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Looking Ahead

Daniel K. Appelquist

Well, here we are at *Quanta* number three. After a close brush with death over the winter break, I found myself back at CMU attempting to deal with an overwhelming number of *Quanta* submissions and subscription requests which had piled up in my mailbox. I'm now proud to say that *Quanta* is reaching over *eight-hundred* addresses world-wide (some of which are re-distribution sites).

Speaking of distribution sites, one of the largest is the distribution for the United Kingdom (comprising twenty-seven subscribers). Michael Green had volunteered to take care of this job at around the time that *Quanta* was first conceptualized. Sadly, he's no longer going to be able to do so. However, the job has been taken over by Lindsay Marshall (lindsay.marshall@uk.ac.newcastle.edu). If you're a subscriber in the United Kingdom, and you'd like to receive back issues or change the status of your subscription, contact Lindsay. For all other matters, contact me directly (such as for submissions or letters to the editor.)

We have three recurring authors this issue, Faye Levine (*Dinner at Nestrosa's*), Christopher Kempke (*Rules of the Game, Going Places*) and William Racicot (*Infernal Repast*). I'm sure you'll enjoy their new works. We have a story by Matthew Sorrels (*Quanta* Assistant Editor) as well as an article by our other assistant editor, Norman Murray.

I'm very excited about the amount of fiction which is being distributed over the net. Of course, there are magazines such as *Athene*, *Dargonzine*, and this one. These seem to be only the beginning of a revolution in net-distributed fiction. The newsgroup alt.prose is a continual source of creativity. We are also seeing entire books posted to newsgroups part by part. Particularly, I'm excited about the amount of Science Fiction being distributed in this manner. Science Fiction and technology have a symbiotic relationship, each feeding off of the other's creations, so I find it especially appropriate that Science Fiction has found such a friendly home on the net.

Jason Snell (*Into Grey*) has given us an article entitled ''Cyberpunk's a Label Like Any Other'' for this issue. In it, he makes some comments on the categorization of fiction and more specifically the generalization of Science Fiction. In that context, I'd like to devote the rest of this article to that topic. (You may wish to read his article before continuing.)

I think Science Fiction should hold a special place among the realms of fiction because it is different. Science Fiction asks ''What if?'' in a way that no other realm of fiction really does. It is the fiction of ideas, of concepts. It has the unique ability to examine mankind from an extra-terrestrial perspective. Indeed, I would argue that Science Fiction has played a role in humankind's growing concept of itself as a race.

To say that Science Fiction should hold a special place is not to say that it should be set apart from ''conventional'' fiction, however. To a certain extent, the decategorization of Science Fiction has already begun. My own high-school English curriculum included Clarke's *Childhood's End*, Miller's *A Canticle for Liebowitz* and Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange*. There are *Cliff's Notes* for Herbert's *Dune* and for Orwell's *1984*. Of course, the widespread popularity of the latter novel should be some indication of the way in which Science Fiction is slowly being integrated into mainstream. *1984* is a great novel, and it is most definitely Science Fiction, but if it were written today, would it instantly be praised as a classic?

There's a great deal of new fiction being written in the genre of Science Fiction which deserves just as much adulation as novels such as *1984* or *A Clockwork Orange* have received, but this fiction simply hasn't been around long enough. It's only when we gain some historical perspective that we can truly call a work of fiction a work of genius. Perhaps William Gibson's works be taught in the schools of the future.

To sum up, I largely agree with Jason's statements on categorization. It can be a very bad thing. However, I don't think that genres can or should be completely eliminated from fiction. The stigma they can sometimes carry, however, should be.

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Cyberpunk's a Label Like Any Other

Jason Snell

As both a reader and a writer, I've been trying to figure out what this ''cyberpunk'' thing really is. Is it a genre? Is it a passing fad? Is it a one-man literary wrecking squad?

And, underneath all that, I've been wondering: should it matter?

I'm not quite sure. Whatever William Gibson's Hugo, Nebula, and Campbell award-winning *Neuromancer* started, it's become quite a special thing.

Gibson's cyberpunk trilogy (which, by the way, he seems to be finished with -- his next book is going to be about an alternate past where the Babbage Engine really works) consists of *Neuromancer*, *Count Zero*, and *Mona Lisa Overdrive*. It shows all of the signs of being its own literary form. In fact, one might even think that it's a pretty darn strict form, too.

For instance, each book works in a cycle of characters. This is most clear in *Count Zero* and *Mona Lisa Overdrive* -- there are various sets of characters which alternate each chapter, eventually coming together (or not coming together) at the end of the novel. The novels are set in a high-tech future dominated by cyberspace, a consensual hallucination, a virtual reality constructed out of all the computer systems in the world interacting with one another. But the world is controlled by international conglomerates, and voodoo-like intelligences run rampant through cyberspace. (Now, Gibson wasn't necessarily the first person to use these different elements, but he was the first to incorporate them all in this specific form.)

The question is, if this is what ''cyberpunk'' is all about, wouldn't any other ''cyberpunk'' novel be simply called a rip-off of William Gibson? Did Gibson start a genre, or are all the ''cyberpunk'' books and stories which followed *Neuromancer* simply rip-offs?

The temptation to write about virtual realities, artificial intelligences, chip constructs, and other ''cyberpunk'' fixtures is great -- it's logical that it would be that way. Some of the best Science Fiction comes from writers telling stories about the human condition from a different, fantastic vantage point. It's a wonderful way of ''coating'' the story -- viewing it from a different angle, so a reader lets down their defenses and doesn't view the novel with the same skeptical view which they take while watching the network news. And cyberpunk is ripe with allegorical potential.

Say I use a virtual computer network in a novel I'm writing. Am I suddenly just ''ripping off'' William Gibson? What if I try to change it a little, don't use the name ''cyberspace'', make it a bit more interactive in some ways, less in others. . . what then? And what if I talk about artificial intelligences? Or ROM-copies of dead people's memory patterns?

This is the big question: is the founder of a genre creating new conventions, or is he just moving within his own work? Is it fair to say ''I'm writing a cyberpunk novel'', or should we be saying ''I'm writing a novel in the style of William Gibson''? And should Gibson be flattered by the following which has sprung up around him, or should he feel that his work is being copied?

Sticky questions, all. And I bring this up because, as you've probably guessed by now, I've been trying to write a story which uses many of Gibson's conventions. My story has three characters which appear in a cycle, it has a virtual reality, it might have artificial intelligences and/or ROM-constructs. Does this mean I'm writing a cyberpunk story? Will people see anything with these conventions and simply scream ''*Cyberpunk!? I've seen it all before!*'' or, worse yet, ''Another Gibson rip-off''?

I hope not. I'd hope Science Fiction readers would be more open than that. But that doesn't seem to be the general pattern. Pigeonholing is the general pattern.

Because, you see, ''mainstream'' readers do that with Science Fiction in general. If I mention a book to a friend of mine, and let it slip that it's set in the future, or has aliens or robots or dinosaurs or anything like that in it, I'm as good as dead. Science fiction itself scares people off. People are scared of genres. So are people doubly scared of the sub-genre of ''cyberpunk''? Quite probably.

And it's all too bad -- because some damn good literature has been put out in the genre. Harlan Ellison fights the label ''Science Fiction'' for a good reason -- people won't take him seriously, people won't read him, if he's a genre writer. As it is, he goes in the literature section of the bookstore (some of the time, anyway) -- as he rightly deserves.

But Gibson belongs there, too. And so do a score of other Science Fiction novels -- not the 50's pulp-style which features aliens named Gloort, or robots named Zog, but sensitive, thought-provoking novels by Heinlein, Asimov, Sturgeon, Dick, Clarke, Le Guin, Tolkein, C.S. Lewis.

And pigeonholing doesn't just cover individual works -- it can cover whole careers. The best example of this is Dan Simmons' novel *Phases of Gravity*. It has nothing ''Science Fictional'' in it at all. But Simmons has written Science Fiction in the past, and the book was published by Bantam as a Spectra Special Edition.

I found it in the Science Fiction section. It was a beautiful novel, which I might not have ever read if it was in the mainstream novels. But that was where it belonged.

Categorizing books and authors in general is bad enough -- but allowing yourself to be scared off from individual books by those generalizations is terrible. We shouldn't run from all westerns, or mysteries, or Science Fiction. . . or cyberpunk.

I guess I'm safe in writing my story, because I can say ''well, it's cyberpunk, you know?''

But, somehow, that scares me. I'd rather just say, ''this is a story I wrote about love, pain, and death. About human nature. It's an attempt at writing meaningful literature. It may be inept, it may just plain stink, but please read it and tell me what you think honestly.''

Yet I know that, if the person I'm giving it to is a mainstream reader, he or she will read the first paragraph and mumble ''Uh-oh-- sci-fi'' to themselves. And if they're Science Fiction readers, chances are they'll say ''Uh-oh-- cyberpunk'' or, worse yet, ''Oh, no, another Gibson rip-off.''

You see, it shouldn't matter whether ''cyberpunk'' is a genre, a following, or whatever. It shouldn't matter whether Simmons' *Phases of Gravity* is Science Fiction or not.

But it does, somehow -- and that's not fair. It prejudices readers, and it shouldn't.

Jason Snell is a sophomore at U.C. San Diego double-majoring in Communication and Literature/Writing, and is the Associate Associate News Editor of the UCSD Guardian *newspaper. His story ''Into Gray'' appeared in the first issue of* Quanta*. He's currently trying to write literature in the form of (eek!) ''cyberpunk,'' and finds it fascinating that he'd write an article about pigeonholing and categorization for a publication which specializes in one particular genre.*

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Bio-Tech in and out of SF

Norman S. Murray

A growing trend in Science Fiction is the use of biotechnology. What is biotechnology you might ask? That is the question which I hope to answer for you in this article.

The first thing that I would like to point out, is that the biological sciences are one of the fastest growing fields today. The main advances are coming in genetic engineering, developmental biology, immunology, pharmaceutical development. There are also advances being made in nanotechnology, which, for the purposes of this article only, I will lump into the biotechnology field (as the only appreciable nanotechnology we now have is the purely biological equipment in every one of us).

In current fiction, I have seen everything from cloning, to ''little pills to cure everything'' (nanomachines that repair every damaged cell in your body) allowing one to live ''forever.'' I have also seen the engineering of animals for transportation, i.e. strap yourself onto the back of a giant cat, and drive to work at seventy kilometers per hour! Also in older works, we have tissue banks for every person, so that when they get old, or injured, you already have enough tissue mass to replace their entire body. There has also been stories where a disease is created, specific to one persons DNA, as a method to catch criminals. There have also been many cases where a gene from one species was isolated and transferred into another species.

These are truly amazing ideas, well worthy of being in science fiction when each of them was written. Interestingly, however, we can now do some things from the older list. We have taken the gene for producing human insulin, and placed it into an *E. coli* (a bacteria native to the human large intestine, that is *the* subject of genetic manipulations (there are many others but none used half as much)). These have been grown in giant vats, and the insulin they produce is commercially available. This is a necessity for some people who are allergic to the more traditional sources from pigs and sheep. We have also been able to grow animal proteins out of a tobacco plant, and have increased crop productivity through genetic engineering.

The other thing we have been able to do is to make transplants common, but they are still too life threatening to be called routine. This is a step towards being able to replace any bodypart in anyone's body at a few days notice, assuming life support technology to keep the individual alive until such time. Another thing we have done has put us onto the path of creating the bionic man, nowadays known as a cyborg. The early steps to this are old, and too large to fit inside the human body. Newer ones are capable of much more and can be implanted into the body. Of course, I'm talking about the old (but still used) iron lungs, and dialysis machines, and the newer artificial heart.

A new, experimental contraceptive technique has been used in lab rats, using the rats own immune system to attack the sperm binding sites on her own egg, preventing fertilization from taking place. Right now it is about 75% effective for the first month, and then begins to drop off on an individual basis over the next few months. This will hopefully become a standard form of contraceptive in humans, but there is much testing left to be done - so maybe in five or ten years. . . [1]

As for the other items on the ''wish list,'' they shall remain on that list for several years. The first to appear will probably be cloning, but beware - your clone will have to grow for about 20 years before you can have an intelligent conversation with it. It will be a very impractical thing to grow a clone of a person, but it will be technologically possible. A scary possibility for the near future is the ability to create a disease so specific that it will infect only redheads (or those who carry one gene for redheadedness, since it is a recessive trait), or any person carrying on their DNA, a preselected code, thus making it possible to infect everyone who is female, while leaving the males perfectly healthy.

This, of course, brings up a Pandora's box of moral questions in biology. Is it right to build an entire species to serve our own needs? and if so where does it stop being acceptable, and start being slavery. Is it morally responsible to ''dial-up'' a baby to order - hair, and eye color, IQ, height, etc. . . ? These are the questions that must be answered by the time we get to this level of technology. Did you know that in the U.S.A. it is legal to patent a new life form?

I don't know what is feeding on what, the science fiction upon real life or vice versa, but there is a definite revolution sweeping the worlds of reality and science fiction.

[1] Taylor, Robert, ''Zona Pellucida Peptite Blocks Fertilization'', *The Journal of NIH Research*, January-February 1990 Vol. II

Norm Murray is a sophomore biology major, at Carnegie Mellon University, concentrating in genetics and computer applications in biology. He is also an assistant editor of this magazine. He would like to be able to spend time and learn how to write science fiction, but for now he is content to meerly read it. He also has a new baby sister (Jan. 31) - and likes to use ' 's and -'s, as well as (and) as decorations when he's typing something. In two words or less, he's ''mostly harmless.''

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Illusions of Reality

Bruce Sterling Woodcock

Dr. Jonathan Scott awoke that morning with a firm conviction -- today would be the day he would make a breakthrough in Brian's case. Today he would uncover Brian's hidden secrets and reveal to him the true nature of reality. Today, thought Dr. Scott, would be a new beginning for Brian Realis.

Dr. Scott drove quickly through the pouring rain to the clinic that morning. He arrived on time and quickly reviewed Brian's file. He then left his office and walked down the corridor to the Therapy Room. The nurse exited the room and informed Dr. Scott that Brian was already inside. Dr. Scott hesitated for a few seconds, took a deep breath and stepped into the room. Brian was there, sitting alone and waiting for the world to end. The clock bells outside heralded the arrival of nine o'clock.

Dr. Scott strode across the carpet and seated himself across from his patient. Brian gave no acknowledgment of the doctor's presence and continued to stare blankly into space. Despite this, Dr. Scott was still sure that the breakthrough would be today. He looked Brian straight in the eye and, with a little smile, began their daily session.

''Hello, Brian. How are we feeling today?''

''Well, I can't say for you, but as for myself I'm feeling the same as I do tomorrow.''

''Well, Brian, I feel fine. But what do you mean by 'the same as I do tomorrow.'?''

''I mean tomorrow. What you call the day after today.''

''What makes you so sure of how you will feel tomorrow?''

''For I can see the future,'' replied Brian, ''and I know what is going to happen. Tomorrow will be the same as today. It always is. But, tomorrow you will no longer be able to 'help' me. As if I needed your 'help' in the first place.''

Dr. Scott was undaunted. His attitude was still positive; the breakthrough, he thought, would still be today. Because today was one of the few days Brian had actually talked, which meant that something significant was going to happen. Dr. Scott decided to ask a question which earlier Brian had been reluctant to talk about.

''Brian, let's talk about the past instead of the future. Tell me about the day of the accident.''

''It was a day like any other,'' Brian began, ''except that today I was to make human history. But the day was the culmination of many years of work, and the story of it really begins many years ago when I was just out of college.

''As I told you before, I began working at the Wheeler Institute of Sub-Quantum Studies. My colleagues and I were conducting physics research at the Planck level. As you know, there is a point at which reality breaks down in Quantum Mechanics. Once one looks at a small enough scale, the fundamental aspects of space-time break down. Reality and the physical laws with which we describe it cease to exist. The only thing left is a space-time pre-geometry composed of probability and imaginary numbers. It was a level which took 200 pages to describe mathematically and impossible to describe physically. It was a level at which the universe stopped trying to fool us and simply disappeared into the nothingness state from which it sprang. And here we were, some of the countries' most brilliant minds, prancing around, giving talks and doing experiments and performing mathematical hand-waving like we knew what we were talking about. It was all so presumptuous of us that we could understand something which was beyond the realm of experience. But we were young and cocky, and no one else doubted our work, because they too couldn't understand it. And so we continued our vacuous verbiage about the 'true nature of reality' and let the blind lead the blind until we fell into the pit.

''We discovered these little 'pockets' of pre-geometry; a sort-of 'Quantum Foam' which permeated all of space-time. Steve called them 'realitons' since they were the ultimate constituents of our reality. We discovered that they were the 'hidden variable' called for in the theories and that they traveled much, much faster than the speed of light. They were the solution to Bell's Theorem and the Einstein-Podolsky-Rosen Paradox.

''We also discovered that they could be excited to resonate at a specific frequency. We discovered that whenever we tried to measure the excited state, the realiton absorbed the energy and re-emitted it thousands of feet away. It wasn't until the scientists in the material science lab started dying from acute radiation exposure did we realize what was happening.

''Whenever a realiton was excited, it dematerialized whatever was nearby in its space-time region and transported in instantaneously (well, almost) across reality, rematerializing whatever was in its space-time pre-geometry wave packet when it fell back to its ground state. That's when we got the idea: what if we used these realitons as a means of transport? Just excite them, hitch a ride, and be materialized quickly across vast distances. The distance traveled could easily be controlled by the frequency of the realiton vibration. Light-years could be crossed in less time than it takes to go to the bathroom. The problems of interstellar space travel were solved!

''So we tried testing it over small distances. First inanimate objects, then live plants, then small animals, etc. We took tons of physical data and saw that everything came through perfectly, exactly as it was before. No being turned inside-out or being dispersed across the solar system that you hear from the science-fiction writers. This was safe, fast, and not too expensive. All that was left was to try it out on a human being.

''Naturally, I volunteered. Oh sure, there were complaints and demonstrations and debates on safety, but everybody knew it had to be tested, and no one else wanted to take my place as volunteer. So the day came, and I was sealed up in the transportation chamber, all ready to take a trip a step out less than a nanosecond later thousands of miles away. Everything was fine. Until they hit the switch.

''Now don't get me wrong. Technically, the experiment was a success. Everything went on schedule and without a hitch; no power outages or computer glitches to foul things up.

''But we had neglected something. The human psyche is a fragile thing. Although we knew what happened physically when we did the transportation, how were we to even guess what it felt like experientially? We had no idea. I had no idea. And I jumped straight into hell.

''How can I describe what it was like? Like trying to describe color to a blind man, the concept cannot be related. All I can say is that the split-second physically was an eternity psychologically. I experienced the whole of the universe in that time. The animals, of course, were unaffected, for they are not conscious or self-aware. But the human mind, you see, contains itself as a self-referent concept. And when that truth is shattered by a look from the reference point of the divine, when one sees reality as it truly is, the whole idea of the concept of the universe, as well as the concept of the self, becomes a farce. To look upon the face of truth and see only nonexistence is truly enough to drive a man mad. At least for a while. But I have sorted out my mind, now, and can fully accept the truth of reality. I am beyond the stage of madness.''

Dr. Scott, who had been listening quietly the entire time, suddenly leapt upon Brian's last few words. ''So you feel we really are making progress?'' he asserted.

''Progress is an illusion,'' Brian replied quickly. ''We change, but we never get anywhere; we never make any progress. So really, nothing changes. The more things change, the more they stay the same. Things. A thing is subject to change. In fact, things seem to be undergoing constant change. But when a thing changes, it is no longer what it was once before. It's not the same thing.''

''But all of the traits of an object do not change,'' interrupted Dr. Scott. He quickly jotted down Brian's reference to things on a notepad. ''There are overall criteria for classification which do not change,'' he continued. ''The overall essence of an object is retained. Most changes involve incidental traits, which are unimportant in the larger scheme.''

''But all changes have an effect,'' explained Brian, ''no matter how small or trivial. Nothing is insignificant; these minor changes add up over the lifetime of a given thing. And since schemes of classification are purely arbitrary, a thing can be defined in any way, thus exposing its subtle changes. The overall essence changes relative to the observer. Since the common essence of all things is existence, the existence also changes relative to the observer. Quantum Mechanics demonstrated the importance of the observer in defining the universe a century ago. But as I pointed out earlier, we don't really change; we only seem to. Therefore we all don't exist.''

Dr. Scott, however, was quick to respond to the philosophical conclusions of Brian's twisted logic. ''Or we do exist, Brian. By your own logic it can be either. That's where you lose reality. Both conclusions are equally correct and possible, but only one applies in our case. We know we exist because *we know* we know we exist.''

''But even if we really do exist,'' replied Brian, ''then change causes a change in our existence. Our existence is therefore fleeting, and we soon become non-existent. If existence defines reality, then non-existence defines non-reality, or nothingness. But nothing is not nothing if it is definable. Thus the paradox of reality and existence. To avoid this paradox, one is forced to conclude one does not exist.''

Dr. Scott scribbled on his notepad while Brian talked. *Coming to grips with his own mortality. The breakthrough is close at hand!* He then waited while Brian continued his speech.

''But in the end,'' Brian sighed, ''I am no longer one of you. I can see it all for what it truly is. It only seems that you know you know you exist. In the end, reality is but an illusion, a cruel lie; the universe is a figment of its own imagination. And upon realizing this, the universe is forced to accept its own non-existence. The end of the universe is close at hand. And since I am not one of you, my existence will continue, while yours shall cease.''

Dr. Scott realized he had reached a dead end. He sighed and wrote slowly on his notepad. *Back to thinking he's immortal. He is drifting further from reality. I will have to retrace the conversation and try from another route*. The doctor consulted notes he had made earlier, and tried again.

''Brian,'' began Dr. Scott, ''you talked about 'things' a moment ago. Exactly what qualifies as things?''

''Something. Anything. Everything. Nothing. A glass of water, for instance. I happen to be thirsty.''

''That's okay, I'll get you one.''

''No thanks,'' replied Brian, ''I'll just drink this.''

Dr. Scott stared at the glass of water as Brian drank it. It hadn't been there a moment ago. ''Where did you get that?'' he drilled.

''From beyond reality. I wanted it, I reached beyond reality, and I got it. It was always here, really. But the illusion of reality hid it from your view.''

Dr. Scott became desperate. ''Brian, listen to yourself. You can't really believe what you're saying. I know you must have had that glass hidden somewhere; stop fooling yourself.''

''It was hidden,'' replied Brian, ''by reality. I wanted it;

I reached beyond the veil of reality; I got it. All of those 'things' I mentioned lie beyond the illusion veil of reality. It is you who are being fooled. For in the end, I am reality. I can get anything I want. And I say reality doesn't exist.''

Megalomania. Illusions of reali . . . scribble scribble erase *grandeur confused about whether he exists or not. It doesn't look good*. Dr. Scott noted these thoughts, then asked Brian a new question.

''What is it you *really* want, Brian?''

Brian Realis thought for a moment, smiled, and then replied:

''I just want it all to stop.''

It did.

Bruce Woodcock is a sophomore at Purdue University, majoring in Physics, and is one of the world's last romantics. He is currently secretary of the Purdue University Chapter of the Society of Physics Students. In his spare time, he enjoys reading ''just about anything,'' writing short stories, building a time machine, exploring the mysteries of the universe, and falling in love. Bruce's other interest include astronomy, computers, philosophy, and politics.

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CAT AND MOUSE

by Matthew Sorrels

Gritty, cold snow came in out of the south, tainting the ground with a kind of dirty, damp death. The sulfur in the air was thick enough to cause shortness of breath. It was not a good week. Blaze shuffled down the snow laden walkway with a weariness that seemed to be the mood of the times. Entering through the glassy front doors to Hitachi, Ltd. he smiled with a kind of childish glee. Unlike most people, Blaze was in love with his work. It was the only reason that he was able to get up in the morning and face the pain of the real world. He was in charge of data security research and development at Hitachi, Ltd. His research team was responsible for the design of most of the systems that guarded computers all over the world. He was an ICE designer, Intrusion Counter measure Electronics. It was perhaps one of the dirtiest jobs around. In order to protect a system you had to be able to understand the slime trying to get in. Blaze was a console jockey, but also a talented and dedicated research software engineer. He walked a line few people could understand -- between the slimy underworld and the corporate zaibatsu.

Of late, a lot of small-time jockeys had been making runs at data banks that should have been impenetrable. And they had been succeeding. They were using some new form of worm. The worm was capable of changing some of the basic rules of the matrix and by doing so confuse any protection system running in that space. It was like fixing the space so that zero equals one, anything that relied on that type of basic logic was toast. Right now his team was working on taking out parts of code from the ICE that relied on matrix operations to try and get around this matrix worm.

Every morning his team assembled in the conference room to discuss what was being done. The smoke filled room reeked of sweat that had been sitting around for days on end. You could taste the caffeine reek in the air. Most of the people in the room hadn't slept in days, and they couldn't count on when they would be allowed to sleep again. Even Blaze hadn't slept, he had been in Osaka trying to find the source of the new worm that was giving him only headaches.

''Ok, I know you're all tired. I want a short report from each of you, then we go home. Can't expect you to work forever.'', Blaze said as calmly as his overworked nerves could manage.

''Well, it's a nightmare. There's no way we can remove all the matrix dependencies from any of the Orange or Mandarin defense systems. They have had matrix dependencies reduced, but it's not possible to make them effective and not have them depend on the matrix.'', John Yater said from his tilted back chair, eyes half-asleep.

''Yes, I have to agree. It's just not possible. O'Yatish has been working on a new minimal ICE that doesn't need any matrix but he doesn't believe it will hold up to any kind of attack that is worth shit.'', Lacy said with an eager excitement. They kind of seemed to say, ''Let us go. We can't fix it.''

''Ok, that's what I felt was inevitable. Right now security is working with the governments of several nations to try and erase all copies of the worm and eliminate whoever or whatever wrote it. But the leads are slim. Word on the street is that some AI wrote the damn thing and started spreading it around. I am almost willing to buy this, except for the fact that we are the only people with AI's that know about that type of stuff. I hope to God that someone working for us here didn't dream up this thing. I don't think that's likely though. I want you all to go home and get some rest. Come back tomorrow and we will see what we can do.''

This wasn't good, Blaze thought. It could only mean big trouble. If an AI did this on its own, it would be in violation of the AI act of 2003. Then on the other hand if an AI didn't do it, someone inside of Hitachi must have had a hand in it. Word on the street was that someone was going to take a run at Hitachi, Ltd. and with this new worm that might even be possible. Blaze spent the rest of the day working the outer matrix defenses and putting everyone on alert. If it was going to happen it would happen soon.

Back home in the gloomy corporate owned apartment. Half-a-bottle of rum later. ''Should stay sharp tonight,'' Blaze whispered into the air, ''But I'm in the mood to get a little wired.'' Blaze popped a sleeping pill before laying down in a fitful doze. About a quarter after three, the console woke him. A level one security breach was in progress. Blaze's dizzy head groggily slapped the electrodes to his body and punched into the matrix. The familiar bright lights of Hitachi, Ltd. surrounding him like an old friend. The never ending red matrix lines, criss-crossing into infinite space. This was home. A kind of adrenaline that you couldn't get with drugs. A fire that singed the soul, ground the will, and blurred the mind. A lifeless form in a sea of egoless dark.

He punched the throttle and zipped within four grids of the break-in. It was a melee of ICE and fire. The worm was re-weaving the space while the ICE was doing its best to attack it. In a rhythmless dance, round and round they went. Behind the worm the data jockey was riding through it all. It would not be long before the worm had cut a hole in the most defensive ICE on Earth. It was almost beautiful, but Blaze wasn't there to admire the art, only to stop it. First he flooded the zone with a new anti-worm that he had dreamed up. To the worm it looked like an infected matrix area, causing the real worm to not work its way into that area. The only difference was that this worm didn't do anything but look like trouble. After doing this, Blaze punched behind the console jockey that was ridding the worm. He hadn't noticed Blaze due to a new cybercloak the guys down in research had come up with. From behind, he flooded the space around the pirate with a nice and neat killer virus. The virus was called Kafka-4. Anything it touched was put on trial and then executed --- no pardons, no appeals. It didn't even give him time to defend himself. He was put out like a dying ember, you could almost hear the scream on the other end when his brain fried.

''Loser,'' Blaze laughed into the glowing matrix.

Now, it was time to flush the worm. Blaze locked off the space segment and then disconnected it from the matrix. Then he refilled the space with a nice, neat, clean new matrix. Of course this could only be done in places that didn't have anything in it, but it was very effective. Then he reactivated the security ICE for that sector.

Before he punched out he decided to take a spin around this area of the matrix just to be safe, after all he would not be able to sleep after this anyway. He noticed something funny over a few grids; some shiny deep dark ICE surrounding a data core. It shouldn't have been there. None of his people had put it there, it must be something one of the other groups had built. Blaze zipped over it real slow, trying to scan it. It was some of the densest ICE he had ever seen. He instructed the AI that ran his home deck to try and break off a sample and analyze it. The deck's data construct peeled off and tried to attack a corner of the black wall, but it completely vanished while Blaze was watching it. This was something serious, it was not only defensive but offense as well.

''Shit. This deck isn't going to cut that. I'm going to have to go into the lab and try to it there,'' Blaze swore. It was his only chance against ICE like that. In the lab the console had the use of a couple of custom ICE breaking AI's that could attack the ICE at so many different places at once that what ever controlled the ICE would get overloaded and break down. The deck in his apartment, while one of the finest decks money could buy, was nothing compared to the wrath that the Cryle AI could bring down on a wall of ICE.

The wind whipped across his face as he left his car for the front door. The moon rose above the company in an ominous glow of dark power. Coming into the main lab, Blaze switched on Cryle. Cryle was a special version of the NuralBio AI. It was equipped with a very large database of knowledge about dealing with the net and how data was transferred around. When used properly it was the most effective form of ICE-breaking tool ever created.

''Ok, Cryle. Here's the deal. There is some type of ICE taking up most of quadrant F67M. I didn't put it there. No one on my team put it there. I want to know what it is hiding and why. I tried to do a scan with an extra deck image but it was wiped before it even got close. What ever it is, it is very dense and very offensive. The probe didn't even get close enough to start scanning before it was purged. Do a scan on that sector and tell me what you think. I also want a complete summary of all data that has moved into or out of that sector in the past month.''

Blaze could taste this hack in the back of his throat. It had been a long time since something had come along that could give him a real challenge. Most of the systems left in the world Blaze had designed or helped with. This was different. The fear and excitement of a virgin jockey was coursing through his veins.

''Blaze, I am not sure what that thing is, but it sure is weird. There has been no traffic into or out of that sector ever. I went all the way back to the date that sector was created. Something had to put that ICE there, but it did it some way that doesn't generate data traffic. In any case that is the meanest ICE I have ever seen. You can't even get close enough to find out what it is. It is so dense that I am not sure that it was built to be broken. It looks more like a one way door. What ever was put there ain't coming out, and it sure is not going to be friendly when you try coming in. Take my advice, leave it alone.'' Cryle's voice coming out of the walls shook Blaze out of a trauma glaze.

''Sorry, I can't just let it go. Here is what I want to try. I want you to run at it with the new Russian breaker you've been playing with, while I attack it head on with a matrix bomb. I know it will be impossible to control the deck after the bomb goes off, but, with any luck, we can send in a dumb probe after we punch a hole in it. In this case we are not doing a secret run. If I have to level that entire sector, that ICE is coming down.''

''Ok. All systems are go. I am sending in the Russian breaker. It will attack the {0,0,0} end of the ICE in one minute, 25 seconds. Be ready to hit the {1,0,0} end with the matrix bomb when the clock on your deck reaches zero. It will count the seconds down. Because you will be in the matrix at the time the bomb goes off I want you to control the release not some subprocess I spawn off; it is safer. All right?'', Cryle's metallic tone echoed.

''Let's do it,'' he screamed. Blaze's voice was barely audible above the massive AI's humming. He jacked into the matrix about a click away from the center of the ICE and began to run forward filling the space in between with a variety of fast processes that would keep the matrix busy and not allow the ICE any room in which to attack his deck. The clock was counting down. Let than thirty seconds. Twenty. Ten. Nine. Eight. Seven. Six. Five. Four. Three.

Two. One. Release. Blaze released the matrix bomb and filled the entire sector with a mass of random logic.

He was put out like a dying ember, you could almost hear the scream on the other end when his brain fried.

''Loser,'' some AI laughed from the glowing matrix.

Matthew Sorrels considers himself a modern Existentialist. He has been known to write an infinite amount of rip-off cyberpunk that most people feel is very bad. He is currently a junior at Carnegie Mellon in computer engineering. As to why he should be allowed to write this story, his answer is ''Anyone who can write in over 10 computer languages fluently should be allowed to write cyberpunk.''

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One

by Faye Levine

1. One

He was a smallish, too-lean man, his lavender skin much paler than it should have been, his ordinary white hair cropped short about the sides and back, a bit longer up front. His face was stretched over sharp, high cheekbones, not quite sunken, but not quite healthy, either. His eyes were a deep yellow, almost orange. They were cold and reflecting, very alert, very intelligent. Very shrewd. The mind behind the eyes did not particularly care about the body which had barely gotten it through the Space Navy physical. That did not matter. What mattered was that it functioned. What mattered was that the man had graduated first in his class at Tansar, the top Space Naval academy, with a multitude of honors, and was now a very successful and respected Lieutenant Commander at the scant age of twenty-five.

His name was Keezor Gemcutter. He did not care for the handle. His registered go-by was Keezor, and that helped a bit, since he never went out of his way to announce his too-quaint family name, or the fact that it meant he had come from a thousand year-old line of jewelers. It was not that he was embarrassed of his heritage; it was simply that ‘‘Gemcutter’’ was really not at all a proper name for an officer. It had no power, no strength. ‘‘Keezor’’, on the other hand, had a certain edge to it, which is why he had insisted on being called by it since he was a child. He knew very well how important image was, and realized that if he could not be a physical presence, he could at least be a psychological one.

His father had long been irked over his refusal to go by the family name, and even more irked over his decision to throw away the years his son had spent apprenticed to him in favor of joining the Space Navy. His mother had simply whined, in a typical motherly fashion, that he was not strong enough. In the end, he had come to terms with his father, and had proved his mother wrong: his somewhat frail body had somehow weathered the physical hardships, and his mind had passed every test with flying colors.

Keezor was an intelligent man, highly so. He knew it.

The average Space Navy recruit, even if they had come from an academy, was just that: average.

That was why he joined.

His opinion was this: They needed him, and they knew it. He did not deny his ego. He knew he was good, and he was damn proud of it. He did not, however, lower himself to bragging. Boasting was bad etiquette, a sign of insecurity, and a way to make others believe you were lying. Keezor revered proper behavior and stood on solid ground. As far as he was concerned, bragging in any form was unnecessary. He preferred to prove himself through his actions, which he had in fact done on numerous occasions.

Keezor was largely a solitary man, or more accurately, a recluse. He was not altogether antisocial, but preferred to be alone, exercising his mind. His bedroom at home was his palace; he spent the majority of his time during leaves there. It was his private sanctuary. He usually did not let anyone in, not even his mother. She had rarely needed to go into his room even when he was a boy, mostly because he kept it so meticulously clean and neat.

People thought he was strange. Likeable, respectable, but strange. He did not care. He lived his life the way he liked it best: orderly, properly, and, when possible, alone.

2. Two

It was dark in his sanctuary tonight. The whole room was wrapped in shadows, save for a bright light over a table. Sitting at the table was Keezor, a large book open before him. Situated on the table was a perfect, scaled down terrain dotted with the troops of two armies prepared to do battle.

Tonight was the last night of a one-week leave. He had spent all day setting up for the battle, deciding that it would be a pleasant way to end his short vacation.

Keezor loved history, especially historical battles. The workings of armies and navies had fascinated him for as long as he could remember. His shelves were filled with books containing detailed accounts of battles from the decade he lived in to millennia past. He believed in learning from history, from others’ mistakes as well as successes. Strategy games were fine to play--he had a cabinet in his room dedicated to holding a score or more of them--but they were, after all, only games. He had already mastered a number of them, and was considered the best Stratigon player, two and three dimensional, in the hemisphere. The re-enactment of real battles, however, gave him a certain satisfaction the games could not. Through his models, he had come to learn and memorize literally hundreds of offensive and defensive strategies, and had also learned why many more had failed. Years of persistence at this hobby had made him the top-notch strategist he was.

Tonight he was field marshaling the Battle of Issai, from some three thousand years in the past, fought from chariots and riding beasts, with spears and crossbows and swords. Its primitive appearance and complex, ingenious workings made for an appealing exercise of the mind.

Keezor was already familiar with the scenario; now he was working his way through the book in front of him, consulting maps and other information. As he read, he would move the model armies' troops through each stage of the battle, pausing to study, make notes, and take mental pictures.

He became so absorbed he did not notice when, sometime after midnight, the young woman sitting across from him put down the book she was reading, got up, stretched, and circled the room, her fingertips brushing the rows of wall-to-wall books on his shelves.

Her name was Marilla. She was naturally attractive, but not beautiful, plump but not large enough to be deemed fat. Her face was perpetually friendly, shining with health and happiness.

She came up behind Keezor and rubbed his shoulders. He sat immobile, his eyes locked on the model. He said nothing. ''Mm, Gem. . . ,'' she hummed. Keezor blinked at the sound of the pet name. He did not particularly like it, but he did tolerate it. ''Gem,'' Marilla repeated.

A long pause. ''Hm,'' Keezor replied, and continued to contemplate the model.

The girl kissed the top of his head and continued to rub his arms, neck and shoulders. ''Are you going to do that all night, Gem?''

Another pause. ''Mm.''

''You should be spending your last night having fun.''

Keezor sat up a bit and paged through his book. ''I'm enjoying myself,'' he said. Marilla continued to pet him. He responded to it with indifference.

He had met her many years ago. She had singled him out at cafe for some unknown reason and had sat down at his table, upsetting privacy as well as his indulgence in a particularly good book. She had more or less forced a conversation on him; however, after the initial annoyance died down, he had found her pleasant enough. She had given him her phone number after several hours of chatting, and he had politely given her his own in return. He would have forgotten about her, except for the fact that she would not go away. She was not annoying, simply a bit overly friendly at first. Eventually they had grown to be friends, although exactly why Keezor did not quite understand. They had little in common. Marilla, however, was quite fond of and intrigued by him, and through a bit of devotion and persistence had managed to win a place in his small circle. She was, in fact, the only person he would allow in his room without question or hesitation.

''You're so thin,'' she said as she ran her hands over him. ''Don't they feed you in the Navy?'' Keezor did not reply; he had heard variations on this lecture from her as well as others a million times before. ''That reminds me. . . ,'' Marilla went on. She left his room and came back with a wrapped plate. She took the crinkly foil off (earning a ''Sh!'' from Keezor) and set the plate down beside him. On it were a multitude of tiny pastries. ''I almost forgot about this,'' she said. ''I made them for you.''

If there was one thing no one would deny about Marilla, it was that she was an excellent cook. She was also a dietician, which meant that Keezor had to endure her constant, motherly attempts to feed him properly.

Keezor stole a glance at the desserts, then chose one at random. He nibbled at it as he made alterations to the model. It was good. Very good. He popped it in his mouth and reached for another. He downed the second pastry in several bites, then took a third. Behind him, Marilla was ecstatic. Keezor rarely did more than nibble, and he never took seconds. She embraced him from behind, snuggling as close as she could. He frowned and shrugged away. Marilla did not care.

''So, you like them?'' she asked, smiling broadly.

''Yes,'' Keezor replied, still concentrating on the model, ''They're very good.''

''I'm glad,'' she told him.

Time passed. The pair fell silent again as Keezor worked at his model. Marilla resumed her seat across the table from him, and sat watching him closely. He seemed thoroughly absorbed in his work. Then, all at once, the girl's pleasant expression dissolved into one of worry.

''Gem,'' she said.

''Hm,'' he replied without looking up from his work.

''Do you have to go away tomorrow?''

''Of course.''

''I mean, do you really have to go away?''

''I've told you before,'' Keezor murmured patiently, ''being selected for the special program aboard the *Surefire* is a rare and excellent opportunity for me to advance my career.''

''I know, I know,'' Marilla protested, ''but you'll be way out in space, far away, for so long! I won't be able to talk to you or anything.''

''It's only for six months.''

''That's forever! What am I going to do without you for six whole months?''

''What do you do with me now?''

''Keezor. . . ''

''You'll be alright,'' Keezor soothed, still absorbed in his battle.

''But I need you,'' Marilla replied quietly.

''You have other friends. . . other men. . . ''

''Other friends, but no other men, Gem, only you.'' Keezor looked up briefly. She was staring at him, sad and longing. He returned to his task.

''Marilla,'' he said at length, ''Are you bored?''

''No,'' she replied, ''Why?''

''Don't you ever get bored, sitting around here with me? You have almost no interest in what I do.''

''No, never,'' Marilla sighed. ''I just like to be with you. That's enough.''

There was another, longer pause. Marilla got up, came around behind him, and began to caress him again. ''When do you have to leave tomorrow?'' she asked.

''I have to be at the aerospaceport at 0900.''

''Hm?''

''Nine o' clock.''

''Oh.'' An awkward pause. ''Gem. . . Do you love me?''

Again Keezor looked up from his work, but gazed ahead at the wall and not at the girl. She had never asked him that before. He closed his eyes for a moment, then opened them again. ''Yes,'' he replied quite frankly, ''In some bizarre way, I suppose I do.''

Marilla bent close and wrapped her arms around him. ''Then how about making love to me?'' she murmured, and kissed his neck. Keezor turned and looked up at her. A tender expression, usually alien to him, crossed his face.

As it happened Marilla was as good a lover as she was a cook, if not better.

3. One

The next morning, after Marilla had embarrassed him by smothering him with good-bye hugs and kisses, Keezor made his way to his departure gate. According to his watch he had another fifteen minutes to kill before the offworld shuttle to Orbital Station One would be called for boarding.

His stomach was rumbling. This was rare for him, especially since he had eaten a very large breakfast. Marilla had discovered one of his little quirks: sex made him hungry. Very hungry. Ravenous. She had been rendered speechless when he had gotten up suddenly and had literally ransacked the kitchen. To her pleasure, he had gorged himself. However, he was still feeling hunger pangs.

He paid an outrageous sum of money for several candy bars and a drink, scarfed the food down, then went back to the gate to wait. There was a video game there; it happened to be two dimensional Space Stratigon.

Keezor regarded the machine in distaste. He hated computers. The human mind, he felt, was so much more superior, capable of true thought, emotion, and integrity. It was the human who truly invented, thought up strategies, and made advancements. A computer was just another tool made by the human. One could claim that a box full of silicon microchips was capable of producing battle tactics, but what would the mass of wiring know about strategies at all without a human to program it? As far as Keezor was concerned, people should spend more time developing their own minds rather than allowing techno-toys to do the thinking for them.

Since he had nothing better to do, he popped a coin into the game and selected the highest level it would allow him to start at: ''Expert''--level ten. The screen burst into a beautiful albeit unnecessary display of astounding graphics as Keezor's and the computer's fleets materialized onto the screen.

Keezor won in five moves.

The game started again, now at level eleven. Seven moves, and it was over.

In less than five minutes he had worked his way up to level fifteen, ''Mastery'' level. He beat the game again, this time in ten moves.

Another five minutes, and he was in the middle of a twentieth level game. His shuttle was called for boarding.

Screw this, he thought. *Why am I wasting my time?* With a flash of bravado, he entered a move, one of his personal favorites. The game paused for a moment. The words ''SURRENDER DECLARED'' flashed on the screen.

Keezor offered the machine a ''Hmph'', accompanied by a patronizing smile, and left to board the shuttle.

4. Fifty-one

Upon arriving at Orbital Station One, Keezor consulted a station map and made his way to the docking bay where the *Surefire* was being kept.

The *Surefire* was a new, experimental ship featuring an extra-long cruising range and advanced anti-detection capabilities. It was well armed, but its main function was to serve as a military scout and survey ship, and, under certain circumstances, as a lesser flag ship. At least that, among other technical information, was what Keezor was told in the report he received after accepting an assignment on its first long-term space trial. There was a bit of ambiguous information as well; the *Surefire* had been part of something called ''Project Friend'', and all information concerning this project was classified.

After presenting his orders and identification to the security staff, Keezor was admitted to the *Surefire's* dock. He was mildly surprised when he saw the vessel; it was much smaller than he had imagined. Still, at least on the exterior, it was sleek and impressive. Then again, he reflected, looks sometimes were deceiving.

As he boarded the ship he wrinkled his nose at the ''new'' smell of the interior. He made his way to the bridge and entered. It appeared empty.

The *Surefire's* bridge was a circle, however the aft quarter of it had been walled off and made into a captain's office. Aside from the captain's chair, there were only five other stations. Port and starboard exits led into hallways.

He took the sight in, impressed despite its emptiness and small size, then glanced at his watch. He was precisely on time; he always was. But where was the captain and the rest of the bridge crew?

As if in reply to his thoughts, the sound of laughter came from behind the door of the captain's office, and a moment later four men, one in a captain's uniform emerged.

Keezor snapped to attention. ''Lieutenant Commander Keezor reporting for duty, sir,'' he said, addressing the captain.

The other man smiled and returned the salute. ''Ah. . .,'' he said, ''At ease. So you're Keezor, eh? I've heard a lot of good things about you. I'm Captain Germayne.'' He motioned to two of the three other men. ''This is Commander Tyros, my second in command, and Commander Slaff, who's here as a consultant. The third officer here is Lieutenant Commander Anton, our detection and analysis technician.'' The four men exchanged nods of greeting. ''There's one other crewmember you have to meet before we get started,'' Germayne went on. He cocked his head slightly, and addressed the air. ''Friend?''

''Yes, Captain Germayne?'' a too-pleasant, female voice replied.

Keezor looked about. ‘‘Who’s that, sir?’’

‘‘That, Keezor, is Friend, the product of Project Friend. She’s the first interactive computer to be installed on one of our military vessels.’’

‘‘Oh,’’ Keezor replied, inwardly grimacing.

‘‘Friend,’’ the captain went on, ‘‘Do you sense a new life-form reading on the bridge which has not been identified?’’

‘‘Affirmative.’’

‘‘Good. Commit to memory.’’ Germayne turned to Keezor. State your full name, rank, and number.’’

Keezor cleared he throat and spoke up. ‘‘I am Lieutenant Commander Keezor Gemcutter, common name Keezor, number S-496-001-2297.’’

There was a slight pause. ‘‘Identification confirmed,’’ Friend informed them. ‘‘Identification matches the on-line information for Lieutenant Commander Keezor.’’

‘‘Excellent,’’ Germayne smiled. ‘‘I declare Keezor as one of my crew. Commit to memory.’’

‘‘Confirmed.’’ ‘‘Now that that’s settled. . . ,’’ the captain said, his attention once again on Keezor, ‘‘Welcome aboard.’’

‘‘Thank you, sir,’’ Keezor replied.

‘‘Don’t get too ruffled about Friend. She takes a little getting used to, but is actually quite interesting to use. When you want or need to speak to her, just call out the name, and be sure to speak clearly. Don’t use foreign words or slang.’’

‘‘Yes, sir.’’

‘‘Any questions?’’

Keezor briefly let his gaze wander about the bridge. ‘‘Are the five of us the entire bridge crew, sir?’’

‘‘Yes and no. We rotate shifts and we do have replacements, but we’re the whole official bridge crew, with the exception of the navigator. He should be coming back soon.’’

‘‘Only six people on the bridge, sir?’’

‘‘That’s right. Between the technical advancements and Friend, the *Surefire* practically takes care of herself, leaving us open to focus our attention on more important things. There are only fifty-one people on board.’’

‘‘I see.’’

A man came through the port entry. ‘‘Ah,’’ said Germayne, ‘‘Here’s the navigator.’’

Keezor turned to look at the new arrival. His face lit up. ‘‘Sine!’’ he exclaimed.

‘‘Keezor!’’ the other replied, ‘‘How long has it been already?’’

‘‘I take it you’ve met,’’ Germayne observed.

‘‘We went to Tansar Academy together,’’ Sine explained. ‘‘I was two years ahead of him, though.’’ He smiled broadly. ‘‘Still got that girl following you around--Gem?’’ Keezor laughed and nodded.

‘‘Please, gentlemen,’’ the captain broke in, although not unkindly, ‘‘Now’s not the time for reunions. We’re scheduled for take-off in an hour. We have plenty to do, so let’s get busy.’’

• • •

Two months passed. Keezor grew to like the *Surefire* and her crew, with the exception of Friend, whom/which he ignored whenever possible. He even insisted on doing things himself when Friend could have easily completed the task for him in a matter of seconds or minutes. While Captain Germayne did not object to Keezor’s dislike and disuse of the computer, he did consider the lieutenant commander’s attitude toward it somewhat severe. He was an easygoing man, however, and was content to let Keezor go about quietly exercising his mind while the rest of the crew made as much use of Friend as possible.

For the first time in over five years, Keezor was given the opportunity to work with Sine on special maneuvers and simulated offensive and defensive runs. The ship performed wonderfully; Sine even better. The pair spent a good portion of their free time together, doing research or playing strategy games. Sine never won, and Keezor would not let him, but the navigator was a good opponent and an even better loser.

One afternoon the bridge was particularly quiet. Anton and Sine manned their stations in boredom while Commanders Tyros and Slaff chatted with Captain Germayne. Keezor sat in his own place, still and proper, waiting patiently for something to happen. ‘‘Keezor,’’ Germayne spoke up, ‘‘There’s nothing for you to do now. You can leave if you’d like.’’ ‘‘No, thank you, sir,’’ Keezor replied. ‘‘I don’t like leaving my post before my shift is over.’’ ‘‘If that’s how you want it. How about a game of Stratigon with Friend? I hear you’re an excellent player. You think you can handle her?’’

Not ‘‘her’’, Keezor thought, suddenly angry, *‘‘It’’. And of course I can, you stupid ass. Don’t insult my intelligence.* ‘‘I don’t know, sir,’’ he replied evenly.

‘‘Have a go at it,’’ Slaff suggested.

‘‘Yeah, why not?’’ Sine offered. ‘‘You can beat Friend. You can beat anything at Stratigon.’’

‘‘Nah,’’ Anton scoffed, ‘‘She’s too good.’’

‘‘Ten says Keezor buries her,’’ Sine challenged.

‘‘Deal.’’

‘‘Well?’’ Captain Germayne prompted. ‘‘Are you up to it, Keezor?’’

Keezor’s eyes flashed, more fiery orange now than amber. He cleared the computer screen in front of him. ‘‘Friend,’’ he said, loathing the name as he spoke it.

‘‘Yes, Lieutenant Commander Keezor?’’

‘‘Load a game of Stratigon. Three-dimensional.’’

‘‘What level?’’

‘‘The highest you can go.’’

‘‘Level thirty,’’ Friend said. The screen in front of him lit up with bright, detailed graphics. ‘‘You may begin when ready.’’

Keezor gave a tight-lipped half smile and cracked his knuckles. He began.

Twenty moves later, he won.

As the others gaped in amazement, Anton handed his money over to a smiling Sine.

''Incredible,'' Germayne laughed, shaking his head. ''Do me a favor, Keezor--go get the portable set in my office and show me how the hell you did that.''

Keezor smiled. ''Yes, sir,'' he replied. He went into the small room and reached for the set on the captain's desk.

For an instant, an alarm sounded. His ears popped. There was the overwhelming sound of rushing, high speed wind, immediately followed by the crash of emergency bulkheads slamming into place.

''What the--?'' Keezor began. He never finished. The ship's alarms began to shriek. The ship dipped and shook. Keezor was thrown to the floor.

''Warning,'' Friend's quiet tones somehow managed to communicate over the din, ''Multiple hull breaches. Severe portside and lightspeed drive damage. Engines are shutting down. Repeat: Warning--Multiple hull breaches. . .''

5. Nine

The first thing Keezor noticed when he left Germayne's office and ran back onto the bridge was Anton's screaming, audible over the alarms. He ran to the man, who was rolling on the floor, clutching at his stomach.

''What happened?'' Keezor yelled at him.

''Port. . .!'' the other gagged.

Keezor looked up. The bridge's port exit had been twisted out of shape. A bulkhead and rapidly hardening sealant closed it off. Keezor shut off the bridge's main speakers and the alarm cut off; he could now only make out the muffled sounds of it coming from outside the starboard exit, which had also been shut but not sealed. Aside from the wailing and Anton's cries, the ship seemed eerily quiet.

Confused and shaken, Keezor looked about him. Germayne, Slaff, Tyros, and Sine were lying crumpled on floor, up against the port side of the bridge, as if they had been thrown. None of them moved. The wall was spattered with blood.

Keezor sprang to the intercom. ''I need medics up here on the double!'' he shouted. There was no reply. He tried again, with the same results. ''Damage report!'' he called. His only answer was a static hiss. ''Engineering! Somebody!'' He turned away. ''Friend! Give me the damage.''

''There are multiple breaches on the port side of the hull. Several projectiles have penetrated the ship. Navigation is functioning at seventy-two percent efficiency. The lightspeed engine is currently unoperational. Long range radio is unoperational and short range radio has been damaged. A priority distress beacon has been activated.''

''Is the intercom functioning?''

''Affirmative.''

Oh God, Keezor thought frantically, *then if none of the decks are answering. . .* He ran past Anton and over to the others. He didn't need medic's training to tell him Germayne, Slaff, and Tyros were dead. Sine was breathing-- just. Keezor pulled out the bridge's medical kit. He stood stupidly for a moment, unsure who he should go to first, Sine or Anton. Anton was still screaming, and now, as he looked more closely, he could see that the man was bleeding badly.

He ran to Anton and pried the man's hands away from his stomach. His clothing was soaked with blood.

''Get it out! Get it out!'' Anton shrieked at him.

''What? Get what out?''

''Shrapnel. . . oh, shit. . . forceps. . . dig. . . find it!''

''But I--''

''DO IT!''

Keezor hesitated, then tried to call for a medic again. Once again, he received no reply.

''They're dead, you stupid fucker!'' Anton screamed. ''HELP ME!''

His hands shaking, Keezor returned to Anton and fumbled through the large box until he found forceps. He tore away Anton's clothes, then abruptly turned away and vomited. Gagging, he gulped in several breaths of air, turned back to his comrade, and tentatively began to search through the man's flesh. Eventually he found what he was looking for. Deep down he could just make out the tip of a piece of metal. Swallowing hard, he reached in and pulled it out, then emptied an entire can of sterile, staunching spray foam into the gory hole. He dressed the wound as quickly and as tightly as he could.

''Muh. . .,'' Anton gasped, ''Morphine. . .''

''Uh. . .,'' Keezor almost whimpered, ''Y-yeah.'' He found a small packet of syringes pre-loaded with the drug, and pulled one out. ''Where--where do I--?''

''ANYWHERE!''

Keezor forced himself to stop shaking long enough to locate a vein and slide the needle home. After a short time Anton's wailing began to subside. Keezor left him and ran over to Sine. The navigator lay twisted on the floor, but he was afraid to touch him for fear of worsening any internal injuries he might already have.

''Friend,'' he called as he sat wondering what to do, ''What happened?''

''Early warning systems detected a sizeable incoming mass traveling at too high a rate of closure for any reaction other than a spectrograph analysis and one automatic defensive action. The spectrograph indicated that the mass in question was ice, however as the port lasers fired to break the mass into non-threatening units, the spectrograph also indicated the presence of iron beneath the ice. There was insufficient time left for further reaction. Five iron masses have struck and penetrated the port hull of the ship.''

''A piece pierced the port corridor,'' Anton grimaced. ''I took a hit and fell, but. . .the air. . .was sucked from. . .starboard to port. . .for an instant before the bulkheads closed. The others. . .picked up. . .thrown. . .''

Keezor nodded. ''Friend, give me the status of the medical wing.''

''The medical wing took a critical hit.''

''Oh, God. . . Status of--no. Friend, how many life-form readings do you currently have aboard this ship?''

''One moment.'' A pause, then: ''Nine.''

Keezor sank to his knees. ''Oh God, oh God. . .,'' he muttered over and over.

The starboard bulkhead suddenly opened and six men ran in. One Keezor recognized instantly. He was Lieutenant Ryde, one of the shift leaders from engineering.

''The captain--?'' he began.

''Dead,'' Keezor told him. ''And Slaff and Tyros, too. Sine and Anton are in bad shape.''

''Uh. . .'' one of the other men broke in, ''Anton's dead.''

''Wha--?'' Keezor gasped. He had not noticed the man had stopped wailing. ''Oh, fuck,'' he muttered under his breath. He realized he was on his knees on the floor, shaking and dazed, certainly not the way he should be behaving. He pulled himself together and stood up. ''Our distress beacon's on--the long range radio's out,'' he informed the others, forcing himself to stand straight and his voice to stop wavering. ''Navigation's intact, but not fully operational.''

''And what about you?'' Ryde asked him.

For a moment Keezor froze, then realized it was an innocent question. ''I was in Germayne's office when it happened. I'm okay. And you?''

''We were all sleeping. I guess we just got lucky.'' Ryde glanced at Sine's still form. He approached the navigator, very gently felt his neck, and peeled back one of his eyelids. ''Is there cervical collar in that kit there?''

Keezor looked. ''No.''

''Okay.'' Ryde looked up at the others. ''Javis, Daq--go see if you can scrounge one up, or something that'll keep this guy's head still. Try to get something hard and flat to put him on, too.'' The two men nodded and left the bridge.

''Is it very bad?'' Keezor asked, surprised at how calm his voice had suddenly become.

''Well, I'm not an authority, but I did have some training once. He's comatose. Looks like he's got some bad head injuries, probably neck injuries, too. But like I said, I'm not a doctor. Could be better, could be worse.''

After Sine had been attended to and the bodies had been cleared away, Ryde and his companions decided to go to engineering to assess the damage. Keezor remained on the bridge, returned to the captain's office, and made a log entry:

Date: fifteenth day of Third Month. Lieutenant Commander Keezor reporting.

Not long ago the ship's hull was breached in five places by chunks of iron from a fragmented mass the spectrograph initially interpreted to be ice. There was no time for reaction; the whole matter was taken care of by the computer's emergency defense system. I don't think any of us realized what had happened until after the impact, when the alarms started going off.

The bridge crew, with the exception of myself and Lieutenant Commander Sine, has died as a result of injuries received when one of the iron masses punctured the ship near the bridge. Sine is down with head and neck injuries.

The Surefire *has been badly damaged. Life support systems appear to be functioning normally and all damaged areas have been sealed off. Navigational systems are not fully operational; long range radio is out and short range radio has been damaged. Our priority distress beacon is on. The medical wing has been more or less destroyed and the lightspeed drive is currently unoperational.*

There are only eight of us left--nine if you count Friend, which I don't. Friend does not appear to be malfunctioning.

The other survivors are from engineering: Lieutenants Ryde, Javis, and Daq, Sergeant Yoriq, and Second Lieutenants Eral and Wellow. They have gone to see if the lightspeed drive is repairable. More later.

End of entry.

Just as he completed the recording, the intercom on Germayne's desk came to life.

''Keezor, this is Ryde,'' came the Lieutenant's voice.

''I hear you. How bad is it?''

''Well, it'll take some time, but it's repairable. I'm a little worried, though; it looks like the cooling system's been damaged. If it gets too hot, a lot of circuitry'll go bad, and that'll mean a longer down time.''

''I see. Are you going to start repairs now?''

''We already have. I'm calling from engine access area seven. Wouldn't you know, the heaviest damage is here, where some of the most important parts are?''

''Is there anything I can do?''

Ryde sighed. ''No, not really. The six of us can handle it, and we've pretty much got all we need. You might as well sit tight up there and man the radar or the radio. You never know--something might come our way.''

''I'll do that,'' Keezor replied. ''Keep me updated.''

''Will do. Ryde out.''

Keezor returned to the main section of the bridge and sat down on the floor next to Sine. ''Sine?'' he tried, ''Can you hear me? Sine?'' His friend did not reply. *At least he's not in pain, like Anton was*, Keezor reflected. *At least he's still alive.* He looked around him. For some reason, the small bridge suddenly seemed very large and very empty. A chill caressed his body with icy fingers, causing him to shudder. He thought of Marilla, warm and soft against his body the night before he left, but it only made him shiver more. He gazed down at Sine helplessly, angry that he could not do more for him. He hated idleness. He hated having nothing to do, no way to engage his mind--

A bell clanged into life. Startled, Keezor sprang to his feet. ''Danger,'' Friend said before he could ask, ''Fire in lightspeed drive port access area seven. Engaging extinguishers.''

''Ryde!'' Keezor exclaimed. He ran to the intercom. ''Ryde!'' he shouted, ''What's happening?''

''We've had a cooling system failure,'' the lieutenant returned tensely but not frantically. ''We've got a chemical/electrical fire here.''

''Well, get out of there!''

''It's okay,'' Ryde assured him. ''It's not that bad. The automatic extinguishers should--''

''Danger,'' Friend broke in, ''Extinguishing system failure in lightspeed drive port access area seven. Closing bulkheads.''

''What?!'' Keezor shouted at the computer. ''No, wait--!''

''Shit!'' Ryde exclaimed. A thudding noise came over the intercom as the area was sealed off. ''Oh, Lord--Friend, open the bulkhead!''

''Under safety code 115, an area containing an uncontrolled fire must be sealed off until the danger is over,'' Friend replied.

''But,'' Keezor sputtered, ''Ryde--the others--they're still in there! Open the bulkheads!''

''Under safety code 115, an area containing an uncontrolled fire must be sealed off until the danger is over.''

''They'll die!''

No reply.

''OPEN THE BULKHEADS!''

''Under safety code 115, an area containing an uncontrolled fire must be sealed off until the danger is over,'' Friend droned.

''Keezor, do something!'' Ryde shouted. ''The fumes--the pressure in the pipes--if this gets any worse we'll have an explosion here!''

Keezor sprinted from the bridge and ran to the lower decks, through the engine room and toward the access areas. He came to a halt in front of area seven. He could hear Ryde and the others inside.

''I'm here!'' he yelled. ''I'll get you out!''

''No good!'' Ryde shouted back. ''We can't open it from in here; you won't be able to open it from out there!''

Keezor ignored the remark and began to pound on the door controls. Nothing happened. ''Friend, open the bulkhead!'' he screamed.

''Under safety code 115, an area containing an uncontrolled fire must be sealed off until the danger is over,'' the computer replied.

''Fuck the safety code! There are personnel trapped in there! Open the bulkhead!''

''Under safety code 115, an area containing an uncontrolled fire must be sealed off until the danger is over.''

''Please!''

''Keezor,'' came Ryde's muffled voice through the door, ''I left some tools out there. Get into the door controls and disconnect them. Maybe we can open this sucker manually.''

Keezor spotted the tools. Using them, he opened up the bulkhead's control panel and began to rip the wires and circuitry out with his bare hands.

''Hurry, Keezor!'' Ryde yelled. Keezor could hear him and the others coughing and gagging.

''I'm trying!'' There was a muffled pop as an explosion tore through the area behind the bulkhead. Keezor heard screaming and frantic cries for help. ''FRIEND, YOU BITCH, OPEN THE FUCKING DOOR!''

''Under safety code 115, an area containing an uncontrolled fire must be sealed off until the danger is over,'' she/it replied calmly.

Keezor began to pound on the impassable door in desperation. He could hear the others screaming, calling his name, begging him for help. He shrieked obscenities at the computer as he shouldered and hit the door over and over again.

He did not remember running back to the bridge. Suddenly he was there, and so were the screams, coming through loud and clear over the intercom. He covered his ears. It was not enough. He broke down, wailing, shouting at Friend as she/it repeated the safety code for him again. He curled into a ball, shut his eyes, and screamed along with Ryde and the others. Eventually, he was the only one yelling. Soon after that, his throat became so raw he could not even do that. Sobbing convulsively, he crawled to the first aid kit, took out one of the syringes loaded with morphine, and plunged it into his arm. He collapsed, sprawled out on the floor, as darkness closed in.

6. Two

The morphine kept him sluggish and oddly calm even after he stopped screaming. He fell into a heavy sleep, and woke up some hours later. He checked on Sine, then dragged himself to the Captain's office to make his report.

Captain's Log, supplemental entry. Lieutenant Commander Keezor reporting for the deceased Captain Germayne.

(pause)

For the record, I will admit that I had knowingly and willingly drugged myself with morphine while on duty, several hours prior to this recording. I don't think I'd be able to give the report I'm about to if I hadn't.

Today, during Lieutenant Ryde and his crew's attempts to repair the lightspeed drive, a fire started in access area seven, where they were working. When the fire control systems did not engage, Friend automatically sealed off the area, and for safety reasons would not respond to my commands to open the access area doors. All other attempts at overriding the door controls failed.

Ryde, Javis, Daq, Yoriq, Eral, and Wellow are dead. Lieutenant Commander Sine and I are the only members of the crew remaining. Sine's condition has remained unchanged.

(pause)

I. . . I had to listen to them. . . scream. . .

Oh God.

End of entry.

Keezor returned to the bridge. ''Bitch!'' he snapped. There was no reply. ''Friend!''

''Yes, Lieutenant Commander Keezor?'' the computer's feminine tones replied soothingly.

''Damage report on the lightspeed drive.''

A pause, then: ''A recent fire has rendered 90% of all computer components necessary for operation inoperable.''

Damn, Keezor thought, *the safety panels must have been off during the fire, and I'm sure Ryde and the others had a hell of a lot more on their minds than putting them back on.* ''Do we carry sufficient replacement parts on board?''

''Yes,'' Friend told him.

''Where?''

''Deck two, storage room one.''

''Good. I want instructions for the repair of the lightspeed drive.''

''Access to the information and components you have requested are restricted to command officers, and electrical and drive mechanics engineers of specialist level three and higher. You are a command cadet of specialist level four and a strategist of specialist level six.''

Keezor thought for a moment. A moment was all he needed. He was, after all, only dealing with a mass of silicon and circuitry. ''Alright,'' he said patiently, ''call up the information I have requested so the proper personnel can execute the necessary repairs.''

''The said personnel, or the command officers, must request the information personally,'' Friend replied. She/it paused, then added, ''You and Lieutenant Commander Sine are the only life-forms aboard, Lieutenant Commander Keezor.''

Keezor drove his fist into the wall. A lance of pain streaked up his arm. He looked down at his hands. They were bruised grey from pounding on the access area door, and one of his fingers appeared to be broken. Gently holding his arms to his body, he sank into the captain's chair. ''How do you expect me to return to base if you won't let me repair the drive?''

''I expect nothing, Lieutenant Commander Keezor. Access to the information and components you have requested are restricted to command officers, and electrical and drive mechanics engineers of specialist level three and higher. You are a command cadet of specialist level four and a strategist of specialist level six.''

''Yes, yes,'' Keezor growled, rubbing his temples. He got up and left the bridge. *I'll do it myself*, he thought. *I'll fix the fucking drive without that bitch-thing's help. It'll take time, but I can do it.* He took a lift to the second deck. After wading through a considerable amount of debris, he eventually arrived at the door of storage room one. He pressed the ''open'' button. Nothing happened. He tried again, and again, and still nothing happened.

''Access to the information and components you have requested are restricted to command officers, and electrical and drive mechanics engineers of specialist level three and higher,'' Friend's voice cut in suddenly. ''You are a command cadet of specialist level four and a strategist of specialist level six.''

''Shut up!'' Keezor shouted. ''Let me in, damn you!''

''Access to the information and components you have requested are restricted to electrical and drive mechanics engineers of specialist level three and higher. You are a command cadet of specialist level four and a strategist of specialist level six.''

Keezor kicked at the door to the storage room. Desperation and fury overrode the morphine in his veins. ''STUPID MOTHERFUCKER!'' he bellowed. ''GOD-DAMNED ASSHOLE SHIT-EATING--''

''Request not understood. Please clarify.''

''BI-I-I-I-I-I-ITCH!'' Keezor shrieked. He threw himself against the door and sagged to the ground. ''What do you want from me?!'' he demanded angrily. ''Do you want Sine and me to die?''

''I do not want anything, Lieutenant Commander Keezor.''

''Fuck you,'' Keezor muttered under his breath. He got up and returned to the bridge. ''Friend,'' he said, grimacing as he spoke the name, ''Does the ship have enough power to reach the nearest Space Naval base?''

A pause. ''Taking current energy expenditures into consideration, negative.''

''How far could the ship go?''

''The *Surefire* can currently cover seventy-five percent of the distance to Station Twenty-One, at coordinates seven-one-seven by nine by two-five point three, on sublight power only.''

Keezor performed a series of quick calculations in his head. That would take the ship to the fringe of short distance radio range and long distance radar detection. ''And how long will that take?''

''Calculating.'' A pause. ''Three days, eighteen hours, and forty-two minutes.''

Keezor stole a glance at Sine's still form. *It'll have to do*, he thought. ''Are you capable of setting and maintaining a course?'' he asked the computer.

''Yes, Lieutenant Commander Keezor.''

''Good. Set course for Station Twenty-One.''

''You are not authorized to order a course change.''

Keezor's expression darkened. ''I gave you an order. execute it.''

''Only Captain Germayne, Commander Slaff, and Commander Tyros are authorized to order course changes which deviate from the mission.''

Keezor pulled at his hair. ''The mission is over!'' he shouted. ''The ship is damaged and the crew is gone! Abort the mission!''

''Only Captain Germayne, Commander Slaff, Commander Tyros, or a member of Space Navy Command have the authority to abort the mission,'' Friend replied.

''Captain Germayne, Commander Slaff, and Commander Tyros are dead! Do you understand me?! Dead! They're not ever going to say anything again, much less order you to abort the mission!''

''Only Captain Germayne--''

''Shut up!'' Keezor snapped. ''Are Captain Germayne, Commander Slaff, and Commander Tyros here?''

The computer paused. ''I show life-form readings only for you and for Lieutenant Commander Sine. Previously said persons are not on board.''

''Not on board? They're in body bags in storage bay two, that's where they are!''

''Previously said persons are not on board.''

Keezor stopped to think. To Friend, ''dead'' meant ''No life-form readings'', and ''No life form readings'' meant ''Not on board.'' ''Friend,'' he went on, ''When the captain is unable to perform his duties, who takes command?''

''The commander, or the designated first officer if there is more than one commander aboard the ship.''

''Correct. And who takes control when the designated deputy captain cannot perform his duties?''

''The next highest-ranking officer of commander level, or, if another commander is not present, the designated deputy commander.''

''What is my rank?''

''You are a lieutenant commander, Lieutenant Commander Keezor.''

''Then, considering that Captain Germayne is not here to perform his duties, and Commanders Slaff and Tyros are not here to perform deputy captain duties, then does that not designate me, the next highest-ranking officer aboard this ship, the deputy commander in Slaff and Tyros' absences, and, since either would have been the deputy captain, but neither are here, the deputy captain?''

There was a very long pause. ''You are not a designated deputy captain.''

''That may be, but in Slaff and Tyros' absences, am I not the designated deputy commander?''

''One moment, please,'' Friend told him, and after a short time replied, ''No such designations were made.''

Keezor screamed.

''Do you not have a default which states that in the event of a crisis situation the highest ranking officer remaining assumes command of this vessel?!'' he roared.

''Affirmative.''

''Is this not a crisis situation?!''

''Taking the damage to the ship into consideration, affirmative.''

''Then as the highest ranking officer aboard this vessel, I command you to obey my instructions!''

''Negative.''

''NEGATIVE?! Why?!''

''You are not the highest ranking officer currently aboard this vessel.''

''THEN WHO THE BLOODY HELL IS?!''

''Lieutenant Commander Sine outranks you by two years of service.''

Keezor shot a glance at his friend, lying prone on the floor. ''Sine?'' he squawked. ''Sine is in command of this ship?''

''Affirmative.''

''But he can't--He's in a coma, for God's sake! He's comatose! Do you understand?''

''Coma:,'' Friend droned, ''a profound state of unconsciousness resulting from illness or injury.''

''Correct,'' Keezor snapped. ''How can Sine command the *Surefire* if he's comatose?''

''I have no verification of that.''

''What?--No--!'' Keezor sputtered, tearing at his hair. ''I'm looking right at him, and I'm telling you, he's comatose!''

''You are not authorized to make such a verification,'' the computer told him.

''Then who is?''

''Only medical personnel are authorized to verify a crewmember's physical condition. You are a command cadet of specialist level four and a strategist of specialist level six.''

''God damn you,'' Keezor growled, and went over to the navigator's station.

''Request not understood,'' Friend told him, ''Please clarify.''

''Never mind. Is the navigational equipment still functioning?''

''The navigational systems are currently operating at seventy-two percent efficiency.''

Keezor scanned the helm. He knew the standard operating procedures, and had watched Sine use the equipment many times before, both in school and on board the *Surefire*. After a moment of thought, he entered a course change.

Nothing happened. ''Only licensed navigators of specialist level five and above are permitted to use the helm of this vessel,'' Friend in him in her/its perpetually patient voice. ''You are a command cadet of specialist level--''

''STOP!'' Keezor roared. Friend cut off. He stomped across the bridge and sat down next to Sine, his eyes wild with fury. ''Sine, Sine. . . '' he groaned, and gazed down at his friend. ''I'm afraid. . . I'm afraid I'm going to have to resort to some--some desperate measures. . . ''

Captain's log, supplemental entry:

Friend--I hate calling it that--has become bureaucratic. Since I am not a commander and since no one was ever designated ''deputy commander'', it refuses to let me take control of the ship. Since I'm not a navigator or engineer, I am denied access to the helm and to information and equipment necessary to repair the lightspeed drive.

The computer told me that under the crisis default, Sine is commander of the Surefire*, since he outranks me by two years of service. Since I am not a medic, it refuses to let me verify that he is comatose and unable to perform his duties. I seemed to be damned no matter what I do.*

There is, of course, one thing left to me other than suicide or a slow death.

I'm sure the decision I'm about to make will get me court-martialled-- just for starters.

Captain's log, supplemental entry:

The situation at hand had forced me to take somewhat drastic measures in order to preserve this ship.

I. . . Without authorization I--I attempted to disconnect Friend, the Surefire's *experimental computer system.*

Keezor stopped, grimaced, and squeezed his right hand tighter in an attempt to close the wide, clean gash in his upper left arm. Blood gushed out from between his fingers.

Friend, however, was hardly keen on the idea. After being wounded by its automatic defense system, I. . . the situation. . . everything. . .

The man paused and bowed his head in shame. His gaze fell upon a large wrench sitting on the captain's desk, the steel wet with blood.

. . . I destroyed Friend.

I now have control of the Surefire*. After dealing with the computer, I went to deck two, storage room one for the parts needed to repair the lightspeed drive, however few of the multitude of parts in the room were labeled, and I was unable to retrieve the necessary components for repair. So, now I have gathered all necessary supplies and equipment, and, in an attempt to conserve energy, have sealed Sine and myself in the bridge. Life support has been shut off in all other areas of the ship, and the gravity has been shut off as well. My plan is to manually navigate the ship to Station Twenty-One, almost four days away. By my calculations, the power should hold up long enough for the* Surefire *to get within short distance radio and long range radar range.*

End of Entry.

Keezor hauled himself up and half floated, half walked back onto the main bridge. He was dizzy from blood loss; he cursed himself for not having taken care of his injury right away.

Sine was still on the floor, held down and still by strips of duct tape. The medical kit hovered over him. Keezor took the kit, settled down in the captain's chair, and strapped himself in. After his attempts to staunch the bleeding in his arm failed, he reached into the large box and withdrew a hypodermic needle pre-loaded with a local anesthetic, a small, curved needle and a length of thread. He cleaned the gash as best he could, turned his head, and pushed the syringe into his arm. After a short time the throbbing, burning pain lessened to near numbness.

Keezor threaded the needle with some difficulty and tied a large knot at the end of the thread. He swallowed and moistened his dry lips, beginning to feel somewhat nauseous. After several false starts he managed to pierce his skin, and after what seemed like forever he had sewn up the wound, however awkwardly. The blood loss was taking its toll; his eyes were beginning to cross. The anesthetic was wearing off. Needles of pain stabbed through his arm. His whole body ached with exhaustion. Still, he forced himself to set the *Surefire's* course for Station Twenty-One before returning to the captain's chair and drifting off to sleep.

When he woke up several hours later, Sine was dead.

7. One

He felt very strange--or was it that he did not feel at all? Somehow there was no longer fear, no anger, no reaction to his situation, not like there had been in the first frantic moments after the hull breech, when Anton was screaming and the alarms were shrieking and confusion and terror had him shaking in his boots. Not like when Ryde and the others had burned to death and he had had to listen to it. Not like the agony of waking up to find his friend lifeless, and realizing in afterthought that if he had not lost his temper Friend--the object of years of research, now ruined--would now recognize him and not Sine as the commander of the *Surefire*.

Oh, yes, he would think, *you don't need anybody and you can do everything yourself and you can beat anything at anything and you just love to be alone don't you alone and quiet and thinking oh yeah you just love it don't you hell yes I do I love being alone with myself but not on a half-dead ship full of fucking corpses!*

He drifted into a sort of dazed stupor, not asleep, but not awake. He would occasionally spasm as a terrible vision of things past would burst into his mind, clear and crisp as the moment he had originally experienced them. He stirred only to get up, moving like a zombie, and correct the ship's course heading when a small light on the helm flashed a warning. He did not eat, speak, or tend to his arm.

Three and a half days passed. He was staring at nothing when out of the corner of his eye he saw the hailing light on the communication panel flash. He stood up on shaky legs and answered the call.

''This,'' he began. His voice was hoarse and cracked. He cleared his throat. ''This is Lieutenant Commander Keezor of the *Surefire*.''

''*Surefire*, this is Captain Oran, administrator of Station Twenty-One. We've received your priority distress signal. What is your condition?''

''We've had five hull breaches,'' Keezor replied dully. ''I'm the only one left out of a crew of fifty-one.''

''Good God.'' There was a pause. ''The High Command contacted us, you know. They got worried--they lost contact with their new ship and didn't know what the hell was going on. It's a good thing we found you. How bad is the ship? Can you navigate her in?''

''No, sir,'' Keezor told him quietly.

''Alright, don't worry. I've already sent out a couple of cruisers; they'll tow you in.''

''Thank you, sir.''

Several hours later the *Surefire* docked at Station Twenty-One. Keezor went to the main airlock, straightening his posture as it opened. A man he presumed to be Captain Oran ran up the boarding ramp to him, several medics in tow.

''Incredible,'' Oran exclaimed as he approached. He stopped in front of Keezor. ''Shit, you're just a kid! You're a lieutenant commander?''

''Yes, sir,'' Keezor affirmed without much emotion.

''How old are you?''

''Twenty-five, sir.''

''Incredible,'' Oran repeated. ''And you got the ship all the way back here by yourself. How did you do it? What the hell happened, anyway?''

Keezor stared at the older man for some moments. He closed his eyes, then opened them slowly. ''With all due respect, sir,'' he said in a low voice, ''it's all in the log.''

Oran seemed mildly disappointed. ''I understand.'' He looked Keezor over. ''Are you alright?''

''Fine, sir,'' Keezor replied.

Oran nodded. ''Come on, then; I'll escort you to your quarters. I'm sure you could use a rest.''

''Thank you, sir.''

The captain turned and started down the boarding ramp.

Behind him, Keezor collapsed in a heap.

He spent the next week at Station One, being treated for exhaustion and damage to his arm. When the doctors deemed him well enough to go, he was put on a shuttle and sent home.

By this time the Surefire's logs had reached the High Command, so it came as no surprise to him when he was summoned for a meeting with the top brass.

An Admiral named Slane questioned him thoroughly but respectfully. He was then brought before a committee including Slane and many other high-ranking officers and officials.

''Under the circumstances, we have chosen to ignore your actions against Friend,'' Slane told him. ''You will not be charged or held accountable in that matter. We have also decided to overlook your admission of performing your duties under the influence of a narcotic.

''It is our opinion that you behaved in the most appropriate and noble manner possible under the circumstances. You have displayed exceptional bravery as well as a number of outstanding traits, for which you will be presented with the Medal of Honor at a ceremony scheduled for next week.

''As for your effort to command, to aid your fellow crewmembers, and to save your ship, we wish to reward you with a choice.''

''A choice, sir?'' Keezor inquired.

''You may, if you wish, take a promotion to the rank of Commander, and captain the scout ship *Nebula*,'' Slane informed him. ''However, it seems the Division of Tactical Research has taken a keen interest in you, and has offered you the opportunity to train as a junior tactician. The program requires several years of studies before certification, and will also require you to remain earthbound for up to two years after that. The program is quite rigorous, and, under certain circumstances, may result in a desk job, so I'm sure you'll want to think about it care--''

''I'll take it.''

Faye Levine is an Art/Design Freshman at Carnegie Mellon Unversity. Recent interesting events in her life include being mistaken for an anime character featured in ''Lum''. She wanted to think of something witty and clever for her bio-blurb, but was seized by a fit of non-creativity. Her persistence at Elvis-hunting has finally rewarded her with success; the King's head is now mounted on her dorm room wall.

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TO A PHOTON

From *Adventures of a Degenerate Electron*

--- Bruce Altner

Stretching before you, the days gone and yet to come,
In coils of amber, vacuum and mist.
You, who live or die by the sword of the Vector Potential,
Intrepid voyager cast upon the way.
Our fates bound together, we ride the wild flux,
Noble companion, ethereal spirit.

altner%champ.span@star.stanford.edu

STILETTO HEELS

by William A. Racicot

T*hese shoes suck*

It was generally considered a bad idea to run in spike heels, but, in this neighborhood, taking them off often meant shards of glass stabbing into your feet. So on she ran, spike heels clicking frantically against the pavement.

Feeling her breath grow short, Lucy gradually slowed down. Eventually, she came to a complete halt in a shadowed alley, dark as the passage to Hell. She crumpled to the ground in exhaustion, and outrage at her feebleness welled over her. Slipping off a shoe, she massaged her troubled foot. *Lucy, Lucy, Lucy... when are you going to learn? Never walk anywhere without decent shoes.*

Her reverie was interrupted by the thudding report of a man's shoe striking pavement. Immediately, she crammed her feet back into her less-than-sensible heels, and began clicking away.

But the man's footsteps grew more pronounced, the basso pounding of his dress boots an eerie counterpoint to the quick, high skipping of Lucy's heels. A hand touched her shoulder. She stopped abruptly and whirled around to glare at her pursuer. ''What do you want Tyre?'' she demanded. Her pursuer was very thin and average height, and the long black trenchcoat he wore emphasized his gauntness. Her shoes made her much taller than he.

''Lucy, why won't you sell me that buckle?'' he panted.

He sounds so old... She glanced protectively at her waist. The buckle her mother had left her rested on a wide leather belt. It was a very exotic looking silver carving of the moon. *I can't believe Mother never wore it. It would have set off the white in her hair so beautifully.*

''I told you, Tyre. It's been in my family forever. I can't just go and sell it to someone who can't even explain why he wants it... Now please, Tyre, if you're going to continue with this, just leave me alone!'' With that she spun on her heel and moved to leave.

Tyre grabbed her shoulder again, but she spun about, kicked his left shin with her four inch heel, and stalked off. Her pace was such that the clicking of her shoes against the road was dignified, even majestic, and she held her head high. *That'll teach him not to screw with a Lady!*

Through his agony, Tyre shouted after her, ''Lucy! I must have that buckle! Damn, I'm bleeding!''

He began to chase after her once again, but upon hearing his motion, she broke into a sprint. With his injured leg, Tyre simply could not keep up. And now it was throbbing. He turned and began to walk home, the pain in his leg intensifying until it was all he could do to limp.

She ran for a while, until finally she broke a heel and tumbled to the ground. *Dammit! I hate these shoes!* She sat there a while, gritting her teeth at whatever supreme being had inflicted this day on her. Despite her best efforts at self control, a tear appeared at the corner of her eye. After a few deep breaths, she stood up. Her posture was somewhat crooked, but she limped on, trying awkwardly to compensate for her broken heel. She grimaced. Well, I guess I got what I deserved for running like a madwoman in four-inch spikes...

Some time later, she arrived at an old house, the home of Albert Simmons. They'd been close friends since high school, and she'd been staying with him since her mother's death.

''Al!'' she called, pounding on the front door. ''Let me in! I forgot my keys! I need to talk to you.'' When no one answered, she tried the door.

Unlocked... he must be writing...

Having taken off her shoes, she sat on the floor and began to rub her aching feet. The day's tensions seemed to melt away into the rust-colored rug, like butter spread on hot toast. *Mmmm... That's fantastic...* Once she had eased her throbbing feet, she rose and padded down the hall toward Al's library. There was a mirror on the far wall, and she couldn't help but see her reflection. *God... I'm a mess...* She began brushing her hair with her fingers, to little effect. *Oh well. Al probably won't notice anyhow...* When she got to the library door, she poked her head in and was assailed by the muffled sound of Queen's *Bohemian Rhapsody* played through a headset. Albert sat behind a huge desk, clicking away at his typewriter. He was oblivious to her presence.

It was clear to her that she was not going to get his attention until he was ready to rejoin the universe. The days when you could distract Al from a great idea had ended soon after he realized that these distractions were why he so often forgot what he was writing about. So she yawned and stretched out on the overstuffed sofa near his big mahogany desk.

Tyre had just barely gotten inside his apartment when he fell to the floor, his bleeding leg crumpling beneath him. He groaned in agony, and struggled to get up.

His girlfriend, Amanda, came rushing into the room. ''Good Lord, Tyre! What happened to your leg? You look like you've been shot! Here let me take a look at that.'' She moved over to him and bent down to examine his wound.

''I had a run in with Lucy. She tried to use her shoe to make Tyre shish-ke-bab!'' he replied, through teeth clenched with pain.

She probed the wound with a finger. ''Oh, and I suppose you'd done nothing to provoke the attack. . . '' Her sarcasm was lost as fresh pain shot up Tyre's leg.

''Argh! I just asked her to sell me her belt buckle. . .''

''The one her mother left in her will? Really, Tyre, that's in terribly poor taste. And besides, what could you possibly want with that thing? Lucy showed it to me when we were in high school -- we were snooping around her parents' room; it's ugly. Let me get some peroxide for that leg.'' With that she left the room, returning a moment later with a brown bottle and a bag of cotton balls.

''Get away from me with that!''

''It's for your own good. This won't hurt nearly as much as that leg will if it gets infected.'' She poured peroxide on a cotton ball and began to swipe it over the cut. She winced at the look on Tyre's face. ''You still haven't told me why you want that awful belt buckle.''

''I did some research after the first time I saw it.'' Tyre replied, ''As it turns out, it's a relic. It dates back to the Age of Chivalry. That buckle was actually a pendant said to have been worn by The Lady of the Lake. It's not doing Lucy any good, but it would be a fantastic addition to the exhibit of Druidic artifacts over at the museum.''

''Well, if she doesn't want to sell it, I really don't see what you can do. It's hers to sell or keep as she sees fit. And it's been in her family for so long, I wouldn't be at all surprised if she's descended from its original owner. Do you really want to piss off the descendant of the Lady of the Lake?'' She chuckled a bit. ''Lady of the Lake! God!''

He decided to ignore the last bit, reaching for the old pocket watch Amanda had given him when they'd first begun dating. ''I think I can persuade her if I can only keep her in one place for a while. . .'' he said thoughtfully.

''You're not thinking about trying that hypnotism garbage again, are you?'' asked Amanda. ''Don't you realize how much rubbish that is?''

''Shut up, Amanda. It works, and that's all there is to it. Believe me or not, as you will, but that doesn't change anything. And another thing: the Lady of the Lake isn't just a myth. There are too many references to her, to Arthur, and to the whole legend for it to be completely fictional. For that matter, it is widely believed that the legends are mostly based on fact. And I must have that amulet.''

''Well, if it's that important to you, I think I heard Lucy was staying with Al for a while -- to help her settle down after her mom's death. There's a laugh. Everyone knows that he's liked her since college,'' said Amanda, with a grimace.

''Staying with Al, huh? Silly shit probably promised he'd protect her, too. What a pain. . .'' He cringed as Amanda washed out his wound a second time. ''Damn! Well, protection or none, I will have that buckle!''

''Don't even think about hurting Albert, Tyre. I know you two haven't gotten along that well in the past few years, but we all had some great times together, back in school. I like him.''

''I will do whatever I have to do to get what I want.''

At that, Amanda rolled her eyes to the sky and stalked out of the room, taking the peroxide with her. Tyre sat looking at a red cotton ball. His leg smelled like disinfectant. *Good Lord. . .* He got up, and limped over to the door through which Amanda had left the room. He went to the medicine cabinet and removed a length of gauze bandage and some tape. He bound up his leg, and then headed painfully for the front door.

Amanda called out, ''Don't take off yet, Tyre. I'm going with you.''

A few minutes later, they departed for Albert's house.

Lucy sat up, and saw Albert looking at her. He looked confused, like he always looked when she appeared while he was writing. ''Hello, Lucy. . .'' he began uncertainly, ''How long have you been here?''

''Oh God. . . I don't know. . . I think I fell asleep.'' As she got a bit reoriented, she remembered the evening's events. ''Al? I wanted to talk to you about Tyre. . .''

His confusion melted, as he focused full attention on the woman before him. ''What's up?''

She told him about her encounter with Tyre, and then asked, ''What am I going to do about him? He's obviously not going to leave me alone until I give up Mother's belt buckle.''

''Hmm. . . don't worry about Tyre, anyway. I'll take care of him. But why does he want the thing? I mean, I really can't see him wearing anything so. . .''

''Watch it.''

''. . .large. Can you think of any reason why he might want it?''

Lucy thought of the events leading up to the evening's festivities. ''No, but he wants it badly. He offered to pay me a lot of money for it. I wonder why. . .''

Her contemplation was halted abruptly by a pounding on the door. ''Guess who. . .'' They went to the front door and Albert innocently called, ''Who is it?''

''It's Tyre and Amanda,'' came a deep voice from outside. ''Is Lucy in there? I wanted to talk to her.''

Lucy frantically shook her head no. Her eyes pleaded that Al not reveal her presence. He whispered to her, ''Don't worry; I'll take care of Tyre.''

Then he opened the door and saw Tyre leaning on Amanda. His leg was bandaged up tightly. ''God, Tyre. . .I haven't seen you forever! How've you been? I see you're still with Amanda. . .'' Al looked ruefully at the woman in question. ''Well, how can I help you?''

Tyre replied, ''Actually, it's Lucy who can help me,'' He limped through the door, followed by Amanda. ''Have you thought about what I said, Lucy?''

''What happened to your leg, Tyre?'' she asked innocently.

''Lucy. . .''

''All right,'' she said, almost giggling, ''I told you before, Tyre. There are too many memories wrapped up in this. I can't just sell it to the highest bidder. Especially not to a buyer who won't say why he wants it.''

''I'm afraid I won't take 'no' for an answer, Lucy.'' He moved toward her, reaching for her waist. Albert interposed his larger body between Tyre and Lucy.

''Sorry, Tyre, but I can't let you do that. If you want the buckle. . . '' At that he reached back and took it from Lucy's belt, which promptly fell to the floor. ''. . . You'll have to take it from me.''

''Fine, then. If that's the way you want it-''

Amanda cut him off. ''Uh, Tyre, I don't think this is a very good idea. . . ''

''Wait a minute, Al.'' commanded Lucy. ''This isn't right. Give me the buckle, and I'll deal with Tyre.''

Al backed down, handing it to Lucy, with the final note: ''Tyre, you can't have the belt buckle. It belongs to Lucy and until you convince Lucy that she wants to sell it, you'll just have to do without. . . ''

''I think I can convince her. . . '' said Tyre, taking out an old pocket watch Amanda had given him when they first began dating. He set it to swinging and looked askance at Lucy, ''If the lady is willing?''

''What do you have in mind?'' she looked straight into his eyes.

Tyre said, ''How about this: If, after ten minutes with you -- no contact of course -- I can convince you to sell me your bauble, then I will give you a substantial price for it. If after those same ten minutes you still insist on keeping it, then I will leave peaceably, and never again bother you about it.''

Albert looked over at Amanda and winked. She barely suppressed a burst of laughter.

Lucy said, ''Fine. Does tomorrow night sound good to you?''

Tyre nodded, ''Tomorrow night it is, then.''

After careful consideration, Lucy's hand settled on a blue dress. She brought it out and set it next to the red one on the bed. Looking at each in the mirror, she finally decided on the blue. *This will look great with Mother's belt buckle.* She replaced the red dress in her closet, and then began to put on the other. She chose a new pair of shoes, high heels the same color as her dress. The overall effect, once she had added a silver chain belt fastened by the moon buckle, was dazzling.

''Hey Al,'' she shouted, poking her head out into the hall, ''How do I look?''

His head appeared around the corner, followed by the rest of his body. ''Why? Are you fishing for compliments?'' She glared playfully at him. ''You look fantastic. Is my tie straight?''

Lucy spent a few minutes adjusting his black tie, and just as she finished, there was a familiar pounding on the front door. ''Showtime. . . ''

Al opened the front door, exposing Tyre and Amanda, who came inside, shutting the door behind them. Amanda wore a gray slit dress which, though simple, brought out her figure beautifully. Tyre, on the other hand, was dressed all in black, his suit finely tailored to make the most of his slight build. He leaned upon an ebony cane which was topped by a gold carving of a dragon's head. His watch chain, hanging from its pocket, balanced out the ensemble.

Lucy maintained her composure, realizing that she struck quite an impressive figure herself. ''You look very nice, Tyre.'' She said, politely.

''So do you.'' He replied, careful to keep the awe out of his voice. Al and Amanda simply stared at the imposing couple.

After what seemed an awfully long time, Al broke out of the trance. ''Well, you may as well join me in the kitchen, Amanda. I have a feeling these two want to be alone. Lucy, Why don't you take Tyre to the living room?''

Al's living room was not very large, but it was comfortable. The most prominent feature was an overstuffed couch. The brown upholstery had seen better days, but it was still functional. In front of that was an old but sturdy coffee table with the finish worn in places. There were a few more chairs on either side of the room, and the floor was covered by a rusty-orange carpet.

''Lucy, why don't you get comfortable on the couch. Stretch out. . . ''

''Tyre you promised that this would be no contact.'' She teased, but she did as he instructed. He sat, facing her, on the old coffee table.

''Hey Tyre, why do you want my belt buckle, anyhow?'' She asked, genuinely curious.

''I'd rather not say. You probably wouldn't believe me if I told you.'' He dodged.

''Come on, Tyre, try me.''

''Fine.'' He said, ''But you won't believe me. This so-called belt buckle that your mother left to you was actually a pendant worn at the bosom of the Lady of the Lake. I had hoped to add it to my collection of Druidic relics.''

Lucy looked him straight in the eye and said, ''Bullshit.'' He stared right back into her eyes, but refused to comment. ''You aren't kidding, are you?'' She looked down at her waist and saw the amulet hanging there, but it seemed much heavier now.

Tyre cleared his throat, ''If we could get on with this. . . ''

''Right.'' Lucy looked over at him.

He took out his gold pocket watch, and began to swing it gently before Lucy's eyes. The two relaxed, and after a few moments, they had achieved a subtle rapport. Presently, Tyre began to whisper, ''You are more comfortable than you have ever been before. . . ''

Almost unconsciously, Lucy reached down and unfastened her belt. She raised the silver moon by the chain, and allowed it to follow the sleepy motion of the gold watch. ''Yes. . . comfortable. . . ever before. . . '' She whispered after him.

''You feel your desire to possess the Amulet of the Lady fading, blowing gently away like pollen on the breeze. . . ''

''. . . the breeze. . . '' Lucy slowly straightened her back up until she and Tyre both sat facing one another. Gold and silver were lowered, as man and woman rose. They stood, each staring into the other's eyes, she gripping the moon, he the dragon.

But to Tyre it seemed a staff. He saw before him, not a woman in a blue dress, but the Lady herself, blue gown flowing, almost as though in a breeze, her posture regal. Barely showing beneath the hem of her gown, a pair of stiletto heels poked their way into view. And he was Merlin, gripping his staff intensely, his black cloak fluttering.

Her eyes bore deeply into his, and she said, ''No Tyre, I'm afraid it's your desire which has faded.''

But it seemed to him that she had said, ''Dear Merlin... You've no power over me.'' And it occurred to him that she was right.

Bill Racicot is a sophomore stuck in Limbo because of a paperwork error in the school of the humanities at Carnegie Mellon University. In the past, he has been a student of mathematics, an actor/singer, an accounts receivable clerk, and a human interface between man and a VHS(tm) machine.

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ICE BALL

by Thomas Hand

Part I

The water was getting cold. It was the city's way of saying he had spent enough time in the shower already.

''Hot water ration nearing end.'' The shower warned him. It always disquieted Teri to have a machine talk to him while he bathed.

''Water off.'' He said, when the water was too frigid to bear. ''Drier on.''

The stainless steel walls slid away revealing large vents which blew warm air over him. When his drying ration was exhausted, he dressed in his robe and stepped out of the Water Closet. Teri surveyed his apartment, till he found the dinner table which had been accumulating a pile of mailchips all that week. With a comfortable scratch and a yawn he settled in a chair beneath the pile.

''Coffee, black.'' The food dispenser processed the request and offered him a mug.

''Thank you. Now let's see.'' He took the first chip, and read ''Sale at Sojki'' The chip tumbled through the air, landing in the open disposal unit.

''Blasted junk mail.'' As he sifted through the other chips, the Sojki chip gained company. Teri stopped his hoopshooting long enough to view a chip from his Aunt.

''Hello, Teri. How are you? I had hoped to hear from you, but I guess you were too busy to worry about your poor old Aunt. . . '' She always enjoyed making him feel guilty, and she was good at it. ''. . . I don't blame you, you probably have some girl you're seeing that is taking up all of your time. . . '' She was also in a hurry to get him married, not exactly what he was planning. ''. . . well, you be sure to sent me a chip. Love and Kisses.'' Teri watched the face pucker, then he added her chip his score.

''Important Message From a Friend'' It sounded important enough, so he popped it in.

''Greetings customer, let me show you. . . '' The face of a businessman polluted the screen, but it never finished its sentence.

''Getting sneaky aren't we.'' Two more points.

Teri picked up the next chip and dropped it as if it bit him. It was marked with the official symbol of the Protectorate. There was to need for further identification.

A stern face filled the screen, while behind him the presidential seal covered the wall.

''This is the President of the Protectorate Council. I am informing you that you have been selected to receive the honor of serving as part of the Protectorate Galactic Marine Corp. You are to follow the proceeding instructions exactly. Failure to do so can be punishable by 40 years imprisonment or permanent exile. Thank you, and remember to vote Liberal.'' The face broke into a smile and disappeared. Teri felt faint.

The next face belonged to a uniformed officer who had a friendly air about him.

''Mr. Teri M. Demsy,'' Patriotic music began in the background. ''You have been chosen to wear the uniform of the finest army in the galaxy, the Galactic Marine Corps.'' The screen changed to a line of uniformed men at attention. ''You will be trained in the latest weaponry. '' The screen showed a firing range. ''You will be given the opportunity to visit exotic planets.'' Pictures of popular tourist attractions on several planets were shown. ''In short, Mr. Demsy, you will become one of the few, the proud, the GMC. You are scheduled to begin training at seven thirty hours at Fort Reagan, April 4, 2054. I must remind you of the consequences should you refuse to appear at the appointed time. Standard punishment is 40 years in prison or permanent exile to an outer planet. I'm sure you don't want this Mr. Demsy.'' The final picture shown was the Protectorate flag, flying in the breeze. The officer's smiling face covered the screen once more. ''We look forward to seeing you Mr. Demsy.'' The screen went blank.

Teri glanced at his watch: April 2nd, two more days to live the rest of his life.

With the war between the Protectorate and the Federation at its present stage, he would be killed within a year. If he didn't join, he would face imprisonment or worse- exile to a frozen planet where he would slowly starve or freeze. There would be little chance to escape the Protectorate if he decided to run since they control the entire planet. He would be continuously running from Administrators. That he disliked more than death. No one could decide how they wanted to die in two days.

The hands of his watch read 3:42 am. Teri could remember the day his grandfather gave it to him, describing how old it was. Since the Protectorate outlawed analog watches long before Teri was born, it must be old. His grandfather speculated its age somewhere before the revolution. However old, it was Teri's only conscious offense against the Protectorate, and he cherished it. He rarely wore it outside his apartment, because, if seen, he would spend the next five years in prison.

The apartment was still the way he left it when he viewed the chip, except for an absence of light. He didn't work that day, instead, he slumped in his quiet room, lost in thought.

It was almost two o'clock when he awoke. He couldn't remember falling asleep, but was grateful he had.

Teri began all the necessary arrangements. By three, he had all his belongings packed and informed the landlord he was moving. By four, he had reservations on a shuttle to Fort Reagan, nine thirty that night, and had sent his luggage to the airport. By five, he removed his savings for the First Bank of the Protectorate, seven years worth. With this done, and his room vacant, he had time to waste.

Teri had always wanted to dine at a restaurant where they still prepare food by hand, but he could never afford to. Although the Protectorate did not approve of this unsanitary practice, they tolerated it because it proved itself profitable. So, with a pleasant lump of bank credits in his pocket, and his grandfather's watch proudly displayed on his wrist, he set off to find one.

Outside the apartment, Teri hailed a personal transport instead of public transit.

''Destination please.'' The mechanical voice of the driver asked.

''The nearest restaurant where they serve food by hand.'' He said hoping the computer understood the request. It did and the transport zipped out into traffic. Teri was enjoying the speed at which the transport was moving. It eventually slowed and stopped before La Brunch restaurant.

''Please insert 39 credits.'' With a shrug, he deposited a day's work.

The restaurant was magnificent. It exceeded everything Teri had imagined. There were people, real people, standing, sitting, walking, talking, dancing, serving, being served, and enjoying themselves. Just like those Protectorate movies showing how wonderful the system is, where everyone is smiling, but this was really happening.

A man dressed in the customary waiter's tuxedo approached him.

''Do you have a reservation?''

''No I was hoping you would have a vacancy.''

''I'm afraid we are booked at the moment, try later.''

Teri had little practice at bribery, and didn't know how much to give him, so he decided to give him the first credit that came out of his pocket. The five hundred credit piece helped the waiter find a vacant table.

He ordered, and watched the as people dance. The waiter returned with his meal, and turned to leave.

''Wait a minute.'' The waiter paused.

''Yes sir. May I help you?''

''I don't suppose you could find me a bottle of wine.''

''Sir we don't serve such things here! That is against the law. . .''

''I would be most generous.'' Again he, played lotto with the credits.

The waiters eyes widened when the next piece was handed to him. ''I'll see what I can do.'' With that he hurried to the kitchen. Teri savored the tender meat, prepared by a fascinating process which the waiter had described as ''broiling.'' The waiter returned with a bottle, stripped of all labels. Teri found that the wine and meat went together very well, so he thanked the waiter with another ''tip.'' The night went on, and the last memory Teri had of that night was asking for another bottle.

When he awoke, he noticed how hard the floor seemed, and wondered why it was so close. He flipped onto his back, and realized he was lying down. He sat up, but the dizziness made him lie down again.

''Where am I?'' He asked the ceiling, but there was no answer. He noticed a smell, like vomit, but he couldn't locate its source.

The room was familiar, but he couldn't quite place it. Perhaps because he was lying on the floor. That must be it. He flopped upright and with practice, managed to keep his balance. He was in his apartment, that's where he was. How long was I unconscious? He wondered. Then Teri remembered his flight. He looked at his watch, eight twenty. There was still time to shower and get rid of this nasty smell.

Teri locked the room after he cleaning off his sample of the floor's dirt. He shuffled down the hall towards his destiny.

''Going somewhere?'' Since he didn't did not recognize the voice he froze, and slowly turned to face a Protectorate Administrator.

''Yes, um, I'm um I have to catch a shuttle.''

''You are not going anywhere, Mr. Demsy.''

''What do you mean, and how do you know my name?''

''That is irrelevant. You had your chance to go on a shuttle ride, Mr. Demsy. You chose not to. I'm afraid you must pay the consequences.''

''What are you talking about?'' He glanced at his watch. ''Its only eight twe. . .'' Teri's jaw dropped. The watches hands were frozen at 8:21 pm. His most cherished object had betrayed him.

• • •

Stenciled in red letters across the cell's only cement wall were the words:

''Absolutely no talking permitted''

Below it were several other sentences written in some other dialects, which Teri assumed said the same thing.

The cell itself consisted of three bare walls and a fourth of cement. It was vacant of all furniture except one blanket for each of its three occupants.

The first of Teri's cellmates wore the majority of a flight suit mixed with other casual wear. He had traced his name in the air with his finger until everyone knew him as Reihn Verice.

The other was wearing the long white jacket of a doctor. It took some time for Teri to realize he was actually a scientist of some sort. Teri found his name rather interesting too, Samual Johnson. He and the pilot were attempting to communicate using hand gestures. Teri tried as well but soon lost interest. He was still awaiting his impending doom.

Teri awoke to the harsh voice of the guard.

''Teri Demsy, your lawyer is here to see you. You gonna get up or should I tell him to go away.'' The guard chuckled.

Teri opened his mouth to reply, then remembered the sign on the wall. His mouth snapped shut before sound could escape and he stood by the door being unlocking.

The guard lead him down a long grey corridor lined with empty cells identical to the one Teri had occupied. They turned a corner and walked through a steel door. Inside was a room no bigger than his cell. Unlike his cell, however, the room had privacy and furniture. Behind a table in the center of the room sat his only hope, the public defender. He was tapping away at his portable console, but did take enough time to direct Teri to the seat opposite him. The guard locked the door behind them, just as the lawyer began to speak.

''Mr. Teri Ran Demsy, age 28, weight 153, brown hair, blue eyes, No previous record. What are you doing here, Mr. Demsy?''

''I. . .''

''Mr. Demsy, please don't interrupt. As I was saying, you are being held, pending judgement, for the crime of treason. . .''

''Treason. . .''

''Yes treason, and they have a pretty good case against you. Now tell me, why didn't you report on time?''

''I uh, I was incapacitated at the time.''

''Incapacitated.''

''Yes uh,'' Teri began to turn a rose shade of red. ''I was drunk.''

The lawyer's expression remained constant.

''This does not make my job any easier, Mr. Demsy. You expect me to walk into that courtroom and say 'please excuse my client, he was drunk, but he promises never to do it again.' Being in possession of alcohol alone carries a five year sentence. No way, Mr. Demsy. You would be sent to the far reaches of space, and I'd probably be sent right behind you.''

The lawyer turned back to his console and tapped away for some time. He sighed and looked back at Teri.

''At least you have a clean record. You've even helped the protectorate while you were an accountant. Maybe with a little persuasion, and luck, I can get you enlisted again with a few fines and a couple months in the stockade.''

''I would appreciate that very much.''

''Don't take this personally. If I don't make my quota, I'll lose my position. That's why you're getting my best.''

The guard had led him back to his cell after his meeting. With a grunt, he slammed the door behind Teri, loud enough to wake the scientist and the pilot. With an unpleasant chuckle, he shuffled on.

Teri sat wrapped in his blanket in the corner, wondering what would become of him. Right now, the Marine Corps seemed the most pleasant of all the choices. He had often wondered what it would be like. If he tried hard enough he could actually make a decent life out of it, assuming that he lived to enjoy it. Teri decided that was exactly what he was going to do make the best of it.

Again, the guard escorted Teri from his cell and down the hallway. Instead of visiting the tiny room, they continued further to a large wooden door labeled Criminal Court. Teri entered the room expecting to see a large number of people. At the table in the center of the room sat his attorney, tapping away again.

''Come in and sit down, Mr. Demsy. We have just enough time to review your case again before court begins.'' The lawyer said without looking up from his console Teri seat next to the lawyer.

''Now, Mr. Demsy, what we are planning to do may seem a little risky, so if you're nervous I understand.'' He wasn't, and he didn't understand why. ''Now let's go over the game plan.''

''Yes, let's''

''Ok, first, you will plead guilty to treason by trying to escape the draft. Second, you present your spotless record, along with your aunt as a character witness. And, finally, you ask that you be enlisted in the marines with whatever punishment they see fit to deliver.''

''Sounds good to me.'' It should, he had been thinking about it all that night.

''Ok, now we wait.''

After waiting for five minutes, Teri began to wonder if anyone would show up. He also wondered where they would sit. There was no other furniture other that the table and the two chairs. The room itself didn't look like what he pictured it to be. Although it was a spacious room, it was not decorative at all. The walls were an off white color, almost transparent. As he was examining the walls, one lit with a beam of light from some unknown source. The light focused into a face which spoke.

''Please stand.'' They both obeyed. ''This Criminal Court is now in session, the Honorary Greod Hjery residing.'' On the wall directly in front of them, five more faces appeared. To their right, another face appeared.

''That's our real opponent.'' The lawyer whisper.

The central face in front of them began to speak.

''We are here to judge one Teri R. Demsy for the crime of treason. Will he please step forward.'' Teri did so. ''How do you plead.''

With a hard swallow, he answered.

''Guilty.''

''Very well, you may sit.'' The face look to the other wall. ''Mr. Prosecutor, you may begin.''

The face to their right began speaking.

''Thank you your honor.'' The face glanced at the table then at the five faces. ''Honorable Judges, I'll make this short. I intend to show this court that Teri Demsy is not some ordinary treason case. Indeed not. Don't be fooled by his innocent looking exterior, for inside lurks a beast. I will show you facts and evidence which will reveal his true identity. Thank you.''

Teri couldn't believe his ears. Was all this really happening? His attorney stood.

''Honorable Judges. My client is a decent man who made a mistake. He now realizes the error in what he has done and wishes to rectify the situation. Please don't close your hearts to him. Thank you.''

The central face spoke again.

''Mr. Defense, you may present your case.''

Teri's lawyer proceeded with his presentation exactly as they planned. He showed Teri's clean record. He displayed Teri's willingness to enlist. He even brought Teri's aunt in as a character witness. Then the prosecutor began his presentation.

''Honorable Judges. I would like to point out a few items that my esteemed collogue failed to mention. First, Mr. Demsy is no ordinary case. He must be recognized for what he really is, a treasonous spy. Second, we must find out just what happened on that mysterious night. And lastly, I will give you my final proof that he is a spy, and a traitor to the Protectorate.''

Teri looked his lawyer with a confused expression, only to meet another.

''I call to the stand Mr. Demsy, since he is the only one who can tell us what really happened.'' Teri slowly stood and walking in front of the table.

''Mr Demsy, please recount what happened to you from the time you received notification on your enlistment to the time you were arrested.''

''Well, I had not gone through my mail all that week. . .''

''. . . and so I closed my account at the bank and decided to splurge a little.''

''Wasn't it true that you went to a Manual Food Preparation Restaurant?''

''Yes, but I had never been. . .''

''And isn't it true that you bought alcohol from the waiter, and drank to excess.''

''Yes, but. . .''

''There are no buts about it Mr. Demsy. You have committed two crimes. You drank until you were drunk, and because of that, you missed your shuttle. Isn't that true Mr. Demsy?''

''Yes.''

There was a pause, probably to allow the words to take effect.

''Mr. Demsy, are you a spy?''

''What?

''Simply answer the question.''

''No, I am certainly not a spy.''

The prosecutor held something up.

''Do you recognize this, Mr. Demsy?''

Again, Teri swallowed hard.

''Yes, it's my grandfather's watch.''

''I see you know it very well then. I suppose you know how the transmitter got inside it.''

''What?''

''The transmitter. We found a transmitter in your watch. I suppose you know nothing about it?''

''Yes, that's right.''

''How long have you had this watch? And, I would like the judges to notice it's analog.''

''About twenty years.''

''That's a long time breaking the law. In all that time you never opened it? Not ever to replace the battery?''

''I've only opened it once. To change the battery like you said.''

Teri's lawyer stood and said.

''I think this has gone far enough.''

''Yes, it has.'' The prosecutor replied. ''Mr. Demsy, you are lying. You have been playing games form the start. You are really a Federation spy.'' The lawyer still went on despite Teri's furious head shaking. ''You have been sent here by the Federation with a perfect record so no one would be suspicious, and report periodically on our economic status using this transmitter.'' He held up a tiny black chip. ''We had it analyzed Mr. Demsy. It was made by the Federation.''

Teri was speakless. The only word he could utter was ''no.'' His attorney was equally at a loss.

''Well Mr. Demsy, can you explain?''

''No, I don't know anything about it.''

''I have no more questions, you may sit down'' Teri slumped back into his chair. The prosecution rests it's case your honor.''

''Why didn't you tell me about the watch?'' Teri's lawyer whispered.

''Well, it was taken from me when I was arrested. I didn't know anything about any transmitter.''

''Well, Mr. Demsy, looks like we are going for a trip.'' The lawyer stood. ''The defense rests your Honor.''

''Very well, this court will adjourn while we decide.'' All faces disappeared.

Thomas Hand is a freshman at Penn State Schuylkill Haven Campus. He plans to graduate with a baccalaureate degree in Computer Science. He also promises to write more about Teri. (At least enough so you know where the title comes from)

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CORPORATE STRESS

by Christopher Kempke

Bremmer put down the Expando-Matic Desk Accessory, and touched the discrete red button on the side. A soft whirr sounded from inside the EMDA, and a drawer popped out containing a set of pens. Bremmer selected one, and used it to scribble on the set of technical diagrams that littered his desk. Pressing another button, he replaced the pen in the drawer. The EMDA acknowledged the weight, said ‘‘Thank you,’’ softly, and closed. Bremmer sighed, and lay back.

‘‘Thank you,’’ said the EMDA softly. Bremmer sat up quickly.

‘‘Thank you,’’ it said, a bit more emphatically. A drawer in its side popped open. Bremmer removed one of the coins that lay there, replaced it. The drawer slid closed.

‘‘Thank you,’’ the EMDA said. Bremmer waited. There was no sound from the EMDA. He relaxed.

‘‘Thank you,’’ the EMDA said implacably.

The door behind Bremmer opened, and Linda, the office mailwoman, walked in. Digging through a basket of mail, she handed him several letters.

‘‘Thank you,’’ said Bremmer and the EMDA simultaneously. Linda's eyebrows rose, and she smiled. Bremmer opened his mouth to say something.

‘‘Thank you, thank you, thank you thankyouthankyouthankyou!’’ the EMDA said in the same quiet tone which Bremmer was beginning to associate with dying rodents. The two of them looked at it in shock. All along the plastic device, drawers were opening and closing with wild abandon. The EMDA began to spin, slowly at first, then faster as it apparently gained courage. Small objects began working themselves lose from its drawers and hurtling around the room. Linda, standing, avoided the first few, then as the tumult began to fill the air, she dived, pulling Bremmer with her. Seconds later, a letter opener went through the space where she had been standing. Crossing the room in a metallic flash, it impaled itself with a loud thunk over the door. Bremmer's **Home Wonders Associates** sign dropped from the wall to the floor with a crystalline crash. Bremmer waited for several seconds. The letter opener quivered in the wall, but there was no sound; the myriad airborne objects appeared to have settled. Carefully, he raised his head.

‘‘Thank you,’’ said the EMDA. Bremmer reached around the back of the desk and unplugged it from the wall.

‘‘Tha-’’ said the EMDA concisely. The two people on the floor looked at each other for a few seconds, then stood up. Bremmer blushed slightly.

‘‘It has a few bugs yet.’’

‘‘A few,’’ Linda agreed, laughing. She turned and left, then popped her head back in. ‘‘You're welcome.’’ she said to the EMDA.

Bremmer walked over to the door, removed his letter opener from the doorframe, and began the task of cleaning up his room.

A week or so later, Michelson plugged in the EMDA and looked at Bremmer.

‘‘Linda was telling me about this thing's homicidal tendencies,’’ he commented. Bremmer laughed shortly.

‘‘It's fixed, now. Never fear.’’

‘‘Then why are you crossing your fingers?’’

Bremmer remained silent, and pushed the EMDA button. A drawer spun to him and slid open. Michelson removed a pen, held it a moment, and put it back. The drawer closed.

‘‘Thank you,’’ said the EMDA in a completely re-engineered voice. Nothing else happened.

Bremmer let his breath out slowly. Michelson smiled.

‘‘Nice job, Bremmer,’’ he said. ‘‘This is just what Home Wonders needs to boost sales. It's polite, convenient, and helps organize to boot. Let's see Computer Home Innovations beat this one!’’

Bremmer bowed slowly, once, expecting the EMDA to thank him at any minute. It did not. ‘‘Thank you,’’ he said, unaccompanied. He shook Michelson's proffered hand, then handed the EMDA to him. The older man left, carrying it.

Bremmer turned and looked out his window. From his forty-third floor window, he could see the entire city spread out below him, blotted only by the **Computer Home Innovations** tower six blocks away, it's dark mirrored steel reflecting the white mirrored lime of the **Home Wonders Associates** building. If ever he was on top of the world, it was now. The EMDA would give him world-wide fame, the promotion that had landed on his desk that morning would seal his financial security, even in the unlikely event that he retired next year as was his right. His wife had recovered her health, his son had called earlier that week to announce the arrival of their first granddaughter. Everything in the world was bright.

He was very, very worried.

CHI's EMDA appeared on the market only a day after HWA's. Bremmer had been completely unaware that the rival company had even been working on such a thing, even more surprised when he had gone home and seen CHI's commercial on television. But all in all he was fairly happy; HWA's EMDA, his EMDA, was by far the superior product, and the consumers seemed aware of this. (There were even rumors that the CHI EMDA had a habit of flying into ‘‘Thank you’’ fits and hurling their contents over a wide area. This was never reported with an HWA EMDA.)

So the next week it was with particular surprise that Bremmer learned that sales on his EMDA had almost ceased, and CHI's EMDAs were in so much demand they couldn't be kept in stock.

Bremmer was sitting around his desk one morning moping and playing with a CHI EMDA, trying to see what advantages it had. Linda entered to hand him his daily mail, stood behind him for a while and watched.

The CHI EMDA was a roughly rectangular lump, tastefully decorated in a mottled camouflage pattern of greens and browns. Six buttons were spaced unevenly around the outside, and a power cord snaked off the back. Bremmer poked at a button; it fell off. He spun the device, pressed another. A drawer slid out of the lump about halfway from the top. As the drawer reached its fullest open position, the entire EMDA overbalanced and rolled until it rested on it. With a laugh, Linda reached over his shoulder and pressed still another button. Another drawer snapped all the way out, ending its flight about six feet away. She flinched, pulled her arm away.

''Must be a defective one.''

Bremmer shook his head. ''Nope. It's the fourth one we've bought. They're all like that, or worse. But CHI has sold almost a million of these things in a few days. I can't understand it.''

He stood up and walked to the window. Linda followed; together they looked over at the dark tower of Computer Home Innovations. They continued to stare for several silent minutes, until a small black object detached itself from the top of the CHI tower and lifted into the air. Bremmer looked at it curiously.

''What is that thing? It's too big to be a bird, but I can't see it very well from here.''

Linda shook her head to show an equal lack of knowledge. Bremmer returned to his desk and pressed a button on his HWA EMDA. The sleek machine opened a drawer; within lay a pair of HWA Golf Goggles. Bremmer slid them on.

A brilliant red display appeared in front of him, flashing columns of figures which completely obscured his view. After a second, the numbers stopped and the words ''RECOMMENDED CLUB SELECTION: NINE IRON'' appeared. In frustration, Bremmer thumbed the switch that shut off the golf computer, and spun the magnification dial.

With the goggles, Bremmer examined the creature which had left the CHI tower. Six foot leathery wings beat rapidly, but behind them lay a relatively humanoid figure, with a human face. The creature, whatever it was, carried a pitchfork in one of its short, clawed arms. Bremmer attempted to increase the magnification, but the words ''RECOMMENDED CLUB SELECTION: 1 WOOD'' suddenly obscured his vision, and by the time he managed to kill the computer again, the creature had vanished from view.

He described it to Linda, who shook her head and shrugged. ''Never heard of anything like it. Maybe its somebody's pet.''

''Some pet,'' Bremmer commented.

Linda was back after lunch, and dropped a sheaf of computer printouts on his desk along with the mail. Bremmer glanced at them briefly, then more carefully as an illustration on the top caught his attention. It was a carefully drawn dot-matrix image of the creature he had seen the day before. Dropping the rest of the mail into the HWA Artificially Intelligent Mail Reader, he grabbed the sheaf and turned to Linda in surprise.

''That's it! Where'd you find it?''

She smiled. ''At the library. Under 'S' for 'Demon'. That's what you've got there-- a full-fledged Inferno Demon. The pitchfork's a dead giveaway, or so they say.''

''But how did CHI get one? Where can we get one? And what the Hell's a magic demon doing in modern day New York?'' He stopped as he realized he wasn't making sense.

''No, not Hell. Inferno. I think it's some sort of Agnostic religious place. In any case, obtaining one is very easy, the spell is listed in the book. But more interesting is what they can do!''

Bremmer paged through the sheaf until he reached a page covered in the glowing, speckled ink of a HWA Highlighter pen. The first words on the page caught his eye: ''capable of mass mind control.''

''So that's how CHI is selling their EMDA!'' He put the sheaf down. ''So how do we get rid of it?''

Linda shrugged. ''It's not in there. Only the spell to summon one.''

There was an explosion behind them as the Artificially Intelligent Mail Reader caught fire. Bremmer grabbed a plastic bucket of water he kept under his desk for just such emergencies as Linda pulled the HWA Fire-B-Gone fire extinguisher off the wall. Putting her finger through the trigger, she began sqeezing it rapidly. With each pull, a thin trickle of water dripped from the Fire-B-Gone. She threw it aside in frustration just as Bremmer hurled his bucket onto the Mail Reader. Thick clouds of steam filled the air, and the two of them sank down to the floor to avoid the mist. . .

Just as the Fire-B-Gone really began to shoot. Lying on its side, the large tank began to spin under the pressure of the watery foam now spraying from its nozzle. Faster and faster it spun, coating the room in white suds before its tank finally ran empty and it slowed to a stop.

Bremmer and Linda stared at one another for a few moments. Silently Linda got up and left the room, leaving a dripping trail behind. Bremmer stood and shook himself off, the reached for his HWA Automatic Drying Unit. Before turning it on he reconsidered and sat down at the desk, still dripping.

Carefully, so that the now-wet paper wouldn't fall apart, he turned to the page containing the summoning spell, and read it carefully. There were a number of long magic words and warnings of dire consequences if they were spoken incorrectly, and a list of ingredients to be mixed together to form an ink with which to draw a pentegram. Bremmer grimaced as he read the list; CHI had broken dozens of laws, including murder several times, to come up with all of these items. Even just the list of creatures from which vital internal organs were required was substantial.

''So much for summoning one ourselves,'' he said aloud to himself. But the glimmerings of an idea touched his mind, and he grabbed a sheet of sodden paper and began to write furiously a list of items he might need.

By the next day, he had assembled his materials, and, by the time Linda arrived with his mail, he was busy stirring things together in a large cauldron in the center of the room. She blinked and shook her head as she entered, then looked at him curiously. He looked up.

''Root beer, powdered daisies and rose petals, milk, sugar, baking powder, mustard, ketchup, honey, chalk dust. . .'' Bremmer continued listing off items as he placed them into the cauldron. When he finally finished, he brushed off his hands and stood.

''All the warnings in the spell description are about the words, not the pentagram ink, so I can't imagine that it makes a whole lot of difference what goes in there. Probably that stuff is just there to deter small children from playing with it.''

Linda was unimpressed with his logic. ''What if you're wrong? This is a demon that you're playing with. Somebody could get hurt -- clawed or mauled or eaten or something.'' She paused. ''Why do you want to summon a demon, anyway?''

Bremmer smiled. ''I don't want to summon one, I want to dispel one. It says there that a demon can only be called once in a thousand years, so if I can make it go back wherever it came from, CHI won't be able to get it again. And it won't eat me; I think that it's a vegetarian.''

Linda just shook her head as Bremmer carefully dipped a paintbrush in the rose-scented mix he had just created and painted several lines on the floor.

Linda watched, then spoke. ''Isn't a pentegram supposed to have five sides?''

Bremmer counted quickly. ''Five, six, what's the difference? I'm not going to give it time to count, anyway.''

''I'm beginning to understand why nothing at HWA works correctly,'' she muttered under her breath, but Bremmer was far too busy to pay attention to her.

''All right,'' he said at last. ''Now all we have to do is get it into the pentagram.''

Linda smiled. ''How about just sending it an invitation?''

Bremmer narrowed his eyes. ''Don't be stupid.'' He picked up a box behind him, and took off the lid with a flourish. ''Devil's-food cake,'' he announced proudly. He placed the burned mass in the center of the pentagram, and sat down in the desk chair. ''Now we wait.''

They didn't wait long. Within a minute, the window shattered, and the demon swept down into the pentagram. Pulling a knife from its back pocket, it began cutting the cake into bite-sized morsels, paying no attention whatsoever to the two people in the room. Bremmer grabbed the sheaf of papers from his desk.

''Where did you find a dispelling spell?'' Linda whispered.

''I didn't,'' Bremmer said. ''I'm just going to try reading these words backwards.''

Linda choked and began looking for an exit, but the demon was between her and the door, stabbing little chunks of cake on the tines of its pitchfork and gobbling them off. Bremmer began to read.

Seconds went by, as the demon finished the cake and Bremmer's words droned on. Finally, the creature in the pentagram looked up, its eyes widening as it realized what Bremmer was doing. It began to speak as well, its speech high and fast. Various pictures on the walls around the room began to shake. Bremmer sped up his reading, and pronounced the final syllable loudly and clearly. A trap door opened beneath the the demon, and it disappeared in a roar of flames.

The pictures detached themselves from the wall, hovering menacingly in the air, and were slowly joined by the books from the shelves. Bremmer thought quickly as they began weaving fast, quick patterns in the air, the books opening and closing rapidly, making a loud drumbeat sound. Suddenly, an idea occured to him. Opening his desk drawer, he lifted out an HWA EMDA, labeled ''Prototype'' in large letters. Setting it on the desk, he pushed its button until all the drawers popped open.

The books and photographs approached nearer, leisurely, joined now by the sharp, jagged fragments of the shattered window.

Bremmer gestured to Linda to plug the EMDA in, then lifted a large dish of pennies off of the top of the desk. He poured as many pennies as would fit into each drawer. The drawers snapped shut.

''Thank you,'' the EMDA said in a dying-rodent voice. Linda's eyes widened at the sound, but she grabbed two HMA Fly-Die Flyswatters, and handed one to Bremmer. He accepted it. ''Thank you,'' said the EMDA.

The two of them began beating at the aerial assault, the wildly gyrating Fly-Die swatters like living things in their grasp, spinning, slapping, and mechanically sneaking up on the attacking items.

''Thank you,'' the EMDA said after a brief pause.

The glass now tore at their arms, and the pictures battered incessantly at them. The books, hanging back, kept up the steady drumbeat. Blood began to flow from dozens of scratches.

''ThankyouThankyouThankyouThankyouThank. . .'' said the EMDA quietly. Bremmer grabbed Linda and the two of them dropped to the floor just as the EMDA began to spin. As it reached its maximum velocity, the drawers began to pop open, and a cloud of swift, heavy coins filled the air, forcing the glass, pictures, and books to slam into one another and the walls. A steady drone of ''Thankyou Thankyou Thankyou Thankyou Thankyou Thankyou'' was kept up the whole time, but within seconds the flying army was gone.

Linda pulled the plug on the raving EMDA. Slowly, the two of them stood up, stepping carefully across the destroyed room to the now-glassless window.

''Look!'' Linda said, pointing. Bremmer looked.

The dark, foreboding tower of CHI was dark no longer. Every trace of glass in the building shimmered and exploded outward, shimmering like a billion diamonds in the sun, then vanished into thin air. Moments later, the entire structure began to sink into the ground, losing a story or so every second until the building had completely vanished.

''They must have built the skyscraper using the demon's magic. I guess it wasn't prefab after all.''

Bremmer restrained a comment as a buzzer somewhere signalled that it was time for lunch. The two of them made their way carefully toward the dented, battered door.

When they got there, Bremmer paused, then returned to his desk. Opening a drawer, he dug for a few moments and found what he was looking for; he placed the ''Maid: Please make up this room now'' sign on the door as he left.

Christopher Kempke is a Computer Science graduate student at Oregon State University. His interests include writing, computers, magic, juggling, bridge, and other games, not necessarily in that order. His major goal in life is to become a professional student, a goal which he is rapidly attaining.

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