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Looking Ahead

Daniel K. Appelquist

Hello again everybody! I'm sorry that this issue has come so late, but I've been *extremely* busy lately, what with trying to finish school this semester and everything. (If you'd like to offer me a job, you know how to reach me. . .) I know this issue's coming out a bit late to be called the "October" issue, but, since the first issue of Quanta came out two years ago this month, I thought it just wouldn't do to not have an October issue. Call me sentimental.

You heard correctly! Quanta has been publishing for a total of two years now, ever since October of 1989. I can't quite believe it myself! It seems like only yesterday that I was reading the first issue of Jim Mccabe's *Athene* and wondering to myself if I could do something like that. And *this will not be the last issue*, let me assure you of that. Quanta will continue to go out as long as I have fingers to type with.

Ok – What have we got lined up for you this issue? Well, the two serials we're carrying (*The Harrison Chapters* and *Earth as an Example*) are both continued. The final chapter of the *Earth as an Example* will be published in next month's issue. In addition, we have some various and sundry fiction from the four corners of the world (well, the Net. . .)

If you find yourself saying "why is this in a science-fiction magazine?" when you reach the end of Michael Arner's *Geek Queen*, you have a point. I feel that the story's marginal science-fiction content, combined with the fact that it's really well written, qualify it for inclusion. If you'd like to see more of this sort of "borderline SF" material, please write me. I'd also like to get more of these types of submissions.

Also of note is that Christopher Kempke returns to Quanta this issue with his *Doorway from Darkness*. Chris tells me that this story is part of a larger work, other parts of which may be published in future issues.

I'd really like to encourage you to send comments to the authors. Part of the whole purpose of Quanta is to give developing authors a chance to get their work out to an audience, and it can be even more valuable if they get feedback from this audience. For that matter, *I'd* appreciate your comments on anything related to Quanta. I'd like to continue to make Quanta better, but I can't do that if I don't know what *you*, the reader, want.

I'd like to thank Eric Moore and Pomona Valero for their invaluable help in redesigning the contents page. I'm sort of in the process of redesigning Quanta, piecemeal. If you have any suggestions, or if you'd like to help design a new cover page, I'd love to hear from you.

More good news – The subscription lists for Quanta have been steadily growing. We are now up to 1800 subscribers, including a growing list of subscribers from eastern block countries.

Well, that's about it from me. See you in December!

Moving?

Take Quanta *with you!*

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

AT THE EDGE OF THE WINNER'S CIRCLE

by D.E. Helbling

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Richard Fentz was working late in the lab again, cursing another failed attempt to repair his frequency pulsed ion beam. Without it, he had no chance of duplicating the results of his earlier efforts. He threw his hands up in despair, then ran them through his long strands of dark, loosely curled hair, tempted to pull out a lock or two.

His long hair was the only remaining badge of a bygone era, a decade of conflict between indulgence and academic excellence. Now the hair, like his patience and his credibility in the physics department here at the university, was wearing thin. He knew that few among the staff really believed he had ever successfully operated his mass reduction device.

No one was more happy about this, Richard also knew, than the Dean of Physics, Gene Royt. That the basic premise of his work held some promise, not even Gene had argued. He reviewed Richard's original paper on the subject before publication in "K-Particle Physics Review" and, as the department head, was more than willing to add his name as co-author. Now that months of work failed to produce a single repeatable demonstration, things were no longer quite so communal.

After Gene's last visit to the lab, Richard was fairly certain that the success he had reported the previous week was viewed as a last ditch effort to save face, or worse yet, a futile attempt to prolong funding for the research. And now, now Royt was coming for another "inspection". Richard could imagine his taunting, gloating smirk staring back at him over the oak desk in the next room, the desk that Eugene Morris Royt kicked his feet up on while he administered project resources and lab allocations with all the grandeur and bearing of a monarch in exile. So Richard was scrambling at this late hour, determined to somehow make it work again, just one more time.

But it was already too late.

"Any change, Fentz?" he heard from over his shoulder.

Richard spun around on his bench stool to face the inimitable Dr. Royt as he walked his pudgy, bald, and annoying frame the rest of the way through the door.

"Nothing consistent," Richard exaggerated. He knew, they both knew, that there was nothing new to report.

"Have you given any thought to your next project?" Gene asked, in some vaguely concerned way, not quite looking Richard in the eye.

"That's it, then? You're bagging it?" Richard snapped, staring right back.

"Well, you've still got a couple thousand left on your grant. You are certainly free to continue until that runs out."

"That's very generous of you, Dr. Royt." Exaggeration, again.

"Now look, there is no need to get sarcastic. You've been given every opportunity to prove your hypothesis, Rick. I think it's time you face the corner you've painted yourself into and admit that this just isn't going anywhere."

Rick, huh? That was a first, Richard thought. "Look, Gene, it's late. I'm sorry, I just guess I'm a bit short-fused right now. I'm sure that you'll find something suitable for me to work on as soon as this grant runs its course. Do you have any ideas you want me to pursue?"

No, I won't argue with you, you pompous bastard, Richard thought. Not tonight. Maybe later, after the next grant is approved and I have another obscure little space to work in for another six months, possibly at a school with a real physics wing. Meanwhile, crawl back into your office. Go back to sleep in your comfortable chair.

"Well, we'll get together next week and talk about it. I suggest you get some of that much needed rest in the meantime."

"Thank you, Doctor. Good night."

"And thank you, God," Richard muttered, under his breath, as Dr. Royt turned to leave. That was about as much mock sympathy as he could stomach without subsequent acts of violence. At least Royt hadn't found out about the broken generator. Did the senior physicist on campus resent him more because he was younger or because he was at least working on some idea of his own? Richard wasn't sure and no longer cared. That Royt took pleasure in his eventual failure was enough for him to at least contemplate with relish his private image of the violent act he knew he would never commit.

He spun back around to face his lab bench, reaching to pick up Test Ball Number One.

"Why won't it work any more?!" He tossed the ball back and forth from left to right a couple more times, then replaced it reverently on its little plastiglas pedestal atop the bench copy of his thesis.

"Potential for Mass Reduction Effects of Controlled Magnetic Flux Environment Ion Particle Beam Target Media, by Richard Morris Fentz", read the cover of the paper. The result of several semesters of work, it was the very sweat and blood of his brain, the most promising of the many papers he had written during his twenty five odd years of research. It had a nice ring to it, too, he thought, and a fairly sound basis in the theorems of other recently proven corollaries to some of the lesser known theories of relativity and subatomic particle physics, all of which was rather pointless now.

He reached, one more time, for his stainless steel trophy. The polished globe had started out at a very precise five pounds. It now weighed four point nine three two two five pounds, for reasons his paper explained, but no one would believe, because he could not make it happen again. He wished he could afford

to have the ball analyzed, but as as the Dean of this gigantic four person department had reminded him, he only had a little money left in the grant, and he would need it to try to repair the beam generator. The thing wasn't really that sophisticated; it was little more than an X-ray machine with a frequency knob, with the exception of the emitter tube, yet it's role in the project was critical.

Looking back, he wondered if Royt's willingness to lend his name to the paper wasn't really just a reason to get the generator into the department. The few papers Royt had published in the last few years had been met with little fanfare in the scientific community. Richard had been in the field long enough by now to know that they had received little acknowledgement of any kind. Royt's own efforts to get funding, inside or outside the barriers of this rustic little liberal arts university, had all failed. If he could get just a few whiz bang gizmo's, Richard figured, Royt thought he would probably be able to attract some of that inspired endowment money. The professor had never shown any genuine respect for the devices themselves, only for their ability to generate more research revenue.

Now, thanks to Richard, Bramer Valley University could boast a pulsed frequency controlled ion beam generator among its educational assets. Had he actually used the beam in his ever so thoroughly calibrated, measured, magnetically controlled environment, to reduce the mass of this metal egg? He was starting to wonder himself.

Dr. Royt and the others were convinced that, unlike Test Ball Number Two, now in place on the digital scale at the focal point of his ion generator, this ball had NEVER weighed five pounds. He imagined the guesses they must be making behind his back. Did he specially fabricate some alloy to appear identical to Ball Two? Or did he rig the scale to somehow read constantly low only when Ball One was on it?

None of them could explain what he somehow did, because they didn't believe it had been done. Yet Richard remembered every detail of the Event like it was ten minutes ago.

He had first adjusted the large blue dial on the panel in front of him. It controlled the strength of the field inside the magnetically tuned environment that was the top of his test bench. A square frame of thin gauge angle steel formed a skeleton cube the size of a tea crate on the soapstone surface of the bench. The cube formed the perimeters of the Hemholtz cage, for all intents and purposes, a magnetic box. Then, time to continue the standard sequence: he tweaked the flux density, the red knob next to the blue one, and reached for the power switch to the particle beam generator that feed its frequency-modulated pulses into the cage.

Richard had liked the colored knobs. He added them early on in the project for a sort of Sesame Street effect. See here. Push this button. Make the little ball weigh less than before. See here. It was really a sideways insult to Royt, who really didn't have a clue as to how Richard's equations worked. Now the knobs no longer amused him. Push this button, and break the virtually irreplaceable imported particle beam generator you stayed an extra three semesters here at Backwater U to use. Perhaps he should have gone the Royt route, sought tenure and power, then at least he would now be free to continue without interference.

Some weeks earlier on in the project, the gym teacher who taught fitness in the classroom on the floor below had come into the room, ranting and panting, totally unglued because she heard there was a particle beam weapon shooting subatomic pieces around above her. She demanded that the entire project be shut down or moved to another building, preferably one in another town. He had assured her that it was not a weapon, that the radiation from these "teenee little particles" were less harmful than the glow the headsup map and gauge displays in her car, but she wouldn't buy it. If it's so harmless, she had asked, why do the building lights keep fluttering every time the damn thing gets turned on?

Doctor Royt had come through for him then, he remembered. Department heads were actually good for some things. In his mind he could see Gene talking to her, making gestures with his hands, explaining that while the generator did consume large amounts of power, it didn't actually produce much at all. Kind of a mechanical government. This she could understand.

With everything on-line at the same time for the first time, Richard had chuckled to himself as he threw the switch. He watched as the lights dimmed as always. Once, twice, three times, then a fourth flicker, as each of the beam's internal power supplies kicked in. He wondered if she was down there now, watching the lights dim, worrying that she was being bombarded. He had been forced to modify the beam's power feed circuitry so it wouldn't blow the breaker every time they used it.

The so-called physics wing of the building consisted of Royt's office next door, this lab, and two classrooms. It was really wired for the language and sociology classes the founding fathers of the school had intended. The intrusion of technology studies onto the curriculum had been a concession from the start; the concession had never extended as far as the facilities. Modifying the beam generator had allowed Richard to avoid spending a big part of his grant on rewiring the lab to accommodate the special equipment.

Now it came up, one grid bank at a time, instead of all at once. He wondered again, briefly, if his modifications had somehow caused the beam to fail. This additional compromise of working on an anorexic budget, he though, would be the most laughable of all the possible gotchas. For want of a watt, and all that.

The lights steadied and he waited and watched, as the hum from the beam leveled off in its low frequency drone. Five, ten, twenty seconds later and he watched in awe as the mass reading on the steel ball dipped. An immediate drop of some fraction of an ounce was showing plainly on the six figure LED display of the digital scale supporting the steel test sphere!

But that was before, just that once, and only once.

Like some mad Faustian scholar on a frantic quest for the Lost Chord, Richard had spent the previous several days struggling to repair the beam generator: calls to the manufacturer in Germany; runs to the electronic component store for parts; a trip to the airport for components shipped via overnight carrier. His own lectures he had long since delegated to the the other two post-grad minions. He took meals in the lab room, slept briefly back in his dorm room, then returned three or four hours later for another go at it.

No luck again tonight. No last minute save before Royt's little visit. The LED's on the power panel of the beam generator still stared back at him in cold, dark defiance. He glanced over his notebook. The lines started running together.

Richard stood up from the bench for a moment and started to swoon. Too many skipped meals. He decided to take a short stroll down the hall to the vending machines for another coffee and a stretch of the legs, then return refreshed to begin again. When he got there, he asked for the usual coffee and doughnuts, but the machine responded with "Sorry, that selection is currently unavailable."

"You piece of crap," he cursed, raising his arm to swing at this other mechanical adversary of long standing, then in his fury dizzied again, reminded of just how little attention his own personal needs had received in these last few days. A sudden desire for fresh air drew him out of the building and into the night.

At this hour few students could be seen on campus. Most were in their own dorm rooms by now, mulling over tomorrow's assignments or tonight's lover. He smiled at the memory of this term's confused first-time dormers, amazed that one so old as he could still be living on campus. He never explained it, preferring to let them think that they, too, might be forty five before they finish with school.

He cast a glance over the skyline, seeing with a new eye the lights of the other campus buildings as they mingled with those of the downtown highrises blocks away. A pretty night. Though no stars seemed to penetrate the cloud cover, he imagined them above him, looking down in quiet admiration as he gazed up from below, poised to walk back indoors and finish making The Big Discovery. Pity I'll have to disappoint you, he thought.

He walked back into the building feeling refreshed and renewed. As he strolled into the lab room and up to the bench, parking himself onto the stool, he shivered, unsettled. Something was wrong.

He looked first at the beam generator, parked in its usual spot on the floor to the right of the bench, with most of its guts spread out next to it, wires and components dangling together like a mound of capsized spiders on a plate of orange and blue spaghetti. He looked at his tools and odd assortment of meters, lying there where he'd left them on the next to the generator. Then he looked at his bench top.

The damn ball, Ball Number Two, was gone!!

He jumped out of his seat and ran out the door to the lab and down the hall. Whoever had taken it mustn't be far away! But as he stood in the front of the building, where he had stood moments earlier admiring the skyline, he could see no one.

Nor had he seen anyone, he remembered, as he came back in the building mintues ago. So they must be still in the building. He ran back in, chasing up and down the halls. Locked, locked and dark, every door was locked and not a person to be found.

Another frat prank? He wondered. Or maybe one of Royt's little mind games? He strutted towards Gene's office, ready to read him the first three chapters of Inferno, the Gaelic translation. Royt's door? Royt was sitting there in his think position, feet on the desk and arms behind his head, snoring away. No, he thought, it's not Royt.

He finally decided that whoever stole it didn't really comprise a threat to the project. Sometime during his running up and down the halls, the truth had come home. In his panic to find the missing ball, enough of his mind was freed from solving the generator problem that the answer came to him.

The emitter tube was fried.

The little hunk of glass and metal was more than just expensive and nearly impossible to replace, at least for him. It was the key to the generator's ability. The coatings of the tube, consisting of highly refined rare earth elements, its superconductive filaments, special crystalline housing, polyplast-ceramic insulators, superconductive interconnects, all combined to give the beam its special properties. Most of these properties could be summed up simply as an order of magnitude improvement in fine control over the intensity of the beam produced. Some properties were manifest in the beam's ability to rapidly respond to changes in input. In Royt-speak, it was simply Bandwidth, with a capital "B". "Gotta have that bandwidth in all your beam generators," Richard mumbled in recollection. "And response time? Hell, yes!! We can give your response time." He snapped himself out of used lab equipment salesman mode long enough to remember that these were the properties he had taken advantage of in bringing his calculations to tangible reality.

Had he zapped the tube during its first use, with his power supply workarounds? Or did it get zapped by some sort of feedback from the magnetic tomb of the Hemholtz cage? It didn't matter now. No emitter tube, no generator. No generator? Well, the rest didn't matter either, not anymore.

He returned to the lab bench and started working his way through his notes; the pages of records of the combinations of replacement components he had swapped out clearly showed that he had by this time replaced the entire unit, except for the damned emitter tube. He had simply blocked it out, he guessed, until he was distracted long enough to forget to forget.

Three hours later, he was still in his back-wrenching hunch on the bench stool, bent over the trailing end of his notes. Somewhere in these numbers, these wonderfully fascinating, unique, bizarre relationships between mass and externally applied energy, somewhere in there was the answer to why his dead emitter tube was setting on the floor next to him in his dead generator. It still seemed pretty damn pointless, he thought, reaching a last time for Ball One. He bounced it back and forth between left and right a couple more times before setting it back, no not on the pedestal, he thought, let's put it over there on the scale, where Ball Two would have been, where Ball Two would now be reading some low mass value of its own.

As he placed Ball One on the scale, his jaw dropped. What? The LED's now showed that it now weighed four point seven two nine pounds. Another stare of disbelief showed no change in the reading.

He reached out and yanked Ball One off the scale like he was avoiding some kind of electric shock, stared at it, tossed it up the air a couple of times. It felt the same. He had played with it so much the last few days he could probably detect a quarter percent change in weight just by the feel. He reached back to return it to the scale again when he noticed that it was no longer reading zero?

"Oh God", he muttered, "Maybe a flaky scale screwed me up after all. Check your measuring equipment, fool." Another lesson in elementary empirical science from the makers of cold fusion. He pressed the reset/recalibrate button on the scale and it returned to zero. But as he did so, he saw something that had escaped his scrutiny before.

The ball dip zone, that little curved receptacle area where the ball rested on top of the scale without falling off, seemed

deeper than before. In fact it appeared considerably deeper. Why didn't he noticed it? Lack of sleep?

Placing Ball One back in the dip zone, he could see that it sank deeper than it had before. Time, he thought, for bed. Much too late. Powers of observation now reduced.

He stood up from the stool, then almost doubled over, as his joints protested resentfully over their lack of use. He stretched slowly, first his arms up overhead, then his legs, one at time, forward then back, forward then back, and found himself falling . . .

As the room abruptly shifted from bright fluorescent to dim moonlight, he could see his hands, stretched out in front of him for balance, suspended over a glassy plane of sparkling light.

In the next second and a half, a thousand possibilities blazed through his mind. A near death experience? A heart attack at the bench? No time for wonder. The surface of the lab floor came up to meet his chin, and he went out.

Richard awoke some undetermined moments later in unbelievable pain. His pounding head was cradled in the lap of someone with a black head, a head he saw looking down over him, busy applying some medication to his upper lip. He reached up to feel it; he must have nearly bit it off. The black-headed, perhaps hooded person pushed his hand away, mumbling something unintelligible.

As the mumble concluded, a feminine, slightly mechanical-sounding voice said, "Be still. Do not move."

He fought the urge to struggle, then yielded to the waves of relief now replacing the pain in his lip as the hooded one smeared some kind of salve slowly from one side of his lip to the other.

"Be calm. You will be fine," the voice continued.

A distinctly close splashing noise broke him away from staring into the now noticeably feminine eyes of the black hooded person stroking his forehead, while the surface beneath him gently rocked back and forth. He started struggling again, but she, yes, it was a she, he knew that much, held him firmly in place, then mumbled again.

Moments later, he heard the voice say, "It is fine. You are in a boat."

The voice, he noticed, appeared to be coming out of a little box on her shoulder. He looked past her shoulder to the same twinkling field of night stars he had seen those brief moments before conking out. Even on the clearest night, he had not remembered such a crystal-bright sprinkle of sky glitter.

He looked back into her eyes, soft, caring, concerned eyes that they appeared to be, and started to fade out again.

Later he awoke to see those same soft, caring, and yes now plainly beautiful green eyes still staring down at him between cascading locks of dark auburn hair. "Gyeslowtenden," she said. "How are you feeling?" asked the little box stuck to her shoulder.

"I feel fine," Richard said, not stopping to think before he answered. "Where am I?"

"Kmen yar shmendahike," she said, or something like it. The box said, "Save that question for a later time." She continued to speak, but he stopped listening to her for the moment; the box was a little easier to understand.

"You must take your rest at this time. Soon, you will be questioned and you will be answered." She smiled at him.

A Florence Nightingale smile? He had not looked at a woman in admiration since the last time he took a summer vacation, some two years earlier. A smile like that on a face like that with such a deliciously foreign accent? Accent?! Maybe, he shuddered, may his NDE was more D than N.

For a moment he had forgotten that matchbook-sized voice-actuated language interpreters, like the one he was apparently now conversing with, didn't exist, not outside of UFO Enquirer's Update, anyway. Yet her persisting smile dissuaded him from panic. She mumbled again and the box told him to open his mouth, then swallow. Richard opened up and she slipped a capsule between his lips. He swallowed, then slept, dreaming a relaxed, safe and warm dream of a relaxed, safe, calm boat ride with a delightful green-eyed woman with a delightful accent and long, luscious curls of the warmest brown hair, flowing on and on in a sea of warm and relaxed safety . . .

When he awoke, she was still looking him over. Next to her were more faces, considerably less warm and definitely not relaxed. They were arguing amongst themselves, as near as he could tell, in the same language he had heard from her lips before.

"Enough now, he is awakening," announced one of the boxes on one of the shoulders. Each of the three, yes there were three of them, each of the three people now looking him over stopped abruptly in their discussion. The Auburn One reached out toward him and lifted him gently up into a sitting position.

"It is time now. You have a few mintues," her box said, "to ask and be asked."

Richard looked at her and her two companions. The one on her right was a square-jawed and seriously handsome blonde man of perhaps thirty, the one on her left a dark haired woman who looked remarkably like her. Maybe they were sisters. They were all wearing the same dark garb, form-fitting and shiny, like wet silk. Richard started to ask them a question, then stopped, struggling for words, as he stared past the three of them, towards the craft, the boat, as she called it, that they all must have been in together some recent moments or hours earlier.

It was quite unlike any boat he had seen before. In shape it appeared similar to the motorized inflatables he had watched down at the river in the summer, boats that pulled skiers around and swamped canoes. This boat did look much like them, except for the fishlike fins protruding from the back, fins that even now looked like they were flapping back and forth a bit.

"Do not concern yourself with the nature of your rescue craft, Richard Joseph Fentz," Auburn's box announced.

"You have me at a disadvantage," he responded. The Auburn One looked at him with a puzzled expression. "I don't know your names."

A smile of discovery dawning in her eyes, she said, "Dana"

"Dana," said her box.

"Jaaspendt," said the blonde gentleman, as did his box.

"Yantz," replied the remaining pair.

"Well, Dana," he asked, "Where am I, how did I get here, and what is it that you want to know?"

Dana looked at her two companions, then back at him, and began. "Richard Joseph Fentz, here is–"

"Please, call me Richard."

"Richard, here is Lake Fentz. You arrived here in the same manner these did. What we want to know is when the rest of

your party is going to arrive."

Dana reached her hand out to him, then opened it to reveal a silver ball about the size of a pea, then with her other hand gave him another, close to the size of Ball Number Two. Of course, the "BALL NUMBER TWO" label on the side was a bit of a hint.

Richard reached out and took them from her, examining each. Then he reached up to her shoulder, touching her little translation box. He looked back over her shoulder at their boat.

"Shit," he said.

Her box made a sort of a bleeping noise and she and Yantz and Jaaspendt laughed, the first smiles he had seen on the faces of the other two.

"What can you tell me about your equations, Richard?" her box asked him. "We know you had set up a repeating series of converging parameters to validate your hypothesis regarding matter/mass displacement. We do not know which of these parameters you used in your experiments at Bramer Valley."

He tried to deny the obvious, to himself at least. He didn't answer.

"How far apart were your time intervals on the power initialization sequence of the beam generator? It is very important that we know."

"About two seconds each, I would guess," he answered without thinking.

"How long was it between when you first operated the generator and, well, when you arrived here?"

"Oh, I guess about five days."

Dana looked at him like he was truly gone. Maybe she was right, but she took that moment to reach up and touch her little box, as did her companions. Their next several minutes of conversation were not translated, save for occasional glances of suspicion or perhaps contempt that required no mechanical interpretation.

Then she shook her head, in some obvious disagreement with the other two, and reached up to switch on her translator.

"Richard, we have a problem. You came to be here by result of your work. I think we did not make that clear. I think you do not realize how far you have traveled. These balls of steel in your hands? They are portions of the test balls you were using in your 'mass reduction' experiments."

Richard nodded in acknowledgement. She continued.

"The small one? This is the inner core of the first test ball from the first time you ran the experiment. The larger one? The second ball, with some part of the equipment beneath it. The next run. You, with a spherical portion of your lab room. That is now out there, in the water." She paused, pointing out toward the center of the lake.

"So here is the future. How far into the future?"

"That is not an issue now, Richard," she replied, genuine worry resting rigid on her face.

"How do you know of my work?"

"Richard, when those parts of your lab disappeared, when you disappeared with them, people of your time began to take your work very seriously. They studied your published papers, to replicate your results, though they apparently did not understand them. In the time span of five years from you left, a new military science formed around your efforts. 'Mass Reduction', to eliminate people, war engines, cities. Without bodies, without rubble, without residual radiation. An ideal weapon, by the standards of your time."

"Eventually," she continued, "it was used for such purposes. Not until much later was the nature of your discoveries truly understood. The users of your 'Mass Reduction' technology thought they were destroying their targets, not relocating them. The amount of mass displacement the target experienced was, we know, a linear function of the energy applied, nothing in your setup would change that. The amount of temporal displacement, and how long it took for the 'send' to take effect after application of the required energy, these relationships were more complex. They were not fully explained by your published calculations."

"The small, then larger balls, " Richard observed, looking blankly into his palms.

"Then you. Exactly."

"So where is the controversy?" Richard asked, visibly struggling to grasp all the ramifications of what he had just heard. "If you know all this, what difference does it make how long it took for my initial test to actually work? I'm here now!"

"Because, Richard, your lab was not the last sphere to be transmitted."

Richard looked at Dana, at Yantz, then over to Jaaspendt. They were a serious looking bunch. He stood up, wobbling a bit, waved off Dana's effort to assist him, then strolled over to the boat, walking around it, kicking a pebble or two from side to side, while he clutched the two steel balls, one in each hand, until his knuckles paled around the larger ball. It, the boat, looked like an alien creature, its long, narrow, yet rigid equivalent of a gunwale sweeping back on each side to melt into a fin that swept out and down, apparently serving as propeller, rudder, and keel. Amazing! And what powered it, he could only guess.

He peered inside the boat and saw a bag of some transparent material, filled with remnants of his lab bench: the scale, pieces of the beam generator. In another bag were some of his notebooks, and there in the prow, tucked between a couple of flaps of whatever made up the boat, he could see a couple more bags filled, he suspected, with more souvenirs of the lab. In the one bag, he thought he could make out the shape to be the bench copy of his paper. The other bag was messy, filled with dripping cloth somethings.

"NO!" he gasped. "Not Royt's Florsheims?" But he knew that they were there in the bag, that Royt's feet and his blood and some portion of his pant legs were in there with them.

In a gasping breath of willpower, Richard turned away from the boat and faced the lake. His gaze stretched out from before him for a stretch before coming to rest out in the center, on what appeared to be a platform. The brightness of the stars would not have been enough to show it here in the night, but the soft blue lights floating all around it gave it a strangely luminescent appearance, like a faint spiral nebula in a field of softly twinkling darkness. It was a round, uniformly flat surface jutting up just a couple of feet above the calm of the water surrounding it. And in the center of the platform stood a roughly circular lump, looking like a crude attempt at a Buckminster Fuller version of a cutaway house. He couldn't make out the contents of this cutaway castle on the sea, but he knew what they were.

He turned away from the water and toward the others, then

paused, spinning back again to face the lake.

Fentz Lake, the perfectly round lake.

Fentz Lake, he would later discover, was one of many such lakes that formed in the hemispherical cavities left by the transmission of military bases, towns, and cities over the many years since his abrupt departure from the university. It was also the first of many such lakes soon to be abruptly filled with a fast moving municipality from the past.

Richard turned back to stare at his rescuers. He wondered if they were part of a centuries long vigil monitoring the lake, waiting for the First Arrival. And the round platform under his falling lab room, where the wall that had stood between him and Royt's desk was now a crumbled piece of lath and plaster, was this platform a sort of catchers mitt for temporal relics? That notion squeezed a chuckle out of him. He started laughing a little louder, gathering return stares from the trio.

He wondered if he could really help these people to determine just when his city would arrive? They probably already assumed that the answer was no, given his last couple of admissions. But he could help them, he hoped, to cope with the cultural earthquakes to follow. The little boxes on their lapels would help.

Would he be able to help though, he wondered, if others among his papers had also been thoroughly scrutinized after his premature departure.

He looked down into his hands again, now cramped from clutching his globes of steel. His left arm was feeling long already, lugging the larger one around. He switched the two balls, putting the big one in his right, then reached back and with a wide swing, plopped it out in to the water. A cry of protest arose from the trio behind him, but he ignored it. They had other souvenirs, and more they could gather. He put the small ball in his right hand, then swung up and out, going for that forty five degree shot, and watched as the little projectile arced out of view.

Standing there next to the water, seeing the last of the waves created by his first launch fading in the glimmer of the night sky, he realized that he had finally escaped obscurity. If he could just slip back into it, like Ball One and Two, now safe on the bottom of the lake.

He began to stroll back toward the group. They would forget all about the little steel orbs, he assured himself, when he told them about the other papers. Unless, of course, they had already read them.

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EARTH AS AN EXAMPLE
Part 2

by Jesse Allen

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There was a knock on the door to Captain Huston's cabin. Or rather, a knock on the wall next to the door—the door itself was open.

"There's no need to knock, Dr. Drucker," said Captain Huston. "In the Navy, an open door is an invitation. Come on in."

Dr. Drucker entered, then seemed startled when he saw Captain Huston was not alone. With him was Captain Second Rank J'ali Suliman.

"If you're both here," started Dr. Drucker, "who's on the bridge?"

"Relax, Dr. Drucker," replied Captain Huston, amused by the archaeologist's concern. "The bridge is less than twenty seconds down the hall. Chief Navigator Smythe is in command. She has intentions of future command, so I deemed it appropriate to introduce her to the throne."

"Don't believe him," cautioned Captain Suliman, his teeth showing as he smiled broadly. "He's just afraid of failing to catch that prankster Jones in the act of pulling the wool over his eyes. So he put Georgia in command while Jones installed the gadget."

"J'ali," said Captain Huston, turning to speak with his second, "you truly hurt me with your disrespect. Of course I put Georgia in command while Jones put the shield modifier in. I'd hardly be giving her a fair feel for command if she wasn't handed something a little unusual during her watch."

"Go ahead and make excuses," said Suliman, "but I know you better, John. Your style of command is to leave someone else to hold the bag whenever possible. You know it. I know it. And you know I know it."

"If you're done assaulting my good character," replied Captain Huston playfully, "I should remind you that she is replacing you, not I, in the Captain's seat right now. Perhaps you'd like to test Jones's creation yourself?"

"No," said Suliman, "I respect your decisions completely. You are, of course, completely correct to leave a junior officer in command while an engineer with even less experience than the acting captain is tinkering with the hyperionic shields.

"You must excuse me, sirs," Suliman continued, "but I have other matters to attend to." With that, he began to leave the room.

"Remember, J'ali," retorted Huston gleefully, "this was your watch. You know it. I know it. And you know I know it." Captain Suliman did not even pause as he walked out the door, but Dr. Drucker though he heard a slight snigger from down the hall moments later.

"What was all that about?" asked the incredulous Doctor.

"Oh, just J'ali and I playing games with each other and the crew as usual. I left Georgia on the bridge while Warwick Jones, the junior engineer I mentioned earlier, puts his stealth system in."

"That should be interesting," said Dr. Drucker.

"Indeed," said Captain Huston. "What's worse, I'm not really sure if Warwick is pulling my leg or not. Usually I can tell such things and then it's just a matter of working out how they're doing it. But Warwick is new and I can't read him as well. Worse, engineering is not my forté. Warwick's compounded the problem by being very thorough in describing the thing's limits. Apparently, a lot of the power and size of standard electronic stealth systems comes from their countermeasures defense circuits—the part of the gadget that keeps other equipment, particularly other ships, from scrambling the cloaking shield. By cutting that out and trimming a few other corners, he says he's saved enough power and space to fit it. Given the thoroughness of his description of the gadget's flaws, I'm tempted to believe him. I do not, however, intend to give in to that temptation easily."

"And Captain Suliman's claim that you gave Lieutenant Smythe the con while Jones was at work to dodge responsibility?"

The Captain smiled. "I see you've caught on to some of the ropes. Yes, there is some truth to it. I've just spent the last three days checking up on Warwick's claim that most of the power goes into counter-scrambling. I was sure that was where he laid a trap for me. . . and I've just managed to learn enough to believe him after all. At least whatever logical pitfall he's laid for me isn't there. So I need more time to search engineering texts to detect other possible tricks.

"But it is just as much a challenge to Georgia as it is me dodging Warwick. You see, she now has the task of proving her ability to command and she knows she'll get quite a recommendation from me if she can find out what Jones has really done before I do.

"If, on the other hand, I work it out when I go on duty in a few hours after she has failed, I'll gloat unmercifully."

"I will feel sorry for Lieutenant Smythe should that happen," said Dr. Drucker. "I know just how unmerciful your gloating can be."

So far, the Captain and Dr. Drucker had completed three games of Chess, all three of which the Captain had won. Dr. Drucker had watched in horror as his pieces were chopped off the board in bold moves that left his King stripped of all protection. All his defensive moves had been countered ruthlessly.

I had not counted on such an aggressive opponent, though the archaeologist. *But with each game, his victory comes harder. I am learning his style. . .*

"It's bad manners not to gloat when someone else challenges you to a game and then proceeds to lose repeatedly," said Captain Huston in a mock self-satisfied tone. "I believe it is your move now."

"I know," said Dr. Drucker with equal mockery. "I shall enjoy wiping that grin off your face. Bishop to Queen 7. Check."

"Feeling assertive today?" said Captain Huston. "Well, let's see what I can do about that. Check, you say?" and the Captain moved over to the side table that now held the chess board. Real pieces of either blackened or bleached steel on the wooden board rather than the holographic projections common to most Knights & Castles games. Yet another anachronism, but it seemed appropriate to play the ancient game by hand. Captain Huston moved a steel bishop to its new position. He contemplated the board silently for several minutes with his hand still on the piece, Dr. Drucker standing across the board to see what happened.

He plans at least three moves ahead of me, thought Dr. Drucker, *and undoubtly knows exactly where he wants to move now and is just playing with me by pretending to work out moves as he goes. But he has a surprise coming to him. . .*

Captain Huston reached forward and moved one of his pale pieces, taking the grey bishop off the board. Without even waiting a moment, Dr. Drucker reached down and moved another dark piece.

"Check," he announced.

Captain Huston looked up at the archaeologist with an expression that was a mix of surprise and a frown. *Now what's he got up his sleeve?* thought the Captain. *He's not usually aggressive at all and it's obvious he's plotted his moves out in advance. He's not even* trying *to hide it!* John contemplated the board carefully, then moved one of his pieces to take the attacking rook. Again Dr. Drucker did not wait, but moved his piece immediately.

"Check."

What the hell? though Captain Huston. *If I take his piece again, he'll have three less than he did five minutes ago without improving his position at all. What is he up to?* Then suddenly, John saw the strategy. *Sneaky fox! If I take the bishop he's using to put me in check, I'll have set myself up to lose all three of those pieces. He's not attacking the King: He's after my playing pieces! But how to counter him. . .*

Dr. Drucker read the Captain's thoughts from the frowns crossing his forehead and his eye movements across the board. A full half hour passed without a word or move. Dr. Drucker smiled to himself. *I have finally gauged him well,* he thought. *I knew he would attack those pieces, yet realize within a few moves that he places his own in jeopardy. Yes, I've finally rattled 'the Dark Master's' cage.*

"Jaffles, John," said the ship's cook who had entered soundlessly to peek over the chief archaeologist's shoulder. "And a pot of coroco. I just ran some up to the bridge and Georgia thought you might want some too. Oh, and she told me to tell you 'Warwick's little gadget works,' whatever that means."

"Thanks, Theo," said the Captain as the cook placed the food on the side table. "Smells good."

"Oceanian cooking always does," replied Theo. "Playing games again? Watch it, Doctor. John has a mean streak and he plays to win."

With that, the cook disappeared as silently as he entered.

"Do all your crew use first names like that?" asked Dr. Drucker.

"Of course," replied Captain Huston. "Discipline and formal titles are all very wonderful for parades. But off duty, I'm a person, not a Captain, and I like being treated that way. You'll find most of the crew feel that way too.

"In fact, it might be good practice for you and your team to use first names when we're off duty, David."

"Oh," replied the archaeologist, "of course. We always try to adjust to the local customs, Capt. . . John. I simply hadn't realized. I would never have imagined the military was quite so. . . well, human. Margie always gave me the impression discipline was a bit on the strict side onboard."

John Huston laughed. "Doesn't surprise me if she was serving with Nick Perry. He's as good as they come, but he's from the Hercules sector and they take discipline a bit seriously there. I'm from Oceania and we've always been a bit more relaxed about such things. Got better grub, too," and as he spoke, he poured a cup from the pot. "Want some?"

"Grub?" asked David.

"Sorry. Local slang for 'food.' "

"I'm afraid I'm not familiar with Oceanian 'grub,' " said David. "I take it that the drink is coroco?"

"Yep. It's water percolated through the dried grounds of a common plant on Gardia, one of the better agri worlds in the quadrant. It's good stuff, though I recommend you limit yourself to a cup a day 'til you get used to it. There's some trace chemicals in it that not only give it the flavour, but might make your bladder work overtime and keep you up all night if you're not careful."

"Sounds a bit like coffee," said David. John gave him a blank look. "It's a drink from home that, from the description, could be fairly similar. These square things are called jaffles?"

"That's right. Leftovers sandwiched between two slices of braco, then sealed and cooked."

"And braco. . . "

". . . is good stuff. My training is in naval command, not food production, I'm afraid, and describing everything that goes into good braco would be long and tedious, not to mention possibly inaccurate. Try one. You can always interrogate Theo if you get really curious about our cooking."

David took a jaffle in his hand. It was warm and light brown, a palm sized square which bulged in the middle. He took a bite and chewed. There was a taste of processed grain and mildly spiced meat along with something he didn't recognize, a gooey yellow substance that fill the jaffle's interior. Steam wafted gently from the filling.

"This is *snack* food?" asked David in disbelief.

"Yeah," replied John. "If you want real Oceanian cooking, you'll have to visit sometime. I tried to convince Theo to serve us real food more often, but most of the crew rebelled, having taste buds cultivated elsewhere. Hence the meals to date."

David took another bite, then sipped his coroco. It was slightly bitter, but with a subtle sweetness to it and a hint of something else that he couldn't quite place, though it was familiar.

"You're right, this is good. If the fare—sorry, 'grub'—is as good as this regularly, I could be talked into moving very easily. There's something in the coroco that I can't quite make out, though. . . ethanol?"

"Just enough to keep the toes warm. But none goes to the bridge. This is strictly an off-duty pot."

John returned to eyeing the chess board, sipping from his cup while silently contemplating his next move. *So the good doctor is getting tricky. There must be some way to foil him, though. . .*

"Is all your crew Oceanian?" asked David. "The *Maelstrom*'s crew seemed to be from all over the Union."

"No," replied John, "but about half the crew is from my home sector. The Navy is divided on how to billet crews. Basically, there are two schools of thought—assignment by ship or by commanding officer. On the *Nikaljuk,* the two schools meet, or collide if you prefer. J'ali has worked on this ship for ten years and probably won't be assigned another command for at least a decade. He has a skeleton crew that stays with the ship at all times, mostly engineers whose greater experience with this ship gives them an edge. Then there's the crew that's assigned to me. Georgia, Theo, and Norman have all served on four different ships with me. There are a few others, some who've been with me longer, some shorter. Warwick was the latest addition, courtesy of Admiral Nick. Due to some regional political settlements with the Union, the *Nikaljuk* and its native crew are Turian, me and my crew are all Oceanian. So we get decent grub when we can, but we have to put up with J'ali's hot spices when the shipbound crew rebels."

"Ah, so he is the person to thank for last night's flaming curry?"

"You got it! Vicious stuff, isn't it?"

"Actually," said David, "I rather liked it. I've never had Turian food before. I'll have to ask Theo how it's made."

"The primary ingredient is rocket fuel, I believe," said John.

"I'll admit it was rather hot. By the way, what does 'Warwick's little gadget works' mean?"

"The *Nikaljuk* either has a working stealth shield or a navigator who's in league with the engineers. Quiet now, please. I can't play two games at once."

David sipped his coroco and smiled.

"No word from the Janella spacedock yet, sir," announced Suliman as Captain Huston relieved him at the con.

"How long have we been in hailing range?"

"Seven hours. At our current rate, we should make planetary orbit in half an hour. A bit long for sleeping on the job."

"Have you been calling them the whole time?"

"Just for the first quarter hour, then we got sick of it and just tried every twenty minutes or so."

"Hmm. . . Sounds like a general power failure. Can you get a visual of the station?"

"Visual scan on maximum magnification," announced Norman Clarke, the *Nikaljuk*'s pilot.

The forward screen showed the blue ball of a planet, complete with white streaks of water clouds. Orbiting high above it was a small splodge of shiny metal, reflecting the starlight of Janella's primary.

"I've not been able to find any emissions from the station whatsoever," continued Norman, monitoring his instruments as he spoke, "including the normal radio noise from their power plant. Not even emergency band signals, which they should be using if there's been a blackout. I'm also not getting any infrared signature other than reflected starlight, though it would be hard to pick up their waste heat even from this distance."

"Anything on the threat board?" asked Huston.

"Nope," replied Suliman. "The nearest action is at Rosanna, over two hundred parsecs from here."

"Hmph. Have you been playing with the would-be stealth shield?"

"No, sir. I had planned to call Janella, then flip it on and see if they could track us, but we haven't even got that far."

"Very well. You are relieved of the con."

"Thank you, sir," said Suliman, saluting sharply before walking off the bridge.

"I have a target solution, *Subahdar*," announced Ordinance Officer Mikoyan aboard the Kalganian Raider *Bristol.* "The ship has been hailing the spacedock without response or change of course. Passive scanners identify it as a lightweight military merchant craft."

"Military?" asked *Subahdar* Argen. "Are you sure it is alone?"

"There are no other ships in detection range."

"Hold your fire," instructed the *Subahdar.*

"Captain, I have engine emission from high and right, approaching from our stern," announced Norman.

"Can you identify it?" asked Captain Huston.

"Negative, Captain. I've never seen an engine plant signature like it."

"Display it, main screen."

Norman threw the image onto the front viewscreen, erasing the picture of the approaching planet.

"Battle stations!" snapped Huston. "Pilot, dive for the planet, maximum acceleration. Navigator, calculate a hyperbolic orbit for optimum gravitational boost from Janella. We've picked up a raider. . . "

"The merchant has detected us. It's diving for the planet, probably to get a gravitational assist," announced Mikoyan.

"Prepare to fire," commanded *Subahdar* Argen.

"Torpedo one is locked on target."

"Fire!"

"Inbound torpedo," announced Norman.

"Slingshot ready?" asked the Captain, slipping easily into the abbreviated speech necessary to handle the rapid pace of battle.

"Orbit computed, sir!" answered Georgia from the navigation console.

"Execute!"

"Done," replied Norman.

"Okay, folks," said the Captain as calmly as he could, "this is what you've all been trained for. We've been shot at before and lived. Stay calm and we'll do it again. Our friend seems to be on his own. We can lose him yet. . . "

Start taking your own advice, he thought to himself. *Stay calm! They're only trying to kill you. . .*

"Engineer Jones!" he ordered, the ship's computer automatically picking up the tone of voice and name to connect him with the engineer.

"Yes, sir?" asked the grill next to his command chair.

"We've picked up unwanted company," explained the Captain, "and I wouldn't mind disappearing. Is your stealth system up to the job?"

"Sir," replied an obviously frightened Jones, "it is only a partial shield, just as I told you. We will be much more difficult to detect at standard search frequencies, but not invisible. Off those search patterns, the stealth characteristics are much weaker. And any cloaking scramblers will be effective against us."

"Thank you, Senior Engineer Jones," said the Captain. "If this works, I'll confirm your promotion with the Navy." He straightened from leaning towards the grill, signalling the computer to cut the comlink. "Stand by, stealth. Lieutenant, compute an orbit change. . . "

"The merchant has gone behind the planet," said Mikoyan. "He'll be eclipsed for five minutes. I am continuing tracking via the torpedo's systems. It confirms the merchant is using the planet's gravity to boost him away from us. He will be in range for fifteen minutes after he re-emerges from the planet."

"How soon 'til the current torpedo makes contact?"

"Three minutes, *Subahdar,* but it will be eclipsed in thirty seconds."

"Set up a shot to intercept the *Federalli* ship when it comes around the planet, just in case the first torpedo does not finish it off."

Mikoyan bent over his instruments.

"Rough solution prepared. I can lock it in when the merchant comes out from behind the planet's disk. Ten seconds 'til torpedo eclipse."

"The planet has eclipsed the raider's contact with its torpedo. . . *now!*" announced Norman

"Release decoy and cloak, then execute course change," commanded Captain Huston.

"Decoy free and running," said Georgia.

"Stealth activated," announced Norman.

Outside the *Nikaljuk,* the invisible energy shields that warded off meteoriods from the ship's hull underwent a subtle change.

"Course change initiated. The raider will be visible in two minutes," said Norman. "The torpedo has acquired the decoy: Ninety seconds 'til impact." Then he turned from the his console to face the Captain. "That was close, sir."

"We'll be closer still soon. Stay calm, but remember: The decoy might have pulled the torpedo off us even without the stealth. Let's hope that little gadget really works. . . "

"The merchant is overdue to emerge from eclipse," said Mikoyan. "The torpedo must have destroyed it."

"Or the captain outmaneuvered it, then shifted to a lower orbit," countered Argen.

"Unlikely. That's a lot of fancy dodging for a freighter."

"Oh, very likely. You have never fought the *Federallies* before. Simpleton ship, maybe. But rarely a simpleton captain. I know them from battle. They are sneaky bastards with tricks you can only dream of. Bring us around the planet in a slow orbit and keep your finger near the trigger. . . "

The *Bristol*'s pilot began to move the ship around the shining blue globe of Janella.

"Further engine emission, sir," announced Georgia. "He's headed for a high orbit."

"Firing solutions?"

"Torpedoes one and two are locked."

"Fire both and set up a third."

"Firing. . . "

"Inbound torpedoes!" announced Mikoyan.

"*What!*"

"Two torpedoes, coming straight at us. I can't see the merchant. He must have a cloaking device. . . "

"A freighter? Impossible!"

"The ship does not appear on any of our scanners and the torpedoes were not launched blindly from behind the planet."

"Evasive maneuvers! Fire!"

"At what?"

"Two inbound torpedoes," announced Georgia. "They've fired back down our tracks."

"Running time?"

"Thirty seconds," answered Norman. "The Kalganians are jamming."

"New solution?"

"It's very rough, but it would give him a nudge," replied Georgia.

"Hold your fire."

Far behind the *Bristol*, a pair of silvery darts drove on through space, headed for the bright engine glow of the fleeing Kalganian. Inside their streamlined metal cases, instruments picked at the subtle signals of the jamming, trying to sort their true target from the dozens of shimmering ghosts thrown at them. At random intervals, each would shift frequency, momentarily clearing away the false images. Fooled for a moment, the first torpedo passed beneath the *Bristol,* harmlessly passing through the image it had perceived. Now, with the *Bristol* astern of it, the torpedo detected nothing and drove straight on, its undirected acceleration stopping only when its fuel supply was exhausted. Janella's primary had a new comet. In a hundred years, the metallic dart would fall in to the fiery star, adding in minuscule measure to the star's vast reserves of metallic gases.

The second torpedo was not fooled. It homed in on the exhaust of the fleeing Kalganian and ten metres short of the engine's vents, the warhead ignited. The entire torpedo was vapourized in an instant. The rear of the *Bristol* softened with the heat and flowed outward, driven by the internal pressure of the air within its hull. Further from the explosion, solid chunks came free and flew on random courses. The hull was punctured in at least a hundred places, completely overwhelming the safety systems. One flying piece ripped the side out of the *Bristol*'s main generator. Shipboard power failed completely. The few not yet killed by the force of the explosion found themselves breathing vacuum instead of air. Backup power sealed sections from venting their atmosphere into space, but

the punctures were so frequent that few of the bulkheads could hold long. Sections of the hull that had not been perforated were severely weakened. Under the continuing pressure of even the partial atmosphere remaining, they buckled and collapsed. In all the ship, only one section remained intact against the damage. And no crew were alive in that sealed tomb.

The Procurator touched the button on the trimensional recorder, deactivating it. Behind her, the sun had set and the night sky was visible. The dark was broken by myriads of shining stars.

"Gentlemen," she said, "my pardon for making you speak so long without a break. Would you care for some refreshments?"

The Doctor stood up from his chair and stretched.

"Yes, that would be nice. Iced water?" Then he arced his back, groaning slightly as he did so. "Old age is catching up with me. My body can't sit still for so long the way it used to."

"I feel a bit worn out myself," said Admiral Perry, "though I bet it has more to do with it being dark outside than anything else. The clock might say it's midday, but my body still thinks dark means time to sleep."

The Procurator smiled. "The price of having an office with a view on a planet where everything is underground. Museum's primary sets every twenty-seven and a quarter hours while planetary time goes full cycle in twenty-five. The last two days, I've just been finishing the day around sunrise."

"No time zones to worry about at least," said Dr. Drucker. "After a few years here, it's strange to visit a more traditional planet where the time is set by the cycles of their primary."

"Yes," she replied. "Museum is much more civilized that way. I can call someone on the other side of the planet in the morning and know I'm not interrupting their dinner. But I'm neglecting my job as host. A drink, Captain. . . sorry, Mr. Huston? Admiral Perry? A snack of some sort? Perhaps even one of those Oceanian delicacies. . . what did you call them? Jaffles?"

"That's correct," replied John, "though I've never heard them called a delicacy before. Some iced coroco would be nice."

"A tofaton for me, thanks," said Admiral Perry, "if that's possible."

"Our bartender is familiar with Herculean drinks," replied the Procurator. "I've yet to have a visitor ask for something it couldn't make. I think I will stick with local custom and have iced water. Pardon me a moment." With that, she moved to the door where she spoke with a guard.

"So that's how you did it," said Admiral Perry looking straight at John. "I heard you pulled some sleight-of-hand trick, but no one told me the details."

"Come again?" asked John. "I don't follow you."

"Your trick with the meteoroid shields at Janella. Neat."

"Actually, it wasn't my trick—as I said, it was the creation of a junior engineer. It was him, not me, that saved our skins."

"He's not a junior engineer, you know," said Admiral Perry with a hint of slyness.

"Not anymore," replied John. "I promoted him on the spot and the Navy confirmed it when we stopped at Maxel." Then he paused for a moment. "You know, it's funny, but I don't think he'll be a senior engineer any longer than he was junior. I've never had so. . . well, so *competent* an engineer who wasn't master rated at least. I won't be surprised if Warwick is assigned to a cruiser in a few years. I wonder how he came to have such a junior rank?"

"That's easy to explain," replied Admiral Perry smiling. "I gave it to him. Regulations required that he either start from the bottom and earn his promotions from there, or go to officer school for three years before getting rank. He and I both agreed that school would be silly or even disastrous when he'd know more than any of his instructors, so he started from the bottom. . . as a junior engineer on the *Nikaljuk.*

"You see, Warwick Jones was a master engineer just a year ago. But civil, not military, and permanently groundside. But after having been on the job for a few years, he discovered he wanted to work on ships, and he came to the Navy. The local recruiter was sharp enough to see that Jones was an unusual candidate and immediately passed him on to me.

"But Admiral or no, I can't bend rules to suit me. I had an eager young man qualified in all but logtime to be chief engineer on a cruiser. . . but without the ship time, there's no way I could even have put him in charge of a pleasure yacht. And giving him junior rank and placing him on a big ship would be disastrous, both for himself in lack of satisfaction, and for his bosses who couldn't help but notice his superior ability. A lot of people feel threatened when they have to give orders to a more capable officer. You can imagine what might happen in a situation like that.

"The obvious solution was to find a small ship, one large enough to interest him, but small enough that there would only be a couple of other engineers who might potentially get aggravated. Besides, mismatches in rank and ability are a little more common on certain small ships, or so you seem to allege."

"Oh?" said John in mock innocence.

"I recall you thinking yourself on par with me once upon a time," replied Admiral Perry jovially. "But I haven't heard anyone call you 'Admiral Huston' yet."

"Well, thank you," said John. "For a moment there, I thought you were implying that I was incompetent and overranked."

"Maybe I was. . . But I digress. I knew I wanted a small ship, preferably with an Oceanian crew since Jones hails from there, and your name came up on the top of my list.

"In many ways, your crew was the most ideal. Jones would be joining you just at the same time you were changing to the *Nikaljuk,* so only the ship's permanent crew would be more experienced with the ship and they would not be surprised to find a highly capable engineer unfamiliar with the shipboard routine.

"The deciding factor, though, was how you work with your crew. I've heard what happens on your ship, playing games with each other like you do. Some of the officers who've served with you have mentioned it. . . or worse yet, tried the same thing on unprepared commanders elsewhere. I find it all most undignified and quite out of character with the code of conduct expected of a naval officer. . . " and as he said this, Admiral Perry's voice grew stern, then suddenly softened, ". . . but quite a lot of fun. You should have seen the look on Byron Parry's face when he discovered one of his senior engineer's had wired the *Brach Y Pwull*'s bridge lights to start a strobe show every time someone used the officer's head! Our commanders could do with a few more safe surprises, and burning up the crew's energy on pranks improves discipline remarkably.

"So here I was with the perfect prank to pull on you, the original prankster himself. I told Jones to use his electrical wizardry on you whenever possible, then deliberately neglected to tell you anything about his background when he was assigned to you. And it all worked even better than I could have imagined. I warned Jones it might be quite a while before he got a promotion. . . and he came back from his first mission crowing victory in my face."

"Yes," said Captain Huston. "You managed to pull quite a joke on us all. Three quarters of my crew managed to get entangled in the attempt to find out if that gadget really was what Warwick claimed it was. J'ali thought it was the real thing while his chief engineer swore no such thing could be so small nor run on as little power as it did. And neither Warwick nor the device revealed a thing 'til we stumbled on the Kalganian raider. He save our lives. . . and the chief engineer *still* insisted it had to be a fake."

"I wouldn't blame him," said Admiral Perry. "While this is the first time I've ever been privy to what exactly happened, I've heard a few whispers in the halls of power. . . and they are just as mystified about how such a useful thing was never made or even thought of before. Jones seems to have a real genius.

"It's just sad that proving his device cost twenty crew their lives, even if they were Kalganian." And with that, Admiral Perry stood up wordlessly and stared out the window.

"Did you notice her ring?" whispered Dr. Drucker leaning into John's ear.

"What ring?" asked John, disoriented by the sudden change of conversation and Admiral Perry's reaction.

"The Procurator's," whispered Dr. Drucker in reply.

"It's a signet ring," answered John quietly, still looking at the melancholy Admiral. "All upper rank civil servants have one. Why are we whispering?"

"Look carefully at the design. . . " but the archaeologist cut himself off as the Procurator returned.

"The drinks will be here in a moment," she said, then turned to the Admiral. "Beautiful view, isn't it?"

"Yes, it is," said the Admiral, startled out of his silent concentration. "I always liked the night sky from Inner worlds. There are so many stars in the galactic plane. I grew up out on the Periphery where there are fewer nearby stars. Just the distant dusty white splodge of the galaxy."

As the Procurator talked with the Admiral, John caught a glimpse of her ring.

The design is familiar, he thought, *but it shouldn't be. Before this business with the* Nikaljuk, *I've never even heard of the Procurator of Museum. Where have I seen that design before?*

A soft bell tone sounded from the desk.

"Ah, our drinks are ready," said the Procurator. "Bring them in!"

One of the uniformed guards brought in the tray and placed it on the desk. He saluted sharply, then turned on his heel and left. Just as he did, John recalled where he had seen the signet design before. . .

How can the Procurator of Museum be wearing the seal of the Federal Commander in Chief unless. . .

"That's the imprint of the Secretary-General!" whispered John. "The only person who can wear it is. . . "

"Plotting something, you two?" asked Admiral Perry. "Come look at the view. Oceania can't boast a sky like this."

"True," said John, coming to the window. "Oceania's in an intermediate sector. Enough stars to dazzle the visitors from the Periphery, but so much less so than the Inner worlds that the ambassadors consider our sky bland. What about your home, Dr. Drucker?"

"My home is gone," Dr. Drucker replied flatly.

John cursed himself inwardly for not remembering. The room was silent for several minutes while they drank and looked out the window. John wrinkled up his nose at the iced coroco. *Every time I ask for iced coroco offworld, they mess it up.* He had been handed a glass of refrigerated coroco with an ice cube floating in it. On any of the Oceanian worlds, it would have been served blended with frozen cream instead of with ice. *It's easy to forget they don't serve it properly elsewhere.*

"Well," said the Procurator finally, "we should get back to business. But before we do, I have some trimens I want you to see." She turned to her desk and pulled out a set of prints from a drawer. She passed them to John.

"These were taken from. . . well, I'll let you guess."

John looked at the first on the pile. It showed a silvery spacedock orbiting a blue planet with the characteristic white streaks of water vapour clouds. The spacedock seemed tiny there, dwarfed by the ball beneath it. Even from as far as the trimenograph had been taken, something did not look right. There appeared to be a gash in the outer hull and several of the protruding arms of the dock appeared snapped, others warped, and there might even have been some missing. John was not familiar enough with space engineering to tell, but from his experience of approaching docks, he knew roughly what they tended to look like. This was wrong. He handed the print to Dr. Drucker.

The next shot was taken much closer and showed the damage much more clearly. Smaller pock marks showed in the hull and the gash now appeared to have ripped through almost all of the hull. Plates of metal were twisted and distorted, bulging outwards where they had been softened by heat and yielded slightly to the pressure of an atmosphere behind them. Other sections of the hull had been heated so fiercely that the metal had vapourized, exposing the interior to the cold vacuum of space.

The next print showed the interior of the dock. There were bodies. . .

John stopped looking. He knew what he would find. It was the space dock at Janella. The close up images looked similar to the brief shots the *Nikaljuk* had made before they had been ordered to Maxel. The Kalganians had gutted and destroyed the entire station, killing all the personnel. Intellectually, he had known that already. They could hardly have left a ship to ambush the *Nikaljuk* with an operational space dock in Federal hands at their back. But he had not thought further. The few brief images caught by the *Nikaljuk* were not taken close up and he had not examined them closely before handing them over to the commander at Maxel. He had not thought what that destruction would look like. . .

"How did you get these?" asked Dr. Drucker. "These pictures are from Janella. The *Nikaljuk* got attacked by the folks that did this and even we haven't seen these before."

"You've both admired my ring," replied the Procurator with a slight smile, "so you know my position. I have access to such

things." She leaned forward and took the prints from Admiral Perry as he finished with them.

"But you are wrong," she continued. "These images are not from Janella. They were presented to me by the ambassador of Turnay after his release. This is what the Federal Navy did to the space station at Turnay two weeks later. However, the pictures taken by the *Haiphong* at Janella are remarkably similar. It seems the tactics of evil Kalganians differ little from our own. . . I can show you the images from Janella too if you wish."

"No, thank you," said John with a hint of firmness in his voice that conveyed certainty.

"Why are you showing us this?" asked Admiral Perry.

"I will come to that in the end," replied the Secretary-General.

"If you're the Secretary-General. . . " began Dr. Drucker, "who has been the Procurator of Museum for the last five years? I mean, this is the first time I've ever had even a hint that you weren't in command here. And what are you doing here? What's this inquiry really about?"

"I have been the Secretary-General of the Federal Galactic Union for ten years, ever since my father passed the title on to me. I've also been the Procurator of Museum for the last five of those years.

"I had always dreamed of having a job like this, but never thought that holding the federal scepter would ever let me. Then there was the assassination attempt by the Kalganian Intelligence Service. It was not the first, but it came within an ace of succeeding and no other threat to my person had ever been so serious. I went into hiding, eventually coming to Museum when the previous procurator resigned.

"It has been the perfect disguise. My first years of office were anonymous enough that I have not been recognized save by those I wished and as Procurator of Museum, seeing my face in any corner of the galaxy is perfectly in place. Whenever and wherever I am needed in my role as Secretary-General, there is sure to be a nearby historian, anthropologist, or archaeologist to justify my official appearance. The government on Throne is a mock structure to draw the fire of the assassins and quell the doubts of all but the most inquisitive."

"But you've just revealed yourself to us!" said Dr. Drucker. "Why? And why does our expedition to First World merit your attention?"

"The most important reason in the Galaxy, Doctor. But let me deal with that when we finish this recording. . . " and so saying, she restarted the recorder on the table.

Jesse Allen is an overworked, underloved graduate student at the Universityof Iowa. In his copious free time, he pretends to teach, do research, keep in touch with the few friends he has left, write science fiction, weave, and have a social life. He is currently working on a thesis on Radio Emission From X-ray Binary Stars (Read as "How to get to Australia at the U.I.'s expense" – a preliminary feasibility study made it to New Mexico.) He can be reached at jsa@vesta.physics.uiowa.edu during those rare times Vesta actually is working.

Earth as an Example *will be condluded next issue.*

DOORWAY FROM DARKNESS

by Christopher Kempke

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A cry of human anguish tore me from my sleep, a bloodcurdling scream which lingered as my vision cleared, dying to a series of sobs.

By the time I was on my feet, my now-awake brain had identified the horrible sounds as my baby crying for its dinner, considerably less terrible than some strange dream had led me to believe. Pulling my mind together, I stumbled to the kitchen, opened the refrigerator, and looked apprehensively within. I am not the best of housekeepers, and my wife is less so, but I located the milk without resorting to a seeking spell, and filled the bottle with practiced skill. A small spell warmed it, and I was on my way to the bedroom in less than a minute.

Erika was sitting up in the crib, her crying stopped now as it was clear that she had my attention. The scent which assailed my nostrils as I bent over her nearly brought tears to my eyes. The milk could wait.

Sal insisted there was something intrinsically wrong with changing diapers by magic, but Sal wasn't around, and her quirks were not of immense concern to me at the moment. The diapers disintegrated at my mental urging, and fresh ones slid from the box to my hand at my call. Erika was of course delighted; her age was not yet sufficient to notice anything wrong with diapers levitating; with luck she never would. I am probably the most powerful wizard of the Web, the only likely competition being my wife Sal. Erika would probably surpass us both when she reached the age that we could teach her. The diaper catastrophe solved, I urged the bottle on my child and helped her with the apparently difficult task of keeping it in her mouth.

When the phone rang some ten minutes later, Erika was deeply asleep. Sal would have accused me of a sleep spell, but since I could do them without gestures or words, it would be difficult to prove. In any case, Sal was on the other end of the line when I picked it up.

"Carl? I just got a call from the police station. Jeremy says you should go to the morgue and ask about the dead wino they brought in last night. He sounded scared."

Jeremy was one of the few people who knew our abilities. Wizards are rare on Earth, the Mages' Council requiring secrecy of them. However, I've been known to train the occasional person in a few small spells, in case I should need their help in the future. Jeremy was such a one.

I pick my people well and train them better; it would take more than a small problem to frighten them. And large problems could take more than a few minutes for me to solve.

"All right. Can you come home and watch Erika?"

"I'll be there in half an hour." There was a click on the other end of the line.

Better than her word, Sal was home in twenty minutes. Her long black hair flew wild as the business suit she wore shifted and changed into more casual clothing. I cast the reverse spell a few minutes later and was out the door.

The Dodge truck in the driveway shone like new; Sal must have had it washed earlier in the morning. I hopped behind the wheel and was halfway into the city when I realized I had no clue where the morgue was. A phone booth rectified this fairly quickly; there was a brief delay until I found its listing under "Funeral Services." I meditated on the oddly-placed listing until I walked in the door of the morgue.

"Carl Moonsente. I have an appointment with the director." I used my real name on the off chance that Jeremy actually had made me an appointment. The barely audible word of command at the end of the sentence was on the more likely chance that he had not.

He hadn't; the technician smiled awkwardly. "I'm afraid the director doesn't actually work here, he's at the office downtown. No one told us you were coming, but if you'll tell me what you'd like. . . "

"I need to see the wino you brought in last night. I understand there's something a bit. . . " I paused meaningfully, not knowing my meaning, "unusual about him."

The technician knew. "That's for sure. Come along."

He led me into the interior, slid a tray out of the wall, pulled back the cloth covering the body.

It looked dead, but little more than that, save that the eyes were sunken more than I might expect. I looked encouragingly at the technician.

"So what do you know so far?" I had no clue what was unusual about this corpse, but if I alerted the technician to my ignorance he'd probably develop a suspicion that would take more than a word of command to undo. Luckily, he was a naively trusting soul.

"Only what you do – his brain is missing completely. Not a cell of it left so far as we can tell. And there's no mark on him anywhere. It's spooky, is all I can say. But what's even spookier. . . " His voice lowered. "We brought in another one just like him, from the same alley, just this afternoon. And Central had one last week, from the same place."

"Any thoughts on what it might be?" I was as clueless as they were. It was quite clear why Jeremy had given Sal a call.

"I think it might be some kind of disease that acts really fast, dissolving the brain."

I shook my head. "Even if it dissolved, it would have to go somewhere."

He nodded, shrugged. I decided not to push my luck.

"Well, thank you for your time. You've been a great help in

my investigation. We'll let you know what we find out." He didn't ask who "we" were, which was fine with me since it was a lie anyhow. He pushed the corpse back into the wall with something like relief. I have to admit I wasn't terribly thrilled either.

Early evening found Sal and I at the alley where the bodies had been found. It had been cordoned off with yellow "police investigation area, do not cross" tape, which we ignored. The alley itself made a sharp bend, hiding its contents from view of the street. If muggers could have designed an alley, this would be it. In our case, though, the lack of visibility was of considerable aid. As soon as we could not be seen, we began protection spells.

Protection magic is a strange art. The usual case is to "weave" a mesh of the particular protections you need; when the shield is triggered, it flashes a metallic blue and prevents the entry of whatever you have it guarding against. However, Sal and I weren't sure what we needed protection against, so we each put up a "generic" shield, literally millions of protection shields interlaced, allowing only air, some light, and our clothing to contact us. This gave us a cobalt blue aura as thousands of dust molecules, small insects, television and radio waves, and the like were repelled. To an observer, we would glow brilliantly. The more serious problem, of course, was the effort required to keep up such an arsenal of protections. Because of a magical accident earlier in my life I could cast spells on some sort of "universal" energy source, but all other wizards, Sal included, became tired quickly as the spell sapped their strength. I could not maintain her shield; for my power to get to her she would have had to allow magical penetration of her shield, and it was not at all clear that magic wasn't exactly what we needed protection against. There was a definite time limit to her participation in this investigation.

The glow helped by providing illumination, bathing the whole place in an eerie glow. I am, to understate the matter considerably, not comfortable in the dark; I added a beam of pure white light, casting it here and there.

Down the alley from us was a stack of garbage, obscuring a small section of the alley; the rest was clearly visible, and just as clearly empty. I gestured to Sal, she nodded and moved back a bit. I gathered energy, wrapped it carefully around the garbage stack, and lifted it twenty feet in the air. Sal wrapped a binding spell around mine. The instant the stack was secure, I flashed my light back to the now-revealed alley.

We were clearly not the first people to ignore the police warning tape. A young man wearing a black leather jacket lay on his back in the alley, hands covering his face. He didn't more as I approached, a mental scan gave me nothing. He was dead.

Sal beat me to him, pulled back his hands, stiffened suddenly. Something small and dark flashed between them, a piece of night attempted to grab onto her face.

It was a bad choice; Sal's reaction was instantaneous; a blast of fire that wrapped the small speck and hurled it toward the alley wall.

I reached it a moment later, dousing the flames with a thought. In my light, the creature resembled nothing more than a piece of black fluff, about a hand-width wide. Sal joined me at my side. "Looks like a tribble."

"Indeed. It appears dead now, though." I confirmed this before letting my protections drop. I picked it up carefully, though there was little enough left after Sal's attack.

It was unlike any creature I has seen in my fairly wide experience. Teeth protruded from beneath, and a gentle static flowed about it, causing its singed hairs to rise and fall despite its lifeless state. Of eyes I could find nothing left, suggesting a magical tracking of its victims. The only thing certain about the body was that it felt somehow wrong, carrying an aura of places just around the corner but infinitely far away. It was clearly a creature of another world, and I needed to know where it came from. I sat down, holding it carefully in my hand.

Closing my eyes, I let my mind drift. Darkness flowed over and through me, spinning and resolving into tiny, star-like points of light. I waited until the stars filled the sky, then lowered my mental vision to the ground. A river of stars flowed by me, millions of tiny glowing dots, swirling like eddies of water. I splashed with my mind, briefly disrupting the flow, then again, a complicated pattern, each break almost immediately vanishing into the river's course. After a time, I waited.

Another presence joined me–a council wizard who had served his apprenticeship with me. I called him Fireflower, as did everyone else, not only because his real name was difficult to pronounce, but in honor of a beautiful pyrotechnic display which had been his first mastered spell.

Fireflower took a few moments to orient himself, then spoke in eloquent, wizardly fashion.

"Whatcha need this time?"

I flashed him a mental picture of the creature we had killed. "Do you know what this is? Killed one of them on Earth, don't think it belongs here."

"It certainly doesn't. Eats brains, no? The Council discovered them a couple years ago trying to open a faster gate to Carcigena. They're nasty little things, almost completely unintelligent, and nearly impossible to put a control spell on. We just slammed the gate shut and blasted the suckers that got through. Not before they'd killed a couple of the guards, though. Certainly not intelligent enough to open gateways themselves. Somebody summoned it, sure as. . . " he paused, searching for an idiom.

I let my breath out in a short sigh. The last thing I wanted to deal with was a hostile Mage. The last one had almost destroyed the Council and several worlds. "Who isn't there right now, Fireflower? One of the Council gone bad again?"

"Everyone's accounted for, Carl. We've been in meeting for several days. But there's a much more likely explanation. Opening the gate to their world was trivial; even a non-Council wizard could open it. Maybe it could even be done by accident."

I smiled at the term "non-council wizard." In the past such a person would have been called a renegade, but I was not technically a Council wizard myself, and Fireflower wasn't going to offend me. Even if our friendship hadn't dictated politeness, the Mages' Council owed me too great a debt for taking care of the aforementioned rogue wizard.

"You think a normal, off-the-street, untrained person could do it? I'd be more inclined to think wizard."

"Me, too, but keep possibilties open. We'd probably know about any practicing wizards beyond the medicine-man stage.

What are you going to do about it?"

"I guess I'll keep a watch on gate openings to Earth. Ask the Council not to come here for a while – I don't want to be tracking the wrong people."

"Are you and Sal really powerful enough to monitor an entire world?"

"Of course not. That's why you're going to come help us."

Fireflower gave a short laugh. "Teach me to open my mouth. Need anybody else?"

"Not if they're in Council. Although what you people find to talk about for five days a month escapes me entirely."

"Mostly rumors about you."

It wasn't a surprise. "Probably as common as Elvis's picture in the tabloids."

"They'd still like you to come back, you know."

"I know. But I'm a father now, and I can't afford to be off gallivanting about the Web. If Erika wants apprenticeship, I'll be back when she's twelve. Until then, I'll keep my red, thank you." Red robes were the mark of an "independent" wizard. Sal wore the black-and-silver, but was barred from council meetings because of her relationship with me.

"I didn't really expect you to change your mind. I'll meet you at your house in a few hours."

"Make sure it's more than two. If you beat us there, you'll scare the living daylights out of the babysitter."

I got a faint affirmative, and Fireflower's mental presence faded from the river.

I opened my eyes. Sal was sitting across the alley from me, her face a mask of boredom. She brightened when I spoke.

"Fireflower recognized it, doesn't think it could have gotten here without a summoning or a gate accident. I'll tell you about it on the way home."

Fireflower made an impressive entrance. A darkening of the air in my living room was the first sign, followed a moment by the "whoosh" of air sliding between two worlds. Light spun on darkness, and Fireflower was there. He wore silver and black robes, his ebony skin almost lost in it's folds.

Erika was delighted, reaching out to tug on his robes. Fireflower adjusted his balance and swept her into his arms, barely managing a nod at Sal and myself until after a major conversation with my delighted child. From somewhere in his robes he produced a small, brightly colored rattle, brilliant hues magically swirling in time to its tiny musical notes.

After an interval, he seated himself, not relinquishing his hold on the child. His grin faded somewhat as he faced us.

"You know this may be a pointless effort? There are, what, five billion people on this planet? And we're supposed to pick out a single wizard?"

Sal smiled. "You enjoy a challenge, remember? Besides, the person we're looking for is probably in the vicinity of the city."

"Which doesn't exactly help. New York has a sizeable population itself." Fireflower shrugged. "But then, I have nothing better to do."

"It's a good thing you're so committed to the cause," I said cheerfully. "Shall we begin?"

He nodded. "Will Erika behave herself?"

"Usually not. I'll put her away." I lifted her from Fireflower's arms, carried her to the bedroom.

"Don't you DARE put a sleep spell on her!" Sal's voice carried from the living room, along with Fireflower's chuckle. Shaking my head, I put Erika in the crib. Obeying the letter if not the spirit of the law, I wove a sleep spell around the rattle, placing it in the crib next to her.

Almost immediately, she picked it up, dropping into a deep slumber a few seconds later. Satisfied, I re-arranged the blankets to be sure she'd be warm enough, then returned to the living room.

Sal and Fireflower sat on the floor, their eyes closed, their breathing deep and regular. I joined them, careful not to disturb their meditation. Moments later I was with them in a completely different sense.

Our minds slid out over the city, looking for unusual activity. The actual spells were not complicated, but the process was. We were looking for emanations of power or a gateway to another world. Unfortunately the background noise in a major city is considerable.

Three times I felt an outflow of magic, three times tracked it to someone dying, their life flowing out in a burst of energy. In no case was the energy gathered, rather it escaped into the general environment. This particular feature of human death was abused in innumerable worlds of the Web; since personal stored of energy were quickly depleted, killing a human or other intelligent creature released a sizable amount of energy which could be harnessed by a wizard. The Mages' Council expressly forbid such activities, of course, but they happened nonetheless. It was just one of the myriad ways in which my profession makes a nuisance of itself across the multitude of worlds.

I kept looking. After an hour or so, I felt Sal's mind touch mine, Fireflower's a bit later.

"Find anything?" I asked.

"Only that you live in a particularly violent city." Fireflower was a inured to such things, but the disgust was still present in his voice. "There's enough energy out there to disintegrate a small mountain, but no one's grabbing it."

"I found another one of those mind-eating creatures. I killed it." Sal's voice was weary. "I'm going to roam out a bit further for the next hour." Her contact shivered, vanished.

"Probably not a bad idea," Fireflower said. "I'll help her. You keep checking the city proper." He broke contact, too.

I slid back into the city, following a couple of likely leads which led nowhere. I was just about to start my search over when a brilliant neon arrow flashed in my mind. I followed its path out of town, past the suburbs, to a small forested grove littered with tiny mind-patterns, all matching the mind-eater we'd killed earlier. Something else was there, too, the subtle hint of alien power.

I snapped my eyes open. "Nice job, Sal! Let's go." Both Sal and Fireflower were already on their feet.

"What do we do about Erika?"

I considered. It would be too dangerous to bring her with us, but there was little chance of getting a babysitter at this moment in time.

"Monitor that power for a while. I'll take her to day-care."

Sal looked at me strangely, then shrugged.

I stepped into the bedroom, lifted Erika from the crib, shook her gently to wake her up. Pulling her close to me, I pulled darkness around myself.

Through the enveloping darkness thin red lines could be seen. We drifted through space, past several of the lines. I found the one I wanted, followed it until it began to wrap over itself in a huge spiral, forming a tunnel several times my own height. We flew down the tunnel, faster and faster, until a dot of white light at the end grew to engulf us, and I stepped onto a stone floor in a room with no doors.

A large stone table filled the majority of this vast room, around it were seated fifty or sixty men, all dressed uniformly in black and silver robes. My own attire had changed during the transit to flowing red robes. I had also changed Erika's diapers to match.

The men looked up as one, whatever they had been discussing a moment before gone. I waited for them to make their move. They didn't. Seconds grew into a distinctly uncomfortable pause.

Finally, the man at the head of the table stood, slowly. His name was Miren. He had a flowing white beard, wrinkled skin, and eyes that could only be described as dead. A recent tragedy had deprived him of both his wizard's immortality and much of his power; he was emotionally and psychologically crippled. Still, he was Miren, worshipped as a god on eight worlds, head of the Mages' Council of Somdor, the man whose words were the final judgement of any wizard who dared cross the Council's wishes. He was the man who had brought me, a homeless orphan, to another world, and trained me to be the wizard I was now. As he looked at me now though, it was unclear what he thought.

The men around the table waited. They were the most powerful group ever assembled, wizards from two hundred Web worlds, judge, jury, and all too often executioner of governments and people on almost a thousand of those worlds. Their combined might could remove a planet from existence, create a new form of life, summon forth or create nearly any object imaginable. I was not sure they'd be equal to the task I needed, however.

"I need you to take care of Erika for a few hours."

Miren stopped his forward motion, shook his head twice as if to clear his ears, and considered.

"Okay." A voice spoke from the table rather than Miren. I turned.

J.R.R Tolkein forever changed Earth's perceptions of wizards. Gandalf was a tall, white-bearded old man in flowing robes, carrying a bent staff of rune-inscribed wood. I have only known one wizard like that in my entire experience, and it was he who stood. However, Antony bowed and grinned crookedly at me, ruining the image entirely.

I considered in turn. Antony's mind had been fractured trying to close a gate to a hostile world known as Caligan, and though he had made some progress since then, he was still prone to fits of bizarre behavior. His malady was one no amount of magic would ever heal; he had been touched by intelligences so alien to our own that full rational thought of either form would now forever be denied him. On the other hand, the entire Council would be watching him, and I hoped I would only be gone for an hour or two. Antony needed my trust as much as I needed a babysitter. I carefully handed Erika to him.

"She's been fed, so you just have to keep her out of trouble for a while. I'll be back in a few hours." Antony nodded as he always did when receiving instructions. From previous experience, I knew there were almost even odds that he understood. Still not sure of my choice, I turned and pulled the darkness of the Web about me just as Miren finally spoke.

I'm not sure what he said, but it might have been "Good luck, Carl."

Sal and Fireflower were waiting impatiently in the driveway. Sal's eyes were closed, they opened at my footsteps. "The power source is getting stronger. I'm fairly sure that it's a gate of some sort, and it's opening again."

"Then let's get on it." I hopped into the truck, Fireflower behind me. Sal sat next to me, closed her eyes, and pointed west. I turned the keys and we were off.

It's worth mentioning that I didn't have a clue how to drive a car. I was taken from Earth as a child, and returned only recently as a wizard; I never had any particular need for a driver's license in the worlds where I spent most of my apprenticeship years. I drove with a combination of Sal's help, some limited experience, and magic. The result wasn't too bad, and it usually got me where I wanted to go.

This time I got only five miles from home before a siren sounded behind me. Cursing softly, I pulled the side of the road. Beside me, Sal opened her eyes and spoke softly.

"Make this fast – that gate is fully open."

A police officer walked up to the window, which I rolled down.

"What's the problem officer?" I noticed his gun was in his hand.

"You're the problem. I clocked you at almost two hundred miles an hour. Would you step out of the car please?"

I heard Sal gasp at the number, and ignored her.

I pointed back onto the road suddenly. "Officer! That car's speeding! You'd better catch it! I'm not important!" I placed a word of command at the end of each sentence.

He struggled with the magic, but my claim was too ludicrous; he broke the enchantment and raised his gun.

"I said out of the car, now!"

Sal's eyes were wide, and I doubted that it was the policeman who caused such an effect. Something was happening with the gate, and I was wasting time.

I reached out quickly, almost carelessly with my mind, shaping a ball of flames and heat, pulled it into this world and rolled it under the unoccupied police car behind me.

The explosion was spectacular; spectacular enough that the officer turned suddenly to look at the remains of his vehicle. I put the truck into gear with my hand while pushing it forward with my mind. By the time the officer knew what had happened he was clearly visible in my rear-view mirror. He chose not to shoot because of the traffic on the road.

"What's up?" I asked Sal.

"I don't know. I've never felt anything like that gate before. It's either very large, or it's opening across a very large distance. In any case, it's only barely under control. Whoever's opening it doesn't know what he's doing."

Fireflower made a few quick gestures, but I heard a siren again before I could tell what he was doing.

"Don't worry about it," Fireflower said. "It's us. I put a police-car disguise on the truck. It's not very good – I've not seen too many of them. But at 200 miles an hour you're going to be a blur anyway."

Sal's knuckles were white.

"Do you want me to slow down?"

"Yes, but we don't have time. Turn north as soon as you're able." She began weaving protection spells around the truck as I scooted in and out of traffic lanes. Cars in front of me were getting out of my way as best they could, though by the time they heard my sirens or saw my lights I was almost on top of them anyway.

A highway turnoff went north; I took it. Vehicles scattered.

"Just like an arcade game," I commented. Sal let out a sound that wasn't quite a moan.

"I don't want to see a flashing 'Game Over,' Carl." She cast a short spell, pushing a car in front of me to the left lane. I took the newly opened lane and sped by.

"Keep that up. Fireflower, navigate!"

He was already doing so. Following his direction, I turned back to the west, depositing me on a little-used road. We were clear of the city now, entering a forest. The road lost its paving, began to turn frequently. I was forced to slow down.

"North again!"

I looked, but could see no road leading the direction I needed to go. "How far?"

Fireflower considered. "About a mile."

I brought the truck to a stop on the side of the road. "Let's do it on foot."

We stepped out of the truck and entered the forest at as quickly as possible in the dark. None of us suggested a light, we knew too little about what was ahead to advertise our position so blatantly. Almost simultaneously, we put up protection spells, toning them to the maximum performance we could achieve without glowing. Sal's clothing shimmered briefly, weaving itself into insubstantiality, then to silver-and-black mage's robes. None of us ceased our half-run into the forest.

Fireflower, in better shape than I, fanned out to the left, his black skin and robes causing him to vanish almost instantly into the forest. Sal noticed and increased her pace, silently disappearing into the forest on my other side.

I slowed to give them time to get ahead, and immediately wished I hadn't. I'm not fond of darkness at any time; deep in unknown woods facing a definitely magical and probably hostile force, I was positively terrified. Every patch of shadow seemed to me to hide a living form, clumps of darkness seemed to move at the edges of my vision, freezing into immobility as I turned my head. Although the night was warm, my skin felt cold, the slightest contact of the wind like the pressure of an unseen hand.

Behind me, a twig snapped. Perhaps it was one of the "sounds of nature" that woodland experts refer to when they're in safe, well-lit houses at high noon; now it was the sound of a danger I didn't care to face. My pace went from a slow walk to a full-out run.

Four minutes is a speedy time for the mile run on level, unobstructed ground. I covered the distance through dense forest in just more than six , aided by magic and fright. Tree limbs snapped out of my way as I ran, undergrowth tore itself from the earth, pulling aside to let me path.

One root failed to observe my magical compulsion; by the coincidence that seems to be the only inflexible natural law, my foot met it. My body lifted, fell, and slid in a brilliant flash of cobalt blue to the edge of a clearing.

A bonfire flamed within. On the other side a giant cross was set into the ground upside down, a decapitated goat suspended from it in a position no one would mistake as natural. Forty or fifty men in white robes stood around the clearing, thirteen of them in a smaller ring around the fire and an alter. One of the thirteen held a curved sacrificial knife, and was bent over a boy of perhaps ten lying on the alter.

Every one of them turned to look at me as I flashed. Unhurt, I got quickly to my feet.

"Good evening, Gentlemen. Someone ordered a pizza?"

The one with the knife narrowed his eyes. "Get him!"

Subtlety, I determined, was not this man's strong point. Several of the robed men started toward me. I held my ground and spoke.

"No, get him!" I pointed, and added a word of command. As one, the body of men turned and charged the one with the knife.

He looked confused a moment, then raised his arms to his sides and spoke a few words. The might have been backwards Latin; on the other hand they may have been complete gibberish. In any event, the flames behind him roared to new heights. His attackers froze, looking around in some confusion.

The Mage's Council has hotly debated the existence of God and Satan. It was generally accepted by the council that though either might exist, they tended not to interfere frequently in the affairs of men. I considered it unlikely that the High Priest had actual help from the Prince of Darkness; still it was undeniable he had tapped some source of power.

I used their confusion as best I could. "Leave us! Return to your homes and never come back here!" The syllables afterward rang with uncontrolled power; I was not attempting subtlety any longer. Anyone who might have wished to confront me changed his mind quickly. The clearing emptied except for the High priest, the twelve others in his circle, and the boy on the altar.

I turned my attention to the last of these. A couple seconds observation convinced me that the boy was still breathing; the red line of blood down his chest appeared to be superficial.

"Let the child go." I strode forward as I talked; obviously not the move the priest expected. But he held his ground.

"You misunderstand; he is one of ours. I have cut his chest, placed the devil in him. He now knows and will obey his master in this world." As if to confirm this, the boy stood up and stepped to the priest's side.

I shook my head. "You shall not have this child. I claim him in the name of our Father in heaven." I slipped a full protection spell around the boy, enhancing mine at the same time until we both glowed with a brilliant blue aura.

The priest attempted to reach through the spell, failed. He turned to me with an anger like none I had ever seen.

"Your power is as nothing before the might of Lucifer! Your death shall only begin your punishment, and the child shall be mine regardless!"

He stretched out his hands toward me, and flames poured forth from them. My shield held, but just barely. I struggled to bring it back while the fire roared around me. This guy was playing with more power than I had expected.

The flames died, and I carefully stood as I had before they had begun, to make it appear that they had no effect whatsoever. One of the robed men slammed into me from the side;

he stumbled away from a brilliant blaze of blue, holding a broken arm and just beginning to scream. His natural mental protections dropped from the pain; I pulled a sleep spell over his mind, and he slumped to the ground.

"Next?" I said casually, wondering desperately how long it would take Sal and Fireflower to get here. Another of the robed men charged; I changed his robes to concrete and he stopped before he got close.

The priest walked toward me with his knife held in front of him. I let him. He swung his knife, I instinctively raised my arm to block the blow; it probably saved my life. The blade passed through my protection spell as though it weren't there, bit deeply into my arm.

Arrogance has gotten me in trouble before; this time it was going to get me killed if I didn't move. I dropped to the ground, rolled away. One of the acolytes, encouraged by his leader's success, drew his own knife and attempted to run it through me. I didn't play games; the acolytes robes blazed suddenly into intense flames. He dropped the knife and ran screaming from the clearing.

I grabbed the knife with both hands, stretched it into a sword, stood. I attempted to ignite the high priest's robes as well, but failed. We both took a fighting stance as the remaining acolytes formed a ring around us.

I took a good swing at him. My swordsmanship is nothing to write home about, but my weapon was longer than his by a good eighteen inches, and I was apparently faster. Still, he managed to block the strike, and my poorly-fashioned sword shattered at the shock.

A blue-white flash of electrical energy darted from somewhere outside the ring, jumping down the priest's blade and slamming into his body with enough force to drive him backwards through the ring of acolytes, stopping against the altar. I didn't need Sal's shout of triumph to tell me that help had arrived.

The acolytes turned to face this new threat; four of them drew their ubiquitous knives and tried to run her down. I saw two of them encased in ice and a third one fending off a wooden staff that appeared out of nowhere to beat his head; then I jerked my attention back to my own aggressors. The five remaining acolytes decided to give the attack one more try. I selected one, grappled him to the ground, exchanged my image for his and let his compatriots beat him senseless while I slid out of the mass of men. A few gestures more and the ground began to swallow them up, stopping only when each man was trapped to his waist.

Satisfied, I turned my attention back the priest. He had survived the shock, and aside from his now-straightened hair looked none the worse for wear. His eyes held raw murder, with that same strange intensity I had noted earlier. As soon as my image returned to normal he raised his arms in my direction.

Some have said I don't learn from experience; this is blatantly false. I was already on the ground and rolling aside when the flames cut the air above me. I gathered my own fire and returned the gesture. It parted around him harmlessly, but the boulder that Sal rolled through his path didn't. He went down in a tangle of limbs. Sal was on him in a moment, a knife in her hands from somewhere.

Above her head, a pale sphere shimmered for a moment in the firelight, and a multitude of tiny voices filled my mind for a fraction of a second. Moments later the sphere shimmered again, larger and only inches from Sal's head.

"Sal! Dive!" Even as I spoke she looked up and realized her danger. The high priest took this opportunity to kick her feet out from under her. They went down together. I lifted a knife from the ground and ran toward them, keeping beneath the flashing sphere.

The high priest wrested Sal's knife from her and swung. Sal rolled aside, the knife tangling itself in her robes. Before the priest could recover it, my own knife had slit his throat. I don't kill easily, I could see no choice this time.

Sal and I scurried away from the growing sphere as voices began again in my mind. I pushed them aside with some force.

We had made it about twenty feet from the sphere when I blacked out.

Darkness filled my mind, a swirling, complete darkness of complete comfort. And somewhere in the darkness a million tiny voices were calling out to me, urging indecipherable actions. . .

My eyes snapped open at Sal's slap. She held my cut wrist in one hand, was weaving spells to stop the profuse bleeding. The high priest's knife wound slowly sealed itself, then closed.

"You've lost a lot of blood," she said with concern in her voice. "I don't have time to do better than just stopping it now– you'll have to be careful."

I nodded and looked over her shoulder. The sphere was no longer flickering; instead it had grown to almost fifteen feet in radius, a blood-red sphere with black "cracks" that slid around it in apparently random patterns, vanishing and reforming slowly. And directly beneath it, bathed in a light blue aura, stood the boy from the altar. He was looking up into the sphere, his mouth open slightly. There was a brilliant cobalt light pouring off the protection spell, but it was weakening quickly.

A ball of silver and black rolled under the sphere. Fireflower grabbed the unresisting boy in his arms just as the protection failed altogether and carried him rapidly to where Sal and I sat waiting.

"What the hell is that thing?" Fireflower's black skin shone with a pale red in the light of the gigantic sphere.

"Caligan gate," Sal and I said together. I continued solo.

"The creatures on the other side 'speak' directly to minds. They cause death in the best case. Those less lucky go insane. Antony met one. . . " I let the sentence trail off. All of us knew Antony's madness. "If that gate opens completely, we're in serious trouble. So is this world, for that matter."

"The priest must have opened it by accident. None of the usual controls are there. I can't get my mind around it. Every time I try I hear voices laughing at me." Sal's voice was exhausted, her body looked worse.

"Shit!" I said suddenly. "Sal! Get that boy out of here! We can't protect him and still have any hope of getting that gate closed."

I looked toward the various immobilized acolytes in the clearing. They had not had any protection; it was clearly too late. The two that still moved did so only to pull themselves into a ball and whimper. Sal grabbed the boy and fled the clearing.

Fireflower still looked relatively fresh; I felt like I would pass out again at any moment. I pictured a two-foot candy

bar in my mind, made the appropriate gestures to bring it into reality. I consumed it as quickly as possible while Fireflower surveyed the gate.

"Well?" I said when I had finished.

"Sal's right; it's uncontrolled."

"Okay, let's try to put a larger gate around it then, contain it. We might be able to force it closed by pulling the larger gate shut."

Fireflower looked at me askance. "Not to be argumentative, Carl, but Miren once told us never to put a gate around a gate. He was quite firm about it."

I shrugged. "Do you have a better idea?"

I knew the answer, began my spell. Fireflower's mind joined mine, and together we began weaving a larger sphere around the smaller gate. By now there was enough power in the clearing that our work could be seen by the naked eye. White strands like gigantic spider webs coalesced into existence, threading through one another to form a pale glowing white sphere. Wizards often speak of "weaving" a spell; usually it's metaphorical, but here we were doing in reality.

While we worked, a tinny laughter kept forming in the back of my mind, a million voices screaming with mirth. I pictured Antony with my mind, used the force of the memory to shove the voices into oblivion.

The last fragments of the spell slid into place. Fireflower looked at me for several long moments, then we wrapped out minds around the cloth we had created and pulled the gate tight.

The explosion was purely mental at first, a millionfold increase in the laughter, then the red gate consumed our white one; flashing outward to triple it's size. Fireflower and I turned and ran from the clearing, stopping a hundred yards later to look back.

"Whatta ya know? Miren was right!"

Fireflower didn't seem amused by my comment. I didn't blame him; the sphere was now more than seventy yards in diameter, pulsing with light like some gigantic disembodied heart lit from the inside.

"Now what?" Fireflower looked contemplative, but he had to be thinking the same thing I was; that gate was almost open, and completely out of our control. My eyes scanned it from top to bottom, looking for something, anything, that could help us close it. I found something else entirely.

A figure bathed in blue light stood only a few feet from the sphere, indistinct because of the distance and the glow, but there was only one person on this world that it could be.

"What's Sal doing?" I pointed. Fireflower looked at me with wide eyes; I returned the look. We started running at the same time.

We were thirty feet from the figure when it turned. It was a weathered old man, white beard flowing in the stiff wind that escaped the gate, holding a gnarled staff in one hand, my baby in the other.

"Antony! Get Erika out of here!"

He appeared not to hear. I closed the distance faster than I have ever run. But there was nothing I could do. Erika was covered by Antony's protection spell; nothing I could do would obtain her unless Antony chose to give her up.

I looked him in the eyes. There was no trace of sanity within; how he managed to keep up a protection spell was beyond me. His eyes stared past and through me.

"Carl!" Fireflower's shout caused me to look up. One side of the gate was splitting, an ebony crack forming larger and larger. The gate was opening.

I summoned fire, poured it through the crack in the gate, trying to reverse the flow of power. The crack slowed, stopped.

I could not maintain both the flames and my protection spells for long. Fireflower added his force to mine. I broke off, repaired my protections, then replaced him as he did the same. We alternated for several minutes, but it was clear that Fireflower was tiring. Already the crack was beginning to split again.

I turned to Antony, was surprised to see him staring right at me.

"I've kept her safe, Carl." His voice was almost, but not quite, that of a sane man. Laughter sounded in my mind; it was echoed in his eyes.

"Yes, Antony. Thank you. I can take care of her now."

He nodded, handed Erika to me. I wrapped my protections around her as well, noting that she was asleep and breathing easily. That had to be the result of a spell, since the howling wind around us would have woken the dead.

I turned my gaze back to Antony. He had walked another ten feet forward, placed his hand on the surface of the sphere itself. I shouted for him to come back, but there was no way he could hear me over the roar of wind.

Fireflower staggered. He looked at me for a moment. "I'm sorry, Carl. I'll bring help." He stepped across and out of my world.

My own fire could not keep the gate from opening any longer. Laughter filled my mind, but not the laughter of the Caligans. It was Antony's voice, magnified a millionfold by some spell.

A tiny red creature with wings slipped from the gate, then another and then hundreds. No larger than wasps, they filled the sky with laughter and voices and crimson fire.

It was now a fight just to keep the protections strong enough to resist the Caligans' voices, protecting my child and I. As quickly as I could and still be sure of my footing, I began backing away from the gate. Cobalt blue almost completely obscured my vision.

Antony's laughter increased in pitch; there was something soothing about it in the mere fact that it was human, though barely so.

Erika screeched suddenly, notifying me that she was awake. I ignored her, my spells were being broken down now faster than I could renew them. I had to put distance between myself and the gate. No longer able to move cautiously, I ran.

A darkness at the edge of my mind threatened to drop me once more into unconsciousness. I slowed my pace, concentrated all my will on staying awake. My protections started to crumble, so I switched my mind back to protecting us.

I dropped unconscious for a moment, but regained it before I struck the ground. Erika landed heavily to my side, but the mass of blankets appeared to protect her. I pulled her back to me, and started crawling away.

Suddenly my protection spells sprang back to full strength, and Sal was at my side. She took Erika from my arms and helped me to my feet, pulling me further from the gate.

Antony's laughter made me turn. He stood at the edge of the gate, half his body already in another world. The swarm of

Caligans flowed by him, but he stepped into the gate, raising his arms as if to block their path.

It actually appeared to work. The Caligans continued to pour forth, but they did so through other cracks in the gate, avoiding Antony altogether.

Some quiet voice in my mind spoke the impossible. Antony had listened to the voices of the Caligans for several minutes, had lived with the memory of those voices for two years. Perhaps he could do what a sane wizard could not.

I pulled away from Sal, running back toward Antony. She followed for a few steps, then realized her protections would never hold. I tapped her mind briefly as I ran.

"I have an idea. Get Erika as far out of here as you can. I'll meet you in the Council chambers if this works." I didn't have the energy to say more; my protections were crumbling already, and I had only a few minutes to work.

"I love you. Don't kill yourself for a crazy old man." Sal's voice was like a beacon of energy; I increased my pace and made it to Antony's side as Sal vanished into another world. Carefully, I placed my hand on Antony's shoulder, trying my best not to startle him.

At the contact the inhuman laughter stopped, and my protection spells went from brilliant blue to completely invisible. Antony had somehow found or created an eye in this storm.

I slid my mind into his, found only the shattered pieces which I had once tried to repair on a distant world. Now I merely tried to understand them, and realized that this would be the harder task.

Minutes passed as I sorted, looking in mental crannies for the key to his insanity. I found only an overpowering will to survive that was in itself more powerful than sanity.

Words from the physical, real world brought my awareness back.

"I understand," Antony said. His eyes were clear. "You must get far away." There was no word of command on the sentance, but a sound of death that was as powerful. I ran for a hundred feet, turned and looked back.

Antony's body was dissolving, turning slowly into light. When all that was left was his head, he turned back to me and laughed. The laughter continued until he was completely gone, and beyond.

The gate began to fade.

The Caligans who were free in this world turned back almost as one, their laughter and voices silent, rushing to recreate what Antony was tearing apart. It was a hopeless task; they fought against a power as implaccable as the insanity they had caused.

It took four minutes for the gate to vanish completely. The few Caligans still on this side dropped dead from the skies to the ground. I would have to return here in a day or two to remove the alien bodies before they were discovered.

I spent a few long moments confirming that the gate was really closed, then stepped across the worlds to the Council Room. Fireflower and Sal were already there, Sal holding Erika in one hand and the hand of the Satanist's boy in the other. The room was full of silver-and-black wizards, their numbers declining quickly as they stepped toward Earth. I stopped the remaining ones with a few short words.

Sal smiled at me. The darkness closed in again, and this time I saw no reason not to let it come.

Christopher Kempke is a dangerous, psychopathic Computer Science graduate student with too much time on his hands. Attempts to lock him up have resulted only in a temporary confinement at Oregon State University, where he can be reached as kempkec@mist.cs.orst.edu on good days, and not at all on bad.

GEEK QUEEN

by Michael Arner

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A note had been scotch-taped to the smallest of Mr. Bendices' (pillaged) rose bushes:

Dear Sir,
I have stolen your lovely white roses – the most beautiful flowers I have ever seen – to give to a girl named Sonia who I am in love with.
We might consider this, philosophically speaking, not as an act of particular malice, but rather, and at worst, as a sort of pretty instance of the transition between golden rule and ugly self-interest: the impersonal theft that becomes the gift with signature. I can only just vaguely imagine you standing or stooping on the lawn here, perusing these words, but I see so clearly her soft red lips pressed against these delicate petals, her sweet – forgive me – her sweet green eyes like these thorns and these leaves.
—sincerely yours.

It wasn't the flowers exactly. Granted, he felt perhaps a little wistful at being on the unromantic end of such a venture, fancied in fact that snatching roses was exactly the sort of thing he might very well have done once himself. When he had loved Annalisa, for example. Or rather, the sort of thing she would have asked him to do for her. (Annalisa: her black skirts and sweaters on such powder-white skin. Her warm, pouting smile and her urgent whispers. How cruel and happy she had been!)

It wasn't then the flowers exactly, but something else ineffable about his circumstances, some other condition, of which his loss was only a symptom, that continued to disturb him during the long drive from Mr. Bendices' home to the college that his daughter attended.

Certainly, some large part of his unease was nervousness about seeing his daughter again for the first time since she had visited at Christmas. Among his circle of high school friends, he remembered, it had always been the girls who had come back most changed by that first year away. How had they changed? At the time, he had suggested (in jaded tones) that he missed a certain aura of innocence about them, but his real feeling was a kind of fear that they had outgrown the old reasons people sometimes have for being intimate and that he had not.

He pushed a cassette into the tape deck, Ghould's recording of the Goldberg Variations – which he had bought expressly for listening to on this trip. He had used to listen to them so often, as an undergraduate, on late winter and early spring afternoons, when the notes smelt to him like the thick pages in his collections of Milton and Spenser, and felt to him like the pleasant weight of theater curtains and the texture of evergreens, and held for him such clear and detailed images of secret and enormous worlds, such spirits of awe and inquiry.

On this day though, the notes sounded a little hollow. Although he tried, with mounting kinds of misgivings, alternately relaxing his mind and then forcing what he thought he ought to be seeing and feeling (at this moment, some fragile arrangement of fountains and statues and skies; in the following moment, some vast expanse of soft gray patios, some peaceful motion of swaying trees), his vision kept dissipating whenever he paused to compare it with his memories, or whenever he groped for stronger inspiration or recollection; and his thoughts kept being being strangely and unkindly invaded by the rhythm of phrases he had inadvertently memorized from the roses note. *Pretty instance of, let's see; pretty gift with signature, pretty sweet, my sweet – forgive me – her sweet – forgive me – her sweet, let's see; thorns and leaves.* In the background, one could hear Ghould moaning as he played. What had that moaning meant to the young Mr. Bendices? Something about compassion that he couldn't quite recollect. He waited for his passions to swell with favorite and familiar passages, only to realize moments later that they had passed unnoticed. And the green countryside rolled idly by Mr. Bendices' car windows and he was so uneasy and so uneasy about being uneasy that he could neither calm his thoughts nor concentrate.

Once Annalisa had worn this impossible lily white dress and her hair in wet braids. They had entered some restaurant together and she had smiled shyly at the room as everyone fell in love with her. A waiter watching her stumbled over a stray cart, throwing his tray and sending dozens of glasses and plates crashing into pieces. What color *were* her eyes? Goldberg. Golden rule; ugly self-interest. Once he had given money to an old man on the street and the man had hugged him and wouldn't let him go. One year they left his name off the list and he didn't get any valentines. He was still attractive. He was still romantic. As a baby, his daughter Tracy had been unusually assured and social. Someone had told him that.

At length, the disordered vale he had been driving through gave way and the university grounds wound slowly into view. They were peppered with young brown bodies, reveling in their newfound freedom like so many oasis prairie dogs. Some aspect of late May, some essence of frisbees and lemonade, and Mr. Bendices felt a rising sense of shyness and excitement, tugged at his eyebrows absent-mindedly. Girls lay tanning on arrays of blankets. Faint breezes scattering abandoned papers. He saw bare-chested boys and felt that he understood something about their shorts and their sunglasses and their cheerful vulgarity. On the lawn before her dorm, his daughter Tracy played aerobee with a group of her friends.

That her friends should also be enjoying the turning of sea-

sons seemed to Mr. Bendices to be a little bit obscene. He had met a number of them before and knew that he didn't much like them. They appeared to him now as a mass of pale, plump white bodies. They were all males, scraggly and unshaven and invariably crouched as cowardly lions, out-of-place out-of-doors, poorly washed and poorly dressed. Their smiles had too much lust and innocence about them.

He had listened to them speak, so arrogant and passionate and smug about their silly fantasies, so delighted in their tiny introverted, well-ordered worlds, so vicarious and lifeless with their science-fiction and their computers and their ludicrous games. And his daughter in the midst of them, worshiped like some reigning geek queen.

Tracy was lovely. She had auburn hair and gray-brown eyes and such soft, peach, freckled skin. He watched her play – so young and happy, her movements so graceful.

He pulled up alongside the curb where her laundry bags and suitcases lay in a heap. When she finally turned to see him, a wide, pretty smile spread across her face.

"Daddy!" in the feigned little-girl voice that had always annoyed him (this time it didn't) and the gnomes she had been romping with stopped and stood up straight and looked at him as if he'd disturbed playing kittens or frightened away some just-discovered gazelle.

"Put the napkin in your lap, Dad." Tracy had arranged for the two of them to have dinner with a few of her friends and their parents at Seagull Street. They were seated closely and uncomfortably around a polished wooden table set at the edge of a dock over an artificial lake. Fragments of conversation drifted down to them occasionally from a sexless couple seated at a balcony somewhere in the darkness above them. Everything was lit dimly: the walls adorned with anchors and lengths of rope and paintings of ships and storms and seas.

Mr. Bendices was irritated at being instructed in etiquette in front of Tracy's friends' parents. He was irritated by the situation in general, especially anxious as he was to speak with his daughter again alone, and he waited with a sublimity of patience for the evening to end.

Tracy's friend Gavin balanced a steak knife between the prongs of his fork, held it there unsteadily with his thumb. "Hand phaser," he declared, "Meem." His skin was tragic and he would always laugh too loudly and too long.

"Cricket, might you pass me the wine list," Tracy's friend Richard suggested in a strained English accent.

"Huh, what?" asked Mr. Bendices.

"He calls me Cricket," Tracy explained.

He kept thinking that his situation was an almost laughable one, but couldn't make himself take this attitude towards it and only became (by slow degrees) more angry. That Richard's father, for example, with his round, wrinkled gray face and his blue velvet bowtie, should be smiling with insane pride as his son scrambled for intimate tones with Tracy – seemed to Mr. Bendices almost conspiratorial, almost too comic to be believed.

"Ale!" screamed Gavin, adopting an earthy tone, "tankards here, wench!" Their waitress – an attractive college-age girl, wearing a half-slit bermuda skirt and a hawiian-print polo shirt – paused at another table to look towards Mr. Bendices' group with some disdain. He was uncomfortable at the head of the table. Sitting there indicated too much authority over and association with the assembly, like being the best man in a ceremony where one hates the bride. He stared intently at the empty chair at the end of the table across from him.

"Gavin has an exceptional imagination," his mother confided. She wore a faded blue jumpsuit with a golden belt around her waist. Heavy black earrings hung within the coils of her dirty-blond hair. She kept rubbing her eyes, which caused the powder on her face to roll up into tiny balls. "He's always off working on one of his *dungeons*," she said. "Or doing research for one of his *medieval dungeons*." Gavin's mother beamed beneath her powder. "Gavin always says that it's so important for every little detail to be *authentic*," she said, touching Mr. Bendices' hand and pronouncing the word *authentic* as if it were some epically clever punch-line.

"Is that so?" Mr. Bendices inquired. He had noticed a pink splash of calomine lotion on his daughter's ankle before she had changed clothes and it had set him to remembering something. He and Annalisa had once slipped through the locked gates of Los Altos Golf Course on a humid August evening, the moon and headlights from the rustling highway shone reflected in the course's various ponds.

"He's also a *poet*. . ." Gavin's mother began.

Tracy's friend Daniel hiccupped at the opposite end of the table without seeming to notice that he had done so. Daniel's parents hadn't come; they wouldn't arrive until the following day. Of all of Tracy's friends, Mr. Bendices liked Daniel the least. His body was always making strange noises, but he almost never said anything himself. He would sit and stare at Mr. Bendices with dull, subdued eyes as if he would rather be in anyone else's company. He smelled like fallen crabapples.

Across the restaurant, a young blond-haired man, wearing black suspenders and a black tie over a baggy white smock, jumped suddenly to his feet, fell to his knees, and asked the woman he was with if she would marry him. The woman laughed and blushed and cried a little and said that she would.

Richard's mother noticed that there were bright orange fish swimming in the artificial lake and that they looked a little sickly.

Daniel smiled stupidly at Tracy and she regarded him, for a moment warmly. Their meals had been ordered ages ago and still hadn't come. Only Mr. Bendices seemed to realize that something was wrong. He leaned to his daughter and whispered in her ear, "I think you are wasting your talents, honey, on hearts too easily broken." Although he was serious, he meant for her to take it jestingly. He meant to sound tender, even accepting. But he felt compelled also to make her see that he still believed she had a destiny in leagues above those of her playmates and that he wanted to re-establish an old sort of candor between them. She looked at him with an odd mixture of love and disappointment and he felt afraid for an instant that someone must be scheming to take the loveliest things in his life away from him.

The dandruff against Gavin's glasses was sparkling in the candlelight as he discoursed giddily on; surely everyone was staring or pretending not to except for Daniel now smiling absently into space. Sometimes Annalisa would get up in the middle of class, run wonderfully out and into the street, trailing scarves or papers or whisps of perfume.

Mr. Bendices loosened his tie and unbuttoned the top of

his dress shirt. It was as if he had been sitting in that chair his entire life, as if he could hardly breathe. He was aching to move, to run perhaps and to feel the night air against his face, and to take Tracy away with him and away from them. Free summer evenings spread before him like well-ordered constellations. He could remember quite clearly when they had first driven her to school nine months earlier. They had traveled late at night, and the stars and the lights of the towns, and the soft green glow of the console instruments in his car, and the weight of the darkness, make him feel as if they were inside of some slow spacecraft, moving bubblelike between immense and mysterious worlds.

He stood up and was a little dizzy and faltered somewhat on his feet, pushed hard against the table, tipping the empty chair at the other end into the artificial lake, scattering pumpkinseed fishes. He had taken hold of Tracy's wrist and she was looking at him quizzically. Gavin and Richard laughed with abandon. Their parents looked ready to forgive him. A group of busboys moved to fish the chair out of the lake. There was a long moment of silence.

"She cracks me up," one of the voices in the balcony above them was saying, "She'll tell you *to your face* that she'll do it and then just like that, she won't do it. What is she *think*ing? It's like absolutely *to your face* and she doesn't even try or anything. . . "

"Daddy?" Tracy laughed nervously.

"I've just remembered," Mr. Bendices stammered. "I've just remembered, so sorry." He let go of Tracy's wrist, brought out his wallet and began shuffling through bills but found that he couldn't count them, threw them all on the table. "It was so nice to see all of you again, it just can't be helped," he said. "Difficult to believe. I've only just remembered."

"What is it, Dad? What?" He turned away from them and found his footing. "We'll be right back," Tracy said. That was good.

He was more anxious still because their looks around the table had been so sad but that escape he experienced as a moment frozen – or rather his egress seemed to have no ending, as one falls in dreams. Bric-a-brac evolved on the restaurant walls with endless variation around their flight. Hostesses and busboys wove lethargic about them. He couldn't look at her. Directionless, they kept making wrong-turns into the same cloak-room and he felt their progress slow and slow, collapsing almost into point where he felt that his failure was much less recent, more ineluctable than he had originally believed. An old and impersonal theft. Then, also suspended, there was the melancholy and the relief of a sort of surrender to it and he held so tightly to his daughter's hand, feeling nothing.

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THE HARRISON CHAPTERS
Part 7

by Jim Vassilakos

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The nightlife was blossoming in its usual splendor for the Calannic capital, the blues, reds, and sunny yellows of evening-wear mocking the conservative, almost Draconian apparel of the working day. Xkutyr was known locally, as well as abroad, as the undercity of sleepless dreams. Before the war, the Duke of Arcadia was said to be a frequent visitor, reputedly lounging within the watery, volcanic caverns awaiting noble orgies too numerous to enumerate. At least, that was the popular philosophy. History on Calanna was jaded at best, most recently by the war. Mike had always regarded the stories as a poor attempt at anti-Imperial propaganda, but whenever he visited the Temple of the Writhing Mermaid, he was always persuaded to reconsider his point of view.

On this occasion the waters churned with unusual vivacity, the warm glow of soaking bodies paddling on the surface as others more intrepid ventured beneath, between the terraces of gravity nullifiers and into the labyrinth beyond. Mike found himself swimming within a crowd of strangers, some groping each other for comfort and others huddled within large floating bubbles of oxygen, bodies intertwined, playing games of the flesh for all to see. Together they imbibed amber and purple fluids from plastic sluispheres, bubbles within bubbles holding potent aphrodisiacs, judging from the inclinations of those who shared them.

Most came here out of boredom, hoping to find fascination in a moment's idle folly. Others, however, came here out of pain, a few thousand drin to smother one burrowing intoxication with yet another and that perhaps with another still. Of course it was all Bill's money, but that didn't matter; he wouldn't need it anymore. Mike was sure of that much.

He swam until the water grew cold and dense and the oxygen bubbles became too few to venture further. Alone in an alcove he shivered, bare of everything save the mandatory wrist locator. The air grew musty and coarse and he tried to close his eyes and sleep, but the water was too frigid this far out from the complex. Suddenly bubbles emerged from below and a woman clad in a gelsuit appeared, her black hair slicked back by the cold water as she emerged.

"Vanwalye?"

Mike regarded her question for all of five seconds.

"Uh. . . No."

"Uquenlye Calain?"

"Umm. . . lastalmet."

"Tulye?"

Mike wondered if he had a choice. They had probably seen how far he was going and sent her out to fetch him back. There was nothing like a troublesome offworlder to piss off the management. Her worried, green eyes seemed to confirm the assessment.

"Okay," Mike nodded. She moved closer to help him.

"No, really, I'm fine. I'll just follow. Hilmet. Okay?"

"Okay," her anxious smile confirmed the communication more than her use of the galanglic. She kept a slow pace, feeding him oxygen from her tank at several intervals. By the time they reached the warm waters, Mike figured he was lucky he hadn't ditched the locator.

After he dressed, Mike spent the next hour sitting at a table along the stony terrace, sipping Miruvor and re-scanning the various databases. The girl came back to check on him, apparently trying to tell him something from the ledge before being yanked backward into the bubbly water by another employee. Mike waved as she was dragged beneath the steaming surface. The bottom half of her gelsuit emerged several moments later, floating around the surface as various patrons began tossing it back and forth between the access pools.

Cecil was nowhere to be found. Even the search on the planetwide directory turned up nothing. Mike went back to investigating the local boards when he came across a familiar name.

"Doggie Blitz?"

He entered within the steady stream of other electronic freefloaters, quietly carousing the various sub-boards for something of interest. He then passed along to the membership records, or at least those sections open for public scrutiny. A number of faces flashed across his screen, most of them chipheads, one of them strangely familiar.

"Check 143/741."

"User online."

"Call him."

"Error. Respecify at call."

"Call 143/741."

"Waiting. . . connect."

"Yo?"

"Umm. . . Hi, 'member me? Command open visual. Umm. . . in the underway. Purchasing tickets?"

"Huh? Oh yeah. You lookin' fer some output."

"That's right. I was wondering if maybe we could meet someplace. I may have more than just output in mind."

"Such as. . . "

"Finding a friend of mine."

"Well, I guess that depends mainly on who it is you're looking for. If you could just give me the name now, I'd be able to give you a better idea when we meet."

"You sure that's safe?"

"Uhhh. . . let's see. . . you're in sector thirteen. Let me repipe this, hold on. . . Okay, go ahead."

"The name is Cecil Dulin. He used to be a local res. . . "

"Hold on. . . Did you say Cecil Dulin?"

"Yeah."

"Uhh. . . Sorry, I don't think I can help you there dude."

"What's the matter?"

"Gotta jam."

"Wait. . . damnit."

"Na Manor."

"Huh? Oh, hi. I thought you lost your suit."

"Ulastalmet."

"Uh. . . Nevermind." Mike reverted to the Calannic, but his words came out wrong when he tried to explain anything too complex. Her green eyes twinkled as she laughed, either perceptibly oblivious to his being both an offworlder and a chiphead, or incapable of harboring either of the two most common prejudices.

"I no understand why you go in cold water without air tank."

"Umm. . . I dunno either."

She liked that one. Her eyes seemed to glitter more with each new giggle, the easy laughter reminding him of Niki, but her eyes were too shallow and sparkly. Mike rubbed his cast, still encased in its mermaid-plastic sheath, wondering how long the tissue- stabilization would last.

"Where you are staying?"

"Umm. . . no place yet."

"Ah, you just arrive then."

"You could say that."

"You looking for a place on computer?"

"I'm looking."

"Hard to find."

"Yeah."

"Maybe you find a friend?"

Mike froze cold before he realized what she meant. She started giggling again, taking his look entirely the wrong way.

"You do find friend. Is easy here. Yes?"

"If you say so."

"If you like, I have extra space."

"Between your ears," Mike added in Galanglic.

"Huh?"

"Never mind."

"No?"

"Well. . . Okay. Sure."

"Okay?"

The cold breeze gave ample excuse for her to nuzzle against him as they exited the underway, the puddles of water on the streets congealing with motor oil and fragments of dead leaves in the dim light of actinic lamps. Drunk stragglers and chipheads were the only inhabitants between the occasional cabs carrying home a late-shifter from the city below. Several drivers huddled just outside the doors, gambling via coin-toss and drinking mataxa.

"Hey, any of you speak Galanglic?"

"Quesse? Hallon. . . neghral?" They seemed to get a good laugh.

"Very funny; maybe you speak the universal language." Mike rubbed a fifty k'drin note between his forefinger and thumb.

He rode with Vilya in the back seat, watching a pale fog build on the windows as they drove to the outskirts of the city. At a quiet intersection, Mike nudged the driver and pointed to a corner tele-booth.

"Dalmet?"

"Stop. You wait."

"Huh?"

"Wait. Stay here."

"No go?"

"No go."

He entered the booth, hitting the operator assistance key while depositing several coins. Outside, the driver rubbed his windshield with a dirty, brown rag.

"Gardansa, first name Narsil. Yes. Hello? Yes, I know what time it is. I need to speak with the General–just tell him it's Michael Harrison."

"Meow."

Mike awoke as something clawed his head jacks, a cool ripple of pain flowing across his skull as he bolted upright, tossing the feline across the room.

"You no like pussy?"

A faint shimmer of light caught the pistol's fiberglass barrel, Vilya lowering it just a notch as she waited for Mike's reply. He studied her eyes, green spheres twinkling with mischief.

"I find out what 'between your ears' mean, asshole."

She clicked back the pistol's lever, preparing for the shot as she licked her lips. Too high and she'd make a mess. Too low and she'd have to use another bullet. Mike stared straight down the barrel, trying arrogantly to suppress the cool sweat breaking along the jacks in his skull. She pulled the trigger, the barrel clicking with a faint resonance.

"Ha ha. Me funny."

Mike batted the gun out of her hands, tumbling out of the bed as she scampered across the floor. She finally locked herself inside the bathroom, her spasmodic laughter ringing through the keyhole.

"Come out here, Vil."

"No way! You apology."

He pocketed the gun and searched though his bag, finally finding the bullets beneath the dodecahedron.

"Me?!" Mike nearly gagged, pointing the weapon toward the bathroom door. "I think you're forgetting one little thing. I'm the one who has the gun now."

"Ha ha ha. . . "

"Meow."

"Or maybe I should just shoot your cat."

The door opened and Vilya crossed the floor to her cat, picking him up and returning to the bathroom before Mike could so much as bat an eyelash.

"Vilya."

"Hee hee hee. . . "

"Meow."

Mike lifted the dodecahedron off the floor, nestling its weight in his lap. Its ceramic exterior carried a dull glimmer in the warm morning light, each surface flat and smooth except for one. There lay etched the figure of a songbird, its wings outstretched as though in flight. Mike regarded it with an unfamiliar mixture of relief and apprehension.

"Apology!"

"Fine. I'm sorry."

"I can't hear you."

The ragged curtain of red twill flapped from the window's edge as he cocked the pistol.

"Hee hee hee. . ."

He finally coaxed her out of the bathroom by frying up a can of mash and onions, the most universal sustenance in her cupboards. They ate in between the morning newsvids and cold cups of zardocha. The gatherers on the monitors were a pair of public faces, computer generated images which the government had been using for newscasts over the past century. The eyes of the female seemed to bulge out and cross as though she were reading from cue cards, an effort to make her image more realistic. Mike remembered reading about the development in an industry update.

"And now to the local headlines. An unidentified woman was killed yesterday in gunfire at the 1st Interstellar Bank. Although officials are withholding her name, the victim was purported to be in the process of cashing a promissory note for fifty million drin. It is believed that the check was stolen from one, Michael James Harrison, an independent gatherer with Galactic Publications. According to the GID, Harrison was terminated by the woman in accordance with global bounty codes and that the shooting was an unlawful retaliation by the Galatican. Harrison, author of Shattered Eden, gained interstellar fame with the. . ."

Mike changed the channel as his press image materialized in the corner of the screen.

"Hey! I was watching," Vilya flicked a speck of potato in his general direction. The other channels proved just as dull, but the ensuing battle over the remote control made up for it. He found himself back on her bed, exhausted, as she left for work, her cat purring at his side in contented bliss.

Outside, the afternoon sun sank slowly into a hazy dusk as Mike patiently hoofed his way across the city. Cecil had been waiting for well over a year, and another cent wouldn't matter.

The ochin dangled precariously from a single thread of its silken web as its spindly legs flailed aside the remains of its latest victim, a tiny mitzignat. The insect's carcass tossed and turned slowly within the nullfield until a lazy spitter gobbled it down with a swift dash of it sticky tongue. Tasting the pungent fragrance of the ochin's poison, the spitter turned sideways and retreated into the darkness.

Though still hungry, the ochin felt safer. Warily, it crept along the narrow commcord which served as a spine to the web, providing some structural foundation for the fragile strands of its home. A dim buzz resounded against the walls of the room as the ochin reached the end of the commcord. It paused to feel the momentary vibrations on the cool air.

The man couldn't hear the buzz. He hung limp in the air, supported only by thin fractures in the null-gravity. His dull senses couldn't feel the ochin as it slowly edged its way along his grizzly beard, searching the maw of unkept hair for juicy goobugs. His thick, oily thatch barely left an egress for the slimy worms which secreted their viscous ooze.

Suddenly the gravmodule flickered, and his body slowly descended to the wooden floor, ripping away the ochin's web and scattering the boopreys as the dusty, maggot-ridden planks creaked soundly underneath the weight of his emaciated body. He lay still for several hours without breathing, his programs refusing the interruption. The uncompromising feeder, however, forced a disconnection as his weak lungs involuntarily gasped for air.

It was evening before he could feel the raw itch. It came on slowly, like a sleeping devil, seeming a thousand times more penetrating than anything he could ever remember. For hours he lay still, unable to resolve the agony before his olfactory senses came around, allowing him to smell the hellish stench of his own rot. Yet, the itch and the stench only served as a distraction which he used to fight the maddening bunkum of raw data which muttered sporadic illusions within his mind.

Slowly, he felt the enzymes go to work, exciting his endocrine gland, pushing adrenalin into his bloodstream, building momentum in his heartbeat, fighting the impending shock. He fluttered his eyelids, the action igniting a stream of ideas, each vaguely interrelated, but they swept by so swiftly that all he could remember was the fragment of a distant dream.

Slowly, he realized that he was sitting upright. He heard the distant hum of the spitter in the corner of the room. The feeder lay next to him. It was already disconnected. He couldn't remember touching it.

"Who's there?"

His voice sounded dry and mottled. He couldn't recognize it as his own, but there it was with nobody to answer. Then he heard the door close.

The tub was brown with mold; a family of quagroachs nested on the floor beneath the grating. He tumbled himself inside and searched for the rusty handle. The ice-cold water hammered against the floor, bathing his still insensitive skin as he rubbed off folds of dead flesh. Soon the welts that merely itched began to sting.

The scum collected around his neck as the waterline threatened. He stood slowly, his arms grasping the grimy runners on the walls of the tub. As the water continued to rise, overtaking his waist, he let one hand fall away, testing the strength of his legs and their balance.

He wasn't aware of the blade until it cut his ear. He tugged it loose from its cord and began to shave, slicing the filthy hair away with deep strokes close to the skin. The goobugs dropped into the water around his waist. Tangled deep within the matted hair, they sunk and drowned beneath the pounding water. He fingered his skull for the jacks; the important things were always as he remembered them.

He was too tired to think about it now. The water at his chest beckoned. He considered how easy it would be to drown. He sunk down beneath the murky water, its numbing chill bringing with it a strange sense of satisfaction. With a twist of the lever, the floor beneath the grating opened, and the water, bugs, and hair swirled away.

Moonlight shimmered through the doorway like a icy veil, its narrow edge stretching across the hardwood floor. She stepped quietly into the dim, misty light, letting her bags slip clumsily from her arms.

"Mikael? You still here, you leech?"

"Meow. . ."

A purple glimmer settled beneath patchy, black clouds along the western horizon as the red cab swerved along the central

highway. The driver hummed to himself most of the way, his right foot jogging a tempo against the floor as he drove. Mike tried to fall asleep, but the bumping of wheels into shallow potholes made him nauseous. They were nearly three hours outside Xin when the car turned off the pavement, taking a dirt trail up a grassy hillside, wildflowers growing in yellow and blue patches along the road's surface.

"Where go?"

"Left. No, that way–left. You know left from right?"

"Huh?"

"Keep going. You're doing fine."

The driver skidded to a sudden halt as they reached the outer gate. Mike climbed out of the car and paid the balance. The driver opened his window a crack to receive the money and then drove out backwards, loose gravel sweeping under the cab's tires as he gunned the motor.

Two men clothed in executioner's leather led him through the gates. Their uniforms betrayed no insignia denoting either rank or service. Private henchmen, Mike figured. It was all that Gardansa had left. His house was like a temple, two marble statues rising as solemn pillars, one the fool and the other an emperor. Black veins ran their full height and the three men crossed between.

Gardansa stood against the tall, ponderous door, a canopy of yellow daisies gleaming in the faint moonlight. His smooth lips curved within some determined pleasantry.

"General."

"Gatherer Harrison. So delightful to see you again." The man's eyes turned dark and saucer shaped as he laughed, his fleshy chin dangling and bouncing as he bobbed his head in welcome.

The house was warm and smelled of sweet perfume. Numerous busts littered the hallways, and the hearth glowed with fiery sparks rising up the chimney only to swirl back down as fine black ash. The general picked short bits of hair from his nose as they talked, flicking them into the steady stream of warm air. They wafted about in the current, occasionally catching within the thick fur of his brown fez.

"I am sorry to hear such dread news of your friends, but then friends come and go. That is the way of life."

Mike nodded, not sure how to respond.

"And, after all, she was a Siri. And the other one, a traitor against you. So well you pick your friends. Makes me wonder that you are still around to tell me stories."

He chuckled at some image lurking deep within his mind. It was a dry sort of noise, starting below his throat and wafting upward like the quaking of a volcano.

"How like the past, this seems. Traitors and psyches. One must somehow breed the other. You not agree?"

"I don't know, General. I came here seeking the answer to another question."

"Ahh," he nodded reluctantly. "It is an answer which I could not divulge were even I to somehow become of it aware."

"And why is that?"

"Might I interest you in some brandy, Mister Harrison."

"Not tonight, General."

"You know, before you and your psyche saved my life, I never thought that I would allow an offworlder in my home. And to allow an offworlder to enter, and leave sober. . . now that is unthinkable."

Mike finally relented in the hope of placating his host. The drink was a deep crimson variety from Ares. Making brandy and building guns were the only two things they did well.

"You are in a very reflective mood tonight, my friend. It makes me tremble to smell such thought in my very home. And yet, mysteriously, you stay your tongue. What chains are these that hold you?"

"I guess I'm just bummed out."

"Bummed out?"

"This whole trip has been one disaster after another."

"Ahh. . . but is that not the life of the gatherer? To sacrifice and lose heart and shed all things precious only to triumph in the end. How like the life of the soldier. You and me, we are very much the same, no?"

"I suppose so," Mike swallowed another gulp, its acidic flavor coating the length of his throat.

"And to die. . . that is the sweetest sacrifice. How more alike we seem, myself in virtual exile, and you. . . "

He suddenly burst out with a wheezing fit of laughter, his cheeks puffing into a patronizing smile.

"Now that you are officially dead, your enemies will no longer be watching for you. What an advantage we have created, you and I. Cast it away, you could. We could easily arrange for your passage off-planet."

"No."

"No?" The general's pudgy-cheeked grin melted into a bare-toothed smirk as he stared into vacant space, his eyes glazed with eager satisfaction.

"Then you must use your advantage, and swiftly. It will not take our enemies long to realize they have been fooled."

"You can't tell me anything about Erestyl."

"As to that, you might ask your friend, Mister Dulin. And when you see him, warn him to be more careful. It is not often on Calanna that one is granted a reprieve."

Mike nodded, "I'm sure he's aware of that."

"The question, Mister Harrison, is whether or not you are."

Mike sucked down the last of the Aresian brandy, a sour expression crossing his face as the general grinned in approval.

"Someday, if you live long enough, I will teach you to drink like a true Calannan."

"Thanks, General. I think." Mike pulled himself upright, his bad shoulder still aching despite the numbing fluid within the cast. Gardansa reached for the bottle, his fingers fumbling at the cork as he shook his head unsympathetically.

"No, you must be certain."

"I'm certain. . . truly and without doubt. Do you have a terminal around here, by the way?"

"You are quite certain?" Gardansa prodded.

"Absolutely. Someday. Some other day."

The Doggie Blitz seemed to have a larger share of traffic than the night before, its electronic corridors clogging with conversation. Mike floated with the frenzy, picking up bits and pieces of conventional wisdom on the various sub-boards. It seemed word had already spread of Cecil's escape from the cellars. The lingo seemed especially prodigious at coming up with new words for various non-places.

Cecil's state was nothing more than electronic disembodiment, something about which Mike cared little and understood less. He engaged a few of the patrons on the topic, hoping to gain more information about Cecil's exact crime against the

authorities, but nobody seemed to be able to agree even on the basic facts. Finally the person he was looking for appeared online.

"Call 143/741"

"Waiting... connect."

"You got the Spokes-man."

"Hi, you still can't help with Cecil?"

"Aww, man... not you again." His image wavered on the screen, its contours shifting as he spat a piece of food at his terminal lens.

"Who else? Besides, I figured you'd be happy to see me."

"All I wanna know is how you did it."

"Check where I'm calling from."

"Hold on... Ummm... damn, out of the district. Can't get a fix. You tell me. No, wait. Let me guess. A certain General."

"Very good." Mike tried not to sound patronizing.

"Damn straight. I saw your face in more than one place last night. Figured I'd never have to look at it again, too."

"That was a little gatherer magic. It comes with knowing certain Generals and drinking whatever they put in front of your face."

"Yeah, I read up on you. Some dirty deeds. So how come you're still alive?"

"Umm... that's actually a pretty good question." Mike rubbed his shoulder, the pain pivoting in and out of focus. "Actually, I need you to do a little job. That is, if you're not afraid of the authorities."

"Hey, I don't follow anybody to the cellars. You can't pay me enough."

"I don't want you to go out... I want you to go in."

"Huh?"

"A robot brain. Draconian design if I'm not missing my guess. You interested?"

"Draconian. Is it sentient?"

"I guess that depends on your definition."

"I'll take a look at it. Meet me at the Tiberian Compound at twenty-five cents. Suite 112J."

"I'll be there."

Gardansa was not a man for long good-byes. When Mike returned to the drawing room, the General was already fast asleep, snoring in his armchair as lumps of loose flesh jiggled on his chin. Within the hallways, the busts seemed to snicker with mischievous delight. The chief guard showed Mike to a polished limousine, it's black exterior coated with sheets of polymer stucco. Mike admired the invulnerability before climbing into the front seat with the driver.

"You speak galanglic?"

"What, do I look like a taxi driver or something?"

Cold wind swept along the limo's prow, the forelights scintillating in amber streaks as the vessel barreled against the rushing breeze. The night was crisp and clear, the celestial canopy flushed bright with a sparkling dew and far below, cool waters broke inward with the folding swell, foam lingering on the soft, white sands.

"You see something interesting out there?"

"Huh? Oh... not really."

Sea birds drifted about on the quiet shore below the cliffs, their outlines vaguely visible against the light drizzle. Occasionally they'd group into pairs and then drift apart, some coasting in circles and others swooping down to the breaking tide. In the distance, a bright point of light appeared followed by the faint whining noise of a turbofan. Mike hit the stick, sending the limousine into a diving spiral. A moment later, the missile impacted on the looming cliffs, sending shrapnel and stones bouncing against the stucco.

"Ay!"

The driver pulled out of the dive, snaking across the choppy waters as another point of light appeared.

"Slow down."

"Are you crazy?"

"Do it."

Mike leapt from the limousine as it slowed, the salty water stinging his eyes as he dived beneath the waves. Suddenly, everything turned bright orange, and for a moment he thought he could see for miles beneath the sea. The explosion rippled the current like a giant's hand slapping the surface, and Mike gasped for air beneath the waves, choking on the salty fluid as it invaded his throat. When he surfaced, all that was left of the limousine was small specks of polymer stucco drifting downward with the gentle rain.

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 seven *is actually chapter eleven as written originally by Jim.* The Harrison Chapters *will be continued next issue.*

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AN EVENING AT HOME

by Roy Stead

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Doctor Gloucester sat in his room, reading a novel by Marcel Proust. *It is a very good novel,* thought the good doctor, *with not too many long words in it.* Idly, Gloucester thumbed the edge of a page, as though about to turn to the next one. Then his thumb, sweat stained and tarnished by newsprint, paused perceptively on the cusp of page-turning. The doctor hesitated a moment. A bead of perspiration rolled from the side of his forehead, threatening to wander along his nose then drip, slowly onto the page – as if to see what all the fuss was about – but it, too, halted awhile to watch the doctor in his deliberations.

Firmly, Doctor Gloucester slammed A La Recherche de Temps Perdu closed, but not before the moist bead, its mind made up at the last, had had a chance to zip down onto the page, providing a single greasy bookmark to remind Gloucester where he had got to in the novel.

Doctor Gloucester glanced about him, and paused awhile once more, in contemplation of what he saw. *A War!* he thought. *A Bore. Such a bore is war, a sore bore, yet not so torn as an apple corn. Which lies, forlorn as though drawn upon a paper.* Drawn, as they were, to the window, the doctor's eyes took in the exterior scene.

A carriage went by. Another followed it.

Something wrong here, thought Gloucester. *Something definitely wrong. But what? But what?*

No horse! the thought screamed out, but none heard it as none were there to hear. *No horse!* it cried again, but louder this time. Again, none heard its wail – but more clearly this time.

The doctor's eyes rose up, maintaining their position on his face as it – too – was raised. This last was caused, as 'twere, by the movement of the good doctor's head, which responded in characteristic fashion to a change in the angle at which his neck was held. So it goes.

A cloud drifted by, as clouds have been known to do, as the doctor stared from his window. A tendril of cloud caressed another cloud, pulling from it – gently, oh so gently – a wisp of likewise cloudy material. A swirl, a whirlpool in the skies, then gone, and only cloud remained.

The doctor stared.

A crick, a cricket, a cricket neck caused Doctor Gloucester to turn away momentarily from the cloudy landscape, and his eye alighted upon a picture beside his desk. The picture showed a herd of sheep, a flock of cows and a shepherd's crook. Around the crook was draped a cobweb, fine as cobweb in the early morning light. The doctor raised his arm, and thereby his hand, to stroke the web, which broke.

A strand of cobweb fell, slowly, drifting to the floor of the doctor's study. He watched it swirl, a whirlpool in the air, then land and come to rest upon the bare floorboards which cushioned Doctor Gloucester's feet from the bare air beneath.

Oh shit, thought the doctor.

A creak, a crack, a racket. A cracket of sound disturbed the good doctor's contemplation of the webby fibres, and caused him to turn to the door. The door was opening, slowly, its hinges shrieking as a hundred knife-wounds of rust buried themselves to the hilt in their vulnerable metal bodies. A chink, a chunk, a clank of light shone through, outlining three sides of the door as it swung wider, wider, and wider still, in answer to the hingey cries.

Oh shit, thought the doctor.

The door now open, a figure emerged, and entered the room with a tray in one hand and a knife in the other. "Who's there?" cried the doctor, his voice betraying the terror he felt in his heart at the sound of the door, and the clank of the light, and the screams of the hinge, "Who's there?"

And a voice, soft and low, whispered across that room, "'Tis eye."

The doctor stood up, the better to walk, and crossed 'cross the room, he crissed crassly crossed 'cross that room, to greet with his voice the bearer of tray and of knife – which the reader has yet to learn more of. The doctor addressed that strange apparition with words from his throat, ushered soft from his mouth, though hoarsened by sounds uttered early in panic 'gainst that very shape, "Who is 'I'?"

" 'Tis I, kindly doctor, who bringeth thy supper for you to partake of now daylight has finished."

The doctor spun round, with a complex manouver, and glared at the window to see the last streaks of the daylight descending like icicles melting beyond the horizon and sighed, like a river, in pain at the passing of a friend.

"Who is 'I'?" he repeated, since last time he uttered those words he had got no reply from the figure, bearing knife and a tray which it claimed was his supper. That figure whose entrance had startled the doctor and caused him to miss the moment of passing of day. "Who is 'eye'?"

The person who stood, a-framed in the doorway, looked on to the doctor and noticed his face, and noted his expression, and formed her opinion of what the poor doctor had done all that evening, and looked for the book, the sweat-stain-ed novel, by Marcel Proust, which the doctor was reading, and said to the doctor, "I'm Mary."

The doctor was shocked. *Oh shit*, thought the doctor.

Mary stalked forward, she storked t'ward the table, deposited tray and placed there the knife, which she had been carrying, onto the tray. Placed she it. Mary turned now to Gloucester, and stared at his face, expressions of pity vieing for place on

her features with shades of expressions of anger that Gloucester had noticed the clouds once again.

Oh shit, thought the doctor.

The table groaned lightly.

Oh shit, thought the doctor.

Then, Mary walked to the doorway, and turned to the doctor, "Goodnight," as the door was closed from the outside, leaving doctor alone with the tray and the table. And the knife. The window was open. Doctor Gloucester left it open, reached for the knife then stabbed his hand downwards to capture a cockroach that crawled 'cross the table t'ward the tray which bore his supper. Gloucester raised the cover and unveiled his meal.

Oh shit, thought the doctor.

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

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Thank you, thank you very much