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Looking Ahead

Daniel K. Appelquist

One year ago, the first issue of *Quanta* was released to about a hundred and twenty subscribers, after about two months of design, experimentation and copious blood, sweat and tears. The *Quanta* of one year ago was really not much more than an experiment. Was there a place for this sort of network magazine? Were there enough amateur writers out there to keep *Quanta* alive? The fact that this, the sixth issue, is being distributed to over *twelve hundred* subscribers in an ever expanding list of countries shows that *Quanta* is viable.

Let me see... I'd like to thank Matthew Sorrels for starting the ball rolling (suggesting LaTeX (I love that) as a platform, doing the initial work to get that operational), and doing proofreading on and off. I'd like to thank Jay Laefer who has spent countless hours proofreading material (and also Todd Williamson who has also done proofreading for *Quanta* at times.) I'd certainly like to thank Norman Murray for his continual support and advice. I have to thank Will Frank. It was Will who came up with the name "*Quanta*," which I think is "really cool." Will has also been a great help in de-mystifying LaTeX (Ok, ok, I'll stop) into a useable form.

I really have to include some remarks thanking Christopher Kempke for a seemingly unending flow of quality prose. Chris has had a story in every single issue of *Quanta* since its inception. "Shifting Sands," published in this issue, is his latest offering.

While I'm thanking people, a big thanks to Tom Roikicki of *Radical Eye Software* for all his help by way of getting DVIPS to work correctly. Thanks to his efforts, this PostScript edition of Quanta will be relatively smaller in code-size than previous issues and should have no problems printing on any PostScript printer.

But enough back-patting. We mustn't be complacent. *Quanta* must continue to evolve and expand if it is to survive. Right now, I'm exploring options for making it available to people on disk and/or paper formats. This may involve a fee for copying costs, but I think people would be willing to pay it. Of course, all network subscriptions are and will remain without charge.

As you may have noticed, I've decided to change some things about the PostScript version of *Quanta* (new title page for one.) I'm still very much in the "market" for PostScript art, so if you're interested in donating any, please write me.

As a bit of a side note, a very interesting matter caught my attention recently, and that is the possibility of a solar sail craft race to Mars. I've only heard sketchy detais on this so unfortunately I can't offer any information on it. However, if there's someone out there who does know more, I would encourage you to write an article and submit it. I'm sure this is the sort of thing *Quanta* readers would be interested in (I know *I* am). I'm always interested in science and science-fiction related articles, by the way. The fact that there are none in this issue is unfortunate, but I hope to make up for that in the December issue.

This will be the second issue without an offering from Faye Levine. Faye is currently involved in writing a sequel to her novel *Revolution*, (entitled *Fronterra*). According to Faye, *Revolution* is being seriously considered for representation by a successful Minneapolis agent. I certainly hope to see it on bookstore shelves in the near future. If you have any words of encouragement for Faye, like "Write more short fiction for *Quanta*," send them to her at *fl0m+@andrew.cmu.edu.*

Unfortunately, I also have some bad news with this issue. *Athene*, the journal of fiction published by Jim Mccabe (*MCCABE@MTUS5.BITNET*) is shortly going to publish its last issue. According to Jim, he simply doesn't have enough time to continue publishing *Athene*. I can certainly see where he's coming from (*Quanta* has continued to take up a large chunk of my time, but a manageable chunk). I certainly hope that someone can take over the *Athene* project for Jim. A net without *Athene* is a depressing thought. *Athene* has been around for about as long as *Quanta* and it was, in fact, the first issue of *Athene* that inspired me to attempt to produce a magazine of my own. I owe a great debt to Jim, and I'd like to take this oppurtunity to thank him for his efforts. We're sorry to see you go, Jim.

I am constantly impressed with how tight knit a community "The Net" is and yet how easily it accepts new people into itself. It's a constantly growing and expanding group, and I'm honored to have been able to contribute in some way to it, as I hopefully will be able to do for years to come. Thank you. Thank you very much. □

BLACK JUSTINIAN

by Dana Goldblatt

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Justin paused. He heard Starkadder's voice a few steps behind and to his left.

"Keep going," it said. "Chereny has one of the overseers watching you. He still thinks you were the one who tried to strangle him last week. He doesn't believe Roge's confession."

When Justin had programmed Starkadder's voice, he'd decided that if it seemed to come from behind, it wouldn't seem so disembodied and spooky. He hadn't thought that he would have an automatic urge to turn around and look for the source of the voice—he knew it was in his mind—but most times he barely stopped himself in time. When he didn't, he pretended to be knocking a bug off his back; still, it might look odd to someone watching. And now there was someone watching all the time.

He bent to plant another handful of seeds. This time of year the soil was moist and newly turned; it gave off a scent that embodied everything good about Nele, the land he'd lived in all his life—the land which was the greatest in a world he now knew was only a primitive planet, far away from the mainstream of the developed stars.

Justin was glad he'd met the Chesetians—after all, they had given him Starkadder—but he wasn't sure he could ever be happy again. Being happy meant knowing his place in the world; now he wasn't sure if his place *was* in the world. He kept thinking he belonged somewhere that wouldn't condemn him for Starkadder, or any of the other improvements he'd made in his brain with the Chesetian equipment. The strict laws of Nele would execute a man for practicing psychotherapy; what would they make of a neural programmer?

At the end of the row, he ran out of seed. Justin walked over to the seed barrel and, holding his sack below the opening, carefully pulled out the cork. A golden stream of seed began slowly to fill the sack.

When it was about half-full, a girl whose own sack was empty came up behind Justin to wait her turn at the seed barrel. Careful not to spill, Justin turned to speak to her. It was odd that he did not recognize her, since he knew all the plantation people. Starkadder did not comment.

"Hello," he said, not knowing how to address her. "I'm Justin, Nal. I am a thousandth planter of this plantation." He waited for her answer.

"Hello, Justin. You may call me Deesay, here. I am here for planting, to help. Lord Chereny has made a call, not having enough planters to put seed down on his entire plantation before the end of the season." She moved closer to him. In his ear, she whispered, "There is more. Meet me after dinner in the transient cabin at Thousan'town—act like you're picking me up. I was told to say: my regards to Starkadder."

Justin's sack was full, more than he would usually have allowed. It was very heavy. He recorked the barrel and allowed Deesay (if that was her name) to move next to the seed.

In the field Justin's mind was working furiously, but he came up with no more than he had in the instant the girl spoke her private message: she was from the Chesetians, or she knew all about them; and she had some way of suppressing the satellite scans, or Starkadder, or both. If Starkadder had known who she was, it would have told him. And if the satellites had been able to track her, as they tracked everyone on Nele, Starkadder should have known. It hadn't even warned him that someone was coming up behind him.

Starkadder had apparently not been permanently suppressed, because its voice now spoke, still seeming to come from several steps behind Justin. "An overseer is approaching, not the one who has been assigned to watch you. Tenth Aza Chereny wants to see you." Aza! Justin hadn't spoken personally to him in three years. First a picture of Aza as a boy, helping Justin up as the two of them climbed a trie, replaced by a memory of a red-faced newly adult Aza calling insults, in turn replaced by a more mature, calm man (seen from a distance) who had in him little of the boy.

The overseer was windblown and weatherbeaten; his class spent all day outdoors guarding the plantation from thieves and small planters. "Thousandth Justin? Tenth Aza requires you in the manor," said the man, with a pronounced Westernele accent.

Justin replied, "When does he want me? I have seventeen more rows to plant. One or two of those is Aza's. He may have to be patient."

"He requires you instantly. I must take you forcibly if you refuse." The overseer, like many who did not speak Southernele from the cradle, reverted to formality at times of stress.

"All right. If Aza requires me, it must be important." Carrying his sack of seed, Justin followed the Western overseer out of the fields. They walked into the roomy entrance hall of the manor. The cool air felt clammy to Justin, who was used to the hot sun and the stuffy interiors of Thousan'town cabins. The overseer went to tell Aza that Justin had arrived. A maid wandered through, dusting the tables and cabinets in the hall.

"Could I have a shirt or something? It's chilly in here," Justin asked the maid.

"I'll see if I can get you something," the maid said. She was amused by his discomfort: he was now shivering a little, the

bare flesh of shoulders and arms covered in goosepimples.

She went out and returned moments later, with a light jacket. The sleeves were a little long for Justin, and the jacket wouldn't fasten around his chest, but he was warmer. He rolled up one sleeve to a comfortable length. As he started on the second one, Aza came in.

He looked much older than Justin knew he was: Aza was losing his hair. The newly high forehead made him look wiser, and even sophisticated. But his thoughtful look and second-long, gone-before-you-really-saw-it smile were left over from Aza's childhood and completely familiar to Justin.

"I apologize for bringing you here without notice," said Aza. "But it was necessary." He led Justin through the manor to his private study, called the *Green Palace* by the manor staff. Aza had a knack for growing exotic plants. "The man who tried to assasinate my father has confessed that he had an accomplice. You are suspected."

"Roge said he had an accomplice? I don't believe it," Justin said.

"Yes, Roge. That is the man's name. Well, I don't believe it either; at least, I don't believe the wretched man had an accomplice. But Lord Chereny does, and the questioner has been . . . encouraging him to say you were involved in the attempt. My father is convinced, for some reason, that you were the one who tried to strangle him. He will accept no other theory." Aza began to pace. He stopped, fingering the dangling leaf of a golden-green plant hanging overhead. "Do you know why he would be so convinced of this? Do you have any information?"

He looked dismayed when Justin shook his head. "If you do not, I will be forced to put you in prison to await trial. I will have no other course to follow. But I don't want to incarcerate you. I don't think you are guilty, and I . . . I feel some friendship towards you."

"The only thing I can tell you is that I would doubt Roge's original confession as much as the accomplice bit. I don't think he is capable of plotting a murder or cooperating in one. The man isn't a doer," Justin said.

Aza told him, "I would have agreed, but why would he confess if he hadn't done it? It would be insane."

"Maybe he has gone insane," said Justin. "Of course, in that case, he could have murdered, too, I suppose."

"And I can't release him unless I have proof that he's innocent and just harmlessly crazy," Aza said. "Even if I do get such proof, you become our first suspect. You have to know more than that."

"I don't," Justin protested. "If I knew who did it . . . "

"You're lying," Aza said. "You're protecting another Thousandth, or a servant, or an overseer, someone you think was justified to try to kill my father. Maybe he hasn't been completely honest with everyone on the plantation, but murder goes a little beyond fair redress, doesn't it?"

Justin was silent.

"He does have some real reason to suspect you, you know. You did say he deserved to be punished for cheating on the distribution two years ago. He's been afraid of you since then, not just this past week," Aza said accusingly.

"I said he should try to live in a cabin in Thousan'town for the summer with a limited ration of fresh water. I said that would be proper punishment for him. That doesn't make me a murderer—unless he is." Justin was getting angry, a little unfairly. He did have a good idea who had tried to kill Lord Chereny, just as Aza thought. But he was not refusing to tell because he was trying to protect the criminal. He simply could not explain how he knew without revealing damning evidence against himself, and even giving Aza the information without a source would reveal that he knew more than any Thousandth planter ever should.

Aza asked, "Just tell me something . . . so I can say you've cooperated. Give me a hint, come on." His voice grew sharper. "And stop sounding so bitter! You're exaggerating, and if you keep acting that way, you'll make him worse. Then I won't be able to help you."

"Do you really feel that friendly toward me?" Justin asked with sincere curiousity. "I wouldn't have thought so, even an hour ago."

Aza looked startled. "Why not? We were good friends, as boys. I think I spent more time with you than with my family. We haven't been . . . recently, but . . . " he trailed off. "Why not?" he repeated.

"Don't you remember how you, well, warned me right before you went North three years ago? You yelled at me to stay in Thousan'town where I belonged, not to mix with advanced folk such as yourself, not to presume; by the time you got back I was presuming quite a bit, investigating your father's practice of stealing from the poor and selling to the rich. I supposed you would never want to speak to me again; I certainly didn't care to speak to you." Justin paused, breathing audibly, almost a sigh. "All right. I can tell you one thing. After this, please leave me alone—you don't want your father thinking you are plotting against him with me. This is it, all right? I don't think it was anyone on this plantation who tried to kill him. And I don't think he will ever be able to put the criminal in prison, even if he finds out who it was. Now I have to go. I have seventeen more rows to plant today." Justin stood up.

Aza stood too. "Let me show you out," he said politely. At the door to the manor, he stopped. "Good-bye, Justin," he said.

"Good-bye." Justin picked up his seed sack and his walked back toward his seventeen rows. He imagined the conversation which might have occurred if he had told his thoughts to Aza.

"I believe the instigators of the murder attempt are people from another planet," Justin says.

"Another *what*?" Aza almost yells. "You mean another plantation, don't you?"

"Another planet, I said," Justin insisted.

"What makes you think there even is such a thing?"

At this point the imaginary conversation breaks down. Justin would not be able to tell Aza about the Chesetians, and he could think of no other possible explanation for his theory. Of course, he could say he had heard rumors, but Aza would question his sanity for believing that kind of rumor with no evidence. It sounded like wish-fulfillment, since the plantation people were desperate to be exonerated.

He finished planting around the time Thousan'town would be

settling down to supper—those who had it. He went into his own cabin, where he'd lived alone since his mother died, and put a half-full pot on the fire, soon to be a quick meal of boiled grains and vegetables.

He took out the past week's Journal to read while the food cooked. It had only arrived two days earlier; the Chereny plantation was so far from Casternor, the city in which the Journal was published, that Justin's copy always came about ten days late. The Journal was somewhere between a weekly newspaper and a nonfiction anthology; the writers were given scope to express their opinions without any attempt at objectivity, but an effort was made to describe the important events of the week in Nele. The quality varied sharply between various writers, some of whom wrote regularly and others only once or twice. Justin himself had had an article published in the Journal, but under an assumed name. He had called himself Ches Nal Black, in honor of the Chesetians, his assumed lineage name Nal, and his mother's true lineage name, Black. Since Justin had never known his father's lineage, he had adopted the Nal lineage. The Nal had, as far as Justin knew, died out about a hundred years earlier, leaving only traces of their history. Only one of the Nal had ever achieved any lasting fame, but that one was Armeny s-Nal, the pioneer popularizer of the share system which now governed most of the plantations of Nele. Armeny based his system on traditional ones used long before in very limited context, but expanded them into a system so flexible and adaptable it could be suited to feudal- or commune-organized plantations equally well.

After eating his supper, Justin decided to follow Deesay's instructions. He was too curious to pass up a chance to solve the puzzle she had created, and felt too threatened by her knowledge to let her continue to pretend she was an ordinary transient.

He walked over to the transients' cabin. It was a large, wooden building, capable of housing fifty men and women in need. Twenty or so transients lived there, fairly comfortably, at most times. During harvest, the building would hold over eighty, sleeping in rotation. As Justin approached, he saw Deesay standing outside, looking at rocks she picked up off the paths.

He stepped up beside her, looking at the black and grey stone she held. "What's so interesting about that rock?" he asked.

Deesay looked up. "Oh, hello. It's not this pebble that's interesting, it's where I found it. This kind of rock is rare on the surface in the South. In this region, it would have to be imported, or taken from a deep excavation, or maybe thrown up in an earthquake."

"How do you know that?" Justin asked, surprised.

"I know lots of things . . . " Deesay said. "I've been studying this place, before I came. Listen, do you have a place here where we can talk privately?" She said this with artifical flirtatiousness, then lowered her voice. "We have to talk. Thank you for coming over, you did very well."

He began to walk toward his cabin. Deesay followed. Justin said, "You didn't do too well. People here don't know that kind of thing, especially transients."

Deesay looked puzzled. "Don't you get traveling students working in the fields here? I thought that was common. Supporting themselves as they study the culture, geology, whatever?"

"I don't know," said Justin. "It sounds reasonable, I guess, but I never met anyone like that. We don't have students here as transients much, I suppose, or they pretend not to be—to study the culture better, maybe."

They arrived at his cabin. Justin opened the door and they walked in.

"I like your furnishings," Deesay said.

"No, you don't," said Justin. "I know what you're used to, wherever you came from. What have you come here for? Why were you told to say—what you said to me."

" 'My regards to Starkadder'? When I told a friend I was coming here to study Nele, he told me he knew a man who was a natural genius at neural programming, who was living on the Chereny plantation in South Nele. I'd been learning Easternele, but once you've got that one Southernele isn't so hard. He asked me to try to persuade you to leave here, and go work for his company. But I don't think—" Justin interrupted. "What company was he talking about?"

"Chesea Neurnetyx Realcompagne, of course." She took a card out of a concealed pocket.

Ch'entzu Whitesmith
Affiliate Partner: Pl.
CHESEA Neurnetyx, Rc.
—
XYrr-2522 tty00028

Justin had never heard this name. But the visitors he called Chesetians had said they were "from Chesea," and he had only assumed they meant their nation.

"If they wanted me to come work for them, why didn't they ask me before?" Justin asked.

"How should I know?" asked Deesay. "But according to Whitey, your talent is wasted here. The anti-psychorifling laws prevent any sort of industry getting started in Nele. There aren't enough natural resources anywhere else on the planet."

The implications of this statement hit Justin with the force of ten gravities. He had thought Nele was the only place on the planet. Or really, he had not thought about the possibility of other nations.

"Where else on the planet could they go?" Justin asked.

"Nowhere, I just said there weren't enough natural resources." Deesay asked, "Well? Are you considering leaving with me? Would you like to be a professional?"

Justin thought about this. It would solve all his problems: no more chance of arrest for Lord Chereny's attempted murder; no more need to conceal Starkadder; no more unfair distribution practices to risk his freedom protesting. His mother was dead, there was no one he would be leaving behind.

"In a way I can't stay in Nele. A man I had forgotten was my friend, Aza Chereny, just warned me I may soon be arrested," Justin said.

"What? For what crime?" protested Deesay.

"Someone tried to strangle his father, Lord Chereny, who thinks I'm behind everything. Aza wanted me to give him some information, so he could say I was helping with the investigation, but I don't know who did it."

"Aza sounds like he's really caught between you and his father," Deesay said.

"Well, I don't know. But if I am going to join Chesea, I don't understand how it works. How would I be allowed to leave Nele?" asked Justin.

"Simple," said Deesay. "When the *Frame* comes to take me back, I'll bring you along."

"Don't I need a passport, or identification? The Chesetians had those rainbow coins they said were their equivalent. I thought they didn't think of taking me with them because they couldn't make me one of those."

"Absolutely right," Deesay said. "But they will have to take you, and we will get one of those made for you right away, at the first bordermark we reach."

Justin was puzzled. "Why will they have to take me? That doesn't make sense."

She brought a folded paper out of the pocket which had also held the card. "This," she said.

It was ornately decorated and written in a language he did not know.

"What is it?" Justin asked.

"Well . . . it's a unification agreement," Deesay said. "It's something like a marriage or adoption contract, binding people together into a legal family."

"I'm going to marry you? Or adopt you? Or maybe you'll adopt me," Justin laughed.

"I said something like," said Deesay. "Ah . . . there's something else. I have to put my real name on it, so you might as well know what that is. Devise Zar-Leroi. But don't say it in public, or when you aren't near me."

"Devise?" Justin asked. "That's a strange name."

"It means 'invent.' It's better than Deesay: Deesay means 'she says.' I'm more inventive than I am talkative," Devise told him.

"When you tell me not to mention you when you're not around, you mean that gadget that keeps the satellites from seeing you, don't you. If they hear me talking about you, someone might notice you're invisible," Justin said.

"How do you know about that?" Devise demanded.

Justin explained, "Starkadder didn't tell me you were coming up behind me. He announces everyone I don't know or can't see. You fit both categories, but he didn't say a word. I thought you might be suppressing him, but you weren't; he just didn't see you, because the satellites didn't."

"That's some program," said Devise. "No wonder Whitey says you're a genius." She brought the paper to Justin's attention again. "You can just sign this," she said. "It's sufficient even if you don't fully understand the agreement's terms. If I've cheated you, you can sue me for recompense, but I promise it's all right by our standards."

Justin had only the vaguest idea what her standards might be like, but he signed anyway. He was so sure now that he wanted to go, he would sign anything to insure it.

"Don't change your behavior, act as though nothing has changed. The *Frame* is going to show up some time between tomorrow morning and next week. I'll come over and get you: have everything you want to take assembled and wrapped to carry. We'll have to leave right away, when they come." Devise left Justin's house.

Justin slept uneasily. He had made the right decision, he thought, but his life would never again be what he considered normal. He hoped that wouldn't translate into unhappy.

A commotion outside his door woke him the next morning. He could see nothing of its cause through his single, narrow window. Justin stood and put on work clothes.

As he finished dressing, his door was thrust open. The commotion grew louder, and now Justin could see that half Thousan'town was standing in his yard. Three overseers had taken the hinges off his door to get it open. Near the edge of the road, Justin saw Devise in the crowd.

An overseer said, "I arrest you, Justin, called Nal, left of Black, to answer the charges of attempted murder and conspiracy against Lord Chereny. Your property is now in the wardship of justice, and forfeit if you are guilty. Come with me now."

As the man spoke, Justin saw Devise moving away, toward the transients' area.

Starkadder spoke at his back, like a murmur in his ear. "Roge has finally been forced to name you as his co-conspirator. You will be imprisoned if you don't leave the area . . . The overseer Lord Chereny sent to arrest you is arriving now . . . " Justin was frightened. Apparently, whatever it was that Devise used to block the satellites and Starkadder was ruining Starkadder's ability to function. Normally it should have warned him of the danger in plenty of time to escape.

Devise was frightened too. She sent a neuromessage to Chesea Recruitment officer Sofya Valadiya on *Frame*. The message was somewhat incoherent, but a translation would be something like: "The solution has caused more problems. To remove recruit from habitat, cause trauma in habitat; but trouble captured recruit and made removal unlikely."

"What happened? Be calm," was Valadiya's reply.

"Two causes: attempt on life of Chereny Senior; interruption of data to keep my presence unknown. Result: recruit wants to leave, but is imprisoned and unable." Devise sends urgency across neuromessage circuit.

"Calm. Rational. Tranquil. Now, send me a causal chain." Valadiya was used to dealing with field agents under stress; when weren't they having an emergency?

"Chesea personnel arranged for recruit to be unwanted in Nele. They arranged he would be suspected of a crime. I arrived. To keep my arrival secret, I blocked satellite scan. The same blocking transmission interfered with operation of recruit's neuroprogram. Therefore he was not as well informed as usual. He was just arrested for the crime Chesea arranged. Now how can I get him to the *Frame*?"

Devise was ordering her thoughts more clearly under the direct influence of the neuromessage circuit.

Valadiya told her, "You have to get him out of prison."

"How?" asked Devise.

"That's your job. You're the agent."

"How much exposure can I allow myself?" she asked.

"As little as possible/Whatever it takes," came an answer loaded with ambivalence.

Devise said, "I won't be able to do it. I claim revocation, take me home."

"You can't do that," Valadiya told her.

"Why not?" Devise protested.

"You signed that unification agreement, didn't you?" asked the recruitment officer.

Devise said, "Oh. You . . . make such plans. I have to get him out of prison, legally, don't I? Because I signed that unification agreement that was just supposed to let him off Nele. Now I know why you're in charge of half of Recruitment." She paused, planning her next transmission carefully. It was an untranslatable joke. Unification agreements were taken seriously, but their many entanglements made them the subjects of every kind of humor.

Justin was taken into the basement of the manor, where prisoners were kept. There were six cells, each of which could hold four men. Only two cells were tenanted. One held three men, the other only one: Roge.

Roge was in bad shape. He looked like a man who had been forced to give false evidence against his will, Justin thought, which supported what Starkadder had told him.

The overseer pushed Justin into a cell across from Roge's. The three men in the cell furthest from Roge were all in their beds, but one raised his head.

"What's going on?" he asked.

The overseer said, "We've got the man Lord Chereny wanted."

"Justin Black," said the man. "I lose again. Gerd!" he said loudly, turning toward the man beside him. "Gerd! Wake up! You win, I'm only four up on you now."

The other prisoner sat up. He was wearing what Justin assumed was a prison suit, an unusually dirty gray one-piece garment. "Well, I thought you'd be in here. Roge is wrong about everything."

The overseer was locking Justin into his cell. "Shut your mouths, all of you," he said, leaving them alone.

Roge looked over at Justin. "Sorry," he said hoarsely.

"Did you do it?" Justin asked. "I told Aza I didn't think you had tried to kill his father, but I'm not sure he believed me."

"Why would I confess to it, if I hadn't done it?" Roge asked.

"Why would you confess if you had?" Justin countered.

"Guilt, maybe," suggested Roge.

"I suppose. I just can't see you as the kind of man . . . " Justin trailed off.

Roge said, "I can't see myself as that kind of person either. I just don't even know why I tried to strangle him. I don't even know why I confessed to it. I don't understand anything."

Justin did not know what to say to answer him. The other prisoners went back to sleep, now that there was nothing going on.

Soon Justin, with nothing else to do, went to sleep too.

The rescue turned out not to be so difficult. Devise had not realized that the "prison" Justin was being taken to was only Lord Chereny's residence. She remembered that Aza Chereny had tried to help Justin, and knew he would be her key into the manor.

She changed her clothing. Devise was now the model of a Lord's daughter from one of the wealthier Easternele plantations.

"Hello," she said to the maid at the door. "I've come to visit Aza." The maid welcomed her in. Devise was led to the plant-filled study, where Aza was working on a boxed row of spiky flowers. "Aza Chereny," she said. "I've been told so much about you." The maid left. As soon as she had, Devise stepped over to Aza. "Listen. I know you've arrested Justin," she began.

Aza said, "What do you—"

She continued, ignoring his attempt to interrupt. "You don't want him in prison, but you can't let him stay free here, right? Well, I'm going to take him off your hands. You'll never see him again, but he'll be free, and happier than he could be here. All you have to do is let me have him."

Aza wanted to believe her, but didn't understand her at all. "I really don't know what you're talking about."

"I'm just going to smuggle him out of here. No one in Nele will ever see him again. No one but you will know how he escaped." Devise waited. There wasn't much time; the *Frame* would touch down in less than an hour.

Doubting his own sanity, Aza took her down a back staircase into the basement. He unlocked all the cell doors, as she directed. Then he took her on a tour of the manor. He noticed her sprinkling a pale yellow powder on the floors, everywhere they went.

The yellow powder all over the manor was a neuroerase formula Devise carried for use in emergencies. The overseers and servants woke the next day with only traces of memory, unable to explain how their wards had vanished. The former prisoners woke in the fields, unable to say how they had escaped.

Justin woke in his room on the *Frame*, knowing only that he was no longer a prisoner of Lord Chereny . . . and no longer a prisoner of Nele.

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THE KING'S CHALLENGE

by Cerise Palmer

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Sorrille trudged slowly through the gauntlet of curious townsfolk, silently cursing the guard who had bound his hands so exceptionally snugly behind his back. What keen satisfaction it would give him to smite these shabby oafs, with their bulging eyes riveted to his progress and their dirt-smudged faces predictable masks of cruel delight or stupid pity.

Sorrille, it must be conceded, was a bit of an arrogant bastard.

The townsfolk watched him dumbly at first, too conscious of his former power to risk their scrawny necks taunting him. But as he neared the city gates it began to dawn on them that he would like as not never return to repay their rude treatment of him, and they rose to the occasion accordingly. Women lifted their aprons to their mouths and tittered as their young brats hurled scraps of rotten food and clods of dung at his head. A toothless old man hopped up and down on one leg in a fit of ecstatic mirth, then swung his balancing stick roundly at Sorrille's shin. One of the guards flanking Sorrille gave the old gargoyle a friendly shove that toppled him into a mud puddle.

"Now, now, venerable grandpap, this here's a royal subject and his escort. Mind yer manners," the guard guffawed, giving Sorrille an insultingly familiar slap on the back. Sorrille curled his lip savagely, unable to decide who he would thrash to a pulp first—guard or gaffer—were he suddenly given the opportunity to do so.

"Say there, lordling, send us yer bones from the Charred Lands so's we'll know yer made yer trip safely," called a paunchy shopkeeper, grinning obscenely as he clapped his hands to his jouncing belly.

"Oi don't know," countered a stableboy, clutching at Sorrille's cloak, "but what he'd do more kerreck to berkweeth us his foinery now. The Children of the Charred Lands ain't pertickelar on how their victims is dressed."

Sorrille pulled himself free of the creature's stinking grip and struggled briefly but earnestly with the rope pretzeled about his wrists. "Don't tempt your fate, dropping. I'll see to it that your coffin is fit for Onri himself."

The stableboy laughed shrilly. "Oh, en ain't he a foine one fer threats. Where he's going there won't even be none to tuck him underground. May the jeckels foind yer corpse most deloightfully tasty, good me lord." His pseudo-court bow, complete with manual flourishes, sent the guard at Sorrille's left elbow into convulsions of nasal glee.

"See how respectful we all are," he said, between snorts, "even to one"—here he preceded his words with the appropriate action—"who's about to be booted from the city."

Sorrille rolled up from the ground as the stone gate whined plaintively to a close behind him. The peepdoor opened just long enough for the guard behind it to drop a tiny bone dagger and a handkerchief-full of biscuits at Sorrille's feet. "Protection and wayfarin' provisions," chuckled the guard, before slamming the door briskly in Sorrille's face.

Muttering under his breath, Sorrille spent the next several minutes applying the minuscule blade of the dagger to his bonds, which frayed sufficiently at last for him to work his hands free. He slipped the dagger into his tunic belt without any real faith in its future utility, then turned to gather the meager contents of the handkerchief, which had spilled loose on contact with the ground. "Sons of dogs," he hissed, scraping the dust from what might well be the last meal he would ever eat.

For the next several hours, as he plodded across the ugly stretch of bare plain surrounding Renith, Sorrille did little but reflect bitterly on the many advantages of the royal table. For one thing, one always left it with one's stomach satiated. For another, its multitudinous delicacies were invariably accompanied by an endless flow of mildly intoxicating—and thirst-quenching—potations. Then, last but not least, one was invited to attend it no less than four times daily, and while a score of musicians and dancers might very well appear out of nowhere to entertain one, it was inconceivable that either fanged rodents or fist-sized flies would ever be allowed to join the festivities.

Flailing his arms furiously at an especially noisy and persistent specimen of the second category, Sorrille began to regret having exhausted his supply of biscuits so rapidly. True, he had not eaten for two days prior to being paraded through and then expelled from the city; the king's henchmen had tactfully ignored his existence from the moment they thrust him into the palace dungeons to the moment they returned to execute His Most August and Senile Majesty Onri's sentence upon poor hotheaded ex-Duke Sorrille. Unfortunately, though, Sorrille was now entirely without any likely prospects of obtaining life-sustaining nourishment, and thirsty as a bloodsucker to boot. Sometime tomorrow, if he kept up a rigorous pace, he might reach the Ashen Forest's cornucopia of snowberries, bone fruit, and mirkwater. But to partake of aught of the Forest's tempting bounty would quickly ensure that Sorrille became not one of the Shadowchildren's victims but rather one of their numbers.

Sorrille toyed sardonically with the notion that were he in fact metamorphosed into a deathless and lifeless ghoul, he could probably catch up with Onri on the next extra-urban hunting expedition and hasten the old boor's end with an exquisitely

nightmarish haunting. Of course, his own existence thenceforward would hardly be an enviable one. No, he reasoned, with a forbearance uncharacteristic of him, that manner of revenge would clearly cost him far too much. Better to meet Onri's insane challenge—to return to Renith with a tame, captive Shadowchild—and behold the king dumbstruck with apoplexy when he learned that his challenge had been met. The doddering bastard's crown would be brusquely removed from his head and set gently on Sorrille's own, Onri's radiant young Belisa would joyously accept his marriage proposal, and every courtier who had ever done him an ill turn would be summarily drawn-and-quartered, or, better yet, driven screaming off a cliff by his pet Shadowchild. It was no doubt a plan of action with much to recommend it, provided Sorrille discovered, within the next day, how to avert certain death and then coax a supernatural nemesis to behave itself.

For the time being, however, he would have to concentrate on such minor though pressing matters as how to avert pangs of hunger and where to spend the night. In solution to the first problem, Sorrille seized a handful of scrubby plains clover and began to chew it greedily; the shepherds and cartdrivers of Lower Renith did swear by it, after all, as a 'rousin' stimulant," and while the stuff surely wouldn't fill his stomach, it might at least hoodwink it into quiescence. The second problem was considerably larger, as the plains wind was a wild and ravenous beast by night. Unless Sorrille could find or devise some sort of shelter by sunset, he was likely to spend the next moonspan being knocked down and tumbled about till his clothes were tattered and his limbs bruised and bloody. After surveying the discouragingly level landscape before him for several minutes, Sorrille concluded that there was nary a tree nor shrub to hide behind or cling to. Then, with a burst of what felt like forced and desperate optimism, he spotted a greyish blotch not too far in the distance which might conceivably be a rock outcrop of some sort. Resigning himself to the possibility that he was travelling all-too-eagerly toward a nonexistent haven he reminded himself repeatedly that it was just as good a destination as any other.

As luck would have it, the blotch was much further off than Sorrille had guessed. The disc of the sun had turned from hot gold to warm peach to an ominously cool carmine and begun to slip below the horizon before he felt even vaguely like he had gotten anywhere. Determined nonetheless to reach his goal, he quickened his already lively pace in a last-ditch attempt to outrace the twilight. He was dourly preparing to entertain notions of defeat when a luminous whorl of milky air came spinning up to greet him.

"Curse the plains and the dog-gods who made them!" Sorrille bellowed, by way of greeting, then broke into a thoroughly antisocial run. It wasn't until the glistening funnel-cloud had enveloped him without so much as flaring his cloak hem that he realized that being battered by the plains wind was the least of his current worries. For, standing in a triumphant circle around him, their diaphanous wings folded, their black nostrils and lips twitching, were four Shadowchildren. Time froze then, for an unspeakably long moment in which countless worlds came into and passed out of existence, and Sorrille watched with helpless fascination as the silver branches of the creatures' hair crackled and hissed like snow-crusted kindling on a winter fire. A pair of shimmering claws began to caress his face with an eerie, hypnotic tenderness, and he found himself sinking pleasantly and endlessly into a deep cavern pool whose dark waters streamed with phosphorescent tendrils. Lulled nearly to insensibility, he recollected somehow that he must surface for air. Proud that his instinct for survival could withstand even the delicious pull of enchanted slumber, he willed himself alert, blinking hard to bring the blurry twin red orbs before him into focus. Finally, his vision cleared, and he met the Shadowchild's blind steady gaze directly. Gods be damned! He had withstood nothing; while he had been doing the backfloat in his imaginary watering-hole, the Children had been collectively sucking at his thoughts like a gang of slithering lampreys. Growing faint with the effort, Sorrille managed to wrench his head sideways and down until the only thing he saw was an elongated, insubstantial foot. The Children convulsed with disappointment, and the one who had been peeping uninvited into the windows of his soul caressed his face once again, with the insistent frenzy of a newly cast-off lover.

"Do not deny us, Sorrille," it coaxed. Its voice was soundless yet reverberant, rather like wind scraping the barrel of a tongueless bell.

"You meant to seek us," another intoned. "Do not despair if we have found you first."

"Are we not wondrous to behold?" inquired a third. "As lovely as Belisa?" For a fraction of a second, the Child's voice took on Belisa's very air of well-practiced coquetry, and Sorrille could picture the creature raising a claw artfully to its scintillant coiffure. He shuddered to realize how deep a draught of his mind the four had drunk in. He fought not to look up and meet the Childrens' eyes again, meanwhile wondering whether the fact of their obvious blindness could not somehow be used to his advantage.

"What is it you want?" he demanded, as if he were addressing a peasant rabble and standing in a perfectly upright and authoritative position.

"What is it we want?" came the mocking reply.

"What is it we want?"

"We want to sup on your heart." The caressing claws found their way to Sorrille's chest. "Is it a kind heart?"

"Is it a bold heart? or a bitter heart?"

"Or perhaps it is a broken heart. How we savor a broken heart."

"What is it we want?"

"Only to sup on your mind. Is it a keen mind, or a weak one?" The claws brushed Sorrille's temples.

"Perhaps it is a broken mind."

"How we savor a broken mind." The claws tangled longingly in his hair.

"What is it we want?"

"We want to see your eyes, pretty lordling." Again the voice was Belisa's. "Will you not show us your eyes, pretty, pretty lordling?"

Sorrille rolled over, growling at the overly soft royal bed, then grunted with satisfaction at the taste of sweet ale on

Belisa's lips. He was about to scold her playfully for cuckolding the king with such wanton frequency when the unnaturally dark lustre of her mouth roused in him the first full-fledged panic of his adult life. He began to thrash about wildly, expecting to feel not one but four pairs of claws groping for his vital organs. Instead, he discovered himself hurling through the amorous Shadowchild's form as if it were no more than a pillar of smoke.

He ran without seeing, his arms raised protectively around his head, his feet pounding the plains with such force that it seemed the whole world was a vibrating drumskin. Ground and sky alternately flew apart and then collided, and between them was Sorrille, just barely managing to keep his balance. Fear roiled in his skull like breakers slamming against a cliff, then spilled over and over again into the forgotten lagoon beyond it. He gasped for breath as if he were drowning, or as if there were too little air in the sky. Like the plains-wind itself, he unsettled feeding vultures, alarmed a pair of rutting dogs. And all the while, the Shadowchildren kept pace with him effortlessly, their ghostly feet skimming the ground, their voiced entangling him in a perpetual litany of taunts and threats which tickled the inside of his ears like the echo of his own crazed thoughts.

Finally, he could endure no more. He turned to face them with the wrath-contorted countenance of a hero scourging the infernal regions, raised his arms prophetically, and cried "Begone!" in a tone that fell somewhere between breathlessness and hysteria. As if to humor, one last time, his ill-conceived attempt to elude them, the Shadowchildren shrank back a few yards in mock terror then burst into discordant hilaria and began to approach him once again. Sorrille backed away from them involuntarily, in the measured, almost ritual dance of quarry that knows itself doomed. And then he was falling. And then slipping, with sublime gratitude, into the deepest midnight of unconsciousness.

Some landscapes are deceptively monochromatic; the eye, drowning in a wash of the one color that begins to seem like no-color, searches frantically for a blazing streak of difference, for some brilliant rebel hue. Instead, it discovers the myriad nuances that reside in even the most economical of palettes. And so a dismally grey landscape, for example, becomes first a welter of possibilities and then an intricate tapestry of shadings and modulations. Steel-grey yields dove's-breast grey and birch grey and the grey of mute dawn and fog-misted lakes. Then synaesthesia sets in, and grey becomes the odor of woodsmoke, the chime of plashing water, a morning wind beaded with dew. The senses unveil themselves to a symphony of grey chords, textures, glimmering motes, and sometimes the Grey Lady who orchestrates it makes her feathery descent and presses a goblet of silver-grey wine to one's lips...

Coughing violently as the bitter cold stuff made its way down his throat, Sorrille hoisted himself into a sitting position on the thatch-bed of dried balsam beneath him. He studied his surroundings long enough to conclude that he was in some sort of mountain aerie, disconcertingly higher than he had ever been before. After reeling with vertigo for a few moments, he turned his attention to the strange-looking being that had apparently appointed herself his nursemaid. Draped loosely in some iridescent cloth the indefinite color of a cloud, she was tall and supple as a young tree, with an oxymoronic combination of smooth, glowing skin and bone-white hair that made her age impossible to determine. Her onyx-black eyes were so widely spaced that it was difficult to look into both of them simultaneously, and her nose was aquiline in a cruelly graceful way. Altogether, her aspect was unsettlingly predatory.

Sorrille assembled his facial features into an expression of rapt attentiveness tinged with urbane wit. "Would you find me presumptuous were I to ask you where I am?"

"Your manners are those of the court," she replied, scrutinizing him as if he were a puzzle to be solved. "This is my dwelling-site. Did you wish to find yourself elsewhere?"

"On the contrary. I am delighted to find myself here, for I had not expected to survive the night." He paused while she tended the small fire near his bed. "I was fleeing the bane of the Charred Lands—the Shadowchildren. Four of them."

Her face registered neither surprise nor fear. "So I suspected. Only a fool or a hunted man would fail to avoid my wolf-trap. The Children must have lost your scent once you fell. Be glad that they are blind."

"Indeed, I am overjoyed. Unfortunately, I lost consciousness while falling into your trap, and am consequently ignorant of what has transpired since that event. Would you be so kind as to share with me any information you may have gleaned on the subject?"

"A great many circumlocutions," she observed, with a trace of what seemed like amusement. Then, as if it were unnecessary to respond to him, she removed some strips of cooking meat from the fire and brought them to him. "You are no doubt very hungry," she said, seeing the flicker of avid interest on his face. "Then it is wisest not to eat too quickly."

Finally, while Sorrille fought to obey her advice, she returned arbitrarily to his unanswered question. "Some things I will tell you. Others I will not." She smiled at him vaguely. "The more you tell me of yourself, the more I may tell you of myself. But still I will not tell you all."

Bristling with irritation at her monosyllabic riddling, Sorrille confined himself to inviting her discretion in such matters. She smiled again, a bit less vaguely.

"I am Naraya. I found you in my wolf-trap last night, cold but safe in the absence of lupine companions. The Children had already scattered, as they would have, in any event, upon my arrival. They do not relish my presence." In response to Sorrille's wary, questioning look, she added, "Calm yourself. If I am not quite the same as you, neither am I unnatural or dangerous." She smiled yet again, this time with the obvious intention of reassuring her guest. "I brought you here," she concluded, "and now I am eager to hear the tale of your adventures. Few men venture this far from Renith city, and you seem poorly equipped for a journey."

"I am not travelling of my own accord." As the indignity of his situation struck him anew, he clenched a fist till the knuckles whitened, then glanced up with a vehement sullenness to meet Naraya's amused and knowing look. "But of course you had already guessed as much."

She nodded her assent. "But what I have guessed or failed to guess is unimportant. Please honor me with the telling of your tale."

He rose from the thatch-bed, paced himself into a more courteous mood, and returned to his place by the fire. "Very well, lady. I shall disclose all to you, as you have been a most gracious and generous hostess." He bowed with curt but sincere gratitude, then sat.

"I am Sorrille, Duke of Renith, only son of the first of the nine landed families. I was banished yesterday morning at the order of Onri himself. It was an astonishingly merciful punishment for the crime of treason, which the king was most fully aware I had not committed. Were I in fact a traitor to Renith, my head would be gracing a pike at the city gate this very moment. Instead, I have been magnanimously sent off to wander about the wastelands, and hopefully perish in them, while Onri enjoys the talk currently circulating about his wise, just, and seemingly perpetual reign. My real crime, incidentally, was dallying with the queen."

Surprise flickered in Naraya's depthless eyes. "You risked the king's wrath for a few hours' pleasure? Was this royal matron so terribly alluring? Or perhaps she had ensorcelled you?"

"Belisa is young and fair, and we had been lovers for many months. We were caught when a valet jealous of Belisa's favor spied on us and then brought the king to keep him company at the keyhole. Had things been otherwise, I might be in the lady's arms this very moment, bathed in the gilt sunlight of her person. She is truly glorious."

"So I would imagine. How came she to be the wife of an aging monarch? Even I know that Onri has ruled in Renith for many decades."

"She was one of the many spoils he returned with from a recent campaign in the Quartz Mountains. She was a princess there; Onri captured her brother along with her. The poor fellow died in the royal dungeons last year, while Belisa lingers on as a pampered prisoner of the palace."

"Apparently she has managed to enjoy a few small liberties." Naraya curled her pale lips mischievously, then caught Sorrille's slightly annoyed look. "But forgive me, I have interrupted again. Please continue."

"To make a long story short, Belisa loathes Onri, and Onri would fain have his kingdom believe otherwise. He is fond of boasting that he is 'more a man than any young pup in the city,' as evidenced by his youthful queen's passionate devotion to him. At nearly every banquet in the palace, he pretends to grow extravagantly drunk as soon as Belisa retires, then dares any man at the table to try and divert her favor from him. He laughs uproariously and says he'll forfeit his crown to the first who succeeds in doing so. It's not quite senile swaggering, though—more a senile stratagem for luring any potential cuckolders into making less-than-careful moves. Onri wants to know who his rivals in love are before they so much as cast a longing look in Belisa's direction. In my case he found out after the fact, and had me arrested on grounds of treason rather than let anyone discover I'd added a pair of horns to the ornamentation on his crown."

Naraya clicked her tongue and chuckled. "You were fortunate to escape with your life, it seems. What possessed the king to be so lenient?"

"Belisa's pleading, no doubt. His compromise was to have me die out of sight instead of in a public execution. And his last perverse joke was inviting me to return with a Shadowchild and claim the throne I had 'tried to gain through most depraved and foul subterfuge.' That was the statement he made before his court in the most smug and self-righteous tone he could muster; only I heard the tremor of insane fury in his voice."

"And what will you do now? Lay siege to Renith, demanding your lady-love?" Naraya's voice was gently mocking.

"Actually, I'm planning to take Onri up on his challenge. He did present it before a score of witnesses, so he can't possibly refuse to honor it. I think Belisa would enjoy being queen of Renith were there a gout-free and virile king at her side. And I'm increasingly taken with the prospect of trying on Onri's crown for size." Sorrille grinned as if he were plotting a schoolboy prank.

"And all you need do is return to Renith with a Shadowchild in tow?" asked Naraya, pretending amazement.

"That's correct."

"Simply capture a Child and take it along home with you?"

"Exactly."

She burst into peals of laughter so infectious that before long Sorrille was doubled over, and the echoes of their combined amusement were rippling the chill mountain air.

Sorrille spent the better part of the afternoon exploring Naraya's aerie like a shepherd on some long-awaited holiday. Shortly after feeding him, Naraya had taken Sorrille on a brief tour of its points of interest: a purple-hued hot spring, a rock ledge curtained by the pristine cascade of a waterfall, several giant birches with foliage so dense they obscured the sun wholly. Then she had excused herself to rest and left him to his own devices. After luxuriating in the hot spring, until his body remembered nothing of the last night's bruising fall, he lay naked on the ledge, sunning in the warm bright mist the waterfall so obligingly exuded. Feeling his strength return at last, he shook the dust from his clothes and donned them with arrogant grace. True enough, his dragon's hide boots were quite scuffed, and a few rubies were loose in the hem of his cloak. Still, considering the events of the previous three days, he had done a remarkable job of avoiding dishevelment. Even the puny bone dagger had finally proved of worth; its blade turned out to be ideally suited for scraping the stubble off one's cheek.

Sorrille's feeling of self-satisfaction was somewhat undercut by the fact that he had no idea whatsoever where he was. When he had asked Naraya, over breakfast, to give him a geographical update, she had calmly reiterated that "there were some things she chose not to tell him," and then, as if to reduce his exasperation, added that her aerie "was where it was." So now, having roamed about the place idly for long enough, Sorrille began to inspect it diligently for some clue to his whereabouts.

The first conclusion he arrived at, after treading every inch of

the aerie twice, was that it was completely devoid of any visible access. Nearly an acre broad, it was bordered on three sides by perilously steep slopes and on the fourth by the mountain's utmost peak. "How on earth did she bring me here?" he muttered repeatedly, more out of dumb wonder than out of any real hope that his strange hostess would enlighten him upon her return. Next he devoted himself to identifying whatever he could in the distance, a task rendered nearly impossible by the mountain's obstructive tiara of clouds. Finally, he made out the palace spires of Renith in the south, the foothills of the Quartz Mountains to the west, and the snarled black treetops of the Ashen Forest appallingly near, in the east. His educated hunch was that in the north, behind the towering peak of Naraya's mountain, the Forest proliferated in yet more wild and unsightly abandon; it did, after all, extend out of sight in that general direction.

With the directness of a homing pigeon, Sorrille's mind returned over and over again to the problem of how the willowy, less-than-massive Naraya had transported him to her aerie. He weighed more than she did, certainly, especially when unconscious, and there were no trails up the mountainside along which she could have dragged him in a litter or led him on horseback. Not that he'd even seen any horses grazing, or any empty litters lying about. He shook his head in bewilderment, staring absently at Renith all the while, as if it were the source of his confusion. And then it struck him: Renith looked mournfully remote not so much because of the shroud of mountain- mist he was forced to view it through, as because of the fact that it was a good deal further than a day's walk in the distance. Naraya's steel-grey peak was none other than the rock outcrop he had tried so desperately to reach last sunset, transformed from mountain to molehill by some weird trick of the waning light.

"Who is she, and how did she bring me here?" he muttered once more, setting off to find the lady and demand that she satisfy his more than idle curiosity. No longer solicitous of her need for rest, he searched the aerie with noisy, impatient movements. He was red-faced and panting by the time he was willing to concede that her present whereabouts were a complete mystery to him. He sighed the terse sigh of a courtier resummoning his dignity, and wondered whether he were any less a captive in this uncharted Shangri-la than he had been in Onri's dungeons.

He had consumed a hearty portion of roasted meat strips and was irritably poking the fire into a more respectable form of defense against the chilly starlight when Naraya emerged noiselessly from behind a curtain of night-heavy foliage. The leaves began to rustle in the wake of her silver-clad form like children whispering in stealthy fits and starts; no doubt if she turned to face them, they would lapse again into frozen silence. As she approached Sorrille, the fire blazed in miniature duplicate in the glossy black disks of her eyes; he shuddered, disturbed anew by his inability to encompass her widely-spaced gaze in his own. Smiling, she placed her hands on either side of his face and bent down to kiss him, rousing in him a dizzying mixture of primal terror and unmistakable desire. He felt weightless yet lethargic, too sleepy to resist her will as it enveloped him like the burning glow of a naked sun. He was perfectly aware he was being enchanted, as he had not been when the Shadowchild laid similarly caressing hands on him not so long ago. And yet, beneath his indignance at Naraya's audacity lay a strangely calm acceptance of it and even amused curiosity about what she would do next.

"I have not had so pleasing a guest as you in some time," she said, stepping back a few paces to study him. Vines of honey-red firelight crept through her white hair again and again, till it seemed she was wearing one of the golden hairnets currently fashionable among the ladies of Renith court.

"And is witchery a customary feature of your hospitality?" inquired Sorrille with a laugh, as he blinked himself alert.

"I was not aware that it was. Do I seem to require such stratagems?" She regarded him with an injured expression and stiffened slightly.

"I meant no offense, lady, but your kiss tasted so unlike any I have known before that I could only explain it in terms of magic."

"Kisses are among those things that be which require no explanation." Apparently Sorrille had soothed her ruffled feathers somewhat; she had resumed her proud, willowy stance, and a look faintly recognizable as coyness flickered across her unsettling features. "Do I seem to require stratagems?" she repeated, with eerie self-assurance, and began to unlace the bodice of her pearlescent gown. Topaz points of firelight glinted in the fabric as it slid back from her shoulders slowly, slowly, and then dropped into a silver pool at her ankles, revealing the most spendid female form Sorrille had ever been privileged to behold. A sculptor, Sorrille thought in amazement, would kill for the opportunity to immortalize it in marble or alabaster, and Naraya's flesh, with its unearthly pallor and flawless luster, did resemble the rarest and most costly specimen of either stone. Moreover, her ample but firmly-molded curves were nothing if not statuesque, though her long limbs and the rhythmic sweep to her walk suggested a sensuality not much inclined toward standing still. Accustomed to the initial modesty and restraint of Renith's noble women, Sorrille could not repress the chord of awe-tinged uneasiness her aura of untrammeled wildness struck deep within him.

"I take it you plan to seduce me," he said, in an effort to stall her, to reverse the weights between them so that he had the advantage. But she did not answer, did not even smile at him in the pertly roguish manner Belisa tended to employ when she knew she was doing something shockingly out of character. Before he had the chance to contemplate fully the striking contrasts between the two women, deft strong fingers were whispering over his chest, unclasping his cloak, his belt, unlacing his tunic, coaxing his blood to roar in his temples. For a moment, he thought he heard Naraya's voice in his ear, soothing and insistent, telling him to "forget Belisa" with each husky exhaled breath. The next he knew, her lips were on his and, wrapped in naught but the cool night air and her limbs, he was spinning endlessly through a skyful of bizarre and vivid dreams. The first involved being dragged aloft to go crashing through a smothering run of treetops with the headlong

momentum of a plains-wind. Then a net of gilded foliage was whirling into a blurry cyclone, bursting apart, hurling Naraya and him at the stars, where they swooped in soaring arcs from constellation to constellation. The spheres embroidered music about them, dazzling improvisations woven of twanging crystalline threads and liquid silver notes. He tried to see Naraya's face but couldn't; they were tumbling too rapidly from the precipice they had been poised upon the instant before. They swung into an upward curve, cast their shadows on the moon, plummeted down and down and down until they were skimming the pewter-and-black silk surface of a lake. Then they were rising in whimsical curlicues, like a tongue of breeze lapping up air, when a low-hanging cloud suddenly wrapped them in its gauzy cloak of ether, its plumes of sleep-inducing smoke...

Then it was pearl-pink early dawn and Naraya was gently prodding him awake...

Sorrille made a drowsy mental note of the fact that he was sprawled naked on some sort of crop-furred hide blanket, and that Naraya, who was fully attired and groomed, looked a great deal more dignified than he. He was fumbling on his clothing with as much haste as he could muster, planning to ask, when he was properly dressed, about her curious predilection for being up and about in the wee hours of the morning. He was about to address her with an expression of wry amusement when she focused her anything-but-crossed eyes on him and smiled in a disconcertingly self-assured, even patronizing way.

"I am more than a little interested," she announced, "in enjoying nights such as the last again."

"Indeed," he replied, feeling oddly piqued, "you seem pleased with what transpired. By the way, what did transpire? Did you, perhaps, strew some vision-provoking powder on the fire while my attention was fixed elsewhere? You could not have tampered with my food or drink, since I had prepared it myself and finished it before you appeared."

She tossed back her granite-colored mane and laughed with abandon for several moments. Then she fell abruptly silent and regarded Sorrille with a sober look that revealed nothing of what she was thinking or feeling. "Some things I will tell you. Others I will not." She briefly tended the fire she had started while he was sleeping, then picked up where she had left off when he so cavalierly interrupted her. Even the patronizing smile was back in place. "I enjoyed last night and am quite anxious for you to prolong your stay with me. But no doubt you will require more of an incentive to remain than a simpler reminder of my charms can provide. After all, your memories of this queen Belisa"—she mispronounced the name in what seemed a calculated fashion—"are bound to distract you sooner or later, and I will have none but an attentive lover."

Sorrille snorted haughtily at her boldness. "I pay attention only to that which I find myself interested in."

"I am sure of it. That is why I have conceived of a proposition I think you will find most fascinating."

"Indeed? Do then, by all means, propose it."

"Agree to be my guest for six more nights, and at the end of that time I will assist you in snaring a Shadowchild. Then I will see to it that you are properly provisioned for a triumphant return to Renith."

Sorrille remained silent for several minutes, torn between the desire to laugh aloud and the sinking feeling that Naraya was perfectly in earnest, no matter how mad her proposal sounded. Then he remembered what she had said about the Children fleeing her approach, like timid birds or squirrels, and decided he would encourage her to elaborate on her invitation. After all, he had nothing to lose, and she might unwittingly reveal useful information to him. Furthermore, he hadn't really resolved the problem of where he would go next, and even were he to descend safely the near-perpendicular slopes of Naraya's mountain, he would find himself in constant mortal peril on the ground below. Accepting the assistance of an expert regional guide was clearly the wisest thing he could do, even if that guide had both albino tresses and lusty designs on his person.

"I'd be delighted to extend my visit here. But perhaps, before I change my travel plans, you ought to tell me more about the rewards that my staying on would assure me of. I do not like to enter contractual arrangements half-informed, and what you are proposing is akin to such an arrangement, is it not?"

"Indeed. I remark upon your judiciousness." She smiled drily as he nodded his acknowledgment of the compliment. "If you will continue to be my guest, for the number of nights I have already specified, I will procure for you a substance which renders the Shadowchildren docile. Then I will help you to administer this substance, and, finally, you will be free to return to Renith and unseat its monarch and your rival in love."

"Most intriguing. And just how is it that this substance affects the Children as you say it does?"

"The Children are ghouls at present, indeed. But once they were human. This substance, the exract of a plant named *mnisse*, wakes a Child's memory of the human state. In its grip, Children pass quickly through self-horror to a boundless gratitude towards that saviour who has raised them from evil. Like once-wild dogs, they lick joyously the hand which breaks their will."

"This *mnisse* sounds formidable. Why haven't you simply used it to encourage the Children to relocate—in Renith, say?"

"The effect of the *mnisse* is but temporary."

"Ah." Sorrille shuddered to think what might befall him should the stuff prove more temporary than anticipated.

"And I am quite happy with the Charred Lands as they are. The Shadowchildren have kept my mountain free of intruders, though I doubt it would give them pleasure to know they had been of service to me. It is well for me that I alone know where to find the *mnisse*."

"And also that the Children know you have the means to control them. That's why they run when they see you coming."

"You are correct. With the help of the *mnisse*, I brought unpleasant fates to a score of them, in order to warn their fellows against disturbing me. It was a successful ploy."

Much to his own surprise, Sorrille found himself believing her, even subtly inclining toward enthusiasm for the project she had outlined. "I don't suppose," he said at last, "that the length of my stay here is negotiable?"

Naraya laughed at him. "Such impatience in a would-be monarch. Onri has devoted a lifetime to Renith's glory, while you, my comely upstart, begrudge it a mere handful of nights."

More than a handful, thought Sorrille.

The following six days were uneventful in the usual sense of that word; Sorrille came before long to anticipate Naraya's comings and goings, and even to enjoy without undue mistrust her disorienting midnight visits. For not only did he survive each rendezvous intact, but he also began to develop a taste for what he consistently perceived as airborne sexual acrobatics. He was faintly disturbed by the fact that Naraya was so mysteriously nocturnal a creature; she seemed continually to vanish while he slept and then again for the bulk of the daylight hours. He spent those hours in solitary idling, alternately wondering where it was she went and how it was she got there, and imagining what it would be like to be Renith's king and Belisa's rightful lover. Even while he soared from pinnacle to pinnacle of ecstasy with Naraya, he remained residually conscious that his passion for Belisa had in no measure abated. And, strangely enough, he had the impression that Naraya was perfectly aware of his feelings and yet completely unperturbed by them. She was a fascinating being, but somehow a faintly revolting one as well. He looked forward with no little eagerness to the end of his sojourn with her.

She approached him on the sixth evening not with glittering magic and seduction in her eyes, but with a vial of crimson liquid. Sorrille, completing his day's-end repast by the fire, sprung to his feet so hastily that his wine goblet was upended.

"Yes," she said, anticipating his query, "this is the *mnisse*. Have done with your meal and we will pay a call to the Ashen Forest."

"Never mind the meal. Why keep the Children waiting?" He dabbed the corners of his mouth with a deplorably grease-stained silken handkerchief, then crumpled it into a ball and tossed it in the fire. "Is anything but that vial necessary? Weapons? A torch? And just how will we be travelling?"

"The vial is all we require. Weapons are useless against the Children, and I have excellent night vision." It was just as well that she left his last question unanswered, for what he witnessed next stunned him so utterly he ceased listening for a reply.

To begin with, Naraya appeared to be encased in some kind of transparent cloud, more palpable than visible, which distorted her features without obscuring them, like some clear, vibrant haze of summer heat. And so, although he could see what was happening to her, moment by moment, he could never be quite sure he was perceiving it correctly. First her hair began to change subtly, from a tousled mane of gauzy filaments to something reminiscent of frozen fountain spray, and then like a wiry, fanned branch of the fabled white palm. As it slowly compressed itself into a crest-like formation neatly dividing one half of her skull from the other, her arms began to gravitate downward in their sockets until they were two stiff, prong-ended affairs protruding from the middle of her chest, which was no longer a voluptuous, sheer fabric-sheathed marvel, but a single smooth arc of snow-silver breast feathers. Next, the train of her gown lengthened into a glorious fan of tail-plumage, spangled not with sequins but with white-on-ebony markings. And as her whole body began to tilt forward, balancing on its new center, Sorrille realized with a start that, with a few seemingly minor exceptions, her face was clearly recognizable as the one he had been regarding just moments earlier. He thought dazedly to himself that, if she was rather peculiar-looking as a woman, she was incomparable as a bird.

"Well? Shall we be on our way?" Her voice, with its typically mocking quality, was relatively unchanged, though it was disconcertingly difficult to locate its present source. Her mica-black beak, opened slightly but immobile, offered no clue as it refracted the pallid moonlight.

Sorrille nodded, still inarticulate, and she hoisted herself aloft with a trio of wing-flaps so powerful he had to struggle to remain on his feet. When she sunk her claws into his cloak-collar, it was all he could do to keep from screaming like a madman.

"Sleep," she told him, "for the altitude may cause you some discomfort, and you must be in sound condition when we descend." But he had lapsed already into the utter oblivion of the terrified, and was floating there impervious both to her magic and to her everlastingly mocking smile.

Sorrille had long been immersed in a most bizarre dream about a series of well-choreographed swordfights with the wind, in which clusters of stars assembled themselves into shields now and again, when Naraya, in her human form, woke and then helped him to his feet. She was wearing the cloud-colored gown once again, and her hair was in the impressively snarled state Sorrille had grown used to in the past week.

Awake now, the memory of her metamorphosis staggered him anew, like some phantom foe come to resume the battle after granting him his paltry respite. "Who and what are you, Lady?"

"Is it not all but obvious that I am bird as well as woman? And we have not come to discuss the essence of my nature, but to conduct our business with the shadow ghouls of Ashen Forest."

"Very well. Lead the way. And by the way, I'm almost glad you nearly turned me into a gibbering fool back there—having done my overreacting for the evening, I find the prospect of confronting Shadowchildren to be positively exhilarating."

Naraya smiled briefly, then led him a few yards towards a brook of jet-black water which glittered dully in the moonlight. She gave him a cautionary look. "Mirkwater," she said, confirming his suspicions, "poisonous as well as fatal to the touch. Keep a safe distance from it, though we will be following the banks of this brook." Sorrille cocked an eyebrow in reply, then hastened into step behind the swift if stealthy Naraya.

The Ashen Forest was every bit as unsettling as he had imagined it would be. Only along the brook did the foliage thin enough to reveal even a tattered black ribbon of sky, and the air, already oppressively thick with darkness, was suffused here and there with a clammy noxious mist. The muddy brook-banks oozed mist as well, though not enough to obscure wholly the occasional snake-tangle disengaging itself for a swim in

the unreflecting water. And yet, notwithstanding, there was a strange beauty to the place as well. The ivory bulbs he knew to be bone-fruit hung in phosphorescent clusters above him, their symmetry and pallor like that of priceless sculpture. Snowberries glittered in the crevices between rocks like fistfuls of mercury droplets, and the tree-trunks, which burgeoned above into medusan gnarls of ebony branches and black-crystal topleaves, were iced below with a kind of silver glaze. The thought crossed his mind that perhaps the bosom of the Forest yielded beings such as Naraya in addition to its loathsome Children.

Naraya signalled for him to stop behind her, finally, at a particularly sinuous curve in the brook. She pointed to the gutted corpses of some dozen Forest animals and informed Sorrille that there were Shadowchildren near.

"I'm afraid I fail to see the connection."

"Unlike other scavengers, the Children hoard dead flesh until there is an abundance of it to dine upon. With all of eternity stretched before them, there is no reason to devour meager sustenance in a haphazard way. What you see here are the remains of a recent feast."

"The Children are scavengers?" asked Sorrille, the hair rising along his neck.

The look in Naraya's eyes told him that she was laughing uproariously in silence. "You did not know? Yes, the Children are an especially nasty kind of vulture; they delight in creating carrion as much as they do in eating it."

"Thank the gods for your wolf trap. And for your succour, lady."

"Ah, yes, gratitude. But we have other business to concern us now." She extracted the vial of *mnisse* from a fold in her gown; its vivid ruby hue disturbed the darkness like a tiny but brilliant lantern. "You must bend over the mirkwater as if you were going to drink; the simple probability that death is imminent will lure our friends closer. Then you must cry out in mimicry of a death throe. As you fall, unstopper the vial and splatter yourself with its contents; the Children will arrive in moments to lap them up greedily. I will be watching from the shadows beyond the curve in the brook, and shall join you at the appropriate moment."

"How thoughtful of nature to make *mnisse* the color of blood," quipped Sorrille.

"The *mnisse* is not red; the blood I stirred it into, however, is." Naraya's eyes glinted with lavish amusement at Sorrille's ignorance. "Enough talk. Here is the vial. Do not spill it needlessly; I travelled quite far to harvest its crucial ingredient." And with this final jibe she moved into the shadows ahead, obscuring herself so well that Sorrille soon had no idea where she was.

Sorrille began to perform the charade with a feeling of witty self-satisfaction he would never have expected to experience in such circumstances. As he knelt by the brook, its aura of evil intensified perceptibly, and he wondered what kind of dolt would insist on drinking water that as much as declared itself poisonous. But he forced himself to bring his face to within inches of the sluggish surface, even panting a little for the sake of verisimilitude. Then he fell back on one hand and issued a lengthy croak of pseudo-agony. Unable to restrain a grimace while dousing throat and chest with the *mnisse*-laced blood, he was careful to conceal the vial before he sank and stiffened in a rendition of *rigor mortis* so subtle he was proud of it. It wasn't until he heard the Children's gossamer wings rustling behind him that he felt unmanageable trepidation and even prayed to the gods that the lady wasn't playing him for a fool.

"Dessert," said one, in an utterly timbreless voice which managed to convey somehow the creature's unsavory sense of humor. It ran its dessicate trio of fingers along Sorrille's form in a way that made him want to scream for Naraya.

"And what a very large dessert," rejoined a second, contributing its manual appendages to the less-than-soothing massage effort. Sorrille squeezed his eyes shut involuntarily. When the third pair of claws began to stroke him, he fantasized, briefly and horribly, that he was buried underground and the roots of plants were groping their way past him.

Then, at last, after Sorrille found his capacity for shallow breathing diminishing with alarming speed, the three Children began to sniff and nibble tentatively at his bloodsoaked tunic. Hissing with dismay when they discovered it was not flesh they were tasting, they hastened to rend the fabric and expose the real delicacy beneath. Sorrille had all but given himself up for lost when, in a abrupt and unified motion, they recoiled from their "dessert" with a chorus of despairing little shrieks.

Still half-dazed, Sorrille rose to his feet just in time to behold what was without contest the most hideous sight of his life. The Shadowchildren, wailing in concert like three of the four winds, were thrashing about violently, slamming their wings into boulders and clawing at their branch-like tresses in what was apparently the ghoulish equivalent of tearing out one's hair though he was beginning to grow concerned by Naraya's failure to appear, he was relieved, at least, to learn that the *mnisse* lived up to her description of it. He had started to move cautiously in the direction of her purported hiding-place when he found himself besieged by three unspeakably contrite monsters. One hung timidly on his sleeve, a second patted his chest ingratiatingly, and the third rolled eyes as mournful as a hounddog's at him. He had the distinct impression they were preparing to address him with some sort of abject plea on their part for mercy and loving kindness on his.

"No," he mumbled, "this is more than I can endure." He allowed himself one convulsive shudder, then, with the wrath-contorted countenance of a hero scourging the infernal regions, he raised his arms prophetically and roared "Begone!" And, for the first time in Renithian history, Shadowchildren scattered in terror at the sound of a human voice.

"Wait!" he added hoarsely, appalled at his own stupidity. The slowest of the three paused in the shadow it was in the midst of vanishing into, one of its badly dented wings twitching uncertainly in the murky light. "I have need of you," he continued, controlling the hysteria in his voice. The Child advanced as if afraid he would change his mind, then halted a few feet before him and hovered on ghostly feet.

"I see the two of you are fast becoming friends," said Naraya, after executing yet another of her out-of-thin air grand entrances.

Sorrille turned on her. "Where in the name of the bird-gods

have you been?"

"Did I not make clear that I would return at the appropriate moment? It seems as though all has proceeded according to plan."

"A matter of perspective, I suppose. What on earth is that?" He pointed to the strange-looking beast she had tethered to her wrist.

"This," she replied, moving it closer for him to inspect, "is how you will be journeying home. I cannot transport you and the Child together." The Child whimpered at the mention of its name, while Sorrille whistled at what he saw. Smaller than a steed but larger than a donkey, its head and legs were covered with greyish-white fur, while its internal organs were plainly visible through the transparent hide of its midsection. Naraya had caparisoned it with tasselled reins and a makeshift blanket and saddlebag.

"What is it known as?"

"It is a Forest deer, unprepossessing in appearance but gentle of temperament and swift for its size—it will easily keep pace with the Shadowchild's flight, especially in light of the battered state of these wings." She clucked her tongue at the object of her criticism, who drooped its head in response, in a horrible travesty of shamefacedness.

"I should create quite a sensation in Renith, considering the company I'll be arriving in. What a shame I'll be doing so in such bedraggled attire." He looked regretfully at the blood-stained rents in his clothing.

"You won't be," Naraya informed him, extracting from the saddlebag a tunic and cloak of the same chameleonic silver fabric as her gown. She handed them to him. "Did I not say that you would be properly provisioned? There are winesacks and food in the bag as well, and here, finally, is a supply of *mnisse* more than adequate to your purposes."

He took the pouch she held outstretched. "Unmixed with blood this time, I see."

"The Child will accept additional doses of *mnisse* quite eagerly in its present state. But you must be sure to feed it those doses nightly, and expel it from your city well before your supply runs out."

"Fear not. I'll send it on its way the first chance I get."

"And now that you are in hands capable as my own," she concluded with a smile, "I will bid you adieu." And with a ritual flourish, she began to transform herself once again into a creature of the sky.

"My thanks, lady." Sorrille could feel his words unravelling, letter by letter, inside the cocoon of luminous air she had wrapped herself within. He swung onto the back of his galloping anatomy lesson and instructed the Child to lead him to a southbound route out of the Forest as quickly as it damn well could.

The return trip to Renith, which took nearly three days, was rendered exceptionally crisis-free by Naraya's abundant forethought. The deer she had rounded up was a quick and sturdy little mount, and the store of food and wine she had stashed in its saddlebag seemed virtually inexhaustible. Most importantly, the nightly pinch of *mnisse* she had recommended Sorrille give the Shadowchild made it a surprisingly indispensable travelling companion, possessed of a flawless sense of direction and protective instincts that would put a mother slinkah to shame. While they were still in the Forest, it regularly shooed snarling skeleton-wolves and overly-inquisitive snake-tangles, and even, on one occasion, discouraged a roving band of its own species from approaching. Then, on the plains, it circled down from its aerial guidepost whenever a cloud of the bulbous flies that had annoyed Sorrille so on his outbound journey required dispersing, and arranged its wings, by night, in an effective shelter from the wind. Sorrille never quite got over his distaste for physical proximity to the Child, and he certainly never adjusted to the way it telepathically second-guessed him. But he was relieved to find that the *mnisse* had apparently ruined his macabre squire's appetite for flesh, cooked or otherwise; through the whole of their trek, he never witnessed the Child consume anything but the plains-clover he himself had found so thoroughly unsatisfactory as a means of sustenance.

When the city gates came into view just after sunset on the third day, he donned the cloak and tunic Naraya had given him and soon discovered with pleasure that he could feel as well as see the intricate lightplay in its fabric, rippling over his torso like a mosaic of liquid silver. Assuming a pose of elegant hauteur, he mentally commanded the Shadowchild to walk slightly behind him on his left—the traditional position of voluntary deference—and exultantly advanced until he was standing opposite the peepdoor. He pummelled it with the tiny but solid hilt of his dagger and waited for the startled response from within; Renithian sheep and cowherds were superstitiously careful about requesting readmittance to the city well before the sun began even to hang low in the sky. Surely enough, the gateguard flung the peepdoor open and peered through cautiously, his view limited, fortunately, to Sorrille's face, which, unfortunately, was suspiciously cleanshaven.

"Yer mightly dapper-lookin' for a herdsman," the guard said slowly, studying Sorrille's eyes for evidence of intent to, perhaps, perpetrate espionage or commit an assassination. Sorrille quickly scanned his aural memories for a lower class voice he could do a passable imitation of, and fixed upon that of the stableboy who had taunted him the day of his banishment.

"Juice because oi takes some proide in me looks is no reason to keeps me and the anymals out 'ere in mortal dainger. Ain't it bad enough that oim late from chasin' a contrary-loike sheep what run away hairs ago?"

Luckily the ruse worked before the guard asked Sorrille to stand back for a full-length inspection, or before he wondered why the returning shepherd's "anymals" were so uniformly silent. Sorrille heaved a sigh of relief and straightened proudly as the guard shut the peepdoor and began to drag the huge half-gate groaningly open. When at last he emerged from behind it, wheezing and panting, Sorrille hesitated just long enough for shock to register on the man's face before nudging the Forest deer into a dainty canter onto Renithian soil. Soon a handful of guards, with equally shocked expressions, stood aghast and silent in a circle around him, clutching their spears, maces, and unsheathed swords like so many dismayed infants grasping

rattles.

"Gentlemen, gentlemen," said Sorrille, "it's most kind of you to all want to escort me into Onri's presence. However, a two-guard retinue is really quite sufficient."

"It's Lord Sorrille, ain't it?" stammered the nasal-voiced guard who had found the circumstances of Sorrille's banishment so entertaining. He scratched under his helmet meditatively. "By gawm, milord. Are ye returned from the dead?"

"No, my old friend. Merely back to claim myself a crown. And that is something, I think, that I would fain have you behold. Come, now, mind my left flank, as you did once before. And you," he commanded a mere boy of a guard, "mind my right."

Despite the fact that a lord sent off to certain death rarely came home astride a see-through quadruped, attended by two trembling king's-guards and a bonafide Shadowchild, Sorrille's triumphant procession toward the palace was a curiously lonesome affair. True, the shopkeepers and laborers typically withdrew for their dinners this time of day, and it was too early for the bawds and roistabouts to have begun prowling the streets. But it was odd not to see a single peddler, or street urchin, or stout huswife pursuing her fugitive chickens. Even the few milling figures Sorrille had noticed upon his entry were nowhere to be seen, and the curtains of nearly every window were tightly drawn, though there was still precious daylight to be had. Plus the streets were preternaturally quiet—no wafts of quarrels or laughter, nothing save the occasional whimper of a dog presumably being forced to hold its tongue. Sorrille had the distinct impression that Lower Renith was collectively holding its breath, and that the residents of every household were taking turns peeping out at him once his back was safely to them.

Enraged, finally, by the cowardice of those who had, less than two weeks earlier, found brazen insults so very easy to hurl about, he reined the deer to a halt and addressed his invisible audience. "Mark my features well, good city-folk, so that you will recognize me when Renith's crown sits atop my head!" He paused just long enough for the echo of his words to subside, then coaxed his mount to resume its forward motion.

"Onri is king! Onri is king!" a feeble, indignant voice sputtered from behind him. He turned to see the decrepit fool who had used his shin for a cricket ball, wielding a walking-stick angrily in the air and preparing to foray off the doorstep to harass Sorrille yet again. Sorrille silently instructed the Shadowchild to cast a brief look in the daft old goat's direction, which had the desired effect of sending him scampering indoors for cover. Sorrille threw back his head and laughed, and the procession continued to the nearby sound of several audibly suppressed gasps.

When the carnelian walls and golden spires of Renith Palace rose before him at last, Sorrille dismounted and handed his tiny steed's reins to a stunned-looking guard who had just risen unsteadily to his feet. The guard's drinking-and-dicing companions remained seated, openmouthed and seemingly paralyzed, on the steps to the palace's huge crystal-and-filigree door.

"It's bad enough your disportment adds a rather unaesthestic aspect to the palace facade." Sorrille's tone of voice struck a duke-like balance between lighthearted mockery and the implicit threat of violence. "Don't compound the problem by forcing me to climb over you."

They scrambled off the steps like petitioners who have misguidedly approached the king in one of his fouler moods. Sorrille caught one by the elbow and inquired as to Onri's whereabouts. The guard, despite his valiant effort not to stare with obvious horror at the Shadowchild, seemed to address his very reply to it.

"His Majesty dines at this hour, milord."

"But of course he does, and I'm tactlessly late for the feast. Do lead the way to the banquet-hall, if you would, and announce that Duke Sorrille is come to table."

Too flustered to say more, the fellow pulled the palace door ajar and proceeded to carry out Sorrille's instructions. As they marched through the tangle of narrow, poorly-lit corridors, Sorrille was amused to see the palace servants scattering before him as timidly as the city-folk had. Even the guards posted at every fourth turning seemed to be resisting the impulse to turn tail and run. So on and on they went, on their unobstructed way, filling the quasi-evacuated labyrinth with the percussive echos of four pairs of booted feet, the gentle whooshing sounds of a pair of large, semi-contracted wings, and an almost audibly intense sequence of regicidal fantasies.

Sorrille let the palace guard precede him into the banquet-hall and nervously inform the general public there that he had arrived, along with what appeared to be a Shadowchild. Then he had the two gate guards go in and situate themselves on either side of the door, at which point he and his eyebrow-raising sidekick were ready to make their grand entrance. He observed with pique that virtually none of the customs of the dinner table had changed, despite the conspicuous emptiness of his place at it: A dazzling profusion of colorful platters spread the length of the table; jewelled goblets overflowed with wine; servingmen wound their way in and out between the exquisitely costumed dancers; the air, scented with sandalwood, was vibrant with the intermingled sounds of witty repartee and ribald minstrelsy; and Onri's guests were uniformly oblivious to the world outside the banquet-hall. Indeed, they paid scarcely any attention to the palace guard's introduction—after all, what was one person more or less at table?

Only Onri seemed to have gathered that there was something noteworthy at the door, and was about to take a good look at it when his queen, attended by no less than six ladies, emerged from a side door to claim her seat beside him. For the next several moments, both Sorrille and Onri stood motionless as men for whom time has stopped, wholly ignoring the gustatory feast upon the table as they gorged themselves visually on that of Belisa's beauty. The gold-embroidered chiffon of Belisa's sleeve caught the light like a butterfly's wing and then spilt down her upraised arm in fold after liquid fold as she pressed self-conscious fingers to her lacquered red tresses, wondering why she had the sense that she was being stared at even more insatiably than usual. As she inclined her chiselled profile in Sorrille's direction, sensing that the especially passionate eyebeams were emanating from thence, she issued a trio of musical little gasps—one of surprised pleasure at Sorrille's

appearance, one of ladylike revulsion at the Shadowchild's grotesque visage, and one of utter terror as Onri noticed Sorrille and began to rise from his chair with an ominous lack of haste.

The banquet-hall fell completely silent for the first time in decades as the nobles of Renith looked up to see their monarch on the brink of a wholly unpredictable confrontation. Sorrille, who everyone *knew* had died an unspeakably horrid death, had somehow come back with not only his notoriously short temper but also with an unspeakably horrid monster for backup. His age- spotted face white with anger, Onri straightened his fur-trimmed robe on still-powerful shoulders and placed his massive gold crown on his wisp-haired head (he disliked wearing it while he ate since it tended to make his bald spot worse).

"Why have you returned, you treasonous cur… you base scoundrel… you verminous–?"

"Allow me to interrupt and you shall have your answer, old man." Belisa took this opening exchange of pleasantries as a cue to make herself as invisible as possible. She sat huddled in her chair, head tilted forward so that quantities of hair obscured her face on either side.

"You dare address me without an honorific, you pompous dandy… you ill-mannered whippersnapper… you foul-mouthed–?"

"Enough! An impotent old fool who cannot secure the love of his bride and who sends those who are capable of doing so into the wilds to die is in no way deserving of honorifics! But lo! I am not dead, and having survived what I have survived, I no longer find myself cowed in any way by a senile foot-stamping monarch."

"He has spoken treason! Seize the traitor!" Onri's face was purple now, and his agitated gesturings had all but knocked his crown from his head. His uncontrolled rage was so novel a spectacle that dinner guests, servants, and guards alike were watching him as raptly as they might the lead actor in a scandalous play. "I have commanded you! Seize him!"

"Silence, Onri! I have not returned to listen to your ranting drool, but to claim the throne and the queen that are rightfully mine. I have met your challenge, and you have no choice but to forfeit both to me!"

"Challenge? What challenge might that be?" inquired Onri with a dangerously innocent tone, daring those at the table to supply a single pertinent detail.

"The *challenge*, Sire!" interjected Tirem, the rosy-faced juniormost member of the court. "Surely you remember—you had your scribe set it down on vellum, just a little under two weeks ago. Then your herald read it aloud the morning Sorrille there was banished, remember? To the crowd that had gathered in front of the palace." Tirem babbled on blithely, so glad to be of some use that he failed to interpret correctly Onri's ferociously indrawn breath. "You know, Sire, the challenge about how anyone who managed to get hold of a Shadowchild like the one Sorrille there's got was entitled—"

"–to Renith's twin glories—its mighty throne and its jewel-lovely queen. Thank you, Tirem, I couldn't have refreshed His Highness' memory better myself." Sorrille strode impatiently toward Onri, who had fallen back into his chair, sputtering soundlessly, his face contorting with hatred as he regarded Sorrille. "Will you honor your promise, Onri?" He hovered over the seated king like the most determined of inquisitioners, willing to wait till eternity for the appropriate reply.

"But of course I will," began Onri calmly, with rekindled deviousness, "the instant you return here with a true denizen of the Ashen Forest, not some inept sorcerer's slapdash concoction! And until you do, I will regard you as a traitor!" Onri sprung to his feet, more or less, his fury having reached a fresh peak of intolerability.

Sorrille pointed to the Shadowchild, who stood near the doorway twitching its wings as if insulted that its credibility had been called into question. "Do any of you at this table harbor any doubts as to the creature's identity?"

"Don't know its name or anything, but it looks like a Child to me!" ventured Tirem.

"Of course it is a Shadowchild," said bewigged Lord Gauntti, clearing his throat after this pronouncement.

Stout, jovial Roddain moved cautiously toward the door for a closer look. "Ah'd agree with the both of ye. Now it's true Ah've never been to the thing's stompin' grounds, and so–"

"There is no way you can possibly verify Sorrille's claim regarding it!" burst in a triumphant Onri, leaving Roddain puzzling over whether that were what he'd meant to say. "None of us knows with any certainty what a Shadowchild looks like because any man that has encountered one hasn't lived to tell the tale! All we know about the creature is hearsay and rumor, and a common thread to every bit of Child-lore is that they are impossible to escape, much less to overcome or tame! Obviously, then, what we have here is some manner of impostor—some barbarian Sorrille has induced to stand before us in his ritual dress, complete with a headdress of branches and black face-paint—"

"Sorry to disappoint you, Onri." Sorrille nodded to the Shadowchild, telepathically requesting it to demonstrate its clearly supernatural ability to fly. It had risen but a few inches in the air when Onri backed away from the table, suddenly unsheathing and then brandishing his sword like a wild man.

"Then it is indeed the forbidden work of some accursed sorcerer! It is fiendish magic and I will not suffer its presence in my palace!"

Before Sorrille could warn him otherwise, Onri had lurched forward to attack the Child. Sorrille tried to command it to do nothing but evade Onri's swordthrusts, but apparently its protective instincts were self-inclusive. It curled back its black satin lips, baring the elongated teeth within, and, angrily beating the air with its wings, struck Onri's sword from his hands with a swiftly downhooking claw. As Onri inspected with speechless horror the bloody furrows which now ran the length of his forearm, the Child gave vent to a gale-force battle cry and swung the blackened bronze of its claw again, this time at Onri's head. Onri staggered sideways as if drunken, clutching a hand to his face and bellowing in pain. When he removed the hand and held its crimson palm before him blindly, it became clear that one of his eyes had been maimed. Belisa, with an unladylike squawk, made her presence felt once more and, the minstrels and dancers having wisely scattered already, the dinner guests to either side of her began to stir uneasily, as if

preparing to escape themselves.

Sorrille groaned. Much as he despised Onri, becoming an accomplice to regicide at this moment would certainly not help legitimize his claim to the throne. Somehow, he had to restrain the Shadowchild's undeniably murderous behavior, and then go and comfort his lovely distraught Belisa. As he moved toward the wrangling pair, he extracted his *mnisse* pouch and wondered whether he could distract the Child long enough to administer the stuff. He dangled the pouch before him hopefully, inwardly suspecting it was hopeless. Then, before he could properly register what was taking plce, the Child, its hair a lurid snarl of snaky lightning, was ascending toward the lofty ceiling vaults like someone's nightmare vision of a bird of prey, with an alternately raving and whimpering Onri hooked securely in its talons.

"Stop!" cried Sorrille. "Stop, I command you!" But the Child was looping and circling in the dark central dome with the impossible agility of a bat, whooping and cawing in harsh depthless tones that were natural neither to human beings nor to creatures of the air. Finally, with a last hissing cry, it flung Onri to his death below and continued its airborne figure-eights with increasingly frenzied speed, in an ecstasy of bloodlust.

"By the gods," Sorrille despaired with silent ferocity, "that thing is completely out of control! How am I to feed it its last doses of *mnisse*, or persuade it to fly away home like a good ghoul, for that matter? And it's no doubt just a matter of time before it decides it's days overdue for its *carcass imperiale a la Renith*!" For the king of Renith lay, crownless and mangled, lengthwise on the dinner table in the midst of some half-dozen platters of sweetbreads and candied meat, surrounded by his former subjects, all of whom had risen in his presence but none of whom seemed able to remove themselves from it. Someone was missing from the table, though—Sorrille tried to rack his addled brain for who it was when he noticed Belisa, pale and unconscious, gracefully draped on the floor alongside the table. He bolted toward her, temporarily forgetting every other alarming circumstance confronting him, and after a fervent series of ministrations, he managed to rouse her, weak and smiling, to her feet.

"That was silly of me, Sori, I know. But you returning unharmed, and that thing up there, and Onri all blood-covered. . . "

"Hardly standard dinner entertainment. Fret not, even I reeled a bit on my feet, Belisa. Here, sit down." He helped her into a chair as far as possible from her dead husband, stroked her sunset-red hair, and turned his attention once more to the problem of the Forest-spawn flapping about and setting all the chandeliers atremble.

"I don't think that's the worst of our troubles, Sorrille," young Tirem suggested politely.

"What's that? What do you–" Sorrille almost choked on his tongue as he turned to see Naraya drift into the room with a tidy double-columned arrangement of *mnisse*-sedated Shadowchildren to her rear. A general murmur of distress ran through the room, and any of the servants who had outlasted the previous episode—either because of their unimpeachable dutifulness or because it was the best show they'd had in ages—began to inch their way toward the kitchen exit now.

"And what a lucky usurper am I," thought Sorrille to himself. "Not one but seven Shadowchildren to contend with as future subjects."

"Ah," said Naraya, halting her troops directly in front of the spot where Onri lay in state, "I see you don't require my assistance, Sorrille, in meting justice to the despot after all."

"What's all this bother during dinner, anyway?" demanded irritable old Baron Merrand. "Is Sorrille king now or ain't he, and when is he going to do something about restoring the peace in here?"

"He's right, y'know," counselled Roddain, managing a kindly smile. "This all seems, indirectly or otherwise, to have some connection t'you, m'boy, and so everyone's 'specting you to make some sense of it. Ah'd hop to, was Ah you, 'specially if ye want the respect of the court in future."

Sorrille's blood raced when he realized that his claim to the throne might well go uncontested henceforward, then again when he realized that a crisis of some moment was taking place.

"Who's that woman, Sori? Do you know her?" asked Belisa, catching him by the elbow. He held up a hand to indicate that she must lend him her forbearance, and approached Naraya and her retinue.

"Milady Naraya," began, bowing, "though your presence here is most unexpected, nonetheless is it quite welcome." He found regal circumlocution so much to his taste that he decided to experiment with a royal pronoun or two. "But we cannot look kindly on the retainers you have brought with you. In short, we must ask you to see to it that they vacate the city immediately, whereupon we would be most pleased to give you a private audience and hear the purpose of your visit."

"Though I am ignorant in the ways of great cities, I believe a coronation is the method by which kings are given their office. Is that not correct?"

"It is," conceded Sorrille cautiously, troubled by her amused expression as well as by her failure to respond directly to him.

"And has there been a coronation here recently?"

"Not for decades," put in the ever-helpful Tirem.

"And I have also thought long that a king's public edict is the most binding of documents. Is that not correct as well?"

"Why, yes, gal," said Roddain. "That's the very line of reasonin' Sorrille here was tryin' to use on Onri. The stubborn ole fool wouldn't listen, and lookit the sorry state he's in now."

"Are you saying that, *ipso facto*, Sorrille's accession to the throne is a given thing?" drawled Gauntti, regarding Roddain over his monocle rim.

"*Ipso fact*, *ergo sum*, and all that. Ah can't see whah not. We all know that edict inside out, what with Onri talkin' 'bout it all through dinner the day that herald read it to the popylace."

"In that case," resumed Naraya, apparently well-pleased by the content of this interchange, "I have come to claim my half of the throne. It was I who enabled your Sorrille to return with the requisite Shadowchild, whose acquaintance, I see, you have already made." She glanced at Sorrille's Child, currently cowering in a corner in an effort to hide from her.

"Who *is* she, Sori?" asked Belisa plaintively, as if resigned to the fact that Sori would ignore her question and that the

answer would prove unpleasant anyway.

"Come hither, Child of the Shadows of Ashen Forest. Eat of the nectar I have brought you." Naraya outstretched her hand, with its generous pinch of *mnisse* in the palm, to Sorrille's half-reverted Child. The Child approached her furtively, with a contrite expression, lipped the *mnisse* from her hand like some timid hulk of a horse, and then quietly retreated.

Naraya scanned her audience slowly before beginning, failing only to meet Sorrille's eyes and lingering inexplicably on Belisa's. "As you can see, I hold sway over the Forest's Children. Should you choose not to honor the binding document I have mentioned, these seven will help me to assert my claim to the throne. Duke Sorrille, I know,"—here she looked at him significantly—"will support that claim fully."

Sorrille sought frantically for a resolution to his dilemma. Were he to reject Naraya outright, as was most certainly his wont, the people of Renith would come to despise him for having exposed their city to a veritable plague of demons. No, inciting Naraya to loose seven Children on the city was hardly a viable means of persuading Renith to gladly award him the sovereignty he so desired. He would become, if he even survived the fiasco, a hated scapegoat, and he and Belisa would live under the constant threat of assassination.

On the other hand, if he pretended nonchalance in the face of Naraya's request—delight would definitely be stretching it—the populace might come to believe that he, as well as Naraya, held sway over the supernatural. That would mean a strengthened position on the throne, which was nothing to sneeze at. Even more importantly, if Naraya felt that he'd been cooperative, she might decide against feeding him to the Shadowchildren the first opportunity she got. Of course, cooperating with Naraya pretty effectively displaced Belisa from the picture. Ah, well, sacrifice *was* the quintessence of noble and effective leadership.

"Rest assured that I am your advocate," said Sorrille, with a bow.

Naraya nodded and smiled. "I am glad to hear it spoken, though our nights together had already helped me to take the true measure of your character."

"Who *is* she, Sori?" repeated Belisa.

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SHIFTING SAND

by Christopher Kempke

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Star of wonder,
Star of night,
Star of royal beauty bright.

The explosion was first noticed by a pair of lovers in the great American desert, but they had other things on their mind and the incident was quickly forgotten. A few other people noticed it in the next few minutes, and eventually one of them was curious enough to call the planetarium. After the phone call, things happened quickly.

The Arizona telescope was appropriated from its mechanical wanderings across the night sky, and carefully aimed at where a new point of light billowed in the heavens, near the southern horizon. Aaron Gregory was the first at the viewplate, and his soft whistle was enough to bring his collegues to silence. Years of experience allowed him to pull all the details he required in a moment, he was not long at the telescope. He said nothing as the rest of the men and women filed by. When they were done, they turned toward him almost as one, expectant. Gregory shrugged, lifted a coffeepot next to him, and poured himself a cup.

The pot was finished well before the meeting was.

"Black holes don't explode."

"Of course not. We're all having a mass hallucination."

"Maybe something near the hole?"

"It's the same distance away to the precision of our instruments, and there's no sign of pull on it at all. Nothing to indicate that there's a hole nearby."

"Check it with a radioscope?"

"Too much interference from the explosion. But I could tell you what the results would be. There's no black hole there, only a supernova."

Gregory cleared his throat, bringing silence to the room. "So we know what happened. Anyone care to speculate how?"

The meeting dissolved in chaos once more.

The press the next morning had plenty of ideas. Most prevalent among them was that the unexplained phenomenon was a sign from God, regardless of its cause. The tabloids expounded on a number of other options, as well. The astronomers continued to be perplexed.

"God moves in mysterious ways," one of the journalists suggested to Gregory at the fifth conference in as many hours. Gregory gave him a look that would melt glass.

"God, my friend, has nothing to do with it. This is a strictly natural phenomenon." His voice carried the strain of many hours without sleep, and the distinct impression that he did not regard the journalist as his friend.

"All natural phenomena are His work," said another voice. Gregory turned to face a priest. His face remained taut for a moment, then relaxed. "Perhaps, yes. But that's not the explanation that I'm after."

"What more explanation do you need? There is, after all, a precedent. The night of our Saviour's birth, some two thousand years ago."

"Has been satisfactorily explained without recourse to a divine being. Are there any more questions of a *scientific* nature?"

Another reporter raised his hand, and the conference stumbled on.

The first time Gregory got to relax was as his plane lifted into the air en route to London. He shuffled through the pages of numbers in front of him for a time, then gave up, put them down, and closed his eyes.

It was fully six hours when he awoke the garbled speech of the plane's intercom system.

"We are experiencing some navigational difficulties. There is no danger involved, and no equipment vital to our safety has been damaged. However, this flight will be some hours longer than previously planned, and we may have to make an additional stop. Trans-Atlantic airlines and your flight crew apologize for the inconvenience. We will keep you posted on further developments. Arrangements are being made for those of you with connecting flights."

Gregory smiled. He would miss his meeting, certain to cause consternation among his international associates. The thought filled him with some glee, for the invitation had stressed the urgency of the meeting in the typically British, overzealous way, and without the data he carried, they had nothing to discuss. They would just have to wait.

He gradually became aware that the man next to him was staring at him, a look of puzzlement on his face. Gregory turned.

"You, or somebody that looks like you, were in the newspaper this morning."

Gregory extended his hand. "Aaron Gregory. I'm an astronomer, and yes, a charming image of me was all over the paper today."

The man nodded sagely. "I'm Raphael. Pleased to meet you."

"No last name?"

"In my country, last names are generally considered secret. A bit of a quaint custom, but it's ingrained."

Gregory nodded, trying to place Raphael's accent as he continued to speak.

"You're the guy who discovered the supernova, aren't you?"

"Not really 'discovered.' I have done the most work on it, though."

"Why does this supernova get so much attention? The one ten years ago didn't even cause a stir."

"Mainly because we think a black hole exploded to form this one. All scientific rationale says that that's impossible. We're looking for a way of understanding how it happened, or, if it didn't, what did."

"And? What do you think?"

"Personally? I'm not sure. We don't really know much about black holes. My suspicion is that we just had the theory wrong, and that explosions are possible. Bunches of my collegues, however, are spouting theories that energy is being 'warped' in from other regions of space. That one just doesn't ring true to me. If it's possible, it should be happening all the time. Of course, I would once have said the whole thing was impossible."

"What if it is?"

"Impossible? I don't understand; we saw it happen. In fact, it's bright enough to be seen in the daytime if you look in the right place. There's no doubt that it's there."

"But not everything has an explainable cause."

"No, but I have to attribute it to nature or God. And I'm quite a devout athiest."

"Yes, yes indeed you are. Funny how it works out that way, sometimes." Raphael's tone was enigmatic, and Gregory could not make sense of the statement. He was about to ask, but Raphael spoke first.

"Excuse me a minute, but nature calls." He rose and walked toward the back of the plane. Suddenly tired, Gregory was asleep before Raphael returned.

A jarring sensation woke him, and apparently a number of the other passengers as well. The plane lurched heavily to one side, scattering trays, books, and people. There were a few moments of stunned silence, then a voice on the intercom.

"The plane has been crippled by some equipment failure. Unfortunately, this will require our making a forced landing. There is a desert below us which will offer safe landing areas. However, to minimize the risk of injury, we request that you all take crash positions. The flight attendents will review the procedure with you now. Please remain calm, the danger is slight. We will be landing in roughly ten minutes."

"Desert?" The voice, from the man in front of Gregory, was breaking. "There are no deserts in Europe. We're all going to die!"

"Look out your window," Gregory said. "If that's somebody's flower garden, I think they need to water it more often. Obviously we're not over Europe."

Below was a stark expanse of sand next to the blue of the ocean. Gregory remembered hearing that there were only a few places on earth where deserts existed adjacent to the sea, but he could not think where they were. He gave up the effort and turned to watch the flight attendent. Beside him, Raphael spoke a prayer in a surprisingly calm voice. Gregory heard his name in it. However, he didn't get a chance to comment before he had to put his head between his knees and a pillow between himself and the next seat. The plane continued its downward descent.

Westward leading,
Still proceeding,
Guide us to thy perfect light.

The three days following the crash became more and more tense as it became obvious that no rescue was on the way. Nothing in the wreckage worked, including the radio, and there was only an occasional plane overhead, much too high and fast to spot the people in the desert below. The days were hot, the nights cold, and the food gradually vanished. Gregory remained somewhat detached from it all, assuming that they would be found eventually, but it appeared that starvation was a more likely possibility.

Midnight came for the fourth time since the crash. Gregory sat with a blanket over him, his back against the smooth metal of the plane, staring at the brilliant supernova that shone high in the heavens here. From this information and the positions of the stars he had deduced that they lay rather close to the equator, though probably not as far south as Africa. It embarrased him not to be able to guess closer, but his specialty, astrophysics, didn't include much study of the constellations.

Raphael appeared from the night and sat beside him.

"Still fascinated by the star?"

"It seems brighter every night. It should be decreasing in intensity by now. It's been almost a week."

"Still think it's a natural phenomenon?"

Gregory sighed. Raphael continued.

"The last time a star shone this brightly in the heavens, people followed it to Bethlehem."

"You don't follow stars. Only a very few stars stay in the same place throughout the night. You'd end up walking straight east for a while, then straight west. Not a productive evening."

"Perhaps not, but there's almost no food here, certainly not enough for another day. And I'm not sure I really want to be around when these folks start looking for 'alternative' food sources."

"You want to leave?"

"I don't think we have a choice. And night's the best time for travel."

Gregory shrugged and stood up. "Let's go meet our deaths, then. Which direction?"

Raphael shook his head, and fixed Gregory. "You decide."

Gregory turned his vision heavenward. "We'll follow the star, then, for a while. That ought to be the direction of the sea, anyway. I don't suppose we're taking anyone with us?"

Raphael simply shook his head again.

Seventy-five dunes later, the night had begun to fade, and the star had long ago slid over their heads and below the horizon. Gregory was tired, more a product of the shifting, uncertain footing than the distance.

"We should probably find a place to rest for the day," he said, looking for such a place without much success.

"Not necessary," Raphael said. "Listen."

Barely audible over the sand was the sound of ringing bells. Gregory turned his head slowly until he could fix on the sound.

"It's still ahead of us." The two men picked up their pace. As they topped the next dune, they saw the source of the sound and could hear it clearly. Nestled in a narrow valley between two dunes lay a village, mostly just a collection of goats and houses, but in one corner stood a church whose bells were ringing to herald the morning. Two kilometers or so beyond, the dunes stopped. Though the sea was invisible from this point, it was clearly there.

They descended toward the village, and were met by a throng of people bearing food and water, and speaking rapidly in a language that Gregory could not understand. He turned to Raphael, who grimaced, and responded in a similar tongue, though very slowly.

"Not similar enough," he said at last. "I still can't understand them." Accepting the water, they followed the party down into the village itself. There, they were directed by hand signs to one of the larger houses.

Within sat maybe a dozen people, all with wrinkled faces and ancient eyes. They looked up as the two travellers entered, and one smiled. He spoke in the same language that the villagers did, softly, and very slowly. Raphael shook his head and attempted a response. A look of understanding came over the elder's face, and he said something back to Raphael. The two began to converse, slowly. Finally, the elder waved to a villager, and began to talk rapidly to him. Raphael turned to Gregory.

"I told them about the others at the plane. They know the desert, so they will bring them here. But they also said they were expecting us, and that tonight would be the last night of our journey. Something about a child being born, and rambling about the bright star."

"Guess what religion these people practice? What else would they think when a bright star shone in the sky for a week? Tell him we are not oriental kings, and ask him how we can get back to civilization. 'Where are we?' wouldn't be a bad question, either."

Raphael nodded and began to speak to the elder again. The man listened impassively, then opened a pouch beside him, handed its contents to Gregory. Gregory accepted it, and looked down. Sparkling in his hands was a diamond perhaps eight centimeters in diameter, cut only roughly, but still the most impressive stone he had ever seen. Raphael, too, was stunned for a moment, then listened as the elder spoke.

"He says that we need not be ashamed of having no gift. This is from his people, and we should offer it to the child tonight."

Gregory tore his gaze away from the stone. "Where is this child?"

Raphael conversed briefly. "He says we need only follow the star." He paused briefly. "He said that if we do not find the child in a single night, he admits his mistake and we may keep the 'pretty rock.' "

"We can't take their diamond. We will find no child. But if it's that important to him, I won't begrudge him one night."

Raphael smiled and relayed this information, then turned back to Gregory. "In that case, he invites us to take part in a feast tonight. I hope you like goat," he added in an undertone. Gregory smiled and bowed to the elder. "I'd be delighted," he said, and though the language could not be understood, he hoped the gesture would be universal.

. . .bearing gifts, we travel afar,
Field and fountain,
Moor and mountain,
Following yonder star.

Night brought them to the top of another dune, bearing not only the diamond, but clothes of goatskin made for an infant, water, and Gregory's Polaroid, which he used to take a picture of the quaint middle east villiage in the fading light. "My colleagues aren't going to believe any of this," he remarked, and Raphael smiled.

Above them in the sky, the supernova glowed with a brilliant light, the brightest thing in the clear desert night. Taking their bearings from it, the two men began a steady stride. An escort from the village followed them for a time, then bowed once as a group and turned back. Gregory waited until they were out of sight before he spoke.

"So what do we do now?"

Raphael frowned, and looked at him. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, if we go back and tell these people we found nothing, they'll be crushed. On the other hand, I wouldn't feel right leaving their gifts out in the desert – it's too likely they'd find them again. And I wouldn't keep them."

Raphael shrugged. "We have all night. Why worry about it now?"

Gregory nodded. "But we have to worry about it sometime." He stopped speaking, looked quizically at the sky. The supernova hanging there had suddenly expanded to about twice its previous size, with a corresponding increase in brightness.

"That's not possible," Gregory said.

"It seems to be," Raphael countered. They kept walking. An hour passed, and the star became steadily brighter.

"A double star," Gregory said at last. "There were two stars there, and the explosion of one made the other unstable. That's why it's getting bigger."

"Fascinating. To think it's happening now, in our lifetime."

"It isn't. It took the light of those stars centuries to get here. The actual explosion happened . . .." He stopped.

"How long ago?"

"About two thousand years. I was just thinking that it was kind of an odd coincidence. But it's not really."

Something on the next ridge caught his attention. Though it was unclear in the light of the double supernova, there was an obvious imperfection in the smoothness of the desert. He pointed, and they picked up their pace. As soon as they could make it out, they ran.

At some time in the last couple of days, a woman and her infant child had crossed this dune in the other direction on a mule. The beast now lay in the sand, unmoving, and the woman and her child rested against it. Both showed signs of dehyration, but both still breathed. Raphael uncorked a flask of water and held it to the semiconscious woman's lips. Gregory lifted the infant and gave it some water as well.

Raphael looked at Gregory for a long moment.

"It's a good thing we were here," Gregory commented as they helped the woman to her feet. He still held the child in his arms, sound asleep but breathing deeply.

"Coincidence, I'm sure." Raphael said, but his tone was completely expressionless.

Gregors laid the Polaroid photograph of a small child on the table in front of him, where the other men could see it. They gathered around, pushing aside astronomical maps and sheets of equations to make room for the rest of his pictures.

"And so there was a child where the star led," Gregory finished, pushing back his chair.

One of the others looked at him strangely. "I thought you were an Athiest."

"I am." He lifted the photograph of the child and slid it to his questioner. "But does it really matter?"

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

From *Adventures of a Degenerate Electron* — Bruce Altner

INSIDE A WHITE DWARF

Oh, now I am a swimmer,
But I don't know how I got here.
There are swimmers by the millions,
Darting through the Fermi Sea.

Through the crush that chokes and smothers
I swim with all my brothers,
Somehow always going faster
In an ever-growing horde.

How I weary of the straining!
(But not to sound complaining),
I yearn to rest my tired nodes
Down in some quiet shell.

But St. Pauli isn't soothing.
He says, "Best you keep on moving!
There's no such thing as slowing down
When swimming in the Fermi Sea!"

He says:
"You've got to go a little faster,
Push a little harder,
Don't you know that letting up
Might bring the whole thing down?"

But no matter how I struggle,
I'm caught up in this bubble
And I guess that I'll be seeing you
On the other side of Time.

THE HARRISON CHAPTERS
Chapter Two

by Jim Vassilakos

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Faint moonbeams caressed the dark ocean swells as they washed the damp beach with the gloomy remnants of memories past. Mike laid still along the water's edge, his bare feet slowly dipping in and out of the quiet tide. An empty flask rested at arm's length from his tired body as he dreamt about years past and worlds far across the vast sea of space.

He remembered a gentle Sirian voice warning him of his own impending assassination just hours before her execution and recalled the words of a wealthy industrialist, "People are profits; individuals: losses." He dug out of the past a friend who committed suicide after having found freedom from an Imperial correctional institute and thought on the immoral techniques once practiced by a medical research lab on all assortments of non-volunteers. He remembered a gang of youths beating a elderly man to death because he was an off-worlder and fought back the recollection of twisted arms and limbs as all the remains of a Tizarian Foreign Embassy staff after a terrorist bombing.

Suddenly, he woke. The familiar sickness was there, but the feeling of being forcibly thrust out of the warmth and safety of Sleep's benign womb was lost to an insidious fear, as if he had barely escaped from the black pit of an ancient nightmare.

"You okay?"

Mike jumped, his nerves swinging his head around nearly to the point of whiplash. It was only Niki, and she promptly began her little giggle at Mike's initial surprise.

He looked over his research assistant with considerable distaste, "What're ya doin' here?"

She drew her hands to her mouth trying to control the spasms of hysteria which only succeeded in making matters worse.

Mike regarded her with a grin, "Fine."

He groggily got to his feet as she rolled on the cold sands clenching her ribs in a coughing fit of laughter.

"C'mon, it wasn't that funny."

Out of breath, she began slowing down. Mike reached for under her shoulders and lifted her small frame off the ground. She put up a mock struggle, laughing all the while.

"Michael... No! Put me down!" He carried her over his shoulder towards the house as she whined, squealed, and laughed.

The house was dark and lonely when they finally arrived. Mike walked in and tumbled Niki on the couch. She rolled herself up around a large pillow and beamed up at him with a smile. He shook his head in disbelief and grinned.

"Aren't ya' gonna say hi?" She was in a playful mood.

"Hi."

They looked at each other for a moment before he continued.

"So, how's my psyche doin'?"

"Just fine... Boss."

"Don't call me that."

She laughed, "Why not? Is it a dirty word?"

He nodded, "Yes. And how's Mr. Fork doin'?"

"Okay-fine."

"Still locked up?"

"Yep, but he's gettin' better."

Mike laughed, "That's sayin' nothin'."

"No, Really. He's a lot better than he was. He's even beginning to talk now."

"What have you gotten out of him?"

"Nothin' much so far. It's still too scrambled to tell what he's thinkin'."

"Bet that makes for some interesting reading though. Look, I'm gonna get a beer, ya want one?"

Her smile faded. "Naw, ya' don't want beer."

"Yes I do," he headed for the kitchen.

"Drink some zardocha instead." She sounded hopeful.

Mike thought about it for half a moment, "Yuchi-foo."

"How 'bout milk?"

He mimicked, "How 'bout beer?"

"You'll get drunk."

He tapped the nozel release, and twisted the setting nob down to Niki's favorite.

She smiled, "You're not gonna get drunk."

He looked at her, mock-seriousness molding his features into a neutral expression. "Do I ever?"

She started giggling, "Tee hee hee... you were so surprised."
"Was not."

"Hee hee... was too."

"Was not you little sneak. Besides, you never told me why you were there."

She stopped laughing, "Just came by to see how you were."

Mike glanced at the clock, "At ten after midnight? How'd you know where I was."

"And I thought ya' had intelligence. Where are ya' always when its dark outside and you're too lazy to answer the door?"

He gulped down half the glass, "Excuse the stupid question. I'm a little buzzed right now."

"Why do ya' sleep out there?"

Mike wondered whether she was requesting information or making small talk. "You've asked me that before."

"Ya' never answered me."

Mike paused. "To sleep... perchance to dream."

"Did ya dream?"

He thought a moment. "Yeah."

"What about?"

"I dunno."

She laughed, "Liar."

He sipped his milk. It was as cold as ice but felt strangely good going down.

"Well?"

"You didn't read me while I was out?"

"Nah. I saw your eyes goin' though. But I still 'member when you said not to read you."

"I wonder why..."

"Aw c'mon. Y'know you can tell me."

He replied laughing, "I do?"

"Yes." For once, her tone was convincing.

He paused, "Okay. You remember hearing about the Tizarian embassy on Calanna?"

"Yeah, I heard got blown up. Hey, that wasn't when you were a correspondent down there, was it?"

Mike nodded, "I was pulled shortly before that, but I was still... sightseeing."

"Of course," she was smiling.

"Now... I had nothing to do with..."

"Don't even try lying, Michael."

"Okay... well anyway, the short of it is that I was there just a cent before it happened. I went out to make this call... the embassy was a notoriously bad place to carry on a private conversation. While I was walking back... I heard the..." He stretched out his arms to form the visual image.

"Boom?"

"Boom," Mike agreed hesitantly. "I started running to see what happened."

Niki watched him sympathetically, "No one survived."

They fell silent for a time as Niki let her milk sit scarcely touched. Mike's dream had shattered her mood.

Her eyes slowly grew glossy in the blue fluorescent light. "I'm sorry."

Surprised, he looked up, "About that?"

"I'm just sorry."

"It's okay."

Mike looked into her eyes and then averted his gaze downward toward the floor. "Drink your milk."

"Mike...?"

Mike awoke stiffly on the floor. Niki sat over him, one hand on his shoulder, gently shaking him to consciousness.

He squinted groggily in the dim light. "What time is it?"

"Twenty. Mike, Fork's in trouble."

Mike was suddenly wide awake. "What is it?"

"I dunno. I think somebody woke him up in the middle of a nightmare."

"Enough to wake you?" Mike asked in hopeful disbelief.

"No. I was still up. I just happened to be open to it."

"Did he wake up by himself?"

"No. I'm pretty sure somethin's up."

"Ok, let's go." Mike picked himself off the floor grabbing his black camera bag on the way out the door and headed straight for the back terrace. He hopped on the fly-cycle, felt under the seat cushion for the key, and switched on the grav-plates while Niki hopped on behind him and held to his waist.

The vehicle raced over the shoreline using its natural flat surface to pick up speed. The crisp ocean waves, remarkably changed in the past few hours, lashed the coast and pounded the beach crag with an unrelenting fury as the bright full moon rose to its apex in an otherwise pitch black sky.

Within five minutes they landed just outside the nearby Tizarian medical center. Only a mile inland, the smell of salt carried by the chilly morning breeze floated through the air. A cargo shuttle rested on a pad under a hundred meters from the complex, and two guards in dark night-uniforms stood outside the entrance in the bleak, morning cold.

Mike dismounted the vehicle and quickly trotted towards the guards.

Niki grabbed Mike's arm cutting short his advance. "I don't have my doctor I.D."

He shrugged, "Forget it. We'll play it straight."

Mike stopped short of the guards and drew out his press card. "Michael Harrison, Gatherer, Galactic Press, Tizarian Division. I need access to this facility to see one of the patients."

The guard in front laughed, "At twenty in the morning?"

"Yes. This may be an emergency."

The guard mocked seriousness, "Well, it must be a pretty big one. What do ya' think George? Do we let little Mikey in?"

The other guard was older. His grey eyes depicted a sternness not much impressed by his partner's attitude. He coughed before speaking, perhaps to be sure he had everyone's attention, "Nobody's allowed in the medical center, mister..."

"Harrison. I'm with the Tizarian Division. I have permanent press clearance to this center. See? It says so right here." Mike pointed toward the card, but neither guard paid any attention.

The first guard laughed again, "Hey, who's your psych?" Niki's dark, Sirian features hinted at her purpose.

Mike talked while getting out his flimsy. "Didn't you hear what I said? I have clearance. By the way, I didn't get you guys' service numbers."

The older guard broke in, "Look, buddy. We have orders not to let anybody in. Anybody! Do you understand? Now why don't you just hop back on your play-scooter with your girly-friend and get your snot-nosed face off our turf!"

"Orders from who?"

"From our commanding officer. Who do you think?"

"Who is?"

The older guard shouted, "I just said who!"

"As in a name."

The guard paused, not quite sure how to phrase his response. "That's classified."

Mike looked up from the flimsy. The guard who spoke reinforced his position by standing in front of the door, his plain,

black uniform blending nicely with the purple background.

"You guy's aren't even wearing Tizarian badges. Who the hell are you?"

"Starlaw." The answer came simultaneously from both.

Mike shot a wary glance at the pair, "You Imperial police have some sort of identification?"

They pulled badges from their pockets.

"Why aren't you guy's wearing these things?"

There was no answer. Mike was fairly certain they couldn't arrest him.

"Oh, I guess that's classified too. Look, I'd like to speak with your commanding officer!"

The young guard pushed Mike backward and began to draw his gun, but the other held him back, the older guard's stare belying a temptation to let his partner carry out the threat. Suddenly, Niki gasped as if shocked.

"What is it?"

She paused, regaining her breath. "He's gone."

"What?"

"No more signal."

Mike drew out his camera and backed away from the guards, pulling Niki back with one hand clenched around her shoulder.

"Smile dudes." Mike snapped the shot, and retreated quickly to the cycle.

The personal office of Charles Linden, copy editor for the Tizarian Division of Galactican Press, rested near the top of the center section of Silver Tri-Towers. It was, as Chuck liked to put it, a room with a view. Out the sky window, if the day was clear enough, the entire expanse of land all the way to the coast could be surveyed. From well over two kilometers high, it was a wondrous sight.

Mike sat at the edge of the editor's dark, mahogany desk staring blankly out the window as the clouds blew by. Niki, leaning against the close, white wall, quietly watched his profile, collecting his emotions, reading his worries.

The faint noise of footsteps approached the entrance, Niki turning to look as the antique, brass doorknob turned clockwise. Linden, stood in the doorway smiling suspiciously while surveying the duo.

"Well! If it isn't Mik and Nik."

Mike intentionally suppressed his smile. "Hi, Chuck."

"That's Mister Linden to you Harrison. So, how's it going?"

"It sucks." The voice was Niki's.

Linden turned his head toward her, leaning his body on the desk toward Mike.

"Does it really?"

"Yeah, it sure does."

Linden laughed, "You teaching her slang, buddy?"

Mike smiled, "Y'know, Chuck, you really have a way of breaking the mood."

"Yeah. I saw your entry this morning; suggested headline: 'Imperial Police Seize Hospital.' Very catchy."

"You don't like it?"

"First off, it isn't a hospital. It's a medical center. Big difference. Secondly, they didn't seize it."

"They refused my clearance."

"I just got off the phone with a Lieutenant Robertson. He tells me you tried to assault one of his guards."

Mike held the smile, "He's lying."

Linden confidently continued, "He also told me you never showed your press I.D. to the guards."

"Chuck, he's lying."

Linden looked Mike in the eyes, "Prove it."

"I have a witness."

"Do you have the encounter on crystal?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"We were in a hurry when we left. I forgot the recorder."

"You forgot the recorder; no substantiation. The paper gets sued. I lose my job. And as for your so-called witness... who has been illegally posing as a psychotherapist at the medical center for the past doce so that you could get a story which was never registered with the paper! What the hell are you trying to pull, Mike!?!"

"The last time I registered a story with the paper my research assistant got her brains blown out by a firing squad!"

"That's because all your, quote-unquote, research assistants are unregistered telepaths!!"

Niki winced. Mike shook his head in disbelief as his boss continued.

"Look buddy, it's not like I don't believe you. I do. But you're just doing everything the wrong way."

"I'm doin' my best." "I know. That's 'cause you are the best... usually."

Mike looked up hopefully, "So what do I do now?"

"Lieutenant Robertson is coming over. He'll be here in a few minutes. I suggest you wait around 'til he gets here. Question him. If you can, trap him."

Linden reached into his vest pocket and pulled out a small, pocket recorder. He placed it on the desk in front of Mike. "You're still on Tizarian turf. Use the advantage."

By that last remark, Linden meant that there were several advantages press gatherers had on Tizar which weren't granted to them on many other worlds. The right to publish recorded statements without the approval of the speaker, the right to use registered telepaths to gather information, and the right to access the non-classified records of any subject were just a few examples.

Mike sat down at the computer terminal in the far corner. Linden, a lover of antiquities, rarely ever touched it, and the file on Robertson revealed nothing out of the ordinary. The twenty-seven year old, Starlaw officer entered the service after attending Duke Marc's College. He earned a degree in Enforcement of Justice, and served Starlaw in the public relations department. He'd been promoted during his first four-year hitch and was now working through his second.

Mike looked up from the file as Linden's secretary knocked at the door to announce the lieutenant's arrival.

"Send him in, Jo... and tell the floor that I'll be down in a few minutes."

"Alrighty, Mr. Linden."

A tall man with short blond hair and smooth brown eyes entered the office. His practiced smile was as wide as it was

non-deceiving.

Linden returned the smile, "Lieutenant, please come in."

"Mr. Linden? How good it is to finally meet you in person. I must confess, I didn't know who to greet at first."

"That's quite understandable."

"You should get a videophone. That's what everyone I know uses."

"Yes. Well, on an editor's salary, I think I'll just stick to the basics. This is Michael Harrison, the reporter who spoke with your guards; and this is Nikita Sen, a research assistant with the Press."

Mike smiled at the lie as he shook hands with the Lieutenant.

Robertson also shook hands with Niki but avoided her eyes.

"Mr. Linden. You hire Sirians. I am surprised."

"Why?"

Robertson laughed uncomfortably, "Have you not heard the Imperial convention against psionic trespassing?"

"Lieutenant, the Psionics Suppression is a matter for historians. Besides, this is Tizar. We have been granted freedom in those areas by your Archduke's grandfather long ago."

Robertson seemed to physically squirm in his stance, "Still, editor. I must insist that my mind... not be... violated." He smiled shyly at Niki.

Mike wondered what kind of people the Imperials were hiring, "You've got something to hide, Lieutenant Robertson?"

"Of course not. There are just certain classified matters... Unrelated, you understand."

Mike smiled, "No problem. Niki's telepathy is very... weak." He decided to stretch the truth, "She can only read the answers to yes or no questions, feel surface emotions, and even for that she has to be looking at the subject in question."

"Still Mr. Harrison, I must insist that she at least leave the room."

Niki broke in, "I don't mind leaving, but I would like to hear what is said. After all, I am, to a certain extent, involved. If I turn around, I'll be largely unable to use my telepathy. Would that be all right Lieutenant?"

Robertson shrugged, "I guess that'll have to do. Sorry about the inconvenience."

Niki smiled, "That's okay. I'm used to it."

Robertson looked at Mike and began to grope for a place to begin. "So, Mr. Harrison, the guards at the medical center told me they had a little trouble with you."

"I suppose they did, Lieutenant. I wanted entrance; they denied it."

"Well, did you tell them you were a gatherer?"

"Yeah, I showed them my press card."

"Well... that's not their story. What were you doing out there so early anyway?"

"Me and Niki suspected that something may be wrong with one of the patients."

"Which one was this?"

"John Doe, number eighteen."

Robertson looked surprised. "Hmmm... that's quite a coincidence. That patient died in his sleep at around midnight last night."

Mike's mouth fell open, "What?"

"There's nothing you could have done. He was well on his way to the golden arches when you arrived, or wherever it is that he went. Wasn't he the insane gentleman who murdered a guard with a carving fork and injured two civilians?"

Mike tried desperately to regain his wits.

Robertson continued, "So, Mr. Harrison, what made you suspect that there was something wrong with the patient."

Mike looked back up at the Lieutenant. "Niki, turn around."

Robertson instinctively withdrew a step.

Mike continued as Niki turned about to face the lieutenant, "Is he lying?"

She nodded yes; her eyes burning red with antipathy.

Robertson avoided both her's and Mike's stare and turned to Linden for support. "I doubt I'd be the first. Mr. Linden, I protest."

Mike stood directly in front of Robertson. "Lieutenant, what was Starlaw doing there?"

"That's confidential, Mr. Harrison."

"Can't you at least tell me the branch of personnel, the name of the commanding officer?"

Robertson shrunk under the direct questions. "Internal Counter-Insurgency. ISIS Division. That's all I can say."

"ISIS?!?" Mike almost jumped back into Linden's lap. "The Imperial Secret Police?"

"Please, Mr. Harrison. You have me at an awkward position. I'm only regular Starlaw."

"Then why are you lying!?!"

Lieutenant Robertson withdrew to the door. "I won't stand to be interrogated in such a fashion," he weakly complained. "I'm leaving."

Robertson opened the door and quickly escaped from the hateful stares of the three people he was sent to pacify. Mike took the recorder out of his pocket and turned it off. "Can I publish it now?"

Linden sat down and crossed his legs, a twinkling of a smile lighting his otherwise sharp countenance. "No. You can go out there and get some more facts, and then come back with a real story. I've got a feeling this'll be a winner once you've got it fully researched, and I won't even make you register Niki."

Mike smiled gravely, "It's a little too late for that; they already know about her. But thanks anyway. We'll take the offer. We'll also try to get some more info. I'd also appreciate it if you'd keep quiet about the story."

"Okay. But I don't see how that's going to help you now either."

"Trust me, it will. Look, I'll catch you later. Thanks for the help."

"Ok, I'll see you two later."

Mike and Niki exited the office. Once in the outer hall, Niki tugged at the gatherer for attention. "Hey, ya' really know how to get people t' listen to ya'."

He looked her in the eyes, "I'm sorry."

She smiled, "About you or about Fork?"

"I'm just sorry."

She shrugged, "Let's get some milk."

The bar was cool and dimly lit. Several ceiling fans twirled silently above as Mike drank his milk on the rocks; Niki had her's straight.

"So," she began, cutting the solemn mood, "where do we start this time?"

Mike sipped thoughtfully, "I haven't the faintest idea."

"Liar." She was smiling.

He grinned back and took another sip.

She grew impatient, "Well?"

"Okay. I met this girl a while ago."

Niki laughed, "Is this one of your drunk maid stories?"

"No. This happened just yesterday. I don't know whether Chuck told you, but me and him met Mr. Clay and his daughter for lunch."

"Boardmember Clay?"

"Uh huh."

"And the girl's his daughter?"

"Yeah. Anyway, so we talked, and then they had to leave, but that afternoon she came over to my house."

"Alone?" Niki looked concerned.

"Uh huh."

"And you let her in?"

"Why not?"

She had no reply.

"So anyway, while she was in the bathroom, I found out she was an android."

"What were you doing in the bathroom with her?"

"I wasn't in the bathroom. I was in the living room."

"What was she doing?"

"Taking her ear off, or putting it on. I don't remember, but that's not important."

"You saw her take her ear off. Ooh gross."

"No, Cindy did."

Niki laughed, "What? You asked your computer what she was doing in the bathroom?"

Mike paused, "Yeah."

"Why?"

"I was curious?"

"Have you no shame? Guy, ya' won't be seeing me go to the bathroom at your place no more."

Mike laughed, "Oh, c'mon. Just one more time. I want to shoot some pictures."

She laughed, "No way, bud. So what happened then?"

"She had to take off, but I'm sure she was there to check me out."

Niki nodded, "I'm sure she was, too."

"No. I mean for somebody else."

"Heck, Mike, everybody's after you. Me, an android, your computer, now somebody else."

"Oh, c'mon." "So where's Clay's real daughter?"

"He doesn't have one."

"You mean, Mrs. Clay gave birth to an android?"

They both laughed.

"Look, stop it. I want you to check up on her... and on Mr. Clay."

"I can't read an android."

"Read Mr. Clay then. No! Wait a mil, it was his niece, not his daughter, his niece."

She laughed, "You've really got your facts straight."

"I was recovering from a hangover at the time."

"Excuses. Excuses."

They laughed and ordered some more milk.

She began again, "So what about Fork. I mean, this could be a dead end."

"I'm fairly sure his mind was shot by one of those Imperial mind scanners. They probably just decided to kill him."

"Why?"

"I dunno, and that's no lie."

"What do we do?"

"You do nothing."

"Aw, c'mon. I wanna help."

Mike refused, "No, they already know about you. I want you where you can do some good. Clay doesn't know about you, and I've got a suspicion he's tied up in this."

"How's that?"

"I think I remember seeing Robin, that's his niece's... I mean android's name... I swear I remember seeing her down at the medical center one of those times I visited Fork."

"Then she'd know me."

"Nope. You're not registered. I am. She wouldn't have any reason to remember your face unless you spoke to her or something, or unless you were registered with Galactic Press, and you're not..."

"Ya' don't think Mr. Linden would say anything about me?"

"Nah, Chuck doesn't talk to Boardmembers. You're in the clear."

"What about you?" She knew the answer to that without asking.

"I'll manage. Look, I'm gonna go home and grab a quick nap."

"Liar."

Mike smiled, "Look, I'll be okay. I promise. Come see me tonight."

"You mean next morning?"

"Whenever. I'll see ya' later." He got up and headed toward the exit.

Niki put down her milk, "Be careful."

"You too."

Niki stayed at the table as the highbowls slowly rose to the ceiling and coasted across the bar. From the opposite aisle a burley man in a heavy, tan coat rubbed a lather of foam from his moustache, his eyes scanning the morning headlines as they scrolled across the surface of his table. In the background, she heard a group of people laughing. Michael didn't want to be followed. She glanced toward the escalator ramp and watched a sprinkling of people zoom by, the cushion of propelled wind whining where its outskirts met the stop-off. The bar seemed warm and snug when compared with some of the other places she had been recently; it was a good place to stay and pout. But not as good as a Boardmember's house. She smiled at the thought as she threw on her wrapper.

"Are you family?" The nurse's eyebrows wrinkled in rehearsed concern as he scratched down Mike's name and Tizarian I.D. number.

"No, but will this do?" Mike showed the nurse his Galactican press clearance. The shiny blue and silver card was nearly identical to his Tizarian personal identification or his Imperial consumer profile. The three were hard to tell apart at a glance.

The young man nodded in acknowledgement and hurriedly escorted Mike through the long white corridors of the medical center. The usually polished floor tiles showed dirty tread markings where a pair of wet, oversized starlaw boots had recently stomped. Mike grinned and snapped a picture though he doubted that analysis of the photo could tell much more than the boot size and service division of its wearer.

The air felt slightly colder as the nurse pushed aside a set of green double doors. The word "Freezers" was painted in icy blue across their surface. Mike followed closely.

"So what d'ya want with a 'corpsicle' anyway?" The nurse smiled at his own joke. He was being too smooth. Mike guessed that they were giving him loads of preferential treatment because they were scared silly of the bad press he could inflict.

"It's a long story." Mike bent over the computer and with a few quick keystrokes he scanned the registry of the dead. Niki had taught him how the system worked last month and the lesson came back to him as quickly as were it taught yesterday. Such were the benefits of being lectured by a Siri, Mike thought as the nurse approached the terminal.

"Hey, wait a second buddy." The nurse was visibly surprised, but he scanned the screen seeing Mike had found his way through the system.

"He's gone." Mike closed his eyes in the anticipated frustration. It was too much too expect that the Imperial police would leave his subject's body on site. That would make verification of the time of death too simple a matter.

"I thought you guys held a patient's body for autopsy."

"We do. At least we're supposed to." The nurse hit a few more keys and scanned the screen for more data.

"Here. The verdict was heart attack due to the stress medication. It happens occasionally. The body's been taken to Greenflower mortuary."

The news startled Mike momentarily, and he wondered what the Imp's motives could be. He pushed himself away from the console and straightened out, slowly perceiving the implications. The nurse gazed up from the computer and tried to read Mike's expression.

Mike finally smiled, "At least Fork's going out in style. Say, you got a spare hour?"

Surrounded by lush costal woodlands and set around a wild flower garden, Greenflower easily rated as the prettiest community in Silver-Tri county. It was small, quiet, nearly perfect in every way. Mike would have lived there, but it lacked in one crucial respect: no beach.

Mike watched the passing trees and sighed as the nurse suddenly turned delivery boy drove the white grav-car along the highway. The med-center was being too kind but totally predictable, loaning him a nurse and a car, all to straighten out its reputation with one reporter from a very powerful news syndicate.

"I hope you're enjoying this." The nurse sounded slightly irritated.

"Sure am. Watch out for the cat."

Small rain droplets marched steadily up the windshield and swerved sideways with every curve in the road as the sun poked between the clouds with sporadic recess, its rays shattering into a kaleidoscope of colorful, dancing patterns.

Cruising at a hundred kilometers per hour, the grav-car sped over the highway at an approximate altitude of one meter. Mike thought that it felt like they were floating on a current of air though he knew that wasn't the case. They were floating on the force of gravity which was really the curvature of space. Mike's mind began to swim with equations learned in a series of undergraduate science courses he had been dragged into by a friend. Something about down-vectors and Higgs boson emissions. He couldn't quite remember who to hate for it. Mike had always liked science, but never enough to actually understand it.

The nurse pulled up to the mortuary and gently touched earth. Outside the deep grey building a small service seemed to be taking place. The dark gloomy afternoon made the mourners looked like an assembly of Draconian diplomats dressed in sleek black suits huddling together exchanging whispers. Their somber mood was catching.

Mike climbed from the car and headed warily for the mortuary. A pit of ashes was exposed to the rain about a hundred feet from the building's entrance, green clover petals curving in along its red brick walls. The nurse, genuinely fascinated, stopped to look down. It was archaic. Almost barbarian.

Mike entered the building's lobby while the nurse ran to catch up.

"What'd you see?"

"Nothing. It was too dark," the young man puffed catching his breath.

"May I help you, gentlemen?" A middle aged woman with a pale complexion suddenly appeared as if from thin air. She was dressed in a long black gown and wore a black pearl necklace.

Mike took out his press clearance, "I hope so. I'm looking for a man, I mean a body of a man which was brought here this morning."

The women seemed strangely amused. "Does this body of a man have a name." Her words sang out like music.

"He was listed as a jay-dee eighteen from Silver-Tri costal med-center."

"I see," She seemed absolutely enthralled.

Mike smiled, "Great," then consciously dropped his smile. "Where is he?"

She slipped between Mike and the nurse and crept to the lobby entrance, opening the large oaken doors and pointing her long slender arm toward the ash pit. Mike watched the rain fall in disappointment.

The setting sun's amber beams tanned the evening coast, streaming thoughtlessly past the white water's edge, scattering

sullenly across Michael Harrison's tired features. He watched two gulls, wings outstretched, gliding peacefully over the shifting blue and crimson waves, hanging precariously onto the thin salty air. As if beckoning him forth, the sea approached within inches of his face and then receded into the distance while thoughts twisted about in his mind like delicate angels on their way to a darktime's meal.

But something was missing; something was overlooked. And for the life of him, he didn't know what it was. What to do when you're deadended? Go back and re-examine the facts. But there were no facts. Everything was hidden behind lies.

Unable to sleep in his only true home, he picked himself up and walked back toward the house. The huge wooden doors seemed even more menacing when sober, but he managed them open and headed to the kitchen for a brew.

His soft bed and cold beer summed up the perfect way to spend an evening, but as he sat on the edge of the covers the camera drew away his attention. Near the wall, it sat on the rug where he had dropped it less than an hour ago as if pleading like a child for a trip to the zoo, "take me a picturing, I want to have fun."

Mike smiled and stretched out on the floor beside his toy. He opened the workset and began to review the pictures in memory. He zipped past a Telmarian mountain range where strange animals carried supplies across a snow ridge to the local guerrilla faction, then floated along Tizarian waters as a shuttle from nearby Aquapolis darted from under the seascape in a beautifully chaotic conglomeration of white water spray and a rainbow of sunshine, then noticed a Calannaan temple where the altar priests sacrificed a political dissident with knives and a chainsaw, but only one picture grabbed his attention– that of two starlaw guards scowling outside a medical center entrance in the wee hours of morning.

Mike pivoted the picture into different corners of the screen and tried to decide where it would look best hanging from the wall. He reversed the colors, intensified the light, rotated the picture around, zoomed out for a wideangle, and suddenly noticed what was missing.

The small distorted numbers mocked him from the far corner of the screen. He manually zoomed in on them and refocused. How could he be so stupid? The medical center had no permanent cargo shuttle. The vessel must have belonged to the Imperials.

He looked toward the controller wall, "Cindy, load file from Silver-Tri. Find Imperial shuttle 8372919041."

She responded within the second, "That shuttle is found."

"Where is it now?"

"Docked onto the independent fast-merchant, Nissithiu, which has jumped out of system fifteen point two centims ago."

The idea itched like a hunch sent by the devil, "What was the cargo?"

"It was dropping off pharmaceutics."

"Departure cargo?"

"None."

Mike leaned back on the bed, "That's pretty strange, leaving a world as wealthy as Tizar."

Cindy gave no reply.

"Where is the ship headed?"

"Flight orders don't state."

"They should."

"They don't."

"Then read topside nav-data and figure it out." Mike hated lazy computers.

Cindy came back to him after a few seconds, "This will take me twenty-four point seven centims to compute."

"Why so long?"

"I'm not a navigation computer."

He shrugged, "Fine, Take your time."

"Now computing," she responded as if more than a little annoyed.

Mike grinned. She'd be working until well past midnight. At least he now knew how to keep her busy.

As he stepped back outside, beer in paw, he shot the dying sun a victory smile and sat down on the damp sands under a chilly wind. Then, curling up next to the surf, Mike closed his eyes and tried not to dream. Songs of water and birds soothed him with a serenity beyond mere music as he drifted away to other seas.

Slowly, his soul floated about in black and empty space. Silently, a touch from above pulled him away from sleep's cherished womb. Sounds of music, songs from the sea, clustered around him like the players of an opera theater, sinking in and out of the void with a strange, perhaps arranged harmony.

She bore no expression as he opened his eyes. He felt himself gripped with a strange combination of confusion and fear as the black sky above cast a bold contrast around her disarranged golden blonde hair and deep blue eyes.

She smiled sweetly whispering, "Good morning."

For a moment, he felt as if he was dreaming, but the rush of questions was uncharacteristic of sleepthink. In dreams he could accept that life was death and good was evil, but on the surface of thought there was only the here and the now and many, many questions.

"Why are you here?"

"We found your psyche."

The cold tide washed the tips of Mike's toes as a cool, salty breeze lifted a few strands of Robin's hair.

"Drop the story, or you'll never see her again."

Robin walked slowly up the beach as Mike sat still in the sand watching the ocean horizon curve away into the distance.

Dawn was particularly brilliant along the coast, a primary reason for his choosing to live there. Mike watched the sunrise with a rueful stare as the dull, throbbing pain stuck like a stiff arrow in the base of his skull. Bitterly, he picked his sand encrusted self off the beach and headed wearily toward the house. Grains of earth fell off him with each dismal step.

The large livingroom reeked of a dreary gloom. Mike glanced toward the couch and the pillow where her head had rested two nights before. He walked sullenly into the bedroom. The far curtains remained closed, dimming the room.

The chain locket she'd given him rested on his bed with the camera.

"Hello."

It beeped compulsively as a point of light danced around the controller screen.

"Yes?"

"The Nissithiu went to the Calanna star system."

"Oh."

Mike tumbled the junk off the bed, all except for the locket. It was in the shape of a heart with words inscribed along the front: "Go For It!"

"Place audio connection call to Linden."

The light danced around the screen.

"Done."

Mike gathered up his breath.

"Hi, What's up Mike?" It was Linden's voice.

"Morning, editor."

"Yes, and a very nice one it is too. Is there anything I can do for you?"

Mike consciously tried collecting his spirit.

"Why did you tell Clay?"

"What?"

"You heard me."

"I don't understand, Mike. What happened?"

"They've got Niki."

"... You think I told Clay about her?"

"I know you did, Chuck. I just wanna know why."

"Now don't start hurling accusations, buddy. I didn't say a thing to Clay or anybody else. Now, tell me exactly what happened. Did she screw up or something?"

"No."

"Well, how do you know?"

"She's not a screw-up! Okay?!"

"Well, I didn't say anything. Editor's honor, Mike."

"Bullshit."

"The honest truth."

"No, it had to be you."

"Nope."

"Chuck, if I find out later..."

"I'm clean."

"Chuck... stupid question coming up..."

Mike scratched his head with the locket searching for the right words.

"You ready?"

"I love dumb questions. Shoot."

"When's the last time you had your office checked for bugs?"

Silence.

"Chuck?!?"

The line was dead.

Jim is a full-time MBA student at UC Riverside. He recently founded the UCR Gamers' Guild and co-edited the first issue of its quarterly journal, The Guildsman. These chapters are the first of several he began during the middle 80's as a prose exercise in description of his Traveller (SF-RPG) setting. He says he writes exactly the same way he gamemasters: without any semblance of plan or preconception.

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

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THE ULTIMATE HELL

by Jeffrey Mark De La Noye

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Kyklos Matlock looked up at the pale blue sky of Hygess above him, his long dark hair blowing in the wind. A snowbird wheeled above, circling over some prey that had earlier succumbed to the cold. Though many things were adapted to the harsh environment north of Hygess' equator, there was always a limit to one's tolerance. The northern hemisphere of Hygess was cold, but to a native like Matlock, the cold was comforting.

His eyes met the metropolitan community of Icelandia on the horizon, his destination. He could hear the distant sound of skimobiles as they scudded off in the distance, and they reminded him of Ford Bedcoe, his friend, who had taken off on a skimobile several hours before. Matlock regretted the argument which caused his flight, but he could see nothing that he could have done, personally, that Ford would not have objected to. Depressed by the fight and alone in the hotel room, Matlock decided to take a comforting walk across the wilderness, and it was now time to return.

The wind blew a bit harder and Matlock pulled his hood over his head and his furskin jacket closer. It was only a few more miles to Icelandia, he kept reminding himself. Only a few more miles.

The sun set and soon the sky was a murky gray. Matlock's stride became shorter and his footsteps fell closer together. Only a few more miles.

The cold black sky with its many stars faced Matlock when, exhausted, he fell over backwards onto the cold snow. He was only a few miles from Icelandia .

Then he heard the sound of skimobiles, and it was the last thing he heard until his friend Ford Bedcoe called to him and lifted him up and into Bedcoe's own skimobile.

"Matlock!" Bedcoe called, "Matlock!"

"Matlock!" Bedcoe called, and at once Matlock woke with a start. He opened his eyes and instead of the dark night he saw the cold gray tungsten-steel alloy side of the Total Survival Suit that he lay face down in. He suddenly realized that he had been dreaming of an event that had happened some months ago. Now, in the TSS, the extremes of the planet Tartarus once again revealed themselves to him.

Matlock looked around and realized where he was. He rubbed his eyes and looked into the viewer, where he saw Bedcoe's concerned face looking at him.

"Oh, hello, Ford." he said sleepily.

"Hello indeed! Your EKG was going wild. I thought you were hurt."

Matlock smiled. "No, I was just dreaming… about that time I almost froze out near Icelandia on my home world. Oh, by the way, I don't think I ever thanked you for that."

Bedcoe shrugged in modesty and smirked. "I think you did. Besides, I couldn't let you die. You were the only transportation I had off that iceball."

Matlock tried to reposition himself in the vehicle, only to fail. The TSS was so low and close to his back that he couldn't stand if he wanted to, and it restricted his movements considerably. Bedcoe had always complained about that, and Matlock had to agree. The surface temperature of Tartarus, thirteenth planet of the solar system, was so cold that it drew heat away from any source, so the less area needed to heat the better.

Early expeditions on Tartarus had been conducted in actual suits, but it was discovered that a human's own personal locomotion couldn't handle the cold of the planet or the distances covered, no matter how well padded and heated the suit. So H-shaped vehicles were created that crawled along the ground "on all fours". Though actually vehicles, they were still called total survival suits.

The TSS was shaped like a person with outstretched arms and legs, within which the driver's own extremities fit. Cybernetic controls were placed in the hand and footpads of the suit to control its various functions. The suit's own housekeeping chores, such as heating and ventilation, were controlled by a separate computer independent of the driver.

As can be expected, the total survival suit completely protected its occupant from the outside. It had to. The atmosphere outside the thick tungsten-steel suit was -200 degrees Fahrenheit and any exposed part of a person would freeze solid instantly. Tartarus received 1/1000 the energy from the sun than the Earth does, and Sirius is brighter in Tartarus' sky than the sun.

It was, in fact, impossible to tell if it was day or night unless you knew which dim object in the sky was the sun, for there wasn't enough light coming to Tartarus to cause any kind of colored sky. Like everything else on Tartarus, time was frozen.

Matlock lightly tapped his fingers to the cybernetic controls in the handpads of his TSS and the feeding mechanism revved up. A machine inside the TSS boiled carbon dioxide out of the rocky surface of Tartarus. It disassociated the carbon dioxide into carbon and oxygen. The oxygen was breathable when combined with nitrogen from the waste processor, and when combined with free hydrogen from the atmosphere created water. The carbon, when combined with other elements from

the rock became a suitable waybread, high in carbohydrates and some protein, but low in fats. It didn't keep them healthy, but it kept them alive.

Bedcoe spoke into Matlock's intercom. "Can't hold out that extra mile, can you?" he joked.

Matlock smiled back at him. "just thought we'd have a picnic. It's a nice enough view, isn't it? Besides, I didn't notice you fasting back there at Tyomni Zvezda."

They had just come from Tyomni Zvezda, an area on Tartarus that was proposed as a permanent spaceport on the planet. While there, they had set up a denamit, a device that drilled deep into the planet where there was heat. The drill brought the heat up to the surface, where it stimulated the growth of crystals that grew geodetically. As the crystals grew, they formed a dome, which also held heat in. The denamit was never turned off, because it heated the dome continually, but the rate at which it drew heat could be slowed so that the dome didn't continue to expand. The main city of Tartarus, Krasni, had been created this way. The crystals would take at least a month to grow to the right size, so in that time Matlock and Bedcoe were heading back to Krasni, their home on the barren, frozen world. There were only a dozen people on Tartarus, and ten of them were currently at Krasni.

The food that Matlock was eating was a spherical gray lump that was the product of the food processor. He looked at it with disdain. "I can't wait to get back to Krasni," he said solemnly, thinking of the real food both of them had enjoyed just before they left Krasni. This tour of duty was starting to get to both of them. The harshness of the environment was one thing. People had to crawl around in these small boxes with very little extra space, and there was no real food to speak of. The supply ship to Krasni came once every two weeks, and so a few days ago he and Bedcoe had eaten actual meat. It had been delicious, but it gave him the impression of being a last supper.

While Matlock ate, Bedcoe adjusted his camera so that he could see the distant Ural Montes that they would have to climb over to get to Krasni. Krasni was tucked away in Grierson Vallis, a small valley in the Ural range. Above the upper peaks of the mountains was the ever black sky and the dim stars. A particularly dim star was setting behind the middle peak.

Matlock stuffed the remainder of the waybread into his mouth and touched the cybernetic contact that moved the tractor skids underneath the machine. There were four caterpillar tracks, one under each handpad and footpad. By gently pressing on the steering contact on each side of the machine, Matlock was able to maneuver the TSS in the direction of the Ural Montes. He touched the contacts on his TSS and began the trackwork. Slowly at first they turned, testing the strength of the "snow" underneath, making micro-adjustments until the TSS master computer was sure that the snow underneath the TSS could support motion. Then, when all the adjustments were completed, the TSS tracks revved up to full speed. The headlights flashed on and lit a wide patch of the frozen blackness before them. Soon both TSSs were crawling quickly up the foothills of the Ural Montes.

Bedcoe spoke into the intercom. "What's the hurry? Wait for me; I don't want to be left alone out here."

Matlock was silent for a moment. Bedcoe sure was getting grumpy; had been for the past day. "I want to get home, " Matlock said. Bedcoe wasn't sure of his meaning. Home for them now was the city of Krasni, and had been for the last six months when they had joined the Frontier Corps. Since Matlock was from Hygess, originally, that could equally have been his meaning.

Hygess, Matlock's home world, was divided politically, geographically, and culturally into the Frozen North and the Sunny South.

Matlock was from the North, but even he was unused to the mile upon mile of snow, or whatever this stuff was. Matlock was never sure what to call the mantle of Tartarus. He had played in the snow on Hygess when he was younger, but this frozen matter was nothing like that. All he knew was that it was instant peril to whoever touched it.

Bedcoe quirked. "Does this place remind you of home?"

Matlock grunted into the microphone. "Hygess isn't this bad, Bedcoe. It's a beautiful world. I can't understand why you hate it so. It can't be because of the cold, or else you wouldn't have come here."

"There's a difference between these two worlds, Kyklos. On Hygess a certain amount of discomfort–cold–is physically acceptable. Which is why you collapsed that day near Icelandia. So long as you were moderately warm and in no danger of frostbite, it was okay. However, on Tartarus, no amount of cold is acceptable. Right now it's about 60 degrees farenheight in my TSS. I feel fine. In a way, Hyges is colder than Tartarus, at least from a certain point of view.

"Plus, I'm doing some real good here. Earth needs a place to store her space fleet, one far from Earth. It would do no good to fight the Cygonians close to Earth. We need room to fight. We need room to grow and expand as an Empire. There's no room left in this system; it's too close in here.

"I'm getting paid for being here too. I don't get paid for galloping around on an isolated member world."

"I know that," Matlock said, "But didn't you enjoy yourself?" he asked. "I thought it would be good to get away, after your brother. . . "

"Don't say another word about that," he said, suddenly becoming intensely grim, and Matlock could tell from the EKG and common sense that Bedcoe was sincere about it.

Matlock remembered what Jonas Radcliffe, the Governor of Krasni, had told him soon after the incident. Ford Bedcoe's brother Urich had just been killed, and Bedcoe was a bit shaken up by it.

"He needs a vacation, " Radcliffe had told Matlock, once he had found a seat in Radcliffe's sparse gray office at Krasni. "Don't talk to him about his brother–at least, not much. Not for the first few days. He's in a kind of waking shock, and there's no telling what could happen to him in that state."

Matlock had shifted uneasily. "So what can I do? Ford's my friend and I want to help him, but I don't know how."

"Take him on a vacation. Take him to a place that you think he'll be very fond of."

Matlock had smiled. He had known just the place.

Or at least, he had thought he did. He had miscalculated,

though. A Hygean, if he's from the north, is more sensitive to different climates. To Matlock, Hygess was as different from Tartarus as Tartarus was from Hygess. But Bedcoe, who was from Earth, saw Tartarus and Hygess as almost the same place. Being in a place so like where his brother died did Bedcoe more harm than good. After a week, when Matlock had finally realized his critical error, he had offered to take Bedcoe to Hygess' warmer southern hemisphere, but Bedcoe wanted to leave the planet as soon as possible. His need to return to Tartarus was no doubt spurred by his need to return to work, not to mope over his brother.

Matlock remembered the night the two of them spent in that small bar in Icelandia, and hoped the trip hadn't been a total loss.

Bedcoe turned to look at the thermometer. It was very sensitive because the Sun didn't give off enough heat to register a change on normal thermometers when night came along. Night, of course, was purely mathematical; there was never a day on Tartarus that either Bedcoe or Matlock would recognize. Only endless night and a constantly star-filled sky, with a faint object in the background known as Sol.

"The outside temperature's gone down a degree" Bedcoe reported. "Night must be falling."

Matlock nodded sullenly. Night was an ever-present disease that riddled the sky of Tartarus, threatening to infect them all.

The two vehicles pulled along for miles, steadily and quickly climbing up the slopes, through the valleys, while their pilots laid face down in suspension webbing. The TSS required very little human interaction, once its occupant told it what to do.

As time lagged on, Bedcoe became edgy and began conversation, no matter how dispirited.

"Hey, Matlock."

"Yeh?" Matlock looked up from his private thoughts.

Bedcoe shifted. "Once I remember that my mother had this speeder, you know, kind of like the skimobiles they used on Hygess, remember?"

"Yeah. I used to have several skimobiles when I was younger. . . "

Bedcoe cut him off. "The speeders my parents had were these gargantuan things– they reminded me of the automobiles that Earth used to have in her past. My parents used to always take me in them to the shopping complex near Bosn. One day, I decided to drive one myself. I had no trouble getting in, but I didn't know how to start it. Then, when I tried to get out, I couldn't. The door automatically locks, you know. It can be opened from inside, but I didn't know how. I screamed for hours, until my parents found me. . . "

"Were you injured?"

"No, not at all," Bedcoe was quick to add, "It's just that I had been stuck in there for so long. . . "

Matlock thought of the similarity between the TSS and the speeder that Bedcoe was talking about, and hoped it wouldn't affect him. As Bedcoe had said, that happened a long time ago. Matlock wondered if it was long enough.

Four hours later, the two TSSs had finally reached the top of Gamma Mensa, the tallest point in the Ural range. Because of the hard-driving wind of Tartarus, most mountains tended to be small. Gamma Mensa was more a plateau than a mountain, and it wasn't much larger than Mt. Washington.

Suddenly the TSSs halted. Matlock's TSS was at the edge of a cliff; Bedcoe's was perpendicular to a fissure that had opened up about two months ago, and the opposite side of the fissure was slightly higher than Bedcoe's side, owing to the fact that some matter had piled up on top of it recently. The two TSSs instantly acted to remove their pilots from danger. The tracks wheeled almost subtly so as not to upset the balance of the vehicles, and then they slowly backed up until the two were out of danger.

Matlock spoke into the intercom. "There's something wrong," he said, adjusting the TSS tracks so that they would continue in the correct direction. "This isn't the usual path across the mountains. Where were you leading us?"

Bedcoe panned his camera back and forth across the ice wall in front of him. "Yeah. It looks familiar though. Maybe this is our usual picnic spot. You know, there's something about this area. . . "

Matlock had a flashing memory of the area, and remembered that this was near where Bedcoe had lost his brother. Their being here couldn't be a coincidence; Bedcoe had led Matlock, subconsciously, to this location, where his brother and the others had been lost. On Tartarus, bodies were never recovered; the risk to the living was too great, so markers were carved into the ice.

Matlock slowly panned the camera around, not wanting to see what he had to see. But it was there, chiseled in the ice:

Here Urich Bedcoe and his crew of five were lost when their vehicles exploded from internal pressure leaks. God have mercy on their souls.

Urich Bedcoe	*Shawn Benjamin*
Ernie Hardin	*Elwell Shaw*
Uwe Smith	*Martin Balfour*

Matlock was sure he shouldn't say anything; it would be best if Bedcoe forgot.

Matlock repositioned the camera so that it faced out over the edge of Gamma Mensa. Bedcoe attempted to do the same thing but his TSS wouldn't let him; it was still trying to get him safely away from the precipice.

"Kyklos, I can't move. Could you send your image through to my camera?"

"Sure," Matlock responded.

Seconds later, the image of the clear ice wall in front of Bedcoe flickered and was replaced by the image Matlock sent him.

The image they both saw was that of Grierson Vallis, the small area crouched between Gamma Mensa and Delta Mensa that held Krasni. It was tucked in the valley because the high-velocity winds of Tartarus would have destroyed the dome of Krasni had it not had the windshadow of the Ural Montes to protect it. Beyond that was a terrible white expanse of nothing, an everlasting ice field that would never melt. All the planets this far out– Erebus, Hades, Tartarus– were all named after the various levels of the Underworld in Greek mythology. They were named for their desolation, their remoteness.

Right now, here in this spot, was the Land of the Dead.

Matlock noticed that Bedcoe's systems monitor was showing unusually high perspiration, blood pressure, and heartbeat.

"Are you okay?" Matlock ventured. A pang of fear struck him when Bedcoe didn't answer for some time. Finally, Bedcoe answered.

"Hm? Oh, sorry, Matlock. I was lost in thought. Is it warm in here, or is it me? I was certain I had more footroom before. . . "

Matlock believed that the Bedcoe was thinking about his brother's death. It wasn't Ford's fault that the internal pressure systems of six TSSs, including his brother's, had exploded, leaving only Bedcoe alive. Nonetheless Bedcoe was convinced that he had done something wrong, that it had been his fault.

He said, "Bedcoe, you have your thoughts to yourself. And your privacy. There's no one else around for miles. No one will see you until you get to Krasni."

Bedcoe seemed alarmed. "Don't remind me," he said. "I'm totally isolated." He turned the TSS around so that it could return back the way they came, since they had come the wrong way. He tried to stay away from the fissure directly in front of him.

Matlock became concerned for Bedcoe. He wasn't sure if Bedcoe was being melodramatic or not. He thought he knew his friend, but the behavior he had displayed these last few days on Tartarus had been uncharacteristic of him; Matlock wished they were back in that bar on Hygess now, sipping Hygean skyros and commenting on the hardy women who often frequented the place.

He knew that Bedcoe did not trust the TSS, and wondered what measures Bedcoe might take to alleviate this. It seemed that he was beginning to show symptoms of TSS Syndrome, a condition that often affects people who are unused to the complete lack of human contact for an extended period of time that the TSS requires. The sudden thought chilled his mind. Quickly, he maneuvered the TSS to follow Bedcoe.

Bedcoe did not speak for some time. Instead, from the brain patterns transmitted to Matlock from Bedcoe, he could tell that he was probably deep in thought. Matlock knew that he was thinking about his brother. Apparently, Icelandia was not the best place to take him for vacation.

On top of his self-inflicted guilt, Bedcoe was suffering from TSS Syndrome. If he should become paranoid that he would never touch a human being again, then he might become claustrophobic, and then. . . Matlock had never seen what a completely frozen human being looked like, but the grisly stories he had heard frightened him to consider that possibility.

A terrible anxiety came over him. The thought of Bedcoe dying was a horrible one, but perhaps more horrible was the idea of himself becoming totally alone. Back in his mind, Matlock knew that he was more worried about being alone than of Bedcoe dying, but in a burst of self-denial he convinced himself that it was not so.

Suddenly the loose snow beneath Bedcoe's TSS gave way, and the TSS went with it. The EKG in Matlock's machine showed an alarming rise in Bedcoe's blood pressure and heartbeat, but that was to be expected.

Matlock's fears were allayed when the EKG showed a quick, but fairly normal heartbeat. Matlock turned on his intercom.

"Bedcoe, buddy, how's the weather down there?"

"Rotten, " Bedcoe returned, "Next stupid question." Matlock smiled. At least Bedcoe's sense of humor had survived the fall. He surveyed the situation; Bedcoe's toppled TSS lay in a snow heap twenty feet below Matlock. From what he could see, Bedcoe's TSS was undamaged. It was designed to take heavy damage, anyway. Bedcoe's voice returned through the intercom, but had gained a timbre of anxiety. "C'mon, Matlock. Get me out of here. It's spooky."

Matlock was on the edge of the cliff that Bedcoe had been on a few minutes ago, twenty feet above Bedcoe's current position. He saw no foreseeable way to get down to Bedcoe without falling himself, as Bedcoe had done. His TSS would probably survive, but how would he get out?

None of this, he thought. I'm becoming cynical like Bedcoe.

All TSSs were equipped with winches. The designers assumed such falls would happen. The difficult part was anchoring his TSS to a fixed position, so that he wouldn't be pulled into the ditch, too.

With his left foot Matlock activated the Anchor Drill, and it revved up and drilled deep into the ground underneath Matlock's chest. The vibration made Matlock's ribs sore. With his right hand he activated the winch in the front of the TSS. Slowly the winch-line dropped the twenty feet to Bedcoe's TSS.

He hadn't heard from Bedcoe in some time. "Matlock to Bedcoe. What's up?"

"You are," Bedcoe said. Matlock winced.

"What can you see?" Matlock asked.

"Not much–hey, there's people down here!"

Matlock gasped. "You mean, people in TSSs?" They weren't late; there was no reason for Radcliffe so send out a search party. If he had, he surely would have told them.

Bedcoe sounded urgent. "No, just people. Six of them. They're reaching out to me. I must help them–"

Suddenly the transmission cut out. Matlock panicked and was able to attach the winchline to Bedcoe's TSS. He reversed the winch engine and it started to pull Bedcoe's TSS out. However, in his panic Matlock hadn't attached the winchline well enough. The snow beneath Matlock's TSS couldn't take the strain and it gave way, toppling into the ditch, as well.

Matlock was unharmed, and so was his TSS, but he had no idea what delusions Bedcoe was under. If Bedcoe did see humans, they were surely dead and frozen. They had to be humans; there was no other life on the planet. Or Bedcoe might just be hallucinating: another symptom of TSS Syndrome.

Matlock's panic continued to grow. He opened a channel to Krasni, and secured it.

"Matlock to Radcliffe," he called, thumping his hand dully on the side of the TSS in frustration. "Come in, please."

After an eternity Jonas Radcliffe's voice came in. "This is Radcliffe, What's the problem?"

Matlock almost dropped the mike. "Bedcoe's starting to see things. I hink he's suffering from TSS Syndrome."

Radcliffe did not speak for some time. When he did, the alarm was evident in his voice. "That's not good. I knew it was too early to let him out, so soon after his brother died. He wanted so much to help, though. . . "

Matlock interrupted him. "What do I do now?'

Radcliffe came back. "What's your position?"

Matlock said slowly, "Gamma Mensa–right near his brother's grave."

"Oh, boy," Radcliffe uttered, silently. "Keep him there, keep him safe. I'm coming out now with a TSS."

Matlock swallowed. Slowly Matlock's TSS crawled over to Bedcoe's position. Bedcoe had righted his TSS, and now Matlock saw it moving towards an ice wall reaching up hundreds of feet. The surface was shiny and reflected the headlights well.

As Matlock inched along, the surface of the ice wall became muddier. Distinct shapes appeared in the ice.

Matlock froze, his fingers involuntarily releasing the cybernetic pads. His face felt hot, when he realized what the shapes were.

Human beings. The humans Bedcoe had mentioned, frozen solid. Every cell in each of their bodies had instantly crystalized. All the cell membranes had ruptured, causing the protoplasm within to rush out and swell the body, only to be instantly frozen.

Their bodies were stretched out in the ice, expanded from the rush of fluids. Mouths were open with shock, eyes wide with terror.

Matlock aimed his camera at the edge of the fissure behind him that they had earlier been on. He saw arms alone sticking out of the ice where it had cracked. One of the bodies in the ice wall in front of him lacked an arm. Matlock felt sick. His head swam. He reached over to the intercom and established contact with Bedcoe.

"Bedcoe, they don't need your help. They're too far gone. They're. . . frozen stiff." A thought crossed his mind, and he dismissed it. He didn't need his mind cluttered with macabre thoughts. He concentrated on how he was going to get out of this. He hoped Radcliffe would hurry.

"You're wrong," Bedcoe said, with a bit of hope to his voice. "They're human, like me. I'm going to greet them." He signed off.

Matlock felt a pain in his chest.

All TSSs had hatches, but none of the hatches would open unless the air above was at least 60 degrees F, or if another TSS was on top, in which case the temperature of the second TSS would be 60 degrees. TSSs seldom docked, only so that the two could establish human contact or confer face to face. It was discouraged, though, since it was dangerous.

Matlock knew that sometimes it had become necessary to override the system to open the hatch, but this was extremely difficult and only really skilled people could do it. Matlock had an awful thought that Bedcoe was just so skilled.

Perhaps, he thought, if I can climb above his TSS, then I can board it, and rescue him, or at least stop him from leaving. He pressed the single cybernetic contact that controlled docking, selected "above" when it asked for direction, and tensely waited, hoping that the TSS computer could handle the operation quickly enough to save Bedcoe, or at least hold him until Radcliffe came.

While he waited, he thought he might try to persuade Bedcoe not to leave. "Bedcoe, I'm sure that those people will get help from someone else. You can't help." He was hoping that maybe he could enter Bedcoe's strange world and help him out of it by going along with him.

Bedcoe sneered into the mike. "Wrong, Matlock. I have to help. See, there's my brother there–if only I can get this darn computer to open the hatch. . . " He signed out.

Matlock was certain that Bedcoe was delirious. As of yet Bedcoe had only seen the outlines of the people in the ice. If he saw the frozen corpse of his brother up close, there was no telling what he would do. For a chilling moment, Matlock feared his own life.

The TSS had nearly completed the docking when Matlock heard an odd drilling sound. For a minute he thought it was Radcliffe, but then he recognized it. He panned his camera around and saw that Bedcoe had given up trying to get out of the TSS and was trying to release the frozen bodies using the anchoring drill. If Bedcoe succeeded, the entire ice wall could fall on them both, in addition to the falling bodies, and neither of them might escape. The chances were great that eight people could be buried here.

The docking maneuver was complete. Matlock opened the hatches that separated him and Bedcoe and climbed through. TSSs are made to fit two, if uncomfortably. Matlock slid in behind Bedcoe, who turned in his webbing to look at him. A look of disbelief captured Bedcoe's face. Then anger took it. "Don't stop me, Matlock! I have to rescue my brother."

Matlock came closer, all the more aware that Bedcoe was losing it, and that Matlock himself might be in danger. "Bedcoe, listen to me. . . " Slowly he reached for the switch that would disengage the drill.

Matlock found himself being pushed away from Bedcoe as Bedcoe wriggled away in the tight space of the TSS. Bedcoe took a distillation pistol from the emergency compartment and shot at Matlock.

Matlock ducked and the shot hit the roof, causing the tungsten to become brittle. Another shot like that and neither of them would have to worry about anything ever.

The next shot hit the wall near Matlock's arm. He lifted himself up, and the next beam hit the wall beneath him just as his feet cleared the hatch.

The butt of Bedcoe's distillation pistol almost made it through the hatch when Matlock closed it.

Matlock retreated into his TSS. Grimly he thought that it might be possible to leave a crack in Bedcoe's TSS hatch so that cold air would enter and freeze Bedcoe. He shook his head violently at the thought. Bedcoe was a friend, after all. At any rate, the drill was automatic and would continue after Bedcoe's death.

Seconds later the intercom came alive. Matlock thought it might be Radcliffe, but he was again disapointed. Instead, Bedcoe's exited speech came through. "Stay away, Matlock! My brother isn't dead; he's right there, in front of me. If you

try to stop me from saving him, I'll rip your TSS open like a sardine can!"

Matlock tried reason. "Bedcoe, if you leave the TSS's protection you'll freeze solid. No human being can survive out there!" He spoke these last words slowly and clearly, hoping they would sink in. They didn't.

With a final sense of defeat, Matlock disengaged from Bedcoe's TSS, making certain that Bedcoe's hatch was closed. He felt he might never see Bedcoe alive again. He thought it might be possible to intercept the drill somehow, stop it from drilling any deeper into the ice.

Matlock decided to try and call Radcliffe. He hadn't heard from him in some time, and had almost given up hope. "Matlock to Radcliffe, " he called.

There were several seconds of static, and then a voice. "This is Radcliffe, Matlock. I'm about two miles from your last known position. What's the condition?"

Matlock swallowed. "I don't know what to do... Bedcoe's trying to drill through the ice to free his brother's body."

Radcliffe whistled. "That could cause the whole ice wall to fall. You'd both be covered."

"I know," Matlock replied.

"Matlock, I think the only thing you can do is hide until I get there. I don't even know what good I can do."

"No!" Matlock shouted, "I won't abandon my friend!" Matlock thought how similar this was to Bedcoe's situation. Bedcoe had refused to listen to reason, and was endangering others as well as himself. Matlock knew that he must hear the words of reason, even as the came from his own mouth. "Okay, Radcliffe. What do you suggest?"

"There's a cave about 60 degrees to your west. It connects to a tunnel that leads under Gamma Mensa. Hide there. I'll be coming up that way, to help."

"If you can," Matlock intoned, after Radcliffe had signed off.

A terrible cracking sound reached Matlock's ears. The ice wall began to crack up the middle, and the topmost body, that of Urich Bedcoe, came loose. With a horrible crash, it fell onto Bedcoe's TSS and shattered into slivers of frozen flesh. Before it did, however, Bedcoe had gotten a fairly good glance at the face, frozen in a horrible shout of instant terror.

Matlock heard the scream through the intercom. He shook his head and realized that Bedcoe was beyond help. Now the wall was really beginning to come apart. Individual blocks of ice that had once held souls were falling wholesale around him. Remembering that only the TSS protected Matlock from total oblivion, he maneuvered it away from Bedcoe, wondering how he was ever going to escape from there. Then he saw the cave that Radcliffe had told him about. He entered it.

He couldn't look back, but felt inclined to. In a quick motion he aimed the camera towards Bedcoe's TSS. The systems monitor came alive in a cacophony of alarm signals. Matlock shut them all off and ignored them, knowing that he was powerless to help.

Suddenly the systems monitor went flatline. Unwillingly, Matlock glanced into the camera lens, and saw a thin, stiff hand reaching out of the TSS, reaching for his brother, who lay shattered about him.

Matlock turned the camera forward, so that he could see which way to maneuver, but he had trouble seeing through the tears that were welling up in his eyes. He ignored them. The hole he had entered emerged from Delta Mensa, and minutes later he was on the open Ice Sea again.

The intercom crackled on again. This time, Matlock was sure who it was.

"Come in, Matlock," Radcliffe called. "Come in! I'm on my way!" But Matlock heard little of it. He carelessly switched on his intercom, and shouted to Radcliffe, insane with fury, "Tartarus! the lowest part of Hades' realm and the most horrible! Bedcoe saved me, but he perished and I was unable to save him, even as he couldn't save his brother. What place can rob a man of his spirit even before it robs him of his body? I'll tell you! Tartarus, the Ultimate Hell!"

Radcliffe tried again, but received nothing coherent, except the man's ravings.

Matlock traveled on through the night, alone.

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DargonZine

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DargonZine is an electronic magazine printing stories written for the Dargon Project, a shared-world anthology similar to (and inspired by) Robert Asprin's Thieves' World anthologies, created by David "Orny" Liscomb in his now retired magazine, FSFNet. The Dargon Project centers around a medieval-style duchy called Dargon in the far reaches of the Kingdom of Baranur on the world named Makdiar, and as such contains stories with a fantasy fiction/sword and sorcery flavor.

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