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Looking Ahead

Daniel K. Appelquist

Hello again everybody – and a very very merry/happy non-denominational holiday occurring in the winter season to you all. . . Sorry this issue is being distributed a bit late, but I've been *incredibly* busy lately. The good news is that I've supposedly completed all of my requirements for my undergraduate degree. The even better news is that I most probably will have a job starting in January! And the simply utterly fantastic news is that since this job is right here at Carnegie Mellon, I'll be able to continue to publish *Quanta*!! (And all this in a recession year, no less. . .)

Some more good news (albeit of a different sort) is that *Quanta* now has its first subscriber from Russia. We've had subscribers from 'eastern block' countries before now, but, I believe, this is the first subscriber from actually within what used to be the Soviet Union. (Well *I* was excited. . .)

So what have we got lined up for you this issue? For one, Jesse Allen's three part serial *Earth as an Example* finishes up with this installment. We've also got new fiction from Jason Snell, editor of *InterText*, and William Racicot, both of whom are returning to *Quanta* after long hiatuses. This issue is a bit shorter than most, but I think you'll find that the quality of fiction is high.

Speaking of quality fiction (ahem) I'd like to make a quick plug for my new story (*A Handful of Dust*) which should be appearing in a future issue of *InterText*.

Jason Snell has compiled an index of stories and articles which have appeared in *Athene*, *InterText* and *Quanta*. If you'd like a copy of the index, send me a note and I'll send it out to you. I'll also try to put it out on the FTP servers.

My submissions directory is currently getting a bit thin, so I'm once again asking you (that's right, YOU) to submit material. If you're a writer (or a potential writer), I urge you to come forward with stories and/or articles. I can always use more submissions, especially from authors who are new to *Quanta*.

There's really not much else to say, except hope you had a good 1991 (God knows mine could have been better) and have a happy New Year!

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THE BABE

by Jason Snell

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The man with the rabbit skins blocked our path as we tried to enter the Kosami Hotel. He was wearing a torn jacket made of some kind of animal, probably vat-grown horsehide. Anyone selling rabbit skins on a streetcorner in Osaka couldn't afford the genuine article.

"Out of my way," I said to him in Japanese, flashing my card. He immediately stepped back, probably out of fear that I might haul him in for soliciting. The cards in Osaka don't mention whether you're a detective or a cop, and that was fine with me – it was a lot less trouble that way. Most of the scum in L.A. would see the neon-flashing "Investigator" as an invitation to either laugh or draw their weapons. Believe me, I preferred it when they laughed.

As I moved to enter the hotel, the rabbit-skin man immediately confronted Gehrig. I turned to explain that Gehrig was with me, and shouldn't be bothered, but Columbia Lou had already scared him away with one wave of his hand. I've always been envious of people who can do that.

"You think this is where he is?" I asked Gehrig as the Kosami's smudged plastic doors slid open in front of us. The place smelled dirty – I couldn't smell the local stink, but the cheap air freshener in the air let me know that it must have been fairly putrid.

"The place may have bright lights and moving doors, Ken, but it's still a cheap hotel. And no matter what century it is, there are only two places to look if you've lost Babe Ruth: bars and cheap hotels."

The Kosami was both. We made our way for the bar first.

Laurie was there, of course. I had been to the bar at least fifty times since Matsushita transferred me to Osaka, and she was always there. The first ten times her appearance reassured me, reminded me of home. Then I was assigned to work with an American exec. I was astounded when I met her, because she looked nothing like Laurie. I guess I had begun to think that all American women looked like hookers – and they don't, no matter what some of my Japanese friends say.

After my experience with the American exec, I tried to forget all about Laurie. She was an American hooker, and that was all. No matter where you are in Japan, there are always expatriate Americans playing hooker both to company boys and to Japanese scum with credit to burn and a taste for the exotic.

"Hi, Kenny. Wanna taste of home?" She licked her lips.

"No thanks, Laurie. I need to ask you if you've seen someone around here."

I think she missed what I said entirely, mostly because she had already focused her attention on Lou.

"Well, who are you?" she asked.

You've got to understand – no matter what the bizarre surroundings, Lou Gehrig still looked like he had walked straight out of 1927. We had given him a modern suit, but the man radiated wholesomeness and purity. His manner made him seem like a prime target for Laurie: he was an American businessman or vacationer far from the States and ripe for some down-home pleasure.

He took of his hat – he had insisted on wearing a hat, don't ask me why – and nodded his head.

"My name's Lou Gehrig, ma'am. We're looking for a friend of mine named Babe Ruth."

I pulled the picture I had of Ruth from my pocket and gave it to her. It had been taken the day before, during the first game of the Matsushita series. Ruth, wearing an official 1927 New York Yankees baseball uniform, was touching home plate. He had just homered off Catfish Hunter to defeat the Oakland Athletics, 6-5. After the game, Ruth disappeared. He never made it back to the team's hotel.

"He's a fat one, isn't he? I didn't know they let fatties like him play baseball."

"Mr. Ruth is good with the bat," I assured her.

"Yeah, that's what Shelly said." She handed the picture back to me.

"Shelly? The Marilyn Monroe model?"

"Yeah, that's him. I can't believe that a recon job could be doing better business than me. Jesus, they took off his dick and moved his fat around a little, that's all. At least I'm fuckin' *real*. As advertised."

"Has Shelly seen Mr. Ruth?"

"Seen him? She *did* the piglet last night. Said she expected him to be exhausted after one round, but he kept comin' back, like a boxer."

"Where is she now?"

"He/she's upstairs with a client," Laurie said with contempt. "A Jap. Little bastards never ask to see his birth certificate, so he takes 'em for full price. My fuckin' genes should be worth a little more, you know?"

"What's the room number?"

"1530. And be sure to scare the shit out of the John, so he asks for a refund. Serves Sheldon right."

I thanked her, and Lou and I turned to go.

"Come back now, slugger," she said to Lou. This time, Lou didn't respond. Despite the 150-year gap, he *did* know when to be polite to hookers and when to ignore them.

"Did she say that Shelly the hooker was a man?" Lou asked as we entered the elevator.

"Yeah. Reconstructive surgery – I guess some guys really have a thing about their dicks, and want 'em gone. Can you believe that? Lots of them end up as hookers, because it's a great way to reaffirm their newfound womanhood. They get tired of it after a while and end up doing something respectable, like being bartenders or marrying decrepit old men for their money."

"This is an incredible world you live in," Gehrig said, and shook his head.

"Not so incredible. There's the same sleaze as before. It's just different sleaze."

I wasn't really talking to Lou Gehrig, of course, no more than the man that we were chasing was really George Herman Ruth. But they thought they were, and for all intents and purposes they acted just like their long-dead counterparts. I don't know the specifics of how they were created – it involves artificial intelligence, chromosome matching, and lots of baseball nuts doing research into the history of the all-time great baseball teams.

Matsushita, seeing as it owns half the National League and most of the teams in the Nippon League, decided to throw some of their money behind a "greatest baseball series of all time" event. So they set their technicians and research people at work on finding the eight greatest teams of all time, getting information on all their players, and creating exact replicas.

And they did it. Last night, in the fifth game of the semifinal series, Babe Ruth – or his ghost, replica, whatever you want to call it – hit a home run to send the 1973 Oakland Athletics (most of whom weren't even born before Ruth had died) back into the ether from whence they came. Ain't science something?

"The woman we're going to meet looks exactly like Marilyn Monroe," I told Gehrig.

"Who?"

"I'm sorry – I thought you knew who she was. Some Yankee player ended up marrying her."

"Must've been after my time."

The elevator stopped on the fifteenth floor, and as the door opened we found ourselves looking right in Shelly's face.

"Shelly, we've got to talk."

"Shit," she said, and pulled something from her purse. It was money. "Here, take three thousand. Just don't pull me in."

"Shelly, you know I'm no cop. And where the hell did you get money like this?"

"All of Scarlett's girls have it on 'em, to make sure they don't get into any trouble with the cops."

The first time I had met Shelly, she had just been a cheap hooker, not much different from any other. But now she was working for Scarlett – the den-mother-meets-madam who controlled half of the city's hookers and a good portion of its money. Being one of Scarlett's girls carried lots of perks – including, it seemed, plenty of bribe money to keep the cops away.

"This gentleman and I need your help, Shelly. We're looking for this man." I took her hand, led her into the elevator, and showed her the picture of Ruth.

"Oh, him," she said, and rolled up her eyes. "I figured he'd be an easy one, pay me for more than he could actually handle. But he didn't stop."

"When did you do business with him?"

"Last night, around midnight. He came into the Kosami bar and we had a few drinks. Then we came upstairs."

"Did he say anything about where he was going after he left you?"

She paused for a moment, pursing her lips in thought.

"It was three or four a.m., and the Kosami bar had closed for the night. He asked what else might be open that late, and I told him to head for American Street. Everything's open all night over there."

The door slid open, and we were back in the lobby. I thanked Shelly, and Lou and I headed for the door.

"You sure I wasn't the Yankee that married her?" he asked me.

"Pretty sure." Gehrig knew his life's history up to 1927, but not beyond. To the Yankees, it seemed as if they had been sucked through a time machine – they didn't even know that they were created beings. I'm sure Lou had spoken to other players from other eras as they stood on first base, next to him, but I didn't know if they had mentioned what happened to Lou Gehrig after 1927.

If I were one of those players, I certainly wouldn't have said anything. To this day, there's still a Lou Gehrig's Disease. There are still people who die slowly as they lose control of their bodies – just like Gehrig did. I tried to picture the huge, incredibly strong man in front of me as a uncontrollable shaking pile of flesh, and couldn't do it.

"Let's go find him, so we can all get back to work," Gehrig said as we walked out the door. "We've got to get ready for the Giants. The game's tomorrow, right?"

"Yeah, tomorrow night." The beginning of the All-Time World Series. Great publicity for Matsushita Corporation – the Corp. I had to discreetly find Babe by midnight, or the corp would send out a massive search team for him. Publicly admitting the loss of one of the ghost players wouldn't reflect well on my dear Corp, but Babe Ruth had to be there for the opening game. He was their star, the all-time best baseball player in the baseball series of the ages.

The Corp preferred that I find him quietly. And considering how well I knew American Street, I would have no problem doing just that. Or so I hoped.

American Street in Osaka is, well, a laugh. Which isn't to say that it isn't American – in fact, I came here quite often, to try and remind myself of what home was really like.

Every time, it made it even clearer why I didn't miss home that much.

The American was a strip of fast food restaurants, movie theaters, cheap hotels, a sports memorabilia shop, a couple of soldier-of-fortune weapons stores – and lots of Lizard Joints.

Lizard Joints were, economically, the glue that held the American together. They were incredibly popular to the Japanese. For them, seeing a Lizard show was the ultimate American experience, without actually going to America.

I avoided them. My memories of growing up in the western United States included McDonald's, Hollywood movies, the occasional stay in a Holiday Inn, cheering on the local sports teams, and even occasional bursts of gunfire.

But I never – not even *once* – went to a live show featuring songs like *My Way*, *Night and Day*, and *The Candy Man*. Nor did I see any Elvis, Beatles, Michael Jackson, or any other oldies revival show. No singer crooning ditties while his gut stuck out over the cummerbund of his tuxedo.

Nobody at the Corp in Osaka could believe it, when I told them. "You have to see it," they said. "It's the best America has to offer!"

And they took me.

I only learned two things from the trip to Sammy's Sinatra-riffic Sensation In The Heart of American Street. First, I discovered that it was up to me, New York, New York. About that same time, I learned that I would never go see a Lizard show again.

"We'll start with the bars," I told Gehrig. "Hopefully we'll find him soon."

I prayed that George Herman Ruth wasn't downing gin and tonics while swinging to the groove of *Feelings* as performed by the Jerry Vale Memorial Orchestra.

"You seen this guy?" I asked Mark, owner of the aptly titled *Mark's American Bar*.

"Fat guy," Mark said in that funny accent of his.

"So you have seen him?"

"Hell, you can tell from that picture that he's a fat guy. Look, Kenny, you know that information don't come without a price."

"Here's a thousand for your time," I said, and dropped the coins in his hand. "Got any leads on him?"

"You guys missed him by about three hours. He was here, all right – first he got completely drunk, but then he got hold of some detox pills. Then he proceeded to get drunk all over again."

"Sounds like our man. Any idea where he went?"

"Look, after he got drunk again, he started playing around with a couple of local girls. They're hookers, but your fat guy was trying to romance 'em or something."

"Was there trouble?"

"Nah. They straightened him out. Guess he paid one of 'em, because they gave him some Randies and then headed for the door."

"Shit. So he bought Randies, and took off with a hooker. Right?"

"Got it." He tapped his watch. "Time's up."

"Look, thanks for your help. Can you call me if you see him again?"

"No way," Mark said. "The babes are Scarlett's. The Randies, too. The moment they walked out the door, it became Scarlett's territory. You know how protective she is of her preferred customers."

"You sure a few thousand wouldn't help you forget that fear?"

"Not for that fat-ass, it wouldn't. Didn't much like the looks of him anyway."

I gave Mark my best *Fuck You* smile. "Let's get out of here," I said.

"I knew he wouldn't help us," Gehrig said as we headed for the door.

"Why?"

"Didn't you hear the accent? He's from Brooklyn. They've always hated the Yankees."

Outside the bar, he dropped his big right hand onto the top of my shoulder.

"Hold on a second," he said. "Do you mind explaining what all that was about?"

"What part didn't you get?"

"Well, most of it. Being one of the Babe's teammates teaches you plenty about hookers and drinking, but... 'Randies?' 'detox?' "

"Pills," I told him. "Randies are heavy intoxicants, slightly psychedelic, that also increase sexual drive and potency. Kind of the best of all worlds. Detox pills are instant sober-ups. Babe probably took a Detox by mistake, and then popped some Randies to rectify the situation."

"What a world," Gehrig said, shaking his head. "If we had those sober pills in the '20s, Babe might've hit 70 or 80 home runs a year."

"And if you had Randies in the '20s, Babe wouldn't have hit *any*–"

And then it hit me. Randies were no common street drug. Scarlett's girls had them because they went with the business. Randied-up Johns could still get it up. But, like Scarlett's girls, Randies cost large sums of money for even the smallest of doses.

And none of the baseball players had carried any money.

"Oh, man," I said.

Gehrig looked puzzled.

"If I asked you to buy me a drink, could you?" He shook his head.

"Of course not. I don't have a wallet – hell, I feel naked without one."

"Right. So where has Babe gotten the money to pay for all the drinks, drugs, and hookers?"

I *had* hoped we could get him back before he had broken any laws. Now I just hoped we'd get him back before the skin of the world's greatest batsman was being peddled on an Osaka streetcorner.

Home base for Scarlett and her girls was a mansion known as -I swear I'm not kidding – Tara. And while the hookers didn't resemble any character in *Gone With the Wind*, all of Scarlett's security people looked exactly like Rhett Butler – or should I say Clark Gable.

"What do you want?" one of the Gables at the door asked us.

"We need to see Scarlett," I told him. "We're looking for a friend of ours."

"Scarlett's real busy," the Gable said. "Who should we say is callin'?"

"My name's Ken Nishi," I said. "I'm looking for a man named Babe Ruth."

"Hold on," Gable Number One said, and went inside. Gehrig and I stood outside with the silent second Gable.

"This Scarlett has identical twin bodyguards?" Gehrig asked me.

"Not quite. The one that just went in is almost two inches shorter than this one." Lou raised his eyebrows. "I'm a detective. I notice this stuff."

"Are these bodyguards like that Shelly girl, then?"

"The plumbing's different – but otherwise, yes."

"I'm sorry," said the first Gable as he emerged from the front door. "Scarlet can't be disturbed right now. I suggest you call again tomorrow."

"Sir," Gehrig began, "would you be so kind as to let us go inside and find our friend?"

The Gable smiled widely. "I'm sorry, friend – but business is business. No visitors while work is in session."

I turned away from the Gables and began walking down the steps that led down to street level.

"Come on, Lou," I said loudly. When we reached the street, I added: "We'll be back. Let's go get us some hookers."

We found a couple of Scarlett's girls back at Mark's American – the problem was getting them interested in us. Scarlett's trained her girls to be *very* selective about who they'll bring back to Tara. The first thing we had to do was make sure that the girls were first-string – only the cream of the crop are based in Tara. The dregs, like Shelly, work at cheap hotels around town.

After we found out that Sara and Viv were Scarlett's top-of-the line, we had to convince them that we had money. The first-string ladies are extremely expensive, and the purchase of a few Randies is also required.

We managed to pass our John Interview by showing them my credit card (with billions in Matsushita money backing it) and claiming to be two of the baseball players from the series. Sara bought Gehrig's story, mostly because he actually *was* what he claimed to be. As for me, well, I told Viv I was legendary Japanese slugger Saduharo Oh.

I guess my credit was good enough that Viv wasn't going to question my veracity. I do look fairly Japanese, though about half my family is European-American – but when it comes to my clothing, body language, and the way I talk, I'm about as *un*-Japanese as you can get.

After they took my money, they handed each of us two small green pills – Randies. I turned to look at Gehrig, who was staring into the palm of his hand. He made a small gulping noise.

I smiled at him and dry-swallowed the Randies. I have to give it to the guy – he had a lot of guts. He imitated my actions as soon as I had finished swallowing.

It was a couple blocks to Tara, so we ended up walking there from Mark's. As I stepped out of the bar and onto the dirty sidewalks of the American, I felt the whole district slide around me. I could tell that the Randies were kicking in, though their psychedelic effects were mild compared to the drugs I'd taken in the past. And I wasn't really afraid of getting out of control – if I needed it, I had a couple of detoxes in the bottom of my pocket and a gun hidden against the small of my back.

The randies also had an effect on my libido, and so I suddenly began to take more notice of Viv. She was reconstituted-gorgeous, every man's dream and a plastic surgeon's reality. Though I like to think of myself as a pretty good detective, I didn't know whether she was a natural male or female. Some people can take one look at a person's neck and figure out whether they've had their Adam's Apple removed or not.

My hand slid around her back and I could feel the curve of her hip underneath the strange material her clothes were made out of. It felt almost alive, more of a second skin than actual clothing. Then again, it could've just been the Randies talking.

Gehrig, meanwhile, was squeezing Sara's breasts and mumbling to himself. I didn't suppose the old boy had much experience with drugs like these, and the double-whammy of sexual drive and hallucinations had to be more powerful than anything that existed in Gehrig's time.

I decided to let him enjoy it while it lasted.

It didn't take us very long to reach Tara. As we neared the front door, a skinseller approached us. It looked like the same one who had been in front of the Kosami earlier.

"Buy skin," he said. "Real rabbit!"

This time, under the influence of Randies, I was a bit nicer to the little man. Rather than ignoring him, I paused briefly to say hello to the cute bunny skin and pet it a little.

"Nice rabbit you've got there," I told the man. Then Viv pulled me away from him. It was time to enter Tara.

I blinked as I looked up at the mansion's facade. It seemed incredibly huge, aristocratic, and completely out-of-place amidst the cheap neon and plastic crap that made up the rest of the American.

"My, my," I said, "I do believe the south has risen again."

We went inside.

"Ready, slugger?" Viv asked me. I have to admit, the Randies were certainly having an effect. I put my hands on her waist, and then slid them up to her breasts. From there, I moved them to on her cheeks, as I began kissing her. Then I slid one of my hands to the nape of her neck and gently stuck a sedative patch to it.

Twenty seconds later, she was unconscious. Two minutes later, Gehrig and I had popped our detoxes and were searching room by room for Ruth.

We found the Sultan of Swat half-clothed and face down on a bed a few doors down from our rooms. One of Scarlett's girls was sitting on a chair in the corner, polishing her fingernails.

"What do you want?" she asked. "Can't you see I've got a customer?"

"A busy one, too," Gehrig said.

"Look, Scarlett doesn't allow more than one client per girl. And I've got mine. So you'd better leave."

"He's a friend of ours," I told her. "We've come to take him back home."

"Oh, no you don't," she said. "He's paid up. I'm supposed to keep him here until he walks himself out."

"Who asked you to do that?" I asked.

"Scarlett. She told me the fat guy had some big money behind him, and that I should try to get as much of it out of

him as possible."

"So you'd keep him here, charging him for your services and for drugs until he finally left?"

"Or until his money ran out, yeah. Why not?"

"Like I said, sister... we've come to take him home." I nodded to Gehrig, who went over to the bed and began shaking Ruth awake.

"Stop it!" the girl shouted. Before she could get protest too loudly, I walked over to her and slapped a sedative derm on her neck.

"Hey!" she shouted. "What the hell do you think you're doing? What's this fucking thing you stuck to me? What did you do to me? Help! I can' stan'up..."

Scarlett's girl hit the ground, completely unconscious.

Babe Ruth was slowly coming to, under the kind hand of Lou Gehrig.

"Come on, Babe... time to get up... got to get back before the next game," Gehrig said to the massive home-run king.

"You done this before?" I asked Gehrig.

"Too many times to remember. Like I said, Ken... the time and place may have changed, but the Babe's still the same man and a whorehouse is still a whorehouse."

Gehrig and I pulled the Babe to his feet and began leading him out of Tara. We were about 10 feet from the back door when an alarm went off. I heard a woman screaming from upstairs – it was Viv.

"He fuckin' knocked me out!" she yelled.

Four Clark Gables were suddenly running toward us, two from the front door and two more from the hallway that led to the rest of the building.

"Down!" I yelled to Gehrig and the Babe, and we all fell to the ground. I pulled my gun, hoping that I could get all four of the Gables before they got us.

"Frankly, my dear," I said, pulled the trigger, and scored a direct hit on the head of Gable Number One. "I don't-" and Gable Two went down, "give a-" and Gable three went down, "damn-"

And then Gable Number Four's gun shattered my pistol hand. The gun flew across the floor, but I didn't really notice. I was screaming so loud that I can't even remember being knocked out when the Gable kicked me in the head.

When I woke up, I was in a Matsushita hospital bed. I obviously hadn't been killed by Scarlett – in fact, she had turned me back over to the Corp.

There was nothing I could do during the next few days I lay in that hospital bed but stare at the TV – so I watched the all-time world series in three dimensions. It was as exciting as the Corp had hoped it would be, and they no doubt made a killing on the entire affair. The series went to seven games, just as they had hoped. Maximizing profits was the key.

I was amazed the series was that close – I figured the Yankees would win in a cakewalk. But they were actually down three games to two going into game six. Just as the corp had hoped, the game ended dramatically – Babe Ruth, looking just as healthy as he always seemed to look on those old-time movie reels, doubled off the top of the centerfield wall in the top of the ninth to score Lou Gehrig and put the Yankees ahead to stay. That hit sent the championship of all time to a seventh game. And to think that just a few days before, Gehrig and I were carrying a half-naked and stoned out of his mind Babe out of a local whorehouse.

The day of the seventh game, I finally found out how I had managed to come out of my adventure alive, and how Babe and Lou had managed to get back in order to play in the series.

My first visitor was a mid-range Matsushita executive named Mariko, and she sure didn't seem happy to see me. In fact, when she walked in the door and saw that I was conscious, she began to scowl. She also refused to make eye contact with me.

"Well, Nishi, at least you managed to get Ruth back without any bad publicity," she said.

No publicity? I had blown away three reincarnations of Rhett Butler in the middle of the biggest brothel in Osaka, and there had been no publicity?

"But you also cost the corporation a mint, almost all of it unauthorized. You paid for hookers and Randies for both yourself and your assistant, and we had to pay Scarlett the madame for all the services Ruth paid for while he was out."

"The Corp had to pay for that?"

"Sure did. Scarlett knew that we were behind the series, and she knew perfectly well who their fat customer was. So they tried to wring as much money out of the corporation as possible."

"Well, I *did* manage to limit how much time the Babe spent at Tara," I told her.

"True. But you also managed to kill two of her bodyguards and seriously wounded a third. We had to pay for his medical bills, plus yours. Scarlett also demanded a very large sum of money to keep it all away from the police."

"How large?"

"Extremely large. That's all I'm allowed to say."

"Shit," I said. Once a Corp worker, always a Corp worker. Matsushita would never fire me – they'd just move me to some ridiculous location like Antarctica and have me gutting fish and throwing their heads into a bucket.

"Don't worry about it. The corporation's got plenty of money, and we got Ruth back in time to have him play in the series. Nothing's going to happen to you, this time. Just don't let *anything* like this happen again."

That was all Mariko had to say. I never heard another word from the Corp about the incident.

But Mariko wasn't my only guest. When she left the room, Gehrig came in. Right behind him was Babe Ruth himself.

"You're looking a lot better, Ken," were the first words out of Gehrig's mouth.

"Yeah, lookin' real good," Ruth said.

"Thanks. Hey, good luck tonight."

Ruth smiled his famous dimpled, fat-cheeked smile.

"And thanks for pullin' me out of that dive the other day," Ruth said. "I've got hold of some mean stuff in my time, but those pills really take the cake."

"Look, Ken," Gehrig started, "we can't stay long. I practically had to beg on my knees before that Mariko woman agreed

to bring us here. I just wanted to thank you for all you've done for us. You did a great job."

"It's the first time anyone's gotten shot up for me," Ruth said with a laugh. "If there's anything I can do for you, just name it."

"One thing, Babe," I said. "Hit one out for me tonight."

He smiled again. "You got it, kid."

Whoever made this Ruth character sure got the recipe right. Not only did they make him so well that he ran away from the team just for the sake of his vices, but even his heroic actions were dead-on. Ruth hit me a homer, all right. It won the series for the Yankees in the bottom of the ninth inning.

The next day, the simulations of the 1927 Yankees were sent back into the void from which they came. They were melted down or erased or whatever you do with computer simulations of real people.

So I had risked my life for these artificial people and the integrity of my corporation. And after all that, while I lay in a hospital bed, the people I had saved were wiped from existence. The only real souvenir I had of the whole event was my shattered hand.

Well, I didn't just have the hand. The day after the series, as those players were being dispatched back into oblivion, a Matsushita courier brought me a special package. Inside was the winning baseball, signed by the real live Babe Ruth and Lou Gehrig replicas.

It was enough for me.

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EARTH AS AN EXAMPLE
Chapter 3

by Jesse Allen

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Maxel space station was one of the products of the war. Though small by Federal standards, the city in the sky regularly housed ten thousand. Unlike its cousins orbiting inhabited planets, Maxel circled no primary. It merely hung in space, the nearest star over three parsecs away. With no populous planets nearby, it was not a commercial stopover. No profit-minded interest had ever been shown in the station. But the war had demanded that there be piers where ships could rest without the normal long haul on ion drive necessary near stars. Once a short distance away, ships departing Maxel simply kicked straight into hyperdrive. A day out of port, they could be a full parsec away, fully ten thousand times the distance covered in the same time on ion drive. Without the lengthy climb out of a stellar gravitational well, and clear of the denser interplanetary medium, ships trimmed days, even weeks, off their voyage time.

The *Nikaljuk* was docked at one of the outermost service corridors, a long flexible tube extending out to the one exit hatch in use. The freighter looked out of place among the sleek war ships of the Federal Navy, their shining steel hulls bristling with the weapons of their trade. Dr. Drucker and Captain Huston looked out on the scene from a large window overlooking the quay. Behind them, a number of officers milled about, two concentrating on a game board projected on the table in front of them.

Suddenly, the stars dimmed as the window darkened. A few kilometres out from the station, a ship cut in its hyperdrive, the bright light of its engine thrust drowning out everything in its dazzling brilliance. But the window had adjusted its filtering appropriately: The bright exhaust tubes could be watched without blinking. The ship pulled away, rapidly picking up speed as it dwindled away into the distance. As it streaked off into the night sky, the stars gradually reappeared as the window returned to its usual transparency.

"John Huston!" called out one of the game players, suddenly looking up from the holographic playing cube in front of him. "What an unexpected pleasure! What brings you to this corner of the Union?"

Captain Huston and Dr. Drucker turned from the window to face the speaker. He was a tall, thin man in his middle thirties with short blonde hair, dressed in the dark, close fitting uniform of a navy officer.

"Byron Parry!" exclaimed Captain Huston, moving over to shake hands with the player. "Good to see you again. Dr. Drucker, this is Byron Parry from the *Brach Y Pwull,* a friend of mine from academy days. Byron, Dr. Drucker, chief archaeologist of Museum."

Captain Huston looked at Byron's neckline for a moment, noting the four silver clusters on the neckline.

"Not a Captain any more? Congratulations!" he remarked.

"Thanks," replied Byron. "I got the promotion to Commander three months ago. And these days, I'm on the *Rodina.* Dr. Drucker, glad to meet you. I recall your name from the ruckus back when the historians were stirring up Parliament to fund Museum."

"My involvement with those affairs was slight," replied Dr. Drucker modestly. "Politics is not my field, though I do think Parliament did make the right decision in the end."

"Indeed," said Byron. "I've been meaning to visit the place for some time. My kids have been twice already with school and have come home screaming with pleasure and running circles around me in History both times. How about you, John? What have you been up to?"

"I'm still a mere captain," replied John, "but I have managed to get off the escort roster. I'm working on the *Nikaljuk,* a light freighter, assisting Dr. Drucker and his team on a research project. A strange occupation for a Navy captain in the middle of a war, but orders are orders."

"Since you're not going to introduce me," said the player across the board, "it *is* your turn." She spoke with a thick accent that Captain Huston did not recognize, swallowing all her vowels.

"John, Dr. Drucker, this is Siabohn O'Neil," Byron said, "Captain of the *Brach Y Pwull.* She was my second."

"Five years on the *Brach Y Pwull,*" said Siabohn, "and he *still* can't pronounce it properly. At least with me in command, the crew has a captain who can talk properly."

"Perhaps if you Orionians spoke using the same vowels as the rest of the galaxy," retorted Byron merrily, "you wouldn't have such troubles." Then he waved his hand at the game board. "What do you think of this, John?"

Captain Huston knelt down to look at the board carefully, examining the formation of red and black pieces strewn throughout the cube's volume.

"It looks like you've been out matched, but there are some possibilities here," said John after a few moments.

"You're in trouble," Dr. Drucker warned Captain O'Neil, "if you let John join the fray. They used to call him 'the Dark

Master' for the way he plays this game."

At that, Huston suddenly looked up at Dr. Drucker who was now examining the playing board from O'Neil's side of the cube.

"Who told you that?" he asked.

"Admiral Perry," replied Dr. Drucker nonchalantly. "Did you honestly think I challenged you blindly?"

"After those first two games," replied Captain Huston, "yes. You knew the whole time? Did you just let me win those two?"

"I wish I could say yes," replied Dr. Drucker sheepishly, "but I'm afraid that, even forewarned, your style managed to take me by surprise. But you've lost that edge now."

Indeed I have, thought Huston. *This last game has been dragging on for a week now. He just started massacring my pieces all of a sudden. I've struck back and devastated him too, but neither of us is winning, more than a hundred moves since the last capture.*

"By the way," started Huston, "what's all the excitement about? We've seen four ships kick off in the last hour." Right on cue, the window darkened again as another ship cut its hyperdrive in.

"How long have you been here?" asked Parry.

"Just a couple of hours," answered Huston. "What have I been missing?"

"You missed it, all right," said O'Neil.

"The *Haiphong*, mate," added Parry. "Admiral Nguyen himself was here not a week ago, then suddenly scrambled out of here yesterday afternoon. Apparently the Kalganians have started a new offensive. They razed a few planets only a dozen parsecs from here. Clobbered the orbital stations, bombarded the ground-space facilities, then left a few snipers to harass anyone who came to aid the locals too soon."

"And they sent the *Haiphong?* Kind of overkill, isn't it?"

"It seems there was some high level concern. A bunch of civilians were headed for one of the nearby systems that lost contact a few days ago. The Secretary-General had some personal interest in the passengers and wanted the Navy to intercept them before they tried to make planet fall. But that was only the first stop: *Haiphong* is heading for Sagittarius to handle the new troubles there."

Captain Huston and Dr. Drucker exchanged a shocked look.

"This ship. . ." asked Dr. Drucker. "It wouldn't happen to have been headed for Janella, by chance?"

Commander Parry's head snapped up from the game cube.

"That's classified information!" he said sternly. "How did you get a hold of it?"

"Good grief!" exclaimed Captain Huston. "That was us! We got jumped by a raider at Janella three days ago and barely got out alive. We were about to survey the area and see what was going on when we got ordered to get here full blast. But the Secretary-General? All I'm doing is shuttling around some prehistory specialists!"

"It seem you've become a VIP," said Commander Parry with respect.

"You said Nguyen was taking the *Haiphong* to Sagittarius," said Dr. Drucker. "What's happening?"

"Hmm," rumbled Commander Parry hesitating. "Well, I doubt the censors will quash this. The razing rampage has only been a small part of a general renewed offensive by the Empire. Sagittarius has born the brunt of it. They've been dropping nova bombs into every star with a ship yard nearby without much regard to inhabited planets."

"Nova bomb?" asked Dr. Drucker, his face turning white. "What's that?"

"It's a device dropped into a star. It penetrates deep into the stellar core, then explodes. The detonation, when placed correctly, disrupts the balance of the fusion reactions that power the star.

"Of course, stirring up something which has a mass of 10^{30} kilograms is quite a task, so the change is quite short lived and doesn't disrupt the entire star. But it's enough — for at least a few hours, the bomb wreaks total chaos. The high energy particle flux from the star jumps by several orders of magnitude, well beyond the maximum tolerance of even the best shipboard shielding. Anything caught in space within a milliparsec is cooked through and through. Space stations too: Even they can't withstand that kind of blast. If they're on the far side of a planet when it starts, the planet will shield them. . . until their orbit takes them over to dayside. And most stations are in low orbits with periods around a hundred minutes, far too short to save them."

"And the planet?" asked Dr. Drucker with concern.

"Dayside, they'll all get baked. . . and they're the lucky ones. The particles turn the atmosphere into a hodgepodge of radioactive isotopes. A lot of air is simply ionized and then neutralizes itself violently. But the altered isotopes. . . Anyone who survives the initial blast will die from radiation sickness. Nightsiders can be evacuated, but their ships have to remain in the planet's shadow until the particle storm is over, which involves defying about a half dozen laws of orbital mechanics. Not that it can't be done, but that can save only a few thousand at best. For everyone else, there's simply nothing that can be done. They'll die. All of them."

"But rescue missions? Surely they can treat the sick?" said Dr. Drucker pathetically.

"This is radiation sickness, not a fever," replied Byron. "Once you get it, the best anyone can do is make you comfortable. And how do you rescue a hundred million people? Half of them won't live long enough for a rescue mission to even make it there. For very mild cases, the tissue damage can be undone or removed, but past that exposure level, there's nothing that can be done. A few very lucky people who hid in shelters might escape enough of the radiation and altered atmosphere to have treatable exposure levels. But again, that's going to be thousands at the most."

"So no one can live through a nova bomb?" said Dr. Drucker quietly.

"That's about the size of it," replied Byron.

Dr. Drucker turned to Captain Huston.

"My family. . . they're on Hardin, near the center of the Sagittarius sector. And there's three ship construction yards there, two of them working for the Navy."

"Hardin?" said Siabohn comfortingly. "I've not heard of

any action reaching that deep into the sector yet. You can check with the base commander: He can get you in touch with your family if it's possible and he'll know if the action is close. The *Haiphong* and its escort fleet is setting up blockades around inhabited planets. If Hardin hasn't been attacked yet, the fleet will be protecting it. And the Kalganians will find it hard to run through the *Haiphong*'s screens. Nguyen's the sort you hate to have as an enemy."

But Dr. Drucker missed the last of her words. He was already out the door headed for the base commander's office.

Lieutenant Judith Swerth noticed she was chewing her nails and forced her hand out of her mouth. It was the fifth time she had caught herself gnawing at her fingers in the last ten minutes and the condition of her nails suggested she had done it many more times than that. It was a nervous habit of teenage years that returned under stress.

She had been in the command chair of the *Wangratta* for the past five hours and was due to change watch in another three. She was one of eight officers from the *Chepachet*, a federal cruiser assigned to monitor the Hardin star system. Although the entire sector was theoretically protected by blockade ships, the Navy was taking no risks and had assigned additional ships to protect individual star systems within the blockade volume. The *Wangratta* was a small scout ship specifically designed to monitor shipping traffic while remaining undetected herself. Her crew were all junior officers training for command positions — they rotated turns at each of the pilot, monitor, engineer and command positions.

When the unexplained signal came in from the neutrino strips lining the *Wangratta*'s hull, Swerth had been excited and pleased she had the command. It was the third such contact and thus was dubbed *Gondor 3*, the Navy parlance for a suspected, but unidentified enemy ship. The other two had occurred while she was off duty or at the navigator's console. While she was certainly involved, there had not been a chance to prove herself from the command chair. But now her enthusiasm had given way to worry and tension. *Gondor 3* had initially appeared as a middle weight Kalganian raider nearby, approaching at a speed that would bring it close to the *Wangratta* in a matter of hours. The *Wangratta* would grapple with the raider, locking on tractor beams to anchor it in space. Her powerful engine plant could generate power enough to maintain her protective shields against the very worst barrage the raider could bring to bear. Meanwhile, the *Chepachet* would come into position and destroy the enemy ship.

But the encounter had not happened. Despite *Gondor 3*'s velocity, clearly discernible from the Doppler shift in its energy pattern, it had not yet arrived. That implied it was at a greater distance and its neutrino signal came from a larger power plant than she had assumed. Each passing moment made the smallest size ship still explainable by the signal larger and larger. In another ten minutes, she would be sure beyond all doubt that the inbound ship was beyond the *Wangratta*'s defensive shield capacity. . . and perhaps would even out gun the *Chepachet*. Yet how could something that large have escaped the outer guards?

There was a possible answer. The neutrino strips were very new and few ships were equipped with them. Neutrinos are highly penetrating particles generated in a host of nuclear reactions. The collapse of a supernova, the deep cauldron of a stellar core, and the power plants of starships all produced the tiny, massless particles in profusion. They were so penetrating that they could escape from the depths of a star and it was hopeless to even attempt to contain them in a fusion vessel. But just as they could pass through a reactor wall, they also passed through detectors without appreciable effect. Neutrino detectors were normally giant devices where a single detection implied the presence of trillions of non-detections.

The *Wangratta*'s detectors, however, were subtly different. A modification of the detector material during its forging yielded a material which, when an appropriate energy field was applied, had a billion-fold greater cross-section to passing neutrinos. Detections remained marginal and little information could be eeked from what signal there were. But it made for a passive tracking system. A ship which shut down its own power plant could lie undetected and yet monitor all traffic within a considerable volume of space around it. And until a way was found to contain neutrinos, there was no countermeasure to thwart it.

What Lieutenant Swerth feared, however, was the countermeasures for the usual scanners which were quite feasible, such as might have been used to slip past the blockade. A ship with a large enough power plant could hold up just such a device, fooling a searching ship into seeing nothing. Those countermeasures, in turn, could be scrambled, but again, power limitations made it possible for only the largest starships to carry the scramblers. Could it be that a large Kalganian ship could have evaded the scrambling fields and with its stealth system, passed unnoticed by the outer guard ships?

But that was impossible! Almost all of the Sagittarius sector was surrounded by heavy ships set in positions such that their scrambling fields would have a 25% overlap. There would be no way to penetrate that shield undetected.

Yet there was definitely something approaching which should not have been and it must have escaped the attention of the outer guards.

"I have signal resolution," announced Lieutenant Helgth. "*Gondor 3* is no longer a single point source."

Good, thought Swerth. *That mean's it's close enough for secondary power sources to be detected, making it quite close. Probably a heavier rated raider instead of the middle weight I had assumed. The* Wangratta *can still handle that.* Swerth's assumptions rested on knowing the volume of space the neutrino strips could comb, the flux and velocity of the approaching vessel, and its probable distance at the time of first contact. There was also the matter of the spectral signatures — different class vessels gave off subtly different energy patterns and *Gondor 3* had many of the spectral signatures of medium displacement raider. But recognizing neutrino signatures was a new and uncertain business and it was quite feasible for the raider to have been somewhat larger than the energy spread of its power plant initially appeared.

"*Gondor 3* now appears as three contacts," continued Helgth.

"Assessment shows central contact is a Kalganian cruiser with two accompanying heavy raiders. From an extreme distance, their combined signature appears like that of a medium raider."

Bad, thought Swerth, her sudden hopes dashed. *Very, very bad.*

"Notify the *Chepachet*," she commanded.

"There is some ambiguity in the identification of *Gondor 3*," explained Helgth from the signal processor. Then he swiveled in his chair.

"There could be even more ships," he said in a dead pan voice.

Siabohn and Byron sat across the table from each other starting down each other's pieces. John Huston sat beside Byron looking at the board, but with an unattentive eye. Occasionally, he would glance at the empty seats next to himself or at the chess pieces arrayed across the table just as they had been put there by himself and David Drucker a week ago. They had been halfway through setting up the board when the Navy reported the vapourization of the *Chepachet* and the subsequent bombardment of Hardin's primary. Dr. Drucker had left then and not returned. No one had seen him since, though everyone knew where he was.

John looked at the chess board one more time and had to fight back the instinct to rise and go to the archaeologist's quarters. But John had sat in the command chair long enough to know some griefs were meant to be private. When Dr. Drucker truly wanted to talk, he would come of his own accord.

"Long range scanners confirm the planet is inhabitable, Captain," announced Georgia. "It has a nearly circular orbit almost exactly in the middle of the life compatible range. Atmosphere analysis shows that the air is predominantly nitrogen with an approximate 20% oxygen content. Carbon dioxide levels are low and within biocompatible limits. This could be it, sir." She couldn't keep a hint of excitement out of her voice.

"It does sound good," replied Captain Huston, "and we can tell more from here than early settlers. Now we have to hope for something a little bad — we're looking for an abandoned planet, so there has to be something to have driven the settlers away after they got here. Something subtle enough to have been missed in a preliminary analysis, but annoying enough to have convinced them to leave later."

"I'll keep looking," said Georgia, obviously pleased.

The *Nikaljuk* was slowly spirally in toward the second of the water/oxygen worlds circling G-type stars within the region the probe was supposed to have come from. The archaeologists that had been bound for Janella and Srosa had left them at Maxel. Instead of being flown to those destinations by the *Nikaljuk* as had been originally planned, they were going with the second wave of military convoys, the first having re-established order. Those who remained with the *Nikaljuk* began the search for the abandoned planets which might, in the ancient settler's ruins, give Dr. Drucker's team another of the missing clues to the elusive First World.

So far, the search has not gone well. The stellography mission to this part of the sector was ancient and outdated. The information was skimpier than it had seemed at first glance. Just a simple note of star mass, luminosity, and stellar class, plus the presence of planets and their orbital parameters. Few of the planets had been accurately classified, let alone examined in detail. The *Nikaljuk*'s first stop at one of the F type stars had been typical: The planet reported in an acceptable orbit for life tolerable conditions had proven to be an airless ball with a distinctly elliptical orbit. At periastron, the planet was too close to its primary for livable temperatures while apastron grazed the outer limit. But it had been a long shot to start with since G, not F, type stars were the norm for habitable planets.

They were still optimistic when they arrived at their next stop, one of the two G type stars in the region which was known to have a planet in the right range of orbits. But that too had proven a disappointment. The stellographers classification of water/oxygen world had not been mistaken, but they had missed one vital detail. There was carbon dioxide in the atmosphere along with the normal gases, and it was present in poisonously high levels. The heavy concentration of the gas trapped infrared emission from the surface, bringing the planet's surface temperature up to hundreds of degrees. Colonists would have been desperate to try living in such a place, though with air conditioned homes and refrigerated greenhouses, they could have survived. But that chance seemed remote enough that Dr. Drucker had not hesitated to move on.

Their third destination, orbiting a F type star, was again a long shot. But they did not waste any time getting close to eliminate it as a possibility. Even as they entered the edges of the planetary system, scanners revealed the candidate planet's atmosphere was transparent to ultraviolet light. Even around a G type star, such a planet would be uninhabitable.

Enthusiasm was growing again as they approached their fourth destination. This, too, orbited a G type star and was known to have a planet within the tolerable orbital limits and classified water/oxygen by the surveyors. Long range scanners confirmed the presence of the usual radiation trapping zones from a magnetic field, the atmosphere was distinctly opaque to all but the longest ultraviolet wavelengths, and the traces of carbon dioxide were normal. Temperatures plummeted near the planet's poles, but were downright balmy across the equator. All in all, everything looked like an ideal planet for settlers to try their hand at. Certainly they must have at least approached this planet.

Soon, the *Nikaljuk* would go into a low polar orbit and make a detailed map of the planet's surface, assisted by a pair of automated probes that had been outfitted on the ship's hull at Museum. If they found anything that looked like it might have been an ancient landing site or settlement, the drones could make low flying passes for closer investigation. If it seemed warranted, the *Nikaljuk* could attempt to find a landing site and set down, though the energy involved in climbing back out of the planet's atmosphere and gravitation well was considerable.

This is the most interesting project I've done since joining the Navy, thought Captain Huston. *Even better than coming to grips with those Kalganian monsters. . .* and as he thought that, he gripped his command chair harder. *Monsters, all right.*

I will make them pay someday. The enthusiasm that everyone else had shown for the exploration and particularly the prospect of this approaching planet had not been shared by Dr. Drucker. He had been very subdued since they left Maxel.

John thought about Hardin's destruction. That the Kalganian cruiser's crew were killed by the same blast that claimed Dr. Drucker's family and over five hundred million other lives seemed poor compensation. *We ought to drop a nova bomb into Kalgania's sun and see what they think of it then!* But beneath his anger, Captain Huston realized that it had been tried and failed several times, and even that would not prove anything even if it did succeed. Destroying the imperial capital would no more halt the Kalganian Empire than if the Union lost Throne. Between the Kalgan sector and all its allies, the Imperium commanded thousands of worlds and destroying every inhabited planet in their power would take more nova bombs than there were in the Union's arsenal.

"I've completed the detailed spectral analysis, sir," announced Georgia. "The planet's primary is G2 with the normal metallic content and a mass of 3×10^{30} kilograms. It is presently in an active period, with a number of flares and prominences, but nothing unusual for its class. Barring some unusual activity cycle that my instruments couldn't predict from these readings, this is a completely normal star for a habitable planet's primary."

"Can you assess the probability of unusual solar activity sufficient to make the planet unpleasant?" inquired Captain Huston.

"I can assess it," answer Georgia, "and it is bloody unlikely! This class is the best studied of all stars; after all, 95% of the galactic population lives within a stone's throw of G type stars. Chances are less than one in a million that solar activity from this star could make things more than mildly uncomfortable on the planet. I don't think we'll find anything to drive away colonists from the star. Whatever it was must have been from the planet itself."

"We'd better find something wrong with this place soon," said Captain Huston. "It would be quite a shock to find that no one in the last ten thousand years has bothered to notice a perfectly inhabitable planet in the middle of the oldest sector. How long 'til we establish orbit?"

"Three hours, sir," answered Norman from the pilot's console. "It will take another half hour of maneuvering to get into the polar mapping orbit from our initial approach orbit."

"Release the drones as soon as we establish polar orbit," ordered Captain Huston.

"You *beauty!*" exclaimed Georgia.

"Lieutenant, you are on the bridge," reprimanded Captain Huston.

"Sorry, Captain," apologized Georgia. "I think I've found what we're looking for."

"We've established a stable polar orbit," announced Norman. There was a twin pair of gentle thuds from the ship's rear. "Both drones released. They should drop to their cruising altitude in half an hour."

"Dr. Drucker to the bridge, please," said Captain Huston to the computer grill. "Lieutenant Smythe?"

"Radioactivity," she said proudly. "There's slight traces of radioactive isotopes spread over the planet. Nothing serious — you'd get only a little less exposure on the surface from the planet's primary. It's unusual, though."

"Native radioactivity?" said Captain Huston. "I've never heard of it being significant enough to be mentioned in a general planetary assessment."

"As I said," replied Georgia, "it's unusual. Radioactivity comes from the heavier elements which normally would not be found on the surface of a planet. During formation, they tend to gravitate towards the inner core of the planet and deposits are very sparse nearer the surface.

"But that's not all that's unusual about this planet. There's that satellite we noted on the way in. It's four hundred thousand kilometres out, but it's almost a full percent of the planet's mass, much more than is common for terrestrial planets. Even from its distant orbit, the satellite exerts sufficient gravitation to alter the surface. We've observed tidal changes in the level of the oceans on the order of metres in places."

"And that would have been sufficient to disturb the differentiation of the planet during its formation and bring heavier elements to the surface?"

"It's just a piece of dead reckoning so far," confessed Georgia. "I got the readings and tried to come up with a hypothesis for it. The computer is running a simulation right now to see if my explanation holds water. But wherever those heavier elements came from, extrapolating the current levels backwards nine thousand years and this starts to become a decidedly uncomfortable place to make home. Not unmanageable, but enough to cause somewhat higher rates of degenerative diseases, birth defects, and a few other nasty side effects. Perhaps tolerable when the pickings were slim, but as soon as colonists found better places, they would have moved on."

"You called for me?" asked Dr. Drucker as he walked onto the bridge.

"Yes," said Captain Huston. "We've just released the surveying drones and established our mapping orbit."

"So this is definitely an inhabitable planet? I've been a little tired lately and have been snoozing instead of following the reports as they come in."

"Indeed it is, barring one detail. The crust is mildly radioactive. It's marginal now, but Lieutenant Smythe claims it would have been at irritating levels nine thousand years ago. The place is good enough to have attracted early colonists, but still unpleasant enough to send them on their way as soon as better prospects offered themselves."

"Radioactivity, you say," said Dr. Drucker.

"It is a little unusual," said Georgia. "I guessed it could have come from an enhanced quantity of heavy elements in the planetary crust."

"Unusual?" said Dr. Drucker, quickly becoming excited. "It's more than unusual! I've never heard of anything like it before! How did you arrive at your figures for the radioactivity levels? Do you have a detailed analysis of the elementary composition?"

"No," answered Georgia. "I couldn't identify the elements from our orbit. The atmosphere blurs the energy of the decay photons. So I made a surmise and threw it back through each of the four standard decay chains."

"Mind if I look at your calculations?" asked Dr. Drucker. "I work with radioactive dating techniques regularly and know a little bit about the subject. What are the end products of each of your extrapolated chains. . . " and the conversation continued, delving into technical language which Captain Huston could not fathom. But it was obvious that Dr. Drucker and Lieutenant Smythe would be untangling the question of the planet's geological history for some time.

There's really nothing I can do with this, thought Captain Huston looking at the chess board on the table in the middle of his room. *Neither of us, barring a mistake by the other, can win.* It had been thirty moves now since Dr. Drucker had tried to draw Captain Huston's rook and knight into an attack on the archaeologist's bishop which was closing in to hound the black king. But Captain Huston had seen through the subterfuge soon enough, noticing that Dr. Drucker's true aim was not the king, but to sneak his one remaining pawn through to be queened. *And if I had not seen that soon enough, the game would have been over in a matter of moves. I can hold his bishop and knight, but never quite threaten his king, just as he can threaten my pieces, but not take them without disastrous loss himself. What was the special name for this stage of the game? Stalemate? But I am not prepared to give up quite yet. Just one little slip. . .*

"Captain Huston, please report to the bridge," said Captain Suliman's voice from the comlink grill next to the door.

Captain Huston looked at the chess board one more time before striding out to the bridge. *Oh, dear,* he though as he saluted Captain Suliman. *Everyone is looking rather glum.*

"You got here promptly," said Captain Suliman. "I thought you would be sleeping. Otherwise I would have called you earlier."

"I was trying to thwart Dr. Drucker's chess strategies," replied Captain Huston. "Is there a problem?"

"I think Lieutenant Smythe and Dr. Drucker can explain better than I," said Captain Suliman.

Captain Huston turned to face the two. The rest of Captain Huston's bridge crew had left when relieved by Captain Suliman and his officers, but Georgia apparently had remained with the archaeologist, arguing over her calculations. Obviously, that had continued for several more hours.

"Captain," began Georgia, "this is not the abandoned planet we were hoping to find."

"So we head for the remaining F star? You realize we'll be flat out of luck if that planet wasn't settled. We don't have any clues where that probe came from if we can't find an abandoned settlement."

"There's no need to move on," she said. "This is First World."

This is it? thought Captain Huston with a sudden surge of excitement, one that died when we saw her expression. *There's nobody down there. . . and why is everyone looking so down? Something is missing here. . .*

"The drones found clusters of mineral deposits that were definitely not accidental," continued Georgia. "What their purpose might have been, we can only guess. Probably surface habitation. Ten thousand years of weathering would have destroyed their original form. But the chemical collections are definitely artificial. No natural force could have gathered materials together in that fashion. And there are thousands of these clusters, some of them hundreds of square kilometres in size. It would take millions of people hundreds of years to construct whatever those heaps once were.

"That's how we eliminated the possibility of this being an abandoned planet. If it was good enough to support a few hundred million, or even a few billion, why abandon it? And how could they evacuate that many? Even now, with the resources of the entire Federation, that would be quite a feat."

"So there were once a few million people living here. . . and they weren't evacuated and they aren't here now. So where are they?"

"If you extrapolate the current radiation levels," said Dr. Drucker, "back to the time of the probe's launch instead of just nine thousand years, the radiation is not only irritating, but lethal. Anyone caught on the surface at that time would die."

"I don't understand," said the thoroughly confused Captain Huston. "First, you say this is First World, then that the planet had a lethal crust. If you extrapolate the radioactivity back a few thousand years more, you'd have enough heat to melt the crust and that is patent nonsense! What gives?"

"The extrapolation combined with information from the drone probes shows that the radioactivity comes from a number of different elements. Principally barium and thorium, but there's quite a mishmash."

"Barium?" said Captain Huston. "The gravitational differentiation model predicted this?"

"No, Captain," said Lieutenant Smythe. "My suggestion proved to be just a shot in the dark. The simulation did not predict particularly unusual radioactivity levels. However, it did suggest the planet would have higher concentrations of heavy metals in the crust, including uranium in mineable deposits."

"And the balance of radioactive elements matches the end products of a widespread fissioning of uranium 238 near the time of the probe's launch," said Dr. Drucker quietly. "Perhaps thirty years later, though the date are somewhat imprecise."

"But U^{238} is stable!" exclaimed Captain Huston. "I'm not a radio chemist, but even I know that!"

"Indeed it is," said Dr. Drucker, "and that's the most alarming part of all. For U^{238} to fission, it must be exposed to an intense flux of fast neutrons. Judging from the evidence of glassified rock at a number of spots where concentrations of the elements are higher, I'd suggest a hydrogen fusion device was used to produce the neutrons in sufficient number to spark the chain reaction."

"But why?" said Captain Huston. "It doesn't make any sense. Why go around shattering perfectly stable uranium nuclei when all the end products are deadly?"

"Exactly," said Dr. Drucker. "They are deadly. . . and that

is the point. Do you have any idea how much energy a few kilograms of U^{238} gives off when it fissions?"

"A lot, but. . . "

"A lot?" snapped Dr. Drucker. "The ignition system alone could flatten a spaceport! The fission would double or even quadruple the power of such a device. Entire cities could be laid waste by one of those! A few hundred of them and an entire planet would die. . . and that's just what happened!"

"Oh, come off it," said Captain Huston light heartedly, trying to disarm the archaeologist's seriousness. "You can't build something like that without understanding what it would do if it was used like you just suggested. Sheer common sense would prevent them from using it. . . and therefore from even building it in the first place. You can't really believe that!"

"Really!" exploded Dr. Drucker. "A race committed genocide here, Captain! But those weapons are puny compared to those in deployment now. They used hundreds of them and it still would have taken years to kill their planet. Hardin was devastated in minutes from a single bomb! Where's the 'sheer common sense' in that?" and with that, the chief archaeologist stomped off the bridge, leaving the entire crew thunderstruck.

Outside, the ruddy ball of Museum's sun was starting to peek over the horizon. The room was silent. Neither the Secretary-General nor Admiral Perry made a move to switch off the trimensional recorder.

"Do you understand now why I have called you here for this report?" asked the Procurator softly after the silence had lasted for several minutes.

"No, sir," replied John.

"It has been twenty years now since the border skirmish that started this war," began the Secretary-General, rising from her seat to stand at the window and watch the dawn. "Since my father sent the fleets to Kalgan all those years ago, over a hundred billion lives have been lost. Many of them soldiers, but mostly civilians. Their crime was merely to have lived on planets with orbiting ship yards of the wrong colour.

"And there's no sign of the carnage stopping. Oh, the Federal Union will win eventually. Of that, there can be no doubt. We have almost twice their resources. But at what cost? It could be twenty years before it ends, or even more. It has cost too much already.

"My father never could have envisaged what he started. Now he'll go down in history as the tyrant who started it all. I have no desire to follow in his footsteps.

"The military are understandably reluctant to back off. . . on both sides. But if the public knew all that was really happening, all popular support for this war would come to an end and the military would have no choice but to negotiate for peace.

"Censorship has, of course, pre-empted that. The armed services have kept a tight rein on the news for years now. Even the best informed people only have an inkling of what is actually happening. . . and they are all in positions where it benefits them to keep silent. Including myself — without the web of people suppressing news of me, my whereabouts would be public and hence enemy knowledge. Considering the number of assassination attempts on the mock government at Throne, there is no doubt that it has been censorship that has kept me alive for so long.

"But the war has exceeded my limits. I will not stay silent any more. This carnage must stop now. And you have provided me with the means to convince the citizenry of the Union.

"Imagine what it would be like if your story was aired. Not just the results of some ten year old archaeological search for. . . what did you call that planet? Earth?"

"Yes, sir," replied Dr. Drucker. "The vernacular name for First World is 'Earth'."

"Yes," continued the Secretary-General, "not just a report on the finding of Earth, but the whole lot. The incident with the *Maelstrom*, the attack of the *Nikaljuk* at Janella, the razing of space stations at Turnay and Janella, the destruction of Hardin and Earth. . . " Her voice trailed off into a whisper.

"There are a number of people in the military," said Admiral Perry picking up where the Procurator had left off, "who don't like this war much either. Enough to force the censors to pause before trying to edit your accounts. The seal of the Secretary-General will weigh heavily in favour of it all being broadcast. We almost got the censors to back down once before. We won't fail this time."

"But do you really think this will change anyone's opinion?" asked Dr. Drucker, his voice betraying his tiredness. "It means a lot to me, but it's my family that's died."

"Yours," said the Secretary-General, "and the families of billions of others too. And it convinced one of the most militant graduates of the Herculean Naval Academy already, hasn't it, *Mr.* Huston?"

John made no response.

"When I first saw your initial reports," continued the Secretary-General after a short pause, "I saw my chance. If Earth can be an example to us all, we can save the lives of more people than those who perished in our ancient ancestor's forgotten war. It is certainly worth trying."

Deep below the surface of Museum, a trio of technicians lowered the ancient probe into a display case in the newest section added to the archives of the planet. Elsewhere in the room, there were trimenographs taken from the surface of Earth, the whole room dedicated to records from that one planet. Only five years after its dramatic rediscovery, the planet had become the most famous in all the galaxy.

Across from the probe's display case which dominated the room, there was a small trimensional plate that showed the Beetle Juice nebula in all its glory. Behind the facáde that the plate was mounted on was the story known galaxy-wide of the discovery of Earth.

"All set!" called one technician. Together, they stepped out of the case and signaled to the door keeper that they were finished. The keeper looked at the shining metal package in the display case for a moment, wondering what stroke of luck had brought it to the attention of its finders all those years ago. *How different history would have been,* he thought, *if this tiny machine had not been found when it was.* Then he turned to the door switch and for the first time, the doors to the new Peace Hall were open.

Shining in the bright floodlights that lit it, *Pioneer 11* looked down on the flood of school children that scrambled into the room, just arrived on an excursion from their home town on distant Kalgan.

Jesse Allen is a graduate student in Astronomy at the University of Iowa. After failing to get a ticket to Australia, he has become disenchanted with Astronomy and he will become a science education student within the next year: yet another reason to avoid the American public high school system. Earth as an Example *is his only published story so far, but his latest science fiction work* Radio Emission from X-ray binary systems: Mapping Cygnus X-1 *will be submitted soon. In more serious science writing, he is working on a* Star Trek: The Next Generation *novel* Salvage Operation *with co-author Debra Johnston.*

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LEACH MCBUGNUTS IS DEAD

by William Racicot

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This is the dawning of the Age of Aquarius. . .

Last year around Thanksgiving, I ran into my friend Leach at the airport. We hadn't seen each other in a while, since we went to colleges on opposite coasts, (I was at Boston College, Leach at U. Oregon) and we hadn't even had a proper phone call all term, so we split a cab fare downtown, and went for doughnuts at a homey little diner on Carson St. We'd found the place a few years back, when I bought my first car – a '76 Plymouth Fury wagon: What a beast! We christened her "Gert the Rap Car" for the way the oil light flicked on and off to the rhythm of the stereo I'd bribed my older brother into installing for me. Anyway, we liked the atmosphere of the place: Gerri, the owner, was a little old woman with a pipe who told dirty jokes to the ever-present policemen, and always greeted us when we came in ("Hey! It's Greg and Leach! What can I get my boys today?"); there was a television in the corner which somehow managed constantly to show "All in the Family" re-runs; and the doughnuts were home-made ("All natural ingredients!") so that you could feel the cholesterol congealing there in your stomach for three days after eating one. But the taste – the taste made it all worthwhile.

I guess Gerri was sick the day Leach and I flew into town, because there was a younger woman waiting on the cops in the diner. She looked familiar; I thought she might be Gerri's granddaughter – about five feet seven, a little overweight, she had Gerri's strong shoulders. We might have gone to high school together, but I wasn't sure. I've been avoiding my high school class for a while, and don't always recognize them.

Leach and I had been sitting in the diner for a while, and were still waiting patiently for service. Well – I was waiting patiently: Leach was whistling show-tunes in an attempt to get the waitress' attention. She was busily smoking Gerri's pipe with a red-haired police officer at a table across the diner from Leach and me. Since we were accustomed to quick and cheerful service from Gerri, we were kind of annoyed, not to mention hungry – the airline food hadn't been much use (how many peanuts can one person eat?). And I couldn't figure out why we hadn't been served yet – it's tough to think straight to the tune of "I Get No Kick From Champagne."

"So Leach," I said, hoping that he might start talking, and, therefore, have to stop whistling, "How long do you suppose we've been in here?" I immediately regretted asking.

"Oh," he responded, loudly and in the waitress' direction, "Can't have been more than an hour or two, yet. I expect *Susan, our waitress*, will be along in a couple days. What are you going to get, since you've had *so long* to decide? I'm going to go with a chocolate glazed and a cup of black coffee, I think." Then he started to sing lyrics from *Pajama Game*.

When you're racing with the clock,
When you're racing with the clock[1]

I don't know where Leach picked up his interest in musical theatre; his parents owned a few dozen chickens, and sold eggs to the local grocery store, and they didn't care for "*that* sort of social function." As far as I know, he'd never auditioned for a show, let alone been in one. He was never involved with the drama kids in high school, anyway, and he didn't strike me as the type who went in for acting. It looked like it might be time I re-evaluated my opinion of his dramatic ability and interest.

I think our waitress (Susan, apparently, although her nametag said "Hello My Name is Gerri.") was in a couple high school musicals, now that I think of it. I've always thought it would be fun to be in a show, but all the best parts are for women, and our school was too prim to let me act in drag. I haven't had time, since, what with classes all year.

I looked across the diner at Susan, and saw her busily smoking Gerri's pipe, just as she'd been doing for some twenty minutes, then looked back to Leach. I decided that there was no point in asking him to be patient: we'd had that discussion more than once in the past, and he was strong in his belief that, if a chicken can reliably produce an egg, then so should a diner. We'd abandoned more than one otherwise acceptable restaurant because their food or service was less than Leach was willing to accept. "If I have to pay for it, then I should get what I want when I want it," he'd always say; so I just pretended he hadn't been shouting across the room. I tried not to notice that the waitress was carefully ignoring us.

I listened to Leach whistling for a few minutes, then he began humming instead, and finally just stopped. He looked over at Susan, and back. "Hmm," he said, tentatively, "Say Greg, there's something I wanted to talk to you about."

"Oh?" This sounded promising: at least he wasn't whistling.

"How do you feel about eggs?"

"Huh? Actually, eggs sound pretty good. I haven't had breakfast yet, and I wasn't really in the mood for doughnuts anyhow. I think I'll have a couple fried eggs, and maybe a slice of hot apple pie."

[1] New York: Richard Adler Music and J&J Ross Company New York : Frank Music Corp. ,©1980, 1952.

"Fried eggs?" he said. He looked upset. "You're going to eat fried eggs? In front of me? So soon after the accident? Oh Greg," here he paused dramatically, and hung his head, "You disappoint me. I should think that after all these years you'd respect my feelings enough not to eat eggs like that, right in front of me – I mean, out in the open like that. Are you trying deliberately to upset me? After what's happened to my parents–"

"What's happened to your parents?" I had no idea what he was talking about at that point; even now, I find it difficult to accept.

"What do you mean, 'What's happened?' " he said, his face beginning to flush, "You know what's happened to my parents."

Nothing had happened to his parents as far as I knew, and considering their lifestyle, I couldn't imagine what could. His father claimed to be a virgin, and his mom's most dangerous activity was getting the mail at the end of her driveway. "What about your parents? I really have no idea what you're talking about. I phoned your mom yesterday to find out when you're flight was getting into town, and she was fine. She said your dad was okay, too, when I asked how things were going. Did something happen to them last night?" I have to admit, I was really concerned now. I'd known his parents for something like twelve years – as long as I'd known Leach – and they were the nicest people I ever met, even if they were a little strange. Sure, they named their son "Leach," but he was named after his great-uncle, the war hero. . . .

"The incu – the –" Leach choked up a bit, but finally managed to say, "The incubator blew up on them, and they were – Oh Greg, they were killed by the shrapnel – I thought you knew. . . ."

"Are you *kidding*?" This was a pretty disgusting joke, if he was. He looked at me, shaking from tense shock that I might doubt him, especially on something like this. But before he could answer, our prodigal waitress, whose friend on the force had finally gone off to disturb some copulating teenagers in station wagons, decided that Leach and I had come to a sufficiently awkward point in our discussion that interrupting us would be worthwhile. "Hello!" she chirped around Gerri's pipe, just as though we'd only that moment arrived, "What can I get you gentlemen?"

I just wanted her to go away, so, before Leach could begin telling her the tragic story of his parents and their demon incubator, or how dare they serve eggs on a day like today, I said, "Hot apple pie, please, and do you have fresh cider today?"

It was no good, though. Before Susan could write down my order on her little green pad, Leach said cheerfully, "Well, gosh! I think I'd like to start with the two hours I've wasted waiting for service, and then, how about a glass of milk? I assume you aren't serving milk today?"

"Leach," I said, trying to calm Leach so we could order and get on with the discussion, "It's only been about half an hour."

No use. Susan just turned around and went back to where she'd been sitting. At least, I thought, she was gone. I turned my attention to my friend, about to ask what the hell he was talking about. He was furious, judging by his expression, and he stood and went to her table.

"Hello!" he chirped. It was a pretty good impression of her. Then he grabbed her pipe. Gerri's pipe.

"Uh, Leach –" I was going to point out exactly whose pipe it was, but he interrupted me.

"What can I get you today, you lazy cow?" he said, and stuck the pipe bowl-first into her coffee cup, which steamed obligingly. He gestured for me to join him as he stormed out of the diner.

Outside, Leach was pounding on the building, and chips and fragments of the decaying brick-face were skittering around the sidewalk. I thought I'd better distract him before he did any more serious damage – say, to the building itself. "What was that about your parents? The incubator blew up?" I knew how tactless I sounded, but I just couldn't take him seriously. It was too weird. "They were fine when I called yesterday."

Leach spun to face me, then deflated. He nodded, all his anger gone with his energy. "I thought you knew. It was all over the papers last week."

That was when I got really skeptical. "If it happened this morning," I said carefully, "How could it have been in the paper last week?"

"It was in their horoscope."

"What? Leach –" I couldn't believe he was telling me this. What was he trying to pull, anyhow?

"It was in their horoscope," he repeated. "See?"

> Aries*: The gentleman in the red convertible wants you.*
> Taurus*: You will score 278 and spare the last frame.*
> Cancer*: Duck!*
> Scorpio*: Watch out for incubators today. Yours is going to blow up.*

"They were born on the same day, you know." He sniffed. "It was supposed to mean – it was supposed to mean they'd be *lucky* together." he choked on lucky.

I had known about his parents' birthday, but it hadn't seemed relevant to the discussion. They'd been at a CYO meeting, or one of those weird Moose Lodge political rallies, or something – it changed with every telling – and the speaker said, "Hey everyone, we have two birthdays today!" in that embarrassing forward way that only masters of ceremonies and lounge singers are taught. "June Roths and Troy McBugnuts are both twenty-five today!" It was all very embarrassing to them both, so they say. But judging by the frequency with which they tell the story, I doubt they were too devastated by the incident.

"Uh, Leach"

"Yeah?" He looked up hopefully, as though the thought I might say 'everything is going to be fine.'

"When did you see this?"

"Last thursday. It was in the *Tribune.* Or do you mean the actual accident?" I nodded that this was, in fact, what I meant. "I haven't actually *seen* the accident yet, Greg. How could I? I haven't been home, and it only happened this morning. I've been with you as long as I've been in town. We met at the airport, remember?" he said it as though he were afraid for my sanity, but I wasn't about to be distracted.

"So you haven't actually seen this mess yet?"

"No! I just told you it happened this morning. I was on a plane from Oregon. Really, you're beginning to worry me Greg."

I ignored the last bit, and said, patiently, "Let's see what's in the *Tribune* this morning and then check out the incubator at your house, okay?"

He mumbled something about choosing less morbid friends in the next life, but I insisted. Wouldn't there be something in the paper if there were a local disaster? So we bought a paper from one of the glass dispenser things on the side of Carson St. and headed for the bus stop in front of the magic store. Rumor has it that the owner was possessed by the spirit of his dead grandfather, until he was exorcised by a benevolent ex-nun. Now he just channels for his late ancestor once a month. We'd almost asked him about it once, but decided it wouldn't be tactful and bought felt top-hats instead, so it would look like we'd meant to come in and buy something.

"Well," I said, once we were on the bus, "There's nothing on the front page. Do you think they'd put something that important inside without a leader to it on the front page?"

"I wouldn't think so, but you never know with the way the *Tribune*'s been lately." He had his parents send him the week's issues every Saturday, so he'd know how things were at home, "Because no one who really loves you will tell you the dirt on your hometown during finals." I was just as willing to remain ignorant of local events myself. They took too much energy away from my classes, and I knew I'd hear everything once I got home. Besides, my attention span is short enough, without the added distraction of trying to keep track of a thousand people I wish I didn't know anyway.

I looked through the rest of the paper, and there was no mention of the accident, although there was a sale on high-intensity light bulbs at Sears, and Leach was listed in the obituaries as having died at four o'clock from a gunshot wound.

COLLEGE STUDENT SHOT BY BURGLARS

Leach McBugnuts, the only son of our own Troy and June McBugnuts of 76 Oklahoma Dr., was shot by burglars yesterday in his mother's kitchen. He was twenty years old, and would have graduated in a year and a half from The University of Oregon where he was a major in Literary Theory (No, we aren't sure what that is either, but maybe Troy or June could tell us. Troy? June?). At any rate, the whole town feels this loss. Although Leach was always an odd child, we all loved him like he was our neighbor's only boy, which he was. Strength June, and you too Troy.

Services will be held Saturday at three pm. And may the Lord bless Leach McBugnuts and his bereaved family.

'May the Lord bless Leach McBugnuts and his bereaved family.' Hmph.

I decided not to point it out to Leach, although it did seem relevant. How could his family be "bereaved" if they were dead? I doubted he'd be reassured. I pointed out, instead, a piece about burglars and the practice of finding out when a house would be empty from funeral announcements. I also told him there was no mention of any incubator accidents.

"Did you check the horoscope section? Let me see that."

I handed him the paper. He was making me really nervous, and his obituary didn't help much either, so the paper shook a bit as I passed it. He seemed not to notice, though, and I relaxed as well as I could. I normally wouldn't have worried about strange behavior from Leach – he's been kind of strange as long as I've known him; not surprising when you consider he had to grow up with a name like his. If my name was Leach McBugnuts, I'd probably be pretty weird, too. But this was stranger than his usual Leach-ness.

I watched him pore over the horoscopes for a few seconds, and marvelled that he seemed to really *believe* the things he was saying. He looked up, eyebrows raised. "That's very odd," he said, "There's not even anything in the horoscopes. See what I mean about how things have gotten in the journalism world? The *Tribune* doesn't even cover my parents' incubator disaster, and they're the ones who predicted the damn thing!"

I was about to say something about the reliability of the horoscopes anywhere, and especially in the *Tribune*, but was denied the opportunity, because (much to the relief of our fellow passengers, who had finally given up staring at us and begun diligently ignoring us) we arrived at our stop just then. We paid the driver, and said, no we wouldn't be needing a transfer slip, but thank you anyway, and got off the bus.

The ten minute walk to his house was tense, so I tried to make conversation.

"You were singing Pajama Game lyrics, huh?"

"Yeah."

"So. . . when d'you get into the theatre? New interest at school?"

He just shot me an irritated glance. The rest of the trip was pretty quiet. I pointed at a few of the places we used to haunt. There was the Superman phone booth we used to use to change our clothes after school – we got arrested once. Boy was my mother mad! "Mrs. Beaulieu? Your son was found naked in a telephone booth about fifteen minutes ago. Could you come down to the station and pick him up?" I wish I could've seen the look on her face!

The livestock in his gravel driveway helped to reassure me that, no matter how strange the rest of the world got, some things would remain consistent: there were chickens everywhere. They waddled around the yard, in and out the hole in the wire fence around the chicken coop, jumped up and down the steps to the front door of the house itself, scratched the lawn up, ate Mrs. McB's tomato stalks, and generally wrecked havoc on the yard. Those chickens had more freedom than Leach did until we were old enough to drive. I asked, once, why his father didn't fix the coop, but Leach only shrugged and said, "That's how the old man likes to have the hens – all over the place. That's how he knows they're alive. He gets nervous if the yard is too quiet, you know." Leach had smiled wisely at me, and nodded as his father passed through the room, as though this were the conventional wisdom, and wasn't I lucky to have heard it.

"See Leach?" I gestured around the yard, encompassing most of the chickens. "Just like always: hens everywhere." The windows to the farmhouse were all open – at least all the

ones I could see – and the screen porch was in slightly better shape than the henhouse. Apparently Mr. McB didn't want the fowl in his living room. We went up the porch steps, but Leach hesitated before he opened up the door.

"Go on."

"Morbid son of a. . . "

He opened the door, and we went in. It was about one o'clock in the afternoon, by then, and I could hear noises from the kitchen and upstairs. I could smell egg salad, too, and I began to remember that I still hadn't eaten breakfast.

"There. Smell that? You're parents aren't dead – your mom is in the kitchen making egg salad, and your father is upstairs. Do you feel better now?" I tried not to sound condescending or sarcastic, but he was being so weird that day that I wasn't sure what to make of it.

He looked at me with his brow crinkled, and said, "Well – I guess so. I'd like to see the incubator, though, just to make sure."

Sigh. "Leach? Do you trust me?"

He nodded. "You've never led me wrong before, at least not without letting me in on the joke a few minutes later. And you've never been a joker about anything that was really important."

He was accusing *me* of joking about something important? I couldn't believe this. But I controlled myself: I said, "Go into the kitchen and say hello to your mom. I'll check the incubator shed and let you know what I find. If there are any bodies in there, we'll call the police, okay?"

"I guess so. . . . Meet me in the living room in about fifteen minutes?"

I nodded, and went back outside.

The smell got stronger as I approached the incubator shed, which was strange since the kitchen was on the other side of the house. By the time I got to the door, the smell was so strong that I could hardly breathe. It was obviously not the smell of egg salad, I decided. Too strong. This was the stink of rotten eggs. I heard a gunshot from the house, and looked back. I heard Leach scream, and a shadow in the window dropped out of view . I turned to run, but stopped, because I had just got a good look into the shed. The hand– I threw up and ran into the woods.

Sometimes, when I'm sitting alone, I remember playing with Leach, there in the shed; we used to bring trucks in there and push them around on the dirt floor, through bridges we made from old bricks. That was before his parents bought the incubator.

My brother told me, once, that the *Tribune* ran an article about Leach that Thanksgiving. He even sent me a copy, but I never read it. It's still in the envelope in my desk drawer, probably yellow by now.

I don't read the *Tribune* anymore.

We, the editorial staff of the Tribune*, would like to extend our deepest regrets for the early release of the Leach McBugnuts obituary. We wish to apologize for any inconvenience this incident may have caused.*

Bill Racicot is one of five surviving humanists at Carnegie Mellon University. He graduates in May.

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THE HARRISON CHAPTERS
Chapter 8

by Jim Vassilakos

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Yellow dandelions swayed within the smooth, evening breeze, their thin stems lingering in silent dance for the dying rays of a dim red sun. Above, the scent of sweet honey floated gently through the faint current, stirring the petals with a quiet cacophony of hushed whispers, carelessly catching the tips of her curls and caressing the thick patch of grass where she lay. The fireflies began to play, little winged faerie, or so she'd imagined. They darted about in circles, one teasingly pursuing another, while below, another host of insects went about their evening business, foraging for sustenance amid the damp, loamy terrain. They seemed dark and ominous, great pinchers perched atop their frames as they straggled about in the abject slumber of community, a congested mass, grinding together, crawling over and beneath, their limbs twisted about each other in ignoble partnership.

A tall bell tower rose from the hillside, its chimes ringing with tempestuous abandon. Vilya watched the bell work back and forth, its clamor growing in intensity. She reached out, her arm elongating into the elastic distance as the waning light slowly settled into black.

"Hello?"

"Hi. Did I wake you up?"

She groggily tried to place the voice.

"Johanes?"

"Umm. . . no. Mikael."

"Oh. . . you."

"I need a favor," Mike gulped down, glad that he was too cheap to pop for a visi-link.

The dawn was misty and cold, precipitation gradually forming into a dense fog along the coast. Her green eyes, though not so sparkly, were a welcome sight. Mike cautiously climbed into the back seat, checking to see the driver's face.

"What happen?"

"I decided to go swimming again." He stripped off his shirt, letting its ullage collect on the seat and slide in slippery droplets to the carpeted floor as the cab's warm air glided along his chest.

"Like cold water too well. Should hitch ride from now on. . . less danger."

She gave him a not-so-gentle squeeze at the end, her eyes scintillating with wicked intent as Mike's crossed involuntarily. He let out a deep groan, packaging the pain instead of striking back. "For waking me so early," she finally explained, and Mike wondered if it was some new custom as he slowly recovered.

"That was dirty."

"Justice never clean."

"Justice? You call that justice? I'd hate to feel revenge."

"Pray you don't have to."

"Vil. . . I don't blame you for being mad, but I really didn't have much of a choice."

"Everyone have choice. I take you in home, I give to you food, I give to you key, and you go and you no leave scratch-marks. . . "

"Look. . . I'm sorry, okay?"

"No. . . you look. . . "

Mike just nodded as she continued, her speech quickening and moving in and out of slang so fast that he could no longer keep up. He knew that the Calannan women had a way of laying the guilt pretty thick, but this one was in a class by herself.

"Vilya, I'm sorry. I'll make it up to you, I promise. What more do you want?"

"Now you want know what I want."

She produced the dodecahedron from her wet, paper bag, its black surface glimmering dimly in the scattered light.

"Maybe I show you, eh?"

Outside, the murky air rushed against her window in pael gusts, droplets of moisture forming along its plastic surface, skidding steadily toward some common goal, and finally flailing blindly into the cab's interior. Beyond, the vague shape of the cliff's edge coursed by.

"What are you doing?"

"I want see how much you care for the pretty cermic. You jump for it, yes?"

"Vilya. . . I said I was sorry."

"Say again. I no hear so well."

"I'm sorry."

"Eh?"

"I'm sorry. How many times do you want me to say it?"

"You want pretty cermic too much."

"Yeah, well. . . it's important."

"Why?"

"Because."

"Because why?"

"It's a long story, okay?"

"We seem to have long time together."

"Yeah, well I'll explain it over breakfast."

She grumbled brusquely, but Mike could tell her stomach was in favor of the notion.

"C'mon, I'm buying. How'd you like to eat in Xekhasmeno?"

"So now I have choice. . . "

Xekhasmeno was known to locals as the forgotten city, a place given away to Imperial commerce as a settlement of war. Offworld, the appropriation was viewed as a no more than a slap on the wrist, but for the Calannans, the city was a brand of shame and defeat, a place forsaken and rarely spoken of except to provide adjectives for their more colorful slang. To hate Xekhasmeno and those who dwelt within it was part of Calanna's unspoken creed, a thing as real and as often underestimated as the thin, electrical barricade which protruded around the city's borders, forbidding entrance except to Megacorp personnel and the starport authority.

They entered at the north-east gates beneath the Tizarian embassy. Work crews were in the process of finishing the new building. A guard wandered along the line of vehicles, knocking on windows and stamping clearance stickers on various hoods. Mike recognized him as one of the old-timers who stayed on after the incident.

"Identification."

Mike opened his window as the guard peered within, his eyes widening in surprise.

"Why, Mister Harri. . . ?!"

"Keep it quiet. You never saw me."

"Uhh. . . alright, sir. Heard you were dead." He whispered it as though saying so more loudly might lend it truth, eyebrows wrinkling in confusion as he backed cautiously from the taxi, waiving them through with a stamp of the sticker machine.

"What he say?" Vilya was rendered oblivious by the Galanglic.

"Huh? Oh. . . he said to have a nice day."

"Nice day?"

"Where to?" The cabby's eyebrows were furrowed in mild irritation.

"Tyberian Compound."

Suite 112J turned out to be on the ground level of a small technical complex. The suite was really more of a repair shop, and Vilya seemed altogether confused by her new surroundings. Spokes rounded a corner from the back of the room, his headgear gleaming in the fluorescent light.

"You're late, man."

"I ran into a little bit of trouble along the way." Mike handed over the dodecahedron, and Spokes inspected the casing, his blue eyes gleaming as though it were a birthday present.

"Bonded cermic?"

"Made to look that way. It's survived quite a bit."

"I'm sure it's not the only one."

Spokes said it with an air of either respect or inveiglement. Mike couldn't tell which for certain.

"You gonna be okay with this?"

"Sure. What exactly am I supposed to be looking for?"

"At this point, anything that seems interesting. . . if you manage to get in that is."

"Don't worry about that. It may take a little time, but I'll get in. You wanna hang around?"

"I promised somebody a square meal. After that, I need to get the shoulder fixed."

"There's a cafeteria on the 3rd floor. If you're looking for something nicer, there's the starport."

"We'll hit the starport."

"Suit yourself. Oh, take this." He handed Mike an SPA maintenance overcoat complete with tinted-bubble hood and IR goggles. "Unless you wanna be a celebrity, that is."

"Not after this morning; thanks."

The starport wasn't much different than he remembered it, a mishmash of technicians, cargo-hands, and jaunty, third-rate brokers strewn in pairs and trios along a sea of polished floor tile. Various shops lined the walkways between the Outworld Market and the shuttle bays. Interspersed between them, wide, circular planters rose from the gleaming tiles, forming benches for all the old people to sit. They studied the drifting masses with sardonic glares, their garish glad rags explicating a backward dive into altricial helplessness.

Mike let down the hood once they were seated in a corner of the Zardocha Cafe. He remembered it fairly well, and by some coincidence found himself at the same table he and Tara had sat at not so long ago. His shoulder began aching again as the food came, the pain sharpening as an indication that the stabilizer was failing. Vilya's mood seemed to improve as she used the gravitic waves of her utensil to thwack his wound beneath the hardened castfoam.

"Gee. . . thanks."

"Why you hurt?"

"I was wondering when you were going to get around to asking me that."

"On Calanna, is impolite to ask such thing."

"Why?"

Her eyes seemed to search the corner of the ceiling for an answer.

"Is like saying you small."

"Small?"

"Like baby."

"I could stand some babying."

That got her. Mike figured it was something about the language he didn't understand. Finally, she tapped the wound again with her grav-utensil, this time on a sharper focus.

"Ow!"

"Ha! You are baby. Tell me who is Cole."

"A friend. Oww. . . "

"Good friend?"

"Not really."

Mike grabbed the utensil from her hand before she could cause him any more pain. She fought tenaciously for several moments, and then suddenly let go, causing him to almost topple backwards.

"Be careful you silly boy. Waiter?! May I have a thing to eat with other than fingers?"

She turned back to Mike, her wicked smile returning as she was brought another grav-utensil.

"Ha ha. . . I win."

"Vilya, I'm not in the mood."

"Too bad. . . I am."

"Look, I don't want you messing with it. I'm gonna get it taken care of right after this."

"But I hate you, and I want to hurt you."

"I'm sure you do."

"Why you come to Calanna?"

"I'm a tourist. I like to go sight-seeing. Ow!"

A couple heads turned, and Mike tried to keep his face angled toward the wall. Vilya giggled at his predicament and motioned for another stab. She was interrupted by the arrival of the food, however, and consoled herself with squirting tiny packets of bean sauce on the bubble hood of his SPA suit and the soggy shoes he'd borrowed. Mike regarded her mood with all the patience it deserved.

"Stop it you brat."

"Make me."

"What's the matter? You don't like the food here or something?"

"They no have haggis."

"Oh wah."

"I see your face on three-vee after the work last night. It say you are dead Tizarian."

"A foul rumor that's been greatly exaggerated."

"Is that purpose you hide face?"

"I told you. . . I'm a tourist. You calling me a liar?"

"What sights you will see, tourist?"

"I dunno. Maybe the coast."

"Maybe you will swim with shoes off this time?"

Mike smiled, "Maybe."

The starport's sick-bay seemed more like a recovery hall for low-berthers. Several stood around popping fizzies to kill their morning breath while others were slowly revived from days or weeks in cryogenic suspension. Cold sleep wasn't so bad, Mike recalled. It was the waking up part that was so unpleasant. Cole's signature bubbled away with the dissolving castfoam. The pharmacist administered the regeneration formula while a medic finished examining the wound. She held a thin fork in her hand, prodding the mesodermal layers as his blood flow slowed to a trickle.

"Passed right through. How'd this happen?"

"It was an accident."

Two shuttle attendants brought in a dozen more of the freezerinos as a feminine voice sedately announced the new arrivals. Her tone was collected, almost dull, enunciating each syllable of their names as though they were items of inventory and not actual people. Included were a few John and Jane Does, each accorded a separate number for the ledger. Mike charged the expense to Linden's account, including an all's well message on the assessment. The nurse swathed the numb shoulder in a fresh bandage as Mike finished typing in Linden's access code.

"We're gonna need some ID on this."

"Check again."

"Huh? Oh. . . guess not. Interesting insurance you've got."

"Yeah. . . Bank of Chuck."

Vilya sat with her back against the antechamber wall, her eyes glossed over with holographic images of interstellar medical technology. The promo featured minimalist cybernetics, nothing too scary or complex yet still fascinating for the uninitiated.

"Fixed?"

"Yeah. . . I guess."

They exited through baggage claims, climbing into a tram on the way out. Spokes was still fiddling with the dodec when they returned. He wore a staid expression, his eyes narrowing to thin slits as they entered.

"What's the matter?"

"You see these things?"

He pointed to two sets of bulbs at the base of his jacks, half of them shattered and fused.

"What about 'em?"

"Electrical inhibitors. . . without which my brain would be a toasty critter. The overload wiped my entire deck."

"I had no idea," Mike tried to make it sound sincere.

"Uh huh."

"What did you find out?"

"It tried to fry me is what I found out."

"Immediately?"

"It asked for some kind of ID clearance. I tried to burn out the active circuits, and it gave me auto-feedback except about ten times stronger than what I flushed in."

"So in other words it fought back."

"To put it mildly."

"Well, what did you expect, a cakewalk?" Mike tried to churn up a wholesome expression.

"I expect you to pay me four thousand for new inhibitors and software, credits not drin."

"No money until you get in."

"I almost got torched, Harrison! I think that qualifies me for working expenses."

"I'll try to get you the money."

Spokes turned and looked away, his eyes following a long, jagged crack in the wall plaster.

"Really hope you're joking, man."

"Finances are a little tight right now. It occasionally happens when you die, but I'll get the money somehow. Don't worry about that."

Spokes smiled, "I won't. I'll be keeping darkie as collateral until you do."

Mike considered the proposition, wondering if he had a choice in the matter.

"Spokes, I'm not trying to rip you off."

"Nor I you, Mister Harrison, but if you want trust, you're gonna have to show some in return."

Mike found himself nodding, almost stupidly, like some Joe Public listening to the big-time politician. Vilya sat idle, ignoring the Galanglic, her eyes casually roaming the technical hardware. Somewhere above her head, the blades of a humidifier kicked in, and a sudden current of musty air bathed her dark hair within its cool, transparent tendrils. She looked upward, squinting. The tall shaft rose above her, dark and imposing, lending a slight echo to their voices.

"Whatever."

"What are you trying to get out of this thing anyway?"

"It's a little hard to explain."

"Try me."

Mike took a deep breath, the musty air sucking through his nostrils.

"This thing, as you call it, was once the brain of a Draconian android. Her name was Robin, and she served what I believe was a sleeper agent sent to work for the Galactican before she got. . . somewhat dismembered. . . by this former friend of mine who decided to start working for the Imperials. For some reason, she decided not to wipe her memory, maybe because she wanted somebody to look at it. I don't know."

"I take it this is gonna be a long story."

Mike nodded, apologetically.

"The Imps have gotten their hands on one of my. . . subjects, for lack of a better word. He seems to be rather important to both them and the Draconians, and I'd just like to find out why."

"What's his name?"

"They call him Erestyl."

"What do you call him?"

"When I found him, he didn't have a name. His brain had been mangled by an Imperial mind-scanner. He didn't know who or what he was. The SPA found him in a galley stabbing people with a fork, one of the non-gravitic kinds you sometimes find in starport medical bays. He was transported to a local facility on Tizar and was snatched back by ISIS and brought here."

"ISIS? On Calanna?"

"I know. It makes no sense. If he was a criminal, I'd maybe have expected them to take him to the 47th. Instead, they opted for secrecy, even from their own people."

"Where does he come from?"

"Unknown. He was shipped to Tizar in a low berth. Another John Doe. . . transported on some tramp freighter that was no longer in port."

"And you feel it's your occupational duty to get involved."

Mike shrugged, "We dropped in five days ago. Me, Robin, and two others. Air defense was alerted to our mission. They destroyed the ship, and to make a long story short, me and this hunk of cermic are all that's left."

"Does ISIS know you're still alive?"

"I had a little run-in with them this morning outside Gardansa's. I'd hoped it might be safe, seeing as how I'm supposed to be dead and all, but apparently not."

"And who's the woman?"

"A friend. Native."

"Obviously."

"I've been encircled ever since I got here. I needed a safe place to stay."

"Get a flat."

"I'm a little short on funds right now."

"Does she even know anything about this?"

"She knows something strange is going on. That's about it."

Spokes winced, his eyes darting between them as an awkward smirk played across his lips.

"That's cold."

"I've made more than my share of mistakes on this drop. If I get caught, anybody who knows anything about what's goin' on is gonna be fair game."

"Oh. . . you're a real hero."

"If I disappear, I'd rather she just think I got up and vanished."

"Well thanks for telling me all about it, Harrison. That's just was I need. . . a bunch of offworld police homing in on me."

"You're the one who wanted trust. Besides, why should I care what happens to you? You're nothin' to me. . . except. . . maybe a possibility."

"A possibility to get yourself killed."

"I need your help to get this brain cracked. If you wanna bail out, I'll take Robin and leave right now. You can bill the Galactican, but you'll never hear from me again."

"And what if I decide to stick my neck out for you? What do I get?"

"The Galactican will cover your expenses. Maybe with luck you'll be able to land a cushy job there, I dunno."

"Weak."

"Yeah, but right now it's about all I can promise."

Spokes backed away from the dodec, his shoulders slumped and eyes wandering the walls. Mike tried to read his posture, the movement of the bony ends of his elbows as they scraped against the desk. Mike rubbed his temples, exhausted from the long night.

"Look, it doesn't take a genius to realize something very strange is going on. If we can find out what it is. . . who knows?"

"I'd like to help you, Harrison. But what you're doing is dumb."

"What would you have me do?"

"Back off. Get uninvolved. If I was you, I'd make a beeline for Tizar and forget this whole thing ever happened."

"Spokes. . . the key to this 'whole thing' could be sitting right in front of our noses. . . literally."

"So that you can write a story about it or get yourself martyred?"

Spokes shook his head, his scowl softening into a dreary stare as the dodec's black surface glimmered in the dim, artificial light. Once again in Mike's possession, its surface felt icy cold, as if the recent skirmish had plunged her into some deep, cryogenic dream. Spokes wandered to the back of his workshop, his head still shaking in mild contempt. Outside, Calanna's great red sun bathed the forgotten city in hues of amber and gold. Vilya said nothing, somber, green eyes speculating as to the mood of the alien conversation.

The ride back to Xin passed quickly. Their driver was a old man, apparently from the local area. He assumed they were tourists, who had become increasingly common since the postwar domestication. He pointed out various roadside landmarks as he drove, switching back and forth between Galanglic and Calannic and occasionally a mishmashed fusion of the two. Vilya remained silent for most of the ride, only speaking near the end to correct of minor point of history.

"You make good story, but that is not how it happen."

"No?" The driver's deep brown nose wrinkled in embarrassment.

"Varilion is no crafty as you say. It was Priestess of Snagarth that give him idea."

"Ha! Why should the Priestess care about Imperial garrison? Eh?"

"She not care, such as negrali mind own business. They refuse this courtesy, to pillage her temple and to murder her harem, that she make revenge.

"Ah... the lady is of the light."

"The light?" Mike inquired.

"She is Calannan, yes?"

"What do you think, Vil? You of the light?"

She shot Mike a sidelong glance, amusement brewing within anger.

"What you know of the light, Mikael?"

"What should I know?"

The driver's voice broke into a hearty, belly laugh, the cab weaving and bouncing with the spasms of his merriment. Vilya concentrated her gaze out the window. The sun's thick rays seemed to fall down as crimson shingles, baked and plastered along the dry, ruddy terrain.

"You children are pleasant, but where to go?"

"Take us to Erfalas."

"Hah! Good choice."

The cab snaked around the back roads of Xin's underbelly, crossing the highway to Pinnath Carach and continuing coastward. The air grew perceptibly cooler, and Mike spotted a flock of gulls on the horizon.

"Hey Vil... where're we going?"

"Erfalas. You like it, trust me."

The road came to an abrupt halt at the edge of a long rocky bluff. Forty feet below, the waves bore past beds of green kelp and red coral, shooting headlong into the stony grey cliffs. Beyond, the blue sea, Aeluin, stretched past the buoyant sudd, extending to infinity, its waters sweet and young, curling softly into the expansive horizon as they kissed the crystal sky, their colors shared, mixed together in some strange yet benevolent duet.

Every liter was similar in chemistry, undulating together beneath cool sheets of air, but where the water touched the shore, so it assumed it's character, relentlessly hammering the broad cliffs, foaming against the lush coral, and settling quietly along the flat, sandy shores. Aeluin was young by geologic standards, bearing only a tenth the salinity of Tizar's ocean, safe for drinking in the short term and unmolested by the pollutants many other civilizations had carelessly scattered.

Vilya began descending the sheer face, her movements unusually agile, as though she'd memorized the rock's most minute features. Mike followed, taking arduous care to mimic her steps and holds. He'd climbed rocks on Tizar, but never without gravitic momentum restrainers. Minus the security, he felt strangely naked, his nerves jittery and clumsy while a cool perspiration broke along his hairline. Dozens of steel eyehooks cut into the stone just above the water line. Vilya rested on one of them, allowing sprinkles of foam to catch in her long, dark hair.

"Why are we here?"

"Sightseeing."

"Oh... right."

"Give me hand."

"What?"

"Give."

Mike stretched out his arm, and her thin fingers wrapped gracefully around his wrist. She tugged for a moment, and suddenly he was slipping, flailing against the stone to regain his balance as he toppled backwards. In an instant, he found himself hanging by a pair of cuffs firmly secured from his wrist to an eyehook.

"Vilya!?"

"You always such easy to snare?"

He cursed as the steel cuff bit into the flesh of his wrist. Frantically, he scratched at the wet rock beneath, his borrowed shoes nearly falling off his feet as the waves came crashing in, pulverizing his legs against the stone. Mike clawed with his free arm, still bandaged, for a nook in the rock on which to hold while Vilya watched, unsympathetically, her eyebrows arched in contemplation of something devious. Finally, she spoke, her words following fluidly with the rushing waves.

"After war, the Count of Tyber make to crush Calanna of her pride. He take her children and chain them here. For long day, they thirst, and Aeluin is at the stomachs of them. But when the sun sit down, Aeluin rise up to mouths and noses and drown them."

"Thanks for the guided history tour. Will you please let me out of these?"

"The light keep life that darkness take. Thus is why Calanna consent to domestication."

"Vil..."

"Are you so full of the pride you cannot say the travel of you? What is secret that shame you?"

"It's a long story."

"Is long time tonight."

Mike tried to grab her with his numb arm, but its movement was too clumsy and slow, his grip on the cliff's face failing again. He finally gave in to gravity as the waves pushed his legs into the grey stone.

"Okay. I'll tell you, but not now. Not like this."

"You have choice?"

"I can ask please, can't I?"

She smiled, a mischievous sparkle entering her continence.

"You look so sad... you are ticklish?"

"Vil!"

"Tell all... or suffer fate worse than castration."

The climb back went more quickly than the coming down, and Mike managed his release without getting into the gory details of his travels. In fact, he'd told her fairly little, and yet she seemed already to understand everything, asking only those questions which were necessary. Even his mention of the Imperial police didn't faze her, nor his mention of the Draconian robot brain. She simply listened as though he were going through motions which were without consequence.

When they returned to the cab, the old man asked earnestly whether or not they had seen the light. Vilya's smile seemed to confirm the suspicion, and she generously popped for the fare as they pulled up to her small flat in Xin.

The cat was nowhere to be found, but a warm breeze blew through the red twill curtains betraying his escape. Outside, the hot afternoon sun seemed to bleach all color from the sky, mysterious grey clouds mixing with the amber-blond vapors billowing in lumpy puffs from the tall, black smokestacks of the inner-city. Mike half expected her to throw him out as she pulled a small taser from her pocket. Instead, she set it, with the cuffs, in a bedside drawer before falling roughly on the center of the sheets. Mike wondered if it was an invitation or a dismissal.

"When are you going to work?"

"Tonight. If I wake."

She turned to the alarm counter and set it forward twenty cents.

"I not know that I want to go."

"How long have you had that job?"

"Too long."

Mike sat at the edge of the bed, kicking off his water-logged shoes. He stretched the top sheet over her, and allowed his fingers to brush quietly through the soft ends of her hair.

"You don't like it?"

"I not like being groped by strangers."

"Hmm. . . wake me up before you leave."

Mike crashed on the couch in front of the three-vee, the muscles in his shoulders loosening as he closed his eyes and tried to feel the onset of sleep. The sweltering heat closed upon him quietly, forming moist patches of perspiration on his chest and forehead and beneath his knees. He threw off his shirt and pants, turning over several times, ignoring the little bits of food particles in the cushions which stuck to his skin. Outside, he could here a wryneck, hissing as it darted from the window.

The cat sneaked inside several minutes later, meticulously licking its fur in front of the couch. Mike listened as it scratched on her door and was promptly allowed entrance. He tried to suppress the slight twinge of envy as the sweat continued to gather, slowly, finally cooling as it evaporated into the thick, clammy air.

In the back of his mind, he could hear the clicking of hundreds of keyboards and the cluttered conversations of dozens of gatherers on the Galactican's main floor. Linden sat in his huge leather chair in the central office, his entire body tilted backward, reading the obituaries column. He came across a name he recognized, circling it with a lightpen as he hit a cut and paste macro with his left hand. Into his scrapbook it went, along with all the others.

"You know what I like about you kid? Persistence. You keep coming back."

He should have called it luck, a strange kind of luck that forgives all mistakes and then comes slapping you back in the face when you least expect it. His father had called it the luck of the space cadet. The cat continued licking its fur, its yellow eyes searching his, forming accusations as they met somewhere in the space between, animal and human; they were not so different. It curled its head backward to lick a spot on the back of its neck, but the head just kept going around and around as though it didn't matter.

Its feet were coated in a soft, white sand which it spread about the carpet. Outside, the surf swept up toward the windows, rushing through the cracks in the seams as the roof began to leak, water dripping from a thousand tiny holes, all scattered about. He could only watch, immobile, as the water sloshed around him, pressing over his nose and mouth in warm trickles. It tasted vaguely salty, and he battled to spit it away before realizing that he no longer needed air to breathe, and the cat swam freely, its instinctive fear reduced to an occasional *Hisssssss*. . . .

He woke, drenched by a slick envelop of oily sweat. The evening was likewise coated in a murky haze, and Vilya was gone, save for a note stuck in the crack of her bedroom door. It said he looked peaceful, too peaceful to waken. Mike clumped the flimsi-leaf into a ball, and tossed in on the kitchen counter. The cupboards were empty save for a moldy loaf of rye and two cans of prickly nopal sauce. The flimsi slowly unfolded of its own volition, the luminescent Calannic flickering across its surface. Mike pressed the corner, releasing the message into electronic oblivion.

"Show contents."

"Done."

Nothing?

"Retrieve all."

"Done."

"Show contents."

"Unnamed-1. Done."

"Read Unnamed-11."

Vilya's message returned to the leaf, her tall, slanted letters seeming to mock him as he read it again.

"Set date by age reversed."

"Done."

"Show history."

"Manufacture: 01.149.968. Last initialization: 01.149.968. Done."

In the shower, Mike wondered what sort of girl would have a flimsi-leaf for over a year and save something to it only once. The cool water flowed smoothly over his body, falling in dirty puddles to the yellow-stained porcelain tiles. The pipes equeaked sternly, and Mike imagined the sound rustling through the entire flat. He shuffled into his smelly pants and shirt and the pair of shoes he was still borrowing, pocketing the flimsi and Bill's body pistol as an afterthought.

The evening had descended into night, and the dark purple sky glittered with spangles of illumination. The streets were fluid with movement, motor cars weaving carelessly around the herds of pedestrians like a pack of hungry wolves as volumes of voids and pleasure junkies sat fidgeting in the gutters, playfully groping the wires which pumped streams of electric illusion into their skulls. The food vendors engaged in fierce shouting matches across the streets, defaming each other's culinary creations while exclaiming the virtues of their own.

"Lissi mituvoreva!"

"Git yer stinkin' paws off me, ya weirdo."

"Hey. . . you wanna echailmet some ywalme?"

"Hirer quaggahaggis!"

"Haggis?"

"Try it. Viuvalye, yes?"

"Two please."

Traffic on the underway was fairly busy going down, and Mike felt lucky to find a seat. He set the two thermoplastic containers between his legs, the thick scent of stewed meat rising to his nostrils as the tram rattled along its narrow course. A bloody-nosed teenager stood in the center of the aisle, his lips puckered as he whistled some ancient melody with meticulous precision. He held his dirty, brown mug with a jittery grip, and drooped over his back was a large, canvas bag. Inside the bag sat an elderly, legless man, with a black, conductor's baton and a pair of painted-out spectacles. Each instant a note fell from place, the man slapped his stick sharply across the boy's face, angrily cursing the younger's stupidity as he continued to wave the baton around like a deadly sabre. Occasionally, the man's face glowed with appreciation when he heard a clink from the mug. Then he mumbled a few kind words in a hoarse voice regarding generosity and alms for the poor, smacking the boy's ear to make him shut-up and then cracking him across the blue welts on the back of his neck to summon forth another round of profitable music.

A wide-screened viewer sat blankly in the corner, its glass window shattered and half its speakers inoperable. Beneath the boy's sporadic whistling, the vague din of casual muttering, and the tram's sharp rattles, a faint, monotonous voice loomed somewhere in the distance, clear and without all the slang structures and difficult intonations so familiar to spoken Calannic.

". . . Gardansa had no comment, except to state that his unknown assassins had obviously failed. The site of the wreckage was examined this morning by police investigators, and the remains of at least one body were discovered. Zared Dir, a local fisherman, was driving his motorbike along this cliff when the incident occurred. *. . . and I see dis great ball of fire on da cliffs, and da noise is someding awful, and den dis aircar droop down to da water and someding fall out, and den da car ekzplode into dousand pieces and. . . .*"

Mike hopped on the rollers as the tram drew to a halt, logging the Temple as his destination and allowing the slavebot's traffic computer to choose the most appropriate route. He found himself weaving around the main channel, narrowly avoiding the other rollers before being deposited in front of the Temple's wide, phallic arches, their peculiar decor never failing to entice newcomers. The receptionist was a young man with soft, ill-defined features. He handed wrist locators to a pair of girls who could not have been older than sixteen and then neatly unfolded their wad of drin as they hurried past him, down the staircase and to the lockers below.

"Welcome to the Temple of the Wrything Mermaid. You make visit us before?"

"Yeah. . . I'm bringing some dinner for a friend who works here."

"Employee?"

"Is that all right?"

"Is the employee name?"

"Vilya."

He shot Mike a strange glance. "I no think such person work here. You certain you have correct. . . ."

"Positive."

He tagged several keys on his computer console, smiling as he discovered the name.

"Ahh. . . she apparently is new, yes?"

"I don't think so."

He swiveled the console toward Mike. Vilya's picture sat in the upper left hand corner beside various employment statistics.

"She was hired yesterday?"

"No hired, she volunteer. Is custom to get job, you know. There is problem?"

Mike shrugged, uncertain.

"When yesterday?"

"You go, and you ask her. . . go in. No jump in water."

Mike hesitated, fear wrapping slowly around his mind like some blurry sort of hunch.

"Do you have a service entrance?"

"Yes, but is no need, you see. . . "

"All I really need to do is drop this off."

"You able to see her from the ledge, right that way."

"Well, it's actually sort of a surprise."

"Surprise?"

"Uhh. . . yeah, special occasion."

The receptionist's eyes inspected Mike with a stare both deliberate and curious.

"Is against rules."

"Well, if you don't have the authority. . . "

"No. . . of course I can, but. . . have we meet before?"

Mike smiled, "I don't think so. . . ."

"Yes. . . I see your face on three-vee. You are in entertainment?"

"Well," Mike shrugged, "some folks call it that. I prefer to think of it as organized gossip."

"You are the famous gatherer. Now I remember. Harrison, yes? I must have autograph. My sister reads all the scratch marks of you."

The employees' entrance was around the side of the structure, down a hallway which was itself nestled between a series of old maintenance supply rooms. The receptionist walked with a jaunty air, unlocking the door with a twirl of his wrist as though he were showing off for somebody. Inside, three employees worked the central office controlling water conditions, accounting for nightly revenues, and watching some sort of location monitor on the far wall while taking turns receiving calls and eating from a pile of stale pastries. A young woman in a black one-piece walked purposefully down the corridor carrying a large bottle in her left hand.

"Justin says Mister Antonius is asking for kirsch, and the tap's just about dry."

"Oh. . . real emergency, eh, Pauli?"

"Get some."

"Where?"

"Anywhere and fast. Also, Corlissa says her receiver's getting kind of funky."

"Pauli... here's another. Say to her someone is lost in gallery again."

"Sure."

"Miles... what are you doing down here?"

"I take breather. This gentleman asks to see new girl... ah... Vilya."

"Right this way."

Mike followed her back along the corridor. She slowed down to look at him again, an air of concern crossing her eyes.

"Have I seen you before?"

"Perhaps... I was here last night."

"Ah, then you must be the gentleman friend who brought Vilya here last night. I must admit, she certainly has a talent for the gravitics."

"Really...."

"I've never seen anyone take as swiftly to zero-gee as she has. And as for finding her way around the caverns... you know she followed some poor fool into the gallery last night. We thought we'd have to talk her out, but she brought him right out without so much as a moment's indecision."

"She's a good learner."

"Where did she meet you? You must be foreign."

Mike paused at a cross-section in the corridor, the right passage lined with machinery rooms and the left descending into a staircase.

"I'm visiting a friend. You sound as though you're from off-planet yourself.

She smiled, "My accent is that bad?"

"No. Not at all."

When it came to Calannic, Mike figured that there were two varieties, that which was theoretical and that which was actual. The same could be said of many other languages, except that with Calannic the discrepancy was particularly pronounced and often varied with respect to region. It was the natural result when a government failed to standardize education.

The corridor ended in two, broad-swinging doors. A cacophony of laughter and music could be heard seeping in from the other side, and Mike paused as the woman swept the doors open, peering from around her shoulder to orient himself with respect to the main entrance. She turned slightly when she realized that he wasn't following.

"You don't want to come in?"

"Bring her to me. It's a surprise."

The doors swept open again, and Mike fixed his eyes toward the main entrance and the wide corridor stretching to the receptionist's desk. A thin mist permeated the space between, diffuse streams of purple and amber bathing the small, round tables squatting between the large hexagonal planters. Dozens of people sat clothed and not-so-clothed, sipping their drinks and occasionally diving from the terrace, through a series of gravity nullifiers and into the pool below. Some jumped in teams, crashing into each other on the way down, using the fractures in the null-gravity to practice a little impromptu acrobatics to the delight of the spectators and even the light clutter of guards lining the walls.

Except one. She sat with her back against the wall, her long, white mane drenched within the thick vapor. A scowl crossed her lips as she watched the main entrance, unblinking, and Mike knew he'd seen her before.

The doors slapped shut after a moment's wavering, and Mike backed away toward the cross-section in the corridor. The short, cement staircase dropped to a green door, its paint peeling away in the humidity. A steam drenched window was built into its frame, clear beads of water cutting jagged lines in the fog. Mike stepped cautiously down the staircase and peered within. Long rows of lockers occupied the floor space, as both men and women changed into and out of their clothes. Some distance away, a man sat within eye shot of the room's foyer, one hand casually resting within the baggy pocket of his waterlogged coat.

Mike retreated up the staircase, reaching the cross-section as Vilya emerged between the wide, double doors. For a moment, she stood silent, a strange smile forming on her lips as she saw the takeout containers dangling limp from each of his hands.

"This is great surprise?"

"I'd figured you might be hungry...."

She approached him, still dripping from the pools. Mike let his hand fall to the back of his pants, gulping down a lump of air as the body pistol's fiberglass frame became vaguely tangible beneath the thin fabric of his shirt.

"That's far enough."

Vilya stopped, her smile giving way to a blank expression as she began to open her mouth. Mike drew the gun, cocking the barrel as he centered he aim.

"You scream, and I'll blow you away."

"What is matter?"

"Just tell me who's side you're on, Vil."

"What you are talking about?"

"No more bullshit. Don't even move."

Her eyes seemed to glaze over with a moment's uncertainty, and then she smiled, almost comically.

"This is Tizarian joke, yes?"

"No, this is *Isis* joke. Now you either tell me what the hell is going on, or I pull this trigger and send your brains flying in ten different directions."

The doors behind her suddenly swung open. It was Pauli, a sedentary expression glazed on her face, until she saw the gun.

"Guards!!!"

While he isn't writing verbose and convoluted sentences or studying for his MBA, Jim can be found gleefully stuffing bushels of ckicken-flavored Raman noodles down the bottomless esophagi of his merry band of Californian role-players. His story is the product of excessively poor planning and a great deal of hope.

What has been published here as chapter seven is actually chapter eleven as written originally by Jim. With any luck, The Harrison Chapters *will be continued next issue.*

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THE SECOND LAW AND I

by Josh Ronsen

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I was there from the beginning. It was hard work back in those days. The universe was structured very differently than it is today. I mean, there was this stuff back then, matter, just as there is the same stuff, matter, today. But what matter did in those days (they seemed to last forever) was quite different from what it does today. Now, there is what is called entropy. Order will become chaos. Disorder and randomness will creep into structured systems. For example, if you place a drop of ink into a glass of water, soon the ink will become dispersed throughout the entire glass. The system has changed from order (all the ink concentrated into one spot) to chaos, (the ink spread out in the water). This is just what you would expect to happen nowadays, but back then it was different. Entropy worked backwards at one time. This might seem strange or even inconceivable to someone who has only witnessed the universe as it is today, but it is true. Trust me, I was there. Particles scattered throughout a box (of course, we had no boxes) would aggregate into a corner. Order and structure would creep into complete chaos. Molecules and crystalline shapes would appear out of nowhere where before there was only a kinetic blur of free particles. You might doubt that this was ever the case, but consider how things must have been in the beginning[1]. In the beginning there was no order. There was no such thing. Recognizable shapes? Ridiculous, we would have said (perhaps as even now you are uttering the same word). All we knew were the particles flying about with nothing else to do. Protons, electrons, mesons, Z bosons (all four kinds), the happy photons, and the mournful gluons. Not to mention the peons, the zions, the neutrinos, the supremos. We had more particles flying about than we knew what to do with. Order would have been a very strange concept if any of us had thought of it then.

There were seven of us back then: myself, Ouphe, Tholus, Pyxidis, Yerba, Nanos, and the strange one, Reis. At first there was not much to do. We somehow discovered the sublime joys of counting, for there was nothing else we could think of doing, and we counted ourselves. We were quite amused to find that this number did not change after repeated summations. Or I should say that the number calculated by each of the two respective fractions of counters did not vary. There were those of us, myself and my followers, Tholus and Pyxidis, who thought that the counter, that is, the one doing the counting, should be included in the summation, and the other group, Ouphe and his cohorts, Yerba and Nanos, who emphatically insisted that the counter should be left out. The number we counted was seven, and the number they counted was six. This problem occupied us for a while, as only one of the two answers could be correct. There were either six or seven of us. It could not be both; then there would be thirteen of us, and nobody had counted that yet, so we couldn't seriously consider it (although for a while it was a theory). This holds the honor of being the first intellectual argument,[2] although I can find no reference to it here on the the many shelves of Eckhart Library. Today we would have applied for government research grants to fund experiments and trips to key observational sites (Hawaii) and then written lengthy reports using such words as nystagimorphic integration, patronumismatical, and isoglophigraphicalism and sent them to prestigious academic journals. But as this was before the universe was ordered in any sense of the word, we could do none of these. Reis, who was different from the beginning, never got involved in these numerational disputes, and if he ever counted, he never revealed his answer to us. Hence, as we lacked a scientific quorum to decide the correct representation of reality, we remained disputatious and unpublished.

When counting ourselves lost most of its appeal, we began to count other things. Those with keener senses of vision could count the number of electrons that passed them. The rest of us had to make due with counting slow moving neutrons or the magnetic monopoles that floated about. Reis wasn't interested in this either, and seemed only to care about watching various particle collisions, or pushing particles into magnetic fields and watching them spiral about. Counting monopoles wasn't as much fun as counting ourselves had been. For one thing, we were all counting different monopoles and couldn't really argue with others about these summations. There were no conflicting ideologies involved, no heated debates and brawls, no passion involved in this counting. But we could think of nothing else to do[3].

I was counting monopole 2,000,367 when it first happened. Next to my elbow a group of particles had suddenly collapsed into the shape of a large cube. Of course, we didn't call it

[1] I refer the Skeptical Reader to the article "Antichaos and Adaptation" by S. Kaufman (1991) for the basis of a theory which attempts to explain how complex nucleic acids formed on Earth by a process similar to what I am describing.

[2] Although there exists evidence of great intellectual turmoil before the universe came into being. The strongest such evidence is the so called *fine structure constant*, which plays an important role in atomic physics. It is roughly equal to 1/137. Such a bizarre number, I feel, could only have been arbitrated by a committee of the worst sort.

[3] The concept of Why had not yet been invented, and hence many important metaphysical and philosophical diatribes were unavailable to us.

a cube, as we had never seen one before. By large I mean about a couple of centimeters. This might not sound large to you, but up until that time we had only been dealing with subatomic particles, so small we could barely see them. The cube reflected photons in a strange way, producing shimmering, swirling patterns on its sides.

This event, the formation of the cube, took us all by surprise. Who could have expected it? It took us a while to figure out what had happened. We were sure that we hadn't been overlooking this object all this time. But that meant it was new. How did it form? What made it form here? As we were pondering these and other questions, another object, a tetraroid crystal, formed right before our eyes. Nanos, who had keen eyes, reported that he saw countless numbers of protons and electrons coming together to form this new shape.

To say the least, we were astounded by these developments. They were so different from what we had known before. We couldn't really ascertain the shapes of the particles around us, even to Nanos they looked just like points. And these new objects were so unlike our nebulous forms. They were so smooth, so perfect, so beautiful.

We didn't have to wait long before more forms appeared, mostly cubes, but also many other solids: hexaphonigons, fullerines, rhododendrigons. This became our primary source of entertainment, watching the objects form, or counting the different types of objects, or pushing like objects together into small spherical piles. This was more exciting and enjoyable than anything we had known before. The joy of seeing a new shape, one that had never been seen before, appear before one's eyes is a joy I cannot begin to describe. Although we were all greatly excited about the multitude of creation about us, it was Reis who was most fascinated by all of this. Never before had we seen him without an expression of bored indifference. Now, he was obsessed with observing all the newness around him.

We were all more than satisfied with our new surroundings. For once there was actually something to do. How could we have magined the danger that we were in? We didn't realize our predicament until it was almost too late for us to do anything. The shapes kept forming even when it was apparent that there were quite enough of them. By the time the shapes had blocked out about 75% of the outside universe from out view (not that there was anything to see, just a uniform glow of photons), things were getting very cramped where we were. It was still a small universe, about the size of Nebraska (but not as flat). It was clear that soon we would be crushed by all of the opalescent objects. When we first realized this, we thought that we could just push the objects away from us. But when we tried to do this, we found to our dismay that the shapes slowly drifted back towards us. All of the objects around us had created a rather sizeable gravitational field, and we were at it's center. We obviously did not have the strength to accelerate the objects to a sufficient escape velocity to rid ourselves of them, although we did try (to this day my arm is still sore). The gravitational field also prevented us from escaping to a volume where there were less crowded conditions.

You might wonder where our problem came from. There was plenty of room in the universe before the shapes began forming, why was there a problem now? We also wondered this for sometime. The shapes formed from subatomic particles, which were small, so if a million particles came together to form a rhumbahedron, it would be the size of a million particles, right? This is what we naively thought. After observing enough of these condensations, we were able to figure out exactly what happened. You would agree that a proton is very small, and an electron smaller still, just a speck! But when they come together to form an atom, the atom is much larger than either of the two constituent particles. Even though the volume inclosed by the atom is enough to contain about a million protons, it only contains one. This extra space is empty, as the electron is in an orbit far (by these standards) from the proton. Are you surprised that most of matter isn't? This was quite a strange discovery for us. The same thing happened with these crystalline shapes, except to a greater extent. So although there was basically the same amount of matter around us, it was now in a new form that occupied a much larger volume.

These new advances in our knowledge did little to comfort us in our present situation. We still had no way of dealing with our problem, which was now becoming desperate. We could see little of the outside universe, being incased in an ever growing shell of these objects. We had managed to push most of the crystals away from the seven of us, forming a small cavity for us to exist. Still more and more of the shapes formed around us. We were doomed.

It was in a fit of rage that I accidentally found the solution to our problems. We had had so little genuine intellectual exercise in our existence that those of you who have been paying attention probably thought of it long ago. I reached out and grabbed two cubes and smashed them together. They collided in a flash of photons and disassembled into their constituent protons and electrons, which were now free from their carngormatic prison.

If our problem was small particles coming together to form collections of particles that filled a larger volume than the sum of the original particles, surely the answer was to take apart the objects into their component forms.

I had only to wordlessly demonstrate this to the others for them to catch onto the idea. They all began to reach for the nearest objects. All except for Reis. He seemed to be horrified at the idea of destroying the crystalline shapes. We had to prod him to get him to join in our efforts. Finally, he gave in and began to smash the things apart, although without much enthusiasm.

After we all had begun breaking the solids, I felt sure that we were out of danger, but I had overlooked two facts. One; after we smashed a crystal, its component parts would fly off and condense into another shape. Two; there were so many of the shapes that we could barely keep up with destroying those newly formed, much less any of the multitude around us.

Existence became for us a miserable experience, each moment spent smashing everything within reach. Five of us would be awake at any one time, leaving two to restless sleep, which we had never needed before, never having had to physically

exert ourselves. The routine was awful; grab the nearest two crystals and smash them. Then the next two. And then the next two.

I cannot tell you how long our misery went on (we had no clocks), but it seemed like an eternity. I can only tell you that we smashed hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of these shapes. How wretched we all were. It seemed like we were doomed to carry out this Sisyphantic task forever. We were now completely cut off from the outside universe, the crystals forming a dense shell around us, like an egg. And we, the helpless chicks that we were, were without hope.

It was by chance that I looked up from the two tetrahedrons that I was smashing to Reis, and what I saw horrified me. Instead of breaking the crystals apart, he was serenely putting them together, oblivious to the doom around him. He had stacked two cubes on top of a agonadron and had smeared a handful of mesons around it for cohesion. He was reaching for a rhombic dodecahedron when I rushed over and smacked him across the face. What was he trying to do, I yelled, let us all be crushed? I reached to smash his design, but he, being the wily sort that he was, snatched it out of my grasp and without a word went to the far end of our remaining space, behind a large wall of crystals where we could not see him. I instinctively started to follow him, but then I thought better of it. Why waste time trying to get him to work. If he wants to get crushed, let him. To survive, I would have to work.

I woke up Yerba and Tholus and explained the situation to them as best as I could. There was not much that we could do. Tholus, being naturally violent, suggested that we get Reis and beat the crap out of him. It was the consensus of the others that this was a Good Thing To Do, but my cooler head prevailed and I convinced everyone to get back to work. We couldn't force Reis to survive, and already he was completely sealed off from us. We were sure that he was no longer alive, crushed by his own foolishness. Soon, I cautioned, a similar fate would befall us.

We were now in a panicked, feverish state. It seemed like there was no way for us to win. We were all exhausted, and there was even less space left for us to move around in. We knew the end was near when the seven of us, six of us, were forced back to back to back, each taking care of the shapes that coalesced right in front. We were sardines in a can. Modern Cosmologists will talk about The Big Crunch, but they have no idea how it feels to have the universe, the entire universe, to close in on them.

Just when we thought that there was no use in trying, when we had given up all hope, when we had no more strength left to fight, when the shapes were forming in our very ears, something unexpected happened. The shapes that composed the wall in front of me began to to quiver. Soon a number of the crystals burst from the wall, forming quite a large hole. From this hole emerged...a...it was...what was it? If I had thought that the first cube that I saw looked weird, it was nothing compared to this. There were two arrays of cubes parallel to each other, each about about twelve by twelve cubes by one thick. The arrays were separated by about ten cube lengths. On the side facing me, there was a row of tetrahedrons, like teeth, attached to each array so that they faced forwards. On the farther side was a mass of shapes and particles which produced magnetic fields. These fields pushed the two arrays together, smashing what ever was in between them. Then the fields switched polarity and separated the arrays. The machine turned to my left and began crunching all of the myriad objects that formed the wall closest to us. It could crush a hundred objects during the time it took us to reach for two. The others had by now seen this, and had stopped to stare dumbfounded at this thing, this smasher. How could objects and particles come together so perfectly to form such a thing, a thing that seemed to have the sole purpose of saving us?

The answer was standing majestically behind it: Reis. He stood there observing his creation, making sure that it was functioning correctly. He placed a few monopoles in to a pion funnel in back (his smasher ran on monopoles). Then he turned without giving us so much as a glance and started to tinker with some particles. We did not care; we were saved. Already the smasher had smashed many of the objects and things were much less crowded. Soon we were able to see the universe outside of our prison. The smasher not only broke the objects apart, but it also gathered together the constituent particles, ejecting them behind it at a great velocity, so there would not be a high concentration of particles floating about. This change in mass distribution had an almost immediate effect on us. Now that the matter around us was being dispersed by the smasher, we were no longer trapped in a gravitational well. We began to drift apart, each of us going in a different direction. Of course, we could have struggled to remain together, but we did not have the strength left after our ordeal to do so. I began to go to sleep, and I could see the others doing the same. We did not even have the strength to wave goodbye to each other as we drifted apart. The last thing I remember seeing is Reis, trying to get an electron to orbit a proton as the smasher continued to destroy the last of the dreaded objects. He's mad, I thought, he'll never get such a wily and tenacious particle like an electron to stay bound to a proton. Then I lost consciousness.

When I woke I was far from my companions; I could not even see them. How long had I been asleep? Quite a while, I guessed. The universe had greatly expanded in my slumber, and the uniform glow of photons was much dimmer than I had remembered it. There was really nothing around me. I was alone.

I have not seen any of the other six since that time. I wonder where they are. I wonder if they watched with awe as I did at the formation of stars, galaxies, life, the Federal Money Reserve. How much I would like to see my former companions in these stale times. I would especially like to see Ouphe, and finally, now that we both know so much more about the world, point out to him that he was wrong and I right; the counter is included in the summation. He would look at me, after inticipating and dreading this moment for years, and say something along the lines of "I always said that," or "Why are you telling me?" or even brazenly 'Just like I told you when we were young." However, he would know that he was beaten, and that would

be enough for me. With that matter settled, we would lean back in our armchairs, light up cigarettes, and wonder how much of the order that we see around us is due to Reis, the Creator.

Josh Ronsen hails from the lonely moors of Austin, TX. There, he developed his writing style, which has been described as "a male Aldous Huxley, but with more hair." Upon arrival to the University of Chicago, he realized he had not even begun to approach the heights of underacheiving. He began writing short stories, because the strict limitations of the format demanded discipline and only a couple sheets of paper. He writes stories with multiple endings, ". . . to give the people a sense of controlling the environment that forms their dreams and way of thinking, and 'cuz I really liked those Choose-Your-Own-Way books." When not trying to get friends to write glowing assessments of his life, he keeps his electronic equipment in a state of constant repair, dreaming of having ". . . a truly cool jam session with Jeff Beck, the true talent to come out of the Yardbirds."

The Second Law And I *is a tribute to the Italian writer Italo Calvino, who died in 1985 (a year after the death of Cortazar, and a year before the demise of Borges and Eliade). Calvino wrote more than a couple of stories which involved an unreliable narrator reflecting upon improbable or impossible events (such as being the last dinosaur, or playing marbles with newly formed Hydrogen atoms created by the expansion of the universe). "The Second Law And I" attemps to emulate Calvino's whimsical style and insight.*

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The Magazine of the *Dargon* Project Contact: Dafydd *white@duvm.BITNET*

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The Journal of the Gamers' Guild of UCR Contact: *jimv@ucrmath.ucr.edu*
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Thank you, thank you very much