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Looking Ahead

Daniel K. Appelquist and Norman S. Murray

Daniel K. Appelquist

The second issue of a magazine is often an acid test. The test is whether the magazine is viable, whether it can survive in the market it exists in. The problems facing Quanta were simple ones. Was there enough material out there? Were enough people interested? Did I even have enough time to produce another issue by my self-imposed December fifteenth deadline? I'm very glad to say that the answer to these questions is "Yes." I'll let Norman expound a bit on that in his section of this column. Whether I have enough time for this is another matter entirely, but aside from that, we've been able to produce a very good second issue.

We've made some progress in the production field as well. The title page for the PostScript version which gave everybody so much trouble last issue has been replaced by a kinder gentler one (thanks to the timely intervention of Derek Noonburg, thanks Derek).

So what's in this issue? Well we have a very good story by Christopher Kempke. Chris gave us "Going Places" last issue and he's come back with "The Rules of the Game." Some more of his material will (hopefully) be appearing in future issues including a possible sequel to "Going Places."

Faye Levine is one of the few writers that I've published whom I've actually met. "Dinner at Nestrosa's" is an excerpt from her novel *revolution*. I haven't yet had a chance to read it, but I wish her luck publishing it none the less. I'd like to think that Quanta could act as some sort of launching ground for authors.

Our first science article was donated by Craig Levin. Craig has also promised to donate more material in the future. He says he's working on an article concerning the recent Galileo probe. This might turn into a regular feature for Quanta.

Matthew Sorrels (Quanta technical director) has promised me a cyberpunk story for next issue, as has Jason Snell (Author of "Into Gray" from last issue. Jason has also written an article on writing Cyberpunk which will go into the next issue. I'd like to continue this trend by publishing more material from this exciting genre.

Looking ahead, I've been thinking of the sort of thing Quanta could eventually become. There are many paths it could take but I'd like to see it keep it's current format: a free journal distributed over the net for everyone to enjoy. Quanta has already been exhibited at one convention (Orycon) thanks to James Drew (author of "So That's Why the Call it the Big Apple" from last issue). Thanks to James, Quanta got its first exposure to non-netters. I'd like to start a subscription service for non-netters, but I really don't have the time or resources. I certainly can't afford to offer it free of charge. If anyone out there has ideas concerning this, drop me a line.

In fact, that's goes for any idea or comment you may have. I'd like to start publishing some reader letters, so if you have a comment on a story (good or bad), or just some issue you'd like to raise, send it over.

A fun idea might be to set up a party for Quanta subscribers at the next large science-fiction convention. World-Con, I believe, is going to be held in Europe next year. European subscribers are encouraged to gather in the name of Quanta, but unfortunately, I won't be able to make it. More realistically, I'd like to set up something at the American equivalent convention.

Well, that's about it for me. I give you my illustrious Editorial Assistant, Norman Murrray:

Norman S. Murray

Hi. I'm Norman Murray, and I've been known to swim more than 4 miles a day. I've also helped my friend, Dan Appelquist, produce the magazine you are currently reading.

Shortly after Dan posted his call for subscriptions and submissions around the world, I asked him if I could help out on Quanta. Now as our second issue is hitting the 'nets', I'm glad I did this.

Since the first issue, where we had fewer than 300 subscriptions, we now have over 500, from three continents, North America, Europe, and Australia and over ten countries. We've also seen an increase in the number of submissions that we're getting, although we can still use more of them.

I would like to thank all of you reading this, and especially all those who have sent submissions, for without you this magazine would not be possible.

Looking ahead, as is the purpose of this article, I see the hope of real space development in the, hopefully not too distant, future. The reason for this newfound hope is that for the first time since man's visits to the moon, America has a Presidentially defined goal to achieve. And with the recent launch of the Galileo probe, and the proximity of the launch of the Hubble Space Telescope, we are again embarking on an explorational mission.

In future issues, (I hope I can say that in the second issue), we should see some authors recurring, and, hopefully, the start of a serial or two. Our next issue will probably be distributed in mid-February.

So, until then have a good holiday season, enjoy this current issue and see you next year.

Triton:
A New Version of Ice Geology

Craig Levin

Although we did not get as good a view of Triton as we did of the moons of Saturn or Jupiter, the pictures that the world has received have shown that the surfaces of the ice worlds of the outer solar system cannot be pigeonholed and categorized, but studied as subjects in their own right. However, before 1986, certain types of ice-based surfaces had been noticed on the moons of Saturn and Jupiter; and it is with a short explanation of these that I begin this small article on Triton.

The major moons of Jupiter that are composed of ice are Callisto, Ganymede, and Europa. Callisto has a "classic" small-body surface – it is covered with craters of various sizes, at least at first glance. At a closer look, however, an observer can find numerous faults and ridges on that battered world. Ganymede is cratered as well, but it shows much evidence of internal activity – the large, light colored upwellings that cover the moon. Europa is perhaps one of the few worlds without craters; instead, its molten (read fluid H_2O) interior erases evidence of cratering by periodic fissure eruptions from the numerous linear features.

Saturn's ice moons, however, are much larger in number. Luckily, though, some of them are fundamentally the similar – variations on a fugue, if you will. For example, Rhea and Dione both have streaked surfaces – most probably the result of fluid water upwelling from the fractures of the crust. Meanwhile, Enceladus shows many prominent ice ridges, a result of more energetic ice volcanism. Also, its white surface bespeaks a geology that recycles the surface, rather than letting the meteorite impacts darken the surface. Tethys and Mimas show many small fault criss-crossing the surface. Finally, Iapetus has confused everyone by its extreme hemispherical differences – one icy light like the rest of the moons of Saturn, and one black as charcoal. Possibly there was an upwelling of carbonaceous ice from the deep core of Iapetus. Titan, while quite definitely large enough to have a very interesting surface, is shrouded in clouds; so it is rather regrettably obvious that I must skip this planet-sized moon.

Uranus's quadruplets look nothing like each other, aside from the cratering that all bodies in the solar system have suffered. Oberon, the outermost, shows some evidence of crater-filling volcanism, but none for fissure eruptions or faulting. Titania has the start of faulting and fissure eruptions, in addition to some crater-filling. Umbriel shows no evidence at all for an active geology. Ariel has a planet-wide system of fissure eruptions and faults. Finally and most extremely, Miranda shows almost all types of volcanism and tectonism – faults, fissure eruptions of both pure and carbonaceous ice, and compressional faults. About the only type of volcanism that it fails to have is what we associate with when we hear the word "volcano" – mountainous volcanism.

Finally, we come to Triton. As you may have expected, Triton has a geological "style" all its own. Using the pictures from the November Scientific American, I have noticed some features that could be caused by the moon's internal geological processes. The first, going from south to north, are the plumes covering the polar cap. These are probably "lava" (most likely carbonaceous ice) from local volcanos. The second is the polar cap itself, caused by volcanic outgassing. The third is the system of faults in the non-capped areas, probably the result of expansion of the core as the frozen crust trapped the heat. The fourth are the open, unmarked areas; caused by ice "lava flows" flooding lowlands and freezing. The fifth is the "cantaloupe" terrain that seems to cover the rest of the moon; this complex of hills and valleys could be the result of local volcanism. Much of the terrain is uncratered, which means that the moon is still active.

As far as is known, none of the ice worlds look completely alike. All have their own idiosyncrasies. The "pearls-on-a-string" theory of ice moon geology is utterly dead. Another matter left for consideration is that these moons are imperfectly mapped – some only have less than a hemisphere mapped. Perhaps the best thing for the study of ice moons are going to be the Galileo and Cassini rocket probes, as they will map the ice moons of Jupiter and Saturn completely.

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Craig Levin began to get involved in astronomy when, in second grade, he received H.A. Rey's "Find the Constellations" as a birthday present. He learned those few constellations visible from Chicago, and his interest remained at a low level until Halley's Comet pulled him out of his freshman high school doldrums. That January, he received his first telescope and started up again. As a high school junior, he had his first article published in the now-defunct Small Scope Observers' Association's newsletter, and by his senior year in high school was helping to establish the "Astronomical Newsletter," a now-defunct magazine based in Atlanta. At present, he is a physics major at Bradley University who intends to turn his first love, planetology, into his profession.

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The Rules of the Game

by Christopher Kempke

Silence enveloped Lirian, darkness pressed against her like a physical blanket that soothed her muscles and clearing her mind. Relief flooded across her. She had not been sure that she could even get here.

The darkness was not complete. Occasionally, sharp lines of blood-red brilliance pierced it, sometimes straight and stretching forever from side to side, more often spiraling away toward some goal that could be seen only as a terminal dot of star-like white. Such apparitions appeared momentarily, and then were gone. Hours passed as Lirian floated among them and slept.

She awoke later feeling better, ready for the journey to end. She called out with her mind, and one of the spiraling red passages appeared before her. Unlike the others, she concentrated on this one, and it grew until it encompassed her. As she passed down it she wondered, as she always did, if she was spinning. The spiral made it appear so, but without reference points there was no certain way to tell.

The white star at the terminus of the spiral grew, faster and faster until it became her entire universe, and she passed through into the light. The magical gateway closed tightly behind her.

A brilliant sun shone warmly on her face. At last, she stood on the parched desert of Game. Memories of this place flooded back to her from her days at the School. She remembered the battles fought here for the great trophies, and the other, illicit ones that were played out after hours. The School must have known that its students came here at night, but at the time it had seemed a great adventure. Especially, she remembered the time when she had come to Game, and found that not apprentices, but full-fledged masters were her opponents.

She had almost won that time, surprising herself, and was even more surprised when the single wizard who had beaten her showed up at the School to talk to her.

"You show a great deal of talent," he had said. "No apprentice has ever done so well before in Game with masters."

She had been proud; even more so when the wizard made her his apprentice. It was an honor that she should have been years from achieving, but the School acknowledged her feat and gave its blessing. She stayed with Rosomar for many years, and learned the perfection of her art from him. The training had been hard, but after the first few months he was no longer so much a teacher to her as a friend. Her magical ability expanded faster than it ever had before. In the end, perhaps, she was a greater wizard than he was, but he was experienced where she was not, and at the end of her apprenticeship she had listened closely to his words.

"For all mages of great power there comes a time when their power fades. Once simple spells become complex and difficult; even when you are sure that the motions are right, the magic will inexplicably fail. This is a dangerous time, for most mages who reach it forever lose their power. But when it happens to you, as it did to me, remember this: retreat to places and situations familiar to you. Do not give up, and always remain confident that your abilities will return. If they do not, you are unsuited for any other occupations– it has taken you too long to learn magic. But if they do, you will be more powerful than you have been before, a master among masters."

For seven years in the wars, she remembered the words, and planned, even as she became one of the most feared combat mages of her day. When at last her spells had begun to fail her, Lirian sought the place most comfortable to her, the place of childhood memories. She returned to Game.

Game was a tiny world, watched closely by whatever gods there were that still dealt in men's affairs. Game overlapped upon itself, for a mage could walk in a straight line and return to his starting point in about four hours. Spaced in a circle, about four miles apart, were seven stone towers, each three stories high. The uppermost floor of each held food and water for the participants. Traditionally called citadels, the first seven mages to arrive in Game appeared in them, one mage to each tower.

Between the towers were small tufts of various terrains, including hills, forests, and deserts. The eighth mage arrived in the middle of the circle, in a small desert. The eighth and final player was in the worst position of them all, for he had neither the food nor protection of the towers. Usually, this mage had to make the first move, as the others waited calmly in their citadels.

The rules were simple. The last mage on Game won. Injury was impossible, but the gods watched closely. Any action that *would* have resulted in death to a player caused that mage to vanish from Game, otherwise unharmed. It was thus a perfect place for apprentices to try out potentially lethal spells in attack situations, without fearing for their own lives.

It was also, Lirian hoped, the perfect place for her to regain her spells. She looked around and saw only desert and the surrounding hills. *I am the eighth,* she thought. It depressed her for a moment, until she remembered that she was not here to win, only to play. In fact, the challenge would probably help.

She set out across the desert, which quickly gave way to hills hiding the citadels from view. Lirian knew the way, however, and within an hour she lay flat on her stomach at the top of a small hill, looking down on a stone tower.

The structure was not impressive, about fifteen feet in diameter and maybe thirty high. Most of its interior space was taken up by the spiral staircase that ran steeply up the inside. However, it was a place of both concealment and protection for a mage inside, and its magically supplied food and water made it invaluable if a game took a long time. Sometimes, a game took weeks, but more often only a few hours determined a winner– in these cases, the food was of minimal importance.

She waited, and within a few minutes a man appeared at the top of the tower, scanning the horizon in all directions. She had not entered an apprentice's game; his robes were the deep blue of a full wizard.

Sliding down to insure that she was not in his view, she pulled a fallen branch toward her and began to work. Quickly, she stripped the bark from in with a small knife, and pulled off some splinters for use later. Then she quietly spoke a few words, made the requisite gestures, and passed her hands rapidly over the limb.

Nothing happened, and she cursed silently to herself. Her power was ebbing even here. A few days ago, she had practiced this spell, and it had worked perfectly. Forcing patience, she began again. This time, the spell triggered, and the limb stretched and bent, curving into the familiar shape of a longbow. Not letting the spell die, she reformed the splinters she had saved earlier until she had a small pile of arrows. A bowstring from the same pouch that had produced the knife finished the weapon, and she lifted it to her shoulder and pulled herself over the hilltop again.

Hidden by a bush, she nocked an arrow and waited. Most people in her profession avoided the use of physical weapons, but Lirian had practiced the bow for years, knowing that her spells would one day fail her. The training would now pay off.

Eventually, the man reappeared. Lifting herself slightly, she took careful aim. She trusted her archery skills more than she trusted her magical ones, but she wasn't going to give the unfamiliar mage warning by missing. When he stopped to survey his surroundings, she drew back the bowstring and fired.

The arrow struck her opponent full in the throat, and he clutched fiercely at it for a few seconds before toppling from the citadel to the ground. Lirian, a lifelong veteran of combat, did not feel any pity for him, only relief that she had overcome this first obstacle. It was only when she had to step over the body of the mage that it struck her that he was really dead. Frowning, she dragged the body with her into the citadel, then checked him over carefully. This was no illusion– the mage was real, and he was dead. The blood still trickling from his neck was red, warm, and human.

Lirian pulled the knife from her pouch, and ran it across her palm. She felt pain, and a thin red line of blood confirmed the injury. She was no more protected than the other mage had been. Death should have been impossible on Game. The rules had changed, and a man had died because he didn't know. Lirian suddenly felt very afraid; only chance had taken him instead of her. Slowly, carefully, she attempted to cast the spell that would pull her from Game to another world, but it failed pitifully, and she knew that she didn't have the strength to keep trying the difficult incantation.

Leaving the body, she climbed to the top of the tower and looked out. She saw no one, but she knew that was meaningless. Still, her anxiety subsided slightly. She looked around, and saw the expected casks of water and chests of preserved meats and breads. Putting aside her fears for a few minutes, she ate and drank; she might have to stay here a long time.

When she had finished, she slung the bow over her shoulders, took some water and jerky, and left the tower at a slow walk, constantly looking from side to side. Her combat reflexes were back, and she was very aware that her life was in danger. Unconsciously, her feet began to step more carefully, and the sound of her movement died to a whisper. It took her almost three hours to cover the four miles to the next tower, but when she reached it she was sure that no one was following or watching her.

The citadel was apparently deserted, but she approached carefully. She considered cloaking herself in an invisibility spell, but the power drain if the spell failed might alert others to her presence like a beacon. So she crept forward silent and unseen by human means, and came to the base of the tower unharmed. Slipping inside, she immediately saw why.

A sorceress lay at the bottom of the stairs, so badly burned that her sex was distinguishable only by the bent four-pointed emblem that she wore. The rest of the room was scorched as well, but the damage ended in a sharp line on the stairs as they approached the next level. If she had had any doubts previously, the line dispelled them; the fire had not been natural.

Lirian instantly became cautious again. There was no sign that the wizard who had caused this was still around, but the fire would have destroyed most of the easily read traces. Chancing a spell, she tried to cast out with her mind, seeking another living being. The power would not flow; she gave up the effort with an inaudible sigh. Her spells were less reliable now than they had been even a few days ago.

She took the stairs to the top floor of the tower, and cautiously peered over. About a mile away, she saw a man walking in the direction of a tower she had not yet visited. His pace was slow, and he seemed old or crippled, though he had proven himself to be a threat. Descending the staircase again, Lirian set off in quiet pursuit.

Lirian had been on Game dozens of times, for hundreds of hours. In all that time, it had always been hot and sunny. Now, however, dark clouds were gathering and building into thunderheads. In a few minutes, the sun was blocked and Game was cool. The occasional sound of thunder grew gradually, and helped hide the sound of her passage.

Within forty minutes she had the man in sight. Carefully keeping her self out of view, she approached. His robes were bedraggled, and he walked with a stoop as if he were ill. Once though, he turned his head to look into the forest, and Lirian got a good look at his face– a face she recognized.

"Rosomar!" she shouted, and the old man turned back to look at her. Recognition stirred in his face, the stoop disappeared. "Lirian!"

The two mages closed the distance between each other, and Rosomar gave her a gentle hug. His face became years younger, but whether it was an illusion that he now wore, or one which he had dropped, Lirian did not know. The younger face became serious.

"You know that people can die now on Game?" He looked at her, his eyes showing the same confusion hers had held.

"Yes," she said softly. "I killed a man earlier."

"I have killed as well. For real. It is the first time." Lirian remembered her first kill. It had not been easy for her, either. Rosomar had never been a combat mage– his skills had always been used in teaching and tricks. The wars held no glory for him; he saw every slain man or woman as a potential apprentice wasted.

"So what do we do?" she said, not really changing the subject.

"We leave Game as soon as possible. It's too dangerous to be here, especially if not everyone knows they can be killed. Some might enjoy the challenge anyway."

Most of them would, Lirian thought, but she did not say it. Instead: "Take me with you. My magic isn't good enough right now to remove a toad from Game, much less myself."

Rosomar looked her over carefully. "So it has happened to you at last. Don't despair. It might come back."

They were not exactly the words she wanted to hear, but Rosomar managed to make them sound comforting. He lifted his arms to the sky, brought them down, and began a soft chant. The words were melodious, and full of power. Even Lirian's diminished powersense could feel the energy flowing from his spell. The soft enfolding darkness fell about them– and shattered.

The look of surprise on Rosomar's face made the slight jolt worthwhile, but Lirian didn't understand, and told him so.

"We can't leave," he said unsteadilly. "They won't let us."

"They?" she asked.

"I don't know. The gods, probably. Maybe just a powerful mage. Something is keeping us here."

"Then we're trapped?" There was an edge of fear to her voice. Her absolute faith in Rosomar's power had been shattered with his spell, and with it went her confidence.

"Quite probably. At least for the time being." He paused, considering. "We should find the others and warn them of their danger." He spoke uncertainly, as if he wanted her to disagree.

She didn't. There was nowhere else for her to go. They might as well attempt some good while they were here. Together, they set off for the next tower.

A few heavy drops of rain fell, then stopped, then the storm was upon them. Lirian succeeded in putting up a simple spell to keep the rain off them, but even so, their footing was unsure. Within minutes, vision had dropped to a few feet, and the two mages crawled along at a snail's pace. After three hours, Rosomar stopped.

"We may have missed the citadel in the rain. Maybe we should stay here until it lets up."

Rosomar dried out a small area, and Lirian extended her spell over it. The two of them lay down and waited for the storm to end.

The heavy rain was a featureless grey, and although the water would not run through their protected zone, it washed and splashed against the non-physical wall they had erected, leaving drops and rivulets in the air, muddy streams carrying sand and leaves on the ground. The sound drowned out all attempts at conversation between the two mages. Once, a tree fell and they had to move their haven a few feet further away. From time to time lightning filled the sky, and they could see the forest around them, and the thousands of raindrops, frozen in the air for a moment by the sudden light.

It took almost four hours for the rain to let up enough to allow travel. Rosomar and Lirian slept lightly for a time, then rose and started moving again. Soon it was dry enough that Lirian could recognize their position, and a few minutes travel brought them in sight of the next tower.

A blast of flame from the top of the citadel told them that it was still occupied. Rosomar shouted loudly "Stop that! We need to talk! You are not protected!"

The flame did not return, and the two mages approached. A woman appeared on the top of the tower, hands at her side, waiting. Not until they had covered half the distance to the citadel did she move. Both mages saw the motion begin, and began protective spells, but Rosomar's went up a split second too late. He spun in wild pain for a few seconds before the flames consumed him completely.

Lirian screamed a curse that would have gotten her expelled from the School, but it was not as strong as the anger she felt. "He came to talk, and you killed him!" She was angry and grief-stricken, but not stupid enough to let her own defense down. When the second blast struck her, she felt the protective spell weaken, and knew it couldn't survive another. Quickly, while the flames still gave her cover, she fitted an arrow to her bow and let it fly.

The wet bowstring caused the arrow to stray from its mark, but not by enough to save the sorceress in the tower. She took the arrow in her left arm, destroying the spell she had just begun, and Lirian's second struck true. The woman crumpled.

Lirian turned to examine Rosomar; only charred ashes remained. The rain was washing these away as well. Choking, she said a brief eulogy for him, then climbed the tower.

The sorceress was still alive, though barely so. Certainly she was no longer capable of casting spells, and carried no visible weapons. Lirian knelt at her side when she began to speak.

"I had to do it, you know. He won't let us leave until only one is left. I tried to kill you, and failed. But I saved you the pain of killing your companion yourself."

"He?" Lirian asked, ignoring the rest of the woman's statement. "Who won't let us leave?"

"You don't know, then? I'll tell you. Maybe you can escape. I didn't have the power. Gruenfeld is here. He is one of the participants."

Lirian's half-forgotten fear returned. "Gruenfeld? The god? He's here on Game?"

The sorceress looked directly at her. "Gruenfeld is here. There are no gods, though, just a man who has learned the limits of his power. But he is greater than either of us. He cannot be killed, and absolutely controls the weather of Game. He forbids us from leaving, and watches us kill one another for his own amusement. He can be the only winner of this game."

Lirian's anger had abated considerably. "Then I won't play by his rules, will I?" The question was more to herself than the sorceress, but the wounded woman smiled anyhow. Lirian pulled the arrow from her arm and began a healing spell. It failed twice, but she kept trying, and eventually the blood flow stopped. The sorceress's other wound presented less difficulty.

"It will take a while before you can cast spells again," Lirian commented. "There's food and water here. When you can, heal yourself, but don't come after me." She didn't add what she was thinking. *I'll be dead by then anyway.*

Lirian descended the tower without looking back. She was not at all sure that the sorceress would live, and even less sure that she cared. Placing her bow over her shoulder, she set off toward the next citadel, already knowing what she would find there.

She was not disappointed. As she came over a small hill, she saw the tower lying in ruins, the bodies of two men lying in the rubble. *That makes seven,* she thought. *And Gruenfeld is eight. All the players have made their moves.* A few seconds later, the god himself strode around the tower.

"Come on down!" he shouted. "No point in prolonging this game any longer than we have to, is there?" His voice was firm and sure, and he looked directly at her as he spoke. The voice carried power, and she took a step toward him before breaking the spell. Then she dropped and rolled.

The blast she had expected did not come. Gruenfeld laughed loudly, with a touch of malice. Lirian knocked an arrow and fired, and had the next one on the bow before the first had traveled half the distance to the god.

Gruenfeld brought his arm up in a single gesture of defiance, and both arrows vanished, followed by the bow. "No," he said. "I do not choose to die today." His next gesture almost caught Lirian by surprise, but at the last second she brought up a protective spell and leapt to the side. The spell failed, but she was far enough away when the flames struck that she received only minor burns.

The god was undaunted. "Very impressive spell you cast," he mocked. "Could you show me how to do it some time?" Suddenly, he took Lirian's blast full in the chest. She relaxed slightly, then screamed in pain as a hail of small sharp spikes went through her left leg.

"Silly apprentice," the god said calmly. "Do you think such as me would even notice your small effort? You do not know much of gods. I shall endeavor to teach you." He brought his hands up, again and again, and Lirian found herself unable to do anything but dodge and try to defend. Her spells failed her altogether, and she could not walk on her leg. Eventually, she fell and could not get up. The god vanished, and appeared behind her.

"This game has gone on long enough. I declare myself the winner." He moved his hands like lightning; Lirian could hardly have moved in time if she had been uninjured. Fire and pain became her world. Darkness descended, but it was broken by thoughts and tiny spots of light.

A god is nothing but a man who knows the limits of his power. Lirian knew her own limits. They had been set by the rules of the sorcery she practiced, reinforced by the instruction of her teacher. *Knows the limits of his own power.* The rules of magic could not change. Gruenfeld's power could not exist; all the laws of power forbade it. *Then why have I lost my spells?*

She knew. With a sudden absolute certainty, she knew where her power had gone. She had learned magic until she thought she had reached its limits. Any more would be impossible, too powerful, forbidden by the rules of the game. But the rules were *wrong.* Since Gruenfeld existed, the power must exist. Rosomar had given her a hint of it, once: *If your magic comes back, you will be a more powerful mage than ever before.* But Rosomar hadn't known. He had merely allowed a slight increase in ability by altering his rules.

Lirian eliminated hers.

In the half of a second that it had taken for realization to come, Gruenfeld's magic had destroyed most of her body. She had no arms, no legs, nothing with which to cast spells. It didn't matter. The magic flowed free, power coursing through her mind like water through a broken dam. Her body repaired itself, and she gathered and magnified Gruenfeld's fire, turning it back upon the unsuspecting god. In a moment he was just a man, if he had ever been anything else. His power was enormous, but his mind could not conceive of another living being matching it. Unready for a response, Gruenfeld did not even try to defend against her. In another moment, he ceased to exist.

Game shook with Lirian's magic as she brought it back under control, and she finally realized her full power. Everything lay bare to her, every tree and citadel on Game, as well as the other worlds which lay outside. Reaching out with her mind, she located the sorceress on the tower, and healed her completely. There was no reason for hostility any longer– Rosomar was dead beyond even Lirian's ability to bring him back; the sorceress still had a chance at life. "Go home," Lirian whispered kindly, and knew that the sorceress heard her across the distance. "Gruenfeld is dead."

Then she turned her mind to Game. At her whim, a soft white snow began to fall, covering the carnage of the last few hours. It would take a lot of work to restore Game to what it had been.

Lirian knew that she could do it. Restoring worlds was, after all, the work of a goddess.

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Interference

by Bruce Altner

I am slowly going bananas in this suffocating little room. "Let us out! Let us out! Let us out!" shriek the blades of the battered fan, clanking rhythmically against their prison of dented wire and trying in vain to stir up a breeze in the soupy air. Izzy Arnold's boom box blasts out an endless stream of chicken-shit music from the concrete stoop five floors below and a bunch of snot-nosed kids are playing noisily in the vacant lot across the street. No wonder I'm accomplishing *el zilcho* on the dissertation today. The integrals don't converge, the model is crude, I'm sick to death of it and it's all a pile of crap anyway. I mean, who gives a *damn* about the connection between convective dredge-up and stellar abundance anomalies? Not me, that's for sure, and it's *my* dissertation. Izzy, Izzy, you don't know how close to death you are at this moment, you meathead.

It's useless. I open my third and last can of Coors and go to the window, which is stuck open almost halfway by layer upon layer of dull green paint. Perhaps if I try hard enough I can conjure up an icy mountain stream or a pine forest, deep, cool, and silent except for the muted sound of my passage along the thick carpet of needles, the fragrance of resin. But no such luck. Across the street is a small abandoned lot, strewn with large boulders and chunks of concrete, broken glass and weeds. My fantasy pine glade is nothing but a few scraggly trees that have somehow managed to maintain a foothold in the packed, sandy soil, and the rising currents of hot air bring to my nostrils the mingled aromas of frying onions and uncollected garbage.

Mercifully, the cacaphonous squawkings from Izzy's stereo fade as he and his friends boogey on down the sidewalk toward the corner delicatessen, where they will probably hang out until dinnertime. As the raucous noise fades so does some of my irritation, and even the kids playing their stupid kids' games among the rocks and broken beer bottles don't annoy me as much as they did just a few moments ago. It's not their fault that this seedy lot is the closest thing to a playground that they have. Surprised, I find myself humming a few bars from Cat Stevens' *Where Do the Children Play?* Well, I was a bratty kid myself, once upon a time. If I try very hard I can recall some pleasant moments from my early years—it wasn't all fighting with my sister and brother, and hating school, and being told you shouldn't do this and you shouldn't do that and you'd better buckle down or you'll never go to college and why are you so moody, Jackie my boy? But mostly it *was* those things, and feeling angry and misunderstood. Well, here I am, stuck in this lousy sweatbox with no more beer in the refrigerator, with six years of my life spent studying physics so that I can author some useless treatise on stellar evolution (which no one will ever read), and across the street there are these kids who don't know a lick about mixing length theory or roundoff error, who don't seem to be affected by the heat and who, dammit, seem to be having a hell of a lot more fun than I ever had as a kid. With a shock of honesty, I realize that I am envious. From my lofty perch five floors above and twenty years beyond them I view the world in a light so totally alien to theirs that I may as well be from another planet. Why *are* you so moody, Jack?

Finally, the heat gets to me and I must brave the street to fetch another six-pack. The elevator deposits me in the lobby, cavernous and dimly lit, smelling faintly of cats and laundry soap. I linger by my mailbox, scanning the junk mail and savoring a last moment of coolness—but if I hang around too long I'll most likely run into Mrs. Gunderson. I am in no mood today to suffer her inexhaustible supply of complaints and sad tribulations.

Leaving the building, I notice that there are eight or ten kids in the lot across the street, each perched atop one of the many large boulders scattered among the weeds. I recognize some of them from my walks through the neighborhood. The girl on the largest boulder is Hector Muñoz's ten year old, Ana. She has long, dark hair and a pretty, though serious, no-nonsense face. Hector had come to repair a leak in the kitchen plumbing not too long ago and he had brought her along. "Would you like some milk and cookies while your father works on the faucet?" I had offered, just trying to be nice, but I was answered with a hard, unsmiling look. "Ana is a better plumber than I am," Hector had said, winking conspiratorially, but from her reaction I knew that I had just been dismissed as another dumb adult who probably thought that girls should stay at home and play with dolls and learn how to sew.

These kids are putting an enormous amount of energy into their game, whatever it is, wailing like the Banshee herself and waving sticks through the torpid air. The sight stops me in momentary amazement. One of them sees me and calls out to the others—an intruder, a spy in the camp! But no, what's this? Expecting hostile faces, I am surprised when some of the youngsters laugh and wave. Two boys clamber down from their boulders and come running over. I recognize them now as the Peterson twins from apartment 5-E. I have played handball with their father once or twice, though you could hardly call us friends. One of them looks up at me, squinting in the harsh sunlight. "Could you be Gordon the Terrible?" he pleads. "Could you?" Is he really asking me to join their game? This is absurd.

"Gordon who?" I laugh, playing along for the moment.

"Gordon Samatar!" pipes in the other, mock fear in his voice. "Gordon the Terrible, we call him. He's the bad guy, the leader of the Black Knights!"

Again I surprise myself. Instead of immediately refusing, telling them I'm too busy with this or that, I hesitate. This is a mistake, for kids are experts at the game of badgering weak-willed adults. "It's pretty hot out here," I offer lamely.

One of the boys (I don't remember their names and can't tell them apart anyway) points to a large, soot-blackened boulder in the slightly elevated southern corner of the lot, well separated from the other rocks and in the partial shade of a few scrub oak. "That's his horse," he insists, brushing away my objection. "All you gotta do is sit on that rock. Please!"

Well, why not? All I had really wanted was relief from the closeness of my four walls. The work on the dissertation was going nowhere anyway, and the trip to the deli for beer was probably just an excuse to get out and move around. Did I really want to play Darth Vader in silly a kids' game, though? Feeling just a little dumb I say, "Okay, boys, I guess I have a few minutes."

"No! We don't want him. He'll ruin the game!" Ana Muñoz jumps down from her boulder and rushes over to us, her inky black hair streaming behind her as she runs, her angry eyes blazing with unexpected fury. Why does this girl hate me so? Just because I offered her cookies, once upon a time? It is obviously time for me to leave.

"Ana, shut up!" says her brother, Luís, who has come running after her. He is somewhat younger than his sister but slightly taller. "Mister, don't pay any attention to her. Just 'cause she's the queen when we play she thinks she's the boss all the time. No way, José."

The last thing I want is to be in the middle of a bunch of bickering kids, especially as the focus of their disagreement. The girl is right, though—I am already ruining their game. Like the scientist who wants only to observe nature, but who must always interact with it in order to do so, all I had done was stop for a moment to watch and now here I am in the thick of it. I start to back away, ignorant of the crimes I am guilty of in that child's eyes. But suddenly I am overcome by a long-forgotten bitterness, and the wishy-washy texture of my retreat begins to rankle.

"Just how will I ruin your game, Ana?" I demand. "Some of your friends seem to want me in it."

A puzzled expression steals across her face. She looks at me more carefully, as if she were seeing me for the first time. "Maybe you *would* make a good Gordon Samatar," she says, but there is a note of disbelief in her voice. After a moment she turns to the others, her mind made up. "Go to your horses, all of you," she commands, and they obey, running back to their rocks and mounting them in elaborate pantomime. So, she's going to let me play in their stupid game after all. Lucky me. See Jack play, see Ana scowl, see funny funny Sally. She turns back to me and points to the large boulder under the oak trees. "That is Samatar's horse, the Black Stallion. The other horses fear him almost as much as we fear the Destroyer himself."

"It just looks like a big rock to me," I say, realizing too late that if I am going to continue this silliness I should really play along. "Anyway, what are the rules of this game? What's so evil about this Gor-Don-the-Ter-Rib-Bull?" I speak the villain's name in tones of exaggerated awe and dread. Get into the spirit of the thing, Jack.

Her eyes narrow to tiny slits. "I guess I was right about you the first time," she says. There is a long, uncomfortable pause, but Ana eventually decides that she is willing to tolerate my stupidity for the sake of having a villain in the game and avoiding another rebellion against her authority. "If you *pretend* that it's a horse, it will *be* a horse," she snaps, impatient at the need to point out the obvious to morons. "There are no rules. Once you mount the Black Stallion you will know all you need to know—all your questions about Gordon Samatar will be answered." She turns away, moving with unquestionable dignity toward her "horse," an orange and white block of sandstone. She mounts in one swift, fluid motion and raises her hand high in the air. "Let the game begin!"

• • •

I am sitting on a rock—a large black boulder with a natural saddle-like depression. It is still hot but the sun is noticeably lower in the sky and is no longer so fierce. This is a very boring game, so far. Ana had said my questions would be answered when I "mount the Black Stallion," but to date not a whole lot has happened. Do I have to wait for Tinkerbell to come along and sprinkle pixie dust on me? Pretend, she had said, pretend. Well, that's something I haven't done for a very long time.

From my slightly elevated position the kids look farther away than they really are. The shrill screams of their earlier play are gone; they speak in hushed whispers if they speak at all. I can now see that Ana's rock is at the head of a wedge-shaped formation pointing more or less toward this hill. They are all bouncing about on their rocks and have been for some time; from this I gather that the whole formation is supposed to be in motion. Perhaps I am being attacked. This goes on a while longer, a real action game. What am I *doing* here? Wasn't I on my way to get another six-pack?

My head is feeling very heavy with the heat and the brew. More minutes pass and I look down at my watch to check the time. *Sunlight reflects softly green-gold through the leaves on the burnished metal of my sword. Heads will roll at the touch of this blade before this day is done, I swear it. Anoj́as snorts his impatience and digs at the earth with his great hooves. I lean forward slightly in the saddle to quiet him…* and I clutch frantically at the rock's rough surface, fighting the sudden vertigo and disorientation. The coolness of the boulder reassures me; it is just a rock, solid, massive and immobile, not a prancing, wild-blooded stallion. But just for a moment there, a flicker of …, something. Anoj́as? The horse's name is Anoj́as. How do I know that?

Ana signals and the kids stop their ludicrous rock bouncing act. *Across the distance I hear one of them call out softly, "Whoa, boy!" Lenora dismounts and calls to her lieutenant. There they confer long moments, examining the ground, scanning the low hills, testing the wind. From the mixture of colors among the horse soldier's garments I deduce that up to three separate villages have united under her in this foolish attempt to oppose me. Why do you hesitate, Lenora? What does that sixth sense of yours tell you I have up my sleeve? But she is no fool, this one they call Queen; she will not ride into my trap.*

I can see now that this little rebellion may not be as simple to stamp out as the others have been. Many of my own soldiers will die today before I have her head on the victory pole, but I care not how many—a thousand would be a small price to pay for the joy of watching that head shrivel in the sun. I draw my sword from its scabbard… but again the ground leaps toward me and I tumble from my perch, the horrid image of Ana's dried up little prune face still before my eyes. The moment of dizziness passes, leaving me more confused than injured.

It's just a game, I tell myself, just a kid's game. But it all seems so real! By rights, I should be scared to death, but a tingle of excitement overrides the fear and I thrill to the vividness of what I've just experienced. Violent? Yes! Evil? You bet—Gordon "the Terrible" is definitely well-named. I should know, for I see into him, I *am* him. Sure, somebody's got to play the heavy, that doesn't bother me. What matters most is that I haven't felt this free in a long time, so close to finding something I thought I'd lost forever. Why haven't I noticed before the intensity of colors around me, the brilliant green of leaves against the deep blue sky, the dazzling white clouds.

How can this be happening, I wonder. But then, not really wanting or needing explanations, I climb back onto Anoj́as, eagerly anticipating the continuation of the game, the transformation of an inert and shapeless stone into a magnificent and powerful beast, so marvelously alive. *I see Lenora and her soldiers advancing up the hill on foot, swords poised and ready. They are almost to the top now, the moment of truth is near. Lenora…* no, wait, it is Ana, it is just Ana …, and the flashing swords are merely branches in the hands of children. Come on, Jack, *pretend!* Suddenly, I become aware of a disturbance at my back and I turn, startled. It's Izzy and his friends, taking a shortcut through the lot back to the apartment building.

"Hey, Jack, how ya doin', man?" Izzy yells, waving as he passes. He thoughtfully cranks the volume of his stereo way up so that I can jive right along with him and his boys. Two of the kids break off from Ana's troop at his call to come home for dinner.

As the wake of Izzy's passing subsides, I become aware that my rear end hurts a great deal from sitting too long on the cold and unyielding stone. There is a momentary feeling of loss as I realize that the game is over. So soon? The rest of the kids begin to drift away, each to his or her own home and family situation, their own unique heaven or hell. The Peterson twins shout a friendly goodbye and I am surprised that there is no hint of rancor in their cheery faces, no accusation that I have ruined their game.

It is time for me to leave also, yet I feel a need to linger a few moments more, to look around one last time, as if to check that nothing important is left behind. Something does seem to be missing, though I can't put a name to it. Ana and Luís walk with me down the hill, along the shortcut back to the building. Broken beer bottles and crushed cigarette packages litter the rutted path and point the way, the crumbs of modern day Hansels and Gretls. Luís shows me the scar on his knee where five stitches had been needed to repair the damage from a fall among the bottles. "Teresa Marguiles pushed me," he says, then adds proudly, "and you shoulda seen the job Ana did on her!" and I am glad for them that, despite their bickering, they are close to each other.

There is nothing of the earlier animosity in Ana's face as she and Luís wave goodbye and enter the building. If nothing else, there is now one less person in the world who hates me, and for me that's a significant accomplishment. But actually, there is more, lots more. For the briefest of moments there had been a tunnel, and through that tunnel I had glimpsed something of myself. Obvious, but never seen so clearly before, it is something that I think helps me to understand the anger. That's a strong dose of insight for one afternoon and it might take a long while for me to understand what it all really means.

I sit down on the front steps, grateful for the dinner-time lull in the diurnal rhythm of life that now gives me a few moments for quiet reflection. A gentle breeze has kicked up and it feels good on my neck, cool and soft. Orange sunlight swirls in rainbow ribbons on the surface of a curbside puddle and I am aware of the beauty within its ugliness. "It's just interference within the layers of oil floating on the surface," I might have said yesterday, neatly wrapping it up, cataloging my experiences to fit on the ordered shelves of my rational world. Tonight, I feel differently.

Interference – in-ter-fear-ence – I roll the word over and over on my tongue like a mantra, until it becomes more than just a label. Like me, the sunlight is unable to pass through without joining the game—it has no choice but to interact with the world within and around it.

Speaking of interacting with the world, what I'd better do is get on down to the deli before it closes and pick up something for my own dinner. Now that it's cooled down a little, maybe I can get some work done on the dissertation.

Altner received his PhD in physics last year (Rutgers University), and the story presented above was written in the early stages of his dissertation work. He is now an astrophysicist at Goddard Space Flight Center (Greenbelt, MD), working on projects involving the International Ultraviolet Explorer and the High Resolution Spectrograph (which is one of the six scientific instruments to fly on the Hubble Space Telescope, to be launched at the end of March, 1990). For relaxation he writes, draws silly cartoons (his favorite comic strip is Bill Waterson's "Calvin and Hobbes"), swims, and plays ice hockey and tennis. He lives with his wife, who also writes fiction, a worthless cat and a frisbee-loving dog, in suburban MD.

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Dinner At Nestrosa's

by Faye Levine

Seated alone at his table in the restaurant, Fleet Captain Quarq sipped at his water as his eyes scanned the menu. Nestrosa's was a classy place, with all-real, classy food and classy patrons, but although being a senior War Council member earned him the right to dine there, Quarq did not feel the part of a classy guy.

He was not sure why he had come that evening. True, he loved the pure, culinary enjoyment and almost primitive appeal that could only come from attacking a juicy, fleshy steak of real meat from some poor dead herd animal slaughtered somewhere on the wide ranges of Planet Druusca, but tonight he for some reason found himself yearning to be dressed in his battered fatigues with his feet up on the table, enjoying a huge malt in a greasy fast food joint.

"Would you care to order now, sir?" said a cultured voice at his side. Coming out of his thoughts, he saw one of the waiters standing patiently at his table, pen and order pad at the ready.

"Sure," he replied. "I'll have the steak."

"And would you like anything to drink, sir?"

The captain was tempted to ask for a malt, just to see what the waiter's reaction would be, then changed his mind and replied, "Give me a twelve-year, straight up, no ice."

"Very good, sir," said the waiter. He picked up the menu and headed for the kitchen.

Quarq leaned back in his chair and stared out one of Nestrosa's huge view windows. It overlooked the surrounding area of the Capitol District, an area filled with subtly-lit theaters, hotels, business towers, and government offices. Off to one side, the evening lights sparkled on the waters of the local reservoir.

Gazing a little farther, the captain's eyes skirted the fringes of the wealthy sector, where the moderately affluent, including himself, made their homes. He lived in a moderately-sized, comfortable building, in the least elaborate, most standard apartment he could find, which was still too large and too done up for his tastes. His eyes traveled still farther into the distance, where he could make out the shrinking band of middle class neighborhoods he had come from. He would have rather lived there, among familiar faces and places, but his rank forced him to remain within a specified radius of the Imperial Grounds. He would have even almost preferred standard officer's quarters on the local Space Navy base to his current residence, but such uncouth behavior was simply not permitted from a Fleet Captain.

His peers never could quite grasp his discomfort with high society; they wondered why a man with his size paycheck was living in such "humble" accommodations and eating standard synthetic food when he could very easily afford much more. As far as they were concerned, they, as well as he, had earned the right to the good life and all of its privileges.

What it all amounted to in the end was that Quarq did not care for frivolity. He saw no need to invest in twenty- year-old fashion model girlfriends, art he had no appreciation for, fancy stocks, top-level credit cards, designer clothes, and ultra-luxury hovercars (his own was a standard ten-year-old with a peeling paint job and distressed landing gear; his superior made him park it out of sight in order to avoid terminal embarrassment). There was only one frivolous activity he partook in, and that was the upkeep of his smoking habit.

He would without a second thought spend a minimum of 12,000 firas for a dozen smoke sticks, imported from one of the other planets in the Empire. That was for merchandise of the lowest standard of quality, considered ordinary cigarettes on their world of origin. His real passion, however, was found in the fragrant leaves of "his" brand, one of superior taste and quality, hand rolled and extra long. For this rarely-imported pleasure he would pay anywhere from 5000 to 10,000 firas a shot, depending on whether he obtained them on the market, by special order, or by somewhat more unorthodox means. He was rarely short on supply; he had good connections. Everyone else he knew thought he was crazy for continuing with a habit the general populace had considered too expensive and unhealthy to keep up decades ago. His peers found the smoke sticks nothing but a waste of money; it was not a liquid asset like a car or a piece of art, and once you used it, it was gone forever. Quarq would merely reply that smoking gave him a unique satisfaction, while fancy apartments full of material wealth did not, and what made him happy, not them happy, was what mattered to him.

Despite the frivolity of his habit, he was not frivolous in its use. A dozen smoke sticks would normally last him for months; he was a disciplined man who stuck to his self- imposed "one-at-the-end-of-the-week-only" rule exceptionally well.

The waiter returned with his drink and set it down on the table. As Quarq sipped at it, he saw a large group of young men, accompanied by a girl who seemed rather uncomfortable in her high heels and sequined dress, arrive at the reception desk and announce that they were the Sarq Artists and Art Appreciation Club. The headwaiter located their name in his reservation book and escorted them to a large table set off to one side. Quarq watched as the group was led across the restaurant floor. It was led by two people in particular: one, an effeminately handsome man of indeterminate age; the other was the tallest drinking straw the captain had ever seen. He snorted and took another mouthful of his drink. Artists.

As he watched the unusual bunch assemble, he smiled faintly (it was indeed a smile; one had to be careful when interpreting Quarq's facial expressions, as a scar, partially obscured by his moustache and running parallel to his upper lip, pulled at the right corner of his mouth, often making it appear as if he were sneering). Goddamn rich brats, he thought, I don't see you getting drafted. Indeed, he assumed, these were privileged children. He wondered how often the family servants put non-synthetic or prime synthetic food on their tables, while the majority of the populace was reared on overpriced, standard synthetic foodstuffs.

His personal waiter returned, set a steak down in front of him, and, after being told that no, Quarq did not care for anything more, thank you, left without a word. The captain stared at the steak and began to feel guilty. Guilty and ashamed for thinking hypocritical thoughts and taking advantage of the privileged life. His appetite vanished. He sat staring at his dinner for a long time. He began to think of the war in Thy, and the food shortages it had caused here in the Capitol District. He recalled that another member of the War Council had joked earlier in the day that perhaps if they waited long enough, the local revolutionaries would starve themselves out of existence.

As he continued to stare at the steak he sneered (this time it was quite obviously a sneer, one quite frightfully enhanced by the very same scar which had skewed his smile) in disgust, both at himself and at the state of things in general. He decided he would eat the steak, but only because in this day and age it was a sin to waste food. He would force himself to eat his meal, to swallow his hypocrisy. And when he had choked down the last detestable bite he would vow never to come to this or any privilege-class restaurant, and never to eat real food again.

He started on his dinner, eating it slowly, looking at it as little as possible. He ordered several more drinks. He also continued to observe the artists' club.

He noticed that, over the course of a couple of hours, they had ordered just about everything on the menu; the multi-course meals, the fresh breads and hot soups, salads tossed with fresh greens and other vegetables (a rare and expensive treat), the finest wines in the house. Then, just when it seemed they had finally gorged themselves, they asked for the dessert menu.

This is some club banquet, Quarq thought, and chuckled. Wait til their parents get their credit card bills.

As the group worked their way through a multitude of desserts, various club members began to deliver speeches. Although no one else in Nestrosa's paid them any heed, Quarq struggled to listen. Oddly, he found that most of the orations were seemingly nonsensical, almost ridiculous. And now, was he imagining things, or was that queer-looking fellow telling the human straw and several others about the relationship between hovercar mechanics and interior design?

Quarq frowned, finished off his drink, and surveyed the array of empty glasses on both his and the artists' tables. He came to three conclusions. Either he did not know a meaningful conversation on modern art when he heard it, the kids were drunk, or he was drunk. Probably more than one of the above.

After a while, one of the waiters approached the artists' table and inquired if they were done. The effeminate replied that they were. "And how would you care to pay?" the waiter then asked.

"Well, gosh, sir," the walking straw replied, "I seem to have forgotten my wallet."

"Me too," chimed in several of the others.

The waiter looked annoyed. "How would you care to pay?" he repeated.

"We wouldn't," said the effeminate artist, and pulled a gun on the man. At his table, Quarq arched his eyebrows and tried to hold back a laugh. His mouth curved into a crooked, tight-lipped smile.

For some reason he found the idea of a prissy queer holding up a waiter quite amusing.

"I say, sir!" yelped the poor waiter as his antagonist gripped him in a headlock. The drinking straw pulled a compact laser sub-machine gun from his jacket and fired off several shots at the ceiling. A large crystal chandelier plummeted down into the seafood tank. The patrons screamed.

"Whoops," said the straw, looking a bit sheepish.

Unable to hold back any longer, Captain Quarq doubled over and began to laugh.

"NOBODY MOVE!" the straw bellowed as he recovered from his embarrassment. Behind him, the rest of the "club members" pulled weapons from beneath their jackets. The young lady reached into her dress and produced a small handgun from the cleft between her breasts.

When Quarq saw this his eyes began to water. He nearly fell off of his chair.

Several of the young men ran into the kitchen and shooed out the cooks. When they, along with the waiters and the manager, had been gathered together at the center of the floor, the tall, skinny youth spoke up again.

"Alright… take-out crew: kitchenward… march!" he snapped. Half a dozen of his fellows disappeared into the kitchen.

"W-wait a minute–" began the manager.

"Shut up! All of you, shut up!" (Somehow, Quarq managed to contain himself.) "Now listen: we don't want to hurt anyone, so don't try anything. While my friends are busy in the kitchen, the rest of us will relieve you of your jewelry, watches, credit cards, money–hic!–size sixteen- and-a-half narrow shoes, and your firstborn children. You will be generous. Is that clear?"

A small, nervous-looking fellow leaned close to the straw. "You never said anything about robbing them!" he hissed.

"Shuddup, Flarax. Go cover those tables over there." The other reluctantly did as he was told.

As the Sarq's Artists and Art Appreciation Club proceeded to collect the patrons' valuables (as well their unfinished bottles of champagne and wine), Quarq began to take more careful notice of the youths' appearances. With the exception of the girl and the effeminate man, most of them seemed gaunt and tired. His smirk momentarily faded as he recalled for a second time what his comrade had said: if we wait long enough, the revolutionaries will starve themselves out of existence.

The captain's weathered face softened. The poor kids. They may be on the wrong track but they've got guts and spunk. I'll at least give them credit for that.

Meanwhile, the young man who had been called Flarax, not so much nervous as ticked off now, sighed as he slowly paced the floor. As he passed Quarq's table for a third time, he halted, turned, and took keen notice of the man. He stared at the captain, his eyes narrowed, his brow furrowed in thought. There was something intriguing about this person, something about the face which might have been handsome if it were not so weathered, something about the narrow moustache broken up by so many scars it seemed scraggly.

The captain stared back. Flarax did not like this. The older man's gaze chilled him. His right eye was a deep golden hue, sharp with intelligence, but the left… The young man shuddered. The iris was slightly misshapen, pale yellow about the edges, the color fading to nearly white in the center. The pupil was askew, fixed to a small, hazy opening.

"Yes?" Quarq asked slowly, smiling a bit (although to Flarax it was an evil sneer which perfectly complimented the eye). The captain studied the boy. So this is one of those local terrorists, eh? He certainly did not seem like a subversive killer. Then again, Quarq did not believe most of the revolutionaries to be subversive, bloodthirsty killers to begin with. The youth was small, a little on the scrawny side, with a pleading expression and a baby face topped with unruly curls. He seemed to be the sort of young man high school girls would deem "So-o-o-o-o cute!"

"Uh . . . " Flarax began. Not knowing what else to say, he replied, "Have–have we met?"

The captain blinked slowly. "I don't think so," he responded blandly.

"Oh." A pause. "Uh . . . got any, you know, valuables?"

"Nope."

"Money?"

"Credit card, but it's got an unauthorized user code. If I call it in to the credit company, and then you try to use it in the store, the register alarms'll go off, and your ass'll be fried." Quarq paused, then added, "Besides, I have to pay for my meal, kid."

"Yeah, okay," Flarax replied distantly, and sighed again. He stood silently, his weapon at the ready.

Presently the young men who had invaded the kitchen emerged, carrying sackloads of food over their shoulders.

"No, no . . . ," the manager groaned.

"Yes, yes," the human straw replied. "Alright, people!" he cried, speaking up to the patrons again, “Thank you very, very much for the lovely meals, the cash, and all your little baubles.” He stopped to take a swig from a bottle of wine. “Anyway,” he went on, returning his attention to the crowd, “We’d love to stay and chat, but we really must be going. We have art to appreciate, you know. I don’t recommend you following us.” He waved his arm and the other revolutionaries gathered at the exit, covering the crowd. “Goodnight, folks–it’s been lovely.” He headed toward the door with the effeminate man, who paused to pinch the cheek of the headwaiter on his way out.

Once they were gone, the manager sprang into action. “You there!” he snapped, “Call the police! And you lot–go look out the windows and see if you can spot their vehicles!” His eyes pinpointed Quarq at the far end of the room. Being familiar with most of the military officers who frequented Nestrosa’s, he quickly approached the captain. “Captain Quarq, sir!” he snapped, “Those were those revolutionary scoundrels, were they not?”

Quarq nodded. “I believe they were.”

“Then why the hell didn’t you do something, man!”

“Do what?” the captain replied coolly, “I’m unarmed at the moment. Not to mention, of course, that there were at least twenty of them and only one of me.”

The manager exhaled sharply, calmed himself, but remained curt. “I see. I’m sorry. Would you please notify the Elite Police immediately? You may use the reception desk phone. This way, sir.” He hurried off toward the entrance.

Quarq sighed, smiled, and shook his head. At length he got up from his seat and followed the man. He was not in a hurry.

Faye Levine is an Art/Design Freshman at Carnegie Mellon University. She hails from Plymouth, Minnesota (land of 10,000 lakes, 10,000,000 mosquitoes, 10,000,000,000 potholes, and one season: Road Construction), where she lives with her demented family and killer rabbit. Her hobbies include, among other things, Elvis hunting. “Dinner At Nestrosa’s” is a slightly revised excerpt from her first novel, “Revolution”, which she will be submitting for publication in the near future.

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Moebius

by Joe Walters

September 19, 2138

Capt Holstid reporting in charge of the Gamma fleet. All system are at fully optional status. All twenty ships still at operational capability. We have entered a location where we believe to have a G2 star, slightly smaller than that of our own Earth. However we have been unable to find the source of the gravity which is still attracting us to the center of what should be a system. There is no star visible however. I have ordered us into an elliptical orbit, of the gravitational point. Commander Wilkins, my science officer believes that it may be a black hole. We will find out. CLOSE LOG.

September 23, 2138

Capt Holstid. We have still yet been unable to discover the Grav force which is attracting us here. No evidence of anything is in order except for radiation of a G2 level. It appears to be concentrated in one direction however. Time to turn-over, two-days. CLOSE LOG.

September 25, 2138

Capt Holstid reporting. We have just approached turnover and i am now inclined to believe that it is a bl… what the? Radiation just went off normal scales. Light shields automatically went on. Research systems on line. CLOSE LOG.

September 26, 2138

Capt Holstid. The sun of this system appears to be concealed by a half completed shell on one side. Reason unknown. We are investigating. CLOSE LOG.

NO FURTHER LOG ENTRIES
Received July 2, 2167
Luna A-1 Receiver, Sol System

• • •

Harris stepped onto the bridge. He sat down pulling out a stick of gum and relaxed. "Time's like these are why I chose this life. No hassles, no troubles, nobody to bother me."

"Intruder has entered our area," the wall spoke.

"No one except you, you crazy piece of machinery," Harris replied to the wall. "Why can't you keep yourself off when I'm … wait a second. What did you say?"

"Intruder has entered our area," the wall repeated, not stifled in the least.

"Identify."

"Computing. Identified as the Seaward, Winward in command. Isn't that the person you had a slight confrontation with-"

"Yes, Nimrod, it is. Now shut up." Harris jumped into the pilot's couch and set for full burn in five seconds. He strapped himself down as the ACCESS came on line. "Four, three, two… "

A blast shook the ship. It lurched causing Harris to temporarily loose track of which way was up. It lay sideways in relation to what should have been, as the gravity disengaged. Harris floated against the straps holding him down. He touched a panel and a streak of fire lept out striking a vessel at close range. He tapped again- silence. He brought up the view to see what was left. Two cruisers still advanced. His attention was drawn to a console which was blinking slightly. Estimated Time of Repair: 3 minutes. They had even taken out Nimrod. Luckily he was able to repair himself, and then the ship, but that would take time.

Time was one luxury Harris McQuaide could no longer afford.

The edge of the world was outlined sharply against the world below. The land curved into infinity at an infinite distance. His eye was caught by the view as he felt his mind slipping into nothingness…

"Quite a view isn't it?", a voice brought him back from the edge of chaos. He spun around to see a rather old looking human dressed in white robes befitting his station. He rose quickly only to be motioned to return to his seat. "No respect necessary, my friend. You are here because I asked you, although I wish you weren't." The man moved around to a chair opposite him.

"What? Why was I asked here then if you do not wish me here?" Malcorn asked, his voice rising slightly in anger.

The man motioned slightly. “It is not that I do not like your presence, it is a matter of why you are here. I wish I did not have to send someone of your importance.”

Malcorn skipped the obvious question of where he was supposed to be going and asked another. “Why? Is there some danger?”

The man nodded. “Much danger in fact, but I am afraid you are the only one who can go, and therefore you are to be sent.”

“What am I to do, then?” Malcorn inquired.

“You must journey to Shell, and find out something we have wondered since our birth here.”

Malcorn turned noticeably pale. He tried to speak, failed, and tried again. “Shell. No one has been there in over a Millenia. Why should we send someone there now?”

“Because it is necessary. But first you should meet your companion in this journey.”

Malcorn barely noticed this statement as the man reached over to a console and pressed a switch. A man walked in dressed in the black robes, signifying his occupation.

“Seeker”, Malcorn barely whispered. The shocks of this were coming too fast for any reason.

The man sat down. “I am Taaylor . I am pleased to meet you,” he said, but did not say. The words came into Malcorn ’s mind. “A pleasure indeed.” His mind touched Malcorn’s as he looked over him mentally.

The older man sat down as well. “Gentlemen, you leave at Day.”

Darsayae stepped into a dimly lit corridor. It was times like these that she hated her profession. Stepping into this world was like stepping into her own personal hell. The world of technology always held horrors for her, but the man she chased had to be brought to justice. Why he ran to this place she would never know. She spun around as a voice echoed from behind her.

“Go home, witch. You will never find me and even if you do you will not take me alive”, the voice laughed. “Why don’t you leave? I can tell how badly you wish to.”

“I cannot. You know of your crimes yet you mocked them? “, she answered the voice. “How can you live with yourself?”

“How can you live with yourself, witch, hunting down a man who seeks only to survive?” the voice answered back.

“Survive at the expense of the others?”

“If that is necessary.”

She crept around the corner, swinging to the side of the wall, following the voice. “Is it not bad enough that you have trespassed upon the ground of our forefathers. None have been here for years and now you disturb their peace.”

“You are wrong, of course. I have been here many times and have yet to find anything resembling spooks. I also have reason to doubt that there has been no one here in a long time. As a matter of fact, there are two here now, headed in your direction at this time. . . ” The voice died off as it faded in distance.

Malcorn and Taaylor walked the corridors. Taaylor rose his head slightly. Malcorn studied him curiously but continued walking. Looking towards the edge of the corridor

“What is it?”

“We are not alone”, came the thought back. “And it is not necessary to speak.”

“If it’s all the same to you, I’ll keep talking”, he said in a horse whisper.

Taaylor nodded as he moved forward. There was no sense in angering his guide. Without this man, or someone else he would be blind as well as deaf.

They entered a room large enough to house several of the Haltar’s race vehicles. A large console adorned the south wall with a large piece of glass resembling a screen. Malcorn walked over and checked over the equipment. It appeared to be fully operational. He flipped several switches as the board came to life. The keyboard was more advanced than the one he learned on, this one being a touch sensor, but the layout was the same. He hummed to himself as he worked.

“Duck!” came the mental scream from Taaylor . The scream froze Malcorn in is tracks as he was hit from behind. He spun around and leapt into the air, his wings spreading from behind his back. A figure stepped out into the light. A light glimmered off of her metallic looking suit as she rose her hands. A mist flowed forth to envelope the creature which had struck him.

“Stop, he hit the. . . ” His scream came too late. Malcorn watched helplessly as the creature bounced off of the console and fell to the ground. He realized that the screen was actually a window as lights came on behind it. A large bay opened beyond to reveal the lights of centuries past, clicking on as they had centuries ago.

And a door, not opened in two and a half millenia creaked open to the vacuum of space.

Harris looked at the control console of his ship and saw the lights blinking all over the system. "Nimrod Status."

The computer squeaked, corrected, and tried again. "Ship's or Tactical?"

"Both."

"Ship's status: All systems malfunctioning. ACCESS travel has malfunctioned. Effective Time of Repair:12 minutes. Life support: functioning. Shields: inactive. Irreparable. Communications functional: not at optimum level. Tactical: Two FORWARD cruisers are still in pursuit. Suggestion: Get out of here immediately."

"Very funny." Harris McQuaide looked at the screen and confirmed Nimrod's messages. He touched several consoles and brought them to life. "Harris McQuaide, in command of the Infinite Possibilities. Come on Winward, give a guy a break!"

The comm panel chortled, but whether from Winward or static was impossible to tell. "Your drive is shot, McQuaide. You can't escape. One more hit and you're gone. Give it up."

"I wouldn't give you the pleasure", Harris McQuaide shot back. He glanced at the panel. ETR: 9 minutes. Keep stalling. "What guarantee would I have that you'd let me live. Regulations or no you'd love to get rid of me for the episode outside of Bantor IV. I remember the headlines on the news: 'Winward, fleet commander of FORWARD, was defeated by Harris McQuaide, a loner originating from Earth. Their race in the single person ships between Bantor VII and IV ended in a firey explosion which destroyed Winward's ship. The commander ejected and was later picked up by the victor, Harris, and hauled back to the finish line on the outside of his vessel.' " Harris smiled as the memory came back to him.

"Shut up," Winward spoke back. "You cheated, and don't say you didn't."

"Oh yeah, I cheated, Just enough to counter your cheat of putting unstable fuel in the opponents vehicles. I just used it to my advantage." Harris sat back to glance at the clock. ETR: 7 minutes. "You still haven't answered my question: What guarantee?"

"You have my word." Winward replied.

"Which is about as good as a swim suit on Pluto," Harris said under his breath. "Let's put it this way, Winward, I think I'd have a better chance trying to outrun you, and don't think I can't."

"I don't think, I know. You are a dead ship, but I'll give you five minutes to choose Harris. Five minutes." The comm went dead. ETR 6 minutes.

"I've cut it close before. At least he doesn't know about you my friend." He glanced at the system adorning his wall.

The wall replied. "Estimate 3you insist on staying here. Nice knowing you Harris."

"Sarcastic Machine."

He activated the comm panel again. "Harris to Seaward. Prepare to receive my vessel. You win Winward."

"Preparing to receive."

Nimrod rattled off. "ETA at enemy vessel 3 minutes. ETR 3.5 minutes. This might work after all."

"Thank you."

"You're welcome."

The ship moved into position for docking. Harris touched several panels and powered up his engines. He watched the repair status light. The amber light appeared to laugh at him. He counted to himself.

"Laugh at this Winward." The light went green, and he punched the panel. The ship shot off in an arc away from the vessel and rotated, fired, rotated again, and was gone.

Ten seconds later he re-emerged into Einstein space. "Nimrod, time until they track us?"

"Impossible to tell, unknown status of their drive systems at time of ACCESS. ACCESS is down again."

Harris McQuaide got up to walk to the rear of the vessel. He pulled off an access hatch, and began working on several controls, murmuring to himself about crazy machines.

The ship lurched and came to a sudden stop. "Warning: collision imminent with structure."

"A little late aren't you?"

"Maybe."

Harris McQuaide suppressed a comment he wanted to make. He recalled the last time he directed an insult at it, something to the point of "Drop dead". It tried to interpret it as an order and nearly got them both killed. He walked up to the control room and stared outside the bridge window. "There's nothing out here", Harris McQuaide mused quietly.

"That nothing is off our mass scale", Nimrod replied casually.

Harris McQuaide opened his mouth but nothing came out. He closed it again as he looked at the view screen. He touched several panels and brought up a view of it. The digital readout showed a sphere shaped object.

"Width?" Harris asked quietly.

"One AU in radius, 186 million miles in diameter." Nimrod replied.

Harris McQuaide touched several panels and swung around the ship. He could not see any stars in the area, absolutely nothing. He brought the ship around again and starting flying above this structured he had collided with.

A square of the darkness opened. Light beamed through the opening.

"Who do you think you are being here?" Malcorn said from ten feet above the floor. His question was addressed at the woman who now stood over her prey. She turned around to face him.

"What do you think I'm doing here?" she shot back.

"Her name is Darsayae , sorceress of the Align. She was chasing this being known as Cy and apparently has apprehended him, "Taaylor replied. She looked at him and then recognized him for what he was.

"A Tech and a Seeker. An interesting combination, and almost impossible. They are not of close company."

"We are here to seek answers to questions given to us by the Council. However, we are not able to give these answers to you."

"I don't really care. I have what I came for. What do you plan on doing about that hole out there?"

Malcorn had to admit he had not even thought about it. He berated himself as he landed. Such a hole could have destroyed the world if the ancient technology had not prevented it in some way. He landed and walked across to the console. Amazing the old technology. In fact if he didn't know any better he would say something was approaching the hole. Of course he couldn't be right about. . .

A shadow eclipsed the stars beyond. A large black object glided smoothly into the gap. The scars on it's hull indicated it had been in a battle of some sort. Several relays clicked over as the vessel cleared the door and it slid shut automatically. It floated gently into a small bay as a docking arm extended.

"I believe this answers all our questions," Taaylor thought, but the rest of the group heard.

Harris looked across the small bay his ship landed in. "Nimrod, where are we?", he asked of the blank control panel.

"We are aboard the Infinite Possibilities in a bay of unknown origin. There appears to be some source of power in the area, accounting for the lights. "

"Thanks a lot. I could have figured that out myself."

"Will you allow me to continue?"

"Sorry", Harris threw to him sarcastically.

"Apology accepted. There are four life forms at 23 degrees, behind that large shield of translucent titanium, a substance designed during. . .

"All right I get the picture", Harris cut him off impatiently. He strolled over to his locker and swung the door outward, and removed his wrist rifle. Strapping it on his wrist he started walking to the door. "Nimrod, I-"

"Air sample breathable, gravity slightly stronger than that of earth. No noxious substances or compounds which would endanger your life form," the wall rattled off. "Would you like me to accompany you?"

Harris sighed. "I guess it couldn't hurt."

Harris walked towards the door and flipped a switch for the airlock to open. The door opened to receive a breath of slightly stale air. He stepped out, slipping to one side as he waited. A door within the airlock opened.

A two foot orb floated out of the door, hovering about three feet above the ground. It slipped aside of Harris and began moving forward. Harris looked skyward (wherever that happen to be here) and fell in behind the orb.

Malcorn and Taaylor sat in anticipation as Darsayae stared at the object within the lock. Malcorn noticed the pale look which had crossed her face. Amazing that such a person could look so pale.

Suddenly she stood up and walked towards the doorway. Upon reaching the hall, she turned right, heading for the hatch of the long arm. Malcorn and Taaylor were too stunned to say anything so they just waited.

Harris looked out at the stark hallway. The shallow light from the nearby panels gave little or no light for one to see by. Nimrod lit up the front of his globe, a small spotlight. It scanned across the panels in the hall and stopped on a young woman in the center of the hall. Harris sucked in his breath. The woman outstretched her hands towards Harris . She made a motion and Harris felt his body grow heavy. His knees buckled as the ground came up to give him its greeting.

Darsayae looked at the spherical object next to the limp body of the strange man. It seemed to look directly back at her. "What are you?"

“I am Nimrod,” The sphere said in a normal tone. “Function: Control of drive and control systems of the Infinite Possibilities. Basis of function: Octal Pattern Recognition memory core.”

Darsayae stared at it, blinking as if it would go away. It remained there as Taaylor and Malcorn stepped into the corridor silently, the old man leaning on the younger. Malcorn looked at Darsayae. “What did you do to him?”

“She placed him in a form of suspended animation similar to sleep, however slightly deeper, his respiration has been slowed to 8 breaths per minute which. . . “

“I didn’t ask you,” Malcorn shot back, then stopped, realizing he was talking to a machine. “Do you always answered what you haven’t been asked?”

“It’s a habit of his, I’m afraid,” the man on the ground said as he rolled over. “Lady, what the blazes did you throw at me? The last time I felt like this was when I had a bit too much Vodka back on the good old Mud-ball. Fun at the time, but not much fun afterwards.” She raised her hands again to which he raised his arm, showing the rifle. “Uh, uh. Lady, I wouldn’t do that if I were you. This thing may not be as pretty in optical effects, but it’s as effective.” He rolled over and got to his feet. She moved again to which he moved in response.

Side stepping, he grabbed her arm and threw her slightly sideways into the doorway. She grabbed the jam and swung around landing on her feet. She spun around to see the device on Harris’s arm glow and she slumped to the ground. Harris turned around to eye the other two. “I have no objections to talking to friends, but answering orders is not in my rule book, Got it?”

They both nodded slightly, when Malcorn suddenly looked up. “How do you speak our language so well?”

“Language, what are you talking about?” It then occurred to him, although he never met this race before, the language was as if he knew it, because he did.

It was his own.

“ ‘In the years of the great, we wished to know what we were set to do, what life would we lead in this world, and so we set out, and found this, this that we call our home. And that which we shall and can never leave.’ ” Taaylor recited from his ancient religion text. They had moved into the control room and brought Darsayae with them. She was still out cold from the blast. Cy had been tied up, but was sitting in a chair just slightly out of reach. Harris had a cup of coffee next to him, sitting atop Nimrod’s slightly curved head. He made a splendid coffee table. Taaylor and Malcorn were slightly opposite, enjoying the fresh food from McQuaide’s ship. Harris sipped his coffee.

“So what’s it mean?” Harris asked?

Taaylor shrugged. “It is believed that we did not come from this world, but were brought here from somewhere else. We discovered this world and completed it, using the technology of whoever started it. We then sealed ourselves within this world so as not to have their problems or intervention. We began to wonder whether or not there was anybody still out there so we came here. You appear to have answered our questions. “

“What about the people who were here before you?” Harris asked after taking another drink.

“They were powerful but small in numbers. Our people defeated them after discovering this place.” Taaylor scanned the mind of Harris to see how much he was believing. He could tell Harris was taking most of it in.

“Do you know where your people came from, how long they’ve been here?” Harris asked his curiosity aroused.

“This was approximately 2000 revolution of Mitar ago.” Taaylor sense the next question forming in Harris’s mind. “Mitar is a silver point at the equator of the sphere. We measure our year by it.”

“Nimrod, compute time necessary for it to revolve a complete circuit and compare to earth year.”

“One circuit of the sphere would be 1.36 Earth Standard years. Total equals approximately 2270 earth years ago.”

Harris leaned back in his chair and sighed. “Compare to Earth history. Any similar events?”

Nimrod sat for a moment. “3007.23 Earth years ago a colonization fleet was headed for Sidra Major 78 light years from Earth. They were lost approximately 29 light years from Earth.”

Harris looked puzzled. “Any other data?”

“Classified.”

“Classified? In other words you don’t have it because it wasn’t given to you because of its status.”

“Yes.”

“During that time, ACCESS, Faster than light travel, didn’t exist. They would have been using ramscoop generators.”

“Yes. Relative travel was the mode of the period.”

Harris sat back, leaving all this settle in. "That means that these people are descendants of the people of that mission."

"87.94

"And if that's true, FORWARD would try to take control of it if they found out about it, these people being an old colony of earth. they're almost a galactic empire now, with several races under control. With the technology they would possess from this structure. . . "

"They could not be opposed," Nimrod finished. "That is against my design to allow that to happen."

"We have to get out of here." He paused to figure out what to do next.

"It looks like I have a problem, gents. My ship needs some work bad, and I can't make it anywhere else. This place maybe just the place for me to stick around, at least until I get this thing fixed and rested." Harris sat back with his coffee as Nimrod went over to examine Darsayae . After a quick scan he lowered himself down and sat practically on top of her.

"Get up, miss. This is no time to be sleeping, or rather pretending to be asleep." He floated back up and drifted over towards Harris. She sat up suddenly and raised her hands to bring them together. The energy which shot forth glanced off of Nimrod and struck a nearby wall, burning the metal. The orb turned around. "My dear, doing that may endanger yourself. I would restrain from it in the future." He then floated over to become a coffee table again. Darsayae looked at Harris, expecting to see him smiling at her failure. Instead she saw him regarding her intently. It was not mockery but instead, it seemed, in respect.

She twisted to her feet and walked over towards the group. It seemed to her that they had done well in her absence. She sat down and picked up one of the cookies which were in front of her. After a bite she said, "You want to stay here, that's fine. When can we leave?"

"Leave?" Harris retorted. "I didn't know you were staying! You may leave now if you wish or a week from now, which is when I expect everything to be done. Either way it doesn't matter to me."

"Then we're not prisoners?" Darsaye asked.

Malcorn looked at her. "No, Harris has been informing us of the world he came from and we have been comparing it to ours. They are a strange people, but we are the same in many ways."

Darsayae looked at Harris and saw him finish his cup of coffee as he got up. He then turned down a side corridor towards the way she had come in. She got up to follow. Malcorn tried to get up as well but Taalor held his arm, shaking his head. Malcorn sighed and sat down. Women. One of these days he might understand them. . . might.

Darsayae caught up to Harris before he reached the entrance and fell into step behind him. When he came to the entrance he looked at it, puzzled, then turned to her and motioned. Without a word she stepped forward and opened the door. The light from a sun beyond beamed inward as Harris had his breath catch in his throat.

Beyond there was nothing, a vast expanse of space between him and anything. Several objects floated nearby as the ground he stood on rotated. The motion was slight but still felt to such an old space hand. He shook his head and brought his sight to one of the nearby objects. Several thousand strips rotated in the nothing, turning slowly back in upon itself. The ground he stood on was at a ninety degree angle to the rest of the ground. One strip floated close by. He studied that, trying to steady his dead nerves. It seemed to him he was standing on a wall of a pit dug into the ground. The land curved upwards until it was lost in the sun beyond.

Harris leaned back against the wall taking a deep breath. Nimrod floated into the area and looked outward. "Nimrod, analysis."

"Analyzing. It appears the sun of this system is encased in a sphere. Colloquial reference: Dyson Sphere. A design created by Freeman Dyson during the late 1960's of earth. Built to collect the total solar output of the sun and convert it into energy for use. The strips in the area appear to be coated with vegetation and soil."

Darsayae nodded. "Our homes. The strip itself is bent upon itself making it one sided."

"A Moebius strip," Nimrod continued. "The strip's bend would occlude sunlight, giving a day-night cycle."

Harris motioned her to close the door. She did so and then turned to look at him. He drew a breath and then headed back to the bay of the Infinite. Darsayae and Nimrod followed slowly behind, one wondering what had overcome Harris, the other what technology it took to build such a structure.

"Damn. Where is he?" Winward asked of a man scanning a nearby panel. "He couldn't have gotten too far."

"We have his course and time, we can be there in several minutes, assuming he hasn't improved his drive since the last time we met, " the man stated clearly.

Winward turned around and shouted some orders. He then turned back to the panel. "This time he's not getting away."

The fleet lept into space, the derelict left behind to fend for itself.

"Nimrod, initiate all repair systems. I want to get out of here," Harris said to the globe. The globe moved to comply with his commands, resuming it's normal position in the airlock. Darsayae moved in behind him as he sat down on the bridge.

"What came over you back there?" she asked carefully.

Harris looked at her as if he had forgotten she was there. He smiled. "So much for your fear of technology, huh?" She seemed startled that he knew, but he continued. "Guess it was fear, fear that something like this could exist." His voice trailed off at the end as his mind remembered the sight his eyes had seen but his mind had refused to believe.

"So something can get at you," Darsayae stated. "Makes me think you're more normal than you appear to be."

He smiled again. "Me? I'm as normal as the next guy, just a little crazier. After all, I spend all my life in space. It is my home."

"You must have seen a lot."

"A lot that I would have missed, and would have been more the sorry for if I hadn't seen," he said nodding. "But I do have to get out of here I'm afraid."

Her expression changed to worry. "Why? Couldn't you just stay here?"

He shook his head. "Afraid not, not with Winward on my tail. Where do you think I got the scars on this ship from?"

"What did you do that he's after you?"

"Well, it's kind of a long story. What it basically comes down to is we were on opposite sides and his side lost. He's one to hold a grudge."

She looked at him awhile and was startled to here a beep on the comm panel. "Status: Systems are coming on line. Main Drive repaired. ACCESS repaired. Life support fully functional. Ships have entered system."

This time Harris didn't ignore him. "Model and identification."

"Seaward and escort ship. Time to this point: 15 minutes."

Harris grew worried, Darsayae could tell that much. "Stupid power hungry fool," he spat. "Winward won't you ever give up?"

Darsayae looked at him intently. "What do you plan to do?"

"Get out of here, ASAP."

She did not recognize the abbreviation, but understood the intent. She got up to leave and was astonished to see Harris following her. "Maintain repair status. I'll be back. Be ready to leave."

"I'll be here," the panel answered.

Harris followed Darsayae back to the control room, where he said his good-byes. Cy still looked miffed at being captured but maintained his position. Darsayae then followed him to the airlock, as did Taalor and Malcorn.

"Wait a couple of minutes and then open the doors. I'll be out of here so fast it'll be funny." He turned to Darsayae. "Guess this is good-bye, huh?"

Darsayae reached up and kissed him, not gently as he tried to enter the airlock. He turned back to the group thinking the same thing Malcorn was: Women!

He entered the ship as the door slid shut.

"Nimrod, bring all systems up." The bay door slid open again, taking the Infinite out with it as the air which had been pumped in escaped. He activated the drive and headed away as it closed.

"There he is, sir," the man at the console spoke. "He just left a large spherical object in the middle of this system."

Winward missed this comment as he saw Harris in his sights. "Fire when ready, gunner."

Harris checked the tactical console and smiled as he brought his hand down upon the ACCESS switch. A sound stopped him. He spun around to see Darsayae standing behind him. "What are you doing here?"

"To see the things you have seen," she stated simply.

A blast shook the ship, then another. He spun around to see the Seaward pulling directly in front of him. He touched a panel causing the ship to head back towards the sphere.

"What are you doing?" Darsayae asked.

"Taking you back!"

"Not on your life."

Harris paused. If he went back, Winward would find out about the sphere and its technology. That would definitely be a problem. But to keep Darsayae aboard ship? Damn. His hand touched the ACCESS panel and the ship vanished, Harris hoping history wouldn't repeat itself.

Winward turned to the console. “Gone, sir. We weren’t ready to track him.”

Winward looked like he would explode but calmed down as his eyes settled on the tactical. That sphere still was on the scanner.

“Let’s see what we have here.” Winward smiled as thoughts of conquest crossed his mind.

Joe Walters is currently a Senior/Sophomore in Penn State’s 2/4 year Computer Science program. Neither he nor the University has yet to figure out how this works, but both maintain the idea. He has several dangerous hobbies, including skydiving and free rock climbing, which help his friends maintain the idea that he is crazy. He is also a determined Roll player and Sci-Fi reader. The works of Niven, Hickman and Weis have been the basis for his inspiration.

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Blades

by Sonia Orin Lyris

I have a story to tell you. Yes, you can sit on my lap, little one. Now the rest of you, settle down and be quiet because this is going to be a good story, and you want to hear it, don't you? All right, quiet now.

There was a certain man who was named Duri, and he had a special skill, more than skill, it was a brilliance, a path, and he might have been the best in his time or maybe ever at what he did. See, he knew the making of the blade like no other. He was as good at it as you can ever hope to be at anything. Sarel, your father probably knows more about making blades than I do, and maybe he could tell this story better, but that doesn't really matter, because the story isn't really about making blades, it's about Duri.

Duri was a young man, young for a master of his trade, but his hands weren't young, and his soul, where it touched the blade, where it knew the blade and knew it like you each know your own faces, that wasn't young either. You don't know how it is, but maybe you will someday, how it is when you learn something so well that every detail of it fades away into a kind of dance, so smooth and beautiful that everything you do is like something out of the center of the world. He was that good, Duri was, so good that he didn't have to worry about how to hammer the steel, or how to shape it, or how to fashion a handle. His body and spirit spoke to the metal and the fire and then a blade was born.

Whether the blade was a sword for some warrior to carve up the evil that attacked his land, or a wealthy whore's thin blade for explaining the price to a customer, it didn't matter, it was like breathing for Duri to make such fine work that you couldn't find better anywhere for all the money in the world.

Now maybe Duri was too young to be so old, and maybe the passion that was in him was eating something inside him, too, because he wasn't really a happy man. He had money, all right, a lot of it, because anyone who wanted the best blade they could have came to Duri and wouldn't settle for less if they could help it. He had money and he had fame and he had plenty of people coming to him all the time for his work.

Maybe he just had too much. You ever think about that, little one? You ever think about just having too much? No? Maybe you should.

Or maybe Duri saw that his work was for hurting and killing and not much good for anything else, and maybe he was tired of that. I don't know what was in his mind when he went into the caverns past the town, where there were deep, deep lakes and dropped his newest blade, which was the best he'd ever made, into the lake where it sank right away to the bottom.

He let it be known that anyone who wanted that sword could have it, all they had to do was go and get it. And then he went home.

They say he didn't say much of anything when they told him about the first boy that had drowned trying to get the sword back up. And he didn't say much when the second boy drowned, or the third, which was a girl, or the fourth, which was a man, or any of the rest who drowned diving deep into the cavern lake looking for that sword.

The townspeople were pretty upset by then, and so they piled the bodies outside the cavern so that people would see them and maybe think twice about trying for the sword at the bottom of the lake.

They looked at Duri with a lot less respect and a lot more anger now, because young and old were dying trying to get at the sword he'd made that it seemed no one could have. They began to call the sword cursed, and the town elders called Duri up in front of them and they told him that too many people were dying because of his sword and to make it stop.

Well Duri must have been a sight to see when they said that. He was pretty mad. He told them that they were fools and idiots if they thought he had any control over the greed in men's hearts that made them do stupid things to get at a sword they didn't need anyway.

And it began to look like that sword in the lake was going to be Duri's last one. He had stopped forging blades completely. When people asked him, he told them that now only the willing would die from his work, and that was fine with him. A lot of folks were real mad when Duri stopped taking their orders for more blades, and some powerful folks got even madder and Duri didn't have a lot of friends anymore. He kept mostly to himself, and his forge was just a quiet home for spiders.

You're young but you probably know by now that people love to talk about other people. But if something doesn't change for a while, they get bored with it and forget about it some, and then some more, and that's what happened to Duri. The years went by and Duri didn't make any more blades, and fewer and fewer people would die trying for the sword at the bottom of the lake until hardly anyone talked about it anymore, and after a while no one believed it was really there, either. No one saw Duri very much anymore and no one particularly missed him. They could hardly even remember what he used to do.

When he came out of his house at all, Duri would sit and just watch people go by. He looked older now, older than he was, probably. Maybe it had been the passion of the blades that kept him young and now that he didn't have it anymore he was aging faster. Maybe he just didn't have anything much to live for and was hurrying to die. Who knows?

It had been years and years since anyone had bothered to ask Duri for a blade, but his work still traveled the world and was still the best, and eventually a man who maybe hadn't heard that Duri didn't make blades anymore came around.

The stranger went into Duri's house and didn't come out for a long time. When he came out he looked kind of thoughtful, and he went down to the caverns. People started to talk again, because now something was happening, and people started to remember what Duri used to do and they remembered about the blade in the cavern lake and they waited to see if the man would float to the surface after he drowned diving for the sword. But the man came right back out of the caverns, walked back to Duri's house and went in to see Duri again and didn't come out again for hours.

The next day Duri's forge was working again. Everyone came out of their house and stared around in surprise. They watched the smoke rise, listened to the pounding, and talked with each other about what had happened. They wondered about the stranger and what he had done to make Duri forge the blade again, and they watched him as he stood waiting in front of Duri's house.

When the smoke rose from the cooling of the metal it was strange and black. You see, Duri had bled himself and used his own blood to quench the thirst of the new blade. And when he was done with the blade, which was truly his finest ever, he slowly came out of his house and gave it to the stranger. Then he fell down on the ground because of all the blood he had given up. The stranger knelt down next to him and stroked his hair and spoke softly to him.

After a little while, Duri died, right there in the stranger's arms.

Don't you wish you knew what that man had said to Duri, little one? Maybe he thanked him for the sword. Maybe he just soothed Duri's way into the next world. Who knows? You'll just have to imagine.

So then the stranger took Duri's last sword and left, just like that, without a word, without explanation.

Someone must have thought about Duri some more and remembered the sword in the cavern lake and gone to look, because they say that they found the lake sword next to the cavern waters, on the bank, just after Duri died. And it was all red, just like blood.

They decided to bury the lake sword with Duri because it seemed proper. That night someone took it, though, stole the sword right out of the ground where it lay next to Duri, and no one ever saw it again.

And that was the end of Duri and his fine blades.

What's that? Oh, I said it was a good story, child, I didn't say it was a nice one.

You want to know what it means? Yes, of course you do.

Maybe that was Duri's problem, too. Everyone told him what everything meant, what he was and what he should do. He was born with a great light inside him and everyone told him how to shine the light outwards and make fine blades with it, but no one ever said anything about how to shine it inside first. Maybe they just didn't know how themselves. But maybe if Duri had used a little of his light to see his own way with he wouldn't have had to give birth to my sword with his dying blood.

Yes, the blade I carry, this one, this is the blade that Duri made in his own blood.

Yes, child, really.

Now you know that a woman can bear a baby in blood but a man can't. You, little one, you'll know this someday as I never can. A man can't make something come alive, only a woman can do that, and that is why woman is the greatest power in this world. Death is a door to somewhere, somewhere else, but the giving of life is the first magic of life.

Every breath you take is from the magic of life and anything you lay your hands on to change is from the magic of your breath.

Duri wanted to make something out of the magic of life, make something of his own body, like a woman would bear a child. And I think he wanted to finally make a blade that would taste his own blood before it tasted anyone else's. But that's just what I think.

And now I've gone and told you what the story means and I didn't want to do that. But you shouldn't listen to what I tell you, anyway. No one can tell you what a story means, just like no one can tell you what you are because no one can tell you what you already know.

All right. That's the story I wanted to tell and it's only words and that's just about enough words for the moment. I'll put this sword down here so that you can all look at it if you want to. You know that blades are sharp, don't you? So don't touch it.

No, no, that's not right. Go ahead and touch it, if that's what's in you to do. Go ahead and touch what Duri made, what he died to make. Mingle your blood with his. See yourself in his reflection, and remember.

Sonia is a software engineer by trade. She has been writing fiction off on and on since she was able to read and write. She also sculpts SF/Fantasy critters and shows them at local SF/Fantasy conventions.

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Literature

by Robert Chansky

Charles Pennet always felt a particular pleasure when he pulled the cover over his ancient typewriter and went to the cupboard to fix himself the usual post-novel drink. It was a great reward, that drink; the stuff that had almost finished him once before now became his reward for a job well done. Nowadays he allowed himself the alcohol only after the finish of a novel. Cause to celebrate, as always.

Charles Pennet wrote dirty books. Pornography was his life.

There was a demand for it, and he seemed to have a talent, or so his many editors told him, and as long as that demand and talent coincided, he would continue with his chosen line.

Oh, there was the occasional twinge of guilt– not for what he did of course, for Charles was a pragmatic man, but for what he did not do; A *real* book, *real* literature, something to be proud of, a profession that he didn't have to hide away beneath his many pseudonyms. Indeed, he had started several serious books, only to give up, frustrated. Each quickly became boring without the added flavor, so to speak, that was Charles' unique style. And his books, after all, had paid for the house he lived in, kept him well fed and with a hefty bank account. He had done quite well for himself.

One might think it odd that Charles never actually did many of the things he wrote of in his many books and articles. He lived a very sheltered life. But that was fine with him. (What was that author's name, the woman who lived out in the moors in England and wrote?– Well, it didn't matter.) Charles was in company with a lot of authors, writing about the human experience while too busy to join in. The only difference between he and they being the experiences he wrote about.

Another ritual consisted of bundling the manuscript up for a stop at the library– photocopying it all was an expensive, but necessary, task, or so his lawyer told him. The industry was very cutthroat. A few big rubber bands kept it together nicely. Charles was engaged in this when there was a knock at the door.

Unfortunately Charles was the type of person who never used the small peephole provided for them to see potential criminals before letting them in. He opened the door wide, and wondered why there seemed to be nobody there, when he chanced to look down and beheld the creature.

Through the miracle of human perception, Charles was instantly able to determine that the creature before him was an alien. Not of this Earth. Not, one would suppose, from anywhere nearby at all.

The alien looked like a boulder. It was about three feet high, mostly round, in fact spherical, and a reddish-brown that might have looked almost comforting on a familiar object such as a rotten tomato. Its skin was wrinkled and worn, like an old leather jacket. Eyestalks sprouted from its right and left flanks, aimed at Charles. What looked like a tentacle sprouted from the side of the boulder (being careful not to get in the way of its eye) aiming a gun– not a streamlined raygun, but a functional Colt .45– directly at Charles. He backed away.

The alien rolled after him. To do this it flattened an area of itself facing Charles, so that it would tumble into the cavity thus created. The eyestalks on both sides of the creature rotated slightly but did not waver from him. Neither did the tentacle with the gun.

Another tentacle made an appearance. This one emerged (from behind the other eyestalk) wrapped around a square black box, grilled at one end. Squeaks and incomprehensible noises came from the creature, and from the box came a voice.

"You," it said, "are Charles Pennet." The box sounded electronic, with irregular pauses between its words.

Charles swallowed. If given a few minutes, he might have said something, either to confirm or deny his name. Neither of these options presented themselves.

"There is something which you will do for me." The alien rolled further into the room without asking for an invitation. Yet another tentacle emerged from the same side of its body as the first to snake around the doorknob and pull it shut.

Charles was not sure how to react to the alien. His life had been very structured, very ordered, until now. The alien's presence *offended* him, in a way he could not really describe, not even to himself. Just as if a total stranger had nudged him with an unwanted elbow, the alien was an intrusion into his life, one he didn't really want, not just now. Charles felt a kind of anger rising inside him.

"Now wait a minute. Wait a minute–" He said, though there was really nothing he could think of to say to the creature.

It didn't care. Something reached out from the creature and pushed at his mind. Charles sank to the floor. He could see and hear, but he could not move. At least he didn't *think* he could move; it just seemed like moving so much as a finger didn't appeal to him at all. Laying as he was on the floor seemed, in the absence of other ideas, an excellent option. Anything else was not to be considered.

"My place of origin," the alien explained, "is known as Cetella. My name is unpronounceable and not important. What you will do for me is." The alien rolled closer to him, giving him the full benefit of a body odor that reminded him of egg salad, as it explained.

Charles had just finished a particularly explicit novel for which he had real hopes just before he was contacted by the Cetellan alien, who had developed a taste for human books.

The Cetellan idea of literature was not at all the same as the human idea of literature. But some of their scrawlings intrigued it greatly. As it pored with glassy eyes over the mass of data the ship's computer had translated for it, it had found, here and there, something that piqued its interest.

And it had decided, fatefully, that here was money to be made.

Regretfully, humans being who they are, and Cetellans being what they are, it was necessary that some adjustments be made before anything of a potential money-making nature was introduced to the Cetellan culture at large.

And the alien, whose name is unpronounceable by a human as well as unprintable by any human typesetter, had thought of a way. A way that involved as little work for it as possible.

Charles wanted to hide in a corner somewhere and gibber. He somehow remained standing. "What. . . what am I supposed to do?"

The gun, and the tentacle that held it, Occupied Charles' full attention, to the point that he had not heard much of what the alien was saying. Now he forced himself to listen.

"It has taken me some time to find you. There is– some literature which you will– translate for me." The electronic voice paused before certain words, possibly because of its translator which had to look them up. "You will change only certain species-specific passages, as I have machines to translate to my own language. I will leave you books and materials to help you." Then it waited for him to speak.

"I don't understand this. You're. . . an alien!"

"Human powers of perception are most impressive."

"What. . . what if I refuse?"

This question was obvious, and the boulder appeared to have worked it out beforehand. "You have ten seconds to accept. otherwise, a– virus will be introduced into your– biosphere which will render it lifeless. This is your incentive to work for me. Remember it, and do not doubt that I will do as I say."

It paused. "Very well," it said. It produced another device, like a small computer, from somewhere inside its actual body, Charles supposed. "This machine is – pro- grammed with translations of an anatomy text of my race, and another book which will help you with what you are to do. The tentacle dropped the machine on Charles' desk nine feet away. "You are to translate this book." The book slapped down next to the other machine. "I will return in seven days. If the book has not been translated by that time, or if you have contacted – authorities of your – government in an attempt to avoid this task, the virus of which I spoke will be immediately vented into your planet's biosphere. I will leave now."

"Wha. . . wait, you can't–. . . "

The alien turned to face him by spiraling like a top. "Remember," it said, "that you are translating the litera- ture into a different culture, and not language, as my dev- ices can manage that. Also remember to preserve the origi- nal. . . flavor. . . for which the writing was intended."

The creature quivered, and began, ponderously, to roll across Charles' floor. One of its tentacles (this made a total of four; he wondered how many it had) opened the door for its owner. The creature rolled heavily down Charles' walkway into the dark, oblivious to its surround- ings, to a car waiting for it. Charles could see through the open door that the interior of the car had been removed, its windows artificially darkened. The car was cavernous inside. Charles watched the alien as it rolled aboard, lowering its vehicle with its weight.

Charles shut his door. He had seen an alien. He had actually seen an alien.

It sounded like some stupid science fiction story.

The Cetellan's car drove off. Would it really destroy the Earth, or was it a bluff?

Charles went to his desk to examine the machine the alien had given him. It seemed very simple; in fact instructions were written in English on the front. He figured out how to call up the anatomy text. He summoned the other, and discovered that it seemed to be the alien equivalent of a sexual self-help book. It was very detailed, and fascinating to someone in Charles' profession.

The title of the terrestrial book on his study, an ordinary hardcover, caught his attention. It was, he found, *Lady Chatterly's Lover*. This was the literature the Cetellan wanted him to translate.

The alien had not left unobserved. A Mrs. Edith Cummings lived next door to him, not knowing (of course) his exact occupation. Mrs. Cummings was an ardent Christian fundamentalist, her thoughts never straying from purity and good faith. She had always kept an eye on Charles, ever since he'd moved in. He was an easy man not to trust. There had been something shiftless about him, like he didn't really belong in this quiet upper-class neighborhood.

And a chance look out her kitchen window, to investigate that strange car parked before her neighbor's house, proved her suspicions correct.

Charles was keeping strange company, indeed.

Aliens.

She decided that this would do with some looking into.

All night and the next day the furious tapping of Charles' typewriter reached Mrs. Cummings' ears incessantly. Eventually the next afternoon the typing came to a halt, and she looked up from her knitting. A quick glance across her front yard told her that Charles had left the house. The time, she thought, was now.

Walking slowly (so as not to arouse suspicion), she headed out of her own abode toward her neighbor's. She tried the door, and found that it was unlocked. Probably going out for something to eat, she thought.

Mrs. Cummings never wasted time. She examined drawers, closets, under beds. Charles' shower and bath did not escape her scrutiny. Eventually she got to the bookshelf, and was, predictably, shocked. "Filth!" she cried.

Adorning the shelf were an uncountable number of books and magazines, their content easily identifiable by the racy pictures on the front. Mrs. Cummings was familiar with many of the titles, as she had participated in a book rally (burning) in which they had been prominently featured. This time, she examined the authors. The names all seemed to have something in common. Chuck Penn... C. Penter... all the names sounded very nearly like her neighbor, Charles Pennet.

Suddenly it dawned on her. He had written them. *He* was the author of this... this...

"Filth!" she said again, louder this time. In fact Charles was the reason the P section in many adult bookstores was disproportionately large.

Mrs. Cummings examined the typewriter and the paper that lay inside it, and unknowingly became the first Cetellan literary critic.

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  She saw him again, in the
garden.  Just to touch him, she
thought.  Just to stroke his
tight, calloused skin would be
heaven...suddenly she stopped.
She realized her dorsal tentacle
was fully extended!  What would
her husband say, if he knew?
But...on the other hand, what
would he say?
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Her first thought was to burn it– burn it all! But then–

No, she thought. She would wait. The police would never understand.

Mrs. Cummings tried to put everything back where it had been, and after reading through the contents of the Cetellan reading machine, exited Charles' house barely five minutes before he returned.

Charles knew it was the alien even before he heard the car door open. It was late again, and exactly one week after its first appearance. He was not too nervous. He had done what it demanded of him, finished the manuscript. The boulder would not sterilize the planet, and then all of this would be behind him.

This time it did not bother with knocking. The door swung wide, and closed again.

He looked up, and there was the alien. It still aimed the gun at him. Charles wondered where it had gotten it from.

"You have done what I wish." A statement, not a question.

"Yes."

"Give me the manuscript." Charles handed the pages to the alien, which put them in a case and concealed it inside itself.

"You're not going to kill everybody?"

In response the alien produced two more hardcovers, placing them on the same corner of Charles' study again. He suddenly felt very sick. He had stayed up three nights… "I will return," the Cetellan said, "in six days. If this literature is not translated in the same manner as the previous sample I gave to you, I will sterilize–"

At that moment Charles' front door exploded inward, as though by some artillery burst. The doorknob sailed across the room, burying itself in the opposite wall. A woman entered, an old woman. She was carrying a shotgun. "Mrs. Cummings!" Charles said, astonished.

Mrs. Cummings saw the Cetellan, and her eyes took on a angry reddish color as she swung her weapon around toward it. "Filth mongerer!" he thought she shouted. This seemed to be all too fast for the alien to use its mind-push or the .45. She fired.

The boulder seemed to explode gore all over the room and Mrs. Cummings. Shredded typewriter paper flew every- where, the work of the last week scattered all over the room and spattered with what passed for alien blood. Charles, shocked but still retaining his senses, tried to shrink from her view, looking for a way to get past her without being killed.

From his knowledge of Cetellan anatomy Charles figured the alien would not be easily killed by a gun like that, as its thick braincase was approximately in its middle and little else but muscle outside that. But Mrs. Cummings seemed to know that too. She took the alien's .45 from the floor and proceeded to pump the center of the bleeding mass full of bullets until the gun was out, then dropped it.

Charles' rear doorknob poked him in the small of his back. He reached behind himself to open it, then saw the old woman had her shotgun on him now. "Don't you move," she said. Ice coated his stomach. "It was you," she said. "You wrote that… tha… "

The word exploded, "Filth!" and the gun would have as well, but it only clicked. Two shots. Charles pushed his way past the woman, grabbed the alien's book and vacated the premises.

The alien body made an incredible media sensation when it was discovered, and Mrs. Cummings became an unwitting instant hero. Charles, who had changed his name so many times that it was almost a habit for him, managed to avoid the persistent reporters and the net of government agents trying to track him, until the sensation died down. Eventually he found another house– smaller but much more isolated– and bought a typewriter.

Cautiously, he checked the dead alien's sex-and-anatomy book, and was pleased to find it still operative. It was time to go to work.

Of course he'd have to find one of the Cetellans again, but perhaps they would find him. They would deal with him on his own terms this time. There was a new demand, and Charles Prendergast intended to fill it.

Robert Chansky is a CIS major due to graduate from UC Santa Cruz next year or whenever. This is, he says, one of the few stories he's managed to finish. He's currently working on a UNIX game called "Galactic Bloodshed", a multi-player Empire-like game of interstellar war.

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The Dove

by Pat Fleckenstein

I heard the call of a distant dove, and I walked off into the forest. The trees covered over me until my shadow was no longer at my side. I stopped by a cool and bubbling stream to dampen my hands. The icy waters rippled under my touch. I sat down beside the brook against a rock to inhale the beauty around me. The trees about me rustled in a breeze that I could not feel on the floor of this great garden. The sunlight sparkled yellows and golds in shimmering beams between the trees.

As I got up, the shirt I wore felt damp from leaning on a small patch of moss on the stone. The dust fell from my pantlegs. I inhaled deeply and set off again.

Quietly, I walked past a family of rabbits who were rummaging for edible leaves in the undergrowth. They watched me with silent curiosity that did not quiver until I had passed. I felt good about this.

The path I walked was not often walked by humans. Deer used it.

I could hear the dove calling, and I followed. It was not long before I was at the edge of a great clearing. I spotted the dove to my left. I dropped noiselessly to my knees and gazed upon the beauty of the dove.

"A-7 and stationary."

The warbling from within this creature was as fascinating as anything I had ever witnessed.

"Still there."

The cocked-head movements of this little bird excited my interest.

"Closing In.. CONVERGE! converge."

A passive relaxation soaked into my being.

"Grab him!"

"Why, sir?" questioned Trooper A-35.

"He cannot be here! No one can be here! Get him back inside."

"He isn't hurting anyone, sir."

In a moment, fifteen men were around me. Two picked me up and walked me back to the prisoner transport. The others wrestled Soldier A-35 along behind me.

When I arrived at Cell Block three of the D-917-51D1, I sat down on my cot. In the next cell, a small struggle ended with the clang of the door closing.

"What was that beautiful sound?" asked Trooper A-35 from behind the wall.

"A dove, a dove. . . " I answered.

We heard the dove calling in the distance.

Pat Fleckenstein, (aka Midnight Poet) is a Freshman at Rochester Institute of Technology where he majors in Comp Sci major and lives in Computer Science House. He feels that life is so much more than the socially imposed hype and hopes his work (poetry, sci-fi, art, and Stuff) can help more to see that. His favorite pastime activity though is "getting meta-physical" with his girlfriend Lisa. "Remember, Infinity is Really Big."

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DargonZine is an electronic magazine printing stories written for the Dargon Project, a shared-world anthology similar to (and inspired by) Robert Asprin's Thieves' World anthologies, created by David "Orny" Liscomb in his now retired magazine, FSFNet. The Dargon Project centers around a medieval-style duchy called Dargon in the far reaches of the Kingdom of Baranur on the world named Makdiar, and as such contains stories with a fantasy fiction/sword and sorcery flavor.

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