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Looking Ahead

Daniel K. Appelquist

This issue marks the seventh time I've highly abused the Internet, Bitnet and UUCP with a mass mailing, this time to over 1300 subscribers. As you may be aware, if you're on the internet, the FTP server which had been doing a great job archiving back issues of *Quanta* has been down for some time. I'm in the process of trying to find a new server, so any help towards that goal would be appreciated. In the mean time, I'll be happy to fill any back order requests through the mail. This presents little or no change for subscribers on BITNET, UUCP or any of the various other non-internet nets out there.

This is also the first issue to bear the official new *Quanta* ISSN (International Standard Serial Number). What does this mean? Not much, besides being a mark of officialdom. All it really means is that the number 1053-8496 is assigned to *Quanta* for ever more in the files of the Library of Congress and in the International Standard Serial Number archives in Paris, France. Neat, huh?

I was accused by some of being "Liberace"-like in my column last issue, and while I'm not quite sure what that entails, I'll try to keep this one to the facts, the bare essentials. You won't catch me going off on a tangent, no sir-ee. Not in this article...

So anyway, we have some really great fiction for you this issue. Some familiar faces are back, specifically Phillip Nolte, Christopher Kempke (of course), William Racicot, and Jim Vassilakos with a new installment of his *Harrison* series. Faye Levine also makes a reappearance with *The Gods of Pittsburgh. Gods* is a bit of a departure for Faye... I think you'll enjoy it. We also have two new authors this issue (at least new to *Quanta*): Fiona Oceanstar gives us timely advice on *How to Pick Out a Good Horror Novel* and Robert Hurvitz lets us in on *The Big Joke.*

Let me take this opportunity to solicit some material. I'm always looking for new material from new authors. If you have something you think would fit into *Quanta*, I encourage you to send it along to me.

I've been throwing around the idea of expanding the scope of *Quanta* to include all genres of fiction, with an emphasis on SF related works, but no strict limitations. If you have any thoughts on this, please express them to me. I feel *Quanta*, as it is, needs to grow, but I'm not sure in what direction that growth should occur. One possible direction for growth is in distributon. I have approached the Compuserve Science-Fiction group on making *Quanta* available for public downloading there. I also hope to get *Quanta* onto GEnie and other online services. If you're a member of one of these service (I personally am not), and if you could provide me with a name I could contact, I'd be deeply appreciative. Also, getting in touch with the administrators of these systems and telling them about *Quanta* yourself might be of help.

In other news, although Jim McCabe has yet to come out with the last issue of Athene, it is official that the magazine has been shut down. Fortunately, Jason Snell, whose name you may recognize from various stories and articles he has published in both *Quanta* and *Athene,* has decided to start up his own magazine. Jason will be inheriting Athene's subscription list, and has been working diligently on the format at last report. If you're interested in this new magazine (working title is "Intertext") send mail to Jason Snell (jsnell@ucsd.edu).

Well, that's about it for me — Enjoy!

How To Pick Out a Good Horror Novel

Fiona Oceanstar

Have you ever had the experience of going into the produce section of the local Hyped-Up Hypermarket to grab something basic like an apple or a melon and found yourself intimidated by the fruit?

I have this problem all the time. I mean there are so many different categories these days, but when you get right up close to them, they all look alike, you know? More alike than they used to, at least. All the apples have exactly the same pigment and the same-sized bruise on them. The melons look like midget green volleyballs, they are so perfect and round and identical. So how are you supposed to choose? You're not allowed to just munch down on the groceries right there in the store, except for popping a few cherries or grapes in your mouth (who me?), so instead you're supposed to rely on these *rules* for how to pick out a good melon. Rules for how to tell the inside from the outside, in other words.

My thing is, I'm always forgetting those rules. Is it supposed to be soft on one end? (But which end? Are the ends different?) I think I heard once you're supposed to prick it with your thumbnail, twirl it around counterclockwise three times, and then see what it smells like. Or do you thump it? And if so, what is it supposed to sound like?

Well at any rate, this happened to me yet again last Saturday as I was standing there in front of the melons, and I started thinking about all the time I spend standing around in front of racks and stacks of books, trying to pick out a good horror novel. If you're lazy about it and just walk out with the first book that catches your attention, it may not turn out to be very tasty. You can't always remember which author they recommended in the magazine you read, or what your officemate Jennifer the horror expert said, so sometimes it would be nice to have some rules. Rules for how to pick out a good horror novel. Except that unlike the melon rules, maybe you'd do it often enough that you'd remember them. I don't know about you, but I read horror novels much more often that I eat *any* kind of fruit.

So. . . I invented some rules. Actually, the truth of the matter is, I invented them about ten years ago and have been testing them and refining them ever since. But only in the light of last Saturday's melon quandary have I felt ready to share them with the general public.

OK. I trust that all who want to learn how to pick out a good horror novel are on board with me at this point, and all who want to learn about honeydews have gone elsewhere. The first step in picking out a horror novel is finding out where the horror novels grow. You can't just wander out into any old place and expect to find horror novels.

"But wait a minute," I can hear you saying. "I thought horror novels grew almost **everywhere**."

This is true. Horror novels DO grow almost everywhere.

It's one of their more endearing characteristics: they are happy, hardy little organisms, managing to survive with some degree of integrity even in the vast poisoned soils of airport newstands, overstimulating supermarkets, and drugstore paperback counters. And you can make some outstanding, even thrilling discoveries in these unlikely places. I discovered T. E. D. Klein, for example, in the paperback rack of a seedy chain drugstore in Little Rock, Arkansas. Klein, who was at one time the editor of the late lamented *Twilight Zone* magazine, is a follower of weird fantasist Arthur Machen, and finding him right across from the candy bars in an Arkansas drugstore was kind of like finding an oversized poster of Hieronymus Bosch's "Garden of Earthly Delights" on sale at the local Pier One. The deliciously peculiar in the midst of the grotesquely ordinary, in other words.

But don't let me mislead you with this little brag of mine about where I found T. E. D. Klein. (It was *Dark Gods*, by the way—a great collection of novellas). If you're a newcomer to horror, you'll do better avoiding the chain drugstores and such places, if only because it's hard to concentrate on reading while standing in an aisle where munchkins are swiping M&M's and yapping in foreign languages.

You'll do better going to a quality bookstore. Not a mall bookstore, either. A **good** bookstore.

Once you get there and commence your reconnoitre, you'll notice that unlike the fantasy and science fiction novels, the horror novels do not congregate neatly in a separate portion of the bookstore. They are usually scattered in with the current fiction and the so-called "literature," although a few (mostly serial killer stories) may show up in the mystery/suspense/crime category. You can take it as a rule of thumb that wherever Stephen King is, that's where most of the other new horror is. (We can talk about the old horror—dusty, creaky, delightful, **old** horror—at another time. It's mostly in the fine literature section, where it belongs.)

Now if you happen to live near a specialty bookstore, then you're in business. Bookstores dealing only or mostly in horror are as rare as real Jewish deli's in the South, but often mystery, sci-fi, or comic bookstores will support a few shelves of horror. You'll always be ahead of the game buying horror at a specialty store, because the buyers are more inclined to pick up some of the lesser known authors, instead of just the big blockbusters.

Let me put in a plug here for used bookstores. Even in small towns that wouldn't dream of having a separate horror section in the local high-inventory outlet, you can almost always find

used bookstores with special horror racks. Often the racks will even be decorated with blood-red "dripping" letters or computer graphics of a skull-and- crossbones. These racks can be great fun. But they are not for the faint of heart, believe me—they can be formidable and mind-numbing, and they definitely are at least 95% pure crap (what is that—Sturgeon's Law?). But they are cheap. They are comfortable places to browse for hours on end. You can pick up the books that are a few years old. And sometimes, you can meet people in there who know enough about horror to give you some pointers. (You might even run into me.)

But no matter where you go—the well-lit book emporium or the quirky second-hand shop—you can't just walk in and hit paydirt if you don't know what you're doing. You must develop a search technique for horror novels. You must develop your own set of nearly infallible rules for separating the yummy from the sour.

I've been reading paperback horror, now, for thirteen lucky years. I am willing to share my own personal horror-novel rules with you, but I must caution you from the start that these are the rules of a person who has a literature background and tends to prefer books that are well-written over books that are not. They are also the rules of a person not easily disgusted or offended. I enjoy flayed skin and dripping flesh. I also enjoy subtle, highly psychological terror. Most of all, I enjoy the nightmares I get from these novels.

Actually, if you don't relish a good juicy nightmare, or a nice eerie paranoid evening all by yourself, you may not want to get into this genre at all.

Enough caveats. For starters, this is the short version of my rules:

1. Text — small print that passes the random page test
2. Blurbs — the more, the more prestigious, the better
3. Little niceties — the more, the more interesting, the better

Let's start with the text of the novel. Don't bother with the cover at first: go straight to the words inside. Flip the pages with your hands. Is the print reasonably small and attractive? Are the chapter headings visually satisfying? Laugh if you want, but I think you can indeed judge a horror novel by its appearance. (But *not* by its cover—more on that later.) The text itself is very important. If the print font is large and clumsy-looking, forget it. You may lose a few gems that way, but if they really have staying power, they'll get reprinted in a more attractive format and you can pick them up later.

If you're satisfied with the size and look of the text, then go for a random page test. Now what you're scanning for, in a page test of a horror novel, is a negative thing: you're scanning for an **absence** of really egregious writing. If you happen to find some **good** writing, fine, but don't be turned off if your random page turns up a workaday narrative of what seem to be ordinary events. I don't know other genres well enough to comment on their styles, but some of the best horror novels have very plain, unembellished prose. But if you find something on that page that turns you off immediately—a hackneyed metaphor or a fuzzy description—the book hasn't passed rule number one. I don't want to be tacky here and name too many names, but examples of authors that (for me) do not pass the random page test are V. C. Andrews, John Saul, and Rick Hautala. Remember: this is a negative criterion, not a positive one.

Once your novel's made it through test number one, it's time to look at the blurbs. You know, those quotations praising the novel that you find plastered on the front cover, back cover, and inside first several pages. The more blurbs, the better. Many blurbs means a lot of people thought this book was worth their while to read and review. The more prestigious publications, the better: if the *New York Times* liked it, if the *Washington Post* liked it, even if the *Houston Chronicle* liked it—if any big-city newspaper gave it some words of encouragement, that's a good sign. So is a positive review from *The New Yorker* or *Playboy*. You don't need to **read** the blurbs at all—they're all more or less the same anyway. The important thing is: where are they from? Be careful about blurbs from California—they're often unreliable. Blurbs from ditzy magazines or nowhere newspapers aren't worth very much. And pay no attention to blurbs from *Library Journal*, *Publishers Weekly*, or *Kirkus Reviews*. Be especially wary of books for which those three publications are the only blurbs they could find.

As for blurbs from other horror writers, you'll have to wait until you've read those writers, to be able to evaluate them. Stephen King throws out a lot of blurbs—he's been called the "blurbmeister" of the field. In my experience, he never plugs a novel that's actively bad, but his blurbs do show up on some mediocre stuff. It goes without saying that if you don't like John Creepy, you probably won't like a novel whose only claim to fame is that John Creepy liked it. Reviews from big-city newspapers are more trustworthy, believe me.

This seems like a good point to pause and talk about the cover art and cover graphics. My rule is: pay absolutely **no** attention to the cover art and cover graphics. If you're going to read a horror novel, get used to the idea that you may be reading something you're tempted to put a brown paper cover on, because the big embossed silver lettering and the fakey-looking monster on the cover look really stupid. What I've noticed is, the more books an author sells, the more veto power they appear to have over their cover art, and thus the art improves with time. Why this should be the case, is beyond me. You'd think the publishers would want to give the most attractive cover art to an unknown author, to make them appear classy or literary. At any rate, some of the best horror has truly lousy cover art.

All right now—if your novel's made it through the first two gauntlets, you're probably going to buy it, but if you want to be really sure, you can move into an area that I call "the little niceties." These are the fussy-fussy things that authors and publishers attach to the text to doll them up: introduction, preface, acknowledgements, dedication, quotations, and (at the end) mini-biography of the author. For the most part, the more of this fussy stuff, the better, because it indicates that someone cared enough about this novel to put a little effort into doing it right. The acknowledgements section, for example, may tell you that the author talked to a doctor to improve the accuracy

of *Le Filet de Human Heart*, or talked to a homicide bureau to figure out what kind of donuts cops eat. A mini-biography at the back is always an encouraging sign, no matter what it says, because it shows that the author is (at least apparently) a real person who's not ashamed to admit having written this book. And most important of all, in my personal view, are the quotations: if the author can appreciate the English language as found in Edgar Allan Poe or Wallace Stevens or Bruce Springsteen or whomever, they may well have a decent critical eye for their own prose.

Don't be disappointed if it takes you a while to get the hang of it. When you find a horror novel, pick it up and quickly run through the three tests. Remember: first the text—scan the pages for visual appeal and then read a little. If it doesn't pass the first test, put it down and move on to another book. Seriously—you should stop right there if you don't like the text. Then the blurbs—don't waste your time reading them, just scan for names of publications. If it doesn't pass the blurb test with flying colors, don't be put off immediately—you may be dealing with an unknown author. (As you get more proficient, you'll get in the habit of checking the spine for a press you've had good luck with in the past.) Move on to the third test, see what there is in the way of little niceties, and decide whether it all adds up to a 'yes' vote or a 'no' vote.

And then, after you've read the novel(s) that you picked out with this technique, look back and see if the rules were valid, or if they need to be modified in some way to suit your particular taste.

If you want, write to me and let me know what book you tried these on and whether they worked for you. I'm always curious about what others like to read when they're looking for a good shudder.

Fiona Oceanstar is a 35-yr-old headshrinker whose secret ambition all through med school, residency, and onward, has been to launch her career as a nonfiction writer about horror. She currently lives in her hometown of Houston, but in a few weeks is moving to the D.C. area, where she plans to continue writing about everything dark, bloody, grotesque, and macabre. She'll also keep up the minor avocational interest of practicing and teaching psychiatry, mostly because her crazy patients are a great source of inspiration.

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THE GODS OF PITTSBURGH

by Faye Levine

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Eternity sucks.

Oh, it's not the boredom that gets to me—there are ways of dealing with that. I'm not the type of eternal who becomes so consumed with boredom that I take to "playing" with poor, stupid mortals. No, what hurts is the drudgery of it all, watching the world decay with pollution, war, and assorted vices. But then, who am I to complain about vice? I'm a satyr.

My birthname is Thaylos, but I've gone by a variety of names over the years. I was born in Greece in the Hellenistic era, some two millenia ago. I am one of the youngest of my kind; as far as I know the last satyr born came sometime during the years of the Roman Empire, and the oldest can be traced back over three thousand years, maybe earlier.

I've got gripes with everyone—with humankind, with the Olympians, with my own kind. The Olympians gave up trying to be almighty and the humans wasted everything Zeus gave them. The gods, for the most part, are sulking up on their mountain, unworshipped and ignored outside the classroom, having contests to see who's the most depressed. A few still walk the earth. As long as love exists, Eros and Aphrodite will have something to do. Artemis is currently masquerading as the president of some women's magazine, I think, and Zeus joined a bowling league because he liked the thunder-sound made by the ball hitting the pins. The old geezer doesn't chase women anymore; Hera keeps him on a tight leash. Hephaestus mucks around grumbling about steel workers getting the short end of things. Apollo's become a yuppie. But the worst of the lot is my "lord", Dionysus. All he does is drink, keeping himself in a perpetual stupor, dreaming of the days when he used to dance with his maenad priestesses. Imagine that: the god of wine an alcoholic. The irony disgusts me.

But at least the great gods have Olympus. The rest of us are stuck down here, in this foul air and spoiled earth. The older satyrs tell me Dionysus used to invite them up for parties, but someone put the moves on Hera and that was the end of that.

I suppose you'd think we lesser deities spend our time hiding in the mountains and forests, away from humans. Some do—I know I appreciate fresh air and clean water—but a good many of us live among you. The various nymphs have become environmentalists and activists, working for organizations like Greenpeace, the EPA, and the SPCA. As for my kind, the satyrs generally enjoy human company. We have ways of hiding our nonhuman features in your presence. There are many of us; chances are you've seen or met or even lived with one of my kind, or even me.

We are the dirty old men, the lovers of porn, the party animals, the playboys, the clubhoppers. We may own the liquor store or Musicland down the street. We are the beautiful men, the happy-go-lucky, the greatest of lovers. We are the unfaithful and multi-partnered. We are the men who will live with but never marry you; we are the ones you love but will never make a commitment.

We never truly mean it when we say "I love you."

That hurts me, which is unusual. Satyrs are not supposed to love or give a damn; it is implanted in us to live and love for the moment, to be perpetually happy. But I look out at the world and see the love beneath hate and poison of the modern society, and I wonder, Why can't I share it?

Not to say I haven't tried. I have. I've gone to therapists and I've read books. I've acted in passionate plays in the dim hope it would spark something within me. I've tried to be committed to one woman. I've tried to love, but nothing works. There's a void inside me. I cannot love, only lust; I feel no need or desire for a significant other in my life.

I used to be normal and happy. I never used to complain. When the last of the Olympians was dumped for Christ, I said, "Who cares? We're all eternal. The party doesn't have to stop." The party didn't stop, but it did become erratic. As the Christian Church grew more and more powerful, the world became less and less inviting. Most of the satyrs slept through the Dark Ages. I made the mistake of not sleeping in long enough. Curious and impatient, I woke up to the world of the Inquisition. There were few satyrs around. For the first time I was frightened—and alone. Too disturbed to go back to sleep, I wandered through Europe hoping to find some company. I did.

She was young and pretty and much brighter than the other peasant girls. She had a wonderful imagination. When she could, she would sneak away to the fields to play with me. I became her secret friend. I thought I loved her. I cared for her so deeply I revealed my True Form to her, goat legs and all. Of course she ran away from me—women *always* run from satyrs—but when I caught her she was laughing and enchanted.

She made the mistake of telling someone she had a half-goat for a friend, and they burned her as a witch. I was devastated.

Three days later, I was in another village, lusting after another young woman.

And then it hit me what I had done. I realized I hadn't *truly* loved that poor girl, or any other woman or nymph I'd ever been with. I loathed myself. Over the years, I attended fewer and fewer satyr gatherings; eventually I stopped going altogether. Europe degenerated. It began to weigh heavily on

me. I thought that foul continent would suffocate me, so I ran away to Asia, where I had some peace of mind. A good friend called me back to Greece in 1785. I found out that far away, across Poseidon's waters, was an endless new land and a budding nation. A few satyrs had made the journey a hundred years earlier, and had just sent word back how beautiful it was. I went to England and took the first ship to America I could find.

It *was* beautiful. I ran with the buffalo through the Great Plains, skipped through the Rockies, and wandered through the woods. In 1790, a group of wood nymphs migrated over and I lived with them. I almost forgot about other satyrs and women and humankind in general. For just a while, I felt good again.

All that changed with the settlers moving further and further west. I soothed the nymphs as they cut down the forests. I choked on their trains' fumes, watched them shoot buffalo for fun, saw them destroy the natives of this country. It was Europe all over again. I went south to Mexico and beyond and found the same thing had happened there. Eventually, I ended up hiding in a corner of Canada, sulking.

Satyrs, however, are social beings, and after a time the loneliness was driving me crazy. I bounced from country to country, never happy with what I found. Finally, I gave up. I ended up back in North America, and have more or less stayed here for the past century. In some respects, it's been amusing, watching the United States grow and advance so quickly. I've enjoyed the music, the television, the movies, motorcycles, fast cars and jet-skis. But the air and land have become foul, and underneath this mask of a happy, productive society there's poverty, stress, and social hangups. The ways of the Greeks and Romans are gone forever.

Like Europe, America began to get me down. My black moods began to affect me. By 1980 I had completely lost my sexual appetite. As of the Fall of 1990, I had been celibate for ten years.

I believe that beats the previous satyr record by nine years, 364 days, and twelve hours, give or take a few minutes.

In September, 1990, I went to Pittsburgh. It's so suited for brooding. I'd been there in the 1700's when it was a beautiful speck of the frontier: three rivers, green hills, and only a couple of ugly forts. After I moved west, I heard the Industrial Revolution had turned it into a filthy, cold city, so I avoided it until that year, when I overheard someone say it had improved. Curious and bored, I went back and found them scraping a century of grime off of the Carnegie Museum and certain other buildings around the city. But really, it wasn't so bad; the downtown area is a pleasant mix of old and new, fairly clean and not that unfriendly. The rivers' junction has become a park with a huge fountain. The weather, however, hasn't changed a bit. On some days, the sky takes on a familiar dingy cast, occasionally dumping rain. It's those wet days that are so perfect for being depressed.

Late one morning, I went downdown. There's an adult book, video and "toy" store there, and as I passed it I felt a tingling inside me. I crossed the street and lingered near the door; the sensation grew stronger. I didn't really want to go in that place. At that point in my life, the thought of smut made me queasy, but I gave in and stepped inside. Immediately, a smell hit my nose; pleasant, musky and familiar to me, undetectable to humans. I can't fully describe it, but it was definately satyr-smell. I looked around, sniffing the air, and finally saw him.

Standing casually near the wall of magazines, smiling as he looked over the titles, was what appeared to be a middle-aged man, dashing and trim, with a tidy grey beard, glasses, and a double-breasted suit. He turned and smiled as I walked over to him.

"Well, well, well. . . " he murmured with a cultured, British accent, his smile broadening.

"Sir William," I greeted happily, and embraced him. "It's been too long."

His name is not in fact "Sir William", but Euriphides. He'd picked up the title by accident, and, fancying the Isles, has lived under the name and guise of a successful producer and entrepreneur for all these years. Euriphides is a different kind of satyr; a selini, to be exact, one of the oldest of our kind. The selini are usually seen on old wine vases; they are the original servants of Dionysus. Euriphides is half-man, like me, but the rest of him—his legs and ears and tail—is horse, not goat. He's one of my dearest friends among the eternals. When I was very small, I used to tug his tail and call him "father", although there's a very low probability that he actually is.

"It *has* been a while," he told me, and leaned a bit closer. "What are you calling yourself nowadays, Thaylos?" he asked quietly.

I shrugged. "I have a Minnesota driver's license which says I'm Theodore Petersen."

He arched an eyebrow. "What a dreadfully tacky name. I shall have to call you 'Teddy', then." He chuckled, then asked, "What brings you here?"

"The gods only know," I replied. "And you?"

"I just decided to take a little trip to the East Coast cities." He waved a stack of magazines in front of my face. I caught the titles *Big Man* and *Whipworld*. "You know, do a little shopping, eh? Know what I mean?" He nudged me, smiling more broadly.

I groaned. Euriphides is a dirty old satyr if there ever was one. For all outward appearances and his love of culture, he's had sexual relations with just about everyone—and everything—imaginable.

"I've been having a lovely time," he went on. "I went out to the fraternities over at the University of Pittsburgh and Carnegie Mellon University—unbelievable! I filched some freshman student I.D.s, altered my looks, and snuck in for Rush. You've got to try it, Teddy. There's music and women and dancing. . . those frat brothers may as well be satyrs, the way they drink! The beer is endless. . . have you been out there?"

"To Oakland? Yes, I've been staying in Schenley Park."

Euriphides squinted. "Are you feeling all right?" he asked me suddenly.

"Yes," I replied, "Why?"

"Well," he murmured, frowning, "You're not aroused. Are you ill?"

While eternals don't die, we are capable of feeling pain and getting sick, so it would seem only logical that a young satyr without an erection must be unwell. "No, I'm fine, really," I said.

Euriphides leaned close. "I can make you feel better," he cooed, giving me the seductive eye.

"No, not today—*father*," I quipped, not wanting to hurt his feelings.

He looked hurt. "You wound me!" he moaned.

"I'm sorry, Eu—Sir William. I. . . I just don't feel up to it—no pun intended."

"What d'you mean, you don't feel like it?" he replied in surprise, and put a hand to my forehead. "Are you sure you're not ill?"

"Positive."

He smiled. "Poor kid," he said, ruffling my hair, then chuckled and lowered his voice. "Or should I say ram?" he corrected, squinting to see through to my True Form. "Your horns have come in so nicely. You're looking like a bighorn sheep." He paused. "Speaking of which, did I ever tell you about the time I—"

"Many times," I smiled.

"I forget sometimes you're not a child anymore," Euriphides admitted. He played with a tress of my long, curly hair, staring at me fondly. "While we're on that line of conversation, it may interest you to know that your favorite playmate is in town, too."

"Minorus?" I replied. "I haven't seen him in ages! What's he up to?"

Euriphides shrugged. "I don't know." Again he drew close to me to mumble in my ear. "I haven't seen him, but I caught his scent earlier today. He may still be in this area."

"Great," I said, "I should go look for him. Why don't we get together for dinner or something?"

"How about 'or something'?"

"William, please. . . "

"All right," Euriphides groaned, giving up, "Meet me at Jimmy Tsang's tomorrow at seven, and if you find Minorus, then by all means bring him."

"You bet," I told him, and left the store.

I couldn't find Minorus. In the late afternoon I gave up searching and went to a grocery store to get something to eat. I was looking over the fruit, considering picking up some apples for Euriphides, when I noticed a young man staring at me. As I looked over at him he looked away and absently surveyed a passion fruit. I ignored him, but couldn't help noticing how he kept watching me—and and the passion fruit. He was an androgynous type, lightly built and very pretty. The human form I happened to be using at the time was not far from my True Form—long, curly, rust-colored hair, smooth face, grey eyes, average but fit build. Quite attractive by human standards. I decided he was hitting on me. I was hardly in the mood for this sort of game, and since Euriphides wasn't there to take over, I moved away and went over to the deli. The young man followed me discretely, still carrying a passion fruit. I got a sandwich and went back to the produce section for the apples.

I saw the guy following me as I walked back to produce, but when I got there, there he was in front of me.

"What do you want me to do, Thaylos, shout?" he snapped, throwing me the passion fruit. I was so surprised I barely caught it. "Get a clue," he added with a sneer. He looked at me hard, and when I stared back I saw him for what he was.

"Cupid," I muttered, and sighed. I don't like Olympians.

"That's 'Eros' to you, pal," he growled. "Watch your attitude."

Again I sighed. "Well," I asked, "What do you want from me?"

"You," he told me with a fair amount of distaste, "are a disgrace to your kind. Mother and I can feel your black thoughts all the way up on Olympus."

"Why should you and Aphrodite care what a lowly little faun like me feels?" I replied, not bothering to hide my annoyance.

"Because it's giving us a headache! We're all connected, you know. Satyrs are not supposed to be unhappy and celibate. You're supposed to be out screwing everything in sight!"

The little bastard was starting to annoy me now. The way he felt about my kind was quite obvious. "Some of us have higher standards than that," I replied, trying hard to control my anger. This isn't an easy thing. Satyrs' emotions are intense. Usually, however, we only radiate lust and happiness and content. Although we're not violent by nature, an angry satyr is not something you'd want to meet in a dark alley.

Eros cringed. "You see?" he groaned, "Stop it, for Zeus' sake! Over the years you've only gotten more and more morbid. All of the other satyrs send me pleasant feelings of lust, but your depression bores into my skull like a stake. It gets stronger every day."

"So why don't you just tune out my bad vibes?" I asked him. "It's none of your business what I feel anyway."

"I *can't* block you out. If something happens to a nymph or an animal, Artemis knows, because the woods and everything in them are her kingdom. If something happens to a naiad, Poseidon knows. Satyrs overlap. You belong to Dionysus, but Artemis is aware of you because you live in the forests and fields. *I* am aware of you because your kind radiates feelings associated with the realm of Love. Do you understand?"

I nodded. "Yes, but what do want from me? What can I do?"

He was very frank. "Get laid."

"I don't feel like it."

"I know. You're not even aroused. For you, that's an illness. The cure is to have a few nice flings."

"But I'm not interested."

"You don't have to lie with a human. In fact, it might be better if you were with a nymph or another satyr. Euriphides is in town; I'm sure he'd be willing to help you out. . . " Eros flashed me a smile.

"I've already spoken with Euriphides," I said flatly. "Look, I'm just not interested. I don't care who it is."

Eros shot me a dark look. "You'd better care," he said. "You're not living up to your kind's standards and you're an-

noying the hell out of me. Trust me—Aphrodite with PMS is bad enough. Aphrodite with PMS *and* a satyr-induced headache is terrifying. Now you change your attitude, Thaylos, or I'll change it for you." He came very close to me, and the next thing I knew he was digging a Beretta 9mm into my gut.

I laughed. "What are you going to do, *kill* me?"

"You're as stupid as the goat's ass you wear," he replied.

I glanced down at the pistol and saw that it wasn't just a pistol. "Oh," I said, but couldn't stop smiling. "You can't affect me," I told him. "Satyrs lust, not love, and your shots are for love."

Eros narrowed his eyes and took on a wicked smile. "Try me," he said. "We'll see how much you know about my powers."

I shrugged. "What happened to your trusty bow and arrow?" I asked, glancing at the Beretta.

He pocketed the pistol. "Times have changed," he replied, and left me standing alone among the apples.

I went back to Schenley Park, got deep into the woods, took off my clothes, and began the Change. It's a somewhat uncomfortable process, but I've learned to live with it. I suppose the worst part—worse than the itchiness of having fleece sprout from your legs—is having your knees bend back the wrong way and your feet change to hooves as you go from man to goat, or vice versa. Either way, I always spend a couple of minutes stumbling around, getting used to walking a different way. Having the horns, the tail and the goatee sprout isn't exactly fun, either. You see, when I walk in public as a man I can't simply project an illusion; if anyone bumped into me they'd feel the truth, and besides, pants wouldn't fit. When Euriphides looked at me closely and saw my True Form, he wasn't seeing through an illusion, but concentrating on me in order to get a mental impression or feeling of what I actually look like.

After the Change, I stretched out my legs and shook my tail a few times to get loosened up, then took off running, easily going up and down the steep, wooded hills human visitors find difficult. After a few minutes, I picked up a small stone, right in the cleft of my right hoof, and had to stop to pull it out. It was wedged in tightly, trickling a little bit of blood, and it hurt like Hades. When I finally pulled it out, I saw the damage wasn't too bad, but decided to stay off my feet until it stopped hurting.

As I sat there, there was a rustling in the bushes. I saw a human coming through the brush. My immediate instinct was to bolt, but as I tried to get up a force held me back. An instant later the human was standing there in front of me, and all I could think was, *Why isn't she running away?*

She was tall and well-built, wearing a perfectly pressed, spotless business suit, which I found interesting because we were in the middle of the woods on damp ground. Her dark hair was pulled back into a bun, and a pair of roundish glasses was perched on her nose.

"Know me, Thaylos," she said, and I did.

"Artemis. . . " I choked.

She curled her lip. "That's 'divine lady' or 'mistress' to you," she replied. "And just so you know, I've been going by my Roman name for years."

"Oh, I—eh, yes, Diana." She stared at me, and I swear her eyes glowed. "Divine mistress," I amended, but the contempt I felt was leaking through. She saw it, but for some reason dismissed it.

"Never mind," she said. "You can just call me 'Artemis' or 'Diana'. I didn't come here to have you revere me." She stopped again, then added, "Not that I'd want one of your kind worshipping me anyway."

I narrowed my eyes at the Olympian. "Then why are you here?" I asked, still trying to hide my distaste, even though I knew she could feel it. The Virgin Huntress is a positive sort of goddess, but she has been known to become violent, especially toward the male sex. As much as I didn't care for her or any other Olympian, I didn't want to provoke her.

She sighed heavily. "We have a problem. A very big one. Do you know the story of Prometheus?"

I shrugged. "Sure. He helped Zeus overthrow the Titans, then gave the humans fire. Zeus tied him up to a rock for that."

"And then?"

"He was eventually freed by Hercules."

"But what else?" Artemis prompted.

"What," I replied, "You mean the prophesy?" Again I shrugged. "Prometheus claimed that one day Zeus would have a son capable of overthrowing him. Eventually he and Poseidon found out the woman who would have the child was the sea goddess Thetis, but she married a mortal, King Peleus."

"No," Artemis told me, "She didn't 'marry him', but was married off by Zeus and Poseidon. She had no choice."

"I don't understand," I replied. "What's the point?"

"Prometheus' prophesy has come true."

"But that's impossible!"

"Why?"Artemis paused and stared at me, her face grim. "No one can escape Fate—not even the gods."

"But her son was Achilles, and he was killed in the Trojan war."

"Exactly. Thetis didn't know why she was forced to marry Peleus. She was very bitter. Her only joy in life was Achilles. It was the gods who caused the Trojan war; the Olympians meddled in it, and because Apollo guided the incompetent Paris' arrow, Achilles died. That seemed to be the end of it. But I've found out that it wasn't. Years later, Prometheus went to her. He hated Zeus and wanted revenge, and Thetis was the one who could give it to him. He explained his prophesy to her, and she was furious at the way she'd been manipulated. That combined with the loss of Achilles pushed her over the edge. She seduced Zeus and bore a son, which she hid from all of us."

I rolled my eyes. "*She* seduced *Zeus*? Isn't it usually the other way around?"

"She pulled his own trick on him," Artemis explained with distaste. "She turned herself into a white cow with sex appeal and Zeus went for her when Hera wasn't looking." She paused to scowl. "Daddy was in a wicked mood that day."

"I still don't understand why—"

The goddess cut me off. "Her son's name is Aetros, but that's all I know about him at the moment. I think he's going to make a move soon."

"But that still doesn't explain why you're telling me!" I snapped.

"Because no one else believes me," she replied.

"I don't think I do."

Artemis sighed. "Well the Olympians don't either, and I'm afraid to go to the other Titans, because they're probably lined up behind Prometheus. The lesser gods wouldn't believe me, either, mostly because Zeus and Hera didn't. The nymphs, who also thought I was crazy, don't consider our politics their business or concern, and the satyrs are too drunk and silly and powerless to be any help."

"So why are you talking to me?" I demanded.

"Because you're different," she explained. "I heard Eros complaining about you and got curious. I've been watching you. You're of a different state of mind than the other satyrs. I thought that just maybe you would listen and believe me. I think maybe you can help me. I don't know how, but I do know I can't handle Aetros alone."

I was becoming annoyed. "Look," I said, "Even if I did believe this story, why should I help you? You Olympians disgust me."

"If Aetros is capable of overthrowing Zeus, he can easily deal with your kind and anyone else in this world, mortal or eternal."

"Why should he care about the satyrs? No one else does, except Dionysus."

"He could overthrow Dionysus. Aren't you bound to protect your master?"

"Frankly," I told Artemis, "I'm fed up with my master."

"Listen," she hissed, "I can't say for sure, but I've got this gut feeling that Aetros carries his mother's and the Titans' grudges to an extreme. I don't know what his powers are, but I know he's stronger than any of us, and I have a terrible feeling he's going to announce his presence soon, and not pleasantly." She grabbed my shoulders and shook me. I was impressed that she touched me at all. "You're the last one I can turn to. Please help me. I'll reward you."

I snorted. "What can you give me?"

"Anything. You can live on Olympus, be a master of your kind, have a harem of nymphs—"

"I'd sooner castrate myself than live on Olympus, and I don't want any power."

She was getting desperate. "Then what do you want?"

I stared her down and decided to play her game. "I want to love."

Artemis frowned. "What?"

"Satyrs are incapable of loving. I want to love."

"I can arrange that."

I pulled away from her. "Leave me alone," I muttered. "Let me be miserable in peace, okay?"

The goddess stepped back. "Think about it," she said. "I'll be back."

She seemed about ready to go, but I stopped her. "Artemis," I asked, "Are there any other reasons you bothered to come to me?"

She gave me a thin smile. "Well, one more. I knew that in your current state of mind you wouldn't put the moves on me." She sneered. "After all, isn't it every satyr's pipe dream to diddle the Chaste Goddess?"

She spread her arms wide and took on an eerie glow. A moment later she was gone.

I went back downtown the next day to look for Minorus. Artemis' words filled my head. At the time, I didn't know why. She was a bitch, I kept telling myself, just a cold, condescending bitch with a nastier case of hormonal imbalance than your average satyr. Still, it bothered me. Unless it really was that important, why else would she mess with a satyr, and an unimportant one at that? She certainly didn't like me or any of my kind. Seeing Eros on the same day as the Huntress only made it worse. I felt like I was being watched.

I tried to push these thoughts away as I got off the bus on Fifth Avenue and searched for Minorus. I tried going to the head shops, liquor stores, and adult bookstalls, but there was no trace of him. The most I found in those places was the lingering scent of Euriphides.

My patience (or what little bit of it satyrs are allotted) was finally rewarded as I passed Sak's Fifth Avenue, a posh, expensive place. Somehow I managed to catch Minorus' scent through the fumes of a passing bus. I went into the store.

He wasn't immediately visible, and I had no idea what form he was currently wearing, so I relied on my nose. Eventually his scent mixed with the scents of many other animals, and soon enough I found myself among the fur coats. There were saleswomen, rich women, and wishful girls going through the coats and jackets, but no men. I was confused. I didn't think Minorus would bother to make himself look like a woman unless he was trying to sneak into a harem or convent. But sure enough, his scent grew very strong as my eyes fell upon a middle-aged woman standing in front of a mirror, a saleslady fawning over her.

"Isn't it just lovely?" gushed the young sales rep.

The older woman petted the coat she was wearing. "It's so soft!" As she paused to glance at the price tag, I cleared my thoat. She turned and looked at me. "And what do you think?" she asked.

"It's. . . it's very nice, ma'am," I replied a bit awkwardly, because I realized as she spoke that she was indeed a she, and not Minorus. It had to be the saleslady then, I decided.

"It's, eh, a bit pricy, though," the older woman remarked, fiddling with the tag.

"Oh," the saleslady replied, "but it's worth it! That's the finest Persian lamb I've ever seen."

And then I took a good look at the coat.

I gasped so loudly they both turned to look at me. "Are you alright, dear?" the older woman asked, but all I could do was shake my head and gasp some more.

"Are you having an asthma attack?" I heard the saleslady say.

I remember screaming and running from the store.

I don't remember how I got back to Oakland.

"I told you so," I heard Artemis say.

I came to my senses. Noise and fumes filled my head. I was under a train bridge in the brush, and the locomotive and its cars were rumbling past. My clothes were in a heap beside me, and I was in my True Form. I pulled at the soft wool on my legs and burst into tears. For the first time in my life, I had been truly terrified. For the first time, I was in anguish.

The train passed, and when I looked up, sniffling, there was Artemis, standing across the tracks. She walked over to me.

"You shouldn't risk letting people see you in your True Form," she said flatly, but I could see in her eyes she was amused.

"Who cares if someone did?" I managed to groan. "It would just end up in the *World Weekly News*."

"I take it you encountered poor Minorus, or what was left of him."

I buried my head in what is approximately my knees and nodded. "How?" I wailed.

"I told you Aetros was powerful," Artemis replied, unsympathetic.

"But satyrs are eternals!" I wailed.

"I know. That's what makes him more powerful than any other god. Now we know. Aetros has the power to kill eternals—you, me, even Zeus. My guess is that Minorus was only an experiment."

"H-how did you know?"

"As much as I despise you oversexed beasts, you are part of my domain. I told you I thought Aetros was going to do something, so when I felt something wrong in the back of my mind, I looked into the matter and found out Minorus had been murdered."

"What did Dionysus say?" I asked. "He has to know."

"He's too drunk to notice. He felt the pain—I remember him screaming one night, just before I noticed something wrong. He made it go away by drinking himself into a deeper stupor." Artemis sighed. "He may know, but just may not want to deal with it or believe it. No one else would. I talked to the other Olympians again, and they still wouldn't listen."

I got a hold of myself and wiped my eyes. "But how? How could Aetros kill an eternal?"

The goddess grew very serious. "Somehow, he's found the eternals' Threads of Fate—possibly the gods', too—and somehow he has the power to cut them, although I'm sure it isn't easy, even if it is his natural power."

"Why aren't the Fates doing something about this?"

"I don't know. But I suspect it has something to do with the fact that I can't find them."

"I don't understand," I told her, "How could the gods not believe you, with an eternal dead and the Fates missing?"

"Because they're too self-centered!" Artemis snapped, disgusted. "They insist the Fates have to be *somewhere*, and they refuse to believe that Minorus is dead. They think I'm either making it up or playing a joke on them. They wouldn't believe me unless they saw his cut Thread, which I don't have. The death of an eternal is simply unimaginable to them."

"It was to me, too," I moaned. "I'm sorry I didn't believe you."

Artemis sighed. "Even if I did have his cut Thread, they probably wouldn't care. Hera said, 'What's all the fuss? Even if it were true, there's a big difference between us and simple eternals. One simply cannot kill an Olympian. In any case, it's just a filthy, randy little satyr you're talking about—who cares?"'

"Yeah?" I fumed, "Well *I'm* a 'filthy little satyr', and so was Minorus. He was my friend!" I looked up at her. "So why should you care?" I asked. "You hate us as much as Hera does—more, even, because you hate sex."

She softened, but only a bit. "I told you, you *are* in my domain, Thaylos. That makes you my responsibility. There's that, and there's the fact that I believe Aetros *is* capable of killing the Olympians. It's not just us, either—I think, if given the chance, he'll destroy all of us, gods and mortals. I don't know exactly what he's planning, how many Threads he has access to, or who will be the next to die. Now I'm asking you again: Will you help me?"

I heaved a sigh. "I don't know. I'll have to think about it."

"All right," Artemis agreed, "I'll give you a day to think it over. We don't have any more time to spare. I'll meet you here this time tomorrow. Have an answer for me." She stepped back a few feet, shimmered, and was gone.

"Booze," I groaned as I slumped into my seat at Euriphides' table, "I need booze."

He grinned. "That's my boy!" he said. "I suppose this means you're feeling better."

"No," I muttered, but I don't think he heard me.

"Waiter!" he called, "We'll have a bottle of some of that nice rice-wine stuff."

"It's called *sake*, and it's *Japanese*. We're in a Chinese restaraunt."

"Oh," Euriphides said. "Sorry," he told the waiter, "I meant plum wine."

"Just bring me a beer," I grumbled.

"Certainly," said the waiter. "Would you care to order now, too?"

"Just pick something," I told Euriphides.

"All right," he said, scanning the menu, "We'll have wonton soup and fantail shrimp for starters, then kung-pao chicken, sweet and sour pork, beef lo-mein, mu-shu pork, lobster kew, Szechuan lamb—" I looked up at him. "Er, nix on the lamb. Make it Peking duck instead. Oh yes, and some of those almond cookies. And a coke." Smiling, he handed the menu over to the waiter.

"—and a coke," the waiter mumbled as he scribbled on his pad. He took the menu and looked cautiously at Euriphides. "And that's for—er, that's all for the two of you?"

"Well," Euriphides replied, "We may have a third coming along, in which case we'll just order some more."

"Yes, sir," said the waiter, and walked away.

"Sorry about the lamb," Euriphides said. "When you looked at me, I assumed you were a bit sensitive."

"William," I groaned, "A lamb is a young sheep. A kid is a young goat. I just happened to look at you. Fauns are part

goat. It's been thousands of years and you're still confusing them."

"Well I called you 'kid' back in the bookstore, didn't I?" he snorted. "Goats, sheep... what's the difference?" He leaned forward in his seat, a wicked grin on his face. "They're all the same to me...." He sighed and sat back. "Anyway—did you find Minorus? Is he coming?"

"Oh, yes," I told him, "Oh, Dionysus, did I find him."

"And?"

"Ask me after I've had a few."

Now it takes quite a lot to get a satyr even tipsy, so "a few" turned out to be several bottles of plum wine later. Euriphides asked me about Minorus again as I twirled my chopsticks through my third helping of lo-mein. I told him the whole story; how I found poor Minorus had been turned into a coat and how Artemis had come to me and told me about Aetros and Thetis and Prometheus' prophesy. When I finished, Euriphides simply stared at me for several long moments. Eventually he began to chuckle.

"Oh, jolly good!" he exclaimed, "Jolly good story, Teddy."

"I'm not kidding," I told him.

"Oh, come now," he replied, "Stop teasing me."

"But—" I began, but the waiter cut me off as he showed up with the check and our fortune cookies. I plucked one out of the bowl, cracked it open, and pulled out the slip of paper.

It is only wise to make decisions in haste, it said, *when a renegade god could cut your Thread at any time.*

"Ah!" I exclaimed, and flung the paper away, "Damn her!"

"Hm?" Euriphides mumbled as he read his own fortune and tossed it into the ashtray. He picked up mine. " '*Many good things shall come to pass*'," he read, "—in bed," he tagged on with a laugh and a wink. "What's wrong with that?"

"Nothing," I muttered, and got up. "I'm going back to the park. I need to be alone."

"Are you sure you're all right?"

"No. Anyway, I bought you some apples. You can come by later tonight to pick them up."

"Oh, Teddy," Euriphides beamed, "You *do* care!"

"Yeah," I replied, "I do. And don't call me 'Teddy'."

When I got back to Schenley Park, I saw Artemis standing near a birdbath.

"I've found out a few things," she told me. "Thetis stole Aetros' Thread from the Fates. She's hidden it in a magical safe-deposit box in a vault somewhere in Idaho. I've also gotten a fix on Aetros, although I don't know exactly where he is. I still don't know where the Fates are. Come here and take a look at this."

I went and stood next to her in front of the birdbath. As she passed he hand over the still water, a picture began to form. It took shape, and I saw what appeared to be a young man sitting at a desk covered with ropes and strings and threads of all kinds and sizes.

"That's Aetros," Artemis told me, "and those are the Threads of the eternals and lesser gods. I don't see the Olympians' or Titans' Threads." As I watched, Aetros picked a Thread at random and looked it over, studying it carefully. Beside me, Artemis closed her eyes, concentrating. "That's Euriphides' Thread. You know him, don't you?"

My eyes widened in horror. "No!" I cried, and lunged for the pool.

"Stop it!" Artemis hissed, catching me just before my fingertips reached the water. "If you upset the water you'll ruin the image. There's nothing you can do. Now be still!"

To my vast relief, Aetros dropped Euriphides' Thread and chose another. He looked over another dozen or so before he chose one which caused Artemis to speak again.

"That is the Thread of the nymph Calissa," she said quietly, "Your mother."

I remember very little about my mother; most satyrs don't remember their mothers at all. I remember being very small, and her holding me, singing me songs. I remember running through the forest with her. I remember her binding up all the cuts and bruises I got from romping around, and pulling stones from my hooves. Those memories are vague. The only clear memory of her I have is the day she sent me away, when I was ten years old. She and two other nymphs took me to a clearing, and on the other side were three satyrs, a faun and two selini, one of them Euriphides. Calissa began to cry and hug me tight.

"Let him go," one of the other nymphs said, "It's time." But Calissa wouldn't. The other nymph sighed. "He's just going to grow up to be one of them," she said, gesturing to the satyrs across the way. "You can't keep him."

"But he's different!" Calissa wailed. "He's my baby!"

"He's not different and he's not your baby anymore. Just like any other animal, a satyr is only cute until he grows up."

"Oh, let her be," the second nymph put in, "it's her first." She patted Calissa on the shoulder. "You'll get used to it, dear," she soothed.

Finally, Calissa gave up and shooed me forward. I was starting to get nervous, but I took a last look at her and went over to the satyrs. I remember Euriphides looked very tall to me. He smiled and offered me his hand, but I took his tail instead. As they led me away, I looked back and saw the nymphs were gone.

I've seen Calissa several times since. The first time I saw her again I tried to talk to her, but the words wouldn't come out. Instead, I was overcome with satyrlust, she with satyrfear, and I ended up chasing my own mother.

I blinked and looked back into the pool. Aetros put down Calissa's Thread and chose another, a delicate, golden one. He smiled terribly as he wrapped it around his hands and began to pull. His body began to radiate an aura of power and strength.

After a moment, the Thread snapped.

Artemis stiffened and screamed. She thrashed the water with her hand, then collapsed. I knelt beside her, frightened and unsure of myself, but after a few seconds she came to and sat up.

"Are you all right?" I asked.

"I—I think so," she replied in a shaky voice. "That was one of my nymphs. I felt it—it was like part of me had died." I helped her to her feet. "Listen, Thaylos—I know where Aetros' own Thread is, and I know of a sword that might be able to cut it. During the Trojan War, Thetis commissioned Hephaestus

to make Achilles arms. There was a shield and armor, and I think there was a sword, too. The sword, if it exists, would probably be in Thetis' cave with the rest of the armor. She's away right now—there's been an oil spill somewhere—so if we work fast she'll never know what happened. There's a young sea-nymph—younger than you—named Nysis who lives in the Atlantic, off of New York. Every night she comes to the beach to watch the sun go down. If you can get her to bring you Achilles' sword while I get Aetros' Thread, we may be able to stop this." Artemis looked me in the eye. "Please help me," she said.

I bit my lip. "Okay," I replied at length. My voice was low and husky. "I'll try."

We turned sharply as we heard someone approach us from behind, and were relieved to see it was only Euriphides.

"Well," he crooned, smiling from ear to ear, "I'll be damned to Hades. Little Thaylos and Lady Artemis!" His eyes lit up. "Did you actually catch her?"

"No," I replied. "The Huntress just needs a favor."

"I'll give her a favor. . . "

Artemis scowled. "Wipe those thoughts from your mind, or I'll make you a gelding!"

"Really, Euriphides," I scolded, "this is serious. How would you like to go nymph-hunting in New York with me?"

I don't know how it was possible, but his smile broadened. "Why, Thaylos!" he said, throwing an arm around my shoulder, "I'd be delighted! I do believe you're getting better!"

"Now," I said to Euriphidies the following day as we crouched behind a grouping of rocks, "Do you remember what to do?"

"I wait until the nymph is preoccupied with the sunset, then get her!" he exclaimed, shaking with anticipation.

"Right. And—?"

"And then we have a *Ménage a Trois*!"

"No!" I told him. "For the last time, we're not going to have sex with her."

Euriphides was taken aback. He had a minuscule attention span and probably didn't even remember that we'd gone over this half a dozen times already. "What do you mean, we're not going to have sex with her! Satyrs always have sex with the nymphs they catch. That's the way it is, my boy!"

I growled in exasperation. "Look—how much self-control do you have?"

"What?" he replied, gazing eagerly out at the ocean.

"Never mind. Just remember to do what I told you."

"Hm?" he replied, still staring at the sea, "Oh—oh yes, of course, Thaylos."

We sat on the New York beach for another hour or so, and then the sun began its turn downward to the horizon. The beach was empty, so Euriphides and I had no qualms about shifting to our true forms. He immediately went about brushing out his beard and horse's tail, claiming he wanted to look good for Nysis.

Eventually, we spotted her coming to shore a short distance away. She walked through the cold waves to the beach, shook the sea-water from her hair, and sat down on the sand, turning west to watch the sun.

"Now, Thaylos, now?" Euriphides whispered.

"Wait," I told him.

"Now, Thaylos, now?" he repeated not half a minute later. Again I told him no. After a couple of minutes he seemed about ready to explode.

"Nysis looks like she's not paying attention," I murmured. "Why don't you try sneaking around behind her and—"

No such luck. With an obscene whinny, Euriphides jumped from behind our hiding place and lunged at the nymph, who immediately screamed and ran for the ocean. He only had two hooves, so he couldn't maneuver the same way a centaur could, but after three thousand years of chasing nymphs and women (and men and livestock and strange vegetables), he was quite agile. He was unable to cut in front of her to block her escape to the water, but he did manage to come close enough to catch her ankle in his hand. Nysis went sprawling at the water's edge, clawing at the wet, oozing sand as Euriphides hauled her in. She was screaming so loudly I was afraid the police would come, but I waited until he dragged her farther upshore before I joined the action. I jumped on Euriphides and threw him off her.

As Artemis said, Nysis was younger than I was, and my guess was that she'd never been caught before. That, combined with shock and the sight of two satyrs fighting over her kept her glued to her spot. Otherwise, she would have run back to the sea in an instant.

My problem now, however, was Euriphides. Having no self-discipline, as far as he was concerned I was truly challenging him for his prize, and he was fighting for real.

"'Riph," I grunted after he landed his hooves in my ribs, "Stop it! Don't you remem—"

It was no use. He launched himself on me again. I realized the nymph wasn't going to sit there forever, so I head-butted my old friend as hard as I could. The curves of my horns connected solidly with his skull and he slumped to the ground unconscious.

Panting, I tried to talk to Nysis, but she only screamed again. She got up and ran for the water, but I managed to pull her down. She pummelled me with her fists, thrashed her legs and bit me, but I held her tight. Finally, she stopped struggling.

"Please don't hurt me!" she cried, and burst into tears.

"I don't want to hurt you," I told her. "Just calm down and listen to me."

She sniffled and looked at my crotch. "Oh," she said, and started to laugh, "Oh, Poseidon! You couldn't even if you wanted to!"

I made her look into my eyes and put on my best pitiful expression. "I know," I said, cracking my voice a little. "That's just it! You're the only one who can help me."

"Why should I want to help you?" she replied. "The other nymphs told me satyrs are nothing but trouble. If I don't help you, there will be one less problem for us to worry about."

I squeezed, out a few tears and thought depressing thoughts, hoping she'd pick them up. "Please!" I begged. "A satyr without an erection is like—I can't think of anything worse!

My brothers will reject me! I'll be all alone! Please help me. . . " I bowed my head and cried.

Behind me, Euriphides came to and with a savage growl pulled me off Nysis. *Damn!* I thought, *She'll get away for sure now!* I head-butted my companion into oblivion again, then spun around. To my surprise, Nysis was still there, sitting on the sand.

"Why didn't you run away?" I asked.

She smiled. "Well, you can't hurt me, for one thing. But mostly I felt sorry for you."

"Oh?"

"The other nymphs always told me, never trust a satyr because they're never sincere. But you are. I can feel it. You really are unhappy."

I was so impressed by this remark I started to feel bad I'd fed her the lie about being sick. But then, I told myself, according to Euriphides and Eros I *was* sick. "Oh," I repeated, unable to say more.

"So what do want from me?" Nysis asked.

"Do you know Thetis the Silver-Footed?" I asked.

"Oh yes, but she's away right now."

"I heard. I was told that during the Trojan War she had special arms made for her son Achilles. I know that after the war they went to Odysseus, but that somewhere along the line she got them back."

"That's right."

"Anyway," I went on, "I was told that if I performed a ritual with Achilles' sword—if it exists—it would heal me."

"It does exist," Nysis informed me, "I've seen it."

"Good! Please, can you get it for me?"

"Oh, I don't know. . . I mean, it belongs to Thetis, and we all know how much she loved Achilles."

"Please," I begged, "I'll only need to borrow it. I'll have it back before she returns."

Nysis stared at me hard, thinking it over. She glanced at Euriphides' prone form. "All right," she said at last, "I guess I owe you." She smiled. "And I kind of like you." I smiled back at her. "Thetis' cave is far away. If I leave now I can be back at dawn."

"Wonderful," I told her.

She got up and headed into the waves. "By the way," she said, "My name's Nysis."

"I'm Thaylos," I replied.

"Well. . . See you at dawn, Thaylos," she said. She dove into the water and was gone.

Behind me, Euriphides stirred. "Gad, what a headache," he groaned.

I helped him up. "Where's the nymph?" he asked.

"She, uh, she got away. Sorry."

"Oh, well," he replied with a lopsided smile, "Jolly good fight. Made the trip worth it. Remind me to mind you more carefully in the future."

"Sure," I told him. "Why don't we go to dinner, then back to the hotel?" He nodded in agreement. We changed to our human forms, got dressed, and left the beach.

I made sure to get him roaring drunk (in the safety of our hotel suite) that night, then got up before dawn while he was still sleeping it off. He hadn't trashed the room too badly; at least everything was still intact, if messy.

I got to the beach when it was still dark, and sat on the sand, watching the sky, waiting for Nysis.

Dawn came, and with rosy fingers.

Gods, I hate that line. Homer beat it to death in *The Odyssey*.

In any case, Nysis climbed out of the water as the sun came up, just as promised, and she did indeed have the sword. She was a slight creature, and had to drag the hunk of metal behind her. I met her halfway and helped her with it. As I pulled off the seaweed tangled around the blade, a warm glow hit our faces.

"Isn't it beautiful?" she breathed. It truly was. The blade was the color of gold, but it was like no other metal I'd ever seen. It was etched with scenes of war, and the hilt was strong and elaborate.

"Thank you," I said. "I can have it back in a couple of days at the most."

"You're welcome," Nysis replied. "Just don't lose it. Hephaestus forged it, and he's a friend of Thetis. If anything happens to that blade, you'll have to answer to him."

"I'll keep it safe," I promised.

"Um, Thaylos," she said after an awkward pause, "Will I see you again after this?"

"I don't know," I replied. "I usually don't like the cities."

"The Atlantic has many coasts," she smiled.

"Yes, but. . . but after I'm. . . cured, I may not be like this anymore. I may even go after you when I return the sword."

"I'll take that chance," she told me. She stood on her tiptoes and kissed me on the forehead. "Good luck, Thaylos."

"Thanks."

I watched as she turned away and went back to the sea. She swam out a bit, waved to me, then disappeared beneath the waves. I sighed, watching the rolling water for a few moments longer, then went back to the hotel.

"What's that?" Euriphides asked me as we headed to the airport, motioning to the wrapped-up sword on my lap.

"Oh, nothing," I replied, "Just a souvenir."

"I've sent word to Aetros," Artemis told me later. "He's going to meet us here later tonight."

"In the park?" I asked.

"No, but in Pittsburgh."

"Why?"

The Huntress shrugged. "I have no idea. But he wants to meet me at one of the local universities, in the Fine Arts building."

"What did you tell him?"

"I sent word to him that I knew who he was and what he was up to. I made it a little threatening—enough to get him to reply and agree to meet me. I don't think he takes me seriously, though—he seems to think he's something special—which he is, but I think it's gone to his head."

"Did you get his Thread?"

Artemis smiled. "Right here," she said, tapping a bag slung around her shoulder. "I've never seen a god's Thread before. It's very interesting—and very large."

"How does it fit in the bag, then?"

"The bag belonged to Perseus," the goddess explained. "It can hold anything. He used it to carry Medusa's head back to King Polydectes. I assume you got the sword?"

I unwrapped the blade. "Right here."

"Can you wield it?"

"I haven't tried. But I know a little bit about swordplay."

"You may need that knowledge," Artemis told me. I didn't like the way she said it. She took the sword from me and tested its balance. "Very nice," she remarked. "Athena would appreciate this." We were deep in the woods of Schenley park now, and there was a large, dead tree nearby. She went over to it, raised the sword, and sliced through the base of the trunk as if it were air. The tree toppled over, neatly sliced through. I was amazed. Next she shooed me off the rock I was sitting on, and cut through it with almost no effort.

But can it still slice a tomato paper-thin? I mused. "Do you think it'll cut Aetros' Thread?"

"Quite possibly," she replied.

"Why don't we just cut it now?" I asked. "Why do you have to go meet him?"

"Why do *we* have to go meet him," she corrected. "I still need you."

"But why don't we just kill him now?"

"It's a serious enough thing to kill an eternal," Artemis explained. "To kill a god, especially one as powerful as Aetros, is a very serious matter, not to mention a shame. We'll give him a chance. Maybe if *he's* threatened with death, he'll see the error of his ways and give up. I'd rather have him for an ally than kill him."

"Judging from what I've seen and from what you've told me," I put in, "He isn't going to change."

"We'll see," the goddess told me, "We'll see."

"Are we going to a fraternity party?" Euriphides asked me.

"No," I told him for the third time. "I really don't think you should follow me tonight."

"Why ever not?"

"I told you, it could be dangerous. Don't you remember what I just told you about Artemis and Aetros and the Threads? How many times do I have to repeat this to you?"

"Oh, stop with that silly story already," Euriphides scoffed, "and tell me truly what you've been doing with Artemis."

"It's not a story!" I insisted. "Minorus is dead! As in gone to Hades! And so is a nymph. This Aetros is capable of dethroning Zeus. He can kill gods and eternals."

"Oh, come now. Minorus is most certainly not dead. Whatever sickness you have, it's affecting your mind. We'll have to do something about it when you're through with Artemis."

I gave up trying to explain. Euriphides simply wasn't going to accept my story, and I was going to have to deal with it. But I was afraid for him; I didn't want him along. I didn't want him to die.

At four in the morning we emerged from Schenley Park and hit Tech Street, behind the academic buildings of Carnegie Mellon University.

"Where are all the parties?" Euriphides asked. "I don't hear any music."

"They're all over by now," I said, and immediately regretted it. I should have sent him off to the fraternity houses.

"Oh, well, I'll stick with you, then," Euriphides sighed.

"Really, you don't have to," I told him. "I wish you wouldn't."

"Well, I'm going to. Too bad."

I sighed and led him to the Fine Arts building. It was a large, cream-colored brick structure dating back to the early part of the twentieth century. A good part of the roof was made of strong panels of opaque glass, used to let light into the personal studios during the day. At night the students working would turn the lights on, giving the top of the building a wonderful glow. Tonight, however, only a few lights were on upstairs.

I led Euriphides down to the basement and changed to my True Form. He followed my example. Next, I took pieces of felt and a bottle of glue from my coat pocket.

"What's that for?" Euriphides asked.

"Sh," I replied quietly, "Lower your voice. The floor upstairs is marble, so we don't want anyone to hear us. Glue the felt to your hooves."

"Ah. . . " he said, rubbing his hands together in delight, "We're going to play a little sneaky-game! Are there nymphs here?"

"No, just a few art students." *And a god with a chip on his shoulder. . .*

"They'll do," Euriphides replied, flashing one of his wicked smiles.

I put my hands on his shoulders. "Look, William—Euriphides. You're going to have to be quiet and do exactly what I say if you want to stay with me. This is serious."

"Oh, all right. I'll play your little game."

"'Riph—I mean it. This could be very dangerous." I paused. I really hated being sappy, but I couldn't help it. "Whatever happens, I want you to know that you're my best friend." I wanted to say "I love you", but I couldn't. I *thought* I meant it, but then, I thought I'd loved that peasant girl, too. I wanted to tell Euriphides the truth, not an empty phrase.

As I mentioned before, we tend to radiate our emotions, and now was no exception. I think Euriphides felt my thoughts quite keenly that moment; perhaps he almost understood. His smile faded and he looked at me in the oddest way.

"Sure, Thaylos," he replied quietly, "You'll always be my little kid."

"Hey," I smiled. "You got it right for once."

We glued the felt to our hooves and crept up a small, corner staircase to the main floor. We stayed in the doorway, next to the concert hall and across from the theater, watching the front door. The sword and the bag holding Aetros' Thread were at my side.

"What now?" Euriphides murmured so quietly I barely heard him.

"We wait for Artemis," I replied, equally low. "And stop swishing your tail." I motioned to him to cease conversation.

The main floor of the Fine Arts building was unusually elaborate compared to the studios upstairs: light grey marble floors

decorated with abstract, black marble floor plans of buildings like the Parthenon; a huge ceiling, at least thirty feet high, painted with murals; replicas of famous Greek sculptures situated in niches; a bizarre, ominous facade on the entrance to the Dean's office; a few columns here and there for good measure. It was entirely neo-classical, a sharp contrast to the art produced upstairs. I was beginning to understand why Aetros had chosen this place. It was reminiscent of a temple, and probably as big as his ego.

At length the front door swung open, and in stepped Artemis. She glanced at me, just long enough to make eye contact, then called out. "Where are you?"

I heard footsteps, then saw a man step out of the shadows. He was tall, with slicked-back, dark hair, wearing a sharp business suit. "Artemis," he said in a deep voice, "You have the honor of being the first Olympian to behold me."

A look crossed the goddess' face, a look which distinctly said, *I think I'm going to puke.* But it quickly vanished, and was replaced by a smile. "Yes, I suppose so," she replied.

"How did you find out about me?" he asked. "I've gone unnoticed for a long time."

"I have my ways," she answered. "Forgive me, but I can't reveal *all* of my powers."

"Understood."

Beside me, Euriphides put his lips to my ear. "That man's a god," he murmured. I nodded. "I don't recognize him."

"That's Aetros," I dared to reply, without taking my eyes off the god. "I told you it wasn't a story."

"I hate to put this childishly, Aetros," Artemis went on, "But I know who you are and I saw what you did."

He chuckled. "Ah, yes. Impressed, are you?"

"Yes. Impressed—and disgusted."

"Come now... what's a satyr or two?"

"Killing eternals is a serious business," Artemis snapped.

Aetros looked her over. "You're afraid of me, aren't you?"

"Considering Prometheus' prophesy, and the fact that you've killed two eternals without remorse, yes."

"Let's get to the point," Aetros said. "Why exactly did you want to talk to me? Somehow I don't think it was to slap my hand."

"You're right. I wanted to talk to you about your plans. It's always a little messy when a new god appears on the scene. I just want to make things easier."

Again Aetros chuckled. "My plans? You should know, if you know the prophesy."

"The prophesy states that Thetis would have a son *capable* of overthrowing Zeus. It doesn't say he will."

"The implications are there. Tell me, Huntress, why shouldn't I fulfill my destiny? Zeus is feeble—he's let the humans degenerate, forfeited to Christianity. He's a disgrace."

"What's a few thousand years to an immortal?" Artemis countered. "I think one day we'll return to glory—and you could be at our side."

"Well, *I* am impatient," Aetros hissed. "The time for the new order is now, before this world gets any more polluted. The humans were never meant to be here in the first place. Prometheus has a soft spot for them, but I don't."

"You want to destroy them?"

"It will be over for them quickly. After that, I'm going to cleanse the planet and start over."

"Let me guess," Artemis said in a low voice, "In your own image."

Aetros smiled. "Very good."

"And what about Zeus?"

"What about him? I told you, my destiny awaits."

"I don't know what Thetis has told you all these years," said Artemis, "but destroying Zeus and all the world isn't the answer to your problems."

"It's my Fate," Aetros told her. "You can't deny Fate."

"Speaking of which," Artemis returned, "Where are the Fates?"

"Safe."

Artemis studied the young god for quite some time. "Tell me," she said at length, "Must you destroy Zeus?"

"I must. I have no love for him. He gave my mother nothing but grief. And as I've said, it's my destiny."

"Are you truly capable of killing him?"

Aetros flashed a broad grin. He made a motion with his hand, and the air began to shimmer. An instant later, the front hall of the building was filled with a beautiful, intricate rope of a million colors and patterns, glowing with life, floating freely in the air. I tried to find its ends but couldn't. "There," Aetros said, "You can feel it, can't you? You know who this belongs to."

"Where did you get that?" Artemis demanded, but he only smiled. "Listen to me," she went on. "If you kill Zeus, all the Olympians will come for you, and many of the lesser gods, too. Why risk that? Why destroy yourself?"

"If I can kill Zeus," he replied, "Why should I fear his children?"

"If you don't stop this now," the Huntress threatened, "We'll be forced to destroy you." She held out her arms and a siver longbow, nocked with a brilliant arrow, appeared in her hands. "Please, Aetros," she said, her words genuine, "We'd much rather have you for an ally. Don't make me hurt you."

Aetoros laughed hard, his mirth echoing off the stone walls and marble floors. He waved his hand again, and Zeus' Thread disappeared, sent back to where it had come from. "Are you threatening me?" he exclaimed. "You can't hurt me, goddess. Nor can you sway me."

"We'll see," Artemis hissed, and let the arrow fly. Aetros held up his hand in a "stop" gesture. The shaft halted in midflight and crumbled away. The Huntress lowered her bow, and it faded out of sight. "You give me no choice," she said, "I'm going to have to contact the Olympians."

"They didn't believe you twice," Aetros scoffed, "Do you think they'll believe you a third time?" He waved his arm again, and another Thread appeared in the hall, woven in silver, gold and green. Artemis gasped. It was her Thread, the Thread of the Goddess of Three Forms, one for the Earth, one for the Moon, and one for the World Below.

"They might," the goddess choked.

"Yes," Aetros agreed, taking hold of the Thread, "They might. You've gone a bit too far, Artemis. I'm afraid I'll have

to deal with you. . . harshly." A terrible, closed smile stretched over his face. His body seemed to grow larger and the aura of strength around him began to throb as he began to twist and pull at Artemis' Thread. The goddess gasped, clutched her chest, and fell to her knees.

Thaylos! I heard her anguished cry in my head, but I was terrified, rooted to the spot.

Thaylos, please! I watched as she writhed on the floor, as Aetros pulled her Thread harder and harder, stretching it to its limits.

Thaylos, where are you?!

I thought hard. I thought about how often I'd become disgusted with the humans, but how many times I'd enjoyed what they had to offer. I thought of all needless slaughters I'd seen—the Inquisition, the Native Americans, the Holocaust. I thought about Minorus and the nymph Aetros had killed, and how he'd arbitrarily played with Euriphides' Thread, considering doing the same to him. I thought of Euriphides, crouched behind me; sincere, eccentric and utterly dippy, but wonderful in his own right, my best friend in all the world.

I hated Aetros.

The feeling radiated from me so strongly the god finally noticed my presence. He turned his head in my direction as I leapt from the stairwell, Achilles' sword in one hand, Perseus' bag in the other.

"STOP!" I shouted.

He laughed.

"Oh, by my mother," he chortled, "Artemis, what have you lowered yourself to?" He turned back to me and grinned. "You think I didn't know what you were up to, you disgusting little satyr? Now put down that sword."

"They say it'll cut through anything," I growled, "Even you."

He narrowed his eyes. "Come here and try," he challenged.

"I don't have to," I told him, and pulled part of his Thread from the bag.

His smile only broadened. "Achilles' sword is powerful, but not that powerful. Perhaps in another god's hands it could harm me. But you—I don't think so." He put on a good act, but I could feel his fear. It became clear he wasn't certain what the sword would do. "Now put the blade down," he ordered, tightening his grip on Artemis' Thread, "Or I'll kill her."

"You were going to kill her anyway," I replied, fuming.

He thought for a moment. "I'll tell you what," he said, brightening a bit, "If you give up this nonsense, I'll let you lie with her before I kill her. You'd like that, wouldn't you?"

Now Euriphides may be that stupid, but I'm not. "Piss off!"

Aetros' face took on a momentary look of shock at my reply.

A moment was all I needed.

I threw Aetros' Thread down on the floor and raised Achilles' sword above my head. My mind was reeling with anger.

I hate I hate I hate I hate I hate I hate. . .

I thought of Euriphides again, and then of Aetros.

I hate I hate I hate I hate I love *I hate. . .*

I heard Artemis scream my name—too late.

A hand closed around my wrist. I was so filled with rage that at first I didn't even feel it, but then it clamped down so hard I heard my wrist break. I let out a shriek. As I spun around to face this new threat I was thrown to the ground. Achilles' sword slipped from my hand and fell with a clatter to the marble floor. I looked up.

"You stupid goat," growled Euriphides—with Aetros' voice.

"'Riph—?!" I blurted. I quickly looked over my shoulder at Aetros. The god threw back his head in mocking laughter, then faded away like mist. I turned back to Euriphides, wide-eyed and frozen to the spot.

Euriphides—or the being who I had thought was Euriphides—rippled in the air before me, and his image was replaced with Aetros'. "I don't seem to have your Thread with me at the moment," he said in a deadly tone, "but I don't think I'll need it." He reached down, and before I could snap out of my fear and dodge away, his hands were wrapped around my throat and he was hauling me off the floor. He began to shake me. I panicked and began to thrash; I was so terrified I think I actually bleated. Purely out of instinct, I pulled up my legs as far as I could, and with a choked cry slammed my hooves into him.

I was quite surprised when they connected with his crotch, not because of where they landed, but because of the effect it had.

For all his power, Aetros howled, dropped me, and doubled over, as crumpled and disabled as any mortal man would be. I scrambled across the floor and grabbed Achilles' sword with my good hand. The god's Thread was still laying on the floor. Again I raised the sword above my head, and brought it down with a roar.

This is for Minorus, you bastard.

There was an explosion of light and pain, and I thought that was what dying must be like. Everything went black for a bit, and then I heard Artemis calling my name. I opened my eyes and saw her bending over me, looking disheveled and a bit concerned, her hands on her knees.

"What happened?" I croaked.

"You did it," she informed me with a weak smile, "You killed him."

I managed to sit up, and from there the goddess helped me to my feet. I looked around. Aetros' Thread was gone, and Achilles' sword was lodged in the floor. Artemis had to pull it out for me.

"Euriphides. . . " I murmured. I turned to the Huntress. "Was he Aetros all along?"

"I don't know," she replied.

"You don't think he killed Euriphides, too?"

"I don't know," Artemis repeated.

"What will happen to Thetis and Prometheus?" I asked.

"They'll be dealt with. You don't have to worry about them coming after you." Artemis heaved a sigh. "Well," she said, "I believe I owe you something."

I barely heard her as I stared at the sword in my hand. "What?"

"You wanted to love," she reminded me.

I looked up at her. "I don't think I'll need your help to achieve that anymore," I told her. We stared at each other for a few moments, and then I turned away, heading for the stairwell.

"Wait!" she called after me, "Where are you going? We still need to find the Fates!"

"Find 'em yourself," I growled. "I've done my good deed for the millenium." I tromped down the stairs to the basement, changed back to my human form, and got my clothes on. I tucked Achilles' sword under my coat and headed off into the night, gingerly holding my broken wrist. For some reason I headed toward Forbes Avenue, away from the Schenley Park.

As I drew near the fraternity houses on the corner, I saw someone stagger out onto the street. He saw me coming, squinted at me, then yelled, "Thaylos! Over 'ere!" and burst into a fit of laughter.

I didn't recognize the face, but I knew the voice, and as I drew near, I caught the familiar, musky smell. "Euriphides?" I called back.

He stumbled up to me. "You look horrible, my dear boy," he said, and giggled again. "I went to the park to look for you," he explained, "but you weren't around, so I went to the parties without you. Jolly good time. Completely makes up for that fiasco in New York." He flashed me a lopsided grin and threw an arm around my shoulder. "Why don't we celebrate having so much fun by having more fun?" he asked. "Let's go back to that lovely Japanese restaraunt."

"Chinese," I corrected, and laughed. I patted the sword resting under my coat. "Maybe later," I told him. "Right now I have to return a sword to a certain nymph I know."

Faye Levine is a Sophomore Illustration major at Carnegie Mellon University. Over the summer her brain stagnated, and the stress of returning to school melted it entirely. Her thoughts of late have been occupied with mythology and killer bunnies; in fact, she and her pet rabbit are currently working on a book entitled Separated at Birth? The Striking Parallels Between Zeus and Elvis. By the time you all read this, she'll be back home, freezing her butt off in Minnesota.

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THE NAMES OF THE STARS

by Christopher Kempke

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I selected male, grey haired and distinguished. I didn't want this to be my whole makeup though, so I countered it with jeans. A featureless white shirt and grey tie completed the outfit, and a pair of silver-rimmed glasses completed the image. Looking at myself, I allowed a small smile. Perfect. I left the room by a door which wasn't a door, and stood on a busy city street corner. Dozens of people were around, but none of them noticed my strange and sudden appearance, because I didn't want them to.

I looked down the street and up to where the Channel 8 building stood, a secure, modest 14-story office building, and smiled again. It was 6:00 in the evening, and the sun would be gone in a few minutes. Everything was perfect for what I had to do. There was nothing left now but to wait and look around this world into which I had so recently returned. I spent some time in careful examination of my surroundings.

A few minutes later almost no one else was on the street, and those that were moved quickly and precisely, since each of them had a meeting he or she could not miss.

It was exactly 6:15 when I reached Channel 8, and found the lobby empty. I walked slowly toward the elevator, to give everyone a few more moments to get home. Time was something I had more of than others. Once I started the ball rolling, it would go quickly enough. Even more quickly than the last time: three days. It hardly seemed enough, but there was another more knowledgeable than I calling my shots, and I could not question that intelligence.

The elevator opened immediately when I pushed the button, probably by chance, although little enough was in this venture. I entered, and rose to the studio level. A man met me as I stepped out, and asked if I wanted to have the curtains open. He seemed to accept my presence quietly, though he had never met me before. "No," I responded. There was nothing to see; I had gained faith, if nothing else, in two millenia. Mankind, perhaps, didn't have even that.

6:20. I walked to the studio, to the anchorman reading the six o'clock news. As I approached, he stopped reading in the middle of a sentence and offered me his seat. This was too easy. I wished briefly that it could remain this way. However, men needed free will for both good and evil. Only through free will could I be once again betrayed; that betrayal was the primary reason I was here. The secondary one was the reason I had to speak to the world.

I took the seat at 6:25, and gave the other stations enough time to loop the broadcast to their own viewers before I spoke. My language was a strangely enhanced speech that spoke directly to my listener's minds, saving me the effort of speaking in several languages. The recordings of these words would probably thoroughly befuddle later analysts.

After waiting for almost two thousand years for this moment, the speech was easy. I raised my arms and brought them down heavily on the table. The tension pulled tight all over the world. My protection was wearing thin, and would vanish altogether when I finished speaking. Thinking this, I spoke.

"People of the world, with this gesture I take the stars from your night sky. Those which you have looked up upon for your lives are gone."

Without looking out the window, I knew it was true.

"There is only blackness there, and this is the way it shall remain until you can convince me to put the stars back. The first rule of my game is simple— there are five words which you must speak to me. It doesn't matter who speaks them, so long as it is in my presence, but don't bother to come read me a dictionary, for the other rule is this: To speak a word, you must know why it is one of the five. For each of the words you speak correctly, I shall put back a fifth of the stars in the sky. Nothing else save my death can cause them to reappear, and that death can come only at the hands of one who holds my trust."

The obligation upon the minds of the world began to unravel.

"I will remain here, alone except for those I take to teach. Come to me with your answers."

I stopped speaking, and the compulsion snapped. Those people around me looked dazed for a moment. I took the opportunity.

"Leave this place at once."

They knew my power— none of them questioned me. The broadcast ended, and a few minutes later, I was alone.

I took the elevator to the ground floor to see what had transpired there. The walls of the building shone with a soft shimmering light, save for a silver gate which stood where the doorway had been. In a room behind I found a bed.

Kneeling beside it, I folded my hands and spoke to the air. "It has begun again. Peace be with you." I cut my prayer to that, and lay down on the bed to wait. Closing my eyes, I dreamed of Judas, so long ago.

Seven hours later there came a knock at the gate. I sat up, and knew the first had arrived. No one else in the world could have knocked. Looking out, I saw television cameras pointing toward the gate. Apparently, no one but those chosen could even get to the gate, held back by some force no mortal power could ignore. It wasn't important to me though. What was important was the woman who stood at the door.

A woman. My mind left me for a moment, then calmed. I had not expected a woman; there had been no women before. Apparently I, too, had something left to learn; I wondered how much. I opened the gate for her.

She stood her distance undecidedly.

"Speak your word!" I made the command harsh. There would be time for understanding later. It was the command she had been waiting for.

"Power," she said softly, then waited expectantly.

"That is incorrect," I said. "If you follow me, I can teach you why."

She did not hesitate. The gate closed silently behind us, and my apprehension calmed. I knew exactly when the one I was waiting for would be arriving, but even so I was glad that he was not the first. However, I had another task to attend to here, and so I led the woman to a back room. Within, I began to teach her what all mankind needed to know. She was named Mary, an interesting coincidence— if anything could be considered coincidence.

It was only an hour before the second one arrived. The crowd outside hushed as he approached, so Mary and I knew even before the knock came. She remained behind, while I opened the gate again. This time, it was a man, and he calmly spoke even before I prompted him.

"Life," he said.

I turned away. "Wrong. Follow me if you would learn why."

The answer was not all that far off, but I didn't explain it to Jose until we were inside. There I began my teachings again, in earnest.

Slowly, time passed, and daytime approached. I knew, as none of the people outside did, that there would be no sun this day. Night was eternal, until the game was finished. Still, I counted this day as one of my three. The ending was still inevitable. I only wished that I knew it.

The knock came again, and I knew who stood there. "Get back in there," I commanded Mary and Jose, directing them to a back room. They complied with full understanding. I had explained some of what was to come, so much of it as I knew.

I opened the gates. Five men stood outside with automatic rifles pointed at me. They could not pass the gates, but it didn't stop their bullets. One looked at me with something like a sneer.

"Die, thief," he commented as he pulled the trigger. The others followed suit, and I bent forward as the bullets struck me one after another for a long time.

When the guns were empty, I stood up, showing myself to be unharmed. Their faces were pictures of terror, except for the one I wanted, in back. His name was Greg, and his eyes showed sudden understanding. "Love," he said.

I nodded. "Yes. Follow me to hear more." Even as he followed me in, a few stars twinkled again in the night sky that should not have been there.

Scott arrived an hour later, incorrectly guessing "Honesty." Linda did not appear for almost six thereafter, but her word of "Peace" was correct. Samuel guessed "Faith" incorrectly, and was admitted as well. At the hour that would have been nightfall had night ever lifted, I returned to the gate. The people outside were silent as I spoke. "Peace and Love. Tell me more." The time approached, and suddenly I knew it had come.

One man materialized in the back of the crowd, but no one noticed. I did not smile—I had been waiting for him. For almost two thousand years, I had been waiting for this one man. I only knew it in that instant.

"Trust," he shouted. I opened my gate for him with a feeling akin to fear. Although I had known he was coming, and had prepared for him, seeing his face again after two thousand years was still a shock. The word he had chosen bit me, but it was one of those I was looking for. Something the world needed more of.

"Correct," I said, and together Judas and I closed the gate. He looked at me suspiciously, but I kept my gaze even. He finally avoided my eyes altogether. Still, he knew the lessons I was teaching well, and helped in the instruction. I could not fault him there. Those things which were new, he listened to attentively.

Later, as I lay down to sleep, I shivered. Judas was the reason for the game, and I was uncertain of the result.

Six more people arrived over the next day and a half, none of them guessing correct words. It would not have mattered if they had; the board was now set and all that remained was for the game to end. Mary, Greg, Scott, Linda, Samuel, Judas, Jose, Judith, Sarah, Thomas, Peter and Paul. The Peter, Paul, Mary, and Judas I wondered about, but coincidence or lack of same was not my most pressing concern.

On the third day, I showed them how to open the gate, and went to lay down.

Judas left, as I knew he would. He spoke with another man outside. I knew the terms too well by this point. Thirty small ingots of silver to do me in, as had thirty coins before. It was a strange bargain in these days, but one which Judas would understand; he was not fully aware of the progress of two thousand years. After a while, he returned, and joined the rest of the disciples. He was carrying two small pouches, and one jingled with silver. I nearly wept. It had been so long. And to still betray my teachings, even now.

I set a table, and on it appeared many foods. I left the disciples to their meal as I took the elevator to the top of the building.

From above, I could see the people milling about in throngs below, and felt my time running low. An hour was all I had left, but my time had been enough. Those who sat at my table below held the knowledge that would save mankind for another thousand years or so, if the world was smart enough to use it. My innate faith in man was that they would.

I was glad that one of my purposes had been fulfilled. The other would cost me my life, and perhaps the last chance at peace I had. Thinking of Judas, I returned to my table.

"Trust, love, peace, hope, evil." With each word, a portion of the stars in the night sky glowed once again where they belonged. "Remember these words, and the ideas that they are keys to. My time here is nearly up, but when I am dead your task begins. Humanity will need your teaching as you needed mine. I shall not return for a thousand years—use the

intervening time well." Each of them at last realized who I truly was, and together we raised a toast to humanity.

As I brought the wine glass to my lips, I saw Judas move. The motion was lightning quick, as he raised his own glass and hurled it. The shouted "No!" still hung in the air as the two glasses collided. Mine fell to the table, somehow still upright.

I looked at him, and the rest fell into silence.

"Poison in the glass," Judas said, then got up and went to the gate. Opening it, he opened the bag of silver and scattered it to the crowd with a gesture, then dropped the bag and returned. He stood before me, and would not meet my glance.

I smiled. "God forgives you," I said.

He shifted uncomfortably, waiting. I poured the poisoned wine onto the floor, and tossed away the glass. It shattered musically in the corner, and the silence with it. My time was over, but this time I had my peace.

"I forgive you," I said quietly.

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THE HARRISON CHAPTERS
Chapter 3

by Jim Vassilakos

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Mike leaned over the mottled piece of metal which had fused itself beyond recognition. The analysis specialist scanned his expression.

"There's no way we can trace manufacture; it's just too far gone," she explained.

"Have you found anymore?"

"Nearly a dozen," Charles Linden broke in, somewhat heatedly. Mike could almost see his boss's anger steaming off the heavy overcoat he wore to protect himself from the lab's sub-zero temperature.

"I don't understand it at all," he continued. "Why would Clay go to all the trouble? And what's so important about this dead John Doe?"

Mike glanced at the specialist who seemed to be examining the editor with an unconcerned stare. He hoped she wasn't the type to blab.

"Look Chuck, there are warmer places to discuss this."

Linden was keen on the idea of getting out of the lab, not so much because of the third party with ears and a mouth as due to the chill. He and Mike took the lift down to the subways leaving the company security personnel to the unhappy clean-up their own incompetence had prompted.

The subway train to Greenflower was nearly empty, and the trip uneventful. Linden was, for once, totally unconcerned about what was happening on the floor. The scores of staff writers would just be sending him more meaningless trash which he would later strip to the bare facts and send back due to lack of content. It was always the same old story at the middle of the week.

Mike promised something far more interesting for the readers, and for the editor as well. Linden had suddenly taken a personal interest in the story, a big no-no in his business. But it was worth bending a few rules, and it felt right. It was even worth a trip to the pit of ashes.

The late morning air warmed Linden as sunshine broke through the white fluffy clouds and streamed down in long silver threads from the heavens. He hiked alongside Mike etching a trail through the dew-sodden expanse of grass. Birds were darting about in the brisk morning air. Their songs were like a child's laughter, almost mocking yet innocent.

The pit suddenly lay before them, its sides sinking into the earth without warning. A variety of religious symbols decorated the inner surfaces informing wayward souls to beware the footsteps of the dead as the familiar sweet scent of ash and apple resin hung heavy in the air. Linden sat down on the red brick lifting his chin and squinting at Mike through the bright beams of sunlight.

"Not what you expected," Mike cautiously broke the silence.

"No," Linden admitted. "It's too…" He couldn't pull off the words.

"Antique?"

"Old fashioned. It's too dated."

"I thought you were into that, Chuck," Mike prodded smiling.

"I am, but there's a limit. This is so undignified. It's a mass burial."

"Just another screwed up religion." Mike stretched out his arm pointing down the pit approvingly, "But you have to admit, they did a great job."

"What? I don't follow."

"The Imps. They kill Fork, and get rid of his body so perfectly that there's no way I can get a confirmation on the time of death."

"Sure, but why the mass burial? Why not just cremate him and leave it at that?"

Mike kicked a stone into the pit, "Because he isn't dead."

"You just said they killed him," Linden countered.

Mike shrugged, "I lied. If they just wanted him dead and gone, they'd have done what you said."

Linden stood up. He glared at Mike in spontaneous disbelief but knew the reporter well enough to realize that doubting was useless and quite possibly counter-productive.

"Explain," Linden finally insisted.

"The Imps want to stage a fake death. They snatch Fork and put some poor fool in his place, kill the guy and send the body to the incinerators. But that still isn't good enough. They now have to get rid of the remains in a legal manner, but in such a way that these remains cannot be later analyzed to prove the guy who got burned wasn't Fork. Even ashes can be analyzed. Admittedly, it isn't something we often do, but it can be done. People don't often share identical body chemistry. A mere difference of as little as a gram in solid weight would be enough to…"

"Enough," Linden interrupted, "I've got the idea. The only legal way to dispose of the ashes in a manner in which they cannot be later analyzed is to mix them with other ashes. Thus, the ash pit."

"Exactly."

Linden laughed, "It's a really neat theory Mike. Now prove it."

Mike looked at the wet grass in front of his feet, "If I try, I lose Niki."

"What makes you so sure you haven't already?"

Mike considered the editor's question with antipathy.

"I know what you're thinking, Harrison."

"Do you?"

"I've already sent for company personnel, off planet. They should be here in a few days."

"Chuck, if we had a few days, we wouldn't be talking."

"Regardless of all other considerations, I won't use our current security staff to deal with this... situation."

Mike shot his boss a rueful grin, "You don't trust them."

"After what happened... would you?"

"We can always go to Tizar police. Even though she's unregistered, they've been supportive in such matters before."

Linden shook his head in flat refusal, "You know as well as I that the paper cannot risk this getting out."

"She's a friend, Chuck."

"She's also a psyche. And Clay is a damn boardmember. There's no win here; we have no choice but to wait and let company people handle it."

"If we wait, it may be to late."

"She's already lost, buddy. If you think you'll ever see her again..." Linden cut himself off mid-sentence. "I'm sorry."

"It's okay. You're probably right."

"So what are you going to do?" The editor carefully enunciated each syllable with the utmost patience.

"What d'you think I should do?"

"If they're hiding, we must chase. I'll get one of the paper's private starships to take you to Calanna. I know you didn't have much fun last time you were there, but like they say, duty calls."

"Fine, but don't stick me in some ice box."

"I wouldn't dream of it," Linden pledged. He knew well Mike's distaste for low passage.

"And what about Niki? If there's any chance..."

Linden gazed back into the pit for some inspiration, but the same anger kept welling within him. Mike studied his boss as the sunlight shined off Linden's black boots and whisked the corners of his eyes.

"Whatever you do between now and the time you leave is your own business," he insisted. "You understand?"

Mike and Chuck took the escalator down to the floor from p872. As they entered the ten acre room all they could hear was the clicking of fingers on keyboards and the dull chatter of hundreds of gatherers. Linden's press office lay at dead center, and a small group of grouchy staff writers wandered about outside the entrance.

"Why the committee?" Mike wondered allowed.

Linden explained, "There's been talk of a strike. Haven't you been reading the paper?"

"Must have missed it. Serious?"

"They just like making waves." It was one of Chuck's pet phrases. Staff writers and clericals were both labeled as replaceable by management. If they decided to strike, there would be no problem finding new recruits. For this reason, their union demands were generally ignored. But even so, they still liked to stomp around and threaten the editor every other year or so. Mike was glad he wasn't following it.

"I guess you read the news once and you've read it a thousand times," Mike quoted.

"Watch that kiddo."

They went their separate ways, and Mike felt the better of it. He didn't envy Linden's job in the least.

"Hey, Harrison. Haven't seen you here in a while."

"Hi, Mike."

"Hey buddy, where've you been?"

"Walker. Kim. Chris, I've been sick."

"I see the boss is catching it too. I hope you guys've been having safe sex."

"Chris, you're an asshole."

"Happy birthday to you too, buddy."

Come to think of it, Mike didn't envy his own job either. Not that he didn't like gathering. He just didn't like many gatherers.

There also came those moments which he genuinely regretted. These he called mistakes. Being seen walking in late with the editor was but one example. He hoped he didn't just call too much attention to himself. Having a trail of story-starved gatherers tagging along could seriously jeopardize his chances of sneaking up on Clay.

Mike sat down at his desk and switched on his terminal scanning the latest breaking headlines.

"Staffwriters Prepare For Strike"

"Youth Locked In Freezer Eats Own Foot"

"Upcoming Press Banquet..."

"So what's up?" It was Bill Walker. He was another crack investigative gatherer. Not very successful, but crack all the same. His youth was his greatest advantage and his biggest stumbling block. Mike could remember what it was like.

"Not much. How 'bout you?"

"Nothin'. Did you see the one about the banquet? You're gonna be speaking." Bill knew how much Mike hated to read the paper and thus usually never got word about these things until it was too late to make reservations for an interstellar cruise.

"The one before it looked more interesting. You write it?" Mike accused in his most inquiring tone.

"Wish I did." It was something Bill would write. He had a flare for the gory.

"Where'd you get cut?" Mike just noticed Bill had a nasty slash under his left ear taking the whole length of cheek down to his dark sunburnt chin.

"Mama did it," he laid out. There was a glint of amusement in his grey-blue eyes. Otherwise he seemed deadly serious.

"Walker, you've got a sweet mama."

"She is."

"But you're a sick bastard."

"Do you really mean it?"

Mike turned back to his headlines pretending he had serious work to do.

"I really got into a fight with my neighbor's cat."

"That's really fascinating." Mike mimicked Walker's distinctive "really" without effort. It was a common part of their interaction on the rare occasion that both were on the floor.

Mike didn't mind the wasted time. He knew it would pay for itself eventually. Walker was young and often useful when he wanted to be. He and Mike worked together occasionally on the difficult parts of each other's assignments. Mike sometimes thought of himself as a kind of mentor teaching a newcomer the tricks of the trade.

But as much as he liked working with Bill Walker, he knew the young man was also dangerous to be around. He took too many unwarranted risks as far as Mike was concerned. He got himself into scrapes that he'd have to fight himself out of. But as the boss would often testify, it was all part of the job.

"So what's really going on?" Bill asked an hour later as he finished picking the seeds out of his xisimo core. His elbows rested on the clear surface of the table as he tossed slivers of the fruit cut by his laser knife high into the air and caught them smoking between his teeth. This was one reason the cafeteria staff insisted they sit in the corner, Mike thought.

"You're about to catch your tongue on fire."

"Only if I miss. C'mon Mike. I need a story. The well is dry, buddy. I'm dying of thirst."

"So you want to steal mine?"

"I've shared with you," Bill acted hurt.

"Yeah, shared crap."

"C'mon Mike. Admit it. You need me."

"Like I need my penis to fall off," Mike agreed thoughtfully.

Bill ignored the comment, "Remember that time on Telmar? Who saved who? Huh?" He pointed the blade of his weapon at Mike, "You owe me one."

Mike gulped down the last of his beer and hoped nobody was listening.

"Hell, you owe me two. Remember. . . "

"I wasn't aware we were counting. But now that we are, how many do you think you owe me?"

Bill estimated a number in his head. Then finally gave in with a sheepish look, "Okay, I'll drop it."

Mike spent most of the afternoon on the computer running searches on Clay and beginning a journal for the story complete with facts, photos, and tapes of conversations. Everyone else was minding their own business which was nice for a change, though they didn't seem to have very much to do. Private reports kept coming in, forwarded from Linden, on new melted pieces of metal being found in Chuck's private residence and on his clothes. There was even one under the seat he sat in during lunch. Such is the life of an editor, Mike smiled.

He kept smiling until his searches started coming up negative. Clay seemed to have disappeared over the past two days except for one use of his corporate credit card at a shop in Aquapolis just that morning. He bought an expensive tie.

Otherwise, zip. He hadn't signed any business or legal documents. He wasn't at his office. He wasn't at his flat in Silver Tri. He hadn't been using the subway. He hadn't so much as peed in an executive toilet. Dead end, pure and simple. The only good thing Mike could tell was that he certainly hadn't left the planet. That would have made things a little too complicated.

"I can tell you where Clay is." Mike turned with alarming speed, almost giving himself the second near-whiplash of the week.

"You've got to break that habit, Mike. Seriously." It was Bill again.

"What the hell do you want, Walker?"

"I can tell you where Clay is." This time it registered. Mike opened his eyes wide, then looked around to be sure nobody was listening.

"Where?"

"Snow Country. He's staying in a friend's cabin. Some sort of ski vacation."

"What friend?" Mike nearly growled it.

"Some sort of business associate with the paper. I don't remember the name, but I can find out."

"How do you know this?"

Bill shrugged, "If I told you. . . maybe it would rain for me." A smug grin crossed his lips, but his eyes remained laser sharp, like the knife he carried for "occupational emergencies".

"You want in on this one?" Mike hated to offer, but he had little choice.

"You don't have to let me in if you don't want to."

"In or out? I'm not saying please."

Bill considered it for all of two seconds, "Okay, I'm in."

The infrared goggles penetrated the icy pitch darkness, making the chimney top of the well-insulated Solomon mansion seem like a beacon of light on an otherwise frozen landscape. Mike bit his upper lip as he lay prone in the snow, considering the fair possibility that Billy's grapevine might be wrong.

"Thank mama there's no wind," Bill whispered. Mike smiled at the phrase. Clay would have thanked the lord; Mike might have thanked the night, but Bill would thank his mama.

"Thank mama they've got a fire going," Mike countered. Bill quietly agreed. The house might have been doubly invisible without it.

"So get goin'," Bill prodded.

Mike dropped the goggles and crawled over the hard slippery ice away from his flycycle. He hoped the vehicle would carry three on the off chance they'd find Niki inside.

As Mike quickly reviewed the plan in his head, he began to wonder if the computer's information was up to date. It showed three entrances to the house; a front, a garage, and a servant's entrance. In fact, it gave him the entire floor plans including electrical access, water, and sewage piping which he and Bill studied most of the evening. Being a reporter on Tizar accorded some amazing privileges.

Mike reached the garage. The door had a hard polymer bolt fashioned to undermine the courage of any would-be thieves. He couldn't see it, but he knew a fancy security alarm would be hidden behind. All the locks would be like this one if the computer told the truth. All would be difficult to saw. At least here he wouldn't be heard.

The borrowed laser knife switched on silently. The little bit of light that it shed was enough for Mike to see what he was doing, though he didn't need the luxury. He knew exactly where to make the initial incision killing the alarm as it were. The rest was grunt work as laser grinded against polymer. Now, it was only a question of time.

Mr. John Clay relaxed in a cushioned rocking chair as he warmed his feet by the fireplace. It was quaint but effective, he mused as he slowly rocked back and forth, like fire itself. He glanced at the wooden chessboard where he had defeated his host, Mr. Solomon; the two kings now stood alone face to face at center board. Not very happy was he, Clay almost giggled. The corporation did not encourage good losers. In that, he was somewhat of an outcast.

He knew he had failed, but at least he was finished. Now, he would soon leave Tizar and return to the home of his childhood. He smiled faintly at the thought.

Suddenly a noise thrust him to full consciousness. Someone was yelling and slamming his fist against the front door.

"Who could it possibly be at such an ungodly hour?" Clay got to his feet, hoping the sound hadn't awakened his host.

"I'll get it, sir." Marley, the night guard took only few seconds to appear from the kitchen area. He seemed stiff and angry.

"Open up! Please hurry! Someone... Oh, thank goodness. You've got to help. There's been a terrible accident. Do you have a videophone?!"

"Who are you?" The guard's face was stern as he looked over the young man. His long stringy black hair was wet from the snowfall, and he held a heavy steel flashlight in his right hand which he kept shining in the guard's eyes.

"Oh please! Let me in. It's a matter of life and death! I've got to use your videophone. There's been a terrible accident..." The young man was panting from exhaustion.

"Where?!"

"Out there," the young man, exasperated, waved his arm back into the darkness.

Mike quickly cut through the lock at the back of the garage leading into the storage hall. Hearing the commotion up front, he slipped into the hall and ran to the kitchen area. The polymer bolt had taken more time than he anticipated. He had to hurry. He reached the security office just a minute behind schedule.

The office was full of little television screens, and there was a desk with a control station. An eight-pack of fun-punch was set on the floor next to the largest screen where the highlights of a tourist hunting safari were being broadcast in via satellite from the far side of the planet by channel #117 sports. Mike scanned the other monitors and saw the recording light on one. He grinned when he saw Bill's face, desperate, nearly frantic. Bill was always good at diversions.

Mike took out the current disk being recorded and slipped it into his pocket. He grabbed a blank from the desk and melted it down with the knife in one swift stroke. Then, by flipping a few red switches, he disconnected the batteries and shut off power to the entire mansion.

The guard turned around in surprise when the stairwell suddenly darkened. He didn't have time to feel the blow to the back of his skull. He was already unconscious.

Mike raced into the room. The fire and the knife blade were the only sources of light in the entire house. Clay stood motionless, hoping he wouldn't be noticed.

"Morning, Mr. Clay."

"Good morning, Michael. You wanted to see me?"

"Well, yes, sir. I was hoping to talk to you about how irresponsible the press has been acting lately. It's a damn disgrace."

Bill walked in, now competing for stage presence. "To think a few reporters could spoil a whole code of ethics through some gross dereliction of duty." He was shaking his head sadly, and he homed in on Clay.

Mike continued, "Overzealous is perhaps more the word. Derelict implies neglect. What do you think, Mr. Boardmember?" Mike held the blade to Clay's throat, igniting the bare traces of aftershave near his chin.

"What do you want?"

"Niki. You. Robin. Not necessarily in that order."

"Your research assistant is upstairs in the south guest room. You can go get her." Clay's breath was heavy with fear.

"Lend me the flashlight, Billy."

"It broke."

Mike pivoted his glance, "You hit with the back."

"I know. I forgot."

Clay strained a smile, "If you two professionals don't mind being interrupted, I happened to notice that the guard was carrying..."

"Sit down and shut-up."

"Merely trying to be helpful." He sat back down in the rocking chair.

Mike stripped the flashlight off the guard's belt and picked up an automatic pistol and a pair of handcuffs to boot. He gave the knife to Bill and wrapped Clay's arms around the back of the chair, securing them with the handcuffs before he headed upstairs. Slowly, carefully, he measured each step as he neared the top of the plush stairwell searching for the barest reason to shoot someone. The south guest room was just down the hall. He found the door unlocked. Niki was inside, on the bed, heavily sedated. Mike picked her up gently, very much relieved to find her unharmed. Content with his prize, he climbed back down the stairs.

"Okay sport, where's Robin." Mike set Niki's limp body on the floor by the guard.

"Asleep, upstairs."

Bill rocked the chair roughly at the answer. "I wasn't aware androids slept."

"She likes to pretend."

"So she's heard everything."

Clay offered a smile, "No, she shuts her senses down, except for touch."

Suddenly, the stairwell light came back on. Mike whirled around to face the kitchen. He lifted the gun half expecting to see Robin running in to save her master. Clay had, of course, lied. Mike inwardly debated blowing the old man away right

there. He could almost see the image of blood cascading through the air as the chair would rock backward plunging its occupant into the fireplace. Mike nearly smiled at the thought.

"Mike. . . "

"I know. Get Niki and get out of here." He tossed Bill the flashlight.

"What about you?!"

"I'll think of something. Go!"

Bill didn't argue. He dragged Niki out the front door as fast as his feet would carry him, leaving Mike with Clay to wonder how many bullets it would take shatter the circuits of a pissed off android.

"She's very cunning, Mr. Harrison. You'd best be careful." Clay seemed amused. He's trying to distract me, Mike thought.

Ignoring Clay, Mike slinked quietly toward the kitchen entrance, wondering with each ill-fated step how good the android's hearing was. Exceptional, he supposed. The designers could make her as well as they wanted. He tried to make his breathing silent, but he only succeeded in noticing every small sound he made whether it was a footstep, a breath, or even a heartbeat.

Suddenly, the door swung open. Miraculously, he squeezed off a shot in time. Her head snapped back from the impact, but it didn't stop her. She struck him with phenomenal force, and Mike felt as if his entire chest were caving in. In another moment, her hand darted up. That was all he remembered.

It was a little like watching the stars fall. The cold coastal breeze gripping and then letting go, the tan sands which seemed rather darker than tan, and that distant disoriented feeling would combine on rare occasion when the stars fell from the sky.

Mike saw the stars falling clearly enough. He could feel the chill. But it was the disorientation that stole the show. He made numerous attempts at standing, but he never quite managed it. The ground seemed to rock like a see-saw back and forth as he lay down, and whenever he tried to get on his feet, he'd upset the balance and the entire room would turn upside-down and send him crashing to the ceiling and after a moment back to the floor again.

He heard voices far away almost shouting. They seemed to be very angry voices, but he couldn't understand the words. Suddenly he knew the language was foreign. Then he heard a girl giggling, but he couldn't place the laugh. It was a sweet innocent laughter which reminded him of the birds singing at Greenflower. But it was very near. Mike thought he could touch it if he reached out his arm just far enough, but suddenly it ceased. He knew she was close. His hand searched for her, but she wouldn't be found. He crawled toward her for a few feet, and then slumped down in despair.

He was too tired and she was too far away. Instead, he listened carefully for her laughter. But she was gone.

• • •

The nose of the kayak climbed quickly over the tall wave, slicing the crest in half before plunging back down to meet the next. Its occupant paddled furiously against the wind, straining frantically to beat the next rise before the sea engulfed her vessel. Her long slender arms gleamed in the morning sunlight, their dark, Draconian tones accented by a rich, brazen glow. A sudden gust of air almost capsized the boat spraying a salty white foam against her long, black windswept hair. She breathed deeply in exhilaration and struggled to keep the kayak upright. Out in the open sea, several kilometers from any land, she was beginning to lose her personal battle of wills against the elements.

She noticed the brilliant silver frame of the hydrofoil from the corner of her eye as it approached. The craft sped over the water in front of her, only its three skinny legs touching the water. They barely seemed to connect at all. Agyris poked his dark smiling face out the window as the pilot crossed her path.

"Had enough yet?!!" he shouted.

She turned her watch transmitter back on, knowing her weak voice wouldn't carry as far as his.

"Almost, give me another cent."

Her aide's voice broke over the transmitter, "Old Johnny's on the Coral. It looks like a situation has developed. It's urgent."

She cursed under her breath. "Okay. Bring the Coral in to get me." The next wave nearly rolled her over, and she turned the kayak around so that she wouldn't have to fight the wind or tide.

Agyris' hand flapped out the window as the hydrofoil sped away. She heard his voice over the transmitter, "Ambassador Uhambra is ready now. Coral steer fifteen degrees starboard and proceed at fifty knots. Pick-up at six-hundred and forty approximate. Over."

She leaned back letting the kayak drift with the tide while avoiding the brunt of the cold wind at her back. The sky was a pale blue without a cloud anywhere in sight. On the eastern horizon, Tizar's brilliant tangerine sun seemed to shimmer through the wide expanse of atmosphere. She saw purple-brown dots when she blinked and decided to refocus elsewhere.

"Ahoy there!" The first mate was waving from the deck. He wore a striped blue and white shirt with a sunny face. He tossed a hook, and smiled down at her as if expecting some reward. She hooked her kayak and climbed aboard, as he manually wheeled in the small craft.

"Where's mister problem?" she absentmindedly inquired, reaching for a towel. The first mate smiled through the pained and exhausted look he liked so much to wear in the company of superiors. She guessed it was his idea of looking busy.

"O'er there, ambassador." He nodded his head toward the cabin as he wrestled with the wheel.

"Don't strain yourself." She wrapped the white towel around her tall slender frame. It was a sharp contrast to her black swimsuit and dark, suntanned skin.

John Clay opened the cabin door and walked out onto the deck. Bags drooped under his usually alert, crystal-blue eyes. He wore a white business suit. She remembered he had a number of them along with a collection of expensive ties. It was considered ancient custom with the corporation; but on Tizar, it was contemporary fashion.

She stared at him silently with her dark brown eyes. She

would let him confess incompetence and beg for another chance before patting him unforgivingly on the head and sending him home. As usual, he waited for the first mate to leave the deck before beginning his report.

"Ambassador, it is good to see you vibrant and alive and as young as ever." She sensed the vague tone of disrespect, the way he said young. Was he envious?

"I'm older than you, Johnny."

"Yes, the miracle of anagathics. It never ceases to amaze me. So lucky it was for you that you became a diplomat and not a sleeper."

She bit her lip in aggravation. "Not luck. What brings you here this time?"

"I have bad news to report."

"Again?"

"The Solomon residence was broken into early this morning by that reporter. We captured him, but his accomplice escaped with the Siri. Together, they have enough evidence to support. . . "

"Let me guess. . . a police investigation."

"Or worse still, a full divisional security review. And that's far more likely." Clay's hands were wrung together, his knuckles white from lack of circulation.

He continued, "This could all have been avoided if we had simply killed Harrison and his Psyche as I advised. . . "

"How did they learn of your whereabouts?" She ignored Clay's complaint. They both knew it had holes.

"We're checking into that now."

"Did you redirect all your people to new controls?"

He nodded, "Yes, but. . . "

"Well, that's all that really matters then. After you leave, they can investigate all they want, it won't do them a bit of good. Do you have a list of your redirections?" He handed her the envelope.

"What was you're method of communication?"

"Non-electronic, of course."

"That leaves quite a lot of room."

"Sealed paper envelope. Like this one but with coded orders."

"In person?"

He hesitated, "Yes. It was safer and fairly quick. And I used private transport."

"Where?"

"Where what?"

She bit her lip again, "Where was contact made?"

"A few at their residences. They spread the word, and the rest came to receive orders at Solomon's. . . "

"Right in the middle of Snow Country?"

"It's fairly out of the way."

"What about the security disk for that day?"

"It was destroyed by Harrison. He had to protect his accomplice."

"You're sure? We can't have that thing floating around."

"Would you like to see its remains?"

"Not particularly." She wondered if he was trying to be funny. "When you leave tonight, take Solomon with you."

"Of course."

She smiled for the first time since seeing him. "Is that all then?"

"Not quite. I'd like to know what we're supposed to do with Harrison."

"Have you interrogated him?"

"Not yet."

"Wake him and do it. Report back if he has anything interesting on his mind."

"If not, can I kill him?"

She laughed, "Would it give you great pleasure?"

"On the contrary. I'd like to keep him alive for torture. He's only ruined everything."

"All right. You can do with him whatever your little heart desires. I emphasize little heart, because I know you very well. That's if and only if he refuses to cooperate. However, if he has something interesting to offer, see if there's a way to avoid murder. He's quite possibly the top gatherer on Tizar, maybe even in the entire sector. There will be a storm in the press if he just disappears. See if there isn't a way we can use him to our advantage. He must have some sort of connections. And find out how much he knows. It'll give us a good idea where we stand."

Clay nodded, trying consciously to make a mental note of every order. He knew he wouldn't try hard to make Harrison talk. It would be fun getting rid of him.

Mike awakened slowly, his body stretched like a slab of meat along a tightly strewn grav-field, its invisible coils suspending him horizontally, tugging his arms and legs in separate directions. He glanced about the large, dimly lit room, its sharp, jutting contours and lack of furnishing serving a dull reminder of his helpless position. A large window along the far wall overlooked a blue-green seascape, gaeyave and shallowfish swimming slowly past the plastic brace, while another creature with long clear tentacles attached itself to the smooth surface. Mike peered between its suctioning arms wondering if he was dreaming. He could barely make out the blurry lights of Aquapolis in the far distance.

Robin leaned with her back against the glass and watched Mike while the drugs slowly lost their grip. As his eyes focused on her dark outline they seemed to close on the neat puncture wound in the center of her forehead. His legs began kicking in a pathetic sort of dance as he tried to physically squirm out of the gravity cell.

"We had to put you in there. You kept on hurting yourself." She approached him cautiously.

"You didn't have to dope me up. How long has it been?"

"Not long."

Mike stopped fighting the field. He tried to relax and think of a way out, but he was out of ideas.

He looked her over. Robin wore a pair of blue coveralls. A headband hung limply from her front pocket.

"Sorry about shooting you." He tried to make it sound genuine.

"Quite all right, Mr. Harrison. I understand your motives."

He wondered how much an android could understand.

"Besides," she continued, "it was about the best place you could have aimed."

"No brains, huh."

She patted her chest.

"Well, it doesn't look good."

She seemed to laugh inwardly as Mr. Clay glibly strolled in, "No, but it will heal." He looked very self-assured, even a little cocky. "Robin is very hard-headed, Michael. May I call you Michael? The bullet you fired simply bounced off. The skin which was torn is constructed with a biochemical agent not unlike that found in mendwear. Bed off."

The grav-field slowly rotated Mike into a standing position. He looked at Robin. She smiled as if on display.

"Why are you telling me this?" Mike tried not to sound too irritated.

Clay pondered the question for a moment, his thin, white brows furrowed in self-restraint. "Because I like you. . . " he managed with a sarcastic twist to his voice.

Mike let a smile creep across him face before plunging, arms outstretched. He felt his body sheathed in fire, burning alive even as he brushed by the old man and hit the floor, his inflamed arms crackling and spitting like dry driftwood over an open barbecue.

"What you are now experiencing, Michael. . . is our cooperation inducing system. It consists of a series of electrical implants in your brain. . . which are capable of constructing a wide array of phantom sensations. . . when properly instructed." His booming voice slowly slipped to its usual volume as the flaring pain evaporated.

Mike felt his head, naked flesh and electrodes.

"You bastard."

Clay smiled at the remark.

"Why the hell are you doing this?"

"I'd like to get to know you. . . get to know your work?"

"Why should I tell you jack-sh. . . " Mike hit the floor as the electricity scathed through his mind, his head throbbing in illusory explosion.

"I believe you will find our methods quite convincing."

Mike tried to talk, but the pain forced his mouth shut, his neck curling backward in agony. Gasping for breath, he refocused his eyes. Robin stood over him, her foot resting softly on his chest.

"I don't know. . . you want. . . "

"Now we're getting somewhere aren't we. . . "

Robin blurred into the ceiling, its dark surface pressing on him, pushing him deeper into the floor.

"We want to know. . . how we can help. . . do we?"

"Ye. . . "

"What's that, Michael?"

"Yes. . . "

The pain faded slowly, the pressure falling away like storm clouds over the coast, raining then leaving in gentle succession. Clay regarded the young man with antipathy, the body tangled in grotesque torment, and without a single scratch. He much preferred real torture, the sort that you could see and have respect for; but that could wait for later.

Robin picked Mike's head off the floor and let it drop. "He's unconscious. Automatic depressants registering in the forward cranium."

"That's no fun. . . let us wake him."

"Are you sure?"

"Do it."

Dark brown eyes burst open as the chemicals neutralized in wave after wave of mind splitting torment. Clay's smiling face loomed above like a bobbing floater.

"Tizar to Michael. . . are you still with us? I hope that was as good for you as it was for me, Michael. Because, to be absolutely honest, it doesn't get much better; but we will try, won't we." He winked toward the silhouette sitting quietly against the window.

"Go ahead. . . "

"What's that, Michael? Are you actually cognizant? Have you a thought to share?"

Mike felt Clay's glaring eyes upon his face even as he closed his own.

". . . before it dies of loneliness? Go ahead. . . what?"

"Kill me. . . "

A long silence passed before Mike opened his eyes. Clay looked astonished and insulted.

"Kill you??? Why in heaven's name should I do a nasty thing like that? I want to be your friend. We are friends. . . aren't we, Michael?"

"What the hell do you want from me?"

"You mustn't be difficult, Michael. . . it's a naughty thing."

Burning sensations tore through Mike's body for a fraction of a second as he turned to look again at Robin.

"She controls it, Michael. . . she could kill you on a whim. . . except, of course, for the obvious fact that androids don't have whims. Lucky for you. . . isn't it?"

Mike griped bare floor as the pain coursed through his veins. He twisted about, vulnerably, clawing toward her with floundering motions.

"But since you've been such a good sport, we're going to keep you company for a while longer. Are you feeling cooperative yet?"

"Tell me what you want."

Clay acquiesced, "Very well, let us start at the common ground, just to see what we both know. Tell me who killed our esteemed friend, Mr. John Doe number seventeen."

Mike stopped and thought as the pain released its hold.

"Who. . . Fork? You want to know who killed Fork?"

"I believe I have made myself abundantly lucid, Michael. You were aware of them. We know you visited the pit."

Clay first heard a chuckle, then a snort, then a laugh, then a sound he couldn't place in any interrogation he had ever participated in or heard of. He looked down at the billowing figure in amazement and then back toward Robin.

"What are you doing?"

She nodded her head, nothing.

"Michael, either we've pushed you completely over the edge, or. . . "

"Fork isn't dead." Mike tumbled himself into a sitting position, holding his side with one hand and wiping away tears with the other.

"You are insane."

Mike beamed up, the laughter leaving him as the memory of pain crept back into his mind.

"You don't believe me, Clay... flush me out the torpedo tubes."

The old man smiled at the suggestion.

Clay wasn't convinced, "If he's alive, then where is he?"

Mike rubbed the metal connections on his head.

"Where is he!?!"

The dim flicker of pain approached his senses and veered away as he steadied his gaze on the dark outline against the wall.

"I'll do it, Michael."

The moment hung open like a sputtering ocean swell refusing to die.

"In transit to Calanna."

"And how do you know this to be true?"

"A little birdie told me. Look, Mr. Clay, I'm a gatherer. I've got ways of finding things out."

"Connections?" Clay seemed intrigued; whether out of playfulness of genuine belief, Mike couldn't tell.

"That, investigation, and sometimes just a little intuitive reasoning."

"What did your little break-in this morning constitute. Investigation or intuitive reasoning?"

Robin told the truth; he hadn't been out very long. Mike wondered how far it was to the surface.

"Mr. Harrison," Clay skipped to the surname as if he were beginning a long lecture, "It seems as if we have fallen into a double-checkmate. Do you play chess?"

"On occasion."

"Double-checkmate is the game's one fault; it is shall we say, the impossible outcome. Yet, in reality, it is all too common. Rarely, instead of there being a winner and a loser, both parties lose."

"There's always stalemate..." Mike involuntarily slid backward an inch as Clay glared at the interruption.

"Not the same, Mr. Harrison. One is more a tie than the other."

"I see."

"We have forced each other into unacceptable losses, and foolishly. We are not enemies. If anything, we both want to see this Mr. Fork as you call him returned to Tizar, alive and well."

"Then why did you kidnap Niki?"

"You were interfering with my work. You were investigating me. And furthermore, you were drawing attention to Mr. Fork. I am convinced that if he were not the subject of your obtuse scrutinies, Imperial attentions would never have been attracted."

"ISIS."

Clay smiled and folded his hands over his belt.

"What part in this do you play, Mr. Clay?"

The old man's skin tightened involuntarily, "Again you probe me, Michael."

Mike looked at Robin. Her outline seemed to shimmer against the dim, blue light of the seascape.

"Fine. I'll forget you. I'll forget I ever met you. But just what are you proposing?"

"That you go to Calanna in search of this Mr. Fork. I would like you to find him and bring him back here to Tizar."

"And what will you do? Linden already knows that you planted those bugs."

"What I will do is unimportant."

Mike smiled in disbelief, "I know Chuck. He doesn't take security lightly. I really doubt that he'd just put this to rest."

"He has no choice. You have no choice. Or would you rather be fed to the fish?"

"Look, I'm just saying..."

"Mr. Harrison, you are not in a position to debate me. Will you do as I bid? A simple yes or no will suffice."

Mike considered it, even though he knew Clay was right. He had no choice. They had no choice. That was the beauty of double-checkmate, or mutual assured destruction as most folks called it. It was a lesson history had invariably taught every culture. And in each culture it had a different name.

"Okay. I guess you've got me. I'll convince Chuck to stay cool, and I'll go to Calanna." He didn't mention that the latter was already decided.

"And you'll take Robin."

"And I'll...now hold it just a minute." Mike raised his hands in protest.

"And you'll take Robin." Clay held all the cards, and he knew it. Mike realized it was pointless to debate.

"Fine. I'll take her."

Jim is a full-time MBA student at UC Riverside. He recently founded the UCR Gamers' Guild and co-edited the first issue of its quarterly journal, The Guildsman. *These chapters are the first of several he began during the middle 80's as a prose exercise in description of his Traveller (SF-RPG) setting. He says he writes exactly the same way he gamemasters: without any semblance of plan or preconception.*

What has been published here as Chapter Three *is actually chapters four and five as written originally by Jim.* The Harrison Chapters *will be continued next issue.*

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HIGH SEDUCTION — A DIALOGUE

Demoness —

Child of the moonlight, why do you sing so
Harshly? Why play so base a lute? In truth
You play so beautifully that one forgets
The instrument's nature; yet perhaps you
Would like to play my golden dulcimer?
I should lend it for so small a token
As a kiss —
Why do you flee so? I mean
You no distress. Am I, then, so ghastly?
Do you not find me attractive? Raphael,
I long to feel your legs upon my own.

Archangel —

My song makes bitter refuge
In this, the house of fallen
Stars and swollen leprous gods.
The very air is pungent
With tawny smells.
Ah, Lilith!
Your breath is sweet as sunset.
Let me welcome your embrace —
Your golden pipe shall replace
My ruined voice; my tender
Throat aches so! Yet your forked
Tongue heals all men's wounds, my love.

William Racicot
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THE BIG JOKE

by Robert Hurvitz

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I woke up in a strange bed, in a strange house, in a stranger's body. All I knew was that I was lying naked on a firm mattress with light blue sheets. The walls of the bedroom were painted white, and the rug was a pleasant beige. Various pieces of furniture lay in strategic locations. There was no sound in the room; I couldn't even hear my own breathing.

I pushed the sheets back, looked at myself, and frowned. This body needs a tan and a lot of exercise, I thought. Good thing it doesn't look familiar. But then, what would look familiar? After a moment, I realized that I didn't know.

A bead of sweat trickled down the side of my forehead, and I cried out when it managed to find its way into my ear, causing my body to shiver and my hand to dart up and hastily try to rub the droplet out. I hate when that happens, I thought. I must make it a point not to sweat. Reaching up, I wiped my brow with the back of my hand.

After taking a deep breath, I swung my legs out of bed and sat up, then surveyed the room again. There were some posters on the walls: Escher drawings, Dali prints, and a large photo of a sleek, black computer. I stared intently at each one, but nothing would come to mind about what they meant to me or even how they came to be on the walls. What does all of this mean? I thought. I didn't know.

On the nightstand was a white push button telephone. Maybe I can call someone, I thought, someone who can help me. But... who? I nervously ran a hand through my hair. I didn't know, and I wanted to scream.

On impulse, I reached out and snatched up the receiver, dialing 911 with my other hand.

It rang twice before someone answered.

"911," greeted someone. I couldn't tell if the person was a man or a woman.

"Hello," I said quickly. "I..." I didn't know what to say.

"Is something wrong?" the voice asked seriously.

"I..."

"Are you all right?"

"I... I don't know. I think I'm all right." My mind did somersaults. "I just woke up—"

"And you don't know...?" the voice finished for me.

"Yes. Yes, that's it exactly."

"So you called 911, first thing?"

"Yes. I didn't know what else to do."

Sudden peals of laughter burst forth from the receiver, and I instinctively jerked it away from my ear.

"You don't know, and so you called 911!" exclaimed the owner of the voice. Another laughing fit followed.

I sat there on the edge of the bed, naked and frozen in horror. The laughter from the phone echoed menacingly about the bedroom, assaulting my ears from all directions. I had a death grip on the receiver, and I thought I could hear the plastic begin to crack. "I don't understand why this is so funny!" I yelled out.

The someone only laughed louder.

And then, with a click, there was abrupt silence.

I remained where I was, stunned, until the dial tone sounded, snapping me out of my fear-induced trance. I glanced around apprehensively, saw that I was still holding the receiver, and gingerly placed it back on the cradle. The laughter still reverberated within the walls of my mind.

Maybe, I thought, maybe this is all a nightmare. Maybe I'll wake up, and everything will be normal again. I paused. Again? I thought. What if this *is* normal? *What if I'm just out of my damned mind?!*

I stared once more at the walls. Escher, Dali, and computer posters? Surely the mark of a lunatic, I concluded. Yes, the three-sided house with the people walking in different reference frames: that must represent my topsy-turvy world. The hands drawing themselves... Hmm, I'll have to think about that one. "The Persistence of Memory": a dash of irony, obviously. "Burning Giraffes and Telephones": a firm reminder of my insanity, no doubt. And the computer poster? Perhaps that has something to do with a job I had before I went nutso.

I gazed at the phone and shuddered. But, I thought, that telephone conversation was definitely real. That person obviously knew something. But why didn't he/she/it help me? Maybe, I thought, maybe this is all a conspiracy, a huge plot to make me think I'm crazy!

I frowned. No, I thought, that *idea* is just plain crazy.

So what do I do?

I stretched out on the bed, rubbing my eyes and mulling over everything I knew.

Well, I concluded, the first thing I can do is get dressed. Then I should get something to eat. And then...? Well, I'll burn that bridge when I get to it.

Determined, I stood up, rooted through the dresser and closet, and picked out some clothes. Then I searched for the bathroom, found it. Finally, I tracked down the kitchen and made myself a hearty breakfast of French toast, scrambled eggs, and a big cup of orange juice.

It hit me while I was swallowing a mouthful of French toast. All of the clothes in the closet, I realized, were of styles I liked, and the garments I picked out had fit me perfectly! Also,

the kitchen is chock full of my favorite foods! Therefore, I concluded, this body must live in this house, and so must I. Hence, this body must indeed be mine. Q.E.D. Now I'm getting somewhere. But, I asked myself, to where am I getting? I forked up some eggs and chewed them thoughtfully. I didn't know.

My stomach finally full, I drained the last of the juice from my glass and thought, Now I'm ready. I leaned back in my chair and considered my options. I didn't have many. I could call 911 again, but that would probably result in further ridicule. I could call the operator, but how would that help me? I could sit around this house all day and hope I get better, but that would be boring. I could go outside, take a walk... Hmm, that idea seems pretty inviting, actually. The fresh air would do me good, and I might even run into someone who knows me. Yes, I think I'll go for a nice, long walk.

I dropped the dirty dishes in the sink, headed for the front door, opened it, and stepped outside. It was a fine day for a walk: the sun was out, no clouds were to be seen, and birds were chirping merrily. Before I closed the door behind me, I made sure the keys I had found on the nightstand fit the locks. Then, my confidence growing, I firmly shut the door and locked it.

I walked to the sidewalk and, on a whim, turned right and headed down the street. The other houses were not especially large, but they looked pleasant enough and had well-tended front lawns.

No one else was outside, but that was perfectly understandable; my digital watch claimed that it was Thursday, 10:30 a.m. So everyone should be at work or at school, I rationalized.

I kept walking, breathing deep and appreciating the large oak trees that lined the street. Four blocks later I came to a park. I eagerly scanned the grassy area and saw several people. Some were sitting on benches, others were lying on the grass; some were reading books, others were merely soaking up the sun. I briskly walked towards the nearest of them, a blond young man wearing shorts and a t-shirt.

As I neared, he glanced up from his book, tilted his head, and smiled.

I stopped in my tracks. Why is he smiling at me? I thought furiously. Does he know me? What should I do? Should I play along? Yes, that would probably be best.

I smiled back.

He nodded approvingly and went back to his book.

Aha! Victory! I took a few more steps in his direction. "Nice day, isn't it?" I said conversationally. I could now see that he was reading a physics textbook. He's probably a college student, I surmised.

He looked back at me. "Yes," he replied. He lifted up his textbook and added, "I can never study indoors on a day like this. It seems like such a waste, you know?"

"Ah, yes. Definitely." I then cleared my throat, glanced at the sky, and asked as nonchalantly as possible, "Do you know me, by any chance?"

He pursed his lips and then said, "Sorry, no." He shrugged and returned to his textbook. Just before I was about to walk away and approach someone else, his eyes shot open and he jerked his head back up. "No way!" he called out jubilantly.

At the sound of his outburst, the other people in the park turned their attention towards us, and I cautiously stepped back.

"You don't know, do you?" the college student asked incredulously.

"Uh, well..." I said lamely.

"You don't know!" he shouted gleefully. He jumped to his feet and pointed at me. "You don't know!"

I grabbed my hair. "What don't I know, damn it?! What!"

He roared with laughter. All the other park patrons had rushed up and were now staring at me, pointing at me. "You don't know!" they yelled, laughing. "You don't know!"

"Why is this so funny?!" I pleaded. "Why won't you tell me?!"

My words only served to fuel their laughter.

Hot tears ran down my cheeks, and I clutched myself. "Why won't you tell me?" I wailed.

"You don't know!" they replied. Many of them were now crying, too, but for vastly different reasons. Several were even on the ground, they were laughing so hard.

I turned and ran blindly because of the tears obscuring my vision. I cried out in agony several times.

The laughter quickly faded; they were too busy expressing their mirth to follow.

I ran on regardless. Houses blurred past me, and I seemed to cover more and more ground with each stride. Soon, buildings sprang up and rushed by, blocking out most of the sky with their height.

And I ran on regardless.

My mind was racing just as fast. That proves it! I thought. This whole nightmare has to be a conspiracy to drive me mad! Everyone's against me! But why, damn it? It doesn't make any sense. Perhaps that's the whole point: I wouldn't understand. Perhaps... Perhaps... My mind reeled as it suddenly hit a brick wall. I didn't know! I needed answers, damn it, *answers*!

After what seemed like an eternity, I slowed down and collapsed from fatigue. No matter how hard I tried, I could not get any part of my body to move. Just as well, I thought. I closed my eyes and fell to sleep instantly.

Nightmares plagued my rest. The whole world was gathered around me, pointing and laughing. Nobody would tell my why, no matter how nicely I asked. Soon, the laughing became so loud and so out of control, that it hit the resonant frequency of the Earth, and the planet exploded, killing everyone except me. I floated in space, and the universe began laughing at me.

I awoke with a scream and jumped to my feet, crouching and glancing around warily. My whole body was sore, but I could move if I didn't mind pain. I was in a dingy neighborhood; trash was piled on the sidewalk, and dreary tenement buildings reaching to infinity lined the street.

A bag lady shuffled around the corner, stopping when she caught sight of me.

"Excuse me," I called out. "Do you know?"

She squinted at me. "Yes," she responded in a raspy voice. "Don't you?"

"Oh, of course," I lied. "Doesn't everybody?"

She drummed her fingers on her leg and shambled closer to me. “Sure,” she said. “Everyone knows. Isn’t that right?”

Panic was starting to build up inside, but I stayed where I was. I can easily outrun her, I reasoned. “Right. And it sure is funny what we all know, isn’t it?”

“Yup. Sure is.” She came to within five feet of me, then stuck her neck out to peer more closely.

A bead of sweat trickled down my nose, hung at the tip for a moment, then fell to the cement where it made a small, wet mark. I bit my lip, hoping that she hadn’t seen that dead giveaway.

“Aha!” she cried. “I knew it! You don’t know, do you?” She cackled loudly and slapped her knee. “You don’t know!”

I was about to reach out and strangle her when I heard cacophonous screechings from above, as if God were scratching His fingernails on the sky.

I looked up, and, to my horror, all the tenement windows were opening. The bag lady cackled even louder as all the residents in the buildings poked their heads out, spotted me, and began their ridicule.

“You don’t know!” they yelled. Their shouts rang out asynchronously and bounced around me, making me feel as if I were in a crazy echo chamber. Then the laughter crashed through, rolling up and down the buildings and sprinkled with continued exclamations of “You don’t know!”

Through the mind-shattering din, it seemed to me that the walls of the buildings were starting to shake. My God! I thought, terrified. They’ve hit the resonant frequency!

I forced myself to sprint down the street, even though my muscles protested vehemently. I must get far enough away, I thought frantically, or else I’ll be buried by the rubble!

I ran for several blocks and eventually came upon another park. I headed into it and collapsed at the base of a particularly sturdy-looking tree. It took me many minutes to regain my breath, but when I did, I rolled over and looked back down the street. The tenement buildings were still standing. And I could still hear their laughter, though it was fading fast.

The buildings didn’t fall, I marvelled. What does this mean? I shook my head. I didn’t know.

Exhaustion hit me like a ton of bricks. I laughed softly at the analogy and crawled off into some nearby bushes to sleep.

Sunlight shining in my eyes woke me from my pleasant slumber. I blinked and wondered, Why am I lying in a bed of shrubbery? Was I mugged? I thought in alarm. I sat up straight and looked around. The sun was low on the horizon, and it was uncommonly cold. I glanced at my watch, and it claimed that the time was 5:56 a.m. and that today was now Friday.

It was a new day, and... and I knew! Yes, I knew everything! I stood up and basked in the sunlight, thinking about the previous day’s events. Soon I was chuckling, then guffawing, and finally I was rolling on the grass laughing uncontrollably.

Many minutes later, I sat up, rubbing the tears from my face and giggling weakly. I caught movement out of the corner of my eye and turned my head. The bag lady was tramping slowly towards me, a smile on her old and wrinkled face.

I smiled back and called out, “I know.”

She nodded her head and sat down a few feet from me. “Wonderful, wasn’t it?” she asked.

“Yes,” I said. “Definitely.”

“Many years ago, when I was young—younger than you, even—I also had the good fortune to not know. I’ll never forget that day.”

I nodded. “Yes, I’ll treasure mine for the rest of my life.”

The bag lady squinted at the rising sun. “Do you think,” she asked after a long moment, “that I’ll ever not know again?”

I thought over her question for a time and finally replied, “I don’t know.”

Robert Hurvitz is a computer science major at UC Berkeley who would rather be a writer, but doesn’t want to starve. “The Big Joke” came to be from listening to too much Oingo Boingo and from too little sleep. This is his first story to get published, and he hopes that it won’t be the last. When he’s not doing anything else, Robert buys compact discs, skis, and hangs out in cafes. He just recently turned 21 and, as a result, feels much more mature.

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ENDURANCE RACER

by Phillip Nolte

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The Marathon was one of the most popular events in Human space and the uncounted masses were hungry for anything involving it. They satiated this hunger by spending their hard-earned credits. They spent them on all sorts of junk: clothing and games, trinkets and baubles and who knows what else! If it said "marathon" on it they bought it, avidly. There were also those who took the obsession to more bizarre lengths. Like Morris Quimby, for instance. For part of each day, Quimby was one of several hundred accountants employed by the huge Federated Metals consortium. At home, after work, deep in the overpopulated rabbit warren that had been carved out of the interior of Ceres, he was a Marathon fanatic. For a few hours, each day he could forget about his mundane job and his shrewish wife and his four squalling children. For a few hours he was master of his own universe as he gloried in the power of his statistical games. He would compile detailed and arcane statistics about past and present marathons. Statistics that had meaning only to him. It was a harmless enough occupation, especially since it had probably kept him from going mad. For the time being, it kept him happy. How could he have known what incredible fame and fortune his oddball hobby would bring him?

In a Galaxy teeming with humans who were ruled by a government that was powerful, corrupt and immovable, the great race was a welcome diversion. The Marathon was held every four years against the backdrop of the asteroid belt in the Sol system, the birthplace of Man before he spread out to populate the galaxy. The sprawling, rocky disc of the belt contains an uncounted number of asteroids ranging from sizeable planetoids, like Ceres, down to specks no bigger than grains of sand and dust motes. In spite of this, the belt is mostly empty space. But there are areas where matter is fairly concentrated, where huge clusters of variously sized lumps of rock are locked on a perpetual cosmic carousel by their mutual gravitational attractions. A tortuous route was mapped out over a 10,000 kilometer course that made the tiny spaceships of the racers wind their way over, under and around the countless planetoids and boulders that made up one of the larger concentrations of matter in the belt. The race was not, as some thought, from Ceres to Pallas. Instead, the name referred to the dual sponsorship of the event by the businesses of the two asteroids.

Imagine an equilateral triangle whose half-kilometer sides are made up of bright bars of neon-green light. Each of the thousands of gates that marked out the course was just such a triangle. Successful negotiation of a gate meant that the contestant's ship passed through somewhere within the triangle. Missing a gate meant disqualification. Between gates the contestants could take any path that they wished. Time could be gained by skimming as closely as possible to the asteroid obstacles in search of the line that placed the spacecraft in the best position for the next maneuver. It was here that the skill and daring of the top racers set them apart from the rest. Invariably several racers were killed and others seriously injured when they tried to gain those precious extra tenths of a second and found that they had used up their narrow margin of safety. The line between superior speed and instant disaster was a razor's edge, ever waiting to nick the unwary.

The Asteroid Marathon, as it was sometimes called, was contested in special one-man space vehicles. Main thrust was provided by a conventional, ultra-high efficiency, electric ion-grid drive. What made them special was that the source of electricity was a man-powered generator.

Essentially, they were pedal-powered spacecraft.

The next running of the great event was only a week away and the handicappers agreed that the contest was down to about twenty-five people out of some two-thousand qualifiers who had a shot at upsetting the champion. The champion was good—the odds were still heavily in his favor.

"What'cha thinking, Yuri?"

Yuri Ramosian, the reigning Marathon champion, shook his head as he looked around the prep room at the other contestants, appraising the competition.

"I don't know, A.J.. . . " said Yuri, "some of these guys look pretty tough!"

"Tough" might have been an understatement. Most of the others were young men, in their physical prime, lean to the point of gauntness, their bodies ropily muscular. Scattered through the group also was a handful of young women. Yuri's gaze came to rest on one in particular.

"That's Chen-Lee, right A.J.? The one we were briefed about?"

The young lady in question was, like the rest of the competition, in top physical condition. Her small bosom was mashed almost flat by the skin-tight fabric of her gaily-colored racing suit and she had the narrow, boyish hips characteristic of top female athletes. Below, the large, powerful, almost grotesque muscles of her marathoner's legs stood out in sharp relief. Unlike the others, she was also strikingly attractive with jet black hair, an oval face and exotic almond-shaped eyes.

"Yeah," replied Thorpe, "She won a couple minor races out in the Kepler Quadrant last year. Big deal."

"I heard that she won them pretty handily, A.J. . . . "

"Sure, Yuri, that's how she got here. Relax, Champ, the handicappers got her tagged a hundred-to-one! She's in the first wave because she's good press—a dark horse from some godforsaken outposter colony." He nodded in the young girl's direction. "Though you got to admit she won't look bad on the newsvids either!"

"Right, A.J.," said Yuri, reassured, as usual, by his teamate's shrewd assessment of the situation. But he had to be honest with himself, the young woman's chances were as good as anyone's.

Their discussion was ended by a call from the crew captain to get ready. The two men strapped on their helmets and slapped hands in a classic high five before squeezing into the cockpits of their racing crafts.

The day's practice session was about to begin. For a few hours each day in the week before the race, the contestants were allowed on a small practice course near Ceres for training and for testing and adjusting the tiny racing vessels.

On the other side of the prep room, Cassandra Chen-Lee also strapped on her lightweight meta-kevlar racing helmet prior to entering her ship for the mid-afternoon workout. She signaled the support crew to push her into the airlock and then ran down a mental checklist while the lock cycled. With the outer door fully open, she began pedaling slowly and used the joystick to divert a small amount of power to the maneuvering thrusters. The tiny ship came gently about and she began pedaling a bit harder to put some space between her and the dock. Cassandra felt the usual tightness in her chest, the lump in her throat that always came unbidden whenever she took the ship out intending to go really fast. As soon as she got out on the course and up to speed, she knew from experience that the feeling would pass.

Pumping the pedals rhythmically, she banked the needle-nosed craft out towards the practice course. After a signal from the gate official that it was safe to enter, she passed through the bright green triangle of the first gate.

Cassandra fell in with a flight of five racers who were warming up and testing the control systems on their racing ships, making sure that things were properly adjusted. Like a multi-colored flock of swift, plastic birds, they soared through several of the gates in a graceful and ever-changing cluster. Within minutes, she knew there were no top competitors like herself in the group and she found herself growing impatient. Their lines were sloppy and none of them had the same intense drive out of the gates as she did. Not that it really mattered. Cassandra had been waiting for two ships in particular, both of which had just caught and passed her group. She increased her speed to join the new pair.

Free of the slow pack, with the other racers in her sights, she felt her spirit soar. As one, the three executed a series of intricate, difficult maneuvers flawlessly. Her powerful legs pumped the pedals smoothly, instinctively, without conscious thought as her breathing and pulse rate quickened. Cassandra became an intense ball of concentration, her attention focused completely on piloting her racing craft. For the first time in months, she felt wholly, vibrantly alive! To the trained marathoner this was heady, joyous fun! For nearly two complete circuits she barnstormed the practice course with the other two craft, learning the lines the other pilots used, sizing them up. Finally she made a move on them at the second-to-last gate. The other racers hadn't expected the maneuver and both had to change their line slightly to let her execute the pass by going between them.

There had nearly been contact between the ships—a mere ten centimeters was all that separated them, but the skills of all three racers were such that none of them had been in any real danger—top level racers handled such maneuvers routinely. Under race conditions, it was not at all uncommon for ships to brush one another or for more serious contacts to occur.

The practice session over, the racers waited for their support crews aboard their chase ships to come and pick them up. Even at the end of a practice session, the speeds achieved were astounding. Without a chase ship, the racer would have been required to expend an equal amount of energy on deceleration. Clearly a waste of time! Better to let a nuclear powered craft do the job for you. As the chase ship began to reel Cassandra in, she signaled to them with a circle made with thumb and forefinger—the universal sign: everything OK.

As soon as she got back to the race facility, Cassandra sought out the two pilots that she had been sparring with for a little post-practice banter. She had no trouble finding the gaily colored ships. As she came up to them, the pilots were standing with their backs to her. One was demonstrating a racing maneuver with his hands and the other was nodding in agreement.

"That was a good session!" she said. "Sorry about that last gate." She did a double-take as they turned to look at her. "Omigod!" she blurted. "You're Yuri Ramosian!" She looked at the other racer. "And you must be A.J. Thorpe?"

The teammates smiled at Cassandra's obvious discomfort.

"That was you in the yellow and blue ship?" asked Thorpe. The young girl nodded sheepishly. Thorpe's reply surprised her. "Good move! We were a tad too relaxed. Serves us right. Right, Yuri?"

"Right, A.J. It's Cassandra, isn't it? Cassandra Chen-Lee?" asked Yuri. The young girl nodded, still a little wide-eyed.

Yuri continued. "I agree, it was a hell of a good session! And don't worry, that was a good move you made at gate seventeen. I came in a little slow and a little wide." He shrugged, "You did the same thing I would have done!"

Cassandra was a surprised to find that Ramosian stood at least a full head shorter than she did. Like many people who finally meet a legend, she discovered that her mental image of the champ was larger than life. He was also beginning to show his age a little. No youth drugs for marathoners! At this level of competition nearly all drugs were illegal and they were rigidly tested for. As a result, he was showing a little grey at the temples and some salt and pepper in the rest of his hair. But, outside of the little touches of grey and the laugh-wrinkles around his brown eyes, the rest of

him was all-business, alloy hard, compact and muscular, ready for anything. His companion, Thorpe, was almost a perfect contrast. Descended from old-earth Kenyan stock, Thorpe was black-skinned and had the characteristic distance runner's physique—long-limbed, gaunt and wiry, without a trace of body fat.

With the introductions over, a short awkward silence ensued. Cassandra self-consciously ran a hand through her dark, damp hair and tried to think of something intelligent to say. Thorpe spoke first.

"I don't know 'bout you guys, but I'm for a hot shower and a cold drink. Cassandra, why don't you meet us at Killian's after we all clean up some?" he asked.

"Good idea, A.J.," said Yuri.

"Killian's?" she asked.

"It's a little bar just down the corridor," said Yuri. "Kind of a racers hangout. You'll like it. It's a good place to unwind after practice."

Cassandra seemed lost in some internal battle for a few moments before she made up her mind. "Okay," she said, nodding. "Killian's it is. Forty-five minutes?"

An hour later she pushed cautiously through an old-fashioned, ornate door into the dimly lit interior of Killian's Olde Irish Pub. She looked around a bit while waiting for her eyes to adjust. An interesting place. The management had tried to capture the spirit of an old-earth English pub, say about mid-nineteenth century. They had done an admirable job, and even though there was no way that the dark paneling could be real wood or that the lamps could be burning natural gas, the place looked downright old. There was little doubt that the bar was a hangout for earth natives and marathon racers—the full-earth gravity guaranteed that. Cassandra didn't know for sure what an old pub was supposed to look like, but she decided immediately that she liked the place.

Yuri signaled to her from a booth in the back corner. Thorpe sat across from him, his long, bony frame somehow jack-knifed into the confines of the smallish booth. Cassandra headed towards them across the crowded bar.

A change into civilian clothing had wrought a transformation in the young girl. A blue outfit accentuated her less-than-generous bosom and disguised the heavily muscled legs. Her glossy black hair made for a flattering contrast against the soft, pale fabric and her smooth, golden skin as it fell in a braid beside her long graceful neck and over her bare shoulder. The hard, purposeful athlete had become tantalizingly feminine. What's more, the exotic almond-shaped eyes were a startling and very beautiful shade of blue! Both men watched in fascination as she slid into the empty space next to Yuri.

Yuri and Thorpe were having the house specialty, an English style pale ale. Their glasses were about half-full. Cassandra thought for a moment before ordering from the human waiter.

"Bring me something wet, and non-alcoholic," she said.

"Did you see the Marathon coverage on the newsvids this morning?" asked Yuri. "It seems like everywhere you look you get this awful pre-race hype! I know it's part of the package, but sometimes I wish they'd just leave us alone and let us race!" He shook his head in disgust.

"Not to worry, Cassandra," said Thorpe, winking. "He always gets this way before a big race." The Champ took a pull on his mug of ale and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

"You're right, A.J. Enough of that," said Yuri. "How about we change the subject. Let's talk about Cassandra instead."

Cassandra took a sip of her drink and swallowed. "Fine," she said, bravely. "What would you like to know?"

Thorpe shrugged. "Where you from?"

"The New Ceylon colony." Their blank expressions were expected. She continued, "It's in the Naccobus star system, way out on the very edge of explored space. But it's nice. You'd like it. It's clean and underpopulated and they grow the best coffee in the galaxy."

"Mining?" asked Yuri.

"Lots," said Cassandra. "In fact, it's our main industry."

Yuri nodded his head and took another drink of the ale, swallowed and softly smacked his lips in appreciation. "Truly a fine ale! Problem is, I only get to have one. Training rules."

"Training rules, Hah! Admit it, Champ, you jus' ain't as young as you used to be!" prodded the much-younger Thorpe, winking at Cassandra. Adding insult to injury, Thorpe ordered himself another drink.

"We'll see about that next Sunday," said the Champ, the laugh-wrinkles around his eyes intensifying slightly. "If you can manage to squeeze that bony carcass of yours into that little tiny ship!" Cassandra smiled at the good-natured banter between the two teammates. She decided that Yuri had been right, Killian's was a good place to unwind.

The pub was crowded and noisy. Cassandra looked around the room at the various knots of race personnel, easily picking out the pilots. Some she recognized, others were still wearing their racing suits, no doubt in an effort to improve their chances of scoring with one or another of the bar's many female patrons. Over on the other side of the bar there was a good-sized group that was engrossed in some kind of hilarious game. Every now and then a shout would erupt, followed by a chorus of laughter from the rest of the group. One of the men in the small group caught her eye and waved. She waved back shyly.

"What's going on over there?" she asked.

"That's Michaels and Sharp and the gang," said Thorpe. "They could be up to mos' anythin'—you can't never tell with that bunch. Oh yeah, the wimpy guy on the left is somethin' different though. He's an accountant. Name's Morris Quimby. Been hanging around the bar for a couple days now. The guy's amazin', he can tell you anythin' you want to know 'bout mos' any Marathon, past or present. Hell, he can probably tell you what your split times were from this mornin's session... and mine and Yuri's and all the other top contenders." He took a pull on his ale. "They're good guys. You wanna meet 'em?"

"I'd like that," she replied. "But later, let's finish our drinks first."

The shared experiences of the racers meant that they had much in common, and conversation was easy as Cassandra got over the initial rush of actually meeting and being with the two celebrities and began to relax a little. After a few more minutes of getting acquainted, Cassandra turned the conversation in a

more serious direction.

"Do you think you can win the championship again?" she asked, surprised at her own boldness. "The competition looks really good this year."

The Champ's reply was unexpected, "I don't know," he shrugged. "What's more, I don't really care all that much. Remember, I've won this damned extravaganza twice. If I go out next week and ride my best but am defeated by you or one of these other handsome young racers..." He motioned towards the group at the other side of the room. "...that won't matter. I'm the most alive when I'm racing!"

"I understand, Mr. Ram... er Yuri," she said, sensing the kinship that they shared. "The ship is like it's part of your body. You drive it with your own vitality and you feel it respond to the slightest move of your hand. Racing takes total concentration; while you're doing it, you forget about everything else. That's an incredible feeling. But, I'll be honest, I like it best when I win!"

"I'd say you got as good a chance as anybody," said Thorpe. Yuri nodded in agreement.

"Thanks," she sighed. "You don't know how good it feels to hear you say that. I had a bad crash during the Heard's World Rally last year, and it's only been the last couple of months that I felt like I was back up to form."

"I know what you mean," said Yuri. "I crashed in my first Asteroid Marathon twelve years ago. I got rear-ended during a chain-reaction incident at gate thirty-five. Wound up with a couple broken bones. I was worthless for weeks and I wasn't competitive for six months. Frustrating!"

Cassandra nodded her head. "I've really made progress since my trainer put me on a holistic program of diet, physical conditioning and mental exercises. It's safe to say that I wouldn't be here without him."

"Tell him he's done a good job," said Yuri. He looked around the room and sighed, "I have to go pretty soon. But, I'm free later on. Are you doing anything?"

Cassandra was flattered by the unexpected pass but knew she couldn't possibly take the Champ up on it. She quickly thought up a little lie to let him down easy. "Thank you, no," she replied graciously. "I have a boyfriend waiting for me." Yuri shrugged, and smiled.

"I was afraid of that! Can't blame me for trying! Seriously, I really enjoyed talking to you. Good luck in the race." He finished his ale and after taking—and kissing—her hand, left the bar with a wave to the raucous group across the room.

"Come on," said Thorpe. "I'll introduce you to these animals." Cassandra picked up her drink and followed her lanky new friend across the room.

The group was young, eager and ready to party. This close to a major race, the pilots generally backed off on the alcohol but several of the crew members were getting pretty drunk.

Looking the group over, Cassandra was reminded once again that the combination of mental and physical attributes that make for a successful racer can come in the strangest packages. Some are cerebral about their approach, like Yuri Ramosian, for instance. Ramosian held an advanced degree in electro-physical engineering and had all sorts of reasons why he raced. He could spend hours talking about it. Thorpe had only a minimum of formal education and, unless you pinned him down, would rather talk about anything else. Both were Marathoners but, aside from that, Ramosian and Thorpe were pretty normal—just regular guys.

And then there was Sharp, the ringleader of the party group. Sharp was certifiably nuts. He was still in his sweaty practice suit and he had opened the collar and rolled up the sleeves in the warm and crowded bar. Above his round face, the thinning hair on his bare head was still plastered to his forehead from sweating inside his helmet during practice. Cassandra sensed that even in normal clothing Sharp would have had an unkempt look about him. Wild, unpredictable, and loud, they called him "Torpedo" Sharp because of his actions both on and off the race course. It was difficult to fathom his motives. As reckless as he was, he probably raced out of some submerged death wish.

The game was 'Catch the five credit note'. A simple game; perhaps a challenge only to those who have had a few too many drinks. The player would put his hand on the table with thumb and forefinger extended out over the edge and held about a centimeter apart. The object of the game was to catch a five credit note that was dropped between the thumb and forefinger. An obviously inebriated young racer was about to try his luck. The wobbly young man was the number two rider for the Lotus team. A practice crash during the day's session had left him without a ride. He was either celebrating being alive or drowning his sorrows because he wouldn't be in the race—take your pick, at this stage it was hard to tell.

At the other end of the table, the group made room for Cassandra and Thorpe to sit. As the game began again, Cassandra found herself sitting right next to the one who had been pointed out to her as 'Quimby'.

Sharp held the five-credit note so that the oval picture of president Tsumaki's face in the middle of the bill was lined up with the contestant's thumb.

"He'll never catch it," said the little accountant, in a surprisingly deep baritone. "He's had way too much to drink."

Sharp released the bill and sure enough, the young racer's fingers closed on empty air.

"How did you know that would happen?" asked Cassandra, while Sharp retrieved the bill.

"It's quite simple, really," replied Quimby. "This game is just a crude test of reaction time. The participant sees the note begin to fall, but the nerve impulse from brain to hand isn't quite quick enough for him to close his fingers before the bill has dropped past them. Placing the hand on the edge of the table means the bill can't be followed down either." Cassandra nodded in understanding.

"I don't suppose a few drinks help any, do they?" she asked.

"No, they don't," replied Quimby. "Even though a racer, like yourself, generally has a much faster reaction time than a normal person, a few drinks will quickly remove that advantage."

"Damn!" said the frustrated young drunk, as he missed a second try.

"C'mon, Sharp, drop it again!"

Sharp dropped the bill again, with the same result. The entire

group laughed at the shout of outrage, Cassandra along with them. That, unfortunately, got the irate contestant's attention. "It looks easy from down there, doesn't it?" he challenged, looking straight at Cassandra. "C'mon, sit over here! That is, if you think you can do any better!"

Cassandra gulped and looked around the table. "N..no! I don't. Really! I'm sorry, I didn't mean to insult you."

But it was too late. Suddenly every one in the entire group thought it was an excellent idea.

"No excuses," said Sharp. "C'mon, move over to the hot seat."

"Go ahead, my dear," said Quimby, chuckling. "You certainly can't do any worse than anyone else."

She sat, reluctantly. "Put your hand on the edge of table, like this," said Sharp, demonstrating. "Hold your thumb and forefinger apart like this. Ready? Now!"

Even though she really wasn't ready, to everyone's surprise she caught the bill before it had moved a bare centimeter downward.

"Hey, no fair anticipatin'!" said Sharp. "Do it again."

Cassandra straighten her shoulders, took a deep breath and nodded her head. Again she caught the bill after only about a one centimeter drop.

"Three's the charm," said Sharp. "One more time!"

She missed it cleanly. And a fourth time. And a fifth. Finally she shook her head in exasperation. "Enough!" she said. "I can't do it anymore. I must've just got lucky the first two times."

Three failures in a row took the pressure off and someone else took the favored seat. The game continued. Quimby looked at her quizzically when she returned to her seat.

"Well done, Ms. Chen-Lee!" said Quimby. "Far and away the best performance of the evening!" He made some notes in a little black book.

Cassandra finished a third drink and talked a bit longer with her new friends before excusing herself.

A bony, nervous, elderly man was waiting in her suite when she finally got back.

"Where have you been?" he asked, wringing his hands. "You're two hours late! I wanted to examine you right after practice!"

"Sorry, Richter. I had some business." The old man seemed to relax a little.

"Did you link up with Ramosian and Thorpe out on the course, Cass?"

"Yeah, no problem."

"Did they suspect that you were waiting for them?"

"No, I doubt it. I acted pretty surprised when I talked to them afterwards. Believe it or not, they invited me to have a drink with them! That's where I was. God, I hope they don't see us together!" she added with a giggle. "I told them you were my boyfriend!"

He ignored the jibe, or didn't hear it. "You talked to Ramosian?" he asked, obviously impressed.

"Yes, I talked to Ramosian. In fact, we had a fairly long conversation. You know what? He said he doesn't care if he wins or loses, he just likes to race. Don't you find that strange?"

"Strange?" replied Richter. "Not at all. Just don't you believe a word of it. He's been touting that line of solid waste so long that he may be beginning to believe it himself. Never fear, Cassandra, when the starting flag drops you'll be up against one the most competitive men who ever lived!" Cassandra nodded in agreement.

"Don't worry, Richter, I wasn't fooled," she reassured him. "Oh, by the way, your training system really works. I had the fastest reaction time in the bar!"

Richter looked suddenly worried. "What did you do, Cass?"

"Oh, nothing serious, I just caught a couple of five credit bills," she replied. "And then I covered up by not catching three more of them." She ignored his puzzled look.

"You know what, Richter? It really felt super out there today. I'm beginning to have a very good feeling about this race!" Cassandra hugged him and headed off towards her sleep chamber. She didn't see the satisfied smile on the old trainer's face as he dimmed the lights and turned towards his own room.

The Asteroid Marathon took place in the vacuum of space where there was no gravity or atmospheric friction to contend with. Under such conditions there were some important points to keep in mind. First, a racing craft that coasted without power did not slow down. Second, and more importantly, the craft's velocity was cumulative. Consider: spinning the pedals on a marathon craft transformed energy from the pilot's muscles into thrust. Thrust was used for changing velocity or for changing direction, both of which were necessary during the course of the race. Naturally, a racer tried to channel as much energy as possible into increasing his speed. The top competitors could reach truly amazing speeds by the end of 10,000 kilometers, a property that had a profound influence on the design of the Marathon race course. The course was designed with very tight and sharp maneuvers in the early going which gradually changed to more open and sweeping maneuvers at its end. In spite of this adjustment, because of the ever escalating velocities, negotiating the course became increasingly more difficult in the later stages.

There was a profound difference in safety between the beginning and end of the Marathon course also. A contestant that crashed near the beginning of the race when the velocities were down had a fair chance of survival. A similar incident at mid-course or later, at the frightening speeds achieved, was almost invariably fatal. The ships were constructed from state-of-the-art materials, but even their incredible strength could withstand only so much force, and the most fragile component—the pilot—was only flesh and blood.

At just over five meters in length, the racing ships were tiny. But they were breathtakingly beautiful. Aerodynamic styling was employed, not because it was required in the airlessness of space, but because the ships looked better that way. The Marathon was, first and foremost, a spectator sport. The ship's nose was long and pointed and the body swelled gracefully back to the widest part, the cockpit, where it was just over a meter wide. The body then tapered back to the chopped-off

tail which housed the grid of the main thruster. The sleek outer shell of the ship was molded in any color or combination of colors that the owner/sponsor wished. It was also common practice for each of the ships to be splashed with a colorful assortment of sponsor logos as well.

Inside the cockpit, the appointments were starkly utilitarian. There was a joystick that controled the maneuvers of the tiny ship and, of course, the pedals that drove it. A clear canopy covered the pressurized cockpit and vision "below" was provided by a small oval window in the floor—a threat to pass could come from anywhere. The instrumentation was likewise very simple: an accelerometer to gauge the amount of thrust, a speedometer, and a cluster of attitude indicators to give readouts on pitch, yaw and the artificial horizon. There was also a "fuel" gauge that reported how much cesium reaction mass was left, but it wasn't really important—no one ever ran out of cesium. Life support and temperature control systems were maintained by a small battery pack. The tiny ships had no actual brakes but they could be flipped around and the main thruster used for deceleration. Under race conditions this was seldom done by any competitor, and never by a winner.

The power generators, maneuvering thrusters and cesium fuel tanks were standardized so that each ship carried identical equipment. The ships were also carefully "weighed" to insure that their masses were above the minimum limit. Differences in acceleration, maneuverability and speed were due solely to the abilities of the racers themselves.

The ships of female contestants carried 100 kilos less mass than those of the males. It was conceded early on that no amount of extra conditioning could quite make up for the slightly superior physical strength of the men. The handicap system worked. Over the years, women had been very competitive in the Marathon.

As the days in the week before the race reeled off, the tensions grew ever more intense. The newsvids had special segments devoted to race information several times each day. The race promoters played the emotions of the huge mass of humanity like so many instruments in some huge galactic orchestra.

Two days before the race, all of the chase ships with the racers and pit crews, all of the dignitaries in their fine and opulent yachts, all of the sportscasters and their support staff and a huge entourage of assorted fans and hangers-on joined in a huge parade that made its way majestically out to the "Marathon Cluster", the site of the famous race course itself. This "Grande Promenade", as it was called, took the better part of a day to make the five-thousand kilometer journey out from Ceres. For those who wished to watch it, there was a live video feed from the spaceport on Ceres that showed each ship as it left. Popular vidstars kept up an endless, truly mindless banter about the race, the racers, and the dignitaries. Most of humanity was tuned in. The irresistible strains of the tension symphony continued to play in the background.

The final day before the race was spent in last-minute preparations. The Marathon ships were checked over one last time. The contestants, in isolation on board their chase ships, carefully re-examined their race strategies, wondering if anything should be changed. At the end of the day the racers retired, to get what rest they could. Meanwhile, the conductors of the mighty tension orchestra were building up to the final crescendo.

Race day! All had been tuned to the perfect fevered pitch of excitement. Finally all of the preliminaries were over. It was time! The race was ready to begin!

Thousands of participants were lined up at the start. They would start in waves, with the fastest first and each consecutive wave would start at two minute intervals. Such a staggered start insured that the fastest racers wouldn't have to contend with the inherent dangers of less skillful contestants. Those who were in the first wave were the best in the galaxy—Ramosian, Thorpe, Chen-Lee, the mighty Sharp from Luna, swift and crafty Michaels from the belt and twenty others.

During the race each competitor could easily be identified by the color of their cesium exhaust. On race day a very tiny amount of just the right impurity gave each exhaust the characteristic color of the contestant's home system. Displaying the colors of one's home world was considered a great honor. Holoposters and vids that promoted the race often showed a twisted, tangled, intertwined rainbow of multicolored exhausts outlined against the black velvet backdrop of space as a tightly packed group of racers executed a tight maneuver through one of the bright triangular gates. In addition to its many other assets, the marathon was a very colorful event—literally! Yuri's exhaust was the sky-blue of his home planet, Earth, while Cassandra's was the deep red of New Ceylon. This exhaust was, of course, nearly transparent at close quarters, allowing the pilots maximum visibility.

Twenty-five multicolored exhaust plumes streamed forth as the first wave was finally given the starting signal.

A young racer from Sirius IV took the early lead, his sleek ship spewing out the violet color of his homeworld. Yuri purposefully held back; no one knew better than he that 10,000 kilometers was a long race. Besides, many a racer had had a race, a career or even his life cut short from an altercation due to the extreme congestion on the course right after the start.

Challenges for position remained at a minimum in the early going as a small knot of twelve ships began to outdistance the others. But the ships began jockeying frantically as they came to the first series of tight obstacles. The right position was vital. Coming into a gate at the wrong angle meant that the contestant could miss the next gate, or that he would have to waste valuable energy getting back onto the right line and be outdistanced by the others. In the worst case, he might even hit an asteroid.

Yuri went into the first clump of asteroids in eighth position. He picked the perfect line, one that allowed him to skim just over the surfaces of the jagged rocks in the large cluster and make each of the gates at the same time. With a gentle nudge on the joystick and a furious burst of power, he exited in fifth. Cassandra, who had been running twelfth, suddenly found herself in ninth when the ship right in front of her went wide, colliding with two others. In less than a heartbeat, three racers were in serious trouble as their ships careened wildly off the racing line. One of them, Michaels, the "home town boy"

from Ceres, used his incredible strength and skill to just make the gate, but his angle was all wrong. He narrowly missed a large, slowly spinning asteroid on the outside edge of the gate. Cassandra held her breath as she watched the yellow wash from Michaels' exhaust brush the pocked surface of the jagged rock. One of the others wasn't quite so lucky. In spite of a valiant, desperate effort, he missed the gate and augered directly into the asteroid. The fragile eggshell of his ship exploded from the horrifying impact into a cloudy smear of fog and debris. Michaels slipped back behind the lead pack, obviously shaken by his narrow escape.

As the course got more difficult, Yuri continued to move methodically up through the pack. By the halfway point, he was in second place. He had developed a distinct admiration for the young racer ahead of him: his teammate, Thorpe. The emerald plume from the back of the sleek racing ship never faltered as A.J. swept through each of the increasingly difficult maneuvers. Yuri smiled. Thorpe had learned a lot since joining the team! The champ nodded in approval at the classic lines that the young racer took through the ever more difficult turns. A bit wide going in; cut as close as possible to the apex of the curve; sweep a bit wide going out, the tiny ship all but scraping the hard unyielding surfaces of the rocky obstacles as Thorpe sought the triangular green glow of the next gate.

Spectators throughout the galaxy held their breath and marveled at the beautiful and deadly minuet that the two men danced through the complex and dangerous series of maneuvers. They made the task look graceful, effortless. This was an illusion. Inside their respective ships the contestants were straining themselves beyond comprehension to maintain the torrid pace, all the while making countless delicate adjustments every second on the flight controls to keep the tiny ship on exactly the right line!

Behind them, by about five kilometers, Cassandra moved quietly into fifth.

And so it went, hour after grueling hour. Some of the contestants were forced to call for their chase ships as one or another of the hardships of the race caused them to cease their effort. They were the fortunate ones. Others, their minds fogged with fatigue, made the fatal mistake—and paid the ultimate price. For some, it was just bad luck. They happened to be in the way when someone made a mistake, like Michaels had been—in the wrong place at the wrong time. To the soulless asteroids that were hit, it made no difference, perpetrator or victim, both suffered the same cruel fate.

With three-quarters of the race well behind him, Yuri made his move. He knew it was now or never, that he had to be in the lead for the final leg. To accomplish this, Yuri had picked his spot well: the famous Pallas tunnel. The "tunnel" was the most difficult portion of the course and involved a complicated series of left and right sweeping turns that also involved a substantial change in "elevation" between each gate, up and left, down and right, down and left, up and right. To make matters worse, the profusion of large, irregular chunks of rock in this very difficult area meant that most of the gates were blind as well—the racers came upon them abruptly, without warning.

Yuri's long experience and consummate skill made the tunnel the ideal place to make his bid for the lead. Once through this area, all that remained was one more gate and then a straight-line powered sprint to the finish.

It was time. In a classic maneuver, Yuri pulled up to where he knew he was visible out of the corner of Thorpe's eye. It was one of the oldest tricks in the book: let your opponent feel your presence right behind him, stick to him, hound him until he makes the one error, the one mistake that will let you through! Yuri smiled again. No doubt about it, Thorpe had really developed! A.J. executed the first series of bends flawlessly, but trying to watch the gates and the rocks and the ever-present ship behind him—all at the same time—was too much to ask. Suddenly, Thorpe's ship bobbled slightly as the awkward position of the next gate surprised him. He made a valiant attempt to make the gate, his green exhaust glowing brightly from the effort. His attempt was successful—but only barely! Luckily he also missed a small boulder-sized asteroid right near the corner of the gate. Thorpe, nearly off the course and on a line that was all wrong, left a huge opening for the Champ to streak past.

Yuri confidently executed the difficult maneuver and just skimmed through the same gate, only his line was perfect. He came out of the tunnel alone. There wasn't a ship within five kilometers of him. Yuri leveled off and fell into the rhythmic pumping of his legs that would take him home. One more gate before the finish line!

Sixty-five percent of the human race got up to stretch, go to the bathroom or to get another drink. It looked like Yuri Ramosian was going to be champion for the third time! Oh well, they thought, at least Thorpe had given him a run for his credits!

Cassandra carved out a line similar to Yuri's and made up a couple of places at the same time, moving her up to third place. Ahead, she could just barely see the blue plume from Yuri's exhaust. Her own red plume intensified as she began to pump the pedals furiously in an attempt to catch the leader. Thorpe was the only contestant between her and Ramosian, but he could do nothing to hold off her charge. His jaw dropped in astonishment as she poured on an unbelievable blast of acceleration that left him behind.

Meanwhile, Yuri was still giving all he had to increase his speed. He knew the competition was a long way back and he was beginning to feel confident that the win was his. No racer in history had ever made up such a deficit and he, the best racer who had ever competed, was the one they had to catch! But, of course, he hadn't counted on Cassandra.

She passed the Champ just before the final gate. Yuri shook his head. Her incredible strength had allowed her to catch up, but she was going much too fast. She'd never make the gate. Sure enough, the exhaust plume from her racing craft faltered for a moment as she seemed to realize it too. The next maneuver took him completely by surprise. Suddenly her ship cartwheeled gracefully over, to travel rear-end first. A flip-turn to decelerate! During a race! Yuri smiled at the bold and novel approach. I'll have to give her credit for that one, he thought, but it'll never work. "Nice try, Cassandra!" he said aloud. As

expected, he passed her slowed-down ship just on the other side of the gate. Yuri straightened out for the final sprint to the finish.

Now was the time to dig deep, to find out what was left. Yuri had always been able to somehow save a little for a "kick" at the very end. This race was to be no exception. It looked bad for Cassandra—she had lost a great deal of time and speed in her successful effort to make the final gate. That one mistake had dropped her back by about twelve kilometers.

The situation did look hopeless, but there was no quit in Cassandra! She went doggedly back to work. With just a hundred kilometers left to the finish, she trailed by ten kilometers. By the time there were fifty left, she trailed by five. Soon, Yuri was taking furtive glances over his shoulder as she continued to come on relentlessly! Sixty-five percent of the human race went back and sat down in front of their vidscreens. This race wasn't over yet!

With ten kilometers left, there was no doubt—it would be a photo finish. If Cassandra could keep it up! Yuri could see the finish gate—a flashing neon-blue rectangle—a heartbreakingly short distance away when the yellow and blue craft with the red exhaust plume blew past underneath. The former Champ crossed the finish line, completely spent, in second place! Cassandra's margin of victory was two-tenths of a second, making it the closest Marathon in history. Thorpe, who had hung on to finish third, was more than twenty kilometers behind them.

Afterwards, after the chase ships had picked them up and they stood on the victor's podium to receive their medals, Yuri sincerely congratulated her on a fine race. He meant every word. It had been a wonderful race, the kind that would be buzzed about for months!

The events of the next few days insured that this Marathon would be talked about for years to come.

Two days after the race, back on Ceres, Yuri and Thorpe were surprised by a summons from the race authorities. Such an unscheduled meeting was highly irregular. As two of the top three finishers, they were very busy people! During the next two days, there were dozens of social functions to attend and hundreds of minor dignitaries to meet and talk with. Crowning it all was the victory banquet that was to be held the final night where the top three were to be guests at an elaborate dinner and would get to shake the hand of President Tsumaki himself! Half-an-hour later Yuri and Thorpe were at the Marathon Complex. Joining them were Harris Dockett, a harried-looking, slightly overweight, middle-aged Marathon official and Dr. Julius Harbour, the official Marathon Physician.

"What's this all about?" asked Yuri.

"Yuri, A.J., you know Dr. Harbour," said Dockett. The former champ and his teammate shook hands with the doctor. Dockett pushed a button on his intercom. "You can send Mr. Quimby in now."

"Quimby?" asked Thorpe. "You mean Morris Quimby?"

"Yes," replied Dockett, somewhat surprised. "You know him?"

"Yeah," said Thorpe. "Met him at Killian's Pub. The guy's a Marathon freak, a reg'lar walkin' Comlink!"

Morris Quimby, looking very nervous, entered the room, nodded at Thorpe and was introduced to the Champ. Quimby cleared his throat. "It is truly a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Ramosian. I'm an accountant for Federated Metals. I'm also a longtime fan of the Marathon. I even do statistical workups on the athletes to assess their performance. It's kind of a hobby with me."

He stopped and looked from Yuri to the Marathon officials. Dockett nodded his head. Quimby cleared his throat again and continued. "Last week's contest was won by the young lady, Cassandra Chen-Lee, in what was a very close and thrilling race."

"The closest and most enjoyable of my career," said Yuri. "Even though I lost."

"You may have lost, Mr. Ramosian, but perhaps not legally," said Quimby, nervously. "I did some calculations on Chen-Lee's performance yesterday and I found a few things that didn't quite add up."

"Be careful what you say, Mr. Quimby, every contestant must pass a rigid battery of drug and genetic tests before and after the race. Especially if they win!" warned Harbour.

"I'm aware of that, doctor, nevertheless, my statement stands! I've calculated the amount of energy that she would have needed to make up the distance between Mr. Ramosian and herself on the final straight power sprint to the finish." He paused here for greater effect. "Not even in your record-breaking win of eight years ago did you put out that much energy in such a short time," he said, looking at Yuri. "She beat your best-ever energy output by more than fifteen percent! And that doesn't even include what it must have cost her to do that unprecedented flip turn just before the final gate."

"Yeah," said Yuri, appreciatively. "That was pretty incredible!"

"As further proof," Quimby continued. "At the weigh-in after the race, there were only two kilograms of cesium left in her tank. Two kilos! She almost ran out, Mr. Ramosian. As you know, no one ever runs out of cesium!"

The Champ shook his head in disbelief.

"One more thing," said Quimby. "Mr. Thorpe and I were witnesses at a game she participated in where she demonstrated evidence of an abnormally fast reaction time."

Thorpe nodded in agreement.

Yuri looked quizzically at Dockett.

"Would you be willing to testify in a court of law about this information, Mr. Quimby?" asked Dockett, his voice very serious.

"In the interest of fair racing, I feel that I must," replied Quimby.

"Maybe we can avoid all that," interjected Harbour. "Why don't we just get Chen-Lee and that Richter character down here and have me take another look at her."

"Good idea," said Dockett.

Within the hour, Cassandra Chen-Lee and Harlow Richter had reported to the complex.

"You wish to examine my racer again?" said Richter indignantly. "Why?"

"There are some minor discrepancies, Mr. Richter. I'm sure it's nothing," soothed Dockett. "Just a quick check-up by Dr. Harbour and we can all go home. Shouldn't take more than a half hour."

"Very well," said Richter grumpily. "But please make it quick. We have a million things to do!"

Ten minutes later they were again in Dockett's office. Dr. Harbour wore a perplexed look.

"Her parameters are all within normal limits," said the old gray haired doctor. "I find nothing illegal. But. . . "

"Good," said Richter. "Then we'll be off for the day's activities."

Dr. Harbour still looked doubtful. "Wait a few more minutes," he said. "I want to take a look at the imaging medscan."

Dr. Harbour's "few minutes" became an hour, then and hour and a half. Finally he called the entire group back together.

"I've found the answer, Harris," said the old doctor.

"And?" said Dockett.

"Here, take a look at these readings."

"What are we supposed to see?"

"Not much, at first glance. Like you would expect for a top Marathon contender, Cassandra's readings are all at the high end of normal. But there are a few things here that, to quote Mr. Quimby, 'don't quite add up."'

"What do you mean?" asked Dockett.

"Let me see if I can give you an example. Take a look at Thorpe's printout over here. What's the figure for lung capacity?"

"Um. . . four point three seven liters. Why?"

"Okay, look at Chen-Lee's." Dockett looked at her printout.

"Six point five nine?" said Dockett.

"Now—sorry Ms. Chen-Lee—compare her chest to Thorpe's."

"Hm. . . Aside from a far more pleasing architecture I'd say there's no way she could have a larger lung capacity than Thorpe." said Dockett.

"Exactly!" said Harbour. "That's one of the things I found when I did a few comparisons! But there's more."

"Yes?"

"As you know, Harris, the Marathon rules state that genetic alterations and use of any but a very small list of drugs by the contestants are strictly forbidden. All my tests show that Cassandra hasn't done any of these things."

"So, what's the point, Julius?"

"It seems there are other ways to improve performance," said the doctor.

"Would you mind explaining that," said Dockett.

Harbour smiled and dropped his bomb.

"Cassandra Chen-Lee has been extensively modified surgically."

"Modified?" said Dockett, shocked. "How?"

"This is ridiculous!" interrupted Richter indignantly. "I came down here in good faith! What kind of nonsense is this?"

"I'd remain calm if I were you, Mr. Richter," said Harbour. "Something very odd is going on here and I assure you we are going to find out what it is. It's also possible that you are in a great deal of trouble!" Richter made a sound of disgust but backed off. The doctor continued. "Gather around. This is the readout from the Horvald imaging med-scan, a procedure which we don't normally do for qualifying. Because there's a protest, I did one today."

"Excellent, Julius," said Dockett. "Just as the rules specify."

The old doctor pointed to his viewscreen which showed a color-coded, three-dimensional internal view of Cassandra Chen-Lee. The projection could be rotated to any angle and any organ system could be zoomed in on and magnified or highlighted. The view zoomed in on the thoracic region. Cassandra, upset by the accusations and uncomfortable at having her internal anatomy more or less on public display, remained at the back of the group but looked on with a kind of morbid fascination.

"To begin with, her lungs have been connected across the bottom and special organic valves have been placed so that air passes completely through both lungs; in through the left lung first, out the bottom, into and up through the right lung before finally being breathed out. There are no dead air spaces like those in an unaltered human's lungs. This modification alone makes her lungs at least ten percent more efficient than normal."

Cassandra, her mouth open, wore a look of disturbed wonder.

Harbour typed a command on the med-scan keyboard and a different portion of the chest region became highlighted. He continued. "In addition, both her heart and her lungs have been equipped with a number of extra veins and arteries to improve oxygen exchange. This is what threw off my original figures for lung capacity and led me to do a more detailed analysis. To further improve performance, there are extra vessels supplying the large muscles of her legs as well." Dockett shook his head in disbelief.

"But that's not the end of it. Look at this!" Harbour typed in another string of commands. The nervous system of the projection became highlighted. "As if increased endurance weren't enough, she has several tiny biomicroprocessers in her hands and arms that have been connected to a microscopic descrambler inside her skull. The connection has been made with an exquisitely crafted set of delicate, hair-thin gold cables that almost escaped detection. In turn, the descrambler is directly connected to the appropriate areas of her brain. I have never measured a faster reaction time! From brain to hand it is about ten times faster than human normal!"

Cassandra sat down heavily in Harbour's thickly padded chair, her head in her hands.

"What does it all mean?" asked Dockett, shooting a disproving glance at Richter.

"It means that she should have won the race easily, but she must have misjudged the pace and held back a little too much in the early going. As a result, she had to far exceed even superhuman performance to win! Except for that slight miscalculation and, of course, the obscure statistics of Morris Quimby, these modifications may have gone unnoticed."

Cassandra was in a state of shock. Distraught, nearly hysterical, she shouted at Richter. "You said you were going to fix

me up after my accident! What have you done to me, Richter?" Yuri and A.J. tried to calm her down.

"Are you responsible for this, Richter?" asked Dockett.

"Yes."

"Incredible techniques!" said Harbour, unable to hide his admiration. "Where did you learn?"

"For ten years I was a doctor for General Metals at their infamous Nacobbus VI mining site. A lot of good men got hurt out there. It was my job to fix them up. Often there wasn't much left to work with. Most of them would have died anyway unless we did something. We were forced to try some pretty radical things."

"What does that have to do with Cassandra?" asked Harbour.

"I'd been patching people up so they could go back to being miners, Dr. Harbour. I wanted to see what my procedures could do for an athlete. Cassandra's accident was the perfect opportunity. I was planning to tell Cassandra and the Marathon committee all about it as soon as the furor surrounding the race died down a bit."

"You mean this isn't an act? She really doesn't know?" asked Harbour, in disbelief. Richter nodded his head.

"She thought it was an unusual diet and my special exercise program."

"I thought you were my friend!" said Cassandra, with an accusing look, her voice still edged with hysteria.

"I am your friend, Cassandra," said the old man quietly. "Before your accident you were a good pilot—one of the best—but you lacked the other important physical attributes that would have made you a top Marathoner." He put his hand on her shoulder. "You were a mess after your accident, Cass! Without my intervention, you wouldn't even have been able to walk again, let alone race! My techniques not only gave you back your health, they also made you into a contender. But you're forgetting something, Cassandra: it was your skill and your desire that made you into a winner!" Richter looked proudly around the room. "Check the rules, Gentlemen. I believe you will find that we haven't broken any of them!"

"What?" said Dockett.

"He may be right, Harris," said the doctor. "There is a distinct possibility that the rules haven't been broken!"

A long and extensive examination of the rule book revealed that Cassandra had indeed broken none of the rules. Remarkably, she was allowed to keep the championship. The rules were rewritten; such modifications to the human body would not be allowed again. Cassandra went numbly through the ceremonies, still in deep emotional shock. Within a few months she had gotten considerably better. Whether or not she ever completely recovered remains unknown. The trophy was a beautifully sculpted cup made of real gold that had been mined from the belt. The inscription read:

FIRST PLACE

UNLIMITED DIVISION

CERES-PALLAS MARATHON

In the realm of sport that tests human endurance to its limits, there is no higher award.

Morris Quimby was offered a position with the lofty title of "Official Statistician to the Ceres-Pallas Marathon". He took the job immediately. After all, how many people get a chance to live their dreams?

Arguments over who was the "real" winner of the marathon raged in barrooms and betting halls for years afterwards. Yuri Ramosian retired soon after, never to race again. He went on to a career in sports journalism and made enormous sums of money endorsing various athletic products. Some say that it was the controversy over the beautiful and enigmatic Cassandra that made him want to quit. Others say he finally got tired of it. Possibly, but, what they didn't know was that Yuri wasn't a "normal" human being himself. It wasn't widely publicized but there's a good chance that the real reason he retired was due to the fact that one of his two hearts was beginning to act up.

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

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DargonZine

The Magazine of the *Dargon* Project Editor: Dafydd *WHITE@DUVM.BITNET*

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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