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Looking Ahead

Daniel K. Appelquist

Ok. So I was a bit over-zealous last issue. I admit it. Starting this issue, I'm going to try and think *small*, or at least *smaller*. Quanta's form seems to have "fused" itself, but I'm still open to suggestions if anyone's interested in making them. PostScript subscribers may also notice the lack of a picture title page this issue. Well, the title page gave so many people trouble that I decided to omit it. I would like to run title pages in future issues, but I'm afraid I'm only going to be able to use pure postscript. If you'd like to submit a cover page for Quanta, feel free. It doesn't have to necessarilly have anything to do with any of the stories.

This issue, I'm printing the first submission I've received from the UK, *Alice Through the Flames* by Roy Stead. I hope to publish more of Roy's material in the future, and I'm always interested in submissions from the UK and other European countries, although, as I had to respond to one Swedish would-be Quanta writer, I only accept submissions in English.

As a side note, there is an electronically distributed fiction magazine for the Scandanavian community. It is called *Volven* and more information on it may be obtained from its editor, Rune Johansen at the address *rune.johansen@odin.re.nta.uninett*. I'm always happy to hear about new magazines of this sort springing up. I truly believe we're on the vanguard of a new era of information exchange.

I'd like to stress the fact that I always need submissions. Right now there are no extra stories hanging around for further issues. If there is a next issue it will be because *you*, the Quanta subscribers, send me material. Quanta was originally founded as a forum for amateur creative writing, and amateur writers are the only ones that can keep it going.

There actually is one submission that I'm sure will appear in the next issue, actually. That's the second part to Jim Vassilakos's *The Harrison Chapters* the first part of which is published in this issue. Normally, I'm wary of serialized works, but chapters two and three are waiting to be printed in the next two issues, and, by that time, Jim should be finished with chapter four (at least). So look forward to those.

Correspondence

I was very intrigued by the results of the poll from last issue. Be assured that your opinions have been counted. I'll act on them as much as is possible. I wish to thank everyone for all the positive feedback. Comments like "you are doing a great job, continue!" were not uncommon in the poll replies, and I really appreciate that. Of course, those of you who thought the magazine was bad probably didn't think it was worth sending in a reply, but what the hell…

Dontin Wang from Grinnel College in Grinnel, Iowa writes:

I won't be here over the summer to subscribe to Quanta. In fact, I will be graduating, and will longer be subscribing at this account…would it be possible to subscribe to Quanta in a more traditional manner? That is, can I get an annual subscription to Quanta in printed form, mailed to my postal address?

If so, please send me the details. I would appreciate it very much.

Dontin Wang
WANG@GRIN1.BITNET

The answer is that I will send printed copies of Quanta. What you have to to is send me a SASE (A self addressed large envelope with enough postage on it, usually around $2.00) and a check for $3.00 to cover printing costs and my time. It is in my long range plans to make Quanta available in printed form, possibly through a small printing house. It will still be free to get Quanta electronically though.

Also, we have a reply to Norman Murray's article entitled *Biotech in and out of SF* (publushed in the February 1990 issue).

davidsond%ac%csc@csc.isu.edu writes:

In the Feb. 1990 issue of Quanta, talking of genetics and ethics, Norm Murray wrote…

> *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?*

An interesting twist to genetic patenting was heard April 10, 1990 by the California Supreme Court, deciding whether a leukemia patient can sue for a share of the profits from an anti-cancer drug derived from his blood cells. John Moore, a 45-year old businessman from Seattle, contends that blood cells from his cancerous spleen were wrongfully used by the University of California, two researchers from UCLA, and two biotechnology companies that helped develop the drug. Moore said he is merely trying to defend "the rights of the individual patient in the case where the physician-researcher is also a businessman-entrepreneur." Outside of the courthouse, Moore added "Without my knowledge or consent, the doctors and the research institutions used a part of me for their own gain. They stole something from me."

University attorney Allen Wagner argued that if justices rule that Moore has property rights to his (former) tissue, then there will be serious setbacks in the development of lifesaving drugs.

Attorney Peter Abrahams, lawyer for defendant Shirley Quan (a UCLA research assistant), added that such a decision would have "a devastating impact on medical research." Strongest arguments from defense lawyers seemed to be against having to negotiate and pay for human tissue used in research and development.

Opinion:
If we accept paying pharmaceutical royalties, what is so horrible about a royalty to the genetic-lottery winner who happens to carry a unique strain within him. It seems naive and unreasonable to believe that such a fee would end genetic research. But the alternative? Without such 'ownership rights' to our own genetic strains and tissue, larger problems are tucked within those Norm Murray discussed. For example, Murray would no doubt be shocked to discover (on his clone's twenty-first birthday) that the clone 'belongs' to his surgeon.

"Keep those letters coming," I suppose would be the appropriate thing to say here. But seriously, do. It is of great help when working on a magazine like Quanta to know that *someone* is paying attention. Thanks.

DKA

ALTER ORIGIN

by Phillip Nolte

It was a damned good thing that the coffee in my cup was only lukewarm, or I might have been painfully scalded as it sloshed over my hand and soaked the front of my lab coat. The ship lurched again, and I grabbed for something solid as I felt the familiar flip-flop in my stomach and the brief disorientation that follows a shift into normal space. Our Whitney Overdrive engine had shut down! Even I knew that something had gone wrong. That wasn't supposed to happen. Not here, not now. Suddenly the bridge was all business.

"Stay out of the way Piper," the captain snapped as he motioned me out of the way. "We've got a problem. Haynes, run a check on those Whitney circuits. I wanna know just what the hell happened! Now!"

The young Lieutenant's fingers clicked frantically over the keys of his control board. Seconds later he said, "I... I've traced it to the mass detector, Sir." More clicking. "Here comes the readout! The drive is fine, it's not a malfunction." His relief was obvious. "We've come within minimum safe distance of a sizable mass concentration. The safety override shut off the drive because a deflected course or impact was imminent. We... "

"Enough!" the captain interrupted. "I'm well aware of what happens when you mix hyperdrives with gravity wells, Haynes. I wanna know what the devil is out there! In case you haven't noticed, the nearest star is still over five light-years away!" He turned to me. "Piper?"

"I'll go see what the scientific staff can find, Harry. I'll get back to you ASAP!" The problems I was having with Evans, the other chief science officer, were temporarily forgotten as I hurried back to the science section to mobilize the staff.

There is no shortage of strange things in our universe, but it became apparent over the next few hours that we had found something really odd. We had almost collided with a solar system of sorts. It was a miniature, with the orbit of the outermost satellite only about three astronomical units in radius, but what made the system really strange was the central body. It was an utterly cold, black, unlit ball of rock and frozen gas more like a planet than a star. Evans is the cosmologist, maybe he can tell you if systems like this are supposed to exist, I can't. In spite of its ridiculously small size, this dark "micro-dwarf" had enough mass to hold five small planets captive and to activate the safety overrides in our hyperdrive system. We did find some weak radio activity when we really began to look for it but it was no wonder this little system had never been found–it produced no visible light and virtually no detectable radiation. Unless you almost ran into it, like we did, you'd never know it was there!

We reported the coordinates of a new navigational hazard. Headquarters, in their infinite wisdom, thought it was unique enough to study for a day or two before we continued our mission. As chief biologist, I found myself with little to do except make sure that Evans and the planetology-geology staff had enough coffee and food to keep them going. We had only a little time to do a lot of work which meant they were so busy that they weren't even stopping to sit down and eat during the regular ship's mess. In the midst of this flurry of activity, I was surprised to get a message that Evans wanted to see me in his quarters. I checked the coffee supply and tidied things up a bit, just to keep him waiting. The whole time I couldn't help but wonder what he wanted with me, a biologist, something he considered to be a lower life form.

Evans, Dr. Richard C., was the ship's cosmologist, exogeologist and, along with me, one of two chief scientists. He was also, without a doubt, the most irritating son of a bitch in the third galactic quadrant! Oh, he was damned bright and he had all the right credentials, but his true talent lay in his unfailing ability to find a person's weak point–a personality trait or speech problem like a stammer or something–and then confront that person with it! At least he didn't pick favorites. At one time or another, each and every one of us had endured the ravages of his acid wit and razor-sharp tongue. My own personal problem was with grammar or, more correctly, the lack thereof.

Our ship, the Galactic Probe #25 (christened, obviously, by some romantic with an unbounded imagination), was an ungainly collection of habitation pods and utility modules connected by a maze of access tubes, the whole of which was laced to the large, elongated central cylinder of the power and command module with a jumble of support struts and tensor cables. "Strictly functional" or "starkly utilitarian" are terms that come to mind–she was, in a word, ugly! But the field generated by her Whitney drive is nearly a perfect sphere and the shape of the vessel is unimportant so long as it fits within the confines of the field's boundaries. Beautiful or not, G-probe 25 was home to a regular ship's crew of eighteen and a scientific staff of twenty-five. At the time of the incident, we were six months into a two-year mission to catalogue and collect preliminary data on uncharted worlds. With luck, some of them would be fit for colonization. Now this is damned interesting work even in the worst of times, but we're all still a bit numb from the shock of our big discovery, the one that could make us all famous. Almost as shocking is the fact that the landmark paper will be co-authored by Evans and me. Evans and Piper, what an unlikely collaboration! I haven't quite gotten used to the idea myself!

We were on our way to "Morley's spearhead", a jagged star formation in a uncharted region way out past the remote

Naccobus system. This delta-shaped cluster contained twenty or so "G" spectral class stars, the very kind we were looking for. We were about ten light-years out from our last refuel and provision stop at the New Ceylon colony. Hyperdrive transport was pretty routine stuff, automatic systems did most of the work, and we more or less had free run of the ship during our off-duty hours. In fact, I had been on the bridge chatting with Captain Stewart about how to handle the morale problems we were having because of Evans when the Whitney incident occurred.

When I knew I couldn't put it off any longer, I made my way through the maze of corridors to Evans' quarters. I composed myself as best I could, took a deep breath and punched the courtesy chime on his door, half hoping that he had gone back to the geology module and was no longer in. No such luck! He answered the door immediately.

"Ah, Piper!" he said, guiding me in. "Glad you could come!" He noticed the brown stains on my coat. In the excitement following our discovery, I had forgotten all about the spilled coffee during the incident on the bridge. "Tch tch, Dr. Piper, you really should be more careful about your appearance! A chief scientist must set a good example at all times, you know!"

That was pure Evans–take advantage of any opportunity to irritate, no matter what the situation. I chose to ignore the jibe. "What can I do for you, Dick?" I said. I knew he hated the nickname so, of course, I used it whenever I had the chance.

"Have a seat," he said. I had barely sat down when he stuffed a printout into my hands. "Check these readings on the third planet, I think you'll find them interesting."

I skimmed over the figures for planetary circumference, mass, orbital radius and such, nothing interesting there. What caught my eye were the unexpectedly energetic spectrophotometer readings. "It looks like ... atmosphere!" My astonishment was genuine. "Very thin, a lot of sulfur compounds ... volcanic?"

"Correct! Perhaps you missed your calling, my young friend, you seem to have an aptitude for planetology," he said.

I shrugged, not taking that bait either, and looked back at the printouts. "I don't understand why there's volcanic activity on that planet," I said, shaking my head. "This system ought to be stone cold dead. Somethin' ain't right!" In spite of myself, I was becoming interested.

"Isn't right," he corrected. "But the explanation is really very simple, Piper. It is a consequence of tidal effects. The planets on either side of it are sufficiently massive and pass near enough to keep it under constantly changing gravitational stresses. The alternate stretching and contracting generate more than enough heat to keep the planet's core molten. Actually it's nothing new, we have a similar situation in the earth home system."

"Yeah ...," I interrupted tentatively. "I read something once ... of course! A moon of one of the gas giants–Jupiter, I think. The original discovery caused quite a stir!"

"I'm impressed, Dr. Piper," he said grudgingly, cocking his left eyebrow. "It was volcanic activity on Jupiter's moon, Io. Perhaps there is hope for you yet!"

He ignored my glare as he continued, "But there is much more. Look at these infrared photographs and the accompanying spectrophotometer readings. What do you see?"

I looked them over carefully before replying. The pictures were close-ups of a valley–A deep and very regular crevasse between two fantastic mountain ranges that looked like it had been carved out by a blow from some huge cosmic battleaxe. Spectacular scenery is the rule on small, low-gravity worlds but the topography of this rugged little planet was in a class by itself! The photos were open to interpretation but the spectrophotometer readings were unmistakable.

"Water vapor!" I said, and shrugged. "Damned impressive, Dick, but not so terribly surprising, considering the temperatures produced by an active volcano!"

"Not just vapor," he said. "Look again. Liquid! That valley may be deep enough to actually have some atmospheric pressure. Based on the preliminary data, I believe it is sufficient to allow the existence of liquid water."

I looked again at the data, "Maybe... kinda hard to tell for sure!" I said, shaking my head. "You could be right."

"Indeed I could," he replied, smugly. "Which brings us to why I requested this meeting. I need your authorization to launch one of the bioprobes."

"A bioprobe? What for? You can get all the chemical profiles you need from the instrumentation staff," I replied. "Besides, we've only got two probes, I can't risk one for this."

Of course, I could have given him one on the spot but, if you remember, we weren't on the best of terms. I was going to need a reason.

"I know they can give me all the chemical information I want," he said. "But, if it's there, I'd like to visually document the existence of liquid water in such an unlikely environment as this."

"You really think you're gonna find water on that godforsaken rock, don't you?" I snorted. "Well, I'm sorry, Dick, I can't authorize a probe launch just for that."

He seemed unperturbed by my reaction. In fact, it was almost like he expected it–or even wanted it.

"Very well then, how about a wager?" he asked calmly.

"Huh? What sort of wager?" I asked warily.

"How about this?" he ventured. "If we find liquid water, you and I shall exchange lodgings. You know that mine are woefully inadequate for someone of my stature. As a bonus, because of your involvement in the discovery, you would be awarded second author on the resulting paper. It's the least I could do."

"And in the unlikely event that you're wrong?" I asked, making no effort to hide the sarcasm.

"I'm not as out of touch as you might think," he said. "If we are unsuccessful, I shall keep my observations regarding you and the rest of the staff to myself. In short, Dr. Piper, you can't lose. Either you get second author on what will be a very important paper, or you get my silence for the duration of our mission."

"Done!" I said. "I hope you haven't started packing!"

"The authorization forms are here, ready for your signature. We should be able to launch within the hour." This was something totally new. Evans was actually smiling, something I had never seen him do before!

The feud we were having was absurd, really. Stripped to the essentials, it was just another of those eternal pissing contests about "who's entitled to what because of their title or reputation or seniority or what-have-you" that academic types seem to enjoy wasting so much of their time on. This one was different only in detail.

For starters, Evans is quite a bit older than the rest the scientific staff and the crew, by some twenty years or so. He's a short, scrawny and pompous little bantam rooster of a man with sparse graying hair and sharp, pointy features. He's not much to look at, but his professional accomplishments are impressive.

He had left a prestigious teaching post on old earth–at Harvard, no less–to, in his words, "Experience firsthand the excitement of discovery." He had no trouble getting included on the survey mission; his credentials and his connections were too good. Too bad for us that he was also in perfect health!

My own background is quite a bit different. I'm a big guy, almost two meters tall, easygoing to a fault and, unless I'm really excited, kind of slow-moving. I was born and educated on Holden, one of the remote colonial worlds. All modesty aside, I'm accurate and methodical, and I'm one hell of a good scientist (you have to be, or you don't go on one of these missions) but my agricultural roots still show up in my speech occasionally–grist for Evans' mill.

With such a contrast in backgrounds, I suppose that a clash of some sort between us was bound to happen sometime, but the feud began soon after he boarded ship–before I even met him! As chief scientists, we were allowed our choice of G-probe's vacant quarters. It was just blind luck, but I had reported for duty two days before he did. The room I chose was not only bigger than his, but I also had a small forward viewport. It really wasn't much, but his room had nothing but an ugly bulkhead and some curved walls and he made it clear immediately that he wasn't happy about it. In fact, he'd been griping about it for six long months. The wager was only his latest attempt to remedy what he felt was an intolerable situation.

The coarsely hewn mountain ridges on either side of the valley and its near-abysmal depth caused the low-lying atmosphere to be even denser than our readings had first indicated. Fortunately the remote guidance systems on the unmanned probe didn't rely solely on visible light because, in the glare of the probe's lights, little showed on our video except a kind of billowing yellow fog. It was hard to believe the printouts on how corrosive that stuff was; good thing the probes were built to last. A search along the valley gave us an intermittent view of an irregular slash of steaming and bubbling open water–yes liquid water, Evans had won–between two jagged shorelines of yellow-brown ice. It had been almost too easy.

"What do you say now, Dr. Piper?" he asked. He was, if anything, even more unbearable when he was flushed with victory.

"Congratulations, Dick!" I said. "Looks like you win."

Under any other circumstances I would have been really excited about such an incredible find. Instead, I felt awful, picturing in my mind an Evans gone mad, swollen and purple with pride, insulting everyone in sight; and us with no way to stop him! The next year and a half was truly going to be hell!

The torn and heaved shoreline had an unstable, jumbled appearance and I couldn't help wondering how long any of the features we were seeing would remain. Still, it was a remarkable scene, possessed of a stark and brutal beauty all its own, composed as it was of steaming vapor clouds which alternately obscured and then revealed the coarse soil and jagged rock-strewn landscape. And the colors! Abundant deposits of sulfur and iron compounds created a panorama of various yellows and browns that was marked here and there with an occasional smudge or smear of dirty orange or even red.

It occurred to me then that we were gazing upon a scene that had never existed before; that the intrusion of our harsh and unwelcome light was the first that had ever been known here except for the weak and inconsequential rays from the so-distant stars. In spite of my mood, the scientist in me was stirred to action at the sight of it.

"This is absolutely incredible," I said. "You know, while we're here, it might be a good idea to take a look around. What say we immerse the probe and get some shots of the volcanic vents that keep this water warm, Dick? It would add some mighty impressive pictures to our paper." He nodded agreement.

Surprisingly, when we plunged the probe into the water, the telemetry indicated a temperature that was just a tad above freezing. All that steaming and bubbling had led us to believe that the water would be much warmer. The video monitor displayed a clouded and murky picture. After a bit of fiddling with the image enhancement circuitry the view improved, enough so we could see pretty well.

We guided the probe down deep into the dirty water to where we thought the actual volcanic vents were likely to be. I maneuvered the probe in as close as I dared to a furiously bubbling and frothing stream of activity but the heat and violent action near the first vent we chose made it too risky to approach too closely. No luck there. The probes were tough, but not that tough! Ditto the second vent. I checked the chronometer and scowled, we only had time for a couple more tries.

At a depth of about 150 meters, we found a smaller, less active vent for our third look, one we could approach more closely without endangering the probe. Suddenly a warning light on the probe control panel began flashing insistently.

"What the hell?" I exclaimed as I quickly skimmed over the monitors, looking for the problem.

"What is it, Piper?" asked Evans, with some concern, as he crossed the room to look at the monitors over my shoulder.

Across the screen flashed an unbelievable message:

Lifeform detected... Lifeform detected... Instructions requested...

No, it was not a malfunction! Believe it or not, in this most inhospitable of places, in the depths of some impossible fjord that shouldn't even have existed, in a tiny, frigid mote of an almost solar system, we had found life! After a short shocked silence there was pandemonium in the science section. People were shouting and throwing printouts and coffee cups and embracing one another. I sat at the probe console and just shook my head, dumbfounded.

There was an entire ecosystem down there. Truthfully, except for the unlikely spot we were looking, they weren't much to write home about. I mean, we hadn't found some new civilization or anything. In fact, they were downright primitive. The largest and most impressive was a sort of invertebrate tube-worm about a meter long whose main anatomical feature was its huge mouth. Unfortunately we have only a photographic record of these, they were just too big and too fragile to bring up. Later, I did a detailed analysis on several of the microscopic forms that were brought back to the ship by the probe. No big surprises. Except for some obvious modifications for the anaerobic environment and the high sulfur content of the water they lived in, they displayed an almost boringly familiar carbon-based biochemistry.

Then things began to get interesting.

A routine search of the literature in the ship's computer library turned up references to similar forms. Nearly identical ecosystems had been found a number of times near volcanic vents deep in old earth's oceans, beginning in the late 1900's, nearly two-hundred and fifty years ago. Evans would approve, the first one had been found by a geological survey team. The team had stumbled upon the organisms by accident, during their studies on plate tectonics.

Further searching turned up two or three entries from several other inhabited planets where someone had bothered to look. In each case, they had been dismissed as interesting curiosities and forgotten.

But none of those guys had the same information that I did. Given the unique set of circumstances surrounding our discovery, it dawned on me that what we had found was more than just a curiosity. In fact, maybe we had just found the final piece of a cosmic puzzle!

Our survey complete, G-Probe 25 shifted back into overdrive and continued on towards the spearhead. I barely noticed. I was feverishly busy trying to put together a new theory. I wanted to be done before I met with Evans to settle our wager. It was going to be an interesting meeting. I'm not particularly fond of crow and I was sure he would try to serve up a generous portion. My only hope was to try and use my new and revolutionary theory to somehow turn the tables on him.

He was positively beaming, humming to himself, when I entered his room. We both sat down, facing each other across his desk.

"Well," he opened. "We certainly have made some interesting discoveries, haven't we?"

"We certainly have," I countered, my expression betraying nothing.

There was a short, charged silence before he continued.

"Tell me, Piper, have you grasped the full significance of this discovery?"

"I'm not sure, Dick," I replied. "Suppose you enlighten me"

"My pleasure!" he said. "With the discovery of life on our planetoid it is now obvious that the central body of that little system was once luminous. Yes I know, from the data we've collected it doesn't look like it was, which means only that what happened out here won't fit with what we presently know of cosmology." He stopped and shrugged. "It appears that we shall simply have to modify the theories, an activity that I'm looking forward to with a great deal of relish."

I was hoping he would say something like that!

"Are you sure about that?" I asked.

"Absolutely."

"That surprises me," I said.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, I think there are variables in this situation that could cast some serious doubt on your solution to this problem," I said reasonably. He made no effort to hide his irritation.

"I suggest that you leave the cosmology to me, Dr. Piper. Believe me, I'm absolutely sure about this."

"Sure enough that you'd care to make a wager on it?" I asked, with an outward calm that belied the seething impatience within. I was like a chess player who had offered to sacrifice a piece, knowing that the outcome of the game hangs in the balance; hoping fervently that his opponent will take the poisoned bait. To my delight, Evans bit hard.

"What did you have in mind?" he asked.

"If I give you an explanation which doesn't alter the current views on cosmology," I said. " I will remain in my present quarters and you will keep your unkind thoughts about me and the other scientists to yourself. If I'm wrong, you get the room and I waive any claim I had for authorship on your paper."

"Are you sure, Piper?" he asked. "This will no doubt be a widely read paper, one that is almost sure to make us famous."

I dismissed that with a wave of my hand.

"Very well, I agree," he said. "But, I warn you, this had better be good!"

Inwardly, I felt a small measure of relief. There was still hope! He had agreed to take the wager! I had been counting on his arrogance to make him overconfident. Fortunately, he hadn't disappointed me.

"Oh, I think it is, Dick," I said. "Are you ready?" He nodded. This was it, the moment of truth! I had prepared my argument well, but had I done it well enough to convince the skeptical Harvard professor? There was only one way to find out. I cleared my throat, stood up and began.

"Theories on how inorganic matter makes the transition from ordinary chemicals to the unique state that we call 'life' involve the action of things like tidal pools, lighting and rain but, probably most important of all, solar energy." He nodded agreement, I continued. "The organisms created by these mechanisms then go on to diversify and populate their respective worlds. Eventually they will evolve and adapt until they occupy every available ecological niche. If we go according to these theories, the creatures that were found by the deep sea volcanic vents on earth, on Heard's world and on Genitia IV are considered to be degenerate or altered types of these mainstream solar- energy-derived lifeforms, degenerate types that just happen to inhabit a very exotic ecological niche. Our creatures fit into the same category."

"This is your revolutionary theory, Piper?"

"No, Dick. It's important background information. Just be patient for a couple more minutes. Here's the point. What if our creatures are different?" He gave me an angry glare.

"Different how?"

I had his full attention now and he was beginning to look a bit worried. I plunged on.

"Let's go over the evidence one more time. As near as we can determine, the primary of this system is not and never has been a star, correct?"

He thought for a moment before replying. "It would appear that this is true, Piper, but as I said. . . " I interrupted him.

"And by its intrinsic velocity and direction it has never been near a star?"

"Not for several billion years anyway. But. . . "

"Hang on, Dick, I'm just starting to roll. This will all make sense in a few minutes." He nodded reluctantly and I continued. "If this is true, it follows that the life forms we found here came into being and evolved to their present level of development using a purely geothermic energy source–an energy source provided by the unique celestial mechanics of this weird little pseudo-solar system." Evans was frowning–a good sign.

"But there's more. If no 'solar-derived forms' ever existed out here for our creatures to degenerate from, a vital bit of information has been made available to us, one that allows us to strike out in a bold new direction. I propose an alternative view, that life on earth and all of the other carbon-based forms we have encountered in this galaxy were actually spawned from primitive creatures much like these."

I had him! He wore a look of worried astonishment as his mind reeled with the possibilities. But I wasn't done yet!

"Think of it, Evans! All you need is water and a volcanic vent and the rest follows. The water near a vent ranges in temperature from boiling to near freezing and the vents provide even higher temperatures plus a continuous stream of chemical raw materials of all sorts. In short, we have the perfect cauldron for brewing life! We have probably just found the solution to one of science's great remaining mysteries! If this theory is valid, life is probably more abundant in our galaxy than anyone ever dreamed!" I threw a hard copy of the draft I had been working on down in front of him. "The paper shall be entitled 'Geothermotrophs: an alternate origin for primordial life'. You'll notice that I have you listed as second author. I felt it was the least I could do." Evans looked like he had swallowed an asteroid!

The scientific establishment will no doubt be arguing over the merits of our paper for some time, but I've been over it from every angle; I think we're on to something. Evans and I may someday be mentioned in the same breath as Darwin and Pasteur. True to his word, not a single insult has passed Evans' lips since he was on the losing end of our little wager.

There is a footnote to the story though. One that came about shortly after the incident. I'm beginning to get a little worried. Maybe we went too far. Evans hasn't been out of his cabin, except to eat, for several days now and when he does come out, he doesn't talk at all to me or to anyone else. We didn't think he'd take it this badly. Remember the large-mouthed tubeworm we found on the little volcanic planet? Well, the biological staff all got together and voted.

They named it after Evans!

Phillip Nolte is a potato pathologist who enjoys science fiction so much that he has to create it to get enough! Alter Origin was conceived several years ago after watching one of those National Geographic specials on TV and seeing the volcanic vents with the ecosystems around them. Wow, degenerate life forms! Or are they? Or are we the degenerate forms? Seemed like a good idea for a story and there you have it. Phil is currently working on getting a piece of his into a small press magazine called Figment so you might soon see him in non-electronic print.

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ALICE THROUGH THE FLAMES

by Roy Stead

Another day at the office over with, Colin had decided to settle down with a good book. The year before, he had had installed a 'real fire.' As he had said at the time, "It gives the place a homely look– with a log fire blazing merrily away in the living room, you can really *believe* that an your home is an impregnable fortress, gallantly keeping the elements at bay whether you be sleeping or awake." Colin smiled to himself, as he often did at these moments, and gave thanks that his wife had taken Jason, the two year-old, to her parents for the weekend. A long, pleasant and– above all– *quiet* weekend stretched out before him as he lowered his body into the comfy armchair by the fire. Colin shifted slightly, to get as comfortable as possible, then adjusted the table lamp to *just* the right angle before picking up the book and beginning to read. . .

Just as the hero was about to decapitate the gargantuan nine-headed beast, Colin's attention was diverted by the sound of someone moving around in the next room. "Strange, there's nobody home. Maybe Karen had to come back early," Colin said to himself. "God, I hope not– I think I'd prefer burglars!" The middle-aged civil servant hoisted his bulk from the chair and wandered into the other room to investigate, pausing only to procure a poker from beside the fire. "Just in case. . . "

"Odd," thought Colin as he approached the door. the sounds from within had started to collect into words. Speech. In a very strange accent, but– nonetheless– English. He slowly opened the door and, poker brandished at the ready, strode into the room. "Who are you, and what are you doing in my home?" Hardly an original line, but then nobody awards points for creativity at these moments.

Colin stopped. There were four people in the kitchen. Three of them were arguing over the toaster, while the fourth– a tall, and rather attractive, blonde woman– looked on. Deliberately and carefully, the blonde turned to face Colin.

"We come in peace." she stated, simply. It looked like cliches were to be the order of the day. Was this some kind of joke? She didn't look to Colin like she was joking but, nonetheless, her words– and that weird accent!

Colin hesitated a moment, then: "Do you, now? Do you usually 'come in peace' by breaking into someone's house, and ransacking their possessions?"

"I must apologize for my friends. They are being,perhaps, a little. . . overzealous. . . " The three, dressed– as was the blonde woman– in brown, discoloured rags and bereft of shoes, now seemed to be in the those of a disagreement over whose turn it was to drink from the cold water tap. The blonde followed Colin's gaze, looked at her friends then returned her stare to the house's owner. She shrugged.

"Perhaps I should explain myself," she continued.

"Yes, I think maybe you ought to!" snapped Colin, who now looked on, bemused as the strange blonde's three companions had a fight over the contents of the icebox.

Unperturbed, the blonde introduced herself as, "Just call me 'Alice'." and went on to describe how she and her three companions were refugees from Colin's own future.

"Oh. Of course," burst in Colin, "I had somebody from the twenty-fifth century for tea last week. Why didn't you say so? Perhaps you would like a quick cup of coffee, before going back to battle daleks or take a spin around Saturn's moons?" His voice cracked, as he shrieked, "Do you think I was born yesterday? You come in here, argue about who gets what in my home then expect me to believe any cock and bull story you care to spin about being time travelers? Well, you're not time travellers!"

"How can you be so sure?" broke in the blonde, Alice, smoothly.

Surprised by the simple audacity of the question, Colin was momentarily nonplussed, before spluttering: "Well, for one thing, time travellers would be better dressed!"

"Look, just hear me out, then– if you still don't believe me– we'll leave you. Okay?"

"No, it's *not* bloody okay! Get out now, or I'll call the police!"

"We're not going. *I* am not going. Not until you've at least heard us out." Colin sighed. He'd had a wonderfully peaceful weekend planned, and it seemed to be falling apart about his ears. But he resigned himself to hearing Alice's story, and led her– followed by her retinue– into the living room, where he settled down in his comfy chair and awaited the tale. At least there would be some entertainment - if only he could find the popcorn. . .

"Picture it: North America, ravaged by war and plagued– yes, *literally* plagued– by disease. The Statue of Liberty toppled like a house of cards, the remains used by destitutes as stepping stones across the Hudson. The Capitol's roof destroyed, caved in by the backwash from an atomic blast. The Golden Gate Bridge no longer capable of supporting the weight even of an anorexic ant. The United States now disunited, and battling amongst themselves for what remains of the spoils of war, while Mexico and Canada, themselves war-torn lands, sit on the sidelines, occassionally swooping, vulture-like, on the carcasses of shattered principalities. Picture it, if you can. That is the world I– we– left behind. And, unless we can do something– unless we can convince *you* to help us– then the war which began the nightmare will come to pass. And The United States will be destroyed, along with the rest of the world."

Colin, mouth gaping, stared a moment at Alice. Then, taking ahold of himself, shook his head as if to clear Alice's description from his mind. "You're serious." It was a statement, not a question, but Alice nodded nonetheless. Colin picked up the phone and dialled, carefully: 9. . . 1. . . 1.

"Hello, emergency services? I'd like a– what the Hell. . . ? What? Oh, never mind. . . " He put the phone down, replacing the receiver in its cradle with all the care of a raw-egg juggler. Emulating the studied patience and concentration of a Zen master, Colin watched the receiver settle in its bed before looking up to check what had so startled him a moment before. It was still there. Or, rather, *they* were still there. The original group of four had multiplied to eight *while Colin was watching*. Nobody had entered the room– not by conventional means, anyway. Yet four people had. . . appeared. Colin was, to say the least, mildly surprised.

The four newcomers were dressed far more smartly than the first arrivals. Perhaps they came from a different time period. Colin caught the thought. Time travellers? Well, let's face it– either the second group teleported in, which is impossible, or they arrived via a time machine, which is impossible. The difference lay in the fact that they *claimed* the latter. And so the pendulum of decision hung in that direction, for the moment.

Colin looked the latest group over. The clothes were definately plusher than Alice's band– they wore loose-fitting robes, after the fashion of Ancient Roman togas– each robe being a single solid block of a bright colour: red, blue, green and. . . a tall, statuesque brunette wore a white 'toga.'

That brunette turned to look at Colin, as he gasped in astonishment. Alice! The two Alices noticed each other then– and paused to look one another over. Ragged Alice was the first to speak: "You dyed your hair. It doesn't suit you."

"Who *are* you? No– don't answer that," began the betoga'ed Alice, "I know who you are– you're me. But how? And why do you have such goddawful clothing? Are you me from my future? If so, why are you here?"

"I was about to ask you the same thing. Since I have no memory of having been you– and you seem to have none of having been me– perhaps you would be kind enough to tell me why you are here?"

"You know as well as I why I'm here– your presence indicates that your research has led you to the same conclusion to which mine led me. This is a junction point. To be more precise, this *man* is a junction point. His actions can start, or prevent, a world war."

Colin burst in, "What are you two talking about? I'm no world leader - how can I start off Armageddon? I'm just a government clerk. I'm good at my job, sure. But that's as far as it goes."

The trampesque Alice broke into Colin's monotribe: "Tomorrow, a memo will cross your desk marked 'SFF-524G/Q.' If you fail to pass it on, the Pentagon will be unaware of a small, but significant, item of information. This ignorance will lead to a breakdown in communications and then, gradually, to a small conflict between states within what you know as the United States of America. As further states join the dispute, so the conflict will escalate until those states which currently maintain a nuclear arsenal– in the name of the National Defense– use them on those regions which they view as enemies. The automated defence computers will register a first strike on US soil, and launch a counter-attack– against the Eastern Bloc. The resulting conflict destroys most Life on Earth."

"My God," Colin breathed, "For want of a nail, the kingdom was lost. . . Well, I must ensure that I don't lose that memo! Will that make things alright? Will that stop the war?"

"We think so," began The war-torn Alice, "But, just to be sure. . . "

"Wait," blurted the more refined Alice, "Think this through. Sure, there will be no war. But– well, perhaps I'd better tell you why *I* am here. . .

"In *my* history, which seems to be different from yours," she gestured in the other Alice's direction, "the memo got through. There was no war, and consequently no massive investment in research– How long from now is your war due to begin, if the memo fails to get through?" The question was directed at the other Alice.

"Twenty-four years before the opening of hostilities, One hundred and sixteen years before the first atomic weapon is used. Why?"

"Just a thought. Don't you realize that mankind *needs* this war? If there is no war, then there is no impetous to survive– to *live*. War means money poured into research– defense systems, weapons systems, computers, space. No war, no research. No research, no advancement. In short, stagnation. The human race will reach its demise gradually, through apathy. Nobody caring enough to *do* anything anymore. The world ending, to borrow one of your phrases," she nods at Colin, "Not with a bang, but a whimper."

Colin, half out of his chair, sank slowly back until he felt the cushions enveloping his body, molding to his shape. "So," he said, eventually, "If I send this memo through, then– according to you," he pointed at the second Alice, "there will be no war, and the human race will bore itself to death. If, on the other hand, I withhold this memo, then *you* say," He pointed at the ragged, and now rather pensive, first Alice, "that there will come a world war which will destroy the human race. Whichever I choose, the human race doesn't seem to stand a chance."

Alice one's brow furrowed, as she thought furiously. Turning to the rather flashily dressed Alice two, she said, "I've been thinking. Maybe a war would be a good idea, after all– at least then we go out with a bang– a light show which aliens might point to in their skies. A kind of last funeral pyre for mankind."

The second Alice considered this a moment, before saying, "No, I think no war would be better– after all, humans *might* recover from this period of apathy, you know. . . "

"No– war would be a good idea, we can re-build the world. . . "

"Uh uh. No war is better, that way, there's no *need* to rebuild!"

Colin broke in, laughing, "Ladies! Ladies!" he shouted, "You've both done a rapid volte-face, have you not? Why is this?" He silenced their explanations with a wave of his hand," No, don't bother to lie - I can see it in your faces. You've both realized what has just become clear to me. If you had succeeded in your original mission, then my future would be altered. Your future would cease to exist: *you* would no longer be 'real.' Instead, your counterpart– the woman you are arguing with at the moment– would be in the 'true' future. However, now your pleas are not so much for the human race– that seems doomed either way– but for your own existence."

The women looked sheepish. Colin was correct, and all of them knew it. Walking across the room, Colin replaced the poker– which he found he was still gripping in his right hand– in the stand beside the fire. He turned from the flames and, with a wry smile, stated,

"Well, I will toss a coin to decide which future shall come about. Does that seem reasonable to each of you?" Reluctantly, they nodded. Colin took a quarter from his trouser pocket, then flipped it: "Heads, war; tails, peace." Even raggedy Alice's cohorts stopped bickering over a toga, previously belonging to a now-unconscious cohort of the other Alice long enough to watch the coin come down. It span in the air, glinting brightly in the flames of Colin's real fire like a single phoenix feather before hurtling toward the carpet, and– as it landed– nobody in that room dared draw breath.

The coin landed on its edge.

"Well," came a familiar voice from a corner of the room. "It seems the human race has a chance after all."

Roy Stead is a research assistant in quantum astrophysics at the English University of Sussex. His hobbies include water skiing, Zen Buddhism and searching for cats. His collection of cats is reputed to be amongst the largest in the Western world, though none have ever been seen by reliable witnesses. "Iggy," a grey-green Persian once did not appear on BBC Television's "Tomorrow's World."

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DICE OF HUMAN BONES: THE DEATH OF PAYTER

by Ryan S. Borgstrom

*H*ave you ever heard of a game called World? The young ones play it often. The name, so they tell me, comes from one of the old legends. –Indulgent smile– Payter once told me in secret that the legend was about the way things actually *were*.

I don't really understand either the legend or the game. –Frown– I watched them play it once. They put limit after limit on themselves until they were barely shells, and then they stumbled around the network for hours. –Grin– They never seemed to get anywhere.

I looked at the legend once . . . it seemed to talk mostly about "love" and "companionship" – the "world" thing seemed to almost be incidental to the story, just sort of a backdrop. Rather puzzling, to me at least.

Even if they were right, though, and we did once live in a "world," it still wouldn't make a great deal of sense, would it? The old ways are gone forever. You can't just decide, and bring them back. But Payter's been acting so strange lately. The others tell me he's been pretending to be "dead." It's been disturbing me more and more.

Hello?

Ryan Borgstrom is a Computer Science graduate student at Johns Hopkins. One night it occurred to him to follow David Brin's example and try to fit a working story into 200 words exactly, and submit the result to Quanta . . . It is unclear whether this intention is violated by the foolish expenditure of words that makes up this about-the-author note. His interests include computer science, science fiction and fantasy, juggling, Judo, history, other genres of fiction, and classical and other music.

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THE HARRISON CHAPTERS
Chapter 1

by Jim Vassilakos

*T*he morning sun's golden rays glided peacefully along the quiet coast, sparkling across the ocean waves as the water's edge shifted randomly between sea and shore. A chilly breeze swept its way over the waters and along the damp beach, quietly winding its way through the little used barbecue pits past a long, wooden pier, and then withdrew back out to sea.

Bright beams of sunlight danced across the eastern horizon as the coastal palm trees cut the early summer winds into multiple streams of cool jet and spray and the light into stark showers of silver and scarlet.

Michael Harrison walked barefoot along the shifting earth that divides land and sea. The ankles of his patched work-trousers skidded into the cold waters as he made his way home. The thin blue fabric of a wet dress shirt stretched down his muscular frame to near his knees. His mind pulsated with an overflowing emptiness; thoughts doubled back upon themselves, twisting and turning with the cold waves, drifting against the overwhelming tide.

He slowly turned and walked up the whitish sands climbing a thin railed stairway in contest with gravity. The thick wooden doors were already open, and entering, he stumbled in between the white walls of his beach home searching for the null-tube. The entire structure seemed to wobble slowly around him. Squinting between the specks of salt and sand which stung his eyes, he grabbed one wall with his right hand, keeping the left stiffly extended in case he should find another. Suddenly, the room turned sharply, and an invisible foot kicked his legs out from under him. A pleasant softness enveloped his senses as he rolled up warm and passed out cold.

"Michael. . . "

He awoke to a calm feminine voice. Kitara? Still sleep-dazed, his bloodshot eyes roamed the room.

"Why am I on the floor?" he mumbled.

"Because that is where you retired for the. . . "

Mike groaned as he sat upright hearing the now familiar voice. "I was just talking to myself. You know Cindy, you don't have to. . . " Mike's voice drifted off as he slowly realized he was talking to his home's computer system. Her voice circuits paused momentarily waiting for him to continue as he masaged his numb arm.

"Talking to oneself is a sign of mental collapse. . . Mr. Linden is on line one."

His boss. Mike slumped back on the floor and closed his eyes. "I'm too tired, tell him to fuck off."

Cindy paused for analysis. Mike heard a quiet buzz and a voice, "Hello. . . Mike?"

"No Mr. Linden. This is Cindy again. Mike said he was tired and he told me to tell you to. . . "

"Stop!" Mike's voice echoed around the entire house. Cindy's voice promptly cut off transmission. "Cut off the video unit and transfer the line. . . voice only. . . to this room."

Mr. Linden's voice broke over the speakers, ". . . there? Hello? Cindy, I didn't get that?"

Mike sat up again and rubbed his eyes, "Chuck, Mike here. . . "

"Hi, Mike? How's it going?"

"Great. . . What's up?"

"Well, I've got a gentleman over here from the board who'd like to congratulate you on your last piece. I told him I didn't know whether or not you'd be in today, so he suggested I call. How'd you like to come over and lunch with us?"

Mike paused, "Sure, you two gonna be in the Gee-Pee?"

"Yeah, he's checking out our facilities, and he really wants to meet you."

It suddenly occured to Mike that he should feel flattered. He rubbed the back of his neck and tilted his head sideways until the spine popped.

"Ok. I'll be over in. . . how's three cents sound?"

"Sounds great."

"Good."

"Okay, thanks. We'll see you then."

"Bye."

Line one closed with a short breaker. A computer a thousand kilometers away had already multiplied the duration of the call by its distance and tolled Chuck's fund. Mike wondered what the editor wanted.

The warm shower spray dissolved the dirt and sweat in no time, and Mike put on a blue mendwear dress shirt, white gelknicks, and a pair of light gravboots. He combed his long, thin, brown hair and tied it in the back. In a few minutes he was in the pantry searching for the standard grub. Picking up a flimsy and light pen he headed back to the living room and straightening his shirt stepped down the stairs into the street.

The sun was at high-noon, and the short walk to the subway entrance proved uneventful. There was the usual strain of grav-cars and flycycles lined along the beachway, and the hundreds of floaters sailing above the coast made a moving polkadot design of shadows along the sands, but there was nothing unusual in the way the tourists eyed Mike over as if he were a specimen at an alien exhibit. Being the only decently dressed person within several kilometers he walked with a pretended importance, as if he owned the entire beach and could toss them all off at the snap of a finger. He grinned at the thought as he coasted down the escalator at the subway entrance.

Showing his all-month pass, he headed past security and straight to the terminal. The gravbuses entered and left the port in perfect succession; and within two minutes his bus had arrived. He boarded and easily found a seat. An old lady eyed him from across the car, and a handsome couple with kids quarreled over where to eat. He sat back and looked out the window. His hangover was nearly unnoticeable, and he rubbed his arm where Cindy had indubitably injected him with the get-well juice.

The train rose above the surface and fell again to catch another station more inland, the sudden shift from daylight to fluorescence leaving the passengers momentarily blind as their eyes adjusted to the rhythmic tempo of the passing cold lanterns. Two young men entered as the doors opened, their faces twisted in consternation as each tried to make his point more loudly than the other. They fell silent as they headed toward the back of the car, the second's long, bony finger still pointed in exaggerated certainty.

The train started rolling again, and this time quickened its pace for some time before eventually rising to the surface. Out the window Silver-Tri-Towers stood as a testament to the might of man. Its arms branching from the main structure reached near the clouds, and the top of the structure blurred with the refraction of light against the atmosphere. The couple's children rushed to the window and pressed their noses against its surface leaving little spots of dense fog on the layered plastic.

The train lost speed and dipped under the surface to stop. The old lady got off and the two young men quietly resumed their discussion. The couple sat quietly, and one of their children asked when they would get to eat.

Soon the train was off again, and as it rose above the surface the kids resumed their former positions at the window, panting puppy dogs with eyes bent skyward. The train turned toward the structure, dipped below the surface, and accelerated. It pulled into a large underground station. Mike quickly exited as a car load of people pressed in.

He made his way through the crowds to a lift. Dozens of people entered as the doors closed against the stragglers. The lift stopped on several floors, picking up and dropping off people along the way, until it reached public floor 872, and Mike stepped off. A short walk through the busy halls led him to the Gee-Pee. Mike peeked between the columns and spotted Linden talking with an elderly gentleman and a young woman over three highbowls of zardocha.

Mike held his position and studied the trio. His boss, the section's copy-editor, was putting on a smiley-face for his administrative counterparts. His small body wrapped itself into a tangled web of false composure, as a dim fluorescent beam caught his olive brown face, receding hairline, and large brown eyes at just the right angle to make Mike wish he'd been carrying his trusty camera.

The gentleman sitting across from the editor was well known to many in the press office. He had a reputation as somebody who could pull stings, and his white hair and often brittle manner did little to detract from his prestige. Just the opposite, they served to make him appear more distinguished. Mike had seen his picture a dozen times and fit together a dozen odd facts in his mind about the man, but he couldn't connect a name to the face.

The lady caught Mike's attention. She seemed strangely familiar. Aside from being simply a woman, her long blonde hair, tan skin, and lithe figure made her appearance incredibly attractive. She sipped her drink carefully, letting the ice flakes clink against the inside of her highbowl as she watched the two men talk.

The chatter from the rest of the room blurred together with their own conversation so well that Mike had trouble picking out specific words. He watched Linden's face. The editor looked like he was geared into brag-mode. The other two listened with facinated expressions.

Mike slipped his consumer card through the scanner as he entered the room. Linden noticed him immediately and motioned him over.

"Well speak of the devil; Michael, this is Mr. John Clay from the company board, and his niece Miss Robin Clay."

"It's a pleasure to meet you Mr. Harrison. Charles has just been telling us a great deal about your work."

"Does that mean I get a raise?"

They all laughed, especially Robin. She seemed to have a special twinkle in her eyes as if there were a secret she wanted to tell him. Her eyes captivated Mike. They were deep sea blue, or maybe sky blue; he couldn't decide. They weren't too dark or too light. Must be implants, Mike thought as he shook off the fascination.

Then Robin extended her golden tanned arm as if she wanted it to be either kissed from pinky to armpit or broken in half at the elbow. Deciding on the third alternative, Mike extended his own arm in response, and with a smile he shook her hand. It was an archiac gesture to be sure, but one still used among gatherers.

Michael sat in the empty chair across from Robin. A fourth highbowl filled with zardocha dropped from overhead and floated in front of Mike. He tested it and sent it aside with a gentle nudge. The dark liquorice cafe stung his taste with its frigid strength.

"We were actually thinking along the lines of a different sort of compensation."

"Mr. Clay, I was joking."

"Within every joke, there must be an element of truth. Without it, the joke isn't funny."

Mike smiled, "Okay, get to the point."

"Michael, we at the Board of Galactic Press & Publications have been watching this division for a number of years. Your rapid progress and personal achievements have not gone unnoticed by the administration. Granted, there have been pieces of your research, some quite extraordinary pieces of information gathering, which were never published… with good reason."

"I'm sure." Mike echoed.

"You, perhaps more than any other gatherer within the sector, understands that we are much more than a news source, and that our gatherers are much more than reporters. They're investigators, they're a form of police, they go into situations where they often risk life and limb."

"The point."

"Well, it's actually somewhat stale. I hope you're not offended, but we'd like to hold an awards' banquet for the division as a whole. Just something to boost morale, and to recognize a job well done."

Mike sipped the zardocha and glanced sideways at Linden. The editor smiled back; his cajoling face Mike thought.

"Go ahead."

"Well, as one of the key figures... as the key figure in your division's success I should say, we'd like you to speak at the ceremony."

Linden beamed, "You have become somewhat of a celebrity Mike."

Mike floated the highbowl in front of his chin, spinning in with one finger to quicken the fluid.

"I'm honored... but I wouldn't know what to say."

"What, with all your experience, with all the various worlds you've visited, not to mention those you've infiltrated," Clay laughed at his own joke, "I'm sure you could think of something to say."

"I really doubt it, sir."

Clay smiled, but Mike sensed something in the older man's eyes that told him to reconsider.

"Michael, Charles here has already hinted to me that you might feel this way, and in your shoes, I might feel the same. After all, a gatherer needs a certain amount of anonymity in order to be effective... and just considering what a high profile you have been earning lately... how long do you really think you can keep it up?"

"I really haven't thought about it, sir," he lied.

"Well, perhaps you should really think about it. This banquet isn't just to fill space and give our people something to do and be happy about. It's opportunity time. An opportunity for us to examine our talent, to redefine our direction, to recruit new prospects into the hierarchy... Charles tells me that you dislike social functions. Is that true, Michael?"

"That would depend."

"On what?"

"On what's in it for me."

Clay paused dumbfounded and then suddenly burst out laughing. Charles and Robin chimed in as if on cue, but Mike was sure he felt someone kick him under the table.

"Shy, Mr. Harrison, you're not."

Linden set the floating highbowl down on the table. He looked a little tired and annoyed.

"Mike, what Mr. Clay is saying is that you've done a good job, but that with the success you're losing your value as a gatherer. It's time to step up the ladder."

"You mean behind a desk."

"Mr. Harrison," Robin spoke for the first time in the conversation, "if you were more valuable behind a desk than in the field, where would you rather be?"

"I'm still pulling my own weight."

"You and who's army?"

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Okay, ask yourself this. How much of your gathering in the field is physically carried out by a third party? If your answer is more than half, then you already over the hill, and half way down the other side."

Clay coughed, "Take care with the metaphors, my dear. Mr. Harrison, forgive my niece, but we understand you've been training a number of research assistants?"

"I'm not going to take a job training gatherers. I've got enough of that already."

"We're not asking for that. We are simply proving a point, that your useful life is swiftly coming to a close unless you change your field of endeavor."

"I couldn't be an administrator, and I know I couldn't edit." Clay smiled, this time genuinely Mike thought.

"You'll be surprised at what you can do when opportunity beckons. Isn't that right Charles? Why, we ourselves are living examples. You think, Mr. Harrison, that your editor was born behind the desk, flimsy in hand? He started just like you. But we all must move on. The banquet is in three days. Yes, it's honoring the anniversary of the founding. It will be at the Lion's Den in GreenFlower. Everything has already been set up, the promotion has already been released in this morning's update, and all you have to do is be there and say a few words to entertain the masses, rub a few noses, and... and pretend that you're having fun."

Mr. Clay stood up and grimmaced at the inside of his wrist. The timepiece implant seemed to tell him he was late. He shot Mike a departing glance, "Then we'll see you at the Banquet, Mr. Harrison... Mr. Linden."

Mike stood up, "Will your niece be there?"

"Of course."

"Then I won't," Mike felt like saying.

Miss Clay shook his hand in a comfortable contrast to the trial run. For the second time during the encounter she spoke, "Will you sit by me at the Banquet, Mr. Harrison? I am very much interested in your work."

Mike grinned, "I really don't have a choice about this, do I?"

"Not if you know what's good for you."

Mike paused and tried to recall the question. He decided later that it was her blue eyes that made him give in so easily.

"I'd be delighted, Miss Clay. If you would like, stop by my house, and I can show you a few items of the trade."

She smiled, or perhaps blushed. "I might take you up on that. Where do you live?"

Mr. Clay conveniently interrupted, "Come now dear, we must be off."

Mike defused the interception, "Sector E-12, 81152 Beach Boulevard."

She smiled apologetically as her uncle grabbed her arm and led her out the door.

When Mike turned around, Linden was looking a little angry.

"What?" Mike asked defensively.

Linden turned away and then tried to keep from laughing. "Nothing. Just..."

"Just what?"

"Just don't blow it, Harrison." Linden was smiling.

Mike smiled back, and they laughed. Everything was still okay.

Mike returned to the house. He recalled that he hadn't seen the morning update, but then he had no will to hear, see, smell, or otherwise comprehend what one dull reporter considered news. He entered the bathroom and relieved himself of the last night's merrymaking. The medical scanner's blue light twirled about until it found and homed in on Mike. He knew Cindy was conducting an analysis. Just as long as she kept to herself about it.

He strolled into his room and sat back on the circular bed. The entire chamber glimmered with an eerie, dim blue light. An opaque window on the wall farthest from the door kept out sunlight and the bothersome noises of modern civilization. He relaxed a bit on the edge of the bed and gathered his senses. A shimmering multicolored light on the controller wall betrayed Cindy's presence.

"What is it?"

It blinked and moved to the center of the wall. "What is what, Michael?"

He frowned. Computers weren't supposed to answer questions with questions. "What are you doing in my room?"

The light blinked a few times. "I work here." Her feminine voice was as matter-of-fact as ever he knew it to be.

He decided to beat her at her own game rather than simply getting frustrated. "Obviously you work here. Please allow me to rephrase myself. Why don't you switch off?"

"Would you like me to switch off?"

She did it again. He contemplated servicing the system by hand with a laser rifle but quickly decided against it. "No. You're too hard to deal with right now. Switch to lower brain mode."

"Done," the response was instantaneous.

From there he decided to do a little learning as long as Cindy's logic circuits were switched off. "Access. File. Information. Library. Galactic Press. Person. John Clay. Personal history.

"... Insufficient person specification. Please respecify at person."

"John Clay, Boardmember of Galactic Press. Personal History.

"... File accessed."

"Write Picture."

"... Insufficient picture specification. Please specify picture type."

"Facial, forward, most recent."

The light at the controller wall danced about for a moment, and suddenly the entire wall surface lighted up with a picture of Mr. Clay. Next to him was another man and a woman. They were all walking down a flight of stairs. The others looked vaguely familiar to Mike, but he couldn't place their names.

"Read picture from wall. Identify. Persons. All."

"... Persons identified."

"Say identifications."

"... Specify data format."

"Left to right. Name and official occupation."

"... Mrs. Helen Jaden, Galactic Press, Tizarian Division, Boardmember. Mr. Edmund Sandair, Galactic Press, Tizarian Division, Chairman of the Board of Directors. Mr. John Clay, Galactic Press, Tizarian Division, Boardmember."

Mike jotted down notes on a flimsy. "Clear wall." When he turned back toward the controller wall, the entire surface was black.

"Say personal history, format brief."

The light at the center of the wall reappeared and began to flicker on and off. "... Personal history, Mr. John Clay in memory. Loading format brief... Mr. John Clay. Born two-hundred and twelve standard days into the Imperial year five-hundred and ninty-one. Attended University of Arcadia majoring in interstellar corporate business. Highest degree received, Master's, at age of twenty-four standard years. Joined with Galactic Press Arcadian Division as marketing advisor in Imperial year six-hundred and sixteen. Was promoted to chief marketing advisor... "

"Stop," Mike was getting bored, so he decided to zoom in on his real object of interest. "Access file. Information. Library. Galactic Press. Person. Miss Robin Clay, niece of Mr. John Clay, Boardmember of Galactic Press. Personal History."

"... File Accessed."

"Write picture, Planetary Identification, Tizar, most current."

A mug shot of the girl he met that afternoon slowly rotated on the controller wall. Mike studied it quickly and then prepared to jot down more notes.

"Say name. Format first, middle, last."

"... Robin Athena Clay."

"Say official occupation."

"... Independent contractor, gatherer, Galactic Press, Tizarian Division."

Mike blinked in disbelief. "That's what I am."

"... Illegal command ignored."

He went to the kitchen, got an algea-cooler and some nutrichips, and returned to the bedroom. Sitting once again in front of the controller wall, he watched the flickering light at the center of the wall for nearly a minute before deciding on a course of action.

"Say list of accomplishments."

"... Illegal command ignored."

"Say list of articles where subject is mentioned."

The light at the center of the screen flickered for a while longer. With Cindy's interpretive processor shut down, the command would take time to be understood.

The light disappeared.

"Stop." Mike was becoming impatient.

"No process in effect. Command Ignored."

"What?"

"... Illegal command ignored."

"Is subject mentioned in any articles?"

"... Illegal command ignored."

Mike began to drink the cooler. He didn't stop until it was finished.

"Switch to higher brain mode."

"Hello Michael." The artistically feminine voice of the SNDI system, so often applauded by computer evaluators, had never sounded sweeter.

Mike got right down to business. "I assume you have all the data of my conversation with your lower brain."

"You assume correctly."

"Is Robin mentioned in any articles?"

"No."

"Has she written any articles?"

"No."

"What is her occupation?"

"She's a gatherer."

". . . Who hasn't written anything."

"That is correct."

"She has to have been mentioned in at least one article."

"She isn't."

"Cindy, check for birth announcements."

"There are none."

"Is there a copy of her birth certificate on file?"

"Yes."

"When was she born?"

"On the ninty-first day of six thirty-three."

"Nearly a year before Niki."

"That is correct."

"Where was she born?"

"Greenflower, Silver-Tri county, Tizar."

"That's close."

Mike opened the package of nutrichips and began to munch. "Cindy, in all your experience, when have you ever encountered a person who was born without the mandatory birth announcements?"

"Offhand, Michael, I know of no single instance."

"Cindy, randomly choose one thousand people from that county, all who were born in six thirty-three, and tell me how many of those people do not have corresponding birth announcements in the news on the day of their birth."

". . . There are zero people who do not have birth announcements."

Mike popped a few chips into his mouth, "Check Tizarian Library files. See if her birth announcements are there."

". . . There are birth announcements in the files of the Tri-Towers Library."

"Why don't we have them?"

"Because when the file was loaded into my banks, the birth announcements weren't in place." She changed her tone of voice as if a little annoyed at the obvious question.

"Check in our own files for her birth certificate. When was it loaded into your banks."

"The ninety-ninth day of this year, six fifty-six."

"Why wasn't her birth announcement also loaded in."

"News files are read-only after their initial loading. There are no editing features available with this system due to the inherent unlawfulness."

Mike munched on some more nutrichips. They tasted good for a change, and he wondered what the deal was about Robin.

"Mike, you have a visitor at the front door."

"Identify."

"The visitor is not identifiable from the people in your files."

"Describe"

"The visitor is female. She has blonde hair, blue eyes, her height. . . "

"Stop. Open the door." Mike headed out of the bedroom and toward the front door. Robin was dressed in the white summer dress she wore to lunch.

She smiled, "Hi."

Mike stepped outside. The sun was into its brilliant afternoon splendor, and the entire coast was lined with tanning bodies, just waiting to be sizzled to a crisp.

He smiled as if surprised, "Hi. Come on in. I wasn't expecting you so soon."

She stepped forward cautiously, a little embarrassed, and at the same time enjoying her predicament. "Well, I just happened to be cruising by. . . and when I remembered your address. . . and. . . "

They both laughed.

She stopped in front of him and smiled. The sunlight caught her bright blue eyes, but he was prepared for them this time.

"Well, since you're here. . . would you like something to drink?" He was careful not to talk into her. He didn't want to blow the second impression by the smell of munchies.

"Sure, if you have water."

He grinned, "Sorry, we're all out. No, just kidding. . . c'mon."

He led her to the living room. Getting two glasses and filling them with water was no major task, and soon he found himself sitting at the chair next to the sofa he had missed the night before. She nimbly seated herself on the couch and accepted the glass of water from his hand.

"So," he started, "Why ya really here?"

She paused and then smiled, "You said you'd show me some of the tools of the trade?"

"Oh, sure." Mike went to the bedroom and picked up his camera and workset. When he returned, Robin was in the kitchen looking for a place to drop the empty glass.

"Should I just put it here on the countertop?"

"Yeah. That'd be fine."

She walked back into the living room while Mike hooked together the camera. "This is a Niko 700AR. The small lens in front here is an all-purpose zoom."

She walked over to him. "Can I?"

"Sure," he put it into her delicate fingers. "Careful, it's kind of heavy."

She looked through the lens and smiled, "Wow. Thirty all the way to a thousand millimeters. . . plus light intensification. No need for a flash."

"Yeah." Mike was pleased that she knew something about cameras. "That's not all, look." He showed her the storage drive, printer, viewer, and controller board. "Y'know what this is, too?"

She stared in wonder. "So this is top of the line."

He laughed. "For external stills, it's as close to it as is practical to use. I mean, it's low tech enough that it can fixed on most worlds if it gets damaged, and, of course, it's replacable. That's its best feature. This thing here is the storage drive. It can hold up to ten-thousand photos in color. More in black and white. I can plug this hundred picture cartridge into the camera, take pictures, and then transfer them to the drive. If I decide that I don't like them later, poof; I delete them. This thing lets me see 'em, and this printer makes a hard copy. With the controller board you can also edit the pictures in a number of different ways– splicing them, shooting color in, mixing them together, going in pixel by pixel and drawing. Like Niko says, 'It defies the imagination.' So what'd'ya think?"

"Pretty wild," She smiled.

"By the way, I heard you were a gatherer with the company."

"Who told you that?"

"Linden said something about it."

She bit her lip, "I'm just kind of getting into it. Right now I do some research for my uncle."

"Oh," Mike was disappointed, but he was far from through.

"What kind of research," he smiled innocently.

She mimicked the smile, staring straight into his eyes, "Y'know, research."

He stopped the questioning. It was still too early.

"So," she continued, "do you really make money at this?"

Mike looked theatrically around the house. She laughed.

"Of course I make money at this."

"But how can you? Information is so cheap these days."

Double meaning, Mike thought. "Yeah, it's cheap. But there are a lot of buying customers. Every two to four weeks the Tizarian Division puts out an issue of 'The Galactican.' Every year, I get a good enough story to convince them to give me a large cut of the paper. That, plus front page stories three or four times a year keep me going nicely. We sell to almost a trillion people in this sector alone. Now even if I took only a millicredit off of every buyer every year, you start adding up the numbers and tell me how rich I'd be."

She grinned, "Very rich."

"Ridiculously rich. And I don't settle for any mere millicredit."

"Wow!" She was being obviously sarcastic.

"And that's only half the story."

She smiled, "What's the other half?"

"Through writing these articles people get to recognize my name; and when I turn around to sell other writings, they'll go ahead and load copies into their own terminals since the price of information, as you put it, is so cheap."

"What other writings do you do?" She seemed genuinely interested this time.

Mike shrugged, "Political stuff, argumentative essays, that sort of thing."

"You must be a fantastic writer." She looked serious.

Mike grinned, "Not really... Y'see, when it comes to writing, it's not the style or the syntax or anything like that. It's your subject. Most of the news people I've met are great writers, but they simply can't research a story. They fall flat on their faces when it comes to the subject simply because they start out with boring material."

Robin looked confused, "How can you say that? You're supposed to be a writer."

"No, I'm a gatherer, big difference. It's like your uncle said, the most important thing that I do right now is investigate. All the polishing can be left to the editor and staff, but researching the facts and getting them down is the most important thing for a gatherer. Hey, what're you doing?"

"I'm putting this thing together." Robin connected the storage drive and monitor. She began paging through the memory.

"You sound like you're already missing it. What's this?"

The picture was of a shallow sea. Sulferous storm clouds loomed heavy over the horizon, and a still yellow mist shrouded the water. Far away, a number of humanoid creatures crouched in the steaming mud and pointed toward the camara.

"That's Aiwelk"

"Are those reptiles?"

"Amphibians. They actually the decendants of mutated humans if you want to get technical."

"What are they doing there?"

Mike smiled, "They live there."

Robin rabbit-punched him in the ribs. "You know what I mean. What were you doing there?"

"I was taking pictures."

Mike braced his ribs for the second blow.

"Okay, they say one picture's worth a thousand words. I was working on a safari expedition at the time."

Robin gasped.

"It's not what you think. We were low on cash, so were hiring ourselves out as animal catchers. Aiwelk's a protectorate, so were couldn't catch there, but this science team hired us on to catch a few of these critters for 'scientific purposes.' They eventually set up a base on-world, but at the time, they were working from a circular satelite. I took some pictures, because the scientists wanted to know exactly where they came from, and what their physical and social environment was like. They already knew the physical pretty much, but they thought it was important to know who was standing next to who and how they were acting among themselves before we caught them. I don't know if that makes any sense."

Robin nodded, "So what'd you find out?"

"Okay, y'see this character here, in the middle. He's like their shaman. No, I'm not kidding. One thing you learn in this job is that everybody's got their own screwed-up religion. Now, before he was, 'examined' physically all-the-way, okay, the scientists were able to decipher a good portion of their language from him, and with it a good portion of their beliefs."

"Because every language is constructed of beliefs and values."

"That's right. I couldn't have said it better. Now, he wasn't the strong guy, but he was more or less their leader, and without these stills with him in the center, and without the moving pictures we caught of him giving instructions, he'd have never gotten the special attention such an important 'specimen' deserves."

"What'd he think about being a specimen?"

"I'm not sure he really thought about it at all."

Robin zoomed in on him and refocused. The dark scales showed well in the poor light of the dim red star.

"So how'd they examine him physically?"

"Oh, you know scientists." Mike looked away from the monitor.

"Yeah."

"Sometimes I just wish we let them be."

"Did they find anything unusual?"

"Would it matter if they did?"

Robin suddenly looked irritated, "Mind if I use the ladies room?"

"Through that door and to your left."

She got up from the couch and went through the hallway to the bathroom, leaving Mike to gather his wits and wonder what it was that he said.

He looked toward the speaker unit by the videophone. Its black shiny surface glittered in the blue fluorescent light.

"Cindy?"

"Yes Michael?"

"Use the medical scanner on Robin but keep its light off."

"What do you want to know about her?"

"Anything unusual."

". . . She's taking her ear off."

Mike's heartbeat jumped. "She's what?"

". . . She's taking her ear off, and she's not human."

"No shit. . . What is she?"

"An android."

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

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The Milk of Human Kindness

by Christopher Kempke

A fire burned in the fireplace, illuminating carefully-laid masonry beneath a walnut mantle, silver pokers to the side, logs stacked to add comfort as well as functionality. A bit further away, the plush earthtone carpeting slid beneath two easy chairs, a few feet apart, facing the fire at an angle that allowed easy conversation between them. Further away still, the fire echoed on the glass of a bay window, through which, were the shades of night not pulled, one might see down a narrow drive that extended three quarters of a mile to a dirt road which fled out of sight, passing no other habitation. On the fire's mantel sat a snifter of brandy, itself reflecting the glow of the flames multiple times.

Its mate was held in the hands of an elderly gentleman sitting in one of the easy chairs. His eyes flickered with the flames; there was no guessing what color they might be in less fickle light. His face showed the beginnings of true age, the short, narrow beard had turned white, his hair was well on the way to silver itself. The arm that did not hold the brandy rested comfortably on the arm of the chair, his body was relaxed as he contemplated his companion.

In the other chair sat a man of indeterminate age, hands folded in his lap, posture slightly less comfortable than that of the older man. He was dressed in a robe of velvet and silk, the only thing about him which would distinguish him from any member of a crowd; if he took off the robe he might cease to exist.

Silence existed for a second, an hour. It was ended when the man with the brandy spoke.

"I've seen you in this contemplative mood before, Andy. You're thinking of a story?"

"Yes. Science fiction, I think."

Davidson's eyes narrowed slightly. "Not your usual genre. Doesn't sell well. Not that money's really a concern." He spread his hands, taking in the world in the flickering firelight, the mantel with its treasures hidden by the light, the rest of the mansion beyond shrouded in darkness. "Tell me about it."

Andrew paused, then gestured toward the window. "Do you think that there's anyone out there? All those stars, probably all those planets. And all that time. Eternity for life to exist."

"I've never really thought about it. But a story must begin somewhere. So I'll give you all the kinds of life you want." He sipped his brandy.

"All those living beings over all that time. You see, it's the time that's important. Time enough for a vast array of creatures to have come into being. We cannot assume that they would be human, or even human-like. We cannot even assume that their thoughts are what a human can consider thinking."

"It's going to be a dull story, if we can't understand the characters thoughts. They claim that you can't tell a story about a nonhuman, that even if the characters are animals or aliens, they must have human, comprehensible motivations or the story will make no sense."

Andrew nodded. "Yes, we must bow that far from possible reality for the sake of a story. But I picked a bad example – my aliens think enough like a human to make the comprehension simple. In fact, I'll bring up their psychology in some depth in a few minutes. For now, though, consider a physical rather than psychological difference, most notably, immortality."

"How immortal?"

"Complete, total immunity to death. The body cannot be destroyed by any means, nor harmed, even by intention."

"Difficult to explain. Unless it's necesary to your story, I'd just give them very long lifespans."

"It's necessary. The explanation could be no more complex than a mental ability to control matter and energy. An inborn defense mechanism that can't be shut down."

"Still sounds pretty awkward."

"Indeed. But how much of reality is convenient? These same mental properties might be controllable to some extent. These aliens have both a limited shape changing ability and significant control over the world around them."

"Magic?"

"Sorcery if you like, though a perfectly rational form of it. A reassembling of matter and energy to specific ends."

"And if you lived forever, you could get pretty good at it."

Andrew nodded quickly. "Very good. Perhaps even enough to create worlds, perhaps life itself."

"You've created God." Davidson took another small sip of his brandy, considering.

"Gods, perhaps. My story concerns a race of such beings. Millions of them."

"Be careful, Andy. You can't let your characters get out of control."

"That's exactly the story. These creatures, I call them Calagar, are out of control." He stood up, retrieved his snifter from the hearth. "It's the long life, you see. How's this for a motivation: pure boredom."

"Certainly not out of the realm of possibility. Everything gets boring after a time. Even life itself, I suppose."

"Indeed. And in boredom begins cruelty. You can only drink of the milk of human kindness so long. Pain, suffering, these are the more interesting possibilities. You'd take it up as a hobby, stick with it because of the entertainment it offers; small, yes, but better than nothing."

"Very dark. Would not some morality, altruism exist, even in such beings? Or are they of one mind?"

"Certainly it would exist, and any one Calagar might go through cycles, alternating good with evil as interest waned. But eventually, all of them would fall, every one. Eternity is a long time, and ideas and people change over even short time. And boredom does not; it is always the same."

"You usually write light, humorous or at least cheerful pieces. Why the change?"

"Even I go through cycles, perhaps." Andrew grinned, produced a jug from the velvet darkness over the mantel. He refilled Davidson's glass, replaced the jug and seated himself again.

"Long cycles. You've been writing the same stuff for twenty six years, since I've known you, and probably before that as well. But continue; perhaps the variety will give some freshness to your writing. Not that it needs it."

"The Calagar attained the stars, easily. Where they went, they found new beings and places, brought technology, civilization, and, almost inevitably, destruction. If they could not find a convenient lifeform or world for a particular game, they created it, destroyed it and its population when it was no longer necessary, useful, or entertaining."

Davidson looked contemplative again, offered nothing into the silence except a brief wave of the hands. Andrew continued.

"Of course, where there is one powerful, starfaring race, there would likely be another. And so there was, the Groli. Not immortal, not possessed of the mental sorceries of the Calagar, but highly advanced and technical. From the view port of their shorter lifetime, they might not lose the virtues that the Calagar had given up. And they would be aghast at the atrocities of the Calagar."

"A lot of good it would do them. Mortals against gods? How do you overcome something you cannot kill?"

"The laws of this country do not permit you to kill a thief. How do you overcome him?"

"You have him put in jail. But how do you jail a god?"

"Remember their inability to harm themselves? Say the Groli managed to create a "cage" that reacted like a Calagar body, unaffected by their sorcery? A very large cage, planetary in scale, which could contain all of the Calagar, trap them forever where they could harm no one."

Davidson shook his head sharply. "War story, then? I doubt it would be very interesting. Battles get old quickly."

"Oh no! The war is only incidental to the story. The Groli win, although their own race is nearly destroyed as a result. The only interesting part about the war is the way one of the Calagar deals with it."

"Which is?"

"Remember the boredom factor. Since an enemy is the first truly interesting thing to happen to the Calagar race since the beginning of time, they race off to battle. The thought that they could lose is unimportant. The odds of it are small, in any case. To the man, they attacked, and the Groli used this to their advantage, trapping each Calagar neatly in their cage."

"But?" Davidson prompted.

"One, only one, of the Calagar considered the consequences of losing the battle that lay before them, truly considered the possibility that the Calagar *could* lose. If he was bored now, spending eternity in a cage without even the outlet of sorcery to amuse himself would be even more boring. He fled, took cover with a group of lifeforms uninvolved in the war, changed his shape, avoided displays of sorcery, and waited."

"While all of his race were trapped."

"Yes, and for centuries more, waiting while the Groli race lost the knowledge of their technology, lost the skills to fight back, eventually lost even the ability to continue as a race. Waiting for the last possible enemy to die."

"Dull."

"Yes, but not so much as one would expect. In all of the universe, there was little chance of being detected, and cruelty exists on the small scale as well as the large. He could play with the world he had chosen, interact with it in a myriad of ways, bring it cruelty and kindness. But he could not destroy it, for to do so would be to lose his entertainment, and risk discovery in the search for more. Only when the last of the Groli had died did he destroy it and move on."

"To free the rest of his race?"

"Perhaps, though I think first he would savor the experience of being a sole god in a universe unprepared to deal with such a being. I haven't really worked out that part of the story yet."

Davidson considered for a time. "It has potential. I should probably sleep on it for a while. It's hard to really find the motivation in such a character."

Andrew smiled. "Boredom, Davidson. Raw boredom." He stood up, retrieved a long jacket from somewhere outside the fire's glow. "You've got a long drive home tonight."

"Indeed." Davidson stood up, put on the offered coat. Leaving the brandy glasses on the hearth, the two of them walked to the door, and through it into the deep August night.

"Good night," Davidson said, taking the two stairs down toward his car.

"Good bye," Andrew said, and there was a funny tone to his voice, as though muted by distance.

Davidson turned. The house was almost a hundred yards away, though he had taken only a couple steps. His car was nowhere to be seen.

In the darkness of the forest, brilliant red eyes glowed, flickering like burgundy in the firelight. Three wolves emerged from the shadows, each as black as the night itself, seven feet tall at the shoulders, moving with a quicksilver speed toward him. Teeth shone coldly, though there was no moon.

"Just to make this interesting. . . " Andrew commented, and a steel pistol appeared in Davidson's hand. "There are exactly three bullets. Please don't make this boring, Davidson."

"By God, Andrew! We've known each other twenty six years!"

Andrew shook his head. "No, only the blink of an eye."

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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The Magazine of the *Dargon* Project Editor: Dafydd *WHITE@DUVM.BITNET*

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