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Looking Ahead

Daniel K. Appelquist

First off, I'd like to thank all the people who responded to my call for submissions. I received over fifty submissions from some of you, and others have told me that more is on the way. My faith is definitely restored. I was certainly very excited to receive another story by Conrad Wong (*Teaching a Unicorn to Dance*) which is a sort of sequel to his story from the last issue (*Chasing Unicorn Songs*, February 1991). I'm very impressed with Conrad's work so far, and I certainly hope he can contribute more material in the future.

Secondly, I'd like to thank the people who sent in money, after my call for contributions in the last issue (February 1991). I still need more contributions if I'm to achieve my goal of being able to produce Quanta independently. I'd like more of you to send in $5, or whatever you can afford. Simply ask yourself what Quanta is worth to you, and then send that much. Again, it's entirely optional. I realize that many Quanta subscribers are students, like myself, who do not have an excessive amount of money lying around.

Thirdly, I'd like to address a matter of some note. This is the first issue of Quanta to *not* carry a story by Christopher Kempke. This has nothing to do with me refusing to print any more of his stories, I simply don't have one (also a first) to publish. I'm sure that Chris will reappear in the next issue, but, just to be certain, you could send him some mail to encourage him. His address is *kempkec@cs.orst.edu*. Heh heh...

Seriously, I'm sorry this issue is so late. As I stated in my letter, last month, I was really suffering from a lack of material. Luckily, my volumes are now overflowing. That's not to say that I don't want you to keep sending. On the contrary, the more submissions, the better. Incidentally, I'd like to thank all the people who sent me Star Trek or Dr. Who stories (or parodies). I appreciate these, but it's not really the type of material I can publish. What I'm looking for, primarily, is original fiction which doesn't borrow its background from any other, possibly trademarked, universe. For example, I wouldn't be able to publish a story written in Isaac Asimov's Robot universe. (In fact, I'm not entirely certain I won't run into copyright hassles just by printing the *name* Isaac Asimov.)

I've been working steadily on a series of "best-of" volumes which, I hope, will be released in very limited print circulation over the summer. These will contain what I consider to be the best stories that have appeared in Quanta. If any of you have a personal favorite, I entreat you to write me and tell me about it. I'm also looking for illustrations to put in these volumes. If there are any artists out there willing to donate their material to this cause, please contact me. In fact, I'm always interested in receiving art submissions, either for cover art or otherwise.

Rune Johansen, of Kjeller Norway recently gave me an interesting idea. He suggested that it would make it easier for Norwegians to submit material to Quanta if there were someone who could competently translate stories from Norwegian into English. This, of course, could apply to all languages, from any of the multiple countries (I've lost count, to tell you the truth, but I think it's around 20) to which Quanta is currently distributed. Just as sort of a preliminary query, are there any bi-linguals out there who would be willing to donate their time to translate stories into English? If so, please write me. I'm very interested in this as a possible way of get more European or otherwise international fiction into Quanta, a goal which I feel is desirable.

That's about it for this column, for this issue. I really want to thank all of you again for responding so quickly, and in such volume, to my call for submissions. Keep them rolling in.

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 such subscription updates to *quanta@andrew.cmu.edu* or *quanta@andrew.BITNET*. Thanks.

TO FIND A DEMON

by John Alexander and Michael Walsh

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Jackie Allan pulled on a pair of oilstained coveralls. She left the warm body sleeping in her bed and made her way to the kitchen. Spring is cold in Minneapolis. Making breakfast, she considered going back to bed. But she decided that she didn't want to be more than half an hour late to her first day on the new job.

She found Kelly Peterson's office behind mirror glass on the seventeenth floor of the new Excon building on Nicollet, and walked in.

"You're late." Kelly, petite and brown-eyed with a delicate face, wore artificially long straight hair in the current fashion. Jackie sat down and put her boots on the desk.

"Skip that. There's an automatic farm on the fritz that I'm supposed to fix," Jackie said.

The air between them began to freeze.

"You seem to forget which of us is the boss," Kelly said. "You refused to take a Political Reliability Exam. You refused to give us blood and urine samples, and access to your health records. You're not on time. These are all conditions of employment. How do you expect to get along with your superiors?"

"Go jump in a lake." Jackie rubbed the heels of her boots together, leaving fragments of dirt on the tabletop. "I'd just as soon quit now as next week. But you need an experienced systems engineer, and that's why I'm getting paid twice what you are. Not that money means anything anymore. Besides, I'm insulted. No scientist, engineer, or technician worth his or her salt will give you a urine sample. No one's even dared ask me since I was fresh out of the Institute. I refused then."

"Here at Excon, we try to maintain higher employee standards than are unfortunately prevalent elsewhere."

"So fire me. Let's see you beukies, I mean bureaucrats, fix a leaky faucett."

"We have some very competent personnel who are willing top take PRE's and give us urine samples," Kelly muttered, surrendering.

"Sure." War over. Jackie swung her legs off the table and got up. "Where's my terminal?"

"Actually, management feels you probably ought to have a look at the farm in person. There's a van in the basement garage. I'll show you."

Management probably ought to have a look at itself, Jackie thought as she followed.

The garage was dim and smoky. The van was enormous. A shirtless man with a well-defined chest and a bristling mustache was loading crates of equipment into the back.

"This is Mark Eckert, an automation tech who will be coming with us. Mark, this is Jackie Allan," Kelly introduced.

"I know Mark. Hi." (Jackie felt that Mark had the most beautiful eyelashes she had ever seen on a man.)

"Hi Jackie."

"You said - us?" Jackie turned to Kelly.

"Uh, I was told to come along."

Jackie gave her a hard look without saying anything. Then she climbed in one of the side doors of the van.

Automation up front; a manual driver's seat just in case; methanol engine; living quarters; lab space with terminals; and storage space in the back.

Mark climbed in with a four foot satellite dish.

"Hey, Jackie, what's with the beukie coming along?"

She reached out and flipped on a terminal.

"I'm not sure. Excon's been security-fanatic ever since people stopped them from putting microwave receivers on the Greenland icecap. You remember that?"

"Microwave power beamed down from the solar arrays in space? But I thought those things were in the Pacific ocean."

"They are." Jackie was watching her screen. She'd found her login and started exploring while they talked. "Some beukie originally wanted to put them on the glaciers. They didn't realize the conversion heat would eventually melt the glaciers, reduce the earth's surface albedo, and give global warming an extra oomph." She suspended a throat mike around her neck.

"What happened?"

"They were stopped. Mortal blow to the collective ego of top management. So now Excon recruits weak-willed people who give urine samples. I think Kelly's supposed to keep an eye on us."

A door slammed up front. The twitch of Mark's thick mustache Did not go unnoticed by Jackie. "So if I gave urine that means I'm weak-willed?" he inquired.

"Just don't do it again," Jackie laughed.

"Do what?" asked Kelly, coming through the door. Mark went back to packing boxes so they wouldn't move around.

"Urinate," Jackie said. "What's the name of that farm?"

"Fnail. Fnail Farm, in Canada. The farm overseer reports that everything is fine and dandy, but the last transport didn't find any produce to load. There are other disturbing reports." Kelly said. She was watching Mark, who was shuffling crates with effortless grace. She made up her mind that the muscle was real, not silicone insert.

"So how do you two know each other?" she asked.

"We worked together on a job for General Wind. Repairing power windmills." Mark placed his hands on the edge of a crate behind him and sat down on them.

"They had a joke about us," Jackie called over from the terminal. "About how you remove a generator housing."

"Yes, yes," Mark grinned. "Jackie holds the screwdriver against the screw and Mark rotates the generator. THEN she had the nerve to write on a recommendation form that I was 'young, but competent.' Tell me what that's supposed to mean." He jabbed an accusatory finger in her direction. Jackie giggled.

Kelly smiled politely, but she had this image of Jackie with the screwdriver which she felt mildly threatening.

"Arrrgh. You're right." *Jackie's moods seemed to switch without warning*, Kelly thought. She had been communicating with the terminal by keyboard and subvocally through the throat mike. Now she turned it off. "From the farm's point of view everything's ok, but the other things flatly contradict that. We'll have to actually go to Canada to find out which machine is right."

"We've been on our way for five minutes," Kelly said.

Jackie looked stunned.

"You didn't notice? Your inner ear must be broken," Mark said generously. "We've been turning corners and everything."

"Damn modern suspensions are too good," Jackie growled reflectively.

It was starting to grow dark, and drizzling, when they pulled up to the end of a gravel track and stopped. The black arms of wet bushes and trees stood around a huge shed and a low crumbling concrete structure. Dull green conifers rose up one hill. In the other directions lay small fields separated by windbreaks.

"...land is poor around here. Vast area, very low level agriculture. It's labor intensive to conserve the soil," Mark was saying as they got out of the van, wearing light hooded jackets and heavy boots.

Kelly went over to the shed and pulled open the big door.

"Machines in here. Tractors ... I wish I knew all the names."

Jackie followed her in, clanged around, and came back out.

"Most of the farm machinery is out. The storage bins are empty... Mark, what is it?"

Mark had been standing in the rain staring off into the distance. He turned around.

"Nothing. Smelling the air. Getting a feeling for the place," he said. "That should be the bot den," pointing at the squat concrete building.

They entered by a wide gate which had doors flung open. Lights came on. It was a large cavern with showers and water hoses for cleaning equipment and bots, farm robots. Side rooms held supplies. Mark headed purposefully for a heavy door on the back wall. The room behind it proved to be dry and heated.

"Weather can get pretty corrosive, even on the bots," Mark explained. "And contacts." He pointed out a series of outlets in the wall. "The bots come here to report the day's events, and to get their assignments in the morning as soon as it's light enough to work. The bigger contacts are for power. Recharging."

"I was told the farm overseer talked to the robots over radio," Kelly put in. Jackie was rattling at a door with a rusted padlock on it.

"Sure, a bit," she said. "But the bots can remember a lot, especially botanical details. The data rate's too low. Same reason we'll be putting up a satellite dish. The van radio won't let us talk to the rest of the world as much as we want." The door wasn't giving.

"Mark, can you get this open? Otherwise I have to go back for a hacksaw."

Mark put his shoulder against it and pushed. The bar bent and came out of the frame. The door swung in.

"Cheap metal," he said.

No light came on here and there was a musty smell. When their eyes adjusted to the dark they saw several large cables passing through the room. One was connected to a large box on a bench, which was connected in turn to an old fashioned terminal. There was even a chair lying on its side.

"Hey, this looks like it used to be a control room for real live people," Mark breathed. "Totally antiquated, twenties stuff."

"Cool it. Some of us are old enough to remember the twenties," Jackie said. She righted the chair and sat down in front of the terminal, raising a clowd of dust.

Mark found an outside door and opened it. The last of the daylight filtered in.

"What I wonder is where all the bots are. They should be coming home," he said.

Kelly peered out, wondering if she would see the earth-toned hominids ambling towards her through the weeds growing over the foundations of long-gone buildings.

"They are home." Jackie stood up alarmingly. "According to this overseer, its storage bins are full of radishes, its fields are all plowed, and all twenty-four bots have been patiently sitting in the room we just came through, for the past hour."

They set off to look for the missing bots with flashlights. The drizzle had stopped. An invisible moon gave the cloud cover a uniform glow, enough to navigate by.

Kelly pushed through the underbrush of a windbreak, and came out on the other side. A bot was right in front of her ten paces off. It cocked its head slightly and watched her.

"Jackie, I have found one," she called out. In the flashlight beam it was brown, with black disks for eyes in an otherwise featureless face. Jackie came up beside Kelly.

"Stop. Test. Test," she said. The bot emitted a low hum. "That's about all they say." She pulled out a complicated-looking probe and walked over, reaching for an access port on the bot's torso. A third beam of light fell on the brown figure. They heard Mark's footsteps.

The bot casually brought up its right arm and knocked Jackie's hand out of the way. She reached out again, and barely dodged a large swipe of the bot's arm - but tripped backwards in the grass. Kelly caught her, staggering in surprise at Jackie's weight. Muscle and bone. Kelly felt strangely excited. In spite of the jokes, Jackie couldn't be much over thirty-five.

"They're not supposed to do that. Anything like that. Ever." Jackie was breathing hard, and there was some fear in her eyes. Kelly wondered how she was supposed to feel.

The bot didn't do anything futher aggressive, and just stood there. Mark had run up and was now standing next to them.

"Let's stay away from that one," he said. "Come on, I found a disabled one. It's probably safer."

Mark's bot was lying on its side at the foot of a grassy incline. It looked considerably less than human with several large panels removed. Mark's finger picked out details.

"See, here, the oil well's dry. I'll bet the joints are ruined. Hydraulic fluid's low. The battery's drained. There's a lot of

physical trauma, especially to the computer casing. I've never seen a bot so mistreated. Usually the mechanical parts wear out after five or so years. This one's brand new." He straightened up. "It almost looks like this bot TRIED to kill itself. And another thing I don't understand is why the operational one over there didn't bring this one in. They're supposed to take care of each other."

"This one was probably ordered to commit suicide," Jackie put in. "I am sure that this was done through the overseer itself. I doubt we'll find many working ones."

Mark hoisted the casualty across his shoulders.

They drove the van around to the outside door of the little control room and carried in a bright light and set up their troubleshooting gear. Jackie quickly broke the system. It had been set up to deliberately destroy the bots, and to deny that anything was wrong.

"There're four bots left. They're not hostile anymore," Jackie stated. She yawned.

"Someone must have done that," Kelly said. "I'm worried. Can we use the bots that are left as guards?"

"Go right ahead. I'm going to bed."

Kelly got Mark to show her how to get a low-resolution picture (of shadowed darkness) through the bots' eyes, how to set an alarm on their motion detectors, and how to tell them to move around. For the rest of the night Kelly kept an avid watch on the nocturnal wildlife.

She also watched the two sleeping figures on the floor. She couldn't decide what to think of them. Some great conflict seemed to be brewing inside her.

The next morning before breakfast Jackie dragged them along to a small lake half a mile away.

"I found this place last night," she said, taking off her sweatshirt.

"But it's cold," Kelly said.

"So we get to prove we're Minnesotans."

"I didn't bring a swimming suit," Kelly continued. Mark and Jackie splashed in, both inarguably lacking swimming suits, and loudly proclaimed the water cold. Kelly shrugged and bowed to fate. She had to admit, it was . . . invigorating.

When they got back, Jackie immersed herself in the global communications network while Mark drove off to gather up the disabled bots, which the overseer was now able to locate. Kelly disappeared on some project of her own.

"Username Ari in Australia," Jackie announced when Mark returned. "Means 'demon' in Icelandic, incidentally. Whoever did this came from there via Kamchatka, France, Argentina, and Estonia. Only thing is, the trail was obvious."

"Um," Mark said.

"I think it's a front doorbell. Here goes."

Several minutes passed before the other end was picked up. A line of text spilled along the bottom of the screen.

"Old union handshake," Jackie said. "Let's see if I can remember how to do this." After several apparently meaningless exchanges the screen cleared to show a bearded man with soft brown eyes and a red face.

"Ah. Jackie Allan," he said. "I've heard of you. You went to the Institute of Wisconsin-Madison? Involved in the Chernobyl cleanup of '27, right? I'm Brent Alberts. Institute of Toronto." He looked at Mark. "Who's our third party?"

"That's Mark Eckert. I know him, he's ok," Jackie said.

There was a pause.

"You're not in Australia," Mark said impulsively. There was full sunlight behind the man's head.

"Not exactly," Brent laughed. "I'm in a safe jurisdiction. Not that Jackie there couldn't find me if she really wanted to."

Jackie nodded at the compliment. Then she got down to business.

"I'm fixing a Canadian farm you set on self-destruct. Why?"

"Maybe you heard about Excon's plan to raze a good part of the remaining Indonesian rainforest so they can build golf courses and luxury apartments for several thousand of their executives." Brent didn't waste words either.

"I read in the news. I assumed somebody was going to stop them."

"Me and some other people decided to do it. Only they've gotten smart since the Greenland affair. Hired sharp people as collaborators. They have actual human beings with guns on the site. Several of us got physically arrested and imprisoned under some barbaric Indonesian law."

"THAT I didn't read in the news." Jackie looked disturbed.

"So we decided on war. Excon has operations in automated farming, automated mining, automated manufacturing, and automated transport, all of them more vulnerable than the Indonesian construction site. This was a test. Tomorrow, it all goes. I think Excon will back down, but it'll be hell in a handbasket."

"I don't like the waste," Mark said slowly. "It hurts me to see bots ruined."

"Neither do I. If we had something like an executive password, we could get at the bulldozers directly. Failing that, the feeling is that bots are more replacable than untouched ecosystems and endangered species. Also, that making an example of Excon will make Consolidated and the others listen to us the next time they try to pull something like the Orinoco salinization scandal. Jackie?"

"Sorry. They gave me barely enough information to find the farm. We do have an executive, though . . . "

. . . who at that moment burst into the room. At a keystroke, a lengthy quote from 'Njal's Saga.' covered up Brent's image.

"I saw some large shapes last night," Kelly said when she had ascertained that no one else was talking. "There aren't any footprints out there today, but I found some two-toed tracks, deer or something."

Jackie tried to think of a good way to put it to her and couldn't.

"Kelly, your company's doing something really idiotic in Indonesia. We need your password to stop it," she stated.

Mark almost groaned.

Kelly's eyes widened. She looked back and forth between their faces, trying to decipher the expressions. She flushed.

"I think it is very nice that the company is able to provide beautiful houses for its administrators. Just because . . . how dare you, you techie anarchist scum!" She turned and ran.

Jackie grimaced and turned Brent back on.

"I assume you heard that."

"What a diplomat you are," he said drily. Mark grumbled something similar.

"You go talk to her, then," Jackie said. "I'll go tell Excon I fixed their overseer, please send twenty new bots."

Kelly ran on past the lake and sat down, tears on her face, under a huge tree not far from one of the bots standing in the tall grass. The sky had cleared. The sun was out, and the air had the rich smell of evaporating rain. For several minutes she tried to figure out why she was crying, and what she would report to her superiors.

"What's the matter?" a calm baritone voice asked out of nowhere.

"Who's there?" Kelly looking around.

"Just me." The bot in the tall grass turned to face her. She froze in terror. It walked toward her casually, almost as if it were using body language to convey ease and confidence to her. Usually, robots walked purposefully.

"You are upset. Why?" The same voice, imperturbably calm.

She tried to talk, swallowed, found her voice.

"I'm ... confused. How should I know about Indonesia, what to do? The techies, I mean the two people I came with, I can't trust them."

"Whom can you trust?"

She thought of her superiors. Suddenly she couldn't remember why she had ever trusted them. Trust was poised in her throat like a boulder on the edge.

"I ... do trust them," she said, surprised at the words even as they came out of her mouth. "Jackie and Mark. If someone could just explain to me ... "

"They asked for your password so that I would be able to stop the Indonesian project directly. Species diversity is essential to the earth's ecology and is a part of human survival. If I can't stop it directly, I will kill tens of thousands of bots the way I killed the bots here, to stop it. That would be a great waste."

Kelly bit her lip and studied the horizon. Then she leaned over and whispered the word at the formless head which was bent to receive it.

"Thank you," it said.

Kelly stood up slowly and took a few steps. She wondered if she should say goodbye. Instead she said,

"Are you human? Or can they make intelligent robots now?"

"They can." The bot rose. "But they haven't. I am a human being named Brent Alberts, talking with you by means of a reprogrammed farm robot."

Kelly felt tricked, but she also felt like laughing.

"Why haven't they, then?"

The bot paused for a second.

"An intelligent robot would be a citizen. What kind of life could we offer this person? Joints that wear out in five years? Poor eyesight, no sense of smell or touch, accidental death by power failure?" He shrugged. "With power comes responsibility. We must refrain from doing many things that we are capable of doing."

That made sense, Kelly thought.

"Bye," she said.

The bot waved in a way that she decided was very suave.

This story was originally written for the Minnesota Technolog's SF Writting Contest and published in the April 1991 issue. (It won first place)

John is a double-major in Math and Secondary Education who wants to become a math teacher. Michael graduated from The College of Liberal Arts with a Physics degree and is now working on his Ph.D. at CERN, Switzerland. The two hope to go on to greater literary fame, but, according to John, are hampered by the fact that they can no longer spend long nights hashing out story ideas while getting wired on caffeine and silly from sleep depravation.

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THE COLD WINDS OF HEAVEN

by Rupert Goodwins

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To the tower, then. It's time. I can remember everything about that day, even those words. It was a beautiful evening, and the three of us had spent the afternoon talking and quarreling, drowsing in the warm summer of the Greenland veldt. Even then, we felt the cool shadow of our friend, the fourth of us, who sat, mute and alone, beneath a tree. Always with us, as we have always been together; but now he was his own statue, a supple monument to remind the three that remained. We had been together for five years before he became thus, an artist whose passion for infinite madness was so soon rewarded.

I walked over to the tree, and bent over to hold his hand. He blinked, and I crouched down beside him, putting my head next to his, aligning, looking where he looked. Then we stood up, silently, slowly, his hand holding tight as he caught sight through my eyes. I matched him pace for steady pace, holding my head as he held his. The tower was a kilometer distant, towards the sea's edge, and we looked at the delicate black-web bowl that pointed at the sky, ready for the night.

As we walked towards it, watching our friends running ahead, getting to the tower while we were still ten minutes away, I wondered what he really saw, whether he was still wandering the chaotic caverns of the old machines. If he wasn't, did he see us as friends still, who kept him close and part of the old team, took him with us wherever, played and talked to him?

Sometimes, I thought he must hate us for so constantly taunting him, now and again making him hear our shouts and chatter and laughter like today, reminding him what he has lost. And then for me to hold hands like this, linking our illicit links, and looking for him. What it must be to see the world so fitfully, and always through someone else's eyes, a spectator alone. I cannot look at him when we are so linked. I could not, as I could never let myself kiss him.

We got to the tower, and as we climbed the first step he let go my hand and walked inside quickly, without hesitation. He knew his way around; we might have built it together but it was always his observatory. He'd all but lived here, amongst the old machines, and one day he'd all but died. I stood there alone, looking at the grey wood walls of the tower against the deep blue evening sky, against the darkening grass and trees, remembering things perhaps I ought not.

Then I went in, and climbed to the observing room. The other two were already busy, lost in the joy of working the machines, letting them talk to each other and out towards the old satellites that still drew their dutiful paths in the sky above. Tonight was special; across the globe fully half the world was listening to our broadcast, ten million souls linked by the distant sea of the ionosphere above us. Ancestor radio; so long ago the only link between the distances, now the one gift of the machines we cannot give back. Tonight, it reclaims a little more of its old glory and we justify a little more of the faith we had in ourselves a millennium ago.

None of us understood those days, for all we talked about them; we couldn't see our mistakes when they were five years from killing us but sent our devices a thousand years into the future. What were we trying to do?

When they sent that starprobe away from Earth, the books say, it was one of the terrible times. There was furious argument about such a wasteful action, when even they could feel their great shining world shaking itself apart. Yet, in the dark and lonely centuries that followed, the mission survived. Even when the last man walked away, he made sure the computers still ran and the starprobe kept its course.

Then we came along, the four of us, young and bored and full of devilish intrigue. The machinery had not been forgotten, but it was left alone. At first, nobody minded as we tinkered and built, but then we found the links. Those were as forbidden as fire, the old laws ignored purely because nobody thought any remained. Some did; we found them, and the machine that built them into us. One morning we took it in turns to lay down in the coffin and emerge, half an hour later, with wire in our veins and new cold life in our heads.

Oh, it was tremendous. The smooth machines woke under our hands, the black slabs that we'd never understood. We understand them now and the things that live within them; brilliant minds, playful, pleading, offering all the knowledge and beauty of the old days, so compelling and satisfying and so dangerous. That these things were toys, pastimes, given to children, is unbelievable; perhaps if we could understand that, we would know so much more.

Perhaps that's what he knows, perhaps that's what he found and couldn't let go. He'd not left the machines alone, particularly when he found the music. We'd always thought he'd be a good composer, but, with the machines, he went far beyond; he used them to amplify his designs and produce music that had us in awe. It frightened us, but he seemed so confident, so positive, so blissfully enthralled.

Then we came into the observatory, ten days after we'd got the links, to find him, apparently asleep, holding on to one of the smooth machines. We woke him up: his eyes opened and he seemed about to say something. Nothing happened. The machines couldn't help; they said he was blind and deaf, but about his mind they said they didn't know. Of course, the families were horrified; we had our links removed and took such punishment as they gave us, but mostly they left us alone.

Since then, we've stayed here. Ten years. The others didn't

replace their links, but I did and he did, and, with a careful, patient learning, I fixed it so that, now and again, he could hear, and, once in a while, I could let him see. I didn't care to use the links other than that, twice since then he's placed his hands on the mission controls and sat, silent as always, feeling the links out into space.

It didn't take long after the accident for the story to spread; our occasional shortwave transmissions, politely reporting the progress of the starprobe as it neared its destination, became more and more popular. First, it was just youngsters, probably because we were perverse heroes due to the terrible things we'd done, but in a quiet world not used to novelty we provided a certain fascination. Lately, we'd started giving talks about the mission and its history as well as charting its course, and, once or twice, we'd even had a visitor.

Now we were alone; tonight, a hundred years ago, the starprobe could have tugged itself into orbit around a far planet, unfurled its banners and started to pass back what it found to the ghosts of its makers. It might not; it might not have survived the long dark years. We wouldn't know until tonight, us and half the world.

Out in space, the relay satellites waited, holding their positions in the tracery of electrons like fat spiders waiting in a shining web, binding the Great Net. I know that whatever that is, it works like our black dish on the tower, but stretches across millions of kilometers of emptiness, sifting the ceaseless storm of star-born radio. Somewhere in that is the thin whisper from the starprobe, a hundred light years away, and somehow it's caught and held and passed back to us mundane humans. A gift.

We sat in the dark observatory, watching the screens. We took it in turns to give the commentary; he sat in his old chair, hands once again on the smooth machine as if the last ten years were just a daydream. We didn't mention him on air; we never had.

The time came, and for a second, two, there was nothing. Then, the screens lit, and our starprobe slowly awoke. We'd stopped reminding the audience that this had all happened a century ago; for us, for everyone, it was happening now.

It was a white planet. Cold and huge, bigger than Earth but still a rock, glazed with gas. We saw great drifts of brilliant cloud lit by its distant sun, smooth yet streaked with golden lines. It was placid, so far away from the warmth of the star that only a few huge whorls marked its weather.

The starprobe swung around, crossing into night. It was still practicing its ancient senses, and the cameras faded and brightened as it struggled to focus on the planet below. As it passed the terminator, the weatherlines mixed and curdled; something was happening there, but we had to wait hours before we could see it again. All the time we described what we saw, what the other readings were, and made wild guesses.

Then it came again, and this time the machinery was ready. A thousand pictures taken in a hundred different ways, at every wavelength and every depth. As the probe went into daylight, we began to understand. It was snow, boiling up from vast fields as the starlight warmed it and cooling out as it fell into night. An eternal blizzard: the first snowstorm on Earth in seven centuries.

The starprobe, so long ago, felt with other senses. What snow it was, cold chemicals that held the hint that once, an age ago, there had been life on the planet. It was no more than a hint; of something that had passed long before our rich and lively solar system had itself cooled like a snowflake out of the void.

Four times the starprobe let go tiny passengers, probes that drifted slowly down into the bleak sky below, tunnelling and tasting as they fell through the layers of cloud. We caught our first flake; big as a peacock's tail and lighter than a sparrow's feather. It was a beautiful thing, complex and fragile; it melted as the cameras tracked up and down. On top were crystal facets, clear layers that might almost have been water ice, reflecting the light from the probe; they were set in a mass of sparkling needles that oozed and combined as we watched. Beneath were regular patterns, faint colours, but they too vanished before we could see them properly.

As the probes descended, they caught marvelous sights; linked spirals of a thousand big flakes breaking up, recombining. One shattered into a flurry of tiny, glinting particles which scattered like fragments of a glass as it hits the floor; it was far away, and that was all we saw.

It was already thirty-six hours since we started, and I was wondering how much longer we could go on for. On the screens, the vast structure of the snowstorms was charted, as varied as a slice through a billion years of rock but dynamic, shifting, a most precise and random dance.

"Listen!"

We looked at each other, then at where he sat. He was motionless, hands still on the machine, but there was no doubt that he'd spoken. I ran over, and shook his shoulder; nothing. Then, from the speakers set into the roof, came a blast of noise, not pure like a waterfall, not distinct like birdsong, but as loud and insistent as both.

"Listen," he said again. "They're talking. Radio."

He shuddered, and smiled. We looked at the screens; he was listening to the broad spectrum radio on the starprobe. We'd ignored it. The pictures were so beautiful, and the maps we drew so interesting, that we hadn't even known it was there.

"I can tune this," he said, "It's all in layers"

The noise shifted; now a pattern of crashes, like slow waves on a beach heard from a distance, now a swiftly rising arpeggio that slipped in and out of time with the waves and was repeated and varied in a mass of variations, faint, loud, slower, faster, always with purpose.

"They're talking... about stars... they're watching them..."

I tried to pull one of his hands away, worried. He stiffened, and held on with an animal strength. I looked at the others, and stood back. Nobody was talking on the radio; across the world the sounds of that ancient planet were playing.

"It's beautiful! I know what they're looking at..." He turned and looked at me; I knew he couldn't see the room, but I nearly screamed with shock; his face, so long slack and lifeless, was transformed, his eyes alight with an almost heavenly glee.

"Lover– listen to me" he said. "I'm nearly at the edge. I'm not going to break the link. They watch the stars too. They know so much. They know about the starprobe. They thought they were alone and now they're... oh, listen!"

The noise grew clearer. I recognized a spark of music, an echo of his glorious days, but it went beyond that. It was a symphony, perfect, that grew and flowered as unerringly as a

rose. We stood there and listened, hardly breathing, caught in the theme, so much his style but carrying a message; vast, majestic, alive.

Beneath the starprobe, the snowflakes formed and were aware. They caught the light of the stars, and passed the news of each tiny snatch of distant light amongst themselves. A compound eye across quarter of the planet, formed in near-darkness, away from the blinding burn of the sun. They drifted down, changed, reformed, carrying the information, analyzing, perceiving. Each snowflake died in hours, yet the snowstorm lived and thought for ever, watching the universe.

The music changed. It was not for ever. It knew how random it was, and how it would perish when the sun got a little brighter or a little colder. It could see such things, it knew so well how a star grew old when its one sure sense was an eye of such power. It thought, for so long, that it was alone.

The music changed. The starprobe had arrived. Whoever sent you, the snowstorm said, if you are still alive, you have a companion now. Please talk to me before I end. We must. If you understand me, come.

We understood through the music, a performance of virtuoso improvisation that left no room for doubt, that convinced utterly.

Come.

Then, he gasped aloud. The music vanished, for a moment the cacophony returned, then a thunderclap of pure, raw, unfeeling noise. We should have been watching the screens, but the music took us over so completely that we hadn't been aware of anything else. A hundred years away, the starprobe crossed the terminator into light, and the edge of the snowstorm was caught in a burning line of chaos. The scream of the tearing apart was carried into the observatory, into the machines, into the link.

He was dead.

We cannot know, now, whether what he told us was true. It's unthinkable to anyone who heard the music that he couldn't have believed it, but whether he was right nobody can say. The starprobe is still there; we have all the data we want but none of the insight. What he did, what he thought, is lost.

But we're coming. Perhaps we needed to rest and brood on our mistakes, perhaps we're wrong now to start again on a road that is so dangerous. I think we know enough, just about, to watch ourselves. This time. Some of us are working on the links, trying to find out what part of his music was genius, what part repeatable. Some of us are reaching out, prodding at those long hundred years between us and the planet; there are ways, we think, to make those years a blink of an eye, ways that the old people would never have thought of.

And now we understand what we must do again. We're coming.

Rupert Goodwins is a computer programmer and journalist manqué who lives and works in East London. He shares a small house with a large collection of paperbacks, old radios and more odd junk than can possibly be healthy for a young lad. Somewhere amid the 1950s' military surplus Geiger counters lurk a wife, a sister and a small child called Richard, although sightings have been sporadic.

Writing SF has stopped seeming like a good idea and threatens to become an obsession. Nothing published yet, apart from a couple of novellas for the Weird Dreams and Wreckers computer games. Currently working on a theory of reverse karmachronism, which he hopes will allow him to be reincarnated as Philip K. Dick the next time 1928 comes around.

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TEACHING A UNICORN TO DANCE

by Conrad Wong

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A shiver ran up Ariaou's back as she stepped into the star-lit stateroom. The task force commander of the Meetpoint system patrol and the captain of this ship, the *Rhadon's Promise* waited within, sitting on the other side of the dimly illuminated table; a steward brought in silver-domed platters and crystal glasses. He watched her calmly, his eyes the dark color of tree bark, his fur reddish-brown. A dire wolf.

The commander misinterpreted her hesitation and waved a paw to the seat at the other end of the table. "Please, be seated. You are quite safe as my guest here– honor demands it."

The black-maned, calico-furred feline bard unslung her ancient shimmerlyre and set it down on the floor next to the table, then sat apprehensively, her tail swishing nervously. She wore her heavily jeweled ankle-length dress with a clumsiness that betrayed her inexperience with such fashions, turquoise squares alternating with emerald ones that matched her glittering green-gold eyes. Memories flitted uneasily within her mind.

A deep green forest, darkened by twilight. Two small kittens cried out to the screeching carrion birds overhead as a yellow-eyed predator approached.

A cloaked figure spoke to Ariaou, warning her that she would shortly receive bad news. The next day, a vidphone call told her that her brother had been murdered at King Ascenion's coronation.

An old grey-furred dire wolf faced down a golden unicorn, suited in swirling light that erupted in bolts of energy. He died, gunned down by a centaur behind him.

Ariaou blinked to see the steward filling her glass with a dark red wine of subtle aroma. The commander raised his glass in a silent toast, so she did the same to avoid looking distracted, barely noticing its rich and complex taste as she watched to see if the wolf noticed her discomfort.

The steward lifted the dome from the appetizer, skewered slivers of meat cooked in Ryme spices. Ariaou took one, watched the viewport as the distant winged form of the starliner *Princess's Favor* receded into a pinpoint of light and blazed into a thin line of fire as it accelerated away under main drive.

There was an uneasy pause after the meat was finished before the commander spoke. "Permit me to introduce myself properly. I am Prince Rhadon Mordenkainen of Hellsgate, the Task Force Commander of the Second Hellsgate Fleet, which is currently assigned to Meetpoint patrol."

"Ariaou, a bard from Meetpoint," she replied. Curiosity overpowered her natural caution. "If I might ask, why did you request my transfer from the *Princess's Favor*? I'm sure it couldn't solely be for the pleasure of my company at dinner."

Rhadon smiled, an eerie sight on a dire wolf. The steward removed the empty appetizer plate, substituted the first entree, an entire Elysian razor-tooth fish broiled and marinaded in redfruit juices, accompanied by a bottle of white wine. After the steward retreated to the kitchen, he said, voice quietly serious, "You and several people were the last to see my older brother. Have you any news of what's befallen him?"

Ariaou hesitated, wondering to herself about Rhadon's intent, then related the story of Gavar Mordenkainen, known better to her as Tarnkappe, and his attempt to wreak revenge upon her and the unicorn. She left out Sundancer's horn and certain other details, cautiously trying not to reveal more than necessary.

The commander's face remained expressionless, his sleek reddish-brown fur turned dark by the dim light of the stateroom. He nodded, finally. "Thank you. So he has found a kind of peace."

She asked, warily, fearing to tread upon some hidden taboo, "Is it true what he said, that a genetic disease haunts your line?"

The prince chuckled humorlessly. "The Curse of Lord Moreah. A sword hanging over each male descendant's head, which I have as yet been lucky enough not to feel. In the eyes of my people, Zephyr could not have killed my brother, for he was dead to them when his madness came, and even before that, his cruelty did not endear him to them. His exile was merely a public safety measure."

Ariaou nibbled on a piece of the fish as Prince Rhadon continued. "It is for this reason that I named my ship *Rhadon's Promise*. Because of the curse, I expect to die much sooner than most of my people, but I also have greater power and responsibilities. I have sworn to overcome my limits and make Hellsgate a power to respect in this galaxy, to serve my people to the best of my abilities."

The steward replaced the fish with the second entree, a traditional dish of Hellsgate: delicately crusty circles of bread filled with spiced and minced jaghorse meat. Though it smelled mouthwatering, Ariaou noted that the food failed to receive more than minimum attention from Rhadon.

"There's little at Meetpoint to hold my interest," the commander said, a faraway look in his dark eyes. "In truth, it's little more than an unneeded vacation, a political assignment of little strategic importance. But honor requires that I perform my duties, so Hellsgate shall be known as a world which keeps its obligations."

"Meetpoint Station's the political, cultural, and intellectual center of the galaxy," Ariaou replied noncommittally. "It's important that it be protected by a joint force, so that no single government will control it."

"True. There are certain possibilities. Yet while we patrol,

who would attack?" The prince beckoned to the steward, who replaced the still half-full platter with a steaming bowl of trideer venison broth and a small plate of crusty finger-wide loaves which he dipped in the soup. "And I fear that while time passes slowly on patrol, the madness may overcome me slowly, first paranoia, then a thirst for battle in any form that might present itself, finally unthinking bloodlust. Each minute that passes is a minute closer to death."

As he spoke, armored shutters moved quietly to close the viewport. A small beeping noise came from Rhadon's belt communicator. He answered it, listened to the voice coming from the other end. "We'll be entering jump in sixteen minutes, Ariaou. At that time, you'll be transferred to a shuttle to Meetpoint. Matters have come up that require my attention."

Time passed slowly while the stewards removed the dishes for safety. Ariaou took up her shimmerlyre and played an ancient aire to fill the time, its sweet strains calming her nerves and apparently soothing Rhadon's as well. The immortally perfect strings of the shimmerlyre called forth visions of moonlight upon the water, quiet forests about a lake.

Rhadon listened quietly. Though his body failed to express emotions, his liquid dark eyes shone with hidden sorrows and memories. As Ariaou's music drew to an end, he stood quietly and took her hand, then kissed it. "My thanks. Your voice is lovely. Would that I could sing so well for you in turn."

A strange sense of unreality swept the room, causing her vision to warp slightly; then, in a moment of sudden shifting, it ended. When it passed, Ariaou stood up and bade farewell to Rhadon.

"Until we meet again under better auspices, fare thee well," he replied.

The steward escorted her to the waiting shuttle, which lifted slowly from the starship and made its way to the inner edge of the Oort cloud where Meetpoint Station orbited silently. *Rhadon's Promise* shrank into a point of light that blazed away as it entered warpspace.

Meetpoint Station approached steadily. Unlike the asteroid that was Ryme's *Quiet Reason*, Meetpoint was built entirely of metal, a hundred spheres stacked one within another, each level a separate environment of its own. As the station grew nearer, Ariaou saw domes of various sizes dotting its surface, the exposed halves of auditoriums, stadiums, and concert halls.

Ariaou felt rather than saw the shuttle attach itself to one of the many docking ports. She disembarked, stepping into the crowded customs area of Meetpoint Starport F, then saw a familiar vulpine face waiting.

"Professor Karikhen!" she called, waving.

"Ariaou!" the red fox exclaimed, walking over to her. It seemed to the feline bard that the teacher walked with a slower gait, even for his age. Beneath short cocky ears, his green eyes shone as brightly as ever, taking note of the shimmerlyre that nestled between her shoulderblades, and the silvery case that protruded from her pouch. "Well met again! I trust you found what you were looking for?"

"Yes! It's a long story, but we've time," she replied, hugging him cordially, then picking up her bags from the collection area. They walked out of the starport section.

Karikhen chuckled and led her down a blue-green striped corridor to his skimmer, directing its autopilot to take them to the Amaranth Memorial Library of Ancient Lore. "I started some research when you sent me your letter," he explained. "But we'll need to use the older hardcopies in the archives."

The skimmer merged into Meetpoint internal traffic, passing two cargo maglev barges ferrying plastic crates to shipping. Shielded from the outside wind and noise within the streamlined vehicle, Ariaou related the full story to Karikhen, leaving out no details, and showed him the horn of the fallen Sundancer resting within its silvery carrying case.

The aged teacher removed a small laser-sighted loup from his many-pocketed vest and examined the horn. "A fascinating specimen, my dear feline. Am I correct in that you seek to know what virtues and secrets it might possess?"

"More than that. With Sundancer gone, there's one less guardian in the galaxy. I feel as if I've inherited a mantle of responsibility." Ariaou looked out the windows of the skimmer, watched the enclosed parks whirl by the clear plastic-walled corridor. "Why was I chosen? What must I do, and how should I do it?"

Karikhen nodded, more to himself than to the bard. "Not very many people recognize that with power must come responsibility. Unleashed power quickly rages out of control and burns its user, and the innocents about him."

The aged fox looked up as the skimmer coasted to a stop. "Perplexing. We've arrived at the Meetpoint Council building rather than the library."

Two uniformed guards arrived to escort them inside the cluster of domes that formed the center of government for the Meetpoint Station. They exchanged words with the professor, then opened the doors and led them up the stairs to the entrance. When Ariaou saw the professor walking calmly, she relaxed and followed with tail swaying anxiously. "Do you know why we've been taken here?"

"Very likely some sort of crisis," Karikhen replied, looking thoughtful and worried. His ears flickered. "It's not uncommon that when a situation arises that must be dealt with quickly and efficiently, they call upon a few people and settle as much as they can discretely before bringing it up with the public."

"It seems rather underhanded to me," Ariaou said, tail lashing.

"Yes, it is. But sometimes it's necessary. And though often it can be beneficial, there'll always be those who oppose it."

The guards saluted and took up positions at the side of the door as they entered a large hemisphere. Circles of chairs lined the gently sloping floor, only the lowest filled with Meetpoint officials; a raised dais sat in the middle of the room with a speaker's podium on top. Large viewscreens hanging from the ceiling flashed starmaps crossed with dotted lines indicating the known starships' plotted paths.

"Welcome, Professor Karikhen, Ariaou. I am Zaharis, the current Meetpoint External Coordinator." the speaker said from the podium. He was a jade-green reptile standing upright, four thin spidery legs providing balance. His skeletal arms played deftly over the keyboard buried in the podium, causing lines of text and graphics to scroll over the viewscreens. "I am sorry that we had to call you in so quickly, but as you'll see here, the situation demands a fast response."

Each screen flickered, then shifted to a grainy deep-space view of many long, thin cylinders bound into a single unit. "Our farthest patrol units discovered an ancient generation ship bound in-system at the far edge of the Oort cloud. A human

ship."

He continued over the gasps of those assembled, "Though its technology appears to be far below that which human civilization achieved at the time of Ragnarok, it still exceeds our own capabilities in many areas. Curiously, it does not seem to possess warpspace travel."

"Despite the passage of many milleniae since Ragnarok and the colonizing of our worlds, anti-human sentiment runs strong virtually everywhere, and for good reasons. No one wishes to see an age return in which humans dominated all other species– and that is precisely what we may be seeing if these humans succeed in colonizing a world." The viewscreen returned to plotting the generation ship's predicted path through the Meetpoint system, a line that ended in an orbit around the fourth planet.

"Professor Karikhen, your judgement has proven sound on previous matters," Zaharis said. "Who would you appoint as our representative to the human starship?"

"Ariaou," he said without hesitating.

The feline bard squeaked in shock and turned to look at him. "I've not the experience," she objected.

"I taught you. You will make a fine representative."

Zaharis raised a delicate second lid in a gesture much like a raised eyebrow. "We may find that tested sooner than we thought. We sent them a radio signal several hours ago from the intercepting ship explaining our faster-than-light communication protocol. They're hailing us now. Ariaou, your decision?"

Ariaou struggled to collect her wits, then stepped up to the podium next to Zaharis; Karikhen followed. The central viewscreen facing them flickered with a communication analysis report and the playback of the transmitted message. Mechanical distortion rendered the message tinny, the effects of slight incompatibilities in the equipment being used.

"This is the generation ship *Starfollower*, crewed by six hundred people and carrying five hundred thousand passengers. We come in peace. We seek only a home for our people. We wish to speak with the denizens of this star system and begin negotiations. Repeat. . . "

"Open communications," Ariaou decided.

Almost immediately, the screen switched to the picture of a silver-haired elderly woman with bright brown eyes, her features pure-bred Japanese. She wore a dark blue ship's uniform with a world-and-starship emblem on her right shoulder and Captain's rank insignia on her sleeves. Her manner was crisp, sharp, and her look calm and analytical. "Greetings to you, Meetpoint Station! I am Captain Elaine Amaterasu of the EFS *Starfollower*. Have you the authority to negotiate with us?"

Ariaou kept herself as diplomatic and neutral as possible, concealing distaste at the sight of Elaine's crewpeople's exposed bare skins. She brightly replied, "Welcome, *Starfollower*! I am Ariaou, a bard of Meetpoint, the station's representative. How may we help you?"

Amaterasu's eyes widened as she took in the scene. "You speak a dialect of our Common Language, yet there's not a true human among your numbers! How can this be? Are you alien species, part of a human federation?"

Ariaou replied cautiously, "From where and when did *Starfollower* depart? Much has changed since humans were dominant in the galaxy."

"We departed Noveaumonde, 5305 UDY, some time after our world joined the Commonwealth." Elaine looked reluctant to go on in further details.

The feline bard explained the story of the Owned People and the colony ships that escaped Ragnarok, aided by the Compassionate, to settle the Tangled Web nebula. "Remarkable," Amaterasu exclaimed when she finished. "Alone in an entire galaxy, so we created our own alien species. And yet our race died out, thousands of years ago, and only our gene-engineered creations survived us. . . "

The feline bard sensed irritation in some of the members of the council at the implied belittlement of "creations". "What do you seek here," she asked quickly. "Why have you come to the Meetpoint System?"

"We picked up your station's broadcasts as artificial signals, and homed in on them, hoping to obtain repairs and resupplying. Thousand-year voyages can be exhausting, you know." Elaine smiled wryly.

Ariaou remained suspicious. "And what will you do then?"

"We'll continue searching for an inhabitable world, far from your own youthful civilization, and try to start a colony."

It was plausible, reasonable even. But Ariaou suspected hidden motives behind Captain Elaine Amaterasu's actions. "I'm sure you understand that we must take certain precautions. *Starfollower*, please hold your position, and we'll send a courier to survey your ship's condition and deliver our decision."

"Understood. We await your messenger anxiously," Amaterasu replied. "This is *Starfollower*, over and out."

The viewscreen went silently dark, to be supplanted by an excited buzzing between the members of the council. Karikhen rested a reassuring paw on Ariaou's left shoulder as Zaharis hissed softly. "Well done. But now we must send the messenger, and the courier. Whose life shall we risk? What if they lie?"

"I'll go." Ariaou said quietly. "Call a convocation of all the worlds. I'll give you my report from on board their ship."

At that moment, the screens blanked and filled with images of Rhadon, but a Rhadon far different from the wolf Ariaou knew, radiating authority. His eyes were flat, devoid of the warmth and depth of soul she'd seen a short while ago.

"I have declared a state of emergency. As empowered by our treaty, the Hellsgate Second Fleet assumes right of jurisdiction over the intruder. For your safety, our personnel on Meetpoint will provide police protection." Simultaneously, black-uniformed, mirror-helmeted soldiers stepped into the council chamber and held heavy plasma rifles at the ready.

Zaharis hissed, "The Council has appointed its representative, and its representative has spoken. How can you justify speaking for Meetpoint?" Behind him, the others present clamored and shouted.

Rhadon spoke, ignoring their protests, "The Council is dissolved for the duration. Until this emergency is over, I appoint Secretary Duvan Gunnersson Meetpoint Director pro-tem." Betrayal! Shock ran down Ariaou's spine, causing her tail to lash angrily.

Pandemonium surged as Rhadon listed other orders that his soldiers would be enforcing, placing Meetpoint under martial law. As Rhadon's list of directives ended and the viewscreens went blank, Duvan walked up to the podium. He was a lightly

built otter standing upright, his fur silver with age, anachronistic wire-rim spectacles dangling over his button nose.

He pressed a button, causing his visage to be spread across not only the screens in the chamber, but the ones throughout Meetpoint Station. His voice boomed over the public speakers, surprisingly loud and stentorian for such a slight person.

"As of three days ago, citizens, the Meetpoint system was invaded by human renegades. I regret the necessity for harsh action," he spoke. "Yet in this time of crisis, we must take actions to protect ourselves. Our patrol fleet is already proceeding to the border of the Oort cloud, where they will intercept the enemy."

Duvan Gunnersson's gaze turned dark, his spectacles glinting and his whiskers twitching angrily. "Yet worse, we may have agents within our midst, who would work to help these aliens. For this reason, I am placing Professor Karikhen K'ris'fer under house arrest. All his current appointees' authority are revoked for the time being. Other members of the current government are being investigated at this moment."

Ariaou gasped at the otter's words. Professor Karikhen merely bowed his head acquiescingly as the soldiers came to escort him away, his tail limply dangling. Other council members snarled and growled unhappily, but in the face of the superior force of Rhadon's troops, they could do nothing.

The remainder of Duvan's directives passed in a blur. Halfway through Gunnersson's organization of a committee to study power usage, Ariaou walked out along with most of the remaining council members. Not having Karikhen's personal skimmer keys, she caught a passing bus and rode it to his home.

Ariaou looked out the windows of the bus to see Meetpoint's society continuing to operate normally. Yet here and there, crowds of people gathered around news channels that continued to broadcast reports of Rhadon's and Duvan's seizure of Meetpoint government by force. They protested angrily until dispersed by the black-uniformed soldiers and told to return to their homes.

Hologram street signs flashed by one by one, the bulkheads merging into a single blurry line. Ariaou watched them flicker as she remembered fondly her first visit to Karikhen's home. To fill in the time, to bring herself a measure of cheer, she took her shimmerlyre, drawing curious looks and sounds of admiration from the other passengers, and began playing a light song, putting her memories to verse. The notes sang forth, tinkling over each other in gay melody, each one perfectly formed.

She'd been a young feline, still kittenish in manners, when she was told she would be taking her journeyship education under the famed Professor K'ris'fer's supervision. Anxiously, she stepped up to the small, modest cluster of bubbles that formed his home, stood in front of the round oak door that formed its entrance, past a row of the Cherry Orchard residential area's namesakes. Fragrant pink blossoms drifted past her whiskers and nose as she rapped on the antique door knocker.

The door opened to reveal a mature red fox dressed in a kimono, his tail fluffy and white-tipped, his ears cocked rakishly. He invited her in, and before she had time to be nervous, she was holding a cup of mint tea and a plate of home baked sugar cookies, and telling the story of her life to Professor Karikhen. They became friends quickly, her bright music and youthful exuberance lending color to his days and his knowledge and wisdom guiding her through life.

Three months later, it was to K'ris'fer's house that Ariaou ran, a red and gold edged envelope clutched in her paws, tears streaming down her whiskers. The surprised fox held her as she sobbed, then took the envelope from her unresisting grasp and read the message within. His gaze widened as he read the official letter. "Killed by terrorists while en route here on the starliner *Queen's Ransom*? Alas, my poor Ariaou, twelve is far too young to lose your parents."

"They're gone forever, and they won't ever come back," the young girl wailed helplessly. Her eyes quivered with the promise of more tears.

Karikhen held her chin up and directed her attention to the two coins he produced magically, suspended between three of his long fingers. "Watch this."

Tempted by the promise of seeing something new, Ariaou rubbed her eyes to dry them, then focused her attention on Karikhen. The coins glittered in the light coming from an oval stained glass window, the obverse sides Meetpoint's logo of a compass rose inscribed around an open book, the reverse sides marked 'Ten Marks' in a cursive, flowing script.

With a sweep of his free hand the fox produced a flower-patterned crimson and gold embroidered scarf, then whisked it past the coins. The young feline gasped to see the coins were gone.

"Vanished, yes, but not for long," the fox said, his bright green eyes laughing. "Watch closely.. They're not in my hands. Nor my sleeves. Nor my feet, or tail." He batted lightly at Ariaou's paws. "Nor my clothes, either, you impudent young kitten. They're right here, in fact." And with that, he pulled the mischevious coins out of the startled cat's ears.

Ariaou smiled a bit at that. Professor K'ris'fer dropped the coins into her paws. "And so it is with your parents. They're not gone, totally, so long as you remember them. They live on in your mind. Remember the good times you had with them."

He spent the rest of the evening showing young Ariaou more of his magic tricks and sleight of hand, evoking some laughs and giggles, and in the morning, she left ready for the daily life of the academy again. With the passage of time, the hurt became a dull sadness. Whenever it threatened to blossom again, she took out the coins to remind herself of his advice.

Ariaou finished on an echoing musical phrase to the applause of the other passengers. Laughing at their pleas for more, she spun ballads from her memories of more innocent days of her childhood until the bus slowed to a stop at the Cherry Orchard stop.

The bard stepped off, looking about to see the familiar neighborhood. Yet an air of neglect surrounded the residential area, visible in the weed-overgrown gardens, the vacancies in smaller homes, and the condition of the streets. Overhead, the sky-blue roof continued to paint the illusion of spacious room, marred by a few cracks running along its length.

Two black-uniformed and mirror-helmeted guards stood outside Karikhen's house, rifles shouldered. They halted Ariaou before she could knock on the door and searched her clothes briskly. The first guard thumbed his communicator, requesting clearance from headquarters, then nodded to the second, who released Ariaou. "Visitors are not permitted for more than two hours at a time," he cautioned.

Karikhen opened the door in response to the first guard's

knocking and guided Ariaou into his parlor. "I'm so sorry that your appointment was cancelled, my child," Karikhen said apologetically. "I'm sure you would have acquitted yourself well, had you been given the chance."

Ariaou smiled slightly. "It's you who should feel slighted, Karikhen. You've been steadfastly trustworthy and loyal for years. But have you heard any news of what's happened?"

"Indeed. While I may have been confined to my house, I've not been isolated from the information network. I've asked a few friends to keep me updated. The latest reports are disturbing." The fox frowned, thoughtfully looking at the notepad he carried.

Ariaou scanned the lines of type there while Karikhen continued, "In fact, if the telemetry's correct, not only is Rhadon's fleet moving to intercept *Starfollower*, but he's trying to provoke them into hostile action by buzzing the ship with his fighters. Rhadon has also declared that if they penetrate the defense periphery or return fire, he will consider himself free to use tactical nuclear weapons. Thus far, the generation ship continues to ignore all this."

"There must be a way I can get there in time..." Ariaou looked frustratedly at the silver case and the horn that rested within, and at the shimmerlyre that rested on her shoulder.

Professor K'ris'fer appeared thoughtful. "I did mention I had done some preliminary studies. Though I don't have access to the complete Meetpoint libraries or the hardcopies stored in the Amaranth archives, I turned up some ancient songs considered fictional that might apply. In fact..." With a few keystrokes, his table computer produced hardcopy sheets of music.

"One of Maria Mask-Dancer's ballads! But I know all her songs, and I've never seen this one before.."

"That's not surprising, considering it's proscribed to those below the rank of Master Musicians. A curious classification, since it deals with the fairly well known Battle of the Starshell Gap of five hundred years ago."

Settling into a comfortably overstuffed chair, Karikhen continued, "In those days, the nine-world empire of Lyonsfar was a feudal state beginning to emerge into an interstellar industrial age, its government becoming fragmented by the factional conflicts of its nobles. Then King Lyonnes VI died without children, barely three years after his wife was killed by an assassin. A civil war began. The two princes with the largest armadas crushed their opponents over a period of twelve years, eventually meeting at Starshell Gap. There, they unexplicably declared for the young Savinfar, and eventually made him the first of the Regents."

Ariaou skimmed through the pages, her eyes widening as she read. "If this account is true, and all of Maria's songs were, then Savinfar was the last surviving descendant of Lyonnes's line! But how could Maria know that?"

"Shortly after Lyonnes's wife Alira was assassinated, Maria visited and took on her semblance, so that she could give King Lyonnes comfort. Savinfar came from their union."

Karikhen raised a hand to stop Ariaou's curious questions. "Yet Maria's gift was entirely in casting a glamour over her listeners so that she would seem to be whatever she liked. How could she have made her way from the homeworld to the lightyears-distant fleets, when all civilian transport had been interdicted?"

The feline bard returned to the beginning pages, recited softly the verses she found within. "A griffon, bright red of wings and green of eyes. A magical winged beast carried her there in but a flicker of an eyelash."

"A Guardian, surely. According to Mask-Dancer, it sang like your Sundancer, and the magic of its songs caused distances to become like nothing. Maria tried to capture the sounds in this ballad, but came away with only a fragile imitation."

"Then the key's lost." Ariaou clenched her paws frustratedly, so close and yet so far from the music she needed. She yelped suddenly as a clawtip caused a drop of blood to well out of her palms.

The professor remained silent a while. "There's a chance, if you remember Sundancer's song of travelling. Perhaps your own musical talent, aided by the shimmerlyre you carry and by the power of Sundancer's horn, can be directed by the Orpheus Sphere. You must go there and sing, until you come across the music that will take you where you wish to go. Or until you fail."

The feline bard nodded, sadly, seriously. "I have to try."

Karikhen rested his hands on Ariaou's shoulders. "Good luck, my child."

Ariaou left with the aged fox's words in her mind, catching the bus without conscious thought. Again holographic street signs flashed past, barely noticed.

The Orpheus Sphere! Innocently glistening like a geode within, cut into a sonic mirror, each facet perfectly carved according to sophisticated mathematics. It would catch a singer's every inflections and reflect them back changed, hundreds and thousands of times. Singers hoping to find fame or fortune within its depth had been driven insane before. Or raised to new levels of genius.

No one had dared to venture into the Orpheus Sphere since Maria Mask-Dancer, those five centuries ago. Who would tamper with wild magic?

When she got off from the bus, she found none of the regular security waiting at the airlock, nor the black-uniformed soldiers who had assumed their police and patrol duties. With heart pounding she stepped into the pressurized corridor that went the few meters from Meetpoint's outermost shell to the Orpheus Sphere. She programmed the controls to initiate the warmup sequence in two minutes, strapped on the bootjets, and stepped in.

Ariaou floated into the middle of the geode, watching light glint from the faraway facets. The sounds of her bootjets faded away softly as she stretched quietly in the exact center, floating in zero gravity. Soon complete silence reigned, punctuated only by the sounds of the feline's gentle breathing.

Drawing on her recollection of Maria Mask-Dancer's ballad, Ariaou took her shimmerlyre, the motion setting her into a slow spin with her tail following behind. Her paws stroked the strings, letting loose a quiet tinkling stream of notes that wove over themselves in the opening chords. Hidden lights responded to the music, flickering in rhythmic patterns.

Slowly, gradually Ariaou spun the image of the far distant towers of Lyonsfar's capital city, Lyonhelm. The earliest sunrise crept along the outermost walls, turning the sky midnight blue, golden notes shivering in midair in complex echoes. A city awoke slowly, the hubbub of the people rising out of subtle dissonances.

Ariaou sang, her voice purring with a soft resonance that became an underlying harmony, evoking the slight winged figure of the Mask-Dancer. Maria stood atop the tallest spire of the palace, her long white hair falling over her silvery cloak that tinkled and flowed about her ankles, her bright grey eyes looking out onto the city below; her translucent butterfly blue-gold wings spread to catch the wind. Rising daylight shimmered about her feet, and cool breezes ruffled her cloak.

The feline bard sang Maria's plea, the ancient dialect of Lyonsfar stately and melodious from her tongue. In answer to Maria's call, a proud gryphon answered, his wings shading from sunlight-orange to flame-red, and cried out in a voice of iron and copper. The sun silhouetted them, a sylph beckoning to the half-lion, half-eagle griffin, begging for assistance that she might stop a senseless civil war, and prevent millions from dying needlessly.

At last the gryphon bowed his head, lowered his wings that Maria might ride. He sang a majestic song, like a whalesong or a rainbow made material in steel and glass as he swept his wings and leapt aloft into the air.

Light glinted off the curve of the Orpheus Sphere, the sheer energy of Ariaou's version of the gryphon's theme multiplying and cascading. She drew upon her memories of Sundancer so long ago in the golden forest, weaving his travel theme with Maria Mask-Dancer's ballad and seeking out the music and repeated phrases that seemed right to her. Waves of sound battered against her body from all directions.

With each new height, Sundancer's horn glowed with greater light, shining like a miniature sun from the necklace that dangled about her neck. Ariaou quested for the key that would open its powers, then found it. Time suspended as her voice, her shimmerlyre, the very walls of the Orpheus Sphere all united in a single pure note that broke down walls of space and time.

Reality cracked in a multitude of rainbows and Ariaou stepped through to someplace else.

She arrived in confusion. The bridge of the *Starfollower* shone red under the emergency lights, crewmembers scanning their displays intently or running back and forth on the catwalks high above. Viewscreens flickered with battle graphics, plotting the incoming fighter squadrons. As Ariaou glanced about, the control board next to her erupted into flames.

The feline jumped back from the fire, falling against Captain Elaine Amaterasu who surprisedly put a hand to her officer's sidearm. Other crewmembers started, turning to watch the strange cat and their captain.

"You're the negotiator we spoke with," Elaine exclaimed. "How did you get onto the bridge? Why did your ships open fire?"

"They've attacked already?" Ariaou asked. She picked herself up and straightened her clothes out. The horn had fallen to the floor, its light dwindling back to a length of cool moonlight; this she replaced in its silver carrying case.

"Didn't you know?" Amaterasu studied the feline's expression, then sighed. "We were half a light-minute from the inner edge of the Oort cloud when their fighters started buzzing us, then they started firing about half an hour ago. Now they're threatening to use tactical nuclear weapons on us if we don't back off."

Security guards approached, their function obvious in their armored uniforms and their heavier guns. The captain came up to Elaine and saluted, his complexion darker and his hair pure black. "Shall we remove this... alien saboteur from the bridge?"

"No, Captain Amaterasu! You're being attacked by a hostile faction that's taken over Meetpoint Station. It's their forces that are trying to draw you into battle. None of this is our fault; we would have dealt with you in good faith!" Ariaou's bright green-gold eyes pleaded with Elaine for time, and for consideration of her words.

Elaine studied the feline bard for a timeless moment, while her crew returned to their stations, while *Starfollower* shuddered under the impact of Rhadon's missiles. Her own dark brown eyes glinted. "I wish I could trust you, but we've been betrayed by nonhumans too many times. We trust no one. Take her to confinement; we'll continue as I directed and trust to our defenses."

A massive jolt shook the ship, causing the crew, their captain, and Ariaou herself to stumble and fall. Viewscreens began blinking on and off, some distorting to static, others showing readouts on the damage inflicted to *Starfollower*'s systems. "That was a five megaton nuclear burst, five hundred kilometers off," a red-haired officer shouted. "The EMP scrambled our drive controls. They shut off automatically, or else we'd all be smeared against the walls like jelly!"

All business now, Elaine snapped, "What about our other systems? I want a damage report, section by section. Main gun sections, prepare to open fire on the enemy fighters."

Ariaou picked herself up, thought fast as she saw the guards doing likewise. With nowhere to run, she controlled her rising panic and took up her shimmerlyre, and began to sing what came to mind.

She did not know the ancient words to the lullabye that she sang, nor the sweet, soft music that underlay them. It was the same one that she'd sung on Ryme, when first she took up the lyre, her paws flying to patterns of strings remembered though she'd never studied it, the same one that had had the power to bring a ghost to forget its vengeance. Its beauty was fey in a way that no modern music could match.

Indecipherable though its words might be, the lullabye's effect on Elaine's crew was instant. Through the entire generation ship, within each bulkheaded area, the ethereal music cut short the damage reports and panicked calls for assistance. The security guards hesitated, looking to the captain for their directions.

Captain Elaine Amaterasu listened also; with a small hand motion, she signalled the guards to return to their posts. Her dark brown eyes glistened with memories suddenly recalled by Ariaou's evocative song, her features losing years as she relaxed her customary frown. She whispered to herself, though Ariaou's sensitive ears caught it, "It's beautiful... The music of my ancestors... Yet I thought it'd been lost long ago, when my parents died."

Ariaou gained confidence as she held the crew's attention spellbound with her music. Reaching the end of the lullabye, she improvised, drawing upon her musical history to spin the old songs of reunion. Meant for the colony worlds rising to interstellar travel, to bind them together despite their mutual distrust and fear of outsiders, she improvised instead a message of camaraderie between species. The crew of the *Starfollower*

listened, held captive by her voice.

Ariaou spoke to them of their differences, a void that, try as it might, could not be eliminated. Though to them, her fur and her feline ancestry might be repulsively different, their own bare skins and their blunt teeth seemed to her things to be pitied. Beneath exterior appearance, she sang, in sweet verse and soft music, there rested a being worth knowing, respecting, befriending. And she spoke to them of their similarities, of value placed on beauty and truth, honor and creativity.

Finally, exhausted, Ariaou rested her shimmerlyre in the crook of one arm and bowed her head, waiting to accept what decision Captain Elaine Amaterasu might make. A moment passed; another nuclear explosion shook the ship, though not so hard. With stunned expressions, the crewmembers returned to their duties, and the damage reports began pouring in again.

"You sing beautifully, Ariaou," Elaine said at last. "And your message is one to which we might open our hearts. I... we... had forgotten that things could be better, that there might be times when we could... trust others... "

"What if it's a trap?" a crewman asked; young, bold, fair of hair and brash. "If this cat is really some kind of saboteur?"

Captain Amaterasu replied, "Trusting has to begin somewhere, Lieutenant. But, tell me, even were we to turn aside, how do you plan to force the attackers to hold their fire?"

"Let me speak with them," Ariaou replied. Drawing upon her knowledge of Tangled Web protocol, she suggested, "Request a ceasefire, under the Mark of the Lion Humbled, and they'll answer. If they don't, they become outlaws, to be hunted by all the nebula's forces."

The captain and her communications officer exchanged words. The message was sent. It took moments for the reply to arrive, an enigmatic message: Ariaou. You have slain one wolf with your powers of song; you shall not have another. Leave behind your instruments, and I shall send a courier to take you to where we first met. With respect, Rhadon.

Ariaou stood stunned for a moment while Elaine considered the message. "I do hope you weren't counting on your powers of sweet song alone to carry the day, my dear feline," she commented drily. "He doesn't sound friendly to me."

"Perhaps there's a way... " the bard replied. "I'd rather chance a face-to-face meeting, even if my life was at stake, than let your lives and theirs be risked in battle."

The minutes passed slowly in a dead silence. Rhadon's fighters ceased to sally forth in their attempts to goad *Starfollower* into returning fire. The dotted paths on the bridge's viewscreens slowly approached each other, the single massive generation ship moving directly toward a horde of far smaller cruisers and destroyers. *Rhadon's Promise* launched a lone shuttle on a high-acceleration path.

The screen flashed the estimated arrival time of the shuttle, flickering from ten minutes to nine, then eight. Captain Elaine barked orders as her crew set about repairing the damage done by the nuclear bursts, directing repair crews to the engine control conduits. "Until those're fixed," she explained to Ariaou, "We'll be unable to navigate or even brake our ship. There's no telling how long it'll take to repair them. If you fail, we'll be forced to use all our weapons systems to defend ourselves, and strike back at your worlds."

"And no matter how long it takes, should it come to that, our forces would certainly destroy your own ship, and with it, the only remaining humans in this galaxy." Ariaou sighed. "This is our only chance."

The courier made fast to a sally port that adjusted its grapple to seal tightly about the shuttle's airlock, compensating for the incompatible docking systems. Ariaou entrusted her shimmerlyre to Elaine's custody and bid farewell to her. The captain of the generation ship saluted back as the feline stepped in with the assistance of the waiting lupine crewman. The shuttle's airlock irised close as she strapped herself into the high-acceleration couch.

"We'll reach the task force in nine minutes," the crewman commented as he operated the controls. "Captain Rhadon's ordered the fleet to remain at their current distance from the enemy ship."

The courier ship separated from the *Starfollower* and boosted away at high speed, its anti-matter engines producing a long stream of charged hydrogen ions accelerated through its drive. Their acceleration reached the maximum the artificial gravity field could negate, pressing Ariaou back onto the couch; that weight reminded her uncomfortably that her own shimmerlyre had been left behind. The forward viewscreen showed a rapidly approaching swarm of bees that grew into long, sleekly deadly warships.

Ariaou's pilot reversed the courier at the midpoint of their flight, using the engines to brake the tiny ship's velocity. They coasted by the missile destroyers that led Rhadon's task force and their fighter escorts, each showing up only as a blip on the viewscreen, their positions delayed by the speed of light. The path of the shuttle converged precisely, as if drawn by a magnet, onto the flagship.

Rhadon's Promise loomed large out of the shadows of space, its sudden tines of gleaming mirror-bright metal punctuated by weapons clusters. The pilot controlled the courier deftly, using the compressed hydrogen jets to snuggle the ship into one of the recessed docking bays without the assistance of the cruiser's grapples. He grinned, his fangs clean white, proud of a job well done.

Two waiting guards, dressed in black uniforms but without the mirrored helmets of those that had taken Meetpoint, escorted Ariaou out of the courier and onto a waiting maglev cart; one was a silver-furred vulpine, the other a mink still in winter white. To her questions, they only replied, "Rhadon is expecting you in his stateroom."

With a sense of déjà vu, Ariaou stood once again in front of Rhadon's stateroom. She stepped forward hesitantly, and confronted the wolf that stood at the other side of the room.

Prince Rhadon Mordenkainen looked terrible. His eyes burned, their once dark brown irises now almost entirely black pupils, and his reddish brown fur was unkempt from lack of grooming and from the sweat of his mental exertions. He tensed, almost crouched over, his tight commander's uniform betraying his battle stance, and to Ariaou's keen sight, his fatigue.

"Who would have thought that my betrayer would be one with the voice of an angel?" he asked, rhetorically, his gaze burning into Ariaou's eyes. The feline restrained herself from quailing, showing visible fear, but she felt sure that the wolf's heightened senses could smell her distress. "It might be better if I were simply to slay you now, eliminating a threat; yet by the Mark of the Humbled Lion, I am forced to guest you

honorably."

Ariaou raised her paws in a display of appeasement. "How could I hurt you? I seek only to speak with you, to arrange a peace so that no lives need be lost."

Rhadon grinned wolfishly, no humour visible in his cruelly gleaming fangs. Determination ran like steel beneath his voice, still eerily normal, honed to an aristocrat's manners. "You yourself are a weapon, innocent though you may seem. Were I to give in, to permit these human invaders to survive, then in a generation's time, or in many's, it does not matter, this nebula would once again be enslaved to their whims. I shall not permit this to happen, and so they must be destroyed, before they can even begin."

The feline approached slowly, paws still outstretched in a show of defenselessness. She thought fast, remembering their conversation only hours gone by, yet an eternity ago. "You live for honor, for service to your people. Yet you've betrayed these both."

"How is that?" Rhadon looked confused, his rock-steady countenance beginning to crack.

"You betrayed your honor when you violated Meetpoint's sanctity, capturing it by force. And you betrayed your people, for they will be forced to answer for your actions, for every life that was lost in your actions." Ariaou's gaze was steady as she took one of Rhadon's trembling paws in her own. Rhadon's muscles tautened, his muzzle quivering.

"No," the wolf snarled, extending long sharp claws. "You are trying to confuse me with your words. I was foolish to permit you to speak, an error that I shall remedy with your death. Then I shall direct my ships to destroy the humans quickly and efficiently."

"I'm sorry, Rhadon... But I have to protect Meetpoint, and the humans, for they're innocent of any crimes of history. Any way that I can." Ariaou reached down to open the silvery case that held Sundancer's horn, revealing the long shaft of cool moonlight. Rhadon's eyes narrowed at the apparent weapon; he swiped at the case, sending it flying from her hands, the horn arcing through air in a perfect parabola to clatter on the floor.

The feline dived after it, scooped it up in her paws like a dagger. The wolf leapt after her, his black eyes swallowing her up in their depths as he closed in, his legs propelling him across the room efficiently. Time slowed as Ariaou met his gaze fiercely, tensing her muscles. She snarled, exposing her own even, shining white fangs.

They met in a suspended moment of glittering claws and flashing horn.

Ariaou fell in a heap of fur. She gradually became aware of a warm wetness from her right side, looked down to see blood welling slowly, then back behind her, where Rhadon struggled upright. The moonlight spire of Sundancer's horn gleamed from his side, barely half its length visible; she vaguely remembered it being ripped out of her paws by the force of his passing. Weaponless, instrumentless, Ariaou waited calmly for whatever fate might bring.

She was, consequently, surprised when he spoke in a completely calm voice. "My apologies. I'm afraid I have not been... quite myself." Rhadon removed the horn from his side, tearing strips of cloth from his uniform to bandage his wound and Ariaou's. "Honor demands that I atone for the shame and injustice I have caused. I am at your service."

Ariaou sighed, too tired to feel exuberance. "Let's call your fleet home to Meetpoint, and invite *Starfollower* to parley." She reclined into Rhadon's supporting arms and fell asleep.

She awoke several days later in a comfortable old-fashioned wooden bed later to Professor Karikhen K'ris'fer's smiling vulpine face. Captain Elaine Amaterasu stood nearby, carrying her shimmerlyre, and Prince Rhadon Mordenkainen cradled Sundancer's horn in his arms. They exchanged wary smiles. "It's over," Karikhen exclaimed happily. "We've signed a treaty with the humans."

Elaine nodded. A rare smile graced her aged features. "Many years may pass before humans can be accepted into your society, but we'll bide our time. Until then, Meetpoint Academy's agreed to let us settle an uninhabited moon of the system, and will send students to study with us on a foreign exchange basis. We'll do likewise, and eventually our cultures will be able to intermingle freely."

"And what of you, Karikhen?" Ariaou asked. She sat up partway, stopping as a twinge ran through her side.

"You're an amazing bard," the fox said with a laugh. "I was cleared of all charges the moment Rhadon rescinded all his orders, but the government was forced to make a public statement because of that song of yours you made up while in the bus. I'm a popular figure now! And you're going to be seeing some royalties soon, I believe..." He shook his head disbelievingly.

The feline smiled tiredly. "That's good... And you, Rhadon? What has your homeworld to say of all this?"

Rhadon reached out with a paw, touched Ariaou's. His eyes glinted softly, once again warm brown. "Officially, I no longer exist, having fallen under the Curse of Lord Moreah, even though you healed me of that; I've been discharged from my duties and disowned by my family. Unofficially? I plan to study here at Meetpoint, now that I have more time ahead of me. And I'd like to get to know a certain bard better."

Conrad Wong is a CS student at U. C. Berkeley, about to graduate and face the terrifying world of "Real Life". He is not looking forward to it. Except, that is, to having more money to spend on the necessities of life: new science fiction and fantasy books, anthropomorphic comics (Conrad's particularly fond of Rhudiprrt), and getting permanent net access. His hobbies include feeble attempts at writing (one of which you see above), drawing, computer games, and MUDs.

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THE HARRISON CHAPTERS
Chapter 5

by Jim Vassilakos

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Downward, through the thick blankets of clouds, a dark figure fell, twisting and twirling, helpless in the howling tempest. Darkness loomed above, seeming to descend and collapse closer to earth with each passing moment. Then the sky became as bright as a thousand suns and the darkness was vanquished. Hair caught fire; skin parched, baked, and blackened in the blink of a boiling eye. Then only a single fireball remained, high above, like a sun but lifeless and slowly disintegrating. The sky seemed to crack as the shell of an egg, and a blast ripped through the clouds, shredding the air and deafening all senses as it passed.

Michael awoke to the pain of burning flesh, the deafening blast seeming like a distant and forgotten dream. The wind tossed him between clouds, scrambling his senses with his emotions. He tasted fear as he saw the ground below and the fireball above. Suddenly, a sharp pain swept through his spine like an ocean wave, sparking memories and stinging his consciousness. He thought he heard Niki giggling somewhere and realized he'd lost his helmet.

He looked down again; it was time. He unhooked the release and pressed the activator. The gravchute seemed to yank him upward toward the filthy night sky, now littered with burning debris as the fireball spread outward, dividing into glowing bits of metal and thunder.

Feet together, knees slightly bent, muscle braced against bone, the old routine flickered in the back of his mind as he hit and rolled, falling uncontrollably into a warm, wet, compost ditch. Botflies circled his head as it emerged from the steaming muck.

Nimble fingers worked free the straps of the shoulder harness and waistbelt, making splish-squish sounds in the lacteal water. The chute slowly sank and disappeared altogether beneath the surface as Mike crawled up the side of the ditch, peeking over the rough earthen edge. The air began to hiss and spit while small chunks of metal ripped into the ground like shrapnel from a grenade. In the distance, some hundred meters, a tall, wire fence, lighted by iridescent lamps, stood proudly, its barbed icing leaning inward, sparking against the hot debris. Mike dug himself into the soft earth as far as he could until his lungs breathed dirt. An explosion rocked the ground, and then another. Several clumps of stone and clay fell into the sludge as Mike felt his fingers grip the roots of some alien weed. The air grew thick and smelled of death and fumes and fire, all mixed together like some unholy beast.

For several minutes the sky seemed to fall, and then all was quiet. Mike crawled cautiously from the ditch. Blood trickled down his neck and dripped slowly onto the ground as he stood, haphazardly, holding onto what was left of his face. The skin crackled and fell away without feeling.

A clean military troop insertion. He tried to smile while there was nobody to see him, but the right side of his mouth was too mangled. He remembered the Vista jolting, the general panic, Bill diving for the drop shaft, himself scrambling with his helmet and pack.

There was no sign of his pack anywhere. No infrared goggles, no niko camera, not even a stupid pair of wire cutters. He stared back toward the fence. The distant sound of hooves against dirt met his ears. Mike staggered toward the light of the fence, drawn by the noise of the spooked animals. As he peered into the murky darkness on the other side, he saw several quagga galloping parallel to the posts, their white stripes shining dimly against the cold light.

In the distance, he heard the faint whine of chemical combustion engines, probably two-wheelers, motorcycles. This was a ranch. He stared dumbly at the fence. A high-security ranch. Mike walked parallel to the gate, crouching behind the cover of the scrub brush and beyond the range of the light. It was too dark to properly perambulate the area. Patches of snow and ice covered the ground, and the dirt was sturdy but largely barren. The air became steadily colder, and he began to shiver.

As he walked, a small spark of light caught his eye. It was on his side, far away from the fence. Bright, yet so small it was hard to distinguish. A flare. Mike crossed though the shallow thicket, dizzied by his loss of blood. He stumbled over a large stone and remembered Robin screaming in mid-air, her gravchute shredded, her body burning, the earth miles below. He heard a dripping noise and tried to concentrate. His hands felt warm and sticky as he regained his footing, but the flare was closer. It stood upright, wedged between two tall rocks on a steep hillside, their sharp edges outlined in the sizzling white light. Mike climbed up the slope, falling to his knees every few meters, his temples pounding with each step, his body shivering from the intense cold.

He contemplated falling asleep. He could reach the flare tomorrow or the next day or sometime after that. He tried to imagine waking up later, seeing the flare, its white flame still burning, grasping it in his hand, touching the hot fire. It would tingle his senses, like the waves of the ocean on Tizar, the cool swells lapping effortlessly at the long shore. He would hold the flare in his hand as he slept beneath the starry night sky. He'd sleep forever, and the sun would never rise. Kitara would stay

beside him, soothing his dreams as she used to, entering them, sharing her own. Something she had whispered; he could hear her calling his name.

"Michael. . . "

Dim evening light slipped lazily through the small glass window, coloring the dark, quiet, chamber in shades of purples and greys. In the corner, a rough wooden stool leaned against the wall by the mantle, small burning embers tickling its legs. A black kettle hung suspended above the crackling fire, steam wisping from its nozzle, mixing with the smoke in the chimney. Above the mantle, a dull wooden-handled axe rested against the wall on a set of long iron nails drilled parallel with the floor.

Niki sat at his bedside, sopping the sweat from his forehead with a cloth napkin. Through one eye, she looked comfortably tired. Mike tried to think of something to say.

"Shhh. . . "

He closed his mouth and let a smile escape. Sharp waves of pain sprinted through his mind.

"You'll have to learn to stop that too."

"What happened?" The words came out slurred.

"You've lost some blood. A mild case of shock. You're lucky I'm a qualified nurse."

"It was a prerequisite. Where are we?"

"I don't know. . . but we're safe."

"What about the others?"

Mike felt a brush of sorrow after he asked the question. Niki's sorrow.

"Are you sure?"

"I don't know anymore than you. I've been searching for Billy, but. . . I just don't know." Mike felt the cool, damp cloth caress his forehead as she spoke. Something in her voice said the task was hopeless.

"Don't lose faith."

"I haven't. I'm going to keep searching. But you have to go back to sleep."

Mike was too tired to argue. He settled back into the bed and closed his one good eye. It wasn't the first time psionics had saved his life or provided shelter, but the chances of Niki finding Bill were slim. Mike tried to guess likelihood; he couldn't. He wondered who owned the cabin. How long could they stay before the owner's return?

Mike felt the right half of his face. Niki had kept the swelling down, and his mouth was almost completely mended, but she couldn't reconstruct the bones or the teeth. Something had definitely hit him. He couldn't remember what. It ached for him to think about it.

The sky was dark when he awoke again, a bowl of hurtleberries on the stool beside him. Her gravchute sat lonesome against the wall. A small pocket in the cabin floor was open. Inside lay a brown leather sack, full of a hodgepodge of useful items. A two- pronged fork, a plate, a rusty distilizer, leaky chemical batteries, a wishbone, a long, thin vial, a pot and serving spoon, a box of matches, a ceramic mug. Mike regarded them curiously.

Outside the cabin, Niki sat crosslegged, facing the forest, deep in meditation, her slight body framed by the predawn light. The forest surrounded the cabin on all sides without leaving so much room for a clearing. A thick, green tarp covered the entire roof, a small hole cut out for the chimney, and, above that, the long, weeping branches of a dwearmurgrove tree hung limp in the cold air. The chimney ended in a dun colored box, black cords falling from underneath its corners and into the tarp's heavy fabric.

Mike guessed the whole mechanism was some sort of makeshift insulation to detract from the IR image. Somebody had gone to a good deal of trouble to build this hideaway. He wondered how Niki had found it and how she had managed to drag him through the dense brush without leaving a conspicuous trail. The memory of a lonely gravchute formed in his mind, it's dull grey exterior blending into the darkness as it sat, propped, against a cabin wall.

Niki opened her eyes, "Lots of juice in those puppies."

Mike looked up, startled.

"Sorry."

He churned up a staid expression. "You're getting good. Were you just reading me or searching for Bill at all?"

"I said I was sorry." She seemed to fold inward on herself, trying to become small and unnoticed, clutching to her string of beads like a security blanket. Mike kneeled down, testing his flexibility after a day in bed.

"Speaking of juice, I'm thirsty. Where's the stream?"

She reached into her cloth knapsack and retrieved a shiny aluminum canteen. Mike drank.

"There's a stream about a kilometer north. Over the hill beyond that is where we came down."

"What have you got in here? Gyrocompass, good. Medscanner, castfoam, pris glasses, synthetic gloves; aha, mullah. You've been holding out on me, Niki."

"Mike?"

"Cold, hard imperial cash. Highly illegal at the moment, but considering the state of the drin, it ought to be good for barter. How much is this. . . y'know you're practically destitute, Niki?"

"Sorry, my boss doesn't pay me what I'm worth."

Mike looked into her eyes and smiled as much as his new facial structure would allow.

"Oh he doesn't, does he?"

"Billy's alive, boss."

"Where?"

"I'm not sure yet, but we gotta start looking."

Mike stretched his arms and yawned, "Hold that thought." He stepped into the treeline, backing within a clump of foliage.

"What's my Mike doing?"

" 'Mike-turating,' lemme lone."

"Huh?"

"Answering the call of Mother Nature."

"Humph. . . well lemme tell you about Father Time," Niki picked out a flat stone and sent it ricocheting off a nearby branch.

"Hey!"

"Now stop rubbing your frowzy face and get back here!"

The two angry men dunked his head into the murky water, thrusting it deeper than before, holding it longer until he reflexively opened his mouth to breathe. He felt himself being yanked back to the surface, coughing, wheezing, sputtering for air, his guts surging upward to his mouth, the stank of the

urine and feces weakening his cuffed limbs from nausea. A brown offal bobbed on the surface, seeming to laugh with every motion.

The white-shirted man stood opposite him, a thin smile playing across his lips. "You approve of our sewage containment system? I give you my assurance that you will have plenty of time to inspect it closely unless you begin talking now."

"No speak."

"You are a stinking liar."

Bill caught a lung full of air as his head submerged beneath the filthy muck. The two men lifted his legs above his upper torso and pushed them down into the refuse until his head hit bottom, dung and piss spilling along the barrel's rusty sides. After a minute, his body began to twist violently, convulsing for lack of air. The guards looked up with doleful eyes.

"Not just yet. Our friend is thirsty; we must let him drink his fill."

Soon, his feet slowed down, stopped kicking, and finally hung limp. The guards pulled his dripping, corpselike body from the slimy excrement, holding him upright off the ground. The white-shirted man walked over and patted Bill on the cheek.

"Yes. I think you will like it here."

Bill opened his bloodshot eyes and sprayed the man's face with a mouthful of sludge, spitting the last of the staining refuse onto the man's white shirt. Seizing the moment, his cuffed legs kicked upward as if by their own volition, striking their target at full force as the man's jaw dropped in horror and pain. Bill watched in satisfaction as the man fell to the littered floor gripping his groin tightly with both hands.

After several deep breaths, the man looked up into Walker's steely grey eyes. "You're dead."

"Now, now Sheffy," a ringing voice from the far end of the room cheerfully chirped, "the boy can't help it. He obviously doesn't speak our language."

Bill saw an elderly woman step into the dim light from the darkness of a corner. She wore a black, levantine dress with long leather gloves and boots, and her silvery hair was clipped with a furl.

"He's lying, mother."

"Really dear, I think it's time you were off to bed."

"Stop patronizing me!"

She stopped in her tracks and cast her son a sharp glance, her sharp blue eyes seeming to sting him from a distance. The man tried to stand, but stumbled over his own legs in agony. She regarded him callously, like a vulture might regard a dying carcass. His eyes glazed over in trepidation as he noted her gaze.

"I mean," the quiver in his voice was laced with fear, "yes... mother. I'm going to bed now." He seemed to force the last words out one at a time. One of the guards helped him to his feet and out of the room. Bill gauged his chances against the other as the woman approached him, carefully sidestepping the scattered droppings and puddles of urine.

"Whew... you smell terrible."

"No speak."

"Though not as bad as Sheff smelled after he cornered that zorille last year. You remember that, don't you Medwin?"

"Yes, Madre."

"Ambrose thought our boy was ready for some hunting."

"No speak."

"No, no that's quite all right. I don't prize my young men for their vocabularies. What I'll do with you is report you to the authorities. In fact, I'll have to report this whole mess. Then we'll have to scour the countryside for your friends. You didn't come alone, did you."

Bill shut his eyes and tried not to listen.

"Then the Imps will come in, if my appraisal is worth beans. That's bad news. The Imps don't much cotton to sticky messes, which is what you're in right now. I think you'd rather work in a labor camp or as a slave in some rotting hole in the ground than have your brain erased. They do that nowadays, you know... with interstellar criminals."

"No speak."

"No you won't speak, and it's too bad. If you only spoke you could save your life, your friends lives. It's a crying shame, I think. But pipe beatings and dung drownings obviously won't cure your affliction."

Bill found himself pondering her words.

"The authorities will have drugs which will make you talk, and the Imps will have methods which are better left undiscussed in polite company."

She shifted her feet around another puddle and stepped in front of Bill, casually waving off a tiny gnat.

"There will be people here in the morning. Will they be looking for you? What should I tell them? What reason do I have to save your ass if you won't talk?"

Bill could feel his breath quicken. Her sharp blue eyes scintillated in the dim light, driving imaginary needles into his own as the gnat spun wildly in the air, plunging recklessly into the rusty rimmed barrel and the thick gooey soup within.

Gall midges buzzed under the trees around the shallow stream as the early sunlight spiked down between the branches like razored knives. Mike decided that Niki must have made a beeline for the cabin after she found him; psionics didn't account for ease of travel. He chopped brush out of the way, and made a neater trail than the one she had sniffed out. The long-handled axe was somewhat dull, but it did the job all the same.

It was the axe, she said, that had led her to the cabin. Psionically, it was like a beacon, a conspicuous aberration in an otherwise unlikely background, full of strong emotions and pain. She thought of calling for help at the ranch instead, but there was pain there as well, and enough angry people to blow their mission. There would probably be government people, as well, asking questions, trying to find out what happened, maybe even Imperials.

Mike tried to collate the data. The explosion still throbbed inside his memory blocking out the usual clutter. The drop never took into consideration a strong defense. Calanna wasn't known for tight planetary defenses. If anything, the opposite was true. It was almost as if they had been expected.

The hilltop was studded with dandelions sprouting forth from the hard terrain. Niki spied the landscape through the pris glasses. To the north, another kilometer almost, Mike saw the tall wire fence gleaming in the morning sunlight. A kilometer further was a ranch house and a tall guardtower jutting upward from the grassy fields.

"To count the sheep?"

"Gimmie dat."

Niki handed over the glasses. Mike adjusted the power and zoomed in, chainlocking until he could see the sun sparkling off their shades.

"Thems is autorifles. Lucy issue. Serial number. . . "

Niki snatched the glasses back, "No poop; lemme see."

"Yes poop. Can that thing take pictures?"

"Nope." She winced though the lenses, the internal flywheel gyroscopically stabilizing the image. "You can't see the serial numbers."

"But it was fun pretending; gimmie back." Mike counted about twenty guards in all. The prisoners numbered at least a hundred, most working the fields with hoes and picks. One tractor sat idle underneath a canopy tent beside a row of stables, its mechanical guts strewn over the ground like so many spare organs. Two kilometers east of the house was a crater a good fifty meters in diameter. Big enough to cause a scare, he figured. Some prisoners and guards were there, sifting through the wreckage.

"What's the matter. Wha'd'ya see?"

Mike handed the glasses back to her, "Take a peek at this."

A smile crossed her lips, a momentary rupture of glee. "He is alive."

"And well, though incarcerated. Typical."

He felt the expected rabbit punch to his kidney as the clapping of copter blades echoed on the wind.

"Now the question is. . . "

She lowered the glasses to complete his thought, "How do we get him out?"

The black copter circled around the ranch house slowly, spying the guardtower and the stables and the tractor under the canopy tent. The morning sunlight glimmered off its dark surface, its guns gleaming like polished spears.

The old woman glanced out her office window, "What the hell are they doing back so early?"

The men in the fields stopped their work, and those in the distant crater climbed out and watched the vessel settle down beside Madre's garden. Bill picked his teeth with a splinter of hull metal.

"Those the Imps?"

"Come to pay us visits," Sheff's blue eyes gleamed in the sunlight as he smiled and shoved Bill backward. "Back to work, neghral."

Bill had learned that the last word translated roughly as "alien" in the planetary lingo, stressing the negative connotations. The Calannans didn't like offworlders; most dirtsiders didn't.

Two figures emerged from the copter's cockpit, one dressed in a white, loose fitting wrapper, the other wearing a khaki uniform, sporting a kepi atop his shiny, bald head. The old woman strolled out to greet them, an air of confidence and composure close about her.

"Colonel Arman, what a pleasant surprise. And I see you've brought our guest. Sule, wasn't it?"

"That is correct." The bald headed colonel bowed slightly, his thick Calannan accent drooling over the Galanglic as he chuckled nervously. The offworlder stepped in front of him wearing a determined smile, her long white hair flowing free with the warm breeze like a quagga's mane.

"I am still looking." She seemed to spit the words, harshly.

"Congratulations," the old woman beamed back.

"Madre, please." The colonel mopped beads of perspiration from his crinkled forehead with a brown cloth. He seemed to her more embarrassed than annoyed as a sharp gust swiped at the visor of his hat. She ached to pity him.

"Why don't you both come inside. I'll make us some tea. Do you drink tea Sule?"

Gusts of wind swept up loose dirt, stinging the prisoners in the field. Bill hustled into the crater for protection, scowling at the suddenly harsh wind.

The living room was plush by local standards, tiled in white marble with dark red streaks, elegantly furnished with the forest's finest. A large table occupied the floor's center, before the hearth. Its stout wooden legs, smoldered black at their base, were shaped as the paws of a lion. Sparks danced carelessly along the floor, seeming to conduct the crackling fire as the old woman poured the hot tea from a white china kettle, her long thin fingers stiffened with age.

"Me and my boys often break fast here, around this table. Greenleaf tea for everyone, that's what we have."

The colonel sipped the home brew, his pudgy fingers wrapped around his small bowl for security. She remembered him as a little boy, always curious and kind. His curiosity had been long chased away.

"The hospitable reputation of Madre is well deserved," he explained, his deep voice cutting through the air. "Not only she care for her boys, but she also take strangers. Is not that right Madre?"

"That all depends on how strange they are. More tea?"

Sule stroked her chin in thought, "Tell her about the tracks." Madre pondered the richness of her voice, not dark and crusty like the colonel's, but somehow different.

"Ah yes, the tracks," the colonel tried to search for the words. The interstellar verse was not easy for him. "We find the tracks of a person near the farrest gate. Much blood. It end on a small hillock south of here."

So he has a friend. The old woman nodded gently, anticipating his train of thought, "And you think I opened my house to this individual?"

The colonel smiled, a flush of pink entering his dark brown cheeks. She glanced toward Sule; the young woman stared solidly back, her bright blue eyes matching the sky at highsun.

"What did this individual do?"

The colonel's smile broke into a deep resonant laugh, "Then you admit."

Madre shook her head, "Admit? No. I never said that. I'm simply curious."

Sule stood up from her chair and walked toward the old woman, "You do understand that harboring a criminal is a felony under Imperial statute?" Her voice was too raspy for a girl, and something about her walk suggested aggression.

"I understand that you are looking for someone. Has this person committed some offense?"

Sule's voice hissed and slithered like something diabolical, "You are not in a position to question me."

"While you are in my house I'll question you whenever I damn well please." The old woman waited for a retort, for a scowl, a blush, some sign of weakness or strength. Sule's reply was silent composure. Suddenly she realized what she'd been thinking all along.

"What are you? You're not a woman. . . "

Sule smiled at the remark.

". . . and you aren't a man either. Are you an android?" Her question touched a spark.

"Do androids interest you, madre?"

"No, I think they're quite disgusting actually, machines parading around as people. I say the lot should be rounded up and roasted on the spit, Lucy style, along with their makers."

Sule perched herself on the table edge, "Isn't it a revolting notion? Microcircuits for brains, complex algorithms to mimic sentience, to pretend emotions. An absolutely horrific science."

"You seem at odds with yourself, child."

"I'm not an android any more than you are."

"Then what are you?"

Sule chewed on the query, her eyes darting to the stone hearth and the dying embers within. She slipped gracefully beside the fire reaching inside to pick out a glowing red coal.

"I am biological," her words now sarcastically melodious as she returned to the table, "yet I do not roast so easily. Do you?" Her hand wavered in front of the old woman's face, her sky blue eyes seeming maliciously playful against the dimming red of the coal.

"Is that supposed to be some sort of frail threat?"

"Just call it a forecast of your imminent future if you continue to refuse to cooperate."

"I'm qui. . . "

"Mother!" Sule's hand closed into a fist around the coal as Sheff crossed the tiled threshold into the dining room, puffing wearily for breath. Cupped in his hands he held a blackened, metallic object, about the size of a grapefruit. Bill was close behind, his frail body seeming less fatigued by the sprint. His grey eyes glinted with a strange mixture of curiosity and apprehension.

"Mother, look what I've found!"

"You found?" Bill started, but Sheff hurriedly bowed before the two guests, ignoring the remark. He proudly displayed his trophy in one hand. The object was a dodecahedron, somewhat scathed from its fall yet still intact. Engraved on one triangular face was the distinct picture of a small songbird with its wings outstretched as if in flight.

"I don't care who found it. Just what is it?"

"It's an alien artifact," he retorted, his free hand sweeping backward into Bill's face.

"Ah, so it is. My boys never cease to amaze me with their brilliant powers of deduction. Oh, by the way, this is Sheffy; he likes to be called Sheff. And this one here is Vilo, but you can call him anything you like, or hate for that matter, not that it matters, because it doesn't unless you make it."

"Mother?"

"Sheffy, I will not put up with your rude interruptions."

"But the artif. . . "

"Now that you're here you can make yourself useful. Wash these dishes. Vilo, show our guests out, they were just leaving."

Colonel Arman stood abruptly from his chair and began to leave, waiving his apology to the Madre. Bill found himself grabbing Sule's arm without effect. When he tugged, it was like trying to pull a mountain. She snatched the dodecahedron from Sheff's hands as he collected the tea bowls, running her long fingers across the shiny engraving.

"You really have these jerks by their nuggets. Especially grey-eyes. Don't you know how to treat a lady?"

Bill instinctively pulled his hand away as he heard her voice, its raspy edge hissing along the hollow between his shoulder blades. It was somehow a dichotomy between cultured refinement and animal barbarism. The old woman smiled at his response.

"Don't mind her boy, she's biological."

"That doesn't mean I won't sting." Sule flicked the coal into his face, leaving a red, burned spot where it nicked his cheek. Bill wanted to shove her head into the hearth, but thought better of it when he noticed the daring smile playing across her lips.

"She's tempting you boy, trying to deny the facts of life." Madre walked toward her, gently guiding Bill aside with her free hand. "Sule, the facts are that you are being forcibly evicted from the premises; your only choice is with respect to the method of transport. You can either walk out or be carried out in pieces. I don't care which."

"I'll go, but I'm taking this." She held the dodecahedron firmly in her palm, testing its weight.

"The hell you are."

"It's from space, unclaimed. That makes it Imperial property."

"It was found on my land and it's mine."

"And what would you do with it?"

"It doesn't matter if I'd make ducks and drakes of it; I still say it's mine. Now put it down or I'll have you shot."

Sule smiled, perching the object on three fingers. "So it is yours for now. Let us see how long you can keep it." She tossed the dodecahedron into the fire, crushing the burning sticks under its weight. Flames enveloped it as Sheff ran to the kitchen for water.

"Good day, Madre." Her tall boots clicked on the tile floor as she left, leaving the stain of their echo on the pungent morning air.

"Vilo, see that they make it to their vehicle."

Sheff scurried back into the dining room with a pail of water which he threw on the fire. The flames sputtered and drowned instantly. He reached into the steaming embers and withdrew the dark object.

"Mother, that girl is a bitch with an attitude."

"She's no girl."

He dropped his prize into the bucket with a sound metallic plunk.

"Why'd you let her go?"

"Colonel Arman."

"Arman's no friend of neghrali."

The old woman finished sipping her tea as the sound of chopper blades clicked off the windows.

"He's a friend of mine."

Sheff sighed, "Mother getting sentimental in her senility?"

"Watch that."

Sheff took the bowl, "I could have softened her up."

"Like you softened up Vilo or whatever his real name is? I don't think so. I gave him to you for fifty cents. Your methods produced nothing. I talk to him for fifty claps and he's blabbering so much I need an extra set of ears just to keep up."

Bill strolled into the room wearing a quizzical smile, "I hope I wasn't that easy."

"My poor boy, being easy is a blessing on Calanna. Nobody admires people who are difficult. Now come give your mother a kiss."

Bill leaned over and pecked her on the cheek, "You're a sweet mama."

"I know I am. Now get back to work before I see fit to have you slaughtered."

"Yes, Madre."

Bill headed outside into the crisp breeze. As he walked toward the crater he watched the black chopper shrinking slowly over the distant horizon, its shiny surface reflecting the growing star's light. Within the house, another pair of eyes followed its descent into the skyline.

"He's trouble, mother."

She frowned at the comment.

"He'll bring the Imps upon us. And for what? His lies?"

"I only hope they are lies. . . "

Sheff considered her reply with a questioning glance, "What did he tell you?"

"Enough to keep me entertained."

"He's a neghral, mother."

"Not anymore, Sheff. He's one of my boys now, and I'll not give him away to the likes of Sule."

Sheff laughed at the statement, anticipating her icy stare without fear.

"And just what's so funny?"

"He's not yours until he's ours."

"Sheffy. . . "

"I've got to insist, mother. It is tradition after all."

She weighed his demand against the harm it could inflict, and decided the latter a lighter sum. It was, after all, tradition.

"Tonight, mother."

"So be it."

Madre turned the time-glass over with as much indifference as she could feign, the steely grains tumbling through its neck like the falling sleet as Bill watched the eight advance around him with an almost orchestrated precision. Sheff closed the distance first, grinning wickedly as he leapt forward into an outstretched leg. Bill slammed the foreman's head into his rising knee, the squeaky crack of a splintered jaw dividing the cheers into opposing camps.

The feeling of triumph lasted about two seconds as his legs swept suddenly from the earth, the wet earth rising in a hateful alliance with his enemies. Bill braced the fall with a forearm and rolled with the momentum, rising to his feet and, seconds later, ducking a roundhouse as the circle fragmented and the crowd pressed forward. Instinct tried to take form in his legs, but there was nowhere to run. On every side, guards held fully automatic rifles, five facing inward as the rest held the crowd at bay. Bill broke into the rim as several barrels homed in on his body. The closest guard thrust a stock into his back, pushing him into the ring as two others forced him to his knees.

He twisted his head sideways, avoiding the brunt of an oncoming boot, and felt his elbow spike into a sloppily defended neck as his fist punched upward into another's crotch. The crowd cheered again but was muffled by the noise of gunfire. Bill spat mud as he rolled back to the rim, desperately trying to regain some footing in the slippery dirt before the ground came crashing back upward, spinning as it impacted and smothered.

Bill felt a rib crack from his tackler's blow, breath fleeing his lungs on its own volition as the man's arms yanked his body upward, the now familiar earth receding from his legs as he kicked wildly into another. The change in momentum, forced his companion into a backward fall with a satisfying crunch, the arms which had lifted him, falling to either side as he rolled from the circle's center and regained his footing at the opposing side.

"You son of a. . . "

The haymaker was too obvious to deserve a block. Bill sidestepped the fist, turning his motion into a backward elbow cut, followed by a second. The farm boy slumped to the ground as two others approached. The crowd roared, and someone threw a burning flask of petro into the circle, the glass shards erupting into an expanding ball of flame. Bill crouched into the sticky dirt as gunfire filled the air, the crowd falling back as his attackers rolled in the mud, desperately extinguishing their burning clothes. He didn't realize the mistake until he was tackled from the side, his already broken rib giving to another as his face hit a stone.

Bill's nose flattened as Sheff pounded the young gatherer's head a second time, blood sluicing out the nostrils like a waterfall. Time slowed to a halt as the crackle of fire and automatic rifles became one; Sheff, trying to say something out of the corner of his mouth, his upper lip split through the middle like a pair of outstretched wings, and a carpet of flame spreading overhead. Sheff seemed to laugh as his skull connected with the ground, wheels of time resuming their motion as Bill found his arm limply tangled around the foreman's neck.

The gunfire ceased as the guards fell back into the circle's center, flames evaporating beneath the foamy spray of chemical extinguishers. Bill felt himself lifted off the ground and carried to the front of the house, the top of the timeglass now empty except for the refraction of the dying firelight. Madre was gone, and her bodyguards with her. Bill scanned the windows and noticed motion from the balcony as three guards in riot gear, weapons blasting, forced their passage into the clearing.

"Confukingratulations, Vilo!"

The largest of their number slammed him to the ground with a sturdy nightstick, belting him over the shoulders until he agreed to remain still. The second revealed a branding syringe from its cylindrical casing, stabbing the needle end deep into the small of his left knee. The ensuing howl of recognition did little to relieve the pain. The guards lifted him to his feet and turned him back toward the crowd, icy hands hoisting him skyward like some enfeebled lark as the Madre watched from the safety of her balcony.

"You're one of us, now, Vilo. . . "

"Hey Madre, he's done!"

She held the tracer in one hand, adjusting its dials with the other and finally glancing back downward with approval.

"She sees you, man."

They carried him into the stables, each singing with unfounded joy. His leg throbbed and buckled as they set him down, their bodies rocking with laughter as he tried to walk.

"Takes time, Vilo."

"Tu saadras. . . c'mon!"

Bill stumbled forward, forcing himself back to his feet. The knee threatened to explode as he tested more weight.

"That's it..."

He fell forward again, bracing his fall with outstretched arms.

"What you need... is a good kick in the face." Sheff's words came out slurred, and Bill heard more laughter as his skull snapped backward with the force of the blow. A warm, mushy feeling swept over him, holding him down as he tried to fight for air. The second kick was lower and far more painful. Voices blurred together in the background as the white ice filled his mind, numbing his senses as he passed out.

"Hey man, that's cold."

"Payback, Rone. Just payback."

• • •

The cold, black night betrayed the scattered silence of a waiting tempest. Occasional droplets fell from the heavens, freezing together as solid pebbles in their descent. The pitter patter of their bodies striking branches and leaves, mixed with the distant roar of a shallow creek, cascading gently over smoothed stones and the occasional rustle of a bitter, darktime breeze among the tall wicks of the lodgepole pines. Ambrose crept quietly through the dense thicket, his eyes darting back and forth as he moved beside the cabin, the pungent odor of burning wood chips bringing his body to a crouch and then a slither. From the corner of his vision he caught the flicker, something ugly in the playful flame telling him to turn away, but his cabin stood as solid as he had remembered, and the warmth of its hearth beckoned as the light hail began to quicken.

"If I knew that, we wouldn't still be here." Mike rubbed the brittle outgrowth of stubble on his scalp, the metal prongs still coming as a surprise. Niki pulled her knees against her chest, her dark eyes still focused on the axe at the hearth.

"I don't like this place, Mike."

"What's so bad about it?"

She shook her head, somehow unable to clarify her feelings.

"You're getting too good at that."

"We don't belong here... and..."

Mike shrugged off the statement, "Of course we don't belong here. We don't even belong on this planet."

He leaned over her lithe form, closing the window as flakes of hail bounced off its glass pains. She turned her head away as he paused to put a hand on her shoulder, the wet hush of confusion and shame forming within her eyes, refusing almost to acknowledge his presence.

Mike breathed a heavy sigh, "Niki, we're gonna find Bill."

"I know," but her eyes looked away. "It's not that."

"Then what is it?"

Her eyes fell again upon the axe, its dull metal stinging her psyche like a mega-watt lamp. Mike stepped to the hearth and gathered the wooden shaft in his hands, weighing it in his mind as a weapon. Niki said the pain it generated was a beacon to the cabin, but, for some reason even she could not explain, the pain only grew. It was as if their arrival sparked its aura, the axe somehow expecting.

Ambrose lifted his boot with a frown as pellets of ice pegged him in the back of the head. It had taken the better part of an afternoon to carve the door and set it on its frame. "Oh, what the hell," he mused with a smile, "doors be fixed."

The wooden portal splintered off its hinges as it fell, the shock nearly causing Mike to drop the flat of the blade on his foot. An old man entered the cabin, wild blue eyes bulging from their sockets as he waved his rifle between Niki and Mike, deciding who to shoot first. His grizzly beard and shaggy, grey mane dripped water onto a drab overcoat as droplets of slush fell onto the backs of his boots, coalescing into a pool at his feet. Suddenly, a smile crossed his face as his eyes began to settle back in their sockets.

"You gone take a chop at me sonny, or do I have to blow your stupi' face off?"

Mike dropped the axe to the floor as the gnarled figure trained his rifle between the gatherer's eyes.

"We mean you no harm," he offered in his best Calannic, which he knew wasn't anything to brag about. The old man seemed to notice his trouble and switched to the Galanglic verse.

"You damn right 'bout dat, son. Hell, ya can barely talk straight. Now slide dat axe over here an have a seat. Psyche... hey psyche for brains, make me some hot water or I'm gonna blow yer boyfrien' inna sushi stew."

Mike let the old man cuff his hands as Niki drew the water and set the kettle over the fire. Ambrose sat down on the bed placing the end of his barrel against Mike's forehead.

"Heh... heh... sushi stew... yum yum..."

"What do you want from us?"

"Who told ya iz okay ta speak?!" His eyes grew large and wild, the blue and white seeming to strain apart like the surf and foam of the sea on Tizar. "Huh... chip-head! Answer me!"

Mike felt the nuzzle of the barrel punch against his forehead.

"We were just staying the night here."

"Staying the night? You say you were staying the night?" His eyes seemed to soften their glare as the barrel dropped to Mike's chest, his tongue taking more care to enunciate the interstellar words. "Hell... you can stay all da nights you want... or days fer that matter. I put you outside, in my cemetery, like I do all da others and you can stay long as you like." He nodded his head as if remembering something he'd forgotten, then turned one eye on the kettle as it began to steam, the other cocked directly at Mike. "Psyche... what'cha doin'bout my wata!"

Niki filled the mug and brought it over, a thin steam rising from the water as she held it before him.

"No woman... not like dat." He opened his drab coat with one hand and reached into a pocket, struggling against the fabric until he finally fished out a small leather pouch. "Just a spoon now. Madre's finest cinnamon," he explained in a whisper as if there were other people all around. "Nothin' burns the blood warmer dan dat, 'cept if its got a tad o' spunk for starters. Which it has, o' course." He fished again and produced a small metal flask. "A wee bit mo dan a spoon of dis," his other eye winking at Mike as she poured. "Ta steady ma aim. Can't be making a mess in ma own cabin, now." He

drank down half and offered the rest to Mike. "Consider it in lieu of a las cigar."

"I don't smoke."

"All da mo reason."

Mike considered the logic for all of two seconds before tilting his head back and letting the old man pour the last half down his throat. The liquid would have carried a healthy flavor if not for the heat scorching his taste buds and flesh of his throat. Mike forced the last drop down, finally coughing at the end as the man laughed and slapped his knee.

"Not bad... not bad at all. You would've made a fine fool when I was a younger."

"It's not to late for that," Niki took the cup back and headed for the kettle. Mike regarded her comment with as much good humor as he could muster, a twinkle entering the old man's blue eyes as he watched her refill the mug.

"Another, or should we get it over wit?"

Mike nodded in favor of the former, hoping to extend his life a few moments longer. The man smiled, understanding the laconic reply for all it was worth.

"Ma name's Ambrose."

"Mike."

"Nikita." Niki handed him the mug.

"Well... now dat we know each other's names, les drink."

The night dragged on for many more mug-fulls of Madre's cinnamon and spunk, a hazy cloud thrashing down on Mike's senses as he lost count. The man had Niki drink too, and soon began drawing the water himself as she collapsed on the floor in a giggling fit. Mike didn't remember when he became aware of the gun sitting in the corner. The oiled barrel gleamed in the weak, shifting light of the fire's dying embers.

"C'mon foolson. You an' me play a game. You get to da gun before me, an' you can kill me." His wild blue eyes seemed to roll clockwise with the thought. "Ha! I die. Go fer it. You can e'en have da first step. Two steps. Two steps lead." Something about Ambrose's invitation told Mike to take the chance, as if the length of his life depended on some see-saw estimation in the old man's twisted mind. Mike felt his feet stumble across the slippery floor as he reached the corner, but the gun was no longer there. The man laughed and aimed the barrel with one arm, gingerly drinking from his mug with the other. "You lose!"

Mike felt his heart sink as the lonely wail of clouded memories began coursing into his mind, their withered bodies pushing wildly through the cold, steel barrel of Ambrose's rifle. For the barest moment, light burst from its void, outlining a silhouette in crisp streaks of icy brilliance. In the back of his brain Mike heard the distant explosion. Gardansa said it was an easy death, more than any psyche deserved. The old man's eyes sunk backward, the blue like a crisp winter sky, the white a frosty droplet falling ever faster, slapping eagerly against the wooden door and then jumping again like a lazy bird, breaking apart into blood and shattered bone, colliding with its brethren, falling into puddles, puddles forming rivulets, coursing together around rocks and mounds in a mad rush for muddy harmony.

And then only darkness, pitch upon black.

"You gonna shoot me?"

Ambrose blinked, "It's getting to be quite a storm out there. Proly go to sunrise, at least."

"Yeah."

Mike heard the rattling of sharp, green, dwearmurgrove leaves against a soft tapestry of color; blues, grays, and amber intermixed between gentle shades of purple and violet.

"You wanna play again?"

Mike considered what the sun might look like, if morning came. Maybe, if he won, he would see it, and know.

"Three steps lead... think you can beat me chiphead?"

"I dunno."

"C'mon then an' find out."

Mike waited for Ambrose to replace the rifle in the corner and walk back to the bed, his tired legs stepping gingerly over the soggy door. Mike dove forward without warning, scrambling for the gun as Ambrose climbed over him. They grabbed the gun in unison, a grin of pleasure coming to Mike's face until he realized he was holding onto the wrong end. He pulled with all his strength, trying to twist the weapon from the old man's grip, but Ambrose grabbed the whiskbroom and in a resourceful moment dusted off Mike's lingering smile.

"Haha! You lose 'gain! Ambro too fast fer the chiphead!"

"I'm not a chiphead."

"Den why're you jacked up, foolson?!"

Mike tried to explain, but his words didn't make much sense even to his own ears. He finally fell backwards over Niki's sleeping form.

"Hey... chiphead. What're you doin'. Leave 'er lone."

Mike pulled her feet onto the bed, and then let them fall as he reached for her shoulders, her lithe body seeming unreasonably heavy. Somewhere in the background he heard the old man laughing. Mike tried to remember the name as he worked her shoulders up and then moved to her feet as the young Siri's head plopped again to the floor.

"What're you doin'?"

"Gotta put her... on the bed." Mike moved back to her feet.

"Hey chiphead, don't you got more important things to worry about?"

Mike focused his eyes back on the gun. He struggled to pull Niki by her legs, finally falling on the bed as a blanket slipped out from under his knees. Ambrose knelt to the floor, gripping his sides with glee.

"You could help, y'know."

"Hee hee... Aw, chiphead... you's real funny."

Mike tried to see the humor in the situation. He knelt down to her arms and tried pulling her up, losing his balance halfway through the procedure and falling back to the floor. Ambrose set his gun back in the corner and helped Mike back onto his feet.

"I can't take anymore of this... I'll help but then you gotta play me again."

Mike shrugged off the old man's arm, "I'm tired of your games."

The task took a good deal of time between the two of them, all the while Mike feeling the presence of the rifle in the cabin's far corner. Ambrose sucked in air as he lifted Niki's shoulders and set them crooked on the torn mattress. By the time he looked back up, Mike was halfway across the room.

"Why, you..."

Mike heard the footsteps giving chase, a feeling of panic erupting in his mind as he skidded across the wet, wooden floor falling to his hands and knees. The gun's barrel seemed

to beckon from the corner, taunting Mike as he crawled desperately toward his target. He finally reached his goal, raising it in his hands as he turned around to face Ambrose. The weapon felt heavy and unwieldy, and Mike managed the barrel into the right direction only after bracing himself into a sitting position against the corner of the room. Ambrose lay crumpled over the door he had previously smashed, finally awakening with a sudden fury.

"You know how long it took you? I was watching!"

"You were out." Mike rubbed beads of perspiration off his palms as he searched for the trigger.

"Ha! I was pretending. You was slow, chiphead."

"Am not."

"Are too!"

"Am not."

"Are not!"

"Am too."

"Hahahahahaha," Ambrose fell to the floor again, his crackly voice exploding with laughter until he gasped for breath. Mike tried to figure out why as he placed his finger inside the trigger guard.

"You forgettin' the safety?"

"Oh yeah." Mike found the safety and clicked it off. With a smile and a rush of adrenalin he aimed the rifle at Ambrose.

"Go ahead chiphead. Kill me. It's what you wanted to do from the moment I came in here."

Mike steadied his aim as Ambrose's image weaved from side to side.

"You gutless sushi pie! Hahahah! What are you waiting fer?! You want me to come over there and pull the trigger fer you?" He stood and began approaching, his mouth forming into a wide, toothy grin.

"Stay away. I don't wanna shoot you."

"Bull!"

"We were just looking for a friend. He's lost." Mike felt his lungs gasp for air as Ambrose approached within two meters, the toothy grin turning wicked.

"You from off world, ain't cha?!"

"Yeah."

"You're an alien! Ya wanna see my leader?!" Ambrose grabbed his crotch. "Here he is, chiphead!"

Mike lowered the barrel until it rested against the crotch of the old man's pants. His bright, blue eyes seemed to enlarge in rage as Mike pressed the barrel deeper.

"I mean it, Ambrose. Either you leave us alone, or your leader bites the bullet."

"Pull it, you sticking, loser, good fer nothin' chiphead!"

Mike waited until the insults subsided before he pulled the trigger, a hollow click being the only result.

"Hahahahah. . . " Ambrose yanked the barrel from Mike's hands and clubbed him over the shoulder. "You fergit to load something, chiphead?!"

Mike fell to the ground before the blow registered in his mind, and even then, what should have been a sharp pain was only a dull throb. He rubbed his shoulder in mild irritation as Ambrose made a long show out of loading his gun. When he finally finished, he made Mike drink two more mugs of "madre's tea."

"You a good younger, chiphead. Someday, you'll be a good oldster like me."

Mike took it as a reprieve.

"You know how old I am? I'm an octogenarian, and I still kick yours!" Ambrose laughed at the word, and Mike tried to imagine him as an octopus back on Tizar, his long tentacles tossing rifles, tea mugs, and whiskbrooms skyward in an elated dance, the items tumbling like snowflakes caught in a blizzard, only to descend with the distant roar of thunder, the blinding light beyond descending as bolts of fire, igniting the earth in inferno.

"Rise an' shine, Vilo. . . "

Bill awoke to the gentle nudge, grey eyes opening only as the pain in his ribs startled his senses. A wide shouldered man knelt beside him, his dark face familiar in the glimmering rays of morning light which seeped sluggishly through the barrack entrance. Bill remembered the tackle and subsequent punch to his side, the splintering feeling he chose to ignore. A white bandage covered his ribs.

"Madre tells me you'll be breaking fast at her table. My name's Rone."

He extended a thick, gnarled hand, his thumb only a stump. Bill let himself be yanked up, the man's remaining fingers surprisingly strong.

"You hit me with that?"

Rone nodded with a wry smile, "Madre's rules. You break it, you gotta fix it. I don't know much 'bout healing ribs though."

The tired workers cast long, lazy shadows across the wet, open field, a purple sky fading to blue as the rising sun peeked over a distant horizon. A scorched patch of earth was the only reminder of the recent night's tumble, even the stench of black faded to grey with the early morning rains. The house seemed warm and homey in comparison, warm cafe brewing over an open fire, while long, thin strips of quagga flesh sputtered on the grill. In a large pot, a compote mixture of honey syrup and various fruit stewed over a gas flame. Sheff held a spatula in one hand and a mug of steaming, yellow liquid in the other, a grim acknowledgement passing his eyes as Bill entered the kitchen.

"Tea, Vilo?" He motioned to the counter. A tall pot stood beside several half-filled bottles, their labels faded and wrinkled. Bill tried to decipher some of the writing, but met with little success, finally reconciling himself to pouring a mug and handing the container to Rone.

Several of the men had already seated themselves at the round, wooden table, a large seat at the far end remaining empty, as if awaiting some important dignitary. With an almost disciplined uniformity, Bill felt his conspicuous presence carefully ignored. Familiar eyes seemed to avert from their sockets, dry mouths casually striking conversation in a foreign tongue, the dull resonance of their words falling deftly, like snowflakes upon a sodden crater.

The black dodecahedron occupied the table's center, a gaudy ornament, seeming more a warning than a trophy. Bill felt his attention involuntarily drawn by the smooth exterior, the shallow etching of a bird trying to fly as stormy, grey eyes flickered with amusement.

"Then you know."

The brittle rasp of her voice snapped his concentration, its harsh tone like a sharp sliver of ice cutting the cords of his

throat. Crystal blue eyes betrayed a curious mixture of amusement and disgust as a fine, silver-white mane shifted with the turn of her head.

"Vilo, I believe you've met Sule."

Bill stared at the offered hand, sharpened nails perfectly transparent, save for their thin, black outline. Madre seated herself at the far chair, seeming to enjoy the moment.

"Now show our guest a tad of courtesy. You'll have to forgive him Sule; he's forgotten his gatherer manners."

Bill looked up, startled at the comment.

"Yes, Vilo... Sule's told us a considerable deal about you and your friends. Not that any of it particularly matters at this point, anyhow."

"Unless you make it," Bill felt a twinge of regret at his words, as though they closed a doorway he'd rather remained open.

"We've tried son, now have a seat, before the fast breaks without you."

Bill chose a place at the table as Sule stood beside the window, watching the distant tree line.

"Will you not eat with us, Sule?"

"I'd rather not."

"Suit yourself." Madre dished out a portion of the compote and sent the rest around the table.

"I think you'll like this Vilo. Do they serve Calannic dishes back on Tizar?"

"What else did she tell you?"

"That you're name is William... Willian Walker. I like a boy with W's in his name, but William is just so... I don't know. It sounds so stiff."

"My friends called me Bill."

"Now Bill is better, but Vilo takes the icing on the cake as far as I'm concerned. You don't mind it, do you? You mustn't, after all. It's the name you wore in the door. I'd much rather consider it a transliteration than a flat out lie."

Bill decided he preferred food to conversation, downing his bowl and filling a second, before looking back across the table. His ears had filtered out the clutter of their alien language, separate discussions merging together as one and then suddenly falling away. Madre seemed to share Sule's fascination with the treeline, letting her eyes wander to the window as she ate.

"I haven't told you any lies... yet."

She glanced back toward him, his words scarcely noticed.

Except by Sule, "What makes you so sure you're going to get another opportunity?"

Bill turned toward the window. Her eyes seemed to flicker with a quiet sort of laughter, almost mocking in their intensity.

"He's not for sale, Sule."

"I'll throw in an extra million drin."

Madre set her spoon down to the table, wiping her lips with a cloth as if considering the offer.

"He's one of my own now; well, since last night, actually. You missed quite an initiation. The point being that he's recognized and can't be sold like some... some hunk of cermic." She motioned toward the table ornament.

Sule regarded the statement with a mixture of confusion and resentment, finally turning back toward the window with a sudden movement in the treeline.

"I'm sure we can settle the matter at a more convenient hour. It seems that your men have returned."

Madre and Sule waited at the porch as the scout team trudged through the thick, shallow mud. An old man took the forward position, leading the others along the gate's outer edge, through the barbed aisle, and into the inner circlet. The rest of the team broke off from him as he approached the house itself, moving toward the barracks as he waived them away. He finally pulled the hood away from his taunt, weathered face as he ascended the porch steps, letting it settle against the grey shoulders of his coat. His blue eyes seemed to sparkle with a weary brand of playfulness as he focused on the Madre, the drab browns and grays of the landspace serving a subtle contrast.

"Sule, this is Ambrose. Ambrose, Sule."

"You the imp."

"That's correct."

"Ha! You been makin' bed too, Madre?"

"And what's that supposed to mean?"

"Heh... you should have to ask... Hey! Be that my food I'm smellin'?"

He stepped toward the door, halting only as she grabbed his shoulder.

"Long time, Madre. I understand."

"Wipe your soles, Ambrose," she scolded.

He shot her a toothy grin as he kicked the mud off his boots.

"Not a way to welcome yer old man..."

"I keep my hospitality for those who earn it."

His thin, grey lips curled blue against the cold, a lethargic snarl escaping his throat as he pointed a long, bony finger in her general direction.

"What in heck's you think I've been doin' woman? Polishin' my one-eye?!"

"In your case, I wouldn't be surprised."

Their voices slipped into the domestic tongue as they mutually spat a clamor of open insults, Sheff's eyes widening and his sewn lip stretching into an unabashed grin.

Rone stifled a chuckle as he leaned toward Bill, "Man and wife will be man and wife."

"Serious?"

"No more so than any other marital ritual. She's mad at him cause he went and left her all alone. He's mad at her cause she threw him out the door... and then some."

"How often this happens?"

"Oh... once every other season... maybe give two or three. Except for this mornin', before you woke, it was near to a full cycle since I'd seen the man. You think this is bad, you should be here when they break up."

Rone turned his head toward the door as the trio ushered themselves inside, Sule skirting along their fringes like an eccentric comet revolving about a closely paired binary. She maintained a blank expression, as though waiting for the commotion to subside. When it didn't, she merely stood there, her impatience become increasingly apparent.

"Does ignoring 'em make 'em go away?"

Bill winced as several of the others laughed at his question, their amusement catching the old man's attention. His bulbarous blue eyes bulged out like two rotten lemons wildly seeking the perpetrator of the query.

"Who be the negrali younger?"

Bill felt numerous pairs of eyes fix on his general location.

"Hmmm... you be a popular boy, Billy."

"You know my name?"

"I just got done blowing holes in yer friends!" He laughed wildly at the memory, yanking his grey coat open with one hand and pulling a short stocked automatic out with the other. "Boom boom! Sushi stew! Hah!"

"Ambrose... how could you?"

"Woman, I did it! That's how! Now where's a bowl? Killing makes me hungry."

Bill felt his legs kick over Rone's chair as he dove toward the old man, his arms outstretched, fighting desperately to be relieved of their sockets. The barrel smacked him against the side of the skull as he fell, Rone tackling him from behind and ramming a now familiar, mutilated fist into his already broken ribs. The sensation of pain was more numbing than he recalled, suffocating as it fell. He gasped for air, but his lungs felt clogged and heavy, and he choked out the salty taste which swept through his windpipe.

The old man spat something in the guttural tongue, the force of his words relieving the pressure on Bill's back. The sharp jab of cold steel replaced the smothering pain, and a safety pin clicked amidst the clutter of alien voices, quietly hushing the static.

"No Ambrose. Not in my house."

"Your house? Woman, you got quagga eggs fer brains!"

"Amb..."

"My offer stands." Sule's harsh voice cut through the impending squabble, shattering the old man's attention.

"We'll be seein' to you later, ya scrawgy imp!"

"Eleven million drin. Interested?"

"What?!?"

"For him and the black hunk of cermic... center table."

Bill felt Rone lift him off the floor as Ambrose gathered the dodecahedron into his free hand.

"Heh. Birdy."

"A robin to be more precise."

"I knew dat!" Ambrose leveled the barrel toward her stomach.

"Do we have a deal?"

"Sure... eleven em-drin fer Ambro... a robin and a dead younger for the ugly thing."

"Live younger..."

"No deal."

Bill felt Rone cuff his wrists, holding them back and up so he couldn't jerk free. Sule's stare betrayed nothing other than apathy, both for the gun and the man who wielded it.

"Name your price."

Ambrose smiled his greedy grin, setting the butt of his barrel against Bill's ear.

"Is only one more body for ma cemetery, which is overfull already so I won't be askin' too much. Fifty em-drin, you want him alive."

"You must be out of your mind."

His eyes bulged outward, blues and whites confirming her observation.

"Don't make me any madder dan I already am. I will blow his fool head off."

Her face remained unchanged, but her eyes seemed to glitter over with laughter. "Then fifty it is."

"What? You accept?" Settling blue eyes stared at her in disbelief.

"As if I had another choice." She gathered the dodecahedron from the old man's free hand and gently nudged his other aside as she gripped Bill's cuffed wrists and wrenched them upward as far as they'd reach without dislocating his shoulders.

"I'll transfer the money into your wife's account."

"Before you go."

"Colonel Arman will be arriving shortly. If you don't trust me, then trust him."

"I trust him all right... just as far as I can kick his blubbery, snot-nosed..."

"Ambrose!"

The salt water used to sting her eyes, something about the sea repelling her even as she used to spend the night along the water's edge. As then, she sat beside him, smoothing the wavy curls of hair as he slept. Their journey to Calanna had been without incident. The Galactican was welcome, or so he'd thought. But something in her eyes told him otherwise, though she'd follow him all the way to her execution. Both knowledge and the sea were like that with her, something that could hurt you but was too big to change. "Playing with fate is a fool's work." It was as if she had foreseen her own, but resigned herself without telling anyone. Not even him.

The bullet pierced the tree's lower limb, scattering leaves and berries across the grassy bed below. Mike and Niki awoke with a startle, rolling away from the sturdy trunk as Ambrose giggled with delight, his soggy boots kicking leaves and dirt into their faces.

"Ha! You youngers sure is funny."

He leaned against the trunk, peering up between the leaves at the crisp, blue sky. In his free arm, he carried a large, brown blanket. On his belt, the wood handled axe hung with a small spark lighter. A thin metal disk nestled against his shin, strapped there by a tight elastic cord.

"Rise an' shine, sushi-stains... ol' uncle Ambro bring happy tidings fer a happy morn."

Mike crawled to his knees, shaking away the fading memories of his dream.

"Surprised to be alive?"

Mike looked at Niki and then back at Ambrose and finally nodded, "a little."

"So you should be. I normally kill chipheads just fer bein' chipheads. Nothin' personal about it. But then, you being so recently shaved and all, I figured you must be real cute with a full head o' hair. You are, aren't you?"

Mike looked back at Niki. She shot him a worried smile, something she'd saved up for a rainy day, he figured. Sunshine spilled over the dew laden grass, the nearby sound of rushing water distracting his senses. He tried to remember when he'd seen Calanna so beautiful.

"Hey, you still in lala-land?"

"Where are we?" Mike stood up and glanced over several rocks beside the stream. The gravchute lay against the nearest boulder.

"Well, considerin' everything dere is to consider, I'd say we're at a tea drinkers crash-haven. Not that it matters much. All I know is dat your fandangle o'er dere seemed to suggest it was a nice enough place to stop last night. Me? I don' care much either way."

A cool, morning breeze gathered Niki to her feet, her usually carefree eyes still sharp and bitter, despite the drug's aftertaste.

"My stuff."

"Gone." Ambrose announced the word as a matter of fact, as though any more thoughts or emotions on the topic would be wasted. "All I have fer you is right here." He set down the blanket, knife, spark lighter, and rifle. "Oh yeah, an' dis. Heh, almost fergited." He handed her a small slip of paper.

She read it momentarily and glanced back up.

"I don't get it."

"What's there not to get?"

"This is a check, made payable to Mike for fifty million drin."

"Dat's true as my big blue eyes, which nobody fails to notice, Mister Harrison."

Mike looked up, realization slowly dawning.

"How'd you know my name?"

"I read the papers too, y'know. No sense learnin' Galanglic unless yer gonna. I liked dat piece on Telmar. Very nicely done, and correct to boot. Civil war and all dat. Makes me almost glad to be here instead. I would o' recognized you right off da bat too, if it wasn't fer yer clever disguise."

Mike felt the thick stubble on his head, the metal jacks protruding from their dense growth.

"Makes you look like a genuine chiphead. I was goin' to blow yer head off, but when you said yer first name, something just clicked in dat old skull o' mine. Not dat I was absolutely sure, y'know. But it did fit, you losin' a friend and all. I understand dat's fairly common."

Mike felt his skin grow cold as he pocketed the check.

"The only thang I didn't understand, which I'm only beginnin' to, is why yer e'en here. Madre said it was cause the imps nabbed one o' yer friends. I figed dat couldn't be the whole story. Seeing how if it was, you'd be chasin' after all sorts of people everywhere."

"Right now I'm lookin' for another friend."

"Huh? Oh, silly me. Talkin' too much and fergitin' why I'm e'en here." He reached to his shin, unstrapping a metal disk. "Go ahead, open it."

Mike opened the catch and peered at the dark surface beneath. Several rings were inscribed within the crystal display, and an shiny green dot blinked steadily at the outer circlet, hovering off the display as the rings closed inward, pulling it backward with their retreat.

"It's a tracer. That dot is yer friend."

Mike looked up, unsure as to whether he could believe the old man.

"I know this comes as somethin' sudden, but there was no way we could just let him go. That would be aidin' a criminal. Arman's too familiar with our operation. He knows people don't just escape. It was either give him away once the paperwork got done or sell him off to the imps."

"Imperials?!"

"They'd have gotten him sooner or later. But time is money, if you know what I mean."

Mike nodded, "And people are profits."

Ambrose snorted at the remark. "All depends who's buying."

"At the rate this blip is moving, we're gonna need transportation."

"Dat's what the money's fer. I've gotta friend, Cole, say 'bout twenty-five an' some odd kilometers downstream. Say Ambrose send ya an' dat yer a payin' customer an' dat ya wanna go straight to Xin. Ya go to Aelflan an' yer a dead man, hear me? By da time yer in city limits, yer have yer friend back in focus. An' with any luck, da imps'll keep dere songbirds in one choir, if ya follow me at all."

Mike picked up the gun, checking the magazine for bullets.

"Cole's gonna have more o' dat too."

"I'm not sure how we can thank you."

"Ha! Don't git mushy now. Blow away a few imps'll be thanks enough fer me. But now dat you mention it, dere is one thing. . . "

"Anything."

"Well, I hope it ain't too much, but ya think ya could mention me in da story?"

Mike grinned at the request as he nodded his acquiescence and tried to imagine what Chuck would think.

Jim's a grad-student at UC Riverside, hoping and praying like crazy that he'll get his MBA before the dean's axe gets him first. In between classes and term papers, he can be found editing The Guildsman*, the raunchiest gaming zine ever to be published.* The Harrison Chapters *were originally written as a setting description for his Traveller (SF-RPG) campaign. His story, he says, is what you get when you combine an overactive imagination with the foolish tendency to wing it. He says he writes exactly the same way he gamemasters: without any semblance of plan or preconception.*

What has been published here as Chapter Five *is actually chapters eight and nine as written originally by Jim.* The Harrison Chapters *will be continued next issue.*

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THE BATTLE FOR AYERS ROCK

by Robert Fur

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From: *U.N.S.S. ORLANDO, Captain Pappas commanding*
To: *Current U.N.C.O. administrators*

Sirs,

By the time you read this, I will have been dead for fifty years.

Perhaps I should have put that first sentence another way.

As soon as I finish this message, I will take the Captain's skiff and enter the atmosphere without power. By doing this, I hope that I will die. If, by some miracle, I survive, it shall not be for long.

The planet you sent us to will kill me, and, even though this has the outward appearance of a suicide, I will believe to the end that it is not.

It is murder.

You killed us.

This planet you sent us to will kill us all, in time. I believe that this will be yet another colony whose name will be engraved in stone on a monument in Berne, one line of barren inscription to mark the passing, fifty years ago, of twenty thousand men and women.

If you have any questions as to why I say this, I suggest you look at the information that accompanies this message. Human life cannot survive on a planet where the deserts are larger than the oceans, where the icecaps are larger than the deserts, and the food algae won't grow. We will die of thirst, and if we don't die of thirst, we will die of cold, and if not cold, starvation, and if, through some wild chance, or through intercession by a sadistic God, we do not starve to death, we will surely die when the technology taken from the Orlando wears out.

In agreeing to captain the Orlando, I took responsibility for the twenty thousand people on board. I still have that responsibility, but I haven't the power to help them.
It was my responsibility. I abdicate it. I now lay the blame at your door, and I hope that at least one of the men who sent us here is still alive to hear what his decision did to us.

I am going now, to die on the planet below. I always wanted to be buried at my home in Greece, but if I cannot have that, then I will at least die in a place with the right name. I will still die on Thessaly.

Captain N. J. Pappas
1/67 Thessaly Standard Date

The first thing I heard when I woke up that morning was an explosion. So was the second, and the third. Dull, flat explosions, their sounds muffled by the dust and distance around the Rock. I couldn't see anything, but since I was still in my duster's tent, that made a lot of sense. You can't see much when you're in a little canvas tube that you covered with dust the night before. So, I crawled out of my tent, and kicked it until it collapsed. I'd set it up again at night, but I couldn't leave it up because of the dayhiders. The dayhiders around the Rock are bigger, meaner, and more poisonous than the ones that wander into houses near Celton. Their front four legs have stingers, not just the front two, and they don't run away from humans. They fight back if the human wants his tent back, and nine times out of ten, the human doesn't win.

I hate dayhiders.

Anyway, I picked up my issues, and shook them to get rid of all the little nasties that crawl in clothes at night. No nasties fell out, so I pulled them on. If no bug wanted to sleep in my issues, that was fine with me. My climbing rig was just a cow leather vest with about twenty pounds of climbing spikes hung on it, so I didn't need to shake it too hard. I slung that over my shoulder, and went to eat.

The explosions continued, but I knew that sound... those were Celton ballista rounds, little rockets with compressed fireweed oil in their tips. The ballistas fire them twenty at a time, and they make big, hollow explosions when they hit.

The chow line was behind the bombshield, the big net hung between the Rock and the main camp, and I walked around it, looking around for anyone else that I might want to eat with. That is, anybody who might have some news about what was going on, and why we were here, and all that. But nobody but the usual boring crew was in the mess pit, so I grabbed a loaf of peelbread and a bottle of water, and sat down (I really wanted a beef sandwich, but beef was too expensive to give to people in Service.) I still ate better then than I ever had at home, but the time the Servicegroup had been in Celton had given me some expensive tastes. Like cow beef. Cows didn't live anywhere except right along the Sea. There was land near the Ocean where people thought they could live, but nobody had ever managed to get a cow across the Dust. And so, there were maybe ten thousand cows on Thessaly, along with maybe another ten thousand sheep, and I don't know how many tens of thousands of camels, and I can't eat camel beef. So, most of my pay that doesn't go home goes to monthly trips to the beef house, when I'm in Celton (when I'm in the field, it all goes home.)

After I finished the dry peelbread, I stood up and wandered over to where the captain was. I wouldn't have done it in town, but in the Dust things get a little less formal. And, besides, my watch wasn't for another four hours. I looked at the captain, a tall, fat man with the sort of build that makes you think that there's a skinny man inside trying to get out. His issues' sleeves were pushed back, and he was staring at the base of the

Rock. I sat down and looked where he was looking.

The ballistamen were pinned down right at the base of the Rock, and they couldn't get their gear set up, much less do any good up there. The Landingers were dug in far enough back that the ballistas couldn't get a good angle, and they were tossing boomite bottles over the lip every time the explosions stopped.

Which meant one thing.

I knew what it meant, so I sat there looking like I didn't know what it meant, in the hopes that the captain wouldn't notice that I knew. Right. Whatever I say.

"Macklamore, get your scrawny duster butt up that rock. Now." The captain was a career Serviceman, muscles gone almost to fat, sloppy in a dirty gray shipsuit, but that didn't make him blind.

There I was, sitting down right next to the captain, on a pile of rope, making little jingling noises with my climbing spikes every time I breathed, and I was hoping he wouldn't remember the fact that I was the only duster in the watch who knew how to climb Ayers Rock.

Like I said before: Right. Whatever.

I stood up. The captain looked at me, looked up the sheer sides of the Rock, and turned his attention back to getting the ballistamen out of danger. He knew that if I didn't go up the Rock, he'd shoot me himself. And since he knew that I knew that, he didn't have to watch me.

The captain is smarter than he looks.

Anyway, I started picking up the ropes and the chunkers and the sliders, and tried to spot a way up the Rock that the Landingers weren't covering.

That's not true.

I stood there and looked at the Rock.

The Rock is funny, there's nothing like it for klicks and klicks to either side on the coastline, and there's a wide plain behind it full of morons and not much else inland, but there it sits. Six hundred meters tall. Six hundred meters wide, too, which makes it look like half of a pair of craps from the right angle. The damn thing is flat on top, with a little pit perfect to store food in, and it's got total arty coverage of the entire western march down to Port Landing, if you can get a catapult up there. Best damn layout on Thessaly, and the Landingers got to it first. And since the western march is five days shorter than the east march, we've got to go to town this way.

But we can't without taking out the Landingers on Ayers Rock.

I grew up on a little island near here, so I'm not a duster by birth, but since earth fish don't hang out near the old homestead, my family had to come in past the Rock about every month to hunt, if we wanted to eat. If we wanted good food, we had to climb the Rock, to get at the earthbirds that nested on top. After Jerm took the dive off of it, I had to climb the Rock for the family. (Jerm was my brother.) I hadn't been back since I'd joined the Service.

Which makes these homecoming memories kind of out of place.

The Landingers were dropping their bombs with the fuses cut to go at like ten meters off the ground, and since they were wrapping the bombs in glass, it was really ripping into the ballistamen. They couldn't retreat, they couldn't go forward carrying their tubes.

Fine. Fine and dandy. I had to figure out a way to climb the damn Rock without getting my ass nailed in the first fifteen meters.

There was the old creek bed on the inland side of the Rock, that got you pretty close to the base... but the Landingers weren't stupid. They had to have someone watching it.

Didn't they?

I couldn't figure out anything better to try. Might as well give that a go. If I bit dust, then I bit dust. So what. I picked up the last of my ropes, grabbed my autoslot,and trotted off around the Rock.

I stopped off at the ammo dump. Grench was there, sitting on top of a pile of slotter ammo crates and whittling away at a bolt for a roper. He looked just like he always did, sleeveless Service shirt, dull gray after a week in the Dust, wide ripper-leather belt with more knives and ammo slung than I usually carry into a slotfest, and looking half-asleep. I knew it was all a cover. He liked being the quartermaster, so he never looked like he gave a damn about it. If they knew he liked it there, they'd move him out, because anyone who likes being quartermaster is probably selling half of his inventory to the highest bidder. So, they left him there. Smarter than he looks, our Grench.

"Grench!" I said. "The captain says I gotta go talk with the Landites upstairs. Can I snag a rack of ballista?"

"All the ballista ammo is over with the tubes." Grench said, never even looking at me. Right next to the pile he was sitting on was a siege roper, the big sort they use to put a fireweed net over a wall. Nine tubes were full. The one left was primed, without a bolt, and it was aimed at the top of the Rock. I looked at Grench a little more closely. He was staring at the top of the Rock, too.

"Grench, you can't torch the Rock!"

"Why not?"

"You'll fry the ballistamen!"

"Only if they're alive to fry. If they're dead, I don't need to worry." Grench wasn't much for honoring the dead. And Grench didn't like Port Landing much. And Grench really didn't like Landingers. I don't know why. Grench won't tell, either.

"Okay, whatever. You don't have any ballista racks?"

"Nope." Grench was in his 'I don't want to talk' mood. "Fine. Got anything else explosive I could take?"

"Um." He looked around, and pointed at a large box over to the side. "You can take those."

"What are they?" I'd never seen that box open.

"Ship rounds."

"Ship rounds. Great. Fine." Ship rounds weigh ten kilos apiece, and they go off on impact, scattering burning fireweed everywhere. No fuses. Built to make life on a ship impossible. Normally, they're fired from a ship's main cannon, so nine times out of ten the person popping one off won't see the explosion. So the armsmen make them as big as they want to... one is supposed to be enough to cover an entire ship. I didn't want to think how far I could throw one, but I didn't want to bet I could throw one far enough. Even if I had to use them, I probably wouldn't survive it, but they were better than nothing. I broke open the box, and stared at the big, glass-slick cylinders that I was going to have to climb six hundred meters

with. One slip, and either I went boom or half the Celton force did.

I took two.

They fit in the canteen pockets on the back of my issue vest, but the flaps wouldn't button. Which wasn't a problem. If I was upside down, I was screwed up a moron's ass anyway, and I didn't figure on drinking much on the way up.

The last thing I did before hauling dust over to the creekbed was to look at where the ballistamen were down. The bombing had stopped, and the surviving ballistamen were cruising out of there like a banshee on homebrew. They'd left their tubes behind. I saw them running, about a half a klick or so away from where I was, they were almost to the bombshield. And then I saw a huge package tumble down the side of the Rock.

So did everyone else. As that thing bounced its way down to the ground, everyone dropped to the ground, or ran, or anything, away from anything that might explode.

They knew as well as I did that something that big had to be a fireweed bomb, and one that size could cover the whole encampment in fire. Those people who were behind the bombshield would be all right, but I wasn't going to put bets on anyone else's survival. Except mine. I was out of range. I had to be.

I ducked behind a boulder anyway.

Then the explosion came.

I didn't feel anything hot anywhere near me, so I stood up.

None of the fireweed had landed anywhere near the bombshield, not much had landed on the slotter's line, and a whole big slab had landed on the ammo dump, and was burning merrily away. The whole face of the Rock was on fire, pretty much, and nobody was going to be getting anywhere near the tubes for a while.

The ammo dump. Grench.

I ran a little ways back, but then I saw what had to be him, standing and watching the Rock, about thirty meters away from the dump. He wasn't running, so I knew that he hadn't loaded the charges into his roper, just the fireweed. Which meant that the ammo dump was gone. There's enough fireweed in a ten-barrel siege roper to keep it burning for days. If he'd loaded the charges, the charges would have cooked off and the fireweed would have gone everywhere, but it would have been scattered, and we might have been able to save some ammo.

No ammo meant that we were damned screwed. Each Serviceman had sixty slotter rounds, maybe ten bolts, and a grenade. That's all we had for the next three days. We were screwed.

I turned back to the Rock.

We were screwed, unless I could climb the fucking Rock and dust the Landites. Nobody else we had on hand was a rock climber, much less a Rock climber. I couldn't take anyone with me, without both of us getting killed by me trying to shoot and shepherd a newby climber at the same time. If I did it right, we could take the top of the Rock and hold it until the rest of the troop came. If I didn't, they could hold it until their relief got here.

I hate responsibility.

The creekbed was in sight, so I dropped and rolled in the dust, all over. I rubbed dust in my hair, over my ropes, my face. I spat and rubbed dust and spit on the metal gear. Then I ran like brickfield and jumped into the creek.

Then I waited.

Nobody dropped a bomb on me, so I figured I hadn't been seen.

The creekbed was about two meters deep, mostly, maybe less, and dry as the Duster. Been a dry summer around here, I guessed. My folks were probably starving back home, they couldn't get a crop in, and now we were over here playing Serviceman on their hunting grounds.

I ran towards the rock, keeping low. As I got nearer, I dropped further and further, until I was crawling at the very end.

Looking up, I swung out of the creekbed, and ran right towards a little indentation in the Rock face. I looked up again. No Landinger faces looked back.

Originally, when I started writing this, I was going to tell everything, but now that I think about it, I'm going to skip over the climb. I can't really explain how I climb, or what happens during a climb. There's no space left in my head for memory, or thought, or anything. The world narrows down to me and the next handhold. Nothing else.

Nobody dropped anything on me, nobody shot at me. I made it to the top all right. I heard explosions on the other side of the Rock, but none near me. Anything else... well, the Rock is still there, and I've told you enough so you could probably find where I started. Go climb it yourself. If you want real fun, do it when someone's dropping a few hundred kilos of boomite near you.

At any rate, I pulled myself over the top, and looked around. It's a great feeling, unlike anything else on Thessaly, to actually stand on top of The Rock.

But I don't recommend it while there's a war on.

The top of the Rock looked just like it had last time I'd been there. Same birds, same rocks, same everything, except for a little tent, and three hungry-looking men watching me, two with slotters, one with his hands still on the crate that he had just emptied down onto the Celton force.

"Hi." I said, and dropped my slotter.

"You're a Celton." one of the ones with slotters said. This one had more of a uniform than the other two. His still had the sleeves. And if the Landingers used the same system we do, he was a sergeant. He looked like one, I guess. Older, balding, a little more heavy set than the other two.

"Right." I said.

"You came to kill us." said the one with the crate. He was young, maybe sixteen, and gaunt.

"Right again." I put my hands behind my head.

"With that?" the sergeant said, pointing at my slotter on the ground.

"Nope," I said, moving my hands just a little.

"Then how?" said the sergeant.

"With this." I said, and pulled one of the ship rounds up and over my head, and I'm sure I sprained my wrist doing it. I pulled the arming key. "You shoot me, this drops, and the entire top of the Rock goes bye-bye. "That won't do it." the sergeant said, not moving his slotter an inch from its aim right at my forehead.

"No, but the second one on my back, and the ballista rounds I've got in my pockets, will." I figured a little extra threat would help, even if I had to make it up. Actually, even with the second one, the blast wouldn't be that big. Big, yes, but if they

managed to find cover, and there was a lot of it around, they could survive. But I hoped they were a little out of it. They looked hungry, and desperate, and if I offered a way for them to get out of this alive, maybe they'd take it.

"Josephi, Saunders, go stand over there. Behind those rocks." said the sergeant, and the other two went. Out of range. Damn. "Look," he continued, to me this time, "We can't let you move us. Now either you disarm that round or you and I go over the cliff together." He looked like he meant it, too. The factual type. I sighed.

"All right," I said and pushed the arming key back in. I hoped it clicked.

"Sit down," he said, pointing with his slotter.

I sat.

"Now, we talk."

"Why?"

"Because I want to. Because I want to ask a real-live Celton a few questions. Because I want. . . "

"I'm not a Celton." I interrupted.

"What?" he looked confused.

"I'm not a Celton." I repeated.

"You're wearing Celton gear."

"So I work for them."

"That's a good enough reason to kill you."

"Fine. Go ahead, kill me."

He stopped, looked confused some more, opened his mouth, and then closed it again. He closed his eyes, and breathed in. Then he opened them again and said "What are you, if you're not a Celton?"

"I'm from a little town on the Styx, upriver from Detroit, but my family made a port on a little island about thirty klicks that way when I was little." I pointed out to sea.

"Then why'd you enlist?" he asked.

"Enlist?"

"You know, join up."

"Oh. . . Join the Service. Yeah. Well, my parents had four other kids to deal with, the earthlife fishing was off, and they could have used the bounty money. So I got it for them. Two years ago."

He paused. "Do you know why you're invading?"

This was a big change in conversation. "No. I figure it's something stupid as always."

"Not this time."

"No?"

"No. The last metsat report. There's a storm whipping up in the Dust, heading this way across Ocean."

"So?"

"It's a really big storm. It'll pick up strength as it crosses Ocean. And they think that by the time it hits here, it'll be strong enough to break Ocean through to the Sea."

I blinked. "Ohhhhh damn. Brickfield and damn."

"That's right. The Celton earthfarms are between Ocean and the Sea. Once it breaks through, there won't be any food that a human can eat anywhere in Celton. Or Chunglyng. Or Dustsown. No food anywhere except Landing and Detroit and a few other minor ports. And we don't especially want to share."

"Why not?" I wasn't pissed, I was just annoyed.

"Because our harvest is smaller than last year's, and last year we almost had food riots anyway. Before this is over, more than half of the people on Thessaly will have died of starvation."

"The. . . the fisheries?"

"Some killed by the new water. Some eaten by new Thessalife. And the rest so dispersed that they probably won't be able to breed." He paused, looked up. "I don't especially want my kids to starve, Serviceman."

"I don't want my family to starve either, muckhead."

"Nobody does. Nobody can win this war, and only about a third of us will survive it. Besides, this area of the Sea is under Landing control."

"So?"

"Landing will try to send food to anyone they can. . . under Landing control. We can't try to feed everyone. We can try to feed our own."

I just sat there for a while.

They hadn't told us. Any of us.

"Can't we do anything?"

"We?" he asked back.

"Celton."

"I don't know. I guess the Portmaster is probably doing everything he can, harvesting early, moving as many farms as he can. I don't think it'll be enough."

"No. Probably not."

I stood, numbly, at the time not thinking about the slotter aimed at me. And then I walked over to the edge of the cliff, and looked towards home.

I looked down, at the Servicemen I'd served with for a year.

I looked back at the sergeant. This man could have surrendered before now, but he hadn't. He was still here, starving slowly. Surrendering isn't a problem, you just wait three months and then you're back at home. No problem.

We hadn't been told why we were invading this time, either. Normally, we get a big speech about why we need to invade, or why we have to defend against this invasion. Not this time. I looked north, towards Celton. It had to be my imagination, but I saw clouds on the horizon. Dark ones.

"How long?" I asked, without turning around.

"Eight to ten days," the sergeant said.

Grench would survive, I knew him, he would always survive, and he was the only Serviceman with whom I was friends. And if this man was telling the truth, I had to go tell my family, had to help, had to try and save what I could. I removed the other ship round from my vest, handed both to the sergeant. "Here." I said. "I don't have anything else. You can catch the birds here by putting out your water decontamination pills in little balls of bread. They explode, and they taste better than nothing."

"I've got to go home," I said.

Rob Furr is a senior at James Madison University in Virginia. He's been writing SF for over ten years, and was once told that his writing was on the level of old SF pulp magazines. He took this as a compliment. His interests range from high explosives, through iguanas, to animation, and he hopes to one day make a music video featuring an exploding komodo dragon. Other than that, he's tall, with dark-brown hair, glasses, and bad posture. He works in a computer center, where he spends a good bit of time hunched over a keyboard. He's also not very good at writing third-person biographical sketches.

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InterText is published in both ASCII and PostScript formats (though the PostScript laser-printer version is the version of choice). Its first issue will appear next month. For a subscription (specify ASCII or PostScript), information, or submissions of stories to be published in InterText, contact Jason Snell at *jsnell@ucsd.edu*.

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

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