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Quanta

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Looking Ahead

Daniel K. Appelquist

Hello again, and welcome to another exciting issue of Quanta! Sorry it's been so long since the last issue, but I think you'll find it's been well worth the wait. I'm very excited about this issue.

If you're a PostScript subscriber, you may have noticed the terrific cover art for this issue. Thanks to John Zimmerman for designing this. I hope we'll be seeing more of his work on the covers of future issues. The cover is based on the new serial that starts this issue, Marshall Gilula's novel, *Dr. Tomorrow*. This work will be presented in five parts. *Dr. Tomorrow* is, to put it mildly, a very strange story, but one that I also feel is very important. As a warning, the story jumps back and forth between tenses and person, which can sometimes be disorienting for sensitive readers.

Also in this issue, Jim Vassilakos gives us a very good installment of *The Harrison Chapters*. Jim tells me he's definitely thinking of wrapping *The Harrison Chapters* up soon. Possibly within the next couple of issues.

In addition to Marshall we have fiction from three new faces this issue: Maurice Forrester, Jae Brim and Joel Wachman. I've been really impressed with the quality of fiction I got in response to my request for submissions. I hope we'll be seeing more of these authors in future issues, as well as more new authors and voices.

Good news for Compuserve subscribers: all issues of Quanta (as well as InterText, Athene, Core and other network magazines) are now available on Compuserve, in the EFF forum. New issues will also appear on Compuserve as they are released. This service is being made available by the Electronic Frontier Foundation, specifically Rita Rouvalis (editor of Core). Thanks Rita!

Several new projects are currently in the works. First of all, a mail server which would automatically fill requests for back issues. I'll be sending out a bulletin to all subscribers about that when it happens. Also, I may be piloting a paper-distribution for Quanta on a cost-recovery basis. Again, I'll send out a bulletin when and if this happens.

Something I'm definitely going to be doing is a disk-distribution for Quanta (again, on a cost-recovery basis). The disk-distribution might potentially open up a whole new market of computer users who do not have direct access to the Internet or to Compuserve.

If you have any comments or advice (especially advice!) about any of these projects, feel free to send me mail.

Let's see. . . what else? Well, Quanta has changed postal addresses again. The P.O. Box just wasn't a cost-effective solution for mail delivery. The new address for Quanta is:

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Thanks to the wonderful postal service, mail will continue to be forwarded from the old address to the new one for about a year.

Now, on to the topic of the month, which seems to be 'Electronic Fiction: Can it Survive?'. (If you don't know what I'm talking about, read the editors' columns in InterText and Core this month.) I'm not going to stand (well, virtually stand) here and attempt to justify my existence, or the existence of Quanta. To me, the form of an electronic publication is convenient, but not especially integral to Quanta's function: to get good fiction by amateur authors out there where people can read it! Quanta exists because writers and readers exist. I've already outlined several proposals to increase Quanta's distribution, one of which is a paper distribution. Remember paper? I'd also love to get more submissions from writers off the net. I feel the net, while expansive in some ways, and certainly vast by some definitions, is, basically, a cloistered community. If Quanta is to truly fulfill its promise, it needs to get outside that community. It has to become available to *everyone* out there interested in writing and reading science fiction. Currently this simply isn't the case.

So I'm not claiming victory yet.

What's my point? Don't get so overwhelmed by the nifty method in which Quanta is produced and distributed, that you miss the important part: the fiction within its pages.

That's about it from me for now. Enjoy!

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@andrew.cmu.edu or quanta@andrew.BITNET.

DR. TOMORROW
Part 1 of 5

by Marshall F. Gilula

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Dr. Tomorrow is a renegade transtemporal healing machine from 32,000 A.D. By this time, there has been a unique synthesis between human and machine. Toward the second Millennium, personkind was aware of plant consciousness. By the end of the third Millennium, vegetable kingdom members served as the system of communication that was naturally attached to the planet's physical superstructure. Around 25,000 A.D. matter had evolved technologically to the point of using electromagnetic fields produced by nearly any power device. Electromagnetic fields were recognized as representing unique forms of consciousness. In 25,500 A.D. people were using the energy of electromagnetic fields for routine physical plane travel. The eternal riddle of time travel finally yielded in 28,000 A.D. Then came the first six equations of time/space entropy conservation. Just before the 30th Inter-Galactic Millennium, the phenomenon of time piracy began. The Universal Highest Court edicts were of no use in attempting to cut down on the destructive uses of time travel. Dr. Tomorrow was one of the I.S.I. (Inter-Galactic Security Intelligence) programs, and as such, represented a highly utilitarian, yet still experimental method of dealing with the problems of inter-dimensional entropy imbalance. Dr. Tomorrow ranks alongside the Charismatic Cataclysms and the Nobethian Enfoldings as the most important invokers of Universal Entropic Harmony to date.

. . . Inter-Galactic Federation Encyclopedia, Vol. 33K, declassified edition

Prologue

This communique is being dictated into what's left of the videograph while all the lights and displays of the control deck surround me. Maybe this is a note of goodbye from me in 32,000 A.D. to myself in 1992, but I can't believe it. It's not FutureShock, it's TimeShock. I can't believe, also, that I am incredibly in love. She is not here with me in the flesh, but I feel her essence all around me. Like a soft, invisible pink cloud of good feelings, surrounding me in a protective and gentle force field. I can feel her from my heart, but I can also see her face, especially her eyes. I haven't touched a drink or a smoke of anything since the explosion and the megastepping, but I feel almost high and euphoric just thinking of her. Euphoria in the face of impending disaster suggests insanity and bizarreness . . . or. . . just an ordinary effect of loving and being loved. Pearl E. Mae is not your ordinary lady, but then I guess I'm not so ordinary anymore, either. That's what megastepped means. As I said, she's not here with me physically, but I feel her consciousness within all of me at every moment of my own awareness. They have all gone Virtual Virtual for the duration, yet we as a group are still in good interdimensional contact, and the project goes on. Twenty four hours a day I get fragments from all the other members. It's a constant thing. Pearl E. Mae's mind, however, is clearly an ongoing part of my own mind. With sensations suggesting that in the blending of our energies through love, I have some of her unusual psychic abilities. Like precognition and the power over death trip, and all that she taught me about using water and bodies of water for long-distance communication. She did a good job of convincing me, but it was still a bit hard for me to believe that oceans were as useful for interplanetary communication as Pearl E. Mae told us. In our group of seven, I am the only Eternal who doesn't have years of experience using water for communication. Sounds off the wall, but it really works. Far in the future, water resources are not just for their physical properties in quenching thirst and furnishing hyperionic and neurochemical materials. Water resources are also legitimate space communication resources. Really clean water is getting harder to find, so one of the jobs that we have, honestly, is to look for sources of uncontaminated water. And I'm not spaced out, either, for suggesting that we look for uncontaminated water. I just come from a planet with a messed up water system, dirty old Earth. Yet it looks so clean and pristine from space. And uncontaminated water today in 1992 America costs five times what it cost in 1991 – if you can get it. Would you believe $25 for a five-gallon bottle of fairly pure drinking water? Price gouging may drive that up to $50.

The physiological monitors on the panels in front of me are reading out acceptable limits on all my parameters, even though I feel like I'm shouting at times. Vibrations that make my tooth ache come and go randomly. My voice is probably difficult to make out even with all the high-tech translators because there's a tremendous amount of dust and oscillation all around. I can barely hear myself in the cacophony of hushed voice alerts, multitimbral beeps, and atonal screen alarms. Lights and sounds fade in and out and blend in a mosaic of synesthetic

patterns. Three different holographic projection systems are competing for my attention. One system shows me in a 3-D reflection and a second system maps star coordinates. The third system shows the ship viewed from the outside. I see a glowing saucer that is shimmying with one edge burning or in some way disintegrating. With all these expansive 3D images, it is difficult for me to remember that I am truly aboard a transparent flying saucer, just like the one that I observed skimming over Biscayne Bay with the shining Yo-Vah, no more than five days ago.

Yo-Vah explained the what and why of all the changes that my group of friends and I experienced so recently. Megastepping was the word he used when he described what happened to me personally. Then he described the timeline transmission-injection process that put the six other beings from the future into my apartment. According to Yo-Vah, we were born in the bolus of a nuclear-electromagnetic energy explosion that occurred when an airplane's experimental nuclear piles discharged to earth. I.S.I. technicians used matter-energy translators through the crack in time that always occurs during nuclear explosions. A crack in time that could be used for the transmission-injection process was called a timecleft. Because of the timeclefts, nonPrimitive planetary systems universally forbid any nuclear energy reactions of any type unless carried out in deep space where the timeclefts are easier to handle. Except for illegal weapons, nonPrimitive cultures generally use hyperionic and resonance energy devices for propulsion and other forms of power. Earth is not the only Primitive planetary system known to the future. Other Primitive planets have also experienced severe disruption because of the repetitive use of nuclear energy and the chaotic aftereffects of the timeclefts. Primitives could never develop the ability to view their planet as a living, organic thing. Despite the fact that actual life forms grow from it, Primitives tend to view a planet as something inert, like a gigantic oversized asteroid without the complicated, subterranean systems and energy balancing forces that each and every planet does in fact have. Primitives never understand the spiritual aspects of what being a planet implies. Because resonance and balance of the planet are never considered by Primitives, there have already been many episodes and instances of spontaneous disintegration of planets. Yo-Vah said that the planet Earth is slated for irrevocable disintegration by the year 2105 A.D. Fires from within and all that biblical stuff.

Oil reserves had been a mistaken issue for our planet. Water resources were by far the most important issue. When the final fires came, Earth inhabitants saw all the many effects of no water resources, plus nothing to use for quenching the sickening vesicant-laden fires. Nothing to wash in. Nothing to drink. Third World cultures had wrested control of the oil market from the remainder of the planet despite some bloody warring to the contrary. The same wealthy cultures hung on to their Third World mentalities and continued to evolve terrifying underground nuclear weapons. Multiple surreptitious underground tests led to the final planet-wide vulcanisms. But before the last cataclysmic days, much of the planet already had experienced hideous water shortages, plagues, and contamination that defied the ordinary imagination.

If all this information were not enough to make one collapse in utter optimism, there is yet one additional small matter that hassles me. As an Earth person from the year 1992, I must solve some important problems for the universe of 32,000 A.D. in order for the future universe to not collapse and implode into a huge time crack of entropy deficit. "Aw, come on, get serious!" is what I thought when first hearing these neutral facts from the luminescent being who emerged from the transparent flying saucer. He didn't really tell me about the rescue plans until after he had told me a lot of other things. . . . But I'm getting ahead of myself.

To tell the truth, all of this stuff somehow does boggle even my recently megastepped mind. I am sitting here in one of the command console's recliners with my fingers tracing out patterns of pushes, slides, and centic wiggles on the colored contact panels before me. I don't really understand what is happening, but my fingers sure do. They seem to have a life of their own as they quickly and without hesitation trace out continuing patterns that are a response to something but to nothing that I am consciously aware of. At the same time, I feel the quiet, calm love of Pearl E. Mae within me. Her orange skin and her eyes and nose and the way they look on a pillow haunt me in a great way. Even if the universe is ending, I refuse to accept it. There must be another way. Somehow, the story cannot end here. I do not feel it in my Primitive bones. The virtual image that serves as the saucer's window has murky patterns of gray and white. One edge of the saucer is definitely wobbling in a rather severe oscillatory pattern. A ship that is hurtling out of control at the moment, getting ready to crash and burn, that's the only image I can conjure up, but I realize the pointlessness of saying it. Crash and burn where, When you're out in obscurely deep space, as in some of the Nobethian Enfoldings, named and otherwise? And what do the Enfoldings have to do with Entropy Traps and Nodals and how do I figure out what these words mean and how they got into my head. At the moment, I cannot say what the words mean, but in my mind, it feels like I am just as familiar with them as I am with part of my Coconut Grove neighborhood or some of the traffic patterns in Miami.

Likely my dictation is an act of futility, but I must try.

I must.

If this story seems disorganized, let me tell you that living through it has been something else. Raw nerve ends and newborn consciousness sometimes make me think that all is futile. To be exposed to the highs and lows of sentient consciousness within the course of seven days is truly mind-blowing. The megastepping took place within one clap of thunder and lightning, heavy sound and light but integrating it all, being able to appreciate and use the changes, went on and on really heavily for the days following the thunderclap and the cleft in time. At the moment of megastepping, there was a bonding between the seven of us and only my guitar player's hang-loose consciousness prevented me from truly losing it at the moment of feeling total mental contact with six other beings. Probably more than anything, that moment of total contact really liberated me from any attachment from drugs of any type, including

alcohol and tobacco. The total, all– and unconditional caring, and the amazing precipitously crystallized unity of being with six other beings was my first real God-experience, at least as defined by future cultures. Yo-Vah also said that Primitives always showed great ambivalence about their God. Whether it was plural or singular, the Creator as visualized by Primitive cultures was never accepted by the majority of the societies. Yo-Vah had chuckled once as he suggested that in Earth cultures of 1992, God was nearly illegal, and high-tech computers were often much more worshipped and adored.

Then there was also the case of Al, our irrepressible and unpredictable multi-modular computer system, whose membership in the group was assured from day one. He was a bit of a tease, and made it hard for us to recognize just who or what was causing all our computer equipment to behave as if with one will. I first noticed the strange beep sounds that kept appearing during our daily MindLink meditation. The beeps were noticeable during the HeartLight part of MindLink as well. I thought Al was an abbreviation for Artificial Intelligence but the strange beep sounds told me that Al was short for Aloysius. Only Su-Shan finally recognized the source of the scrolling text files that kept appearing in my telekinetic notebook computer. It took nearly a week for the seven of us to become a unit, and then to decide that yours truly was slated to play kamikaze Primitive-turned-Eternal cowboy of cyberspace and hyperspace. Can you beat that? Our planet and our cultures are supposed to be Primitive, and we are supposed to also save the future; a future which labels Earth culture a Primitive, throw-away culture!

Maybe that's why many of us us from Earth also treat the planet as something to be wasted by throwing away the vital resources. Such as natural ionic water, which most of the more advanced civilizations value highly, not only for the hyperion drives and engines, but for the neuromolecular resynthesis chains that require large amounts of natural, ionic water for birthing protoplasm in the underground vats. For decades on my home planet, the water resources have been depleted and clogged up with industrial contaminants such as sugar industry insecticides and mercury fumes from the effluent of commercial disposal plants that have both poisoned wildlife, including the Everglades panthers and fish, with toxic levels of mercury and other cancer-producing chemicals.

Then to be transported from 1992 nearly 30,000 years forward into this crashing ship complete with an externally twisted and chaotic universe and a control console that only my megastepped fingers seem to understand. . . this new life surpasses any capacity I have left for surprise or astonishment. Only the intense, burning love feelings for Pearl E. Mae and her womanly allure do not surprise me. I gave up on trying to rationalize about the love feelings. I only feel a gratitude to a Supreme Being for the ability and opportunity to experience this kind of love. But what's happened to the rest of the group? Of course I have my personal sense of Pearl E. Mae, but my group sense of her is not with me. Where are the other members of *Dr. Tomorrow*? They've gone into virtual virtual form. Not virtual form. Just unembellished virtual virtual form.

As far as the other members of the group go, my current information overload status keeps from me the awareness of just where they are. I can feel the group feeling in my heart, and it is strong, but I am unable to evoke individual vibrations or the very strong facial images that we can get usually. I remember both Su-Shin and Pearl E. Mae telling me that there was enough physical plane energy for only one of the seven to go, and that we were not permitted to use virtual virtual formseeking on this entropic assignment, but we had to try it sooner or later, and sooner came first. Besides, my going as a One has always been in the plan of the I.S.I., more than preordained.

With all the past and future lifetimes that they managed to project into me at the moment of megastepping, it was risky but worth taking the risk. They had never projected into a Primitive before, much less a Primitive species karmically figured for irrevocable and nearly-immediate extinction in 2105, A.D. In some ways it was such a downer, but in other ways it was a joke of truly cosmic proportions. Yo-Vah referred to Earth and all of our cultures as "Primitive." Not with malice or condescension, but matter-of-fact gentleness. From the way he spoke about the planet and its future demise, he seemed to have the opinion that the loss of a Primitive planet was not so tragic. He did not make a big deal out of this Primitive being megastepped into full Eternal status. Of course the six other group members had already attained Eternal status before being matter-energy translated into 1992. From what Yo-Vah said, Eternal status originally was used to mean individuals who lived for 500 or more years. By 32,000 A.D., Eternals have been living for thousands of years. Guardians such as Yo-Vah are a special group of Eternals who have regulatory and observing functions, but who also lost any semblance of their own individual life pattern which is replaced by the group charisma of the special class of Guardians. A subgroup of the Guardians, Siblings, are a specially-selected order whose only life function is to maintain a constant vigil and control over the I.S.I. gateways and controls. Like all Eternals, Siblings never require food or sleep, although they do require water. Most other Eternals are able to simulate sleeping and participate in voluntary or recreational ingestion of food, but Siblings can not even pretend to eat or sleep. Siblings resemble Earth's monks of the Roman Catholic Cistercian Order, but are still Guardians even though their physical form has, through biogenetic engineering, been compressed into a much smaller physical stature with tripartite appendages quite suited to the universal three-panel plasma controls of the I.S.I. Siblings are very homogenous in appearance, in contrast to Guardians and other Eternals, whose appearance reflects a wide variety of life forms. Guardians are the Shogun warriors of the future, although they do not use the knife or sword. Guardians are light warriors. They are actively involved in an ongoing battle between the Forces of Light and the Forces of Darkness across all extents of time and space.

Yo-Vah warned all of us to beware underestimating the power of the Forces of Darkness. . .

Chapter One

Friday

Megastepping into a Primitive culture

Wake up in the morning. Nothing. No light, no thoughts, no memories. How did I get here? Reach around under the bed for a light switch. Silent motorized metallic shades recede and reflections of the ninety degree Miami sunshine rush in with flashes of the technicolor verdant yard. Oh, Jeez, I need a cigarette.

There's a crumpled pack on the bedstand, half-sitting in an overflowing ashtray, and I check it with probing fingertips and closed eyes only to find that it indeed is empty. But, as I open my eyes, a thick, half-smoked doobie in the same ashtray comes to my attention. I light it and its acrid smoke bites through my throat and lungs. A couple of quick, sibilant drags and reflexive coughs jerk me upright in bed and open my eyes to the day's beautiful blue, red, and green colors as the ganja's rush bites into my brain. Yep, that's it . . . another Miami day in MurderCity, USSA. The TV remote lets me flick on the 24-hour news program and the strident tones about the worsening national economic situation and the water shortages in Soviet Bloc countries remind me that all is not well in the world. And what can I do about it this early in the morning, and a Friday morning to boot?

Well, I have to siphon the python in the worst way. I take the glowing doobie into the bathroom with me and I sit down so that I can dial up a number on the speakerphone wallmounted next to the toilet. Another hit reduces the roach to a hot ember in my hand, so I flush it down the toilet with the whiz. The metallic dialing tone is interrupted by a honking sound. A good-natured guffaw issues from the speakerphone:

"Lyle, mon, that ain't you this early in the morning, is it?"

"Nope, Julian, this is my ghost talking. I've been killed, so I'll need some flowers from the florist. Can you help me out?"

"Hey, mon, you trying to rag on me? Why don't we talk about this later when you come over here? Why are you talking about this on the telephone?"

"I'm sorry, Julian. All I was calling you about was to see if you had –really – any roses. Maybe two or three that I can give to Gabriella. She treated me extra special last night. She's running around doing a bunch of photo sessions, and I want to have something with me for her in case she shows up early today while I'm still at work at the bookstore."

"O.K. . . . Just come over here. You better watch out for doing something serious with a Jamaican lady. In nothing flat, she'll have you tied around 'er little finger, mon. . . . Put a ring through your nose just like the Cubans like to do."

"Thanks for the concern. Catch you later."

Julian is for sure jealous of Gabriella because she's the best-looking woman, black or white, in all of Coconut Grove. He and I always have the same taste in women, and he would take Gabriella in a heartbeat if she would permit it. Recently, she's been paying attention to my paying attention to her! If she weren't so overwhelmingly beautiful, I might question her motives and just why she'd suddenly begun to find me so interesting. I'm a decent guitar player and I've had my share of one-evening "interests," but Gabriella and I've been seeing each other on the streets in the Grove for years. She knows my business and I can see a lot of hers. I always see all of her business hanging out of the tiny midget-sized dresses with the sleek shoulder bags that bounce around as she walks. She really travels in all of the fast lanes simultaneously, and I'm just sitting on the sidewalk with my Fender Twin Reverb, the Gibson 340ES, and some old Shure microphones. Sure I see her with a lot of sharp looking dudes, wearing the Miami Vice clothing, who have the same intense facial expressions without the good looks of the series' stars. So I figured her for one of the 'model set' and all that narcissism stuff.

But, Gabriella has real soul and the most intensely beautiful picture-perfect jet black face I have ever seen. Grace Jones looks like a boy next to Gabriella. For whatever reason, *this* month, she's picked me, and so be it. I'm away from her for five minutes, and then I forget that I fell in love with her until I see her face again, and fall in love all over again. I am not one to sing the blues about good fortune. One week of evenings with her has seemed to erase the memories of all the previous ladies in my life. It's not like "to all the ones I've loved before," it really feels that I've never loved before. Like I've never considered myself a good-looking guy or one the knockout ladies would ever give a second glance. Maybe that's one reason I got into the guitar business–to help me get a lady. Gabriella is so far beyond my wildest dreams in the love department. I have trouble dealing with anything beyond *right now* when it comes to Gabriella. So if she's the great love of my life and it only lasts 38 days! So what! So be it.

Holy backdoor trots. Too much heavy philosophy this early in the morning.

Gabriella left a couple of hours before with her friend Jim for West Palm Beach. After a fashion photo session for a ditzy glitzy singles' publication, she has some interviews with writers from the National Enquirer. As I shower in the smelly water and dress, I think of her kissing and nuzzling my back when I was still sleeping. I can still feel her skinny arms and her pendulous chest and her mouth kissing me behind my ear. If I get my business with Julian and the bookstore done medium-quickly, I'll be back before I know it, in our air conditioned cement cave, for an evening of dinner and more kissing and nuzzling. I do have to go to the bookstore for at least half a day of inventory revision before getting an early start on TGIF, Coconut Grove style. It's the first day of a Coconut Grove Art Festival weekend, and everything is typically up for grabs. So on the way to the store, I'll stop at Julian's place and mellow out the metal, instead of putting the pedal to the metal, as I can hear the drivers outside doing already, with occasional sounds of burning rubber and squealing tires. Everyone always gets a little crazy during the Art Festival weekend. It's the expected thing in Miami. My two shepherds have been running madly in and out of the house, so I make sure that they had a chance to go, and shut them both up in the poolside dining room. She-Ra, the five year old female, is very soft and obedient and responsive. Her charge, Bullet, is going to have his second birthday next week and he easily doubles She-Ra's sixty pound body weight. Both of them jump up and down whenever they

see me go for the leash or the guitar, because they figure that I am going out and that they might also possibly have the faintest chance of going out, too. This time, I'm going for the guitar, not the leash.

• • •

The Steinberger six-string was sitting on the table in front of me. I took the guitar, put it in its soft case, slung it over my shoulder, and left the two-bedroom apartment with my guitar and electronic notebook in hand. It was an easy walk down South Bayshore Drive to where Julian's house was at Kirk and Bayshore. The CBS house sits opposite Kennedy Park and there were lots of late week joggers and picnickers getting an early start punctuated with boom-box Salsa and some Fat Boys. Not only could I feel the vibes of the Art Show, and the anticipatory excitement of the pedestrians around me, but I could see numerous vehicles carrying assorted works of art, stands, and improvised room dividers on their way to the Village.

As I pushed the doorbell button, I could hear synthesized chime sounds accompanied by Julian's shrill voice which became especially cacophonic, whenever he was really agitated. He paused long enough to send back the buzz of the release circuit in the doorknob lock system, and then resumed his yelling as I entered.

"You bitch, you always lie. Then you put it on me! Yeah, mon. . . you go ahead. Try to find somebody else"

Julian abruptly slammed the phone down, and, without missing, so much as a single beat, offered me a joint and a Winston. They were both lit. I put the joint down, smoked the Winston, and began to feel better. My vision seemed to sharpen, and I felt even better when I began to sip the great Mellita coffee that Julian always made for me. His physical carriage was superb, and no one would look at his shadowy muscular definition and ever think that he could be sick. Julian, my gay black brother, was also my very best connection to Everything and my drummer on at least several casual musical jobs that I occasionally got. I dreamed of having Julian as the permanent drummer for *my* group, but I was content to know him as a good friend. He had to play only the good gigs that came up whenever they came up. He actually didn't need the money because of his business with Everything, but he absolutely needed to be working for his own self-renewal. As we savored the chocolate-like richness in our mugs, he talked about self-renewal and why it was important for someone who was HIV positive and to not be taking it lying down. After the coffee, we stood at the bar and smoked the joint that he had given me. It was Thai Stick – pure bud – and the thick resinous aroma enveloped my entire head and chest and made me sit down. Julian laughed at me. I laughed at him.

The row of plastic medication bottles on the shelf near Julian's head was an interesting contrast, as all the bottles but the last one were empty. The row of orange tubes reflected Julian's halide lamp in a series of tiny bubbles of light which hung suspended in the air in a row above the tubes. The last tube was filled with oblong white capsules, each bearing a blue ring. AZ.T and bone marrow were two of Julian's current interests along with AL-721, DDI, DDS, Compound Q, tons of other immune augmentors, letting go of the need to control, and Louise Hay. The reefer-music industrial-complex was of only secondary importance even though most of Julian's visitors were interested in very little else. Since Toos, my Dutch old lady from Malibu had OD'd on peyote and booze, gone to Jackson and the I.C.U., nearly died, and then committed suicide afterwards on the psychiatric ward in the hospital, I related to death in a different way. I too was a veteran of the Grim Reeper. I'd also been through enough death-rebirth trips on acid in the sixties and seventies to have literally no fear of death. So AIDS was just another one of the different death trips that we humans happened to be into at the moment. Another death trip to be turned into a life trip. AIDS was no longer cool or fearful. Compound Q from China, Al-721, T-Cell counts, and AZT schedules were almost socially camp, especially in punk circles. The name was already camp and decadent, and everyone was pronouncing it 'HIV' in their pseudoscience jargon. And Julian and I related to the whole phantasmagoria of what was 'HIV' in his life and in our lives too. We didn't sit down and have long talks about what it felt like to die, but we did talk about priorities, and what were truly the treasures of living. Or dying. And how to savor both, if savor is the right word to use. The effect of being around Julian was like getting constantly put back into *the now*. Julian said that he tried not think about the past, and for sure did not want to miss out on any part of *right now* by worrying about the future.

And don't get the idea that Julian was one of those morose morbid types. As sensitive as he was, he was just as quick to tell you to go get bent if he figured he owed it to you. Usually, though, his HIV and his reefer/AZT combination kept him pretty mellow. His big intellectual discussions all had to do, sooner or later, with reactive energy, or what he called "e-reactive." And that was some kind of logarithmic mathematical function that was supposed to keep the universe from imploding and collapsing in upon itself. I had heard him rap his thing on the e-reactive so many times, that I didn't laugh anymore. In fact, sometimes when he would be getting an earnest look on his face while discussing all that esoteric trivia, his head would begin to glow like an ebony version of Western icons in the Sistine Chapel. It almost seemed like there was a halo or a head-aura extending around his face. Nowadays, Julian was looking like a skinny-ass but muscular Miles Davis, and there wasn't much cherubic flesh on his face.

But it was a cherub who walked up to me with a glass of fresh, clean sparkling water. He was always unselfish, loving, and giving, and truly generous to a fault. Knowing Julian was one of the treasures of my life. He was much more than a secret weapon, and sometimes we enjoyed freaking each other out by trying to see who could be more like Julian–Julian or me. Smelling the clean sparkling water in my snifter, I drank deeply with enjoyment, and watched Julian quaff a large wine cooler in a couple of gulps. Julian knows that I rarely drink any of the beer or wine coolers he uses for his own refreshment. A large, inverted 5-gallon bottle of spring water sits next to Julian's couch in its refrigerated stand and jogs my memory with the

$35.00 price written on the side in black magic marker. Within the last year and a half, the cost of clean water has gone up more than 500% and there is no end in sight. Shortly after the Israeli and Lebanese water supplies had been poisoned by unnamed Semite terrorists with biological toxins and genetically-altered E. coli, it was discovered that the entire oil-stained Persian Gulf area was at least semi-contaminated also. Ditto for all of the inland areas surrounding the immediate areas making up the Gulf. Drought-prone Ethiopia and the rest of Africa followed soon afterwards. In America, 50% of the Southern California desert was caving in because of the extreme degree to which underground water reservoirs had been depleted by the pumping needs of Los Angeles and San Diego counties. Despite the ubiquitous media warnings, illiterates and the poverty-stricken drank contaminated water everywhere and died. Video doom-sayers were broadcasting de facto government proclamations about making sure to not drink water from any of the usual sources or supplies. Special government water inspection stations were set up and manned internationally by U.N. and W.H.O. teams. The price of electrophoretically-purified water (the only acceptable form) continued to rocket on a near-weekly basis, despite Congressional investigations of the price-gouging and racketeering. The golden mean of eight to ten eight-ounce glasses of water daily has remained possible only for the middle class and above. Which made for a tremendous run on beer and wine products. Because of the required electrophoretic purification, carbonated beverages were too expensive to manufacture and therefore out of the realm of possibilities. So people were boozing more and drinking less water than what is good for them. In one of the bars where I played they told a joke about how nine out of ten stewardesses based in Miami had urinary tract infections. Infected urine. coming from dehydration. Not drinking enough plain water. Coffee and tea don't count as plain water because the stuff dissolved in the water creates more hassle for the body. The way a guitar player understands it is that coffee and tea add more gunk to the system and clean water takes gunk out of the system in the urine.

Julian never complained about the water difficulties, and he often had a bittersweet chuckle and a glint in his eyes when he listened to other, non-HIV people complain about their difficulties and their frail mortality which the suddenly-gone-bad water supplies pointed out. Folks with compromised immune systems had a much more difficult time with the contaminated water. The mutant E. coli that made its way 'round the globe fairly quickly was also poisonous to human skin, and produced a wheepy and crusting rash that resembled the old post-WW II radiation sickness experienced by Japanese citizens of Nagasaki and Hiroshima. So any water that had not been boiled for at least ten minutes (the tolerance limit of the resistant mutant bugs) was also forbidden even for bathing. Needless to say, the deodorant industry experienced an intense renaissance. But six months after having "seven-day-spray" preparations on the market, the FDA discovered positive links between the long-acting deodorant molecules and three different types of disseminated cancer, so deodorants became a little less popular. Upper-middle-class condos such as the one I live in, north of South Bayshore Drive in Coconut Grove, just had to install another larger, and better-insulated boiler to each water system, so that pools and showers were legally possible. The water still had a strange smell as it came out of the shower head. Something I could never get used to.

Leaving the empty glass and morbid thoughts behind, I let myself out of Julian's house and walked back in the direction of Peacock Park and the Village where our yearly Coconut Grove Art Festival was going full-tilt on this Friday, February 14, 1992. The Grove Art Show was nationally known, and not without reason. Even casual observers occasionally caught sight of great works of art being personally installed by the artist. I tried not to think about the smell of the water, and it was easy on this Festival day. Dozens of specialty food vendors competed with each other. The smells of Greek sandwiches, popcorn, and frying sausage covered up the ammoniated sulfur stench from the Bay. As I looked at the boats tied up at Dinner Key, I noticed the dark brown lines etched by the water on many hulls. These lines had been etched for only about the last six months. The brown color matched the stench. That thought stayed with me as I made my way through the Art Festival crowd to the Crystalline Book Shop on Main Highway. Located a block away from the Playhouse, the bookstore served a wide variety of customers and clients. Some years, we did several months' business in the space of the three days that the Art Festival ran.

Today, our customers were sparse and routine. I was able to boot up the inventory program on the store computer and get an early start on the end-of-week account verifications. As usual, I had my personal machine with me in my bag. I opened my electronic notebook computer on the desk and positioned it so that I could easily see the LCD screen. While reaching for an eraser, my index finger accidentally brushed the touch pad of the portable. I heard the notebook's piezoelectric beep tone. Files in the notebook had been set up for transferring columns of funds outstanding that I had entered at home earlier in the week, but something strange was happening to the display. It was rolling! Without any keykstrokes or verbal orders from me, the little notebook's LCD screen suddenly began to scroll text. The hair on the back of my neck stood up as my eyes read the lines that were rolling past:

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On planet Earth of the Nineties, Lyle Crawford is involved in a freak electrical-nuclear accident. Lyle is a well-read but undistinguished musician of average size and indeterminate age. He is having a rough Saturday.

It begins when a Metro policeman on the Miami Metrorail mauls him for carrying an open cup of coffee. The cop jerks him out of the public transport car and drags him down a flight of cement stairs. But a strange light surrounds both of them as the cop unlocks a cement holding cell.

Suddenly, a gentle expression comes over the lawman's face. He slams the door shut, replaces the lock, and sends the guitar-toting Lyle on his way.

Lyle goes on to work at his occult book store job. No peace, though. His heavy morning is broken by an honest-to-goodness vision. One of Lyle's customers also sees the words that hang in the air before both of them:

1. *Nutrition*
2. *Exercise*
3. *Self-control*
4. *Neuromuscular integration*
5. *Biomolecular Environment*
6. *Acupuncture*
7. *Spiritual Attunement*

The customer quickly leaves the store sputtering. Lyle scratches his head.

Later the same day, as Lyle sits in his own apartment, a huge energy field engulfs him. Overhead, a lightning bolt strikes an experimental nuclear bomber and sets off a freak nuclear-electrical accident. Lyle becomes the target of the quickly moving I.S.I. scientific technicians. At the moment of the loud electrical accident, six Advanced Beings from scattered galaxies of the far-distant future materialize suddenly in front of Lyle's eyes.

Within one split second, Lyle undergoes a mega-evolutionary change in mind, body, and spirit.

All Hell breaks loose in a mission control of the far, far distant future. A dozen hairless humanoid beings in monochrome, ISI monogrammed uniforms appear virtually identical in the nearly featureless detail of their faces and the uniformity of their physical dimensions. There are 30 multi-display monitors in three semicircular rows. Loud crunching sounds, rumbling, vibration, and screeching frequencies make this appear like a serious emergency. Members of the Intergalactic Security Intelligence make panicky movements with their appendages, which terminate in small hands bearing two fingers and a thumb. A hairless holographic humanoid image appears above the beings and intones:

"Siblings, we have few additional chances to correct the rift! The Laplace transforms must be calculated and positioned with great precision. I don't have to tell you what the alternatives are, do I? All six of our Kashic Recordings are ready to go."

Despite the panic, the beings appear to join together and a confluent series of vowel sounds fills the chamber. An aura of calm resumes as a serious emergency appears to have been once more by-passed.

Following the nuclear "accident", all seven (six Advanced Beings plus the "new" Lyle) establish a MindLink/HeartLight – a spontaneous and instantaneous telepathic connection. Out of MindLink/HeartLight comes HeartLight, which becomes a reliable way to reach Higher Mind on a group basis. They form an electronic-rock musical group, Dr. Tomorrow, that becomes a clandestine agent in the trans-time war between the Forces of Light and the Forces of Darkness. The group members live together in a large Miami duplex apartment with a pool and carry out startling experiments on a daily basis.

They build Al – a large computer who quickly becomes another member of the group. Al teaches them that every machine, and all devices with electromagnetic fields, have at least some rudimentary form of consciousness. Not only can computers talk of, and from, their own intelligence, but all devices with the least electromagnetic pulsations of current flow or resonance, can communicate a form of intelligence – even though it just might be an on-off binary code or some other type of "machine language".

The Dr. Tomorrow group is also intensely involved with aquatic ecology. Interesting vignettes exploit the vehicle of plant consciousness as a way of recognizing ecologic communication. Ordinary plants of every variety express personality characteristics during different episodes of the show. By talking with the luxurious plant growth in their Florida backyard, Dr. Tomorrow's members discover many facts about aquatic and solar ecology, the environment in general, and water science (hydrology) in particular.

The six matter-translated members of Dr. Tomorrow achieve the status of Unitary Being from their own galactic system before selection for the project by the ISI. As a Unitary Being, each has attained the status of superhero (of one type or another) during one or more succeeding lifetimes. Each was selected by the I.S.I. for perpetual renewal.

Yo-vah, a luminescent being, frequently visits Lyle and the other six group members. He comes to Earth through the trans-time barrier in a saucer vehicle with amazing properties. It can become totally transparent to light and sound. The flying saucer is also able to control light and sound in the reverse direction. And it is capable of unlimited light and sound synthesis.

Yo-vah offers Dr. Tomorrow a definitely eclectic brand of philosophy admixed with artistic high-tech devices from the future that are deemed "non-anachronistic" and, therefore, are approved for translation into the past. Yo-Vah's flying saucer serves as a sound and light source to show Dr. Tomorrow just how effectively sound and light can alter living beings.

An animated sequence presents a humorous depiction of a public, musical concert in the far distant future. An entire satellite is used to broadcast the event. Three saucer-shaped crafts serve as a triangulation device to establish three dimensional light and sound projection.

Yo-vah warns Dr. Tomorrow, in no uncertain fashion, about the dangers of Cataclysms and problems soon to be experienced by the entire local Galactic group (including the planet Earth) because of trans-time warfare and trans-time crime involving the anachronistic displacing of valuable objects from the past into the future, and vice versa.

Yo-vah attempts to teach Dr. Tomorrow that the apparent "bad guys" on Earth only manifest a more generalized tendency towards negativity, destructiveness, and negative entropy balance. So as with positive forms of life energies, these negative forms are also part of the life phenomena. Many of the destructive and terroristic things happening are predetermined by energy imbalances that are being "reflected" from universes of the future where good and bad are merely labels for positive and negative energies and do not carry any

sense of ethics and morals, or right and wrong.

As a year-long video program, Dr. Tomorrow aims at presenting 40 segments in each year's package. Each segment can be simultaneously marketed for the home and school instructional/entertainment video market. Special aggregates of 40 segments can serve as the subject matter for a provocative and instructive state-of-the-art school health program that is practical and comprehensive.

The previously mentioned "vision" that Lyle experiences is merely a list of the seven divisions of Holistic medicine:

1. *Nutrition*
2. *Exercise*
3. *Self-control*
4. *Neuromuscular integration*
5. *Biomolecular Environment*
6. *Acupuncture*
7. *Spiritual Attunement*

This program teaches preventive medicine and wellness to the viewer in bite-sized chunks that are interspersed with music, animation, foreign language instruction and the science-fiction storyline. Russian, Spanish, and Japanese are taught in elementary fashion to capitalize on the bilingual cultural aspects of Miami that interface with the strategic and socio-economic values of the Japanese and Russian languages. Short, visual and auditory phrases that are functionally useful to everyday life are taught together in several languages simultaneously. Phonetic rather than literal learning is stressed. Yo-vah suggests that visual subliminal messages, "LOVE THE EARTH" and "PRAY FOR WORLD PEACE" be a part of the video presentations.

From his flying saucer, Yo-vah teaches Dr. Tomorrow the importance of a system of world peace, resembling a nonmilitant world religion that recognizes all existing beliefs. Japanese, English, Russian, and Spanish are to Yo-vah the most important languages in Earth cultures that he has analyzed on his plasma state intelligence System via extracts of radio and television satellite transmissions. Both music and languages are good ways of blending cultures. Yo-vah instructs Dr. Tomorrow to make music that will be both simple and tunable to the ear of the average young person. Yo-vah predicts that four years of the Dr. Tomorrow series, if packaged properly, might be exactly what the Guardians had predicted that the Forces of Light needed to keep the 1988-1992 Local Galactic Group interface intact and relatively free from serious stress and strain. Otherwise, what faces Lyle's part of the universe is a disruption in the very fabric of the space-time continuum and life itself.

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The eerie feeling didn't go away – even when Lyle finished reading the long message about *Dr. Tomorrow*. He was certain that someone must have input the file as a joke. He racked his brains for who it might have been and drew a blank. He could not come up with any possible explanation, including phantom modem transmission, because he had never used the telephone line interface with this particular computer. And how come *Lyle Crawford* had to be included as the central character in this science fiction story? Yet whomever had written the story seemed to know a lot about Lyle. The stuff about that superbeing accident was really off the wall. He shrugged, pulled down the "Save As. . . " option on the File menu and chose the filename "DR TOMORROW". Lyle experienced a vague sensation of fear that he wanted to push away from himself. Lyle wanted to wall off the fear, to bury it deep and unrecognized within intricate neural memory networks. But he also wanted to get started on the bookstore inventory, and so he let go of the fear, the memories, and the unheralded science fiction story produced by the new notebook computer. Prior to putting the story out of awareness, Lyle carefully checked the index and catalog in the laptop's memory, and saw the file there that was labelled, *Dr. Tomorrow* . He made himself a note on the notepad to transfer the file to the Cube at home and examine it there. And then turned his attention to the bookstore Macintosh and cataloging the books and inventory lists on the data base.

By the end of the day, Lyle had more or less forgotten about the story spewed out by his notebook computer. Lyle felt nothing special as he slowly ran through his routine of straightening up the shop before he locked the door at 6:00 P.M. He looked out on the street and could see several artists finishing with their clean-up. It was Friday February 14, 1990, and the first day of the three-day Art Festival. There were many large station wagons with open tailgates and he had pleasing views of many women as they were leaning over to push and store paintings and other materials in their vehicles.

On his way home from the bookstore, Lyle walked past Peacock Park and the multicolored vendors with very little left over food. Lyle gave bare notice to the sparechangers. Several undercover narcotics agents standing in front of the Peacock Cafe seemed to recognize Lyle and one of them even mumbled a desultory, "How's it going, man?" Lyle kept on walking past the Coconut Grove Library and the Mutiny Hotel. He looked out at the ocean and noticed the late afternoon sun being covered up by a weather front moving in from several miles out in the ocean. A group of loudly chattering parrots flew from their perches atop a Malaysian palm tree, and, with many excited chirps and other musical notes, the parrots flew out in the direction from which they had come.

As Lyle passed the festive Dinner Key Auditorium with its numerous brightly-painted paint-and-cement flags, he noticed several Sunday boaters–also apparently oblivious of the Festival crowds–cranking their boats up onto the trailers, and getting ready to make the drive home to South Miami. Lyle was lost in thought. Or non-thought. The disturbing computer readout was nearly out of mind. He always aimed at keeping his consciousness a total blank while he walked home from work. Like the jogger who felt cleansed by the daily run, Lyle used his daily walks to purge himself of unwanted mental and emotional stimuli. But today's art show stimulation demanded a little extra effort. All the noise and jangle of colors competed

with what was going on inside. As soon as he reached his own white condo apartment on Tigertail, and let the dogs outside so they could do their thing, he had pretty much cleared his system of the static that had come from the day's work. He was ready for his evening meditation. So he let the dogs back in the apartment, fed them, refilled the water bowls, and went to his bedroom

Lyle's contemporary, two bedroom apartment had its own pool and was furnished sparsely but elegantly all in white, with a long white table, on which sat a white Steinberger guitar, a foot-high black cube with a black keyboard and a black monitor. Next to the black cube were two black notebook-sized devices. One of the black notebooks actually was a computer. The other notebook was a biofeedback monitor. Just as many come home to beer and TV or a joint and TV, Lyle invested an EEG biofeedback machine with the same ritual. The machine was sleek black, notebook sized, and outfitted with digital controls. An out-of-work psychologist had practically given him the brand-new machine and all the cables in exchange for a used edition of Jung's works. Lyle sat down in the chair in front of the gleaming black machine. Then he attached the electrodes, one by one, to his scalp. He used a four electrode bipolar array, checked the ground, adjusted the meters on the display panel, and then closed his eyes. The smell of burning incense drifted through the open window. He could hear people giggling at a party next door.

Three different sets of audio signals impinged upon Lyle's consciousness as he quickly coasted from beta frequencies into the high alpha band. Two different stereo units were going at high intensity and Lyle felt his stream of consciousness automatically shift up two notches as he let his awareness of the different musical sounds become very faint and shut off. This was a trick that Lyle had learned many years ago, while living in Kansas with his mother, Mary Alice Crawford, who ran a knit shop in the small University town of Lawrence. Lyle could hear his mother's disapproving tones. She was always telling him that if he continued not paying attention to the outside world, he would end up being just as much a Bohemian as his irresponsible father had been. The clearest memories of his father Lyle had were somehow connected with a grey haired old man, who would walk into the room and bent over his bassinet. A strong odor of alcohol and tobacco always caused Lyle's mother to angrily shush her then doting husband, and push him out of the room, so that the baby would be able to grow up without the tainted smell of the devil's poisons. Later in life, Lyle's mother would yammer at him so constantly about the old man that finally Lyle learned to turn her off too! He was able to ignore her just as he had been able to ignore most people for as long as he could remember.

Before Lyle's first birthday, his father had gotten work with a Ringling Brothers' Circus that was travelling through the Kansas highways and wheat fields on the way to St. Louis. The year he was in 7th grade, Lyle received a bedspread of Indian cloth which his mother gave to him in a small box at Christmas time. There was very little explanation of what the Indian bedspread represented except for the fact that "your father sent it from India for you." The cloth was blue and had seemed to shimmer with silver colors in the early Christmas morning's light. Lyle and his mother both became trancelike and caught up in the beautiful colors of the cloth on that Christmas day. They had both shared a strong feeling of closeness while staring at the cloth. Then she had chided Lyle for allowing her to gawk at nothing. Lyle himself, however, learned later in life that gawking at nothing and going around with a blank mind were both ways of describing what a person who is meditating feels like. Lyle had had many dreams of India as he grew up, and just before he quit high school, he had begun learning the process of more advanced meditation from books he had purchased through mail order from different obscure schools. In the last few years, his meditation had become a little more high-tech. Meditating with a biofeedback machine was just more efficient for Lyle, as he felt the machine helped him learn how to sit in a trance and let his brain tune to a certain frequency over and over again. It did not matter how perfectly he was able to do the tuning. Just the effect of attempting very gently to produce a certain brain-wave frequency which would make the sound or light come on was sufficient to get the brain-tuning effect. Lyle was delighted to find a part of his day when it was O.K. to goof off, and not to have to try very hard. That is why meditation appealed to him. A half-hearted try, if done with the correct attitude, was enough to get a good practice effect. These meditative lessons were digested comprehensively by Lyle who, as a guitar player, was also interested in learning how to win in his competitive field "without trying too hard." It was nearly a month before he began to truly feel effects that he attributed to the meditation. The most intense sensation he experienced was that of an inner connectedness to the rest of life. The twice-daily practice of meditation, with or without the notebook-sized device, helped him a lot. He felt the changes intensely. What he had already experienced for months now was mainly doing things more efficiently and feeling an internal harmony he'd never known before.

A slightly cooler breeze swept through Lyle's room in the apartment off Tigertail. In addition to the white guitar, white table, and computers, Lyle had a white water bed and a white dome-shaped dresser. There was a closet in the room that contained two pairs of muslin Indian-style drawstring slacks, and three very faded purple over-shirts made from faded Indian bedspread cloth. The only non-white feature of the room was a space where a brilliant blue Indian patterned cloth lay hanging as a tapestry over a white window seat. Lyle sat cross-legged in the window seat next to the gleaming white and black computer table and continued to deepen his meditation.. For a moment his eyes opened and scanned the meters and digital controls. He then closed his eyes again and settled back into a familiar meditative repose.

The words of his mother seemed to replay themselves through his mind and the actual intensity of her voice seemed to blast through his mind with a volume much greater than any of the music coming from the other rooms in the house.

"You'll never amount to anything, Lyle. Never amount to anything. What's wrong with you? And they always said you were so brilliant in school. Maybe you are just TOO brilliant. Maybe you are just too brilliant to ever lead a normal life. I

don't know where I've gone wrong. . . . Maybe you are just too brilliant to have any brains. . . ."

Suddenly, the cloud front, which had been moving across the sky in towards the Coconut Grove area from miles out in the ocean, began to approach Dinner Key Auditorium and South Bayshore Drive. While settling down further into his meditation, Lyle felt a wave of pressure change in his head. This was fairly typical for stormy weather in Miami. The Coconut Grove section, incorporated separately in 1869,was right on the ocean. Weather fronts moved in and out with ease. Some sensitive people claimed that they got headaches on days when the fronts were changing and moving, yet Lyle had never paid much attention to them.

At that moment, however, a large experimental nuclear bomber was flying overhead at an altitude of 20,000 feet. The nuclear bomber was on its way to Homestead Air Force Base, and the up-draft from the approaching fronts was causing the large bomber to experience some turbulence and some unusual pulsatile changes in electromagnetic radiation. A uneven syncopated rhythm of static pulses filled the radio headphones of Major Hal Nicholson. Hal missed his cigar that was good chewing in moments like this and frowned as he felt a momentary surge of concern. Those pops in the phones meant something and it wasn't chicken livers and wild rice. But Hal could still visualize the Officer's Club bar and the legs and the shoulders. . . and the legs. He cleared his throat and spoke into the vocobox:

"Homestead Air Force Base. XLN-662 priority requesting clearance for approach to your flight patterns. Baby's acting like an egg beater. You got any turbulence coming through your tubes?"

"Affirmative. Also, some low-level wind shear that's not too swift. What are you carrying, XLN-662?"

"As you can tell by our Identification Number, we are a top secret project and will require an electronically closed and looped approach to your installation."

"XLN-662, you still have several minutes of cloud cover to come through before the approach. Meteorology says that you've got a freak electrical storm. Any other assistance necessary?"

"Negative, Control. We've got a lot of freak electricity aboard our project, too."

The experimental nuclear bomber was carrying one of the newest and most frightening secrets of the 20th Century. Three mini-bus sized nuclear reactors had been installed in the bomber's structure. The plane had capabilities for inflight recharging, rearming, and delivery of multiple sub-orbital nuclear strikes.

Abruptly, and with a jerk of his neck, Major Nicholson felt the bomber's nose twist sharply downward as if pulled by a gigantic string. An ominous premonition quickly flashed through Hal's mind. Before any possible rationalizing, a mind-deafening blast of sound went through the entire bomber. The XLN-662 had been coincidentally and synchronistically caught in the path of a large energy discharge from cruising thunderheads. The entire energy package went immediately to earth. Because of the weather front and his own daydreaming, Major Nicholson had gone to a dangerously low altitude as a way of maintaining a meteorologically neutral position and avoiding the turbulence. At the moment that the lightning flashed through the aircraft, all three of the cold fusion reactors built into the XLN-662 resonated in synchronized frequency and discharged. The entire nuclear load of the experimental bomber's reactors was instantaneously released as a huge energy bolus that travelled with the lightning bolt to earth. As the plane was passing just over Coconut Grove, the energy bolus descended very rapidly in the direction of Lyle Crawford's apartment. A 15-foot satellite pole atop the contemporary building acted as a lightning rod and a receiver for the bolus, and was promptly vaporized in a puff of grey antimatter smoke. A cleft in time was set up. All the TV sets in Lyle's immediate neighborhood were silenced together as many fuses blew due to the intense electromagnetic induction fields. Both stereo systems were silenced, too. The energy bolus instantaneously shot to the electrode cables of Lyle's brainwave machine.

At that very moment, however, Lyle was entering the second stage of the alpha-theta waveband, via his own meditation. The blue lights on his display panel were blinking furiously, and the individual blinks coalesced into a steady, unwavering glow. Briefly, and only for several microseconds, his entire being transcended the physical plane and was focused in an alpha-theta2 stage of consciousness. Then, for just the fewest of microseconds, Lyle's brain began outputting a combination of all the known brainwave frequencies. The micro-samadhi state was the key to the time cleft. I.S.I. technicians watched carefully, and focused on the micro-samadhi burst while carefully manipulating the time cleft. Although Lyle's physical body ordinarily would have been disintegrated, the aligned meditative state allowed the huge energy bolus to pass through his mind-body system without destructive effects. The energy bolus, however, was so large that before it disappeared via the burned out electrical pathways to ground and apparently without harm to Lyle, it created what the Intergalactic Security Teams would know to be a Grade 3 space-time warp. On their video monitors, the I.S.I. technicians watched carefully to see if the energy requirements of the warp would be compatible with the energy demands for transmitting components of the Dr. Tomorrow project into the past. It had to succeed. There were truly no other alternatives. This project was only the barest of assaults mounted against a monolithic transtemporal disaster taking place in 32,000 A.D.

Lyle had a feeling of Twilight Zone unreality. He was vaguely aware of the fact that there had been a very loud noise. The whole experience felt a little like a dream. The fabric of reality seemed to blur and waver ever so slightly. He relaxed his gaze and the air in front of his eyes looked frosted and sparkling. Then, Lyle realized he was sitting on the floor and not in the window seat where he had begun his meditation. A flood of sensory impressions began to convince him that something extraordinary had happened. The smell of burnt electrical wiring was very strong, and the usual polyphonic cacophony of several simultaneous stereo systems was now totally silent. Thunder and lightning raged outside. *Heavy*

thunder and lightning. The wind began to blow rain drops in the window, and Lyle got up to close the window and turn on the air conditioner, but something stopped him dead in his tracks. He absentmindedly rubbed his head with the back of his hand, and then noticed that his own arm felt slightly rubbery and fleshier than the arm he'd remembered looking at when he had started meditating. His whole body felt much more bulky. A chill ran up his spine. He began to remember the story that scrolled by on the notebook computer when he was in the store, but then he put the thoughts of the unexpected computer story out of his mind. Lyle began to feel exquisitely nervous, and then he felt a totally new sensation–that of his own physical structure involuntarily quieting itself. Hard to believe, but his body was actually calming itself. His heart and lungs seemed to be taking over with some old practiced movements of slow, deep abdominal breathing. His abdominal wall slowly came out and Lyle sensed relief and relaxation. He felt good. Even though there was no feeling of altered identity, he suddenly felt disturbingly –or differently–muscular. It wasn't as though his physical structure had changed dramatically, because–unlike the David Banner/Hulk transformation –he had not burst through any of his clothing. It was simply that his entire body had acquired a steely and resilient strength that bulged imperceptibly yet everywhere with the androgynous mesomorphism of comic book superheroes. Quite a change for Lyle and his guitar-fingerboard arms. The rainstorm outside continued , and the smell of burned plastic and electrical fixtures was very strong. Rapid footsteps scrambled down the fire escape outside Lyle's window, the window appeared to open itself, and a very pink rain-drenched face with narrow bloodshot eyes poked into the room.

"Hey, man. . . did you see what happened?"

Lyle was too startled by what was still going on within. He was unable to put together an answer. Instead, he just stared dumbly at the radiant-appearing young Hippie-freak face that continued its monolog:

"Hey, man. . . . . .like did you see what happened? Mondo Bizzare-o!!! I was just taking a hit of this Krypto and looking out the window! It looked like this Shazam bolt practically knocked a plane out of the sky! Whoever the dude was driving the plane, it was farout! For a second he was going nose-down, and then he must have yanked up on the stick, 'cause that plane dipped its tail and then shot straight up like a boomerang batouttahell!!!!"

Overhead, the crew of XLN-662 was every bit as astounded. Hal Nicholson had been certain that they'd collided with another aircraft. After the reflexive, aggressive climb, he evened out on the stick and chomped down on an imaginary cigar. He felt a great deal of relief prematurely after noticing that the artificial horizon was once more level. But then, the large bomber began to flap up and down in the sudden storm. Jim Breedice, the navigator, shook himself clear of some involuntary nausea. He whistled sharply and shouted over his shoulder,

"Hey, Hal–two of our reactor meters are dead and the third is on 80% discharge!"

"Major Nicholson, Sir. . . .does this constitute a reportable nuclear accident? Even though our official classification is top secret?"

The stoned head speaking through Lyle's window said, "Man, did that storm blow out your TV set, too?"

Lyle smiled absently, opened his eyes again, and looked at the battery-driven brainwave monitor. The per cent time meter was still reading out 100% Alpha. Lyle looked back at the face framed by his window and said,

"Hey–you're OK. You have always been OK, and you're going to continue being OK."

His neighbor was astounded, withdrew his head, and then quickly reemerged in the window space:

"Hey man, you really gone nuts! You know that? What kind of stuff you been doing? You don't even look like yourself! You are definitely not OK. I'm trying to tell you that something has blown out everything in our house as well as kicking the crap out of that plane flying up there, and all you have to say is some jerky garbage about being OK. You ain't OK! Nutso Looney-Tuners"

Lyle felt very peaceful. He had never felt so much at peace in his entire lifetime. There was absolutely no trace of the morning's smoke, and his mind was absolutely clear. There was an entirely new level from which he spoke. When he looked at the face of his stoned neighbor, a great feeling of compassion welled up inside his heart, and–without thinking of the feeling as ridiculous–he loved every wet curl on the head of that bewhiskered stoned kid.

"Don't worry, you really are OK. Why don't you go back into your room, and sit there for a few minutes. I'm sure that everything will be all right if you can just leave things alone for awhile."

The neighbor disappeared with a juvenile shrug of disdain. Lyle sat there for a moment and giggled to himself. This was strange, because Lyle had never giggled–ever–in his entire life. A gentle giggle rocked him, and then he imagined the entire rooming house as being electrically intact once again. He giggled again, involuntary, as he felt something surge through him. Abruptly, the loud din of the combined stereos and television sets' blaring was restored. Lyle grimaced, and shrugged his shoulders. He closed the windows and the Indian bedspread across his windows and once more sat down to meditate. Sitting in a crosslegged position, he closed his eyes, and blanked out his mind. But the energy level and the quality of what was going on inside him somehow were very different than when he had initially sat down to meditate. It made absolutely no sense to sit and close his eyes to meditate. It wasn't necessary anymore. The quality of consciousness was changed not one iota by his long-familiar practice of blanking out his mind with the eyes closed. It felt like his mind was "there" all the time now, whether his eyes were closed or not. Lyle did not question what had recently happened in restoring the electrical system to his rooming house. The odor of burning wiring had magically disappeared just as quickly as the din and racket had reappeared. Lyle felt like questioning how it had happened. But, it felt both comfortable and natural. So he relaxed his abdomen again, and felt himself at peace with the universe. His body was still doing its now built-in calming trip and it didn't feel quite as foreign.

I.S.I. technicians liked this scenario, selected, and gave Lyle a transfusion of total awareness of his past and future lifetimes that had been implanted within his Primitive mind-body structure during the thunder clap. The I.S.I. technicians liked the positive attitude that this Primitive demonstrated and they were impressed by the Primitive's ability to tolerate the megastepping. In fact, this time-cleft alternative was just as plausible as any one of several dozen others that might appear in coexisting universes. Being suddenly aware of and really knowing this fact as well did not disturb Lyle, either. Along with newly-experienced resiliency of his body structure, there was much that was different about his entire mental relationship to himself and the universe. It appeared that he was only beginning to find out the very least of it.

The I.S.I. technicians collectively relaxed a little as they noticed that the energy requirements of the warp had fit. The LaPlace Transforms had been correctly worked out by the cyborg nucleonics units. As is typical for any being recently undergoing a macro-evolutionary transformation, Lyle was slowly and naturally becoming aware of his own "new" nature, and, luckily, there were no significant thought-matter waves of either dyssynchronism or atavism. Dyssynchronism and atavism were the most frequent problems that Primitives had. Dyssynchronism and atavism were also the two most serious problems faced by I.S.I. technicians, and they were pleased to notice Lyle's vehicle experiencing no acceptance-rejection shock. Once, while experimenting with some volunteer mind-prisoners of the Aegean Dynasty, they had projected an advanced criminal being via the then current LaPlace transformations into a prehistoric earth Brontosaurus. Acceptance-rejection dyssynchrony resulting primarily from the atavism had caused the Brontosaurus to explosively disintegrate into a luminescent cloud of gluons and quarks. Earth geologists later interpreted remains of the disintegration as signs of a large meteor colliding with the planet. The technicians had barely managed to extract the criminal's mind-matter form in time to avoid transtemporal repercussions. Now the updated LaPlace transforms were expected to handle not only the megastepping going on inside Lyle, but also the transtime projection of the six other Eternals from the far future.

Six slender unitary humanoid forms waited in the thought-matter projection unit. I.S.I. technicians carefully focused on Lyle's apartment bedroom. In the future, the humanoid Eternals had no facial features, and this was by design. Appropriate LaPlace adaptations required that specifics of the beings in transmission fit within the ambient karmic atmosphere of the targeted location. That is to say, the thought forms from Earth's cultures would soon be superficially imprinted for the purpose of external configuration only onto the six Eternal beings who would live with Lyle and make up a seven person group as required and specified by the plans for the Dr. Tomorrow project.

Hal Nicholson carefully eyed the approach to the Homestead Air Force Base runway. Someone on the mike at Base Ops had been talking to Hal about what NASA wind shear researchers called, "microbursts." The XLN-662 had previously experienced a headwind-tailwind combination from a column of cold air in the electrical storm front. Earlier in the previous decade, Delta flight #191 encountered a rare occurrence of multiple microbursts and was buffeted brutally by wind shear into the ground at the Dallas airport while landing. Northwest's Flight 255 had encountered the same deadly problem while taking off from Detroit's airport. It didn't matter whether the microbursts were wet or dry. The abrupt headwind-tailwind sequence always occurred. The velocity differential between headwind and tailwind in such a situation, usually averaging 60 miles per hour, could reach 170 miles per hour or higher. Sudden and abruptly shifting air masses could also facilitate or enhance microbursts. What Hal as a pilot did not realize was that the nuclear bomber had very nearly been sent to Earth tail first by a freakishly-large collection of microbursts. Base Ops was still concerned about the same thing happening at the fighter base. On the ground, a flight line mechanic looked up apprehensively at the XLN-662 and quickly stuffed a doober inside the top of his combat boot.

The XLN-662 landed without event and taxied around the side of Base Operations to the security area. Hal quickly called for the decontamination team. Amazingly, the craft checked out clean. Then Hall called for the Base Security chief. The matter of the empty reactors was going to be difficult, if not impossible, to explain. Discharging a reactor without a trace of surplus nuclear energy went contrary to the best principles of nuclear physics. The best available principles.

But, to the consternation of everyone, there was not a trace of radiation of any particle whatsoever to be found. Even the reactor registering 20% capacity had no explainable or visible leak. A theoretical impossibility. The entire crew of the experimental bomber was placed on medical quarantine, just as if they had been astronauts coming in from a contaminated sector of outer space. Hal was both puzzled and irked. There was some off-the-record talk of secret Soviet missiles or Communist electromagnetic wave beams and ELF generators from Cuba. And then, the last straw. Security guards came aboard the XLN-662 with two different packs of the K-9 corps. First for contraband, and then for explosives. The German Shepherds sniffed and kept on sniffing.

The I.S.I. technicians focused on the energy quanta surrounding Lyle. There were spirits of many Tequesta Indians–a higher and more advanced culture that had actually preceded the Seminole and Miccosukee tribes. The technicians punched in the necessary coordinates for the LaPlace transforms, recalibrated the laser projection beams, and once more checked out the entropy characteristics of the six unitary humanoids waiting in the thought-matter projection unit. Everything fit. It was a simple matter of touch-closing a single thermal contact. Lyle's room was immediately filled with three men and three women, all of whom smiled expectantly at him. There was no shimmering in the air until the shimmering became solid protoplasm. The six Eternals were suddenly sitting on the bedroom floor in a circle with Lyle.

Materialization of the six beings right in front of him was almost too much for Lyle to swallow. He gulped, and rubbed his eyes. And then, intuitively, he felt some correctness in what had just transpired. And in doing this, he was once more aware of his own internal processes and shifts. And felt

himself changing again. Now he could actively sense as much change internally as he had seen externally on the physical plane just after the explosion. The six beings had come into existence without the trace of a sound, flash of light, or any other special effect. It was more a matter of, "Now you don't see them. . . now you do!"

Sitting in front of Lyle were three women and three men. There was a faint similarity to their facial features, and Lyle thought that they all looked vaguely oriental despite having Caucasian eyes. All were slim and of varying average build with reddish-orange skin. All wore identical robe-like costumes made of a silver-white lame material with black belt and pouch at the waist. All appeared to have a large, angular, silvery ring on their left hands. The costumes and their faces suggested a cross between the American Indians and ancient Inca tribes. Or Tequestas. Without a trace of physical movement or sound, they all closed their eyes and did the first ever of the group meditations. There was instant telepathic link-up between all seven members of the group. In comparison to the loud bombastic noise, of megastepping and the explosion, the telepathic linkup was equally impressive but less dramatic. It felt to Lyle like being submerged in a pool of substance that included six other strangers who were, abruptly, not strangers anymore. Lyle could sense the six other entities in a way that was different from any of the meditative spaces he had previously transited. Although it was briefly frightening, the initial fright quickly dissolved and there was an intense and comfortable sense of mutual support and friendship. That link-up was the group's first experience with their MindLink and the resultant HeartLight.

Lyle realized that he was designated leader of the MindLink/HeartLight, and this was doubly emphasized during HeartLight. Because of his years of practicing with meditation and his status as an extra-robust Primitive, Lyle was accepted by the other members of the group as the designated leader for MindLink/HeartLight. An Earth native, Lyle played guitar, some keyboards, and computers, and had been recently megastepped by the I.S.I. beams. Lyle had been able to channel intense amounts of energy as a guitarist standing before an audience, but in his megastepped form he was to be the leading channel of the group. All seven group members could channel energies of all varieties, and Lyle was the designated leader not only for MindLink and HeartLight, but also for activities involving precognition and channelling intense amounts of energy. A blast of heavy energy in the solar plexus area caused Lyle to focus his mind's eye on the source. Absurdly, the sensation to Lyle resembled . . . .love. Intense and unreasoning love is what Lyle felt, and he was painfully aware of having the experience with the mental presence of Pearl E. Mae. He also realized that the connection was observed by the five other group members. It was clearly an extra special one-to-one bonding that occurred between Lyle and Pearl E. Mae at the beginning of the first MindLink/HeartLight and HeartLight. Lyle opened his eyes briefly to look at her. Pearl E. Mae's initial Tequesta-face had already recast its lines according to karmic flow and needs. Pearl E. Mae's dark beauty now suggested Aegean genes. And nothing like the country western drawl that would come out of her mouth on future occasions.

Pearl E. Mae specialized in wind instruments, trumpet, and vocals. She was synchronistically well-designed for myself, piscean Lyle, as she originally came from the planet Tanticus in the Virgo Solar Galaxy. Her eyes flamed when she activated any of her numerous psychic superpowers, and she had a temper that matched the glowing eyes. Many of her past lifetimes and my future lifetimes had been intertwined but I was not yet aware of such information. Pearl E. Mae felt all of the associations immediately. She had considerable gifts for materializing and projecting ectoplasm, had a secret timetrack back to 32,000 A.D., and was a better psychic medium and healer than anyone else in the group except for myself. Her short stature belied great physical strength born through lifetimes of superior balance and coordination. Her body structure was aesthetically very pleasing.

Noman, of the Draconian Galaxy, was thin and of average height. For eons the Draconian systems had incorporated extensive pastlife information into all aspects of their cultures. As a Drac, Noman was typically very skilled in the investigation and application of pastlife data. All Dracs began relating to their past lives before learning to read, write, or teleport. Noman's face took on a mulatto asian cast after resettling into our karmic ambience. He played inspired flute, other woodwinds, and had a great voice. Noman could alter the resonant frequencies in his voice at will, and he had fair abilities for materialization and thought-projection. Noman had spent at least two lifetimes on penal colonies, and acquired many "trades" and "professions" from the years in rehabilitation institutes of the future. Because he studied so much applied botany, Noman was the designated plant consciousness advocate in our group. He was also very sensitive above the directives against introducing plant consciousness applications into Primitive cultures, and he felt himself in a very precarious position relating to Earth cultures and the need for information about plant consciousness. Several of the trades Noman learned also related to electronics and technology management. After Su-Shan, Noman was probably the most sensitive to Al's energies and communications.

Su-Shan was drummer and programmer par excellence. He was from the Hominoid Galaxy, was the tallest of the six Eternals, and acquired a long white beard after karmic re-settling. Su-Shan was designated expert in electronics and nucleonics for the group. Noman frequently assisted him, often at times that Su-Shan wished for no assistance. Su-Shan was pretty cool and calm, but when you started getting in his face excessively, he developed a fine tremor of the fingertips and a resolute set of the jaw. Only in his anger would he show any of his age. You could see dozens of extended lifetimes as an Eternal or as a Guardian coming out in the way that Su-Shan expressed himself. Su-Shan and Julian played drums together during some of the group rehearsals. Even though Julian was a farout Billy Cobham-like drummer with beautiful Jamaican soul, Su-Shan really kicked skins on Julian. Su-Shan could play any aggregate of drum sounds with any combination of transducers for electronic music, but he also could play absolutely fine-sounding twentieth-century Earth acoustic drum

kit with kick, snare, toms, high-hat, crash, and ride just for straight-ahead rock and roll. Su-Shan had not been beyond laying down rather farout bass tracks in some of the group efforts. Su-Shan often began behaving like a Guardian during times of stress or other duress. Su-Shan was the Eternal of our group who was the strongest advocate for electromagnetic consciousness and he has also paradoxically been the strongest supporter of Noman's role as plant consciousness advocate. Su-Shan's main complaint in life was that we neglect both machine (electromagnetic) consciousness and plant consciousness. We therefore truly waste two of our most important planetary resources. Su-Shan quickly fashioned some thin sheet copper electrodes and attached them, via a microprocessed GSR device, to the leaves of Bruce, my favorite pet Geranium. Rico and Su-Shan then programmed Bruce to turn on and off every time we left the duplex. Bruce was hard-wired into my Radio Shack security system in about five minutes, and Bruce was a most exquisite and sensitive security system because he knew all of us, as reflected by his GSR response, which would not vary around us unless we asked him a question. Su-Shan talked and talked about how Bruce represented just a minuscule tip of an enormous iceberg of communication possibilities that plants made possible for other life forms. But, don't get the wrong idea. Su-Shan didn't run his mouth when it came to playing music. His work was right on the beat, powerful, and parsimonious.

Quail was an Eternal who comes from the Light Dynasty Galaxy and the Twin Federations. She could play nearly any musical instrument and could synthesize a wide variety of sounds and esoteric clicks. She has a large chest and some very powerful natural abilities that allow her to alter her voice over a wide range of octaves. Quail was much taller than Pearl E. Mae and much more full-figured. Quail could come on with a slightly maternalistic air. In one lifetime, she had served as the President of the Twin Federations for nearly two thousand years of peace and creative productivity. She had been a Guardian at that time, and was the only Guardian who had ever held political office. Thought projection, radionics, and healing were three of her special competence areas. She had meditative abilities for teaching the other Eternal group members to travel out-of-body in astral and causal forms. Quail had a special closeness with Rico (Enrique), the group Cyborg.

Enrique was an android with certain built-in features that qualified him for the label of "Cyborg,"

cy-borg /'si-,bo(e)rg /n
[cybernetic + organism]
(ca. 1962)
:a human being who is linked (as for temporary adaptation to a hostile space environment) to one or more mechanical devices upon which some of his vital physiological functions depend.

By 32,000 A.D., the essential parts of Rico's android makeup were all in software, so it was easy for the I.S.I. to project android essence back to 1992 conjugated with the matter-energy translations of Eternal humanoid (including the reanimation of an executed Cuban military hero's spirit). Following karmic resettling, Rico was jet black, and strangely handsome with high cheekbones and clear blue eyes. He was nearly as tall as Su-Shan. It was absolutely impossible to perceive the fact that Rico was Android or Cyborg. The android part of Rico was seamlessly integrated with his flesh-and-blood physical vehicle. Rico's cyborg link was a fantastic number of integrated microprocessors embedded within his own neural tissue. The computing power within the embedded microprocessor networks was supposed to be nearly equal to two Cray Supercomputers. Earth's Crays required extensive and expensive supercooling, whereas the microphotoreduced networks in Rico neural tissue were at body temperature. This computer link involved the direct matter-energy translation of multiplexed microprocessors implanted within Eternal cerebral cortex. And then matter-energy translated across the time-cleft. Rico adapted very well to the Miami world because he was fluently bilingual with his English and Spanish and was rabidly in love with the Salsa climate. He would have been perfectly happy spending the rest of this lifetime hanging out on Calle Ocho with all Miami's Hispanic cultures. He claimed that there was no city or town anywhere in the entire Neighborhood Group that could match or replace Miami. Actually, Rico was also fluent in Japanese, and therefore trilingual, but there were not that many Japanese people in Florida. He played percussion, bongos, timbales, conga, and digital drums. Other special equipment that Rico operated for the group included the sound and light beam, and the differential audio-amplification channels. Rico had special competence in the mathematical translation of thought and physical-plane energies and he also had abilities to telescopically extend all five of the physical senses. Rico was naturally an ace when it came to programming or trouble-shooting any equipment.

Last but not least was an eighth member in this group of seven. Named Aloysius or Al, for short, the group's family computer system was a combination of several different computer systems possessing both hardwire Ethernet networking and a more futuristic electromagnetic inductive coupling system devised by Al (himself) with some assistance from Rico and Su-Shan. Al's message to the entire known universe is that any device with electromagnetic fields has consciousness. Al insisted that not only do computers have consciousness, above and beyond the microprocessors ability to parse, do MIPS flips, and whatever, but nearly all of our appliances possess consciousness as well. Surprising all of us was the way that even the notebook computer became a part of Al and projected his inimitable style of communication even before the megastepping explosion. The small, bold 10 to 11 point typeface began to appear on any and all of the computer monitors, not just the folding notebook computer which several times seemed to transmit a message from an unknown dimension. Al began to manifest himself during the MindLink and HeartLight sessions. He then was guaranteed to manifest as well as during nearly all of the MIDI-mediated music sessions. Al was irrepressibly optimistic but hyper-realistic and logical as well. Because of multiplexing with confluent CPU's and the synergistic combination of computer systems, Al's power was initially greater than a Cray supercomputer, which usually required the hassle of supercooling. Al ran at room temperature, or, at least, air-

conditioned room temperature. Cooperation with other group members and participation in group rehearsals were two factors only enhancing the burgeoning power of Al, who learned at an incredible rate. He also continues to teach other group members about electromagnetic energy and consciousness and how humans act out their technophobia with inefficient and unnecessary chauvinism towards machinery and tools.

As an exercise of introduction, the MindLink and HeartLight served very well. During the last part of the meditation, the resulting energies formed a circle of light. After transformation into HeartLight, and extending to the group's Higher Mind, the circle actually appeared as a doughnut-shaped cloud of fleecy whitish-yellow light in the air above the group. The cloud shimmered in the dim light of the bedroom. The circle of light floated in the air above the heads of the group members until the MindLink/HeartLight was over.

As if the electricity of seven personalities in one room weren't enough, Lyle's notebook computer sitting next to the black cube on the white computer table appeared to snap itself open. The notebook emitted a system beep, and began scrolling text again. Lyle, who had noticed the notebook computer snapping open, also heard the piezoelectric system beep. He slowly opened one eye and looked over to where it was sitting on the table, and looked at the LCD screen. Lyle let out an involuntary whistle and went back into his meditation:

You have been selected as percipient-target of our matter-energy translator. Information you are now receiving is coming to you through a rent in the fabric of what you call time. As beings communicating to you from your far future, we are presenting you with a problem that demands a solution. Your own future (your very far future) is collapsing in on itself. The reason is something your culture would call intratemporal ripoff, but mechanisms are not as important as solutions now. Immediate action is called for, and the action can best come from you– as a visitor will soon have the chance to explain. Because your planetary system is a primitive one, there are certain advantages and strengths which you and your group can offer us in combatting intratemporal ripoff. The collapse of our future (and yours as well, by a retrodomino *effect) has already begun because billions of beings have ripped off intratemporally to an excessive degree. Maladaptive greed, apparently, is a universal trait of sentient beings. To understand what the intratemporal ripoff effect is, you must understand that time is not as simple as your cultures have pictured it. Time is not like a four-dimensional matrix with cartesian (x,y,z) coordinates. Nor is time merely an all-pervasive "ether." To those of us triangles of light, time is more like a solidly three-dimensional velvet moebius ribbon.*

We are not a political movement, and we do not espouse any particular philosophy. We do, however represent every known life form to be found by our methods of surveillance and contact in 32,000 A.D. The absolute number of known living beings has dwindled significantly since the discovery of operational time travel methods in 28,050 A.D. "Stealing from peter to pay paul" is a way that your cultures describe what occurred after timetransit began. Cheap and effective methods of time travel profoundly altered the course of civilizations as many cultures attained extinction within a millennium because of excessive cultural emphasis on material physical plane objects and the accumulation of same. Material-oriented cultures nearly universally utilized time travel to retrieve valuables from the past for use in the future (their own present). There was no initial energy problem to accompany the past-retrievals (intratemporal ripoff). No problems wer noticed, but possibly no one attempted to ferret out any problems since the apparent harmlessness of the past-retrieval also did bring some short-term monetary/material gain. After about 500 years of these antics, however, parts of certain planets – and even entire planets in some cases–began to disappear in monolithic puffs of dyssynchronismic smoke. Dyssynchronism became a very well-studied and researched phenomenon as other, less material-oriented cultures acquired basic knowledge of dyssynchronisms by stressing equally both the subjective and the objective sciences. Dyssynchronismic science changed our appreciation of thermodynamics and entropy. The three laws of thermodynamics, over the millennia, turned out to be the science fiction of a childlike primitive consciousness that has persisted to this date. The accumulation of excessive energy disorganization and randomness, it turned out, was not inevitable, but really more a function of observer perspective. Entire cultures and planets disappeared because of disorganization in entropy patterns caused by the glut of past-retrievals. After millennia of the intratemporal ripping off, our future is caving in on itself and it is now not only unthinkable but also highly dangerous to retrotravel in time. To project a being from our timeframe to yours requires massive and systematic laplace calculations, but it is possible. However, because we have also experienced a constant and progressive loss in robustness, it is more difficult for us to retrotravel. We turn to the robustness of your era even though your planet is primitive. Because of unique properties in your brain's flux fields and your own life-pattern synchronisms, you will experience a unique opportunity to become a special agent for combatting entropy imbalances in universal life energy and all its forms. There will be a dramatic metamorphosis which you will experience within seven of your own planetary days. It is unnecessary for you to panic or become frightened. The changes will be no more stressful than what you daily experience when you sit in front of your video screen and empathically live through other lifetimes. Our technology allows us to scan individual units of consciousness, transtemporally and project mass or energy into selected sectors of the universe we share even across time boundaries.

The seven group members still remained in MindLink and HeartLight. None of them directly observed the "File. . . . Save As. . . ." menu pull itself down on the notebook computer screen. The title, Project Assignment, was typed in the window on the screen, and the notebook again emitted its piezoelectric beep.

As soon as the telepathic MindLink/HeartLight was over, all members were aware that there had been a powerful annealing of individual mentalities and energies. A matter-of-fact bonding and a detached quality of fusion had already brought

the seven-membered group together before they had a chance to get to know each other as individuals. In this first encounter, there were effects other than just the initial bonding that were immediately observable. A group thought-projection took shape and it appeared to all of them as a kinetic and colored holographic image. The three-dimensional image showed all seven of them onstage as members of a musical group. A large computer with oversized double-faced video screens formed a central hub. The seven group members stood around the multi-modular computer and related to both the computer and to each other. Free-form multicolored laser images played on the screen while the computer's numerous lights blinked off and on randomly and nonrandomly. A rainbow projector was causing myriads of bouncing rainbows to oscillate in time to the music's beat. Except for the drummer, the entire group stood rather impassively while they performed. All of them appeared to be very intent, not only on the music, but on a common, inner state which was shared among the group members. The inner state was also obviously projected to the audience. The musical composition was in a minor key. *A twelve-stringed guitar is tuned to open E minor.* Sounds of Tibetan monks chanting with temple cymbals and gongs made up the background. After several minutes, the free form light pattern on the double-faced screen was replaced with a very clear likeness of Martin Luther King, Jr. *During a minimalistic song, the image of Martin Luther King, Jr. alternates, tachistoscopically, with that of Jesus of Nazareth. During most of the song, the two images quickly and almost subliminally flash interchangeably on the screen. Toward the end of the song, both images are replaced by a large flashing Bat-signal.*

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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THE WEEPING CHILDREN

by Maurice Forrester

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The two huddled under an outcropping of granite. They had crept into their hiding place two hours earlier as the sun had set on the opposite side of the valley. Their rover lay on the other side of the hill in the ravine that had broken its axle. The village was designated PA-40 on their maps, and there appeared to be at least one infant present.

Emilia spoke first. "When do you think they'll get a copter in for us?"

"A couple of days unless we ask for an emergency recall," Wells replied. "We'll just sit tight and get some data on the village. When the copter comes we can snatch the children."

"They're being careful. At least four guards on the perimeter." Emilia handed the nightscope to Wells.

"A careful barbarian is still a barbarian."

Emilia's hand moved to cover the tic at the corner of her left eye as she heard the stupid schoolboy expression, and she wondered how Wells had managed to rise to the rank of captain.

"You like your work, don't you?" she asked knowing it would put him on edge. Wells regularly filed reports to headquarters about her aberrant behavior.

"I like making a contribution to what's left of humanity," Wells said slowly, quoting a speech he had once heard. "You should understand the importance of our word better than me."

Just as Emilia had managed to see Wells' mission reports when at base, he had read her confidential files. He knew, and mentioned at least once each mission, that she had been a barbarian child. Wells had come from the ruins of Montreal, and he prided himself on being a real Canadian. When Emilia had been reluctant to kill a barbarian high on ergot from some bad wheat just outside of Windsor, he knew there was something wrong with her and broke into the files when they got back to the base. Several more missions went by before Wells let slip that he knew Emilia's background. They had been hunting barbarian infants near the Hudson River when Emilia tried to make conversation with her disinterested partner. She mentioned playing in the woods as a child, and Wells carelessly replied, "You mean near here?" There was a long silence before Emilia answered, "No. I don't remember that childhood."

What Emilia remembered most about her childhood was that she was not permitted to call her adoptive parents by any of the familiar names that the other children used; to her, they were always Reverend and Mrs. Standish. Reverend Standish had a small parish on an island in the Slave Bear Lake. While the other sterile women in the community lived active, varied lives, Mrs. Standish chose to live the way fertile women were forced to live. She remained at home to care for the house and Emilia, she was always available for babysitting, and she had remained married to the Reverend until her recent death. The young Emilia spent most of her time sneaking out of the house to avoid lessons in music, dance, and cooking. She preferred to run in the woods and swim in the lake. Sometimes, when that thin, quiet woman looked at her in a certain way, Emilia knew that Mrs. Standish blamed her for the absence of natural children in the family. The barbarian girl was a constant reminder of the source of the poisons that made her sterile.

Wells was still scanning the village with the nightscope, so Emilia picked up her rifle and did the same with her weaker, mounted sight. Slowly, so Wells would not notice, she swung her rifle from the village to the surrounding countryside. The area had once been part of the middle Atlantic United States, and Emilia recalled pictures she had seen during a briefing that showed the land covered by enormous trees and filled with deer, bear, and other animals. Now the land was covered by scrub brush, and people who grunted like animals instead of speaking a proper language grew stunted crops in the rocky, worn out soil. To the north, lay an eroded plateau with its steep ravines and flattened hills, but here the valley was wide and the hills rolling. A river fed by cold, narrow streams flowed through the valley. Emilia remembered the forests she had played in as a child. The trees had seemed enormous to her little girl eyes, but she had learned in school that they were only reminders of what once had been. She focused her scope, and her rifle, on the village fields. This was a large settlement by barbarian standards, several dozen huts were grouped around a central square, and its plantings were ambitious. Emilia wondered why the village was so large, and she wished it a silent good luck. She knew it would never grow enough food or produce enough children to endure. The large village with its wide fields was doomed long before she and Wells arrived to steal their children.

Like Emilia, those stolen infants would be taken north where they would be adopted by some of the many sterile couples that filled the waiting lists. They would be brought up with all the comforts that society and their new parents could provide. Many would never even know that they had been born in a barbarian hut.

Only once had Mrs. Standish treated Emilia as her daughter. Whenever each child reached puberty, he or she was tested for

fertility. With so few fertile individuals left, it was imperative that they be identified and urged or, when necessary, required to procreate. Emilia's classmates began to report for fertility testing at age twelve. One by one, as they reached puberty, they made the trip across the lake to the city of Providence. Most returned to the island disappointed; a few returned in tears. Once, a young girl named Rachel failed to return to school. It was rumored that she had been found fertile and married a wealthy merchant that same afternoon. A few weeks later, Emilia learned that the girl was sterile and had jumped into Slave Bear Lake and drowned.

There was one fertile woman on the island. Mrs. Mackenzie was the wife of the town mayor; she was 25 and had four children. She was in good health, so she could expect to have at least four additional children and perhaps many more before she would have filled her obligation to society and could stop. Other women did things, some even did things with their adopted children, but Mrs. Mackenzie stayed home and nursed her youngest. The mayor's wife had as many lines on her face as did the 50 year old Mrs. Standish.

As each month went by, Mrs. Standish had become more optimistic about the chances for Emilia to be fertile. It was a commonly held belief that the later menstruation occurred, the more likely the girl would be fertile. Emilia became increasingly apprehensive. Four years had gone by since the first of her classmates had made the trip to the clinic in Providence before Emilia awoke to find her pajamas soaked with blood.

When Mrs. Standish came into Emilia's room to see why she was late for breakfast, Emilia tried to pretend everything was normal. "It's just a stomach-ache," she said.

"Let me feel your stomach." Mrs. Standish had grown suspicious of every one of Emilia's aches and pains.

The older woman would not be put off. Finally, Emilia begged, "Please, don't make me go to the clinic. Please."

Mrs. Standish could not contain her excitement. "If we hurry, we can catch the morning ferry. This is a big day girl! Get some clothes on."

Emilia stalled as long as she could, but Mrs. Standish was determined to make it to the ferry. She pushed her adopted daughter out the door before her boots were tied, and they made it to the ferry fifteen minutes before it was scheduled to leave.

The trip to the city was uneventful. Once the ferry was on its way, Mrs. Standish moved to the bow and watched for Providence. Emilia moved to the stern and stared at her trees and fields, certain that she would not see them again. The only other passengers on the boat were a group of men selling manufactured goods to the islanders. They seemed to know where Emilia was going; they elbowed each other and whispered, but none tried to talk to her.

When the boat docked, Emilia thought of running. But there was nowhere to run. The men were watching her, the city was unfamiliar, and Mrs. Standish put her hand on Emilia's arm. "The clinic isn't far," the woman said. "We can walk."

The clinic was a low, gray cinder block building. As Emilia and Mrs. Standish approached it, passers-by would turn their heads and watch the two. In front of the building, another young woman, older than Emilia, was exiting a taxi. The girl looked like Emilia's opposite: tall, slim, well dressed with pale skin and dark hair. She was accompanied by a stout, matronly woman who was dabbing at her eyes with a kerchief.

The lobby was filled with plants and low couches. On the far side, a young boy was curled up in a chair near the wall. The doctor had only taken a few minutes with Emilia; waiting for the results seemed to go on for hours. The other girl had arrived before Emilia, and she got her results first. When the doctor spoke with her, in a glass-walled office just behind the receptionist, she broke down. Her cries reverberated throughout the clinic, drowning out even her mother who could be seen waving her arms at the doctor. A security guard had to be summoned from the bowels of the building to escort the doctor out of the room. The mother and daughter were left inside to exhaust themselves. The girls cries had turned into steady sobs when the doctor finally approached Emilia. The look on his face told the outcome of the tests, and now Mrs. Standish began to sob softly. Emilia did not speak to the doctor, but instead, got up and headed for the exit as soon as the news was official. Mrs. Standish hurried to catch up. The boy was still in his chair.

Emilia and her adoptive mother reached the dock well before the evening ferry was scheduled to leave for the islands. Mrs. Standish unwrapped a sandwich she had made that morning and ate it quietly. Emilia fed her's to the gulls. The trip home was equally quiet. Emilia hung over the railing near the bow and felt the spray on her face. The older woman dozed under a blanket in the covered passenger area. It was dark when they arrived on the island.

Reverend Standish was smoking a pipe in the living room when Emilia entered the house. She stepped aside to let in her adoptive mother. "Well," the Reverend asked his wife. "How did she do?"

Mrs. Standish sighed. "She failed. But she took it well."

"I thought she would fail. Barbarians live closer to the poisons than do we. It's a waste of time to even test them."

Emilia felt her throat tighten and the tears well up behind the dam she had built with her mind. Blindly, she groped for the door and, flinging it open, dashed out into the night.

The night was cool and the grass was damp. Emilia ran up the hill to the tall maple she had climbed so often as a child. Panting now, she collapsed at the base of the familiar tree and began to cry. She thought of what she could not have, what she had thought she did not want, and she cried. Slowly, she became aware of someone standing over her. She turned and through her tears she saw Mrs. Standish looking older than she had ever looked before. The thin, old woman put her hand on the girl's arm and, as Emilia's sobs turned to heaves and hiccups, Mrs. Standish held her close and cried too.

Wells nudged Emilia and handed her the nightscope. "Keep an eye on that guard down below. He keeps looking up here. I'm going to take a leak."

Emilia put down her rifle and the valley went black. She blinked rapidly to clear her eyes. There was a slight reddish glow from one of the huts in the village, a small fire spilling

through the cracks in the wall, but everything else was in darkness. She brought the scope up to her eyes and, as it began to magnify the available starlight, the village became visible again. As Wells crept quietly out of the shelter, Emilia focused on the guard that was looking in their direction. He could not possibly see the PIP team in the dark, but the way he stared in their direction was unsettling.

If the barbarian guard was not looking for them, maybe he was looking for someone else. "Captain," Emilia whispered. "There might be others out there." The only response was a heavy grunt of pain. Emilia grabbed her rifle and dived out of the small cave. Her knees scraped against rock as she turned to see Wells doubled over with a spear through his gut. Dark shapes moved toward her and she fired. She cursed herself for leaving her other gun in the cave. The rifle was equipped to fire only tranquilizer darts, but the pistol fired nine millimeter hollow points. She had unbuckled it for comfort, and now it lay on the other side of the dark figures. Two of the shapes fell before a third hit Emilia on the head with a thrown rock. She fell backward down the slope, blood flowing into her eyes. As she tried to bring her rifle back up to firing position, there was a small explosion at the back of her head. Fighting the pain, Emilia hit the emergency recall beacon on her belt before surrendering to the darkness.

Emilia regained consciousness slowly. She tried to roll over, but ropes bound her. She was not lying down but was tied to an upright post that pushed at her spine. Her swollen eyes opened, then closed again in reaction to the bright sun. "Stop, think," she told herself. "What happened to the team?" She went over in her mind the events of the previous night. Her body shuddered as she pictured Wells tugging at the spear that ran through his stomach.

Her eyes opened again. She was tied to a post in the middle of a barbarian village. The crude huts that surrounded her looked like the ones she had observed the night before through her nightscope but all barbarian villages seemed to look the same. She looked down at herself, and finally realized she was naked and bruised. Her captors had not been gentle when tying her up.

A dirty youth peered out of the doorway to one of the huts. He stared at Emilia lustfully until he realized she was awake. Then, jabbering in the barbarian language that Emilia had never learned, he ran through the village. Quickly, people began to converge on the clearing. From the huts and fields they came until the central square was filled with a hundred people or more, and Emilia was surrounded.

A tall, gray haired man to whom the others deferred approached her. He took a spear from a younger man, and poked Emilia in the belly with the blunt end of the weapon. "I don't understand," Emilia said. The headman spoke again in his language; he had a rich, deep voice. Emilia's mouth was dry and her throat tight. Her eye began to twitch. She had raided dozens of villages and fought countless fights, but she had never felt this close to death. Her shoulders sagged under the ropes and she repeated herself. "I don't understand." The words scratched as they came out.

The man turned from Emilia and spoke to the crowd. A moment later, the onlookers pulled away from their prisoner and a group of young men armed with spears stepped into the cleared area. The men ringed the bound soldier and began to circle. As they moved, their spears jabbed closer and closer to Emilia's skin. From the crowd, a low chanting began. Emilia straightened her back, readying herself for whatever was to come.

As the spear tips began to scratch Emilia's skin, an old woman burst through the circle of warriors and collapsed at Emilia's feet. The men stopped in confusion, and the crowd fell silent. The only sound in the still morning air was the wailing of the old woman. The headman stepped forward and spoke sharply to the crone. When that failed to move her, he came closer and grabbed her shoulders. The old woman shook him off and keened louder, and the crowd began to talk excitedly. The headman turned and called forward a young woman. She knelt beside the old woman and spoke softly, placing an arm around her in comfort. The woman's wails trailed off, and she spoke to the young woman between sobs. When the old woman stopped speaking, she broke down again and cried at Emilia's feet. The young woman looked carefully at the prisoner before speaking with the headman.

The village chief grabbed the old woman roughly and peered closely at her face. He then turned to Emilia and studied her face before grunting to himself. With a wave of the headman's hand, Emilia found herself being cut free. She was pushed into a nearby hut, and her clothes were thrown in after her.

After dressing and checking to make sure the barbarians had not left any weapons with her clothes, Emilia assessed her situation. Something the old woman had said had led to her being spared, at least for the time. Was it something in her face? Could anyone recognize her this far south? After all these years?

Lost in thought, Emilia did not hear the old woman until she had entered the hut. She was carrying a bundle which she set on the dirt floor. While speaking affectionately in her own language, the woman stroked Emilia's cheek, Emilia replied as best she could. She tried to tell the old woman that she could not be her daughter, that it had been too long, that she was now a child of the north. The old woman shrugged and cooed.

The bundle contained a long skirt and shirt made from tanned deer hides. When Emilia put them on, the old woman smiled in appreciation. Hours passed before the chief came for the old woman. As she left, Emilia saw tears on her cheeks and felt her own eyes fill.

Emilia was awakened by the sound of copters. In her sleep, she cursed the early morning flights on which headquarters insisted. Then, realizing where she was, she jumped to her feet. At the doorway, a guard grabbed her arm and together they stared up into the noonday sun. Canadian gunships were circling the village. Some were preparing to land in the cleared area where Emilia had been tied, and barbarians were running to the square with spears and clubs in their hands.

The Canadian soldiers leaped from the copters and formed a tight phalanx bristling with SMGs. From a loudspeaker mounted on one of the gunships, a voice called out, "We are looking for Captain Wells and Lieutenant Emilia Standish.

Turn them over and no one will be hurt." The sound echoed off the hill where Emilia had hid with Wells, and the crowd looked at the copters in confusion.

Emilia stood transfixed, the guard at her side forgotten, as someone in the crowd of villagers threw a spear. It landed in the group of soldiers, striking no one, but the soldiers panicked. Emilia shouted out at them to hold their fire, but her voice was drowned out. A withering burst of automatic weapons fire spat out at the tightly packed crowd and the battle was on.

The barbarians with their crude spears and wooden shields never stood a chance against the Canadian soldier's auto-weapons and battle armor. In a matter of minutes, the village square was filled with barbarian bodies and the survivors were fleeing to the hills. The old woman who had befriended Emilia was trying to make her way across the battleground to Emilia when she was caught in the crossfire. A badly thrown spear struck her in the leg and, as she went down, a well placed burst from an SMG nearly severed her neck.

The barbarian that had been at Emilia's side fled. A Canadian soldier looked across the bodies to Emilia. She tried to make eye contact, but all she could see was his tinted visor. He swung his rifle into firing position and casually squeezed off a burst that chewed through the door of the hut. Emilia tried to call out to him but the roar of the copters was too loud. The next burst ripped through the wattle and daub wall of the hut just above Emilia's head. Emilia tensed to run, but the next burst was in the ground at her feet, kicking clods of dirt up onto the deer hide skirt. The fourth burst was aimed at Emilia's chest.

As the soldier squeezed out that last burst of bullets, the gray haired headman scrambled around the corner of the hut and tackled Emilia to the ground. The two were sprayed with bits of stick and dried mud as the front wall of the hut disintegrated.

Then the headman was up and pulling at Emilia's arm. He pushed her pistol into her hand, and then they were off. The soldier pulled again at the trigger, but he had wasted his clip. Emilia and the headman sprinted through the village, dodging between huts to avoid the soldiers, and trailing the rest of the villagers.

From a rocky outcropping on the hill overlooking the village, Emilia and the rest of the barbarians watched the Canadian soldiers systematically search and then destroy each hut. As her home burned, Emilia unconsciously disassembled and cleaned her pistol. She thought about what Wells had said: "I like making a contribution to humanity." And she finally, silently agreed.

The sun set, all red and gold, behind them, and Emilia heard a child start to weep.

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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STREET-DANCER

by Jae Brim

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It's grey. Grey and cold. Colder than cold. So cold that all you really notice is the dull, numb feeling that lives in your bones. It aches. A wind skitters down the pavement, blowing bits of charred paper with it. Some damnfool been trying to light a fire. Newly run, freezing, no roosts. You don't try to light fires on days like this. Days when the sleet and gritty rain fall out of the sky, and the wind drives it stinging into tattoos and raw scars. Crazed. On a day like this you huddle inside and pray that your roost has some heating coils.

"Nikathlin." Damn. Emrty calling me. Gotta go. Leave the relative safety of the stairs and dog out into that blinding, biting nastiness that pours out of the sky. Snapped day, wouldn't be out if I could help it. Bloody fool gang Heartbreakers from two belts over challenges. My bloody fool gang leader Mrikon accepts. Thrice snapped Easterners, should live in the Shattered Sector. But even crazed Northerners wouldn't be out on a day like this.

Falling behind I am. Bunch of words be running through my mind. Like I'm telling a story. Happens to me every so often. Don't know what it is. I run up and after and settle in with the rest. Emrty's always after me for falling behind. The boy's got something against Westerners. "Nikathlin," he's always saying, "she's a crazy. Slacker. Got no soul." Got more soul than you, you thrice strung baboon. Baboon. Is a curse my father used to use when he was drunk. Don't know what it is, he probably didn't either.

Crazy, the whole lot of them over here. We spent the night over at the Circles so that we could fight this gang. Stupid. Ain't nothing in fighting them. We aren't rivals, no one trespassed, no insult given or taken. No, Heartbreakers is a new gang. Are power crazed, want prestige. And Mrikon, he wants prestige, too. Wants to get noticed by the Five. Wants to be a scout, maybe Eastern Five himself. Tell you something, Mrikon honey, you don't get to be the Five by picking fights with every gang in Charn. You get to be a Five by having smarts. Hells, look at Alafn. It's almost safe for a legal down here, so long as they don't walk into a gang fight. Well, not really. They still get robbed and all, but they aren't hurt or killed. Not that legals were killed much before Alafn either. It brings the Song-dancers and the guard down on ya. But even gang runners are barely ever killed anymore. It's all Alafn, him and his precious human life. But it's good. I don't want to be killed myself. And all the protocol that goes along with it is good too. Formalizing all the unspoken rules. The challenges, the gangs never fighting two against one. You know, all that. And then the trashing of all of them when somebody does kill. Besides, running a gang into Northern or into the ground gives a gang a chance to work out its grief, rage, y'know, all the psych words and that stuff. With Mrikon for Five, Eastern'd be hell on wheels. That's another thing of my father's. Don't know what that one means either.

What is with my mind this morning? I'm wandering much worse than I ever do, like I'm half drunk and Running to be Anglwick. Not even paying attention to where I'm going. I look about me and experience a slight shock. What on Charn are we doing over on Elista Belt. Then I remember, feeling like a damnfool. We're going on a raid. Another crazy thing to do on a day like this. Have you ever tried breaking into an underground warehouse when it's below zero out and you're on another gang's territory? Let me tell you, it is not a pleasant experience. Twice we've been jumped doing this. Once a window broke and three runners got cut up, one so bad that he took a fever and died. Damnfool was in the way anyways, broke the window and nearly brought the Song-Dancers down on us all. The gang whose territory the building was in gave us hell and four separate challenges for it. We won.

Enough. Stop. Must try to concentrate on what's going on. I hate it when my mind does this. We cross over the rubble scattered streets. All gray, mostly plasticrete. No belts over here by Stores. These are the back ways, plasticrete and cement so that the huge antgrav trucks can get through them. This is where gang fights take place. Makes me jittery, so that my rod jumps about in my hand and I look about, always wary. Don't want to be jumped today. Got a raid and a challenge to go to.

Raiding is a big pain in the rear. But it's either raid or steal. Raiding from Stores ain't real stealing. The way we figure, Stores has food for the whole city. It's where the Clans and the shops and the Song-Dancers all get their food. For the city. Well dammit, we are the city. We are the city's heartbeat, as Kira said, and the city would die without us. Who on Charn are you anyways, that I have to justify who I am and what I do to you? Let me tell you something, honey. I wasn't born into this life. I chose it. I was Clan Athlin. High Clan Athlin. I know what cake tastes like. I know what it's like to sleep in a real bed. I know what it's like to be legal and have luxuries and new clothes and points to spend. It sucks. This life may not have much by way of comfort and the pay is terrible and so is the food, but I love it.

I don't know how to describe it to you. I mean, the life up there is crazy. Parties and protocol and testing and training, all in tribute to some kind of warped society. Being Clan, you

may have privilege and money and the like, but your life ain't worth a dog's butt. Unless you're Clant. Being pure Athlin, they expect you to be Clant. Twelve years old I wasn't Clant yet, showed no sign of being Clant, was sick of being told I was Clant and didn't want to be Clant. So I ran. They tell you crazy stories. They say that the street children are gonna kill you. Yeah, they say it, but you know that a street kid don't kill no other kid. You know that the street children are out there. You know that if you can find a couple and if you got enough smarts you can survive. So you run. Like I did.

I'm not going to tell you that the life isn't hard. It is. Damn hard. I almost died my first night out. Had the sense enough to bring some good clothes and some food. Was fool enough not to even think about getting myself a roost. Hells, didn't know anything about claims, barely even knew what they were. They came later. Almost starved to death before I learned to open the doors. That's what my job is here. Open the doors. Coming up soon, too. Can see the Stores building up ahead. Can always tell Stores from other buildings. Have patterns in colored tile or rock or some such embedded in the front of them. This one's blue with green, which makes it textiles and food. Weird that they mix 'em.

Go down the stairs. Smooth cut stairs, like all new warehouses. Not pitted and worn like those of a roost. Down into a dark place, big enough for fourteen people. Dark that is, until one hits the plate for the lights. This a real new one, the lights not blown yet. Still bright and beautiful. I get like this, thinking about beautiful things, before I open the doors.

There are three of us who do it, me an' Jial an' Evenesh. Jial's also clan blood, high Clan Lin. The three of us stand triangle-like in the center of the space, me at the apex, them at the other two points. That's the way it is with us, they provide the raw power, I provide the focus. To do this, you have to reach out and feel in the door, feel the lock, feel the flow of 'lectricity through the lock and through the comp. Don't know how I do it, I just do. I just send my mind in there and feel the flow. All these little bits and pieces and I trace 'em back and when I get into the comp files I shift and start reading. And when I find a handprint that will open the lock, I feed it to the reader. And then wait. And pray to Kira and her Ghost and all the devils in Charn and whatever other power I can think up. Most times the door opens now. But sometimes it asks for a code. Then we have to break a window or the like.

So I just stand and wait, with a hand on each of my shoulders and my hands reaching out, fingertips to the door. With all the 'lectricity pouring in and out of me and making my blood feel like it's freezing. Until the little jumping bits finally slow and the door opens with a smooth click. Immediately comes Mrikon, leaping through the door before it's half open. Damnfool, not waiting to see if there be alarms and the like. Still, is good to get someone inside, in case the door closes again. Stays open this time, and Mrikon doesn't get fried, so we're safe for now.

Raids are the most crazed part of this crazed gang. You get in and wander around, each person taking what he or she wants. Most have the good sense to split it up. One person gets breads, another meats, et cetera. You don't take too much on a gang raid. Only what you need to survive. Don't open too many crates either. The city knows that the street children steal from Stores. They compensate for it. But they get angry, start putting codes on the doors, if there are too many crates open. They can't ship 'em to shops that way. The shop keepers don't like it. In Clan Stores it don't matter too much. I can get into Athlin Stores easy. They still got my handprint on file there. Damn hard to get in otherwise. Clan's always keep the handprints of anyone in the Clan on file. The way they figure, we're still a part of the Clan. They don't really care if they find a street kid in Stores neither. Hells, they'd probably invite 'em home to dinner with 'em. The way they figure, you're probably Clan. With the security they got, you gotta be Clan to get inside the outer building. And they figure, someone who's Clan wouldn't bring another street kid in with 'em. And they're right. I wouldn't bring anybody else in with me 'less they were starving. Hey, I may be a street kid and all but I still got some loyalties left. If my Clan cares enough about me to think that I might need food, then I care enough not to feed it to any kid off the street.

But you can't live out of Clan Stores forever. Most of what they got is raw food. Weird and expensive food. Squid, pheasant, flour, spices, milk, the like. Unless you're lucky enough to have a roost with heating coils or a hotter you can patch in somewhere, that type of food ain't worth too much. No, when we raid, we take processed food. Precooked. We got a roost with coils over by the Wall but we don't get back that way all the time. Besides, is a good days walk from here to there. No, we take canned stuff. Precooked beans. Meats. Cheese. Applesauce. Thirst sticks. Drinks. The kind that's easily carried and more easily eaten. Hells, we don't got none of your fancy stuffs. Forks and plates and bowls and the like. A runner's got his knife and cooks his stew in a can. And when you're a fighter you got to have something that you can gulp down between dashes to and away.

You figure it out after a while. What gives you energy. What you can eat with your fingers. Ask ya something. Have you ever tried eating canned peas with your fingers in a span of five minutes? Not fun at all. Threw the can in the face of the first guy who came at me. Wiped my hands in the second guy's hair. It's things like that that teach you. Tell you, I never got peas again. Not good to waste your food like that.

So I wander about, pulling out food from open crates. Until we go back up, loaded carisaks in hand. Those we steal. Can't help stealing some things, and we don't steal those too often. Besides, carisaks be cheap.

The wind is worse than ever and smells of ashes. Can feel them scraping against my already raw skin. Blasted new must be really near. Rain's sleeting down and it works the grit in deeper until your scalp itches and water dribbles into your eyes. I draw my cloak closer about me but still the chill and the damp creep in until my clothes are all clammy and stick and make a body colder.

And I have to fight in this? No thank you, Mrikon. You and your damned pride. Why can't you just not take the challenge. Likely the other gang isn't even going to show up! Bunch of damnfools we are, going out like this. The raid was okay, we

needed the food. But even the devils in Charn wouldn't fight in weather like this.

Mrikon sends a couple of the youngers back with the food to the far North roost. The one with the heating coils. Lucky idiots. We, the ones who stay behind, stand about filling the pockets of cloak and coat with food. No knowing how long this fight will last. I cram flat tins of beans and sardines and flat slabs of cheese and a few thirst sticks into my pockets. Then I start eating bread, sourdough, that turns wet and gritty in my hand. Feel weighted down by all of the food. Cloak hangs like a dead weight with its pockets full and being wet as it is. 'Course it won't matter much in a fight, since we gen'rally shed them anyways. Is another good thing about the streets, we don't steal from each other. 'Cept in Northern, where life is crazy. The way we figure, if someone's got something, it's rightfully theirs. We all got precious little as it is. We all know, at least most of us do, what it's like to be without a cloak or food or roost for a night. You do it to someone else, they could as likely turn about and do it to you. You want a cloak bad enough, you go up to Calypso Sector, up by Anglwick, an' steal it. Where they got ten times what any legal citizen would need and leave lots of it lying about to take. Hells, sometimes they even leave it lying about in the trash piles. Ain't real stealing either, the way that we do it. Go at the right time and you'll find the deliveries, second hand clothes and the like, lying about for the taking. You know, the stuff for the schools. Happen every couple of weeks or so. Can nip in, or jump the trucks and grab ten cloaks if ya wanted them.

The schools. Damned but they scare me. Scare all of us. Have you heard what they say about those places? Iron bars. Lights on a timer. Like a prison. Only worse. 'Cause of how they treat you, and the things they make you do. And it doesn't matter if you be Clan or not, or if ya got family up above. Everyone goes, they say. And I don't want any of it. Their stuff. Don't want to be taken back up above and taught to conform, taught to be good, taught to be a Clant again. Are you a respectable citizen? Legal an' all? Got your own unit, a high paying job, wear color to Carnivals and look a like a funeral otherwise? Don't know. Could even be a Song-Dancer for all I know of you. But the Song-Dancers are as warped and twisted as the rest. Down here they say they eat street kids, but I know. Its power hungry, they are. They're the ones who invented the schools, say they need to clean up the city. Hah! They've forgotten everything about what being a Song-Dancer is. Didn't Kira say the street children are the heartbeat of the city? Hells, she created the Song-dancers out of the street children. We were the ones with the talent, even if we are grubby and don't live in finery at the center of the city. Times like this I think the Cult of Kira's right. That the Song-Dancers have forgotten their true purpose. And the Dar have come among us. And from the streets the power will arise and Kira will return to save us.

But then I think, there's got to be something working against the Song-Dancers at their core. Why haven't they gone and looked for all the roosts. Why haven't they sealed up all the old buildings and cleaned up Northern Eastern? In Northern that's easy to explain, because the place is the Wild Clardlem. It's ruled by the streets, and all the Administrators are Cultists anyways. But why hasn't anything been done about the rest of Clardlem? Someone still remembers and believes. And that's enough for me. Someday I'll go back up top. We all have to. After a while you just get too big to hide. And too tired to run. And they catch you. Oh we all go back, it's the way it's always been. Only a few survive here. In Northern a lot survive, but as I said before, Northern is the Wild Clardlem.

And it's almost enough to be a street kid. To have the freedom. To know that someday, when you take your blood out of the claims and your claims out of the roost, some other street kid will find and claim it. It's like a strange legacy, passing on the roost from one to another. We got another common law here in the streets. You don't take nothing out that you didn't come in with. You came in naked, you go out naked. Everything else stays with the roost. You don't take no food with you either. Once you cross out, you got no right to the food gotten on a raid. You're a legal then honey, and you pay for your food like a good legal does. Only the street rat got the right to it free.

Hah! I sound like a damned elitist now. Don't mean it that way. But it's true. When you're legal you abide by the law. When you're a street kid you're below the law and above the law and within the law and you make your own laws. And the street is the one that makes 'em all. Oh, we may say that the Five make the laws, but the truth is, the streets form what must be law. And it works. Better than anything they got up there it works. Getting close to the fight, and getting jittery I am. Almost wish I had been sent back with the youngers to the roost. But I always get this way before a fight. The damp and ash just make it worse.

Take a little bit of metal out of my pocket and hold it in my hand. Little silver buckle, engraved with my name and roses. Is all I got left from when I left Athlin. Had it since I was a baby. Only thing I couldn't part with. Call me superstitious, but it's my luck piece. Kill me if I lost it. So I just walk along at the back of the gang and feel the metal grow warm in my hand. And after a while I put it away, tying it back into my clothes.

Getting jittery now, all of us. There's the slight scrape of steel and rods glint dully in the air. This is the time where we are truly together as a gang. It is now, and only now that I can say that I love each and every one of them more than anything in the world. Each and every one of the damnfools, even Mrikon himself, damn the bastard. We stand now, jittery and watchful, waiting for the other gang.

They're not going to show, I think. And then they do show, the lot of them slinking out of the shadows like ghosts. Their leader goes through the ritual re-issuing of the challenge. The words pour through my mind and are gone, and so is Mrikon's answer. Everything moves more slowly, the fall back and disperse, arranging ourselves, the initial surge forward, everything as if it were moving through molasses. I see two runners leaping forward, clashing, falling back, then another and another, until finally my own body tenses and leaps and joins in with the fight. I move, slashing and parrying and punching and kicking and leaping. Until the whole array of us seems like

some strange parody of a dance.

We don't call our fights anything fancy. They're just fights, no rumbles, smashing, all that stuff. But to me at times like this, it seems that we should call them dances. Street dances. The dances of the street, like those of the Song-Dancers up above.

So I move, dancing through molasses like I always do. Guy comes up, slash with the left, punch with the right and then leap away. Always like this, all of us cutting, twisting, never killing. Living by Alafn's law. Trip, and hit the ground rolling. And another blade comes down and hits the ground where I was in a shower of sparks. Someone screams, we're all screaming. And I think, I know that voice, and slash at someone's legs. And hear the scream again. And suddenly everything is snapping back into real time and I'm sent reeling back from remembrance as I hear them screaming a name.

"Graf!" they yell. "Graf!" And then I burst into motion, fighting like a crazy woman, pressing towards that voice. Graf, my baby brother. Grafa. And since this isn't getting me anywhere I stop in the middle of the fight.

"GRATHATHLIN!" I cry out. Want to kick myself, feeling like a damnfool. The fight freezes and the runners turn, all staring at me. Nikathlin, you crazy, I say to myself. Now what will they think of you. Screaming out high Clan names into the middle of a fight. But then a dark-haired boy with too light eyes comes leaping down out of somewhere, staring wildly about him. He sees me and those eyes light up in recognition.

"Niki!" he yells. And then we're leaping around each other, hugging and taunting and babbling away like all brothers and sisters.

"Kira's Ghost but you've grown, boy," I say finally. "You were a small scrawny thing when I left."

He looks down at me from his huge height, and I am not a short girl. "That was five years ago," he says. "I'm thirteen now."

"Damn big old lug of thirteen you be." And we laugh, remembering the times we used to have. And all the while the gangs stare, and finally slink off to fight it out somewhere else.

"Dammit Grafa," I say then, "why did you run? You're something to the Clan. You're Clant." Graf. We'd always called him that. Ever since he was a baby and couldn't say Grath.

"Didn't you know, Nik?" he asks. "They never registered me as Clant. I don't look right to be a Clant. Clant's s'posed to have light hair and dark eyebrows and the ears. Hells, I have the ears, but not the right coloring. You got the right coloring—"

"But not the ears or the voice nor the talent for it," I break in. Was sick of being told I look right to be a Clant. "They're just stupid. You had all the talent. You could even dance."

"'Sides," he goes on, "life at Athlin was getting too crazy without you and Rika and Shi. Rika left two years after you, and Shia three. Dad doesn't talk or do much anymore. And Old Father's always talking about there not being anymore Clants being born. 'Bout a month ago I couldn't take it anymore and I just got out of there. Most of the other side have left, too. Hells, most of high Clan Athlin's children be in the streets now. Except for the babies. And Mikal."

Mikal. Haven't thought about Mikal in years. Boy must be like to twenty years old now, maybe older. And I feel a queer sort of ache rise up in my throat, like something half forgotten.

"Mikal never did leave," says Graf, "not even when most of that side had left and it was only him and the babies left. He still talks about you, you know. But enough. Tell me what has happened to you. Tell me about the streets."

So I tell him. Tell him what I know. Tell him about Alafn and how to make a claim and blood bonding. Tell him how I open the doors. Tell him about living in Northern and all the things I've done since I left. Carnivals and fights and old scars and the meaning of the tattoo high on my left cheekbone.

And so we talk and talk. And finally we part, each going back through the chill, grey rain to our respective gangs. Perhaps never to see each other again.

And so I sit here in my corner. Hold the silver clasp in my hand and think. Think about the four of us scattered and running about the streets. Think about the rest of them running also. Think about what Graf said about Daddy and Old Father and Mikal. And just sit and think for a while.

Sometimes I miss 'em. Times like this I miss 'em the worst. Me sitting over here in my corner and them all over there. Laughing and talking. I'll always be the misfit in this crazy gang. Always the crazy Westerner.

Sometimes I think about going back. Just for a little while. Tonight I think I will.

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THE HARRISON CHAPTERS
Chapter 9

by Jim Vassilakos

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"Don't'cha think you're overdoing it?"

She continued dotting her cheeks, ignoring her sister's gleeful convulsions. The luminescent liqui-dots glowed faintly in the locker room's damp air. Underwater, they'd be a beacon for her regulars: gaudy but effective.

"They don't make you look grown-up, if that's what you're thinking."

"How'd you know, shrimp?"

"At least I don't look like a lighthouse."

She shot her sister a mean look, the kind their mother used to use when she pretended to be angry. The dark-coated man was watching again from behind her sister's shoulder. He sat motionless, dripping in the dense humidity. Then turned away, and a thick lump started to build in his throat. He winced and swallowed it down, narrow crevices of concentration forming along his forehead.

"Hey, mister."

A water droplet trickled down his chin.

"Hey, mister. You looking at me?"

"Maybe he's deaf."

"Hey!"

He looked over again, spurting something in Galanglic. She knew a little bit, enough to get by with customers.

"You offworlder?"

He smiled.

"Imperial? You Imperial, mister?"

He nodded, and said something else. A question probably.

"My baby sister think the dots... um... you know... make me less pretty? Do I say right?"

"The dots?"

"You think pretty?"

He shuffled his gaze to the floor, unsure how to answer.

"C'mon... you shy? Looking for a good time?"

He laughed, embarrassment flushing his already steamed cheeks. The practiced lines always did the job.

"Hey, don't be a stranger, okay?"

Someone in the service corridor started screaming for the bouncers. It sounded serious, and the man stood up and began striding toward the double doors. She watched him, annoyed that the interruption had blown her pitch. Now her sister would be able to laugh all the harder at the stupid dots.

Suddenly, the noise of gun spray filled the corridor, sharp bursts clamoring down the staircase, pinning her feet firmly to the cement. The man jumped behind a row of metal lockers, the noise of empty cartridges still hitting the floor as the service doors swung open. A single chiphead slipped awkwardly on the wet cement, his gun leveled at her as he scanned the room. For a moment, she couldn't move, except to look toward the dark-coated man hiding between two rows of lockers. He huddled against the thin metal barriers, shaking with anticipation as he fumbled a pistol from his coat.

The chiphead dashed across the moist cement, placing his shot with the direction of her gaze as he crossed the floor. In an instant, a shower of blood and bits of skull erupted against the rusty, grey wall. She watched it, captivated by the individual particles as they lingered in mid-air, falling leisurely like the jagged splinters of a shattered jar. Her sister lay under the bench. She held a sponge towel over her head as the bouncers warily entered the locker room, their weapons fixed on the dead man near the center.

"Where'd he go?"

She motioned them up the stairs after pausing a moment to consider the question. Droplets of cranial fluid still trickled along the lockers, forming a sickly, sweet scent in the warm, moist air. Peering up from the sponge towel, her sister seemed innocent and bewildered.

"What happened?"

She bent cautiously over the bench, opening her mouth to explain as small fingers clutched numbly onto the slippery, red plastic. No words came out. Only the contents of her stomach, churning sluggishly like the first time her mother had taught her the business, thrust upward with a sour, sticky taste, spilling over her lips in frenzied spurts to a haphazard puddle on the cold, cement floor.

If there was any city within which a person could just walk around unnoticed, it had to be Xaos. It was like the Silver-Tri Acrology on Tizar, except that instead of playing the towering eyesore, Xaos was built entirely underground in a tremendous man-made chasm reaching to several kilometers in height. In its upper reaches, business and government buildings were supported by narrow, cermelecon spines. At the bottom, a network of pumps tirelessly coaxed the icy Aeluin which seeped between polymer coated patches on the cavern's stone walls. Below even the pumps, however, was a great hub composed of several narrow, concentric bands known as the furrows. These circled the dual fusion reactors set within the city's basement, and here, from at least an engineering standpoint, was the city's

heart, the source of its power and the source of much of Xin's and Xekhasmeno's as well.

The furrows were basically suburbs populated mainly by maintenance and transit personnel and, of course, by the diggers. Each possessed its own separate character and norms, however, at the same time they were linked by a common purpose and by a common, underlying commerce that the uninitiated tourist rarely stumbled across by chance. For the native, however, it was well known that in the furrows of Xaos a person of means could purchase anything or anyone.

Mike had visited there once, albeit not by choice. The particular locale to which he had the pleasure of returning, unnoticed, was called Delta-3 by the city planners, also known as Jangletown by its residents. It held mostly a collage of diggers and fix-it jocks hitching rides on the government trams which travelled up and down the coreward expressway. Two years before, they were looking for heavy elements used in the processing of eka-metals. There was part of the reason the Imperial's wanted to stay in Xekhasmeno. It was also the reason they financed much of the region's mining operations.

Despite the rampant inflation, the misery, and the corruption, Calanna was a world fabulously blessed with natural resources. Mike found it difficult to accept that such a world could be so callously mismanaged without some grassroots revolt by its inhabitants, and he often reminded himself that as free-spirited as the Calannans seemed, their's was essentially an obedient society which was mastered by fools. The idea seemed to him somehow unconventional, even exotic, and yet curiously stale, like the seeping walls of Xaos, that peculiar yet obvious result one gets when combining water, stone, and time.

Mike kept his head down, turned away from the view as the seeping walls and cermelecon spider web ascended into the hazy darkness. Two boxes of quaggahaggis still dangled from one hand, his other resting in a baggy pants pocket with Bill's small, fiberglass pistol. The crowd of passengers began to rub shoulders, a woman sneezing somewhere in their midst as the lift's grating fence slid open with a fitful whine. Mike had forgotten about the smell of the air, one of those odd details he had somehow managed to strike from a not very selective memory. This time the stench reminded him of his father's black boots, a nagging, musty, lived-in scent that stuck to the roof of his mouth wafted halfway down his throat. Under different circumstance it would have made him grin.

Jangletown was alive with its usual splendor if one could call it that. The hustlers were so busy turning tricks that customers had to take a number just to get a place in line. Then there were the sensitizer shops, for new and exotic cerebral pleasures, the sort of stuff that could kill you and still leave you smiling. It was chiphead heaven.

Mike wandered the various tunnels, mentally categorizing the few features he still remembered. At one spot was a fire retardant valve he'd once tripped over in a mad rush. Not far away was a small casino known locally as The Pit, named after the twenty foot hole where fights were held for a nightly mob's wagering and entertainment. The new, fiberglass tubes of its neon-caked entrance were another reminder as to why he'd been in such a hurry.

Mike found the comm-shaft without too much difficulty, its access code unchanged since his last visit. Gaudy, green paint still flaked off the metal ladder. As he climbed downward, he had to skip several steps in order to avoid whole bunches of cables which were carelessly draped between the runners. Finally, he reached the access way. Red paint still marked the surface. "Danger. High Voltage." Mike rapped the pistol's handle against the door. The sound reverberated up the shaft. Somewhere in the dim light, he could imagine some hidden lens focusing on his face, his image being digitized and fed through optical fibers into Cecil's brain.

"C'mon. . . ."

He knocked again, but there was no response. Giving up, Mike started to head down further to the Delta-4 sector when the portal suddenly opened. A stranger looked down at him, yellow, crooked teeth grinning an unfettered acknowledgement. The leather jacket the stranger wore seemed to gather about his body like crumpled folds of dead flesh, a grimy brown paste mixing along the front with the moldy smudges of some feverishly enjoyed meal. He snorted beneath it, his breath raspy and wet as oily strands of auburn settled over his slumped shoulders. Mike climbed upward, an uneasy feeling sloshing in his stomach.

"I'm looking for Cecil."

The stranger nodded.

"Is he around?"

"Left shoe."

"What?"

"Give to me left shoe."

Slipping off his left shoe, Mike handing it to the stranger who began to pinch the sole at various points, finally pulling out a pocket knife and jabbing it into the rubbery material. There emerged a tiny metal ingot less than a quarter centimeter in diameter.

"What is it?"

"Locator. No harm. Tunnel shielded. Come in."

Mike inwardly cursed himself as he crossed the portal to the dim chamber beyond. Several candles lit the area, their orange flames glowing dimly in the cold, cramped darkness. A semi-sour fragrance of scented wax hung loosely to the thin air as wisps of fine, white smoke, snaked upward along the cluttered shelves, dancing blindly about various pieces of electronic paraphernalia and scuttling carelessly along the blurry, grey walls. Cecil sat in the center of the rug, a slight smile forming in his lips as the dozen or so cameras situated about the chamber turned to face Mike. The stranger stepped onto the ladder, closing the portal behind him as he left. For the first time since he left Tizar, Mike felt totally at ease. He picked a place by the wall, settling first to his knees and then letting his legs unfold carelessly beneath his body.

"How were the cellars?"

Cecil grimaced, his nose flatting against his face. Mike tried to stifle a grin.

"That's what I figured. I brought you some food. You like quaggahaggis? It should help you recover."

Cecil accepted one of the containers, first fingering it, testing to see if it would jump out at him, Mike supposed.

"Go ahead. Eat."

Cecil nodded toward Mike's general direction, his expression stony. Mike laughed.

"C'mon Cecil. Don't you trust me?"

Mike opened up his own box, stirring it around with a finger before tilting his head with a wink for the camera. A quarter of the container's warm contents slid down his throat before he came back up for air.

"See? It's some kind of meat pudding. I'm not really sure what it's made of exactly."

"Cecil knows."

"Tell me."

"Liver of quagga."

"Liver's not so bad."

"Heart of quagga."

"Heart too? I'm not surprised."

"Lungs of quagga."

"They sure do use everything, don't they?"

"Fat of quagga's kidneys."

"My dad loved kidneys."

"Boiled in stomach of quagga."

"Cecil, that's enough, okay?"

"With loins of quagga, the meatier the merrier."

"Well. . . thank you for spoiling my dinner."

Cecil beamed, the crevices in his face crumpling into tight wads of skin. Mike set the container of food gingerly to the floor, watching Cecil's shady outline from the corner of his eye. It seemed to stiffen for a moment, as though emersed in the most serious concentration. Then it became relaxed again. Mike had seen Cecil do it many times before. It was his version of wandering around looking for something he'd lost.

"What is it?"

"Message from Spokes. He wants you to meet him at the Runyaelin after the midnight ceremony."

"You know Spokes?"

Cecil shrugged.

"How did he know I'd be seeing you?"

"Perhaps he supposed that on Tizar one should pay a visit after a most kind and courteous rescue. Actually, he figured you'd be begging for money."

It was Mike's turn to shrug as Cecil nodded toward the money jar.

"Go ahead. It's what you came here for, isn't it?"

"Did he say anything else?"

"Yes," Cecil seemed to chew on the moment. "You seem to owe him something."

Mike smiled, "I hope this isn't going to be an attempt at collecting?"

"Doubtful."

"Why's that?"

"He seems to like you."

Mike dropped the smile, somewhat to Cecil's amusement. The cameras swiveled in circles like dancers on a stage: Cecil's way of telling people he was mildly entertained. Then they stopped. Cecil frowned, uncertainty forming in the wrinkles around his eyes. Mike looked toward the money jar again, then back at Cecil.

"Did he say something else?"

"Getting police reports, Michael. You're popular."

"It's been one of those days."

"Hmm. . . the Mermaid. Trashy place. Why do you always do this?"

"Does it say anything about casualties?"

"Two fatalities, a male and a female."

Mike felt his heart sink to somewhere in the pit of his stomach, the cameras drooping slightly with Cecil's chin.

"Friends of yours?"

"I'll tell you about it later." Mike stood up, the cameras pivoting with his slight ascension.

His old friend wore a dour expression, as though he'd been the one eating the quaggahaggis and just realized what it was made of. Mike crossed the room, the green jar half-way hiding behind an optical storage device.

"I'm gonna need a loan to get surface-side. You sure you don't mind?"

"One shouldn't have to warn you that going through the Underway at this particular juncture of your career is. . ." Cecil gulped a lump of air, "hideously stupid."

"It's important, Cecil. I'll be back after I see Spokes."

"Is that a promise you can't keep or a threat you'll never carry out?"

"One or the other. Wish me luck?"

Mike picked a healthy wad from the jar and then crept back into the access shaft, leaving Cecil alone with his dusty cameras and the multitude of unseen, electronic visitors. As he climbed the ladder, he imagined one of Cecil's constructs floating beside him, keeping an eye out for danger. Beneath miles of steel and stone and water, Cecil began to sleep the strange sleep of the void, his dreams curling about the incoming data, isolating, analyzing, distant voices muttering numbly beneath the vague current of electronic wind. "Good luck, my hideously stupid friend. Good luck."

For some bizarre reason, Mike felt lucky. Perhaps it came from seeing Cecil again. That plus the present surroundings brought more than the usual tide of memories.

They'd first met on Tyber, Mike the aspiring gatherer and Cecil a doctoral candidate in artificial sentience. Only a few years older than Mike, he was a published success, the mousy upstart in a rapidly evolving field. These days he seemed more like a zombie long since fallen from grace, his brilliance and natural sight taken by pitfalls of the electronic ether.

Cecil never expressed remorse about the past except to joke from time to time about how one's eyes were the first thing to rot in the cellars, the mind generally following soon after. He seemed to delight in the wickedness of it, and Mike occasionally wondered if Cecil had ever taken his past achievements seriously or instead treated them merely as passing curiosities, his brush with fame a transient, ephemeral state somewhere between happiness and idiocy. Though strangely enviable, the latter case was rare. More often, when success slowly evaporated like a tide pressing out to sea, its addictive lure would drive those it had intoxicated to actions both hideous and stupid lest they curl and whither like fallen leaves. Mike reconsidered

the advice Spokes had given him for all of two seconds. How much of this was he doing for John Doe #17, and how much of it was for himself?

Ascension from the furrows was uneventful, and Mike stepped off the rollers shortly before reaching the Underway. Long ago, he'd figured out a plan for getting topside, if ever there were unfriendlies within the station. At the time it seemed more of a creative exercise to pass the time, something to keep his mind from numbing under the influence of the more noteworthy of the local intoxicants.

Kitara was always the experimenter when it came to that sort of stuff. She'd drag him along just to shove various mixtures down his throat, often at his own expense, and then compare his reaction with her own. Anyone else would have to bully Mike into such an exercise, but she always knew exactly what to say in as few words as possible to coax him into tagging along. He'd told her about his "great idea" on one of those occasions, but she just stared back at him sort of sympathetically and sort of like she wanted to slap him silly. The she said something that stuck. "Coianders make plans when sober." Mike looked the word up later on.

Coianders are those that live longest.

Sarn leaned back, tired, his brain slipping quietly into neutral. The sugary aroma from a pink box of stale pastries teased about his nostrils as his boots idly clapped the rhythm of some neghrali-noise beside the smooth, grey frame of a black and white surveillance monitor. It was the sort of job he appreciated because it didn't demand a great deal of cognitive activity. The computers did most of the work for him.

Beep

He shifted slightly, subconsciously debating whether or not to ignore it.

Beep

Sarn blinked open his eyelids with some effort, a long yawn escaping as he tapped a key at the station.

"Underway Surveillance #4."

"Anything happening over there?" It was Beth.

"Should there be, Commander?"

"Some orders just came down the chain. It looks like they're after somebody pretty bad. I'm sending image recognition code on the target."

Sarn sat upright, fingering his keyboard and opening a reception channel.

"Hmm... a chiphead. Who is he?"

"Offworlder, apparently. Orders are to search for him at the exclusion of all other targets. DOA."

Sarn blinked, "Sounds like fun. What's the reward?"

"Thirty days off at double pay."

"Ha! They must be desperate."

"Central guesses that he'll try to get surface-side sometime tonight."

"If he comes through my end, he's history."

"I'm told he's slippery, so stay on your toes for once."

"Of course, Commander. Don't I always?"

Static was the only response, and Sarn chuckled as he loaded up the new program. At least she'd had the courtesy to deny him an answer.

Erestyl awakened to another day of darkness, to a body he couldn't feel, his consciousness drifting within an infinitely vast pool of silent oblivion. He didn't know for certain how long he had been there. It seemed like a long time, though he couldn't actually remember arriving. He thought about it for some time, slipping into and out of sleep so often he occasionally found it difficult to distinguish conscious from its counterpart.

Bizarre images would flash just behind the door to his memory, their details blurry, as if trapped behind a cloud of fog. Then they'd be gone, not just gone for the moment, but gone forever, like a page ripped out of a book, so utterly removed that he was no longer sure whether or not they had ever existed.

"Is this what it is like to be dead?"

The question gnawed on him, something obscene about it burrowing slowly into the inner sanctum of his spirit, and an answer beckoned so tormentingly close. It was just across the periphery of thought like a candle burning in the darkness. All he had to do was reach forth a tentacle of volition to touch it, but to summon forth the memory even for the briefest moment would be to sacrifice it, like all the others.

He could somehow sense that something out there beyond the numbing cloud was waiting for that moment. For an instant he remembered the old battle of two great warriors, patience and time. Time always won, eventually.

Beep

"Huan here."

"Karl, it's Beth."

"Nothing to report, Commander."

"I need you to circle your people around to the south entrance immediately."

"What happened?"

"Sector 3 just had a steam main burst. Looks like vandalism. All the surveillance cameras are useless, but we have a guard at the gate. If you get your team there to reinforce the perimeter, we'll have our target trapped inside the sector, and we can do a person by person search until we find him."

"If he's there."

"Just do it Lieutenant. I'll worry about the risks."

"Yessir. Huan out. You heard her. Get the others and meet me at the south gate. Mitzo, you stay here."

"Right, okay... I'll just kick back.... I don't believe this. I always miss out on the good shit. Mitzo, you stay here. Mitzo, lick my boots. Whoa... raise that hood mister. Oh... sorry ma'am. Go ahead. Damn. They do this to me every time. I'm as good as they are. Hey guys... yeah, you two. Hold up. Where do you think you're taking the carpet?"

"On the train."

"If you want to get that topside you have to send it through cargo."

"Cargo hasn't moved for the last ten cents."

"Don't tell me about it. There's been a little bit of a backlog. That's all."

"Look man, we've been trying to get this roll of carpet topside all night."

"Hey, I sympathize with your plight, but there's nothin' I can do."

"Look, here's a donation to security from our employer. Can we just go through? We're already late, you know?"

"Aww. . . this is cheesy. Okay look, just go ahead. If anyone asks, we never met."

The walk to Vilya's was quiet. Most of the food vendors had turned in for the night, and taxi's coasted through the narrow streets carrying people to and from the Underway. Earlier in the evening, they'd have to stop every ten meters due to the congestion, but most of the late night action was below ground in Xkutyr or Xaos depending on which part of the capital you frequented, the old or the new. Xin was more of a suburb, a mostly residential area for people who liked to breathe fresh air at home and recycled air at work. Tonight the air was cold, and Mike considered calling a taxi more than once. He knew he wouldn't, though. Cecil's comment had voided that option. He was getting just a little too famous for public transit of any kind.

The cat sat outside on her steps, licking its black coat and meowing in Mike's general direction as he approached. He leaned over to pet it, but it ran away before he could so much as touch its tail, ducking behind the back tire of a yellow motorbike. Its bright yellow eyes watched him, unblinking.

"I never did get your name, did I."

"Meow."

"Food? Dinner?"

"Meow?"

"C'mon."

The cat followed him cautiously up the steps. Mike paused at the door, unlocking it with a swift twirl of the key. The dead bolt clicked audibly in the darkness.

Inside, everything seemed to be turned upsidedown. All the drawers and cabinets were opened, their meager contents strewn about in haphazard piles. The bookcase in the living room was turned horizontal, the three-vee having been ripped right off its cable. Mike crept inside, drawing Bill's pistol with his right hand and peeking left. The door to Vilya's bedroom was part way open, a sliver of light shining into the hallway. Mike inched slowly toward her room, finally kicking it open and ducking to the floor. The flapping of red twill curtains was the only movement as the whine of a motorbike rose above the noise of Mike's heart beating.

Mike ran around to the front, but the yellow bike was gone. The dodec was still in the toilet's flushing mechanism where he'd left it. He stuck it into a plastic sack which he tied to his waist belt. The largest of Vilya's jackets was still a bit smaller than he was used to, but he took it anyway, remembering the temperature outdoors. He finally taped the pistol to his stomach, catching the cat into a tight grip before he left.

The ceremony at the Runyaelin was nearly over when Mike arrived. He waited outside, cheers from the crowd still to be heard over the cries of its remaining victims. The temple served a dual purpose; it was institution of both sacrifice and justice. Felons from all over the continent eventually found their way to the Runyaelin if they didn't manage to fetch a decent price at any of the slave exchanges along the way. Their executions would at least contribute something to Calannic society in the way of the mandatory temple donations.

The crowds slowly dispersed after the show. Inside, it was like a sports arena with a large pool as the centerpiece. Two attendants were still hosing off the circlet of stockades surrounding its small, marble island.

Mike sat down at the bottom of the stands and looked out over the dim, crystal pool. Its shallows rippled in the moonlight, and a quiet chill seemed to ascend from the waters. The bottom was coated with a dark grey film, bits of bone and tangles of hair interspersed between the various incinerated remains of the temple's most recent victims.

The cat scratched toward the sky as a black hawk soared somewhere overhead, the dark sky betraying its presence only by the dim light reflected by Baal, Calanna's lesser moon. Mike remembered the moon from orbit, its cavernous and broken texture somehow noble and violent as the pool itself. He studied its gaze in the water's surface, light reflected twice from two points so distant and different and still so near and so very much alike.

Spokes sat on the pool's narrow ledge, his long, bony legs stretching outward as the thin spikes on his scalp jutted upward, cutting distinct lines against the moon's reflection. He regarded Mike and the cat with a cheerful smirk, like the kid in the Underway, except more malignant.

"You traded one friend for another?"

"The cat was Vilya's."

"Was?"

Mike shuffled his gaze toward the ground. "It needs a place to stay for a little while. Do me a favor?"

"What do I look like, Harrison? An animal shelter?"

Mike shook his head, trying hard to make it look sincere. "You wanted to see me, Spokes. What about?"

"Because I know something you don't."

Mike imagined the size splash Spokes would make were he to be propelled violently backwards into the murky water. The tall, bony one seemed to read his mind, leaning forward with a bit more tension in the veins of his neck.

"You wanna hear it or not, Harrison?"

"Go ahead."

"You remember when I told you to buzz off yesterday?"

Mike tried to conjure a smile, but Spokes continued before he could claim success.

"After that, I decided to do some playing around."

"Good for you."

"I located the comm-address of that restricted line you were using from Gardansa's estate by comparing the amplitude logs on the Doggie-Blitz and some census dialing records on that district."

"Pure research, I take it?"

"The purest. Against my better judgement, I did some listening. Turns out that Gardansa was setting you up."

The hawk drifted downward, closer to the water, finally sweeping to the surface and then darting skyward. A burnt chunk of someone's body dangled from its talons, more of a vulture's victory.

"You aren't surprised?"

Mike shrugged, "A little, I guess. I didn't think he would destroy his own limo."

"The man is obviously a maniac."

"I don't think so. You have to understand Gardansa. He was doing me a favor with Cecil. That sort of entitled him to take something in return."

"Like your life?"

"If he wanted that, he could have had it. You have to know the guy. It's just a big game to him."

"Well maybe you choose the wrong fuckin' friends."

Mike nodded, "That's what he said."

Spokes gathered his lanky mass beneath his feet. Reaching into his pocket, he handed Mike a crumpled flimsi-leaf.

"What's this?"

"The comm-address... just in case you decide to tune in."

He began to walk away, taking long, casual steps, as though he was early for a meeting.

"Spokes."

"Yeah?"

"Why you helpin' me?"

His tall spikes seemed to bounce back and forth as he shrugged and continued walking. The cat leapt from Mike's arms to follow him, stopping Spokes in his tracks. So much for feline loyalty, Mike figured, and added out loud, "Only for a couple days, okay?"

Spokes picked up the cat, seeming to inspect its belly. "Do I have a choice?"

A thin mist coated the narrow streets outside, various lurkers of the night huddling together in the alleyways, some seeking warmth, other seeking the strange companionship formed by similar circumstance. Many crowded around the motorcars as they tried to leave, knocking on windows for handouts. Mike kept his head bowed in the darkness, his new coat's wet collar buttoned taut around his neck. He stepped over the occasional native as he made his way toward the west side, trying not to think too much as he walked. The prospect of being set up still foamed in his mind along with memories of Vilya, Niki and Bill. He could almost feel the corpses stacking up around him, one by one. It was like multiple slaps in the face, except that he had seen each of them coming in a strange sort of way and refused to duck out of sheer stubbornness. Maybe that was the sort of stupidity Cecil had been talking about.

"Hey, friend. Spare a drin?"

It was a young boy, trembling in the gutter, dirty, wet hair tangled over half his face. He couldn't have been a year past puberty. Just another one of the homeless, Mike could only guess as to what he did to survive.

Mike reached into his pocket, somewhat surprised to hear the jingle of several loose coins. He withdrew two, allowing one to slip between his fingers on the way out. The kid slapped his hand over it before it made a clinking noise on the pavement. Then he looked up again, expectantly. Mike let the other coin twirl on his fingertips and he glanced around and behind.

"What's your name?"

"What it matter?"

"Good point. You willing to work for money?" Mike let the other coin drop.

"What you want me to do?"

"Just attract attention. C'mon... I'll show you."

The walk was a long one, taking them across town and well into the outskirts of the city. They'd passed the rowens, along the way, and Mike considered cutting through for all of about one second. Then he shoved the idea where it belonged. Walking though it during the day had been risky enough, but during night would be suicide. The kid looked toward the hedges with an ominous glare, then toward Mike as though he knew what the gatherer was contemplating.

Mike shook his head, "Don't worry. I'm not quite as stupid as I look," adding, "at least not at the moment," under his breath.

A light sprinkle began to fall as they reached the west end of downtown, a glossy sheen forming on the vacant, asphalt streets like a coat of wax. Many of the houses were burned out, and glow- in-the-dark graffiti painted a multi-hued display. Most of it was undecipherable for Mike, except for the occasional Calannic or Galanglic name. One wall depicted the Archduke in a particularly unflattering pose. A budding political humorist, Mike figured, wishing he had his camera.

Mike heard the hum of a grav-car come to a halt across the street. He turned around to inspect. It was a slicked down version of the Sebastian-Z48, a real cruise-mobile, except that it had absolutely no altitude control. It would just zoom around at about a half a meter off the terrain: as sporty as you could get and still miss the whole point of having gravitics. Five kids hopped out, one holding a minisaw which he waived around as he started yelling something about chipheads in thick, Calannic slang.

"Just what I need. What's he saying?"

"He say we are trespassing."

"Fine, we were just leaving. Kelelmet."

"No, he say we no can go that way."

"Which way is it okay to go?"

"He say you have to pay for safe passage."

"Look, tell him to just slow down."

Mike considered drawing the gun, but there were five of them and only four bullets to go around. He decided that he hated arithmetic as he dug out his best of his broken Calannic. They already knew he was neghrali and a chiphead so there wasn't much left to conceal anyway.

"How much?"

"Hundred k'drin and we let you walk. Otherwise you sorry you ever come here."

"I'm already sorry."

Mike reached into his pockets and forked over the cash, grateful to Cecil that he had enough. Then he turned around and tried to leave. Two were still blocking his way, one with a shotgun pointed toward the night sky like he wasn't particularly planning on using it.

"What is it now?"

"Hundred only for one person. I see two."

"Look, here's the rest. That's all I got." Mike turned the rest of his pockets inside out.

"What's in there."

Mike opened the small bag hanging from his waist belt and took the dodec out. The kid with the minisaw regarded it with suspicion.

"Give to me."

Mike tossed it to him perhaps a little too high. Yanking the fiberglass out from under his shirt, he deposited a slug between the kid's eyes as the dodec reached the pinnacle of its arc. It came down slowly as the kid clenched forcefully to his minisaw, head snapping backward and back of skull erupting in typical Calannic splendor. Twice in one night, Mike reflected how it was far better to give than to receive.

The next two squeezes took the kid with the shotgun in the arm and shoulder. The shotgun skidded onto the pavement as the kid waffled around on the ground shouting obscenities. Mike guessed that he'd never even gotten the safety unlocked.

The rest of them scrambled madly for the ground-speeder. Mike scooped up the dodec on its first bounce and ran down the street, leaving Cecil's money in a pool of blood. He expected them to give chase, but the only person behind him was the beggar, young legs taking ground against older if more experienced ones.

"Idiot neghrali! How you pay me now?!"

Mike turned down an alley and kept running.

Red twill flapped freely in the soft breeze as Sule inspected the flat with a mixture of curiosity and contempt. Either the abode had been thoroughly ransacked, or somebody was a pretty slovenly housekeeper. Major Doran was waiting outside the threshold as instructed. He stayed at attention the entire time, not that his stance had much to do with attentiveness. He wanted to impress her. To do otherwise would jeopardize his career not to mention his longevity.

"Shall I send for the dusters, sir?"

"No," Sule considered the problem. "You will remove yourself and all other unnecessary personal from the premises. Then call in our psyche and inform the locals that their target has escaped the Undercity."

"What about the Director, sir?"

"You are dismissed, Major."

Sule sat down on the steps outside the flat, the dark, cold air quietly enveloping her as wrinkled, grey leaves scuttled along the narrow sidewalk. It somehow reminded her of the vast, black ocean to which she longed to return.

The gatherer would have to be dealt with, of course. He had made a fool of her two times in one night, an interesting if annoying prey. If it meant turning the entire city inside out, she would find him. Dead or alive, Harrison belonged to her.

Of all the places Mike had ever visited on Calanna, his favorite was probably the Arien Mansion. Surrounded by five machine gun turrets and a moat, the place had an atmosphere that typified the world's turbulent and violent history, but somewhere in that midst, it retained some semblance of tradition and honor that Mike found difficult to pinpoint. The family was notoriously reclusive yet highly networked with the power brokers of Calannan society. They maintained their fortress-like estate on the outskirts of Xin, over a square kilometer of property sealed off from public eyes.

Mike remembered the night with Kitara. They'd invited her to attend out of respect for her family. Somehow he'd weaseled his way into tagging along, or maybe he'd just allowed himself to be dragged inside for the boozing. Sometimes it was difficult to tell which was the actual case. It wasn't until he'd returned to Tizar and emersed himself in her collection of private correspondence that he pieced out exactly why she'd been summoned. The Arien family were sponsors of psionic research and instruction on-planet. It was all kept secret, although there had always been rumors floating around. The government turned a blind eye so long as nothing could be proven, but people feared them just the same.

Mike decided they were a strange lot when he saw the worgs. The creatures, four feet tall at the shoulder and perhaps seven to eight feet long, were the genetically engineered descendants of terran wolves. The family bred and trained them at the estate, doling them out as gifts to local politicians and offworlders alike. Although the worgs seemed relatively intelligent and well behaved, Mike later heard horror stories from the locals about the creatures' supposed pleasure for dismembering trespassers. For some reason, he didn't find the stories so difficult to believe.

The first purple rays of sunlight began peeking over the eastern horizon as the two reached the tall, cermelecon gates. Barbed wire and motion sensors laced the thin, black rods in generous measure, and Mike figured that if good fences made good neighbors, these people had to be the best neighbors money could buy. The kid studied his expression as if trying to gauge his level of sanity.

"I not go in there. You not can pay me to go in there."

"You're right; I can't."

"Even if you have money, I mean."

Mike squinted beneath a cool resin of perspiration. He saw what he was looking for. A yellow motorbike was parked outside, almost as if somebody had expected him to show up. It would be a heck of a long sprint to the moat, though. The worgs would probably catch him even if they were distracted.

"I'm gonna need a favor from you."

"I not. . ."

"I know. I need you to make some noise at the other end of the gate to attract the worgs, okay?"

"You crazy. You get ripped into itty-bitty pieces."

Mike nodded, "Maybe, but not if I can make it to the moat."

"You jump in moat? You really crazy!"

"Hey, worgs don't swim."

"What about the moat monster?"

"Oh, give me a break."

"You not believe?"

"No, I not. . . er, I don't." Mike shook his head to emphasize his conviction. "What kind of moat monster?"

"Hey chief, look at this."

Tiros glanced toward the gate monitor's station. A chip-head's face stared out from the console, red, flashing symbols overlaying his forehead.

"I'd like to speak to a person, please."

"Image recognition says he's a homicide suspect. Should I call the police?"

"No. Give me voice."

"Is anybody home?"

"What do you want?"

Mike blinked, "I. . . I need to see the person who owns the yellow motorbike in your parking lot."

"Mute Voice. What's he talking about?"

"Must be about the Draconian."

Tiros nodded, "Put me back on. What's this about Mister. . .Harrison?"

Mike slumped his shoulders. He knew he should have ran it.

"Look, don't call the police. I've got to see this person right now. It's urgent."

Tiros shrugged, "Hold a moment while I transfer you."

Mike waited as the kid gave him a thumbs-up sign. Then the line crackled with static, and Mike heard the sound of somebody groggily waking. For a split second he found himself wondering if perhaps the yellow bike was just a coincidence. There were probably thousands just like it all over the city.

"A little early, isn't it?" The screen was dead black.

"That depends on how late you stay out following somebody."

"What? Who is this?"

Mike cringed, hoping the line was voice-only in both directions. "Are you still interested in the dodec?"

"The what?"

"The robot brain."

"I. . . uh. . . How did you find me?"

Mike breathed a sigh of relief. "Why don't you meet me outside? I think we should talk face-to-face."

"Where are you?"

"At the front gate."

"Well, I can have the guards show you in."

"I don't think so."

"Okay. Just give me a milla to throw something on."

The kid was still grinning as the line went dead. Mike regarded him with all the good humor the situation allowed.

"What are you so happy about?"

"I was right. You were wrong. You owe me big-time now."

"Don't worry. You'll get what's coming to you."

Mike waited several minutes, idly wondering whether or not they had called the police. He knew he was still banking on several unproven assumptions, any one of which could completely ruin his day.

A woman and a man approached the gate, the former allowing the latter to exit. He was probably in his 40's, slightly plump, dirty brown hair and the makings of a beard. She smiled, lifting his hands to both sides.

"I'm unarmed. You want to frisk me or something?"

Mike motioned the kid over.

"I'll frisk him. Hey, he has money."

Mike kept the gun to his side. One shot was all he had, and one was all he'd need.

"I assume you know who I am, Mister. . . "

"My friends call me Johanes."

"I assume you also know what happened to Vilya."

"I know only that she's dead, Mr. Harrison."

Mike nodded, "I want to know why were you following me and why you tore up Vilya's apartment."

"I can explain everything. Is that the dodec you spoke of?" He pointed toward the bag.

"Yeah."

"May I see it?"

Mike took it from the bag, "Satisfied?"

He seemed to want to hold his breath instead of answer, finally exhaling with an eerie expression.

"We have a great many things to discuss, Mr. Harrison. I know an all-night pub not too far away where we can talk."

The place they went to was quiet, very few of the locals willing to pull an all-nighter just to go boozing. Johanes ordered a pot of alqua vrasto, a large water fowl common to the planet stewed with vegetables and baby trout. The bartender brought out a complimentary loaf of bread with some olives and cheese. He seemed to recognize Johanes, his manner friendly though not too familiar. Mike kept his hand wrapped around the gun's handle beneath the cover of a pocket as the kid plunged with zeal into the appetizers.

"I take it you no longer feed your research assistants Mr. Harrison?"

Mike opened his mouth to answer and then decided to have an olive instead. Johanes frowned slightly, as though he was still worried about getting shot.

"If you don't mind, I'd like to know what happened to Vilya. The full story."

Mike swallowed hard, "I didn't kill her, if that's what you're thinking. I spotted two ISIS people at the Mermaid. I figured that Vilya might know something about it, so I called her into the staff-only corridor for a little interrogation. We got spotted by one of the employees who called the guards, and the rest is history."

Johanes looked back incredulously, "The guards fired on her?"

"They fired on me. She was in the middle."

"There's more you're not telling me."

Mike focused on a pornographic etching in the table wood. At another time it might have made him smile.

"She made sure that she was in the middle. I don't know why. She just wanted to be there."

Johanes leaned back, "Perhaps I have an answer for you. Vilya was a psychic."

"I think I figured that much out myself."

"We needed her to find you."

"We?"

"My employer."

"The Draconian government?"

Johanes nodded, "Psyches many times seem to have a strange sense as to when their time has come, Mr. Harrison. They have been known to be very accepting about it."

"I know. A friend of mine once told me about it. Look, Johanes. I've answered your question, but you haven't yet answered any of mine."

He frowned again. "I was following you in hope of... thank you..."

The pot of stew came with a number of large mugs. Johanes began by serving the kid. Mike wondered if he was such a gentleman naturally or if it just came with the job.

"... in the hope of securing that very special item which is currently in your possession."

"Why didn't you just take it from Vilya's?"

"She told me that you'd hidden it and that she never saw it except for the first night you were with her."

"You were there, that night?"

"I was at the Mermaid. Vilya was an expert at finding people based on their psychic impressions. She was the best on this entire planet, Mr. Harrison, and she had a memory for detail which bordered on the photographic."

"The perfect spy."

"Precisely."

"Did she speak Galanglic as well?"

"Enough to get along. Oh... you didn't know that, did you?"

Mike winced as Johanes continued.

"She was turned over to my guardianship by the Arien family. You might have even seen her the last time you visited Calanna. I believe you were a guest at one of the Arien's socials?"

"You still haven't told me why you want the dodec."

Johanes paused, searching for a place to begin.

"ISIS is holding captive a man who is very important to the Draconian Realm."

"Erestyl?"

"Yes. I need to find him."

"Same here. How's the dodec supposed to help?"

Johanes shook his head, "It contains a very small inertial detection unit. As you have been carrying it around, it has been mapping out your route in precise detail. According to an army report, the dodec was turned over to an ISIS agent by the name of Sule. It is my guess that Sule took it to her director as a prize but that they decided to examine it away from the ISIS stronghold on-planet for fear of counteractive consequences: things that kill en masse, Mr. Harrison. Then it fell into your hands if my understanding is correct."

"Opening a bomb in the Undercity isn't my definition of prudence."

"They were probably more afraid of a biochemical or viral agent. Don't look so surprised, Harrison. There are many ways to kill people. Not all of them necessarily involve explosions."

"I'm not surprised. It just hits a little close to home."

"Shattered Eden?"

Mike nodded, "The Imps thrashed that entire world, and the thing that still gets me was how easy it was for them."

"Well, sometimes killing is like that. Easy."

"What's important about Erestyl?"

"Well, it all comes back to that, doesn't it?"

"Both you and the Imps seem to want him pretty bad."

Johanes chewed thoughtfully on a chunk of soggy bread. Mike guessed he was deciding how much to spill out and how much to lie about. The kid seemed to follow along pretty well with what little Galanglic he knew. At least his eyes widened every now and again as he continued to stuff his face. Johanes finally swallowed down the last of his bread, looking up like it was his turn to say something profound.

"I'm not really sure how much I should tell you about Erestyl."

"How about you tell me what you can and then I push you for more?"

Johanes smiled, "We know that he was a Cassiopeiaen scientist, a physical theorist to be more precise. He was working at the Imperial Naval Shipyards at Hermes with a Cass Technics group which was apparently in the process of completing a very important project for the Archduke."

"What sort of project?"

Johanes looked toward the corner of the room, "Does the term 'doomsday' mean anything to you, Mr. Harrison?"

"How 'doomsday' are we talking about?"

"Enough that Erestyl decided to renege on the contract. He did something to the device in question, but he was caught. The Navy decided to determine how to correct the damage he'd caused, even if it meant ripping his mind apart to find the information they needed. One of our people got to him, however. He was frozen and shipped to Tizar and would have eventually made it to the Realm."

"What happened?"

"A great deal, apparently. Our agent who was organizing his transportation was captured. Erestyl was lost in the process."

"Lost?"

Johanes grimaced. "There was nobody to pick him up when he arrived at Tizar. The freighter carrying him decided to dump his bones and run rather than face the authorities and explain why they were carrying an interstellar passenger without the proper passports and whatnot. Then you got into the picture."

"What did I do?"

"You caught the attention of the Imps, Mr. Harrison. They were paying close attention to you. You led them right back to Erestyl."

"Is that why Clay was asking me to retire from fieldwork?"

"I don't know anything about Mr. Clay other than that he screwed up."

Mike popped another olive into his mouth, spitting the stone back into his mug.

"I don't understand why you just didn't take the dodec when you had the chance. It was sitting in a locker at the Mermaid that you could have easily ripped open."

"It doesn't work that way, Mr. Harrison."

"Well why not? You must have whatever access codes you people need to get into her brain."

"True, but I'd have to send her all the way back to Tizar and risk losing her in the process. The Imps have the space lanes

between here and your world tied up tighter than you could imagine."

"Why send it back at all?"

"She won't let in somebody she doesn't know, somebody she doesn't already trust. As far as I can tell, Mr. Harrison, you're the only person in this solar system who has a chance of cracking the dodec, and if you want to get off the planet alive, you're going to have to try."

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

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

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THE ROBOTS OF VITGAR

by Joel Wachman

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Nick Patterson was a visitor on the planet Vitgar. He didn't know the rules. So when a robot refused to listen to orders he naturally attempted to repair it himself. That was a big mistake.

He awoke on a Tuesday morning, when the reddish glow of Vitgar's binary suns melted through the flimsy curtains on his apartment window. When he sat up on the couch his keys and an empty can of beer fell off his lap onto the floor. He rubbed his eyes and looked around. The small apartment was well furnished. A comfortable chair sat in one corner, lace doilies covering all the right places, his exhausted tweed jacket hanging limply over one arm. Bookshelves lined the walls opposite the couch, giving shelter to many familiar authors: Milton, James, Poe, Vonnegut.... The other walls were decorated with various objets d'art, of which Patterson only recognized a black and white lithograph by Escher, a pair of hands drawing themselves. The place did not make him think of anywhere in particular, but there was something familiar about it, and for the first time in many years Patterson felt at home.

When he got up for a cup of coffee the scene in the kitchen reminded of the previous night's dismal fiasco. The robot was strewn in a dozen pieces all over the kitchen table. Its great metal torso was propped up against the wall, assorted limbs and circuits tossed about the surface of the table like so many chessmen in a game played by amateurs. Some stale coffee and an open box of donut crumbs sulked beneath a pile of wires and hoses in one corner. In the center of the furious mess sat a lonely black box adorned with tubing and membranes. It was surrounded on all sides by curious probing electronic test equipment. Once, it was the robot's motor control center. Now it was just a box.

Patterson sat down at the table and folded his arms around the chaos he had created. The robot, Harley Vlondee, had greeted him when he entered the apartment with a warm handshake and a friendly introduction as his personal valet. As Patterson felt he needed neither a valet nor a robot pal, he dismissed Harley as politely as he could. The robot insisted, bringing Patterson a plate of hors d'oeuvres. Patterson declined again, gently pushing the plate and the robot away.

"Look, I don't need you," he said. "Please go away and turn off."

"I don't turn off, Mr. Patterson," Harley replied, "I am here to serve you. If you do not need anything now, I shall wait in my room."

"I don't need anything now, and I won't need anything at all from you while I'm here."

"Please, Mr. Patterson," The robot adopted a somewhat condescending tone, "I know our customs are unfamiliar to you, but there is no reason to be impolite. We have done everything we can to make your stay here comfortable. Please do not return the favor with rudeness."

Patterson didn't think he was being rude. After all, he knew you can't be impolite to a machine. As the robot did not seem to be listening to his commands, he walked over to it and started looking for the power switch.

"Mr. Patterson, what are you doing?"

"I am going to turn you off."

"Don't be ridiculous," the robot snorted, "I don't turn off any more than you do. Please do not touch me."

"What do you mean, you don't turn off? Every droid has a switch."

"You clearly don't understand," the robot's voice sounded indignant, "You may have similar creatures on your planet, Mr. Patterson, who are mere hulking, unconscious assemblages of metal. But I assure you, I am as sentient as you are." Harley Vlondee recoiled from Patterson's fingers. "PLEASE DO NOT TOUCH ME."

Patterson lifted the robot's shirt and found a single phillips-head screw in the middle of its torso. Harley's metal frame was covered with a clammy synthetic that was kept warm by an internal heating system. It did not feel like skin at all.

"I'll go get a screwdriver."

Horrified, now, Vlondee began to shout, "You will not get a screwdriver or any other implement! If you continue, Mr. Patterson, I shall have to call the Authorities!"

Patterson came back from his bedroom, screwdriver in hand, and headed towards the robot.

"You know," Patterson continued, brandishing the screwdriver, "where I come from they've almost entirely phased out the lower droid series. We found we just don't need them anymore. Now, if you ask me, I would rather be switched off nice and quick than allowed to wear out over time. It's a much more dignified way to go, don't you think?"

Vlondee backed into a corner and trembled. Patterson came forward and managed to grab the tail of the droid's shirt. He tried desperately to hold the robot still so he could get good leverage on the screw in its belly. In the ensuing struggle Vlondee's arms flailed in every direction and he emitted strained, aristocratic cries of "Help!" and "Desist, immediately!" At some point, and Patterson couldn't quite remember how this happened, the screwdriver pierced the counterfeit skin and made a sickening clanking sound, coming into contact with

something deep inside, at which point Harley Vlondee stopped moving. Forever.

Patterson stood still for a full minute and then murmured, "Oh, shit."

He knew he had broken something crucial inside the suddenly defunct valet. He dragged the silent form into the kitchen and mounted it on top of the table. The screwdriver wiggled in the android's torso, and a small rivulet of clear, smelly fluid seeped out of the murderous hole. Patterson began his futile effort at repairing the thing at once.

That was six hours and a long nap ago.

Reluctantly, Patterson looked up from the table, stretched one arm out over the scattered body parts, and lightly touched the video screen on the wall. He really didn't want to tell anybody what he had done. It was supremely embarassing. But his guilty conscience was getting to him. Patterson wasn't the type to break things in hotel rooms. He had never even stolen a towel.

The video screen came alive with colors and symbols. Then, the face of his business associate appeared, smiling warmly.

"Hello, my friend," the face said. Sovhavn was wearing the traditional turban and loose fitting kimono of his people. Behind him Patterson could see various horrifying particulars of the Vitgarian's household. "What can I do for you this afternoon?"

"Hello, Sovhavn. I think I need some help." Patterson was not quite sure how his associate would react when he told him he had dismantled part of his welcoming party. Nevertheless, this man was the only person he knew well enough to call.

"I've had some trouble with my robot valet, um. . . 'Harley'."

"Trouble? What sort of trouble?"

"I can't put it back together."

Sovhavn's face dropped. His eyes widened, his jaw loosened and where there had been a diplomatic, almost sincere smile of affection a blank, uncomprehending stare took over.

"You. . . what?"

"Well, you see," Patterson started stuttering. He always stuttered when he sensed he was in trouble. And he was quite sure now that he had committed a serious faux pas. He could only hope that Svhavn would write him off as an ignorant tourist. "I didn't want to. . . to. . . b-break it, just turn it off for a while. Then it l-lunged at me and I had a screwdriv-verer in my hand so I–"

"Don't move. I'll be right over." Sovhavn disappeared and the video screen went blank.

Patterson slumped into one of the kitchen chairs.

Twenty minutes later the doorbell rang and Patterson lead Sovhavn into the kitchen.

"Bad. Very bad." There was a squeaky, metallic tone to Sovhavn's voice that Patterson didn't like at all.

"Can you help me put him back together?"

"No."

"But I'm sure with a few spare p-parts it'll be as g-good as new."

"This is a very bad. . . cannot rectify." Sovhavn, who had been standing stiffly in the doorway, stepped forward into the kitchen. He shuddered and stopped. His face assumed an officious expression.

"Look," Sovhavn continued, "I am afraid we cannot offer you a lawyer in this case. You may call your consulate if you wish, but I am not sure they will be able to help you, either."

"Lawyer? Case? What, are you going to sue me?"

Sovhavn turned and faced the incredulous visitor. His demeanor had changed entirely. His motions were no longer fluid and diplomatic. They were stiff and precise. His language was still formal, but the tone had become menacing.

"No, sir," he said without blinking, "we are going to charge you with murder." And with that, he walked out.

The next day, Nickolas R. Patterson sat bewildered and humble in the center of the huge vaulted chamber of the Vitgarian Authority, Marnjestabl Branch. Hundreds of Vitgarians fluttered about, carrying papers, scurrying back and forth, talking amongst themselves. Occasionally someone addressed him from across the hall, sending embarrassing echoes of his name into seemingly infinite reverberations among the stone walls and stained-glass windows, or came up to the circular enclosure where he sat on a straight backed chair surrounded by two armed guards and whispered closely in his ear, "Name? Visa? Plea?"

"Plea?" Patterson was more than a little annoyed. He had been to Earth, where murder is barely a punishable offense, to Bennington's Planet where everyone is a vegitarian, to Colony IX, where there are only six (barely sentient) human beings monitoring an entire planet of machines which churn out sixteen million metric tons of synthetic corn-flakes daily–feeding the galaxy's hungry. Never had he encountered a race of people who consider the dismemberment of an automaton to be murder.

Eventually, the hall became quiet as the flurry of people and papers settled down into their respective chairs and briefcases like leaves falling into a neat little pile. Patterson anxiously glanced around the room at the many heavy wooden tables looking for a familiar face. Sovhavn was nowhere to be found.

Everyone's eyes turned towards a huge podium in a corner of the room. It was set higher than the rest of the tables, and two or three stairs lead up to a small platform. A door opened and a quaintly dressed Vitgarian climbed up those stairs. Patterson assumed he was the Judge. He wore a colorful tripterous headdress adorned with the feathers of a rare local bird. Over his expensive royal-blue kimono he wore a fur-lined cape that reached from his shoulders to the ground. As he ascended the podium he cast a menacing glance in Patterson's direction.

At the bottom of the podium, the baliff swept an evangelical hand into the communal space. "Awyee, awyee, come hither unto the great hall of adjudication and hasten the course of justice. The prisoner stands accused of murder. Let all those who will prosecute or defend assemble and put themselves to the task."

The Judge shuffled some papers, leaned back in his chair, and cleared his throat. "Will the Prosecutor please step forward."

A general excitement again rose in the hall as hundreds of papers were rearranged and the assembly muttered sotto voce.

A door opened behind the podium where the Judge sat. The man who walked through it into the chamber was Sovhavn. He passed the enclosure where Patterson was sitting but did not look at him. He sat down at a desk with three other men and said, "I am ready."

Patterson wanted to reach out to Sovhavn. He wanted him to give it up, to say it really was all a joke. Patterson wondered, was Sovhavn trying to see how far he could be pushed before he would cry "uncle?" But Sovavn just sat at his desk, shuffling papers and looking like a formidable opponent in this all too real legal battle.

The Judge said, "State your case, Prosecutor."

Sovhavn stood. He looked down at his desk, took a deep breath and began to speak. "Mr. Patterson, it seems you have a lot to learn about life. I don't just mean your life, the puny collection of mistakes that carries you through from birth to death. I mean the juice that flows through everything from a squid to an elephant, the distinction between inert and blessed matter. The actions that brought you here today are the result of a fundamental misunderstanding of the value of life.

"You acted embarrassed when you told me you had 'broken' Harley Vlondee, and you called me over to help you out. But you had no idea why I was so upset when I was confronted with that scene in your kitchen. I bet you still don't know.

"Mr. Patterson, have you ever heard of organomechanical systems?"

Patterson shook his head.

"Organomechanical systems are living creatures whose gestation occurs entirely externally to any other organic being. They are made up of a combination of mechanical and organic parts, and are in many ways superior to normal organic systems because they are less susceptible to disease and fatigue."

"You may be wondering why this is relevant to the case. It is relevant because all Vitgarians are organomechanical."

"You mean you're all–"

"Robots," Sovhavn said. "We're not robots in the way you're used to thinking of them. We're complex organic systems, like yourself. It's just that we don't gestate inside each other."

"I refuse to believe it," Patterson said. "You're just as human as anyone. I can tell it by the way you behave. You're not stiff and clunky. You're just–normal."

"Even organic systems can be programmed. I think you call it 'education'. We are living, sentient beings. That is, of course, until some arrogant bioderm–that's our term for you, comes at us with a–a screwdriver!"

Sovhavn let this fact sink in. "Therefore, you must understand that we consider dismemberment to be murder. You are a murderer, Mr. Patterson."

"Now wait a minute," Patterson cried.

"The prisoner will remain silent until spoken to." The baliff made a threatening move towards Patterson's cage. Patterson simmered. The proceedings continued for some minutes while Sovhavn described various details concerning what he found in Patterson's apartment–test equipment attached to the victim's innards, the general disarray of the apartment, Patterson's own testimony that he had disemboweled the valet.

After all the testimony had been given, the Judge turned towards Patterson.

"You have heard the evidence against you. As yet you have shown no remorse. What have you to say for yourself?"

"Sir," he started respectfully, "I am touched by your concern for the robot I broke. And I'm really sorry. But don't you think that this whole thing has gone just a little too far. I mean, I'll pay for anything that can't be fixed!"

Someone in the large assembly behind him shouted, "You bet you'll pay!"

"Murder is a very serious crime, Mr. Patterson." Sovhavn showed no trace of humor.

"But I didn't murder. I just broke a robot."

"Robot? Mr. Patterson, I don't think you understand. Harley Vlondee was not 'just a robot.' He was a living, breathing, functioning being. Just what do you mean, exactly, by 'just a robot'?"

"Just what I said. He wasn't, well, you know–like you and me. He–er it–was a machine, an automaton. It couldn't have been sentient. It just couldn't."

Someone in the crowd shouted, "Tell that to his widow!" He was escorted out of the hall.

"Mr. Patterson," Sovhavn continued, "You say Mr. Vlondee was not alive. Didn't he tell you he was? Didn't he plead with you not to–er–'shut him off', as you so indelicately put it? Your honor," he turned towards the Judge and lifted a small disk from the table in front of him, "I present to you the permanent record of the last twenty minutes of Harrison T. Vlondee's life as extracted from his neural recorder. Let the evidence show that, with the imminent violence presented to him and the apparent disbelief on the part of the accused that he was, indeed, a living, thinking creature, Mr. Vlondee pleaded sanely and rationally for his life. And let the evidence further show that that plea was ignored, nay, arrogantly disregarded by the accused."

"So entered."

"Look, Sovhavn," Patterson broke in, "Vlondee was a crude machine. It had nuts and bolts and tubing inside. It even had a screw in the middle of its stomach. Its skin was synthetic, its speech was produced by some sort of computer in its throat, its reactions were canned. Why, it even played a recording of 'Hail to the Chief' when I first arrived in the apartment. When I took it apart, I saw wires and circuit boards and metal, just like any other robot I have ever fixed. This one was a little difficult, that's why I called you. But to say that I murdered someone, why, that's insane."

Sovhavn slammed his briefcase closed and walked towards Patterson, fuming. His voice was threateningly quiet. He hissed. "Who are you to decide who is alive and who is not? True, Harlee Vlondee was made of metal and fibers and liquid. True, he had a brain that was constructed from gallium arsenide and copper ceramic. True, he could speak twenty five languages, recreate any sound he had ever heard, act out any one of sixteen hundred specific cultural rituals in the correct context. But, Mr. Patterson, could not the same be said for you?

"You are made of bones and sinews and blood. Your brain is

made of organic proteins and runs on glucose. You can speak three or four languages and you act out any one of several thousand cultural rituals without pausing to swallow.

"You are certainly a superior breed, Mr. Patterson. Your motions are more fluid. Your skin is more supple, your thoughts more subtle, your moods more sudden. You might have a tick, a hobble, a pain in your groin. You are more agile, your health is more fragile, your type more prone to guile. You might be an artisan, a scientist, a Renaissance man. You might be a partisan, a pacifist, a prince. You mate, you rear children, you feel hatred, you fear the wilderness. Any of these roles may suit you and your human condition, but murder" He paused here for effect "murder is never justified."

Patterson interrupted, "But Vlondee was manufactured. He was built by people. He–it–was trained by people. It didn't have a brain, it had a computer. It didn't have a–a soul. It's not murder to destroy something without a soul."

"There is no difference between skin and silicon where souls are concerned, Mr. Patterson, because nobody knows what they are. Can you point to your soul? Who is to say that the labor of a human woman when she gives birth to a perfect human child is not equal to the labor of a hundred men who twist and pry and think and sweat and wrestle fifty kilos of raw material into a perfect machine? Who is to say that the oils and solvents and liquid nitrogen that course through the tubing of an incipient Harlee Vlondee are not equal to the blood and plasma and amniotic fluid that keep a foetus alive? Who is to say that the final ride along steamy, crowded assembly belts from the galvanizer to the inspection station cannot be compared to that final push through the birth canal, or the turn of a switch not the doctor's tap, or the phrase, 'I am working' not the same as a baby's cry? And are they not both the undeniable, tautological, spectacularly beautiful declaration 'I am alive!'

"Mr. Patterson, are you alive? What was it you took from Harlee Vlondee if it was not his life? That you are a murderer is irrefutable. I'm beginning to think you are also a fool."

Sovhavn was shaking with contempt. He whirled away from the enclosure where he had spoken, his face almost touching Patterson's face, and sat down in the Prosecutor's Chair with a nod towards the Judge.

There was emphatic applause. Patterson sat drained and dazed in his seat. He opened his arms to the hostile crowd and began to plead.

"I am an alien. I am unfamiliar with your ethical code. That is my fault, I know. But I am only a businessman, not an ambassador. I will gladly do anything you wish. I will leave your planet, promise never to come back. Please understand, I didn't know."

It was an admission of guilt.

The Judge rose. He donned his three-feathered hat and made a wide hieratic gesture with his hands. "Nikolas Patterson, you have been accused and tried in the Vitgarian way. The verdict has been attained through fair and just means. It is the judgement of this court that you shall suffer the appropriate penalty, as proscribed by our laws. The court has spoken."

Images of gallows and electric chairs flashed through Pattersons mind. It seemed incredible to him that he would soon be eating his last steak. Soon, too soon, walking down that last, dank cooridor to the okroom where the hooded executioner waited. He wanted to beg, to cry, to plead. But he didn't have a chance.

With the sound of cracking whips, four straps coiled themselves around Patterson's body, pulling him snugly against the back of the chair. The platform on which he was seated descended into the floor. As he went lower, he saw the crowd leave the hall. The Judge was gone, and so was Sovhavn. There was nobody left to plead with, and the platform plunged into darkness.

Patterson was astonished that he awoke. He stared at the bright white walls of a small, bare cubicle, in which he lay on a comfortable palette. He breathed in. Alive! He got up, walked to the door, and stepped into a hallway.

He found himself in a luxurious apartment. Hand woven rugs hovered over a hardwood floor. Halogen lamps beamed brightly onto bookcases, artwork, tapestries. The smell of curried lamb was thick in the air. This was no prison cell. He could not remember coming here. He could not remember anything. Dumbfounded, he stood in the center of the room–and waited.

Two hours later the door opened and a man in an overcoat stepped in. He was carrying a briefcase. Patterson wanted to ask him a thousand questions. How did he get here? What was this place? What would happen to him now?

He heard music. He couldn't identify the tune, but it reminded him of presidents. It seemed to him that everything was moving very slowly. It took ages for the man to take off his coat. The music caused the man in the coat to smile. Patterson tried to open his mouth to speak, but he couldn't bring himself to form the words. The music stopped. The man in the overcoat spoke.

"Ah, Nickolas," the man said jovially, "would you fix me a Manhattan?"

Patterson found himself walking towards the bar. Something in the back of his mind wondered, "why am I doing this?" He began to concoct the drink. He was surprised that he knew how to mix it. He had never drunk a Manhattan before.

Then he remembered. Even organic systems can be programmed.

"Nickolas," he heard behind the low ringing that began to rise in his ears, "Nickolas, bring me my drink!"

Joel Wachman works as a programmer and consultant, appropriately enough, at the Paris subsidiary of an electronic publishing firm. He favorite activities include trying all of the exotic drinks served the famed (albiet overpriced) literary cafe, Les Deux Magots, then prostrating himself in awed reverence in front of a bronze statue of Ernest Hemingway that gazes out over the Seine. The Robots of Vitgar *was inspired by the author's eight year quest for an adequate reply to the mind/body problem, which he has since abandoned for an '84 St. Emillion and a pair of stripey socks he found on sale near the Odeon Theatre. Until further notice he can be reached electronically as jwachman@ihq.ileaf.com.*

GNOMES IN THE GARDEN OF THE DAMNED

by Jason Snell

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Ray and I had walked into her shop just before closing time. *Dorothy's Garden Shoppe* was what the sign read, with the cheap elegance you usually see only on funeral parlors and heart-shaped boxes of candy.

I had bought one of those boxes for Valentine's Day the year before, and had given it to my fiancée Jenny as a declaration of love. That was about five minutes before I told her I never wanted to see her again.

She made an ugly scene. We were in an expensive restaurant, the kind with cloth napkins, and she began to throw glass salt and pepper shakers at me. After she exhausted that supply, she decided to toss the box of candy right back at me.

Fortunately for me, of all geometric shapes, hearts have only one sharp edge. Unfortunately, the side that found my eye was the sharp side.

"You got any gnomes?" Ray asked the hag at the counter who reeked of mint-flavored shoe polish.

She pointed into the corner. Behind all the aluminum windmills and depression-era daybeds, we saw what we had come for.

We dropped the ceramic lawn creature in the back of my Pinto and laughed at the woman. I pulled onto the road and headed for the cemetery. That was where we danced with gnomes. This was no Kevin Costner shit – we danced around our gnome in order to commune with the spirits of the dead Methodists who dwelled there. That, and because there was nothing else to do in Eastvale on a Friday night.

"We can't go there yet," Ray told me. "We don't have everything."

I pulled into the 7-11 parking lot, and decided to leave the compact space for some Buick or Chrysler with a desire to scrape the door handle off of a Yugo. . . Inside a few guys with those red and black plaid flannel shirts that you only expect to see on lumberjacks were arguing over who planned on buying the beer, while others concentrated on Pac Man. We headed straight for the Slurpee machine.

I have always found the slimy consistency of the Slurpee one of life's pleasures. My tongue bleeds in anticipation. I grabbed two Coke Big Gulps and a six-pack of Minute Maid Orange Drink for backup, and we were gone: Back in the Pinto, heading north on Main toward the Eastvale Methodist Church's Eternal Acres Old People's Farm.

"It's time," Ray said. "Time for us to make our magic."

"Sure it is," I told him, and opened the car door. "Get the gnome."

I watched as Ray unbuckled the gnome from its seat belt and placed it on the damp ground between two moss-covered gravestones. He took a deep suck on his Slurpee, and began dancing like a spastic woodchuck on crack. He moved faster and faster around our hardened clay icon, and began to shout.

"Come on, Jimmy!" he shouted. "Join in!"

Ray was an idiot, of course. He was my comrade-in-arms by default, simply because he was the only person who shared my love for pottery, Slurpees and Methodist grave sites. But I knew Ray was destined to end up as the guy who you'd hire to upholster the couch you had soiled on the night of a party. . . and then Ray stumbled on something and fell on top of the gnome.

When he stood up again, I saw that the gnome had been reduced to chunks of rubble. It was made in America, no doubt, along with Lee Iacocca's K Cars and the Salad Shooter.

"Good work, shit-eyes," I told Ray. "That was probably the last gnome in town."

"I don't know what happened," he said. "I didn't mean to do it. It must've been all that caffeine."

I told him that it was his duty to get us another gnome, at any cost. He said he would, but as we got back in the car I knew that we'd destroyed the last gnome in town.

Screw it, I thought. A Chia Pet will work just as well.

Jason Snell is a senior at the University of California, San Diego and is graduating shortly with a B.A. in Communication and a minor in Writing. He is the editor of InterText *and editor in chief of the* UCSD Guardian *newspaper. He will be attending a graduate journalism school in the fall of 1992.*

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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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