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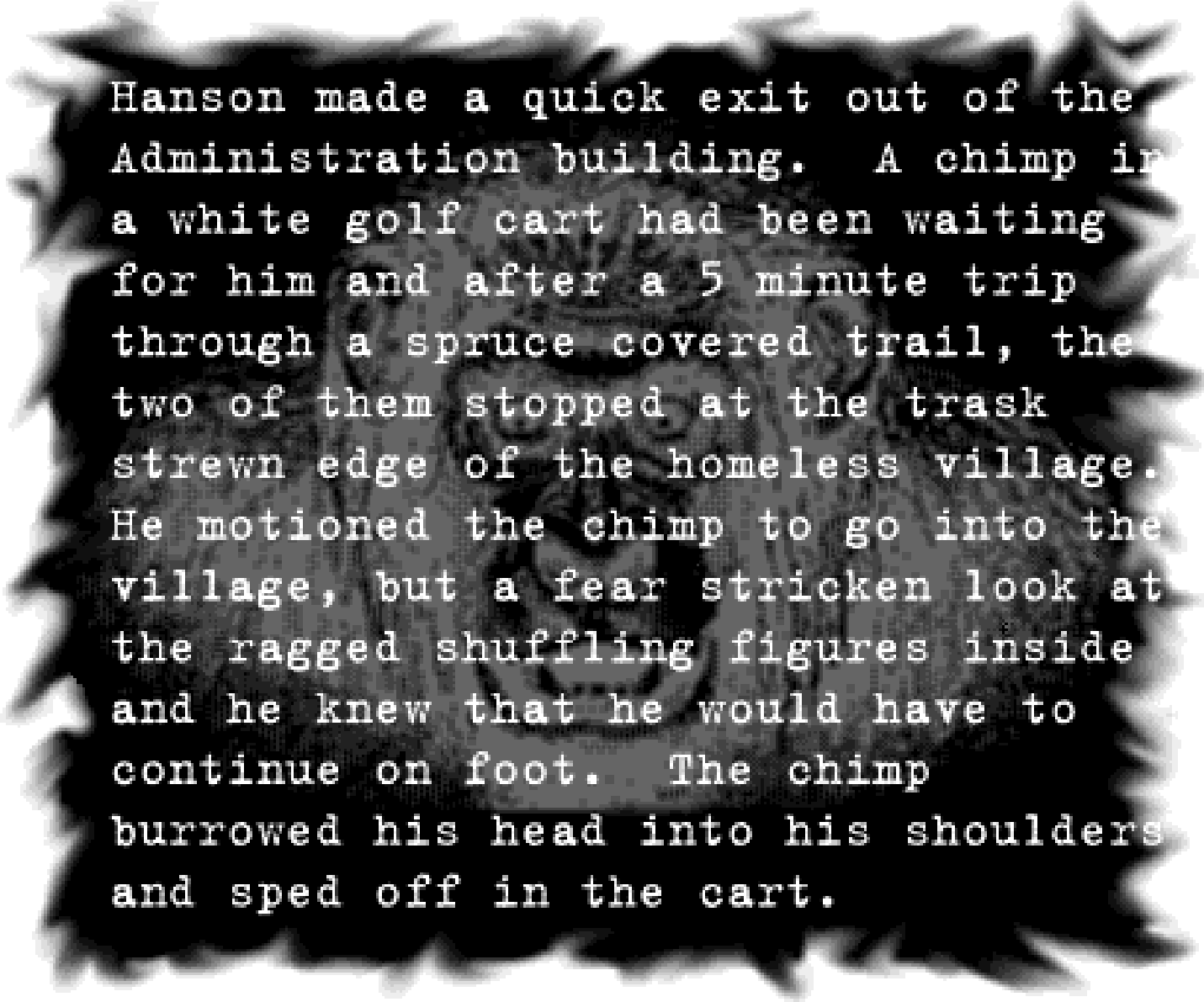

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Looking Ahead

Daniel K. Appelquist

Well, I just got back from Internet World 93 in New York City. Many thanks to Tony Abbott and Meckler Corporation for arranging for my free ticket. I have to say, however, that I haven't come away from the conference with any bold new realizations about the direction of Quanta or electronic publishing. The main question people at the conference seemed to be asking about the Internet was "Well, what have we got here?" Unfortunately, the answer at this point seems to be "Uh… We don't really know." People are unsure how to proceed, unsure what the immediate future will bring for the Internet. American politicians are talking about "information super-highways," corporations are becoming increasingly Net-aware, commercialization of the Internet seems imminent and inevitable. Yet those who already inhabit the Internet seem determined to hold on to what they have, and what they have is mostly free services and information. It's a tricky balance.

I attended one session on copyright issues which was fairly interesting. One of the speakers' point of view was that the Internet needs to be "civilized" so that it will be more attractive to business interests. They pointed out that traditional ways of doing business, and traditional ways of publishing simply don't work on the Internet. My reaction to this went something like this: The Internet, as it exists right now, is a generic information delivery and access system. The metaphor for document publishing on this system should take full advantage of the system, and not rely on outdated concepts propitiated by and originating in the print publishing world. One speaker at this session railed against the idea of authors retaining the copyrights to their own works. What's up with that? Why is it so bad for authors to retain copyright on their own work? We need to re-examine the commodity-based view we have of publishing (something I believe Mike Goodwin of the EFF had been pushing earlier in the session, although I didn't catch his talk). If the Internet does not lend itself to traditional publishing, perhaps it is traditional publishing which needs to change and not the Internet.

Now, I'm not saying that the freely distributed journal should be the model for Internet publishing. In fact, many models were suggested for revenue-generating publishing at the conference. One of these, proposed by Brad Templeton of Clarinet, consisted of a fiction database, where, for a monthly charge, users could connect and read all the fiction they wanted. The system would keep track of how many users had read which pieces, and remunerate the authors of those pieces accordingly. This seemed to me like an extremely elegant solution for that type of revenue-based publishing. Many other models were also suggested, all of them interesting and worth thinking about.

An interesting model that's already being pioneered is that of *Unit Circle*, published by Kevin Goldsmith (see ad. on page 20). *Unit Circle* publishes a print version, which one can subscribe to for a fee, and also publishes a PostScript electronic version, which is free. Larger magazines, like *Wired*, are trying this hybrid format out on a much larger scale (although *Wired* only publishes in ASCII text form electronically).

My point, though, is that both models of publishing (revenue generating and free journals like *Quanta* and *Intertext*) can exist simultaneously. I think the real interesting areas in the next few years will be in hybrid, quasi-electronic, forms of publishing, and in Internet publishing via hypertext systems such as Mosaic. By the way, this issue of Quanta will be available on Mosaic in hypertext form in the near future. The plan is for future issues to be made available this way as well. I'll be sending out a letter with information on that as soon as things materialize.

The future of electronic publishing is still mirky however, as mirky as the future of the Internet itself. I'm convinced something good will come of it. Electronic publishing has not yet come of age, but we're working on it.

We've got a great issue for you this month. My friend Jason Snell is back with a new one "Different Circumstances." As a side note, although Jason and I have been called "friends" for a while by the authors of various publications, we actually just met recently when I travelled to California to visit friends and drop in on Worldcon.

We've also got continuations of three serials, and a new piece from A.Y. Tanaka that's likely to amuse… or was that confuse? At any rate, enjoy!

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Excerpts from *Earth Rhetoric*

(203rd. ed.)

A.Y Tanaka

From the Introductory Exhortation:

Charting the rhetorical terrain of most planets is a relatively straightforward endeavor. Certain patterns of expression are used in certain standard situations for certain fairly discernible ends. For rhetoric is, after all, the use of language to produce results. But Earth stands alone in the subtlety and obscurity of its rhetorical techniques…

(From Section 7.3) The phenomenon discussed in this section reflects the continuing underground [figure of speech] resistance to the written word throughout human history, and the chronic re-emergence of the vocal apparatus as a medium of self-expression, analogous to the objectively purposeless use of comparable organs in tour-pacing, key action (musical/alpha-numerical) and sex (see note 7). We have chosen Benedictine Recapitulation as our term for this, not for religious reasons nor for its implications in the sphere of food and drink, but because prominent examples – remnants of the earlier oral tradition – first appear in unrefined form in the quaintly-apocalyptic Book of the Wars of Baruch (=Benedict). In the second chapter, Jorak (son of Nathan? son of Julian?), after long brooding in his tent, sends for Xergorianobis, tending flock on Mt. Negus near Kiryat ha-Nabim.

Xergorianobis: "What service, my captain?"

"Of weight, my keeper of flocks. Listen well."

"I listen."

"Ride, with no sign of haste (to confound the spies) to Jorak my namesake. Bid him, thrice on our name and thrice on the stones of prophecy, join his with ours at Megan Hill before the dawn, thence to surprise the camp of Rurik of Khoth, who has long done us ill. Choose your fleece well, my keeper of flocks, for the night is cold, and muzzle your ass in Sarmatia's manner, for strong teeth are rare. Go now."

Xergorianobis rides as bidden and shortly reaches the tent of the younger (we assume) Jorak (son of Eben? son of Obed?) but is confronted by Jorak's ensign, who demands to know why his captain must be disturbed. Xergorianobis:

"I tell. Listen."

"I listen."

Xergorianobis: "Jorak my captain, after long brooding in his tent, sent for this humble messenger, long tending flock on Mt. Negus near Kiryat ha-Nabim. 'What service, my captain?' 'Of weight, my keeper of flocks. Listen.' I listened. 'Ride,' he said, 'with no sign of haste (to confound the spies) to Jorak my namesake. Bid him, thrice on our name and thrice on the stones of prophecy, join his with ours at Megan Hill before the dawn, thence to surprise the camp of Rurik of Khoth, who has long done us ill. Choose your fleece well, my keeper of flocks, for the night is cold, and muzzle your ass in Sarmatia's manner, for strong teeth are rare.' Thus he spoke, then bade me go." Impressed, the ensign wakes his captain. "My captain, a keeper of flocks brings weight. Tending flock on Mt. Negus near Kiryat ha-Nabim was he, when Jorak his captain, after long brooding in his tent, sent for him. 'What service, my captain?' he spoke, and Jorak answered, 'Of weight, my keeper of flocks. Listen.' He listened. 'Ride,' he said, 'with no sign of haste (to confound the spies) to Jorak my namesake. Bid him, thrice on our name and thrice on the stones of prophecy, join his with ours at Megan Hill before the dawn, thence to surprise the camp of Rurik of Khoth, who has long done us ill.' He further bade him choose his fleece well, for the night was cold, as it still is, and to muzzle his ass in Sarmatia's manner, for strong teeth are rare. Thus he spoke, then bade him go."

For rhetoric is, after all, the use of language to produce results. But Earth stands alone in the subtlety and obscurity of its rhetorical techniques…

Fully awake, the younger Jorak orders Xergorianobis in.

"Speak, keeper of flocks."

"I speak. Listen."

"I listen."

"Sire, as rule dictates, tending flock on Mt. Negus near Kiryat ha-Nabim was I, when my captain, the Jorak of origin, after long brooding in his tent, sent for this humble messenger. I came. 'What service, my captain?' 'Of weight, my keeper of flocks. Listen.' I listened. 'Ride,' he said, 'with no sign of haste (to confound the spies) to Jorak my namesake…'"

The younger Jorak thereupon – *see Appendix XVII for the full text.*

This and other portions of the Book of the Wars of Baruch (=Benedict) were taken down [figure of speech] much too faithfully from one of the unlettered public storytellers of the time, who may have suspected his listeners had all the time in the world [figure of speech]. How different, how shorter, the written text might have been had the storyteller sensed bad weather approaching, or enemy troops, or an impatience among his hearers, or was himself hungry or tired.

Today, more than a few humans retain these extensive recapitulatory powers. Examples (condensed):

(a) "So my bless-mom told me to shut up and get out of bed and stick on my shoes, who cares which ones, and come on over here and pester you to let me have an extra chair – the hoity-toity one if you know what's good for you – because what the hell [figure of speech] you never get company anyway with the crap you serve and you won't miss it and besides Uncle Dormus and Aunt Shelly are coming for a visit but mom calls it an inspection and the cat scratched up the other chair we got and Mom says Aunt Shelly won't sit on the chair from the kitchen because she's stuck up [figure of speech] and expects us to bend over backwards…

(b) "Let's see now, the flag was up so I got dressed and went out and walked over to the mailbox and got the mail and walked back and sat down and finished up the coffee and the cream bun and started to snip open the mail and sure enough right on top was this here long-awaited just-can't-keep-my-pants-on annual letter from Maude the church secretary asking what my tithing plans are for this year so they can start in fixing the plumbing in the parsonage. She and the committee, I guess which is George, Bibi and Rheinhardt recommend I plunk down five dollars flat every Sunday for fifty weeks (they won't make a fuss about my two weeks with Bess and Joe in Portland) which comes out to just about two-hundred-fifty a year. That's a dollar a week more than they wanted last year – four dollars a week for fifty weeks (they didn't make a fuss about my two weeks with Bess and Joe in San Francisco) which comes out – came out, that is – to… well, just about two-hundred. That's a dollar a week more than they wanted the year before – three dollars a week for fifty weeks (they didn't make a fuss about my two weeks with Bess and Joe at Ft. Drum) which comes out – came out, that is – to one-fifty for that year. That's a dollar more…"

(c) "O-dokie, sure, I know, I know, it's two-thirty already but I can't get there yet 'cause the Roach broke down at the ingress to E-62, the tricky one between 107 and 130 near the VTM building (local's entrance) and the Montessori school – you can see it from the Dewer's statue if you sight it just right. So the slope climbs real steep there, 'prox seven degrees above code – eight, in fact near the lamp tower, says the [unclear]. The engine (it's a Milton-cyl job, just tuned a month ago) starts to flutter, so I say to myself just needs more bean soup, so I press the pad and instead of vroom-vroom I get ~Eg~=~E~ and then fdzz. Then a 620 slides up behind me, growling cyls, and a 512 behind him, and a Mickle Hardy behind him, and a Shadrack 22 behind him (her, really), and then a Montego Pariah, all hunkered up, than a…"

What triggers these transports? Neither content nor circumstance give us a clue. Sj's answer – "Anything" – may be the one. In example (a) the child, at another time of day or under a cloudier or sunnier sky, or within the sound-reach of alternate neighborhood bird species, might have settled for, "I want your chair and I'll hold my breath till you give me it." In (b) the church member might have hammered a brief note to the church door: "Enough's enough; indoor plumbing's overrated." In (c) the driver of the failed Roach might have just muttered, "Scratch it for today" and slouched back toward the ingress. The human possessing or possessed by this talent rarely monitors the episode as it takes place nor recalls much of it afterwards. The rare subject who recalls it fully finds in it nothing out of the ordinary. We've lost data on this phenomenon in the less advanced jurisdictions. Mh fears for the safety of subjects enclaved where Government is understandably but unnecessarily venerated. The subject's unpredictable and barely repressible Benedictine faculty is a vocal, if unintentioned, reminder of humanity's pre-rule past. Sn, less fearful, points out the overwhelmingly non- controversial nature of the material elicited during these episodes and has higher hopes for the subject's fate. Mh responds that it is not the material that endangers, but the performance itself, easily taken as a declaration of the subject's freedom to expound upon whatever strikes his fancy [figure of speech]. To bystanders and undercover police – the potential witnesses at the trial – it would be distressingly impious.

For Sn, most administrators were not born yesterday [figure of speech], are not so naive as to confuse form and substance. A compassionate administrator may even encourage irrelevant superficial discourse _ distract the subject and his fellow citizens from more frustrating matters.

But for Mh, most administrators are not so bull-headed [figure of speech] as to arbitrarily distinguish form and substance; for they, as we, are fully aware form predetermines substance, facilitates it, limits it and, for most of them, is it. She cautions us with a quaint but valid analogy: The Big Roach hauling fertilizer this trip, may next trip (once aired out) be hauling anti-rule printouts; and next trip, anti-rule type-D Indefatigables.

(From Section 9.02)

Initially troublesome, but to which we've slowly adjusted, is the Spiked Moat. Examples include (a) through (f) with others available through source #326:

(a) Art thou not Simon? "Nay, Lord… rather, yes indeed."

(b) Do YOU want back the ten guineas I borrowed? "Hell no – Shut my mouth, sure I do."

(c) That's a real nice fence YOU painted there. "Who me? I never painted any… oh, thanks."

(d) You've seen George? "I don't know any George. Wait, there he is."

(e) What do YOU get when YOU cross a monkeY with a chicken? "Hey, I never touched that chicken."

(f) Where's Chicago? "I didn't take it."

When the inquirer (and few can resist, can we?) ventures a comment on this phenomenon, the subject denies the Moat exists. One, more open than most, explained, "If something's not, it's not. What's the fuss?" Another answered simply, "Not true."

The rationalia, for Fp, have to do with psycho-analytically elucidible mechanisms. Ao sees evidence of integrated media-opaque stimulus/response patterns (habitual tendencies III through VI) since most queries directed to humans do seem to elicit – often to require – a negative response, for self-preservation ("I didn't do it") or an occasional truth ("I didn't do it").

(From Section 9.10) Our local assistant offered the term Blindsiding for this phenomenon. It originally described a technique often used, and often advised against, in the hunting of the larger animals. Example:

How about Tuesday?

"Out of the question."

So what do YOU suggest?

"How about Tuesday?"

Rationalia: Bk, as usual, is understanding [figure of speech], sees the subject hard of hearing or a bit forgetful. But Km sees the subject consciously and cleverly attempting to disconcert an equal, to render him (rarely her) in some subtle way subservient. The subject gathers virtue rank as (a) the one who denies, (b) the one who taketh away and giveth, (c) the one who redeems false starts, (d) the one who initiates, and, if done right [figure of speech], (e) the one who creates. Sadly, as with all those exalted by the befuddlement of their fellows, the subject is never at peace. His tenure depends on the extent his ploy is recog-

nized, tolerated – and imitated. He will be often heard in the shadows desperately rehearsing new dialogues: How about Wednesday? "Out of the question." How about Chicago? "Out of the question." How about a cream bun? "Out of the question." So what do YOU suggest? "How about…"

(From Section 13.8)

The typical subject ("perpetrator" is Yt's term) of Didactic Incontinence is a parent or concerned other (what constitutes a "concerned" other is purposely vague) who broadcasts – without charge, surprisingly – advice, instruction and summary exegesis in fields broad and narrow, in contexts pressing and relaxed, to children of whatever age and to unproved adults. (What constitutes a "proved" adult is purposely vague.)

No explicit vanity here; the subject shuns the obvious ego-centered patterns of "I say/believe/think/suggest, strongly advise," to choose the other-directed patterns of "You ought to, You'd better, Why don't/didn't/haven't you, Do it this way, Don't do it this way, Don't forget to, Don't you dare, Don't."

Before we selected our term for this phenomenon we hovered about and were tempted by a variety of others, some inexcusably gross and vituperative. We shocked ourselves, for we'd never fully realized how close we lie to those negative forces from which we claim to stand aloof [figure of speech]. Among the less offensive were Eternal Vigilance, Didactic Apotheosis, Tutorial Entropy and the neo-Latin Didacticismo a Codazo Limpio, somewhat difficult but not impossible to translate: a, "thus, in the manner of"; codo, "elbow"; -azo, a suffix denoting a blow or thrust; limpio, "clean" and by semantic extension, swift and kinetically elegant. The evocation is of a scholar, a teacher, a molder of minds, vigorously elbowing his/her way through a mob.

So great the visceral distress we experienced preparing this section, we chose to forego specific examples. Even a harmless bit of evidence such as "Don't get your feet wet," heard at a local's restricted beach not too many years ago, proved strangely disturbing to us. Those whom misfortune has ever placed on the receiving end [figure of speech] of this theoretically harmless, potentially valuable but distressingly trying phenomenon will readily understand our reluctance. Those ignorant of such experience are truly blessed, in the stellar as well as the terrestrial sense. May their decline be as pleasant as their youth.

We nevertheless attempt to list some of the possible rationalia driving the subject:

(a) "To show I care."
(b) "So if anything goes wrong, I'm covered."
(c) "Someone's got to slap some order on this chaos."
(d) "It's good for you."
(e) "Human culture is transmitted through education, from the old to the young. Don't you know that?"
(f) "Through observation and experience I've found this the most effective means of functioning in society and of being recognized by it."
(g) "Please – I'm getting dizzy – please stop the merry-go-round."

(From Section 21.04)

The Friendly Sparrow(s) ought not be classed with Didactic Incontinence; many understandably take offense. The original subjects were attested to in The Tale of Peter Rabbit by Beatrix Potter, an insightful witness of the period. Trespassing in McGregor's garden [figure of speech?] Peter stumbles into a gooseberry net and is caught therein by the large brass buttons on his jacket – a blue one, rather new. He sobs, helpless should McGregor come this way, but is overheard by some friendly sparrows, who fly down to him and implore him to exert himself. Mr. McGregor comes ever closer, but Peter wriggles out just in time, loosing his jacket. We've already seen him lose one shoe amongst the cabbages, another amongst the potatoes. Modern examples (source #180) include:

(a) Rabbit, on release from prison: "Jesus [figure of speech?], the screws in that pen don't let up." Sparrow: "Next time choose your detention center with more care."
(b) Rabbit: "Ever since I lost my job I've had these lard-and-cheese patties almost every night, and it's getting to me." Sparrow: "Don't get in a rut. lobster two-three times a week."

The rationalia, for all but Lj, is self-evident.

(From Section 28.01)

The Sleeping Guru. The subject in this case is the unexpressive (class IV?) query-receiver responding with equal enthusiasm ("Hmm"/"Mmh"/"Mhm") to both ambiential and substantive queries. (Ambiential: "So I K-Bosched him, wouldn't you?" "Like, you know, things get uremic, know what I mean?" Substantive: "Are you in tune with Ishida's discussion of Weber's thesis?")

Rationalia:

(a) The subject (i) lacks familiarity with the material discussed or with the speaker's perhaps extra/other-terrestrial mode of presentation; (ii) suffers from a defective appreciation of the complementary roles of ambience and substance in successful communication; (iii) suffers from a unique, perhaps defective, personal interpretation of reality.
(b) The subject has simply chosen not to pay attention, under the assumption (information from an outside source) that the speaker has been rated predisposition/prelude-to-rebellion, or otherwise not worth listening to. Should this be the case, the recommended option for the neglected speaker is to contact that outside source through a source of one's own, to suggest by means of bribery, threats or new (not necessarily valid) information that the original advice to the subject be modified.

(From Section 31.06)

The Smoke Alarm is a loud, unrelenting, infinitely recyclable request/demand for X's presence; for example, Mac! Mac! Mac! Or, in an effort to get at the "real" Mac: Maxwell! Maxwell! Maxwell! The subject is not necessarily a child, rarely an invalid. He calls from the next berm or from the other end of the fort (Mac! Mac! Mac!) or from the fort to the field or from the fort to the Roach or from the Roach to the fort or the field or from the field to the Roach (Mac! Mac! Mac!) or from one end of the field to the other until "Mac" reaches him and by his presence shuts him off.

Although Mac hears the subject clearly enough, the subject hears Mac not at all, whatever the volume, intensity, tone, pitch or fervor of Mac's answering call, cry, yell, scream, shout, wail, bellow, bleat or ultimate mutter, be it "Yes?" or "Yes!" or "O-dokie, I'm coming" or "Hold your horses [figure of speech]" or "All right, all right, shut up already" or "Temper yourself before a body calls Public Safety" or "Damn your hide, this better be good."

By Lk's analysis, the subject hears no

Mac, though everyone else does, because his psycho-aural diagram has no Y-juncture to pre-route and encapsulate an intermedial response. Even so, given the intra-cranial backlog entailed, any received response would likely be misread by the subject as (a) Mac's feeble/shameful/cunning excuse for dawdling, or (b) a cheap conspiratorial substitute for the "real" Mac. (Unusual, this example of reality associated with the person/thing itself rather than with his/her/its more durable and reproducible photo/holo/audio image.)

Kq, on the other hand [figure of speech], claims the hear-no-Mac phenomenon derives from the stressed freq/ampl sines of the subject's own voice unrolling an endosonic barrier impervious to what are perceived as xeno-sonic transmissions.

Thunderspeak takes this further. The subject performs under conditions most consider hostile to the human voice. We assume a method to his madness [figure of speech], some unfulfilled agenda, never revealed. The subject enthusiastically discusses life and art, loyalty and so on, oblivious to thunder, howling winds, the slapping of branches against the sides of the house, the spray of cold rain through the open window, the roar of a passing bi-train, the rumble of a nearby earthquake, the distraction of a murder in the room, even the murder of the only listener.

Aquaphilia is a variant of this. The subject shows measurable (on the MZD scale) discomfort, in both speaking and listening modes, if unable (for lack of access, say, or some mechanical inefficiency) to trigger the nearest water tap. In m-level areas this occurs in about 42% of those studied. The preferences are: kitchen sink, 26%; dishwasher, 7%, clotheswasher, 9%; bathroom sink, 11.5%; tub/shower, 16.5%; toilet flush, 22%; outside faucet, 8%. For pace-changing, the subject may trigger the radio (4%), the video (11%), the Harmonium (7%), the food resolver (9%), the Roach engine (10%), or unhook the telephone to release the dial tone (17%). [Figures adjusted for use of two or more items at the same time.]

(From Section 31.12)

An apparent contradiction to the active mnemonism discussed elsewhere is the tendency to perversely forget or maliciously withhold the local codes. Our researcher was victimized by this (having stumbled into it unprepared) concluding a data-interview with an otherwise good-natured kiosk dweller. The informant made no attempt to formally terminate the interview, thereby preventing the researcher from leaving (formulaic restraint); in effect, wasting his valuable time. The kiosker was evidently toying with him [figure of speech], teasing him with false codes such as "O-dokie, fella, that's it for now," "Well, hope it's what you wanted," "Good luck on your work, whatever it is," "O-dokie, time's up," "Take care now, watch that head-beam going out," "On your way, then," "You'd better get home before it rains – rust, you know." Our researcher's strain was great, kept thus in limbo [figure of speech] until the kiosk dweller released him at last with the correct form, "It is finished."

For Ln, this phenomenon's Earth-role is less obvious than our researcher, through us, has suggested. Her rationalia appear illogical.

(From Section 31.21)

The Whynot. In the semi-jurisdictions, rather than ask "Have you cleansed the Roach today?" the subject asks, "Why haven't you cleansed the Roach today?" or the more compassionate "Why weren't you able to cleanse the Roach today?" where the subject in neither case has even seen the Roach in question. Bf adds, "Nor intends to see it, either, if in fact it exists – well, 'exists' as other than a false but useful concept." (See Lk et al. on the legend of the Joneses.)

Purveyors of rationalia share general agreement on the theme: roughly, Knowing YOU, I don't expect much. This may be so where the Whynot is chosen from a pool of options, the others being perhaps: (ii) "Have you cleansed it?" (iii) "I just glimpsed the Roach and it's still uncleansed." (iv) "It seems that after you cleansed it, some clown [figure of speech] rolled by and messed it up again." But what to make of a venue where humans use the Whynot consistently? Addressed with equal vigor to friends/enemies, journeymen/bunglers, experts/novices alike.

With no choice involved, there are no relevant rationalia. We've in this case a historical development, comparable to those which led to such formulae as "Hi there, whatchadoin?" where any damn fool [figure of speech] can see what you're doing, or "Ah, 'tis your vehicle malfunctioning, is it now?" when, as our assistant put it, "I'll surely'd not be out drenched and greased by the way's apron just for the blossomin' health of it" [an approximation].

This Whynot, the consistent one, derives (see Rz) from the injudiciousness of forebosses on the honor farms where hardly-corrigibles were assigned for their own good. Newcomers to the farms, exposed to the 5th Lingo phraseology common there ("Why didn't you, haven't you, won't you, do you refuse to? What are you hiding? Where is it? Why not? Why don't you cooperate? What are you up to? Admit it.") came to associate Ling-5 with a higher soc/ec/ed level and over time adopted it (along with the loud, harsh, impatient, rasping snorts, which drove their children into therapy) as a mark of achieved status and high culture.

(From Section 31.29)

We call attention to a more complex variant of Blindsiding (see above) and Judo (unavailable at press time). One of our researchers uncovered a rhetorical device obviously conscious and malevolent – effective evidence, albeit anecdotal, to counter the revisionists who see purposelessness as essential to human communication. Our researcher came upon it inadvertently, while in the process of chiding one of the more recalcitrant kiosk dwellers for an apparently insufficient display of respect. Here follows a necessarily rough translation.

Our researcher (feeling for the appropriate figure of speech): "You are [but a] contemptible swine [an extinct species], a perverter of [hitherto ordered] minds, a caresser of impure bodies [?], a dreamer of unsanitary notions…"

Kiosker: "Well fella, you hit the nail right on the head. It's something I work at every day."

Ours (after a brief pause for evaluation): "You agree – you agree? It is not yours to agree. Is your unworthiness of such depth as to render you neither capable nor desirous of disputation?" (And so continued in this vein, solidifying the essence of his position.)

Kiosker: "Well, you want me to, so I'll comply. (Give me a moment to get ready; it's been years now… O-dokie, here goes:) I hereby refute you and any anyone who smells like you, and declare your words false. Yours, and theirs. I present myself as without sin, as an active friend of all who think; of all who try to, at least. So there. Happy?"

Ours (after a brief pause for evaluation):

"You challenge – you challenge? It is not yours to challenge. What perverse bedevilment [figure of speech] drives you to such madness…?"

As can be seen, the purpose of the kiosk dweller's clever game (and those of others of his school) is to confuse, warp and render impotent such intelligent yet unready minds as that of our researcher, whose short temper was certainly understandable.

(From Section 31.47)

The variety of pithy greetings we continue to uncover suggests to us a tendency to formula, while Tr leaves hope for a surviving rationalism. Regardless of semantic niceties or the lack of them, Ch's classification remains the respected norm. His early notes, recently recovered, reveal new insights:

"Reciprocal: Howdy/Howdy, Xylum/xylum, Hi/Hi, Hola/Hola, etc. Reflective: Xylum Locum/Locum Xylum, Sugar and spice/spice and suqar (formula of extinct sorority Nu Nu Lambda). In Hola Pepe/Hola Paco (compare Kata Zim/Kata Piro, Hi Joe/Hi Lynn) the Hola/Hola portion is the reflective greeting, Pepe/Paco the names of the mutual greeters. But [scratched-out name]'s imprudent view sees the full Hola Pepe as the initial call, Hola Paco as the standard response, which would imply the conceivably proper:

(a) 'Hola Pepe, Miguel'/'Hola Paco, Ernesto'

(b) 'Hi Joe, Roy'/'Hi Lynn, Sam'

(c) 'Hi Joe'/'Hi Joe to you, too.'

"When I get a new notebook I'll have to shift some of the reciprocals to the subclass of continuants or completives (God [?] keep the Tsar/Far from us [quite widespread recently, despite there being, as we know, no more tsars]; Okowe/Ka-i-ka; Saints, it's you/And who else would I be, now). Kd, as always, confuses completives with reflectives, which I guess is understandable. After all, who can say with authority what Howdy/what's up, Howdy/Doody, Glad to see You/same here, Mornin'/What's good about it and all the rest really mean?"

(From section 32.02)

"The Vessel of Difficult-to-Measure Content." In a few small but important jurisdictions one looks on the good side of a good situation only if one finds no other choice. Rather than elsewhere's "It looks like a fine day" the subjects tell us "I see no danger." For "Let's walk on the beach" they tell us "Let's avoid the casino." For "Catch our newly-painted Roach" they tell us "Note how it's not yet faded." For "He's got three balls" they tell us "He's not yet struck out."

Here again, analysis of the rationalia indicts the reeducation system, in which (for good reason, we assume) a positive attitude was long interpreted as predisposition/ prelude to rebellion, and sternly corrected. Kw doubts this, suspects the human psyche is not so easily molded, finds in this phenomenon yet another of their clever means of making communication difficult; not because the subjects in question value impaired communication as an ideal worth striving for, but "just for the hell of it" [figure of speech].

(From Section 32.07)

An unexpected amount of inter-person/species violence would often result from what was too quickly explained by, "Sorry, my mistake." Attestation #235 is instructive:

"(Uh, what do I talk into? This one? O-dokie, whatever. Now? 'Dokie, here goes:) Well, I was stringing it down Two-Two-Three Street, near the Julienne Gardens, and I heard this guy talking, 'prox three-four blocks away, saying something like Mort, YOU blockhead. So I got riled, wouldn't you?"

Interviewer: "But you're not Mort."

"Sure, easy enough to say that now…"

The plethora of documentation of this sort explains the decision in some jurisdictions to never, neither in conversation nor in private musings, admit one's own or comment on another's faults, confess one's own or comment on another's transgressions, because a careless eavesdropper might easily misunderstand. The effective corollary is to permit that potential violence-monger to overhear comments only of a positive nature ("You/I/Rosa keep getting better and better"). Should the subject misinterpret, it would be to assume the (self-) praise he overhears is for him, that he's getting better and better.

(From Section 32.18) Consider this a specialized cognate of Benedictine Recapitulation. Lr, in their Guidebook, label it Recipe Overcook and describe it as "humans progressing – or reverting – to idyllic pre-literacy" because of the demands made upon the pre-literate, or hypermnemonic, area of the midbrain.

Often during conversation one hears, in a breath-prose pattern with minimal pauses, a discourse comparable to the following, as surreptitiously recorded by our researcher:

"[…] O-dokie, I'll fold, haven't had a good hand all afternoon, but say, I was thinking there's another way to finish off all those bananas your cousin gave you: all you do is take one half cup butter or margarine (Cher uses a half cup oil – yuck), one cup sugar (a quarter cup if you bust out of your clothes a lot [figure of speech?] like Cher), two eggs, seven-eight ripe bananas (mash 'em good, you get about two cups), three tablespoons water – milk maybe (Cher uses three teaspoons of powdered milk, you can't really blame her), two cups flour (Cher's fancy-pantsy, makes it one white, one cornmeal), one teaspoon baking soda (Cher puts in baking powder, tastes terrible, too much aluminum – 'dokie for them, sure, but –) and a half cup chopped nuts (anything but peanuts – too heavy). Got all that?

"You cream the butter and sugar till it's fluffy, beat in the eggs one… at… a… time. (That Cher, she cuddles the eggs in her hand and says, In Mexico you know what 'two eggs' means, don't you, girls?) So you add the water and the bananas (You can bet Cher's got something to say there, too) then you mix in the flour and the baking soda (but if it's baking powder, forget the whole thing) and shake in the nuts (Cher again). Then you pour the whole thing in any kind of greased and floured Hot Box (I won't say a word) and shove it in your slow cooker (who me?) on SOON for say two-and-a-half hours, and you get a great banana cake, even Cher. And speaking of slow cookers – nah, shouldn't say things behind her back. And that's all there is to it, try it next time, 'try it or buy it.' O-dokie then, who's dealing…"

Fortunately, the recorder had already been turned on, for there was neither provision nor time for written or keyed notes. Which of course was the subject's witting or unwitting purpose sees in this phenomenon a trend in human evolution responding to some obscure genetic or ecological imperative. For Bj, such extended information-bearing discourse, relying on inborn retentive skills, shows the resurgent hypermnemone of the subject's brain striving to contact and stimulate the analogous though still dormant hypermnemone of the listener's brain.

This reaction within the human brain against its own creation – human civilization, of which literacy is a major component – has been studied by a variety of our Institutes. The resulting rationalia may be gathered and purveyed thus:

(a) If left free to grow, this hypermnemonic force will in time bring an end to the ever discouraged yet ever-recurring cruelties attending the march [figure of speech] of civilization, especially during its self-guided phase.

(b) The cruelties in question derive not from some evil inherent in civilization, but from the ever pulsating, not yet completely suppressed, pre-literate hypermnemone that has always been covertly active in the human psyche [figure of speech], successfully giving civilization a bad name [figure of speech], the host bearing the blame for the sins of the parasite [figure of speech].

We need to know if (a) this subversive force has been steadily gaining strength over the years, or if (b) our astounding advances in anthropometry have merely enabled us to observe more of what has always been there.

(From Section 41.06)

Example:

What'll it be?

"I'll have coffee and a cream bun."

We don't have any cream buns.

"Then I'll have orange juice and a cream bun."

I said, we don't have any cream buns.

"Then I'll have milk and a cream bun.

I said, we don't have any cream buns.

"Then I'll have tea and a cream bun."

I said, we don't have any cream buns.

"Then I'll have yogurt and a cream bun."

I said, we don't have any cream buns.

"Then I'll have cocoa and a cream bun."

I said, we don't have any cream buns.

(Pause.)

"Then I'll just have a cream bun."

This ought not be taken for a variant of Blindsiding; the subject's (the customer's) supposed purpose is to obtain food, not to disconcert the food purveyor. Rationalia:

(a) The subject is hard of hearing. Rather then the purveyor's "We don't have any cream buns," he hears something on the order of "That item you requested does not go well with a cream bun," implying "Try something else."

(b) The subject is unclear about relationships in the physical world, as well as disturbingly ignorant of nutrition. He does not consider '+ cream bun' an independent factor in the equation *X + cream bun = breakfast* but as conditional to and dependent upon the factor *+X*.

For example, in the incantation (for such it effectively is) "I'll have coffee and a cream bun" the cream bun exists, or will come into existence, not to manifest its own virtue but to manifest whatever virtue resides in the coffee. That is:

i. X = *coffee,*

ii. *coffee* $\neq$ *breakfast, hence*

iii. *breakfast* = …+ *coffee* + *cream bun* + …

If the cream bun fails to materialize, well then, try again. Another X-factor must be chosen, another incantation formulated: "Then I'll have orange juice and a cream bun." The climax – "Then I'll just have a cream bun" – is a brief psalm, a confession of impotence in the face of the cosmos, declaring in effect: "Dear God [Ammon, Kali, Athena], I have trusted in mine own strength and failed, I have conjured demons and consorted with them but for naught. I herewith lay bare before thee my soul with its longings, that thou doest with me as thou wouldst."

(From the Concluding Exhortation)

…But Earth stands alone in the subtlety of its rhetorical techniques. Many a researcher has been lost seeking the aims or circumstances of their use. Millennia of rationalization has enabled this amazing race to internalize much of its intellectual functioning, leaving its members, in Vr's phrase, "adrift as carbon-based automatons." Small wonder it was this planet that gave birth to the subconscious, a concept quaint and irrelevant on some worlds but of immense practical value on this one. As we are now aware, the rationalia speak in code.

More than a stylus and recorder with which to keep track of the form and function of each rhetorical phenomenon, we need an ear [figure of speech] for the rumble and hum of the human mind, while it is still available for study. Q

A.Y. Tanaka was born on Maui in 1936, raised in Newark, NJ (safer than the West Coast); lived, sometimes worked, in Puerto Rico, San Francisco, Hawaii, Chicago, Amherst, perhaps elsewhere. His proudest achievement was inventing a phantom senior for his high school yearbook (Weequahic HS, Newark). Since then it's been downhill. Subsequent honors and attainments are as nought.

Different Circumstances

Jason Snell

Shannon came over to my apartment at seven with the dozen ball-point pens and extra magazines she wanted to give me.

You've got to understand this about her: she gives people gifts all the time. Weird gifts. Pens and magazines, paper clips and key chains. When I asked her where she got all the blue disposable pens, she'd only say: "They just turn up."

This night, I took them without any questions. I glanced at the magazine subscription labels, just to assure myself that the mistakes were there. Her name was Shannon Erica Steinman, but the labels were always addressed to Shannon D. Steinman or Erica S. Steinman.

Sometimes, to spoil my fun, she steamed off the magazine labels. I never bothered asking why.

All of us have a few of our own quirks; I'd like to think Shannon's only weird one is gift-giving. Other than her pen and magazine philanthropy, she's the kind of person I'd call normal — working at a day-care center while toiling with the idea of going back to school to become a teacher.

"I'm not sure, Jer," she told me that night, when the subject came up. "I like working with the kids, and I think I'd like teaching, but I don't know if I could stand going back to school."

"If you go back to school, you'll be able to teach kids instead of just babysitting them."

"Yeah, but now I get paid to go to the beach and to movies and to play Monopoly with these kids. The biggest decision I have to make during any given week is whether to play Four Square or Hopscotch."

She and I were up very late that night, mostly because neither of us had much else to do except talk. Her boyfriend was in L.A. on business and Shannon didn't have many other friends, so her social calendar was empty. As for me, well, I'm sort of a hermit. If I weren't, would I be talking to you now? No offense. I'm just being honest.

So Shannon and I sat around my apartment all night, talking about our shoe sizes and what our favorite yogurt flavors were and, most importantly, how early we got up on Saturday mornings to watch cartoons when we were kids.

She got up late, and her mother always made a big breakfast on Saturdays, so she never got to see any of the cool cartoons that were on early. Me, I was an early riser back then — I'd be up in time to catch the end of the farm report, and then I'd sit through thirty minutes of Mister Ed before finally hitting the animated excitement I'd been searching for.

We weren't bored by this stuff, believe it or not. The only thing that finished our conversation was sleep — at about one in the morning, we both conked out next to each other on my couch. She shook me awake at threea.m..

"It's late," she said. "Do you mind if I spend the night here?"

"Sure," I told her. "You take my bed. I'll sleep on the couch."

"No, I'll sleep on the couch."

"No. Take the bed."

"No. It's your bed. I'll just sleep here."

I shook my head.

"Okay," she said. "We'll both sleep on your bed."

"Well, there's certainly plenty of room," I said, nudging her toward the bedroom door.

That was a running joke of ours — I had a king-sized bed, one that I bought during a relationship I'd had a year or so before. Michele and I knew we weren't going to be together forever, but in the meantime, we needed a bigger bed.

The day the bed was delivered, Michele and I split up. The two events are not related, but the size of the bed and its emptiness had become a source of great amusement to Shannon. It was slightly less amusing to me.

The stereo was playing a song I had never heard before. I was in my apartment, but the furniture in my bedroom was different. There were curtains instead of the awful roll-up blinds I had bought at K-Mart, and framed pictures were hung on the walls where my posters had been tacked.

Still wearing our T-shirts and shorts, we slid into bed. Now, I swear I never gave any thought to the fact that we were in bed together. We were just friends. That was all we'd ever be.

She snuggled against me, and I put my arm around her. I mumbled a tired "Good night" and closed my eyes.

"I should warn you," she said. "I turn in my sleep."

"Okay," I said, and closed my eyes.

After a few minutes on her side, Shannon made a low groan and turned onto her back. A few more minutes, and she was on her other side.

Before she could turn onto her stomach, I was snoring softly.

Somewhere around three in the morning, I felt Shannon move next to me. Then she turned from her right side onto her back. That was when the world changed.

The stereo was playing a song I had never heard before. I was in my apartment, but the furniture in my bedroom was different. There were curtains instead of the awful roll-up blinds I had bought at K-Mart, and framed pictures were hung on the walls where my posters had been tacked.

I sorted most of that information out later, though I was flooded with all of it immediately. Of the most importance, though, was what I found myself doing as the song I had never heard played in the background.

Shannon and I were making love.

I was shocked, of course, not just because I had never expected anything like that to happen between us, but because I couldn't remember how we got from sleeping next to each other to having sex with the stereo on. It was as if I had blacked out.

I could see in Shannon's eyes that she was also shocked by the turn of events, but that didn't make her ask me to stop what we were doing.

When we were done, as I held her, I finally noticed the curtains.

"Shannon, what happened to my blinds?"

"Hmm?"

"My cheap K-mart blinds are gone."

A brief pause then: "God, you're right. And your posters are gone, too."

I flipped the light on and looked around my bedroom. The framed pictures on the walls were mostly prints I'd seen before. They were Shannon's.

One picture, however, was one neither of us had seen before.

Shannon looked gorgeous, of course… her darker complexion balanced well with the white dress. And though the expression on my face was typically stupid, the tuxedo made me almost seem dignified.

Below the picture was printed Jeremy and Shannon, September 16, 1991.

I looked at Shannon. She was holding up her hand, showing me the wedding ring she was wearing.

"What the hell is going on?" I asked her.

She bent over next to the bed, picked up something — I could see that it was a magazine — and glanced at it before tossing it to me.

"Look at the label."

It was addressed to Shannon and Jeremy Alden.

I was about to say something else to her when a wave of dizziness hit me. Maybe, I reasoned, this is all just a dream. That's it. I'm dreaming.

And I was in bed again, next to Shannon, fully clothed. She was still asleep, slowly turning to lay on her left side.

Between movements, I was in the right world. The moment Shannon turned to her left, I felt that world slip away.

I was in Shannon's apartment, in her bed. We weren't making love this time; it felt like we might have done it a few minutes before, but now we were just laying in bed, my arms around her, naked.

"Shannon?"

"Hmm?"

"Do you remember the last time? Just a few minutes ago?"

"We were in your apartment. My pictures were on your…"

She glanced around her walls. All her pictures were there, right where she left them.

"Do you have a wedding ring this time?"

She held up her hand. "Nope. An engagement ring, though."

"What the hell is going on?"

"I think it might have something to do with the magazines," she said. But before I could ask her what she meant, her bedroom door opened and someone flipped on the light switch.

It was Steve.

"Oh, no," he said. "You can't…"

For a minute he looked hurt, like I'd expect someone to look the moment he found his fiancée — I knew then that the ring on Shannon's finger wasn't from me — in bed with another man.

Then Steve made the transition to the other expression I expected to see. It was rage — pure jealous rage. He had always been jealous of my relationship with Shannon because he wondered why she needed to have any other male companionship if he was around.

Now, in this world, his jealousy had been borne out. I was sleeping with Shannon behind his back.

He punched me quite a few times, I think. I was so shocked by the whole turn of events that I wasn't really paying attention. It hurt a lot, I know that. Shannon was screaming and crying in the background. Steve was yelling at me to get the hell out, and when I didn't do anything but sit there, he hit me again.

Then, as he hit me in the head for the umpteenth time, I started to lose it. I'd never been knocked unconscious before, but it looked like this would be my chance. Then I felt Shannon shifting, and knew that it wasn't Steve's right hook that had caused my dizziness.

It was time to leave that world. And not a moment too soon.

She was moving again, next to me, shifting from her left side onto her stomach. She was awake in the different realities, but here she was still sleeping.

I think it might have something to do with the magazines, she had said. Magazines?

Shannon moved to her stomach. The world slid away again.

I could tell I was in a hotel room, just because of the smell. Whatever hotel rooms smelled of, whether it was carpet cleaner or industrial toilet bowl cleaner, this was one of those rooms. Light seeped in through cheap tan curtains.

I was having sex again. It seemed to be a recurring theme, for some reason. It certainly wasn't because I had a history as a great lover. Far from it.

This time, I wasn't looking down into the deep, brown, loving eyes of Shannon Steinman. The hair my fingers were running through was long and blonde, not short and brown. The eyes I was staring at were blue.

"Oh, yeah, honey," she moaned in what could've only been a New York accent. I almost laughed out loud.

What was this world? The world where I got to shack up in hotels with bimbos with bad accents?

Okay, I'll admit something else to you, since I've told you so much already. I've always been attracted to blondes, just like every other American male around. They're supposed to be the sexiest ones, more inherently attractive than any dark-haired woman can be.

But with a catch: I've also always said that while blondes tended to be prettier, the most striking women, the ones that make you turn your head when you're walking down the street, even if you're walking down that street with your own girlfriend, have dark hair. There aren't many of them like that — Shannon was one.

But like Pavlov's puppies at feeding time, when I see a blonde, I start drooling. It's undignified and unintelligent, but I do it. Maybe it was the forbidden nature of them — they were attractive and I couldn't have them. I had never even kissed a blonde before.

Now I was having sex with one.

But while it was all going on, a part of me was busy asking questions. Where's Shannon? What about the magazines?

It turned out that the blonde's name was Holly and she was from New Jersey, not New York. She and I had first met in a hotel bar two weeks ago and had retreated to a room upstairs after both of us had a little too much to drink.

I was lucky. I had managed to prod her into some reminiscence without having the faintest idea about my history with her. I also found it funny that it had been too much alcohol that had brought us together because I don't drink. In 25 years, my total alcoholic consumption was probably five beers and four glasses of wine.

Not that I was an incredibly moral person, thumping a Bible and preaching about That Demon Alcohol every time I got the opportunity. I just decided, fairly early on in my life that not only did I not like the taste of alcohol, I didn't like the way it changed people.

So I bought into blondes but not into booze. Consider me batting .500 on the

Red-Blooded American Male scale.

But laying there next to Holly, I wondered if that choice was the right one. Should I have stayed as adamantly different as I was in my own world?

In my life, I had slept with a grand total of one woman — and I didn't even love Michele — and I was an emotional wreck. Here it was different.

It's easy to make moral decisions when you've got no way to see the alternative. You just make your choices, take your chances and wonder about what might have been.

I'm insecure enough about my life. I didn't need to be shown what I'd been missing, but here it was.

I left Holly, found my car in the hotel parking garage and drove home. I kept waiting for this dream or other reality or whatever it was to end, but I was still in the world of voluptuous blondes and too many margaritas when I reached my apartment.

As I jogged up the steps, I knew I had to call Shannon. After all, she was my only link back to the other world, the one where I was still laying under a ragged blue comforter with my best friend on her stomach next to me.

Then I opened the door to the apartment. Shannon was standing inside, holding a baby in her arms.

"There you are!" she said. "I was worried."

I looked at the baby. "Is that…"

"The baby book says her name's Diana Alden, six months old," she told me. "We're parents. God, Jer, we're parents."

I was supposed to ask her about the magazines, about how we could be leading the lives of other people who were ourselves. But instead, all I could think about was a blonde named Holly as I stared into the shiny eyes of my daughter.

"There's something else," Shannon said, and picked up a magazine off the kitchen table.

"Huh?"

"Look at the cover."

It was a picture of the embattled president, trying hard to win re-election despite an economic downturn and a tough challenger. Four years in the White House had turned his hair markedly gray, but his eyebrows were as thick and dark as ever.

"President Dukakis?" I asked.

"This world really is screwed up," she said to me.

Oh, Shannon, you don't know the half of it, I thought, and then the dizziness hit me.

For a split second I thought about waking her, ending this thing we had fallen into as soon as possible. But before I could even grab her shoulders, let alone start shaking her awake, she moved from her stomach to her right side.

The world went one way, and we went the other.

Magazines. I've got to remember the magazines.

I was drinking coffee. I despise coffee, so I put down the cup as soon as I could, but I still had to swallow the foul-tasting stuff that was in my mouth.

I was sitting in the living room of a house I had never seen before. Some of the decorations, however, were familiar — they were Shannon's.

Across with me, sitting with their arms around each other in what I somehow knew was marital bliss were Shannon and Steve.

"So, do you like the place?" Steve asked me.

"Oh, of course," I said. "It's great."

"Well, it's certainly better organized now than before the wedding," Steve said.

Wedding. I was getting good at making these guesses, but I didn't want to push it too far. I told them that I had to go to the bathroom and excused myself.

When I came back, they were still there, smiling. I was wondering how Shannon managed to do it, put up the appearances of knowing all about her married life with Steve when in her own life they were still just boyfriend and girlfriend.

"So, how is Michele doing?" Steve asked me.

Michele? Oh, God, what does Michele have to do with this?

"Fine, just fine," I said, looking at Shannon. She raised an eyebrow — she was just as curious about Michele being mentioned as I was.

"Well, we can't wait until next month," Steve said, sounding far too much like a pal and not at all like the guy who had beaten the crap out of me a few hours before and a universe away. "Saint Anne's is really a pretty church. You're so lucky to have gotten it."

A "yes" was about all I could manage. Michele and I were going to get married?

I kept up the conversation for a few minutes more, slowly realizing that I was never going to get Shannon alone somewhere to talk. Though she might not like it, in this world she and Steve had become a pair, a joint person. They were married, and so they were together.

I wondered what it would've been like to be in a world like that, where Shannon was no longer my friend by herself but just a co-acquaintance, half of SteveAndShannon.

As I started to become dizzy again and knew that Shannon would be moving onto her back now — how many times did this woman turn in one night, anyway? — I realized that I might not have to speculate about this possibility very long.

"Steve and I are supposed to get engaged this summer," Shannon had said to me a couple months ago.

"So you're engaged to be engaged, is that what you're trying to say?"

"Right."

I didn't know quite how to take it. I didn't have any claim to her myself, and her boyfriend certainly did. Even though she was my best friend, she had been dating Steve before we'd ever met.

"Well, congratulations," was what I finally said to her, trying to be a friend even though I wasn't sure how I was feeling just then.

"Thanks," she said, and gave me a hug. Before she pulled back, she whispered to me, "You're still my best friend."

I was so wrapped up in thinking that I had no time to stop Shannon's spin. She settled on her back and reality was torn away again.

She and I were sitting on my bed. It seemed like we were nothing more than friends.

"Okay, what's the catch?" she asked. "Are we married or single or having an affair or what?"

"Check your purse," I told her.

She pulled her wallet out of her purse and showed me her driver's license — it said she was single, a Miss Shannon Steinman. Her middle initial was incorrectly — for me — listed as G.

"Shannon, would you might telling me what the hell all this is about? Magazines?"

She sat there for a moment, with her eyes closed and her brow wrinkled. Then she looked at me and nodded.

"You know the pens and magazines I keep giving to people?"

"Of course."

"Well, I don't buy those anywhere. I find them."

"Where?"

"All over my house. They just show up. You know how everybody else loses things like ball point pens and key chains? Well, I never do. I find them."

"And the magazines?"

"Same way. Except most of them I can't get rid of, because they've got President Dukakis or President Dole on the cover. Some of them are just like our magazines, but they're addressed to Shannon and Steve or Shannon and Jeremy. I steam those ones off."

"How long has this been going on?"

"A year or two," she said and started looking around the room. "What's different about this world?"

"I don't know. You seem a little different."

"What do you mean?"

"I don't know. You're not as…" I paused.

"What?"

"Well, I sort of… I think you're an attractive person, Shannon. You're usually really pretty. But for some reason, you're just not that cute in this world."

She got up and looked in a mirror, then turned around and frowned at me.

"I look exactly the same," she said. "Too many pimples, like always. But nothing else is different."

There was a magazine — okay, I'll admit it, I buy way too many of the damned things — next to my bed in this reality, too. I picked it up.

"Maybe Newsweek can tell us what's different about this world," I said.

I leafed through the magazine, with Shannon looking over my shoulder. Everything seemed the same — it was exactly the same as the issue I had next to my bed at home.

I flipped past a cover story about Yugoslavia. On the next page was an ad for bodybuilding equipment. A large, sweaty football player-type was lifting a barbell.

"Oh, he's cute," I found myself saying. I immediately dropped the magazine.

"He's cute?" Shannon asked me.

He was cute. I was actually attracted to him. And not to Shannon.

Well, I knew what was different about that world, didn't I? And in it, Shannon really could never have been anything but a pal.

She moved from her back to her right side in one quick motion, and it all shifted again.

This time was different, somehow. I was outside for the first time, standing on a carefully tended lawn. I was by myself, and I realized where I was when I looked up and saw the headstone in front of me:

SHANNON STEINMAN ALDEN
1968-1992

She was my wife in this place, too. Flowers that I had no doubt just placed were sitting on top of her grave. The grass growing on the grave was very short — I got the impression that Shannon hadn't been dead long.

I felt dizzy, but this time the world didn't go away. Was it just the shock of contemplating what a world without Shannon would be like? The idea that I'd never again spend all those hours talking about insignificant details?

I stood at the grave for a long time, wondering just how much Shannon meant to me. She had been a good friend in my life, but in these other lives she was always there. Sometimes she was with Steve, sometimes with me… sometimes even both at once. She was obviously someone I was capable of marrying and having children with.

I waited for that reality to end, for the brief bout of dizziness to come and take me away, but it didn't. That was when I began wondering if something was terribly wrong. After all, Shannon had been alive in all the other dreamworlds we had visited. If she was dead here… could she be dead back in "real life?"

I think I panicked then. I remember collapsing in front of Shannon's headstone and sobbing for a long time. Then, sometime later, I remember screaming.

The blackness shattered into pieces, each piece pulling me into a different world that was there and gone in an instant.

Laying on the street, covered with a blanket of newspaper, trying to keep the night chill from giving me pneumonia.

Laying next to Michele in bed, staring down at the wedding ring on my hand and wondering how I could have been trapped into marrying someone I didn't love.

Dancing with Shannon at our wedding.

Dancing with Shannon at her wedding.

Slapping Michele in the heat of an argument we were having in our bedroom.

Sitting in front of a computer, writing computer code as I slowly bored myself to death.

Standing in the middle of a forest fire, asking questions like any intrepid journalist should.

Lowering the french fries into the oil. (I knew I'd be working at McDonald's sometime, I chuckled to myself as the vision slipped away.)

Telling Michele I loved her and lying.

Telling Shannon I loved her. And not lying.

Kneeling at Shannon's grave again and crying.

Looking at another grave, one with my own name on it.

Blackness.

I sat up in bed and screamed once. Shannon didn't move from her position on her side. I grabbed her shoulders and shook her.

She wasn't breathing when I started shaking her. But as soon as I touched her, she gasped and opened her eyes. I pulled her up and hugged her as her breathing started to calm back to normal.

"Are you okay?" I asked her.

"I'm… fine," she said. "I just blacked out. I don't know what happened."

"Me neither," I said. "Me neither."

We sat there for a long time, not saying anything. We had both taken walks through each other's lives and would-be lives. We knew about what might have been — or what might be — between us. But in some of the worlds, she was with Steve. There was no One True Path. There were a series of possibilities, ones that had already passed us by.

After a while, I finally pulled back and looked right into her eyes.

"Now what?" I asked her.

"I don't know," she said. "We'll see what happens."

She gave me a kiss on the cheek. It was completely innocent. It was also the first time she'd ever kissed me in this life.

"We sure will," I said later, as we tried to get back to sleep again — this time in our own world. "We sure will." Q

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To Touch the Stars

Part 2: 'Dancing on Tenterhooks'

Nicole Gustas

Livana arranged Tamsin's unconscious body as comfortably as she could, then ran down to check on the refugees. She was relieved when she found no one had been injured in the extremely rough landing. She directed them up to the galley and rushed to the door. She opened it and saw two men running toward the spaceship with a number of medical personnel trailing behind them. As the two men came to the door, she pulled out a blaster and trained it on them, a cold sick feeling in the pit of her stomach. The danger wasn't at an end yet. She couldn't let them board the ship until she was sure who they were.

"Stand and deliver," she called to them, then waited breathlessly for their response to the code.

"Your money or your life," said the shorter one with bronzed skin and curly brown hair. "We're from Ground Zero." He rushed up the stairs and into the ship, the tall, bearded darker one close on his heels. "I'm Chas El Andar, head of the hospital here. This is Troy Guthridge. Who are you? Where are Tamsin and Jaysen?"

Livana rushed along beside them, trotting to keep up with their long legs. "I'm Livana. I've been helping out on the ship, keeping the refugees organized and trying to get Tamsin to rest. She's extremely ill. She passed out just after the landing. I don't know where Jaysen is."

"What are Tamsin's symptoms?" asked Chas, taking the stairs two at a time.

"She has an extremely resilient strain of gangrene. I haven't seen it before. It's resistant to the broad-based antibiotics you have on board this ship. I've tried to help the antibodies breed, but I haven't had any luck. If you put me in touch with your chief genetic engineer, we can design an antibody that should put it out of commission." Livana gasped out the last few words, out of breath from hoisting her heavy body up the steps even in the relatively light gravity.

"You were able to analyze the infection that closely with the instruments we had on board?" Chas asked skeptically.

"No one could do that. It's my Gift; I can link with a patient and view the infecting cells that way."

Chas stopped and, for the first time, she felt, really looked at her. "Doctor Livana Oduvai! I've read your papers on substance-induced tachyocardia!" He shook her hand quickly, then continued rushing toward the bridge, now within view. "It's a pleasure to have you here. I hope I can encourage you to join our staff; we're always looking for more medical doctors."

They reached the top of the stairs and Chas threw open the door. Livana could see one pale, waxy hand hanging from the pilot's chair. Chas tapped his comunit. "I need a stretcher on the bridge immediately." He knelt by her and turned the chair.

Tamsin's face looked like a mask; her skin and lips were the same drained white. She didn't move as Chas lifted one eyelid and shone a small light into her eye. "Absolutely no reaction. She's sunk into a comatose state."

A nurse leading an antigrav stretcher came to the door. "Help me get her on there," Chas ordered. With Troy's help, Chas and the nurse gently lifted Tamsin onto the stretcher. "Bring her to the intensive care unit in the quarantine section; start her on amoximycin immediately. Take her blood and get Kazimir Raudanitis to start immediately on crafting an antibody. She's infected with a new strain of gangrene. I'll be sending someone to assist him in a few minutes. Tell him to use the large lab in the quarantine section. He can bring in any of the techs he wants." The nurse nodded and sped down the stairs, maneuvering the antigrav stretcher skillfully. Livana stood against the wall, out of the rush of action.

The man paced like a caged wildcat in the locked cabin. His right arm hung uselessly at his side, the forearm swinging slightly at the midpoint, bone showing through a gap in the skin. He didn't seem aware of the pain.

Troy tapped his comunit. "We need Layten or Zach up here immediately to access the computer and get the logs. We have to find out what happened to Jaysen."

Chas turned to Livana. "Where are the rest of the refugees? We need to put them in the quarantine units."

"I told them to go to the galley. They're waiting for directions."

Chas turned to Troy. "Get those refugees into the quarantine units; I have some doctors there ready to process them."

"You need to send some guards here, as well," Livana said. Chas and Troy looked at her, confused. She straightened her shoulders. "We have a prisoner down in crew cabin D."

The man paced like a caged wildcat in the locked cabin. His right arm hung uselessly at his side, the forearm swinging slightly at the midpoint, bone showing through a gap in the skin. He didn't seem aware of the pain.

"He attacked Tamsin down in the engine room with a laser cutter. She broke his arm to get it away from him," Livana told Chas. "He destroyed one of the power receptors. Tamsin rerouted the power, but had to continually manually stabilize it to keep the ship going."

"What else did he do?" asked Chas.

"He brought a transmitter on board with him. After we launched, he broadcast our position. I gather some fighters came after us. I wanted to treat his arm, but every time I came near him, he attacked me." She ignored the bile that came up her throat at the memory of him rushing toward her, blood in his eyes.

Chas shook his head. "I can't believe Tamsin and Jaysen could have such poor judgment! They know as well as anyone else how cautious we have to be."

"Don't blame them. He was imprisoned by the government and 'reeducated'. They embedded a second personality that was triggered when he made arrangements to board the ship. No one could have known.

Even his Gifted wife couldn't tell the difference."

The armed guards came to the door. Chas gestured inside. "That's the prisoner. We'll have more details about him when we get the details in the ship's log."

The guards opened the door and the man rushed toward them, attacking. One of the guards stunned him. The guards put their arms under his, and dragged him from the room, head bobbing limply. Livana felt her stomach begin to quiet as Chas escorted her out of the ship. She knew she was on her way to the lab, and she couldn't afford any distractions while she was trying to heal someone.

"It's unfortunate," Livana said. "He was a kind man. Not very intelligent, or very driven, but he had a good heart. He was trying to help the Gifteds. He just wasn't clever enough to avoid being caught."

Chas nodded. "It's happened before. We have a great psychiatric staff here; they may be able to help him." As he led her across the spaceport and toward the medical facility, he looked at her quizzically. "How do you know all this about him, anyway?"

Livana smiled bleakly. "He was my husband."

Livana spent most of her twenty-nine hours of required quarantine with Kazimir, the genetic engineer, working to develop an antibody that would keep Tamsin's body from being consumed by the infection, going through the physical parts of the quarantine procedures when she stopped for a bite to eat or to use the bathroom. Even with their non-stop work, it was a near thing. Chas had to cut away the worst of the infected flesh to slow the pace of the invading gangrene, and replace it with an organic bandage that would be absorbed back into the body as Tamsin healed. Once the antibodies began to work, Livana urged the new cells to divide more quickly, speeding the pace of healing. When Tamsin's vital signs had stabilized, Chas brought Livana to the temporary quarters that she and her daughter had been assigned to and told her he'd set up an appointment to discuss her future with the medical center later in the day. As soon as she opened the door, she was assaulted by an excited twelve year old.

"Mom, Mom, I'm so glad you're back!" Olanna said, hugging her excitedly. Her nose wrinkled and she let go quickly. "Whew, you smell! I was worried about you. I haven't seen you since we got here. They sent one of the nurses to tell me you were OK, but I was still kind of nervous."

"I'm fine. I was working with the pilot of our ship. She's still very ill, but it looks like she's going to make it. And I think I got a job." Livana stood on her toes to kiss her daughter's forehead. Her daughter was already as tall as she was! She looked like her father, with his creamy brown skin, so much paler than Livana's own. Livana shook her head as she hugged her skinny daughter. "Has Kaori been taking care of you?"

"Kaori's boring, Mom. Kalin let me borrow a primary psychology textbook. It's really neat."

Now that her daughter wasn't wrapped around her neck, she could see a slight figure standing by the window. She wasn't much taller than Olanna or Livana. Her hair fell like ebony silk down to her knees, and her black, tilted eyes crinkled at the corners as she smiled at Livana and held out two delicate hands, palm up, in greeting. She radiated serenity. *I like this woman*, thought Livana immediately. She placed her plump hands, palm down, atop the woman's. "I'm Kalin," said the dark-haired woman. "I'm with the resettlement group. I came to ask your daughter if she'd like to go to school today. We're having an orientation session for the new children in a few minutes. Would you mind if she went?"

Livana turned to her daughter. "Would you like to go?"

"Of course I want to go! Besides, you'll be sleeping for hours anyway." Her daughter was accustomed to the routine of her mother the doctor.

Livana yawned. "You're probably right. But isn't it a little late in the day for school to start?"

"You're still spacelagged. It's now seven-forty-five AM," said Kalin. She rested a hand on Livana's arm. Livana felt a wave of compassion and – was it hope? – spilling through her. "Get some sleep. I heard what you did for Tamsin. You deserve it."

After she kissed Olanna good-bye, Livana curled up on the bed and fell deeply asleep.

She woke to the sound of her daughter quietly puttering around the room. She stretched and smiled blearily at the girl. "Hi, hon. How was school?"

"It was great. They said they'll put me in an accelerated class if you don't mind. They also want to test my Gifts, if you think it's OK." Olanna sat down on the edge of the bed.

Livana stroked her daughter's hair. "I think that's wonderful. Some of the best teachers are here. I'm glad they'll teach you to use them."

Olanna got up and began straightening her schooldisks, which spilled all over the dresser. "I checked your v-mail. Chas El-Andar wants to meet with you at five-thirty. Is he the one who wants to give you the job? And Kalin invited us to dinner with some other families at seven, to talk about resettlement. Can I go play with Vasilissa tomorrow after school?"

Livana tried to keep track of the questions tumbling over one another. "Is Vasilissa one of your schoolmates?" asked Livana, smiling. Back on Narid, no one would ask a Gifted child over to their house to play. Olanna had had a lonely childhood. It looked like that was going to change.

"Yeah. I figured you'd be working late."

"Not if I can help it. I want to spend some time with you."

Olanna, eyes alight as they had never been on Narid, shrugged and smiled. "I'll keep busy. Did you know Kalin is Dad's doctor?"

Livana was used to following her daughter's non-linear conversation, but this comment surprised her. "She is?"

"Yeah, she's going to try to help Dad get better."

"How did you know there was something wrong with your Dad?" How much did her daughter know, anyway?

"I found out on the ship. I heard you talking to the pilot about it." Livana's heart sank. Her daughter knew everything. Olanna held her hand and smiled at her. "It's OK, Mom. Kalin told me it's not Dad's fault. I know he didn't want it to happen. If anyone can make him better, Kalin will."

Livana didn't feel much better. While she and her husband had spent most of the past few years separated, and he'd had very little contact with Olanna, her daughter was still at that age where she considered her parents infallible. When he'd told them he would get them off Narid, it had made him a hero in Olanna's eyes. It hurt Livana to know that her daughter had learned what had happened to her father.

"Get up, Mom!" said Olanna loudly, poking her mother and dragging her out of her self-accusatory thoughts. "It's four-

thirty. You'd better get ready for your interview." She pulled clothes out of the drawers, then turned back to her mother. "Go take a shower. You don't want to look like you just got out of bed, do you?"

Livana walked to the bathroom, trying to figure out where the day had gone and wondering just when her daughter had decided to become her mother.

"The hospital needs a competent administrator, and from all the recommendations I've received from your coworkers who preceded you here, you fit the bill admirably." Chas poured her a cup of green tea, which matched the pale green tunic and pants her daughter had selected for her. ("You're not going to wear *that* old outfit, are you, Mom? It makes you look pudgy. Wear this instead – it makes you look more businesslike.")

He blew on his tea to cool it as he continued. Even sitting calmly, Chas seemed to take up the whole room; he was almost bouncing in his chair, anxious to get up and move around. He spoke quickly, the words leaping out of his mouth. "One of our people – I'll introduce you to him later – managed to coax your records from New Boston Hospital. You had some very impressive reviews. It's fairly clear that, without the restrictions put on Gifteds, you would have been titular head of your department by this time, instead of just doing the admin work of one."

The bronzed man put his cup down and leaned forward. "Ms. Oduvai, I'd like to offer you the position of Head Administrator at Selene Hospital." Livana sat back in surprise. She'd been expecting a position as staff doctor, at best, but nothing like this. "It's a larger position than you've held before, but I think you have the skills. And, quite frankly, we really need someone with both medical talent and administrative ability in the position. I've been trying to do it, but," he made a large gesture, nearly knocking over the teapot, "I really don't have any talent for it. And I don't have the time, with all my other duties." He held up a hand in warning. "It's not the easiest job. You'll be expected to take on some patients. And we'd also like you to work with our metametric division. They're researching the various Gifts. Your healing ability is one we haven't had a chance to work with before. They'd like to help you develop it." He pushed a datapadd at her. Her eyes opened even wider at the yearly figure she'd be paid. "That includes a month's paid vacation the first year. After the first year, you'll also receive a month's paid sabbatical, although I've never seemed to use mine. You'll find there's not enough hours in the day here on Maris."

"But isn't that always the case?" Livana smiled.

Chas waved his hands, sending his cup teetering on the edge of the table. "I'm not speaking metaphorically. Since you're from Narid, you're used to a 29-hour day. Here, there's only 22 hours in a day." Livana blinked in surprise. Now she knew where her day had fled to. "But there's an advantage; a work day is only 7 hours here. What do you think?"

Livana tried to catch her breath. Chas' enthusiasm was infectious, but she had to really think about this offer for a while. "I have to admit, I'm very surprised by your offer. This wasn't what I was expecting at all. My only concern is…you see, I have a daughter…"

"Olanna is taking an advanced course load, plus beginning metametric courses. She's also signed up for the Young Explorers and the Drama Club." He grinned at Livana. "If I were you, I'd be worried whether my daughter was going to have enough time for me!"

"How do you know all this?" asked Livana, taken aback.

"Your daughter told me when she came to visit this afternoon. She likes it here. She said she wanted to keep busy when you took your new job."

"She couldn't socialize much in New Boston over the past few years. I guess she's trying to make up for lost time," Livana said with a wry smile.

Chas stood. "Why don't I take you on a tour of the hospital, and while we walk, I'll tell you a little more about life on Maris." She left the room at his heels and kept up with his fast walk down the brightly-colored halls. "Selene Hospital is the primary medical center and research facility on Maris. It's also linked with Ground Zero, the Naridian resettlement project. The colony was established less than a hundred years ago, which is part of the reason we set up a refugee center here. The colony was thrilled to get new people, especially highly skilled ones like many of the Naridian refugees. You'll find no prejudice against Gifteds here."

Chas turned left into the patient wing, leaning a bit to the side like a racing aircar in a steep turn. His shoes made a soft hissing sound against the floor. "I want to take you in to check on our new star patient." He stopped at a door and paused for a second. Livana read the patient's name on the door – *T. Donner*. Chas threw open the door.

Inside, Livana saw Tamsin, slightly less pale than the white sheets. Her head snapped up guiltily as she withdrew the organic knife she'd been using to dismantle the bed's computer. Livana wondered absently at the mechanism that allowed the blade to slide so smoothly back into her wrist. Pieces of the computer lay all over the brightly colored patchwork quilt spread over her lap. "Hi Chas. How are you settling in, Livana?" she asked weakly.

Chas sighed. "Tam, you did that last time. Don't you think we've caught on by now? That's a dummy computer. We hid the real one." Turning to Livana, he said, "Last time she was here, she realigned the monitoring computer so it would continue to report that she was here and stable while she snuck out of the hospital." He turned back to the pale woman in the bed, her hair in a tangled copper halo around her head. "We've Tamsin-proofed the room, kid. You're not sneaking away this time."

"Then give me a datapadd or something!" the redhead snarled. "I've been stuck here, with nothing to read but a hardcopy book of deconstructionist poetry Kalin gave me. I'd rather be back on intravenous food than eat the stuff that passes for food here. And no one will tell me what's going on! Let me out!" She pulled a pillow out from behind her and threw it at Chas. It fell uselessly to the floor half a meter short of his feet.

Chas picked up the pillow and fluffed it, then walked over behind the bed and tucked it behind Tamsin's head as she squirmed down under the quilt, pulling it up to her chin, breathing heavily after her outburst. "If you were well enough to go home, you would have hit me with that pillow. Besides, knowing you, you'll find a way to use the datapadd to help you get out of here."

"Just tell me one thing, and I swear I'll be the perfect patient," Tamsin said defiantly.

"What do you want to know?" asked Chas.

Tamsin suddenly looked vulnerable and very scared, burrowed almost completely under the big patchwork quilt. "What happened to Jaysen?"

Livana's stomach twisted. Kasimir, the tech who'd helped her create the antibody, had told her a lot about Tamsin and Jaysen. If half the stories of their exploits were true, they deserved great respect. He described the two as being almost one person in two bodies, so deeply were their souls intertwined. It wasn't just Tamsin's body that was injured near Narid. She seemed bereft, torn apart without her other half. When Livana saw people like this, she felt almost relieved she'd never bonded with anyone, not even her husband, so strongly.

Chas sighed and patted Tamsin's shoulder. "We still don't know. As soon as we find out, I'll come right down here and tell you."

Tamsin's jade eyes were hollow and dark. "If they caught him – Chas, I don't know if Kalin ever told you what happened to her in there. I remember what she looked like. I brought her back to Maris."

"I've read the records," Chas said. "Try not to think about it, Tamsin. You can't do anything from a hospital bed. Now, will you please get some rest? I'm going down to Layten's office right now. I'm as worried as you are." He squeezed her hand. "Stop dismantling our equipment, will you?"

Livana slipped out of the room behind Chas. "What happened to Kalin?"

"You remember when the medical center outside New Boston blew up?"

Livana could still smell the charred flesh. "We received a few of the corpses at the hospital. They never had a chance."

Chas looked grim. "Don't feel too bad for them. I don't know all the details. I was in transit when everything happened. I think there are some things they didn't put in the report." He swallowed and continued, speaking distantly and clinically. "Kalin was methodically tortured. They found some interesting ways to stimulate the nerve endings. There are areas on her skin that will never have sensation again. The nerves were burnt out entirely, and we have no way to replace them, at least not now. They used cruder methods, too – they pulled all her nails out by the roots, crushed the bones in her feet – it's amazing that she was ever able to walk again."

"But – that was a medical center! I used to refer some of my patients there! I'd tried to get a job there because they were known for their innovative techniques. I can't believe –"

Chas cut her off with a chopping motion. "There's a reason they had those innovative techniques. The doctors there felt progression of their research outweighed any ethical questions. They had a lot of subjects to test on, all the prisoners who were difficult to break. We still haven't seen all the fallout from the experiments done on the people who were kept there – it'll be years before all the problems come to light." He pressed his lips together.

Livana could see him going over the records of the patients in his mind and could only imagine the horrors he found there. Torture, experiments – those were all things she only read about or watched in the latest adventure sagas. She knew, in some part of her mind, that it had happened, but she couldn't quite grasp it. Kalin was so calm, so serene; how could she have been through all that and come out intact?

"Anyway, here's our destination – the computer facility." He led her into a dim room with a number of holos playing near all the walls. Two men sat in the center of the room. One with black hair pulled back in a ponytail, high cheekbones, a dark beard, and bright blue, tilted eyes was tapping away on a datapadd; the other, slumped slightly, wan, and disheveled-looking, had his eyes closed. Livana looked at the largest holo to see Tamsin, weary and pale, in her ship's uniform. "I've lost Jaysen. I believe he's been captured. We were sabotaged shortly after taking off. Jaysen was boarded while defending the ship so it could go into warp and depart the system. In case I don't make it to Maris, I want it known that I take full responsibility for what has happened here…"

The man with the datapadd paused the image and turned to Chas. "I've been going through the logs again to see if I can get any more information. No luck so far. Layten's been trying to access some systems on Narid."

The other man shifted in his seat and began to sit up, tucking his long, dark skirt around his legs. Livana noticed that, even when alert, Layten looked like he was trying to blend in with the couch he was sitting on.

"I'm glad to see you're back. I thought you might have gotten trapped in a subroutine," said the first man.

"You try getting results from a program when there's an eight-hour time lag between you and the computer you're working on. It's not easy," Layten said, stretching. Livana could hear his back crack.

"I forgot. Introductions." Chas ran his hands through his hair. "This is Livana Oduvai; she's going to be head of admin at Selene Hospital. Livana, this is Zach Shima and Layten Kaige. They run the systems for the hospital and for Ground Zero. Layten," he said, turning to the man still rubbing his eyes, "did you find out what happened to Jaysen?"

"It wasn't easy," said Layten. "I sent a search command through most of the databanks. No luck. I think that hardly anyone even knows they have him."

"You're saying that they do have him, then?" Chas asked excitedly.

"The files were encoded. I just cracked them now." He gestured at the large holo and the frozen log shot of Tamsin was replaced by text broken up by an occasional graph or picture. "These are the records of the Killian Research Facility. They're holding many prisoners there. Total records," he shut his eyes for a minute, then opened them again, "ninety-four. These people are considered the most dangerous to the government. They're now being used as lab rats for new reeducation techniques. The idea, apparently, is to break them and then get them working for the government. It's a refined version of what they did to Kalin."

Livana could hear the disgust in his voice. She bit her lip and wrapped her arms tightly around herself. She'd only seen the quicksilver man who'd helped her get off-planet once, but that image, as he helped her into the ship with a quick grin, whispering words of encouragement, had flashed before her whenever anyone mentioned him. She couldn't imagine him being tortured.

Then she realized she could and felt even sicker.

Layten continued grimly. "I also accessed the records of former detainees. Seems they're more successful at killing them than reeducating them."

"What else have you got?" asked Chas.

Layten blinked again, and the text changed to a three-dimensional map of the building. "This shows the various rooms in the facility. Cross-matching." He closed his eyes. Livana realized, with a shock, that he was mentally connected with the computer. She'd heard of people who had cortical implants allowing them to link with computer systems, but she had never actually seen one. Most people didn't like to get that close to their machines. Names began popping up in the rooms on the screen.

"Jaysen's being held here." Layten put his finger in the center of the holo, pointing at a room at the bottom floor in the center of the building. "Except for the top two floors, which house the workers at the facility, this building is completely underground."

"Any chance you can take down their system?" Zach asked.

"Put me on Maris, with a five millisecond lag between me and their computer, and I might be able to do it. But from here – impossible. Too many things change too quickly. I'm not even sure I could dredge any more information from their system."

"Can you make sure Tamsin knows about this?" Chas asked him.

"I told Kalin as soon as I knew. She's breaking it to Tamsin now."

"We need to bring it up in the Council meeting on Wednesday," said Zach, "even if we can't do anything. Do you think Tamsin will be well enough to attend?"

"Do you think I could keep her from leaving her bed?" said Chas, laughter behind his quick, staccato speech. "She's only been conscious twelve hours, and I already caught her trying to dismantle the computer in her room. I don't think I'll be able to keep her here past tomorrow night." He glanced at his watch. "Look, Livana's got a dinner appointment in a few minutes, and I want to try to finish this tour. We'll talk about this later, okay?"

"It was nice meeting you two," said Livana over her shoulder, rushing out of the room on Chas' heels.

"I'd like to show you the metametric research facility," said Chas, speeding down the corridor. Livana had to nearly run to keep up with him. The first thing she was going to do as administrator, she decided, would be to get Chas to slow down. "No one's really done the research full-time on the Gifts the way we have here. We've conclusively proved that metametric ability is the result of mutations caused by prolonged low-level radiation exposure in the first two hundred years of spaceflight. The mutations just exacerbated a latent ability humans already had to one extent or another. We found records dating back to three hundred years before commercial spaceflight that showed humans had these abilities. Unfortunately, most of them were put under psychiatric care because they heard 'voices'. No one realized they were picking up other people's thoughts. And no one could teach them how to shut them out. When a telepath can't learn shielding, they tend to go mad." The corridor they turned into was crafted out of polished stone, with round windows. A waterfall trickled in an alcove in one wall. The click of Livana's heels echoed off the walls.

"But how do you explain all these new talents that are cropping up?" asked Livana.

"Once again, we go back into archaic records. For instance, your talent is one that pops up repeatedly in religious chronicles. The founders of a number of Terran religions, for instance, were said to be able to heal by simply touching a person. Skeptics thought that the people who were healed simply had psychosomatic illnesses, but some of these healers had amazing track records. One man, named Cayce, had hundreds of tomes that kept records on the many people he'd healed. And you, of course, are living proof. We're hoping that, through you, we can learn how to develop those skills and teach other people with that talent how to use it."

"There's one thing you haven't told me. How did Kalin and all the rest get out?" They entered an large atrium which was decorated like an old-fashioned Zen garden. They stepped on the stone path between the plants and walked toward the bridge over the free-form pond in the center of the room. It had an air of tranquillity to it. The atmosphere even seemed to affect Chas – his steps slowed, as did his speech.

Livana watched him stare into the water, chewing his lip, his bright, flowered shirt looking completely out of place in the staid garden. "You probably read the reports. There was an accident with some flammable chemicals being stored at the site. Tamsin and Jaysen were near there when the firestorm happened. They'd been trying to figure out a way to get her out. When they got to the site, they found the prisoners picking their way out between the bodies. Kalin and all the other subjects there escaped unscathed." He paused and grimaced. "Well, no more damaged than they were before the fire, anyway."

"But that's impossible!" Livana said, shaking her head, remembering the giant fireball she'd seen from miles away.

"It happened. But we won't know why until we can get into Layten's head to find out how he did it."

"You mean he…"

"Kalin's husband is a firestarter. He has no control over his talent. He's only used it in times of crisis. In fact, no one knew he was Gifted until the one time he used it, when those chemicals ignited. He says he doesn't know how he did it. He may have a memory block."

"He knew what happened to Kalin?" She'd heard Gifted people shared a mental bond, though she herself had never experienced it.

Chas nodded, pulling leaves off the elm tree by the bridge and tearing them apart. "And we still don't have any more details. That's one mutation that I'm sure has plenty of military uses."

Livana folded her arms and stared down at the worn, purplish wooden planking of the bridge. "Layten said they're using a refined version of the techniques used on Kalin."

"Yeah." Chas was leaning against the railing, head in his hands.

"Do you think we can get Jaysen out?" Livana felt a responsibility to the people of Ground Zero. They'd rescued her, and she'd do nearly anything to keep them from harm.

Chas looked at her, dark eyes hollow as Tamsin's had been earlier. "If we can't, I hope he dies quickly."

Tamsin studied the perfectly smooth, glassy water in the kilometer-long reflecting pool, the just-rising tiny white sun chasing the surface with a thin coat of silver. She looked to her left, to her right, and then, cautiously over her shoulder to the shadowed arches of the hospital. She was alone in the spacious courtyard. She tossed the coins in her hand, then took one, placing the rest in her pocket. She crooked her finger around the silver disk, then glanced again around the courtyard. She saw no one. She tossed the coin precisely at the pool. It bounced off the glassy surface, once, then twice. As it skipped, the distance of the hops got shorter and shorter. After twenty-six hops, it sank to the bottom of the pool.

"So, this is where you are every morning," said a mellow contralto to Tamsin's right.

Tamsin jumped and, by reflex, began to crouch in an attack position facing the voice. She saw the rose lips curling in a gentle smile and sighed, dropping back into a more normal stance. "I really hate it when you do that."

Kalin looked out at the water, the small ripples caused by the recent disturbance quickly stilling, and then back at Tamsin, glossy jet hair slipping over her shoulder. "How did you do that? There aren't any

pebbles anywhere around here."

Tamsin took her left hand out of her pocket, clenched in a fist. She opened it toward Kalin, showing her the three copper and one silver disk that lay there. "My one inheritance from my mother. Thirty-eight cents."

Kalin inhaled sharply, then breathed out in a low whistle. "Thirty-eight cents? You could buy some planets with that! Those should be in a museum. I'm surprised you're throwing such valuable artifacts in this pool. Did you ever try to sell them?"

"Yeah," shrugged Tamsin. She took one copper disk, shoved the rest back in her pocket, and tossed it at the pool. Twelve skips. She grimaced. Kalin had disturbed her concentration. "They're counterfeit." Kalin's mouth pursed in a silent "oh." Tamsin smiled with some bitterness. "They skip well, though."

Kalin stared out at the water. Tamsin sent another disk skimming across. Patter patter patter plop. She turned and stared at Kalin, waiting for her to break the silence. Kalin just stared at the water, calmly. After a minute, Tamsin said angrily, "Look, did you come out here to talk to me, or what?"

Kalin turned to her smoothly. "I didn't want to disturb you while you were entertaining yourself."

"You've already done that. I probably won't get one skip out of the rest of these." She balanced on one leg, tugging the boot off her other foot.

"I wanted to talk to you about Jaysen," said Kalin.

Tamsin ripped the boot off her other foot, tugged off her socks, then shoved her pants above her heavily muscled calves. "I'm going after him."

"Are you sure that's a good idea?" Kalin asked.

Tamsin waded into the pool, the water splashing around her legs as she went to pick up the first coin. "It's the only thing I can do. I can't leave him there."

"You're not in good health right now," Kalin said calmly. Tamsin began to feel a pressure, slight but growing, in her head. "Do you think you could slip in there in your condition?"

Tamsin was furious. "It doesn't matter what my condition is! I won't leave him in there!" She kicked violently, sending water everywhere. "And will you stop doing that! *Scheiss'n* projecting empath – it drives me crazy!"

"*Scheiss'n*?" asked Kalin, one eyebrow raised.

Tamsin shrugged. "Sorry. It's Staatsprache." Even now, whenever she got angry, she slipped into the rough city language she'd grown up speaking. Considering who was in control of the government now, it might become Narid's planetary language in a few years. "You wouldn't want to know."

Kalin smiled apologetically. "I was just trying to calm you down a little. It feels like you're about to attack someone. But I've never been able to do that with you. Your shields are impressive. You're sure you're not Gifted?"

Tamsin wanted to hit something, but there was only water. "I'm not Gifted! I hate that word! Damn it, that's the whole root of the problem."

"I don't understand."

Tamsin's smile was sharp and brittle. "Of course. You have no idea what the word Gift means in Staatsprache, do you?" Kalin shook her head. "It means poison. Where I come from, you wouldn't dare admit you had the talent, even before the new government came in. It's considered," she thought for a second for the best word, "unclean. And dangerous. Even the word, Gifted." Her stress on it was slightly different, the *i* becoming nearly an *e*, the *d* becoming a soft *sh*. "How can you think it's a good thing when it sounds like it's poisonous?"

Kalin's brow wrinkled. "Goddess, you're serious, aren't you?"

Tamsin picked up the last coin and stepped onto the blue brick, trailing dark stains of water. "And that's why Jaysen is where he is now. Sometimes I think both of us would have been better off staying in Tiburon." Her mother had hoped she'd stay; she'd been too old for her work and had wanted to support herself by selling Tamsin's body instead. But she'd stayed in school, right next to Jaysen, if only to keep him from being killed by some of the gang members he'd offended.

"You both would have been dead by now."

"I rest my case." Tamsin picked up her boots and walked across the courtyard toward her quarters. "There's no way you can change my mind. I'm responsible for him, and I won't leave him behind." Her boots slapped against the edge of the arch as she stepped under it, out of the sun. "Remember when you were a prisoner? Did you think we'd leave you behind?"

"Yes." Tamsin turned, shocked to Kalin, a dark, delicate figure silhouetted by the light streaming through one of the arches. "I never thought anyone would get me out. I thought if you didn't, then you'd be safe."

Tamsin leaned a shoulder against the cool stone wall and gritted her teeth. She'd never cried in front of anyone, and she wasn't about to start now. "You thought we'd leave you there? You thought we'd let you die?" She heard her voice break and shut her eyes, trying to clamp down. She would not, *would not*, think of Jaysen, trapped in despair.

She felt Kalin put an arm around her waist, felt the weight of her delicate head against a shoulder. "Tamsin, you got me out. But look at Layten. I know his nightmares. I feel them every night when he sleeps beside me. The four of us nearly didn't get away. Are you willing to take the risk again and have it go the other way?"

Tamsin buried her face in her friend's obsidian hair and pulled her a little closer, trying to block away the dark hole filling her chest. "I have to. I can't let him die."

Kalin paused for a moment before the doors to Tamsin's quarters. Layten stood behind her, a cool rock, providing support mentally as well as physically. Kalin took a deep breath and knocked on the door.

"What do you want?" came the hostile voice from the other side as the door opened. Tamsin was curled up on a chair, copper hair pulled back, black clothes making her look terribly pale as she tapped away at a computer console.

Kalin placed a datapadd on the desk. "Here's a list of what we'll need."

Tamsin looked up at her blankly. "Need? I don't follow you."

"Supplies. To rescue Jaysen." Tamsin's mouth opened, but she didn't say anything, just stared. Kalin smiled slightly, the only hint she'd give of the laughter bubbling inside. She'd always wanted to strike Tamsin speechless. "You didn't think I'd let you go alone, did you?"

Layten slipped an arm around her waist. *I'm going, too.*

She gave him a quick kiss on the cheek. *Of course. Did you think I'd leave you behind?* She spoke aloud again. "There's supplies for three there. Night goggles, food, camouflage clothing," she shrugged, "big guns…"

"But I haven't even talked to Manda yet," Tamsin said, shaking her head.

"We did," said Kalin. "She understands what you want to do. She figures she'll tell the rest of the Council after we leave. That way, they won't be able to protest."

Tamsin snorted as she scanned the list on the padd. "Sounds like our dear chair is going to get herself into some pretty hot water."

"It wouldn't be the first time," rumbled Layten's deep voice.

"You're going to need to add supplies for one more person. Chas is coming," Tamsin said.

"Chas is a doctor. He's got no combat training. Do you really think he's appropriate?" Layten asked.

"And what do you think we're going to do when we get Jaysen out?" snapped Tamsin, looking up at him. "Bring him to Arcadia Hospital and say 'Hi, our friend's been tortured, can you patch him up'? Not bloody likely. Besides," she continued, looking back at the padd, "he insisted. I couldn't talk him out of it."

Kalin sat down on the sofa. Layten stood against the door, hands clasped behind his back. Tamsin's sparking green eyes shifted back and forth, from one to the other. "So. We have four people against about sixty guards. I love an even fight," she said sarcastically. She propped one foot up on her desk, drumming her fingers against her knee. "I have an idea on how to get in there. Layten, do you think you could crash their system?"

Whenever Layten accessed the computer, Kalin could hear it whirring in the back of her head like it was part of her brain as well. "I can, but not for long. It's got an automatic reset mechanism."

"That's fine," said Tamsin. "This is going to be a quick in and out operation, nothing fancy. Our only objective is to get Jaysen out."

"What about the others?" asked Layten.

"If we have time. I don't want to be callous, but there's only so much we can do." She leaned forward and stabbed a button on the console. A three dimensional line drawing of the complex filled the center of the room. The room where Jaysen was being held was tinted gold. "Here's what we're going to do."

Interlude Two

Jaysen curled up on the hard pallet that passed for a bed, staring at the gray walls in his perennially twilit cell, rubbing his face as the last traces of the drug left him. The interrogation sessions came as irregularly as the food. He didn't even have any facial hair to tell him how long he'd been there; he'd had it suppressed months ago so he wouldn't have to shave. He smiled slightly. If only he'd wanted a beard, like Zach.

He pictured his friend, safe on Maris, remembering the last time he'd been there. Two days before the mission, he'd gone boating with Zach and Tamsin. He could almost smell the salt, and see Tamsin leaning over the prow of the boat, her copper hair hanging loose over the water. He smiled, remembering how he'd pushed her over the side, and how she'd quickly pulled him in after her, completely ruining his new silk velvet shirt. He hadn't minded; the ensuing water fight had been too much fun. If Zach hadn't been there, maybe he would have had a chance…

The gray walls loomed high, and his throat closed. He knew he'd never survive to see her again. *Oh, Tam*, he thought, then whispered to the air, "There was so much I wanted to tell you."

He turned his face into the corner and tried to sleep, using the meditation techniques Kalin had taught him. But sleep wouldn't come. He kept seeing Tamsin's green flashing eyes, smelling her, hearing her voice.

A hand touched his shoulder. He sat up in shock, instinctively grabbing the wrist and pulling on it to unbalance his attacker. The legs before him shifted only slightly, and he heard a soft snort. "I'm glad you remembered something from your physical combat classes."

He looked up to see sharp green eyes smiling slightly at him, a red braid slithering over one gray-suited shoulder. "Tam!" he exclaimed. "What are you doing here?"

She pulled him to a standing position. "Did you think I could leave you in here? I had to rescue you." She stopped and stared at him quite closely. "Answer me one question," she asked him. "Who did you take to our final-year semiformal at University?"

"I didn't go. I was supposed to take you, but you were busy slogging through the jungle at the time," he said. Somewhere, a voice inside him whispered, *Don't trust Tamsin*. "Why are you asking me?"

She bit her lower lip and looked down a moment. "I had to make sure it was you," she said. She turned to lead him out of the cell, but not before he caught the worried look in her eyes. "This has all been too easy. I think there must be a trap hidden somewhere." She looked up the corridor, then down. "Coast is clear. Our distraction must have worked. Come on!"

He followed her as softly as he could down the corridor. Voices came from around a corner, speaking in that peculiar Western drawl so familiar from his childhood. She flattened herself against the wall as she peered around a corner. He saw her fists clench spasmodically as she turned back to him. "Someone's coming." She pulled him to a door, then tapped a quick code on the lock next to it. The door opened and she pulled him in, then slapped a panel beside the inner door to close and lock it.

"We're safe for now," she sighed, then slapped on the bright lights. Jaysen found himself standing at the center of an interrogation room, and his stomach flipped as it brought back vague memories of questioning. He looked back to his friend for support as a voice inside said, *Don't trust Tamsin*. She was leaning against the door, arms folded, looking at him with a curiously cold smile. "Something bothering you, Jaysen?"

"How'd you get the code for the door?" *Don't trust Tamsin don't trust Tamsin DON'T TRUST TAMSIN.*

She shrugged. "One of the techs gave it to me."

He walked closer to her. "Which one?"

"There are so many," she said, waving a hand and walking toward the table in the middle of the room.

The voice inside him screamed. He clenched a fist, fighting an almost overwhelming urge to hit her and grabbed her by the hair, to yank her back. Something was wrong, very wrong. "There are only two."

Very quickly, Tamsin turned around, wrenching her hair out of his grasp and grabbed his wrist. With a quick, bone-wrenching twist, she pivoted, moving his arm behind his back and forcing him, face-first, against a cold wall.

He could feel her body press against his and her hot, moist breath against his ear. "You should know better than to try that on me, Jaysen," she whispered, her free hand tracing down his thigh, her voice like a shard of glass. He shivered. "I've always been better at hand-to-hand than you."

He felt a jolt of pain as his wrist was pulled higher, almost above his shoulder blades. A tongue quickly flicked on his earlobe, his throat. He began shaking and couldn't stop.

The hot mouth moved away from his throat and he felt cold metal slide along it. It moved up to his cheek. He looked down, out of the corner of his eye, afraid to move any more, and saw a silver blade trace along, felt the flat of it stroke around and back along his skin to the nape of his neck. He wanted to laugh, or to cry. It wasn't Tamsin. She never used a metal knife, not when the two organic blades in her wrists served her so well. He tried to take a deep breath and couldn't. "What do you want from me?"

Her damp, warm voice whispered in his ear again. "Only the answers to a few questions." He heard tearing cloth as the knife traced down his spine, felt the salty trickle of a few drops of blood following it. His wrist was released as she cut his clothes off, but he didn't dare move, feeling burning where the blade cut him, on his arms, then again across his back and down, knowing even the slightest shift could mean worse damage. Her fingers gently traced the cuts, rubbing wet slick blood into his back, his buttocks, his thighs. He felt the tickle of her tongue again on his ear as he tried to lose himself in the pain and ignore her fingers, and the knife. "There's no reason I can't have fun while I ask," the voice laughed, as the knife traced down his spine, then lower.

Jaysen lay balled up, shuddering, in a corner of his cell. He felt filthy; his skin crawled and his mind wouldn't stop screaming, replaying the hours in the torture chamber. He could feel her hands all over him, and the ever-present knife. He knew he'd heal soon. He knew she'd be back again. And he knew, however much he wished for it, she wouldn't kill him. Q

Nicole Gustas (ngustas@hamp.hampshire.edu) recently gave up working 80 hour weeks in favor of following Duran Duran around the East Coast. (Some people follow the Dead…) She's interviewing at various colleges, including CMU and American, in hopes of completing her bachelor's degree sometime before she's 90. She's desperately searching for a better title for this series of stories, so if anyone thinks of one, please let her know.

If you like *Quanta*, you may want to check out these other magazines, also produced and distributed electronically:

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Cyberspace Vanguard

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Cyberspace Vanguard is a new digest/newsletter, containing news and views from the science fiction universe. Send subscription requests, submissions, questions, and comments to xx133@cleveland.freenet.edu or cn577@cleveland.freenet.edu.

Inter*Text*

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Inter*Text* is the network fiction magazine devoted to the publication of quality fiction in all genres. It is published bi-monthly in both ASCII and PostScript editions. The magazine's editor is Jason Snell, who has written for *Quanta* and for Inter*Text*'s predecessor, *Athene*. Assistant editor is are Geoff Duncan.

The PostScript laser-printer edition is the version of choice, and includes PostScript cover art. For a subscription (specify ASCII or PostScript), writer's guidelines, or to submit stories, mail Jason Snell at jsnell@ocf.berkeley.edu. InterText is also available via anonymous FTP from network.ucsd.edu (IP# 128.54.16.3). If you plan on FTPing the issues, you can be placed on a list that will notify you when each new issue appears – just mail your request to jsnell@ocf.berkeley.edu.

Unit Circle

Contact: kmg@esd.sgi.com

The brainchild of Kevin Goldsmith, Unit Circle is the underground quasi-electronic 'zine of new music, radical politics and rage in the 1990's. "Quasi-electronic" bcause Unit Circle is published both as an electronic magazine (in PostScript form only) and as an underground journal, in paper form. If you're interested in receiving either format of the 'zine, send mail to Kevin at kmg@esd.sgi.com.

Next Issue:

We'll be featuring a new novella dealing with the exploration of the Moon … by hot air balloon, called "Moonifest Destiny." We'll also be featuring the real conclusion to Nicole's serial (*To Touch the Stars*) as well as continuations of the Harrison Chapters and Microchips Never Rust.

The Harrison Chapters

Chapter 15

Jim Vassilakos

The morning sun's delicate rays curved across Calanna's sloping horizon, blues and reds mixing together in a strange and beautiful tapestry of seas and continents spinning gently in the vastness of space. Erik watched from the open airlock, his eyes full of the gorgeous vista. It had been a long time since he'd seen a world from orbit with nothing between his nose and vacuum save for a thin layer of plastic. It had been a very long time, though it was even longer to fall. "A little closer."

Below them, the target vessel waited in impassive silence, its starboard aft gaping and gnarled like a crippled beast immersed in deathly slumber. Slowly it grew, until they were practically upon it.

"Hold us here, bridge. Okay, Beckerson at my back. Gringer and Saloris, next."

Erik pushed himself into the void, the orange tether his only assurance of returning. Splintered open by laser fire, the vessel's port airlock seemed the best entrance. He slipped inside, reaching the inner portal. Its opening mechanism was obviously damaged, though laser scoring didn't seem to have anything to do with it.

"Beckerson. What do you make of this?"

The enlisted man stuck his gloved hand in the broken electronics compartment, fishing around until he found what he was looking for. When it reemerged, he was holding a small, flattened piece of metal. Erik studied it apprehensively.

"What is it?"

"Kinetic projectile casing."

"What?"

"A bullet, sir." The others smiled, obviously amused by the exchange.

"Don't give me attitude, Mister."

"No sir."

Erik reached through the door's smashed window, gently pawing the opposite side for a switch. When the door finally decided to move, he wasn't ready for it and ended up obstructing its egress into the wall with a padded arm.

"Damnit… stop it!"

Saloris fired his laser into the groove between the door and its compartment until the mechanical apparatus agreed to surrender its quarry. They successfully dislodged his arm moments later.

"Well, at least that got it open."

Beckerson nodded, "Good job, sir."

The others managed to keep straight faces this time, and Erik found it hard to forge a reply, particularly when he saw the corpse, her skin frozen and eyes sunken inward, the fluid beneath them still boiling away in the silent vacuum.

"My God."

Beckerson turned against the bulkhead in agreement, for once without a wisecrack to share as Saloris stepped cautiously over the body, Gringer at his back.

"Hold, people." Erik squeezed past them, "I'm sorry I didn't warn you. This wasn't entirely unexpected."

"What the hell are we looking for, sir?"

"Survivors. Exactly as you were briefed. But I remain in front."

Saloris let a wry smile escape his lips.

"Be my guest."

Erik shook his head, "I wasn't asking your permission, Saloris. You're at my back. Everyone turn on your head lamps."

Erik slowly inched forward, inadvertently kicking the globules of blood this way and that, as he bent over, shining his head lamp into a pair of brown eyes. "Pupil reflex positive. We've got a live one, people."

They reached the intersection in the corridor and turned left. The laser carbine scuttled silently along the floor as Erik gently nudged it, and the half-open iris valve showed heavy laser scars. Inside, two bodies rested in a corner, their vacc suits smothered beneath hundreds of flattened, red, bubbling spheres. Erik slowly inched forward, inadvertently kicking the globules of blood this way and that, as he bent over, shining his head lamp into a pair of brown eyes.

"Pupil reflex positive. We've got a live one, people."

Touchdowns and takeoffs were always the best parts. Those few she experienced reminded her of life as a young girl, always getting a window seat so she could see the darting scenery. As a Commodore, her treatment was much the same. She was cloistered by her aides, pampered by her servants, and each world she visited seemed like no more than a montage of elegant architecture and postcard panoramas, not so much because of the worlds themselves as because of her remote and incredibly detached perspective. Somehow, after decades of tireless work, she had finally come full circle. That was the bitter taste of success: to have accomplished all of one's goals, yet to have ultimately changed nothing.

They treated her as a child, albeit a child to be obeyed. In a strange sort of way she rather liked it, but it was too rare that she could visit the fun spots on a planet, even those where the Empire was respected. Instead, her aides kept her cooped in orbit, tantalizing her with selected scenes from various travel videos so as to give her the illusion of adventure. She'd seen the Undercity, the Runyaelin, and even the Palace of Snagarth over and over again, though to have actually visited any of those places could have meant her life. Of that, she had little doubt.

She was so used to her sheltered existence, that if it wasn't for the cool, fresh breeze sifting her hair, she could have imagined herself in an entertainment booth back aboard the Crimson Queen, watching the local star's amber rays scatter carelessly across an illusory, purple horizon. A great risk it was to breathe fresh air beneath a wild, open sky, she thought to herself, as the guards formed a protective circlet around her.

"Lieutenant."

"Sir?"

"Is it dawn or dusk?"

"Dawn, sir."

"Good."

It meant that real sunlight, not artificial radiation, would touch her for the first time in weeks. She smiled in anticipation. First, however, she had business to attend to, and the sooner it was over, the better.

The starport administrator's office was about as plush as Imperial specifications would allow. General Gardansa sat behind the mahogany desk, standing and saluting at she entered. It was their first meeting in person, though she had grown rather used to him during their electronic meetings.

"Commodore, what a glorious occasion. Please be seated. I must warn you that your visit comes as somewhat of a surprise. What, with the civic unrest, we have not been able to take all the security precautions…"

"Forget about my security, General. We both know why I'm here."

"Ah… yes. The starport. I assure you, no harm has come to it."

"I noticed you people are without power."

"We shut down the main generator as a precaution. With the nuclear incident, it was not inconceivable that the rioters would try to take an eye for an eye."

Reece nodded, "I understand that you had some sort of incident this morning."

"Incident?"

"…that you ordered an air strike on an unarmed merchant craft which was harbored at this facility."

The general laughed as he leaned back.

"Ah… of course. As I expected, your information is less than complete."

"Do tell."

"The craft you speak of was smuggling a suspected felon off-planet. It was in the process of departing when we discovered the crime in-process and acted accordingly."

Reece arched an eyebrow, mildly amused by the story.

"What sort of felon?"

"I will make all our information available to you in due time."

"Did you manage to catch the person?"

Gardansa frowned, "Unfortunately, no. This was the reason I was so insistent that our airspace not be violated. By sending down your inspectors at such an inopportune moment and having your gunships fire on us as we attempted to pursue our suspect… ah… we we're unable to deal effectively with the situation at hand."

"I am told that your vessels harassed ours first."

"A misunderstanding, I am certain. However, now that we have cleared the smoke between us, I hope that you will return our suspect, especially in consideration of the fact that the vessel we intended to pursue is still in our airspace."

"It's in orbit."

"Technicalities, merely. May I interest you in a drink?" He opened one of the desk's drawers, ushering forth two glasses. Commodore Reece was about to decline when a subtle knock came from the door.

"Commodore, you have an urgent call."

"If you'll excuse me, General. This will just be a moment."

"Take your time," he smiled, a glass in each hand. "As you can see, I am in good company."

She stepped onto a balcony with her private aide, snatching the radio from his hand and shooing him back inside.

"Wait. Is this coded?"

"Yes sir."

"Good. Leave me. This is Reece."

The static on the other end was fairly fierce.

"Hello?"

"Commodore, this is Lieutenant Torin."

"Go ahead Lieutenant. I read you."

Erik took a deep breath, the communications officer leaning beside him catching the hint and getting up to fetch a highbowl of zardocha.

"We've recovered one survivor from the target, sir. The doctors say he'll be fine but that he'll need time to recuperate before we can get any information."

"Have you confirmed that he's ISIS?"

"Not yet, but considering the wavelength he chose to make initial contact, I'd say it's pretty much a sure thing."

"What about the craft? Did the local's damage it badly?"

"Well, they shattered the fuel tanks. According to our engineer's, the drives are still in working order, but the thing just ran out of pep before it could really break free of the planet's gravity well."

"You mean it's coming back down?"

"Yeah… well, they've been telling me that we should either tow it to a safer altitude to make repairs or rig up an independent fuel supply. If we want to keep the ship, that is."

"How long until it falls low enough to burn-up in the planet's atmosphere?"

"Um… we've been getting jolted up here by scattered clouds of gas, but disintegration is probably a week away, at least."

Reece chewed her lower lip, weighing the options.

"This is the problem, Lieutenant. Our friend up there committed some crimes down here, and the local representative is already talking about extradition. They're not going to sit on their hands for even a day while their suspect is floating only a few kilometers over their heads."

"We can assume custody, can't we?"

"Probably, but there would be a stink, and the locals are restless enough as it is."

"Then what do we do? I'm sure they've already scanned us making contact."

Reece shook her head, "Two vessels in the same place, one an Imperial gunship and the other an independent merchant, and beyond that, they know nothing. So this is the story. Instead of allowing himself to be captured, their suspect turned his nose directly into the gravity well and hit full throttle."

"That's suicide."

"And from what I understand, far safer than Calannan justice. As far as we are concerned, this rescue never happened. How's it sound?"

Erik blinked, "You're asking my opinion?"

"Lieutenant, right now you are the closest, healthy thing I have to an ISIS representative. Yes, I'm asking for your opinion."

"Well, although it's unlikely, I can't rule out that the initial transmission Captain Dunham received wasn't monitored, and if it was…"

"I can live with a small risk. Anything else?"

"Um… we've been practically coupling ship-to-ship up here. Considering the proximity, they're probably not going to believe us."

Reece smiled, "I'm not asking if they'll buy it."

"Well, some will, and some won't. But they can't prove we're lying. That's what diplomacy boils down to, right?"

"More or less. Anything else?"

"Not offhand."

"Then you know what to do."

"Yes sir."

"Good. Do it. Reece out."

The communications officer returned with the zardocha, floating a highbowl in Erik's general direction as he fidgeted with the various knobs and dials. Erik took a sip and then downed the icy liquid in one shot. It was already well past his sleep shift, and he knew he'd need the jolt of wake-up and several more like it just to keep going.

"How do I get engineering?"

"Here."

"Cooper, you down there?"

"Right here, Erik." Her voice sounded crisp and almost perky, one of those workaholics who enjoyed any chance to get out and play with a new piece of machinery. They'd met at the officers' club some four months back during a surprise birthday bash for one of the fleet's retired admirals. Thereafter, he'd been found hanging around engineering a little more often than he'd like to admit. She caught on pretty quick but seemed more amused than interested, so he put away his notions before they ever got around to becoming more than notions.

"Erik, you there?"

"Yeah. Sorry. I'm gonna have to take you up on that offer."

"Which one?"

"About the collapsible deuterium compartment. Time is an issue."

"Oh, sure. Inside two hours. No problem."

"Good."

"You want to forward Arch the specs on our new toy?"

"No. We aren't taking her back to the Crimson."

There was a short pause on the other end.

"Then what are we doing?"

"Your new toy's taking the big plunge. Hate to be the one to break the news." He smiled.

"Any special reason?"

"I'd tell you if I could, but I can't, so I won't. Okay?"

Another pause, and he could almost see the dejected look in her eyes.

"Oh well. Fireworks from orbit, I guess."

As far as fireworks went, they weren't particularly exciting. They even went out of their way to make sure nobody got hurt. Erik kept his eyes open and alert, however, right until the very end.

"Impact confirmed."

Traveling at several hundred kilometers per hour, an impact with the Aeluin meant instant destruction of whatever hadn't disintegrated on the way down. The locals had kept clear once they realized what was going on, and from their radio transmissions, it didn't sound like they were going to investigate. At a depth of several kilometers, who would?

Erik entered his quarters, exhausted but very satisfied with a job well done. Almost done, he reminded himself, as he keyed in the strongbox's combination. Though blurry-eyed, he was careful. One slip of the finger would mean incineration of the records, not to mention his life. The vault opened, and he found the folder he was looking for, slapping the door shut with a stern swipe of his hand.

"Computer. Access medical records, John Doe."

"Done."

"Display picture, facial, forward."

The chiphead's picture emerged on the far wall. Erik leafed through the personnel folder. All it's information could easily be contained on one flimsi, but for security's sake, ISIS insisted on using a lower, more combustible technology. He knew what was really going on, of course. They just wanted to scare the hell out of him, and at that they usually did a good job.

Ding

He lifted his head, his mind so fuzzy that he wondered if he was imagining noises.

Ding

"Computer, open channel visitor."

"Hey Erik, you in there?" It was Cooper. He was about to tell the computer to open the door when he bit his tongue before the words could drop out."

"Yeah, sort of. What's up, Lieutenant?"

"I was hoping we could talk."

"Sort of late for a social visit, isn't it?"

"The way you were guzzling zardocha, I figured you'd be wide awake."

"What's this about Lieutenant?"

"Well… I was wondering why we destroyed that ship back there. I'm sort of confused as to who's making the decisions, and I was just hoping you could just clue me in a little."

Erik snorted, "The decisions come straight from the top. It's better not to question them, okay?"

"Yeah, I sort of figured you'd say that. You gonna let me in or what?"

"I'm really tired."

"Don't brush me off, Erik."

He winced. He wanted to let her in, but he knew it'd be a bad idea. She didn't have a need to know, which meant telling her anything could spell his court-martial. Better to just piss her off all at once than bit by bit, he figured.

"I'm sorry. I can't talk to you right now."

"What's the matter? You got somebody in there?"

He thought about it.

"Yeah. Yeah, I do. Be good and go away, and maybe it'll be you next time. Computer, close channel."

Erik felt like the ultimate weener even though he kept reminding himself that he had no real choice, not unless he wanted to do time for being a nice guy.

Ding Ding Ding

"Computer, modify defaults, channel visitor, attention off for one hour."

"Done."

Erik leafed through the folder, looking for the face. The image of the chiphead on his wall might have looked strangely familiar, but all he could focus on were the metallic head tricks and Cooper's little visit. No doubt she already suspected something. She was the type of person who would start asking questions. He dictated a quick request to have her transferred, finally leafing through the folder a second time, focusing on every detail in its proper order.

It contained typical restricted information: all sorts of facts, none of them useful, except one perhaps. The chiphead wasn't mentioned anywhere. Erik groaned, a sickened feeling sloshing over him. There was one more problem with the Commodore's plan, now painfully obvious. Destroying the ship meant destroying evidence about who this character was.

"Computer, open channel, voice only, medical section, Dr. Hunter."

The line clicked open with an audible pop.

"Sickbay, Sosrodjojo speaking."

"This is Lieutenant Torin. Is Dr. Hunter in?"

"Um… I think she just stepped out. Can I take a message?"

"I really need to speak to the patient."

Erik could almost see the nurse smiling on the other end, his voice lathered with amusement. He'd called before and talked to the same nurse at length. He knew what to expect.

"No can do, Lieutenant. He's still resting."

"When will he wake up?"

"Ah… you'd have to talk to Dr. Hunter about that, but I'm sure she'll tell you try back no sooner than tomorrow."

Erik sighed, "Okay, but there may be a problem with the patient. I want him moved to the cage."

"The cage? You really think that's necessary?"

"I don't know, but I'd rather we took the precaution."

"Ah… very well. I'll call security."

The line closed with the same pop it made while connecting, and Erik scratched

his head, staring at the image on the wall.

"Computer, locate person. Captain Dunham."

"Done."

"Say."

"Captain Dunham is on the main bridge."

Erik leaned back on the couch.

"Open channel, voice only, main bridge."

There was a short pause.

"Bridge."

"Get me the captain."

Erik sat back up when he heard the captain's deep, resonant voice.

"This is Dunham."

"Captain, this is Lieutenant Torin. I'm Commodore Reece's special attache."

"I know."

"I need to talk to you."

"You can find me on the bridge. I'll arrange for your clearance if that's a problem."

"Clearance isn't a problem, Captain. I need to speak with you privately. There's a little discrepancy in the records we need to clear up."

"Ah… I doubt I can be of any help to you there, Lieutenant."

Erik rubbed his eyes, trying to think of some way to push nicely.

"It could be important, Captain. When can I meet you?"

He heard a heavy breath on the other end.

"Alright, Lieutenant. My quarters. One hour."

"Thank you, Captain."

Erik spent his spare time walking the passenger decks. Without his uniform, he drew little attention and soon ended up in the Slippery Whisker, one of the Crimson Queen's less ritzy canteens. Cooper was probably down in engineering, he figured, reminding himself that he felt like dirt, though he knew he'd made the right choice.

The crowd was fairly thick, so he just ordered and drank, sitting alone in an alcove with his back to the wall. He preferred his little corner to the bar where masses of people pressed together without any semblance of order or civility. On this occasion, one rose above the rest, not so much in stature as in head gear. Erik watched the tall spokes on the man's head jiggle back and forth as he nodded to one of the bar wenches. It reminded him of John Doe, helping to focus his mind on the matter at hand, and the more he thought about it, the more it irked him.

Erik made his way back to officers' quarters and hung around in the lounge until Dunham showed up. The captain was early as well, though the bored look on his face didn't portray a man who was looking forward to this meeting. Rather, he seemed to just want to get it over with, as quickly as possible, and Erik wondered if his own presence on board represented some sort of threat. Over the years, he'd learned that many of the naval and quasi-naval officers didn't like ISIS, though they were the very people most often made to cooperate with the service. Erik had always figured it was because the Navy had it's own intelligence division, but nothing about the captain's mood betrayed professional jealousy.

"Enter."

Dunham's cabin was fairly unassertive. It could be called spartan, if not for the shimmer-sketches upon the wall. They were unsigned, though each revealed a similar style. Erik recognized one as being of the commodore. The picture depicted her on the observation deck, looking longingly into the studded darkness of space and at a world turning gently below.

"Your work, sir?"

"A hobby of mine. It helps me relax."

Erik turned around.

"My reason for wanting to speak with you concerns a conversation you allegedly had with our lucky guest."

"Before you continue, Lieutenant, I must confess that it was hardly a conversation."

"Nevertheless, you did speak with him."

Dunham nodded, "I've already reported that to the commodore."

"And you also reported that our guest told you that he was an ISIS operative."

"That's correct."

Erik paced to the corner of the room.

"Captain, this may seem a trivial question, but it's extremely important that we be absolutely clear on this."

"I've told you what I can."

"Think again. Try to remember his exact words. Did he say he was an ISIS operative or did he say that he was working with one?"

"Lieutenant, you've got to understand that our lucky guest, as you call him, was not especially comprehensible. He was wounded. I could hear that his voice, even amidst the static, was fatigued. He was coughing between his words, and beyond that he was rather upset. In short, he was just barely making sense at all."

"You're telling me you don't know what he said."

"I'm telling you that what he said and what he meant may be two different creatures entirely. I asked him who he was. He replied that he was an ISIS operative, not that he was working for one. However, considering his physical state at the time, it wouldn't surprise me greatly if I was misinformed."

"You sure this is such a good idea?"

Johanes looked up, a little peeved that Cecil's spoke-headed disciple was having second thoughts.

"What are you bitching about? I'm the one who's drinking it."

Spokes shrugged and continued stirring as Johanes turned up the particle stream, watching the bottom of the bowl with an increasingly intense stare. If it stopped simmering evenly it would be useless, and if it rose to a boil it would make him sick for at least a day. The trick was in getting it just right; such was the nature of Draconian toejam.

It was a temperamental and unusually fragile drug. Johanes remembered one instructor telling a class of recruits how home-made batches were held to spoil on the side of caution nine times out of ten, hence the Realm's enormous profits on their peculiar version, which was widely regarded as having the best trade-off between safety and potency. What naturally resulted was a "get 'em hooked and milk 'em dry" external revenue policy, while inside the Realm itself, the drug was taxed to extinction. Meanwhile, competitive operations were encircled and incorporated via the corporate state's ruthlessly legal policy of economic barbarism, or so Mike might have called it. Johanes gritted his teeth. He would find out soon, one way or the other.

"You'd better hurry on that," Cecil murmured from his corner of the room, his meditation seemingly concluded.

"You have the frequency and encryption set-up?"

The cameras nodded as he flicked the little, communications package into the air, it's metallic casing no larger than a walnut. Johanes caught it in one hand, hoping sincerely it would come of some use.

"A little slower. You're cooling the outside too fast."

Spokes shook his head, "We should just fix some hellacious flamebowls and be done with it."

"I need some semblance of lucidity while I'm in there. If we do this right, I'm as sick as an Alfirinian marsh slog for half a cent, and after that, all I have to deal with are the vibes."

Spokes grinned, "Lucky bastard."

Johanes nodded. His first two years of training included a fairly substantial appreciation of the drug culture, and the vibes were one of the loosest highs he had ever experienced. They were brought on by the interaction of the toe-jam and the body's own defense chemistry. They never encouraged paranoia, made him hyper or hallucinate, or even put him on planet nine. It was different. It was like being totally healthy, completely aware, and remarkably resonant to reality. In short, it was like not being stoned at all, except you were, but you wouldn't know it, and after a few times, just when you thought you'd gotten the hang of it, you'd wake up to the facts of addiction. He'd seen an acquaintance almost kill herself by quaffing an obviously burnt batch on purpose. Good ol' Souxie, she thought she could handle it, and here he was, practically thinking the same thing.

"If I don't come out of there after two cents, you tell the nurse on duty what I did, okay?"

Spokes nodded, not taking his eyes off his stirring, "Sure. No problem."

"I'm serious."

"I know."

Beep "This is Captain Dunham. Before we enter hyperspace, I want to take this opportunity on behalf of myself and the crew to thank you for traveling with Royal Fleet. At this time, I would advise arosthoros sufferers to begin heading toward sickbay if they haven't done so already. We will be arriving at Tyber in roughly twenty-six standard hours. Until then, if we can do anything to make your voyage more pleasant, please do not hesitate to inquire with our attendants."

Johanes shut down the heat, throwing a fist of ground ice into his highbowl.

"Okay. It's time."

Feso grinned and made the mandatory jokes as he handed out the space sickness capsules with little paper cups of water. As usual, most of the passengers who showed up were over twice his age. They drank and smiled, nodding and thanking him for his trouble. One old lady even complemented him on his nice, white, lab coat. In short, all of them seemed happy, all of them except for one. He was roughly the same age as Feso himself, yet his face seemed ashen and worn, as if he was psyching himself up for the black plague. Feso put a gentle hand on his shoulder.

"Don't worry. You'll be just fine."

Being a nurse, Feso saw that sort of reaction all the time. In every batch of passengers, there would be at least one who would start getting sick scarce minutes before the jump into hyperspace. Dr. Hunter explained it away as being some sort of psychological, anal-retentive thing, but Feso could never help getting worried. Maybe they were carrying some dread illness. After all, it was impossible to screen everyone thoroughly.

Dr. Hunter always laughed his distress off as though he were making a joke. She thought he was funny and told him so, barking a string of new orders during the very next sentence. Fret was the natural consequence of an idle mind, in her book. Still, this guy looked different.

Concerned undertones reverberated within the sickbay as everyone felt the disorientation. Several clung to the hand holds as their knees quaked back and forth, and one man, possibly in his nineties, sat down on the floor, blinking in confusion as the room swirled around him. Feso smiled, leaning next to him.

"Still with us?"

"Eh?"

Some laughed, others leaving as they realized that the worst was over, and Feso helped the old man back to his feet who was now smiling at his part in the joke.

"Eh… I was just taking a breather."

"Yes. I noticed."

Four of them stayed, the young man he was originally worried about included. Feso looked them over, feeling foreheads with his bare palm.

"How are you feeling?"

"I still feel dizzy," one replied

"That's normal. Here, sit down. We have a medicinal compound already prepared that should get you back on your feet in no time."

He administered four injections, three of them seeming to have some small effect. The young man wasn't responding, however. He fidgeted in his seat, perspiration soaking his shirt as his face turned a rosy hue of red. He squinted up with dilated pupils.

"I'm gonna be sick."

"It's okay."

Feso gave him another injection. The man started to lean over and drool on the floor.

"Ugghhh!"

"Umm… okay. You're gonna be just fine."

"No I'm not."

"Just wait here."

"Where are you going?"

Feso ran to the office. Dr. Hunter was on the comm board, arguing with the bureaucracy as usual.

"There's a problem with one of the passengers."

She looked up as though expecting his outburst.

"Acute arosthoros?"

He nodded.

"What code is the patient?"

"Green."

She nodded, "Double the injection."

"I already tripled it."

Dr. Hunter put the bureaucracy on hold and started across the room when she heard somebody vomiting on the floor. The man had fallen out of his seat, his face smeared with the contents of his stomach, while the other four passengers were alternating between looking away and sneaking peeks, their faces masked by utter revulsion. Only Hunter seemed unaffected.

"This isn't arosthoros."

"Then what is it?"

"I don't know… yet. How long as he been doing this?"

"About a minute."

She dragged the man to his feet, pulling him inside intensive care.

"Stay with the others. Don't let them leave."

Johanes felt like he'd been turned inside-out and left to rot as she dumped him into the gravitic recliner. She immediately turned her back to him, turning knobs, pushing buttons, as he let loose with another volley from the interior of his stomach. The room seemed to turn around on him, flipping and flopping as blood rushed to his mouth, exiting through his nostrils and lips and washing itself over his face.

Hunter examined the readings, a perplexed look crossing her face. The man's defensive system was going wild. She held him down with a grip only taught in medical school and took a blood sample, stepping back to the analyzer with her trophy. The man continued to shake, his hair now soaked with sweat.

"Help…"

"Quiet. I'm working."

The analyzer broke down the blood into its constituent parts, and the machine spat back readings she hadn't seen since the music festival on Satyr IV. She switched the IC open and groaned.

"You can let the others go, Nurse."

Feso came darting in a minute later.

"What was it?"

"See for yourself."

She put a pulse monitor around the patient's arm as Feso studied the output.

"Artificial contaminant of some kind."

"Yep. We've got ourselves a druggie."

Feso breathed a deep sigh of relief, then turned around hoping she hadn't noticed. Hunter smiled up at him.

"It's okay. At least it wasn't a contagion, right?"

He nodded and smiled, somewhat embarrassed, "The possibility had crossed my mind."

"You always think that…"

"And so far, I'm always wrong," he confessed, finishing the sentence for her. She pressed the ice pack to the back of the patient's neck as he continued to groan, trying in vain to force out the emptiness in his belly.

"He already has a lot of chemicals in his system, but I want you to administer a stabilizer. It may draw out his body's reaction to whatever he took, but at least it should keep him from getting any worse."

Feso nodded, "Somebody should watch him, right?"

"You watch him. I don't have time for baby-sitting. I've got a call on hold."

"You want me to stay with him alone?"

Hunter looked her nurse over, a slight frown creeping down her face.

"He's a grown man on drugs, Feso. He's harmless, not to mention pathetic."

"What if you're wrong?"

"About him being harmless? Then you load up the hypo-rod and punch him with a canister of Teramethenol-12. That should keep him happy."

"If it doesn't kill him, first," Feso muttered, but she had already left. He prepared the stabilizer and administered it, though putting one drug on top of another was more his idea of recklessness than medicine. Hunter just wanted the bozo to suffer for a while longer. She knew that he wasn't in any real danger, and the pulse-monitor would keep an eye on him better than any human could.

Johanes turned over, particles of vomit resting at his sides in the gravitic field. The noise of his breathing sounded parched and ragged behind the thumping in his ears, and the nurse stood over him, a concerned though unsympathetic look on the young man's face.

"How are you feeling, Mr. Smyth?"

"Terrible. Is it over?"

Feso shook his head, "I gave you a stabilizer. It seems to be bringing your pulse down, but you'll probably be sick for a while."

"Great."

"What did you take?"

"Huh?"

"What drug did you take?"

"Drug?" Johanes tried to laugh, but it only made him feel worse. "I thought I was space-sick."

"No. The doctor found some sort of drug in your system."

"Damn. No kidding. Must have been in that drink I had. Those Calannans sure do have a wicked sense of humor."

Feso blinked, "You mean you didn't even know?"

"There was this little pre-jump party on the promenade deck. I guess things got a little out of hand. Uh oh…" Johanes turned over and opened his mouth to heave. Only a rotting, stinking belch came out, the sort that gets holed-up in some damp recess of the stomach and refuses to poke its head out for weeks at a time. Feso leaned back once he got a whiff, squinting in extreme displeasure.

"Uh… I guess I can leave you alone for a little while. If you get into trouble, just call through the door. I'll leave it open, okay?"

"No problem."

Johanes switched off the gravitic recliner, settling to the sticky, white floor, now polka-dotted by various yellow and red particles of an origin he didn't wish to recall. Meanwhile, the computerized gadgetry continued to beep in time with his pulse. He walked over to it, toying with the dials as blood seeped from his nostrils and onto his lips while his tongue wagged back and forth, trying to avoid the awful taste.

"Remember, Jo. You gotta eat apples. They taste the same coming back up as they do going down. Two meals for the price of one." It was Souxie's voice in his head, as clear as the last time he'd heard it. Good ol' toe-jam.

He was relatively familiar with the operating system. He'd once used something remotely akin to it in a lab on Estin, except that the Draconian equipment was far more advanced. This was cruise liner material, a paltry product by any comparison. The medical console reported that a job was still in process: blood sample analysis, unknown compound recognition. He removed the sample tray, pocketing it and dumping the job out of queue. He then recalled the last minute of pulse readings from memory and set the playback into an infinite loop, tearing the pulse monitor off his arm as quietly as haste would allow.

The intensive care chamber was long and rectangular, the far wall coated with long plastic windows. A narrow corridor ran behind them, cutting a path between the antechamber and a row of laboratories. Behind the clear plastic barrier, Johanes could see someone dressed in a long white coat walking down the corridor, holding a stack of flimsies under one arm. The person seemed to be whistling, through from the behind the plastic, Johanes couldn't hear the noise, yet from the movement of the man's lips, he could still pick up the basic rhythm. The lips were cherry hued, like the front of his shirt, though that used to be white. He remembered how it had been so thoroughly cleaned at the Arien estate. Kori had shoved him into the moat just for kicks. She'd later asked him how he'd felt when the mansion's mascot dragged him beneath the water in one, swift, tug of a tentacle. It was only playing, she tried to explain, and they laughed, though he'd been rather annoyed at the time.

Johanes blinked, ducking to his belly. He'd probably been standing there looking stupid for close to a minute, maybe longer. He tried to focus his mind, but it kept on going off on tangents. The intrusion of the stabilizer, he figured. Planet nine would pass by, he reassured himself, as he started noticing the little cracks in the tile, the variations in the shape of one from another. He crawled about the chamber, his eyes examining everything in sight, as he investigated his new surroundings cubicle by cubicle like a cockroach in search of sustenance.

At the far end he found what he was looking for. The pulse monitor made no noise, but from the little jumping dot on the console, he could tell that somebody in the bed was alive. He drew Mike's fiberglass pistol, a little memento he'd been saving for a special occasion, and standing over the bedside, pulled the sheets down slowly with his free hand. The headjacks came as somewhat of a shock, as he fully expected to find

a white mane instead. Holding his breath, he pulled the sheet a little further.

"Michael."

There was no response, and Johanes grinned as he re-concealed the firearm, shaking the gatherer by the shoulder.

"C'mon. Wake up."

From the antechamber he could hear voices, one of them a woman's, strangely familiar.

"We'd rather wait until he's awake before we start moving him around. Besides, he's safer in intensive care. If something goes wrong, we can treat him better in there than in the cage."

"Look, doctor. I have direct orders to make sure he gets moved, so he's getting moved. End of story."

"I understand, but he's still at a very critical stage in the healing process. Why is it so important that he be moved now?"

"Right. Let me try put this as succinctly as possible. He gets moved now. We are not having a discussion about it. If you want to stomp on me, fine. Call my commanding officer and bitch. I don't care. I have my orders. Nothing personal, okay?"

"You people haven't even given me his medical records. We have no idea what sort of prior conditions might exist. If he's not inside intensive care, I can't assume responsibility for what might happen."

"Fine. That's great. Like I said before, I don't really care what happens to him."

The security officer entered the chamber, turning first toward the beeping noise and then to his left.

"My oh my. What happened to this fella?"

"Ah…."

"Space-sickness," Feso interrupted.

"No. Really?"

Hunter stood quietly, watching her nurse beneath an arched eyebrow. The security officer just laughed.

"I never knew it got that bad. I mean, not on a ship like this, anyway. Back when I was serving in the navy, one of our engineers had to crawl outside while we were in the middle of hyperspace. Very serious repairs. Okay? And he puked his guts out after we pulled him back in. Just between us, I don't think he ever really recovered, neither. And the janitors! I mean barf-o-rama, okay? And they were just a bunch of robots, and they still got pissed. You know when your robots start getting pissed off, you've got some serious…"

"How fascinating."

"Yeah, and this other time…"

"The patient is over there. Please, just move him."

Johanes let the pulse monitor fall again from his arm as they walked past, dumping the playback job and the rest of the computer's soft-memory with a silent turn of a power switch. He then stopped the nurse, who was trailing behind the other two.

"Real sorry about the mess."

"Aw… don't worry about it. We have nicer robots than the navy."

"Great. Look, I'm gonna get back to that party."

"No. You can't leave."

"Sorry. Got to. We ordered a hermaphrodite stripper, and I really don't want to miss it. Thanks."

"But…"

Johanes scampered out of sickbay before Feso could utter another word. Spokes was sitting on a bench nearby, trying desperately to hide inconspicuously behind a king-sized flimsi and a pair of mirrored stick-on shades. If not for the head jacks poking above the flimsi leaf, he might of succeeded, but as it was, he made less than the perfect spy. For starters, he was too honest.

"You look like garbage and smell like stomach swill."

Johanes grinned, "Compliments will get you everywhere."

"Damn. You must be having a good high."

"No, it evaporated, which is fine because it was pretty rotten while it lasted. They injected me full of stabilizers."

"Tough luck."

"Agreed."

"You take care of business?"

Johanes shrugged, "I think Michael beat me to the punch. They're moving him right now."

"What do we do?"

"You keep your eyes peeled. I'm going to take a shower." Q

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

'The Harrison Chapters' will be continued next issue.

MICROCHIPS NEVER RUST

Part 2

Eric Miller

October 5, 1957. Huge headline in today's newspaper that the first satellite is circling the earth. For a minute I lay on the bed with a pounding heart. Some events really hit me hard. During the first forty years of my life, I admired technology. When Wernher von Braun told me about his future projects, such as a flight to the moon, I was fascinated. But Hitler, with his technologically-based doctorship and his assembly-line extermination of the Jews, shocked me so deeply that I can never again be so naive about technology. Every advance nowadays only frightens me. News like this account of the first satellite makes me think of new potentialities for annihilation and arouses fear. If they fly to the moon tomorrow, my fear will be all the greater.

– Albert Speer, "Spandau – The Secret Diaries"

Hanson looked at the office chimp and waved his hand. The chimp responded with a very mechanical nod that betrayed a complete lack of spontaneity.

"Do you speak English?"

Suddenly wide eyed, the chimp typed as fast as his fingers could hit the keyboard. It was obvious that the clumsy fingers hit and missed keys almost at random. On the overhead screen could be read the message, "No, but I can hear and type English very well." The chimp grunted in a whoo-whoo, obviously delighted at the personal request to know his abilities.

Okay, thought Hanson. Link this together. Bob and Susan, like its all one joke. The chimps, the menial tasks. He also noticed one thing. The chimp typed things that came out in perfect English, even though you saw his fingers do things like hit two keys at once. An Intelligent keyboard. All at once it hit Hanson.

"Do I have my own account?"

"Of course," signaled the chimp.

Hanson ventured forward with a comment, "I can tell that you're very good with computers. I could really use your help." The chimp ooped with delight. Several administrators walked past the desk in the lobby, but they paid no attention to what they were doing. Another fact was confirmed: none of these people ever carried folders or paper of any kind. The two or three chimps who scurried in and out carrying files received no attention. Hanson felt comfortable enough to assume the chimp's place behind the workstation. A press of the 'Flocculating' icon prompted 'type your question, please, and enter your name.' "What is my apartment like?"

The video that popped up showed a small, split-level white townhouse. A saccharine voiced cooed softly from the speaker, "Welcome to North Campus Village, faculty section. Every effort has been made to match your personnel profile with your surroundings. Please convey any changes you would like made to us immediately. Remember that new housing assignments will require 2 weeks to be processed." The camera traveled through the street to show each little unit with its own plot of Kentucky blue grass out front. The narrow sidewalks lead from the front door to the crisp line of curb that lined immaculate black asphalt streets. Everything in the video looked so brand new that Hanson suspected a simulation was at work. "You will be pleased to know, Dr. Hanson, that your new neighbors have been selected for your intellectual stimulation. Programmers, artists and writers on the faculty live in a one block radius from your house." A close-up on the front door showed a box-like contraption wheeling itself in. "For your convenience, a complete food preparation and house cleaning unit is on all call 24 hours a day. For your driving convenience, a car has been matched to your personality profile; we believe you will enjoy this limited edition 1996 Lamborghini Diablo." A steering wheel too! The video stopped. The chimp pressed the "Get Help" option and pointed at Hanson's bowlcut. "Right." A request for an appearance stylist was typed after Get Help. And another thing. There is no way I'm going to wear a Brother Jim monkey suit, no offense to you, chimp. I may be a professor, but I wear what I wear. A request was typed out to find the nearest clothing store. The Image Boutique on North Lake Drive would do for both the haircut and clothes. The uniform: Prewashed jeans, Hawaiian shirt, black leather jacket and running shoes.

…even worse was the Klan robe. Who would have thought that Iran would embrace the Ku Klux Klan. They still looked at the late President Duke as being some kind of a god. Yeck.

The mail icon on the view panel blipped a few times. The chimp pounded the keyboard and up scrolled a screen with the message: "Art! Art! Good Buddy. We've got to talk. Call me at A-2042 tonight. Mari and some friends want to meet you. I've got a great idea for an album, need your help. Faculty get together this Friday too. See ya. Dr. Bill Britten, Department of Physics." The chimp looked at the panel and pulled his lower lip. A command prompt at the bottom read "Message #2: Address 2Hanson – For your eyes only." The chimp scowled and pressed the paper print button and handed the sheet to Hanson without looking at it. This letter was much less cheerful than the other.

"Mr. Hanson: Congratulations on your new appointment. Must see you immediately. Please go to South Campus library at once. Enter door and tell guard that you're with 'Research.' Sit at table by window. Wait for message from us to be hand delivered. We know who you are and have news which is of urgent interest to you. We are friends. Please be careful." A black block of characters read "To dispose, Press here twice in rapid succession." Tap tap. The paper dissolved in a small cloud of black ash. Part of it landed on the chimp's head and had to be wiped off. Hanson knew something was up. 'We are friends. Please be careful.' Ya, right. People were always

pressing him for favors. But it was his doing favors that kept him out of the worst camps. But he felt like forgetting message two and heading North to his new house. But this certainly would come back to haunt him. Better get it over with.

It has come to our attention that some confusion has resulted over the proper Canadian usage of the term American. After great pains were apparently affected by the Reich Senator from Georgia to include us in his definition of what was covered by the term American, we have been prompted to deliver by official channels the current state of this usage.

Gentlemen, upon hearing the word American, we are proud to accede that this nation consists only of Washington administered states, German occupied Ontario and Montreal, and the newly independent Western states. We of Northern Canada and rebel Alaska no longer use this name to refer to ourselves and would greatly appreciate it if your correspondence would reflect this fact from now on. Thank you."

– UN Security Council address from the consul of Commonwealth of Independent Arctic States.

Hanson made a quick exit out of the Administration building. A chimp in a white golf cart had been waiting for him and after a 5 minute trip through a spruce covered trail, the two of them stopped at the trash strewn edge of the homeless village. He motioned the chimp to go into the village, but a fear stricken look at the ragged shuffling figures inside and he knew that he would have to continue on foot. The chimp burrowed his head back into his shoulders and sped off in the cart.

Hanson had been dropped off at the old University sidewalk that ran north to the Bell Tower and Library. In its present state, the sidewalk would challenge the most rugged mountain bike; the cement slabs had broken up into complete rubble at several points and were covered over by long grass and weeds. Old black and white photos painted a picture of the walk in better times: smartly dressed young men and women, argyle socks, plaid skirts, carrying books. Classes chosen without the approval of a career officer, careers chosen at freedom.

Oh, Central in our hopes and dreams
To thee we work and strive
To shine a light upon ourselves
So that we a path may shine…

Sigh. The old Bell Tower could be seen up the path. Like everything in sight, it had been appropriated in some way by the homeless. Three youths were at the top of the tower inside the cement Tudor battlements that closed in the roof. An old oil drum made into a barbecue was spilling out smoke. Squint your eyes just a bit and it looks like you've signed up as a free-lancer in Richard II's army, advancing on the French. The beauty of the once-grand lawn had evolved into the squalor of a trash strewn sea of mud. A hundred crude huts made out of cardboard and scraps of wood littered the area. Shuffling old women in long mud-stained skirts, wild-haired teenagers and stubbly faced old men milled around. An old man stood at the entrance of a cardboard hovel to Hanson's right.

"Bom Dia, Herr Professor!" squeaked the old man. Hanson started to say "What?" but quickly glanced at the blue polyester encircling his sleeves, realizing that the appearance of crisp blue polyester signaled authority, especially on the campus. Hanson replied in greeting, using the Portuguese he had learned in Brazil. What came back from the old man was a strange form of Pidgin, a kind of half German, half Portuguese mixed with American street slang. Hanson could only finish the conversation by nodding in pretend understanding and quickly left.

The Library presented a strange sight. Like most other buildings in town, most of the windows had been long smashed out, or removed and replaced by the ubiquitous sheets of tarpaper that the nazi occupation government was so keen on using. Most of the base of the brick on the first level was covered over with a mass of lean-tos filled with old women selling food rations and recycled household appliances. A kid was in one tent trying to sell potential customers on the idea of using a waffle iron as a clothes ringer. In another, partially-opened boxes of spray paint held up a cardboard sign which read, "Spray on Hair. Real Cheep. Used by Pope Ron."

The warm air of the afternoon left a kind of festive feeling, and in spite of the constant background smell of burning tires, the heavenly smell of garlic, sage, olive oil and ginger wafted in from several woc fires. Even the old fountain was still up and running in the front plaza and several village kids ran in and splashed around. A PVC pipe wired to the fountain filled the water buckets of several people standing in a line.

Hanson reached the front entrance where a teenaged guard stood watch at an old school desk. He was bald with an M. C. Escher design tattooed to the top of his scalp. A pitbull/rottweiler mix guard dog eyed him lazily.

"I'm with research." The dog's ears perked up as Hanson spoke.

"Oh, go inside and sit down. Someone will be down to meet you."

The first available seat was a chair by one of the few remaining windows on the first level. Hanson could see the guard and dog from behind as well as the view down into the homeless village. After 15 minutes a small figure darted up to the guard and his dog, a Capuchin monkey with plastered back gray face hair and alert blue eyes. The monkey wore a small denim backpack from which he pulled a biscuit. The biscuit got tossed into the air where it was caught and devoured by the dog, who happily wagged his tail. The monkey darted quickly into the entrance and stopped momentarily to eye Hanson before running off into the dark hallway of the unlit interior. Hanson's eyes became used to the interior darkness. All around him could be seen stacks of old books, magazines and bunk-bed mattresses. Piles of tin-cans, loops of wire and neatly stacked corrugated boxes lined the walls. Most of the old book stacks were still there, and at first glance they seemed to hold to capacity dozens of old-style bound books. The stacks of mattresses betrayed the fact that the Library opened its doors as a homeless shelter during the worst winter months. Closer to the window, and more readable in the dust-filtered light were several scattered piles of full color posters. Hanson bent down to pick one up and positioned it front of him. The top logo read:

"Join the Advanced Guard. Become part of a revolution."

Two figures made up the body of the poster. One was an Iranian extremist who held his fist into the air. He was wearing the Klan robe with a Prussian cross emblazoned on the chest. The other figure seemed to be an American youth holding a rifle in both hands. A maniacal smile was on the youth's lips; the unnatural appearance of it lead Hanson to conclude that the smile itself had been morphed into the original photograph. Poor guy, he was probably a war prisoner to begin with. But even worse was the Klan

robe. Who would have thought that Iran would embrace the Ku Klux Klan. They still looked at the late President Duke as being some kind of a god. Yeck.

Hidden inside our advance to a new production system is a potential for social change so breath-taking in scope that few among us have been willing to face its meaning.

– Alvin Toffler

Hanson's reverie on the complex web of international events was broken by the appearance of the monkey who jumped out of the darkness. A tiny hand thrust out a card which read, "Follow me." Reluctantly, Hanson left his chair to follow the monkey in the dark interior. A door at the extreme end of the hall opened up, and with it came enough light to navigate by. The light allowed closer examination of the book stacks. Each shelf contained a large pile of books that had been shellacked together with a tough polyurethane glue. As book burning was considered too passe and reminiscent of violent times past, the new censors at Central had sent most of the Library's books to a factory where they underwent 'archiving preservation' so that 'future generations could enjoy them.' Unfortunately, the process turned the books into little more than unopenable plastic bricks but they did look really nice on the shelves. Lately, though, censors worried a little less about the issue, as Compressed English was now widely adopted in grade schools and kids shown an example of 20th century English usually gave up in despair over the contorted arrangement of double letters and strange vowel combinations.

Hanson and the monkey ascended a staircase leading to the upper levels. The stairwell was filled with large piles of coiled-up copper wiring, old style cable television wiring, and telephone cords. Apparently the spoils of 'Operation Cut and Snip' were ending up in the Library. Stepping onto the third level, the pair navigated through ever larger piles of junk and old magazines, including, incredibly, a crumbling issue of Popular Electronics from 1968, the title do-it-yourself construction project: "Build your own Theremin!" Hanson bent down and picked up an old yellowed paperback book titled "Rise and Fall of the Third Reich." The book randomly fell open to a page which read,

"By the end of September 1944, some seven and a half million civilian foreigners were toiling for the Third Reich. Nearly all of them had been rounded up by force, deported to Germany in boxcars, usually without food or water or any sanitary facilities and were put to work in the factories, fields and mines. They were not only put to work but degraded, beaten and starved and often left to die for lack of food, clothing and shelter."

Hmm. Try as you might, you can never predict the past with much accuracy.

The monkey hissed impatiently. Hanson dropped the book and followed it into a corridor that once held the office suite for the Library staff. The randomly dispersed junk contained piles of old black-and-white TV's, 'all in one' stereos, including 8-track, and old yellowed book pages. At last Hanson was led to a room containing several beaten old oak desks and book shelves lined with many bits of flotsam and jetsam. On one of the desks an old soldering iron was burning. A radio was quietly blasting out the 5th movement of Philip Glass's 'Satyagraha'. The acrid smell of burning solder, old tube electronics burning red-hot, and burning coffee grinds was music to Hanson's nose. A figure seated with his back to the door, silver hair spilling past shirt collar, suddenly swung around to face a shocked Hanson.

"Dr. Owen! I thought you were dead!"

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vi. xinitrc
default NeWS = talk.eliza.net
From:
Prison.net;section=info.crime.felon
ius;status=limited
```

"I think the one thing that really pushed me over the edge was all these old people telling me how I should help people who were less fortunate than I was. But I would be the one showing up at their house with a truck and some tools and telling them to join me 'cause some friends and I were going to help a couple of families fix up their houses. But these old dudes would be sitting at their computers saying, 'no, I can't, I've got to finish this social services grant application.' They would apply for money that would let them do studies "On the root causes of poverty among the poor." And I'd say shit, we already know why they're poor. And they would get twisted out of shape because I didn't join their cause, and they thought the best way I could help the poor was to sit at some desk filling out their paperwork. That really got to me. All these hypocrites telling me that by spending all day writing on 8-1/2 by 11 sheets of paper they're helping the poor. You know what's really sick? That guy who stands behind the counter handing out free food, and these so-called crusaders won't invite him to their parties cause he's not really doing important work. I'll take one of those food counter guys over ten of them any day. Man, these older guys talk a good talk, but when it comes time to do any real work, like helping build a clinic downtown, they're off at one of their congratulation dinners, and if they're not at one of these dinners, they're off zonked in front of the tube watching some show telling them how 'significant' they are."

"Why are you here?"

"Well, you couldn't help the poor then, not legally and in the way you wanted to cause you had to get permits and write all this shit. So I started saying this phrase to workers my age which went:

'The next time they tell you to pick up a pen, pick up a hammer.' And everyone knew that it meant to stop doing the paperwork bullshit and start doing something with your hands and your tools."

"And then what happened?"

"Well, The Information Crimes Division of the Secret Service arrested me for 'promoting lawlessness and destruction.' I had this BBS that you could log into to exchange info on places that needed help. And at my court trial they claimed I was promoting anarchy."

"Were you?"

"Man, the anarchy was already there long before I showed up. We were just trying to divert the stream of bad anarchy into the stream of good anarchy. You know, the kind you can live with and feel good about."

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run pgm
symbolic analysis=12% time spent:
years=15 subject not rehabilitated
request for parole denied close
logout
```

After awhile I started to realize that there were three Newsgroups that I went to first: alt.cyberpunk, sci.virtual-worlds, and soc.culture.brazil. Somehow these three groups read together give off a strange synergy that cannot be seen individually.

– The Author

Picture if you will, a giant bubble over 100 billion light years in radius. We, on Earth, are at the center of this bubble. When we start to look out over the expanse of this bubble, we

see that the further a galaxy is from us, the more its light has shifted into the red part of the light spectrum. Because we seek to explain the origin of the universe in a way that resembles our everyday physical reality, we say that the red shift is proof that all matter in the universe is hurtling from a central point; this Doppler shift is to us proof that the universe was created from some ancient Big Bang.

But we look closer at the situation and see many strange paradoxes. As an example, our instruments tell us that the Universe is humming with the background radiation left over from the Big Bang. When we look closer at what the source of this radiation is, is it possible that these extreme low frequencies are themselves the images of galaxies whose red-shifts are so extreme that they are detectable only as low-frequency radiation? And as this background radiation is detectable from all sides, can this not be caused by the large number of galaxies laying beyond the bubble of visibility of which the Earth is at the center?

Our astronomers tell us that the visible universe accounts for only 10 percent of the matter that can be detected. Can this other 90 percent also consist of those galaxies whose red-shift is so extreme that their images cannot be resolved?

But the greatest issue that comes under scrutiny is this: that the very motion which is said to be proof of the motion caused by the Big Bang is the doppler shift held detectable by the red-shift.

Ladies and Gentlemen, we have, through close physical scrutiny of the universe and through our new space based telescope, uncovered irrefutable proof that the red-shift is not a Doppler shift, but a shift in the wavelength of light itself as it crosses the vast distances of the Universe. The massive gravitational force of the Universe itself causes light to shift into the red spectrum over a prescribed distance. True to the original theory of Einstein, this shift is caused by the topology of a closed universe which refracts light in the same way that a spoon viewed in a glass of water appears to have a bent handle. It is a form of gravitational refraction that cause the frequencies of light to shift toward the red. When we on the Earth look at a galaxy many billions of light years away, we see a galaxy whose light frequency waves have been physically slowed down by the effect of crossing our great sea of matter. Likewise, someone on that particular galaxy looking at our Milky Way would see that same red-shift. Formerly, scientists maintained that this universal red-shift existed because the universe expanded at such an immense and uniform speed that all forms of matter accelerated from each at the same shift.

We can now feel confident to say that the background radiation is caused by the uncountable seas of galaxies beyond our so called visible Universe affected by this principle. In centuries past, scientists said that it was impossible for the Universe to be infinite because at night we would look into a blindingly bright sky. Because of our new principle, we can say that it is possible for the Universe to be infinite; beyond 100 billion light years, the light and energy of the stars becomes so shifted that we no longer see or detect them. It is this model that we now prefer over the "Big Bang" theory. As for the creation of matter itself, one can now argue that if the "Big Bang" was needed as point from which matter was created, it is just as acceptable to believe that matter arose from an infinite amount of points in space arising from the turbulent quantum fabric of the Universe itself."

– Lecture given after the Nobel prize in Physics award given to Paulo Morais for his publication and verification of the Theory of Electrodynamic Entropy

Paulo Morais stepped onto the gangplank that separated the office dome from the scientific complex. The plank was usually off limits for safety reasons, but Morais had a universal key. Besides taking a much needed short-cut, the key allowed him to feel for himself just how efficient the space cooling effect was. Inside the dome there was a fairly light breeze, upper 70's, normal humidity. Pressing the key into the lock and onto the outside of the dome caused a heat blast of warm, moist upper 90's Amazon Jungle air. Morais crossed the twenty feet into the next dome and looked upward to admire the superconductive webbing that ran from strut to strut inside the geodesic structure. One of the many discoveries of room temperature superconductivity was the space cooling effect. Woven strands of conducting fiber into a mosquito net pattern and apply current. Water in the air immediately condenses on the web and runs off at the bottom. In a dome, the sudden condensation creates a cool blanket of dehumidified air that sinks to the floor. In the sweltering heat of the Amazon, the domes made living and working inside a pleasant experience.

Morais entered his lab. A young Yanomami Indian looked up from a stack of papers and said, "Bom Dia, Herr Professor!"

Morais studied the youth quietly. "Now don't tell me you're trying to learn Portuguese."

"Nah. I think I'll stick to learning how to speak English with a thick Russian accent."

"Did you ever find out what 'Wilco' means?"

"Like in 'Roger Wilco' and 'A-OK'? I think the two terms are interchangeable. I don't know why someone would say 'Wilco' by itself."

"If it's just more slang, don't bother to transcribe it."

Morais and his assistant had inherited a huge pile of documents that were sold to the Brazilian government by an Icelandic salvage operation. As a favor to the Amazonian Technical Institute, Morais offered to interpret the meaning behind many old stacks of documents that described the rise and fall of the American space program.

"You know, Dar. This makes for rather depressing reading. Sort of like reading how the Romans built the world's most elaborate sewers and aqueducts and then a couple of centuries down the road deciding that its not even worth the bother to take a bath anymore."

Morais' watch beeped a few times. "Paulo. Get over to Barlow's office right away. They have some news about the Brother Jimmers that you're going to find really interesting."

"The Boom-era damage has been particularly severe among the hardest-pressed 13ers. The gap between the young rich and the young poor, bridgeable for the Boomers, has become a yawning canyon. Minority-group claims have lost much of their '60s-era luster and leadership. Inner cities, then perceived as morally solid and economically improving, are now social Dresdens of ruined families, gang crime, and sudden death. Boomer teens who got in trouble heard political leaders call for social services; 13ers who get in trouble mainly hear calls for boot-camp prisons - or swift execution."

– Neil Howe and Bill Strauss,
13th Gen.- Abort, Retry, Fail?

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open line 12
execute data link
300 baud cache and forward
1700 KHz rider signal
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'O.K. O.K. That was the 'Who' won't get fooled again. Won't Get Fooled Again. Sorry. I keep having to remember to 'Capitalize All Proper Names'. You are connected to the voice of Hogger Radio.

Hogger Radio. Coming to you from the voice of Free Colorado. Free Colorado, where no man is in debt. Had to give a plug. A gentle listener wrote in (sorry again, I can't receive snail mail) askin' "Hogger" Why do you often sound so bad?' and I have to say back tha this is a 65 in 1 electronics kit from Radio Shack, and I'm patched into a satellite by God knows what type of wire. But they keep me on the air cause I'm the only one who knows how to talk to the right people and let them talk. That's right. I listen to them and they vibrate my ear drums. And my eardrums vibrate a micro-microphone that gets get decompressed over a… well you get the idea. I don't always. But you get to hear good talk. And I always love what I'm hearin'. And I get a letter (remember, I can't get letters) but I know someone wants to know: Hogger, when you sound so bad, how can I make you sound better? Well, easy, son. You get an old wire coat hanger and you stick it on the end of that old crystal set that Big Burger Fun Meal for the month of August told you how to build out of old scrap radio parts. And you take the hanger and pull it out so it looks real square, and when you're listenin' to Hogger its goin' to sound so much better, cause that old coat hanger hooks up real nice to the 1700 Kilohertz wave that I'm a trying to blast out of my eardrums.

And I'm here in my mobile studio, which is nothing more than little ol' me and I'm sitting at a bar stool, and if you listen real hard, and you used that little coat hanger trick I told you about, you can hear the pool sticks and waitresses clinking glasses. I can't tell you where I am, cause we have to be real secret about this. Some of you who are listening might think this is really illegal, and sure enough, just a couple of ya have been paid to find out where we are and come after us and give us the ol' deep six, so all I'm going say is that we're in a bar that gets real busy in the ski season and has the best suds this ol' dude has ever tasted. But enough talk. I'm here in the old back room with none other than Bobby DelRay. You know who is he is. Bobby likes to ski and has a kind of reckless streak in 'im and so when I walks up to hims and say "How you like to be on the old Hogger show?" this ageing rebel couldn't pass it up.

"Bobby, how ya doin'!"

"Pretty good. I guess."

"Now let me ask you. The New York Times once called you 'The First Rebel of America's Second Civil War.' How does that make you feel."

"Nothing much, I guess. I'm here in beautiful Colorado, and that's what counts."

"Now you were a part of the Great Kentucky Fried Hamburger Rebellion of 2005. Can you fill us in on what happened then?"

"Well, Joe. Joe? I'm sorry, I'm not supposed to call you Joe. But anyway, I was only in high school back then."

"And what was going on then?"

"Well. I was, as you know, living in southern Ohio. And me and most of my school buddies worked odd jobs to get whatever money we could back in those scarce days."

"Things pretty tough, huh?'

"Oh yeah. Anyway, I was working at a place called Big Burger, and some kids I knew then worked at Kentucky Fried Chicken, and Shop-N-Go, and a bunch of other food type jobs. And as you can guess, things were real bad, cause the state had been given the go ahead to lower the minimum wage on account of the hard times."

"And how much was that?"

"I know we made $5.00 an hour for awhile, but that was when we were real lucky. The state then lowered the minimum to what they called a $3.35 an hour 'business hardship' wage, which you know, back in 2005 was really bad. The state also had some law that said you could require a worker to stay longer than 40 hours a week and not have to pay them. Something called 'a competitive labor overhead reduction.' We were real pissed and called relatives to see if anything outside of Ohio was better, but it seemed like everyone you called was in the same boat."

"Were there any other jobs?"

"Not really. My old man had been laid off from a machine shop that specialized in overseas CNC contracts. But the factory got bought up by someone who laid everyone off. We found out it was one of those things where a competitor buys the factory just to eliminate the competition. My dad was kind of lucky though. He headed straight home as soon as the overseas owner laid everyone off. Joe Gullwright was not lucky. He and about twelve other men took rifles and tried to take over the place. They stayed there for 3 days, and you know, not even twelve men can keep up a good guard shift for 3 days straight. So at the night of the third day a bomb got lobbed into the machine shop and everyone was gone at that point. My parents said be careful, just do everything they say right now."

"And you did nothing?"

"At that point, everyone agreed that we should just stick to our jobs and just keep our ears peeled. We had word that anyone trying to leave town got arrested. And they got arrested by these company security police types. When we contacted the county sherriff's office, we got some type of recorded message that they were no longer in service. My dad and the mayor try to get through to Mark Thompson's house to see if he was still working for the sherriff's office, but we got his wife who said that Mark had been taken to a state training center in the middle of the night, and she was sick worried cause Mark said he wasn't allowed to call or write or until after he had completed his special training. We were all taking mental notes at that time, and we didn't like what we saw. I was still able to sneak home enough French Fries and burgers that my family didn't starve though."

"And speaking of starve, I heard you really had some food problems."

"Oh yeah. Everyone on our block had gotten together to get all the lawns turned into gardens, and since it was July we had finally gotten some food. And one Sunday, when I finally could take off some time

from Big Burger, I was out in the garden watering everything from an illegal tap I made in the ground cause they had shut off our house water. Anyway, this lady drives up in a really fancy sports car, like a black German Porsche, the kind we never get to see in southern Ohio. And she steps out, and she's really young and pretty, maybe 25. And she gets out and looks at everything with this scowl on her face, and I'm sure it looked like hell, cause we had piles of dirt everywhere and had fenced in a couple of goats to a side pen and a had a couple of chicken wandering in and out of the house. And she walks up to ask me if I live here, and she tells me that she is in charge of the real estate development association and I ask what does that have to do with us? and she says everything, since the county approved her company buying up the houses on our block and that we had two months to move out, and in the mean time, it was illegal to do anything to the lawns and house without their permission."

"Whew. You must have pissed!"

"Hell ya! The next day we tried to get to the bottom of things, but it was the same story for everyone. The county assessor's office had been purchased by a multinational firm, but you could never find out who was in charge."

"Didn't you ever try to call out state to get help?"

"Try? Ya! But the phones had this strange problem. You could call long distance only if you had an account with a long distance company. If you tried to get more details, like 'Can I make this call and charge it to my bank account or regular long-distance provider?' they would either get pissed or tell you some gobbledygook about "We can not help toll customers who do not have an account." If you asked for details on how to get an account, you heard stuff about how you had to have an account to get an account. Garbage like that. Bif had a ham radio and he came up to us one night after I had a fight with the new Big Burger manager who was this 14-year-old kid who knew nothing about how to do anything and got really pissed if you talked to him. Anyway Bif is talking to us and it's a beautiful night and the fireflies on the grass are making the stars look like they're coming down from the sky, and I can tell by Bif's voice that something's up, and he tells us that when he tries to contact someone on the ham radio no one responds, and there's no one talking. And he only listens now cause he's afraid something out there is got the people who were talking. But he doesn't hear anyone from Ohio."

"But he must have picked up other states?"

"Oh yeah. But for some reason, almost all the eastern U.S. was silent. He would hear from time to time someone saying "Anyone out there? Please respond." But Bif said he could tell it wasn't a real ham radio operator and that it might be a trap. He also picked up some stuff from way West, but real hard to understand. Kind of cryptic, mostly numbers, like that strange voice that used to recite a bunch of numbers in Florida, but no one could tell what they were for. Bif heard a couple of sentences once, though, like: "I can see how many tanks they have." and "Make sure they bury the lines."

"Tell us about Samson."

"Marty Samson owned the gas station on the main drive, and just like everyone else, like Vernon Smith who had to sell Big Burger to the 14 year old snot, Marty was broke and had to sell out to these mysterious company folk who had just moved into town. Anyway, Marty says one night he was working, they hired him to be manager, and he sees this big truck move in for a tank of diesel. But the front of it looks real strange. And of all things, the truck is yelling at him, "Please put in the nozzle."!?! Jeez. The truck is talking to Marty and tells him to accept a credit card, and Marty makes sure it's legit and the truck is legit. Well, I read Popular Science when it gets left behind in town, and I now start to piece things together. This is one of those 'fuzzy-logic' trucks that everyone is writing about since they can work 24 hours a day and get through their route much faster and safer."

"And what about high-school? Oh. Excuse me. Just bring another pitcher."

"I was getting to that. So I'm back at school which is only 4 hours a day because the district went broke and the teachers are volunteer, and we can get more work in anyways, when Bart Studer calls all of us in from a beautiful sunny day where we have somehow gotten an old frisbee and are playing a game of Guts and we are yelling 'Shit. Now they're going to tell us they can't afford to let us have a goddam frisbee'. So we get hustled into the old basketball gym and Bart is looking real nervous and we all feel sorry for him, cause who would take on the hassle of being Principle for no pay. After about 10 minutes all the students are in the seats and under the backboard is this big guy who is wearing a black pin-striped suit, and he has blond hair and a really deep tan, not some farmer tan like we got."

"And I'll bet he had quite a speech to give you guys."

"More like the most bizarre bullshit I ever heard in my life. Anyway, everyone was real silent, cause all the families had been having all this strange stuff happening and we knew this guy was connected to it somehow."

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Disconnect Notice
1700 KHz Jamming alert
See Big Burger VeggieGulp Wrapper
Month of May for New Time
and Frequency
To continue above audio mail append
message tag #1120-1 part
2.
Logout
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Eric Miller is a graduate student at Michigan State University where he studies the use of Computer Aided Design (CAD) in architectural and product design. Other academic interests include Artificial Life, Virtual Reality, and Cyberspace culture. Recreational interests include mountain biking and cross-country skiing in Michigan's beautiful forests, painting, and composing electronic music as well as writing fiction.

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