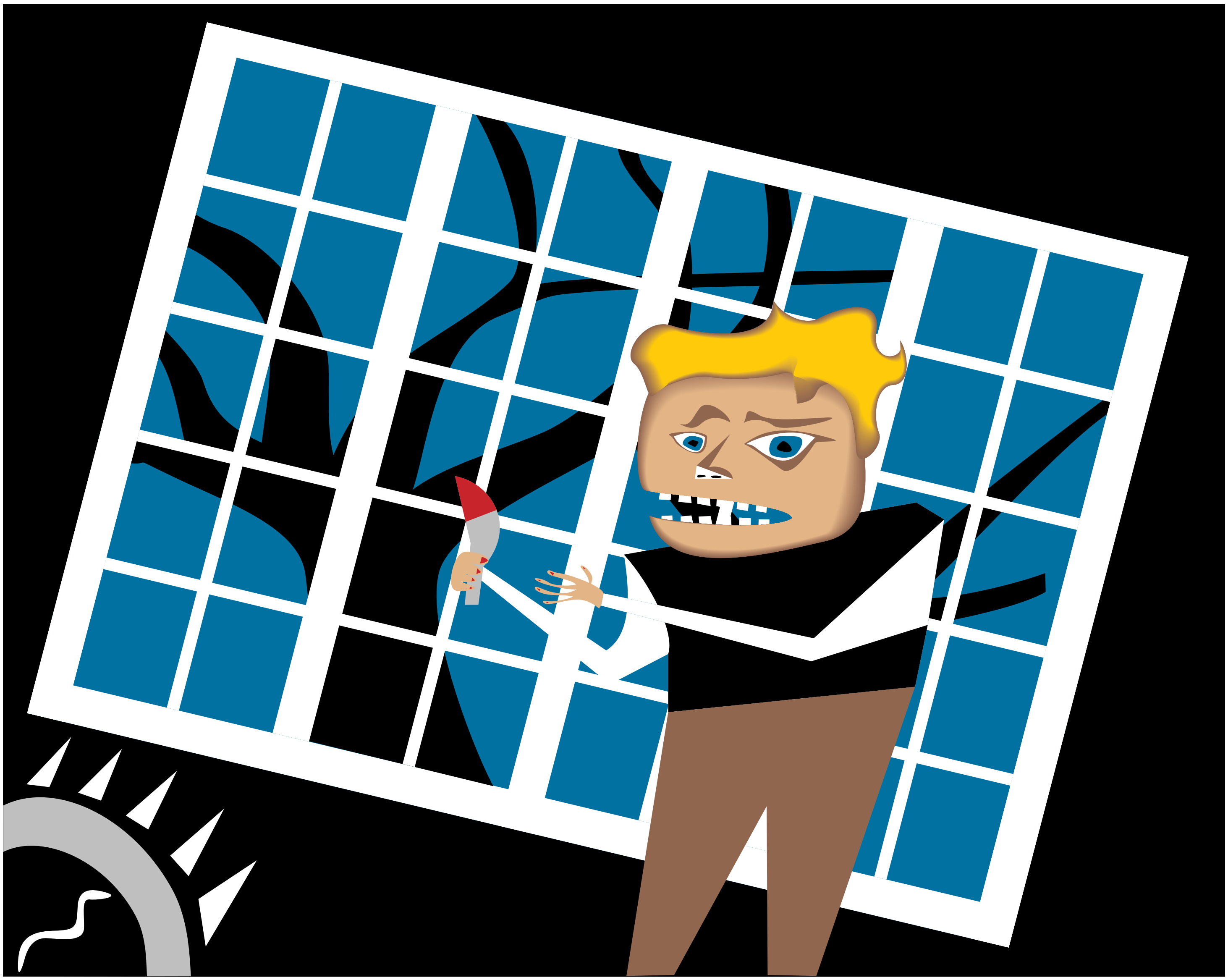
# Quanta



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# *Quanta*

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*Articles*



*Serials*



*Stories*

# Looking Ahead

## Daniel K. Appelquist

Hi, y'all! I'm practicing my southern drawl, because I'm soon to be moving to Virginia (well... Reston, Virginia, which is really more like a suburb of D.C., but you get the idea). Anyway, I'll be sending out a letter to all subscribers informing people of my new email address when I get one. For now, though, you can continue to send mail to be at quanta@andrew.cmu.edu.

Some people have asked "Dan, now that you're leaving Carnegie Mellon, what happens to *Quanta*?" Well, the beauty of a network entity like *Quanta* is that it can exist anywhere on the network. The answer is, of course, that *Quanta* goes where I go.

So, much to my disappointment, I've only been able to produce four issues of *Quanta* this year (March, June, August and December). What this means is that I haven't been able to round out the *Dr Tomorrow* serial within the year. There's still one more chapter to go on that, and you should be seeing it around February, although I may have to postpone the February issue to a March issue since I'll be starting a new job and all.

As I write this particular paragraph, I'm working on my new Macintosh PowerBook Duo 210 laptop computer. All I can say is that I'm extremely impressed with it. It really is a piece of science fiction in and of itself. Apple needs to work on their quality control, however. When I first received my Duo, it had a serial port problem and needed to be sent back twice before it was resolved. Hopefully I should be able to get lots more work done, both on Quanta and my own writing. But who am I kidding? I bought the thing because it's a really neat toy.

Submissions! Submissions submissions submissions. What can I say? I received a fair number after my recent plea for material, and I was very pleased with the quality. I'm always in need of more, however. I've gotten letters from a lot of people saying things like "I may send you something in the near future." Well, I would love to receive those manuscripts. If any of you have something you've been holding back from me, shame on you!

Subscriptions! Wow — This month, Quanta subscriptions for the first time rose above 2000. That's not even counting re-distribution points like bulletin boards and CompuServe, or people who pick up issues from one of the FTP servers or Gopher. If you are reading Quanta in one of these ways and you aren't receiving a notice whenever a new issue comes out, mail me and I'll put you on a "notice only" mailing list. That way I can have a more accurate idea of how many people are reading Quanta and you can know whenever a new issue hits the 'stands'.

I have some very interesting material for you in this issue... some fresh faces, some new ideas. I hope you enjoy reading it as much as I enjoyed putting it together.

## Quanta Party!

OK — I've been talking about putting together a Quanta party for a while now, but this time I really and truly mean it. I'd like to arrange someting for near future. What prompted this sudden enthusiasm? I recently attended PhilCon (a science fiction convention based in Philadelphia) and was very impressed. Apart from the guests (one of whom was Greg Bear, who was an excellent speaker), the art show, the gaming, and the general feeling of community and openness that permiated the con, what really impressed me about it was the parties! Mostly they were just little impromptu get-togethers in some of the hotel rooms occupied by con attendees, but they were lots of fun. So I thought to myself, why not have a party at an upcoming convention and invite all Quanta subscribers and submitters. So what about it? How many subscribers out there are con-goers who would be interested in something like this? I guess since I'm going to be in D.C., I'm thinking of a convention like Disclave (which is in D.C.) or another eastern con (perhaps in New York or Boston). If there's interest, I'll start making more definite plans. If any of you already have plans to attend cons in the near future, that would be good information to have as well. Hopefully, we can get something rolling here.

Moving?

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# STARBLOOD

## by Steven Schuldt



*"Don't you* ***move****." said Einstein, the semi-automatic handgun trembling in his hands, his thick accent still failing to conceal his terror. The sky was boiling overhead; dark, restless geometric shapes sliding above and behind each other. The wind had started to kick up again and Ursula's long hair danced across her pale white face. "Raise your arms."*

*She slowly raised her arms above her head. "That's good. Now walk."*

*"You're crazy, you old bastard." she hissed, taking a step towards the ledge. A distant crack of thunder was heard and a swirling choir of voices began to rise ominously. "Crazy! Cr-"*

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Phyllis took an outlet. "How much longer?"

"Fifteen minutes." said the shell. She was going to die in here. Ursula's wedding was only four days away, and Phyllis felt obligated to try another print if she died. She was annoyed, feeling too much pressure to contemplate this noir spy mess that the VanGehr Group engine had spit up. She looked out of the rain-spattered bullet train window. Quebec's streets were skidding by like wet black cat hairs through her dim reflection in the glass. It looked very different than she remembered it. Phyllis closed the shell, settled back in the deep white folds of her seat and thought about Process.

Process hadn't allowed itself to be benchmarked in nine quarters. Not that the other IM players were complaining too loudly, Process Publishing Industries had always taken the benchmarks by light-years. Most were content to let CEO Paul Reuters and the PPI network of enigmacrats thrash and twist in a web of what was beginning to appear as its over-cultivated mystique. Besides, other corporate prime movers in Image Manipulation were tired of tumbling vats of capital into the black hole of random number benchmarking. Now, at last, a certain parity seemed reachable and majors like ClimeLight/Fissure and Junee-July could concentrate on the more pressing but no less challenging craft of star-making.

How Process tested so well was pretty widely known. The *entropic harrier* it was only half-jokingly called. Their variant of seed value generation based on the interference tier-contours created by 4D graphs of radioactive decay and simple Lorenz attractors had proven a ruthlessly effective, if somewhat quasi-mystical approach to the problem. The variant was Process' ace card, however, and would have remained a standard for years.

Process hadn't allowed itself to be benchmarked in nine quarters. Not that the other IM players were complaining too loudly, Process Publishing Industries had always taken the benchmarks by light-years.

The house was old and pathologically gothic, all odd angles, bleak corners and towering cloisters. Set near the edge of the Gaspe' peninsula, the place was about as far away from civilization as this ancient province allowed. Phyllis found herself waiting in a sparse antechamber after having been buzzed through wrought iron gates she would have guessed to be fourteen feet high. She had been led by a smallish bespectacled man of fifty or so down six-hundred feet of winding private road. He had spoken with a harsh French-Canadian accent. Despite all her preparation and determination, she felt extremely nervous. This shoot had to be good; she wouldn't get another chance. The rain had stopped on the taxi ride in from the station but the gray sky and cool autumn weather seemed to mirror her feelings of unease. The little man had taken her coat and addressed her as "Miss Cope". For some reason she was reminded of the teasings of an ex-boyfriend, "Miss *can't Cope*".

"I am terribly sorry, madam," said the man, "but Mr. Nareid is preoccupied at the moment and has advised me to show you in. If you please." Phyllis nodded politely and, lifting her gearbag, followed his gesturing hand into a large, skylit circular room. There was a disused marble water fountain at its center. The man followed her in. "Mr. Nareid informs me that you are a photographer." Phyllis was looking absently up at the grimy, stained-glass dome.

"Yes, of sorts" she half laughed. "I'm a cam-tech really."

"Oh, I am sorry," he was looking up at her and Phyllis felt that he was standing uncomfortably close. "There is a difference?"

"No! No, not really," said Phyllis, instantly regretting her nervous response. "it's just not a term I've ever used."

"I see," he said slowly, and there was an awkward moment of silence before he gestured, "Make yourself comfortable." She thanked him and accepted his offer of tea, hoping to redeem herself somewhat. He left and Phyllis perceived for the first time the place's dead air and unsettling feeling of perversity, the decayed lavishness of the entire estate. Whatever sort of person this James Nareid turned out to be, he was not, she guessed, going to be an average shoot. Even by Process' standards.

Image manipulation was the inevitable resonating phenomenon of a media mad world. A miracle of style *becoming* substance. Every icon, every movement in art, music, video, holography, and film, captured, treated and distorted by the latest computer rendering gear. Hyper-real storylines cropped, spliced and juxtaposed, culled from every source old and new, from Homer through Messiana/Hologramic slasher vids. The latest in rotational dissolving and recombinant overlay-tracing applied to the bulk of the flotsam of the human information system. After so many years now it had become reality's feedback loop. The gather and distort technique had been born out of necessity, of course, in the years before automatic royalties, with the standing copyright laws taxed to the limit and straining to hold back the dike. Process had been there from the start. The vast bulk of Process' profits still came from the quaint black octagonal boxes found at every HDHF local, the IMAGER. Inside where girl and boy could tumble their way down a hierarchy of silly menus packed with time-frames, icons and double entendres — to leave with their own "Totally unique!" little chunk of the zeitgeist. A fine time for all concerned as PPI had years earlier licensed off its IMAGER to the Fissure corporation, pretensions to high art intact as well as safe gliding distance above the red.

Things had changed since then and the better IMs, like Process, had learned almost unconsciously to play to the last and all inclusive human gallery. They had realized that at the end of the day people wanted something to hold on to, invariably, an intelligibly convoluted mirror.

As a child growing up in Montreal, Phyllis would spend most nights alone. Her grisette mother worked and slowly grew more unsound, acting ambitions fading out year by year. At the age of nine Phyllis was sent to Paris to live with her cousins. Her only truly enduring memories of early childhood: a collage of neon, white light and pain. That light had stayed with her, had kept her straight through the shooting of some of the most bizarre imagery a jaded world could come up with.

Things had gone better in Europe, later on. She had returned to the Americas to attend film school in Cote-Saint-Luc and had done her cam-tech grunt work in LA. It got pretty ugly for awhile, months of shooting warehouses and dockyards for the truly sleazy Estienne and Finch. She guessed her couples work for respected independent Lemaitre! had gotten her the Process call. Phyllis hated that idea, however, because couples made for some of the worst subject matter. Most of them got drunk or bent on some analog first so they could get loose enough to screw in front of a stranger, but somehow the returns had always been okay. Shooting Process, however, was every cam-tech's grail, and when they flew two reps to Vienna to watch her shoot an industrio-demolition sponsored by some bored Austrian art fags, she had felt that white light rising in her head.

"Ms. Cope, isn't it?" said a voice behind her. Phyllis turned to see a thin, almost emaciated looking young man of twenty or so approaching her and smiling. He wore an oversize half-buttoned white shirt and pastel red baggy silk pants. He had a shoulder-length mop of wispy black hair. Phyllis' first impression was that of some nineteenth century lion tamer's apprentice.

"Yes," she smiled and shook his small, bird-like hand. He grinned widely. "James Nareid."

"You can call me Phyllis." she said, assuming her best friendly-but-professional tone.

"Yes. Phyllis. I see Ryeland has forced his tea upon you." He was looking fixedly at her with wide hazel eyes that suggested no depth at all.

"Hardly," she said uncomfortably, his apparent pomposity and atrocious hawk's gaze distracting her, "it's very good actually." There was a brief pause before James spoke.

"Well, I've never done anything like this before so...do I pose?" he said, looking hopeful.

"Oh, its nothing like that at all," she said laughing and beginning to root through her bag. "I'll be shooting almost continuously for as long or as briefly as you like. Obviously," she began pulling out several objects and resting them carefully on the floor "the more variegated," she continued fastening a lens and new cartridge on her Leico TiarraShot "—this is my favorite camera— the more variegated the shots the more chance we have of obtaining interesting results. Most random Image engines work best with diverse shots of the main subject." She raised the camera and began shooting, slowly and reflexively circling her subject. James was looking right at her with an amused smile. "So just move around and pretend I'm not even here. Try to do whatever it is you'd normally be doing."

"What if I'd be masturbating?" he said, with the same fixed grin.

*This is going to be cake* thought Phyllis.

"By all means, makes for some great stuff, semen. Nothing beats the old money shot."

"Well," he said "I wouldn't be, but just checking. Maybe I'd have some tea." He poured himself a cup from the pot Ryeland had left on the tray and stared in profile at the fountain. Phyllis was now shooting from a crouched position.

"Do I understand correctly, that in this deal I have you for as long as I like?" he asked, looking now up at the skylight and taking a small sip of tea. "Or while the optic medium holds out, maybe thirty hours worth of straight shooting." she slowly rose from her crouch. James was now looking intently into his china cup.

"This *is* good isn't it. A lovely blend." he smiled at her, "I do have a *little* something planned..."

Every IM had by definition a huge database of countless portrayals, delineations, and distortions of almost everything and everyone worth capturing ever. These catalogs were more or less interchangeable, as there were only so many sources for interesting material and the rate at which the new became the old had almost achieved real-time. Stars of course were IM's lifeblood and the majors spent vast amounts of resources farming out difference and intrigue. Icons were routinely erected overnight only to have their electronic exoskeletons ground into image-gristle weeks later. Manufactured stars were not, however, the lifeblood of Process. They always let you be the star, for the right price. An extravagant one. That any IM could command the compensation for a location shoot, random engine recombination, and print that PPI could was partially attributable to their quality but mainly to their reputation. The finished product was good, this was undeniable, the Process engine seemed to be able to make intuitive and often otherworldly connections to attenuated and rarely used perceptions of cultural totems disused by more mainstream IM's, but it wasn't that good. Yet to own a Process episode of your own Process shoot was a status symbol the monied worldwide coveted. Guaranteed only one original to exist, generated at the Process labs with no human intervention. As their infrequent advertisements claimed, *two things in life are certain, only one isn't*. Even the daughter of the CEO of Junee-July had provoked no end of embarrassment at corporate headquarters when she boasted of her Process shoot in an interview with CRUEL.

Playing pool turned out to be the *little something* that James had spoken about. He had led her upstairs into an oak paneled room with a huge table and deep maroon carpeting. The room was dank with the smell of mold. For nearly an hour he quietly racked, broke and cleared. Phyllis was doing her best to make this look interesting, she guessed he wasn't half bad as a player, but this would undoubtedly make for poor source material and she knew who would have to carry the can for *that*. Occasionally he would light a cigarette and Phyllis would frantically try every trick she knew to make it look dramatic. Ryeland came in and offered another round of tea, which was declined, and informed James that he would be leaving for the afternoon. "Is this okay?" he asked Phyllis a few minutes later, after clearing the table and beginning to set up a new break.

"Fine, sure." she said, trying to sound intrigued.

"If not, then there *is* something else I might be doing."

Phyllis followed James down a long, winding, semi-lit hallway that sloped for maybe forty-five yards, shooting the entire way.

"I've always wanted to record my dreams," said James with a hint of resignation, "but you people have made that desire obsolete, haven't you?"

"I'd like to think we augment peoples dreams." said Phyllis, shooting now at close range, nearly over his shoulders. James stopped suddenly, maybe ten meters from what appeared to Phyllis to be the end of the corridor. "Oh wait, one thing I have *got* to have first, those inner lights? Do they still do that?" It took Phyllis a few moments to understand what it was he wanted.

"Like in Goelsann's Deduche' Jar" said James.

"Micro-machines?"

"Yes! Can you do that?" He seemed almost childishly enthused by the idea.

"Sure." Phyllis said, halting the shoot. Micro-machines. *Oh brother.* How hackneyed can he make this? She knelt again to root through her equipment bag. "I have to tell you though, they do require you to sign a waiver authorizing a hypodermic injection. Also," and suddenly the thought of injecting a syringe full of little paddling chemo-phosphorescent machines into this fey man struck her as too repulsive for words, "also, you may experience some after-effects until they are completely flushed out of your system."

"Like?"

"Like headaches and diarrhea."

"That doesn't sound too terrible," he said, the smile fixed on his face. Phyllis carefully unwrapped a new needle and handed both a pen and the needle's paper jacket, which doubled as both waiver and warning, to James. He signed it with short quick stabs.

"What density?" asked Phyllis.

"Pardon?"

"Do you want a few or a lot?" She was crouching and holding the needle carefully, with both hands.

"Oh, light me up like a Christmas tree, by all means." She took his arm and slowly administered the machine injection.

He was leaning against a brick wall of the corridor and looking at her with half-lidded eyes as she fastened a chemo-sensitive lens to the TiarraShot.

"How long have you been doing this?" he asked. Phyllis stood up and noticed, oddly and for the first time, that she was considerably taller than James.

"Almost ten years, professionally four." She smiled and raised the camera.

"An old hand. You've seen some weird stuff, I bet." He was smiling and walking slowly towards the corridors' end.

"Nothing's shocking." She said, following closely.

"That's good because some people might not feel up to recording something I really want in this." And the room opened up behind him. Phyllis did not feel well at that moment. Not at all.

She was naked and tied to a rusted metal table with red stockings. Her eyes were open but un-focused and her hair was a matted brown. She was covered with scars and uttered streams of non-words, like someone speaking in tongues, every few moments. "This is a friend of mine, Phyllis. Her name is Alice," said James. He circled around the table and looked down at the woman with an adoring glare. Phyllis had let her bag fall to the floor and the Leico drop to her chest upon entering the large room but had now raised the camera again, almost in self defense. The room at the end of the corridor turned out to be large and rectangular, maybe twelve by twenty meters. One wall was completely framed glass with a view out into what Phyllis guessed to be the rear quadrangle of the estate. The ceiling was high, maybe twenty feet. The room was dimly illuminated on the near side by an arc lamp that stretched from one wall out over the table. There were several small wooden deck chairs scattered around the table. It was nearly dark outside and the rain had begun again. Through the camera James was beginning to glow with the tiny red, blue and green lights of the micro-machines.

"I'm sort of a medical enthusiast, Phyllis." said James. She noticed, as she circled around to his side of the table, the small tray of surgical implements. "I've got some radical ideas in the area."

"So she needs an operation?" said Phyllis, getting weak in the knees, her voice unsteady.

"Yes, very desperately." He smiled fixedly and looked at Phyllis.

"James," she said lowering the TiarraShot, "there was something in the tea." She felt the rising edge of panic in her voice. The room seemed to be the culmination of some deliberate and insidious chain of events. The implements, her camera, the table and its babbling girl, all felt like props in a game that was about to end.

"There was *something* in the tea, yes. Can I begin now?" He ventured a quick glance at the camera dangling at her neck. Phyllis raised the camera and un-halted. James was now almost a blazing sheet of white through the lens, so she reflexively keyed the shutter speed down to avoid retinal burn. He slowly raised a small cutting tool and leaned over Alice. The first incision extended along her left side from her neck to just below her ribcage, a tiny thread of blood following his hand. The girl on the table let out a low moan and then uttered a small stream of sibilant non-words. Phyllis struggled to hold the Leico steady, shooting now over James' shoulder. He cut her again, more deeply this time, a small jet of blood leaping out of her neck and onto the table. Phyllis let the camera fall and backed quickly away from the table. "James, this—" she couldn't seem to form words and in her eyes she still saw the faint ghost of James' blazing silhouette leaning over the table. "I have to go," she turned, stumbled, and hit glass. The rain was coming down hard and cold, running down her face. Phyllis felt dizzy, burning with confusion and slicing pain.

"This thing I'm doing here," James said softly, kneeling in the broken glass and firmly holding her bleeding arm, "is a dedication." He let go of her and she watched in fear and bemusement as he ran the scalpel along his wrist. He took her arm again and pressed his wrist to it.

Phyllis got up unsteadily and walked into the room. Her vision was swimming and she felt an unbearable nausea. Alice was looking mutely at her from the table, unblinking.

"If you are feeling ill," said James "we could finish some other time." Phyllis had spilled her equipment bag by the entrance and was clumsily packing.

"Yes," she muttered, speech feeling alien and unnatural to her mouth. She got up, walked over to the glass wall, gave James a half-nod and ducked out of the broken portion of the window into the rain. She found herself choking back a sob as she stumbled around the outside of the house through the downpour, fighting an urge to run. The rain felt like molasses running down her face. The words and glances of peers reverberated in her head. A cam-tech was a *go-between* for star and fanatic, a mere tool of the truly famous, the elite. They couldn't know that Phyllis had wanted very much to opt out of the loop. She could scarcely admit it to herself. She remembered her mother's eyes, the curse that fame denied can really be. She just didn't have it. She would fail this audition, there was no doubt. "Miss *can't Cope*..."

He was sitting in a deck chair by the illuminated end of the room, smoking a cigarette. The girl and the table were gone. Phyllis breathed deeply and tried to calm the speeding sensation her body was experiencing. *D-Lysergic acid*, she told herself, *kid's stuff*. She silently pressed the camera to the glass and un-halted. Momentarily James turned and looked at her. She had the momentary thought that he looked like a vulture but resisted an urge to run and kept shooting. A smile slowly spread across his thin face.

*Welcome aboard. You handle yourself very professionally. I like your technique. My son is my favorite camera by the way, and he likes you as well. We'll be in touch. P. Reuters*

There were two prints in the package, the first being Ursula's wedding gift. Phyllis realized she must have left it behind when her bag had spilled. An attached note chided her for her taste in IM's. Phyllis couldn't seem to care about that at the moment, and took an immediate inlet into the other episode. For many minutes the thing made very little sense indeed. A montage of beautiful, wavering portraits, all vaguely familiar, all with the strangely vast *more real than reality* edge every Process episode seemed to possess, but no evidence of James at all. The thing then segued into a minimal children's story of a farm girl who loved cats and had a cruel grandmother. The whole thing somehow was the most astonishing episode she had ever seen but she couldn't figure out why until the final few moments when the engine seemed to power down from a spectral, idealized shot of a gigantic urban skyline into the episode's source material. The final shot was a ghostly, skeletal treatment of a woman soaked in rain, seen through glass and holding a camera, treated with some sort of hyper-trophied ray tracing algorithm. The micro-machines circulating beneath her skin tiny, red sparks.

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*She spun with grace and impossible quickness. The gun skittered across the tar and arched in slow motion off the roof.*

*"- crazy if you thought you could kill me, Al." said Ursula. Albert Einstein fell to his knees. He began to cry. "You're pathetic. I knew your game from the first, and I waited too long for this, but its going to be a different world from here on out." Einstein looked slowly up into her eyes and nodded.*

*Steven Schuldt is an undergraduate at the Sterling school of post-cyberpunk fiction. He is currently majoring in Slipstream studies and working on his first novel, tentatively titled "Transmission and Grace". He lives in Boston with his fiance, three cats and a computer.*

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# THE HARRISON CHAPTERS

## by Jim Vassilakos

## Chapter 12



The condo's comm-board continued to beep, muted light from the Sintrivani sketching dim lines across the white, plaster walls. Cecil curled his lip into an angry grimace.

"Great hindsight, gatherer."

"Just answer it." Mike added a t-cross with his finger and thumb, an old gatherer hand-sign, and one of the few which he remembered teaching Cecil. It usually meant "track" or "follow", but given the proper context, it could mean "trace". Cecil's cameras bobbed in comprehension as Johanes' image appeared on the three-vee, a slight nod displaying all the greetings he wished to convey.

Cecil snorted, "Speak of the devil and he shalt come."

"Look, I don't have time to dance the verbal footsie with either of you. I know that you're probably tracing this call, so just stop me if I start getting long-winded."

Mike smiled, "Fat chance."

"I'm calling on your behalf, Michael. I realize that right now you probably think that I'm lower than a swamp slog."

"You could have killed thousands of people, Johanes."

"But I didn't."

"And you tried to set me up. You sacrificed Nicholas. And for all you knew, that nuke could have gone off in the heart of Xin."

"All true."

Mike shook his head is disbelief, "You don't even care."

"There's a lot at stake, Michael."

"Doomsday?"

"I've already told you far too much."

"Now you have to kill me, I suppose?" Mike grinned his baiting grin, waiting for anything that would keep Johanes on the line just a few moments longer. The Draconian seemed to read his mind from afar, sifting implications through the pours of Mike's skin. He took a deep breath.

"If I wasn't pressed for time, perhaps I would do the honors, but I imagine the Imps will do a far better job with you."

"Too bad. You could have done us all. Why didn't you?"

"Just do yourself a favor, Michael. Get back to Tizar. Forget about this story. If you try publishing even half of what you know, it'll be the same as signing your own execution warrant."

"How many times have I heard that before?"

"This isn't like the other stories. Don't give them a reason to pay you a visit. It's not worth it."

His face flickered off the depth box as the connection broke, and within a minute, Mike had dismembered the "bug" from its battery.

Mike grinned his baiting grin, waiting for anything that would keep Johanes on the line just a few moments longer. The Draconian seemed to read his mind from afar, sifting implications through the pours of Mike's skin.

"Hmm... didn't self-destruct like the others. Did you trace him?"

Cecil shook his head, "He's a crafty one. He piggy-backed on a remote dialer. Could have found him, but he dropped the line before it became apparent."

"Damnit, Cecil! I had him on for how long?!"

"Cecil be sorry." The camera's made a dejected pose. "Got the last of it recorded from the remote if you're interested. Just didn't think to extend the trace in time."

"Great hindsight, hacker."

The camera nearest Mike perked sideways like a confused dog trying to see things from a slightly different perspective: Cecil's way of acknowledging a turnabout. However, something about its hound-like stance and the crumpled flimsi in his pants pocket told Mike the chase wasn't over. The comm-address glittered faintly as Mike flattened the flimsi out on the rug.

"Cecil, I just thought of something."

"Congratulations."

"Spokes managed to trace a call I made him from Gardansa's to a restricted comm-address."

"So?"

"He was using amplitude logs or something. Can you do the same thing?"

The camera seemed to shrug.

"That could take days."

"I bet you he's at the Arien mansion. Just compare the dialing records to the mansion and the immediate area around it."

Cecil half-sighed half-grumbled.

"He's not going to be that stupid, Michael. If he doesn't want you to find him, that's the last place he would go."

"Unless...

Cecil's cameras started rotating in victorious delight as Mike looked out the window toward Xin.

"...he has an good reason to be there. That was fast. He's inside the mansion, I take it?"

"You aren't planning on going down there, are you?" The cameras stopped rejoicing as Vilya's cat pawed at one of them, uncertain as to it's edibility.

"I'd like to know more about the Ariens themselves. They're playing some part in this, Cecil."

"And probably on both sides of the court, knowing how psyches are."

Mike smirked. It was like Cecil to understate the galaxy's most common prejudice just to needle him. He was probably baiting for the sort of reaction that could get them into an hours-long argument. Anything to waste time and keep Mike from going there. Cecil would simply consider it a friendly favor on his part.

"I'm going down there. I don't believe Johanes will carry out his threat."

"Well, then say hello to the rioters. Tell them you're a nice neghrali and maybe they won't hurt you either."

"I doubt I'll see any. Whatever unrest there is in Xin is not being directed against the Ariens."

"Oh really?"

"Yeah, really."

"Anger, once sparked, burns a path toward the most opportunistic form of release, no matter how malign or misdirected."

"What idiot said that?"

The quote flashed across the three-vee. Below it, "Shattered Eden, Michael J. Harrison, Tyberian Publications." Mike scratched his head trying to figure out whether or not Cecil was pulling his leg.

"So I write a lot of stupid things. Big deal."

"What are you going to gain by going there?"

"Maybe I'll be able to talk to Mr. Arien. I met him briefly, the last time I was here."

"Met him?"

"Okay, Tara met him. I was there."

"Along for the ride."

"Yeah. All right. I don't really expect him to remember me, but if he does, it could be the break I need."

"Or break you don't need."

"You have a better idea?"

Cecil shrugged, "Investigate from afar. It's less dangerous."

"If I had access to Cindy, I would."

"SNDI? Supernatural Data, Incorporated? You've got it, Michael. What did you think the Doggie Blitz ran on? Punch cards?"

Mike tried to formulate an appropriate response as Cecil taught him how to hook into the phone jack. From what he gathered, higher brain functions were off-limits to all save the super-users or "wizards" as they were called. Mike considered calling the favor, but he figured that lower-brain would be just fine as long as he could avoid running into snags. Cecil retired to the balcony. Outside, the warm, jetting waters of the Sintrivani carried a late evening crowd high above the dispersed illumination save for the few strands of blue and purple laser light captured within the misty fog.

"Woof!"

Mike jumped slightly, though the cat seemed neither to notice nor care. The noise was in his head, no more than an electrical illusion.

"Access. File. Information. Library. Galactic Press."

"...Woof!"

"Does that mean..."

"Woof!"

"Damnit."

"...Woof!"

"Access. File. System. Output parameters. Errors. Command. Set format. Long."

"...Pant pant."

Mike rubbed the side of his face. For a moment, he could almost smell wet, sticky, dog breath.

"Very funny."

"...Woof! Illegal command ignored."

"Access. File. System. Output parameters. Errors. Command. Ignore. Keyword woof."

"...Pant pant."

"Access. File. System. Output messages. Command. Galanglicize. Message. Most recent."

"...Done."

"Access. Userlog. Current. Command. Find. Username. Spokes."

"...Done."

"Query. Date. Login through logout. Most recent."

"...Insufficient format specification."

"Tora-centric. Positive past. Unit centim. Single decimal."

"96.2 through 71.9."

Mike looked out the window wondering what Spokes was up to. The evening was hacker time, and Spokes had been gone long enough to make it back to Xekhasmeno. Long enough to get pulled off the road and molested by locals, Mike figured.

Cecil was leaning back in a lounge chair, luxuriating in his abstinence from the electronic environs as thin layers of warm mist settled over him and the gleeful screams of children resounded in the distance. He used to say that he needed the condo to get away from it all. Then, when he was rested, he'd go back into a little cubicle somewhere and not be seen for days or weeks. It didn't make a great deal of sense to Mike, but then a lot of things didn't make much sense. He hoped that Spokes had the same idea. Better isolation than dislocation.

"Access. File. Information. Library. The Aggressor. Interstellar society page. Command. Search. Keyword Arien."

"...Insufficient file specification."

"Most recent."

"...Done."

"Say file."

"...Incompatible format error."

"Show file."

A page of the local paper appeared in glowing blue Calannic in front of Mike's face. Even blinking his eyes refused to dislodge it, and whoever scanned it into memory hadn't bothered to reduce it into text. Instead, it was simply an image with a list of keywords attached to it. Sloppy but cost-efficient.

As he began to scan the first few lines, Mike realized that the article wasn't about the Arien family at all, but he instantly recognized the picture. Long, dark hair fell straight along her spine, her sharp, brown eyes watching the row of black grav-limos rising from a well manicured lawn. The color of the cars clashed against her white evening dress, her shoulders bare save for the reflection of headlights on deep, bronzed skin. In the background, a crowd of people were escaping the Lion's Den. Mike remembered the awards ceremony all too well. The headline read, "Draconian Ambassador Disappears."

"Cecil!"

"...Illegal command ignored."

"Command. Pause."

Cecil poked his head in.

"What is it?"

"I got something. How do I display this on the three-vee?"

Cecil strolled in, unplugging Mike and plugging himself in with two swift motions of his wrist. The image appeared on the depth box a moment later.

"You know her?"

Mike nodded, "I met her at an awards banquet just before coming to Calanna. It looks like this image was taken just after it."

"How did this turn up?"

"It says she was married to..."

Mike read the paragraph again, still shaking off his disbelief.

"...Alister Arien. An unnamed source in

the Draconian Embassy blamed the DSS. I don't believe this."

"Good. The written word is rarely worth believing."

"Why would they kidnap their own ambassador?"

"Cloak and dagger stuff. Conspiracy of hate. You know how it is."

Mike looked up incredulously. His old friend wore a fool's grin, the sort he'd throw on for guests he was planning on throwing out. Mike stood up, stepping toward the door.

"You don't buy any of this, do you."

"It's a local rag, Michael. The Aggressor rarely prints anything worth reading beyond its entertainment value. Too bad Doggie Blitz doesn't carry The Galactican. But then we'd have to deal with those silly writers' royalties, not to mention all varieties of interstellar propaganda."

Mike winced, "I'm not biting, Cecil. I have to get to the Arien mansion."

"You already know Cecil's opinion."

"That I'm being hideously stupid?"

The nearest camera nodded, and Cecil sighed.

"Before you go, there's something more you should know."

"Such as?"

"Found something interesting while sifting through the booty from that android brain."

"Robin?"

"She had some very peculiar orders, Michael. Orders which she had to consult before deciding to fry you. She was to kill you and Niki upon touch down and then report to her temporary supervisor for further instructions."

"Clay?"

"A chap by the name of William Walker."

Mike blinked, "Bill?"

"One and the same."

"That doesn't make sense."

"If she recognized him and he had the proper access code, then he could have gotten inside just like we did tonight. Judging from these orders, he could have gotten further."

"Why would Clay turn her over to Bill? Why would he send us on this mission just to kill us?"

Cecil smiled, "A change of plans, perhaps? Now, at least, you and Johanes might have something interesting to talk about. Give the Draconian Cecil's warmest regards. Translation: if he blinks, fry him."

---

Evening descended into night as Mike approached the outskirts of Xin, his impatience forcing a speed well beyond the limits proscribed by Calannan law. Judging from the radio reports, however, he wouldn't have to worry about being pulled over. The police were most likely busy in the inner city, quelling the incessant looting and vandalism.

He'd seen riots before. Even in his early youth, he'd learned what to expect. What made "Shattered Eden" a success wasn't so much the accurate description of such events. It was the human nature that got people, the law of opportunism as Cecil might have called it. To Mike, it was just sloth.

People liked to take the easy out in nearly all endeavors whether they were flagellating their brains in the electronic void or expressing rage at things they only barely understood. Even the grand Imperial bureaucracy which sought to destroy an entire world had shied away from the big bang approach. Too messy, they must have figured: bad for interstellar relations. Germ warfare had been far easier for them, far less newsworthy.

These locals were no different. Mike knew they would try to hit the obvious targets. But unlike Eden, the two most obvious targets, the Arien mansion and Xekhasmeno, were both out of the way and very defensible. The Calannans could fume and fuss, destroy small businesses, even kill a few unfortunates. But if they wanted to make the sort of statement worth making, they'd have to take casualties. Mike suspected that few rioters would be so inclined, because at heart, those most indolent were often the most cowardly.

Thus, the Arien mansion resembled not so much a war zone as a refugee camp. Bathed in the moon's faint luminescence, a quarrelsome throng resided outside the front gates, tossing occasional molotovs onto the lawn and shouting threats into the studded darkness. Mike parked at the side of the road among the other vehicles and started circling the mansion grounds on foot to glean some idea of his chances. He guessed that the direct approach would likely constitute a recipe for suicide, as just outside the moat, he could discern the movement of clumsy shapes in the darkness: a row of Alister's mutated minions most probably. He could imagine the worgs wearing hungry grins, the sort normally reserved for career bureaucrats and used grav-car dealers named "Slim-price Sam".

Half way around, he spotted the yellow motorbike. It sat beside a row of shrubs on the near side of the moat, plainly visible from the fence but hidden from the mansion itself. Mike figured that either Johanes was taking half-hearted precautions or he was planning a swift get-away. Another step yielded sudden pain from below. Several thick cords of barbed wire lay strewn about, one snagged on his bare foot. Mike knelt down, tearing it loose with a determined yank. Someone had cut it off the top of the gate, motion sensors and all, and a new wire was strung loosely between the severed ends carrying electricity from one side to the other but skipping the portion in between. Mike climbed up and over, smearing blood on the cermelicon rails and finally settling himself on estate grounds just inside the gate.

As though on cue, the noise of gun spray cracked through the air. Mike froze, huddling into a ball before he realized that he wasn't a target. The gun towers were firing on the front gates as gas canisters exploded in the crowd's midst. Though nearly half a kilometer distant, Mike could still see the gates open, cermelicon railings reflecting the moonlight as they slid to the side allowing the worgs to charge through. It was a slaughter, pure and simple, and those who couldn't make it back to their vehicles were chewed up and left to rot on the blood stained pavement.

Mike picked himself off the grass, the moments ticking in his mind with each heartbeat in his ears as he began bolting toward the mansion. Every stride ate precious time, but with all attention focused on the front gate, Mike skidded to a halt beside Johanes' bike having apparently attracted no notice whatsoever. The bike's motor idled quietly, its noise muffled by a black, plastic jacket. A long, insulated tube extended from the jacket, running to the moat beneath the shrubbery. It was a cooling sheath, Mike guessed, keeping the bike both quiet and invisible to infra-red sensors as well as protecting it from over-heating.

Reaching up, Mike gently switched off the motor and pocketed the key, glancing toward the moat as though it were an after-thought, a fifteen meter wide after-thought with gun towers looming overhead and tales of a moat monster fully appreciated. Still, the mansion walls beckoned, and Mike knew he'd never have a better chance. The water was warm and mucky, its thin layer of brown surface jelly sending memories of Aiwelk tumbling about in his head. Holding the automatic pistol overhead, Mike tried wading across but sunk into the deep, slimy mud along the moat's banks. He finally resorted to lodging the barrel between his teeth and dog paddling like a mad man.

Leafy, moist vegetation hugged the mansion's stone walls amidst a tapestry of drab moss which dipped gently into the water. The thin vines were surprisingly strong, and Mike found himself climbing upward toward the second floor windows when he felt an annoying tug at his legs. The moat had extruded a long, grey tentacle which had wrapped a determined hold around his ankles.

"Good evening, Mister Harrison. So good of you to drop by."

Mike nearly fell off the wall, his mud caked hand frozen just inches from his mouth. The voice came from the nearest gun tower. He could see Mr. Arien's head sticking from a window one floor above him, his sparse, silver hair glittering in the dim moonlight. Johanes stood beside the old man, a dour grimace painted across the Draconian's lips. The barrel of a rifle poked out an adjacent window, its laser sights cutting a fine beam of light through the damp air between it and the back of Mike's neck.

"At a loss for words?"

Mike spat, propelling the pistol from his mouth into the murky water below. The grey tentacle immediately retreated back beneath the surface either in response to some unseen command or in order to examine its new, metallic visitor.

"That's better." Someone handed Arien a flimsi. "Let's see what we have on you. Mmmm... juicy. You've been up to mischief, young man?"

"A little. Can I come inside?"

"Just hang out."

Mike gripped two vines and stayed put, the thought of diving back into the moat playing back and forth between his brain lobes. Leaning over slightly, Johanes seemed to whisper something into Arien's ear.

"Kill him?! Our first truly determined trespasser in how many years?" Johanes winced and gritted his teeth as the old man continued. "Mr. Harrison, being that I am expecting company rather soon, I don't have a great deal of time to chit-chat, so you'll have to be brief. Why shouldn't I blast you off my walls like the bug you are, and more importantly, why does your Draconian friend want me to?"

"To your first question: Ambassador Kato. To your second: he's not my friend." Mike bit his lip, half expecting to become a late night morsel for the moat creature. Arien, however, seemed to frown in consideration.

"Bring him up."

The rope was easier to climb than wall carpet, and Mike accepted the invitation with a healthy tug. Inside, Johanes and Arien were surrounded by a number of guards, each wearing black body armor and carrying automatic rifles with electronic sights. Perfect for sniping the locals, Mike figured, though a bit long ranged for disposing of nosy gatherers.

"Do not be afraid, Mr. Harrison. I have no intention of killing you so long as you speak the truth. Where is she?"

Mike gulped down, trying to conjure the knowledge as Johanes answered for him.

"You're wasting your time. He knows nothing. If you refuse to punish him directly, Alister, at least turn him over to the police."

"Silence, Draconian. I wish to hear what he has to say."

Mike looked back toward the open window. Muddy footprints left his trace easily visible. He shook his arms off, finally turning toward Arien with a discouraged shrug.

"I don't know where she is. The last time I saw the Ambassador was on Tizar. She wanted me to come here to Calanna."

"To do what?"

"To die, apparently, or so Robin said."

"Robin?"

Johanes stepped between them, "We don't have time for this nonsense, Alister. Sule will be arriving with the Ambassador and Erestyl at any moment."

Mike squinted, "Sule? ISIS?"

"Stay out of this, Michael."

"ISIS is coming here?! What, their mind scanners didn't work, so you're cooperating?" Mike gazed, incredulously.

"I'm warning you..."

"No. No, you're not. You want Sule. One bullet, and it'll be over. You're aware of the nuclear detonation today, Mr. Arien?"

"Michael!"

"There's a fair chance that the Ambassador was at ground zero. You already know that I'm wanted by the police for homicide. Well Johanes here isn't wanted for anything, and it's very likely that he's guilty of murdering your wife."

"Michael, we're not playing games here! Your fantasies will have to find another audience."

"Why the fast getaway, Johanes? You planning to just kill and run?"

"I have no intention of running."

Johanes drew a pistol from his coat, an integral laser pistol to be more exact. It's polished iridium handle made it look more like a hood ornament than a weapon, however, with it aimed between his eyes, Mike didn't doubt its lethal competence. Given the proper setting, he'd seen such devices carve holes in flesh so neatly, they could cauterize the wounds they inflicted before spilling a single drop of blood. He guessed that Johanes had been saving this weapon for a special occasion and tried to feel honored.

"No!"

The voice was Arien's, and Johanes obeyed it, if only for a moment.

"Alister..."

"Put it down."

"I am politely asking your permission to kill this liar."

"Put it down or be punctured."

Nearly every automatic rifle in the room pointed toward the Draconian, the glint of steel wary with expectation as three of the guards crouched down at the corners to avoid the cross fire. It was the sort of threat that would be carried out with neither postponement nor afterthought, and Mike watched, silent and breathless, as Johanes, wavering with indecision, reluctantly complied.

"Restrain him."

"Of for... there's no need to..."

"Remain still, Johanes. I do not wish to see you damaged. Please continue, Mr. Harrison. Your hypothesis intrigues me."

Mike sat down on the window sill, oblivious for once to the squashing sound of his muddy pants. He imagined falling backwards into the moat, nose cartilage sunken deep within his skull and Johanes' boot print embedded firmly upon his face. Johanes was thinking it too. His eyes betrayed him, if not his fists or the veins in his neck. Throat dry with expired fear, Mike swallowed a warm drop of saliva and blinked in consideration of where to begin.

"It's no longer hypothetical."

Mike withdrew the key from his pocket.

"Your fence has a hole in it. Just across the moat you'll find Johanes' bike. There's a cooling sheath wrapped around the motor. That he was planning a quick escape was obvious. I just couldn't figure out why. Now I can. If Sule is coming here with Erestyl, it means that the mind scanner wasn't a success. They need a telepath to get inside his head. Somebody good. Like you. Am I right?"

"Continue."

"However, you've never worked for Imperials, at least not to my knowledge, and according to Kitara, you have as much reason to hate them as I do."

Arien's eyes sparkled at his recollection of the Siri.

"You knew Kitara?"

"Very well. You probably don't remember me, but we've met before. A year ago. She told me a few things about you. If you're working for the Imps, you must have a very good reason. That's where Ambassador Kato comes in. ISIS has her. Just stop me if I'm wrong."

"You're right."

"Are you're certain she's still alive?"

Arien looked down, drawing a deep breath. "No. However, as long as the possibility remains..."

"You'll do anything for anyone. And Johanes here, he's to deal with Sule as soon as the Ambassador is safe. To let Imperial blood fall on Draconian hands. Pardon my candor, Mr. Arien, but you're a fool."

"Perhaps."

"Did Johanes explain to you what's at stake?"

"He didn't have to. I've known of the Prometheus device for some time."

"Prometheus device?"

Arien glanced toward Johanes, his eyes betraying a mixture of uncertainty and solicitation.

"He doesn't know?"

Johanes shook his head, "I was trying to protect him from the details."

Mike broke in, "What about this Prometheus device?"

"It's like one of those weapons we were talking about, Mike, the kind that kill en masse. Only this one gives en masse a whole new definition."

"Doomsday?"

"You don't want to know the details. Trust me."

"What makes you so sure?"

"Because... if you publish so much as a peep, you're dead meat."

"The Imps already want to kill me, Jo, and at least one member of the DSS seems to feel the same way."

Johanes smiled, "I don't want to kill you, Mike. I want to throttle you, and then I want to kill you."

"Oh, thanks. That makes me feel so much better."

"Don't take it personally. I want to do likewise with Alister here."

"Now is not a good time to be threatening me, Johanes."

"You think I give a damn? You think I'm in this for my jollies like Mike here? Tell me something, Alister. Even assuming that Sule's telling the truth and Kato is somehow still alive, heaven forbid that should be the case, but just supposing it is... tell me something. Is she worth it? Doomsday for a single human life?"

Arien looked insulted, then confused, then finally a mixture of the two.

"How am I supposed to answer that?"

"Don't answer it. Just think about it. It's not too late. We can still turn this thing around. All I'm asking for is one clear shot. I'll take Sule out like a can of garbage. We'll have Erestyl. We'll find your wife, if she's still alive. Just trust me. For one lousy night, trust me."

"If I let you kill Sule..."

"I know what you're going to say, Alister, and she's already dead... or worse than dead. Why the hell can't you see that?! You know what ISIS does to captives like her."

"Mental mutilation."

"That's right. She'll be a zombie, Alister. You'll be trading the secret of Promethius for a zombie. Think it over."

"I have already," He looked toward Mike as he announced the decision, not so much at him as through him, and strange it may seem, Mike found himself frozen, unable to turn aside from the tone of finality in the old man's voice, unable to blink from the sight of his eyes nor even shut his mind to the message they contained. It was as though Alister had seen something in him, a fragment of thought, a whisp of spirit, or even a moment of future destiny. Whatever it was, he counted on it, settling more weight upon its value that Mike cared to ascertain. And then Alister turned away, the moment lost in the shuffle of a heartbeat.

"As you perhaps know, Johanes, there are ways of repairing such injuries given the proper precautions, and Draconians are, generally speaking, very cautious people. I'd thought I'd convinced you to bide your time, to wait for the right moment, however, it seems that you have reverted to your original idea. Kill her at the first opportunity, and leave old Alister to pick up the pieces. Who can tell why? Perhaps you expected that the right moment would never come, that it was stolen by things that go boom in the daytime."

"Nuke?" Mike queried.

Arien nodded, "I'd always known it was a fitting nick-name. Her temper was rather explosive. But if I'd known what would be her end..."

"Both Sule and Erestyl apparently survived."

"Regardless, this Draconian filth tried to sacrifice her like some..."

"I know what I did! I'm not pleased about it anymore than you, but I'd do it again, and you know damn well the reason!"

"Yes, of course. You were just being cautious."

A small, metallic sphere floated in through the door, a red light flashing at its zenith.

"Speak."

"Sule has arrived, my lord. She is outside the front gate awaiting permission to enter."

"Grant it. Guards, make our guests

comfortable."

Arien left, bequeathing his private soldiers with a simple if indefinite task. Mike stood back, smiling ever so slightly as Johanes was physically searched in the most comprehensive manner allowable by law. Being that Calannan law was rather lax on such matters, he had some time to wait and wonder if he was to be their next victim. Several minutes later, they found themselves in a basement cell, Johanes wearing a towel one of Arien's more generous employees had loaned him. He stood in the cell's corner, feet together and legs slightly bent, the white towel knotted around his waist. Mike tried to churn forth a wholesome expression.

"Did it hurt?"

Johanes merely gritted his teeth in response, angry eyes glaring stubbornly at the opposite wall. Mike nodded, trying to look sympathetic.

"I'm just asking, because if you think you need a proctologist or anything..."

"Shut-up, Harrison."

"Right... um," Mike paused, searching for the right words, "Do you mind if I ask you a question?"

Johanes ignored him, wincing as he shifted his weight slightly.

"Were you really going to shoot me back there?"

"Yes."

"You were."

"Absolutely."

"May I ask why?"

Johanes snorted and then winced again as the vibration crawled down along his spine. Mike looked away, granting him some private latitude for expression of discomfort.

"I mean, it's a little extreme, isn't it? To shoot somebody?"

"Why don't you ask Bill Walker."

"Where did you hear about that?"

"Various places. Before the operation you were telling Cecil all about it."

Mike shook his head, "Then you heard it was self-defense, and Bill was a friend."

"A friend, perhaps. As for self-defense, I understand that he was unarmed."

"I had no choice."

"Precisely. You were protecting your own precious hide from an unarmed friend as you put it. I, on the other hand, am trying to protect millions of people."

Mike smiled, "Let me get this straight. You pull out a laser with every intention of carving holes in me, and two cents later you're calling my morality into question?"

"You got it. Oh, and by the way, I didn't have the heart to tell you this before, but you'll probably figure it out sooner or later. Your friend was working for the Imps, true enough, but he didn't know it until it was too late. He thought he was working for the DSS, for John Clay to be more precise. He didn't really know what he'd gotten himself into until Sule came prancing along."

Mike stared back incredulously, the smile wiped from his face as thoroughly as if he'd been hit by a ton of bricks. Johanes simply nodded and continued.

"ISIS found out about Erestyl being on Tizar when Clay, one of our boys, decided he was getting a lousy deal from the agency. He cleverly diverted our internal investigations after the raid on the medcenter by shifting the blame for Erestyl's capture to you. Then he disappeared, and that disk you stole from the Solomon mansion... that disk you left in Walker's hands... it became extremely valuable to ISIS. I don't know whether Clay told your friend what to expect from Robin upon reaching Calanna or whether he just figured it out by himself, but either way, Walker saved your life, and you repaid him by blowing a hole through his chest. Why, if it wasn't for your juvenile curiosity combined with those amazing trigger-happy reflexes, your friend would still be alive."

Mike held his breath for a moment to keep from bolting to his feet. Getting into a fight with Johanes was not something he would let himself be talked into.

"You're twisting it, Jo. He was with Sule. He was trying to get me captured by ISIS."

"For questioning. My guess is that he figured that you knew just about nothing regarding Erestyl. Sule probably promised him that you'd be set free, and who knows, you might very well have been at that point. You were still blissfully ignorant, and you'd already done them a great service. You played right into their trap, after all."

"You don't honestly believe that."

"What you or I believe isn't particularly important. It's what Bill believed that is interesting. You wrote him off as a traitor without even bothering to attend the funeral. When the locals got around to doing an autopsy on the body, they found the primary arteries in his neck already shattered. The culprit was a tiny capsule with its own radio receiver, timing mechanism, and explosive charge courtesy of ISIS. Their leverage over him, Michael. Your friend knew that he'd made a huge mistake. He knew that you were in the process of making another similar mistake, and he wanted to get you out of the picture as quickly and as painlessly as possible, even if it meant handing you over to the Imps. As far as he was concerned, they'd catch you sooner or later."

"The psyche bloodhound?"

Johanes nodded, "A gift from Alister. Before the Imps admitted to having Ambassador Kato, they had Clay pay Alister a social call. Clay, I am told, was very convincing in blaming Kato's capture on rogue elements in the DSS. He requested psychic assistance in tracking her down."

"Arien couldn't see through it?"

"Clay has a psionic shield implant."

"You're reaching, Jo."

"If you don't believe me, the why don't you look at his file. I'm sure Cecil could supply it now that he's virtually jumped Robin's bones."

"She doesn't have any bones, and I'm not buying any of this."

"Her circuits then, and yes you are. Because it's true, and you know it."

Mike took a deep breath. "Why are you telling me this?"

Johanes shrugged, "Because, it's as close to throttling you as I'm likely to get... at least in this lifetime. You may not realize it yet, Michael, but you're not long for this world."

"Sule doesn't even know I'm here."

"If Vlep lives, she knows."

"Vlep?"

"The psyche bloodhound."

Mike winced, "He lives."

Johanes cocked his head sideways, "What makes you so certain?"

"I hand-cuffed him to a steering wheel this morning."

Johanes coughed, "You what?"

"It's a bit of a story."

"We seem to have a bit of spare time."

---

Despair curled about the corridor like

knotted strands of raw meat, a nourishing meal, though people rarely gobbled it with enthusiasm. Pausing, she carefully rested her hand upon the stone tile. Johanes and several of the guards had passed recently. Remnants of their emotions lay scattered carelessly, and yet there was more, the gatherer she had yet to meet. He was neither angry nor dutiful. Instead, he seemed relieved, as though being jailed in the mansion's dungeon had been more reprieve than punishment. Why Sule had requested him, she could scarcely imagine. The bio-synthe was difficult to read. So many of them turned out deranged, trying to establish a telepathic rapport was rarely worth the effort.

Mixtures of fear and respect pressed quickly away as the guards stepped aside to let her pass, and with a slight motion of her thumb, the one at the end opened the tall, brown door. Its metal plating was rusty with age, and its grey, galvorn lock jutted out conspicuously like some misbehaved organ. Inside, Johanes leaned against a wall as the gatherer sat on the bench, looking up cautiously, his eyes keen and brown, a web of fear swept over whatever curiosity still lingered.

"Korina?" Johanes pressed against the bars. "Kori... tell me you've come to let me out of here."

"In your dreams, Draconian. Father sent me for the gatherer."

She watched the figure on the bench. He stood slowly, naked save for a pair of mud-caked britches. Turning, Johanes slumped his shoulders.

"Sule wants him, eh? We'd already assumed as much."

"Get out of the way."

Johanes complied, escalating Mike forward with a swift boot to the back.

"Go ahead, Michael. And good fortune. You'll need it."

Mike let himself be escorted down the corridor. Two guards stayed behind them, their rifles ready for a moment's distraction. The young woman at his side seemed to ignore them, her green eyes lost in a dreamy haze. As they passed a row of windows, he considered making a break for it. To die with bullets in his back or bullets in his front, it made little difference. Even the gullet of the strange moat creature seemed preferable to a meeting with Sule. Green eyes watched him from the corners of their vision.

"Don't be afraid. As long as you are here, my father will see to your safety."

Mike nodded doubtfully, the poke of a muzzle nudging his spine.

"And what about Erestyl?"

"He is Imperial property."

"Oh," Mike gulped, "so that's how it works."

She stopped in the antechamber before the sanctuary. Mike remembered the mauve carpet and indigo tapestries all too well. Tara had been ignoring him the night of their visit, so he'd wandered around until he was sure he was lost, eventually winding up in the meditation chamber with his head poked out a window, sky-diving snot wads and half-nibbled hors d'oeuvres on the patrolling worgs. She found him after a few direct hits, apparently aware of some bizarre sense of satisfaction he was feeling and curious as to its source. They ended up spending half the night there before the servants finally kicked them out. Green eyes stared through him, her expression lingering in the grey stretch between curiosity and bewilderment. Mike looked back at the floor and consciously cleared his mind.

"My thoughts are my property."

She opened her mouth as if to respond and then shut it again. Mike regarded her indecision with contempt.

"If you have something to say, say it."

"I was curious as to why she wants you."

"Sule? Why don't you read her like you did me?"

"She..." green eyes narrowed, "it is difficult."

"Must really stink to have a puzzle, eh?"

"I'll survive."

Mike let his annoyance fade into a mediocre smirk. "Are we going in or not?"

She thumped the base of her palm against the door, the resulting sound dull but determined, and as though by its own volition, the wooden barrier slid quietly into the wall. Sule stood at arm's reach, her silver-hued eyes glinting with the barest trace of anger.

Mike gulped down, "You called?"

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

*'The Harrison Chapters' will be continued next issue.*

# Last Train

## by Lou Crago



On the trak, there was nothin' for the babies to do but jes rest they minds. They be trandscendin' the worlds — all the worlds that anybody evah thought of. They don't have to be thinkin' bout nothing' at all anymore.

But Old General Ven, he be tryin to call 'em back. that high-rankin' ole sumbitch, he all the time tryin to yank 'em back down. He a Motor Man, thas why. All Motor Mans, first to lass, is *bad*!

Them babies rollin around on the trak, and they payin no mind to Old Ven. And ever time he come, he try to get 'em down, but they not lissnen. And after while he give up, and he come over to where I'm layin on the floor, and he say all that metal talk at me. And when I don't answer back, he give me a kick in mah ribs. Then he go out the place and the door shut behind him and you hear them magnetic bolts lockin into place.

Most times, I jes lay there and watch them babies. I watch 'em rollin, cause I can *see* 'em. Old Ven, he know I can see 'em, and it make him mad as hell — cause he can't. He a Motor Man, he ain't got livin eyes, not like me. I guess thas why he keep on lettin' me live. He kick me sometimes, but he won't kill me. If he kill me, he know he won't *never* get them babies!

I lie and watch long through the night, and them babies they shining in mah mind, they like the sunrise what used to come on this here planet, they like what used to be stars in the night. They singing too — not like any song, not 'zactly a sound, but I hears 'em. And when them babies sing, it sho do grab me.

Then I got to fight like hell not to think of the way it wuz. I got to fight to stay steady just like I is now, and keep on bein just what I done decided to be. I can't even think one single thought that ain't in line with that, else them Motor Mens be tracin it on machines they got. So I lie still and lissen to them babies singing, and if I think 'bout anything, I be dam sure it's somethin like feels good to be scratching fleas, or how tasty corn pone is with molasses poured on it. Stuff like that.

And it's been near about fifteen days now, but I doin it so good that Old Ven and them other Motor Mens ain't picked up a thing yet. And mah babies, they safe on the trak where Old Ven, even he do be a General and got all his science mens with him, he can't get 'em down. No sir, long as theys on the trak, they gone! They got no bodies, they got no minds, they got nuthin he can grab hold of, nuthin he can download. And it 'bout to drive Old Ven and them crazy. I lie there, and I'm anxious as hell, but all the time I be laffin too.

We ain't safe yet, no way. There be one of them babies ain't restin her mind too good, she sometime lose hold of what's happenin. And she come down a little bit then, and she sorta like hang her head down over the trak. And she be callin out, wantin' to know if it maybe it be good to come down to the world again, like Old Ven been sayin' over and over. She startin' to innerface again, with this damned world she don't even know is trashed.

But Old General Ven, he be tryin to call 'em back. that high-rankin' ole sumbitch, he all the time tryin to yank 'em back down. He a Motor Man, thas why. All Motor Mans, first to lass, is *bad*!

I calls her Glo, and I says, "Glo, you git back! Long as I'm here, you ain't no way comin down! So don't be thinkin 'bout it. You go back to restin yo mind!"

She say, "I remember things. I remember."

And the more she remember, the more she start to take on shape. And I got to nip that in the bud right there, damn quick!.

So I say, "Glo, git on back now! What's the use of me bein here, and layin on this hard floor night after night like a old dog, if you gonna fool around that way? If you let Old Ven talk you down, then he gonna kill me. That what you want?"

She say, "I'll go back, but talk to me a little first, Gabriel. When I start remembering things, I get so terribly lonely."

I say, "Okay, Honey, we chat a little bit. But then you go back to restin' yo mind on nuthin, like them others."

She say, "How many of us are there, Gabriel?" She axed me this question before, but I got to tell her again and again 'cause when she outta mind she can't remember.

"They's twenty-four of you," I reminds her. "You a dozen positive and a dozen negative. And you is the *last ones* on this here planet, so you gotta remember that, okay?"

"I'll remember," she say. But she sounding sleepy and dreamy, and I know she 'bout ready to go back. Which is fine, 'cause no matter how much pleasure I might git outta chattin, it ain't good for her to be thinkin and talkin. If Old Ven come in while she in her mind, then it'a be hell to pay. Then if she take a form, he be able to grab her. Then we all be up shit creek.

She say, "I wanted to ask you, Gabriel..."

" 'Bout what, Honey?"

"How is it that you're in a body? Why didn't you die... like all the others?"

But she startin to lose her mind shape right then, and in a minnit she back on the trak restin along with them others, and she be transcendin all the worlds. I hates to lose her company, but all the same I give a sigh of relief. Now we all safe for another night. Nothin won't be happenin on this here world.

It weren't even mornin yet. Old Ven he come in, and a bunch of Motor Mens followin him, and they makin their metal talk. They walks up and down, up and down, and they starin at the track, and they hookin up wires and makin beeps. But after a while they sees it ain't doin no good. No way can they access them babies.

So Old Ven he come over to where I'm layin and this time he don't kick, he squats down and he stares. Then he start in to talkin at me. He know I don't unnerstand no metal talk, I be too low a form, but he keep on. He lookin' at mah eyes, and he even tryin' to smile — which is a pitiful sight on the face of a Motor Man, lemmie tell you! — and then he waitin for me to feedback.

But I ain't sayin nothin, 'cause by now there ain't nothin for me to say to the likes of him. Things is the way they is: the babies is the last ones, and the Motor Mans is stranded, and we all here in it together. He gonna keep tryin to git them babies, and I'm gonna keep tryin to make damn sure he don't — so there ain't nothin to be said. Old Ven, he know this good as I do.

Then, I guess he make up his mind to do somethin he ain't tried before. He grab me up and start walkin out the door of that room with me. But 'bout that time the trak commence to shiver and shake, and it makin' a terrible whine, and the babies rollin faster and faster. 'Cause me and them babies, we linked up. We been linked up all through time, whatever shape we be in. Back before the end, half the time them babies didn't even know it — they just goin along, bein first one thing and then another, and they ain't studyin 'bout no linkup. And me, I be lookin like whatever I done decide to look like, and most the time them babies ain't catchin on to who or whut I wuz. But that don't make no nevermind, 'cause we got the link. We got the synchronous wave goin, we ain't never outta touch with each other. So when Old Ven he try to take me outta there and do somethin bad to me, them babies they feelin it and they commencin to waller around.

So Old Ven he see he can't do it that way or them babies gonna go clean out they minds. And maybe they quit lyin there all nice in a row, hummin that soft song, and maybe they start to go crazy and throw theyselfs around. If all twenty-four of 'em gits crazy and raisin hell all at once, that old trak ain't gonna stand the pressure, it'a break sure as hell! Them babies, they got power — they don't even *know* theyselfs how much power, 'cause they keep on forgettin.

But ah know.

And Old Ven, he know. Him and his science mens, they smart enough to figure out about the trak, 'cause they seen ones just like it on them other planets. And they smart enough to build this here magnetic room to hold it, knowin its the attractor for them babies, and they gonna come straight to it when everthing else break down. But Old Ven he also know he got to play it easy, else he end up with nothin — the trak broke, and them babies withered up and dead, not fit to make no shapes a'tall.

So he put me back down on the floor and he wave his hand to them other Motor Mens. They come over and they holdin me down, pretendin they gonna be easy like, but they starts in puttin' them wires on me, stickin 'em in with little bitty pins. They got me wired through everplace they can, and it ain't hurtin too much. But it's makin somethin rise in me, they's a rushin feelin in me, and they's sparks startin to jump out from all over mah hide.

So I have to hold real still, and keep on thinkin to myself over and over how I ain't gonna change my shape, how I ain't gonna let 'em shake me loose from this here form I took on, which is what I made up mah mind to be, back when the end done come.

They pumpin the juice through them wires and the sparks is jumpin out, and Old Ven he come and hunker down on the floor beside me and he start to talk at me again.

He say, "Our readings show that you are not at all a primitive vertebrate, as you have the appearance. You are a Monad, merely taking this shape."

I keepin' myself real still. I tellin' mahself over and over the way I wants it to be.

Old Ven he nod to them Motor Mens and they pour on more juice, and them wires in me they start to heat up. They stingin like wasps used to be, and then they burnin like red-hot needles, but I go on tellin mahself I got to stand it, 'cause they's no way I'm lettin him get them babies.

Well...they keep on doin it for a long time, a damn long time. Finally, he tell 'em shut off the juice, and he let me drink a little water from a tube he got.

He say, "The drink will make you feel at ease."

That drink taste funny, but it do in fact make me feel a whole lot better. Then he give me some more. And then they start pumpin the juice through them wires again, but now they ain't hurtin a'tall. Everwhere on me that one of them wires is pinned through, there's a fine feelin, like starting to tremble with some kinda crazy joy, starting to roll with it, startin to take it on home, so fine that I can't stop.

Old Ven's talkin through the waves risin in me, and he sound so fine and mellow and like he mah friend, and he say, "Now, tell me who you are. Tell me what your name is."

I ain't wantin to say nothin to Ven, but it sorta leak outta me without my knowin. "I be Gabriel, boss."

He say, "Tell me now, what form did you have before the destruction?"

I tryin to sort of growl but it come out a whine, and I can't keep mahself from answerin. "Wuz humanoid, boss."

Old Ven say, "What is the purpose of this form you have assumed? It is not in the index of creatures which were indigenous to this planet. There is nothing like it in our archives. There were hirsute quadrapeds, but none with the cranial formation you have assumed. You appear to have amalgamated disparate species. What is the purpose?"

I tryin hard as hell to keep mah mouth shut, I tryin to think 'bout scratchin fleas, but that water he give me makin mah head swim. The words comin out of me and there ain't nothin I can do.

"That old blast come too soon," I tell him. "I wudden no way ready! I was jest then thinkin 'bout how I gotta get me a form that nobody gonna pay no attention to."

"But you could have disincorporated, returned to baseline presence."

"No, boss, no. You don't unnerstan. I do that and they's no way I can hang around and watch after them babies. I had to get me a form real quick, I had to choose somethin. And I was standin there thinkin 'bout all the stuff I done ever knowed on this planet."

"Cultural images?" Ven axes me. "Mythical images?"

"Everthing, first to lass," I tell him. "Run it through mah head, from the time it first started up on this here dirt-ball all the way down to when you muthfukkin Motor Mens come flyin down."

"What technological devices did you employ?" he axe me.

"I don't have no truck with that stuff," I tell him. "Ain't needin it. I just be scannin through all I got in mind, and then I be whatever I decides to be. But when the blast come, it taken me by surprise. And I flashed on pictures I seen in a little old book, one time when I was bein a child. I recollected them pictures I seen once, 'cause they be folks nobody gonna notice much."

"What pictures?" Ven axe me.

"They was Old Uncle Tom. And nother 'bout Old Dog Tray."

Ven say, "Explicate Uncle Tom form. Explicate Dog Tray form."

But I start to lose hold long about then. I start to lose mah grasp of vernacular and mah Tom-Tray persona but, damn that drink, I couldn't stop talkin. "It got mixed...between least animal and least human..."

Ven saw I was losing verbal control. He jerked my head up. "Your origin?" he demanded. "Inside the System or outside?"

"Outside."

"Will they send a mission to retrieve you?"

"No," I said, with difficulty. "...guardian... take surviving archiplasms... out."

Ven dropped my head and talked to the other Motor Men. I was in a black and buzzing place and couldn't distinguish what they said. Then he came back to me. And the wires began to heat up once more. Now it was pain and pleasure mixed intolerably, so that I could neither accept nor reject. I had to fight very hard to keep myself from leaving form. You do not know the excruciation form can be until it is tormented.

He eased it very slightly, and said, "We can keep you embodied and held precisely at this point for a long, long time. You are a Monad, you cannot expire. We can prevent your disincorporating. And there is nothing — nothing anywhere — that can intervene."

He had them heat the wires a little hotter. "It is imperative that we have the surviving archiplasms! They must come back into form. They must re-initiate organic life on this planet."

"This world is dead," I managed to say. "You won't be able to start it again. It's a corpse."

"We risked a great deal in order to take this habitat," Ven said. "But it is useless, as it is now. We cannot return to where we came from because it is destroyed, and we cannot continue here without organic life to provide raw materials. Those last surviving archiplasms must enter into form, they must re-boot generation."

"Slavery," I said. "Never-ending slavery."

"You can see them, so you must bring them down from the trak. You must force them to take back consciousness of worlds."

He leaned down and stared at me with his unliving eyes. "Our entire future depends on what you do — on what I can make you do," he amended. "You will acquiese eventually, Monad, so why not do it now and save yourself great suffering?"

The heat of the wires increased. The mad pleasure increased. The body I had taken on convulsed and there was a muzzle of white froth suffocating me. I twisted and kicked and tried to bite, to claw, but it was no use. Maybe I had whined before, but now I howled — I howled and howled!

The long wavering howl reverberated against the walls of the room, its coils distorting and amplifying the sound. The archiplasms were outside comprehension of worlds, but maybe they heard. Or maybe it was the age-old linkup between us. They rolled faster, wobbling with erratic motion, all of them. But it was Glo who went completely crazy and came off the trak.

She hurtled out into a shape without stopping to consider, without stopping to choose, or to build carefully. She came out a billowing giant, a mushroom monster, a whirlwind of blizzard ice and lashing cold, a glacier thing crunching and booming as it approached. It was a burst of manifestation hurled at the Motor Men. They only turned and looked, registering it as a phenomenon.

She saw the lack of affect and changed instantaneously, belching flame and blast, torching them massively in plumes of white-hot burning. Their uniforms melted faintly at the edges. That was all.

Recalculating, she hovered a moment as a diaphanous undulating blackness, a filmy eclipse of light. Then the blackness exhaled like the lung of a black hole. It was a dense puff of inky softness. It was a heavy cloud of burning rubber. It was a suffocating slow cyclone of carbon and hair-spray and graphite.

The glittering exteriors of the Motor Men became smudged. They could not get visuals. Their circuits spasmed, flickered, then jammed. Their white uniforms were besmirched. The glinting lights on their helmets stopped sparkling. They went static, some just turning their heads, some raising a gauntleted hand to ward off the gritty cloud.

General Ven froze where he kneeled beside me. His platinum alloy mouth was open to frame the next question. Cinders sifted slowly down, frosting his golden face. The lights behind his crystal eyes went out.

Then Glo became a hundred hands, like the old statues of Avalokitesvara, all of them yanking at the wires pinned into me. When the wires were a tangle on the floor, her rage subsided, and she disassembled. With a delicate tremor of the surrounding air, she incorporated Glo once more, the way I had been seeing her on the trak, the way she best remembered herself.

"I had to come down," she said with a quaver in her voice. "They were *hurting* you, Gabriel!"

I wanted to tell her how stupendous she had been, I wanted to praise her cleverness and power. I wanted to tell her that, as it had always been, she was the glittering blade and I was the sturdy handle holding her sharpness. But because she was back in "a world", she would not understand such talk — she wouldn't understand till we were home. It was 'Gabriel' who had brought her out of the unknowing, had wrenched her down from the trak, so it was Gabriel I had to remain until we were all safe.

"Honey, you done fine!" I said. "But now you git back! Old Ven and them is froze, we can break through that door and get out of this dam hellhole. But you got to get back on the trak, Glo, and rest yo mind!"

She didn't move.

"Girl, if you be in *any* shape, if you be in *any* form at all, you won't be able to git through. You hear what I'm sayin?"

"Oh, Gabriel," she said, tears rising in her eyes, "just let me stroke your head once."

She came and kneeled down. She took my embodied head in her hands and looked into my eyes. She scratched a little behind my ears. She said, "I always was a fool about animals."

I said, "Now git yo self back on the trak, rest yo damned mind, girl! We gettin the hell outta here!"

She got back.

All them babies started in to roll, and roll, and roll like glory! The wuz amps rising, the decibels wuz rising! I so hyped I come all the way outta my form. I taken on humanoid shape and ran to that door and heaved open the latch and pushed open that ton of metal. I was outside at last, after all those days! I punched the buttons on the console outside and crashed the whole entire system.

Then the trak started to flash rays in the visible bandwidth. It started to move, slowly at first, then speeding up. It came straight out of that magnetic room and started to glide upward like a steel shaft. It blasted the roof off the place. There was no more atmosphere, so it left no trail.

I shucked body, discarding neural templates for all the various possible disguises from all the centuries, and followed the trak upward, out of the System.

The crazed world would not be born again to serve Motor Men. The last twenty-four archiplasms were out of form now forever, and free. They rode the ancient trak, hurtling for Home.

I followed along behind, traveling easy, traveling light, and herding them like a cheerful shepherd.

*Lou Crago has published mainly poetry, but now has decided SF is probably the most enticing literary form around, and is goint to try to write more of it. Other interests include Hindu astrology, southern cooking, and virtual reality.*

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# WAITING FOR THE NIGHT BOAT

## by Nicole Gustas



It had been three days since she slipped from the ship. Three days since she lost her grip and slid off into the cold blackness. She knew now she had been overconfident about maneuvering in zero gee. No one had seen her slide off into space; she had been maneuvering outside on the crew's sleep shift, without telling anyone where she was going, so she wouldn't be disturbed in her research. She was alone, with little hope of rescue.

She had sent out calls on her radio until it began to consume power she needed for the heating unit in her suit. She wasn't sure if she'd heard a reply — sensory deprivation had been causing intermittent hallucinations after the first eight hours. She didn't realize how bad it was until she found herself back in her playroom from her childhood at home, sitting in front of her dollhouse. She wondered if she'd recover her sanity if a ship picked her up.

The hallucinations added stimuli to the emptiness around her. The only view was the endlessly unchanging starfield, and the only sound the rhythm of her breathing. No one had ever been so alone, she thought, as she remembered those hectic days on the ship where she had wished for complete solitude. Now she craved the stress, the constant flow of information.

She kept turning because she was sure she heard something dark and misty moaning behind her. It tried to grab her and she pushed it back, then fell into the waves of space washing over her. Cold sweat brought her back to reality momentarily. Shudders went through her. She realized, looking at her gauges, that her oxygen would soon run out. She was about to die alone. She used all the power in her suit for one last radio squirt. Perhaps when they found her they could bury her in a crowded cemetery. She didn't want to be alone forever.

The silence screamed at her once again and she turned to face it. Space came back to life around her. She tried to keep it from clawing at her, felt a burning in her chest and realized she was bleeding over the clean white tile. She fell to her knees in her kitchen, felt the man stab her again and became dizzy with the loss of blood. She turned back to the darkness and felt the beast with its tentacles wrapped around her pulling her into its maw. She opened her eyes once more to the stars; they quickly fell shut and the night embraced her.

The roaring forced her back to consciousness. She tried to run from it, but was unable to move. She opened her eyes and stared into a bright light which made a halo around the head of the man who stood before her. "You're safe now," said the man. She relaxed as she felt energy enter her once again. Everything was all right.

*Nicole Gustas is currently taking night classes at SUNY Purchase in an attempt to get her bachelor's degree. She works days as an administrative assistant at JWP (hey, it pays the bills). Her ambition is to someday be wealthy enough to buy all the books she lusts after.*

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# GREEN

## by John Goodrich



The sun blazed down into the clearing, loosing the steam, making the dig unbearable. I regretted all the chickens I had cooked in pits when I was a boy scout; now I knew how they felt. I was sweating like a pig in humid Peten jungle of Guatemala, unable to breathe, lakes of perspiration spreading across my back and forehead. I wished I had never heard of the Maya, or taken up European archaeology instead.

I managed ten native workers, while my fellow student from Peaslee University was managing fifteen. Chas had a heavier workload according to her experience and much greater facility with Spanish. Chas's working knowledge showed in the way she did everything, efficient, confident, brilliant. I, on the other hand, was on my first dig, and three years of university Spanish hadn't prepared me for what these workers spat at me. Too fast and heavily accented, I barely managed communication. I could have asked Chas to translate, but it would have been a sign of weakness, and I really didn't want to increase her stress level, calling her over every time someone wanted to talk to me. I just struggled on, the way I usually did.

This dig, for example. Everyone had to do some field work before they got a graduate degree in archaeology. This dismal little hole in the Peten was a recent discovery. About half a dozen students had signed up to go on the dig, but I was chosen because I had great grades in my classes. Of course I didn't know squat about Mesoamerican field archaeology. The Maya were my nominal area of specialty. I never imagined that the place would be so isolated. The most reliable method of getting to this dig was by mule. Here it is, the twentieth century, we've put a man on the moon, and I have to use a mule to get to and from an archaeological dig.

There were other things, the heat, the total humidity, the night noises, the malaria, the mosquitoes; nobody really impressed on me how bad it was. So here I was, sweating over my workers who were doing most of the heavy work. In Central America, we hire people to do our digging; it was the traditional way of things. Of course, being bored also seemed to be the traditional way of things.

I wandered over to Chas, who was between trench inspections herself. "Who was bored enough to go combing through satellite photos of Guatemala to find this place?" I asked her.

Chas laughed her bright, blonde laugh. I hate to say it, but she does laugh like a blonde. Yeah, she's got a master's, and is working on her Ph.D., but she laughs like a stupid blonde. Chas's hair was probably sandy, but a couple of months near the equator had bleached it almost as well as peroxide. She also had the most fascinating eyes — gray with flecks in them, like some sort of cracked rock crystal. Her bronze skin made her light eyes stand out even more.

She turned her tanned face with the bright eyes to me and smiled brightly. "Probably some poor CIA schmuck who didn't have Soviets to ogle any more. Your tax dollars at work, Dave. If I remember correctly, they found this when they were searching for Noriega."

"A bit far out for Noriega, isn't it?" I can never tell when she's pulling my leg.

"No, I'm absolutely serious. Apparently, the guy who found it was a Peaslee graduate, and he gave us first crack at it."

I had never though the CIA was good for much, and this news buttressed my position. Chas smiled brightly again. "Gotta go, work to do, you know."

I sighed, "Yeah, sure. See you in a few."

Bored, bored bored, bored, I thought, watching her go. Chas seemed to be the only bright spot in this dull, tense, sopping wet, overgrown forest. But then, I had left the excitement of being an EMT in New Haven, Connecticut. I had left that when some drug-crazed freak mistook me for a cop. I still had a puckered bullet scar in my shoulder from that encounter.

Chas's trench erupted with excitement. A small, brown man jabbered away in Spanish faster that I could follow. Talented as ever, Chas yakked back just as fast, then climbed into the trench with him. I sighed. I'd find out what it was at dinner tonight. If it was really good, I'd see it in a few minutes, but it didn't look like that was going to happen.

Chas's trench erupted with excitement. A small, brown man jabbered away in Spanish faster that I could follow. Talented as ever, Chas yakked back just as fast, then climbed into the trench with him.

One of my own workers had found something interesting, however, so I came over to her trench. She handed up a series of brightly-colored pottery fragments, and I turned them over in my fingers. There were a few tantalizing bits of information, and a couple pieces linked up, but the fragments were too small to make anything conclusive. It could be weeks before they found any more pieces of this one. Dimly, I heard Chas's group erupting in conversation again, but I was concentrating on the pieces of pottery, cleaning them off with a toothbrush. The pieces were a polychrome drawing of a headdress, probably a priest's to judge from the complexity and . . .

Something touched my shoulder and I jumped. Pedro, one of Chas's workers was standing behind me. "Seenior Dave," he said in better English than most, "I theenk the seniorita needs help"

I spun around and looked at Chas's trench. She wasn't there, but her workers were crowding around the lip and waving to me.

My EMT training kicked into high gear, and I took charge, sort of. I told the shovel bums to back away from the trench and let me down into it. Chas had fallen in, her limbs splayed like those of a discarded doll. Her heartbeat was strong and regular, and her skin wasn't hot. No heat stroke, no heart attack, probably not malaria . . . . I shouted in Spanish for someone to go find Dr. Fossey. Fossey was out in what were the fields of the settlement, digging up dirt and pollen samples, trying to date the dig. Nobody wanted to go. Fossey didn't have a kind personality. I pitied any dog she had back in the states.

I turned back to Chas. Somewhere behind the emergency, I wondered at the jadeite spine she was holding in her right hand. Although stingray spines were kosher ritual gear, I couldn't think of any examples of jade ones. Usually the spines were obsidian or organic sea-ray cartilage. I shoved the thoughts aside and concentrated on what would be best for Chas, since the afternoon rain was due to start in about ten minutes, and I figured it would be good to keep her dry. The tents aren't much cooler than outside, but the principle of shelter made me feel better. Chas didn't react at all. Ten minutes later, Fossey burst into the tent, impatient to know what was going on. Chas was stirring weakly by then.

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The sun was descending, already clotted by the rainforest outside the little clearing. Unusually, there was no rain this afternoon. There was almost always an afternoon rainfall in the Peten. That's why they called it a rain forest. Of course, it didn't help the humidity, which was higher than the temperature's ninety. At least the rains sometimes brought cooler air with them.

I sat at the table, and began to brush the mud and dirt off an obsidian eccentric that had been dug up two days earlier. I concentrated for a few minutes, brushing it with careful strokes of the beaten toothbrush I had bought just before I came to Guatemala. Layers of grunge came off, and it began to look like a banana clip with much of the Mahabarata being performed on top of it. Typical Mayan weirdness I thought. After about fifteen minutes, I was bored. I simply can't take the tedious work of archaeology without something else going on. I walked into my tent and brought out my treasured bag. The walkman had been a birthday present two years ago, and I was on the third set of batteries that month. They were also my last batteries until the supply mule came in another two weeks. I didn't know what I was going to do when this set went dead. I hate living away from civilization.

I fumbled with the walkman for a second, then delved into a thick stack of tapes, and came up with the Alarm's Standards. I slid in the tape and pressed play. A few seconds later, my world consisted of dirt, toothbrush, and Mike Peter's voice.

Six songs later, I jumped as someone put their hand on my shoulder. I whipped around, dragging the walkman to the soggy dirt in the process. Chas was there, looking down at me. She looked a bit pale, but otherwise all right. Sheepishly, I picked up the tape player and wiped the mud off it.

"Dave, I want to talk to you." Her voice was soft, and hot flash rushed down my spine. Damn heat I thought

"Sure," I said, "what about?" Chas walked over to my cot, pushed aside the mosquito netting, and sat in the shade.

"I had a real weird dream this afternoon. When I tried to pick up the spine, I..." she stopped, "this sounds really silly, but I dreamed I was at the site when it was active. It was pretty weird..." her voice trailed off. She wasn't really talking to me, I realized, she was talking to get this out. She looked at me again. "I usually don't dream. And this one was so very, well, vivid. I don't know, forget I said anything." She got off the cot, and started to leave, but I stopped her.

"Tell me about it Chas," I blurted, then hesitated, the words damming in my throat. "I want to hear."

Chas looked at her toes for a second, then drew patterns in the soggy dirt with a boot, and sat back down. "It was weird. I felt like I wasn't really there - sort of like a ghost I guess." She was looking at her toes again. "The jungle was cleared. There were people, all sorts of people, just milling around in, in here." She made a sweeping gesture, indicating the clearing and probably the jungle behind it. "There were rows of crops growing in the fields, and the temple looked sharp and new. There were people, too. I saw about a hundred people in the central square." She fell silent, and something hung in the air between us.

Suddenly, her beautiful eyes sparked. "Hey, where's the spine?"

"I dunno," I said stupidly, then caught up with her thoughts. "Uh. We better go get it before some digger decides that it'd make a nice piece to sell . . . " Chas was already headed for her trench. I tore off my headphones and ran after her.

I caught up with her as she climbed back into the three meter wide pit carved across what had been the central court of the settlement. I climbed down and saw Chas standing near where she had fallen. She was crouching near the spine. It was still there, but Chas seemed reluctant to touch it. Not thinking, I bent down and picked it up.

An electric shock jolted up my arm, as if I had stuck a pin in a socket. Chas was gone.

Bewildered, I stood up, looking for her. She had been right next to me when I picked up the spine, and now she wasn't. I climbed out of the trench to find her.

I was somewhere else. Instead of a small glade carved out of a rainforest, I was at a completely restored Maya site. I looked behind me and discovered that the trench had disappeared. People were walking around, the square busy with the comings and doings of these people dressed as ...classic Maya.

Wait a minute.

I closed my eyes and shook my head to clear it. I was not in the center of a Maya city. The inhabitants of the city were not walking around me. When I opened my eyes, nothing had changed.

The temple of the Old Ones was no longer a crumbling relic, but a recently carved, pure white edifice. The comb on top of it stood like an extended middle finger to the sky. Every possible surface of the walls was carved, intricate and delicate bas relief so sharp it was almost painful to look at. I was used to the crumbling and weathered modern carvings, ruined by ten centuries of rain, wind and water, but here they were, fresh, less than a century old. This would be a major find - to see these carvings in the original condition . . . Snap out of it, shithead, I thought. This isn't real, I'm just seeing what I want to see. Any minute I'm going to wake up and this will all be a dream. Any minute now . . .

Beyond the carved temple were rows of wheat and maize, rippling in the wind like a golden ocean. The sky was dark with rolling clouds, and I smelled the threat of rain. Lightning jumped between clouds, and the retort of thunder rumbled in the humid sky.

Well, I thought, Might as well enjoy it while I'm out of it. I noticed that I was still carrying the green spine. Absently, I flipped it in the air.

With a jarring thud, I landed in the watery muck at the bottom of Chas's trench. Chas was standing over me, gently shaking my head.

"Aaag, shit, quit it . . . " I thrashed around, knocking the cool hands off my face. Silently, Chas withdrew. Her face was concerned, and the sky above her was darker than I remembered it.

"What happened? All I remember was touching the spine and then I was in this weird Maya place . . . "

Chas just raised an eyebrow, but it was enough. I stopped babbling and blinked a few times. We both looked at the green spine that was a few inches from my right hand. We looked at each other, unspoken understanding rushing through each of us.

Chas was the first to open her mouth. "This is too weird." She seemed to be taking this fairly well.

I wasn't. "I ain't touching that thing. No way."

Chas took off her hat and used the brim to scoop up the green menace, careful not to let her skin touch it. "I think I'll put this someplace nice and safe," she said, wrapping the hat tightly around her prize.

I raised an eyebrow. "Where? Wait, what are you going to do with that thing?"

Her cracked crystal eyes glowed. "This is an unprecedented opportunity to do research. Think of it! For the first time since Cortez, we have an opportunity to observe the Maya as they were."

I let my scepticism show. "Right, sure. How the hell are you going to publish this? Who's going to believe you?" I was warming to the argument. I didn't like this green thing at all, and I really didn't want Chas using it. Especially not Chas. "What are you going to do, conduct guided tours of this place and pass that thing around?"

She wasn't listening. She had climbed out of the trench and was heading for her tent. I jogged to catch up with her in the deepening Peten blackness. "Come on. What are you going to do with that?"

She stopped, and I caught up with her. Her eyes looked up at me, and my face flushed under the attention. She spoke quietly, "This is the perfect archaeological tool. We can go back and watch them as they were. I'll publish my findings as deductions. What's the problem?"

I pursed my lips. I knew I was being irrational. I took a hold of her elbow. "I don't like that thing. It scares me. Please leave it? Chas, please?"

Her eyes dropped. "I can't. This is too important."

I couldn't accept it. I flailed around to find something that would stop her. "What are you going to do when this stint is up? Pass it along to the next person from Peaslee who comes along? How about Dr. Fussy, she'd get a real kick out of this thing." I smiled at the thought.

She returned a wry grin, and brushed an errant golden hair out of her mouth. "God, you're right. She'd go around pointing out all the things they were doing wrong." A light chuckle flickered between us.

The smile faded, and she looked straight into my eyes. "I'm going to use it." She reached out, and gave my hand a squeeze, then walked into the mist towards her tent. The nocturnal monkeys were just beginning to howl as I walked to my tent.

The next day, it was business as usual, no mention of the spine, Chas was just as bright and cheery as she always was. We dug and in the hot afternoon, I brushed the mud from onyx and pottery. Chas went about her duties, chatting with the diggers and Fussy cataloging the pottery, the eccentrics, and drawing the carvings on the temple. I watched Chas closely, but it wasn't until two weeks later that I noticed her drawing was much more detailed than the weathered carvings.

There were other signs. She had a whole section of her sketch book that she didn't show to anyone, and for the first time, she argued with Dr. Fossey about site use and management. Chas's new theories were fresh and deviated from her previous ideas, and she wouldn't budge one inch from them. I tried to keep out of the discussions as they escalated. After three weeks, they were regularly shouting at each other.

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One night, about a month after we had discovered the spine, I broke from sleep to the dark, muggy black of the Peten. The howling monkeys were mating in the trees, shrieking loudly at each other. It had taken me two weeks to learn to sleep through a whole night. Something else was out there . . .

"Dave?"

It was just the ghost of a whisper, barely audible over the screams of the primates.

"Chas?" I called, "Jesus, come in."

She came in, legs stiff, arm movements jerky. Her face was a tight, inexpressive mask. I gathered the sheet around my thighs, as Chas pushed aside the mosquito netting and climbed onto the cot. She sat stiffly on the other end, her breathing sharp, and punctuated.

"Chas? Chas? What's wrong?"

She was slow in responding. Her voice was raw, and her eyes forlorn when she finally looked at me. "They're scared, Dave. Something's wrong with them."

"What? I don't get it. What's wrong?"

She swallowed once, then spoke in a low gravelly voice. "They made a sacrifice. They took a prisoner and they suh-sacrificed him."

All the blood drained from my face, and I felt queasy. Evidence said that Maya prisoner sacrifices were long, drawn-out and incredibly bloody affairs. Although they didn't practice the wholesale slaughters the Aztecs had, the Maya seemed to have had a particular genius for truly unpleasant torture. Supposedly, blood was collected from a live prisoner and then burned for the gods, giving them vitality. Blood from a living victim was more potent than dead blood, so it made a twisted sort of sense to get the highest "miles per gallon," as it were, by keeping the unfortunate victim alive as long as possible.

Chas continued. "They drove a," she swallowed, and licked her lips, "a spine through his tongue, and then, they drew a cord through it. I think it was eight feet, Dave. Then th-they took the same spine and p-pierced his lips and penis." I shuddered at the same time she did. "God, he screamed for over an hour," she covered her ears, as if she could hear him now, a thousand years later.

She drew herself into a tighter ball--self-contained and impenetrable. She didn't weep, but her breath came in gasps. We sat for a while. I longed to take her into my arms and hold her, but I couldn't. She sat alone at the other side of my bed, a hundred miles away.

All I found to say ten minutes later was, "why didn't you drop the spine?"

Oddly enough, the question relaxed her somewhat, and she looked up at me with her beautiful eyes red and puffy. She sighed deeply, almost embarrassed by the answer that was coming. "I- I couldn't. I knew I couldn't go back if he was still alive. I wouldn't be able to face that screaming again" She avoided looking at me, sighing again. "Whatever else they were, Dave, they were butchers and savages. I guess it never really occurred to me what they were."

My mind groped for something to say - something to make her feel better. I dredged up a quote from an anthropologist I had known at Peaslee. "It's a different culture. We're not here to judge right from wrong. We must try to be as impartial as we can."

It was the wrong thing to say. She brushed aside the mosquito netting and stood up. "Their fucking priest poked fucking holes in his fucking body and they all just fucking stood there and watched him do it! Don't you fucking tell me to ignore it! Torture is not something fucking civilized people do, is it?" Outside, the monkeys began shrieking again. Her face was drawn back into a skull of anger. She whirled out of the dark confines of the tent and left running.

I was alone with a sunk feeling in my stomach. I had done the wrong thing, again. I mentally replayed the conversation five times, each time coming up with something better to say. Going after her wouldn't do any good, so I lay down on the cot again. I slept after half an hour of silent tears

I dreamed that night. I dreamed I was in New Haven, in an ambulance, heading for a call. It was a tractor-trailer accident, I remembered. We got to the scene, and it was a mess; the truck had struck a car and then run it over, crushing it. There couldn't be anything alive in the car, I thought. We proceeded with the extraction, and got out most of a young couple, probably out for a date. Neither was breathing. We did it all - intubation, two IV's, Adenosine, defibrilation. Nothing worked, so we had at start CPR and artificial respiration. I was working with blood all over my hands, pressing in the column-fractured ribs, watching the chest collapse and rebound liquidly with only a few ribs to support it. One, two three, four; breathe. One, two three, four; breathe. I heard behind me that LifeStar was coming and I shouted for them to get a doctor on board. A doctor could declare the two corpses dead. We couldn't. I kept pumping; one, two, three, four; breathe. One, two three, four; breathe. There was no response, and I hadn't expected one, but I had to keep the pace. One, two three, four; breathe. One, two three, four; breathe. Then I noticed the people around me were packing up and getting ready to leave. The other victim was sitting up and talking to a fireman. They all started to leave, and I was still sitting on the guy's chest, pumping away: one, two three, four; breathe.

Slowly, one by one, everyone else left - the ambulance, the police, the fire truck. Everyone. The woman from the car seemed to have struck up a friendship with the one of the fireman, and they went off together in his car. Lifestar never came, but I was still there, pumping away, one, two, three, four; breathe. One two, three, four; breathe. My arms ached and I was light-headed. One, two, three, four; breathe. One two, three, four; breathe. Everyone else left until it was just me in the middle of the street, legally bound to keep working CPR until relieved by a doctor. Each push was an effort, my whole body aching with each pump. One. Two. Three. Four. Breathe. One. Two. Three. Four.

I woke up sweating, my arms aching. My glowing watch face told me it was twenty past two in the morning. I slowed my breathing and wished for something stiff to drink. This shit's really getting to me I thought.

A week later, I sneaked into Chas's tent to have a look at her journal. Chas was off analyzing pollen samples with Fossey, and I figured they'd be at it for some time. Her sketch pad was sitting on her cot. Feeling guilty, and looking furtively around me, I peeked at the drawings.

They were amazing. I hadn't realized the extent of Chas's artistic talents. There were more than two dozen sketched of faces- the young, the old, and sometimes the clothes they wore. I noticed that they all wore a look of worry- deep lines furrowed around the tightly close mouths and into foreheads. These people were scared, and Chas's art made them seem very real. At times it was like the mass of faces was staring at me, accusing me. There was a full-page picture of a priest at the foot of the Old Ones' temple. He had apparently fallen down the steep front stairs. His head was twisted at an impossible angle, the side of his head smashed against the paving stones.

Later, there was a written account of her travels, Chas's crabbed handwriting describing the smells, sounds, and other things that couldn't be drawn. There was more than eight pages to it, so I quickly skimmed to the last entry.

"These people are terrified. I think that they have in some way offended their gods. Everyone has this doomed look that I can see in their eyes and faces. There is also what looks like a hurricane approaching. The first rain was beginning to fall, and they looked at the sky like it was the end of the world. The funny part is, they all gathered in the center of the ceremonial green and stood there. Some were weeping, others looking stoically up into the rain. I don't remember anything like this in any reference. They just keep looking at the sky, as if they expected the wrath of God to come down."

I was scared. If this little magic widget worked, maybe the Old Gods were not as imaginary as we thought they were. One rational part of my mind told me that this was nonsense, and that there were no pagan gods. I remembered that this was the same part of my mind that said I hadn't been back to a classic Maya site. I didn't know which side to believe. I threw the sketch book back on her bed and ran out of the tent, my brain buzzing.

I took Chas aside that night, after dinner. "Don't go out tonight." I had wanted to say more, but words collided in my throat like boxcars. I wanted to say "I care" or maybe more, but I couldn't.

She only gave me an odd look and went back to her tent.

She didn't come back that night. We discovered a breathing corpse in the morning, eyes rolled back into her head, a thin line of drool on her cheek. The marvelous light in her eyes gone, replaced by a dull, filmy gray, like a rock worn smooth by a stream. Chas was gone. While everyone else was buzzing about trying to figure out what was wrong with her, I found the jade spine where she had dropped it. I wrapped it in a handkerchief and stuffed it into a corner of her trunk.

The Guatemalans were going to send a four-wheel drive vehicle to come and get Chas. It probably would take at least two days, but I spent my time packing, trying to keep my mind off the breathing corpse in Chas's tent. Technically, there was nothing wrong with her; just no brain activity. She breathed, and she swallowed when stimulated, but her eyes didn't react to light, and they never moved. I told Fossey that I'd be shipping out with Chas- I couldn't take the stress. I was glad that she hadn't fought; I was in no shape to argue with her. When the sun went down that day, I only had one more thing to do.

I gathered one of the sledgehammers and my trowel. After searching around for a few minutes I found a pair of beaten leather gloves and a belt pouch. I went back to Chas's tent, and plundered her green treasure, and took the thing out into the jungle.

The monkeys were in a fury that night, screaming as if one of them had been murdered, or sacrificed. I shuddered, hearing the echoes of a dead man's agony. Maybe the Maya taught them to scream that way.

I found a flat rock, and took out the spine to look at it. It had a sharp tip, with a slightly rougher edge at the other end. Slowly, deliberately, I looked down the hollow shaft, and saw a fine lace of carvings on the surface I hadn't noticed before. It was slippery smooth, and I almost dropped it as I turned it over in the unfeeling gloves.

Curiosity satisfied, I put it on the flat rock. It sort of gleamed as it sat there, a small instrument of death, a gateway to the past. The only piece of real magic I had ever known. I sat next to it for several long minutes, tempted to rip off the gloves and be transported to the past, perhaps to find Chas there. I took off the gloves and reached for it, then checked myself.

Suddenly resolute, I stood, and brought the sledge down. The spine pulsed with energy an instant before impact, then tiny pieces of green squirted out from under the sledge. I didn't believe what I had done for an instant. Ripping off my gloves, I knelt by the rock and put my bare flesh on the mashed green spot that had been the spine. For a second, tiny jolts tickled my fingers, like static from a television. Then nothing. I sat with my head in my hands, tears streaming down my face, but my sobs were lost to the howls of the monkeys.

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# DR TOMORROW

by Marshall F. Gilula

Part 4 of 5



## Chapter 4

### Monday

#### Logos Who?

This morning I'm not in the least freaked by anything. It seemed like we got back around sunrise, but I'm not certain. I regret still being Primitive enough to need my sleep, and when I wake up, there is a 120 pound German Shepherd lying in the bed between Pearl E. Mae and me. Bullet looks at me, puts his nose under my pillow, and attempts to beat me to death with his wagging tail. He knows that he is not supposed to be in the bed, and Pearl E. Mae giggles as turns and licks her face in an attempt to gain her approval. She is sitting by the side of the bed observing us and waiting for someone's permission to jump up on the bed. I slide out of the bed onto the floor and hug She-Ra, whose tail is now wagging with pleasure. She is such a joy, compact and tough, but soft and gentle, and she has done over a year and a half of unpaid baby-sitting with Bullet, whom she has raised to be a soft and gentle dog despite his large economy size and his ferocious demeanor. Her good nature extends to the way that she tolerates Bullet's nose and his massive presence jealously intruding into the intimacy She-Ra and I are having. When I pet one, the other demands it. She-Ra, Bullet, and I all get tied up in a pile of paws, arms, tails, legs, three heads, and two sets of very sharp teeth. All three of us are making growling, grunting sounds. The only problem with being a "member of the pack" is that occasionally the four-legged members bite on me in the same way they chew on each other, and I have to quickly withdraw from the pretend fracas because my skin is literally not thick enough. Pearl E. Mae and my other Eternal room mates gathered around the pile of Lyle plus dogs on the floor. They had never observed any of my special communication with Bullet and She-Ra. To me it was just part of an ordinary day. As I wiped some dog spittle out of my eye, I noticed that both Quail and Pearl E. Mae were smiling and crying as they watched us on the floor. They understood that some Primitives are evolved enough to really communicate with other species in the universal languages of love and play. Quail explained that my playing with the dogs reminded her of what her last aquatic life form valued most in existence — the same free-spirited gamboling with a powerful sense of comfort and safety. Pearl E. Mae scooted over to where I was on the floor, put her arms around me, and kissed the side of my face. She moved her wet eyelids against my face and told me she was very glad that the I.S.I. had sent her here to be in the DR TOMORROW project. Both dogs lay on the floor next to us, and I had one of those brief, momentary feelings of intense happiness...the kind of spontaneous peak experience that you always remember in great detail when looking back. It seemed at that moment that all the forces of the universe were in harmony and that there was very little more I could hope for. A far out Eternal old lady, two beautiful dogs, five other new friends, and a recently-overhauled mind and body.

What a naive attitude. Considering everything that I had just been exposed to over the past few days, I should have known better. What about my megastepped mind? Why did I not sense or see that it was about to hit the fan with all the ugliness of the universe? I guess even megastepped Eternals are human and have their flaws. For me, it was a matter of the newness — new friends, new music, new old lady, and new philosophy. Without warning, the teachings of the Masters were suddenly being externalized right before my eyes and it was everything I could do just to keep up. It almost felt like jet lag, with a vague combination of weakness, headache, and disorientation. All the previous study, meditation, psychedelics, music, and generally righteous living did not equip me for what was to follow. Well, of course that was true! Why else would the megastepping have been necessary? It felt like everything was going too fast. And what was the reason? Why was all of this happening? Was all of this for real?

And I wasn't too sure how much of the disorientation was coming from the megastepping procedure. Of course, I really appreciated the numerous changes in my physical body. Who wouldn't? I loved Pearl E. Mae's near-perfect body, but mine was pretty much the same, too. My opinion about the changes in my mind was not clear: I had mixed feelings. It is much easier to *see* what your abdominal wall looks like, but how do you visualize your memories? I can understand that certain synergisms are possible during MindLink/HeartLight, but you are experiencing the effect of seven minds. When MindLink/HeartLight is over, I don't have as much confidence and belief in my individual mind, I guess. Before becoming an

Without warning, the teachings of the Masters were suddenly being externalized right before my eyes and it was everything I could do just to keep up.

Eternal, I never spent much time questioning my own mind. Not that meditation doesn't involve the mind, but what I usually have done in meditation requires that I still my mind, not explore all its nooks and crannies. And since the megastepping, I only know that my mind hooks up with others very easily during MindLink/HeartLight. My mind appears to have many more nooks and crannies than I ever imagined. Other than this, I really don't know.

The door bell begins ringing its "Close Encounters" melody. She-Ra and Bullet both run across the apartment to the front door, but neither one is barking. Sure sign that it's either Julian or Gabriella.

And it is Julian with a lit Winston and a large rolled spliff behind his left ear. He absentmindedly hands me the Winston, and I hand it back to him. Julian is very cool. He pretends that he doesn't notice my quick return of the cigarette, walks in a bit stiffly, and sits down on the couch. Bullet immediately gets up on the couch and tries to put his massive head into Julian's lap. This blows Julian's cool because he is a sucker for dogs too.

"Bullet, get off me. I need to put my head in your lap! Maybe you ain't seeing ghosts."

"Julian, that dog loves you whether you're seeing ghosts or not."

"Hey, Lyle, mon.... Gabriella's ghost be messing with me mind big time."

"Gabriella's what?"

"Her ghost be irritating me, mon. No matter what or how much I hit the spliff, her spirit still be there talking to me."

"Julian, are you being straight with me?"

"Lyle, mon, me be as straight as possible. It be Gabriella because I know her for sure. You remember that I know her before you, mon. We go back to Kingston."

"Why are you irritated by someone's spirit? If it's Gabriella spirit, why is she hassling you?"

"I say irritate, mon. I mean irritate. She be telling me foolishness. She be saying Watch out for Lyle like you be bad, mon. Like maybe you be killin' or hurtin' people. She look like maybe she have the bad spirits with her. Say you be with the Evil and Bad side."

"Gabriella never believed in any of that stuff."

Which is the truth. Gabriella shunned psychics and astrologers generally. She felt that such people took advantage of the poor and the ignorant. She would even point out examples of the well-heeled socialites pictured on video with their own seances and proclaim that the socialites were poor and ignorant also because they believed in such things. And Julian was conveying messages he feels came from Gabriella now in the thick of things in the spirit world which she maligned so much. Julian put out the Winston in the ash tray and fired up the lovingly rolled spliff. Bullet left his place on the couch and padded over to the other side of the room to avoid the billowing clouds of smoke from Julian and the spliff. Julian passed the spliff to me. I held it for a moment and, in a practiced gesture, passed it back to him. He seemed to ignore that I wasn't smoking because he didn't comment on it. Instead, he took a few deep tokes, and then passed the spliff to Pearl E. Mae, who also held it briefly and then passed it back to him. There was a moment of tension as Julian consciously decided to just hang on to the spliff himself. He continued:

"Gabriella, she say I must save you from those who are Evil. She sound very scary to me. I don't know how she knows, but she say to watch out for your new group. 'Be crazy, but that's all. No more. Just that. Now maybe you feel like not me bro...."

"Hey, man...don't be silly! How can the best drummer in Coconut Grove not be my bro? And all the deep stuff we been through? Maybe Gabriella didn't believe in spirits, but I do. I'm sorry that her spirit is causing you so much pain. Maybe you're worried that I didn't know you were married to Gabriella in Jamaica when you both lived in Kingston."

Julian became very pale, because evidently I had hit upon something that had been a secret. Just after the words left my mouth, I realized that there was no reason for me to know this information, if, in fact, it were true. But I just didn't know why or how the knowledge came to me. Somehow, I had access to this information

"How you know this, mon?"

"I don't know, Julian. It just came into my mind."

"Well it be true. Blow me away because I never tell you. I never tell no people not Jamaican. How you know, mon?"

"Julian, maybe it's a part of my megastepped mind."

"Mega-who?"

"Megastepped means what the electrical nuclear discharge did to me. You remember. I already told you all about it, and you saw the changes in my body, immediately."

"Sure, sure. Your body look like for sure Man of God in Babylon. So why not same thing with your mind."

"So you understand. The mind has been transformed too. More sensitive and maybe more powerful. Because you and I are close already, I'm just much better now at getting into your vibration. Picking up information about you and Gabriella is probably a very simple demonstration of the transformations that my mind has been going through."

"You not be working for the Darkside. I don't feel it. If you were, I know I feel it. But why Gabriella say so much about you in danger and you work for Evil."

"I don't know, Julian. The truth is what I have told you. My understanding is that we Eternals are definitely on God's team and working for the good side. If the Eternals and the Guardians all believe in a Supreme Being, and manifest themselves on the physical plane in light, how could you consider any other possibility. Beings from the Forces of Darkness cannot manifest themselves on the physical plane, although they can affect physical plane events."

"Heavy, mon. Maybe me mind not be ready for all of this."

"Don't take it in all at once. You don't have to believe any of it if you don't want to."

"O.K., mon. But I want to tell you that I been with Gabriella this week, and last week, too. I did not want to screw my brother's woman, but I had a very strong feeling about never see her again. Couldn't help myself, mon. And I used a rubber, both times, too."

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Julian hung out with us that morning in the duplex. We did our MindLink/HeartLight and let him sit in the circle with us. As a Rastafarian person, meditation was nothing new to him. He even went along with eyes-closed format and afterwards claimed he received a profound healing. He teared, spoke with obvious lump in his throat, and emotionally hugged each of us in turn. After letting the dogs out into the fenced yard and pool area, we closed up the apartment and all went down to the Peacock Cafe for breakfast. That is to say, Julian and I ate breakfast and the rest of us sipped on diet uncola.

So when we got back to the duplex and found the dogs dead, it was a stark, sadistic shock. Both Shepherds were floating, limp in the pool. Reality had just ripped the screen out from under me. I felt the universe crumbling in on me. It was not possible for both my dogs to be taken from me. At the same time. Bullet wasn't even full grown. They could not be dead. I turned on Bruce's GSR translator and speaker. The organic security system was fairly specific. According to Bruce's steady, buzzing GSR response, there had been no one there since we last left. It was simply too much for me to assimilate. Even with my megastepped vehicle. Grief is grief, and there was no way to get around it. Things became gloomier and gloomier, and I simply went mute. Julian took over and called the animal hospital. He told Dr. Michaels that I was getting ready to go off the deep end because we had just discovered both of my Shepherds floating dead in our pool. The vet from the office around the post office came over right after we called, checked out the animals, and then offered to have the dogs cremated for us. He saw what he said were classic findings of cyanide poisoning, and he drew blood specimens for later corroboration. I appreciated his offer to cremate She-Ra and Bullet, but refused. In a cracking voice, I told him I would take care of their burials.

The vet was tired-looking. Even his handle-bar mustache seemed to droop. We forced him to take $100 from us as payment for the house call. As he left the duplex, I felt myself start to lose it. I burst into tears. The machinery ground to a halt and I could only feel my pain for my beloved shepherds. I could see both She-Ra and Bullet alive and rough-housing around the apartment. It was exquisitely painful for me to look at either of their corpses. When I walked over to where their stiffening bodies were and sat down and hugged both of them, something really snapped inside me. It was fair for them to be dead and I really didn't know why it should happen, either. I sobbed uncontrollably and felt great pain within my chest in the heart space. As I continued to sob, the pain in my chest became transformed into a sensation of fire, and then into a sensation of liquid fire. My heart was filled with liquid fire. The common-sense objections to having liquid fire in one's chest were pushed from my consciousness in the grief of the moment. The molten liquid gushed out of my chest into the bodies of both dogs. The gushing continued for some moments, and then I realized that the Eternals were all sitting around me. Our HeartLight had turned on without my conscious awareness. I sat up, closed up eyes, and entered the second MindLink/HeartLight of the day. Yo-Vah appeared to us and asked what had transpired to cause him to hear and record my subjective grief and our collective distress. He was worried that it might have been some problems with dyssynchronisms because of the megastepping. His face grew more concerned when he heard about Bullet and She-Ra. Yo-Vah said that the Forces of Darkness had already begun their attempts at intimidation by extracting life energies from our pets. He reminded us that we would have no trouble reanimating them if we hurried up about it. The challenges of the problem, however, would evoke from us the requisite abilities. In fact, the liquid fire gush from my chest to the shepherds was one of our first signs of "the requisite abilities." Yo-Vah officially invited us to meet him at Kennedy Park that evening at which time the Eternals would get a tour of the saucer craft. He suggested that we leave the dogs inside with Al when we were gone, and he gave us a listing of hexadecimal code that Al could use for generating a randomly shifting pattern of low volume dissonant tones. These tone patterns could be used as a sonic net to protect the Eternals from transtemporal field-induction linking. Like the linking used by Forces of Darkness. This transtemporal application of field-induction linking enables the Forces of Darkness to parasitically drain the life energies from others who are in some way compromised. As Yo-Vah's image faded from our annealed One Mind, the group cohesion swiftly lifted me out of my paralyzing grief. The molten fire in my chest was transformed into blinding white light which surrounded all of us and temporarily blocked out awareness of anything other than the light. Although we were all enclosed and protected within the One Higher Mind of our MindLink/HeartLight, we could still feel an overall flickering of the light that happened two or three times. I sensed that this interruption was a purging of FOD induction links. This was a purging of the FOD transtemporal field-induction links that had been going up for the past few days. Our formation as a group and as an I.S.I. project for sure didn't go unnoticed by the FOD. And in clearing out whatever negative links were responsible for the shepherds' physical plane deaths, we had also made an energy connection to the Negative. Awareness of garbage is sometimes necessary before it is possible to flush it or vent it, even on an etheric, astral, or mental plane. Because we were aware of the Negative, we Eternals would have a more functional knowledge of MindLink/HeartLight by understanding FOD energies as random garbage to be carefully and assiduously cleaned out on a regular basis. Like tooth brushing and flossing.

I was never so happy to get a wet tongue in the face as when I came out of MindLink/HeartLight this time. Bullet, hair matted from his time in the pool, had crawled into my lap, and was licking my face. Talk about roller coaster highs and lows. Because She-Ra was still groggy on the floor, Pearl E. Mae brought out the spheres and we Eternals focused our energies consciously on the small gray shepherd by using the spheres together in the way that Yo-Vah taught us. Pearl E. Mae had even given the eighth sphere to Julian so that he could meditate on She-Ra with us and maybe understand how we were using the spheres. A small cloud of brilliant white light surrounded She-Ra. The energy cloud pulsated around She-Ra for what seemed to be a long time. I thought that our heart rates were all synchronized into the pulsation rate of the brilliant white light. At the moment that I perceived our synchronized heart rates, She-Ra was back up and in leaping good form. She jumped up and down in the air several times to express her general joyousness at finding all of us suddenly there. Tail wagging, she carefully went around to each person in the group to let them know how glad she was to be back. Julian, who had been cool all the way through, was now the one who was crying silently with the uncharacteristic tears staining his dashiki-shirt.

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*And I would really like to know why there were so many warnings about the Forces of Darkness. I understand about what happened with the dogs, at least about the part where we were able to bring them back. But that's just good Eternals and new and improved Medicine of the future. How the bad guys (or the bad energies) got to my dogs I'll never know. The metal spheres were certainly an unusual tool for Yo-Vah to gift us with. The spheres turn out to manifest themselves at many different levels of reality — on the physical plane and on the astral plane, for example. We were given the spheres while all of us were out of body. We then took the spheres with us back to the duplex while we were still out of body. Then, after the MindLink/HeartLight, we were able to touch, feel, and handle the metal spheres at a physical plane level.*

*When Yo-Vah spoke of virtual reality, he reminded us that the Forces of Darkness were much more powerful in the provinces of virtual realities. In a virtual universe, the FOD could run roughshod in uncontrollable fashion. Terror, intimidation, apathy, destructiveness, and hatred were all very possible and all amplified as much as was allowed. But the obverse could easily obtain. In a virtual virtual universe, everything was truly up for grabs. The FOD was just as likely to be absolutely helpless in a virtual virtual universe, because the operational rules were so much more obscure and symbolic. The Forces of Light routinely patrolled reality at multiple levels. The saucercraft travelled just as well in virtual universes as in physical plane here-and-now universes. Patrolling the physical plane occupied most of the FOL's attention, given the temporal span that had to be covered. Navigating virtual universes posed a severe mathematical conundrum for any guidance system, so each Guardian saucercraft usually comes equipped with a plasma guidance system that does require a rocket scientist, or at least a good hacker to operate it.*

*I really don't know how to find the plasma guidance area in the controls. And I'm not sure about what is going to happen when I press the various multicolored contact plates. The high-resolution graphics look nearly three-dimensional and have chromatic holographic patterns that are visually quite arresting and distract me from learning what their functional significance really is.*

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Julian said that he was going home and going to bed. That it had been much heavy a day for him already. We logged Julian on to one of Al's terminals, set up an account for him in the Unix network, and gave him a password and high-level access. Su-Shan explained to Julian how he could get into the apartment and inactivate the hexadecimal tone generator by letting Al recognize him. He always has had a key to my place, and now he was concerned about helping us see to it that the two shepherds were safe. We told Julian that we would be going out this evening and leaving the dogs in with Al. We walked him outside, and he and I hugged.

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"You be clean now, mon. I know it. No problem, mon. God be with you. Truly sounds crazy, with all the stuff that's been happening. But it feels all right in my stomach, mon. You be O.K. Maybe Gabriella's spirit be telling me something different than what I hear, now."

"Thanks for telling me about Gabriella, man. Both of us still love her, and I'm glad we're straight on her. Maybe Dr. Tomorrow will have the privilege of two acoustic drum kits when you aren't busy with some other gig. You and Su-Shan open up a hole in the Earth's atmosphere, for sure."

"For sure my brother. I think you are into the big time now, mon. Your guitar even sounds better. I play with you any time, Lyle. But please be careful with evil and the dark side. Better not be mixed up with your music. I can sing for Jesus, and for The Lord, mon, but don't get me mixed up with any of that Devil stuff. Not your style, mon."

"Just for throwing out the garbage and housecleaning, Julian. Nothing else."

"The dark side be all around. Don't need no flying saucer man to tell me. But where you get the metal balls?"

"Those silver spheres? From the flying saucer man."

"I believe you, but don't mess with me mind. Make sure to talk to Bruce before you leave on that journey. Godspeed, mon."

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We took leave of each other in the sweltering Miami sun under a couple of Royal Palms. By the time Julian got down to Bayshore Drive, he realized that he still had the silver sphere in his pocket. He would call later.

The Eternals were a bit sombre during their music rehearsal. Al was also unusually quiet. Yo-Vah had said that "the requisite abilities" would appear. That was definitely happening. "Requisite abilities" were appearing all over the place. Where did the recognition of the FOD, the dark side, or evil come in? All the negative was a necessary concomitant of the positive, and vice versa. Yet it was good AND evil, not good OR evil. There was a huge difference. Primitives nearly never grasped the philosophical implications of this difference. The Eternals did. They discussed it.

Noman, who had spent at least one lifetime on a penal colony made a strong case for some musical compositions which had a mixture of dark and light features, so as to more efficiently process both positive and negative energies through the music and the music-making process. The reality of Life includes both positive and negative in the process.

The process loop included the musicians, so by extension, all the Eternals would be required to process potentially huge amounts of negative and positive energies while performing before an audience. The megastepped physical vehicles would be much more efficient than ordinary Earth bodies. The Eternals would be capable of processing the very energies that often facilitated horrendous excessive substance abuse by musicians who took the substances to feel more comfortable while processing the high-intensity energies. Precisely because of his megastepped condition, Lyle developed an exquisite understanding of how any performing musician could have trouble handling the energies of high-volume music production and a large audience to boot. But during rehearsal now, the Eternals aimed at producing a mixing board mellowness. The DAT recorder worked fine, and Lyle made a stereo mix off the board while they were rehearsing. The long minimalistic tune in open E minor was turning into a good Time Tunnel. Lyle programmed 200 bars of the tune into an older Yamaha keyboard that had built-in rhythms, and the tune synchronistically just turned out to loop nearly seamlessly at bar number 200. So it made for very long and drawn-out jams on top of a background suggesting Eastern themes and meditation. After the rehearsal, Lyle made a cassette dupe of the DAT and popped an ultraWalkman and ear buds into his bag with the notebook computer. Never know when they might have a chance to review the tape before the next rehearsal. And on a modern flying saucer, well, things would probably be so automated that listening to the tape would give Lyle something to do instead of twiddling his fingers.

The Eternals dressed in the Indian bedspread tunics that Pearl E. Mae had put together for the group. We were a little squeamish about leaving She-Ra and Bullet alone in the house, but we reprogrammed Bruce the talking Geranium and set up Al's hexadecimal sound net. We hugged both dogs and left. It was getting pretty dark by the time we got to Kennedy Park on South Bayshore Drive. We had to walk by Julian's house, but I didn't notice any signs of activity. We walked along the thin inlet of sulfur-smelling mangrove that divided up two lobes of the green running areas. At the ocean's edge, the park was bounded on one side by Rockerman Road and its canal. There were too many boats in the canal for anyone else to be able to get in there. So it seemed to me that the other green lobe of running area would be a more likely landing place for Yo-Vah. We walked over the curved wooden bridge at the ocean's edge that led from one side to the other. The sound of Monty's outdoor band was already reflecting off the waters in the islands and anchorages of Dinner Key. The side of Kennedy Park that was away from the urbanization of Rockerman Road had an area of quiet mangrove facing Monty Trainer's groups of Docks.

The transparent flying saucer was waiting there for us when we got there. As we approached the area that looked like trees and shadows from a distance, the saucer's outlines because quickly apparent. With a soft hum and a muffled vibration, a sparkling panel slid open to reveal Yo-Vah smiling at us. He extended a hand and we entered the craft single file. I was too overwhelmed by the novelty to notice the startled glance of recognition that Yo-Vah had given us for some reason. We were all impressed at how much bigger the saucer seemed inside. The internal structure was, for all intents and purposes, a forty foot geodesic dome with internal panelling made of a sparkling transparent material that resembled plastic more than metal. There were panels of controls everywhere that controlled, for one thing, the transparency or translucency of the individual walls. Some of the walls were not quite transparent, giving us a visual hint of the individual cabins looked like. The central chamber contained a tube-shaped compartment with a two level command center. Individual cabins were spaced like orange sections around the command center. Each cabin was subdivided into work and sleep areas. A superficial glance suggested that all the cabins were exactly alike with no variation in either furnishings or lighting.

The command center had more than enough recliners for all eight of us surrounded by a beautiful combination of different color displays and control panels. We manned the recliners at Yo-Vah's request and were treated a spectacular view of our own solar system as the craft left Earth's gravitational field with little more than a shimmy of the saucer. The g-force we experienced was barely more than your average jetliner taking off, but the craft itself was whisper quiet in comparison to a jet plane.

At close range, and when viewed in the flesh and from the flesh rather than an out of body perspective, Yo-Vah was less ephemeral and more humanlike. In fact, he really looked like an older guy with a lot of mileage. He had a grandfatherly air. There was still a strangely familiar cast to his face, but I could not catalog my response. Yo-Vah's ship turned out to be a high tech wonder, and not an imaginary reflective fantasy craft. The accelerated view of our solar system that was whizzing by on the full-circle surround screens resembled one of the PBS specials I have seen that showed the same view, except that it was simulated and much slower than Yo-Vah's craft which was deftly burning a path straight for the Milky Way. At least that's what it looked like to us. Now, even in my megastepped days, I am not an astronomer, but the simulated screen was showing what looked liked clumps of stars that seemed to be going by incredibly fast, and I said so. Yo-Vah laughed good-naturedly and explained that saucers always travelled in bursts of speed to help conserve power and cut down on entropy disorganization. He said that we were travelling at intermittent bursts that were ten times the speed of light towards what I called the Milky Way because that is where the closest Time Zone Interchange Area was located. These areas were set up by the I.S.I. to help preserve whatever degree of integrity still remained in the Entropy Equations. Making time transits through the Interchanges minimized the associated problems like entropic scatter, dyssynchronism, and time shock. I.S.I. agents set up the Karmic Ring defenses at Time Zone Interchange Areas to help preserve crucial relationships across time and other dimensions. The

Karmic Ring defenses were also something like the metal and explosive detectors in our airports. Atavistic metals, as determined by Carbon dating or other isotope techniques, set off alarms in the Guardian network. Usually, the metals were gold, silver, or platinum or — in the case of Primitive travellers — heavy element isotopes such as uranium or plutonium. The atavistic metals that were heading from the past into a future dimension were now automatically tracked and collated in a special registry. I.S.I. agents of the 3200th Century now could keep track of the problem "exports" and were able to combat the intratemporal ripping off. The agents regretted that the Rings had not been set up when time travel really became popular in the 2800's.

I was the only Eternal who had never been in a spacecraft, but there was little time for incredulous wide-eyed reactions. Yo-Vah told us that the Karmic Rings allowed time dimensional shifts with minimum disturbance of universal entropy. He would be able to take us into our own future to demonstrate the truth of what he had told us. I reminded Yo-Vah that I was not able to understand any of the lettering or inscriptions on the control panels. He chuckled again, and there was something very familiar about the chuckle. The back of my mind reached for a memory, but I came up with a blank, and then forgot about the memory as I turned to my attention to what Yo-Vah was doing. He made some movements on the panel before him with his fingers and the main viewing screen went blank. Then the other screens went blank. The same pulsating flash of color now appeared on each of the screens. The pulsation continued for at least several minutes. It felt like I was getting a headache, which is very atypical for me because I never get headaches. After the headache sensation passed, a feeling of clarity emerged. My eyes could read the lettering and inscriptions on the control panel, just as though the panels had all been written in English. But part of my brain still somehow knew that the symbols were definitely not English. There were still a lot of mathematical symbols which I could grasp only with my imagination. It was possible to pick out one digital display which read "2105", and I wondered silently if I were going to have the chance to observe myself die.

Yo-Vah said I would not see myself. Ignoring my startled expression, he continued on to indicate that we would be at a very safe distance from Earth's solar system. We were not supposed to view the final cataclysmic event directly within the solar system because it might produce very dangerous debris. As we approached the Karmic Rings, there was nothing special to be seen on the viewer. Yo-Vah told us we would feel nothing in particular as we made a time-dimensional transfer other than the blinking lights because the technology of interdimensional travel had been made very safe and smooth by the I.S.I. techniques.

He tapped a rhythm on a part of the main control panel, and the large central screen abruptly switched to an excellent color version of Star Wars. I was the only Eternal who was shocked and surprised by us. Yo-Vah confessed that my Primitive planet produced some of the best albeit primitive science fiction entertainment. One paradoxical reason for the popularity of Earth's films was the excessive dwelling upon violent and destructive themes. Such art forms (except for Primitive planets and solar systems) were generally forbidden as negatively contaminating by the Guardians and the I.S.I. But Earth and its solar system were notorious throughout the future because of the entertainment value of Primitive violence. Even evolved beings occasionally appreciated escapism. As I watched the Empire trying to strike back, I noticed that the other Eternals were enraptured with the sleek Hollywood flash. We had not had much time to watch television during the past four days. Yo-Vah understood the fascination that the other Eternals had. All Guardians of the future were very very fond of Earth culture movies, books, and some music. Despite the extinction of the Primitive planet, science fiction movies of twentieth century Earth especially conveyed a powerfully charming view of the future for those beings who actually lived in the future. Possibly because of the vast numbers of forbidden behaviors to be found in Earth movies, Guardians enjoyed them as purely escapist, as physical violence and destructiveness simply do not exist on a regular basis during the times of the I.S.I. Of course there was still plenty potential for negativity. Destructive instruments of the future have become so efficient that the rare examples of violence and/or destructiveness can produce individual or planetary death with equal facility. But criminal types in the times of the I.S.I. are really rare. Since systematic detection of the intratemporal rip-offs began, the actual incidence of the crimes had been slowly down exponentially. The amount of intratemporal ripping off that occurred before the I.S.I. installed the Karmic Rings was so great, that a critical amount of negative momentum had been gained. The known universe was experiencing entropy imbalance to such an extreme degree that the imbalance had long ago began ripping through the time barriers. So the actual entropy imbalance of the universe reflected backwards into the past from the future. The sins of the children began to be visited upon the great great great grandfathers. Then the retrograde effects, once started, continued to manifest more and more intensely. Burgeoning violence and destructiveness began to amass into retrotemporal pockets of Primitive cultures where the behaviors were either permitted or actively sanctioned. The destructive retrotemporal effects were also cumulative, and the I.S.I. had become very alarmed with the recorded extinction of more than 50% of the Primitive planets known to and charted by the Guardians of the I.S.I. When two planets that were definitely not Primitive, but possibly borderline, began to show signs of cultural backsliding with intermediate scale physical plane violence, the I.S.I. reasoned that possibly the retrotemporal effects were beginning to threaten civilized cultures. Thus something had to be to slow or otherwise control the entropic degradation. So DR TOMORROW was born as a project, one of three aimed at helping to correct the entropy imbalance of the universe. Violence and destructiveness have largely been weeded out in the far future of 32,000 A.D., but the intratemporal ripping off that went on between the years 28,000 and 32,000 was enough to guarantee dreadful repercussions to the past. As long as the repercussions were wiping out only Primitive life forms, no one got too upset. But when life forms clearly not Primitive began having serious problems, and then started regressing into Primitive cultural activities, the I.S.I. clearly discerned a pattern of possible ultimate danger if unchecked or uncontrolled. The I.S.I. were never certain that entropy imbalance was a puzzle with a solution, but all the Guardians generally hoped that the imbalance could be cut off at its source and then also possibly harmonized.

Yo-Vah explained all of this to me. The other Eternals all seemed to be listening also with one ear but gluing most of their attention on the science fiction movie. I assumed that they already knew the facts we were hearing. What a universe!

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

*DR TOMORROW will be continued next issue.*

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