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Quanta

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Articles

LOOKING AHEAD
Daniel K. Appelquist Page 2

Serials

DR TOMORROW
Marshall F. Gilula Page 7

THE HARRISON CHAPTERS
Jim Vassilakos Page 28

Short Fiction

HURRICANE
Maurice Forrester Page 3

GEM OF THE UNIVERSE
David Borcherding Page 24

NEW BEGINNINGS
James E. McWhinney Page 19

JOHNNY APPLESEED
Curtis Yarvin Page 33

Poetry

RADIATION GIRL
David Drinnan Page 18

Looking Ahead

Daniel K. Appelquist

Hi everyone! Ok – so this issue is a bit late. Do we see a trend developing here? Well, let me just say that I still plan to put out five issues total this year (the next one being in August) but if it doesn't happen, it doesn't happen. The problem has simply been one of time: I don't have as much of it as I used to. On that subject, I'd like to post a "job opening" in this column. I'm looking for a competent assistant editor. This person would have to be willing to devote *lots* of time and energy to Quanta, both in helping to produce the magazine as it currently exists and in helping to expand Quanta in some of the ways I outlined in column last issue. Also, I'm looking for someone who thinks they're going to be around on the Net for a while (at least 2 years). I'm looking for someone with a writing background, preferably with editorial experience, who's also facile with computer networks and network mail. LaTeXexperience is a plus, but I'm mainly looking for someone who's a good *editor*. So, if you're willing to donate some of your time to Quanta, send me mail telling me a bit about yourself, and I'll try and get back to you as soon as possible.

In other news, I've started a pilot program of offering Quanta on disk for the price of $5 per issue, or $20 for a five issue subscription. So far I have yet to advertise, but I'm planning to put an ad in one of the "big" SF magazines. This ad will be paid for by reader contributions, so thanks a lot to those who've contributed so far! If anyone has advice on this sort of thing (kind of breaking new ground here, myself) please feel free to offer it.

Another novel way Quanta is now available is via Gopher. All back issues of Quanta are on the Gopher server at Carnegie Mellon University, in the Archives directory. The server is at: gopher-srv.acs.cmu.edu, port 70. The issues (in ascii format only) are also indexed for queried searches. What this means is: if you were interested in virtual reality, you could use Gopher to get to the archive, select the index, input "virtual reality" as keywords, and you would be presented with all the stories that have appeared in Quanta, to date, dealing with virtual reality. (Likewise, you could search for authors' names or any other topic.) I hope this will become a useful tool for subscribers – if you make use the service, please send me mail, especially if you find a problem of some kind. The Gopher software is a project of the University of Minnesota, and is available from the ftp archive at boombox.micro.umn.edu. Quanta is only one of the resources available over Gopher – I encourage everyone get the gopher software up and running at their sites and explore what is fastly becoming a standard way to get information out onto the Net. Gopher is only useful for people with direct Internet access.

I'm still (and always) looking for submissions. I'm especially going to need more new submissions if I'm going to put out an August issue. My submission guidelines are simple: Submit straight text or LaTeXformat if your story is already in LaTeXformat; length is not an issue; stories need only have marginal science fiction content; stories cannot use previously copyrighted characters or situations. If I think a story is good but needs a re-write, I'll try and work with the author to that end. I'm especially interested in new and/or experimental narratorial styles or content and fiction that doesn't conform to genre molds. The *Dr Tomorrow* series is a good example, the second chapter of which is published in this issue. Of course, I'm also interested in traditional forms, such as hard science fiction, or what have you. At any rate, I look forward to receiving your submissions. Experience has taught me that there's a great deal of talent lurking out there on the Net that only needs a bit of encouragement to come out into the open.

Well, that's about it for me. Pretty much as soon as I release this issue of Quanta, I'll be off to Aspen, Colorado for a much needed vacation. I'll be back mid-July so farewell until then!

Moving?

Take Quanta *with you!*

Please remember to keep us apprised of any changes in your address. If you don't, we can't guarantee that you'll continue to receive the high quality fiction and non-fiction that Quanta provides. Also, if your account is going to become non-existent, even temporarily, please inform us. This way, we can keep Net-traffic, due to bounced mail messages, at a minimum. Please send all subscription updates to quanta@cmu.edu.

HURRICANE

by Maurice Forrester

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Ruiz stepped out of the hopper and sank to his ankles in mud. Rossenby Station was a ruin. The storm had shattered the dome that sheltered the weather station and had reduced the sophisticated monitoring equipment to rubble. Dazed technicians were unloading supplies from the hopper while the pilot shook his head in disbelief.

"I can't wait to get transferred off this damn planet," he shouted to Ruiz over the rumble of the engines. "The storms won't ever let you alone."

Without a word, Ruiz slogged through the mud to the temporary shelter that had been dropped in that morning. "Take yourself to some soft planet where you can grow fat," he silently told the pilot. The storms made Williwaw what it was. The planet demanded you be tough, and it demanded respect. It was no place for the weak that crowded Earth. That was supposed to be why the planet was run by a military government, but the military too had grown flabby. The officer who ran the station was weak– a bureaucrat masquerading as a soldier–and could not control his staff. So a tough private citizen had to be called in to pick up the pieces. Ruiz almost smiled at the irony.

Captain Samuel Wall was sitting on the floor surrounded by filthy boxes of files. "Just a moment," he said without looking up. "It's a good thing I insisted on keeping paper files. We lost everything on the computers."

"Captain Wall, I'm here about a meteorologist you lost."

The captain's head jerked up, and he scrambled to his feet. "Are you from headquarters?" he asked, wiping his muddy hands on his slacks.

"Central Weather. We try to look after our own."

"Oh. I thought maybe the brass... I'm Sam Wall." The captain relaxed and held out his hand.

"I'm Ruiz. I'll need to talk to you first, then your staff. I'll also need a place to work and sleep. I'll be out of your hair as soon as possible."

"Oh, it's no problem Mr. Ruiz. You can have full access to my files." Wall swept his hand vaguely over the muddy boxes.

"Captain, I've got biographical data, psychological profiles, letters of commendation, and letters of rebuke. I know more about Lon Manning than his mother does. All I need from you and your people is some information on the week before the storm hit and then I'll know where to find the little bastard."

"You've got one hell of a chip on your shoulder, Mister. If Lon Manning walked out into that storm, he's a corpse by now. And if by some miracle he survived, I can handle him a lot better than you can. I've been handling him for two years." Wall's fists were clenched, and his voice trembled.

"Do you know anything about Manning's life before he came to Williwaw?" Ruiz asked calmly.

"He was from Earth..." Wall's voice trailed off.

"The man is a fucking genius. He's a first rate exometeorologist, and he headed his own section at the Weather Bureau when he was 25. He even designed some of this fancy equipment your storm smashed to pieces. And do you know why he was working as your second in command in this second rate weather station?" Ruiz only paused for a breath. "He's a quitter. He requested a transfer off Earth when his kid got hit by lightening and died a couple of years ago. Even left his wife there."

"I knew he'd had some problems, but... He still couldn't have survived the storm. It was the worst we've ever seen."

"He's a cagey one alright. I figure he waited until the hurricane started to die down and ducked out of the shelter. My report says your people didn't notice when he left."

"But why? Where would he go?"

"Manning thought he was going to get put in charge of a planetwide office, but he got stuck here because the psychological boys didn't trust his profile. This is his way of getting even. But he's only got three choices. All I've got to do is figure out if he went native up in the hills, is hiding out in some farming village, or is headed for the spaceport to try to hustle a ride back to Earth. And that's what you people are going to tell me."

Captain Wall licked his lips nervously. "I'll answer any questions I can."

"I'm sure you will, Captain, but now I think I'll start with your staff. I'll be back to talk to you later." Ruiz turned on his heel and marched out of the hut.

The hopper that had brought Ruiz in had left, but another one was dropping off tents to be used as temporary housing, its jets stirring up clouds of dust on the plateau. The sky was swirling with clouds of every color in the spectrum, and the air was charged with oxygen. Ruiz breathed deep and looked past the landing copter to the snow-capped mountains, then turned to look past the cliffs to the choppy, blue-green ocean. There were only a few planets among the hundreds that had been discovered that could support human life as it was supported on Earth. No world had yet been discovered with intelligent life, but scientists had originally thought Williwaw might finally prove the exception because of the favorable ecosystem. Here on Williwaw, men could breath the air, drink the water, and eat from the vegetation. Scientists were disappointed when no higher animals were discovered, but the politicians were

pleased. With a dying Earth growing more crowded every day, new worlds were needed to handle the overflow. The only obstacle was the storms.

For half of Williwaw's year, the storms swept north from the equator and battered the coast of the narrow continent. The most sophisticated weather equipment in existence had been brought to bear on the problem: satellites tracked the storms, probes reported on wind speed before being ripped apart by the storms, and exometeorologists and technicians manned weather stations all along the coast to compile data. Still, the storm movements went unpredicted. Storms headed out to sea suddenly reversed direction and headed to the coast. Storms died and then revived for no apparent reason. During the other half of the year the settlements were safe; then it was the turn of the unsettled continent in the southern hemisphere to be battered by the storms.

But the storms did not concern Ruiz. He was a security chief at Central Weather, and his only concern at that moment was to find the best exometeorologist in the whole sector. After picking up his supplies from one of the techs, Ruiz headed for the station's junior meteorologist. He recognized Rebecca Smith-Jones from the picture in her file. She was a thin, bony woman with a plain face and dark, straight hair. Ordinarily, Ruiz wouldn't have looked at her twice, but here at this desolate weather station, she looked almost attractive.

Rebecca was supervising the setting up of the tents. After introductions were made, she took Ruiz to the far side of the station where she sat on some rocks overlooking the sea. "I know what happened to Lon," she said.

"Go on."

"He used the hurricane as a cover for committing suicide. He wasn't a happy man, you know."

"I know. But he doesn't fit the suicide profile."

"Oh, all sorts of people commit suicide. He used the storm to cover it up so people wouldn't know. Lon and I were lovers. I got to know him quite well. He was always moody, but after I broke off our relationship, he got worse. He needed someone to care about him, and I turned him away. Really, I blame myself."

"Why hasn't anyone found the body?"

"The storm could have ripped him to pieces. Or look at the sea. He could be out there somewhere."

"How did the relationship end?"

Rebecca was standing up now. The wind was blowing through her long, straight hair. "It just didn't work out. We weren't right for each other."

Ruiz stood up. "What was it he said about you? Too suffocating? Was that it?" Rebecca's shoulders slumped, but she didn't answer. "He ended the affair, and you're the one who thinks about suicide. But don't do it yet. I may need to ask you some more questions"

"I loved him," Rebecca said as Ruiz walked away. "I would have done anything for him. Anything!" Ruiz kept walking.

Manning's work area had been in the underground portion of the weather station, just above the shelter where the station's staff had waited out the storm. Unlike Manning's sleeping quarters, it had survived more or less intact. On the floor, there were a couple of inches of water that seeped into Ruiz's shoes. A bank of shorted out computers lined the wall to the right, a long work bench filled the middle of the room, and boxes were piled to the ceiling at the far end. A couple of temporary lights had been strung up over the computers, but nothing else appeared to have been touched.

Ruiz headed for the work bench. It was piled with electronic equipment, parts, and tools, some of it quite old. Underneath some parts from a disassembled weather probe, Ruiz found a couple of pages of handwritten notes. They looked like the start of a computer program, but the weather stations all used intelligent, self-programming computers. There was a moan from behind the boxes, and Ruiz quickly stuffed the pages into his pocket.

"Who's out there?" asked a slurred voice.

Ruiz walked to the back of the room where a thin, glassy-eyed workman was huddled behind some empty crates. The man was dressed in dirty coveralls, and he wore a transmitter in his ear. "You must be Eb," Ruiz sneered at the buzz head. "This station must be home to all the rejects on Williwaw." Eb was the station's maintenance man. According to Ruiz's files, he was a rehabilitated buzz-head, but Ruiz had never put much faith in rehabilitation.

"Whuddya want?"

Ruiz yanked the plug out of Eb's ear. "You're the only one here who spent much time with Lon Manning. What do you know about what happened to him?"

Eb rubbed his temples trying to bring back the high. "He walked out into the storm. What else is there?"

"When?"

"I dunno. When the storm got quiet. When the whuddya call it was over the station."

"The eye. Why?"

"I dunno. I gotta get to work."

"Why did he do it?"

"He said he knew something about the storms. Why don't you leave me alone?"

Ruiz reached down and pulled Eb up by his collar. "You'll never work again if you don't answer my questions. Why did Lon leave the shelter?"

"I said I dunno. Somethin' that would make him a big man. Can't I please go now?"

"Anybody down here?" The voice came from the door to the work area.

Ruiz dropped the shaking maintenance man and stepped out from behind the boxes. A technician was looking through the material on Lon's workbench. "Oh, excuse me sir," he said. "I'm just looking for some cable for our satellite link-up."

"I thought the monitors wouldn't be up for a few days," Ruiz said as he walked towards the tech.

"We have to get it running sooner than we expected. It looks like that big storm is headed back this way."

Ruiz left the work area and headed for his tent. Far out over the ocean the sky had grown dark. The hoppers had all gone, and a salty wind was blowing inland. Except for some technicians scurrying into the shelter erected that morning, the camp looked deserted.

In the tent, Ruiz flipped on a light and pulled out the papers he had lifted from Lon's workbench. They were notes for a computer program for the drones sent out to monitor storms, but Ruiz lacked the background to determine exactly what the program was supposed to accomplish. Copies of Lon's files at the home office were included and Ruiz plugged them into his computer. He had read them all before and remembered all that he had read, but having them in front of him again helped focus his attention. Little went on at any of the weather stations in Ruiz's jurisdiction that escaped his attention. All the data pointed to one thing: Lon was a quitter. He wasn't suicidal, and that reminded Ruiz that Rebecca's suicidal tendencies seemed to have gotten worse. He would have to file a new report on her. Lon wasn't a buzzer; Eb was the only addict at Rossenby. If he left the underground storm shelter when the eye of the storm was over the station, he might have been able to get to another shelter. But where would he go? To a cave nearby in the hills? He didn't seem the type to go native but maybe he would if he broke under the pressure of the planet.

Ruiz awoke to the sound of rain drumming on the tent. Eb was outside, gathering up debris that had blown out of the destroyed dome, and he looked suspiciously at Ruiz as the investigator approached.

"You went native a few years ago," Ruiz said.

"Yeah. For a while."

"Did you ever talk to Manning about it?"

"Yeah," Eb answered. "But Lon wouldn't have gone native."

"Why did you come back?"

Eb shrugged. "It didn't feel right. I felt like a parasite living where I didn't belong." He pointed to the mountains that overlooked Rossenby.

Ruiz had never understood why some settlers went native. They left their settlements and went up into the hills where they lived alone in crude huts. If they were responsible, they could live like that for years. The few who had been interviewed said they wanted to become part of the planet, but some, like Eb, came back saying they didn't fit in. What was there to fit in to?

Ruiz left Eb and headed for the temporary command center. The crew was silently huddled around a row of computer monitors. As Ruiz entered the cluttered shelter, Captain Wall separated himself from his crew.

"Well," he said. "Now you'll get to see what you think Manning walked into. The storm that hit us so hard moved one day out to sea, stalled, and now its coming back."

"It is getting rough out there."

"This is nothing. We should really start to feel it in a few hours."

"Shouldn't we get in the shelter if that storm is coming back?"

Wall shrugged his shoulders. "We will if the storm passes over us. It still might turn away."

"You people should be able to predict these storms," Ruiz said. "What have you been doing?"

"Nobody can predict the storms. You know that." Wall started to walk towards the computers. "Sometimes I think this whole damn planet is alive and hates me."

Ruiz walked back to his tent to get his notes. The wind was at his back and pushed him along. This storm seemed to exist solely to cover Manning's tracks: it was here when Manning disappeared and it came back when Ruiz was trying to track down Manning. Ruiz pulled his notes and his computer out of the tent. As he turned back to the larger shelter, a gust of wind tore his tent loose and it was whipped across the compound.

"I don't have time to talk." Back at the command center, Ruiz was trying to talk to Rebecca, but she was monitoring the storm's progress.

"You don't have a choice. As soon as I track down Manning, I'll be out of your hair."

"I've got a job to do, Mister. Go bother somebody else."

"It's okay, Rebecca," Captain Wall said. "The techs will let you know if anything happens in the next few minutes."

"Thank you," Ruiz said sarcastically. He led Rebecca to the far corner of the building and took out the papers he had found on Lon's workbench. "What are these?"

Rebecca sighed and took her eyes away from the monitors. "Notes for a computer program. Are these Lon's?" Ruiz didn't answer. "It looks like he was reprogramming the probes."

"Why?"

"I don't know. We get those from Central all ready to fire off. It looks like he wanted the probe to broadcast on a different frequency. Here's the wavelength he wanted to use." Rebecca circled a figure.

"Why that frequency?"

"I don't know. It's one we never use on Williwaw. There's too much natural interference. Sunspots or something."

Ruiz took the papers back. "Thanks," he said. "I'll be in Manning's work area for awhile."

Little had been done to clean up the exometoerologist's workshop. Boxes still filled the back of the room, and the workbench was still cluttered with equipment. Next to the workbench was a locked cabinet that Ruiz had not gotten to the first time he went through Manning's effects. It was a low-tech padlock, and Ruiz quickly pried it off. Inside, along with some expensive computer equipment, was an old fashioned radio.

Ruiz hooked up the radio and tuned it to the frequency Rebecca had circled. There was a lot of static, but as he adjusted the antenna, a familiar pattern could be heard above the rest: three long, three short, three long.

"Lon! You're back!" Eb came stumbling out from behind the boxes. He staggered to a halt as he saw Ruiz. "Whuddya want this time?"

"Did Lon use this much?"

"Yeah, sometimes. Why?"

"That's an SOS signal. I think he's in some trouble. Where's the mike?"

"Ain't no mike. Lon used it to send those dots and dashes."

"Morse Code!" Ruiz exploded. "Nobody uses that anymore."

"He even made me learn it," Eb said proudly. "Said I might need it sometime."

Ruiz grabbed Eb's arm. "Quick. Answer him. Find out where he is."

Eb fished a keypad out of the cabinet and plugged it into the radio. Slowly, he tapped out a message then listened to the reply. Outside, the wind was howling louder, and inside, the lights dimmed.

"I musta missed part of that," Eb said. "He's sayin' he's in the storm."

"What's he in? A boat or a plane?"

As Eb tapped out the question, the rest of the crew entered the room, their clothing soaked with rain. "We'll have to go below," Captain Wall said to the two men. "The storm's getting worse."

"He said it again," Eb said to Ruiz over the sound of the crew tramping down to the lower level. "He said he is the storm."

Ruiz walked to the stairway and looked up at the ruined weather station. The rain stung his face, as he watched the winds whip the debris across the plateau. Rebecca and the techs pushed past him to get down to the shelter. Captain Wall took his arm, but Ruiz shook him off. "The storms are alive," he said to himself. "The whole damn planet's alive."

"Excuse me," Eb said as he stepped by, his voice clear and firm. "I'm going with him. Lon promised he'd come back for me if he found a way. If he found a way to live on this planet without feeling like a leech." Eb's voice trailed off as he climbed the steps, and he whispered the last words.

Ruiz watched as Eb walked into the hurricane.

Maurice Forrester lives in Syracuse with his wife, Lori, and three year old son, John. He is a Ph.D. student in the history department at Syracuse University where he is doing research on American religious Perfectionism and antebellum reform.

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DR TOMORROW
Part 2 of 5

by Marshall F. Gilula

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Chapter 2

Saturday

Transit City: Goodbye Gabriella, Hello Pearl E. Mae

"Heavy changes," thought Lyle as he woke from sleep with an unusually clear head. He heard the phone ringing in the bathroom and was immediately alert and awake. Lyle reached over in the bed for Gabriella. What a strange sensation, because it was not the Gabriella he had known to the touch. This was someone else. Or else she had unexpectedly lost thirty pounds in the chest. Opening his eyes more widely in the darkened room, he saw Pearl E. Mae lying in the bed next to him. Of course, it was such a natural feeling to see her there, like his ancient wife in the bed with him. Almost like a deja vu, but more a sense of real intimacy that must have occurred over many years together. Truth was that Lyle had not even kissed her yet. Pearl E. Mae had explained it to him yesterday as she went over some of the basic pastlife information from 32,000 A.D. She discussed the stuff about past lives in such a matter-of-fact way, Lyle got the idea that reincarnation was considered as basic as religious training for children by 32,000 years into our future. The phone rang a couple more times. Lyle got out of the bed, stepped over the motionless, unsleeping forms, and made his way into the bathroom. Both dogs were waiting for him in the bathroom, where they often hung out, especially when there were other house guests. Lyle sat down and She-Ra began licking his feet. Then he pushed the button on the speakerphone. He was really awake when he heard Julian's voice on the line:

"Hey, mon, gotta come over there. We lost Gabriella, mon. They wasted her, we lost her, mon!"

"Hey, get it together, Julian! You having a relapse or something?"

"No, mon... I'm coming over there." He sobbed briefly, and then clicked off.

Less than five minutes later Julian appeared with glowing doober in hand. He shoved it at me, and appeared tired and puzzled when I declined. As we walked around through the apartment, past my new room mates who were all getting up, Julian offered the doober to each of them in turn. Each of the six other Eternals, of course, declined. Even with the robustness of my Primitive lungs, something in my transplanted Eternal nature saw no sense in putting smoke of any kind into my lungs. Julian shook his head, and continued puffing away. The smoke bothered me in a strange new way. My megastepped body now disliked the hemp smell, but tolerated it the same way I had learned to tolerate the Los Angeles County smog much earlier in my life. Cigarette smoke turned out to be even more unpleasant and less tolerable. I was incredulous that less than two days ago I had been smoking a pack of Winstons.

"Mon, you gonna need this thing if you not be smokin' now...Suit thyself. Gabriella be driving Liberty City dude's Mercedes on Grand Avenue around Douglas Road and they blow her away. Looks like four dozen bullet holes in the car. "

"Gabriella was hurt?"

"Mon, she was wasted. She be gone, mon. Gone."

"Dead gone?"

"Double dead wasted gone, mon. Whattsa matter your head? You don't understand me?"

"Sorry, Julian...maybe I am beginning to understand you. I wish I didn't understand, man. You say something happened to Gabriella while she was driving whose Mercedes...?"

"I wish I knew, mon. She just had the richman's car and they wipe her out. Bunch of rock stars. You know. Rock monsters. She's dead."

"Well, she left with Jim the photographer yesterday, and he drives an old Dodge Van. Driving a Mercedes doesn't make any sense. You keep saying that she's dead, and I keep having trouble groking the picture. Besides, I don't want to think of her as dead. She didn't come home last night, but I figured it was just like some other business deal went down. Not just for a john, but sometimes she looks for other gigs like the modelling one you saw her have on TV last week. If she gets involved in something intense, she just follows it up. It doesn't mean that she was hookin' all the time!"

"Yeah, mon. I'm real sorry. Nothin' more to say. But, now that I think about it, mon...You know, you look a little strange yourself. Your skin always be white, now your skin be lookin' nearly orange. What kind of a drug you been doin'? You firin' up?"

"Of course not. Would you believe that I haven't smoked even one cigarette since yesterday? I ain't been doin' no drug, but there have been some heavy duty electrical field zapping changes that I been going through. Can you believe me?"

"I can believe anything nowadays. What kind of electricity you talking about, mon?"

"You know about flying saucers and people from the future?"

"Don't be playin' with me mind, mon. Then you gonna tell me they shot you with some ray and now you be the transformed Man of God in Babylon."

"Julian, you grasped it exactly. I should've known that my drum bro is sensitive enough to be absolutely hip to the entire scene."

"Mon, we people of the double minority and the HIV, we be very hip and very cool. Maybe your flying saucer has good medicine to poison the virus. But Gabriella is gone. I see them take her body in. Me myself, I feel sick when I see her and the condition she was in. But she be gone, mon. Gone."

"Yeah, Julian. . .Maybe it don't look that way to you, but I am major broken up and upset inside about Gabriella. And I have been through a few minor renovations in mind and body lately, so don't freak if I come off fried out. I know this sounds totally bizzare, but would you believe, I also have a new woman, already. Her name is Pearl E. Mae and she sings like a crystal goddess. We ain't kissed or done it yet, but she and I are for sure plugged into each other since yesterday. I wake up in the morning and she's in my bed. Only she ain't sleeping, it looks like, because these Eternal folks from the future don't need to sleep or eat, unless they want to for some special reason. I don't know if I am a transformed Man of God in Babylon, but I'm an Earth man transformed into what they call an Eternal. But I still sleep and eat, probably more than the other six, because they've been Eternals for a long time, not for only a day like me. I dig them, and we're going to make some killer music. I really dig Pearl E. Mae, and she says that we were hitched more than once in previous lifetimes. Come over here with me, man, and check her out. Unless you're afraid of people with reddish-orange skin instead of black or white."

Julian didn't say a single word, but he turned around with a dumfounded air and followed me over to where Pearl E. Mae was sitting. Since I've known Julian, he's never been at a loss for words. But he sure was this time. He just kept staring at her face. When he started talking with Pearl E. Mae, he immediately told her about how he'd figured for the longest time that maybe I was a closet wacko. After hearing the latest story, he admitted, the only question that remained for him was about his own sanity. But I could tell from the way he was talking to Pearl E. Mae, that he was just as much in love with her as I was.

Hal Nicholson was happily tucked away behind a corner table at the Homestead Air Force Base Officer's Club. The young nurse he was drinking with seemed awed and intimidated by his major's insignias. After 24 hours of involuntary quarantine, the crew had all been released. Since it was getting on into evening again, everyone naturally gravitated to the clubs. Quarantine had been perfunctorily lifted after the third decontamination team again found no source of radiation leak. Hal was now quickly into his third beer and the back of his head was beginning to have a pleasant and faintly numb feeling. His bladder felt full too. Hal and Jim and most of the rest of the bomber's crew were treated like celebrities. Jim Breedice had lucked into a plump R.N. Captain who responded to her third screwdriver by getting up on the bar, shoes and all, to demonstrate eye-catching legs and softly pulsatile talents for tap dancing. Hal found himself looking longingly at Jim's friend's legs. Jim found himself doing the same thing, but also looking long and hard in a northerly direction as well. The plump Captain found herself wondering what she was going to do with two men.

The nurse was just starting to really get into her dancing. David Rose's, 'The Stripper,' was on the jukebox and she was moving in perfect sync with the music. Uniform buttons were coming undone when a two-striper burst into the lounge and shouted,

"Hey, Major, Sir. . . Base security wants you down at operations!"

On the double and they meant it. After all the quarantine time, then they notice it. Doesn't it figure. There was a heavy burn mark on the bottom of reactor number two. No radiation to speak of. Just a severe burn mark.

"I'll be a son of a coke bottle," Hal said in amazement. "Sure looks like some kind of an explosion, discharge, or something ! Not a single extra tick on the Geiger counter?"

"No, Sir. She's as clean as when she was cherry. Sure can't understand that."

"We did go through an electrical storm. Do you suppose that Mother Nature could have emptied those reactors?"

"No way. Even Mother Nature is gonna get radioactivity outside of those tanks."

Partly right and partly wrong. The I.S.I. technicians had very carefully calculated the energy exchange, and had accounted for every bit of the redirected nuclear energy because that is what the I.S.I. was all about. Considering the Laws of Thermodynamics and The New General Laws of Relativistic Energy, and paying extreme attention to very fine details were constant concerns of the I.S.I. The overall negative entropy balance, just as with the similar but smaller problems of pestilence, war, and famine, threatened the fabric of the space-time continuum and the life matrix itself.

Our story also begins in the very, very far-distant future. We find ourselves catapulted into a Mission Control setting at the outreaches of three confluent galactic group vortices. There are thirty multi-display monitors in three semicircular rows. Hairless beings in iridescent white-silver I.S.I.-monogrammed uniforms appear virtually identical in the nearly featureless detail of their faces and the uniformity of their physical dimensions. Humanoid limbs operate keyboards and other control panels arrayed before the monitors. Just after noticing how much all the operators resemble each other, our attention is drawn by the sound track, in full Dolby stereo. Loud cacophony provides the main stimulation to the viewer because the scene is in muted light broken only by blinking of the monitors. Sound begins to increase in amplitude. Rumbling, vibration, and screeching frequencies make it seem like all Hell is literally breaking loose. Crunching noises continue, and dust-like fragments begin to fall from the ceiling of the underground control chamber. Members of the Intergalactic

Security Intelligence briefly make purposeless-seeming movements with their appendages, which terminate in small hands bearing two fingers and a thumb. A close-up shot shows two of these hands typing on a keyboard in nervous animation. Camera view cuts contrast two of the featureless faces, looking at each other. Although there is no trace of any mouth movement, the viewer can hear high-pitched yet calm voices speaking to each other.

Garth: "Well, what of this new series of crises, sibling? The prime leader's teachings have certainly predicted this disorganization. And can you imagine the real problems are only yet to come, if there is much time left."

Barth: "Obviously, sibling . And being at the center of our numinous asteroid will do nothing for any of the siblings nor will it help unless we succeed with the LaPlace Transforms."

Garth: "I know, sibling. We know, don't we?"

The rumbling sounds get louder. Flashes of light appear out of nowhere and coalesce in the air above the thirty I.S.I. technicians. A three-dimensional image of the prime leader communicates in the same high-pitched, mellifluous tones:

Alpha-One: "Time for our exercise, isn't it, siblings?"

A confluent series of vowel sounds fills the chamber, as all the beings cease their activities at the monitors, fold their appendages, and stare straight ahead. The high-pitched sound continues and becomes more intense. Particles of dust appear to reverse their flight and leave the chamber through the ceiling from the spots through which they originally fell. Soon, the high-pitched sound is all that remains as the rumbling noises disappear. A strong sense of balanced harmony and purpose pervades the chamber.

Alpha-One: "All right, siblings. Now let's get back to the LaPlace Transforms. We are in a no-lose situation, because at this point, there is nothing left to lose if we fail in our attempts. May the grace and the power of The One be within us all."

The image of Alpha-One dissolves into the darkness and tripartite appendages again begin to operate the numerous keyboards and control panels. In addition to the three rows of ten monitors, there is a very large concave screen at the front of the chamber. The screen is filled with multiple, smaller screen-views which are linked together across the surface as a series of interlocking windows. Barth and Garth continue their conversation.

Barth: "So why is it that we must focus on such a small and insignificant planet from pre-Cataclysmic times? Our time studies repeatedly show us that very long-range views are necessary before it is possible to assess the ultimate effect of even an apparently insignificant and minor character in the history of a given culture. I remember that the personal belongings of a military hero named Custer from the same planet appeared millennia later in the Vorgat galaxy. One of our adolescent time pirates from 29,000 A.D. was using Custer's military belt buckle as the energizer in his magneto-oscillatory drive because it was solid silver. That anachronistic piece of silver truly wreaked havoc in a time frame when the 'lower' precious metals had been replaced by all synthetic metals of extremely high atomic number. And after that, several frightfully destructive time-fabric rents began setting off random anti-matter implosions that nearly disintegrated our I.S.I. predecessors before the I.S.I. really became aware of what trans-time warfare was all about. Many of us used to scan those early pre-Cataclysmic solar systems as a part of our routine training maneuvers. Don't you recall how many of us loved to scan the life span of Jesus of Nazareth over and over again? The vibrations and the fields surrounding that primitive ritual of crucifixion sent many of us back to the processors during our early apprenticeship periods. I myself can still feel that stormy atmosphere surrounding the entire planet when only one portion of the whole was terminated."

Garth: "Remember, this solar system is only one of four possible loci for an effective, direct intervention. Because of Local Group proximity, this system is also ideal for our first transmission. The energy requirements are lower so there will some margin for slight errors and practice effect expenditures. Their system is only early nuclear and pre-Cataclysmic at that, eh Sibling? With such an early culture, it is almost for certain that we will succeed in this first projected matter-energy translation through one of many time-fissures. Let us pray that we can carry it out in a manner that is truly benign in an entropic sense. We are required to make at least three of the four possibilities fully functional before Alpha-One's return."

Entropy imbalance is more or less the raison d'etre of the I.S.I. because transtemporal distortions (including intratemporal ripoffs) make the process of entropy accumulation qualitatively much more disorderly. When entropy accumulates in orderly fashion the results are regular time dimensions and ordinary time passages. However, when entropy accumulates by fits and starts that are occasionally of very great magnitude compared to the baseline, the results are disorderly accumulation and possible breakdown of the space-time continuum itself and therefore disintegration of the life matrix.

Base security was still very uncomfortable with the apparent discrepancy between two facts:

1. Two and one-half experimental nuclear power plants discharged from a top-secret aircraft

2. Not even a trace of any surface radiation leaks or remnants of whatever it was that happened to the XLN-662.

Discrepancies that were visible never got by in the security world without lots and lots of explanations. So Hal was very grumpily sitting in the plain, undesignated security chief's office with the usual cigar in his mouth, but without the beers and without the female companionship. He and the Chief, also a Major, argued with great intensity for a few minutes over yet another question: What were they going to do about their Reportable Nuclear Accident Report? Both decided to forget about it later over a beer at the Officer's Club–at least, until after they'd had the beer. And Hal, of course, had still not forgotten about the Captain. In fact, he was thinking of ways to sidetrack Jim Breedice into duty with the base security chief so that he could have the duty with the nurse Captain.

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We have carefully studied the flow of your individual lifetime to select the proper time frame for our initial transmission to you. Our calculations indicate that the next six or seven day-units of your life will be absolutely uneventful. You will have sufficient time to make preparations for the transition. If, for some reason, you decide that involvement with us is not to your individual liking, we will be able to observe this with our remote monitoring system. You do not have to write it out or state the decision in so many words. Merely experiencing and settling in on this opinion consistently for a period of several hours will allow us to realize that we must make another choice. Possibly even from another galactic system, and another time nexus that is linkable with our matter-energy translation technique. Above all, there must be a strong voluntary component on your part, in order for us to cooperatively establish the necessary cellular electromagnetic transtime bridge for altering universal entropy and transtemporal dyssynchronisms.

Introducing Julian to Pearl E. Mae and the other group members did not remove the fact of Gabriella's death. Lyle, had he been like many other people, might have reached for a drink of straight scotch or a couple of hits off a joint after he really accepted the fact that Gabriella was dead. But did she know that she was going to die? Was she aware of anything at the moment of death? Or was everything all over in a couple of seconds? Gabriella was fast, and a couple of seconds were enough for her with her street smarts to pick up what was going down and avoid it if at all possible. Gabriella's entire life, from some perspectives, had been a long series of hot spots and difficult positions, one after another. Gabriella always survived the most outrageous situations. And now she had been snuffed? Why could it not have been a dream? It had not been a dream. If anything, that part of his life up to this point with Gabriella suddenly seemed distant and faded off in the past and dream-like when he compared it to the uncomfortable and embarrassing sensation currently in his chest that was yearning for Pearl E. Mae. He wanted to get into her britches like he'd been there a lot before. It did not matter if she had a name out of the Old West, or that she could sing country-western with a real twang. There was some solid-home comfort he could feel for her in his bones. Yet he ached vaguely in the shock of Gabriella's death. Lyle was getting a feeling of sadness and disorientation. He yearned for the comfort of the love feeling he had with Pearl E. Mae and he grieved for Gabriella even though their relationship had been brief. Lyle began to feel pain, and to feel lost.

Without warning, a part of Lyle's mind suddenly gaped wide open. Then it happened again. His body's mind began to calm itself through the breathing. Like the day before, something felt involuntary but also very familiar, in the same way that pressing the accelerator or the brake pedals might feel familiar to a driver. The megastepped Lyle had some great built-in safety and regeneration devices. While his body's breathing systems calmed him, his mind sensed a calming issuing from the six other beings. His self-relaxation was enhanced much more than tenfold, it seemed. When he closed his eyes and prayed for strength and stability, the swift answer was the group synergism. Like a small cloud of white light programmed for a healing mode, the effect of the group was to make him feel very supported. The grief for Gabriella was much less painful, and he had the distinct impression of having shared the grief with others. Then he felt the light and had no thoughts whatsoever for several minutes. The white light enveloped him and conveyed a soft, pleasurable sensation to the central part of his chest. The light in the heart expanded to further envelop him and gave him feelings of Divine protection. In a psychic sense, there was an intense chasm of disjointed energies suddenly settling down into a harmonious crystallization of unity. Unity with something unlike anything Lyle could remember, even considering the massive amount of reading he'd managed to sneak in for free while working as a clerk in the book store. After awhile, the entire process of his occult growth had become almost like something out of a comic book story of occult powers and extrasensory abilities. Whatever he read about seemed to take shape in a literal or figurative way before his very eyes during the days and weeks following exposure to the concepts or spiritual practices such as those described in Tibetan Yoga. He often wondered whether some part of this could have been auto-suggestion or self-hypnosis, but it was unlikely. This was something different. Very different!

Although Lyle's friends who came into the bookstore often told him that his imagination was too active, Lyle didn't see it that way. Most of the spiritual teachings he was interested in enough to read about felt almost natural and intuitive on first reading. Books and essays that felt strange or in any way incomprehensible he simply put down since there were so many more books in the store left to sample. So much of the stuff had already changed his outlook, at least compared to the highschool dropout guitar player reading background he had when he first started the job at the Crystalline Book Shop.

The day's events were not that illogical an extension of what had been going on the day before, however. Even with the profound inner sense of peace and love, Lyle's head still buzzed – 24 hours later – from the thunderclap rainstorm and the multichannel data of the six other group members that was nearly inundating his nervous system. The presence of six other beings in his life brought Lyle constantly back to the here-and-now in the same way that musical groups had brought him back to ground after flying too high and too long on a solo passage. Lyle Crawford was just one day past undergoing a mega-evolutionary step toward becoming part of a unique man-machine synergism: DR TOMORROW. The initial, sudden contact of the seven beings and their mentalities was the main substance of the first of many MindLink/HeartLights on the day before, and Lyle energetically set to work with the group by starting out the day with another MindLink/HeartLight despite having the grief of Gabriella's death sitting on his heart.

Julian was pretty cool about my not smoking, even though he continued to reflexly pass the doober whenever he finished taking a hit. I was more surprised that my tobacco habit was not speaking to me through my body. Ganja was nothing to quit smoking, but tobacco withdrawal was a major overhaul. Julian reminded me of my deceased ex-, Toos, and how she always

maintained that quitting heroine (which she had done twice successfully) was much easier than quitting tobacco (which she had done only once successfully). Julian, my man for Everything, was now a little freaked out at all that was unusual at my house. He was hanging out with us when Su-Shan gave me the Eternal ring he had brought for me into the past. Julian took a look at the ring and then split. I noticed the ring right away after the megastepping because of the highly unusual shape of the pewter-like silver structure. The Eternal Ring was a tiny and powerful supercomputer from 32,000 A.D. with multimedia functions and projection systems. Atop a double-spiral finger-ring, the small silver pyramid sat inside a thin, corner-shaped silver shell. Along the top outside border of the shell were the six control buttons. The small pyramid possessed a frighteningly effective laser kineholographic projector, and the silver shell's control panel contained two tiny microefficient stereo speakers for very realistic sound and incredible stereo imaging. Many cuts above the best screen projection systems I've seen in video stores, the Eternal Rings can play back ultra high fidelity stereo video images in a three-dimensional format. The Eternal Ring, of course, is also an auto-zeroing, voice activated communicator and networking device. The ring possesses capabilities for storing objects in virtual space on an indefinite basis while safeguarding the stored objects with combination of voiceprint and digital analysis of radial arterial pulse wave. Field-induction linking permits the linking up of all our computer modules, but the rings have another type of synchronizing function. Special synchronizing pulses laid down by each Eternal Ring let us synchronize our bodies' physiological signals more efficiently, especially when functioning in a multitracking environment. Pulse multitracking gives all seven of us special potentials for relating to MIDI music and troubleshooting problems with the MIDI wiring, interfaces, and circuitry. Of course this sounds too heavy for me to save in my personal memory, so I just put on the ring, and resumed preparing for MindLink/HeartLight A small part of my mind worried about Julian, and whether or not it was O.K. for him to be alone. I wished he could be in on our MindLink/HeartLight, and I wished for him to feel some of the love and cohesiveness and HeartLight that we Eternals were beginning to have as a group. Especially because of the HeartLight, I was sure that the residual effect of being centered in the heart was something we could pass on to Julian and any other human we felt close to.

This time, we are sitting around the pool. It is our second day together, and the MindLink/HeartLight is almost as important as the first one we had the day before because we learn about travelling together as a group. The first MindLink/HeartLight demonstrated to us that we were already a group and could function together in a heart-centered and creative way by producing the musical thought form and composition that terminated with the bat signal. The first MindLink/HeartLight gave proof of how unified we could become. This second MindLink/HeartLight was powerfully facilitated by Quail, who helped us to learn how to travel and work together as a group. She taught us to travel together out of the body and to function as Eternals while out of the body.

Quail came to DR TOMORROW from perhaps the farthest away point in the future. An inhabitant of the Light Dynasty Galaxy and the Twin Federations, Quail was tall, very buxom, and capable of both instant invisibility and physical plane space flight. She very rarely spoke with language, and yet was one of the group's most powerful telepaths. Quail could play or emulate nearly any musical instrument, and could also synthesize or emulate a wide variety of esoteric clicks and other sounds. When singing, she was able to alter her voice over a large range of octaves and had the capability of making her voice sound like nearly any of the controls on any of the group's synthesizers. Quail was also imbued with an ability both very ancient and very futuristic: she could voluntarily split the frequencies of her voice so that she sounded like several voices singing or chanting at the same time.

These abilities were somewhat ironic, because in her native habitat, Quail's physical form resembled more that of an fish. The specific form that Quail's native configuration resembled was that of the earthly Manta Ray. Quail's home planet was mainly a series of liquid seas made up of sulfur-silicon congeners. As a being originally possessing physical structure based on geometry of the silicon atom, Quail was required to undergo extensive matter transposition before being sent to carbon-based Earth of the past via the thought-matter projection unit by the I.S.I. technicians. Quail's humanoid identity, after karmic resettling, was that of a Tequesta Indian Princess who had been a champion huntress. Just as Quail had been an outstanding heroine of the Light Dynasty Galaxy, her humanoid alter ego had been a female hero from an advanced Indian civilization that antedated the Florida Seminoles by hundreds of years.

Quail found the human form quite interesting when she compared it with her native life-form. When she and Morphosa swam together in the DR TOMORROW pool, Quail's human form felt almost like a plastic costume or sheath. Quail could easily remember the soaring underwater movements of her Light Dynasty life-form and she really missed it at times. She found it a challenge to see whether or not her human body could slide gracefully through the water, but a bayonet-type of glide was all she could manage because the densities and specific gravities were quite different. Quail once observed Earth athletes performing a 'dolphin kick' in a televised swimming race and it made her laugh involuntarily. Morphosa and Quail felt a certain type of comradeship, because both of them had the capacity for changing their molecular structure. But when it would be necessary for DR TOMORROW to do any really fast physical plane travelling, Quail was always the one who served as the bus driver.

During the MindLink/HeartLight on this Saturday, Quail served as designated leader. The meditation began and there was an intense sensation of linking up with each other, that could be most clearly felt in the breathing. After we had been inked up for a little more than thirty minutes, Quail was able to easily transport all seven of us in one common energy package to wherever we wished to go. On this Art Festival Saturday, we ascended over the house and went zooming over the Grove at tree-top level. Even though all seven of us were out of body,

there were sensations of the breeze and smells from the Art Festival. Quail flew us over the city and out to South Beach. We had a breathtaking view of the entire Miami Beach hotel and motel strips in all their fluorescent afternoon glory. Then Quail shot us up in the direction of outer space and quickly circumnavigated the entire planet from space, and returned to the southeast Florida coast. We then returned to what Quail felt was the strongest power spot in their neighborhood. Only a few miles away from the DR TOMORROW house. Quail loved the trip out to the tip of Cape Florida, where the ocean was blue-green during the day, and beautiful and usually undisturbed late at night because the State Park Service closed up the roads to the park just before sunset. She pointed out a section of houses half a mile offshore in the water built up on stilts. We had flown over the houses before returning to the Cape Florida ocean wall and sitting together there. It did not matter that their physical bodies were back in meditative trance around the pool. They sat together and contemplated the stilt houses which Lyle identified as occasionally having extremely loud and rowdy parties.

At the sea wall by the ocean, Quail was able to teach the Eternals how to use the large fluid medium as a means of communicating with all other large bodies of fluid media everywhere. Although most of the group members other than Lyle were familiar with the use of plants for telepathic communication, both fluid wave and plant communication were definitely something new for Lyle. Quail merely demonstrated to the Eternals that any large body of liquid was able to absorb, resonate with, and emit an unlimited number of vibrations. Earlier in the MindLink/HeartLight, members of DR TOMORROW learned about telepathic fluid wave communication between Earth and Venus during the third planet's ancient history. This form of communication was infinitely cheaper than utilizing gross, physical plane electronic or quantal energy. The early Venusian colonists communicated with the original Mind back on Venus by simply living clearly and being in the vicinity of any large body of water. Despite increasing contamination in all continents, the major oceans of Earth actually served best for this purpose because their volumes most nearly approached the relative volume of infinity, Quail taught. Whenever a fluid volume approached that of an infinite conductor, the frequency of oscillations necessary for relatively infinite long-distance propagation becomes minimized.

Since the large volume of Earth's oceans approached, for practical purposes, infinity, nearly any of the oceans could be used for fluid wave energy projection. Quail taught the other members of DR TOMORROW how to talk to each other through the Atlantic Ocean. They learned how to bounce and beam thoughts and sensations from the rolling waves along the surface of the ocean and they also learned, while out of body, to bounce themselves from the depths of the ocean floor in giant swirls and eddies of much larger and slowly changing waves that were nearly invisible but of immense scope and size compared to the waves that rolled along the top of the water's surface. Low frequency and extra-low frequency signals and stimuli sometimes have the greatest biologic impact. Slow oscillatory vibrations could also penetrate the earth's crust beneath the ocean bed to emerge on the opposite side of the planet. Quail also taught them the trick of using the ocean to focus the energy propagations of radio and other wave-form and quantal communications.

To Lyle, this was all astounding. Many of his forays into the written word had spoken of the Hierarchies, but his fellow Eternals seemed to put many of the higher spiritual principles into direct practice. With his megastepped mentality, Lyle grasped these techniques with amazing ease. He experienced no difficulties in learning how to bounce vibrations off the ocean's surface, or from the large slow eddies in the ocean's depths. He was also learning how to use the large body of fluid to focus his own higher energies when necessary. The Miami area had so many points of contact with bodies of water, that Lyle found it easy to nearly always use the hydro-bouncing and focusing during all of his meditations. Since the Eternals do not require food or drink on a regular basis, it was difficult for Lyle to convince the other Eternals about the seriousness of the water contamination and the drinking water shortages.

From their position many thousands of years in the future, the I.S.I. technicians watched Lyle on their multi-coordinate monitors and gently smiled. Lyle, despite his mega-evolutionary changes, was still very typical of pre-Cataclysmic people. It was easier for Lyle to accept mega-evolutionary changes initially just in terms of his physical being, and he still comprehended mental and spiritual changes in higher energies as being primarily physical manifestations. Lyle was able to understand and use the idea of water being part of telepathy, but he had difficulty applying the process itself. This was paradoxical considering the extensive telepathic communication that goes on between musicians in a group while they are playing. So even though Lyle was a sensitive, he was rather redneck about considering the possibilities of either plant or electromagnetic field consciousness. Technophobic or not, Lyle treated all equipment with respect. He even talked to his computers. But when it came to having communication with plants, he drew the line. That was just for Walt Disney characters.

The other members of DR TOMORROW had no such problems. Simple plants had been used for thousands of years as rudimentary telepathic communicators throughout most Galaxies. And the fluid medium, water of life, aqua vitae, was the primeval source of all simple plants. On Earth and many other planets, plants both originated from water and possess water as the vital and the single most characteristic compositional substance. Telepathy involves wave propagation or transmission. The members of DR TOMORROW all knew that both speech and thinking were different forms of waves. Since a body of water such as the ocean always has waves, to send the waves of communication through water was very easily done by simply superimposing one set of waves (telepathy) upon another set of waves (the fluid). Many galactic systems were not based upon the carbon-hydrogen-oxygen combination, but always had some form of a basic fluid medium. When the fluid happened to be a condensed form of a gas such as methane or a silicon congener, the overriding relationship between the liquid and the waves and the communication was still universal.

Although the DR TOMORROW pool was fairly small, Quail

had been able to demonstrate this Saturday that when the members would carry out their MindLink/HeartLight around the pool, it was slightly easier to communicate feelings and concepts by using the waves in the pool. Despite the fact that the pool was so small, the Earth's rotation and gravity fields actually caused very tiny waves even in such a small body of fluid as the swimming pool. Lyle quickly realized that with continuing practice, the members of DR TOMORROW could utilize the waves of airflow for communication.

Megastepped Lyle was still the most primitive member of DR TOMORROW. The Primitive. The Primitive megastepped into Eternal status. The other Eternals, because of I.S.I. translation and projection techniques, had some say in their choice of physical vehicles and also physical plane personalities. Despite enhancing of his own muscular development and definition to a superior level from an earthly point of view, Lyle was still a Primitive because of being firmly rooted to a nevertheless advanced physical and emotional body. Long before his DR TOMORROW days, Lyle had already learned how to temporarily transcend the physical body during meditation. During the daily MindLink/HeartLight experiences, however, Lyle was astounded to learn that even though all members became One in a sense, it was also possible to trade and shift physical bodies as well as lower-plane personalities. Since Lyle had been a musician prior to the electric cataclysm, it was not so new to him to learn that this type of body-shifting and personality-trading also resembled what was possible while playing music together as a group.

During the the first musical session, later in the day, Lyle was also fascinated by learning to listen to, without actually hearing, many other trains of musical thought that seemed to be going on at the same time as the physical plane music the group, DR TOMORROW, was playing. Many of these trains of musical expression seemed to come in waves. During the first MIDI-mediated rehearsal, Lyle felt himself inadvertently being carried away and losing control over his guitar playing and his voice. Like what the druggies used to call overamping. Only the common musical MindLink/HeartLight of the other members was able to help Lyle keep his feet on the ground and stay musically grounded with the bass and drum lines. Music rehearsals and performances were just be a special form of the daily, vibration-forging MindLink/HeartLight.

It was Lyle's idea that some common physical movements and exercises for the group might be helpful. Despite the fact that disco was no longer trendy, Su-Shan used several programmed disco beats and songs as a way of experimenting with musical body movement patterns. However, most of the compositions played during that first rehearsal belonged to two other types. One style was a very subtle wave-like movement combined with minimalistic techniques that resembled what Lyle had seen in Eastern musicians like sitar and tabla players who were performing ecstasy music. The other main type of composition emerging from the first DR TOMORROW session was more of a neoclassical, hard rock beat. Lyle opined that it would be useful for the music to focus on breathing sounds and breathing patterns, so the hard rock beat began to feature whooshing air-like sounds that would randomly seem to track the listeners own breathing. Aloysius, the computer, made an important contribution here, even though his existence had not yet been officially recognized. Suffice it to say that VDT graphics consisting of schematic patterns reminded Su-Shan how simple it would be to add a white sound generator. Su-Shan and Noman later added three of the white sound generators and arranged them in a triangular configuration. The idea proved very effective. Some of the air-like sounds, as well as the white sound patterns were included in both the hard-rock music and in the disco-patterned music.

The changes and transitions were very fast and seemed natural. Lyle and the Eternals were living together in the large, palm and cypress-shaded Art Deco house off Tigertail in the Grove.

Despite being able to control ectoplasmic projections of mind-energy, Pearl E. May had very little control of her own physical structure. Her dark hair and Aegean china doll-like face belied the multi-colored Vesuvius of higher plane energies she became whenever she transcended. One of the first official acts Pearl E. May performed for DR TOMORROW the group was taking Lyle's blue Indian bedspread material and parcelled it out so that there was enough to make UniSex shirt-garments for all seven members of the group. From the time when Pearl E. May began to work with the blue cloth, its shimmering qualities seemed to increase and become more intense. Pearl E. May decided to ectoplasmically shape the cloth into long Indian shirt-garments for each member, and the shirt-garments seemed to begin independent and separate lives of their own shortly after Pearl E. May's abilities molded them into existence. For one thing, cloth became instantly fireproof and indestructible as far as ordinary means were concerned. The garments also seemed to have a Morphosa-like quality of variable density. When the Eternals were wearing these garments on a hot and muggy day, the cloth appeared to become sleazy and diaphanous. One the other hand, the blue Indian bedspread material became very much like velvet during the rare nights that were chilly on the ocean. In the tropical rain storms, the material took on a synthetic plastic-like consistency and yet was able to allow the interchange of inside and outside air. In nearly every one of the group images of DR TOMORROW, all seven Eternals appeared in the blue Indian shirt-garments. In addition to having and performing distinctively with Aloysius the computer, the Indian shirt-garments actually became a trademark of the group. The shirts were really a far cry from all the punk and glitter-rock used by many musical groups and entertainers. However, since the shirts did have a density-altering property, they also tended to diffract light of different colors in a random way. And actually took on the appearance of colors other than blue.

Of course, the shirts had a very special meaning for Lyle, because he was able to understand some of the eerie feelings he had as a child when he first received the gift from his mother. The Indian cloth was an interface between Lyle, the past, and the future. The megastepping had not only changed his physical vehicle, but empowered him with the ability to receive, understand, and manage intense amounts of energy. Just as much as he had been or seemed very dull and humdrum before, Lyle

now was able to maintain a powerful level of equanimity in the face of nearly overwhelming and massive overload on any plane including the physical. Lyle now already experienced two of the automatic calming incidents during which his body itself started and maintained the process of slow deep abdominal breathing. During the first two MindLink/HeartLights, Lyle, as a member of the common mind, met his father who had died in India. On one of these occasions, a blustery arctic wind seemed to convey all of them into the Himalayas, where the group, Lyle's father, and two Tibetan monks had a great silent conversation. On other scattered occasions that followed, Lyle directly reencountered the energies of his father and learned that these energies gave him certain powers or abilities to communicate with passed-on spirits. This again was difficult for Lyle to really grasp. His Western background made it difficult for him to be able to really believe in spirits. Gradually, however, and with the passing of days and sufficient experiences with atypical kinds of energies, Lyle was able to react to even the word, 'spirits,' with less disdain and more of an open-minded attitude.

With the exception of Su-Shan, each Eternal came to Miami with only the robe, belt, pouch, and ring. In addition to the Eternal ring intended for Lyle, Su-Shan, the drummer, also brought a large piece of highly compressed carbon through the time transporter-translator. Diamonds, because of their compressed carbon-lattice crystalline structure, caused the least amount of entropic disturbance, and I.S.I. agents had very carefully and scrupulously calculated out the energy required through the LaPlace transforms for the whole diamond. Earthside, Su-Shan used an ordinary hammer and chisel to break up the large hypercrystalline fragment. The many smaller pieces were quite negotiable in the gold resale shops located far out west on Bird Road.

Understanding the entire electronic requirements of a musical group was the most serious problem facing Lyle and his six friends because music technology in this Primitive culture, while based on relatively simple programming principles, was packaged in some very complex ways. Lyle's previous music involved only a small but very heavy combo guitar amp and a few effects pedals. Now it was necessary to set up for an entire group. Just a couple of the tiny diamond fragments yielded a large ammount of dollars. Lyle managed to buy the basic sound-production set-up equipment for the group's initial musical efforts although the group members' appearance nearly caused a riot in the music store. They selected amplifiers for the individual instruments, a multichannel board along with a fairly standard PA system, and a portable DAT recorder. Lyle also purchased an inexpensive Macintosh computer, voice and patch editors, and some sequencing software. Then Lyle ran into a brick wall trying to explain Primitive ideas about signal processing for both sound production and sound recording. He himself barely understood Earth electronics. So even though his mind had been megastepped, he still came up with a blank when Su-Shan and Noman tried to initiate him into the mysteries of field-induction linking and transmission. Field-induction linking was the way that Al the computer system had managed to recruit all their different computers into his microprocessor-based shenanigans. Some day, field-induction linking would permit Eternals to link with each other by using their rings. Field-induction linking was the mechanism by which each Eternal could now access any or all of Al's different systems. Field-induction linking was a problem for Su-Shan. Su-Shan not only understood it very well, he was able to communicate the technical information very efficiently to Lyle and the others, using both verbal and extrasensory techniques. Some Eternals came from galaxies or times that did not use electronic transduction for music, but instead used plasma flow transmission units or simple yet sophisticated systems of built-in genetically engineered vibrating membranes that produced the musical sounds directly while being colored by resonance properties of the being's own structure. Lyle had always been a fair and sometimes commercial guitar player, but the megastepped energy changes (like the changes he experienced with his own muscular structure) placed within his fingertips' grasp a startling knowledge of all stringed instruments. He now viewed the electric guitar as a rather primitive precursor of Draconian feeling-lutes. Lyle managed to adapt himself to the six-stringed Drac instrument with startling speed. Piano and keyboards are stringed instruments also, and Lyle began playing both guitar and keyboard during different parts of a tune in the group's first rehearsals. What was even more impressive to Lyle and other members of the group, however, was the speed with which they navigated and understood modern electronic design and the currently available products. Su-Shan, the percussion expert, was also a 30,000 A.D. expert in nucleonics. It was difficult for him to make a transfer back to the archaic physical plane electronic components such as LSI, VLSI, and bubble memories. But he and Lyle quickly mastered the low-level difficulties of MIDI implementation codes and the elementary programming involved in the patch editors and sequencing software. With some of the tone generators and a special rack-mounted interface for the black Cube computer, Lyle and Su-Shan ran the main outputs of the stereo PA board into the DSP 56001 chip that was set to sample the music at a rate of 48 KHz and meet the technical standards for DAT quality recording.

After a blazing day of MindLink/HeartLight and music rehearsal, the group broke up into two different directions. Noman, Su-Shan, Quail, Morphosa, and Rico decided to go visit the Peacock Cafe across from Peacock Park. They would pretend to eat while checking out the street scene.

Pearl E. Mae and I looked at each other and laughed. It did not matter whether the other Eternals could read our minds or not. We changed our clothing, got the dogs, and went out into the pool again. I have never known any lady who had previously been an aquatic life form, so I never had any idea of how fish do it, until now. At first, it felt like Pearl E. Mae had rubber lips. She kept them semi-pursed as we kissed. I tried not to laugh, but she picked up my mirth and looked at me with questioning eyes, that spoke of her inner channel that grasped my humor with puzzlement. I kept pushing my lips softly against hers. My fingers touched her orange-reddish face and her eyelashes seemed to emit electrical sparks as my fingertips ran over them.

Talk about chemistry, this was going to be Electrocution City. The tip of my tongue gently pried itself between her lips. She softly opened her mouth and began to suck on the tip of my tongue. As we kissed, it seemed like the rockets' red glare was going off in my throat and in my chest. Except that it didn't feel like it was anything that belonged to me anymore. It felt like the rockets' red glare going off in our throats and our chests. Chemistry City within the context of Electrocution City. We were really melting into each other. It didn't matter whether Pearl E. Mae had been a fish, or a cow, or an octopus, and whether I had been a monkey or gorilla or whatever. Together, the two of us were two globs of light blending synergistically. It didn't matter that the blending was taking place from a base of the physical body. It was tighter than MindLink/HeartLight and sweeter than HeartLight. An unending collaborative series of dolphin kicks plunged both the depths and the heights of aquatic consciousness with very efficient, high-amplitude eddies.

It was a spectacular black and red and yellow sunset.

The old man's hair shone like platinum in the sunlight. Waves of light appeared to cascade over his head and onto his shoulders. Although his face was unfamiliar, there was an urgency and deceptive familiarity to his voice that demanded careful attention. The words felt as though they were being spoken underwater, without any clear sound dimension but a type of low frequency pressure or pre-sound sensation. Within the same bubbles of pressure were included images that were almost but not quite visual. After some minutes of conversation, the actual words and images lost their bubble-like quality. The power of transcerebral translation software and field-induction coupling soon had Yo-Vah speaking colloquial Earth English.

"Welcome to transitions, transitions, and more transitions. I wonder why none of you have asked any questions about why this I.S.I. project has been codenamed 'DR TOMORROW', what it means, why music is involved at all in the project, or what the role is of harmony in a transtemporal entropic intervention. No one has asked whether there is to be a doctor involved in the project."

"Since it was my computer that started telling the story," Lyle offered. "I'd like to ask how my name got involved with it, and how come the little notebook computer also gave me a three-dimensional straight-ahead view of my immediate future that was 100% accurate."

"I'm afraid you're still being a little Primitive and concrete, Lyle. . . The information that came to you via the little computer was being issued to you from a place where there is 100% accurate, as you would say, representation of a person's immediate past, present, and future as well as past and future lifetimes. Just the fact that one has access to information of this type suggests the need to consciously function from more than just the physical plane."

"O.K., I own up to being Primitive, Yo-Vah. But hit me with your best shot. What does 'DR TOMORROW' mean. Like, I noticed there wasn't any period after the 'r' in 'Doctor.' Does that have anything to do with the name? Am I the Doctor Tomorrow character?"

"Good guesses for a Primitive. Both the group and the project codename are DR TOMORROW. The 'DR' is an acronym for Direct Reclamation. And the letters of 'TOMORROW' abbreviate a complex mathematical algorithm that represents critical elements of the timetransit process. Or, tomorrow equals future when viewed from the correct perspective. Briefly, the project involves Direct Reclamation of the Future as timetransit. The project seeks to re-direct entropy-critical energies by means of culturally-valued music and artistic science-fiction materials featuring time travel. Megastepping you into your Eternal form and injecting the other Eternals was the first and most important step in the project. Despite being a terminally Primitive planet, Earth has the cultural seeds and elements which can evolve into help for the future. Many of your own future lifetimes will be spent as famous physicians and healers. These lifetimes will reflect upon your successful DR TOMORROW project. Extensive data from these lifetimes has been projected into you at the moment of megastepping. You will gradually realize some of these otherlife abilities. You actually are a healer and a physician from the future, but above all else you are a teacher. You will soon be able to discover and use creative ways of teaching. The word in many systems for healer often means teacher as well. Earth's Japanese culture, I believe, uses the word, sensei, to mean both doctor and teacher. In nonPrimitive cultures there is often a common educational and professional pathway for both teachers and healers. The MindLink and HeartLight exercises will help you to integrate otherlife information. Never forget that the HeartLight is always the way to your Higher Mind. And Higher Mind, for both individuals and the group as well, is the best platform from which to deal with otherlife information. Noman can teach you much about otherlife abilities and how integrated and realized beings can draw on otherlife abilities in a very balanced way. Future events will demand that you have many skills of which you now have no conscious recall. When the skill is needed, it will appear, especially if you let it happen. For example, although you are now a musician, you will soon be drawing extensively on your abilities as both a musician/composer and healer. Remember – 'Both/And'? I believe you were discussing these words with someone recently. The healing abilities will emerge if you allow them to do so. Remember, it is DR TOMORROW as a thought form that is most important. Please remember the thought form! When you begin to work more specifically on the thought form, you will also find that part of your megastepping includes extensive cultural and language knowledge from several of your main planetary cultures. Since culture has been one of my abiding hobbies, I saw to it that you will find within you fluency in Russian, Japanese, and Spanish languages. The languages will help with the thought form, but also with having more of a feeling for your planet. Remember also that from a galactic point of view, it is of course Primitive and limited to only view the outcome of a single planet in the Universe."

"O.K., I guess I did say to hit me with your best shot, and that was a pretty good shot, Yo-Vah."

And Yo-Vah said unto Lyle, with almost stern admonishment:

"So now is the time when you must take up the cape of divine human and assist the Guardians, the Eternals, and the I.S.I. with preserving the entropy balance of the Universe. Why do you think your planetary subcultures all have the common myth of the Super Man who has more than mortal abilities? Do you remember the special properties that Superman's cape had? The Cape I give you now is a real object, even though it is invisible and exists only in virtual reality until evocation, it will project and amplify your abilities considerably farther than what you observed with the being your media termed, 'the Man of Steel'."

"Good grief, Yo-vah! Do you mean to tell me that your computer analyses included our animated comic book heroes as well?"

"Not only have we analyzed your comic book heroes and themes, but we have also intensely catalogued and cross-referenced most of your science fiction and fantasy literature as well. One of our members even wrote up a History of the Universe as a comic book series and injected it into your cultures. There are at least several Guardians who are specialists in your twentieth century English science fiction. For a soon-to-be-extinct planet, your Primitive culture has been the site of some very worthwhile cultural achievements, especially in your science fiction. Bradbury and Asimov, we love too. But do you think that either of them actually comes from your system? Another of your later injected, 'walk-in' writers, William Gibson, was my personal favorite because of the amount of realism along the optimism-pessimism dimension that you found in his writings. His 'Matrix' into which software cowboys plunge by the simple act of 'jacking in' with electrodes is a virtual reality that operates at different levels within itself. Gibson's heroes live in both a physical reality and virtual reality simultaneously. Gibson's Matrix, however, is just one of very many possible virtual realities. Far in the future, we begin dealing with virtual virtual reality. This level is a virtual representation of a virtual reality, as with a symbol of a symbol, or the mathematical derivative of a derivative. In virtual virtual realities, the mathematics become impossible, even when you are able to use complex equations and multivariate imaginary functions. At this level, symbols become even more powerful and can sometimes cause a bleed-over of effect from a higher plane to a lower plane if the symbol is a very good one. Consider the cross, and the labelled-as-miraculous cures that have been seen on your planet associated with crosses and other religious objects. Occasionally, in the course of a planet's or a culture's rise and fall, the most trivial objects, or even objects of hatred and scorn, such as the cross in pre-Nazarene days, can assume proportions of immense proportions. Your comic book heroes come from somewhere similar, don't they? In your occult readings, you have become familiar with Jung, as I can read from the infrared patterns of your mind. You know about the Myth. Well, DOCTOR TOMORROW is one of the new Myths that we believe you and your group can sell your planet. A myth of hope and positive attitudes, backed by optimistic applications of technology borrowed from your future. Firearms and weapons are merely the least optimistic applications of technology because of the old-fashioned anachronisms of violence and destructiveness that require and merit replacing. You will need to get the new myths across to the entire planet, or else there will no sector 221 of Your Local Group. Maybe even sooner than the 2105 A.D. date I gave you before."

". . . meaning that I will not be able to couch-potato it for the next forty years."

"Meaning that it might be good for you to have some experience being a couch potato, if you are going to know how to get across to millions of couch potatoes who are presently helping to subvert the general equations of entropy into the mire and sludge of general sloth and apathy."

"Aren't you being a bit overly dramatic?"

"Absolutely not! When you see billions of your Earth 'humans' with addictions to drugs, sex, power, and food, this is not a trivial example of what happens as the entropy equations begin to mire and sludge. It is just a matter of very basic temporal mathematics for the I.S.I. technicians in your future, but it would require unending time for me to be able to explain this to you, even with your obviously megastepped mind and nervous system. Just trust me, whether or not you have ever read or understood anything by your planet's Buckminister Fuller. If you properly design or otherwise alter the environment, in an all-inclusive sense, the beings within the environment will surely change. So trust me. Believe me : if you can succeed in having a harmonizing effect on the energy of the planet at this time, you will yourself begin to observe individuals undergoing change for the better. And believe me when I also say that harmonizing is one of the few transtemporal activities known to not increase the randomness of the overall Entropy Equations. So please, be my guest, and harmonize away. You have nothing to lose but your anergy. That is, the anergy of your so-called Human Race. To many of our Eternals, your planet has resembled more of a Human Crawl or a Human Drag, as in dragging to heels to avoid becoming really Human and caring for each other in ways that are entropy-efficient. Do you get my drift?"

"O.K. O.K. Are you going to give me some kind of superscientific device which will add to the harmonizing of the entire planet, or the entire city, or the entire neighborhood. . . ."

"I'm glad to see that you've grasped the idea. It doesn't matter if you are expressing it in the reverse, the same principles still apply. But we were talking about using the experience of being a couch potato for positive rather than negative ends. And your typical Primitive orientation towards material objects still persists despite your megastepping courtesy of the I.S.I. The superscientific device you referred to is the thought form of DR TOMORROW. Not just the music, the group, the story, the media forms, but the thought form. That's the way you have to approach it. Because you are seven Eternals,. . . or. . . eight. . . or seven and one-half. . . is what I seem to be receiving from your group's energy fields. You will have to explain that to me later. Maybe it has to do with your computer system. Anyway, it is the higher, thought form aspects of DR TOMORROW that are the most important. You will realize it more fully when you have been able to more fully appreciate your own megastepped mind. As you are probably now aware, a change of body is infinitely easier

than a change of mind. Primitives, especially, almost never realize the degree to which their own individual minds define the boundaries of their individual universes. Because of this limitation, Primitives, by definition, never learn to use their minds as networking devices."

"Maybe I am a Primitive, or a megastepped Primitive, or whatever. Maybe I don't know about networking, either. I always thought that networking was a word that women's libbers used to mean a 'good old girl' system like the 'good old boy' system that still rules the southern U.S. But even though I am a Primitive, I do know that you are talking about a whole lot of heavy philosophical stuff that most people don't want to be thinking about. Maybe I don't want to be thinking about those things, either. Maybe I shouldn't be thinking about those things – that could be dangerous. Most people don't want to be thinking about why nearly everyone's water supply is poisoned, or why halfway clean water costs $25 a bottle all of a sudden. It's like Mother Nature has turned against us, and is now charging us for generations of uncontrolled littering."

"Lyle, you are getting off the subject. Mother Nature is a mythical figure created for you by advertising agencies and salespeople, just like the ones who dreamed up the mutant turtles and the animated transforming vehicles. Primitives always need to have some type of divinity projected outside of themselves, because it is difficult for Primitives to recognize or utilize their inherent divinity."

Marshall F. Gilula, otherwise known as NeXT Registered Developer (NeRD) #1054, spends a lot of his time with a customized white Steinberger guitar, and a couple of racks of rapidly-aging electronic equipment controlled by a Mac IIsi running MOTU's Performer. *This version of* DR TOMORROW *was part of a Ph.D. Dissertation written for Columbia Pacific University.* DR TOMORROW *is a project that aspires to being a profitable multidimensional wellness learning system. Marshall Gilula lives in Miami with a black Cube, several Macs, numerous stringed instruments, and two beautiful gigantic German Shepherds, She-Ra and Bullet.* DR TOMORROW *and* Project Talking Dog *(She-Ra and Bullet) are two scientific activities of Life Energies Research Institute, P.O. Box 588, Miami, Florida 33133.*

DR TOMORROW *will be continued next issue.*

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RADIATION GIRL

by David Drinnan

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She spends all her time in the tub now.
Sometimes I miss her.
I duck my head in through the door,
just a peek, to say hello.

She's always there.

After it happened, I'd stay with her.
In the hot, heavy armour of my protective suit.
Bring down the helmet, turn on the pump.
Sitting beside the tub watching her.
Her hand on my glove,
my eyes hidden behind silvered glass.
Watch the dull blue glow of her arms, her legs, her body, safely under water.
Remember the feel of her arms, her legs, her body, silken skin under my hands.

Our old friends don't mention her any more.
Not since it happened.

I see them when I walk the streets.
When I need to forget the sound of water splashing gently against porcelain as she stirs.

When I need to forget, they forget for me.
And when I come back, the black suit hangs by the door.

David Drinnan has been pursuing a lifestyle of travelling and writing for several years, though he never quite catches it. After studying physics and psychology in university, he found himself writing books about how to Call Forward and Survive. At 28, he lives in Ottawa and has his own writing business.

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NEW BEGINNINGS

by James E. McWhinney

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The Red Dragon Inn is a good place to be if you need time to think. King Roland's soldiers don't often venture very far into this part of the city, even during daylight. Some of the people up in the Royal Quarter call this area Jester's Quarter, but only when they're not here. There's nothing funny down here. Nothing at all. That's what makes it a good place to be when you need to think, and tonight I do.

For months, rumors have been filtering into town about an elfin wizard who has been stirring up trouble in the Southern Forest. Three days ago, a messenger from one of the outlying territories came to the city demanding an audience with the King. This morning, the sound of hammers forging steel into weapons could be heard at every smithy in Tradesman's Quarter. The possibility of war is all too real. I'm thinking of going north, out the city, maybe out of the Realm. It's not that I mind killing, it's just that I prefer to do it on my own terms, alone, and for gold.

I'm leaning back in a chair, with my back against the wall and my feet on the table in front of me. The people around me probably think that I'm staring at my boots, drunk or lost in thought.

I am thinking, that's for sure, and in a way, I guess that I am staring at my boots. That doesn't mean that I don't know what's going on around me.

Over at the bar, a short figure in a long cloak just slid a small pouch to the barkeep The barkeep pocketed the pouch, nodded toward me, and turned away.

The stranger in the cloak is coming this way. I can see him right over the tip of my boot. He'll probably think that these worn old boot have seen better days. I disagree. When I was nineteen, I stole these boots from the house of an assassin. They've served me much better than they did their original owner.

When I think of the boots, I smile, but only for a second. smiling changes the youthful look of my face. It shows a few of the wrinkles and scars that I've collected over the last thirty some years. That will never do. In my business, appearances are everything.

The stranger in the cloak is about five paces away. That's close enough.

"What?," I say in a flat monotone.

He's staring at me now, straining to make out my features. I know exactly what he's seeing, just a dark figure leaning back in a chair. More of an outline that anything else.

He takes a step closer, around the table, and to my right.

"I won't ask again stranger," I say, a hint of menace in my voice.

"A thousand pieces of gold to talk outside," he says.

"You don't have that kind of gold with you stranger." "Gems," he says, as he pulls aside his cloak.

There's a pouch tied at his belt. It's bulging with something. Probably gems considering that the barkeep hasn't killed him yet.

"What's to stop me from taking those stranger?" I ask.

He shrugs indifferently. "I suppose you could try." Time to teach this fool a lesson.

Before he can move, I leap at him. The boots make it easy despite my awkward position.

I slip a dagger out of my sleeve as I move. It's nearly at his throat when something solid smashes into my groin. I vomit as I'm slammed back into my chair.

When the nausea passes, I look up. The air in front of me is shimmering, taking shape. The shape of. . . a man.

"Sorry I had to do it his way Thaldon," the shimmering figure purrs. "Go with him."

I know the voice.

"Dangar?" I croak, as the apparition fades.

The cloaked stranger turns and walks away.

I scan the crowd as I follow him to he door on unsteady legs. No one seems to have noticed what just happened. What in all the cursed god's names is happening here? Dangar's been gone for well over ten years. Who's under that cloak? Why hasn't anyone noticed any of this?

The cloaked figure leaves the tavern and keeps walking. He doesn't look back. I follow. He goes a good fifty paces with me at his heels.

Abruptly, he turns and speaks, "I am Rendell, a follower of Dangar, Mage of the Southern Forest. I have been sent to ask you to meet with the Mage on a matter he thinks you will find interesting and profitable."

He opens his cloak and takes the pouch from his belt. I can hear the faint tinkle of gems touching. Slowly, he tosses the pouch toward me.

In one smooth motion, I catch it and slip it into my tunic. catch it and slip it into my tunic in one smooth motion.

"Another thousand if you follow me to the meeting place," Rendell says.

"Meeting place?"

"Two days ride south. Dangar is there."

"Gems first."

He tosses me another pouch. I bounce it in my hand. Judging by the way it feels, I'm willing to bet that it's full of gems. I

tuck it away with the other.

"I've got two horses near the south gate," he says.

"Lead on," I reply.

We reach the south gate without incident. The horses are fresh and strong. We mount in silence and leave the gate at a fast trot. The evening is still young, the gate guards pay us little mind.

It's late when we reach a small grove some miles from the city. He dismounts and says, "Let the horses graze, they won't stray far. . . ."

I spread a blanket at the base of a large oak. I like to have a good, solid thing like that at my back. I'll sleep well. I don't have to worry about Rendell. I'll be on my feet, dagger in hand, at the snap of a single twig, one of the benefits of training and experience.

"We leave at first light," he says, as lays down on his blanket.

I wake just before dawn and nudge Rendell with my boot.

"There's food in the packs on the horses," he says.

The horses are nearby. I get the food and we eat in silence. We're back on the road quickly. We ride till late in the night, stopping only briefly to rest and water the horses. There's little traffic on the road, and none but us headed south.

Halfway through the next day, we leave the road and pick our way through the woods. The going is slow. As the last light of day is fading, we top a small rise. There is a camp just over the far side. Armed elves meet us as we near the camp.

"The Mage will be with you soon," one of them says.

I scan the camp, taking stock, and count maybe ten elves, a dozen horses, and a half dozen mules. A half dozen sacks lay beside the mules.

A tall thin figure is leaving the camp and moving towards us. I recognize Dangar as he gets closer. Fifteen years have not changed his looks. Elfin folk can live to be over a hundred.

"Thaldon my friend, it has been a long time," he says.

I nod. "It has.".

"My apology for the incident at the Inn," he continues. Your reputation marks you as a dangerous man. I didn't want you to kill Rendell."

"I wouldn't say dangerous," I reply, looking toward the guards and then back at Dangar.

"Thaldon," he chuckles. "Modesty has never suited you. You're the best assassin in the entire Realm. I know. I've heard the tales and talked to the people. Even Daldes says that you're the best."

"Assassin?" I ask, again looking toward the guards and then back at Dangar. "I've been called a lot of things but, never that."

"You worry needlessly my friend," he says. "They can't hear a word we say. I've taken care of that."

I nod, standing so that I can see both Dangar and the guards. If they can hear us, they don't show it.

"Daldes is a corpse," I say.

"Of course he is," Dangar replies. "You snuck past his guard, foiled not one but three magical traps, slipped a poisoned dagger neatly into his chest, and stole his boots. And that was over ten years ago. With the practice you've had since then, you're almost unstoppable. That's the only reason the assassin's guild hasn't killed you. They don't permit rogues like you to operate outside their guidelines. . . unless they can't stop you. The rumors say that you killed two of their men who tried."

I keep my face blank, concealing my surprise. "You're well informed. Am I supposed to guess at your fortunes or will you tell me those too?"

"Ah. . . Thaldon. There is so much to tell, but I'll be brief. We must get to the business at hand. When Goldsen lost the crown and our families fell from grace, my family fled south. Elfin blood made us welcome, fortune made me a mage. Ambition made me a leader. I've united all ten elfin settlements in the Southern Forest. We're ready to expand. I want the Realm. I've never forgotten what happened when dear Roland's father took the crown. He made me an outcast. Now I'm ready to be a king."

"Where's my place in this?"

"You," he says, "are in need of a new beginning. I am here to give you that chance. It's time you quit living in the slums and return to the life you knew, we both knew, in our youth."

"Go on."

"Do you see the sacks by the mules?" he asks. They are full of gold. A fortune by any standard. Enough for you to buy respectability and live as you please, anywhere. The gold is yours if you kill Roland."

He holds my gaze, looking for a reaction.

"How much time do I have?" I ask.

"Three days, maybe a week. As we speak, Roland is meeting with his Lords in the palace. He will ask for a renewal of their oaths of allegiance. Once they swear loyalty, he will announce that the forces of the Realm will march on the Southern Forest to quell the elfin insurrection. I want him dead before his army marches."

He pauses. I review his words in my mind. Kill Roland. . .

"You see," he continues. "Roland and I are very much alike. He has under his command, the united forces of the Lords of the Realm. I control the combined forces of the elfin settlements. Roland has no rightful heir. When he dies the Lords will battle for the power. They will form allegiances, the strongest of which will put a king on the throne. If I should die, the elfin coalition will dissolve."

A look of irritation crosses his face. He falls silent, running a hand through his hair.

"Thaldon. . . You must understand, I am not a tyrant. I do not wish to terrorize the subjects of the Realm, I wish to be their king. I want the Realm and the Southern Forest to form a vast, powerful, united territory. For this to happen, Roland must die."

I smile. "A fortune in gold is not easily passed up by one in my position and profession."

Dangar nods. "I will leave here when you do. I will return in three days time and remain for one week. When the deed is done, return here for your gold."

"I'll need five thousand croats before I leave."

"Take a sack," he answers, nodding toward the mules.

"I'd prefer gems."

"Gems?" he questions.

"I do this my way, no questions."

Nodding, he turns away muttering as he rubs his temples.

One of the guards Jogs back toward the camp.

"He'll fetch them," Dangar says as he turns back toward me.

"When I return," I say, "I will not look as I do now. Do not be alarmed if I look younger. Much younger. And please, keep the guards close to camp. I don't want many people to see the man who killed the King."

"I'll wait with only two men," he smiles. "My magic will protect us while we wait, and when it is time to leave this camp, only the two of us will ride away."

The guard approaches. Dangar weaves a pattern in the air with his fingers. "Thank You Ogden," he says, as the guard hands him a half full sack.

He hands me the sack. I open it to find four sizable pouches, all are full of gems. I nod and close the sack.

"Fair enough. I ride at dawn, but for now, I rest."

He nods.

I walk to my horse, unpack the blanket and spread it on the ground.

"Rest well my friend," he says, walking back toward his camp.

I note that two elves are on guard duty before I let myself sleep.

I wake before the others. I pack and leave in silence. If I ride hard through the night, I can reach the city by noon tomorrow.

After two hours on the main road, I overtake a small band of travelers. They have an old wagon packed full of their belongings. As I pass, an older man looks toward me and smiles a grim smile.

"Riding that fast, I'd have to say that your fleeing the elves too," he calls out.

I reign in to keep pace with the wagon.

"The city seems like a safe place to be now eh?" I reply.

"I hope," he says. "They've got the lands bordering the forest. I've never seen such butchery. My wife...in the wagon...they..." he stops as sobs wrack his body. "I...I hope she lives," he sobs.

I drop back and in look in the wagon. The bed is black with dried blood. The cloth wrapped figure lying there looks dead already. It has only one arm. A slow trickle of blood seeps from bandages on the bloody stump.

I spur my horse into a gallop and pass the wagon without another word. War is so ugly. Not at all like what I do. I don't torture and maim. When I kill, I do it quickly and with honor. It is not random murder. Women and children are not butchered. Men are not killed for sport. Dangar's wishes may be good, but solders are difficult to work with. Things get sloppy. People die.

The night passes quickly on the road. The horse is panting heavily. It won't survive this trip, but I knew it wouldn't. A small sacrifice in the name of time. It 1S important to reach the city quickly. Time is short. If the price on Roland's head weren't so high, I'd demand more time to plan this.

Four more hours on the road and the horse is stumbling. It doesn't matter, we're close now. I dismount and walk the horse into the woods beside the road. I dispatch him quickly. With the sack of gems over my shoulder, I walk the rest of the way to the city, arranging myself along the way. A little dirt here and there, a few tears in the shirt and cloak, sad eyes, and hunched back. I look old and tired by the time I reach the city. It is just past noon.

In Merchants Quarter, I buy a new cloak and a bit to eat. Back in the Commons, I go to Tenbro's Ale House.

The barkeep raises his eyebrows in question, when I come in.

"A tankard of ale?" he asks.

I shake my head. "Aardo."

He nods and walks off. I sit at the bar. A few minutes later, the barkeep returns. A stout man with a big barrel chest follows him.

"Aardo," I smile.

He circles the bar and gives me a hug. Aardo is a good man. He runs a brothel, but also lets friends looking for a quiet place use the rooms.

"A room," I whisper.

"Ah my friend," he bellows," as he straightens up. "It is good to see you." He slips me a key as he clasps my hand.

"I must go, but I wanted to see you first," I say. "I'll be back tonight."

He laughs. "I'll be waiting my friend."

I leave the Ale House and circle to the rear. The boarding brothel isn't far. There's a private entrance to every room in the building. I slip in unnoticed. There's a lot that I need to find out, but sleep comes first. The sack of gems serves as a pillow.

It's mid-evening by the time I wake. I empty the sack onto the bed and spread the gems out evenly. With the sheet pulled up, they'll go unnoticed unless someone sits on the bed. That won't happen here. I toss my old cloak on the table to ward off any unexpected intruders. No one violates privacy at Aardo's.

In Merchant's Quarter, I stop at the Cavalier Tavern, and take a small table near the bar. I eat and I listen. Young aristocrats frequent this place. They know no discretion. I almost chuckle thinking about it. I wouldn't fit in with these people anymore, even if I wasn't an outlaw. Twenty years in Common Quarter changes a man.

"I say he'll announce tomorrow," a tall fellow toting a long-sword screams at the fat knight next to him.

"And just how would you know so much stable boy? I'm one of Lord Tengrill's knights and I've heard no such rubbish."

"Well brave knight, not two hours ago, this groom just happens to have brushed the King's horse and polished his leathers."

"I'll drink to the King," the knight replies.

Their words nearly choke me. I've got to move, now. I finish my meal quickly and make haste to Common Quarter. In an ill lit and foul smelling cellar, I find the man I need.

"A dagger Rexan," I say to the young dwarf. He's fifty years old, but dwarves often live to two hundred. youngster, he's got connections.

"Fifteen hundred croats".

"Fifteen hundred? You must think I'm a fool."

"Fifteen hundred. I've got a cache that just came in from the south. Elfin steel, blessed with farie fire. The best."

"From the south?"

He smiles a curious little smile. "Dwarven folk don't kin with the elves, as you know, but the elves are coming and magic rides in their stead. The elves are going sack this city when they defeat Roland. I'm leaving by weeks end."

"Defeat? Roland has the strength of the Realm behind him. His forces number in the tens of thousands."

He frowns and lowers his gaze to the floor.

"Roland will lose."

"Lose?"

"Cromwell hasn't come to the palace."

I stand quiet, shocked by the news. Cromwell holds the largest Barony in the Realm. His forces nearly match those of the King. If Cromwell doesn't march, the other Lords will balk. They'll ride home to protect their lands.

"That's not the worst," he says. "The southern mage bears a half moon on the back of his left hand. He follows Togi, God of Black Arts."

I'm confused. "Black Arts?" I thought elven magic is pure, derived from nature."

"Most is, but not all," he replies. "Those that follow Togi make sacrifices for their power. In times of war, they collect the left arms of their victims and burn them to gain Togi's blessing. When the mage comes, this city'll be a blood bath."

An image of the woman in the wagon flashes in my mind. Dangar's words echo in my head. . . You must understand. I am not a tyrant. He and I were friends, but we were children then. Still, I have no reason to disbelieve him. I rode off with seven thousand croats worth of his gems, but I know better than to take chances.

"Rexan, I'll take two daggers."

His eyes gleam. "Three thousand croats."

Greedy little dwarf' Fifteen hundred for the pair."

"You rob me' Twenty five hundred."

"Two thousand."

He shrugs. "If I wasn't leaving town, I'd send you away empty handed thief, but under these conditions, I'll sacrifice."

I hand over my two small gem pouches.

He pulls a pair of finely crafted daggers from under a nearby counter, and holds them out, pommels facing me. When I take them, he points to a battered helmet lying on a nearby table. "Test them on that," he says.

I flip the daggers around, so that the blades face me. They feel good. Perfectly balanced. I throw them both at once. They strike the helmet side by side and sink to their hilts.

I sigh. "Impressive steel."

"The best," he says.

Back in my room, I take the gems from he bed and put them back in the sack. I review my plan. I'll make the hit in Royal Square. It's right out in the open, but it's also very predictable. The Royal entourage always enters the square in exactly the same way. All but two of the King's escorts ride to the stage with him. While the speech is given, the two escorts not at the stage wait about forty paces away in the street. The whole city understands. As long as those guards stay in the street, the citizens leave enough space for the King and his escort to leave the Square. This is done to aid the King should he need a quick escape from the Square. It will provides the perfect escape route for a bold assassin.

When the bed i5 clear of gems, I tuck a few into my tunic, take off my boots and lie down. I've got a lot of things to do by noon tomorrow.

I wake early and put on the tattered cloak. It has four leather scabbards sewn into it to conceal my daggers. I replace the two daggers hidden in the left side of the cloak with the two I bought from Rexan. I prefer to throw right handed, and don't want to waste time fumbling with the cloak should I need the second dagger. I use light twine to tie one of the original daggers to my left wrist. I cover it with the sleeve of my cloak. The twine will snap easily enough if I need the dagger. It always has before. The other dagger is used to pin the sack of gems to wall beside the door. Anyone opening the door won't find the gems unless the come into the room and closes the door. Not a very tricky hiding place, but it doesn't have to be. This is Aardo's place. I shave and cut my hair. That and a few other tricks make me look quite a bit younger.

When I leave the room, I go to Royal Square. I stroll through slowly, pretending to watch the carpenters finish the stage. The first alley way in Royal Quarter is only two hundred paces from the stage. Once I there, it's no hard task to reach Common Quarter. Satisfied, I stop at nearby ale house for a bit to eat. It's still early, but I eat quickly. The people will gather for the announcement several hours before the arrival of the King.

When I reach the Square again, there are already many people waiting. I take position about ten short paces from the stage, careful to keep near where the clear lane will be formed.

I watch the crowd and wait. All is as it should be. I stay watchful but relaxed. Two hours pass quickly as the Square fills. A fat man stops beside me as the royal entourage enters the square. There isn't time or space to work my way around him. I just have to deal with him when the time comes. Things are going to happen quickly, 50 I don't want to attract any attention right now.

Roland and his escort of Lords ride solemnly to the stage. Cromwell and several others are missing. The King dismounts and takes the stage. His Lords dismount and take their places beside him. A quiet comes over the crowd as all eyes fix on Roland.

"My people," he begins. He says a word or two more, but I don't hear. I scan the open lane. The escort has drawn up, facing away from the stage. All is perfect. I draw and throw the first dagger in a single motion.

It takes Roland in the throat. His word disappear in a splash of crimson as I smash my left forearm into the face of the fat man beside me. The weight of the dagger breaks his Jaw. I I easily knock him to the ground as I rush past.

The crowd is still as I charge into the open lane. I can feel my heart pound as I race toward the mounted escort. I'm nearly there when a leg darts out of the crowd and smashes into my shin. I roll as I fall and come up running.

A few steps later, I feel a tug on the back of my cloak. I

glance back to see an angry man in pursuit. This has to stop. I tear the dagger from my left wrist and flip it at my pursuer. It buries itself in his chest and he falls to the ground.

The horseman is in front of my now. He's still facing away. I pull out the second dagger from the left side of my cloak. With a leap, I'm on the horse and plunging the dagger into the soldier. The fine elfin blade never slows as it passes through his mail shirt and sinks into flesh. A strong kick and the horse starts running.

As I turn into the first alley, I risk a look back. The other horseman is far back, but charging my way. He's too late. I'll never be caught in these streets. Quickly and easily, I make my way across the city. The guards never stir as I saunter casually out of the south gate.

On the road south, I pass many people headed toward the city. There are many stories about the elves. None of them are good.

Near dusk on the second day, I near Dangar's camp. I tether the horse a short distance away and approach the camp slowly. Dangar is there with two others and the mule train. I circle the camp to be sure that no others are hidden nearby. When I'm satisfied, I step from cover and call to Dangar.

"I trust it is done," he says.

"It is done."

"Good."

He turns to his companions. "Pack the mules and saddle the horses."

We stand in silence and watch the men. As they finish up, Dangar motions for me to follow, and moves behind the elves. He begins to mumble under under his breath and raises his hands over his head. As the elves fall to the ground, I see a red crescent etched on the back of Dangar's hand. My dagger slips easily into his back. He dies quickly.

It has now been three months since I killed Roland. Cromwell sits on the throne. The Kings soldiers still avoid some part of Common Quarter. The elfin insurrection has fallen apart. The Red Dragon i5 still a good place to be if you need time to think. I'm there now, sitting at my usual table in the corner. Dangar was wrong when he said that I should return to the life I knew in my youth. I has been too many years and too many things have changed.

"Thaldon," a gruff voice calls.

I look up with a grin as a balding older man approaches. "Yes, Yando?"

"What kind of proprietor are you? Ever since I sold you the Dragon all you do is sit in that damn corner."

James E. McWhinney is a Pennsylvania native, born in Pittsburgh PA in 1969. As a youth, he was encouraged to pursue his talent for writing but instead, he focused his attention on aviation, in an attempt to find a stable, well paying career. He earned an Associates of Science Degree, as well as his pilot's license, graduating with honors from the Community College of Allegheny County. After that, he spent a year at the University of Pittsburgh, before transferring to Carnegie Mellon University, where he studied Professional as well as Creative Writing. At present, he is considering graduate study in Creative Writing. Eventually, James hopes to earn a living as fiction novelist.

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GEM OF THE UNIVERSE

by David Borcherding

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Woodstock Bach records his death fantasies is a small datpad he purchased en route to Yati. The palmtop computer sorts them automatically into one of three categories: Accidental Death, Murder, and Suicide. Accidental Death has the most entries (205), but Murder is a close second (199). Suicide lags far behind (45), and most of those are variations on a few themes.

The most recent entry is a Murder entry. He got the idea in the cab on the way from the downport.

MURDER 199: The chiphead that shared my taxi decides I am worth robbing. He breaks into my hotel room, and is halfway through my things when I return from dinner. Using an implanted launch pistol, he blows my heart out. I have enough time to write a last "I love you, Larrine" on the carpet, in blood.

He isn't really being fair in that one, and he knows it. The chiphead had turned out to be a pretty nice guy, after he'd gotten to know him. A little odd, but then, they all are.

His name was the first odd thing. No, his hair was the first odd thing. It was a fluid, black mass dotted with microlights, a kind of model of the universe. The tiny white illuminators were so strong that the effect stood out even in full daylight. Woodstock couldn't help but stare, and soon noticed that the chiphead was staring back.

"Like it?" he said, shaking his head and causing the lights to dance wildly.

"Sorry."

"Sorry why? For noticing? Don't you think that's why I do it? I'd be pretty dumb not to want people to notice."

Woodstock hadn't said anything. Chipheads are a dangerous lot. The synapse-inhibitors, flatliners, and other drugs they do make them unpredictable. Say the wrong thing, and they're just as likely to vape your head as laugh. Woodstock hadn't wanted to die right then, not until he was sure there was no hope left for him and Larrine.

"My name's Richard," the other said, extending a slim, pale hand. When Woodstock took it, he was surprised by its warmth. It seemed to tingle with energy, perhaps having something to do with the lights. Perhaps some sort of weapon.

He dropped the hand as soon as he introduced himself, before this stranger named Richard could up the voltage. Turning to look out the window, he told himself he would not stare.

For the remainder of the ride, they said nothing more. Then, when the taxi reached Woodstock's hotel, Richard spoke.

"Why are you here?"

Not "Thanks for letting me share the cab," or "Have a nice vacation," but the question that had been on Woodstock's mind ever since he'd left his homeworld, Galondin. And one for which he had no answer.

Remembering it, he sits on his bed and wonders what Richard had meant. Had he known what Woodstock was thinking? As far as Woodstock knows, there are no psionic implants available. He doesn't know much about cybertech, though. Cybers are illegal on Galondin.

He pushes the thoughts aside and decides to go shopping. He skips the hotel gift shop and opts for the bright lights and bright colors of the shops on the street. They line the boulevard as far as he can see. Swahla's, Honest Blodgett's, Nuclear Ned's Powerhouse Bar & Grill, Chingteh's Casino.

He starts his buying odyssey at Swahla's with a very bright Yatiin shirt. On the back, a buxom dancing girl moves in the light. Next, he purchases a holographic paperweight with Yati afloat inside and "Gem Of The Universe" engraved in gold on a fauxwood base. He hums a requiem as he spends.

SUICIDE 46: After spending all my credit, I starve to death in the streets of Yati, surrounded by bags on non-returnable souvenirs. Unless I die of pneumonia first from sleeping in the rain.

He puts on the shirt and places the paperweight in one of its wide pockets. The weight stretches the shirt a bit, but it beats carrying around a bag all day.

While buying some Yatiin scene tiffs for his wallscape back home, he asks the clerk, a cute blond named whose nameplate says "Ayram," for the name of a good restaurant.

"Sheabin's is good, and it's just around the corner," she says, smiling a goddess' smile.

"Great. When do you get off?" It's reckless, but he's got nothing to lose.

Ayram smiles again, but this time it's not so wide.

"Sorry, but I've already got two jealous husbands, and they've made it quite clear that they don't want a third."

"I don't want to marry you," Woodstock says, "I just want to take you out for dinner. Consider it a very generous tip for such efficient service."

"Here's your receipt, sir," she replies, holding out the slip. "Thanks for the offer, but I really can't."

"No problem. You change your mind, just let me know, okay?"

She nods and smiles again, and Woodstock leaves. Out on the sidewalk, he takes a deep breath of the warm, floral scented air. Overhead, the sun shines in a cloudless cobalt sky.

So I failed, he thinks. So what. I'm here to have fun and I'm not going to let it bother me.

He turns the corner, finds Sheabin's, and goes in.

Two hours later, he finds himself at the allumer table. He's convinced that he's just had the best meal of his life. The Atlantan bluecrab legs were split and heavily buttered, and the body stuffed and basted with a slightly garlicky cream sauce. Fresh bread and an exotic salad filled what little space the crab had left, and he'd washed it all down with an expensive red wine called Brutezza.

He plans on spending the rest of the night gambling, making a big strike. He needs more credit so he can spend more tomorrow. It's the only thing that makes him feel better.

There are fourteen other players at the table, making it a full game. As soon as one drops out, another quickly takes his or her place. It's not long before the seat next to Woodstock opens up, and who should fill it but Richard.

He's still wearing the outfit he had on in the cab, a black synthskin jumper that matches his hair. His carry-on bag is over his shoulder, and the only other piece of luggage he'd had in the taxi, an instrument case, is missing. Woodstock wonders why he would leave one in his hotel room, and not the other.

Richard comes to the table with a fair-sized stack of chips. Apparently, his luck has been better than Woodstock's.

"How's the luck run here?" he asks as he sits down.

"Not bad, not good." Woodstock has fewer chips than when he started, but this round seems to be going his way.

Anje, the waitress, comes around regularly with free drinks for all the players. All except Richard, that is. Woodstock suspects that she's been ordered not to serve him. He looks around and notices the pit boss staring at Richard. An icy feeling stirs his gut.

Richard doesn't notice. While the rest of the table gets hammered on their free booze, Richard stays sober and keeps winning. His chips pile up, while everyone else's dwindle. Players begin to drop out faster.

What really gets to Woodstock is that the cyber doesn't even seem to care. Sure, when things are going right, you tend not to get flustered. But there's a unnatural calm about Richard, and Woodstock suspects he'd act the same even if he'd just lost everything. It's as if it's the game that's important, the fun, rather than the money.

"I'm afraid I'm going to have to ask you to leave." The pit boss has suddenly appeared at Richard's elbow, with two large bouncers flanking him.

"Why?" Woodstock says, jumping up from his seat. "What's the problem."

"Relax, Woodstock. It's okay. I was just finishing anyway."

"Yeah, I bet you were, chip," the pit boss says. His nameplate reads Mr. Puppenase. "I bet you got a nice little program runnin' to beat this game, huh."

"No, actually I don't."

"Save it. Look, your kind ain't illegal here, but it ain't welcome, either. Now you can choose to leave on your own, or I can have Beni and Touch here escort you out."

Richard smiles, as if he's sharing an inside joke with an old friend.

"You're absolutely right," he says, and collects his chips. Woodstock collects his, too, and all five walk to the cashier's booth.

The cashier gives Woodstock his fifty credits, which he has her post to his account. As she counts through Richard's chips, Woodstock counts with her. His total is a hundred credits more than the money she hands to Richard. He starts to say this, but his friend silences him with a look and a smile.

"Thank you," Richard says, taking the cash. He peels off a fifty credit note and hands it back to her. "And this is for your trouble. Have a pleasant evening."

He turns from the booth and heads for the door, leaving Mr. Puppenase, Beni and Touch behind. Woodstock hurries after him.

MURDER 200: I am beaten to death by two huge bouncers named Beni and Touch, because Richard has hacked them off. My only crime is that I was with him.

"They chizzed you, you know," Woodstock says, once they are outside. "You should have got a hundred credits more."

"Depends on how you choose to look at it. I think I chizzed them."

"You mean you really did have a calc chip in?"

"NO!" Richard's angry tone takes Woodstock by surprise. When he continues, he is calm again.

"How else can you choose to look at that situation, and say that I robbed them? Think about it before you answer."

They walk along in silence, Richard taking in the night sky, Woodstock staring at the ground in thought.

"You know," Richard says, "the body does funny things to help us think. When we try to remember something, we look up and to the right. When we try to create something new, like trying to think of a name for something, we look up and to the left. And when we are deep in thought, we tend to look down."

"Well, I was deep in thought, until you interrupted me," Woodstock says, casting an annoyed glance at his companion. "But what's your point?"

"My point is, everybody thinks in pre-established, age-old patterns. If people look up instead of down when they are deep in thought, maybe they'll find a new way of thinking about something. If they choose to think differently, they will."

"Anyway," Woodstock shrugs, "I can't think of how you beat those guys, unless you mean that you walked out with more than you walked in with."

"Exactly!"

"Richard, everyone does that! Yatiin casinos always let the players win, so that they spend it all, and more, in the Yatiin gift shops and such. Yati subsidizes the casinos for just that reason. You don't think they kicked you out because you won too much, do you? No way! They kicked you out because you're a – "

Woodstock stops, catching himself before he actually says the words.

"I'm a what?"

"A, well, you know, a. . . "

"A what? A person?"

"No. A chiphead. Their term, not mine."

"You heard them say this?"

"No, but what did you think they meant by 'your kind'?"

"If you didn't hear them say it, it's your term."

"Richard, really, it's not."

"Doesn't matter," Richard says, his hair imitating the night sky, "because I'm not one."

"That's a good way to approach it. Refuse the label. Fight the prejudice by not being angered by it."

"No, Woodstock, you don't get it. I'm not cyberenhanced. There is no silicon in this body." As if to prove his point, the lights float up out of his hair and begin to dance in the air.

"What," Woodstock says after a moment, "are those things?"

"Just a miracle."

Woodstock stares at the dancing lights, then starts walking stiffly across the street towards a bar called Tough N' Eddie's.

"I need a drink," he calls over his shoulder, but Richard is right behind him.

Four hours later, they're in Jaeiou's Groundzero Lounge, having been kicked out of three others. Everything in the bar is chrome, and red and orange lights glare off all the surfaces. Each table is surrounded by a hush field, and can be programmed for whichever kind of music the customers desire. Woodstock and Richard have chosen nothing, so everything is silent. The only outside noise that intrudes comes when the waitress enters the field to take their order or bring them drinks.

Sitting in this haven of silence, they have talked about many things. Woodstock has learned that Richard has just come from Onyx, and is a wandering minstrel, a synthar player that plays when and where he gets the chance or the inclination. He would play now, but his instrument has been stolen.

"I was trying to explain to the desk clerk that I really had made reservations two weeks ago, and that they must have made an error. While I wasn't looking, someone walked off with my synthar."

"Did you tell the police? Did you ask the clerk if he'd seen anything?"

"She, and no she hadn't. And the police weren't very helpful either."

Woodstock knows why. Everyone on Yati thinks, as he thought, that Richard is a chiphead. In fact, Woodstock isn't sure what Richard is. After the incident in the street, they never talked about it. He needed a few drinks first, which he now has, and so he asks.

"What the hell are you, Richard?"

"I told you. A musician."

"You know what I mean."

"I'm just a person, just like you. Just like the pit boss and the cashier and the desk clerk and the police. People, every one of us."

"Except you're the only one who has dancing lights in his hair." Woodstock downs the last of his Nixx, and signals the waitress for another.

"I told you, it's just a miracle. No big deal."

"No big deal, huh. Just a miracle."

"You've got it! You really are a quick study, you know. Most people take a few lifetimes to learn the commonality of miracles." He smiles his placid smile again, the one that is starting to get on Woodstock's nerves. It's a smile that seems to say "I have a secret, and I'll only share it with you if you're nice to me."

"I've got it? I don't even know what the hell you're talking about!" He realizes he is yelling, and grins sheepishly at the waitress who's just entered the field to give him his drink.

"Look, Woodstock. Miracles are everyday things. Life is a miracle. This table is a miracle."

"How is this table a miracle?" Woodstock examines the chromed fixture. It isn't even an attractive design.

"Think about it. This table is made up of millions of molecules. Tiny little things we can't even see, and yet they are holding up this glass." He raises his glass, which has only water and a slice of Deluran candyfruit in it, and then sets it back down with a loud clink. "What gives those little things the strength to do that, hmm? Why doesn't the glass just sink right through it, like it would if this table were made of water? As a matter of fact, why doesn't it just pass right through it as if it were air? Air is made up of molecules, too."

"I dunno." Everything Richard is saying makes sense to Woodstock, but he writes it all off to the Nixx.

"Me either." He picks up the glass again, then drops it from about four inches over the table. It passes right through.

Woodstock quickly looks under the table, amazed. What is even more amazing is that the glass is just hovering in the air as firm as if it were sitting on the table.

"For that matter," Richard says, looking under the table with Woodstock, "Why does it pass through air? If a table molecules can hold it up, why can't air molecules?" He grabs the glass and sets it back on the table. This time, it stays.

"Once you start questioning the why of reality, you realize that nothing is real."

"Oh fuck," is all that Woodstock says, and lets his head fall hard against the very real table.

MURDER 201: Richard convinces me that I can pass through solid matter, and tells me to step in front of a speeding gravcab to prove it. I am so drunk, I believe I can. The gravcab reminds me that I can't.

"What is that?" Richard leans across the table to look at the datpad.

"My death diary." He shoves it across, and his friend picks it up. After reading a few entries, he shoves it back with a frown.

"Woodstock, why are you here?"

"You asked me that at the hotel."

"And you never answered."

"Ah, yes. Well, the short version is that I was dropped by a woman I planned to spend the rest of my life with." He slugs down the rest of his Nixx, and signals for yet another. He's beginning to think that Richard is right about this whole reality thing. He feels like he is floating.

"So you came here to forget her, and fantasize about death."

"No way can I forget her. We're soulmates. We're meant to be together."

"No you're not." Richard smiles again, and Woodstock fights the urge to break his teeth.

"How would you know? You don't even know her."

"If you two were soulmates, don't you think she would realize it too? Since she doesn't, you aren't."

"Oh, I forgot. You know everything."

"When you get past your pain, you'll realize it's true."

The bartender enters the hush field, bearing Woodstock's drink. He sets it down in front of Woodstock, but his eyes are locked on Richard.

"Don't you think it's about time you chummies hack out?" He's a big man, and his stance and eyes are threatening.

"Dammit, I am tired of getting thrown out of bars. My friend here is a human being, just like you and me. What the fuck is your problem?" Woodstock manages to get to his feet, but he's having trouble staying there.

The bartender looks at him, then stares at Richard again.

"I don't count cyboys as being the same as you and me."

"You know what you are?" Woodstock starts. Before he can finish, Richard stands and grabs his arm.

"We were just leaving. Sorry about the trouble."

"Trouble? You ain't seen trouble yet, pal," Woodstock shouts. The heavy paperweight in his pocket is making it difficult for him to keep his balance.

"Come on, Woodstock." Richard pulls at his friend's arm.

"Better listen to your chum, cyberlover." The bartender takes a menacing step towards them.

"Cyberlover? You overdeveloped, glandular freak. You wouldn't know a true implant from a. . . a. . . "

"Come on, Woodstock."

"From your own, steroid-shrunken willy!" Woodstock grins broadly and looks at Richard, proud that he is able to finish the insult in such a grand manner. When he looks back, it's just in time to see the fist.

The next thing he knows, he's in the dark. At first, he thinks he's dead. Then he feels the hand that is still on his shoulder.

"Richard?" He looks over, and sees the lights in his friend's hair. "Where are we? Why does it smell so bad?"

"We're in the sewer below the bar." That answers both questions.

Woodstock looks down and sees nothing. He does, however, begin to feel the slippery ooze soaking through his shoes and pants legs.

"How?"

"Well, it's the funniest thing. Remember our talk about molecules before? Seems they decided not to hold us up at just the right time."

Woodstock starts chuckling and slowly builds into a full-scale guffaw. Soon Richard joins in, and they laugh together until the sewer is filled with their echoes.

He wakes up on the steps of The Night Fantastique, a local pleasure palace. Someone is shaking him gently, telling him he has to leave. He sits up, groggy but not hung over. Every detail of the previous night is clear in his head. Every word spoken still echoes as if it's just been said.

He searches his pockets to make sure everything is still there. Next to the paperweight, he finds a folded napkin.

It was a pleasure to spend the evening with you. I am sorry we did not get the chance to finish our conversation, but the authorities insist that I leave. I hope we got far enough along for you to figure the rest out. I am sure we will meet again, if we choose to. Until then, take care.

-R

Woodstock stares at it for a moment, then re-folds it and places it back in his pocket. He hails a cab and takes it back to his hotel.

After a quick pass through the sonic shower, he packs and touches the comm link.

"Front desk," says a polite, female voice.

"This is room 1342. I will be checking out immediately. Could you please send someone up for my bags?"

"But Mr. Bach, you are still registered for five more days."

"And I imagine you'll credit my account for that, won't you?"

"If you choose."

"I do. Thank you." He touches the link again and silences it.

Sitting down at the room's data terminal, he brings up the hourly departure schedule for the starport. There's a ship going back to Galondin, one heading for Onyx, and a third heading for Etherea, one of the outermost planets of the Imperium. He logs a ticket for Etherea as the porter arrives for his bags.

On the way to the starport, the gravcab passes Swahla's. Something in the window catches Woodstock's eye, and he has the taxi stop.

"How much for the synthar in the window?" he asks the clerk. It is a man this time, perhaps one of Ayram's jealous husbands.

"A fine instrument, sir. Not many – "

"Look, I'm in a hurry. The meter's running on the cab there. How much?"

"Five hundred credits."

He crosses to the window, lifts the synthar and its case out of the display.

"It's used. See, there's a custom's sticker still on the case." And sure enough, it's the Onyx Customs Bureau. "I'll give you three hundred, that's all. No dicking. Like I said, my meter's running."

The clerk nods, and Woodstock hands him his credit chip. He also gives him the paperweight.

"What's this?" The clerk eyes it with suspicion.

"Gem of the Universe. I'm returning it. It's flawed."

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THE HARRISON CHAPTERS
Chapter 10

by Jim Vassilakos

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"Well?"

Vlep crossed the front room again. The flat was still in chaos, furniture and personal belongings scattered haphazardly, but he was sure it was not because of the quarry. Sule stood in the doorway, sharp eyes transfixed upon her servant as soft, blue rays of predawn light fell silently along her icy, white mane. Vlep ignored her while she stood there contaminating the mental space with frustration.

Frustration, definitely, and yet there was something underneath it, some sort of satisfaction.

"Nothing?!"

He shook his head, "It is as I told you before."

"You ran us into a dead end, before."

Vlep turned, cautiously. Her patience was like a strip of rubber ready to snap.

"Is it my fault that your quarry decided to go to the Runyaelin during the ceremony of sacrifice? How am I supposed to trace him from such a place of death?"

"No excuses, psyche. I need information now."

He shrugged. She understood very little about the second sight. Explaining the difficulties would earn few favors. He decided to shovel out the few answers he had rather than bank on her dwindling hope.

"I will be plain Sule. I don't think this mess was caused by the quarry."

"You said Harrison was here."

"He was. I am certain of it. But I don't believe he did this."

"Why didn't you tell me this before.

"I was not sure before," he lied. "Beside, would you have believed me?"

"Come here, Vlep. . . closer."

She smacked the sheepish grin off his face before he even noticed her hand in motion. By the sting it left, he guessed that there would be blisters.

"When you have permission to think, I'll let you know. Until then you do as you're told. Clear?"

"Ah, very," he replied, surprised that he hadn't seen it coming.

"Who is this person who is with Harrison?"

"I don't know. A man, I think."

"And he didn't follow Harrison to the Runyaelin?"

Vlep shook his head, "I'm not sure. I was keying on Harrison only."

"Get me answers," Sule commanded, stepping back from the doorway.

Vlep rubbed the side of his face, looking again around the flat.

"He was looking for something."

"Obviously. Did he find it?"

Vlep stepped into the hallway, crossing the threshold into the bedroom. The impressions were mixed and strong as before.

"The girl Harrison was with. . . it is difficult to see past her."

Red twill hung silent in the still morning air. Somewhere up above, a bird was singing.

"Try harder, Vlep."

He put his hand on the window sill. A mixture of anxiety upon anxiety, fresh and unpolluted. Vlep crossed back to the front door, this time almost running.

"What is it?"

Outside, the sidewalk lay empty except for the clutter of dead leaves and the white, government car.

"What is it, Vlep?"

"He sees something, yet it isn't there."

"What does he see?"

He descended the steps, looking at the pavement directly in front of the flat. From the corner of his eye, he could see an alley cat cross the sidewalk and hide underneath the car, its two occupants oblivious to the intrusion, and in the back of his mind he heard the whine of a chemical engine.

"Vlep!"

Vlep felt his arm extending to point down the street, "He was running from something."

"Get in the car. You're going to take us where he went."

"No. I have to be on foot."

"Okay. Come people! Vlep's taking us for a walk."

Soft voices crossed within the fog like knotted strands of hair, pulling taut and then snapping as they spiraled and blurred beyond recognition. The lumpy terrain seemed familiar, but the wispy, white haze swirled his recollection into a befuddled mass of disarranged static. Below, a small girl with long, sandy hair and wide, hazel eyes stood screaming, her voice lost within the vacant space between. Then the old city rose cautiously to its feet, a museum of looming statues, gargantuan and hollow, all abandoned except for the rush of tattered echoes, voices of bogeymen, or so he was told.

He'd occasionally see them, their skin drab and mottled. They kept a distance, eyes webbed with curiosity, daring to look but not to touch as he snapped images like a tourist at the zoo. Sometimes he pretended to be some famous archeologist searching for relics of the past, sneaking home later to bury his trophies before anyone should discovered his absence. The bogey-people didn't seem to mind. They would sometimes even leave him gifts which he would collect with a gravitic net and boil before handling.

They had only become angry once, and then they poured out enough anger to sate the frustration of an entire lifetime. Mobs of them had stormed the Naval Hospital, the one safe place in the old city or barrens as it became known. The underground routes to the suburbs were caved-in, and the overland barriers were laced with mines. After the battle, the hospital stood alone, the buildings around it reduced to rubble by explosive detonations. Hours were counted within by the number of corpses incinerated on the 40th floor. Volunteers, they were called.

"Put on the slickersuit, or you'll be next," his father had warned. Mike spent a week just learning how to secure the plastic helmet. Righty-tighty... clip, tighten, tie... swivel, clip, tighten, tie, check. Or was it tighten, clip? "My son, the space cadet." He accepted his father's recognition with a sense of accomplishment, holding the memory with a youthful pride which bordered on the pompous. A year would pass before he learned that the comment wasn't meant as a compliment.

He cheeks wore a rosy hue that day, somewhat brighter than the burnt brown of the doctor's whose thick, blue veins and patchy tufts of white hair blew back and forth in the ventilating stink. Dirty beads of perspiration glistened on his brows, flowing in trickles from the wrinkles between his eyes, as he stacked small metallic cylinders into the small, silver box.

"Here boy," he offered in a soft but desperate voice. "Take this to your mother. And watch yourself while you're out there. Lei got away; crafty, little runt."

Outside, sunbeams bathed the asphalt in a bellowing heat, and the dust of the dead fell about him like a summer shower, clogging the filter as he unfastened the helmet and gulped for air. The buildings stood about him in various states of disrepair, the tall communications tower rising like a lone palm tree amidst a rocky and deserted beach. Memories of her running along the flat, wet sands sparked to mind. She'd been crying. Her brother destroyed the house she'd built for the small, white, kitten crabs. He couldn't remember why.

Somewhere in the distance he heard her voice, sweat accumulating in his eyebrows as he searched the hillside. She stood near the top beside the old cathedral, its tall, stained-glass windows, once polished and beautiful before people came and painted graffiti on the saints. Now, instead of reading from scrolls, they played long violins and wore red and black headbands. The big guy in the dome window no longer smiled, and his chalice and loaf were replaced with a straight-backed snake and a bulging phallus.

They'd visited it several times. The few who attended sat in sparse clusters, their moods somber and suspicious. She'd once gone wandering, greeting people as they came in. His father grabbed her by the shoulder and put her over his knee. Later she asked him why, but he wouldn't explain. He just looked up at the dome, muttering something under his breath.

"Does Jesus sing, Daddy?"

"He snaps the sticks, sweetheart. Can you hear him?"

They never went back after that, but his mother told them stories about how people used to pray there, especially after what had happened. He didn't understand what she meant by praying, but it seemed like a serious business. It had something to do with the guys in the windows. She often showed him her favorite.

"Michael!?"

She started running down the hill, her bony legs quaking with each hop until a moist patch suddenly gave way and she blundered into the thickets, her legs falling away from underneath, hurtling her into the dense brush below. He felt a cold lump of cotton form in his throat, stealing his voice. Then she crawled out, tears streaming down her cheeks as patches of blood showed through the knees of her white stockings.

"Mike, don't leave me. I'm afraid."

A shaft of stark red cascaded from the dome, its bright, pulsing heat joining with the perspiration in his brows. Together, they splashed into his eyes, blinding him within in a warm veil of brine. For a moment he was aware only of the sun's broad cymbals clashing on his skull and of his pounding heartbeat and the sprinting sound of his feet touching the ground and leaving again in quick succession.

"Michael!"

The pounding grew louder, like a sledgehammer crushing a block of marble, all the splinters shattering in all different directions, jumping out at people, bodies imploding in a maelstrom of hydrogen and fire, and then the blurry ground rising as he skidded and slid down the loamy slope, skipping over brambles and thrush as large stones protruded from the path to strike him. A dew-laden carpet of grass and twigs lay before his feet, the small, crooked trees emerging sporadically from the dense brush as birds scattered from their branches, the squashing noise of his sprint splashing dirty water toward either side.

He'd dropped the metal box somewhere far behind and kept running until her wails were only a thin whisper in the distance, the sound reverberating against the walls of his conscience, a texture soft and familiar but which he could never seem to reach.

"Namarie, nilimo, ve firnuvan hior."

And then it faded until it was too quiet to distinguish as more than random noise.

"Mike..."

His whole body tingled, a fluttering sensation as though he were chopped into pieces and frozen. He tried to move his fingers, yet his hands couldn't find them, nor could his arms find his hands, and so forth, all the way to his spirit, unshackled and floating free, ready to draw away with the gentle barrens wind.

"Son of a bitch is giving up... five more cc's."

"C'mon Mike, pull out...."

A thin man stood over him, watching Mike as though he were some spectacle at a freak show. Mike imagined the tall spokes jutting from his skull to be the long fronds of a palm, it's stalk swaying in the coastal wind. Thin, brown eyebrows danced like frolicking caterpillars, the soft eyes beneath shimmering a placid blue.

"Did you hear me? Five more!"

"Got it. . . ."

With the sudden jolt in pulse-rate, Mike's fingers gripped at the null field for something to squeeze.

"Well. . . that worked. . . ."

Johanes pulled back the syringe as the convulsions began, a rattling of bones against flesh all suspended in air.

"Is he gonna make it?"

"Of course he will. . . although. . ."

"Although?"

"What's left when he gets back. . . ." Spokes shrugged his shoulders apathetically, "Unhook him."

Beneath a canopy of skull, thin fibers pulled taunt and disappeared, the throbbing hum echoing into the silence of an invisible rhyme. Johanes quickly cleaned the connections before replacing their caps, and Spokes bent over Mike, checking the pupil reflex with a bright penlight.

"How ya feeling, Harrison?"

Mike felt the grid solidify as he involuntarily rotated toward the cheery voice. His eyes overcompensated for the distance making the figured blur in and out of focus, and he could hear a steady pounding in his head. Spokes slapped him on the cheek and watched as the sensation tingled slowly across the gatherer's face.

"Huh?"

"You need to talk to me, Harrison. How many fingers do I have up?"

"Uh. . . three."

"Excellent. You don't mind if I check out a few reflexes, do you?" A crisp bolt of electricity arced from somewhere above, its touch like icy fire upon his forehead. Mike winced at the shock.

"Good. Now, try saying something intelligent for us."

Mike paused, finally blurting out the first thing that came to mind: "Where am I?"

Spokes beamed, apparently impressed.

"Tyberian compound. How much do you remember?"

Mike pictured Vilya sitting under the ventilation shaft, her dark hair shuffling gently in the damp current. From the corner of his vision he could barely discern the outline of her shadow amidst the yellow rays of sunshine which scattered evenly through an open doorway and onto the cold cement floor. All the while Spokes kept trying to make conversation, threatening to test a few more reflexes if Mike didn't mumble a response every so often.

"You folding up on me, Harrison?"

Mike yanked his head to the side but the field re-solidified, closing him within a tight bubble of gravitational force. Spokes, looking vaguely apologetic, readjusted the controls as the field gently settled Mike to the floor.

The shadow and a pair of legs crossed the chamber in synchronous step, finally meeting like twin V's at a pair of quagga-hide loafers beside the bio-monitor's tall, metallic frame. Mike watched his own pulse rate in the electronic display for several seconds before he realized that it matched the faint pounding noise in his head. A pair of electronic pinchers still wavered carelessly in the gravitic null. The densest objects were always the last to fall due to over-compensation on the part of the computer. Johanes snatched them on their slow descent as he watched Spokes unplug the inertial modules. Then he looked toward Mike, his sweaty face the color of a rotten egg.

"Anybody home in there?"

Mike considered the question carefully, but Johanes seemed impatient for a response.

"What's the matter? Can't he understand?"

"Of course he understands; he's just a little whomped."

Spokes finished stowing the equipment and turned around, a white plastic tube in one hand and a pair of silicon adapters in the other. He knelt down beside Mike, cautiously extracting a thread of optifiber from the tube and uncapping two of the jack's on Mike's skull.

"This is going to feel sorta funny, but we figure it's better to zap you while you're still dead to the world."

Spokes worked both ends of the thread into the adapters, finally plugging them into Mike's skull so that the optifiber seemed to emerge at one point and sink back at another. Mike felt a tingling sensation within his joints which spread along his skin as Spokes sat back to admire his handiwork. The tingling slowly grew into a strange, blazing sort of itch, as though hundreds of electrical spiders were crawling within his stomach, head, and limbs. Spokes and Johanes held him down as the floor seemed to wrap itself around his body in a vain attempt to extinguish the fire. Johanes was talking in a worried tone, but Spokes kept shaking his head as if everything was normal.

Mike listened to the sound of the voices, finally accepting the burning sensation which swept back and forth along his spine and through his legs like the icy Aeluin on the gentle, sloping shores beside Erfalas. Then, it slowly began to transform itself into a numbing, almost paralytic massage, the tingling returning, and the entire series of sensations beginning anew and repeating, over and over. After more iterations than he cared to count, Mike noticed that the familiar hands which held him down during the burning periods had mysteriously disappeared. He waited for awhile to see if they would return, finally observing that the yellow rays were also gone, and the room was bathed in dim blue and pink, most of it generated by the bio-monitor's video display and small glowbeads scattered about the walls.

Reaching to his head almost instinctively, he carefully unscrewed the adapters, allowing the sensations to leave him like a decent lover: sweaty, sore and thirsty. A sluice-stick lay conscientiously beside him on the floor, and he chewed it open and sucked out the syrupy contents while righting himself into a sitting position. Something sharp bumped into his head, and he crouched back down, squinting toward the ceiling. A flimsi-leaf seemed to dangle in mid-air, "try me" scrawled across it

in dim, glowing pink. Mike tugged it free from two long black cords which hung from one of the many ceiling cables, curling it and himself into a tight ball. The cold cement felt strangely comforting, the wet, sticky sluice still coating his numb lips as he watched the cords swing gently back and forth, beckoning in the dim light.

He reached toward them, propping himself up with one elbow as he tugged himself back into a sitting position. Mike examined them, cautiously, the dim pink light changing in intensity as the flimsi slowly stretched itself out. The cords ended in adapters not unlike those he had recently unscrewed. Shrugging, he screwed the new ones into where they seemed to fit. At first he could just hear voices, but from the shadows around him, ghosts seemed to emerge.

"Well look who's here."

"Hey, Harrison. How ya feeling?"

"Who is he?"

"Must be a novice. He doesn't seem to be very talkative."

Mike felt a sudden jolt of static like an electric slap across his senses.

"Hey, cut it out. He's my guest."

"Sorry."

"Hey Mike. That was pretty quick. You okay?"

"Spokes?" Mike gulped down, blinking his eyes to refocus. It didn't seem to matter whether his eyes were open or closed. They were still there, all the same.

"Yeah, it's me. Cecil's here too."

"Hi there, little one."

Cecil's image seemed to have yellow eyes, shining faintly through an acidic smog like the sun on Tyber. Mike nodded, still contemplating whether or not to tear the twin cords from his skull.

"You seem a little uneasy."

Mike shrugged, "I've having a weird day."

"I zapped him after we installed his output," Spokes explained.

"So soon?!" The yellow eyes flared brightly.

"Easy Cecil. Johanes said they were in a hurry."

The eyes dulled and tilted slightly.

"So how did you like the jitters, Michael?"

Mike frowned, "What's he talking about?"

"Technical stuff. In order to stick in the outputs, we have to go all the way to the amygdala, and that means that we have to get close to the hippocampus."

"The butcher speaks." It was a voice from the crowd.

"Shut-up; I didn't do him," Spokes retaliated.

"I'm lost," Mike confessed.

"Whenever you go that deep, anything can happen. The mind has a tendency to flip-out sometimes. We talked about it before the operation."

"We did?"

"Yeah. You don't remember, but we did. That's another problem with getting too close to the hippocampus. It tends to scramble short-term memory."

"The last thing I can remember it talking to Johanes."

"He brought you in this morning. We took you to the doc."

Yellow eyes seemed to dance in circles.

"The doc?"

"The butcher," Cecil interrupted. "I felt that I still owed you a favor."

"Some favor," Mike mumbled, except that his voice carried across the ether loud and clear, much to the amusement of several electronic loiterers. Even Spokes seemed to get a good snort out of it. Then he turned serious, as though perfectly able to jump from one emotion to the other without crossing the intervening space.

"It was time to join the club, Mike."

"Is that why you're helping me now? Because you wanted a new member for your sick society?"

"No, actually I'm getting paid."

"Johanes?"

"Yep."

"So where's he been while I've been twitching on the floor all day?"

Mike heard a few more snorts, exact replicas of the earlier ones, except this time some vague maniacal laughter seemed to hover in the distance, yellow eyes swirling excitedly.

"You can stop talking with your mouth now, Harrison. Everybody can hear you. Use your head. Just look at me and focus."

"Like this?!"

"Hey. . . ."

"What were you doing to me today, Spokes?!"

"What are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about the funny feeling you said I'd have. Can you see how much I'm laughing?!"

Mike felt an on-rush of static block the way between them. Cecil stopped laughing and stared intently.

"What are you two fighting about?"

"He's pissed 'cause I zapped him," Spokes confided.

The yellow eyes nodded, knowingly.

"It had to happen eventually, old friend. Spokes let your mind get to know itself. Auto-feedback was all it was. The pathways have to build-up mental calluses, and you have to learn to deal with pain. Spokes here is surprised you came out as quickly as you did. For many people, it takes much longer."

Mike straightened, "I don't understand."

"Johanes wants you to go into the dodec," Spokes interrupted. "If it tries to nail you in any way, the only chance you're going to have is if you have some resistance. You understand?"

"No."

"Well don't worry about it. It was for your own good."

"Where is Johanes, and where is the dodec?"

"He went back to the Arien Mansion. He took the dodec with him, Mike."

"Shit. Where are you?"

"At the Sintrivani."

"You mean you guys got done with me and just left me here to rot?"

Spokes sort of shook his head and nodded at the same time, "Johanes said that ISIS has some psyche bloodhound sniffing your trail but hard. He went for help to smear the scent, but

neither of us are yearning to be around you right now. Is that so hard to understand?"

"I've heard enough."

"Johanes said he'd be coming back for you, so don't go any. . . "

Mike unscrewed the cords from his jacks and watched the electric apparitions evaporate into darkness as graciously as they had appeared. Outside, a chilly breeze flapped across the streets, lifting loose dirt and leaves into the sky and inducing the hairs on his bare chest to prickle and tense in rows. With a fuzzy warm ambience enshrouding his senses, he ambled along the side of the road, waving down a taxi before the main gates.

"Where to?"

The driver was middle-aged, his sparse, graying hair combed straight back, eyes sunken and tired in the rear-view mirror. Mike dipped his hands into his pockets, the emptiness sparking an image of Cecil's money in a pool of blood. Sighing, he mumbled an apology and shuffled himself out of the car.

"Is okay. Where you want to go?"

"I'm broke."

"Get in."

The driver opened the front door to prove his sincerity, and Mike climbed in, unsure whether to thank him or just do as he was told, and the driver looked sympathetic.

"You know where you're going?"

"Erfalas."

Mike felt his back and shoulders affix themselves to the plastic seat covers, a sticky noise resulting every time the car hit a bump in the road. The driver either didn't notice, didn't mind, or was just being polite.

"So what the name of you?"

"Michael; my friends call me Mike. You?"

"Pateras; my friends call me Pat," he qualified with a smirk.

"Why the charity?"

"You look like you need it. You know the output of you bleeds?"

Mike reached to his skull, withdrawing a smear of pasty orange puss.

"Here, use this."

"A towel?"

"Hitch-hiker must never forget it."

Mike draped it over his head, catching the ullage as it tried to drip down his neck. The rest began to dry into a sticky crust.

"The daughter of me was a chiphead. She tell me which is input and which is output. That all I know."

"She was a chiphead? What is she now?"

The man half smiled, half winced. He dug out his wallet and extracted the image plate. Mike leafed through those in memory, several of his little girl, first as a baby and finally as a teenager with all the years in between. The last one showed a bald kid in a hospital bed.

"They burn out head of her, you know. She not know which way was up."

Mike handed back the plate.

Erfalas was cold and windy, and the driver offered him the towel.

"What have I need of it? Is blood of you. You clean, yes?"

"Yeah. Thanks for the ride."

He stood, watching, as the tail-lights ebbed into the distance. The beach was soft and sandy, and moonlight sparked along the watery horizon, however, the hooks on the cliffs were no longer to be seen. Only rarely would one emerge from the pounding waves, and then it would sparkle like a diamond across the dim, lavender seaside.

Mike winced as the cold water stung his scalp and the bleeding renewed. Though he couldn't smell any salt, the nerves around the wound told him that some was there. He finally staggered out of the water, throwing the towel around his body as he curled up between two tall rocks. The cold breeze continued to blow airy waves of fine white dust over his still form. Sticking to his skin, the tiny particles bonded together in the darkness and slowly dried until he found himself wearing clothing made of sand that cracked and flaked away when he shifted in half-slumber.

Faint violet rays warily peeked over the eastern horizon, glinting across the smooth, narrow stretch of sand which teased the incoming waves. Beneath the noise of water grasping toward shore, Mike heard the distant gurgle of a chemical engine. At first, he thought it was the final illusory fragment of a dream, but the sound grew steadily, until it resided at the top of the cliff where Vilya had shown him the eyehooks and so splendidly demonstrated their use. Several people were climbing out of a white, government car, each peering toward the dim violet horizon. Half-buried by the sand, Mike watched them from his shadowy lair between the two tall rocks. He tried to make out their features in the faint, shifting light, but it was difficult even to count them. Then he glimpsed the white mane, its owner allowing the breeze's gentle tendrils to reshuffle her hair to its own liking, and for a silent moment his eyes widened with fear.

Jim Vassilakos (jimv@ucrmath.ucr.edu) just graduated from UCR with an MBA. In between responding to employment advertisements and attending Job Fairs, he DM's a hearty group of dormies and wonders how he's going to finish Harrison off once and for all. Judging his protagionist's current situation, he may not have to wonder for very long.

JOHNNY APPLESEED

by Curtis Yarvin

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It's early morning when I hit the Tappan Zee. The alchemy of sunrise and water turns the Hudson to gold, but the bridge is showing its years, rusty and snaggletoothed. A few suspension cables have rotted through, cut low to sway ominously in the wind, or high to hunch over and dangle trawling the shining river, gilt v-wakes marking empty steel-bristled hooks thirty feet under, hoping for a bite from... what? What would bite on such a lure? Perhaps the old mills of Albany, dead forty years before the last collapse, have moldered alive, metal husks slipping into the upper Hudson, revived and evolved by the cold rapids until a new sort of salmon runs again to the sea: Jacquard-loom gills, die-cast scales, firepump heart and bandsaw jaws. I'd like to meet one someday, we could swap notes... ah, hell, I'm an old man. Forgive my meanderings. Anyway the bridge looks sound enough, so I cross.

Someone has burned the tollbooths on the other side. Fried the fuckers in their own juices. Always wanted to try that. An incurable pyromaniac and I don't think I want to be cured, either. I pick my way through the blackened steel bones. I'm getting a bit tired, but persuade myself to scramble up one of the high granite hills on the far side. I stumble through groves of sumac, dogwood, patches of poison ivy, starting to wonder if I'll make it to the top. Falling asleep would be bad; I'm on the shady side of the mountain. Then all of a sudden a steep earth bank, a clump of pines, a glimpse of blue sky, and the summit. A patch of bare rocks. Beautiful. I stand on the highest rock and gaze out over New Jersey, the rising sun in my eyes.

New Jersey. Butt of a million asphalt jokes. New Jersey. "What exit?" New Jersey. "Lay-deez an' gentlemen, Da Toxic Sludge State." New Jersey. "Why do all the trees in New York bend south? 'Cause New Jersey sucks." New Jersey. "Where even the skunks wear gas masks."

But, seeing it now, I can taste the old spirit of the land, long flat cattail marshes alive with turtles and blackbirds and muskrats, thick forests of tulip and maple swaying skeletal in the winter wind and bursting out green with the sweet spring breeze, these weary granite mountains, soft and round with age, waiting patiently to see the holocaust through. So it was not so long ago, and so it will be again. Soon.

The land is healing fast, now. Old smokestacks line the horizon, but more than a few are crumbling, broken in half or festooned with clinging ivy. I pull out binoculars and focus, morbidly, on the nearest factory. It looks like a refinery. Alive, it was a monstrosity, a belching metal beast settled like a queen ant to sprawl and spawn. Poison its food, poison its blood, poison its dung. But, dead, it has a certain grandeur to it. Difficult to explain; think perhaps of a young man, dissolute, cheeks reddened and belly padded with beer, wispy blond hair and a smug grin and the smell of cheap aftershave. Not a beautiful object, seen for what it is. Leave it out in the desert for a few months, and like grape juice it undergoes an miraculous transformation, becoming an intricate palace of ivory, a maze of clean spars and beams and smooth hollow places lying jumbled on the hot dry sand. These relics of Hoboken are the same.

It must be almost ten in the morning by now, and rationality reminds me I won't make much progress tonight unless I charge up. Normally I find a nice wide highway to bask on like a snake in the sun, but the bare mountaintop is good enough. I spread out the solar blanket, plug in, and drift away on a nice flat rock.

Late in the afternoon I hit the highway again. Walking, of course. You can go a long way walking. Slap, thud, slap, thud, four miles an hour, forty miles a day and my those miles do add up. Beats those old diesel-hounds any day. You just can't appreciate a continent in a car; it's too small. The water turns you around every few days. You get frustrated and settle down in a concrete box and die. The Gypsies died out when they changed their Conestogas for Winnebagos. They thought they could master the machine, but the machine mastered them, and they ended up just another tribe of welfare Indians on the wrong side of the tracks. But me? I'll be walking around for quite a few years yet. Planning on seeing the Amazon and the Andes this winter; maybe Europe next summer.

As the sun is setting I spot a column of smoke a few hundred yards off the road. Worth investigating. A narrow overgrown path leads off the shoulder through the trees. I take it. A few minutes of mud and brambles and I come into a little dell in the bend of a stream. Tiny cottage on the hillside and an old woman working a sun-dappled cornfield hardly the size of a healthy rug. She sees me. Pauses a second in surprise, then yells with joy. "Young man!"

I think of the Holy Roman Empire.

She runs over and hits me with a fierce hug. "So they've done it then! Wonderful." Her face is a cracked dark-brown mudpie, her eyes are burnt charcoal, her body is short and squat, but she is beautiful. Hard not to be, these days. Society used to let its old dry into machines - tv-watching machines, gossip machines, bridge machines - but society is a thing of the past. To be old and survive today you have to be tough as nails and sweet as butter. She looks it. "Come inside and have a beer."

I decline the beer, obviously from a shrinking stash of ancient treasure, but we go inside and talk for a while. She wants to

know where I'm from. My story: a research group at Yale kept on working for a while after the collapse and found the cure. Now they have a little village going and they're sending people out to see what's left. It's not a very good story but it's believable. Though hardly uplifting. The world repopulated by roving tribes of shiny-shoed silk-tied snotheaded Yalelies? I think I'll stick with the apocalypse, thank you.

She seems happy enough with it, though, and tells me her story. Born in '08, worked as a bank manager, married and widowed. When the bank closed she found a good patch of soil, bought some seed corn, and gave what was left of civilization its walking papers. Good instincts. We talk some more and she offers to let me spend the night. (On the couch, smartass.) I'd normally travel, but time is long and I don't see any reason not to accept.

After she's asleep I stop pretending to be and explore the place. Finding: a small barn for a nonexistent goat. That cornfield, which doesn't look big enough to support a full-grown chicken let alone a person. A root cellar with a few forlorn cans of green beans heaped at the far end. A trash heap with the rusting shells of what looks like enough cans to have filled the cellar. I go back inside and watch her sleep. She's smiling faintly.

She's not going to make it through the winter. This is clear. And it won't be a pretty death, not at all. A person should die happy.

The flickering red glow casts long shadows on the brambles. The path is still muddy. The Indians had it right: destruction and resurrection are one and the same. Ash is the finest fertilizer around.

In the morning I have a less pleasant experience. Hiking down the Garden State, the sky grayish-blue but the trees still blocking the sun, I get ambushed. The hollow sthick-thwock of a pump shotgun being cocked:

"Freeze, motherfucker, put your hands on your head and turn around slowly."

A crisp, spry old voice. Bet he heard that line on TV thirty years ago, been practicing it ever since. I turn around, and a man steps out of the woods. He's eighty-five if he's a day, but he's standing about twenty feet away with a big 12-gauge, and looks like he knows how to use it.

An uncertain pause, then... "Ha! Mitsui eighty-four-C! Didn't know they had any of those left anymore. Look, pig, I know exactly what you're riding there and I know this gun will blow pieces of your nice little toy all over my fucking cornfield, so don't try anythng funny, right? Okay. So who are you? Who's riding that thing?"

"Nobody. I'm autonomous."

The geezer's hands make pumping movements with the shotgun. "What the fuck, pig, you think I'm stupid? Huh? You trying to fuck with my head? That's bullshit, I know it's bullshit and you know it's bullshit, and if you give me any more bullshit I'll blow your brains out through your back. You on extended recon? Got your recharge blanket?"

"Yes."

"Take it out - slowly - and toss it at my feet."

I spin the small bundle as I throw it at him, hard. The air catches the crumpled sheet of silvery film and exploded it to float suspended between us for a moment, blocking his view. The sudden beat of my feet on the pavement, dart left spin and roll, a huge hollow boom, the impact of bodies, and he's on the ground and I have his gun. There's a fist-sized hole in my blanket but it'll still work. I point the gun at him.

"Shit," and he's crying, long racking sobs. "Ah, shit. Christ, I'm sorry, I wouldn't have done it but the arthritis has been acting up something awful lately, my joints freeze up and I can't tend the corn, I don't know if I'll have enough to make it through the winter... but I used to be a cop, still have an old Mitsui controller in the garage, and when I saw you, well, it was like a fucking dream come true." He starts to cry again. "Please don't hurt me, okay? I didn't mean no harm."

"Calm down, old man, why would I hurt you? Let's go sit down in the shade, I'll tell you a story." I keep the gun pointed at him as we walk, and make sure he sits down first.

Statistics teaches us to see the work of prophets as mere chance. Failure was forgotten and success remembered, and so the diviners of old and the pundits of my day earned my keep. Yet it often seems, looking backward, as though they were even worse than that, as though a veil of confusion barred them from the obvious course of history. Prophets had been predicting the Apocalypse for millennia; it seems inconceivable that all of them could have missed the mark. But so it goes.

When I was young, in the Eighties, we were told the world would end in atomic Armageddon; I practiced my own version of the old duck-and-cover, rolling and falling at the flash in my window to be safe under my bed before the blast wave hit. In the Nineties, it was environmental catastrophe; if we refused to mend our foolish ways, we would all boil, drown, freeze, or die of cancer, depending on the latest study. I spent an abominably tedious summer working in an inner-city recycling plant. The Zeros set us quivering in fear of deadly bioengineered plagues, escaped from some latter-day Strangelove's skunkworks lab or set loose by diabolical terrorists; we'd be merrily strolling down the street and suddenly everyone would burst out in buboes and cysts and cancers and die oozing loathsome fluids. I bought a designer gas mask, a garish Hawaiian style festooned with parrots and flowers and mutant fruit, and a little ring on the bottom to clip a tie on. Whether it would have actually done any good is unlikely; anyway the things went out of fashion in months. We trusted Fate and went on with our lives. The end of the world had gotten a bit old.

When the apocalypse did finally come, there was nothing exciting about it. I got a bad cold. A lot of sneezing and sniffling for a couple days. Pretty much everyone came down with it. When we found out it was an engineered sterility virus, that everyone on the planet was permanently infertile... I don't know, it was so long ago and I don't really remember much from those days. Nobody went crazy, anyway. We assumed the scientists would cure it soon, and then we could all go on breeding, la di da.

The years went by and it didn't happen. After a while, people realized that it wasn't going to, that the technical problems were intractable within the lifetime of the current generation, but the truth's gradual advance gave the situation a relaxed normalcy.

There was nothing violent about it; nobody was being killed in the streets, nobody was starving, even the criminals were getting old and settling down. The fade of civilization was an occasional human-interest story on TV.

Eventually the population grew too low to support a viable economy, and civilization more or less collapsed. But it was a soft collapse; no riots and barricades in the streets, just a load of old geezers dying as much from malaise as starvation. The tough ones moved to the countryside and stayed alive on small farms.

I was running a private bioengineering research facility, up in Vermont, for Tony Petrovic. The man who'd made a billion in solar power and retired at forty to become a full-time professional nutcase. He had us working on a technique to transfer the human mind from the brain into a computer. Well, what can I say? It was bullshit. Utterly impossible. But God, Petrovic raved about it. You couldn't hold a conversation with the man without getting a spew about mechanical resurrection and psychic transfiguration of the soul and all that. He was paying good money, too. So I hired a few neuroengineers and computer types and we more or less just fooled around all-expenses-paid. No life for the ambitious, but it was fun enough.

Petrovic died in '51. We kept working on the transfer project. Because he'd left a hefty endowment, because we'd made a few actual advances, but mostly from sheer inertia; there was nothing else worth doing. After things finally collapsed we turned our lawn into a cornfield and kept going; by this time we'd actually started to make real progress. In '70 we broke through. We had some old Mitsui remote-controlled androids, designed for undercover police work, refitted with the last generation of Neimann neuroprocessors, and a jury-rigged transfer scanner. We'd tested the latter on a dog, and it had seemed to work, but you can't tell much from a barking android and nobody was taking bets on it.

By then I was ninety and going senile. Did I want to be the first one through, or did the younger scientists just draft me as a guinea pig? Hard to say; maybe it was both. My memories of those days are cloudy. I remember the sharp stink of anesthetic putting my to sleep under the scanner, hoping to hell I wouldn't wake up there. . . and waking up in the android. Heaven. My mind had needed dry-cleaning for forty years, and when I came back, the must and the mothballs were washed away. A cold shower on the brain. I was alive.

The others wanted to try it. Naturally. We had enough equipment for everyone. But those people? Senility had left my personality more or less untouched under the dustbunnies, but, looking at my colleagues with new eyes. . . Tyler, who kept eighty-year-old kiddie porn mags in her desk? Berzinski, who walked imaginary dogs on real leashes? Stevens, who loved to reminisce about his glory days in the Great Chimpanzee-Fucking Project of '31 (tell him he's full of shit, and he'd just smile his soft dirty smile: "Ah, don't you wish you could have been there, too?"). . . these people wanted new lives? They were dead already, they just hadn't realized it yet. Even the exme never quite recovered after he'd lost the luck of the draw. He went all to moping self-pity. And he was a pretty worthless fuck, anyway; I should know.

The Mitsuis were the best androids ever designed. Battery-powered with solar recharge. Titanium skeleton and electro-muscular power. No internal moving parts. The warranty expired a long time ago, but my new body should last a few hundred years if I'm careful. Time enough for anything.

I burned the institute behind me. Some of the others might have been caught in the fire, I don't know. It didn't seem to matter much at that point. Now? Now I'm just kicking around, passing time, checking out the world. I thought it'd be fun to see the East Coast the way I always wanted it to be, and I was right.

I shut up and look the old guy in the eye. He seems a little nervous. And who can blame him? I think he's sensed that I've said more than a stranger who expects to part a stranger usually does.

"You're gonna kill me, aren't you?"

"Well, I hadn't really thought much about it, but, yeah, I suppose I will."

"What the hell? Why?"

"Well, I could say I have to, that I think you'd track me down and catch me when my batteries ran out, but that'd be bullshit, because I'd do it anyway. Or I could ask you why the hell you want to live a couple more years if your life is so unpleasant. But that'd be bullshit, too, because I really don't care. No, the reason I'm going to kill you is that the world'll be a more beautiful place without you."

A long pause. "You're a pretty crazy fucker."

"You might want to run, you know. I doubt it'll do much good, but it's traditional."

Another long silence. The shotgun's hollow boom makes it permanent.

Alone again, which is how I like it. Any place, even this rotting patch of highway with free finest-quality geezer carcass no extra charge, is nicer when you're alone. Something to do with the ancient territorial instinct, I think; the old urge to piss on a tree. I have a lot of trees to piss on these days, and it feels good.

Curtis Yarvin hatched in Maryland, larvated in the tepid waters of Brown University, and will shortly be pupating in Computer Science at UC Berkeley. He likes to read Pynchon and Lucius Shepard, smoke fat cigars, and howl at the moon. Send him lots of mail, rattle his cage, poke sticks through the bars; he don't bite.

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

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The Journal of the Gamers' Guild of UCR Contact: *jimv@ucrmath.ucr.edu*
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