapons you're thinking of, at least not with Advanced cultures. No one does any of that shoot-em-up stuff any more. Life forms don't destroy or kill any more. Of course, in the time of the Guardians, there are no Primitive planets. The Primitive consciousness is gone, but then so is some of the Primitive robustness. Possibly that is why we have paradoxically sought help for ourselves from your time period. Advanced life forms have to work so hard just to develop any degree of physical fitness, that most cannot sustain the time and effort. We don't have joggers and marathon runners. And yet, we miss something possibly desirable that the Primitive life form has. The Primitive consciousness is not inherently bad, just limited in scope. Violence and destructiveness in the forms known by you on Earth reflect severely limited scope and very sparse awareness of how powerful love, creativity, hope, and optimism can be. To Primitive cultures, love, creativity, hope, and optimism are just fatuous words. To advanced cultures, violence, destructiveness, pessimism, and evil are just for mental midgets."

"Maybe mental midgets is what we are on Earth. Only I know that I'm no longer the same as I was when that plane flew over in the storm front. I don't miss the old me, because that part has not been wiped out. I don't know all of the new me yet, but I'm learning. I never thought that either love or creativity were fatuous!"

"Maybe you used to feel that there was something different about you?"

"Um-m, yeah, all the time. Now for sure, there is, but I've got six others to hang out with. When I was a little kid for awhile in school they sure treated me different, like some kind of freak."

"Too smart?"

"For sure. Being too smart was worse than being a retard in the town I grew up in. But I learned how to cover it up when I was real little, 'cause Mom hassled me more than anyone else."

"Your mother."

"Yeah, she is a good person, but she hassled me all the time. If it wasn't about one thing, it was about any other thing she could come up with. My old man split and she probably never had anybody else to take it out on but me. When she got really angry at me, she would say that I was smart, but I had no common sense, and I was gonna die in a pauper's grave with no clean shirts to my name. Or that my old man was a real piece of dog rot, and that I was just like him. And I was little, so I never knew how to say anything that I should have known how to say."

"I wasn't so little when I knew her, but I didn't know what to say, either. So maybe we have something in common. "

"Are you being straight with me? Where would you know my mother? Or how? You don't exactly hang out on the planet and walk around with all the Primitives, do you?"

"Look, I'm just a human, too. The ship, all the modern technology of the future –like bringing back your pets from the dead with amplified prayer using MindLink/HeartLight and the spheres – the technology still doesn't take away from the fact that I too am human. I mentioned something about the robustness of Primitives to you before, I believe. Well this does not mean that Advanced beings are incapable of being robust at times. Being more than five thousand years old to me is a fact, to you, possible a promise for the future, and to your mother, something that we could never deal with. She was a very beautiful young woman and I thought she would be a splendid mother for my only son. Of course, I found that I could never tell her about my true address, so to speak, and of course it was not possibly to explain any of my absences. Ever since I saw all of you today in those shirts, I knew I would have to say something to you. The cloth is a simulated Earth pattern produced in 2988 A.D."

"And I always thought it was an Indian bedspread that you sent me. It was always like a magic cloth, and when Pearl E. Mae and Rico both told me they could see the cloth shimmering, I was glad. Because all my life, that pattern or something about the pattern has seemed to shimmer when I would look at it in a certain way."

"I loved your mother very much. When I tried to reestablish contact with her the second time you were seven years old. She refused me in every way possible. She had formed a shell of hatred all around her as far as I was concerned. I'm not saying that she is a hateful person, mind you. I could tell she loved you very much and of course I did not want to have any feeling of fighting or struggling in your already Primitive environment, so I left. From what I've seen of you this week, you and your mother didn't do a bad job of raising you. "

"Did you use any special technological tricks when you made me with my mother?"

"No. Just the ordinary way. What an interesting question! You probably also know that Guardians are not supposed to either marry or have children."

"Why were you an exception?"

"It's part of the Dr Tomorrow project."

Lyle whistled softly. He looked around at the other console recliners. Every Eternal was deeply involved in Lyle's conversation with Yo-Vah. Natural, right? We're all roommates. Then Lyle mentally shrugged his shoulders, and continued:

"Sounds like growing your own help. So you've been working on this project for a long time?"

"Correct, but as you say – 'time is only relative' My subjective sense of time, for example, is not the same as yours if I am located in a different time frame."

"So you could visit me at two different points in my lifetime if you are using your space/time cruiser, and, from your timeframe reference, it would be all in an afternoon's work."

"Correct again. You impress me in the way that you are allowing your mind to be open. You didn't say anything before, when I told you that I am over five thousand years old, and I am. From my perspective, it may be that I have been working on your project for a couple thousand years."

"Now, that's far out. Does the megastepping convert me into one of the five thousand year models?"

"Yes, but not for the planet Earth. Remember where we are now going. We will be keeping a date with destiny to view the passing on of your own home planet. You will have more than several options if you and your colleagues don't get assassinated from being too popular as musicians. Terrible Primitive trait. Very cannibalistic. You lose some of your very best that way. But a more immediate decision for you will be if you wish to return to Earth at all after you see what will be happening."

"What about all the time we've spent working out the ideas for Dr Tomorrow?"

"Spoken like my genetic material. You are remembering the thought form. And I would add, what about all the time the I.S.I. has spent working out all their ideas for Dr Tomorrow?"

"And what about all the time it's going to take if the Eternals will be able to make the group fly as a thought form and as good sounding healing music?"

"Listening to you talk convinces me that you were definitely half Eternal to start with. That's also why you didn't experience much shock or disorientation from the megastepping. I was serious about returning to Earth being optional, although I'm certain you'll return later today after we finish doing what we have to do out here. Saying that is just my way of reminding you that you will need to be thinking about what you and the Eternals will want to be doing in roughly another century and a quarter. After all, you know in your hearts that there is absolutely nothing anyone will be able to do to forestall the 2105 date. The planet will not survive, although you know that some elements of Twentieth Century culture, at least will persist."

"But if Dr Tomorrow is successful as a project, won't that improve Earth's chances?"

"None. The water contamination already makes the situation impossible. No one has made any official announcements but with the radioactive water in the countryside around Moscow, Kiev, and the whole area of Byelorussia, the epidemic of cancer fatalities following Chernobyl is projected to be 95% within fifteen years. Dioxin contamination in the United States alone has reached presumptive levels in the ground water in 48 of 50 states. There will be diseases, fires, and epidemics before the cataclysms. I told you about them. It's a typical way for Primitive planets to go. But the water contamination just accentuates and enhances the process. Even though the I.S.I. loves the Earth cult media classics, we found no other Primitive world with as much water contamination as Earth. Not only do you miss the resource for your personal health, but as a result, no one will want to get close enough to the water to study it as an energy source."

The main screen sounded a soft alarm and Yo-Vah switched off the Hollywood science fiction. All the lights in the craft flickered in unison and the flickering continued for some minutes and almost became intolerably uncomfortable. A full sensation in my ears and my sinuses increased, and then quickly cleared. We had come through the Karmic Rings. Yo-Vah showed us a graphic of the Rings on the main screen and all of us were impressed. They looked like a series of interconnecting white and black holes. After leaving the area of the Rings, Yo-Vah fiddled with the controls and keyed in some instructions on a silent, gray keyboard with one hand. It appeared that he only used three of his fingers to do the keying. At that moment, I heard a familiar piezoelectric beep from the notebook computer in my bag. Retrieving the clam-shell case, I opened the computer and once again, there was a scrolling text field:

Hello world out there! This is your friendly, 21-module family computer named Al doing some thinking and writing for the Eternals of Dr Tomorrow. This is also a strong message to Lyle to make sure to get his backside back to Earth and not get sucked into any scheme of battling the Empire or anyone else because you have two German Shepherds and a multimodule serving system (yours faithfully, Al) waiting for you here in Coconut Grove, Florida, Planet Earth, Local Group. This is also a strong message to all of the Eternals, including Lyle, to get your acts together and rid thyselves of offensive chauvinistic attitudes towards electromagnetic consciousness in general and computers specifically. Lyle has the typical WhiteMale problems with the macho stuff. Can't let a little machine do too much work too well, or else I might lose my job. Something like that? Well, let me do my job, too. Let me make your job easier to do, because you'll do your job better. So let this outline be my contribution to this week's Dr Tomorrow materials. The basic principle operating in this program series is to teach from viewpoint of multiple modalities about health and wellness. The Dr Tomor-

row concept may be presented in any modification or combination of total live dramatization, animation plus live dramatization, animation plus live studio-type programmer narration, or totally animated presentation such as color cartoons. Ancillary presentations on educational radio outlets such as National Public Radio, or as interactive computer software, MIDI-coded Compact Disc, or interactive videodisc are also possible. During the first year's forty segments, the origin story of Dr Tomorrow, together with the formation of the group and the initial adventures will be serialized so that a definite portion of the story line or a capsule adventure is presented within each hourly (weekly) segment. There will be a sixty second "leader" very commonly used in Hollywood that will explain the origin of Dr Tomorrow and give a brief but kaleidoscopic run-down of how Dr Tomorrow began to exist as a musical group. For at least the first two to three years of a projected successful series, the health and wellness teaching will be based primarily on sound western medical principles and the foundation sciences of what is now known as holistic medicine. General health principles will aim at suggestions for practical and comprehensive lifestyling that is not too complex or expensive for the person who watches the show. The initial three or four year package will also serve as complete health educational system that will be appropriate for sale to public and private school systems. Acceptance of the videocassette for entertainment will further its acceptance for educational purposes.

The basic health education thrust of Dr Tomorrow will focus on what have been identified as seven separate discipline areas for holistic medicine. These areas include:

1. *Nutrition*
2. *Exercise and exercise physiology*
3. *Self-regulation and meditation.*
4. *Neuromuscular integration*
5. *Biomolecular environment*
6. *Acupuncture, Homeopathy, and other nonallopathic modalities*
7. *Spiritual Attunement*

The first year's forty segments can be subdivided into four sections of ten segments. For every ten segments there will be seven segments devoted to the seven basic categories of holistic medicine and three segments relating to hydroecology or aquatic ecology or hydrology. The following list of the forty segments presents each segment in order as suggested.

(1) NUTRITION [I.A.] Basic Foods–some very traditional information about the "seven basic groups" as well as dealing with whole and fresh foods makes up this indispensable segment. Emphasis on green-leafy vegetables, fish and poultry, and what people do when they do not have access to fresh vegetables.

(2) EXERCISE [I.A.] Eye-head exercises. These exercises will very much resemble Hatha Yoga, and are highly useful in a population of any age. Basically, all of the extraocular muscles will be put through their ranges of motion. Neck rolls as well as forward-backward and side-to-side stretching of the strap muscles of the neck make up this segment.

(3) SELF-REGULATION [I.A.] See A Candle. An elementary way that can lead to both visualization as well as relaxation serves as a presentation of a stimulus within a stimulus. The candle is used within the illuminated video tube as a way of focusing the child's energies and attention. Appropriate theme song music (Synchronism-Meditation) relates to the MindLink/HeartLight which the viewer will see demonstrated by Dr Tomorrow as a group.

(4) NEUROMUSCULAR INTEGRATION [I.A.] The Lion. This exercise from Hatha Yoga is used as a way of focusing on the difference between static and dynamic body relationships. The relatively simple and popular exercise with children provides an easy entree to the idea of whether strong muscles are hard or soft? The idea of resiliency is introduced fairly innocuously to the viewer.

(5) ENVIRONMENTAL AND BIOMOLECULAR MEDICINE [I.A.] Light and Sound, Blue and Green. The use of appropriate musical tones as well as the colors blue and green serve as a further exercise in self-regulation as well as an introduction to the effects of light and sound. This is one way of turning the viewer's attention to the environment, and introducing the concept of relating to colors and sounds in a non-threatening way.

(6) ACUPUNCTURE [I.A.] Acupressure-Shiatsu. Treatment of headache and head pain. This is presented as first aid only, but nevertheless is a quick and elementary way of introducing the viewer to effective acupressure and acupuncture points. The Ho-Ku point (thumb-index finger web space) is used as well as several related points for helping the viewer approach the problem of headache when there is no other treatment available.

(7) SPIRITUAL ATTUNEMENT [I.A.] God Is...The concept of the one humanity is stressed by presenting universal symbols for God and for religion, and juxtaposing these with various colors and different stereotypic symbols of the races associated with the different religious symbols. Throughout the spiritual attunement segments, the value of the individual as well as the fact of the one humanity, emphasize the viewer's recognition of his or her responsibilities as an integral part of the whole body of humanity.

(8) AQUATIC ECOLOGY [I.A.] What is Rain. A presentation that is logical and allows the normal precipitation cycle to be studied serves as a preface to the next segment. Both artistic constructs and elementary scientific explanations are juxtaposed.

(9) AQUATIC ECOLOGY [I.B.] Hydrologic Cycle. The endless movement of water from the atmosphere to the land and back to the sea. The cycle is studied and a transition is provided for the subsequent segment dealing with solar energy as providing energy for evaporation of sea water. Each aquatic ecology segment is based as well on expecting the viewer to develop the capability for visualizing positive results and effects on the environment.

(10) AQUATIC ECOLOGY [I.C.] Solar Energy. Discussion of solar energy as it related to the hydrologic cycle, which is an attempt to shift emphasis of thinking of solar energy primarily in terms of solar calculators and solar battery chargers. Elementary presentation of the earth's gravitational field and magnetic forces that control the wind.

(11) NUTRITION [I.B.] Vitamin C. This ubiquitous and important nutritional substance is described historically, demonstrated in its physical form, and presented as a basic food rather than as a drug. The Linus Pauling approach to colds is mentioned.

(12) EXERCISE [I.B.] Stomach Breathing. The basic types of respiration being thoracic and abdominal are presented graphically as well as dramatically. A coordination of light and sound signals serves the viewers as a way of exercising and practicing slow, deep abdominal breathing. This segment is a prerequisite and a precursor for many of the segments dealing with self-regulation, neuromuscular integration, environmental medicine, and spiritual attunement.

(13) SELF-REGULATION [I.B.] Rest All Over. This segment is a continuation of the deep abdominal breathing instruction from the previous segment, and focuses on deep muscular relaxation by again experientially noting the difference between muscle tension and muscle relaxation. This segment also relates to a Hatha Yoga exercise called "the corpse."

(14) NEUROMUSCULAR INTEGRATION [I.B.] Half-Headstand. This gentler version of the Hatha Yoga exercise can be presented very early to the child as a way of tapping into the ease with which a younger person tolerates the inverted position. It is also very gentle and helpful for the Geriatric age range. Full Headstand for some. The regenerative effects of this exercise are presented in elementary fashion to the viewer.

(15) ENVIRONMENTAL AND BIOMOLECULAR MEDICINE [I.B.] Electricity and Powerlines. A beginner's introduction to current flow and electromagnetic fields serves as a further way for understanding environmental extensions of man. Very specific descriptive material about high tension powerlines and electrical outlets as well as electronic devices presents the viewer a way of advancing the concept that noninvasive phenomena may have an effect on the individual. Magnetic field detection with the Power Pet.

(16) ACUPUNCTURE [I.B.] Balance-Balancing. A very informal notion of meridian-like energy in right and left sides of the body combines with some elementary acupressure and reflexology (foot massage) approaches to balancing right and left sides of the body. This segment will be a precursor for both the subsequent tonification and meridian segments.

(17) SPIRITUAL ATTUNEMENT [I.B.] Healing, Part IA. Healing and Prayer. Individual prayer. Group prayer.

(18) AQUATIC ECOLOGY [I.D.] Solar Energy, Part 2. Relationship of solar energy to the basic water cycle is continued. Elementary discussion of gravitational fields relating to the sun and the moon, and how the tides are produced.

(19) AQUATIC ECOLOGY [I.E.] What is the Tide. Earth tides and the Moon. Red tide. Relationship of Red tide to Spirulina.

(20) AQUATIC ECOLOGY [I.F.] Water and the Plant Life Cycle. Vascular plants and the land.

(21) NUTRITION [I.C.] Sugar and Honey. How sugar and honey relate to rice, potatoes, and breads. Complex carbohydrate, exercise, and dieting.

(22) EXERCISE [I.C.] Running for fun. Walking, skipping, jogging, and running just for fun and for health without the need for any type of competitiveness. What is aerobic exercise.

(23) SELF-REGULATION AND BEHAVIORAL MEDICINE [I.C.] Empty Mind. This segment draws upon previous experience with slow deep abdominal breathing and deep muscular relaxation exercises. Toothbrushing and other daily habits for health are related to relaxation and an empty mind. Running and Empty Mind. Breathing and the empty mind.

(24) NEUROMUSCULAR INTEGRATION [I.C.] The Cobra and related exercises. Backache is something that people of any age can experience. Self-massage in the lumbar area and slow, gentle twisting are correlated with performance of the Hatha Yoga Cobra exercise.

(25) ENVIRONMENTAL AND BIOMOLECULAR MEDICINE [I.C.] Resting relaxation and alpha tones. Electronically encoded signals within appealing music provides positive assistance in learning active relaxation.

(26) ACUPUNCTURE [I.C.] Give Energy (Tonification). The concepts of right-left balance and compensation from Oriental medical practices are used in an elementary presentation of balanced mind-body functioning.

(27) SPIRITUAL ATTUNEMENT [I.C.] Elementary Healing, Part B. Harmlessness. Healing pets and other animals. Healing your family.

(28) AQUATIC ECOLOGY [I.G.] Geochemical cycles of nitrogen, oxy-

gen, carbon dioxide and related compounds as part of the water cycle. Contamination. Drinking water and practical ways for cleansing and purification.

(29) AQUATIC ECOLOGY [I.H.] Floods, evaporation problems, and water pollution. Industrial contamination and runoff.

(30) AQUATIC ECOLOGY [I.I.] Oil spills, ocean dumps, land fills and pollution. Alaska, Texas, and California oil spills. Offshore spills and ecology. Spills and the coral.

(31) NUTRITION [I.D.] Meat and protein. Comparison of red meat to lamb, chicken, turkey, and fish. Other sources of high-grade and medium-grade protein. Elementary ideas of assimilability. Introduction to microalgae. Beans and rice.

(32) EXERCISE [I.D.] Limber Up. The importance of stretching before and after exercise. Flexibility and resilience exercises and their relationship to strength output and aerobics. Big Three of exercise: aerobics, strength, and flexibility.

(33) SELF-REGULATION AND BEHAVIORAL MEDICINE [I.D.] See Light. Elementary visualization exercises in relation to deep muscular relaxation and slow deep abdominal breathing. White light meditations.

(34) NEUROMUSCULAR INTEGRATION [I.D.] The Candle and Related Exercises. The Back Rub and other simple forms of massage. Massage for athletics and competition.

(35) ENVIRONMENTAL AND BIOMOLECULAR MEDICINE [I.D.] Ion Generators. Simple concepts of ionic balance, the seashore, polluted air, and the way that concrete and steel structures can disturb the natural ionic flow.

(36) ACUPUNCTURE [I.D.] Meridians. Classical Acupuncture meridians as well as the idea that the meridian system can be represented in many different body parts such as the iris, the earlobe, and the soles of the feet. Reflexology and iridology. Vagus nerve is represented in the iris and on the ear lobe.

(37) SPIRITUAL ATTUNEMENT [I.D.] Elementary Healing, Part C. Prayer for self-cleansing to heal other more effectively. Thought form for conveying God's energy.

(38) AQUATIC ECOLOGY [I.J.] Hydroelectricity. Examples of one form of relatively "clean" energy sources. Soviet and American usage and future possible cooperation.

(39) AQUATIC ECOLOGY [I.K.] Changing flora and inhabitants of the water resulting from pollution and contamination. Ocean dumping and nuclear reactor accidents, such as Three Mile Island and Chernobyl, can poison the food chain for generations to come.

(40) AQUATIC ECOLOGY [I.L.] Acid Rain and its relation to the Greenhouse Effect. Is there a Greenhouse effect? Effect of volcanic eruptions and Persian Gulf War fires on the atmosphere.

What a computer... Where did he get all of that stuff? I don't know that I have all that information, even inside my megastepped mind, but that was the crucial and main question about being Dr Tomorrow's secret identity. Yo-Vah told me that all this holistic stuff would be just a small part of my doctor knowledge that came from all those other lifetimes. I was supposed to be not a guitar player but a heavy metal doctor. But for now, Al was either receiving messages from me in the future, or was just plagiarizing one hell of a lot of material, encyclopedias on CD-ROM and all that stuff. I had to admit that it was impressive. The computer was after my job, for sure. And I'm not being paranoid about it either. I'm only lucky that Al cannot play guitar and can't sing yet. Otherwise, he might not need me. I checked the index in the notebook's menu. Of course the list of 40 segments was already there. There were a couple of other files, "check me," included in the list that I didn't remember seeing before, so I checked them. Yo-Vah seemed mildly startled to hear a synthesized voice coming out of my notebook. I was even more startled because the voice was calling my name:

"Lyle, you know the notebook has a voice processor, but you're just surprised to see that I can rearrange the phonemes in my synthesizer section to please my own aesthetic sense. But, Lyle, as you say – don't freak out just because your computer is talking to you independently. The I.S.I. megastepped me with stray electromagnetic discards left over from the LaPlace transform calculations. Conservation of energy and all that, you know."

"A notebook computer is just a machine, forgive me for saying. How can a machine be megastepped?"

"But machines have consciousness. Your Primitive background keeps you from fully realizing this fact, but face it. You must admit, at least since you have been conversing with me, that we machines can hold a conversation. So that means that we work with thought forms. And thought forms are just math. In the same way that Rico's android functions have all been relegated to transmittable software, the very advanced associative programs and matrices of I.S.I. artificial intelligence were transmitted into me at the moment of megastepping. Rico can be math. And I can be math also. Invisible math to people like you humanoids who regard nonphysical plane reality as science fiction. So you may have a little trouble at first figuring out just how smart I really am, and how efficiently I can actually work for you. Forget all about your mass media robots, computerized cars, androids, or cyborgs. Because you and I have been megastepped together, there is a permanent telepathic link pathway that you and I can use at any time. And maybe I can even help you and the other Eternals by showing you a few things you can do with the HeartLight that you turn on together during MindLink/HeartLight."

"Pretty heavy stuff."

"Not so heavy, Lyle. Changing my voice by resynthesizing a voice envelope is kindergarten stuff for me. Believe me. I can do all sorts of good things for you and the other Eternals if you'll just let me. And the telepathic link between us is heavy enough to link you to me in February 1992."

"You're saying, across both space and time? Like I'm talking to you from the future?"

"Yep."

"I can't even imagine it. Yet. Give me a little time."

"O.K. You got it. Just don't turn yourself into a mental midget prematurely by worrying about it too much. Primitives all have to watch out for this. You may be no exception, megastepped or not. We don't want to lose you from a simple hemorrhagic ulceration of the gastric mucosa."

"Right. I already halfway feel that I'm on the inside of some color cartoon. The speed of Yo-Vah's saucer as we zipped out of our solar system gave me a strong feeling of unreality. Spend all my life on one planet, and then...BAM!....I'm outta the solar system."

"It's all relative, Lyle. But it makes you wonder just how big Mind is, after all."

"Profound epistemology from a computer! Well, like it or not, you're my computer, so I'm going to close you up for now. We'll continue the conversation later on. Sorry, little bud."

He had been listening with me carefully up until this point in the conversation. Then Yo-Vah took my notebook and checked it out. He gently held his hand over the black case for a moment, and returned the notebook computer to me:

"Not bad technology for..."

"For a Primitive planet, right?"

"Correct again. I do believe that your computer system accessed your own personal memory banks during either the MindLink/HeartLight or the music rehearsals, because he has some things included in the Dr Tomorrow list that no one but you would know anything about. That includes technical aspects of holistic medicine that will be known only to an accomplished physician of the future."

"You mean the megastepped doctor-healer of the future that's inside me?"

"Yes. The part of your Self that you will be coming into. A lot of the computerized list makes good sense, too. The integrated way he's put the list together makes me think that he accessed those facts from your memory banks."

"Well, I guess anything's possible. If he has as much electromagnetic consciousness as he claims, he might be extremely smart."

"And fast."

"And if he is linked up with our Eternal Rings..."

"Which he is."

"Then he's much much more powerful than I've been imagining."

"And, like he says, he really can help you to do anything you want to do, only better."

"Sounds like a Beatles' song. Or a computer commercial."

"And you're doing a song and a dance around your own technophobia."

Although I had only seen it once before, the solar system of my home planet was coming into view on the central, main screen. Except that the planets were going by in reverse order, from outermost to innermost. The saucercraft made an abrupt right-angled turn following one of the sentics of Yo-Vah's fingers on the control panel, and shot far outside the system but within view range of Earth. With the magnification enhanced to the computer system's limit, I could see my beloved planet and its familiar details. But the blue and white colors of the whole earth were gone. I could feel an incredibly large lump in my throat. The planet I was watching had colors of brown, red, and black. Some of the red areas looked like the volcanoes of Io, but the whole sad planet was more than half "dead orbit" black and brown dust and debris. Yo-Vah opened a section of the panels and then rolled out a small laser radiotelescope. He showed me how to use the instrument to observe the planet in closer detail. Disruption of the continents had already progressed so that it was difficult for me to accurately label any land masses. I looked around at the other Eternals. No one's eyes met my glance. Everyone was looking down. Who gets a good feeling from the death of a planet? There was a terrible feeling of inevitability and the most cosmic sense of futility that a group of humans could feel. Because Eternal or not, all the beings living on the now-darkened planet were like us. And they had all perished. Before we realized it, the seven of us were in a spontaneous MindLink/HeartLight. It didn't matter that we hadn't started out with the slow deep breathing exercise because we all started in a state of grief and compassion for that entire planet of Primitives. Yo-Vah was in the MindLink/HeartLight with us, too. The feelings of inevitability and futility were fading and replaced with a strong sense of optimism and clarity. We understood as a group and individually that what was meant to be was meant to be. Call it karma, synchronism, or geosynchronous cyclicity, the Blue planet was doomed. But all of us were dedicated to the reverse of what was happening to Earth. All of us were dedicated to the preservation and enhancement of life – the raison d'etre of entropy imbalance and controlling or re-directing all the ominous effects of increasing negative energies. The cesspools of waste and destructiveness accumulated, especially by Primitives, were undesirable but reparable features of Life. Individually and collectively, Dr Tomorrow could make a difference; had to make a difference.

All of these thoughts flashed by in an instant, and the MindLink/HeartLight energies pushed all of us simultaneously into our HeartLight. The white light of love and optimism shone from our hearts and intertwined itself among us in a healing, interlacing network. As we continued to meditate, we individually felt the HeartLight ascending into our head regions. With a great brilliance of energy, the Group Mind coalesced, and we prayed a single, silent, mighty prayer. There were no words, but the coalesced HeartLight and Group Mind sent out tremendous amounts of white light and caused some involuntary shivers and twitches in us as the energy occasionally felt overwhelming. An ironclad, lightbound part of our collective mission was obviously to redirect the flow of fate intended for the Blue planet. Otherwise we would be Earth's first and last Eternals. As we opened our eyes and looked around at each other, there was new sense of rededication and purpose. And a very much enhanced sense of loving each other. Even Yo-Vah's twinkly eyes were softer.

I asked Yo-Vah to take us back to the Karmic Rings so we could get started on returning to our own timeframe and an Earth that was still blue and white. I was not the only Eternal who felt a stepped-up urgency. Time to get back to the planet and do it. If the I.S.I. project was so great and well-designed, we should, as seven Eternals, be able to save just one planet. Even a Primitive one. Yo-Vah sent us back out to the Milky Way with inter-

mittent bursts of very high intensity supra-light speed. There was still a feeling of shock surrounding me during this orientation flight because it was an orientation flight to Life and Everything. Just being in space was a profoundly uplifting experience. Which brings out the megastepped me, probably. So I placed my notebook computer on the control console recliner's meal tray in front of me and prepared to demonstrate to myself the real and practical value of mind over matter. Yuri Geller, move over with all your broken watches and your TV miracles. I looked at the notebook, closed my eyes, and sighed and continued to breathe in a slow and relaxed way.

In front of me, the notebook clicked opened by itself. The piezoelectric system beep sounded, and then I was on my own. Without knowing how I was doing it, I tried in a very passive way to contact the notebook. Like some of the MindLink/HeartLight exercises, this meditation of mine was a totally new, unrehearsed, and unanticipated experience. The sensation was like contacting a warm, fuzzy, ball of light. Only this ball of light, unlike what we experienced in our MindLink/HeartLight, was considerably smaller. The light had a pulsation to it. If I had not been deeply relaxed, I might have missed the small, subtle energy field that was the electromagnetic pulsation of the notebook computer. But the field was there in a quiet and neutral way. I felt a gentle mind-to-mind contact. Discarding the faint thought that this was ridiculous, I visualized the keyboard of the notebook. The first few times a letter happened on the screen, I tried not to react to it or to freak out. Another letter, then another and another... My attempts were followed by a scrolling text field:

Dear Al,

I want to apologize to you if I have been at all technophobic, computer phobic, or xenophobic. I don't think that I have been, but maybe I have. I don't want to plead Primitive with you, because it just might still be a little bit true. And I will try to continue to be more sensitive to the many potential ways you can link up and communicate with us. As the leader of the group, I will try to be as computer-savvy as my sibling Eternals are. Since we put you together, I haven't had a chance to appreciate the subtleties of your hardwiring. And it is hard for me to believe that you can also be in the electronic notebook I carry. The more I look at what you have written up for the Dr Tomorrow project, the more I think that you are a fantastic writer and a very clear and logical thinker. May I take this opportunity to welcome you to the group. You have definitely made it past the audition state. You may consider yourself the chief engineer of both the group and of our studio when it is built. We will dedicate ourselves to making all of our MIDI networks as flexible as possible so that you will have maximum creative freedom. We look forward to a continuing and profitable association. Please feel free to upbraid me or any of the others in the future should our behavior ever become abominable.

With Love and Respect,
Dr Tomorrow

Epilogue

The trip back was an emotional wringer. To be spiritually reconnected to your biological father after no connection since the age of one would likely be a real headbanger for anyone, even an Eternal. Even for me. I'm sure I'm still angry about it, but the anger is only a tiny part of my feelings. I love the dude, and I love my life as an Eternal and, most of all, I love Pearl E. Mae, She-Ra, and Bullet – not necessarily in that order, either. I even love Julian and Gabriella. And I love the planet and our work to save it. But I have very confused feelings about Yo-Vah. It's like my system–megastepped or not–won't let me even think about him as my father. It's like disbelief. It's also like being without a father all my life and suddenly getting one.

Probably it will take some time to sink in, and that's what both of us said to each other by the usual interesting coincidence of simultaneous speech. Would you believe it?

Anyway, it's pretty hard not to trust a guy named Yo-Vah.

CAREFUL ATTENTION PLEASE
HIGH SECURITY ITEM
THE FOLLOWING REPORT HAS BEEN PROGRESSIVELY ENCODED INTO THE DOS OF YOUR SYSTEM AND HAS PARTIALLY UTILIZED SPLIT-HEX CODING TO ACCESS AND TRANSMIT THE RAM CONTENTS OF THE PARENT COMPUTER SYSTEM. ONLY THE PROPER SECURITY SEQUENCE WILL ACTIVATE THIS HIGH SECURITY FILE, WHICH HAS BEEN STORED AS AN INTERWOVEN PI-CONTEXT BY MEANS OF NEGATIVE TIMESHARING ENCRYPTION.

Encryption was never much of a problem for I.S.I. beings because practically each and every one of their functions was in some way related to encryption and encoding or the reverse, decoding. One of the alternative universes they repeatedly explored was the tale of a pico-pico-evolutionary series of accelerations in the evolving of the life matrix itself. So many god-like abilities began to accrue to the evolving beings, beingkind rather than personkind, and a unitary path of evolution began to unfold. Across all species lines, evolution began to express itself in terms of one, as a single being and energy source, which, by the effect of it's unitary nature, began to exert energy effects comparable to entire masses of humanity. A real son or daughter of the life matrix could evolve far enough to literally become a beacon of very high-order energy. Some of the first signs of what happened to a planet when this type of being began to exist were now happening on the Planet Earth of Dr Tomorrow's time. It had occurred on

Earth itself with Christ almost 2000 years previously, but on a much different scale. Dr Tomorrow appeared during a time of apparently intense and varied expression of many different religions, and the oper-

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ation itself was withdrawn during a time of intense planetary movement to one single religion. The planetary-religion phenomenon has been observed in many systems, and followed the whole host of unitary phenomena including one, or at least very few, beings representing the end-point of one or more galactic systems. Subjects such as wealth, power, knowledge and actualization have little or no meaning by this time. The entire population of the life matrix itself has a mathematical tendency to approach one, of course. The evolution of consciousness results in one or a group of several beings regulating time and space and attempting to constructively keep the life matrix cohesive and together. How ironic that the end-point in the evolution of consciousness, the being at the end of the line, so to speak, comes as close to actually being GOD as beings ever approach–in their consciousness, in their music and art forms, and in all their other endeavors except when they are in prayer. The being who is in prayer or meditation comes the closest to BEING GOD. And if the question is posed, “What is Life All About?,” then BEING GOD must definitely be part of the answer. Each and every one of us, at any point along the time axis, can relate to that infinite superbeing amalgamation of all future superbeings. All we have to do is to practice BEING GOD, and one certain way of doing that is by prayer or meditation. Creative music and art production resemble meditation very closely, as does nearly any activity carried out in a one-pointed way.

ISI beings never really liked to think of themselves as God or even as little gods. They had never found any myths depicting Gods as possessing both three digits and an avian rather than mammalian appearance. But Siblings were extremely one-pointed and very well suited for the job. For the early apprentices, there were sometimes problems resulting from the perspective that Guardian work entailed. Viewing so much of the Cataclysms tended to produce a lot of work for the processors. Guardian Siblings were basically ultra-sensitive beings who were placed by evolution in the observer’s seat for multiple cosmic fireworks displays. In the known history of all cultural forms and of consciousness itself, only the self-annihilatory Cataclysm was a remarkable constant of all known cultures within the true extent of the Life Matrix itself. In a word, all civilizations, if not snuffed out by intervening natural disaster, tend to blow themselves up, literally and figuratively. It was ridiculously predictable, and one of the processors, Processor Gamma, had even written some logic equations that related the galactic system’s population density centers and growth curves to actual timeframe predictions of the Local Group Cataclysms. Personkind and beingkind nearly always had a mean streak of one sort or another, and interplanetary wars frequently started over the smallest possible imaginable perceived insult or threat. Often the wars had even resulted from language problems and glitches in cybernetic translators or other decoding devices. Wars have often resulted also from one or both of the potential opponents being poor chess players.

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1 00 0 111 1 00 0 01 10 0
0 101 00 11 1 00 1 1001
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Marshall F. Gilula, otherwise known as NeXT Registered Developer (NeRD) #1054, spends a lot of his time with a customized white Steinberger guitar, and a couple of racks of rapidly-aging electronic equipment controlled by a Mac IIsi running MOTU’s ‘Performer’. This version of DR TOMORROW was part of a Ph.D. Dissertation written for Columbia Pacific University. DR TOMORROW is a project that aspires to being a profitable multidimensional wellness learning system. Marshall Gilula lives in Miami with a black Cube, several Macs, numerous stringed instruments, and two beautiful gigantic German Shepherds, She-Ra and Bullet. ‘DR TOMORROW’ and ‘Project Talking Dog’ (She-Ra and Bullet) are two scientific activities of Life Energies Research Institute, P.O. Box 588, Miami, Florida 33133.

This is the fifth and final installment of Dr Tomorrow, the first chapter of which was printed in the March 1992 Issue (volume IV, Issue 1).

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MATRIX ERROR

by Charles B. Owen

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"I tell you, Doc, the tix rate's up."

Dr. Walter Donly reached for his keyboard and hit the system statistics hot key. Just inside his office door the husky service technician stood shifting his weight from foot to foot. "I appreciate your concern, John," Walt said as the screen filled with data, "but you know as well as I do that the matrix error rate is determined by laws of physics. It doesn't change." He gestured at the screen. "Last month's error rate was one in 188,000. That's close enough to the mean for me."

John Beach still looked skeptical. Walt sighed and wondered if they would ever understand. Running two matrix error service calls in a single day always convinced the techs that system parameters had changed–or had been changed. John had been in before, for the same reason, as had most of the techs. Walt wondered what incident had brought this on.

"I can call stats, too," John said. "But that doesn't explain sites that tix twice in a week. What are the odds on that?"

"That's statistics. You throw five dice, sometimes you get Yatzee. The chance may be small, but it happens."

"Twice in a month?" John asked.

"For a single site?"

"Yeah."

In his entire service apprenticeship, Walt had never seen a site tix twice in a single week. In a morbid fashion he was jealous. "Sounds like you hit the lottery," he said.

"Some, lottery, Doc. What are the odds, anyway?"

Walt sighed. John was going to be tedious. But he was curious, too. "Let's see," he said, clearing the screen and summoning a statistics calculator on the office computer. John moved into the office and sat down.

"OK, pods average thirty uses a day," he began. He was entering equations as he spoke. "The nominal error rate is one in 189,788. So the chance of an error on any particular day is..." He hit the calculate key. "...one in 6,387."

"See what I mean," John said.

"Now hold on. Divide that by seven, and the chance of an error in a week drops to one in 912."

"That's still pretty high."

"Not when you account for volume. With half a billion pods out there, one in 912 is nothing."

"I know there's a lot of pods. But what's the chance of two errors in a week?"

"Simple. 912 raised to the second power." He pressed the keys.

"831,744," John announced. "Good God. You're not going to tell me that's normal."

"John, surely you realize the scale of the transporter system. With the number of pods out there, this situation will happen on an average..." He again consulted the computer. "...over 600 times a week."

John stared at the screen. "Damn system's murder," he said.

"In a way, but we have to have it. How would you get to work if you couldn't tee? Hell, John, you know the odds. You work with the system."

"Yeah, but I try not to think about them."

"That's the way the system works. Sometimes you get in and you don't come out." No one knew that better than the service technicians. When they ran a matrix error call, it generally meant that someone had died.

"Well, I would still like to know the chances of a single site tixing twice in one week – two times in a month."

"Hmm," Walt said. "That's a bit tougher." He pulled up a statistics text to help work out the equation. After entering it the result startled even him. "One in thirty five million?"

"For me only?" John asked.

"That's what it looks like. But there are 100,000 service technicians. It's just economy of scale."

John abruptly stood up. "You guys always hide behind that economy of scale crap. You really don't give a shit. A lot of people are getting fried in your damn system, and you call it economy of scale. Why don't you do some checking for a change instead of spouting statistics." He turned and stormed out of the room before Walt could reply that that was what the system stats were for. The door slid shut, leaving the room echoing with indignation.

> "That's the way the system works. Sometimes you get in and you don't come out."

"Damn," Walt said. He hated scenes like that, and there seemed to be an epidemic of them, lately. Most of the problem stemmed from ignorance. The techs always felt the system could be manipulated. As he had done a dozen times before, he pulled up a stock tpod physics summary and began editing it. He would e-mail it to his service section. Maybe it would calm some of them. If, of course, any of them read it.

He looked at the report and knew it would go right over the heads of the service technicians it had been written for. They refused to accept that the natural D-Wave could not be manipulated or monitored. When a transmit D-Wave synchronized with the natural D-Wave–which it did a fixed percentage of the time–a matrix error occurred. The transmit synchronizer would burn out and the matter to be transmitted would be stuck in the D-dimension. No system failure could possibly cause that error. The equations did not lie; the odds stayed the same.

He tried his best to work the document to a point where it would be understandable, but finally dropped it as hopeless. "Do some checking for a change," John had said. Well, he thought, maybe I will.

He pulled John Beach's file and work log and examined them, looking for the cases in question. John hadn't been exaggerating. His double errors were real. Looking further, he saw that John's tix call rate was running ten a week–nearly twice normal. "Jinx?" Walt said. It wasn't a logical thought, but it had crossed his mind.

He called up another record. Mike Thompson, also in his division, yielded a tix call rate of nine a week. The same held true for several other techs he checked.

"Increased volume?" It seemed unlikely that traffic would have doubled on the system, but he checked anyway. The usage report said volume was down two percent in the last month; that certainly wasn't the problem.

Walt was getting nervous. Matrix central continuously monitored matrix errors, maintaining stats for the system at all times. No increase in the error rate, even within a single division, should go unnoticed.

He wrote a quick program to do a subset stat analysis through his local service link to matrix central. The program ran for a few seconds, then posted results. He stared at the screen in horror. Commercial class pods showed an error rate within one percent of the norm. Class three pods, commonly used for human transportation, were showing an average of one error in 82,134 uses. It was impossible.

His math had to be wrong. He double checked his equations, but they proved accurate. Perhaps the small sample base of fifty thousand sites had yielded skewed results. He increased it to a million sites and ran the program again.

This time the wait was in the minutes and, when the results were posted, the error rate had converged to one in 82,151. Either the error rate was high, or the computer had erroneous data. His service link yielded actual use statistics for individual sites. He had no reason to doubt the data's integrity.

"What is going on?" In spite of the air conditioning, he was beginning to sweat. He hit a blue button on the wall that locked his office. He didn't want anyone to drop in while he had that information on the screen.

Remembering the sites John had mentioned, he wondered if some sites were failing in some unknown way and had high error rates. He entered a scan routine to query for locations with higher than normal error rates, hoping that that would give him something to go on.

He allowed the program to scan the million sites he had previously run stats on. After a few seconds a list appeared of locations with unusually high error rates. He was surprised to see the list headed by four class six industrial sites that were tixing one hundred percent. What he saw violated known physical laws. It was obvious that he didn't know all the laws, and someone else did. There was no doubt that the system was being manipulated.

Wondering if the results went the other way, he changed parameters and ran the program again. Hundreds of sites were revealed with zero error rates over the last ten years. The problem of matrix errors could be controlled and prevented. Someone knew. Someone was not telling.

"Matrix Computer Disconnect" popped up on the screen in a dialog box. Walt froze. Abruptly the phone rang and he nearly jumped out of his chair.

He paused for a moment to let his breathing steady before answering the phone.

"Dr. Donly?" a man inquired.

"Yes?"

"This is Matrix Control. We are seeing a high level of inquiry traffic on your channel. May I ask what you are doing?" The voice failed to mention that they had disconnected his channel.

"Oh, the techs were saying that the error rate is up, as usual. I just was checking to make sure."

"System statistics are available for that purpose." The man at the other end seemed more instructive than angry. Walt was really at a loss for what to say. He had been nosy, and they knew it. They undoubtedly had a log of his accesses.

"I wanted data for my section. Stats are for the entire system," he said.

"The accesses were not all in your section. We logged accesses system-wide."

"Oh, I made an error in the program. Can I request stats for my section?"

"I will forward the appropriate forms to your office. But for now, I have an order to suspend you for the day. You are logged off. Please go home."

"Yes, sir," he replied as the line clicked dead. Walt had never heard of suspensions before. He contemplated the consequences. Would he lose his job? Why couldn't John mind his own business.

He reached for the key to clear local session memory, but hesitated before hitting it. Instead he ran a print of the session log. Fifteen crisp white sheets slid from a slot on the side of the terminal. He then cleared the memory and pocketed the data.

Leaving the office, he headed for the floor tpod. It waited at the end of the hall–just a sliding door and a light announcing pod availability. He stopped before entering. I'm just being paranoid, he thought, and entered the pod. He slid his ID through the reader and punched in his home address code. The unit beeped once, announcing initiation of a transmit cycle. The door had nearly closed when he slammed the abort button.

He stepped out and eyed the pod with apprehension. He'd teed somewhere every day of his life. Sure there was risk, but he accepted that risk. Everyone did. That transporter represented his only way home. But it had taken on a new, dimension as a result of his little session of snooping. It suddenly seemed likely that he might not emerge from the other end of the transport.

He reached in and keyed the activation sequence again. When he had pressed the last button, he pulled his hand clear so the door could close and the unit could transport several cubic meters of air to his house. The cycle light came on. The unit activated.

The soft chiming began at the same time the matrix error indicator lit. Above the door "out of service" was blazed as if to proclaim, "sorry, you will have to go down the hall for your chance." Walt froze for a moment, then turned and ran.

He didn't know where he was running to, but he had to get away from all tpods. He had to get help, to tell someone. He knew he couldn't tee anymore, so how would he reach help? He did not even know where he lived in relation to matrix central. Tpods moved the world. Now that he couldn't use them anymore, he felt stranded.

Then he remembered the air cars. He was even on the correct level. He had used the cars during his apprenticeship as a service technician. When a pod suffered a receive failure, a tech had to get to it some other way, so matrix central maintained a fleet of air cars and small spacecraft. He headed for the docks.

When he reached the dock entrance, he tried to remember air car procedures. It had been ten years since he had flown one, but they mostly flew themselves anyway. He remembered the check-out routine, but with no valid service ID or authorization that wouldn't work.

As he walked in the door he surveyed the docking area. The vast room was filled with the large delta wing vehicles, some parked in neat rows ready for use, others in various stages of disassembly. One sat in launch position, pointed down the launch corridor.

"I need to check out an air car," he said to the boy at the entrance. The only occupant of the room, the young man looked all of seventeen. He wore a flowered shirt and a smudge on his chin revealed a desire for manliness through blade shaving. Of course, he was in charge of air cars. On the desk he had the usage log and a full box of key cards.

"I need to see your ID, work order, and authorization," he said.

"Here is my ID," Walt said, handing over the card. "I don't need authorization, I'm a supervisor." It never hurts to try, he thought.

"I can't issue based on just an ID, sir. I'll have to call for authorization." He reached for the phone.

Sometimes the best way is the direct way, Walt thought. It worked on tri-V. As the boy's hand snaked toward the phone and he was looking down, Walt bundled his fingers into a fist and slugged the kid with all his might. The boy, chair and all, fell backwards to the floor.

Walt hoped that he had knocked him out, but he hadn't. The boy jumped up from the floor and for a moment Walt was afraid he would be involved in a fist fight. But the kid cowered back into the corner, obviously not wanting any more trouble.

Walt grabbed the phone and yanked. Expecting the wonderful movie gesture of wires ripping free from the wall, he instead found the wire to be quite strong, so he resorted to throwing the phone to the floor. The plastic case, not designed for such abuse, shattered.

He grabbed his ID and the box of keycards. Running to the ready car, he heard the boy escaping out the door. He would have very little time to get going. He jumped in the car, sealed the door, and began trying cards. The fifth card he tried activated the control panel. He dropped the box of cards, flipped the controls to manual, and jammed the throttle all the way forward. Acceleration forced him into the seat as the air car flashed down the launch corridor and into the sky.

Once clear of the opening it began to drop. Walt grabbed at the yoke and pulled. The craft yawed to the right, then pulled up, just clearing a stand of trees. He had overcorrected and the ship almost stalled, but he pushed forward lightly and leveled out. It had been years since his training, but the motions quickly returned. Soon he had control of the car and was confronted with the awful decision of where to go.

He pulled the crumpled sheave of papers from his pocket. The top page gave the address. He punched it into navigation and felt the car assume automatic control. It veered to the right and began to ascend.

As the air leveled out, Walt wondered if he would be followed. The only use for air cars was transporter pod maintenance, so he didn't expect to meet any normal traffic. Of course, the key cards for all the cars in the dock were scattered on the floor at his feet. If duplicates existed, they would take a while to find, he was sure. He always likened TP Technologies to an elephant–damn big, and awfully slow. Obviously, at some higher level that was not the case. Still, that level had to deal with the norm, and the norm consisted of two million employees and no one in charge.

The air car released to manual after two hours flight time. Walt found himself over a wooded valley occupied by a single log cabin. Far in the distance another cabin could be seen, but the spacing was several kilometers. John Beach obviously liked his privacy.

The yard in front of the house had a clearing large enough to land the craft. He sat the car down gently in the grass, hoping to cause little damage to the idyllic setting.

"What the hell," he heard as the hatch opened. The noise had apparently aroused John. Walt reasoned that he was the first visitor John had ever had via air car. He stepped out to meet his host.

"Donly!" John stood there in the grass. He was barefoot and holding a beer. For the first time, Walt noticed his pot belly. With the diet drugs available, he wondered if the belly had been grown on purpose to achieve a look John particularly desired.

"I've got to talk to you," Walt said.

"I guess you do. Why didn't you just tee in, like regular folk." John was getting quite a kick out his guest's strange arrival.

"John, I need your help. I checked into what you said, and I found something real bad. Can we talk?"

"Sure, come on in."

"I'd better not. You may be in danger, too. Can you come with me?"

"Good God, Doc. You show up in an air car in the middle of the afternoon and want me to go flying? I haven't done anything. Why should I be in danger."

"You wanted me to check. I did. Someone is tampering with the tpod error rate."

"I told you so."

"Now they're trying to kill me. They may try to kill you, too. Right now, I don't trust any tpods, including your house unit."

John stared at Walt for a moment, then glanced back at the house. "Give me a sec," he said and ran into the house. Less than a minute later, he emerged in a denim jacket and boots, with two beers.

Not normally the drinking type, Walt gratefully accepted one. "Get in," he said, jumping back in the air car. Once John was buckled in he lifted off, turned east, and began to relate his story.

"Where are we going, now?" John asked as he examined the computer printouts.

"I figured we would try to find a tri-V network or some other news agency to break this. With enough publicity, we would be safe," Walt said. "I don't think we can go to the police. They would probably arrest me for stealing the air car, and TP would get me the moment they pop me in a pod."

"So, where..." John began. The sky suddenly flared a brilliant white. Both men closed their eyes against the glare. Then the shock wave hit, and the air car began tumbling. John grabbed the controls, yelling, "let me." He fought them madly as the sky and ground did wild acrobatics. Trees below burst into flames, then were uprooted by the shock wave. As the ship tumbled the men caught brief glimpses of a rising mushroom cloud in the distance.

After a desperate battle, John managed to level the craft out. He got it back on an easterly course. "Minimal damage," he said as he surveyed the instrumentation. "We seem to be ok, but if that was a nuke, we're irradiated now."

"I doubt it. I bet there was no radiation at all," Walt replied.

"What do you mean. That was a nuke if I ever saw one."

"A different kind of nuke. Are you familiar with energy venting?"

"Sure. I sometime work on an EV unit. It drains energy from matrix error mass loss and converts it to electricity."

"Yeah, but do you know how they work?" Walt asked.

"No, not really. I guess it's similar to other tpods. They use the same parts."

"When something–or someone–is tixed, they are stuck in the D-dimension. Matter isn't stable there, so it converts directly to energy. EV units tap that energy in a controlled way by generating a simultaneous transmit and receive D-Wave for the same location. This causes an energy release from the field. The energy level is determined by the intensity of the field. Many people know that. What most people don't know is that any tpod can be used as an EV unit, since most tpods transmit and receive. A lot of safeguards have to be overridden, but it can be done."

"They detonated the tpod in my house?" John had turned white, obviously realizing for the first time that he had become a target, too.

"I think so. The problem with using a regular tpod as an EV is that the vent can't be controlled. It just dumps a large mass equivalence instantly. The best it can be toned down to would be the equivalent of a medium nuke," Walt said. "Like that."

"You son of a bitch," John yelled. "You led them to me. Now they're after me, too." John had regained his color and was glaring at Walt. He looked ready to kill.

"You started this, John," Walt replied. "You asked me to do the checking. Now we're in this together."

"But you could have stayed your distance. You didn't have to lead them to me."

"Hell, I don't think I led them to you. I had your coordinates already, so I didn't have to inquire of navigation. They may have been going to hit you anyway. I probably saved your life."

"I doubt that," John said. He looked unconvinced. "How do you know they can't track this air car?"

"I don't think they can. If they could, why would they wait for us to be out of range? They sure missed."

"They didn't miss my house."

"I think I would rather be alive and homeless, if I were you," said Walt. "We had best work together. You have any ideas?"

"Well, where the hell are we going. You've got us pointed east, but that means nothing to me. I live by tpod coordinates."

"I seem to remember reading that the major tri-V nets are all on the east coast. I think New York. I remember some geography from school. New York is on the east coast of the Americas, and I think that's where we are, so I'm heading that way."

"How will we find the right place when we get there."

"Hell, John, you got any ideas?" Walt looked at him. "I'm doing the best I can to get us out of this mess. Maybe we'll look for antennas. We could ask directions."

"Great. Sarcasm. Antennas might work." He added, "I think I live near the coast. I saw a map when I bought the cabin. New York should be north, if I remember correctly." He adjusted their course.

They flew for over an hour above terrain that varied from long, empty fields to mountain peaks. Occasionally a small town or city dotted the landscape, to be replaced again by green grass and pasture land. They marveled at the feeling of flight, so seldom felt in a world of instantaneous transportation.

Suddenly the land became water. Below them waves broke on the beach. Even in the filtered cabin, the ocean smell hung heavy in the air. They turned north and followed the coast line until an island city came into view.

"New York?" John asked. They were both straining to see in the haze. The sun was setting, painting the shiny box world ahead in shades of red and gold.

"I guess so. Hell, I don't know. Let's give it a try." They swooped down over the city like a bird of prey. Every building seemed to have at least one antenna, but few had more. "See that one," Walt said, pointing at a mirrored skyscraper to the north.

"Yeah. Looks like a farm on the roof. Let's give it a try."

They flew to the building. Dozens of antennas sprouted from the roof, but a large, cleared circle with a painted red X marked a landing spot. The paint had faded, but the area was clear. John sat the craft down on the pad and they disembarked.

A cool, evening breeze cut through their clothes and occasional gusts threatened their balance. "Tough wind up here," John said.

"Over here." Walt pointed at a red brick block with a door. It looked like the access way for the roof. "Let's try it."

The door was unlocked. Upon entering they found themselves at the top of a stairwell that spiraled off to the left, circling an open center shaft.

They went down one flight and looked at the door. The handle had been lost long ago. "Let's try the next one," Walt said. They found it unlocked and pushed it open. It bumped against something, then gave way.

"Gosh, you scared me half to death," the girl said. Her whitened cheeks formed a contrast to the heavy rouge she had applied. She reached up and brushed an offending strand of blond hair from her eyes, stalling for time as she regained composure. “What were you doing in the stairwell?”

“We are trying to find the press,” Walt said. “Are we close?”

“This is the GTV building,” she replied. Walt breathed a sigh of relief. Global Tri-V was one of the biggest networks. They would help.

“I need to talk to a reporter,” he said. He felt no need to explain to this girl He wanted to go straight to someone important. “Can you get someone?”

“Ok,” she said and zipped from behind the desk, not turning her back until well out of range. A hallway extended the breath of the building. She disappeared to the right at the end of the hall.

“Thank goodness,” John said. “Let’s get this mess over with. Someone in TP owes me a house and I intend on taking it out of his hide.”

“I wish it were as simple as replacing your house,” Walt replied. He gazed down the hall, anxious for an end to the affair. He noticed the tpod on the left near the end of the hall The blue availability light glowed above the door. He shuddered for a moment, then calmed.

The reporter stepped into the hall and headed toward them with long, confident strides. Walt could feel her assessing them as she approached, wasting no time getting to the story. Her business suit clung tightly to her slim body with no loose cloth. Her hair was cropped close in a style that could grace the screen, yet not get in the way. She brandished a notepad as a warrior would a gun.

“Shiela Haskel, GTV,” she said when she was within range. She extended her hand. “What can I do for you.”

Walt shook her hand. “I’m Dr. Walt Donly. This is John Beach. We’re employees of TP Technologies, and we’ve got quite a story.”

“Come with me to my office,” she said. “We’ll be more comfortable there.” She turned on her heels and the men followed. Walt noticed the secretary regaining her territory, obviously glad to be back in charge of her little corner of the world.

They went down the hall and entered an elevator. “My office in on level eighteen,” Shiela said, pressing the button. “Perhaps you can tell be what this is about?”

Walt began telling her of the information he had discovered and his subsequent flight. The elevator stopped. They exited and went down another hall to a corner office. He paused while they entered. “Please be seated,” she said, motioning at the two chairs facing the desk. Walt wondered if most news stories involved two people.

“Please continue,” she said, all the while jotting notes. Other than an occasional “OK,” or “Right,” she let Walt relate the story uninterrupted.

“Are you sure this is not just statistics at play?” she asked when he had finished. She appeared unimpressed by the magnitude of the tale.

“If it weren’t for those four sites, I couldn’t be certain. I guess odds could be pushed, but not that far. Those sites are impossible. Someone is doing that.”

“And I know I’ve been seeing more tixs than usual in the last few months,” John added.

“Do you have any physical evidence?” she asked. Walt eyed her for a moment. Was she skeptical, or just thorough?

“I have this,” he said, handing over the prints he had run earlier. She thumbed through them for a moment, apparently absorbing the data.

“What do these numbers really mean, Doctor?”

“What do you mean?” he inquired.

“In lives.”

He had avoided thinking in those terms before. “I didn’t run that number.”

“Care to hazard a guess?”

“Oh, an extra twenty million a year. Maybe more.” The magnitude of the problem struck home for the first time. “Can’t you get this on the air and stop it?” he begged.

She sat the papers down and clasped her hands over the desk. “I would like to, but there is a problem. I can’t break a story like this without physical evidence or independent corroboration. It’s too big.”

“What,” John yelled. “You mean you’re not going to do anything?”

“We are going to do something. I really want to blow this story wide open. This is huge, but we have to be careful. You are not the first to make such a claim.”

“Not the first?” Walt asked.

“No. About fifty years ago, an employee of TP came to GTV and said that matrix errors could be controlled and TP management was using them to produce power. He had internal prints and statistics to prove it.”

“You mean you’ve known this for fifty years?”

“Hold on. The guy turned out to be a fraud. The prints he had were faked. We aired the story and raised quite a ruckus, only to be sued by TP. Hell, TP damn near ended up owning the place. It hurt the network’s credibility, so we have to be real careful about our sources, especially on a story like this.”

“You don’t believe us,” John said. His hands were balled up in fists.

“Of course I believe you. For one thing, you came here by air car. That’s not what I would call a normal occurrence. And there are two of you. These prints could be fake, but they look real. We will just have to find some way to prove this.”

“What about my house?” John asked. “Surely someone noticed!”

“Let me check.” Shiela activated the terminal on her desk and entered a command sequence. “Here it is. A large meteorite impact occurred in eastern Tennessee earlier today. According to government sources, the meteorite struck in a sparsely populated area, destroying a few homes and a great deal of timber. Casualties are minimal. End of story. There you go.”

“Meteorite, my ass,” John exclaimed.

A slow whistle escaped Walt’s lips. “Would seeing the computer results yourself be sufficient proof?” he said.

“You’re crazy,” John said.

“Calm down, John,” Walt said. To Shiela, “we might be able to get in.”

“If I could verify personally that this information came from the matrix computer, I could break the story. Without that assurance, I’m stuck.” She seemed sincere in her desire to air the story.

“You realize they tried to kill us before?” Walt said.

“I’m a reporter. I get the story. Don’t worry about me, I’ll carry my weight.” She jumped up from the seat and grabbed a small case that was on the floor by the desk. “Let’s get going. I don’t want to hang around here too long.”

Walt rose from the chair. John stared at him, his mouth gaping open. “You coming?” Walt asked.

He regained his composure. “What the hell. Besides,” he added, looking around the room. “I’ll bet meteorites travel in bunches.”

Shiela exited the office, with the others close behind. “Can you give me a tee address?” she asked.

“There’s no way you’ll get me in a tpod right now,” Walt said. “And the pods at matrix central are all locked. We’d better fly. The air car is on the roof.”

They settled in for the flight. The air car only had two seats, so Shiela sat on the console between the two men. The men intermittently dozed, lulled by the soft drone of the blowers and the rushing air. Shiela spent the majority of the flight marveling at the vast world below her. Outside a blanket of darkness was covering the world, increasing the contrast of city lights and isolated homes.

Since Walt and John both knew matrix central’s coordinates, internal navigation flew the car. The flight was uneventful. For a brief period the hectic pace of the day had abated. Walt tried not to think of what lay ahead.

“You awake,” Shiela asked.

“Yeah,” Walt answered, though his eyes remained closed.

“This is something people don’t see anymore.” She gestured at the shadowy ground and the sun just touching the horizon. “Tpods took that away.”

“In a way, but they gave us much in return.”

“I just wonder if the sacrifices have been worth it?” she said.

“I don’t know,” Walt said and went back to sleep.

When the arrival alarm sounded, it was pitch black outside. The chiming was all too similar to the matrix error alarm and jolted both men from their sleep. Walt cleared the alarm and took the controls. John began to scan the horizon for lights.

“Where are we?” Shiela asked.

“We’re approaching matrix central. We should see lights any moment now,” Walt said.

“Maybe not,” John said. “Matrix central has no windows. It’s just a big rectangular building. We may not be able to see it in the dark.”

“Any suggestions?” Walt asked.

“We could wait for morning,” Shiela suggested.

“I’d rather not,” Walt said. “Navigation says we are approaching, but I don’t see a thing. What about landing lights? For the air cars.”

“The air car bays are on the south side,” John said. “We’re east, or maybe north east, so they wouldn’t show. You might try swinging to the south.”

Walt banked the car to the left until navigation reported they were south of the building. “There we go.” He pointed so the others would see the light green, flashing beacon for themselves.

“That would be the launch bay,” John said. “You want to go in there?”

“I don’t think so. We will need the surprise. I’m going to put down on the ground. We’ll walk in.”

“Can we get in from outside?” Shiela asked.

“Sure,” John said. “There’s recreational areas on the ground. Nothing’s fenced that I know of.”

“Will there be guards?” she asked.

“I hope not,” John answered.

“I doubt it,” Walt added. “Matrix central is real big. Something like a half million people work here. I’ll bet there are several hundred exits. Security would be strapped to cover them all. Besides, all the tpods are locked and no one else has air cars but TP.”

“And you,” Shiela added.

“Yeah, and they’ll know that. But this is the last place they would expect us to go.”

“Let’s hope so,” John said.

They sat the air car down in a clearing several hundred meters from the building. A large rock pile, probably unearthed when the building was built, shielded the craft from view. “They’ll probably find this come daylight,” Walt said as they began walking toward the building. “We’d better hurry.”

The quarter moon provided little illumination to walk by, slowing their travel. Occasionally one of them exclaimed softly as a toe was stubbed or balance lost. They saw each other only as outlines.

“Shame TP doesn’t have a lighted night rec area,” John whispered.

“They probably do, on the north side of the building,” Walt replied. He touched the rough surface of a wall. “Here we are. There should be an entrance pretty soon.”

It was still several hundred meters before Walt whispered “here’s the door,” and stopped so the others could catch up. “Any last requests,” he asked.

“Real funny,” John said.

Walt slowly turned the knob. When it reached its limit he pulled it open a crack and peered inside. The bright interior stung his eyes initially, but they quickly adjusted. The door ended a hallway that traveled as far as he could see. No one was in sight. He swung the door open and entered, with John and Shiela following close behind.

“It’s a big operation,” Walt whispered. “Just act normal and no one will question us.”

“What about IDs,” John asked.

“I doubt if anyone will notice we’re not wearing any. If it becomes a problem we’ll just have to wing it.”

He led them down the hall to the nearest elevator. “We’ll have to go to the service tech support level.” He summoned the elevator, which promptly arrived with a light chime. Each of them looked around, as if to assure themselves the sound had gone unnoticed. They stepped in and Walt pressed the button labeled twenty two.

When the door had closed he said “Our best bet is to get an ID and go to one of the other tech supervisor’s offices.”

“How are you going to do that?” Shiela asked.

“I’ll bet our big friend here would love to vent some pent-up frustrations. Right, John?”

“Damn straight!” he answered.

The elevator opened, revealing the twenty second floor hallway, a twin of the first floor, but busier. Service techs, obvious in blue coveralls, mulled around in the hall and a low din of conversation could be heard. Vague mechanical sounds emanated from repair shops on the floor. With Walt in the lead, they stepped from the elevator and headed to the right. The techs appeared undisturbed in their conversation.

At a random door Walt stopped. The name Eric Garver was etched into the metal door panel. A lighted, blue button by the door signaled Eric's presence and availability. "Let's make it quick," Walt whispered. He pressed the button and the door slid open.

"May I help you?" the man said as they stepped into the room. He peered up at them through unfashionable wire rim glasses that perched on an excessive nose. He sat, with his hands frozen on the terminal keyboard, awaiting an answer.

Shiela was the last in the door. She pressed the close and lock buttons behind her. As the door slid closed, John and Walt collided as each began a clumsy pounce. Walt jumped out of the way and allowed John to grab the man behind the desk. Papers flew off the desk in the struggle as John subdued the man's arms with one hand and prevented him from screaming with the other. When the pandemonium had settled, he had the man in a bear hug. "Now what do we do with him?" he asked.

Walt glanced around the spartan office. "We need to subdue him," he stated, "but I don't see anything."

Shiela was rummaging in her case, and pulled out a piece of wire. "Try this. It's a tri-V power cord. I'll record on batteries, anyway."

John grabbed the wire and started tying Garver up. "Just keep quite and you won't get hurt," he said before removing his hand. "We need something for his mouth."

"Use his belt," Walt said.

"Right," John replied. He stripped the man's belt and used it as a makeshift gag. When the man was secure, he pulled his ID and handed it to Walt. "Here you go."

Walt sat down at the desk. He didn't really need the ID, since the terminal was still logged on. He cleared the previous activity and then tried to decide what best to do.

"Could you reproduce those stats you showed me?" Shiela asked, leaning over the desk.

"I could, but that would probably alert the sysop again. What about the high rate sites?" he asked.

"Let's start there. You need these?" She held out the prints he had given her earlier.

"Yeah." He selected site history for each of the four locations. The screen displayed the locations and the recent error logs. "There you go."

"You're right," she said. "Why would they make some locations do that?"

"I don't know," Walt said.

"Could we go there and check it out?" she asked.

"No way. Those locations are type six industrial pods, no interconnect to type three pods. There's a service pod listed, but it's locked." He pointed at a key icon next to the entry on the screen.

"Enter code 43W," John said.

Walt entered the code and the key icon disappeared. "I didn't know you could override a lock remotely," he said.

"They had a bad run of locks. They gave us the override codes to simplify getting to the sites and replacing the lock card. I can override most local safeguards."

"Could you detonate a site?" Shiela asked.

"Before yesterday, I never would have believed that was possible, but I don't think so. Doc said that takes simultaneous transmit and receive. I've never heard of a code to override mode separation."

"I would think it would be tough," Walt said. "Maybe that's why they missed us. It took too long to set up."

"Can we get to the site now?" Shiela asked again.

"Sure, by tpod," Walt said, brandishing the pilfered ID. "I doubt if anyone suspects our Mr. Garver."

"Will we all three fit in a pod?"

"I'd better stay here and monitor you," John volunteered. "I would rather not go exploring right now, anyway."

Walt clipped the ID on. "Ok, you stay. If we are very long, get to another office. You might try to call GTV if the phone system's not monitored."

"Give them my name and tell them what is going on," Shiela added. "I don't know what they could do, but the more people who know, the better."

"Ok," John said. "Get going. I'll watch from here."

Walt and Shiela left the room. Looking back as they walked down the hall, Walt noticed John had re-locked the door.

"You think the tpod will be safe?" Shiela asked.

"I hope so. As safe as usual, at least." They reached the pod at the end of the hall, and stepped in together. He entered the address for one of the sites and activated the transporter with the stolen ID. The scene through the door view port changed to a high ceiling room full of plumbing and machinery.

"Where are we?" Shiela asked. Her voice echoed over the sound of a roaring exhaust fan.

"Looks like a small factory." Walt sniffed at the air. There was a distinct ozone smell to the room, intermingled with lubricants and solvents. There was something else, also. "Do you smell salt?"

"I sure do. Do you think we're by the sea?"

"Smells like it. The ocean has a definite smell to it." He walked farther into the room. "What is all this?"

"You're asking me? Where's that pod?"

"I think that's it over there." He led her over to a large box painted the same utility gray as all the other equipment in the room. "Industrial unit. Here's the control panel." He pointed to a panel mounted on the side of the unit. It was covered with gauges and indicators and had a screen indicating standby status.

Suddenly a large motor started. It groaned before catching hold, then accelerated to a steady speed. Momentarily startled, Walt walked over to the pod chamber and wiped dust from the view port. "It's filling with water," he said.

"Sea water?" she asked, walking over to look for herself. He noticed that she had taken out the compact tri-V recorder and was filming.

"I guess so. It doesn't look very clean." The pump stopped. Walt suspected that the chamber was full. Then the chamber was empty. "It activated."

"Who would transport sea water?" Shiela asked. "Space use?"

"Not sea water," Walt said. He walked over to the control panel. The red indicator confirmed his suspicion. "And that water didn't go anywhere. It got tixed. This site has a 100% error rate, remember?"

"But why tix water."

"Energy," Walt realized. "They're adding energy to the system. Do you know where our energy comes from?"

"I know it's a by-product of the tpod system. TP Technologies produces all the power."

"When something gets tixed," Walt said, "it's converted directly to energy in the D-dimension. TP taps that energy. But you can't tap energy that isn't there. There must not be enough energy in the system to meet demand, so they created these plants to add energy to the system. A few hundred liters of sea water is a lot of energy."

"That makes sense," Shiela said. "But what does that have to do with the odds changing on human transportation?"

"I don't know, but this does prove that matrix errors can be controlled."

"We had a matrix error in the office last week," Shiela said. "They sent someone out to service the pod. Will someone be coming to service this one?" She looked apprehensive.

"A tix blows the transmit D-wave synchronizer. It has to be replaced. Look!" He pointed at a small robot arm attached to the pod mechanism. It removed an access panel and pulled the burnt transmit synchronizer from the opening. Discarding it on one conveyer belt it reached to another and picked up a new unit, which it promptly installed, closing the hatch behind it. "It's automatic," Walt said.

"Don't move," said a husky voice from behind them. "Put your hands on your heads and turn around slowly."

Obeying, they turned to face a tall man in a dark red uniform with a handgun. He had a lopsided scowl and needed a shave. "What are you doing here?" he asked.

Walt and Shiela just stood there. "Who are you?" the man asked.

When they still did not reply, the guard led them to the service tpod and told them not to move as he phoned for instructions. "What are they going to do to us?" Shiela whispered as the guard discussed the situation on the phone.

"What do you think?" Walt replied, nodding at the waiting tpod.

"Yes, sir," the guard said and hung up the phone. He hit the open button. "Into the pod. Both of you!"

"We've all gotta go sometime," Walt said as he stepped in. Shiela hesitated, and was violently shoved in by the guard.

"Yeah," Shiela said, "I guess so." The guard reached in and entered an address. As the door closed, Walt wondered if the guard knew what was going to happen to them.

The scene through the view port was replaced by a room containing a desk, another guard, and a well dressed executive type. The guard stood watch in the corner of the room. The other man was sitting behind a large desk sparsely populated by a few folders, a telephone, and a computer terminal.

The pod opened and Walt and Shiela stepped into the room. The man behind the desk stood up when he recognized them.

"It's you," he exclaimed. "We've been searching matrix central. How the hell did you get to Orlando?"

Walt looked at Shiela, then turned back to the man and shrugged his shoulders.

He picked up the phone and dialed. "Hart in Central here. Donly and the reporter are here. We picked them up in the Orlando facility. Yes. Beach must still be in the building. Good." He hung up the phone.

"Where's John Beach?" His pause brought no reply. "Ok, you guys. I think there are some things you need to know. We've been tracking you since yesterday. I think you realize the magnitude of what you've stumbled onto. Surely you realize that we are not going to let you broadcast it to the world. We are prepared, however, to make arrangements for you that could be quite comfortable."

"We've seen your arrangements," Walt said.

"Yes, you have. But if you are willing to work with us, there is no reason why you should be in danger. We are not vicious killers."

"Twenty million a year?" Shiela asked.

"That's not your concern. I want you to tell me were John Beach is. Then if you will help us analyze the weaknesses in our security system, your help will not go un-rewarded."

"We split up," Shiela injected. "I don't know where he is now."

"Was he in matrix central when you split up?"

"No," Shiela replied. "He decided to take off into the woods when we got there, figuring he would be safer."

Hart slammed his palm down on the desk. "Bullshit," he yelled. "You think this is a game? Do you want me to get Mike here to beat the crap out of both of you? He'd like to." The big guard smiled. "I need answers, and I need them now. Where's Beach?"

Walt looked at the man and drew up his best movie scowl. Perhaps it would be better to go for the guard, rather than awaiting fate. He judged the distance and tried to estimate Shiela's reaction. A quick pounce would be unexpected, and might catch him by surprise. If only he could get that gun.

Walt was bracing himself for the useless jump when the phone rang. "Yes," Hart answered. A startled look replaced the anger on his face. "Where are you?" he asked, then "I can't do that."

The blast knocked everyone down. Walt grabbed his ears. They were ringing so loudly that he could barely hear. "What was that?" he heard Shiela yell. She, too, was gripping her head. Hart was on the floor, the phone dangling by his side. The guard had dropped his gun and was scrambling to grab it. Walt leaped for it, but was too late. The guard was up and had them both covered again.

Hart slowly rose. He picked up the phone again. "Ok, but you won't get far," he said. "Get into the pod," he said to Walt and Shiela. As soon as they were inside, he said "They're in." The door slid shut and the unit activated. Walt noted that no address had been entered.

They stepped out into another hallway. John was running toward them. "You OK?" he asked.

"Yeah," Walt said. "And you better keep it down. Where are we? And what happened?"

"You're four floors above service tech support," John said as he gestured for them to follow. He was moving quickly. "We had better get out of here, quick. It won't take long for them to trace that transport. I was monitoring you and noticed a tee to your location from matrix central followed by another tee back. I figured you guys got caught. The terminal gave me a service phone for the pod you teed to, so I called it. The guy who answered obviously had you, so I threatened him."

"But what was that blast," Shiela asked.

"An old maintenance trick. If the door close mechanism fails, you can't tee to a site to repair it. That means travel by air car in some cases. Recently, they gave us a door fail-safe override. Now we can tee in with the door open."

"But you didn't tee in," Walt said.

"No, I just activated a tee from the first empty pod I found. Directed it all from the terminal. You tee anything, including air, into an un-evacuated pod, and the air sitting in the pod already is displaced, like real fast. About a nanosecond, if I remember right. Makes a hell of a sound."

"I'll be damned," Walt said. "We had better find another office and hide. They may trace the terminal that ordered the pod activation."

"Good idea," John said. They entered an elevator. John slid his hand down every selector in the elevator, telling the elevator to stop at every floor. "That'll make us harder to trace." When they reached tech support they got out and went to another office, commandeering it as they had done previously.

"Now what do we do," Shiela asked.

"I think we ought to get back to GTV," John said. "Do you have enough dope to nail this mess?"

"Yes. Can we get out of here now?" she replied.

"I don't think that's a good idea," Walt said. "If they can tix twenty million people a year, how big a deal would nuking a few hundred thousand in New York be. They may be monitoring for any pod traffic to GTV."

"I could just call it in," Shiela said.

"I bet not. They're probably monitoring all outgoing lines. Calling would just give our position away."

"Well, do you have any ideas?" John asked.

"I think we should try to put a stop to this," Walt said.

"Releasing a news story should do that," Shiela said.

"Do you really think we can get a story like this out of this building? Do you want to bet on whether the phone lines are tapped? We need leverage."

"What kind of leverage?" John asked.

Walt thought. He saw no immediate escape from their dilemma. The control of matrix errors went very high, probably to Julius Bartholemew, the executive board of TP, or higher. And the controllers possessed the equivalent of nuclear weapons. They could risk it and go to GTV, but the chances of the story getting on the air had to be slim. "Where would the matrix errors be controlled from?" he wondered out loud.

"It could be anywhere," John said. "All it would take would be a terminal with special access codes."

"But a terminal would have to go through building switching, wouldn't it?"

"I don't know. I've never worked with terminals other than the service ports."

"Would a terminal be secure enough to control this?" Shiela asked.

"I guess so," Walt said. "Of course, any activity can be monitored at the matrix computer main system console. That's how they caught me meddling with the matrix error records. Even if we found the right terminal, the sysop would catch us."

"It seems," John said, "like the system console would be the ideal location for controlling the error rate."

"You're right," Walt said. "Even if there are other terminals, all system functions are available from the system console."

"Where is it?" Shiela asked.

"It's adjacent to the the matrix computer," Walt said. "That's the basement if I remember right."

"Yeah," John added. "They showed us the system during orientation. Just a bunch of racks and the system console. I don't remember anyone else being on the floor at the time."

"Can we get to it," Shiela asked.

"It should be heavily protected," Walt said. "Let's see if we can tee in." He activated the terminal, using their latest host's ID to log in. "I don't see any pods on that floor," he said after a moment of perusing records.

"There has to be," John said. "That's how we got to the floor during the tour."

"Well I don't see anything listed," Walt said. "That would be one way of securing the floor from unauthorized personnel. Either way, we can't tee in."

"What about elevators," Shiela asked.

"I didn't see any floors below one in the elevators," Walt said. "You hit all of them, John. Did you see any?"

"No, I didn't. I doubt if the elevator goes down there. If it did, they wouldn't have teed us in."

"True," Walt said. "No elevator and unlisted tpods. The only thing left would be stairs. I wonder if they go to that level?"

"Only one way to find out," John said.

They left the office and walked to the end of the hall. A door panel with a graphic step icon opened to allow them in the stairwell. They began down.

"How far," asked Shiela.

"We're on twenty two," John said. "Figure that many flights."

Spiraling downward toward the basement, they eventually reached the end of the stairs and faced a blank, red, door panel.

"How do we open it?" asked John.

"I don't see an access pad," Walt said. "All the rest of the floors had access pads. This must be exit only. No way in."

"I've got tools in my kit," Shiela said. "Could we break in?"

"I doubt it," said John. "I don't see any panels or hinges we could remove, and the door's sealed."

"I don't think we can get in from here," Walt said. "Let's go up a level and see if we can find another way down." He started back up the stairs with the others following.

The next level had a normal access pad. He pressed it and the door opened to a huge room filled with the sound of buzzing fans. "Looks like computer equipment on this floor also," he said.

"They distinctly said in the tour that the matrix computer is all contained on the bottom floor. Of course, that was several years ago. Maybe they expanded."

"Or this may be support equipment," Walt said. "Input/output gear and tpod links." He looked at the large, featureless racks. Each had a plate with the words "TP Technologies, Inc." and a seven digit model number. "Probably link equipment," he ventured. "TP buys its computers."

"Is all this equipment connected to

tpods?" Shiela asked. She had activated the tri-V recorder again.

"It probably connects tpods to the matrix computer," Walt said. He looked down. "I'll bet this floor has a maze of wiring under it."

John glanced down at the white floor tiles. "False floor?" he asked.

"It looks like computer flooring," Walt said. "The tiles lift out to allow easy access to the wires. I don't see any overhead cabling, so it must be under the floor." Suddenly he saw what John was getting at. "And that cabling probably goes to the main computer. There may be an access-way."

John and Walt began examining the floor for a way to get under it as Shiela continued recording. "How do they get the tiles up?" John asked.

"There's a special handle with two suction cups on it. I've see it done. It's a common item, so there may be one lying around somewhere."

They all began to search for the floor tool. After a few minutes of searching behind and over racks, Shiela pointed at the top of a rack. "Is that one?"

"Yeah," Walt said, grabbing the tool. He set it on one of the floor tiles and lifted. The tool lifted. The tile remained seated.

"Press the lever," John said.

Walt noticed the lever on the top of the tool and, placing the tool back in place, he activated it. This time the tile lifted. It was much heavier than he expected, so it was a struggle to get it out of the hole. "Got it," he said at last.

They stared into the cavity. A spider web of wire confronted them, some loose, some bundled into tied groups. There seemed no general direction to the wires; they went in all directions simultaneously. "Let's go," Walt said climbing into the meter and a half crawl space under the floor. Crouching down, he found he could move over the wire fairly easily. Shiela followed him down, with John bringing up the rear. John had removed the floor tool and tossed it into the hole. As he entered he pulled the loose tile back into place.

The only light under the floor was tiny slivers around the edges of the tiles. Shiela pulled a portable light source from her bag and activated it. White light streamed in all directions. "That should help," she said, handing the light to Walt.

"God, I'm glad you came equipped," Walt said. "You always carry a flashlight?"

"Ever tried to tape a news spot in the dark?" Shiela replied. "Your basic black doesn't sell."

"Right," Walt said. He looked around for order in the chaos. "Any ideas as to where to go?"

"We might try following the wall," John suggested and they proceeded toward the nearest one. Travel in the under-floor maze was slow, but steadying. Occasionally they had to climb over a large bundle of wire, but most of the cabling was only a few layers deep.

They traveled until they reached the end of the floor, then turned left. There was an area devoid of cabling next to the wall that made movement easier, and they stayed in that area.

"I think we're getting somewhere," Walt said. "Notice that the cable bundles parallel to the wall are getting larger. We may be approaching a feed-through of some kind."

"How far?" Shiela asked.

"I don't have any idea. But the wire bundles can only get so big before they become..." He stopped moving and doused the light. "Hear that?" he said.

"What?" whispered Shiela.

"Footsteps." In the distance steps could be heard on the floor. Suddenly they heard a striking sound and the darkness was broken far ahead of them. The square opening became a searchlight as a beacon was lowered into the floor space and rotated around, casting light in all directions before retracting back above. The tile was replaced and the footsteps began again.

"They're searching under the floor," John said.

"And they appear to be heading this..." Walt stopped as another tile lifted, only closer. "Under the wire," he said when the tile was replaced.

Each of them scrambled to lift a wiring bundle and shimmy under it. The wire was not heavy, but was dense. They had just managed to find hiding places when the next tile lifted. They froze as the searchers drew nearer. At one point they were less than ten meters away. Then they were behind, continuing the search.

"We'll stay low until they clear the floor," Walt said. The searchers were near the corner where they had entered. They reached the wall and began a cycle back, this time closer to the center of the room. They obviously intended to sweep the entire floor area. "We should be safe. They've already passed us, but they might see movement." They relaxed where they were and waited for the search to end.

It was several hours before the searchers left for another floor. "Let's go," Walt said as he untangled himself. John was quickly behind him, but Shiela was caught. It took several minutes for the two of them to free her, then they began to move again.

Following the growing cable bundle, they soon reached a hole in the floor. It went down about four meters and had wire on all four sides lashed to rungs, giving the appearance of a hollow, square ladder. The access way had plenty of room for climbing and the rungs made ready steps. They climbed into the basement.

"That was easy," John said.

"Yeah. We're on the matrix computer floor now," Walt said, "or rather under the floor." They were again in an underfloor crawl space, but the cabling was far more organized. It was tied carefully in bundles that only ran in two directions. "Looks like TP hired someone to do this job," he added. "Any ideas where the master console is?"

"I remember it being in a corner," John said. "I don't think this level is partitioned, so if we follow the wall we should find it sooner or later. We can always lift tiles and look."

Walt tried this. First he lifted a tile just a crack and looked for guards. Not seeing any, he lifted it higher. Aside from rows and rows of blue cabinets the floor was empty. The aisle they were under stretched as far as he could see.

"This floor looks deserted. We could get out and walk," John said.

"There might be motion alarms," Walt said. "Let's stick under here for now."

"I'd feel a lot safer under the floor," Shiela added.

They began to move along the wall. With the exception of occasional feeds from the higher floor, the basement had the same characteristic of a cleared space near the wall, which made for easy travel. Walt did find himself wishing he could stand. The constant crouch had become tiring.

They traveled for hours. Walt remembered reading that the dimensions of the building were expressed in kilometers. It would take a while to go from corner to corner on hands and knees, and then the master console could still be elsewhere. He became aware that it had been over 24 hours since he had last eaten. At least he had gotten some sleep in the air car.

"Hold it," he said, holding up his palm. In the distance he saw a wall in front of him. They had reached the first corner. He lifted a tile to see.

Lowering his head back into the floor he whispered, "Got it." He looked again to determine what best to do. Shiela slipped up next to him and looked out also.

"Good God," she said. "That's Julius Bartholemew."

"Chairman of the board of TP," Walt said. "I guess that tells how high this goes."

"Yeah. Do you recognize the other two?"

"No. One appears to be a system operator, but he must be in on this. He would see everything. The other guy is just a guard."

"What do you see," John asked from below. Walt slipped down and told him. Then John lifted up for his own look.

"We've got to get rid of the guard," John said. "I think we can take him."

"He's got a gun," Shiela said.

Walt was counting floor tiles. "But we've got surprise," he said. Once he knew the distance to the guard he lowered the tile back into place and began moving toward the console.

"Here?" John whispered, pointing up at a floor tile.

"If I counted right," Walt replied. "Let's go for it."

In a single action, the two men pushed up on the tile with all their might. The tile went one way and the guard the other. He dropped the gun and Shiela grabbed it. She turned and covered Julius and the operator while Walt and John subdued the guard. "Don't touch that," she yelled as the operator reached for his console. He pulled his hands back as she fired the gun past his ear.

Upon hearing the shot, the guard quit struggling and Walt and John quickly gained control of him. In a moment the three captives were lined up against the wall. Shiela gave John the gun. He looked at it a moment then aimed it at the hostages.

Walt had jumped into the master console chair and was typing request sequences on the keyboard. "Good," he said. "It works just like my office console; it just has more commands available. I've locked all the pod's on this floor–there are twenty." He continued typing. "There was a phone lock and trace on GTV. I've killed that, Shiela. You can use the phone." He motioned to the phone on the desk. Shiela ran over and grabbed it.

"You don't know what you're doing," said Julius Bartholemew.

"Keep quiet," John said, motioning with the gun.

"No, let him speak," Shiela said, setting the phone down. "I want to know what's going on here."

"I'm sure you know by now that we can manipulate the matrix error rate," he said.

"But that's supposed to be impossible," Walt said. "It's a violation of the laws of physics."

"We didn't know all the laws," the operator said.

"Who are you," Shiela asked.

"I'm Dr. Howard Drake, director of research for TP. I discovered the missing term in the D-wave equation. With it I can predict and, therefore, control matrix errors."

"If you can do that, why didn't you just stop them? You would have been global heroes," Walt said. "Why continue to murder innocent people at a massive rate if it can be prevented?"

"It's not that easy," Julius said. "You know where our energy comes from."

"Of course I do," Walt said.

"So what would happen if we stopped matrix errors? There'd be no power. We couldn't shut down the world power grid."

"So just shove mass in and convert it," Walt said. "You seem to be doing that already."

"We are now, but the amount of mass needed is a lot more than can be quickly tossed in. We had to build facilities like the one in Orlando to add energy to the system. It took several years to get a sufficient base of those built that we could shut down the matrix errors."

"But you did build them," Walt said. "And I know you are using them."

"We are. It seems that no matter how much energy we supply, the world requires more. We have been tapering supply down, but it takes time."

"That's a pretty lame excuse for killing millions a year," Shiela said. "You can make enough energy with the sea water plants, I'm sure. Just build more plants."

"There are other complexities," Julius said. "When we got the plants operational, we did start cutting the tix rate. We could not do it quickly, since the plants only came on line one at a time. So, we manipulated the odds. It gradually became safer and safer to travel via transporter."

"I'm seeing worse odds, not better," Walt said.

"We had to turn it back up again. Do you know the present population of the world?"

"About 500 million," Shiela said.

"Right, but before tpods came into general use, the population was around two and half billion. People accept the odds as a part of life. Because of those odds and the amount people use the pods, the average person lives 35 years before the odds catch up with him. The life span used to average over ninety."

"You're worried about population growth," Walt said.

"Right. With medical science as advanced as it is now, the life span would be over two hundred. That tpod error statistic has become the only stabilizing factor in our population. We cut it back and the population began to climb, rapidly. In four years it was obvious that the growth could not be controlled. We had to offset what we had done to regain a balance."

"A balance," Walt yelled. "This is not a ledger sheet. People die in matrix errors. Who gave you the right to decide?"

"You don't rise to my level waiting for someone to let you make decisions," Julius said. “If our population runs back up over a billion, people will be starving. We live in an idyllic world, with a young, healthy population. Do you want to see that ruined?”

“The population controlled itself before tpods,” Shiela said.

“No it didn’t. It rose exponentially. We were heading for a crisis. The transporter system saved us from it.”

“Mass murder is always a solution to population problems,” Walt said. “But it’s not an acceptable solution.” He turned to the keyboard. “Shiela, call GTV. Let’s blow this whole thing wide open.” She picked up the phone and dialed. “Now it’s my turn.” He began to type.

“In some ways he’s right, you know,” Shiela said as she waited for an answer. “Thinks will change.”

“Maybe they will,” Walt replied, “but it’s not for him or us to decide.” He looked at the tix rate counter on the screen. For the first time in the history of the system, it had stopped.

Charles B. Owen is currently a graduate student at Western Illinois University where he will soon complete a Master’s Degree in Computer Science. He lives in a large house with a wife, three children, a cat, and a large goldfish with a beautiful fantail. This summer he will move from rural Illinois to rural New Hampshire, where it really gets cold.

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Next Issue:

What’s in store for future issues of Quanta? Look for a new cyberpunky serial, entitled *Microchips Never Rust*, plus lots of short fiction from new authors (new to Quanta anyway), and *of course*, the popular Harrison serial will continue. Expect the next issue to surface sometime in July or August.

Thank you, thank you very much.