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Looking Ahead

Daniel K. Appelquist

Hi there everybody! Well, it's been a while, hasn't it? I must apologize for not putting out an issue since December of last year. This issue started out as a May issue and kept getting pushed back for various reasons until it became an August issue! Absolutely inexcusable! Well, think of it as a hiatus… Anyway, I'm back, Quanta is back (actually it never really left) and better than ever. Since December, I've been working behind the scenes to increase Quanta's distribution. We now have an archive on America Online where all current and back issues may be found (see the contents page for details). Also, we're up to three thousand individual subscribers! The method of subscribing and unsubscribing has changed slightly (all the details are on the contents page) and the official email address for Quanta has changed to **quanta@netcom.com** (although the folks at Carnegie Mellon University tell me that mail to the old address will continue to be forwarded to me here). What this means, among other things, is that the subscription process for Quanta will now be automated. This will free up a huge chunk of my time and will hopefully allow me to concentrate on putting out issues. Note also that the separate lists for BITNET users and Internet users are a thing of the past. If you are subscribed to either the PostScript or Ascii versions of Quanta in mail format, you will receive them as a series of mail messages. I highly suggest that those who have FTP access switch over to the "notice" subscription list, where a notice is sent to you. If you are subscribed to the Ascii list, you do this by sending an email message to **listserv@netcom.com** with the content:

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These subscribe and unsubscribe commands need to be in the actual message body, *not* the subject line. I want to thank the people at Netcom for making my switch-over a relatively painless process, and I want to thank all you subscribers in advance for being patient while we settle in to this new subscription service.

The primary archive site for Quanta is also changing to **ftp.etext.org**, where issues may be found in the directory **/pub/Zines/Quanta**.

Starting with this issue, I will be publishing Quanta on the World Wide Web as well as on the various gopher and ftp sites. Set your WWW client (Mosaic or what have you) to **http://www.etext.org/Zines/Quanta** and you're off and running.

Also, concerning donations, please note that I can no longer accept checks made out to Quanta magazine. Please make all checks out to Daniel Appelquist. This has to do with the way my new bank handles business accounts, even for non-businesses like Quanta (I didn't request a new bank – the new bank swooped in and gobbled up my old bank like a horrendous bird of prey, and I have experienced no end of grief because of it). I very much appreciate the contributions I've gotten so far, and since I have now switched to Netcom as my email service provider (which is a pay service) I am in more need than ever. Please do contribute if you can afford it.

This issue marks the much anticipated end of Nicole Gustas's three part "To Touch the Stars." I have received numerous positive comments about this story and also numerous letters asking when the last part would be published. I'm sure you'll all enjoy the exciting finale.

Next issue will be a special one, featuring one novella: Peter Gelman's "Moonifest Destiny," the fantastic story of the invasion of the Moon by the Earth during the late 1800's by air balloon. Sound bizarre? You don't know the half of it. After that, there will probably be one more issue published this year.

I want to thank many of you for mailing me and asking what was up with Quanta and why you hadn't heard from me in a while. Quanta lives. I have every reason to suspect that Quanta will be around for a long time. Well, I think it's about time to send this issue out, so I'll leave off here. Enjoy! *Q*

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 that Quanta provides. Also, if your account is going to become non-existent, even temporarily, please unsubscribe and then resubscribe when it becomes active again. This way, we can keep Net traffic (due to bounced mail) at a minimum.

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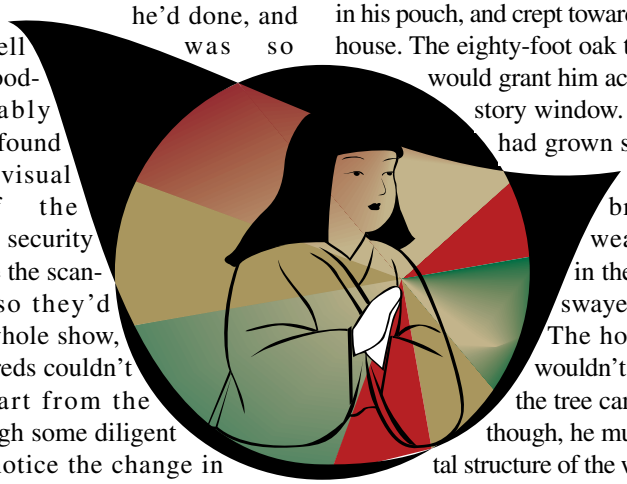
ALTERED

Valerie Jones

Jim Leary panted as quietly as he could as he pulled a small electronic keypad from the pouch fastened around his waist. The dash across the yard had been a long one—upslope, no less. With deft fingers he attached each of the keypad's leads to the proper places inside a nondescript gray metal box mounted against the white stone wall. White. He grimaced, showing teeth. Terrence Aston had built the entire structure out of the same white stone. In sunlight, the place shimmered with the colors of the rainbow as the light was refracted by the prismatic stone. Jim knew he was going to stick out like a sore thumb against that pale background. Often, the eccentric displays of wealth were to Jim's advantage, and it pleased him that the high and mighty could be brought down with the help of their vanities. It was fitting. Unfortunately, this time, that wasn't the case.

He switched the hand-computer on with a flick of his thumb and set to work dismantling the house security system. The heady scent of the lilac bushes beneath which he crouched filled his sensitive nose and made it twitch. Just don't sneeze, he reminded himself. Aston had a thing for lilacs— they ran rampant on his estate. You couldn't walk more than four feet in any direction without running into more of the accursed bushes. Just thinking about it made Jim's nose itch. He wondered how the dogs could stand it. Maybe their noses weren't as sensitive. His nose twitched again. It was a moot point, though, since the dogs were dead. That was the first thing he'd done, and the lilac smell was so strong their bodies probably wouldn't be found except by a visual search of the grounds. The security cameras were the scanning type, so they'd missed the whole show, and the infrareds couldn't tell him apart from the canines, though some diligent soul might notice the change in numbers as their bodies cooled. That was just a chance he had to accept. He scratched his still itching nose with light fingers, sniffling. They came away wet with the blood that still covered his face, and he licked each digit clean before he reached back into the gray box. He couldn't just say it was habit and instinct: he actually liked the taste of blood. Though if he thought about that for very long it would give him a case of the shivers.



Half an hour later, Jim paused and studied the grounds. Nothing moved save for an owl that swooped low over the lilacs in search of prey, though what it thought it could catch under the tall bushes he couldn't guess. The whisper of its wings parting the wind was a comfortable night sound, along with the crickets that had finally taken up their song around him. The guards down at the gate remained unaware, intent on their caffeine sticks and conversation. Jim couldn't quite make out the words from across the wide lawn, but he didn't care to. The soft click as he switched the keypad off silenced the crickets once more and their silence followed him like a wake as he removed the wire attachments, placed the computer back in his pouch, and crept toward the end of the house. The eighty-foot oak that grew there would grant him access to a third-story window. The giant tree had grown so close to the house that the branches were wearing grooves in the stone as they swayed in the wind. The house probably wouldn't be damaged if the tree came down on it, though, he mused. The crystal structure of the white stone had been developed for more than just beauty.

Jim was never certain whether Aston even saw his killer. Not that he was waiting around to ask. He dropped the gun and loped away. He didn't have any fingerprints, and tracing the gun would only lead to a stolen shipment — a dead end.

The window was latched from the inside, Jim noted, with a plain metal hook. Not a magnetic latch. He didn't think the house was that old, but maybe it was just an oddity, courtesy of the original owner. He tapped the pane gently.. The window was made of duraglass, which was actually a plastic, and a whole lot tougher than conventional safe glass. He'd brought tools to deal with either, since he hadn't been able to find out which one it was before hand. The duraglass melted nicely with the application of the right chemicals. Jim was glad for the stiff breeze that carried the acrid stench away from him. The smell was the price he paid for a low-temperature melt. If he were unlucky, however, that would be enough. He unlatched the window, then oiled the window tracks down with fluid from a small plastic tube. His claws bit deep into the bark as he braced himself and raised the window with barely a sound. Good thing, too. A girl slept in the white, fluffy bed that dominated the room. That would be Aston's daughter, he knew. Maybe she liked the noise of the oak tree, or, better yet, liked lilacs no better than he. Their saccharine perfume was not so overwhelming here. Well, she'd be able to uproot every single one of the hideous purple-splotched bushes if she chose soon enough, he thought as he stepped through the window. He stood balanced on the sill to survey the room. The girl was asleep, her breathing deep and even. She clutched an Altered Gladiators doll in her sleeping arms and Jim had the distinct impression that the glass eyes above the drooling snarl were staring directly at him. Nothing else stirred amid the soft piles of stuffed toys and strewn clothes. He bounded to the floor without a sound save the spongy crunch of the thick carpet under his paws. The long, dexterous fingers of his hands were folded under so that he was actually walking on his knuckles and, as he padded across the room, those hands were indistinguishable from paws.

Shadow silent, Jim slipped through the halls. Most of the forty-two room house was in darkness. That was good. Aston ought to

be in his office still, which was on the second floor, north end. The floor plan flitted through his mind. There should be two guards wandering somewhere inside as well, but those didn't bother Jim unduly. He would hear them coming long before they heard him.

He stopped at the top of the stairs. This would be a good place for additional security, though the plans hadn't held any mention of another system. The staircase was isolated, walled on both sides with carved wood panelling. Rosarian's work, he thought, though art wasn't his specialty. The carved protuberances would provide good hiding places for laser sensors on both sides of the stairs. Jim pulled a small, illegal aerosol from his pouch and sprayed the air before him. A fine net of red laser beams dissected the empty space up to about waist height on a normal human, fading to invisibility as the mist settled. If they followed the same pattern all the way down the staircase, he'd be fine. He could leap them. Coming back up would be the problem. He checked once more for signs of weapons mounted into the walls, saw none. The ceiling looked clean, too. He stopped to listen, then backed up and took a running leap off the top of the staircase. His compact, four-legged body sailed easily through empty space, landing in the downstairs hallway with an unavoidable thump. Twohundred and twenty pounds could not land silently after that kind of jump.

Before he moved on, he stopped to sit back on his haunches. Reaching into the pouch strapped across his stomach, he pulled out a black plastic gun. The bulb of the silencer at the business end made it somewhat unwieldy, but he clamped it between his jaws and loped toward Aston's office. As he turned the corner, he heard footsteps in the distance behind him, moving slowly. The guards were being careful. He would have plenty of time.

Light leaked from beneath the door to Aston's office, warm and inviting. That door would hiss as it slid open, he knew, so he took the gun in his hand and settled onto his haunches once again. That was the only position from which he could shoot. Genetic curse, which was why he rarely depended on guns. But in this case it just made the most sense. He reached up and slapped the door pad, taking aim through the doorway as the door slid aside. Terrence Aston sat behind a wide redwood desk, his attention on the terminal screen built into the top. He looked up just as Jim fired, and Jim was never certain whether Aston even saw his killer. Not that he was waiting around to ask. He dropped the gun and loped away. He didn't have any fingerprints, and tracing the gun would only lead to a stolen shipment —- a dead end.

There would be a second set of stairs further down the hall, he knew. Speed was his best protection, now. He found the other staircase and raced up it, triggering a blaring alarm that filled the house. The upstairs hall was empty, and he ran the length of it, not pausing as he streaked through the end bedroom and out the window. He registered the white face and staring eyes of the girl as he ran past. His head was filled with the smell of oak bark and the drifting scent of lilacs, the metal sounds of guns being readied, and the shouts of men. He ran headlong down the tree trunk, counting on his claws to hold him to its rough surface, and sprinted toward the fence at a point three hundred and four yards from the gate. He'd actually measured it during his preparations. The floodlights lit up just as he reached the electrified fence, illuminating the entire estate, and blinding him. He leapt anyway, depending on natural ability to carry him safely over.

The memory returned to Jim as a whole, filled with the scents and sounds of that night, as he stared at the woman across from him. The little girl was long gone, replaced by a firm, mature intelligence dressed impeccably in a floor length blue silk skirt, yellow silk blouse, and obi. The blouse might have been peach or even a creamy white, Jim thought absently. His vision was based on shades of light and dark, more than color.

"Konichi wa Mr. Leary." The soft voice was very proper and melodious, completely at odds with the black eyes that bored directly into his. "I assume you know who I am?"

"Of course, Councillor," Jim answered, nodding. Though he had never put her picture together with that night at the Aston estate before. Twenty years was a long time, though the emergence of another Councillor Aston should have pricked his memory.

Julee Lin Aston continued to stare at him, lost in private thoughts. Jim figured he could probably guess what some of them were. No doubt she had never seen anyone Altered so extremely before. Not even the Gladiators on the viewer. They, at least, still resembled human beings despite the ridiculous musculature and occasional fur. That was the standard reaction. He glanced at his reflection in the darkened windows that fronted the restaurant. Black as night, he was barely visible against the dark street, save for the sheen of light that rippled across his fur. In form, he was nearly identical to the black panther of the Asian jungles. A bit larger, perhaps, with only his limber five-fingered hands and versatile brain to distinguish him from his feline cousins.

"You paid a large handful of yen to arrange this meeting, Councillor," Jim reminded her, annoyed. The words rumbled out of a throat that was not designed for language.

"Of course." She regained her composure and took a breath. Jim noted the effect that had on the thin fabric of her blouse with discreet interest. "I have a proposition for you." Jim's ears twitched, though his feline face betrayed nothing. Very few facial expressions were possible for him, which he had always considered an asset.

"There have been two attempts on my life, Mr. Leary," she continued without preamble. "Both occurred at my estate. Both were nearly successful."

Jim eyed her warily. It sounded like an accusation. Despite the fact that he had chosen this meeting place, he was far from confident. There were fifteen Councillors who governed Jap-Am, and Julee Aston was the first woman ever to hold that position in the colony's history. She was no push over.

He kept diligent track of the traffic through the small restaurant. Most of the faces at nearby tables were familiar because Jim had hired them. But that didn't mean much. A Councillor had vast resources. If she wanted him dead, and knew who to hire, he might as well get ready to meet the man in black. Anyone could be assassinated.

"So what do you want from me?" Jim asked.

Julee leaned forward. "I want to hire you, Mr. Leary. Your particular... talents... would make you exceptionally qualified to handle my personal security." She betrayed no emotion.

Jim felt his insides go cold. "I think you overestimate me, Councillor."

"I haven't," she assured him. "I'm willing to pay." She named a figure that was generous. Very generous. But not enough to be a mockery. When he said nothing, she

continued in a sudden change of subject, "There were four attempts on my father's life at the estate. Two never made it into the house, and the third died in the downstairs hall. But the fourth— the fourth was exceptional." She sat back in her chair. "I need that kind of exceptional talent working for me." She sipped her drink, the glass catching the light and bursting into rainbow hued stars.

"My father died a long time ago, Mr. Leary," she continued after setting the glass down. "I'm interested in survival, not vengeance." She met Jim's gaze squarely, as if daring him to admit it.

"As I said before, I think you overestimate me," Jim replied.

"Then you're not interested?"

Unfortunately, Jim was. He needed the money, and offers that size didn't come by very often. But the very root of his temptation, he knew, was the simple fact that he held some respect for this Councillor. She had made herself the champion of the Altereds, against stiff opposition. But the fact that she knew it was him that night was highly unsettling.

Jim sighed. "All right. Count me in." He was surprised to see her smile, but it was somehow an enigmatic expression. "I'll come to the house tomorrow." He stood and prepared to jump down from his chair.

"Um- Mr. Leary? There's one more thing." Now she seemed almost embarrassed. "All of my employees swear an oath of allegiance."

Jim looked at her and shrugged. Why not? Oaths held power in a court, but, being who and what he was, he would be dead long before he ever saw the inside of a courthouse. Reaching across the table he laid his hand over hers and quickly repeated the necessary words. It was somehow both more and less than just a legal ceremony.

City towers scrolled by the car's darkened window as Julee kicked off her shoes with a sigh. She did not notice the steady rumble of the billowing air that held the hovercar aloft; she had ridden in hovercraft all her life. But she did hear the sound of Jim's fur against the leather seats as the tip of his tail twitched with inner disquiet.

"What is it?" she asked, her eyes going to the windows and the view beyond, seeking an unnamed danger. They were on their way home from the latest in a long series of Council sessions where Julee continued to argue strenuously for the creation of a council seat to represent Altereds. She was making slow headway against Councillor Tanaki's purist thinking.

"Bad feeling." Jim did not look at her. His eyes continued to roam the streetsides visible through the bulletproof plastic of her private car. He could see the top of their driver's head over the back of his seat, and a portion of the snub-nosed automatic rifle mounted on the dash. Yeng was a good man, but not as familiar with the Councillor's car as Jim might have wished. Ned Chang, the regular driver had come in so sick that morning that Jim had ordered him back to bed, and Yeng was the best he could find to fill in. They were sandwiched between two armored cruisers, each carrying three guards, but that didn't provide more than basic security. The convoy followed the route Jim had chosen only the night before through San Louis' crowded riverfront district, and through the buildings he caught brief glimpses of the Mississippi off to his right.

Any information can be bought, Jim reminded himself, especially here in the capitol. He found himself searching his knowledge of the city, trying to guess where an attack might come from.

"Is this where you would have picked, if Tanaki had hired you to kill me?" Julee asked curiously.

Jim froze, blindsided by the blunt question. Most people were far more discreet when they discussed his profession. He managed to swallow his surprise, grateful once again that his face carried little expression.

He wasn't sure why he answered with the truth. "No. I'd probably hit the house." The "again" that belonged on the end of the sentence was left unvoiced. "You don't know for certain that it's Tanaki," he added as an afterthought.

"Of course I do," she snapped. "First he tried to bribe me to change my vote. Then he threatened me. Now he's trying to make good on his threats."

Jim had no chance to respond. His only indication of trouble was the squeal of old rubber tires on pavement as a sporty silver landcar sped down an access ramp and slewed across the lanes toward them. Jim grabbed Julee's shoulders and forced her down on the seat, below the level of the windows. He held her there as their car swerved violently. They felt the change as they crossed over the grass median, and dove into the midst of oncoming traffic on the other side of the highway. Proximity alarms blared all around them, then were drowned out by thunder as the silver landcar exploded. The force of the blast tipped their car over on its side, tumbling the two passengers in the rear compartment like rag dolls.

When Jim's vision cleared and the ringing in his ears dropped to a sufferable level, he raised his head to look around. The car had somehow ended right-side up. Black smoke billowed around it, searing his eyes and nose with acrid grit. He and Julee were wedged together in the floorboard. She held onto him with a deathgrip, fingers knotted painfully into his short fur. A trickle of blood leaked from the corner of her mouth where her lip had split, but her eyes were open.

Heart pounding, Jim urged her up onto the seat with a caution to stay down. Julee released him with a spasmodic jerk, then obeyed. A fleeting expression of revulsion crossed her face. Cold inside from more than fear, Jim climbed to his feet and peered through the broken window into the smoke. He could see figures moving beyond the heat shimmer but couldn't identify them. The sudden rattle of automatic gunfire decided him.

"Can you run?" he asked Julee.

She nodded uncertainly. "I think so."

"Good, then stay low and don't stop until I tell you to. Head for that building." He pointed to a tower whose side could be seen rising above the smoke. "I'll follow you." He studied the tower a moment more, wondering if that was where the landcar had been controlled from. If it hadn't been a kamikaze hit. Which it might easily have been, with a Councillor as the target.

At his command, Julee took off across the highway, doing a credible sprint in her stocking clad feet. Jim followed at her heels, nipping at her thigh to urge her on as bullets scored the pavement beside them. He got an impression of wrecked and burning cars, with several men using them as cover from which to snipe at each other. He could not guess who was alive and who was dead from among the Councillor's staff, nor how many of their attackers might remain.

They reached the edge of the highway and Jim guided his charge down among the smaller streets that ran between the buildings. The sooner they lost themselves, the sooner they would lose the men that pursued them, Jim thought, though he knew the

area well. He had seen two figures following them, for certain.

Julee's breath was coming in ragged gasps. She had barely slowed, but he knew that she would have to stop soon. They turned onto a new street and Jim spied what he had been looking for. Cracked cement stairs led down below street level, into a basement that had been the foundation of a building that was built before the Japanese conquest. A new building had been raised on the site, on top of the old basement. It would give them a shortcut over to the next street, and perhaps confuse their pursuers. The basement was dark, but Jim's eyes used light far more efficiently than a normal human. He guided Julee through the fallen supports and tumbled bricks with nudges and an occasional growled word. They emerged on the street, apparently without company. Jim turned them back toward the river. There were some high-class restaurants in that direction. The Councillor's face would get them in, he reasoned, and the establishment security would keep them safe until her people could pick them up.

They reached the Tea Room just as their pursuers found them again. But it was too late. Julee spoke a quick word to the maitre'd and they were in. Jim watched the men on the street fade away and sighed in relief. He was shaking from the adrenaline coursing through his system, but forced his body to move normally.

Every eye followed them as they made their way to a table near the back of the restaurant. It was in unspoken accord that they took a table against the wall. Jim felt the stares boring into him. They were covert stares, for this crowd was too polite to stare openly, but Jim felt the stigma just as sharply. He was different. They looked at him and saw an animal, not a man.

Waiters brought saki, and a cloth to wipe the blood from Julee's mouth. Conversations began to pick up around them. Jim tried to ignore the eyes as he sipped his saki. The maitre'd had already made the call to Julee's estate so they had nothing to do but wait. They did so in silence.

Julee looked up with a small start as Jim and another man entered the office.

"Have you found something?" she asked.

Jim hopped up into the chair that was pulled up against the far side of the desk. He carried a rolled sheaf of papers gently in his mouth, which he dropped onto the chair seat before answering. "Maybe. Dan, tell her what you found out."

Dan Erickson was a tall, sandy-haired man with a permanently mournful expression. His dislike for his boss was apparent in every line of his body, but he was loyal to the Councillor, so he made the effort to ignore it.

"The car was driven by a Mr. Rani Nataru, age 42. He has been a member of Councillor Tanaki's house staff for eighteen years."

Julee's eyebrows rose. "That's not something?"

Jim tipped his head to the side in a gesture equivalent to a shrug. "Not really."

"Tanaki is claiming that Nataru was acting completely on his own." Dan added. "And he has some evidence—- a tape of a conversation that took place in Tanaki's suite at the Capitol building. There's no way to know if it was a setup, of course, but I'd guess so. Either that, or he got lucky."

Julee tapped a fingernail against the glossy wood of the desk. "Well, no help there. Are you still tracing the car?" The question was directed at Jim.

"And the explosives," he answered, "but that'll take a few days, at least."

Julee nodded. "I understand. Thank you, gentlemen."

At a pointed glance from Jim, Dan scowled and left. Jim picked up the sheaf of papers and laid them out flat on the desk. The logo at the top indicated that they were printouts from one of the less reputable news services.

"I thought you might want to see this." His tone was studiously neutral.

"See what?" Julee picked up the papers and read the headline: "Councillor Aston and Altered Lover Exposed." Beneath the caption was a picture of the two of them at the Tea Room.

"Wonderful. More fuel to add to Tanaki's fire." Julee tossed the sheets back onto the desk with a wordless expression of disgust and leaned back in her chair. "Now he's going to use this to try to convince the Council that I'm—-" She broke off, uncertain how to finish.

"A pervert?" Jim supplied.

"No!" Julee straightened abruptly. "That's not what I meant."

"But it is what you were thinking." Bitterness pooled in the pit of his stomach. "Admit it, Councillor."

Julee said nothing, her lips pressed together in a thin white line, but her eyes snapped dangerously. The tips of Jim's long canines showed white against his black fur as he met the Councillor's stare. Eventually, she looked away.

"Let me know when you learn something new, Mr. Leary." Julee's voice was faint and her eyes distant when she looked back at him.

Jim jumped down from the chair and padded to the door. As it slid aside, he paused and turned.

"Goodnight, Councillor." The subtle mockery in his words echoed old memories and hollow promises. He had lived with them all his life. No matter what people said, they always hated down deep, always feared.

He turned again and left before Julee had a chance to reply.

Jim perched on the edge of the massive work table, silent and unmoving. He had come in his usual way (which changed every time), and waited patiently for the man across the room to notice him. Had he possessed facial expression, a small, mischievous smile would have played about his lips.

The man finally located the part he was looking for amid the neat trays that lined the far wall and turned, only to do a violent doubletake and nearly drop the intricate metal thing he was holding.

"Leary! Don' do that! You nearly gave me a heart attack, man."

"'Lo Snake." Jim held out a lightly clenched fist, claws retracted, and Snake tapped his knuckles with a similar fist, grinning. That grin was a sight to see, Jim thought with a private chuckle. Snake only had two teeth—- long curved fangs that hung out of his mouth. Those, and the colored scales that covered his body in geometric patterns, gave Snake his name.

"You ain't been 'round much lately," Snake said. The words were a bit slurred because of the overhanging teeth, but understandable enough. Poison sacks on either side of Snake's neck pulsed rhythmically. That was one reason Snake didn't get much trouble. The other was his size. Even Jim would hesitate before taking him on. The man was built like a tree. Jim guessed that his ancestors must have been Negroid: his face had that general cast, though it was almost lost amid the strangeness. Snake was among the most highly Altered, like Jim himself.

"Been busy." Jim walked across the table, picking his way with dainty steps through the clutter, to examine the mass of plastic and wires that Snake was working on. His nose was assailed by the tangy scents of cold-bonding glue, plastic, and carbon composite, and the musty smell of plastique. He found a clear space and sat down. From the pouch at his waist he drew a burned, melted tangle and held it out to Snake.

"This your work?"

Snake took the mess and poked at it, holding it under the magnifying lamp that hung drunkenly over his workspace.

"Yeah, it's mine. How'd ya know?"

Jim shrugged. "Fancy detonator. You and Coleman are the only ones that do that kind of stuff locally."

Snake tossed the burnt detonator onto the table. "So what about it?"

Jim laid several colorful bills down next to it. "Who'd you make it for?"

Snake fingered the bills. Then he snorted and picked them up. "Some suit."

"Did he give you a name?"

"Course not. Paid in cash, though. No credit transfer."

"What did he look like?" Jim picked up the detonator and put it back in his carry pouch.

Snake shrugged. "Pretty tall. Lots of americana in'm. Brown hair, black eyes."

"Is he the one that made the pickup?"

"Na. Little Japanese guy."

Jim dug back into his pouch and brought out a picture of Nataru. "This him?"

Snake glanced at it and nodded. "That's him."

Jim shifted positions with care, trying to ease the ache in his hips. He was lying prone on the metal bar that supported one of a row of lights that illuminated Julee Aston on the stage below him. It was the best vantage point he could find in the small auditorium, allowing him to keep the Councillor in view at all times, as well as see into both wings and out into the audience. But it was a precarious perch.

The Councillor was speaking to a group of students at Washington University and Jim was nervous. Public addresses were scheduled months in advance, and gave an assassin plenty of time to prepare. Not that it mattered, really. Tanaki's people could only have had twelve hours notice, at most, for that last attempt, and they'd nearly succeeded. The timing on that one still bothered him, though in the month since, he had not been able to find anything concrete with which to back his instincts.

Julee's voice interrupted his thoughts and he focused on her for a moment. The powerful lights brought out blue highlights from her raven hair and made the silk of her dress shimmer.

"How long, ladies and gentlemen, will we make the children pay for the sins of the parents?" she asked the audience. "How long will we condemn the Altered to be less than citizens? Are they inferior to us? No, they are not. They have minds and feelings just like yours or mine.

"Are they different?" She paused, considering. "Yes, they're different. But is that bad? I'm sure your grandmothers will tell you that they're cursed by the gods, or some such nonsense. That's what my grandmother used to tell me. But you and I know better.

"We know that the Altereds that we see today are the unfortunate descendants of men and women who perverted nature. They tried to be gods, playing with things they had no right to alter. But that was two-hundred years ago. And the DNA codes that those careless men and women broke, we still cannot mend.

"Is that the fault of the children? They did not choose to be what they are. No." Her voice died to a bare murmur, so that everyone in the auditorium strained to hear.

"It is our fault, ladies and gentlemen. Ours. It was people just like you and I that allowed the Alterations to happen."

Jim shook his head and tried to regain his bearings. He made a quick sweep of the auditorium and stage, amazed at how entranced he had been by the Councillor's words. But they were words he desperately wanted to hear. He was almost willing not to care whether she truly meant what she said, just to hear it. Almost. A cold, cynical voice deep inside reminded him of her reaction when they had been pressed against each other on the floor of her car.

"Got a possibility, boss." The voice was fed to Jim by a tiny microphone clipped to the edge of one triangular ear. That was Tony. Of all of the Councillor's employees, Tony was the only one who really didn't seem to care that Jim walked on four legs and had fur. But Tony's eyes were a pale shade of lavender, without irises. He understood the stigma.

"Where?" Another microphone was attached to a collar around Jim's neck. His eyes scanned the auditorium below him.

"Out in the hall right now. Heading backstage. He's a tall man, mid thirties, wearing a brown leather jacket with fur trim."

"Thanks Tony. Seal off the backstage area." The last was a command directed to all of the Councillor's guards who were linked to him via radio. "Bull, Erickson, cut him off."

Jim watched the two men move forward to intercept the visitor who was not yet visible to Jim because of a curtained wall that hung in the way. The man rounded the corner at a casual stroll and stopped when he saw the Councillor's guards. Alarms went off in Jim's head. The man below him was named Derek Van der Voehnn. He was a walking funeral. Jim had only met him once, years before, when they'd both been hired for the same hit by different parties.

The alarm bells kept ringing. This wasn't Van der Voehnn's style. He was a sharpshooter. He'd never walk backstage for a close up. And he'd certainly never let himself be stopped by a couple of bodyguards.

Jim whipped around, searching frantically for Julee. She still stood at the podium, oblivious to all but her audience. Jim's motion sensitive eyes searched the room. The audience watched her in rapt silence as she drew the speech to a close, save for one small shadowed figure in the second row that rose to its feet and raised a hand to shoulder height, arm outstretched. Jim didn't wait to see the gun—- he leapt from his perch, crashing into the Councillor and carrying her to the ground behind the podium. The gunshot was thunderous in the still quiet room.

Pandemonium broke out as Jim yelled instructions through the microphone at his throat.

Julee groaned and shook her head dizzily as Jim staggered to his feet and peered around the edge of the podium. The assassin had her back turned (Jim was almost certain it was a woman), and was pushing her way through the panicked crowd toward the doors at the back of the auditorium. She hadn't gotten very far yet. Jim launched himself at the retreating form, claws gouging the polished wood floor of the stage as he scrabbled for purchase. Alerted to his approach somehow, the woman turned just as he leapt off the edge of the stage. Her eyes widened and she squeezed off an instinctive shot before he plowed into her.

They tumbled to the floor in a tangle of limbs, taking several others down with them in the press of bodies. Jim knocked the gun out of her hand with a swipe of a paw, leaving bloody welts. She yelped in pain, but didn't try to fight when she felt the prick of the other set of claws at her throat.

"How do you feel?" Julee asked as the house physician finished the last stitch. The bullet had sliced through the top of Jim's shoulder, leaving a bloody, but not serious, gash. He was lying on the velour couch in Julee's office, chin on paw, with the nap of the fabric tickling his nose.

"As good as I look, no doubt," he answered. "You?" A fair-sized bruise was beginning to spread across her cheek. She grinned and winced as the gesture stretched abused tissues.

"About the same." She cradled her left arm protectively. She would be sore for a long time, though she hadn't done any real damage. "We had to turn the assassin over to the police. The Council demanded it."

"Meaning Tanaki."

"Who else?"

The doctor interrupted to give Jim some final instructions and a sheet of pain tabs. Silence fell behind him as he left the room.

Jim sighed and allowed his eyes to sag shut. "What about Van der Voehnn?"

"Who?" She was startled.

Jim lifted his head and turned to look at her. "The man backstage."

At her blank look he said, "Is Dan still around? I need to talk to him."

"I'll see." Julee climbed stiffly to her feet and left the room. She glanced over her shoulder at Jim as she did, a puzzled expression on her face.

Jim dozed until the door hissed open and Dan Erickson walked in, with Julee on his heels. "The Councillor said you wanted to see me."

"Yeah." Jim shook his head to clear the cobwebs. "What happened to Van der Voehnn?"

Dan looked over at Julee, who did not return the gaze. "We let him go."

"You what?"

"We didn't have any reason to keep him. He said he was looking for you." His tone was vaguely accusing.

Jim digested that in surprise, and some alarm. "Strange time for him to come looking," he growled. Dan shrugged.

"All right. That's what I wanted to know." Jim laid his head back down, too tired to fight the other man's obstinacy. After a moment, Dan took the hint and left.

Julee resumed her seat on the floor next to the couch. "Who's Van der Voehnn?"

"An assassin. One of the best."

"Oh." She did not sound terribly alarmed.

"You should be more concerned, Councillor. He's very good." Jim raised his head to look directly into her eyes. But whatever expression was there remained closely guarded. He snorted in private disgust and dug one of the bright red pain tabs out of its plastic bubble. The pill wouldn't take effect for another ten minutes, but that was all right. He could wait a little longer. He laid his head back down and closed his eyes. He hurt too much to think.

"Hey, boss. Wake up." Tony's round face swam into view as Jim blinked and moaned. He was a mass of pain, and the bright morning sun streaming through the windows did not help his temperament.

"What is it?" He rolled onto his stomach, rubbing at the sleep that matted the inner corners of his eyes.

"The Councillor said it'd be all right to wake you. I think I've got a line on the guy that paid for the explosives."

Jim sat up with interest. "Go on."

Tony produced a photo and handed it to Jim. "Name's Eddie Blake. He's done freelance for Tanaki before."

Jim took the picture and studied it. "I'll see what my friend thinks."

Unfortunately, Snake wasn't home. Jim grumbled to himself, shoulder already aching from the long walk. But he wasn't willing to give away the lab's location to Julee's staff, so he took to the afternoon shadows, limping and muttering. There was one other thing he wanted to check out.

Carylon's was almost empty at that time of day, seeming stale and somehow sterile without the mass of flesh that rippled and gyrated across the floor during the hours of darkness. The band was onstage, practicing, and Jim winced at the squeal of electronic pipes.

Jim nodded to the guy behind the bar and headed backstage. He was a familiar sight at Carylon's, though not as much so recently. He padded past cracked cement walls and felt the chill of the floor through the soft pads on his feet. The air smelled of old smoke and old sweat, alcohol and urine, and beneath it all, the scent of human sensuality that only Jim's sensitive nose could pick up. It was a familiar smell, comforting simply because he had known it all his life. Here, he knew the rules, and knew his place.

He scratched lightly on Carylon's door, taking care not to mar the plastic. She called for him to enter and he did. She sat crosslegged on the bed, shimmering material cascading around her and an intense look of concentration on her delicate face as she repaired the tear in one of her costumes. The club was hers, but she had made herself poor to buy it. Jim wasn't certain whether he thought that was a wise move or not.

"Well, you haven't been around much lately." She set the pile of fabric aside, clearing a space for him.

"I need to ask a favor." He leapt up beside her. The small welcoming smile died, and he wondered if things had gone bad for her.

"What kind?"

"I need to arrange a meet. Here, preferably."

"Everybody walks away?" Her gaze was skeptical.

"It's not a hit." He knew better than that. The one time he'd tried to use her club, he'd paid dearly for it, friends or no.

Carylon thought a moment, then shrugged. "Okay."

Jim leaned across her to punch a button on the phone. He entered a number and spoke briefly to the man who answered.

"How long 'til you get an answer?" Carylon dragged long, painted fingernails along the line of his jaw as he cut the connection. Jim looked into her hazel eyes once before closing his eyes and submitting, almost involuntarily, to the caress. He still didn't know why she liked him, except that she seemed to have a thing for Altereds. He never asked. And, most of the time, it didn't matter, anyway.

Derek Van der Voehnn wove his way deftly through the writhing crowd towards the small side table Jim had claimed. Jim had been honestly surprised when he agreed to the meeting, and now had the disturbing feeling that he didn't quite know everything that was going on.

Van der Voehnn dropped gracelessly into an empty chair and folded his fingers together on the table before him. He seemed, to Jim, to be built entirely of angles, with skin thrown over his frame only as an afterthought. But his eyes were keen and belied the air of gangly adolescence that surrounded him.

He was grinning. "I'll bet you want to know what I was doing at Councillor Aston's speech, right?"

Jim nodded. "That'd be a good place to start." He tried to keep the sarcasm out of his voice, not knowing how Van der Voehnn would interpret it. This wasn't the tack he'd expected the man to take. It made him nervous.

"It was a coincidence, you know. That I was there when the hit went down. I really was looking for you. You're a hard man to find, sometimes." His tongue tripped over the word "man," as if he considered for a moment using a different one.

Jim tried to ignore it. "I'm listening."

Van der Voehnn's lips quirked in a smile. He seemed genuinely entertained by Jim's skepticism. "Well, this one's a freebie, since I got the better end of the deal the last time." Van der Voehnn had gotten the hit, and the money, and Jim had nearly gotten killed because of the confusion. It wasn't a memory Jim cherished. But now he was definitely interested.

Van der Voehnn must have read it in him. His smile widened, then disappeared. "I just thought you might like to know that Councillor Aston tried to hire me for a job about six months ago." That would put it approximately two and a half months before Jim had started working for her.

"Who was the mark?"

"You, of course." He grinned again, enjoying Jim's sudden shock. "I turned it down. Too much work for the money. I don't know if she made the offer to anyone else, but the answer would've been the same, probably. At least for the professionals. Since you're spending so much time with the lady, I figured you deserved a warning."

"Yeah, thanks." Jim felt like he'd just been hit with a baseball bat. Stunned and disoriented. "You didn't exactly rush to tell me this," he added, as soon as he recovered his wits.

Van der Voehnn shrugged. "Didn't know you were working for Aston until a few weeks ago. And I didn't really want to let the Councillor know that I'd talked to you. Could be bad for my health, y'know? I just picked a bad time." He stood, though perhaps unfolded might be a better word, Jim thought, and left without another word. The abrupt departure was the perfect ending to the disturbing conversation, chilling Jim to the bone.

"Are you planning to ignore me again today, Mr. Leary?" Julee's voice was sharp, annoyed.

Jim glanced at her and growled. It had not been a good few days. Snake had identified the man who had purchased the explosives as Eddie Blake, the freelancer that worked for Tanaki. That was no surprise, really. Now Jim was left with the task of confronting Blake, except that he didn't quite know how to go about it. Somewhere, there was a traitor on the Councillor's staff, but he didn't know where to look, didn't know who he could trust. And to top it off, the Councillor herself had suddenly become an enemy, at least in his eyes. All of which left him in a very sour mood. Part of him wanted to simply cut his losses and leave before he got himself killed, but he found that he couldn't, because he had sworn an oath of allegiance and couldn't betray it until he knew for sure.

Well, at least he could do something about Blake, though it wasn't a particularly inspired idea. Ignoring the black eyes that remained on him, he unfolded the portable phone in his hands and punched a number. Dan Erickson answered.

"Go ahead and pick up Blake," Jim told him.

"Right." Dan cut the connection. He was hardly friendly, Jim mused, but his original hostility had faded. It was an unaccustomed relief.

Dan and two others brought Eddie Blake to the estate in less than an hour. They had kept surveillance on him since they'd learned his name, but Jim hadn't wanted to rush into anything unless Blake tried to leave suddenly. Letting him roam free hadn't helped, to Jim's disappointment. The man had kept mostly to himself, except to make a nightly foray into the crowded jumble of people and lights that filled the bars along the streets of the Dug. He had even spent part of an evening at Carylon's.

Blake was an addict. The glaze of Silverdust was in his eyes, and his clothes reeked from the smoke. Jim observed from behind a pane of one-way glass while Dan and a man named Chow Fong tossed questions and threats at the hapless Blake. It wasn't a very productive session: Yes, he'd contacted Snake, no, he didn't know who the blast was meant for until after the fact. Tanaki had hired him in person and paid in cash, like always. No, he didn't know if there was another hit planned— nobody had contacted him for anything.

Eventually, Jim turned him loose. He was fairly certain the man was too much of a coward to have hidden anything important from them. Then he spent a long time pacing the length of the estate's formal living room, past the empty fireplace, while he thought.

The woman shooter had turned up dead, not three hours after the police put her in a cell at the Justiary. Tony had brought him the news while they were questioning Blake. He cursed again the politics that had kept them from being able to talk to her, and himself, for not pushing her before the police arrived.

Julee Aston entered the room with a muted swish of her long skirt over the plush, cream-colored carpeting. She held a glass of brandy in either hand as she came over and settled into a corner of the long couch, her skirt a splash of bright color against its paleness. The coffee table in front of her was carved from some black stone, with a single gray flaw staggering artfully across the polished surface. She set Oone of the brandies on the table's edge nearest the place where Jim paced. It clinked loudly in the otherwise silent room. The other she sipped with the bowl cupped in both hands. Jim paused in his pacing, watching her. With her toes tucked up under her on the couch seat and her long hair spilling about her shoulders, she had an oddly childish air, and he remembered the wide, terrified eyes that had followed him through the darkness of her bedroom that night so long ago.

"So what did I do to make you so angry?" she asked him, her gaze boring steadily and calmly into his above the rim of her glass. Again he was struck by how little of that child remained in her eyes.

"Does it matter?" The tip of his tail twitched spasmodically from side to side.

"Of course it does." She set her glass down and folded her arms across her stomach. "The next time someone tries to kill me, I don't want you hesitating because I did something that angered you." A small, wry smile accompanied her words.

Jim sat down where he was and curled his tail around his body. The tip of that tail, which he could not control, thumped against the floor in time to his thoughts.

"You tried to hire Van der Voehnn to kill me."

Surprise flickered across her face for a moment, then she sighed. "I was afraid you were going to find out about that." She reached out and took another sip of brandy.

"Is there an active contract?"

"No," she answered without looking up from her glass.

Jim wasn't certain why he believed her, but he did. He didn't often get suckered by beautiful women, and hoped that he wasn't making that mistake now. Julee Aston was far to dangerous to misjudge.

After a prolonged silence, Julee spoke. "I hated you for a very long time," she said softly. Her eyes touched his briefly, then shied away. "No one believed me when I told them about you, and for a while I wondered if maybe I hadn't made it all up, or dreamed it, maybe."

"When I reached majority and gained control of the estate, I decided that I had to find out." A cynical expression touched her small features. "You should be flattered. I spent a lot of money trying to find you. But I didn't have any luck. Not for years."

She fell silent once again, and Jim wisely said nothing. He wasn't certain what he could say.

Julee drained the last of her drink. "I did finally find proof that you existed, just about the time Tanaki made the first attempt on my life. At first, all I wanted was to make sure you died. That's when I talked to Mr. Van der Voehnn. When he refused, I got…scared. I wondered if Tanaki might hire you." Jim found himself staring into the dark pools of her eyes and saw fear twisting beneath their calm surface. "I knew you could do it. So I figured I'd hire you first."

"Why didn't you have me, or Van der Voehnn, for that matter, hit Tanaki?" Jim was acutely aware of just how openly he was speaking. If there were a microphone in the room, he was dead. But he felt compelled to say the words anyway.

Julee's eyes flared wide with surprise, as if she had never considered it. And she probably hadn't, Jim reflected sourly, at least not seriously. She didn't hate Tanaki— she only wanted to defeat him in the political arena. Their enmity was purely business.

Jim read the truth in her expression and shook his head in disgust. "You've got a screwed set of standards, lady." He watched anger darken her face. "What I did to your father is exactly what Tanaki is trying to do to you now. There's not a bit of difference."

"No." She was biting her lip, trying to control the rampage of her emotions. "It's not the same."

"Why not?" Jim knew he was hurting her, driving the nails of truth into her heart without regard for the wounds they would inflict. But his own anger spurred him. He wanted to hear the words— the real, underlying truth.

He came forward and leapt up on the couch. "Why not?" He flung the question at her again, at the face she had turned away from him. "What makes me different from Tanaki?"

"He— he was my father," she whispered.

"And your own life isn't as dear to you as his was?" Jim's gravelly voice was scathing.

A sob broke through the mask of her face, and she covered it with her hands, trembling. She had finally seen the truth of why she hated Jim so passionately, and even the real reason that she was compelled to assuage that subconscious guilt by championing the Altereds in Council. Bitter tears leaked from between her fingers.

"Get away from me," she ordered in a broken whisper. When he did not move, she looked up at him, her eyes full of agonized fury. "Get away from me!" Her voice still did not rise above a hoarse whisper.

"Why? So you can forget all about me and go on living your lie? You have no idea what it really means to be Altered." Jim already knew that the victory he had won was an empty one: he could feel the bitter echoes in his own heart. But the weight of the years, the pain and anger, were boiling out of him, and he could not stop himself.

Julee turned away from him, but he knew that she listened as he described, in every ugly detail, what it meant to be Altered. The memories he had tried so long to bury rose up again: staggering through the streets in the rain, a starved, freezing kitten whose mother had thrown him out when he was barely four months old because she could no longer bear the sight of the child she had borne. Instinct had kept him alive until his human brain could develop— the hunter's instinct that let him catch roaches and beetles, and a keen nose that found the edible bits in the garbage that sat, stinking, in the alleyways. He remembered being driven away with kicks and curses from every place he had tried to take shelter in, either because they thought he was an animal or because he frightened the customers away. He remembered the government child custody house he was put in for a while. The stern nurses had given him decent food and a warm place to sleep, and even taught him the basics of reading and writing before the fear and loathing behind their eyes drove him out into the streets once again. He remembered being caught and beaten by the neighborhood gangs while he was still too small for his teeth and claws to be much defense, and he remembered turning tricks for the truly perverse, in exchange for a meal and a place to sleep for the night.

When he had grown old enough, and strong enough, to hold his own on the street, he had found it sweetly satisfying to repay the gangs, the barmen and their bouncers, and anyone else who tried to hurt him, with teeth and claws. When the first offer had come to pay him to do what he was already doing, he hadn't thought twice about it. Eventually the money had gotten him off the street, given him comfort, women, even an education of sorts. He did not regret it.

When he finished speaking, Julee was staring at the fingers clasped together in her lap, struggling to deny the truth of what he said. She had winced at every description of brutality he had thrown at her, but had not interrupted. Jim felt exhausted, drained. He had never exposed so much of himself to anyone and wondered why, of all people, he had done so to this one. It frightened him in a way he could not describe.

Eventually Julee looked up at him. A wan smile peeked from beneath her tears. "We should form a club. Call it the Mutual Hate Society."

Surprised, Jim smiled back. He wasn't sure why, but he found the joke humorous.

They remained that way for several minutes, wrapped in the silence of the late hour. Jim could hear the tread of the security guards elsewhere in the house as they made their rounds, and the sigh of the wind in the trees outside the window. The breeze that came to him was filled with the smells of damp earth and of the rain that would fall later that night. He noticed consciously for the first time that there were no lilacs.

Julee rose in a whisper of silk. She was almost to the arched doorway that led to the stairs before she turned. "Goodnight, Jim Leary."

He could not read the expression in her voice. "Goodnight," he answered.

She left then, and Jim followed her with his ears as she made her way up the stairs to her bedroom. A few moments later he, too, left to seek his bed.

"Three days left until the vote." Julee closed up the keyboard on her desk and folded her arms over it. "Do you think Tanaki will still try something?"

Jim shrugged. "Probably. The odds are getting long that you'll survive another attempt. Four is pretty impressive already."

"Thank you so much for the analysis, Mr. Expert. I really didn't want to hear that."

Jim grinned at her, showing a row of sharp teeth. The sarcasm had been playful rather than biting. In unspoken accord they did not mention their midnight conversation, but somehow it had shattered the formality of their relationship. Not that they were taking long walks in the garden together, or even working on a first name basis, but something had changed. Jim wasn't quite certain whether he liked it.

"I was trying to point out why I don't like the idea of you leaving the estate," he said.

"I know. But this meeting is too important to miss. An equal trade agreement with Hyundai/Hwang would open some big doors for us back in Japan. Tanaki surely wouldn't try to hit me there— it's bad form."

Jim sighed, defeated. "Well, the security's as tight as I can make it."

"Good." The portable phone Jim habitually carried with him rang before she could add anything else. Jim unfolded it and listened to the frantic voice on the other end.

"Sit tight and I'll meet you there," he said and closed the phone down.

Julee lifted an eyebrow curiously.

"Either Eddie Blake is having a really bad trip, or he's scared enough to want to sell us some information," Jim said as he jumped down from his chair. "He didn't know anything a week ago, so maybe he's learned something important. He's convinced Tanaki tried to off him.

"I'm going to meet him. It shouldn't take long to find out if he's running a game. So don't leave the estate until I get back."

She nodded and threw him a mock salute. "Take care."

He found Blake exactly where he said he'd be, holed up in a smelly dive of a motel down in the Central West End. Blake had an old 12-gauge shotgun across his knees, and to Jim he looked very frightened, and very straight. Jim had spent twenty minutes watching the building, the room, and the man. If there was a trap, he couldn't spot it.

"So what's the word?" he asked Blake while he surveyed the room from his momentary perch on the window sill.

Blake tightened his grip on the shotgun. "Here's the deal: you give me a plane ticket out of the colony, a little spending money, and enough protection to keep me alive to enjoy it, and I give you the name of the guy that's selling your Councillor out to Tanaki." His gaze darted nervously about the room.

Jim considered him. "How do I know you've got the right name?"

Despair flickered in Blake's eyes. "C'mon, man! They killed Isabella. She was one of Tanaki's regulars and she knew a lot about what he was doing. Maybe she even helped recruit this guy." Isabella was the woman who had shot at Julee Aston during her lecture.

"So why not you? That was almost two weeks ago."

"Man, 'cause I didn't know anything!" Blake was squirming like a restless child. "That's the way it's always been. Tanaki pays good, tells me what to do, and I don't ask questions. I don't wanna know. But this time, I went up to the big house to pick up the rest of my money for another job— it didn't have anything to do with Councillor Aston— and I got there at the same time this guy did. It took me a minute to figure out who he was. I've seen him on the viewer a few times when the Councillor was on. So then I split. I figured if Tanaki'd kill Isabella, he'd sure kill me if he thought I knew about the guy."

Jim thought it over. The story was plausible, and even convincing. "All right," he finally said. "I'm willing to buy. Who is it?"

Blake shook his head. "Nuh-uh. Not until I'm someplace safe."

"Will the Aston estate do? It'll take a while to arrange a flight and your money." Jim was beginning to wish Blake was as dumb as he looked.

Blake nodded, and they left through the window and down the fire escape. Jim didn't want to take any chances while the hairs on his neck were bristling with unknown danger.

They reached the estate without incident. Jim took Blake to the basement and locked him into one of the holding cells that had been built there. No one saw Blake, as Jim had intended.

"I can't exactly let you roam about the estate," he explained to Blake when they reached the cell. "This isn't the nicest of accommodations, but it will keep you safe and out of trouble until I get back."

Blake submitted with the air of a doomed man. He had pretty much sold himself, and knew it.

"Now I want a name." Jim had kept his part of the bargain, and Blake was not in much of a position to argue.

"I don't actually know his name. He drives the Councillor's car. Short little guy that's got no hair."

Jim clamped his jaw shut on his surprise. Ned? But as he thought about it, it made sense. Ned had access to the gate key, and the first assassin had come in through the gate. Security had found the gate shorted, but that could be arranged from inside as well as out, and after the fact as easily as before. And Ned had been sick the morning that the car bomb had nearly taken them out. Jim himself had sent the man home, as he did anyone who was not operating at their peak. It had never occurred to him that the symptoms could have been faked.

With a rush of adrenaline, he realized that the Councillor's car had not been in it's spot when he had brought Blake in. He wasn't sure what time it was, but knew it couldn't be too late. He growled deep in his throat, unconsciously voicing his anger. The woman had left despite his orders! And Ned was driving her.

Jim locked Blake into his cell and then sprinted up the stairs, cursing as the half-healed wound in his shoulder lanced him with pain. He yelled for his staff as soon as he was out of the basement and explained the situation in a few terse sentences when they came at a run. They were in a car and heading out through the gate within two minutes, which pleased Jim in an unoccupied corner of his mind. The helo crew was also alerted, but it would be a few minutes more before they could get airborne.

Jim caught up the phone and dialed the Councillor's private number. The phone rang twice, then Julee's voice came to him from the other end, "Hello?"

"Hello, Councillor," Jim replied. "This is a friendly conversation. Smile and nod, and pretend you're talking to one of your lady-friends."

"What's going on?" Her voice was light, but her sudden concern was clear beneath the false joviality.

"Is the divider up? Can Ned hear you?"

"No, he can't. What's going on?" She was more insistent this time.

"Laugh. Your ladyfriend just told you a joke." On the other end, he could hear her obey. "Now," he continued, "tell me where you are."

A pause. "Fifth and Old 70. Am I in trouble?"

"Yes. Where are your escorts?"

"My car blew out its hoverfan. One of the cars stayed with it and we transferred to the other one. I didn't want to be late."

Jim sucked in his breath. It couldn't have been an accident, could it? He was barely aware of the deep gouges his claws were ripping in the seat as he flexed them in response to the tension that gripped him.

"Who's in the car with you, and where are they?" The armored escorts had two compartments: one in the front that also extended up into a small turret from which a gunner could fire, and a rear compartment buried in the belly.

"Ned's up in front with Dan and Xiao. I'm in the back. What is going on? Wait a minute. We're stopping."

Jim's heart leapt up into his throat. "Where, Councillor? Where are you?"

Another pause as she peered out through the viewing slits. "We're still on Old 70. We must have crossed the bridge: there's nothing here but ruins." There was a note of fear in her voice.

"Put the phone down but don't hang up. Put it on the floor. We'll be there as soon as we can." Then, "Old 70 across the river," he told the driver of his own car.

"Hurry," was all Julee said. Then, distantly, Jim heard the door grate open and a man's voice order her out of the car.

Jim could see the bridge ahead of them, and the blasted landscape of East Louis on the far side. During the war, a targeting mistake had flattened the ghetto of East Louis while leaving San Louis and her military airport virtually unscathed. The drumming of a helo's blades reached Jim above the thunder of the racing hovercar, and he hoped it was theirs.

They arrived in an inevitable cloud of dust and ashes kicked up from beneath the hovercar's skirt, diving out of the car as bullets shattered the windshield and tore holes in the upholstery. It wasn't armored, Jim reminded himself as he tried to pierce the swirling dust. The car began to settle with a whine, and the dust settled with it, as the two men with Jim returned fire.

Ned had taken cover behind the armored escort and was keeping them pinned with devastating accuracy. The shell of a building rose behind him, covering his back. Jim had doubts about how long their own car could continue to shield them as the withering fire slowly shredded it. Ned would have to run out of ammunition before they could do much to him. They weren't about to hit him— he was using the door of the cockpit as a shield and firing through the hinge slit.

Julee Aston was nowhere to be seen. Jim peered around the edge of the open door behind which he crouched, then jerked back as bullets whizzed past his ears, painfully loud.

A new rattle of gunfire, deeper than the tinny sounds of hand weapons, joined the cacophony. The helo was descending, and Jim could see the fire that spit from her guns. The heavy slugs hammered the side of the armored car, rocking it. Ned turned to face this new threat and raised his weapon.

Jim didn't think he'd ever get a better opportunity. The rough ground gave him excellent traction as he bounded across the space that separated the two vehicles and up onto the body of the armored car. The strength and speed that made his ancestors one of the most feared predators in Asia made Jim a dark blur as he leapt from the roof of the car and crashed into Ned Chang. He took him from the side, throwing his greater weight into a twist that brought Ned down beneath him. His claws sank into the man's back and the sweet taste of blood filled his mouth as he clamped powerful jaws around his neck and squeezed.

A flicker of motion at the corner of his eye brought his head around with a snap. Julee Aston stared at him in a mixture of shock and horror from beneath the car where she had taken refuge when the firefight began. Her eyes were huge against the pale skin of her face. It was the child's face, exactly as he had seen it twenty years before.

They remained that way for several moments, staring into each others' eyes. The understanding that passed between them ran too deep for words. Then Julee broke the contact and looked around.

"Is it safe to come out?" She asked. The gunfire had stilled, and only the sound of the hovering helo filled the air.

Jim nodded. Uncertain, he offered her his hand despite the blood that covered it. After a moment, she took it, and let him pull her out from underneath the car.

Four days later, Jim found himself once more sitting across from Julee Aston in the familiar environs of her study. A man occupied a third chair. He was, Jim had to admit, one of the most handsome men he had ever seen, with the perfect features of a Greek god. His hair fell in waves of burnt gold to his shoulders, and he had the lean, muscular build of a swimmer, easily visible through the loose, sleeveless shirt that he wore. Like the rest of his clothing, the shirt was carefully tailored, and expensive. Everything about him spoke of money and of quality. The only unusual thing about him were the thick folds of brightly colored skin that fell the length of his body from his shoulders and arms. When he raised his arms, they expanded into a beautiful mosaic of butterfly markings, like a spread cape, that stretched from ankles to wrists. And yes, he had answered Jim's question, he could glide formidable distances, provided the winds weren't too rough.

His name was Parker Eddings. And he was now a member of the Council, occupying the newly created Altered seat. Julee's motion had passed by a narrow margin the day before.

Jim was thoroughly curious why she had asked him here.

After the introductions were made, Julee turned to him. "Councillor Eddings asked me to arrange this meeting, so I will leave it to him to say whatever he has planned."

Eddings smiled at the light jab. Then he turned to Jim. "I understand that your employment with Councillor Aston will soon be ending."

Jim nodded, "Yes." Out of the corner of his eye he watched Julee for a reaction, but was disappointed. She had not said anything when he had told her the first time, either.

"Then I would like to offer you a position on my own staff." He held up a hand. "And not just as a bodyguard. You know what it is to be Altered without the advantages I have always enjoyed. I need someone with that perspective if I'm going to do anything truly useful for our people."

He was an incredible orator, this new Councillor, Jim thought. For a moment he was tempted, drawn by the power of the man's personality. Then he shook his head.

"I can't, Councillor."

Eddings watched him for several moments, as if debating whether or not to try to convince him. Eventually he smiled, resigned.

"I was afraid that might be your answer. I hope you'll reconsider." He laid a small card on the desk near Jim. "That has my private number, in case you do."

Jim picked up the card, nodded.

After a few minutes of idle talk with Julee, Councillor Eddings took his leave. To Jim's surprise, he offered him a hand as he was leaving, and Jim could tell that he had

not thought twice about the gesture. It was the first time in Jim's memory. He glanced at the man's card again after the door had closed and wondered if he might not take his offer after all.

The stillness in the room brought Jim out of his thoughts. Julee Aston sat behind her desk, chin cupped in her hands, staring at him. It was not a hostile gaze, but Jim could not decipher it beyond that. Surprised to find his heart beating fast, Jim waited for her to break the silence. When she did, it was not with anything he had hoped she'd say.

"I am formally releasing you from your oath, Jim Leary, as of this time. Your employment by the Aston Estate is thereby terminated, without prejudice." The words were formal, as they were required to be, in order to be binding under law.

Jim nodded and said nothing. He didn't know what he could say, or even if he wanted to say anything.

Julee leaned back in her chair. "So this is goodbye?" There was a note of sadness in her voice.

"I guess it is, Councillor."

A ghost of a smile illuminated her features. "Well, it's been an adventure, to use an old cliche."

Jim found himself smiling as well. Then he sobered. "Take care, Councillor." Tucking Eddings card away in his waist pouch, he jumped to the floor and walked toward the door.

"Leary, wait." Julee's voice stopped him before he had taken three steps. He paused and turned.

"This is for you." She came around the desk and handed him a small cream colored envelope. He accepted it curiously.

"Open it later," she added when he turned it over to examine the seal.

"All right," he shrugged, and added it to the contents of his pouch. Then, without further ado, he turned and padded quietly from the room. Julee watched him go, face expressionless.

When he opened the cream colored envelope, Jim found inside a reservation ticket for two for dinner at the Tea Room. It was dated nearly a year in the future, on the first anniversary of the creation of a Council seat for Altereds. Jim grinned to himself and wondered if either of them would show. **Q**

Valerie Jones is an engineer, although not currently working in her field, which is the aerospace industry. She loves flying, cats, horses, gardening and computer games. She's been hooked on science fiction ever since her mother read her to sleep with the Dragonriders of Pern novels. She lives in Lawerence, Kansas with her husband and sixteen month old son.

To Touch the Stars

Part 3: 'Burning the Ground'

Nicole Gustas

Tamsin and Kalin squatted in the bushes near the gates of the Killian Research Facility. As Tamsin pulled on her black gloves and adjusted the hood of her black jumpsuit, tucking her copper hair into it to make sure it wouldn't give her away, she was thankful for the Naridian love of shrubbery and ornamentation.

Kalin touched Tamsin's knee and counted under her breath. "Five, four, three, two, one." As they watched, the gate of the facility opened slightly, then the lights flickered and went out. The compound soon came into focus for the two women, who had used eyedrops that briefly increased their ability to see in the dark. Tamsin crept into the guard booth and grabbed the soldier on duty from behind. She wrapped one hand around the corporal's mouth, and with the other, pressed on the woman's throat to cut the flow of blood through the carotid artery. In a few seconds, the woman passed out, and Tamsin stuffed her behind the bushes, trussed with a gag stuffed in her mouth.

She quietly ran up to Kalin, who was almost at the entrance to the research facility. "We have thirteen minutes," Kalin subvocalized. They were both wearing throatmikes and earphones so they could speak to each other without anyone overhearing.

"I know. I took too long. But I don't want to kill anyone if I don't have to," said Tamsin just before she slipped inside the open double doors. She spun as she entered and kicked the guard waiting behind the door in the stomach, then grabbed his gun and cracked him on the back of the head, knocking him unconscious before he had a chance to cry out. She waved Kalin inside. "Remember to thank Layten for opening all the doors for us."

Tamsin crept into the guard booth and grabbed the soldier on duty from behind. She wrapped one hand around the corporal's mouth, and with the other pressed on the woman's throat to cut the flow of blood through the carotid artery.

"I already have," said Kalin. "Take a right, here." They jogged down the hall silently, Kalin leading the way. The faint emergency lighting gave an eerie glow to the halls. They took another right, then jogged down a flight of stairs. Kalin flattened herself against a wall, and Tamsin followed suit. They listened to the voice around the corner. "Wir muss'n wirschaff hab'n," he shouted into a wrist communicator, in Staatsprache.

Tamsin translated for Kalin. "He's trying to find out what's wrong with the power. He's alarmed. He says all the doors are open."

"Well, all the prisoners are being held two floors below," said Kalin. "It's only a matter of time before they realize what's going on and come up here."

They continued down several flights of stairs and entered the corridor. Tamsin skidded on the floor and nearly fell. She smelled the coppery scent of blood. She turned and saw Kalin squatting near the body, now a bloody, unrecognizable mass inside a uniform. "Looks like they're out," Kalin said grimly. "Come on — Jaysen's this way."

They ran quickly down the eerily deserted halls, turning left, then right, then left again. Tamsin picked up the lead as they neared Jaysen's cell, skidding inside seconds ahead of Kalin.

She could see him clearly. He was gaunt and pale, curled up asleep on his side in a corner of the cell, wearing nothing. Tamsin knelt beside him and shook him. "Jaysen, wake up! We've come to get you out."

He sat up and backed further into the corner. She could see him shaking. "Get away from me. Don't touch me." His voice was filled with loathing.

"Jayce, it's me, Tamsin." She reached toward him and he shrank back. What was wrong with him? Her stomach clenched tightly. "Come on. We have to hurry."

She watched his hands clench into fists. "You'll have to drag me out of here. I'm not walking willingly into your trap."

Tamsin stared at him in consternation for a moment, then heard movement. She and Jaysen turned as Kalin came through the door. "Hurry up! We only have nine minutes left."

"Kalin?" Jaysen said, startled. He stood up hesitantly, wincing.

"Are you hurt?" asked Tamsin, reaching to help him. He twitched away from her and nearly fell.

"No, I'm fine, just sore. Just get me out of here," he said.

Tamsin could see him pale as he began to move, but was afraid to try to touch him again. "I'll take point and clear out anyone in your path. Kalin, stay with Jaysen." Kalin pulled a dark shirt and pants out of her shouldersac and quickly handed them to Jaysen.

She hurried down the hall and paused. Kalin and Jaysen followed soon after, Jaysen now clad in black from neck to toe. Tamsin waved them around the corner. The dim halls were frighteningly quiet. She jogged up the stairs and slammed through the doors at the top of the landing, to find a gun pointed straight at her head.

Tamsin stared at the face behind the muzzle of the gun as a delicate white hand ripped the throatmike off her neck. She shuddered as she looked into her own green eyes.

"So," said her twin holding the gun, dropping the throatmike to the ground and crushing it under her heel. "You're the illustrious Tamsin."

Kalin put one arm around Jaysen's waist, supporting him as he limped down the hall. She let her consciousness drift lightly across the surface of his mind, with a feathery, nearly invisible touch, testing the walls that normally held him together. It was like skipping across a broken bridge after a bad earthquake; she could feel holes and gaps, with Jaysen's strong force of will barely holding it all together. She felt the surface shiver and begin to fall.

Her light touch became an iron grip as she threw up her own wall around his, shoring up his disintegrating protection in an attempt to keep him from complete collapse. He was stable on the surface, but she could feel the fierce storm roiling beneath, and knew she had only bought him time. She also knew her control was being bought at a high future cost to him, but knew she couldn't get him out if not under his own power. She did a quick check on his physical injuries and was relieved to find they weren't as bad as his mental damages.

She looked up at him and he gave her a weak, shaky smile. "Thanks," he said.

"Don't say that until we get you out of here," Kalin said, as they walked toward the stairs. She watched Tamsin barrel through the doors at the top of the stairs, and could feel some of the tension in Jaysen's mind ease as she left his field of vision. She couldn't quite grasp the tangled, contradictory emotions his copper-haired friend inspired, but knew Tamsin was a flashpoint that should, for now, be avoided in discussion. "I think you're going to be spending a lot of time with me after we get out."

"I'm supposed to object at the prospect of spending a lot of time with a beautiful woman?" asked Jaysen, with his former flirtatious humor. From inside his mind, she could feel how forced it was.

"I'm afraid I'll be sharing you with Chas," she said, keeping up the illusion. She narrowed her eyes at the doors and pulled Jaysen to a stop at the bottom of the stairs as she listened to the empty hiss in her ear where Tamsin's voice should have been. She quickly switched to mental speech. Wait. We need to take another route.

Why? asked Jaysen. It was more of a feeling than the word; Jaysen had never mastered the art of speaking mind-to-mind.

Tamsin should have waved us through by now. She must have walked into a trap. She felt waves of concern from him, but didn't bother to spend the energy to soothe them as they walked in another direction. She looked at her wrist. They had seven minutes.

Tamsin looked desperately for an opening, knowing that every second she waited gave the woman standing across from her an advantage. She watched her own face break into an icy smile. "Here for Jaysen, are you?" asked the woman.

Immediately Tamsin knew what had been going on, knew why Jaysen had reacted with such hatred for her. "I tried. He refused to leave with me. I had to leave him behind," she lied, as she tried to adopt a defeated pose. She tasted bile at the back of her throat, and tried to control and channel her fury.

"Now he won't be the only one stuck here," said her counterpart. "Up against the wall; I want to check you for weapons."

Tamsin stood spreadeagled against the wall, hands above her head. She heard the rustle of fabric as the woman stuck the gun into a holster. Tamsin held her breath steady and waited. Not yet, not yet…don't give anything away…

Her flesh crawled as she felt the woman's hands pat her down, starting at her collar. The hands moved down, toward her waist. Not yet…

An explosion quietly echoed down the corridor from the distance. She felt the woman behind her start slightly, and took her chance. Tamsin pushed off from the wall as much as she could manage and twisted as she kicked out with her right leg. She felt her foot connect with something solid, and heard a crunch as she began falling. Time began to slow with the adrenaline rush.

"A fall does not have to be a bad thing," her combat instructor had told her, "as long as you know where you will land, and your enemy does not." As she began to fall, she snapped her right wrist back. The blade shot out, and she felt it score. As she fell to the floor, she saw the cut across the other woman's face, and saw drops of blood spatter. The woman was falling; the kick had landed on one of her knees. Tamsin pulled her knees toward her chest and used the momentum of her fall to roll backward over her right shoulder. She sprang up as her feet touched the floor.

Her double had fallen to her hands and knees and looked up at Tamsin through blood and copper hair. "They forgot to tell us about the knives," she said. She tried to push herself up, but fell as the right knee gave out. Tamsin saw her reach for the gun and kicked her in the head. The blow cracked her counterpart's skull against the wall and she fell, unconscious. Tamsin stripped off the woman's gun and holster and quickly strapped them onto her leg. She began running down the corridor as she looked at her chrono.

She had five minutes.

Kalin and Jaysen had climbed to the top of the staircase. For security reasons, no staircase went all the way up or down the complex, and now, Kalin remembered, they had to cross several corridors before they would reach a stairway which would take them to the entrance. She tried to reach out and feel whether anyone was in the corridor, but her mind was too involved in holding Jaysen together and finding their way out to be able to take on another task. All she felt was a wash of many people's emotions — mostly anger and fear. Many of the sensations were highly controlled, the feeling of a well-trained Gifted mind. She pushed open the door slightly, hoping to peer out and see whether anyone was in the corridor before they crossed. The door handle was suddenly ripped from her grasp as the door was flung open, and a gun was aimed at her head.

The gun muzzle dropped as soon as the short woman behind it saw she wasn't wearing a uniform. Kalin looked around at the crowd of people, some armed, dressed in light blue cotton — the garb of a patient.

Or, in these strange times, of a prisoner.

Next to the woman with the gun, a man with red hair and a mustache stepped forward. "You're not one of us," he said. "Have you come to get us out?"

A wave of helplessness washed over Kalin. Jaysen felt it and squeezed her shoulder. She took a deep breath. "We don't have enough people to get you out. But we can help you take over this place."

"How?" exclaimed the man as the fifteen or twenty people behind him murmured in surprise.

"There's a central control room one floor up. From there you can control the power, the doors, the lights, the intruder control systems, everything. And the armory's right next to it." The map of the building had been burned into Kalin's mind. "But we'll have to move quickly. The power comes on in —" she looked at her chrono and winced — "five minutes, and when it does, you'll lose your only advantage."

The woman with the gun, curly blond hair cropped short, stared at her with hard blue eyes. "How do we know we can trust you?"

Kalin took a deep breath to calm herself and held out her hand, palm up. "Look and see."

The man with the mustache put his hand on top of hers. She felt his mind probe quickly through hers, and felt him turn over her memories of her own stay with the gov-

ernment. His eyes locked with hers and she felt understanding ripple through the link. "I don't think there's anyone we could trust more, Talia," Tomas — for she had read his name in the link — said to the short woman. "Let's move — follow Kalin."

Kalin led them down the corridors and up the stairs, still helping Jaysen, the focused energy behind her supporting her. Before they went through the doors at the top of the stairs, Kalin said to Tomas, "Do you sense anyone in the corridor?"

He concentrated for a second. "Not right in front of the doors," he said. "Further away, two, maybe three people." He shook his head. "I'm sorry, I'm not good enough to tell where they are."

"I'm fairly sure I know where they are," she said. She turned and spoke to the group, reinforcing her speech by sending out images to those who could receive them. "About halfway down this corridor, just after the first juncture, there's a door on the left. Behind that door is the control room. There are probably two or three people in it. If you go right at the first juncture, the armory is the first door on your left. It should be unlocked."

The group looked grimly determined. "People with weapons should hit the control room," said Tomas. "The rest of us will hit the armory. When the power comes back on, we'll clean this place out." Then he said four words Kalin knew very well from her work in the underground. "Now is the time." He looked at them once more. "Let's go."

Now is the time. The words known through the underground as the signal for full-scale revolt. Kalin shivered, trying to shut out a sudden mental flash of blood and fire. The people ran out into the corridor and split at the juncture. Talia was the first at the door to the control room, and opened fire as soon as she reached it. Tomas, even though he was unarmed, was right behind her. Through the fading link, Kalin glimpsed the control room. Three soldiers were dead in the room, one sprawled on the floor in a pool of blood, one face down on a console, the third staring at the door with a surprised expression still lingering in his dead eyes, his face slowly turning red from the blood running down. She sensed no regret from Tomas or Talia.

She understood why they felt they had to strike first, but was still ashamed. If we don't offer them mercy, she thought, carefully shielding herself from Jaysen, who was again semiconscious, how are we any better than them? She continued up the stairs, leading Jaysen, looking quickly at her chrono.

They had three minutes.

Tamsin vaulted up the final flight of stairs and pushed the door slightly ajar, not wanting to make the same mistake twice. She saw a tall, thin figure standing near the exit, holding a gun, and wished they'd planned to leave by the same doors they'd arrived by. Then she remembered her double downstairs, and smiled.

She pulled the hood off her head, shaking her hair out, entered the corridor and walked toward the exit quickly as if she had every right to be there. The man at the door looked at her, registering the copper hair and relaxing slightly. Then he saw her black clothing and began to stiffen, but it was too late. Tamsin grabbed his hand and gave his wrist a vicious twist. He dropped the gun and she kicked it down the hall. He recovered more quickly than Tamsin, throwing her hard into the opposite wall. She felt the concussion reverberate through her whole body, and barely kept on her feet. She had badly underestimated the man. He might be thin, but he was strong, and he was almost half a meter taller than she. She nearly laughed. Gentle Goddess, this man could kill me…

They stood face to face in the corridor, a few feet from the door. She eyed him carefully, trying to find a weak spot. Even his knees are a pretty high kick for me. No way can I aim for his throat. She looked at her face and her breath caught in her throat.

His face belied his height. He looked young – far too young to be there. And those intense blue eyes; surely she'd seen them before. But where?

He spoke, and everything fell into place. "What are you trying to do here?" he asked, speaking in the soft, blurred tones of the city she'd grown up in. She could almost see him, younger, playing in the streets with the other children.

"I'm trying to fix a terrible wrong that's been done here," she said. She saw him flinch as he recognized her accent.

"How can you do this?" he asked, angry and bewildered. "You come from the West, from the same place I do. You know how bad it was for us. People were starving. They killed each other on the streets for drugs or a few credits. You go there now and it's changed. The streets are clean. People have jobs. They have hope! How can you try to destroy everything we worked for?"

Tamsin felt as if she'd been slapped. His words brought her most buried feelings to the fore, the thoughts she held back when she listened to her friends in Ground Zero talk. She remembered what it had been like growing up, remembered walking by burnt-out buildings, remembered running away from the gangs. When she was lucky, she'd managed to run away from the gangs. She still bore the scars from when she'd been unlucky. And the government had done nothing about it. How could she work for the old one that had done nothing to help them? Even if the desire was to form a new coalition, some of the strongest supporters of Ground Zero were powerful members of the old, deposed government who had escaped Narid.

The desire to believe in a government that could make such improvements in the West was almost overpowering. But how could she not try to bring down a new one that had done such violence to her friends? "The things that you've worked for have been built on a lie!" she shouted, as much to herself as to him. "Look at what's been done to the people here! They've been tortured, forced to betray their friends and family."

His fierce blue eyes snapped fire down at her. "What did they do for us when we were in need? They ignored us. They just sapped our resources to improve their lives, then restricted us so we couldn't better ourselves."

Tamsin saw two figures dressed in black moving toward the doors from behind the guard. She had to keep him occupied until Jaysen and Kalin got through the door. She had to keep him talking. She didn't want to kill him.

"Those laws were made to protect the environment! Or would you have us be a planet of desert and sewage, like Old Earth?" she said.

"If the laws were to protect the environment, why was only the West subject to them? Why was the East free to do as they would with their resources? The laws were made to keep us down!"

Tamsin clenched her fists. He was voicing many of her own thoughts, thoughts she had rationalized away again and again. Worse, she was beginning, in some small corner of her mind, to believe in him. Kalin and Jaysen were almost through the door. She had to keep him talking, and came back to the one point that had kept her fighting against the new government. "None of that

excuses what is being done here! How can you support the way these people are treated. They aren't being treated this way for what they've done, but what they are. If you'd been born Gifted, you'd be down there instead of up here."

She saw him flinch, saw his jaw clench, and saw those intense blue eyes grow opaque. Suddenly she knew. "You are Gifted. You hid it all your life to keep yourself safe, and now you're helping them hurt people just like you." Jaysen and Kalin were right behind him, about to go through the door. "How can you not hate yourself for that?"

She knew how he loathed himself for turning against people like him. She knew quite well. She felt the same way, because she'd done the same thing. She saw him begin to turn, and saw his eyes catch the motion behind him.

She reacted before she could think, before she could let him hurt her friends. She rushed him, and her right wrist snapped back just before it hit his chest. The blade slid between the ribs, through several inches of flesh. She felt the warm blood gush out over her hand and body as her other arm wrapped around him. She held him as he began to crumple to the floor, met his eyes and saw the shock and despair there. He tried to speak, but blood dripped out of his mouth.

"I'm sorry," she whispered to him, tears threatening to spill out. "I'm so sorry." She held his hand as he died a few seconds later, and closed his eyes. Then she ran out the doors, covered in blood. She stopped, stone-still, as light exploded all around her, momentarily blinding her.

Their time was up.

Kalin saw Tamsin rush the tall guard, but didn't wait to see the results. She moved Jaysen out as fast as she could, aware that she couldn't maintain his barriers much longer. She had seconds, a minute at best.

She got him into the courtyard, but stopped for a moment when she saw the two military aircars sitting there, with Layten between them. She rushed forward. What the hell are you DOING here? she sent, as forcefully as she could.

He gave a little shrug, the one she found most infuriating. I believe it's called hijacking. Get in.

She shoved Jaysen into the rear of one car, sitting down beside him and fastening the safety harnesses, and took his hands. She knew Layten was waiting until the last possible second to take off. Do you know how to fly these things?

No, not really, he replied. But I'm interfaced with a computer that does.

Kalin sighed, then put it out of her mind. She would not worry about things she had no control over. Suddenly, the lights flashed on around them. She heard Layten call Tamsin's name. Beneath her hands, she felt a twitch, and felt something crumble in his mind. His body went limp as she felt his mind collapse.

She began probing his mind, trying to patch him together as she dimly heard the engines roar beneath them. She touched a recent memory, a painful one, and probed deeper. The whole event was flung into her mind, as strong as if it had happened to her.

He tried to take a deep breath and couldn't. "What do you want from me?"

Tamsin's damp, warm voice whispered in his ear again. "Only the answers to a few questions." He heard tearing cloth as the knife traced down his spine, felt the blood following it. He didn't dare move, feeling burning where the blade cut him, on his arms, then again across his back and down, knowing even the slightest shift could mean worse damage. He knew the woman wasn't Tamsin, but it didn't matter. The shock of the image of his best friend hurting him held him frozen to the spot, paralyzed with fear and betrayal. He felt the tickle of her tongue again on his ear as he tried to lose himself in the pain, and ignore the knife. "There's no reason I can't have fun while I ask," the voice laughed, as the knife traced down his spine, then lower.

Kalin traced one hand over her friend's brow, moving the hair out of his still-closed eyes. "Oh, Jaysen," she whispered.

"You're hurt!" Layten exclaimed.

Tamsin was aware that the grin on her face was probably maniacal at best. At some point in the past minute, she'd become very detached. She didn't really care what happened next. "Don't worry, it's not mine. Can you cover us?"

Layten nodded. "We're going to Kerna N'tali's compound. Once we get within those walls, the military won't dare touch us."

Tamsin felt the smile grow broader across her face. Someone inside her was screaming — she told it to shut up. "But first we have to get there. Leave your radio at 1430 megahertz - they don't usually monitor that channel. Good luck." She flung herself into the aircar, glancing quickly at Jaysen and Kalin in the back before she started it up. The car lifted quickly, and she brought it as high as she was willing to push it.

A bass voice came over the radio. "These are aircars, not suborbital vehicles."

"Yeah, I know, Layten. I'm just pushing it a little high."

She heard a hiss, then Layten spoke again. "The records say it's not rated to go this high."

"Well, the records lie. They'll safely go a lot higher than the manufacturers say they will. It's a safety precaution against people like me." Tamsin banked sharply and made a beeline for the N'tali compound. Layten followed behind and at a somewhat lower altitude. Only one of the five moons were full, making them harder to spot.

There was silence for the next few minutes as both pilots concentrated on reaching their goal. Then Layten's voice crackled over the intercom. "A car is coming at us from Capus. It'll be intersecting our path in two minutes." He paused, and Tamsin could almost hear the computer he'd interfaced with whirring. "It's not hostile yet. It's coming to check out why we're traveling on an unscheduled flight path."

Tamsin let out a hiss of air between her teeth. Even though those back at the Killian Research Facility who were capable of warning the military of their theft probably weren't inclined to do so, transponders were placed on each car to make them traceable. She'd been hoping that, by the time they were noticed, they'd be in the N'tali compound. "Layten, you do the talking. Audio only, if you can manage it. Find out the most plausible excuse from that computer, and use it. I'll be listening."

A few seconds later, the radio shifted to the standard military frequency as the other car matched course with theirs. "Ships S93-0760 and S93-0931, please state your course."

Layten's voice sounded, deep and authoritative, over the radio. "We're traveling to the N'tali compound."

"For what purpose?" asked the other voice sharply.

"Our flight path and details of our mission are contained in memo dated 13/12/28, timecode 16:32."

The radio hissed. "I can't access that file. It's protected — Code Indigo," said the other car.

"Exactly. Your superior officer can check our orders."

There was another pause. The voice came again, less sure. "I'd like a visual, please."

"I can't do that. Check Code Indigo procedures. No visual allowed."

"What are –"

Layten's voice interrupted. "I can't give you more information. I suggest you return to your base. And, soldier, I suggest you check Code Indigo procedures. If I wanted to, I could shoot you out of the sky right now for interfering."

Tamsin's finger itched over the trigger for the car's guns, but she held her fire. After a few seconds, the car banked and turned south. She spoke to Layten over their low frequency. "That was close."

"Hopefully I intimidated him enough that he won't check that order."

"Why?" asked Tamsin.

"Code Indigo orders come from a general. I could forge an audiovisual message with retina prints in two days, but not in thirty seconds. It's an empty message."

"ETA to N'tali compound is twelve minutes. Keep your fingers crossed."

Tamsin took a moment to look over her shoulder at Jaysen and Kalin. Jaysen sprawled, comatose, on the seat, his head on Kalin's shoulder. Kalin's ebony hair had fallen forward, obscuring both their faces.

Tamsin turned back to the console, and tried to quiet the thoughts that were filling her mind. How can you try to destroy everything we worked for? The guard's voice rang through her head.

They were within three minutes of the compound when she heard Layten's voice again. "Our luck just ran out. There are three cars coming at us. They're big, they're armed to the teeth, and they'll get to us in forty-eight seconds."

"Scheiss'n," said Tamsin shortly. She checked her sensors. "They're Enigma-class. Aim two meters ahead of the engine at the top of the car. The shielding's weak there, and the fuel line goes through it. One good hit, and it'll blow." She paused, and only heard static from the other end. "Layten, please acknowledge." She switched bands, but still heard nothing but static. "So they're jamming us," she said to herself. "Well, they won't be able to hear each other, either." She hoped he'd heard her last message.

She put the car in a steep, fast dive and came at the lead car from above, feeling gravity tug against the safety harness. As the other car began to bank, she targeted ahead of the engine, fired and continued to dive below the wedge-shaped Enigma, plotting her course to come up behind the other two cars. Her shot hit dead on. The first car began losing altitude quickly, spitting a trail of smoke that quickly became flame. It exploded about four hundred meters from the ground. Tamsin tried to hold her car steady against the concussion waves buffeting it. She saw the forest below burst into flame.

One of the two remaining cars went briefly into a spin, then recovered. The other, further away from the blast, stayed steady and turned to intercept her. Tamsin looked at her sensors for Layten's car. The boxy vehicle was bobbing and weaving erratically. "Layten, what the hell is wrong?" she shouted, without hope of a response. She'd been lucky against the first car; they hadn't expected her to attack so quickly. She wasn't too sanguine about her chances against the other two.

She sent the car up as fast as she could, knowing the only way she could damage either of the other two cars was by an attack from above, where they were less heavily shielded. She also knew the cars would be expecting such an attack. She dove again, firing. This time the Enigmas moved quickly, dodging her shots. She scored a glancing shot against one of them, and completely missed the other. The fight was drifting, she noticed, coming closer and closer to the N'tali compound. If she was lucky, she'd soon be close enough to make a run for it.

Layten was firing, too, with less luck than she was having, staying barely in range to do any damage. Tamsin pushed the car up again, tearing in a steep left-hand turn around and above the two cars. Both began firing at her, and her car bounced in response. She began to lose thrust. She swore loudly as she arced back toward them, preparing to fire once again.

Through talent or sheer blind luck, she didn't know which, Layten fired a shot which passed perhaps a meter below her car and hit one of the two remaining Enigmas. The car immediately began to list to one side. After a few seconds, it banked away, turning back toward its base.

Tamsin was jolted as another shot hit her from the remaining Enigma. She heard the engine hesitate, then continue, but with an underlying disonant hum. Her sensors were down; she was relying strictly on visual. She tried to gain altitude but didn't have the power. She braked sharply and the Enigma shot by her. She slammed her finger on the trigger as her car began to drop from the lack of momentum.

Nothing happened.

She slammed her hand against the console hard in frustration, and cursed the makers of the car as she accelerated quickly, making a beeline for the N'tali compound. The car responded jerkily, accelerating in fits and starts, slowly losing altitude. She had no idea where Layten was. The Enigma dropped out of sight in front of her. When she looked over her shoulder through the back window, she saw it coming up from below. It loomed behind her. She saw it shake, and shake again. Layten was firing, without much lasting effect. The N'tali compound was within sight, but she knew she didn't have a chance of reaching it. She braced herself for the Enigma's final shot.

She saw a bloom of fire come from the rear of the Enigma, then another. It crawled up the car, turning the black hull to red and gold. Then it exploded.

Tamsin's car tumbled forward end over end. She tried to adjust the spin, turning it into a side roll that was bringing her directly toward the compound. The ground below her revolved more and more slowly as she stabilized the car. The blue-green blur below her resolved itself into the lake and trees within the N'tali compound. As she pulled the car back to a stable, slow descent, she heard the engines sputter.

"Don't you dare stall yet!" she shouted at the engines. Unlike the Enigmas, which could glide for quite a distance without power, her car was not very aerodynamic, and would drop like a stone when the engines cut out.

She was ten meters above the ground when the engines cut out. The car continued its gentle downward glide for a few seconds, then dropped. Tamsin heard a crash as the dark closed around her.

She woke to hands brushing her body. She instinctively grabbed for them.

"Tamsin, it's Chas! Don't hurt me!" he exclaimed. "I'm just brushing the glass off you."

She opened her eyes. Everything was blurry, and her stomach began to heave. Chas moved to the side and pulled her head forward as she began to vomit all over the shattered console. When she was done, he gave her a sip of water. She noticed, in a

detached way, that the cloth he was wiping her face with came away red. She also saw three of them. "How are Kalin and Jaysen?" she asked.

"They're fine — a lot better than you, as a matter of fact. They're being brought inside now. You destroyed Kerna's flower garden."

She could smell gardenias, roses and violets all around her. "Whoops. I was aiming for the landing pad."

"You missed," said Chas. "But the trees to the side of the garden broke your fall. You were lucky."

Tamsin felt very remote, as if she were dreaming. Her eyes began to sag shut. She felt a sting against her cheek and realized Chas had slapped her. "Don't you dare go to sleep," he said. "You've got a bad concussion."

"What happened to Layten?" she asked.

"I lost contact with the computer when they jammed the radio signals," a bass voice said. "And I really have no idea how to fly those things."

"So we threw you in the water and you learned how to swim. Great," she said, closing her eyes.

"Don't shut your eyes!" Chas yelled at her, and her eyes snapped back open. She stared at the green shadows above her and heard voices rumbling in the background.

"No, she can't be moved, it's too dangerous. We'll have to do it here," she heard as the green patterns in front of her began to swell and change shape. She felt herself slide down a tunnel.

A few days later, Chas walked on the green path by the lake, escaping momentarily the visuals of the standoff at the Killian Research Institute. A copper-haired figure stood at the edge of the water, throwing rocks at the glassy surface. She tossed him a wave as he came closer.

"How are you feeling?" he asked her.

"I feel fine," she said. "The upper third of my vision is still gone, though. It's like I'm wearing a hat all the time."

"There isn't any permanent damage. It'll come back soon," he said.

She stared at him. "What?" he asked.

"You saw me just this morning. What do you really want to talk to me about?" she asked.

He stared out at the water and tried to form his words carefully. "It's about Jaysen."

She walked away from him a few steps, keeping her back to him. "I don't think I want to hear what you're going to tell me."

"Kalin's been working with him steadily. He's holding together now."

"So why can't I see him?" asked Tamsin angrily, turning around.

Chas hesitated. "How much do you know about what they did to him?"

"Enough," she snapped. "I had a run-in with her."

"Kalin feels that it would be best if Jaysen didn't see you for a while," said Chas.

"How long do you mean?"

"We don't know. But she thinks that if he saw you right now, it could do a lot of damage."

"You mean it would send him over the edge again." She laughed bitterly and threw a rock into the lake. "It's like he's still locked up there. Sometimes I wish he was dead. Then I'd have a reason to grieve, to miss him. Even if I do get to see him again, it won't be…him."

Chas walked toward her and put a hand on her arm. He hesitated, then decided to tell her. "Tamsin, Jaysen was in love with you."

She shook his arm off. He looked at her face. Her jaw was clenched and her eyes were burning. Her breath came fast. "Chas, please go away."

"Tamsin –"

"Chas, I have an overwhelming desire to hit something repeatedly," she said. Her voice was like brittle glass shards. "I'd rather it wasn't you."

Chas walked back up the path. Before he went between the trees, he looked back toward the lake. Tamsin still stared at the water, an alarming lack of expression on her face.

Chas went to the house, intending to ask Kalin to check on Tamsin, not sure what she might do next. Layten was sitting in the middle of the room, holograms all around him.

Chas stared at the flickering images of fire and blood. The research facility wasn't the only building in dispute now. "What's happening?" he asked.

Layten's voice was triumphant, yet bleak. "Revolution." Q

Nicole Gustas (ngustas@hamp.hampshire.edu) just got accepted to American University and is now frantically searching for a job and housing in Washington DC. She has so far successfully avoided the flesh-eating virus that has invaded southwestern Connecticut. She highly recommends the TV show Animaniacs. "Badda-bing!"

The Harrison Chapters

Chapter 16

Jim Vassilakos

He liked the sound it made, twirling on the counter top, and the way it made her hazel eyes open wide with glee.

"Lemme see."

Mike's first impulse was to clasp his hand into a tight fist. She tried prying back his fingers one by one, but each time she got one where she wanted it, she'd have to let it go to work on another. "Dummy," he thought, as it would snap back down, and she'd scream and then laugh, frustrated and easily amused.

"Mike... please. I'm gonna tell mom."

"Tell her what? I found it."

"I just want to look at it."

He held its edge between two fingers, its coppery color reflecting the late afternoon sunlight. Some sort of profile lay etched on the side, a man with a beard, all distinguished and stately. She squinted, trying to make out the details as he jiggled it back and forth, forcing her eyes to constantly refocus. Finally giving up, she tried to grab it. "Slowpoke," he thought as he felt a snickering smile form on his lips.

"I have all. You have none."

"Mike..." she started to whine.

"Oh, don't cry, baby. You want it?"

"Yes."

"I bet you do."

She ended up chasing him around the flat, underneath tables, through the shower, over their parents' bed, until she finally cornered him at the balcony, hazel eyes deadly serious.

"Gimme it or else."

"If you insist."

He made as if to hand it forward, but just at her moment of triumph, he flicked it backwards over his head. It was over twenty stories down.

"Mike... I'm telling."

She never did, of course. She never told about anything, while he would tell about almost anything, even the stuff he made up.

"Mommy already knows you're a big fat liar."

"Does not... uh.... Am not."

He didn't know why she held her tongue. He never really thought about it. He knew it was a good thing though. She'd certainly collected enough dirt over the years to put him on life-long restriction.

"Where you going?"

He froze, his lower torso hanging out the ventilation shaft. It wasn't the first time she'd pretended to be asleep. He looked down, uncertain.

"Nowhere."

"I'll tell."

"Go ahead."

He stopped once he reached the roof. She was at his heels, hazel eyes shimmering faintly in the starlight. Mike scowled. A tagalong was just what he needed.

"Where do you think you're going?" he queried in his most accusatory voice.

"Where are you going?" she chirped in reply.

"Nowhere."

"I'm going nowhere too."

He gritted his teeth, walking over to the old staircase. He'd busted the lock on the door with his father's gun while nobody was home to hear the noise. His dad never even noticed the bullet missing.

His eyes snapped open but saw nothing save for a blue dot in the distance... He closed his hand into a fist as a beeping noise rose somewhere in the distance. Then the lights came on, and he squinted, barely able to see at all. "Good morning."

Mike told her to go back at least twenty times on the way to the ground floor. It wasn't that she'd get him caught. Sneaking past the security-bot wasn't a problem. The thing was stupid, and he'd learned long ago how to distract it with a pebble. It was just the idea of her company which irritated him.

She walked behind him once they were outside, picking up funny shaped stones or bits of metal. She even found a coin, probably the one he'd tossed over the balcony. They ended up going into one of the deserted buildings at her insistence. She wanted to find something hard and flat to spin it on. Mike suggested her head, which she didn't find funny.

They must have sat there for hours while she twirled it with glee and wouldn't let him touch it for all the false promises in the world. He watched her, his eyelids growing increasingly heavy as he reminded himself that they couldn't fall asleep. Without her in the room, there would be nobody to cover for him in the morning. Still, she seemed too happy to budge. She finally looked up, waking him from his pseudo-slumber.

"Remember Dana?"

Mike looked at her and yawned, "Haven't seen her in awhile."

"Mom said her family must've moved, but I went over the other day, and her older sister answered the door. Said she wasn't living there anymore."

"Maybe she got the bug."

That made her pause, but then she looked up again, "I don't see how she could have. She hardly ever went out. Her dad wouldn't let her."

Mike sat upright on the floor, crossing his legs.

"Sounds almost like Jason."

Lei twirled the coin again.

"Yeah. Before his parents moved, he said they were leaving because of him and that I should go too. Because we were both second-born."

"Second-born?"

"I know. I asked mom what he meant. She said they were really leaving because his parents couldn't face their chores."

A goo-spitter crept beside her leg while she was talking. Mike flicked a string of pebbles at it until it got the hint and crawled away. She didn't seem to notice and just kept twirling the coin.

"Mom said some people just hide from real life. Isn't that weird?"

"I guess."

She was quiet for a while after that, and Mike closed his eyes wondering what the big people were up to.

"Mike. Wake up!"

His eyes snapped open but saw nothing save for a blue dot in the distance, jumping like the beat to a really slow song. His mouth felt strange, almost swollen, and his body felt warm and numb, as though he'd melted into the concrete. It took about a minute before he realized there was something in his mouth. He spat it out gently, feeling it brush by his arm several moments later. With considerable concentration, his hand found it somewhere in the darkness. It was about the size of a walnut, cold and metallic. He closed his hand into a fist as a beeping noise rose somewhere in the distance. Then the lights came on, and he squinted, barely able to see at all.

"Good morning."

It was a woman's voice, detached yet strangely familiar. She sounded a little tired as her face blurred in and out of focus.

"How are you feeling?"

She wiped his eyes with some sort of sticky, gauze pad, and Mike could see her short, dark hair as she leaned forward again, looking into his eyes with an elongated, metal instrument.

"Do you know where you are?"

Mike thought about it.

"No."

"You're on the Crimson Queen... Royal Fleet passenger liner. You're safe."

She put something on his head and then pressed a few buttons. A twisted red line appeared on the display, sparking to mind images of floating bubbles, crimson and boiling. Mike blinked as she turned back around.

"Do you remember anything?"

"Umm..."

For some reason, he found himself imagining her with long, white hair. Her eyes were light brown, like a tiger's. Not silver, like Sule's. He blinked again as the memories came rushing with neither heed nor invitation.

"Do you know who you are?"

"Mi..." he bit his tongue. "My head feels... kinda woozy."

"It's okay. Just rest. If you need anything," she tapped a red button beside his fist. "Lights dim," she commanded.

They obeyed, and she seemed to have to play with the door, making it beep several times before it would open. A man wearing a holster stood on the other side, smiling and sneaking a peek. Then the door closed again, and Mike saw a small number pad nested into the wall beside it.

The object in his hand was metallic with two small holes set into one face. A moon-shaped etching lay beneath them, making a smiling face of the trio, and the words "try me" were carefully etched along the adjoining side. Frowning, Mike raised it carefully to his head, using his fingers to find the appropriate jacks. His arm felt strangely disconnected, as though half the nerves were deadened, and it took considerable fumbling before the device agreed click into its proper place. The lights seemed to stutter for a moment, and sitting somewhere within one wall, he could see the pair of dancing yellow lanterns.

"Cecil, what's going on?"

"Speak with your mind, my friend. You are in the gravest danger yet."

Mike tried to shrug, but his shoulders barely responded, so he just sat still as the lanterns continued to swirl, beckoning attention.

"The Imps believe you are working with ISIS. They think it is you who summoned them to Sule's rescue. It is only a matter of time before they learn the truth."

"Where am I?"

"The cage, the Crimson Queen's high security section of sickbay."

"Are we in hyperspace?"

"En route to Tyber."

Mike took a deep breath, "No wonder I'm having weird dreams."

The lanterns halted their dance, mid-stride.

"Dreams?"

"Realistic, actually. Ever hear of delayed action re-play?"

"Ah... understood."

Mike sighed. Cecil knew him too well.

"What's our ETA?"

"Fifteen hours."

"Anybody with you?"

The lanterns danced again, "The whole team, Pooper-dumper included."

"Does anyone have any ideas for getting me out of here?"

"Brain cells be burning over it. Trust in that."

"Could you be more specific?"

"Locks on doors, for starters. Codes to enter, unknown."

Mike smirked, "Unknown? To the ultimate hack?"

"Hack Cecil could, but not quietly. Not on this boat, and certainly not concerning their prize jewel."

Their prize jewel. Mike savored the sound of it as his smirk decomposed itself into a sullen stare.

"I'll get the combo. You guys figure out how to use it. Okay?"

"Agreed."

Mike disengaged the radio from his jacks, using several minutes debating where to hide it. Precious little was sacred in a hospital null, particularly one in which your every bodily function was monitored by various medical gadgetry. Even a woman doctor would have to get intimate from time to time. He finally settled on wedging it beneath the upper-torso sheath between his armpit and the castfoam, pressing the red button almost as a after-thought. A young man entered the room a minute later. He wore a white coat with snake insignia and had a soft, friendly face.

"Ah... Lieutenant Feso Sosrodjojo at your service."

Mike tried to grin, "Lieutenant, I can barely move."

"That's just the regen compound doing its work. It contains a mild paralytic."

"Take me off it."

"Ah... I can't do that."

"Lieutenant, don't make me pull rank here. Can you at least take me off the paralytic?"

He sighed, "If you don't mind pain, sure."

Mike nodded, "I'd also like to see myself. If you have a mirror somewhere..."

"No problem. I'll be right back."

A minute later, Mike discovered the nurse true to his word.

"Why are you being so nice to me, Feso?"

"Ah... you're Mr. Important, right? I see Lieutenant Torin always asking about you. He's very tight with the Commodore, I hear." He grinned knowingly, his eyebrows arching as if to say "nudge nudge... wink wink." Then he smiled, sort of shyly. "No, I'm always nice to the patients. It helps people heal, and you need all the healing you can get."

"What I need is to be able to move."

"Ah... you can move your arm and head."

"I want to be able to move my body. I want to be able to do my own digestion and defecation instead of these machines. Can you take me out of the body sheath?"

"Ah... I don't think that would be such a good idea."

"Please?"

Erik knew he'd overslept even before he was moderately conscious. He'd woken at his usual time several hours earlier, and recalling the previous night's excitement, promptly closed his eyes. It was a nice change, he decided, though a little too habit forming.

"Computer. Reinstate program wake-me."

"Done. You have messages waiting."

"Say messages, list."

"Commodore's quarters. Medical department, check-in desk. Custodial department, laundry section. Done."

"Laundry?"

"Illegal command ignored."

"Say messages, all."

"Lieutenant, I am eagerly awaiting a report concerning you-know-who. Make sure I am fully briefed by the time we arrive at Tyber."

He groaned.

Blip

"Hi. Lieutenant Torin, this is Sosrodjojo over at sickbay. In case you haven't gotten word yet, I figured I should let you know before my shift ends. That patient of yours has woken up, and he seems completely cognizant as far as I can determine. You know, because the first thing they do usually is to start complaining. Anyway, I just thought you'd want to know as soon as possible. Bye now."

Blip

"Hello. This is Chief Ater. We had an interesting time removing those seal-it patches off the fleximesh you sent us. I just wanted to let you know, Lieutenant, that there was a Draconian service insignia underneath. Showed up on the computer as external intelligence branch. I took the liberty of forwarding a memo up the chain of command, but I figured I should at least clue you in as well. Oh, and by the way, we figured out that we can't repair it on-board, but I'd like to shuttle it down to Tyber when we arrive and see what we can do with it on planet."

Blip "There are no more messages."

"Erase messages, all."

Erik crawled out of the null tube and showered, whipping out his clearance badge as he entered the cage's guard room scarce minutes later.

"Hold it there, Mister."

Hunter's hair was slicked back from perspiration, and Erik guessed that she probably just finished her mid-morning workout. Rumor had it she kept a pair of grav-weights in her desk, and though he'd never confirmed it one way or the other, he'd read that some of the new-school, hands-on surgeons were taking up martial arts for their nerves. Either way, she looked pumped-up enough to belt him one.

"Where do you think you're going?"

He put on his best smile, "Where's it look like I'm going?"

"It looks like you're trying, rather foolishly I might add, to sneak into the cage."

"How observant of you."

"Don't even think it. I have a patient in there who needs his sleep."

"Doctor, this will only take a moment. Open the door."

"Don't open it. Lieutenant, the answer is emphatically no."

The guard looked between them, obviously befuddled. Erik knew she out-ranked him, but he also knew that he had the power of God to call upon for all the guard was concerned. He pulled the writ from his shin pocket.

"You see this?"

"Yes sir."

"You see the seal?"

"Yessir."

"You recognize it?"

"Yessir!"

"Open the door."

Dr. Hunter stood behind, her mouth gaping open with a string of saliva ready to spill to the floor.

"Nobody ever told me that ISIS was involved!"

"You never asked, and keep your voice down."

The guard began punching in the access number once they reached the cell.

"The door can only be opened from this side. The number is two-four-one-five-three. You key it in from the other side, and it'll tell me that you've entered it correctly. Then I key it on this side, and the door opens."

"Keep it open until I say otherwise."

"Yessir."

The cell door slid into the wall, and Erik entered, followed by a pair of irate footsteps. Her patient was reclining diagonally in the gravitic null, his body sheath laying along the wall behind him. A short, folded chair rested against the near corner, a mirror propped against one of its legs, and another chair, unfolded, sat facing him directly as though he were fully expecting the intrusion. He smiled, his head jacks gleamed in the eerie, turquoise light.

"Lieutenant Torin, I take it."

Erik sat down, Hunter preferring to stand and look threatening.

"Why are you out of your body sheath?"

The patient shrugged, a pained wince traveling the length of his face, "I no longer required it."

"I'll be the judge of that. I can't believe Feso didn't tell me he did this. Has he been administering the regen compound?"

"More or less."

"More or less?"

She examined the playback for all of two seconds.

"What happened to the paralytic?"

"I needed to move."

"Moving is exactly what you don't need. Mister... Mister Doe, you have been shot several times."

"Twice. Only two got through."

"Only two?! Look Mister... whoever the hell you are! If you saw yourself yesterday dripping in blood..."

Erik broke in, "Doctor! Please."

"Lieutenant..."

"Doctor, this is a very unusual patient. Please allow him a moment or two of insanity. I can assure you, it comes with the territory."

"I will not put up with..."

"Due to security matters, I'm going to have to ask you to leave."

"What?!"

"I am asking, Doctor. Please, don't force me to go further."

Tiger-eyes glared down on him, "I don't care what kind of connections you have, Torin. This is coming around. You hear me?"

"Fine. Get her out of here."

She left before the guard could muster the courage, and Erik made a toothy grin, the sort he used to practice in front of a mirror just to break up his buddies during oral exams.

"Guard, you can close the door now. So..."

"So..."

"How was Calanna?"

Mike frowned, "Difficult."

"Really. I would never have guessed."

"Lieutenant, why am I being locked up?"

"Precautions. For your own safety, mainly. After all, how often do we get a genuine ISIS operative on board? And that's not even considering the valuable information which you carry... yes?"

Mike nodded, "Yes, but you may be under a misconception. I'm not an operative."

"Who are you?"

He took a deep breath, hoping his scratchy, wounded voice sounded convincing.

"The name's Mikaelis Caiton. I was originally one of John Clay's men."

"DSS?"

"No. Far from it. I was working only for John. He brought me over from Tizar to keep an eye on Ambassador Kato, but somehow one of your operatives, her name was Sule... no last name, I guess... somehow she found out about me and basically made an offer I couldn't refuse."

"What sort of an offer?"

"Initiation into ISIS."

"She doesn't have that authority, Mr. Caiton."

"Call me Mikaelis."

"She lied to you."

"I'm not surprised. Do you want to hear the rest or not?"

"Please."

"First, what are you willing to offer me?" Mike grinned, his question a little too direct. Erik grinned back.

"Look, Mikaelis. If I wanted to, I could just burn the information from your brain."

Mike dropped his grin, "Well, if you put it that way... I started working as a liaison between Clay and your people and managed to escape when things eventually went down on Calanna."

"What happened?"

"Clay turned triple agent on us. He sacrificed his own life in that nuclear incident you no doubt heard about and managed to kill Erestyl and destroy the ISIS headquarters in a single, calculated strike."

Erik sat back, utterly befuddled.

"How did you escape?"

"Luck. Sule dumped a copy of our mind scanner readings to crystal. I then accompanied her to the starport to deposit them into an interstellar postal envelope. She doesn't like to take chances; that's one thing I liked about her."

"How did you get wounded?"

"Two of Clay's goons tried to make short work of us at the starport. They were locals. Real temporary hires. They didn't even know their source of income had already reduced himself to a jumble of sub-molecular particles. Really tacky way to go, if you ask me."

"And what about Sule?"

"She was wounded also. We managed to get to a starship, but its occupants weren't too crazy to have us there. She fought well, but..."

Erik took a deep breath, trying to digest the story as quickly as Mike had made it up.

"Where's the envelope addressed to?"

"If I tell you that, what keeps you from just killing me?"

Erik shrugged, "Nothing. You're going to have to trust me."

"I don't think so."

"Perhaps you should. It could be your last opportunity... to think I mean."

Mike nodded, "I'll take you to it, but not until I have a chance to at least introduce myself to your superiors. If you find that unreasonable, then take your chances with the mind scanner, and I'll take mine."

Blue light shifted along the Lieutenant's features as he considered the offer. He finally stood up.

"I should warn you that insolence is not tolerated in ISIS."

"Neither is stupidity," Mike countered, "at least according to Sule."

Erik keyed in the combination as he reached the door, oblivious to the shift in his prisoner's gaze. After the door closed again, Mike stumbled over to the folded chair, taking the mirror and placing it flat against the metal deck. Amidst all the gleaming silver, it had either gone unnoticed or been disregarded as trivial. He took a deep breath and re-attached the radio. It took a minute before Cecil's dancing, yellow lanterns returned.

"Greetings."

"Greetings yourself. I got it. It's two-four-one-five-three."

"Copy that. You'll be out in no time."

The lanterns disappeared, and Mike disengaged the radio from his jacks, hiding it again while wondering how long "no time" would take.

It was just a little blinker. To anyone else on the bridge, it would have been beneath notice, but Tabor knew what it meant. He'd just barely finished re-configuring his display for that one little light. His personal message board began scrawling letters almost immediately. "There. See that?"

He opened a channel to engineering. Nakaguchi was talking on the other end even before the line opened.

"...just like I said. Did you catch it?"

Tabor smiled, "I see it," though he had to admit to himself that he could scarcely believe it. "What do you think is causing it?"

"You're the communications genius. You tell me."

Tabor imported the section of hyperfield fractometer readings which his configuration had obligingly saved narrow seconds before they would have been consigned to electronic oblivion with the rest of the computer's standard erasures. With a few key strokes, he converted the data to a graph, and his eyes grew wide at the puzzling image. Nakaguchi was right. It was pure chaos, except for those few seconds where a series of peaks and troughs appeared with perfectly equidistant delays.

"You see it?"

"Yeah. I see it, alright. I just don't know what it is."

"I do."

"What?"

Nakaguchi laughed, "It's the slogs of space."

"You're doing this, aren't you? This is a joke."

"A sick and dangerous joke."

"Well, somebody's doing it. This does not happen naturally."

"That's what I've been telling you. You should have seen it last time. It went on for more than a minute. I wish I was ready for it. I would have saved it."

Tabor nodded, "I wish you had. A few seconds isn't much to go on. I'll get back to you if I figure anything out."

"You do that."

The line closed with a fitful pop, and Tabor began running the standard code-cracker routines. Lish looked up, yawning contagiously. They'd both got on duty less than an hour ago, and her sleepiness had been infectious until now.

"What's up?"

"Got a little mystery."

"Well, it's no mystery to me. I know how men are. Oooh, you think you're tough, don't you?"

Carla retaliated with a full round kick, knocking Hunter back at least four feet. The doctor didn't even seem fazed.

"I'm telling you, it was infuriating."

"Well, don't take it out on me, sister."

"Why not?!"

Carla had to duck and then some, finally retreating to her safe corner.

"Alice, you bitch, you are in a bad mood."

"Don't call me that."

"Hey, it's okay. I'm one too. I freely admit it. Now if only we could get all men to admit they're assholes, the universe might be an honest place to live."

"No... I mean don't call me Alice."

"It's your name, ain't it?"

"Stop gabbing and fight."

Carla kept to the defensive. She could tell her favorite karate student was out for bloody, no-holds-barred aggression, and it was a beautiful sight.

"You keep on like this, and I'm gonna have you in the tournament. Talk about focus. The only problem is that you're so pissed, you aren't thinking."

She dished back just what the doctor ordered, except that Hunter didn't know it until she was already on the floor, dazed, Carla's foot scrunching down on her nose.

"Damn."

"Ha! And you thought you had me. Didn't you?"

Hunter stood up, rubbing the leg which took the brunt of the take-down.

"For maybe half a second."

"Longer than that. You were getting wicked, woman."

"I have good reason to be wicked."

"Yeah, well... you have to think and be wicked at the same time. Once you have that down, all men better run and hide."

Hunter smiled. It had taken a while, but Carla was finally getting to her. She always knew the doctor's weak spots.

"I didn't say all men."

"No, but that is what you mean. C'mon girl. You don't have to pretend different. I know."

Hunter shrugged, picking up a towel, "It's just that they're so stupid."

"Ain't that the truth."

"They refuse to listen to reason. They're pig-headed."

"I heard that right. Hey, where's that come from, anyway?"

"What?"

"Pig-headed."

"You never heard of pigs?"

"No."

Hunter started to laugh, except that she was too angry and couldn't sustain it, so it just came out like all wrong, like a pig's snort. Carla watched her, a hurt scowl crossing her brow.

"What's that supposed to mean? I'm stupid or something? Listen girl, just because not everybody goes to college for ten years..."

"No... I didn't mean it like that. Pigs are proto-slogs. That's just the sound they make."

Carla looked at her again, that strange sort of smile forming along her lips like she figured she was being lied to for the fun of it.

"I can do that. Listen..." *snort* "Hey, this is great." *snort snort*

"You're a real natural."

"I've always been able to make that noise. That's a pig noise?"

Hunter nodded, "I friend of mine was doing her dissertation on some of the old DNA samples. They were supposedly brainy animals for their time."

snort snort

"You should have been a science major, Carla."

"I'll pass on that. The closest I ever got to science was a psychology class they made me take. It was real cheesy. For the final project, we had to find some sort of phenomena and explain it, okay?"

"Uh oh..."

"So, this guy in our co-op, he was my subject, except he didn't know it. See? Every time he got hungry, he would go over to the cold food locker, open it up, and just sort of stare inside like some meal was going to jump out at him all of a sudden and make itself. You ever see men do this?"

"Not really."

"Well, they do. If you ever bothered to just watch people, you will notice a lot of men exhibiting this sort of behavior. And it wasn't like it wasn't his food. It was everybody's food."

"Okay. So what was your explanation?"

"The cold."

"Huh?"

"The cold air hitting his stomach caused it to shrink, and so by standing in front of the thing while it was open, he actually reduced the amount of free space in his stomach. How ya like it?"

Hunter smiled sympathetically, "What grade did you get?"

"It went down as an incomplete. The professor advised me to forget about the sciences and take some trig to cover the slot. Can't say I'm sorry. I'm pretty damn good at what I do."

"When do you use trig?"

"When is your friend ever gonna meet a pig?"

Hunter pondered Carla's eccentric sort of logic on the way back to sickbay. It was already an hour into her sleep shift, but she felt determined to immobilize her patient even if it meant chaining him to the wall and whipping him with warm squash, and ditto for Lieutenant Torin if he was unfortunate enough to still be loitering in the general vicinity. Her thoughts were cut short by the door, however, or more specifically, by it's remaining closed as she tried to walk through it. She picked herself off the floor, holding her bruised nose in one hand as she looked around to see if anybody had witnessed her comedic display of dexterity.

Sickbay was never locked. She slid her ID through the scanner slot, but the door refused to budge, defiant and imposing as never before. She considered kicking it, but buried the notion in her list of unspent aggressions.

She finally hit the white comm-switch on the right.

"Can somebody open the door, please?"

The security button beckoned. She hit the white switch again, closing the line and hit the red switch with an angry jab of her thumb.

"Security?"

The door slid compliantly into the wall, and a tall, lanky figure stood before her. Behind the black face mask, soft blue eyes seemed to rotate within their sockets. She didn't even feel the two darts hitting her stomach until a pair of gloved hands caught her fall and carried her gently inside.

"Who... what..."

The doorway began to spin and blur, and as the walls closed quietly upon her, she heard a grainy voice reverberate somewhere in the hazy distance.

"This is security.... Please identify yourself. Hello?"

The Commodore leaned back, seemingly impressed with the story, and Erik hoped she wouldn't ask about specifics. He was still fuzzy on the details, himself.

"Let me get this straight. He wants an interview?"

Erik shrugged, "He wants into ISIS... or so he purports."

She frowned, glancing at the wall image of Roxanne's Palace on Tyber. Computer generated banks of orange, acid smog blew past the structure's summit, somehow clouding her eyes with memories of the sunrise on Calanna.

"Commodore?"

"Even had I the clout, I wouldn't use it. It's not like the Navy. ISIS doesn't take applications. Besides, he's too attached to Clay, who already proved himself a traitor after we had trusted him."

"According to Caiton."

"The more I think about it, the more difficult I find it to believe this Mikaelis Caiton. Why did Clay expose his entire network on Tizar if he was never with us? As a sacrifice?"

Erik nodded, "Perhaps."

"No. Even were they all discards, what did he have to gain by risking Erestyl?"

"He managed to destroy the operation of Calanna."

"A minuscule victory entirely beneath mention. He won nothing. This prisoner would have us believe that he sacrificed his life and risked Erestyl for nothing. Preposterous."

"Maybe Clay had second thoughts. That's the only explanation."

Reece cast him a cool stare, "There is another. He could be making the whole thing up."

"Too many pieces fit. He knows a great deal. He must have been on the inside."

She nodded, "That is all he has told us. Nothing more."

"Still, given the possibility that he's telling us the truth, shouldn't we at least humor him?"

"Yes. We should. Regardless, I do want to meet him. If nothing else, a more thorough questioning might serve to reveal who he really is."

Beep

"Reece here."

"This is Dunham. There's been an incident at sickbay. Your John Doe has escaped."

Reece looked up, eyes cold as ice.

"On my way."

Hunter awoke in the infirmary, a swarm of stewards and part-time medics darting frantically from null to null. They dressed the patients with neurogram napkins and monitored pulse rates, such was the extent of their training. She heard Feso's voice somewhere in the back of the room, delivering instructions while donning a white service coat over his red and pink striped pajamas, the only calm voice amidst a babble of cacophony.

"Well look who's among the living." He quickly stepped over, reaching for her arm as she tried to sit upright. "There, Doctor. Just let it pass."

"The living?"

"Don't worry. Everyone seems fine."

"What happened?"

"You tell me. I just got here."

She glanced over his shoulder as the haze slowly dissipated from her mind. Commodore Reece stood with the Captain and Lieutenant Torin near the main desk, a first-class power-huddle if she'd ever seen one.

"You didn't tell me we had guests."

"Doctor..."

"C'mon."

She tore the napkin from her forehead and began traversing the distance with Feso's shoulder in tow, not a mean task considering his reluctance. It wasn't that he minded substituting for a pair of crutches. On the contrary, he'd do anything to help a patient. His hesitation was founded in cowardice, the prospect of interrupting an impromptu executive conference rating somewhere between jamming his finger in an iris valve and taking a long walk out a short airlock.

"Doctor, this is not such a good idea. You should lay back down and rest."

"Steady, Feso. You drop me and it goes on your permanent record."

The Commodore was spitting out orders left and right, her voice crisp and determined and more than a little peeved.

"I want his image circulated among the crew. Also, post armed stewards at the lifts and escalators. Shoot to maim."

Shoot to maim?

"Excuse me, sir. Might somebody tell me what's going on?"

"Your patient has escaped, Doctor. What do you last remember?"

Hunter took a deep breath and let go of Feso's shoulder.

"I was trying to enter sickbay, and the door was locked for some reason. I opened a channel to security. Then the door opened and... everything went black."

"Hypo darts. You took a double tap in the belly. Did you get a look at him?"

"I... remember a face mask."

"We found this in your hand."

Reece handed her a flimsi, glowing pink letters scrawled across its face: "If you ever want to see me again, don't conduct a search. It's tacky, and you'll only inconvenience the passengers, particularly if you get too close to me."

Erik broke in, "Commodore..."

Reece put up a steady hand.

"Do you have any idea why this was left in your hand, Doctor?"

"I was the ranking officer."

"Did anyone besides the medical staff and guard have access to the prisoner?"

"Lieutenant Torin."

"Any passengers?"

"No sir."

Reece pressed her lips together, "One more question, Doctor. Is he well enough to survive without medical attention?"

"That depends, sir."

"Give me an educated guess."

"Assuming there are no complications, yes."

"Complications?"

"He's very weak. When the regen-compound wears off, his condition will worsen. How badly, I can't say."

"How soon?"

Hunter glanced toward her thumbnail chronometer.

"He's already past due, but there's a two to four hour grace period on the compound."

Reece nodded, "There will be a meeting in the executive conference lounge in two hours. I want an account of inventory losses."

"Aye, sir."

Hunter about-faced as well as her wobbly legs would allow before the Commodore's words hit her.

"Inventory losses?"

The medicine cabinets hung open, boxes of various drugs and chemicals scattered haphazardly on the floor. Feso pulled a chair out of the mess, offering her a place to sit down. She ignored the gesture, bending over to sort through the contents of some of the emptied boxes.

"What did they take?"

"Haven't had time to check."

She sat down in the middle of the floor, starting to pick up and sort the miscellaneous bottles, jars, and canisters into tight, alphabetical rows.

"We'd better find out then, Feso. We've only got two hours."

Johanes administered the injection with all the delicacy of a marsh slog in heat.

"Oops, missed the vein again."

"Ow... you sure you know you're doing?"

"Don't worry."

If not for Cecil and his bottle of miruvor, Mike figured he'd be heading back to sickbay on account of his health.

"Told you you'd be out in no time."

Mike shrugged as Johanes withdrew the hypo, placing the empty plastic capsule in his pocket.

"You're certain about Sule."

"Positive."

"You saw her dead."

"To put it mildly."

"And what about the body?"

Mike accepted a highbowl by way of congratulations, pausing before taking a sip.

"The body?"

"Anything on it?"

"I don't know. She was wearing a vacc suit."

Johanes shot Cecil a worried glance as he caught the next highbowl, its course erratic as it teetered, languid, from side to side. Spokes received the next, and Cecil finally sent his own spinning on a collision course with the others until it clinked gently against each in consecutive sequence.

"To freedom."

"To freedom," everyone concurred, everyone except the Draconian.

"I don't want to disappoint you all, but we're not out of the asteroids yet. We have about enough time for one drink."

"Two drinks," Spokes took another sip and started reattaching his headgear.

"One drink. If they decide to conduct a ship-wide search, I'd like to know about it before it's too late."

"That would be uncouth."

"That never stopped ISIS before." Johanes gulped down the last of his drink like a man stranded in the desert. Then he smiled. "I hereby conclude this celebration. Cecil, you stay here and monitor their communications. Michael, go to sleep. You've got six hours until the next injection."

"Terrific."

"Don't bitch. Spokes, you're with me."

"Okay, just a sec."

Mike poured himself another highbowl.

"Thanks. Everyone."

"Save your gratitude until we're dirtside. C'mon, we haven't got all millennium."

"Okay... jeeze."

Mike floated his half-drained highbowl toward the corner of the room as the door closed behind the dynamic if ill-disciplined duo. Cecil, meanwhile, leaned calmly beside his multi-wave radio, sipping miruvor and warming a left-over chili pita in the portable cooker. When it came out, the cheese oozed between the cracks in the flatbread like a wad of snot leaking out the folds of an overused hanky.

"Want some?"

Mike winced, "I'll pass."

"Suit yourself."

"I'd rather stick to liquids for now."

"As in miruvor?"

"Whatever's being served."

Cecil's single camera danced a bit, the cat taking notice and pouncing on it with claws outstretched, "Your problem is you don't know when to quit."

"Untrue. I haven't gotten drunk for over a week... unless you count being force-fed by psychopaths."

"Well, congratulations," Cecil said, almost like he meant it.

"Give me a break, Cecil. I'm on my second highbowl which is nowhere near my face."

"Why the sudden fit of restraint?"

Mike shrugged, "Maybe seeing that old weasel Gardansa slurping it down..." he grunted, crawling into the null-tube, "I dunno. I was shot recently, okay?"

"Good excuse as any."

"Besides, I want to keep clear-headed for a change. You check this place for bugs?"

"You calling Cecil a fool?"

Mike sighed, "Just do me a favor. Check again."

Setting the pita beside his multi-wave, Cecil dug a small box out of his suitcase. It's antenna telescoped out, and he proceeded to wave it around the room, switching off the light and then his multiwave as he scanned.

"Light on. You see. Nothing here but us chickens."

"Meow?"

"What's it key on?"

"Electrostatic emissions. Do us a favor and switch off the sleeper."

Mike complied, and Cecil waved the antenna over the null tube.

"Interesting," his friend commented, as though he'd found a strange insect on the bottom of his shoe.

"What? Something on the sleeper?"

"No. On you."

Cecil poked him with the antenna a few times, finally stopping at the belt by which Mike's loose-fitting robe was held shut.

"Johanes find this for you?"

Mike untangled it from around his waist, inspecting the stiff fabric until he found what he was looking for. The bug was flat and circular, like one of those old coins he used to find in the barrens, only a little thicker and without a stately, bearded profile on the side.

"One down."

Cecil kept looking, this time even more diligently than before, but the one was all they found. Cecil finally cracked it open.

"It's just a recorder. Looks like cheap crystal."

He put it back together and dropped it into the portable heater.

"Cheap crystal fries easy."

Mike smiled, "Now that we're alone, you can start by telling me everything."

Cecil sat down, his camera taking a thoughtful, sidelong pose as it dumped Pooper-dumper back to the carpet in a fitful of snarls and hairballs.

"Not much to tell."

"Humor me."

Cecil sighed, leaning himself backward until the multiwave became a makeshift pillow.

"Spokes showed up at the Sintrivani after you left, and we heard about the air strike over the three-vee. Assumed you were somehow involved, knowing your aptitude for mischief."

"I'm flattered."

"You should be. One of the offworlders waiting for transport must have sneaked near the landing platform with a camera, because next thing we see is Tizar's favorite gatherer hanging out the airlock of an orbit-bound vessel. Then some explosions in the sky. Made for an amusing show."

"I was on three-vee?"

"More or less. The back of your head was, at least. We knew who it was. Johanes dropped by a few hours later and basically confirmed what we saw."

"And so you guys decided to rescue me... just for kicks."

Cecil thought about it before answering, as though he was deciding whether to be polite or honest.

"Johanes gave you less than even odds against Sule. He wanted our help to finish her off."

"Assassination. This is getting even better."

"One might remind you that you're hardly virginal, Michael."

"I wasn't in it for money."

"Neither was I!"

Cecil spat the words out, pronoun included, pausing briefly to regain his composure. The cat darted to the corner of the

room, certain a voice of that volume could only be directed at four- legged personages.

"We agreed to aid him in what he wanted, provided that he aid us in what we wanted."

"Which was?"

"Your rescue, given the unlikelihood that you would still be kicking after a confrontation with Sule."

Mike smiled meekly, a little embarrassed.

"That's it?"

The camera nodded, "In verbose totality."

"If it was just you, I'd buy it. Why's Spokes here?"

"Like Cecil said before, he seems to like you. We chipheads stick together."

Mike smirked, "That's pretty weak."

"Then call Cecil a liar. It won't be a first."

"What are you giving him? Free wedgies?"

Cecil chomped another bite from his cheese pita as he pondered the question. In the hackers lingo "free wedgies" equated to a gratis apprenticeship, master to novice, wizard to user, or between any other combination of disparate proficiencies: in short, Cecil to just about anyone. Before, Spokes was just the aspiring pupil. But now, given the risks involved, he was encroaching to the point of earning his keep, making the so-called "wedgies" not entirely free.

"What's it to you, Michael?"

"Well... I guess I'm just curious how this all came about. I've never known you to team-up with people, much less take on a long-term student."

"Life brings newness."

"Is that what you told Spokes?"

"Not precisely."

Mike laughed, then coughed.

"Try me."

"Get some RL." Real life, he meant.

"C'mon Cecil. Just the main points. You can spare the slogshit."

Cecil smirked, "Courage as an aspect of knowledge. Necessity of the will to seek. Proof of intents..."

"You waste my time, I waste yours?"

"Stop whining. It got you out, didn't it?"

Mike shrugged defensively, "I'm not whining. I don't really care that you're using him. It's merely a transaction as far as he's concerned. I just wanted to know here everyone stands. For some reason," Mike tried to laugh, "I just couldn't picture you three guys coming all the way out here. You maybe. I mean, now we're more or less even again. Right?"

"More or less."

"But Johanes and Spokes... I thought I was dreaming."

"Maybe you are."

"No... I've got other dreams. I guess we both do."

Cecil was silent for a bit after that, finishing the pita and sucking down the last of his miruvor. Maybe he didn't know what to say. Mike tried closing his eyes, but sleep wouldn't come.

"Y'think we're gonna get out of here, Cecil?"

He didn't answer. Mike wondered if he'd even heard the question. With eyes glossed over, Cecil was already in the other world.

"See 'em? Self-replication detected. Zoom."

Chief Tuto looked from one monitor window to the other, his brown eyes narrowing on the detection pings as they appeared, divided, and vanished in short order. It was just as before, only quicker, as if they knew they'd been spotted.

"Where are they coming from?"

Dira shrugged, a tangle of amber hair falling over one eye.

"Tracer says medical, but look at the entry log."

"Could be stealthing. Run a CPU verify."

One hand danced over the keyboard, "Yeah... no... well, something was there. A difference of two percent detected for about... half a second."

"Run a full heads on exit channels, quick."

It was a waste of time, of course, and by the time they got around to checking out the entry logs, there were no entry logs. Tuto studied the blank screen with an equally blank expression, finally releasing an irritated grunt.

"This is getting rude."

"Maybe not."

Her hand did another dance. "Port 129 shows simultaneous closure."

Tuto glanced toward the wall-chart. 129 was one of the public aether ports. It could be accessed via wireless terminal, open to virtually any person on board.

"Entry logs?"

"Nope."

"He's not taking chances. And he's too fast to lock in place." He chewed on the thought. Speed usually bred sloppiness. "Do a frequency comparison on the ports."

Dira tapped a few more keys, her dark blue eyes scanning the row of frequencies as they scrolled off the monitor window. "Got it. Here's the band they were using, and here it's being used on Port 182. Same exact frequency."

Tuto nodded, not terribly surprised bytheir trespasser's lack of precautions. Too bad. The game had just started getting interesting.

"Feed in a command stop. We'll lock him in place and check the entry logs."

Her fingers complied, and the keyboard locked up as though somebody had yanked it off the desk.

"Huh?"

Tuto went to another console. Same story. He slammed a fist on the keyboard in frustration. Dira put a hand on his shoulder.

"That won't help."

"It makes me feel better."

"Look at the port display."

One-eight-two flashed all the way from the command console to the security desk, as cruel a set-up as he'd ever witnessed. Dira seemed to smile at their predicament.

"We got re-routed, sir."

Tuto pushed the air from his lungs and began pacing around the room, re-booting each of the consoles in turn. It would be several minutes before they were back online, and somebody out there was making the most of the time, probably laughing hysterically.

"This is getting very rude."

It felt a little like free-ditching off the Aerial Palace, the rush of adrenalin and anxiety clawing at the will's outer shell. He could break a sweat just thinking about it, because every time the possibility of fate catching up was both real and expected. They had a place called "Gyron's Fall," named after some poor sap whose grav-restrainer failed. Not his fault. It just suddenly decided to up and quit in mid-air. Became the biggest joke halfway across the Realm. Gyron ended up bouncing, and they dug a little crater and buried him head-first, his feet sticking up with a pair of boots that had foggers in their soles, such was the Draconian sense of humor. Johanes remembered laughing out loud at the time, wishing he could have been there.

"It's locked."

Spokes waved his hands in an apparently arcane gesture as the door slid open.

Johanes regarded his triumphant expression with all the amusement it deserved.

"We're on a schedule here, okay?"

"Sorry."

Spokes followed him inside with a casual waltz, a sharp contrast to his crisp-collared maintenance uniform. That was okay. It made him look like he knew what he was doing. Johanes paced about the room, flipping a power screwdriver end over end.

"There are fire sprinklers in here."

"So there are."

"Here, hold this."

The chiphead still regarded the canister with a mixture of curiosity and ambivalence. All he knew was that it held clear liquid sandwiched between white powder and a fan, each separated by a sheet of impacted polymer with radio-controlled shutters. Enough information for the average ten-year-old, Johanes figured, opening a vent.

"There's a sensor in here also."

"So?"

"Tell Cecil we'll need to deactivate it just before this is triggered. All of them. This has to work perfectly or we all get caught. Understand?"

"I still don't know what you're talking about."

Johanes bit his tongue. Spokes knew, all right. He just didn't want to admit it, the perfect conspirator, hedging all bets by feigning ignorance.

"Relay the message. Can you do that much?"

The tall one sighed and finally nodded, soft blue eyes seeing no ready alternative.

"First of all, we're going to find the escapee. There are no alternatives. There will be no excuses for failure."

Reece stared around the chamber, slowly taking in all their expressions. Every officer in the room knew that organizing a ship-wide search on a ship the size of the Crimson Queen was no mean task. The deadline only increased the challenge.

"As you all know, we'll be dropping back into normal space in about nine hours. The traffic situation at Tyber will be enough of a problem without a fugitive to worry about, so it would seem that time is of the essence. Keep that fact in mind while you make your reports. Captain?"

Dunham leaned forward, nodding to the Commodore as his broad mass shifted. With the press of a button, Mike's image materialized over the conference table in three dimensions.

"This is the man we're looking for. Pictures have already been distributed to the crew, several of whom have noticed a likeness with this man."

He pressed the button again, and the jacks were replaced by an unkept mane of long brown hair.

"His real name is Michael Harrison. He's a gatherer with the Tizarian division of Galactic Press. We believe he has two allies on board. They used hypo guns with a short-duration sedative in order to incapacitate the guard stationed at the cage. They also tranquilized Dr. Hunter and two specialists."

Reece interrupted, "Has the hypo compound been identified?"

Hunter nodded, "Senthinol-3. It's a consumer product made at a number of systems in this sector. Been in circulation for the past three centuries."

The Captain looked around slowly, drawing presence from the silence before continuing.

"Harrison is wanted for homicide on Calanna. He is also suspected of impersonating an ISIS operative in order to get aboard, a felony under interstellar law."

"He's wanted for homicide?"

Dunham nodded, "Apparently, but we don't have any details."

It made sense. The Calannans were generally private about such things. But that didn't explain why he wasn't caught.

"They must have sent us his image recognition code."

"Yes, but because of the unusual way he attained passage, he was never checked out."

Reece bit her lip.

"Any idea on how his associates got the cell combination?"

"We have a theory. Security ran a level two diagnostic of the ship's computer after the break-in. They found a number of recon–worms. We've been attempting to trace their source, but so far, no luck."

"You're saying they broke into the system and just read the combination?"

"So it would seem."

Reece bit her lip again.

"Those combinations are well protected. Why wasn't an alarm activated?"

"We don't know."

"How are they avoiding our trace?"

Dunham turned toward a petty officer at his right. "Chief Tuto?"

"They're using a variety of means. Stealth, entry-log erasures, misdirection tactics. They've also found out how to slip into unused frequencies unobserved."

"I thought all unused frequencies were observed continuously."

"They've managed to draw out our observation routines and are sending data packets between the check points. We also believe they're using above-board frequencies for voice transmissions."

"Have you conferred with communications about this?"

"Actually sir, they were already aware of it." He nodded across the table to another officer. Tabor shifted in his seat, realizing he was suddenly on-stage.

"Uh... six hours ago..."

"Who are you?"

"Tabor. Ensign. First Class. Communications Officer, sir."

He looked raw, like a typical navy recruit, the coppery-orange hair cropped so close to his head that his appearance reminded her of a turnip. She guessed that his problem had more to do with nerves than hair. He seemed so scared it made her jitter just to look at him.

"Go ahead, Ensign."

"Six hours ago, one of our engineers noticed some very interesting readings from an instrument which measures fractures in the normal-space bubble around the ship. The device operates by bouncing a short-wave signal along the bubble's area perimeter."

"Excuse me, Ensign," Reece waved from the other side of the table. "Is this going to take a while to explain? We don't have time for a lecture in astrophysics."

"Umm... I'll be brief, sir."

"Very brief."

"Yes sir. The gist of it is that this radio frequency is being used continuously while we are in hyperspace, but to someone unfamiliar with engineering, it looks like normal line noise between usable bands, thus qualifying it for exploitation by a tight frequency transmission."

"You're telling me that they're using a voice frequency which is already in use?"

"Anyone sufficiently skilled in communications can compress transmissions into data packets, fire each one off several times, then decompress the packets, check for inconsistencies caused by the line noise, correct, and presto; they're using a frequency which also happens to be in use by a non-sentient system, and their transmission goes through entirely undetected. But in this case, it didn't."

"I think you just confused me more. Try the gist again."

Tabor took a deep breath, "Okay. Prior to jump, they must have been looking for an above-board frequency with residual noise. Something that wasn't being used, but that had enough random noise on it that it wouldn't be scanned like a clean frequency where their transmission would be picked up in an instant. This frequency qualified perfectly. The computer was running tests on it by generating random noise, transmitting it externally to the sensor, and making comparisons to see whether or not the sensor was operating within its safety parameters."

"So you're saying this particular band was ideal for their purposes?"

"Very much so. If this had been an older craft where the comm system isn't as tight and clean as it is on this ship, they would have had a lot more to choose from, but on this vessel we don't really have any junkie above-board frequencies, so their choice was very limited."

"And our engineers caught them when their transmissions interfered with the operation of the sensors."

"Correct."

Reece nodded, "I understand, but why wasn't this reported immediately?"

Tabor took a deep breath, "I didn't learn about it until I came on shift about three hours ago, and at that point I didn't believe it. By the time the second transmission rolled around, I was convinced, but..."

"There were two?"

"Three, sir. The first six hours ago which lasted for a minute or two. The second, a little over two and a half hours ago, which lasted only few seconds. And the third began a little over two hours ago and has been continuous since then."

Reece bit her lip yet again, this time hard enough to make her reconsider the action.

"Let me get this straight. Harrison has been using a restricted frequency for the past six hours, the past two hours continuously, and this is the first I hear of it?"

"Sir, we didn't even know what we were dealing with until news of the prisoner escape started to circulate. For all we knew, it was some sort of localized hyperspace phenomenon or even a prank."

"A prank?"

"Yes sir."

Reece regarded Dunham with a sinister stare, and the Captain's dark cheeks grew rosy under her scrutiny.

"Well, it's a relief that the crew has grown proficient at entertaining themselves. We wouldn't want morale to suffer. Ensign, can we pinpoint the signal source?"

"Not with the equipment on board."

"Can you at least tell us what it's saying?"

"The instrument's readings are used and removed from computer memory in a continuous cycle, so we lost the first transmission entirely. That's gone forever. The second one lasted only for a few seconds, and I've already tried around a thousand standard decryption routines, none of which has worked. I wouldn't put too much hope on us ever deciphering its contents, at least not any time soon, and certainly not without very powerful computer support. The current transmission is still being saved, but I expect that we'll find the same problem we're having with the second."

Reece took a deep breath, "So in other words, no."

Tabor just sat there looking pale.

"In the future, Ensign, when I ask you a question, don't give me a speech. A yes or no will suffice."

"Aye, sir."

"Can you jam the frequency?"

"Yes, sir."

"Do it. Immediately. You're dismissed."

"Aye, sir."

He saluted and exited.

"Chief Tuto, I want all passenger access to the computer stopped and aether port access restricted to pre-verified frequencies. You're dismissed."

"Aye, sir."

Reece waited for him to leave as she studied the stony expression on Dunham's face. He seemed to be waiting for some comment, or perhaps a pat on the head. She might have obliged him had she a sturdy club.

"Pranks?"

"They do happen, sir."

"We could have spotted this hacker hours in advance if there hadn't been such leniency. Now that they've had hours to feel out our system..."

"It makes them all the more dangerous," he took the luxury of completing her thought.

"I want one of your people to run through the passenger lists and see who looks like they might qualify. Unless those have already been erased."

"Will do, sir."

"Also, see if any of the passengers are mentioned in our library records as being associated with this Mr. Harrison."

"Of course."

Reece leaned back, seemingly examining the ceiling.

"I'd like to order a re-boot as well."

Dunham smiled, "Not a good idea, sir."

"No, not while we're in hyperspace," the Commodore reluctantly agreed. "Lieutenant."

Erik snapped to attention, "Yes, sir."

"Give me a scenario."

He took a breath, "Gatherer in search of a story. He learns more than is wise; breaks some planetary laws. He decides to turn tail but gets cornered at the starport. He calls us, pretends that he's an ISIS agent, and we obligingly offer him a ride. His friends figure out what happened easily enough. They rescue him."

"A great deal of risk on their part. And what about Erestyl? What about the information we so ardently desire?"

Erik bit his lip. "More than likely it is gone, blown to bits by Clay. Perhaps he wasn't lying except about his own role."

"If he is simply a gatherer, then how did he happen upon Draconian fleximesh?"

"Bought it at a Calannic yard sale?"

"Right," Reece smiled, then frowned again, looking back across the table at nobody in particular. "It seems to me this whole thing reeks of the DSS, and who more willing to take such a risk, provided the pay-off is right? Which would suggest that Harrison is important to them alive. All the more reason for us to take him alive. Commander Simms?"

"Sir."

He had broad-shoulders and a square jaw, the sort that made her wonder if he spent his free time doing push-ups in three-gee while chewing down carrots and ironweed.

"Are we prepared for a top to bottom?"

"Yes, sir."

"Word to the troops?"

"Shoot to maim, sir."

"I don't want him dead."

"Aye, sir."

She began to wonder if there was a half a brain in there. Then she noticed the look on Hunter's face, half way between fear and urgency.

"Doctor, you look like you have something itching up your backside."

"Yes, sir."

"Spit it out."

"Well, first of all, I think this Mr. Harrison is in trouble... to put things mildly, sir."

The Commodore's eyebrows arched playfully.

"Enlighten me."

"We found several vials of Torogon-66 missing from our stores. It's a wide-spectrum regen-formula common to the outer worlds. We've kept it in stock for patients who are unsuited or prove allergic to the in-house compound."

"So?"

"The Torogon formula is never injected directly following use of our in-house compound without an intervening stabilizer and a twelve hour waiting period. If this isn't done, the interaction of the formula and our compound will cause a high-potential for misreads of the patient's DNA."

"What, he mutates?" said with a smirk.

"I doubt he'll live long enough for that. It'll begin by wiping out the delicate systems, two critical ones being the immune and nervous systems. He'll lose control of his lungs in a day or two, and he'll have to invent a new way of fending off opportunistic viruses sooner than that."

"Did they take any stabilizers?"

"I haven't found any missing."

Reece nodded, "We can only assume that our thieves are pharmaceutically inept. They have probably already injected him. Is there any treatment?"

"Yes, there's a compound called Anamesa."

"Go on."

"It'll stop the interaction between the regens and boost the immune system so the body has time to restore itself, but if it isn't applied within the first six to twelve hours, you can forget it. It'll be too late to do anything without extensive medical resources, much greater than we have onboard."

Dunham sat upright, "How soon until he gets sick?"

"Like I said, it varies, though usually by the time the patient is seriously ill, it's too late to apply the Anamesa. You can still artificially boost their immunity to specific diseases, however, the damage to their system, per se, is already there."

"And restoring it is not easy."

Hunter shook her head, "Some might say impossible."

The Commodore grinned from ear to ear, "I hate to be celebrating another person's misfortune, but all in all, that's excellent news. I want our supply of Anamesa destroyed, and I want our mind-scanner readied for use."

"Sir?"

"You have moral reservations, Doctor?"

Hunter averted her eyes. "Sir, we have never used the mind-scanner."

"You don't have trained staff?"

"No, it's not that. I just... it's over ten years old. I don't even know if it'll work. And as for destroying the Anamesa, if you do capture this Mr. Harrison, that may be the only thing you have to bargain with."

"Oh, don't worry Doctor. We'll capture him. I just have no intentions of serving him the opportunity to live, and besides, this way it isn't anyone's fault." She smiled, then frowned.

"What is it, Doctor?"

"They took more than the Torogon-66."

"Such as?"

"Hydrochloric acid and potassium cyanide."

"Enough to pose a threat?"

"Not to the entire ship, but to a small section, yes. I would like poison filters circulated to the crew and passengers."

Reece shook her head, "We don't have enough except for the senior officers. I wouldn't worry about it too much Doctor. It's a lame threat. He's asking us what its worth to catch him. The answer is yes... it's worth a few lives."

"I am prepared to declare quarantine."

"That won't be necessary." Reece shrugged. "They probably won't use it. They would have nothing to gain and everything to lose. I could see them smuggling it to Tyber, but..."

"And that sits well with you?"

"The Tyber Corporation is just barely Imperial aligned as it is. We owe them no favors."

"Sir, the Tyberian population is extremely impacted. In such an environment..."

"I know, Doctor. Look, cyanide gas is easy to make; its components are easy to come by. Nobody will trace it to us, and even if they do, we can simply deny involvement."

"Commodore..."

"Don't argue with me, Doctor. There's more at stake than you may realize."

"Sir... with all due respect, human life is at stake."

Reece felt her cheeks flush red with anger. What did she think this was? A playground?!

"Doctor, I can see that you've been under a great deal of stress lately. I don't want you to take this the wrong way, but I'm relieving you of your post until we leave the Tyber system. I want to you get some rest, and under no circumstances are you permitted to discuss any of this with anyone. Understood?"

"You're relieving me of duty?"

"Affirmative."

"Sir..."

"Don't argue with me, Doctor. I'm made up my mind. Now go to your quarters and get some rest."

"But sir..."

"That's an order."

Hunter took a deep breath. "Yes, sir."

The bridge seemed imersed in slumber as Tabor exited the lift. The reason was fairly apparent. Most of the officers took their sleep shift during the ship's final hours in hyperspace. It was a common practice. Everyone wanted to wake up and be ready for sightseeing. That was the real attraction to working on board a liner.

Of course, somebody had to stick around. The Captain didn't want people calling the bridge to end up talking to a computer. It would leave a bad impression, and people would start wondering if anybody was ever up there in the proverbial nerve center. It was such a joke. The computer was in charge while in hyperspace, and everyone knew it. They just refused to accept it.

So while everyone else was dozing, he and Lish often had the whole place to themselves. A communications officer had to be there. Communication still went on, hyperspace or normal space, it didn't matter. But she was a sensor operator. She could go to sleep, though she seemed to prefer the solitude, fiddling with the equipment during the wee hours, programming new image recognition routines, skimming library files, and generally being a nuisance or a quiet companion as the mood suited her.

"How'd it go?"

"Oh... not so well."

She grinned, turning back to her work station.

"Lots of questions?"

"Yeah. A few too many. Oh, terrific. What are they doing now?"

She turned around again.

"What is it?"

"These bastards. I don't believe this. Just when I'm about to jam their frequency..."

Lish studied the monitor from over his shoulder, "Why is everything blinking?"

"They using the clean bands, must be switching continuously. They're not even trying to disguise it anymore."

He hit a switch, listening for the familiar pop signaling a channel opening.

"Bernie?"

"Huh? Oh, hi."

"Bernie, have you been watching the free lanes lately?"

"Yeah. Did you just freak the system? I think it's space sick."

"It's working fine. Look, I'm gonna need you to hook up our wide-band transmitter."

"The shouter?"

"Yeah. We need to jam all the free lanes."

"All of 'em? What's up?"

"Freeloaders."

"Ah... so we've got a little war on our hands, do we? Just gimme a minute or two to get it online, and we'll have 'em sending smoke signals."

"Okay, open sesame."

The door complied, and Johanes peeked inside, spraying a canister of air-freshener from ceiling to floor. The Lieutenant's cabin was decked out more nicely that he probably deserved. Queen-sized null tube, a full length wall monitor, and the sort of fluffy red carpet that suggested Imperial royalty.

"Hmmm... cozy. A trifle insecure but very cozy."

"Don't you think you're over-doing it?"

Johanes turned around, "One can never over-do it."

Beep

"Attention all personnel and passengers. By order of the Commodore, all radio frequencies are to be restricted for the remainder of this voyage. Obtain clearance for all vital transmissions through channel two. This order takes effect in one minute."

Johanes breathed a sigh of relief, "Important corollary. One may always count on the enemy to over-do it. Contact Cecil for me. Tell him that's his cue. Also have him jam channels one and two."

Spokes leaned against the wall, his long, lanky arms dropping to his sides, head tricks gleaming in the steady, white light as he seemed to concentrate on nothing in particular. Then in a hollow voice, "He says we have to get something for Mike."

"What now?!"

"Anamesa. Difference between life and death."

"This is getting tiresome."

"It's in sickbay."

"Later. Tell him we're busy."

"Now or no deal."

Johanes grunted and kicked the wall, "We don't have time to discuss it."

"He says this is a dead end. It was never mentioned. They don't seem to know it exists. What's he talking about, Jo?"

"They must!"

"He says it probably got trashed in the air strike. Or they left it on the Louise."

"I don't believe this. Look, just tell him to activate the canister or it'll be too late. We'll get this Anamesa now. Tell him... ummm... tell him to change the computer records on it... make it a lust-potion... but he has to activate the canister now."

Spokes shook his head, "Everything's jammed. He was saying okay, but I don't know if he had time."

Johanes smirked, "If he said yes... he had time."

"...and at that point, Harrison's only alternative will be to turn himself in. We'll have a mind-scanner readied for when he arrives at sickb... what's that sm..."

The odor was overpowering, like a strong whiff of almond extract. She'd breathed several gulps before the bubbling noise and the gentle hum of the fan even registered, and then her head throbbed as though a vice were pushing on both sides. When she looked back up, Dunham was busying himself by body-slamming the door. His heavy mass finally crumpled to the ground, limbs still thrashing spastically as gunfire ricocheted against its metal frame and into the locking mechanism. Simms was already at the IC, hitting his fist against the audio pick-up and switching channels wildly. Presently, the room began swirling, and she felt herself drop from the chair, her communicator miraculously in one hand. She switched it to channel one.

"Anybody..." Static.

"Help..." Channel two. More static.

"Need help..."

Hunter didn't know which peeved her more, getting force-fed an unsolicited sedative or being relieved from duty, by the Commodore herself, no less. The perverse politics they were playing was only upstaged by their thoughtless endangerment of human life. Hunter shook her head, disgusted with the whole mess. At least there was a bright side. She was no longer responsible. Whatever happened would be on their heads, and as soon as she was back in bed, this awful day would be over.

She let a yawn escape as she glanced at her thumbnail chronometer, ignoring the minor sparks of pain her bruised nose loved so much to scream about. It was already the middle of her sleep shift, and her body was aching from a recent workout which bordered somewhere between spirited and raging. Sickbay was just around the corner. She decided she could stay up for a few more minutes, squinting her eyes shut as another yawn muscled its way down her throat. After all, what more could happen in a few lousy minutes?

Boxes were everywhere, reds, blues, yellows, all falling in different directions, their long, curly ribbons waving gleefully from the impact. She picked herself slowly off the floor, looking amidst all the colorful, geometric shapes as a red, sticky liquid dripped to the white, hexagonal tile. The culprit's head tricks had to take the prize for conspicuousness. They rose from his head like long, thin, needles, clearly illegal on many worlds not only for their self-destructive properties but also for their ability to skewer innocent bystanders should he suddenly flip-out and go on a bloody, head-butting rampage. He looked up slowly, the soft blue eyes strangely familiar as she helped his long, lanky body back to its feet.

"I'm terribly sorry." She mouthed the words, obedient to the ship's policy code. It was his fault, of course, but he was just another stupid passenger, oblivious to the world around him. She felt like telling him that in so many words, but his blue eyes and gentle hands, still shaky from the impact, helped stay her tongue.

"No," he smiled as she helped him up. "It was my fault. Are you okay?" Then he dropped his look of shame. "Alice?!"

Hunter nodded, wiping the blood from her nose with the back of her sleeve.

"Do I know you?"

"What, you don't remember me?"

"Umm..."

"IASM, class of '43."

"I'm sorry, I don't..."

"Hanson's microbiotics."

"Umm," she stared back into his eyes, soft blue pinwheels coasting vaguely in her head. "I'm sorry, what's your name?"

"Well well... if it isn't Mr. Smyth."

Johanes grinned shyly as he walked into sickbay. Feso was with a patient, one of the food service workers probably. The crew had their uniforms color coded according to section, the only problem with the system being that there didn't seem to be enough distinguishable colors to go around. Feso, of course, had found the perfect solution.

"You always wear your pajamas to work?"

Feso laughed, "I've been getting comments on this all day. No, we had a little bit of a... how shall one put it..."

"A busy morning?"

"Very busy."

The patient looked very frigid, but whatever Feso had given him seemed to be warming the blood. Johanes followed the nurse back the main desk, looking over his shoulder as they passed the office. Several boxes were still scattered about.

"What's with the mess?"

"Ah... just been taking inventory."

"I love your system."

"Yeah. Well, we're sort of disorganized at the moment. So what can I do for you? That drug been giving you a bad aftertaste?"

"I just wanted to say thanks. I don't know what would have happened to me if you hadn't been here."

"Awww..." Feso grinned, "you just got to beware Calannans bearing gifts. Oh... what's this?"

"A tip. "

"Five hundred credits? I didn't know they printed denominations this high. This is very nice of you, but I couldn't."

"Please. I made a mess. I feel bad. Please take it." He looked like he was on the verge of being mortally wounded.

"Okay. You twist my arm, how can I refuse?" Feso pocketed the waxy bill with a grin. "This is a very big tip. You sure that drug isn't affecting your brain or something?"

Johanes laughed, "I think that's what she had in mind."

"She?"

"The woman who spiked my punch. Actually, she's part of the reason I'm dropping by."

"Oh?"

"I didn't really know who else to ask, but I need something."

"What?"

"Anamesa. Just a few grams."

"Anamesa? I've heard of that somewhere."

"Can you... you know..." Johanes motioned his glance toward the boxes in the office.

Feso shook his head, "Not a chance. I don't even think you can get Anamesa without a prescription. What's she need it for? Isn't it some sort of immunity enhancer?"

Johanes laughed, "You call yourself a nurse."

"What? It is, isn't it?"

Johanes leaned over the counter, lowering his voice to a bare whisper. "It's an aphrodisiac."

"No..."

"Would I lie?"

Feso turned to the medical console, bringing up a description from computer records. He blinked at least twice when he saw the classification. Johanes just smiled.

"See. What'd I tell you?"

"Wow. Learn something new every day."

"So can you?"

Feso looked back towards the boxes. The A's were long since reorganized. Finding it would be a snap. Still, he didn't like the idea.

"You know, it says it's non-restricted. You can probably get it from the pharmacy."

"Already tried. They're out. I guess a lot of people have been partying."

Feso smiled, "Guess so. Wait... what's this for? You're not thinking of getting that Calannan back, are you?"

"Hey, she drugged me. She said I could drug her back."

He laughed, "That's immoral."

"I'm going to propose."

"Then it's extremely immoral."

"Please?"

Feso smiled, "Just because I'm wearing pajamas doesn't mean I'm a push-over."

"Look... the proposal is sincere. We've been talking about marriage for the past five years."

"Five years?"

Johanes nodded, making his best honest face. Feso pondered the request for a moment. The Captain always did say to bend over backwards for the passengers.

"I never did this for you. Okay?"

"Thanks. I knew I could count on you."

"Yeah yeah... sheesh."

Feso watched him leave, trophy in fist, and not a moment too soon. Hunter came through the door two seconds later, holding her nose and looking mildly irate.

"Wasn't that our resident stoner?"

"Naw... you mean Mr. Smyth?"

"Yeah. What are you so happy about? He give you a roach to go with the jammies?"

Feso smiled, "I take it the meeting didn't go as well as planned."

"It was horrible."

"What's wrong with your nose? The Commodore smack you one?"

"In a manner of speaking. She relieved me of duty."

Feso's jaw dropped, "Why?"

"Various reasons."

"Ah..."

She forced a smirk. Feso had long since learned when to keep his mouth shut, even when it looked like his boss was defying a direct order.

"I'm just getting a bandage, Feso."

"I didn't ask."

The infirmary had all the good ones, not like the flimsy retail bandages that held just long enough to soak through with blood. She taped one under her nose, giving herself the little- moustache look. It suited her, Feso decided, going back to check on the food service worker who still sat wrapped in a warm blanket, a layer of frost melting along his eyebrows. Hunter came in, maybe to ask a question or give an order. He could never tell which was coming. Then she looked at Mr. Frosty, whatever was on her mind apparently stolen by the spectacle.

"What happened to you?"

"Huh?"

"Anyone tell you that you resemble an ice cube?"

The man looked up, a slow sort of smile crossing his face.

"Accidentally locked myself in a meat locker."

"How come?"

"Just happened."

Hunter smiled, heading back to the office with her nurse in tow. Feso felt somewhat confused.

"What now?"

"I thought that since I'm dishonorably relieved, you'd like to know that you're hereby conferred the honorable title of boss until I'm back on the job."

"Me? What about Dr. Pendelton?"

"He's a techie, Feso. He doesn't know anything about running the shop. You do. Besides, you know how he is when he gets a gram of power."

"Yeah. He likes to take charge."

"He'll be in charge... of the mind scanner."

"Mind scanner?"

"Better not to ask questions."

"Yeah, but I don't think he'll like..."

Beep

"Attention all personnel and passengers. By order of the Commodore, public access to the computer is disallowed until we reach Tizar. Requests for waivers must be made in person at the computer security center on Deck Four."

The line popped shut, and Feso shot her an incredulous look, "Jeeze... this is getting ridiculous. First the comm-system. Now the computers. What's going on?"

"Politics. Go get Pendelton and tell him we need the scanner."

She went to the office and shuffled through the stacks until she found the carton of Anamesa. The tiny, yellow bottles were the size of her thumb, and one by one, she opened them over the sink, washing their syrupy contents down the drain. Her joints felt grainy and brittle, her skin growing increasingly coarse with every new bottle. As she reached in for the last one, her fingers met only vacant air. Feso was coming back in, a dismayed expression now transforming to the epitome of innocence.

"Feso, I'm not sure, but I think we're missing a bottle here."

"A bottle?"

"Yeah, of the Anamesa. When I counted them this morning, I'm sure there were six. There are only five here."

"Ah... that's interesting. What do you want with Anamesa?"

"I'm trying to get rid of it."

She tapped a few keys on the medical console, and the database's query prompt popped into view at the bottom of the screen. For a moment, Feso's blood froze cold. Hunter finally looked up at him, her eyes sullen and tired.

"I guess I was mistaken. It says five."

"It does?"

"Feso... is something the matter?"

"Yes... I mean no... I'm fine. What's all the concern with Anamesa. People getting too horny or something?"

"What?"

Feso gulped, "Why was the Captain ordering you to destroy an aphrodisiac?"

She laughed, "Anamesa is not an aphrodisiac. Where'd you get that idea?"

"I thought it was."

"Well, it's not."

Feso looked her over like she was crazy, and she imagined she was staring back the same way.

"You don't believe me?"

Feso shrugged, "With all due respect, sir, I just happen to know for a fact that you're wrong."

"You do, do you?"

"Yes. I'll put five-hundred on it right now."

"You're on."

He hit a few keys on the medical console, staring dumbfounded at the screen when he saw the result. Hunter regarded him with a cheerful smirk.

"Pay up, buddy."

He figured that either he was going nuts or he was being toyed with, and luckily, the latter was the more likely of the two.

"This is a prank, right? You and Mr. Smyth. Very clever. Okay, here you are." He didn't care. He was tired and just as rich as when the whole thing started.

"What's this about Mr. Smyth?"

"Oh... nothing I'm sure the two of you can't figure out. Tell him thanks for the tip when you see him. It provided me with so much joy and happiness."

"What?"

"I'm going to sleep. It's the middle of my sleep shift."

"Feso, what's the matter?"

But he was gone, leaving her alone with a half-frozen patient in the other room. Two security guards emerged at the entry portal a minute later, both puffing anxiously.

"Dr. Hunter?"

"Yeah."

"Need you at the EC-lounge. Medical emergency."

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 in the next issue.

The Fourth Cat

Lou Crago

Kiko lost her big cat somewhere between Jin Place and home. It was the third one she'd lost in a month. Tito was going to stop making them for her at this rate — he was generous, but he didn't like to see his art wasted.

The last time, he had said, "It's not just a matter of waste. It's that now they're out there!"

"But they won't live long," she had said in defense. "You said yourself they don't stay constabulated."

"I said," he answered, "but that's if nobody else gets hold of them."

She didn't know what that meant. Tito was an Artist. She didn't know for sure what that meant either. He could make awesome things, like the cats — things far beyond mere tech — but he wouldn't even sell them. He could have made a gigantic fortune! But he just gave them away — to her, and to one or two others. She had never actually seen the others; they came on foot probably, while she came in the Embassy car.

She wanted to be able to come on foot also, to slip through street shadows and show up at Tito's like an anonymous. Except her Grandmother, who ruled everything — at least everything in this capitol city of an occupied nation — wouldn't allow it. Every time Kiko went out, it was the car, and the chauffeur, an d the personal guard. There was no way she could live a life of her own choice, like everyone else. Wear black clothes, and not sleep, and prowl the streets, and march in foolish demonstrations.

Her Grandmother was, of course, Dylete Mikyo, the JapaChine Ambassador. She'd had the post for at least 60 years, but had been fixed repeatedly, so that she looked 30, maybe 40 in sunlight. She'd had Kiko's mother and father eliminated — so Kiko suspected — and now the only blood-relation she would tolerate i n the Embassy was 17-year-old Kiko, thin and frail. It meant Kiko wa s constantly attended by tutors and guards, and had the surveillance cameras on while she slept.

At 16, Kiko had threatened suicide if she wasn't given some personal freedom. She demanded one six-hour stretch every fortnight, with the bracelet monitor off, and freedom to leave the Embassy. She won that, except that she had to be driven to where she wanted to go in the car, then picked up six hours later and driven home. Kiko chose eight p.m. to two a.m. Dylete was hard to sway, but finally agreed when she saw that Kiko was perfectly serious about the suicide.

The first time out, Kiko found Jin Place. The second time she followed a bizarre red animal like a fox along the shadowed street, and it led her to Tito's alley, and to his door.

It was open. That, in itself, was strange. Nobody left doors open. She stepped in. He turned from a table where he stood working and stared and stared at her without a word. He was old! You scarcely ever saw old-looking people — not when it was so cheap and safe to get fixed. He was small and thin, with very intense eyes.

She let him look. That was what diplomatic life, and being rich, meant — your gear was the most beautiful, sleek, and costly that was available. Even in diplomatic circles, they looked. Then you looked back at them. Something unspoken was decided. Dylete, her Grandmother, had been coming out on top for 60 years in these contests; now Kiko had the knack also. Maybe because she didn't think anything when the looking contest was in progress. She just waited calmly, knowing she would win. Or maybe she'd inherited something from Dylete.

...there were rich and poor, regal and common, even diplomats, all accepting, or enduring, each other in the haze and music. She sat in a scallop along one wall and the big black cat lay at her feet with its head raised and its huge yellow eyes watchful.

Tito said, "Presence without mind. I like that. Maybe I'll give you a gift to go along with it."

Kiko was used to that too; diplomats gave gifts to make up for having lost. She held out her hand, expecting some rare object. But he turned and opened a door, and out came a big cat. It was big and orange, striped with black. She'd never seen anything like it. The only animals she'd been allowed to have were little and with white fluff all over. They died after a year or so, looking sad.

This one came and stood beside her, lazily switching its long tail. It paid no attention to her, but followed when she went out. She couldn't make it get in the car, but it loped along beside. Before the car pulled into the Embassy gates, however, it had disappeared.

On her next free night, she went back to Tito's and informed him about it. He stared at her again, and then gave her another cat. This one was the same size, but sleekly black all over. She took it back with her to Jin Place, where nobody would be surprised by anything. There, there were rich and poor, regal and common, even diplomats, all accepting, or enduring, each other in the haze and music. She sat in a scallop along one wall and the big black cat lay at her feet with its head raised and its huge yellow eyes watchful.

She drank an exotic drink, smoked a hookah, and watched the people watching her. The diplomats bowed when they passed her scollop; they knew who she was, what rank. It was a very satisfying evening. But when she tried to force the cat into the car, it turned and loped away into the shadows of the street.

The next time, she actually talked to Tito — the way you talk in private, the way she remembered talking to her Mother long ago.

"They won't come home with me. What's wrong?"

"Maybe the breeding isn't right," he said.

"I never assumed you were breeding them — there's no breeding stock left. I thought you were making them."

"No breeding stock left? Ah, so they've educated you a little."

"I've had the very best education!" she said haughtily. "Subliminals every night since I was six."

"Ah, so you have stored in your head all the world's factoids?"

"Certainly," she said.

Then he explained that "made" creatures were outside that paradigm.

That made it strangely exciting to her. She wasn't sure exactly why, except that anything beyond tech was exciting because it was forbidden. In any case, she wanted another one.

"All right, one more," he said. "But see you don't let it get loose."

Now she had lost this third cat, a blue-grey one. Again she and Tito talked privately, and she became so engrossed that she sat down, no doubt creasing her rich dress, and clasped her jeweled hands together passionately like a child or an anonymous. "If it could come home with me," she said, "and be in my suite. And maybe even — this sounds bizarre — even sleep on my bed. Make it to do that."

"Why?" he asked.

She thought about it. "I want to hear its purr in the night. Or growl, or whatever it does."

"And what will you do?"

"I will…listen."

As an incentive, she told him to bill the Embassy, but he sneered at that. Nevertheless, he gave her another cat. It was deep gold with black spots on its flanks. And around its neck was a leather collar studded with chunks of amber. He also gave her a narrow leather leash, which he snapped onto the collar.

"No more after this," he said, his eyes narrowing. "Keep this one, or don't come back."

She didn't even go back to Jin Place. She waved forward the unobtrusively following car, and when the chauffeur had opened the door, stepped in. The lea sh made it possible to pull the big cat in too.

On the ride home, she let it lie on the seat beside her, and she used the tips of her fingers to stroke its silky head. The guard at the Embassy gate ma de as if to refuse the cat admission, but she stared at him, and let him look at her staring, so he backed down. Naturally.

She took the lift up to her suite. The big cat sat on its haunches, not disturbed by being in the mechanism — it even lowered its lids slowly once or twice, as if contented.

She went through to her bedroom. There, she had the sudden and remarkable desire not to wear any of her sleep robes that night. She slid into the satin naked, and even unplugged the subliminal unit at the headboard. The cat leapt lightly up on the bed, stepped around for a few moments, then lay down. It's head rested on her stomach. She lay very still, waiting to hear its purr.

There were alarm shriekers going off somewhere, and people shouting. Footsteps running. She sat up, threw back the satin, and went blindly across the carpet a dozen steps before she even knew she was awake.

The double doors burst open. Security guards and male secretaries came pouring in. Kiko watched them look at her with shocked eyes and realized, looking down, that she was still naked. She stood quite still and let them look, thinking nothing. And within a few moments, she had won. They began to make the brief, obligatory bows, and to edge backward out the doorway.

Dylete's Chief of Staff came forward, moving through them and, with his hand trembling slightly, held out a precious object. It was Dylete's Seal of Office.

"The Ambassador has met with — an accident. Which precludes her fulfilling her post. I am now at your service, as you assume the post by heredity."

Kiko said carefully, "How was the Ambassador accidented?"

The man hesitated. "By laceration s to the throat. The jugular vein was... shredded. There was a great deal of bleeding."

"Who did this?" she asked, her eyes wide.

"We have not apprehended the....the intruder," he said. "The alarm system was not tripped. We will continue to investigate."

"Very well," said Kiko. She did not look around for the cat which no one was supposed to know was in her suite. She sensed that it was no longer there.

"Attend to the body of the former Ambassador," she instructed.

The Chief of Staff made a formal bow. "And shall I bring her robe of state to you now?"

"Yes, you may do that."

He backed out.

Kiko stood waiting. Even in nakedness, she was totally enrobed by presence. But her right hand, unaccountably, lifted slowly to her throat. There was a leather collar studded with amber around her neck.

And there was a taste in her mouth: something strange that she had never before tasted.

She suddenly knew much more than factoids. Very much more, all in a rush!

She knew about Tito. And why "made" things beyond tech were forbidden.

And something about what it was going to be like, being Ambassador, when she was so young and unaccustomed to politics. With four lost cats prowling somewhere. Out there in the shadowed streets, where the great mass of people were anonymous, poor, wore black, and didn't sleep. Q

MICROCHIPS NEVER RUST

Part 3

Eric Miller

I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness, starving hysterical naked, dragging themselves throughout the negro streets at dawn looking for an angry fix, angle-headed hipsters burning for the ancient heavenly connection to the starry dynamo in the machinery of night, who poverty and tatters and hollowed-eyed and high sat up smoking in the supernatural darkness of cold-water flats floating across the tops of cities contemplating jazz, who bared their brains to Heaven under the El and saw Mohammedan angels staggering on tenement roofs illuminated, who passed through universities with radiant cool eyes hallucinating Arkansas and Blake-light tragedy among the scholars of war.

Allen Ginsberg, 1955-1956

Oh, you want to know when the end has come, my friend? I'll tell you when. You'll be sitting in your flat on a gorgeous Sunday afternoon, entertaining friends in your studio, when a phone call rings on your unlisted number, and it's some American youth speaking very poor French because that's what he learned in University and he is trying to sell you some magazine subscription that can be sent overseas for 'great savings over the newsstand price.' And you ask, "How did you get my number?" but he hesitates because he is reluctant to tell you that his boss has a way of getting unlisted French numbers. And you slam the phone down, but you realize with dread that you will never have any real peace for the rest of your life.

French photographer being interviewed on his opposition to a proposed takeover of France Telecom by AT&T/Sears.

Newsweek, October, 1998.

The U.S. Marshal's Office has just granted broad, discretionary powers to the Software Printer's Association, a company started in the 1980's which claimed to represent the copyright interests of software manufacturers. The company has engaged in quasi-legal actions which included threatening to take a company to court for using unlicensed software and pocketing the out of court settlement for itself. Alfred Milbourne, then President of Digiscript Inc., described a typical scenario:

"You would see posters with pictures of two of our product, and some logo reading 'The One on the Right just cost someone $500,000,' and it would be a picture of one of our own Digiscript floppies. The ad would then go on to state that you could send in $80 to get a copy of their pirate software detector, which in reality was nothing more than a batch file which listed all the executable files on your hard disk!"

"I was here for at least six months after the bombs were dropped. One of the steam tunnels under the Student Union led to a suite of storerooms. About 150 of us were able to hide out there. Hotter than fresh roof tar in August."

Milbourne went on to list the contents of some of the lurid press releases put out by the SPA, including accounts of how some of the biggest ringleaders in software piracy were being put away for years in Federal Penitentiaries. Milbourne's own legal staff eventually looked into the matter:

"We found out that the SPA would call up a company and in effect tell it that they had heard that employees were using pirated software and that they would have to submit themselves to an 'audit' or else face a raid by the U.S. Marshal's Office. They would then visit the office and find that, lo and behold, someone was using a duplicate copy of our Digiscript program. Depending on how gullible the company president was, the SPA would then shake down the company for tens of thousands of dollars to prevent them from being taken to court in order to extract 'compensatory damages.' We found out that our product was often the lynch-pin behind these extortions, yet, believe it or not, we never saw a penny from the SPA!"*

SPA efforts to act as a quasi-official organ of the government have finally paid off: starting this year the SPA will be able to use its own security and policing staff to raid companies under suspicion. The U.S. Attorney's office has given the SPA the authority to search and seize all computer equipment which may be suspected of harboring pirated software. This means that any SPA employee can now walk into your company and snag that attractive looking hypercube that took you months to get a hold of. Suspicion is all that is needed! Attorney General Gregory Lucas upon being questioned about the SPA had this to say:

"I don't know much about this computer stuff, you know, bits and bytes and all that crap, but I do know this! If we let pirates run free in this society it will be the end of American civilization as we know it. I am proud that someone like the SPA has seen fit to go mano a mano against these pirates and they will continue to have my

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* Penny: obsolete copper coinage; discontinued by Federal Mint in 1998 –Editors.

support as well as my authority to conduct raids under the deputization powers of my office."

SPA publications can now be found in most schools, as well as videos starring rap music superstar D.J. saran-rap-gangsta, just released from prison, rapping the SPA's snappy jingle 'Don't archive that computer file in an unauthorized manner!'

Wormwood II, April, 2001

Arthur Hanson stood in front of Dr. Jarod Owen, not quite sure of what to say.

Owen barked, "Grab a seat, Dr. Hanson! Fill me in on what you've been up to these last five years!" Good, nothing out of the ordinary. Hanson slumped back into a decrepit office chair that groaned from the impact of his spine against the seatback.

"Doc, maybe I'm out of it, but what the hell am I doing here? One day I'm rambling around the Wurkhaus camp system and the next I find that I'm a new prof here."

"Rambling around the camp system for five years." Owen shook his head sadly, but retained the twinkle in his eyes that betrayed an endless font of energy. "Let's both start from the beginning. Now since it's a surprise to you that I'm still alive, I can only assume that you thought that I died in the attack along with a great number of people. For a long time I certainly thought the same of you."

Hanson looked up at the water stained ceiling. "I was here for at least six months after the bombs were dropped. One of the steam tunnels under the Student Union led to a suite of storerooms. About 150 of us were able to hide out there. Hotter than fresh roof tar in August. We figured that it was at least 130 degrees for two or three days from the fires. Lucky for us the store room was deep enough in the earth for us to survive in."

"What did you do about food and water?" asked Owen.

"Oh, that lasted about 4 months; a huge case of Spam lasted about a month, too. I don't think my digestive track ever recovered from that culinary adventure. When we ran out of food, we started scouting around up top. When I got caught by one of the GermanMetalFuzz, I..."

"German what?" interrupted Owen.

"The German Motorized Infantry Security Police. I convinced him that if he helped us find food we would make it worth his while. The Fuzz got a load of about 200 college dorm mini-fridges right before his boss nabbed him. We stripped this campus dry from the bottom up for whatever we could find. Light bulbs, blankets, hell, even those awful cafeteria trays were in big demand."

"I hear that Central Services is still bitchin' about the trays," laughed Owen.

"Naturally we just didn't have enough to barter with anymore. A new law that allowed the Fuzz to pack people up to camps if they didn't have a home just went into effect, and most of us got rounded up and sent north. I was shipped to Wurkhaus 211 at the intersection of Highway 12 and 93."

"First Service Motors?" asked Owen.

"Was then, only now it's the chief autotruck production plant in Michigan for the German Army. I was sent to live with an assembly line gang that packed the trucks as they were being sent to the Mississippi River war zone. Fortunately for me I got pulled off the line and placed in detention to await interrogation. When I got taken to the interview room down the cell hall I was strapped into a chair, and told that I would be interrogated by a Major Schulmann."

"And this was fortunate?" Owen asked.

"Well, I didn't think so at the time. But Schulmann came into the room and asked me all sorts of questions, so naturally I told him what I was doing here at Central, and he got real upset and started yelling to someone on the phone in German, which I could barely understand, but I got the sense that he was yelling at one of the Fuzz about treating me badly and why was I taken here in the first place. The guards then took me outside. They were really nice to me all of sudden, giving me food cards and cigarettes. I was taken to a big house where I could see what the change of attitude was about."

"Which was?"

"Everything that you could possibly imagine going wrong in a computerized office. Equipment hooked up the wrong way, operators not saving their files, no documentation, wall outlets that looked like they were sprouting octopuses, a big list of information age no-nos. I found out within the week that Schulmann had been put on notice to organize the warehouse office or else be transferred to the Iranian front."

"Your first job in the real world!" Owen quipped sarcastically.

"The computers were the easy part. The logistics were a little tougher, because, in essence, I had to figure out how the German Army could transfer goods in and out of Michigan by way of our warehouse in such a way that losses were minimized."

"Losses?"

"Oh yeah. Everywhere. I can tell you for sure that not a single box of Cinnamon Poptarts has ever made it to the River zone. Unopened boxes of those things command a pretty high price on the black market. Schulmann was savvy enough to understand what I was talking about. I showed him how to disguise shipments by using digit flipping bookkeeping and key authorized database records stored on the autotrucks. He was a real happy guy after a while. Both he and his upper echelon got promoted up the ladder to a military post somewhere in Kansas. The warehouse was then sold to the Brother Jims at a profit."

"Ooh, boy. The Jims."

"I barely managed to escape the day the Jims were surrounding the place with poison barbed wire. Schulmann probably told the Jims that I went with the purchase. Bastard. Ever since then I've been roaming the area doing whatever I can to survive in the winter months and leading the slacker lifestyle when the weather gets warm."

"Which brings us up to the point in your story when you mysteriously show up on the IMF's labor invoice database." Owen squirmed uneasily in his chair. He had a huge favor to ask of Hanson. One that in all probability would cost Arthur his life.

Dataflage Corporation has just announced a new line of lap-top computers meant to prevent seizure by the Software Printer's Association, whose plainclothes operatives have been known to hide out in airports where travelers carry a large selection of portables on their business trips. For travelers who want the very best, Dataflage manufactures a clone of the Silicon Graphics 4D Reality Engine Laptop disguised as an old fashioned Radio Shack Portable. A screen saver simulates the crude black and white LCD pixels of a by gone era, requiring a voice activated password to reactivate the holographic display. The delta-wave transmitter used to navigate through the laptop's virtual landscape has been disguised as an old-style portable 8 track tape player complete with a Captain and Tenille tape and head transponder disguised as bulky old AV lab headphones. Simulated Coke

spills and finger grime add to the effect. Purchasers also receive a catalog of accessories which enable the traveler to affect the complete grunge computist look, with items such as 'too large rubber galoshes' and sweatshirts which appear to be faded and unwashed. The catalog also features props such as simulated old, beaten copies of 'Dune' and 'Spock Must Die' which can be used as battery and cellphone holders. Don't become another SPA statistic! Call Dataflage today!

Morais pressed the 'repeat message' playback button on his watch several times, but still couldn't make out the originator of the message.

"Dar, who do you think that was?"

"My guess would be Grove. I could hear a Texas accent under that voice changer," Dar answered, shrugging his shoulders.

"Grove is supposed to be in Biosphere 9. If he had to make a special trip from the moon, something is up. Here, put my watch on; that should foil the office pager. I'm going to run into Ivari's office and see if I can watch this drama take place from behind."

Dar Im-Tula took the watch-com from Morais and placed it on his wrist. Dar was one of the rare Indian programmers who allowed himself to be called by name. Among the Yanomami it was usually considered an insult to call someone by their name. It took Morais several years to understand the Yanomami mind, but for his efforts he was paid off in two ways: he was allowed the privilege to address Dar by his phonetic label, and he had access to the most gifted pool of computer talent on the planet. His colleagues were not so lucky. Being less understanding types, they would often hear of the legendary computer prowess of the Yanomami and then 'hire' them for programming projects at the Institute. The managers of these projects would invite the Yanomami to Project Meetings, speaking of deadlines, product deliveries dates, work schedules, and salaries. The 'employed' Amazon Tribe member would then be shown to a cubicle and asked to show up at 8:00 the next morning. The results would be disastrous. The new employee would never show up on time, sometimes as late as 4:00 in the afternoon. A project manager might be eating dinner on his screened-in porch at home and look up to see the employee seated across from him, after somehow slipping silently in, all eager to discuss the project. To make things worse, they would never give out their names, and refused to sign any paperwork, saying that a salary was unimportant, yet showing up at night, asking to borrow the water sled, because they had to visit an uncle for the next two weeks, and then returning two months later without the sled because it had been given away during a festival. Most managers went apoplectic over this sort of behavior, resolving never to hire the Yanomami ever again, but having no qualms about cannibalizing whatever juicy bits of Yanomami code appeared on the public nets. Morais, however, took a different approach.

Ten years before, when a knotty problem concerning the Space Construction Platform had Morais up for nights, Morais looked up tired from his terminal to see that a Yanomami Indian was standing silently next to him. He muttered "Can I sit down?" Morais was too tired to protest and gave him his chair. Within 4 hours the unknown Yanomami had entirely re-written the emergent behavior algorithm that allowed the robots to return to their fuel tanks without losing the timing involved in rolling out the steel sheet involved in the beam formation process at the Platform. After several debugging run-throughs, the gentle face of the ageless appearing tribesman looked up at Morais and muttered "Remember that the Ant gives his legs to the Colony before he moves his own body." The Amazon silently disappeared leaving behind a perplexed Morais. But later, when the Platform started receiving steel shipments from Earth, the meaning behind the Yanomami's words hit Morais. Not quite able to express it in words, Morais was nonetheless able to give the Russian Draftsman the complete proposal for the Mars Launch Program. Every time the project slowed down, the same thing would happen. At the back of the meeting room, when the managers conference had descended into bickering, a lone individual would silently appear. Morais would then silence the proceedings and ask to hear what the Yanomami had to say. The words would always have a cryptic but homespun tribal sound to them. Sometimes they elicited laughter from the project leaders, who were surprised to find the Indian laughing along with them. But it would always happen. Four hours later. Two days later. Two weeks later. Morais would be thinking about the words muttered at the proceedings and would have a flash of inspiration which would take him running to the Russian Draftsman's lab. The Draftsman's hard-headed genius for all things mechanical usually meant that any idea remotely unsound was met with a disparaging wave of the hand and complete ignorance of the messenger. But with Morais it would be different. The Draftsman would gently nod his head yes, and turn away to furiously sketch something on an old, battered artist's sketch pad. In five years, this strange, triple collaboration allowed Morais to advance to the Project Head for Manned Space Exploration of the Amazonian Technical Institute, a position which brought much fame, from all over the world, as well as inside the Brazilian Empire. But for the Yanomami, it would always be the same. An individual, a brother, a cousin, perhaps would show up at your house: Can I borrow this laptop? My Grandfather wants to keep track of the number of Dolphins in the River. My third cousin from up North is starting classes, can he stay at your house for awhile? Can I sit down? The program would work much better if you did this...

How to Protect Yourself in the 21st Century

with a new introduction by
General Buford Keegan

Ladies and Gentlemen. It has been over ten years since I have been directly involved in the production of the volume that you now hold in your hands. When Roberto DelReyes, the chief author of this book's current edition approached me about writing a new introduction, I could not refuse. After all, it was Roberto himself who conceived the idea for this book when almost twenty years ago such information was not commonplace. It was, after all, twenty years ago that Roberto's involvement in a brave and daring plan to evacuate the town of Riverside, Ohio that made it possible for me to continue the work of ensuring that men everywhere have the choice of remaining and acting as free and responsible citizens of this great planet of ours. Roberto's questions continuously assured me that even in an age like ours, any one possessed of a good mind and free heart could understand the most knotty questions involved in resisting a high-technology dictatorship, in whatever form it took. I have gained great strength from knowing that in such chaotic circumstances such as ours, basic common sense is all that is needed in order to understand such topics as 'how to write a trojan

virus' or 'what behavior is appropriate under infrared surveillance.'

That we live in difficult times, times that often more closely resemble the civil war of the 1860s' than the high-tech paradise of the 1950's, when it was thought that all that was needed to survive a nuclear war were lead impregnated bib-overalls, is quite obvious. You are now holding in your hands a very special volume. A volume that is only three by five inches, and whose cover reads 'Charts and Tables of Standards for Weights and Measures Used Under the English System of Measurement.' By camouflaging our book in this way, we have practically assured that very few people will willingly open up its cover for fear of the tedious and boring content suspected of lurking on its pages. Yet the cover also indicates that this volume has an inherent usefulness that prevents it from being thrown out, and indeed, will often cause those being sent this volume to place it on an esteemed roost on a bookshelf without the cover ever being opened. In this way, our manual has spread into all corners of society, and many of those in the East who seek our information have only to visit a library reference section to find it. Many techniques like the one I just described are found in the pages of this book.

Those of us involved in the production of this volume have had many labels thrown at us: Terrorist, criminal, revolutionary, and even Communist, even when the techniques in this book help defend the individual against Communist oppression as well as any other. We do not subscribe to labels of any kind. As we look back into the twentieth century, we can only see that labels, no matter how well intentioned, eventually turn into oppressive straight-jackets. Rather than labels, we hold the radical viewpoint that individuals are much better able to determine their own destinies than outside organizations. The purveyor of these organizational modes of living constantly accuse of pedaling death in our philosophy as we propose the death of the organization. But we ask those who seek to erase our existence a continual question: when in our history has the individual ever benefitted from allegiance to the organization? An example often put forth is the defeat of Adolf Hitler during World War II (according to Western U.S. history). Evidence has shown time and time again that the defeat of Nazi Germany arose from individuals who only *temporarily* chose to act as a collective. When the need for such a collective passed, those who chose to prop it by via organizational and extra-individual means bought about the debacle of Vietnam, an event so humiliating to contemplate that it has now been excised from Eastern U.S. textbooks. Because of these views we have been accused of being pessimistic and destructive to the true cause of human nature. Quite the contrary is true. We have an unflagging optimism in the Human Spirit. We are products of at least 3 billion years of biological evolution, and when such a grand creation chooses to hold opinion as to whether such a war is wrong or such a government is corrupt, it does good to listen to it. To believe that one's own individual instincts are somehow inferior to those of the Nation State or other extra-individual entity, is to invite disaster as those of us who live the Eastern United States can now readily attest. We live in radically dangerous times that call for a new form of resistance. Those of us who have access to an uncensored history of the last century have seen the same mistake happen over and over again: that is, to defend yourself against your enemy, you must defeat your enemy; to defeat your enemy, you must become your enemy, and in the process, lose what it is you were trying to defend. We have resolved not to make this mistake. Our enemies are those who say that they must capture us in order that we may be reintegrated into their collective, a collective made up of mental illness, substance abuse, homelessness, violence and the adoration of a group of corrupt, senile old men whose only achievements in life have been to hold large buckets under the money faucets of the Federal Reserve Bank. Our enemies have been coming after us with guns, planes, and tanks, yet, in all cases, we have been able to defeat them on our own territory, without having to recourse to their weapons-based methods. You will find our methods in this book. Our methods are faster, cheaper, and more effective than theirs. Our method relies on something far cheaper and deadlier than clunky military hardware and dangerous explosives. Our method relies on Information. And it is with Information and little else that will enable you to single-handedly disarm a tank or cause an enemy soldier to retreat to his homeland. Our method is the most effective of all in that it directs the strength of your enemy back upon himself.

Back in the dark ages of the 1980's the Reagan Administration chose to go to war against the peasants of Nicaragua so that corporate shareholders could realize more profits from the sale of military hardware. At that time, it was difficult to kill a peasant and his children; the soldier most likely had a family of his own, and was remiss to take such action. However, just by muttering one word: "Communists!" the same soldier could easily destroy an entire village. That my friends, was the power of Information. To survive in the Twenty-First you will have to learn how to use Information as a weapon, and you will have to learn how the enemy is determined to use Information as a weapon against you, and take the necessary steps to defend yourself.

I wish you the best of luck in all your endeavors,

General Keegan
Durango, Mexico, May, 2025

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From: Bob Jacobson <bluefire@well.sf.ca.us>
Subject: Washington State (USA) legislation could censor VR (and much more)!

Date: Wed, 9 Feb 1994 23:25:54 GMT

This has relevance throughout the U.S. and around the world, as it can happen anywhere ignorance of virtual worlds is inflamed by odd ideas.

Forwarded from Daniel Pezely <dpezely@bvu-lads.loral.com>

A friend who frequents the Washington state government passed this on to me:

There is a bill at the state level: (excerpts from the Public Health & Safety Act 1994" bill, SBR 6174)

NEW SECTION. Sec. 706 (1) A license is required for the commercial use of virtual reality technology for entertainment or purposes other then bona fide education, training, research, and development.

Where VR is defined:

NEW SECTION. Sec 702. (4) ``Virtual Reality" means any computer or other electronic technology that creates an enhanced illusion of three-dimensional, real-time or near-real-time interactive reality through the use of software, specialized hardware, holograms, gloves, masks, glasses, computer guns, or other item capable of producing visual, audio, and sensory effects of verisimilitude beyond those available with a personal computer.

My friend was present at the hearing of a portion of this bill. Evidently, the person backing the bill, Senator Phil Talmadge, and his crew are convincing the State Congress that VR will permit "a realistic illusion of killing another person and such an illusion will make it easier for someone to go out and actually commit such a crime outside of VR." The State Congress has a very short calendar this year. This matter could be voted on as early as next week (week of 14 February 94), and the congressional session ends 8 March 1994, so this could be voted into law in less than one month.

Senator Phil Talmadge (206) 786-7436 Leading the opposition: Senator Sheldon (206) 786-7644

Senate Fax: (206) 786-1999. Commission on Public Health & Safety Act 1994. Bill to be heard in Ways & Means Committee (Sen. Reinhart, Chair), Wednesday night, February 9, 1994; then to Rules. For status of bill, call Secretary of Senate: (206) 786-7550.

If virtual reality is outlawed, only outlaws will have virtual reality.

-The Author

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open line 12
execute data link
300 baud cache and forward
1700 KHz rider signal
note to new listeners: Public key
decoder found on head of DAT release
"Greatest Hits of Honky-Tonk Punk"
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"We're back? Fantastic. I keep tellin' them that my pager doesn't always work, but lucky for you good listeners, you ain't gonna miss a lick of my show. Hogger Radio. That's me. And Hogger remembers that some of you is curious as to how Hogger gets out the way he does. You may remember that because of an accident long ago Hogger had his eardrums taken out and replaced with what are called 'cochlear transducers' which means for you folks that all I need is a wire attached the right way and somehow I can get what I hear in my own head broadcast out by a semi full of old radio gear that calls itself Radio Free Colorado and has to travel a lot to avoid detection by a vigilante squad. But I keep hearing that Hogger radio is so popular that me and RFC are going to keep at it for as long as our Eastern brothers are still in chains, come Hell or high water.

"Like we was hearing just a few minutes ago, that legendary rebel Bobby DelRay ran into ol' Hogger enjoying the end of the ski season on the mountain, and Hogger just couldn't pass up an opportunity to ask him what happened twenty years ago in the Great Kentucky Fried Hamburger rebellion and Bobby agreed, so long as yours truly springs for the beer.

"Now Bobby, you was tellin' us that way back in high school you got called into the gym to get a talkin' to."

"Yep. All us students were together listening to this guy, O.K., and he tells us that he works for the IMF which is the International Monetary Fund. Now the IMF is a big bank that we didn't know much about, but this guy goes on to tell us that somehow this IMF has now become the largest bank in the United States and that just recently the Bank of the Federal Reserve of the United States of America has gone into what he called a 'triple default;' that is, the government has been given three chances to pay some debts that is has owed, but has failed to come up with the money each time. He flipped out one of those laptop computers that gives off this bright light so that we could see the screen showing on the wall, and it's full of pie charts and other mumbo-jumbo. So naturally we wondered what the heck he was talkin' about.

"Eventually he tells us that the federal government has failed to institute an 'austerity program' so that interest payments on the eight trillion dollar federal debt can be made in a more timely manner. He also tells, and this is real important, that in order to operate and remain 'liquid,' the federal government has had to sell bonds to rich foreign dudes so that they can afford to pay the interest on the federal bonds that have been bought and sold outside the U.S."

"Sort of like taking out money on your credit card to pay off the interest on another credit card."

"Ya, if you can rack up eight trillion on your credit card. Don't quote me on this stuff; I'm sure I'm getting some of the facts wrong, but this is basically what I remember. Anyways he gets to the part that really affects us. He says that in order to pay off all our debts, which I guess included us so-called taxpayers, a group of banks had been authorized by the federal government to seize control of the assets of the U.S. government and that we would have to continue working and give over half of our earnings to what he called 'major creditors' of the taxpayers of the U.S."

"Half? And you were making like three dollars an hour? I figure that would have netted you like $1.50 an hour."

"Try fifty cents an hour. It turned out that another foreign bank owned something called the Social Security Entitlement Corporation which by law could take out as much money from our paychecks as it wanted in order give its principal investors a steady return. Of course, when we retired we would get something, too, NOT. The whole thing was a Ponzi scheme, but it was the law, so what could you do? Anyway, the talk finally concludes away from all this stuff and gets to the heart of the matter. It turns out that because of something called the 'Federal Domain,' all of our houses and all of the land has been sold to a group of banks in Europe and would be resettled by the new owners within a month, and we had only a few weeks to get everything together and move out. The guy in the gym was their representative and he flashes up a chart that tells us what we are going to have to do. Like all of our cars and TVs and cameras and stuff had also been bought up so we are going to have to leave them behind 'in good condition,' We could only take the clothes on our backs and enough food and medicine that we could carry in our hands. Then it got really scary. 'Martial law' or something like it had just been declared in our county which meant that we were under orders not

to leave town until a truck came by our house that would take us to our new place of work."

"New place of work?"

"Oh yeah. The foreign guy was now showing some film off of his laptop, and it's really old looking, kind like someone spliced together an old 16mm movie. And it shows all of these people in a big bunkhouse somewhere, and they're smiling and making beds and walking through gardens and collecting vegetables. And the guy continues talking, and says that a new federal law has just been passed which requires us to work, even if we have lost our homes and have no place to go, and that we would be given an interview to find out what our assignments were. Like, if you had some electrical work in your background you would be assigned to the military, but if you were some high-schoolers like us, you would be taken to a bunkhouse to work at some job and later, if your attitude was real good, you would be eligible for something called The Plan."

"The Plan?"

"Yep. All we knew at the time was that it had something to do with that wacked out televangelist Brother Jim who was getting rich bilking old people out of their money. This was the first time we had heard that he was wrapped up in all this federal mess, and we was sure that he was making a mint off this, too. Made sense, though. This Jimbo character was on TV a lot, in one of those infomercials tellin' people how they could make a killing in Real Estate with such tactics like finding somebody who was having trouble making their house payments and walking in front of their house in the winter and falling and getting a lawyer to sue them for doctor bills and settling out of court for the title to the house. But a lot of people were like, 'but Brother Jim is so good and wants to help America, we should listen to him, he is one of the great spiritual leaders of our time' and all that crap.

"Now you can be sure that some of the kids were real smart-asses upon hearing this, and a couple of them yelled out that they wouldn't leave. And then comes the Mark Shipman incident."

"Very famous incident indeed!"

"Ya, Mark jumps up and starts yelling 'My Dad says you're a bunch of Nazis and if you come anywhere near our house he's gonna pump you full of lead!' So the speaker's face gets real red and he steps outside for a moment and motions someone in, another guy with a pinstriped suit, only he's got some really small machine gun slung over his shoulder, and the speaker points his finger at Mark and the machine-gun guy writes something down and leaves. Right after that, we were lead out of the school yard by some other guys with guns and told that we couldn't return there anymore. Two days later there was a big fire a couple of blocks away. It was the Shipman house. Someone had lobbed a bomb into the house in the middle of the night. My parents had heard similar things like we did, only they were visiting the houses one by one while we were in school and posting guards at the end of the streets. Dad had been told that he would be checked on to make sure that nothing happened out of the ordinary. I still had to go to Big Burger to work, only now it was something like eighty hours a week, and we had cameras watching us. I tried to find out if I could stay at Big Burger while the town was being evacuated, but they said no. We were installing machines that would wait on customers and deliver their food to them much faster than we could, and was told that we would be gone in a couple of weeks as soon as the transition was completed. It was at this point that Bif started to play an important role in our lives."

"Now for our audience, explain just who Bif is today."

"Right now Bif, er, I mean General Keegan, is Commander-in-Chief of the Northern Mexico Defense Battery, and if you've been accessing the paper lately you know that we have him to thank for the recent defeat of the Aryan Nation attack on the state of Arizona. Back then, though, we had no idea. No idea at all what Bif was. You see, back in high school, Bif was what we called a 'Hacker.' And in a small town like ours, being a hacker got you made fun of, big time. And Bif didn't have many friends, so he spent a heck of an amount of time in his uncle's basement, even when the weather was nice, doing God knows what with telephone wire and old game computers and broken CD recorders and whatever junk he could scrounge from his uncle's recently defunct radio repair business. Now, I didn't understand Bif very well, but we had become friends about a month before the infamous gym speech because he had stolen a password needed to operate the burger computer where I worked and showed me ho to scam food from the place. One night after I managed to sneak home, I got to talk to Bif after he snuck into our basement. He had some other guys our age follow him in and said that from now on we were going to hold regular meetings at three a.m. Boy did Bif change."

"Change?"

"You had to have been there. He started showing us all these maps of the county, using terms like 'Info-terrorism' and 'Surveillance Weakness Zones.' Turns out that Bif was finally able to use the Ham radio after all. A group of hackers in Toledo had figured out a way to scramble the conversation and disguise it as white noise, something called 'analog least-significant bit stegonography,' now don't ask me what that means. To decode the conversation, you had to know someone personally who would hand you the secret code. Then, any form of secret code, like PGP, had been made illegal, so Bif and his friends were really risking their lives.

"We talked very low, for hours, with me only understanding the gist of the matter, but come dawn I was officially a member of The Plan."

"The Plan?"

"We adopted that Brother Jim crap as a code name for our own activities so that if someone overheard they wouldn't be able to guess what we were up to. Now Bif had formed some sort of a secret network, kind of like a 'hacker patrol' that was going to strike back when the trucks arrived to take us away. You got to believe that back then, hackers striking back against those guys sounded way ridiculous, but for some crazy reason, I believed that Bif knew what he was talking about, and that he was our best chance for escaping this situation alive."

"Hmm, clarify to our audience why you used the word 'alive'."

"Bif had found out through his network that cities all over the Eastern U.S. were having the same things happen to them. We didn't have phone service, newspapers, or anything coming into town that told us what was happening. If you watched TV, all you got was crap. Even the local station was showing nothing but those damned infomercials to prevent from going out of business. But Bif could get real news over his computer, which he had disguised to look like an old typewriter to prevent the SPA from nabbing it. Bif was learning about some real bad riots going on in Cleveland and Detroit. He even had some news about the trucks that were supposed to take us away. Well, it turns out that some of the trucks were actually being driven into large fenced-in areas where the cargo portions would be stacked on top of each other and the cab would unhook and drive off for its next load. As for jobs, only a small amount of those trucks would get driven into Michigan where they would drop off people to work at some real horrible slave labor jobs.

Bif said he learned that the population of Ohio was considered to be 'surplus' and that only those people who had skills were given real jobs. Of course, this was causing a lot of violence. And strange uniforms. It turns out that some of the European police who were being sent here to quell some of the riots were wearing a uniform adapted from a three-piece pin-striped suit, right down to a fake white boutonniere in the lapel. Of course, all us town folk had been forbidden to travel out of town, and this bought us time. They were working in a line running down the state, with our town having only three weeks 'til Judgement Day. Bif's contacts in Cleveland had given him all sorts of technical material to go on, and he was sure that we could get most of the town to escape into Kentucky, which still had an intact government, if we had a well timed plan."

"And the timing couldn't have been better."

"The three week deadline actually placed us on the date right after Halloween which was going to have a new moon! Bif had said that this advantage was important, and started describing how we were going to wear camouflage under our Halloween outfits and use the annual party as a diversion. The outfits were also going to help us move people out of town through a relay system. That is, one youngster would come up to our door wearing an outfit and hand it off to someone in the basement, who would take his place and leave the house with candy. He would then give some candy to the guard watching the end of the street with his infrared camcorder. The kid would then duck around back and put on another costume, one matching the next trick or treater coming up to our house. In this way we could cycle more kids into our house where we would have a leaf fort coming out into the woods out back. A lot of details to work out at the time. The key part of the plan was to pretend that we were happy townsfolk who were ignorant of our fate and happy to spend one last Halloween with friends and family. We even invited the head of the new real estate holding company to the costume party! Bif had also developed something called an EMP bomb which was a stick of dynamite wired into a large coil so that when the bomb went off, a powerful radio wave would shoot out and fry out the computers and handi-talkies our guests were using. Bif and his assistants had maps that showed where everything was located, and which wires had to be snipped and which radios had to be fried in order to throw them off. We decided that the Bell Tower going off at Midnight would be the signal for our first attack, and I was placed in charge of tracking down the chief security for the bad guys and knocking them out after the electrical grid into town was severed. As you now know, when we actually did go through with our Plan, things really got out of hand."

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Disconnect Notice
Possible Security Breach
Shutdown until further notice
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Thank you, thank you very much.

Eric Miller is a graduate student at Michigan State University where he studies the use of Computer Aided Design (CAD) in architectural and product design. Other academic interests include Artificial Life, Virtual Reality, and Cyberspace culture. Recreational interests include mountain biking and cross-country skiing in Michigan's beautiful forests, painting, and composing electronic music as well as writing fiction. "Microchips Never Rust" will be continued next issue.

millere@student.msu.edu

If you like *Quanta*, you may want to check out these other magazines, also produced and distributed electronically:

Cyberspace Vanguard

Contact: **cn577@cleveland.freenet.edu**

Cyberspace Vanguard is a new digest/newsletter, containing news and views from the science fiction universe. Send subscription requests, submissions, questions, and comments to **xx133@cleveland.freenet.edu** or **cn577@cleveland.freenet.edu**.

Inter*Text*

Contact: **intertext@etext.org**

Inter*Text* is the network fiction magazine devoted to the publication of quality fiction in all genres. It is published bi-monthly in both ASCII and PostScript editions. The magazine's editor is Jason Snell, who has written for *Quanta* and for Inter*Text*'s predecessor, *Athene*. Assistant editor is Geoff Duncan.

The PostScript laserprinter edition is the version of choice, and includes PostScript cover art. For a subscription (specify ASCII or PostScript), writer's guidelines, or to submit stories, mail Jason Snell at **jsnell@etext.org**. Inter*Text* is also available via anonymous ftp from **ftp.etext.org** (**/pub/Zines/Intertext**). If you plan on ftpingthe issues, you can be placed on a list that will notify you when each new issue appears – just mail your request to **intertext@etext.org**.

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Contact: **unitcirc@netcom.com**

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