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" V A N G O G H I N S P A C E "

Infinity City series book #1, ed7.

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(Note: Pretend words in all CAPTIALS are really in *italics*!)

N O W , L E T T H E S T O R Y B E G I N ! !

PROLOGUE

SEETHING with frustration after standing for over two hours under the sweaty summer sun of southern France, staring at the beckoning though blank canvas, but really aware of nothing but the heavy pistol weighing down his pocket -- and his soul -- the lean, red-bearded painter noticed the tall, mysterious stranger in the distance bouncing along the road on a bicycle across the beautiful, rolling, green French countryside... It was said the stranger made all his purchases with impossibly pure gold and flawless precious jewels. It was also said that he had murdered a young local man -- somehow the scandal involved the affections of some young and pretty French girl.

The painter was in no mood for an encounter with this approaching man; the painter was in no mood to encounter ANYONE ever again at all! He threw down his palette then jabbed his hand into his pocket, grasping for the loaded pistol...

CHAPTER 1 - INFINITY CITY

Infinity City is an interesting place and not just because it happens to be located in a black hole. Though, this of course does affect the style if not the standard of living of the natives. Infinity City is wonderfully interesting because throughout its long existence its people have always maintained a virtual Cult of Adventure due most probably to the excitement of living within the FIRST EVENT HORIZON of a black hole. Adventure dominates the lives of the men of Infinity City. Controlling these men, to avoid the trouble their Galactic scale Adventures usually cause, dominates the lives of Infinity City's remarkable women.

Infinity City is a romantic place. Death from aging has been eliminated through the monthly ingestion of the PILL OF LIFE, an hormonal protein inhibiting the human body's genetic propensity toward immune system degradation. Love can last an eternity! Feuds between some families smolder on and on. And, without the natural process of aging, unbearable lives can last forever. But, seldom do...

The WELL OF THE WISH, a mysterious brick cistern at the very heart of Infinity City -- located above the sparkling point of the black hole's second event horizon -- has been the scene of many a tragic life's ending.

The WELL OF THE WISH! The final solution for those with intolerable situations, unattainable dreams, unbearable memories... Duels of incredibly macabre nature take place when proud men fail to compromise over political power, business judgments, and of course, the alluring women of Infinity City.

Ah, the women of Infinity City! They are free from the looming threat of death from old age. Many find themselves blessed with timeless beauty. But, they are still limited to fertility's finite period. And, after that? After giving birth and rearing as many children as are wanted (the now traditional occupation of a woman's first 30-60 years) what follows? The

serene, graceful peace of female political control, for some. Business, careers, enjoyment of riches, perhaps even Adventuring for others. Many others follow children that have grown bored within the confines of Infinity City and have sailed off throughout the Galaxy to seek fame and fortune; the inhabitants

of Infinity City "sail" through the Galaxy aboard faster-than-light GRAVITONIC SAILSHIPS; few other human worlds have the sophisticated knowledge and intricate technology to allow this.) All in all, the population has remained stable near one million. With the Grand Dames firmly in control through intricate networks of familial alliances, the forces of power, business, male adventurousness, and female security are all maintained in equilibrium.

And so, on with the saga of a mysterious man given the chance to live again in a mysterious world, another tale of Adventure springing from this the most fascinating city of human future history: Infinity City!

CHAPTER 2 - JOHN ONE

A young man, John One, received a generous offer from his wealthy uncle to sail a small merchant ship up and out of Infinity City, taking it back in time to the latter part of Earth's second Christian-era millennium in search of general items of artistic and rare value. John was tall and slim, clean-shaven with short, light brown hair. He had the peaceful looks of someone preoccupied with inward reflections, due to the deep influence of his days at the Militia Academy. There, he had developed a strong belief, even a passion, for discipline and self-control. His warrior training had demanded he learn to be constantly relaxed to conserve physiological energy before and during battle; hand-to-hand or ship-to-ship. His high aristocratic cheekbones and thoughtful looking gray eyes were common in his family. All in all, he had the appearance of someone you could have confidence in; someone you could trust immediately. And, most people he met did!

He had just finished a five year commission with Infinity City's Militia Guard. With his training and experience piloting advanced scouting ships and even a few battle skirmishes with hostile sailships, and with nothing better in mind, he accepted the offer from his uncle the owner of the little merchant ship, after a long, good natured negotiation over profit margin.

His uncle prepared and provisioned the ship for the journey while John One was charged with the responsibility of gathering the specifics he would need to get by in second millennia Earth: Speech translator, automatic pistols, sophisticated first-aid equipment, fabric and sewing equipment for making local costumes... And, of course, a large supply of the PILL OF LIFE anti-aging drug (though he was really not physically old enough yet to require it). The technology for the production of the PILL is unknown anywhere else in the Galaxy, the scientists of Infinity City never successfully manufacturing the PILL outside of the unique gravitonic radiation within the black hole. Adventurers normally take a large supply in case they become

stranded and also for barter (though a given prescription works for only one specific person and is worthless to anyone else except, perhaps, as a souvenir). Unfortunately, the molecular structures of the proteins making up the PILL are very complex, giving the PILL a shelf-life of only about 25 years; if an Adventurer is stranded even with a large supply he'll only stay young for 25 years and then begin aging. The PILL cannot survive cryogenic storage.

A few days before his scheduled departure his uncle threw the traditional party for a young man's first grand adventure. Hundreds of family members attended. Wrapped up in his academic studies, even at an early age John One never developed close ties within his family, even with his brothers and sisters. In spite of this, he had always taken his familial responsibilities seriously, had a good reputation for being helpful and was graced with the favor of the family's Grand Dame matriarch for always supporting her position during the inevitable family squabbles which in Infinity City, with the number and ages of the individuals within a family, could become immensely complicated affairs making or breaking personal fortunes and futures.

So he was surprised at the intimacy with which his brothers and other male members would coach him regarding the delights and techniques of seduction of second millennium Earth women. Any Grand Dame upon hearing such conversation would steer him away and lecture him on his responsibility to alter as little as possible the events and objects in the time that he was about to find himself.

At the end of the evening, on one knee with his head bowed, various Grand Dames ceremoniously bestowed upon him ribbons and medals of faith in his upcoming adventure. The family matriarch Grand Dame Deirdre herself wearing her family crown and a formal gown of sky blue with an immense ruffled collar presented him with a thin ribbon with spiraling rainbow colored patterns.

After the party had ended, a somewhat stuffy and formal affair, John One found himself excited and restless, so he decided to take his favorite coup for a last drive around Infinity City before his grand departure.

Infinity City lay spread across the top side of a disk-shaped superstructure about 30 miles across and 2 miles thick. It floated like a "big dime" (the actual nickname within the venerable Militia Guard) in the middle of the black hole's egg-shaped first cycle "pocket." Actually, it was not floating -- complex gravitonic engineering kept the world safely at equilibrium with the gravitonic torrents pouring between the first and second event horizons at the top and bottom of the black hole.

The same gravitonics also held an atmosphere as thick as Earth's on Infinity City's life side. (Its other side underneath the great disk was barren, but could be used in the future if population pressure ever required expansion.) The atmosphere had manually controlled weather and was natural enough to even allow, with the help of an orbiting artificial Sun, open-air

agricultural -- the produce of which was far more popular than the inexpensive though not-quite-natural fruits and vegetables grown in oozing hydroponic vats.

John One had an urge to leave the central, metropolitan area and head out to the open agricultural periphery of Infinity City to have a final look at the family "farm" -- the Larsch plantation, largest on Infinity City, a sprawling area of thousands of acres.

He drove away from the family mansion 'Old Rumble' along smooth, wide tree-lined boulevards within the aristocratic and governmental confines of the Canterbury district where he had grown up. Here and there were the halls of government, two or three story buildings shaped from cubes of various sizes with overly rounded corners, each a different shade of flat gray. Also could be seen, at the end of fine, stately landscaped lawns, were the mansions of Infinity City's greater and lesser controlling families -- some were not even occupied but it was

tradition for each Grand Dame to maintain at least token residence within the Canterbury district.

Leaving Canterbury, he passed beside the mysterious Old Town at the very center of Infinity City. This section had been constructed by the Original Builders themselves and still maintained the same quaint style of architecture the Original Builders had brought from ancient Earth. Something about the area always filled John with uneasiness. Perhaps the Well of the Wish at the center, the dangerous shaft which led all the way down through Infinity City toward the tiny second event horizon at the bottom of the black hole.

John One tapped a command at the luxurious little coup's hand-held control unit ordering the onboard computer to generate more energy from the cold nuclear pile which was converted to angular kinetic energy through electromagnetic phasing directly into all four of the independent wheels -- he had pressed the FASTEST button -- the car smoothly shot forward. The little two-seater luxury sport coup was the best money could buy, featuring the latest in related technology. With magnetic suspension the wheels were not physically connected to the car -- with no vibration from wheels, the car seemed to float like a magic carpet. Using four wheels with independent computer-controlled suspension, the car was unaffected by Infinity City's sometimes less-than-perfect road system. (The Family responsible for the extensive road system throughout Infinity City complained that they did not have the resources to handle the endless repairs caused by the incredible variety of ground vehicles so popular all over the City. Sky vehicles had been tried from time to time during Infinity City's long history but were always eventually outlawed in response to citizens uncomfortable with hundreds of vehicles weighing several tons constantly swooping by overhead.

John headed down West Road one of the four main compass-point roads that headed straight from City center, out past sub-road turnoffs to the many large estate farms and smaller family farm businesses, and out to the periphery road which circled the perimeter at the edge of Infinity City. Along the periphery road, at the four points of the Infinity City compass were the

four Militia Guard bases: North Base, East, South, and West. And at periodic intervals along the periphery road were the gravitonic control installations that kept Infinity City in the center of the black hole, and maintained local gravity and atmosphere.

John One turned off West Road at the entrance to the Larsch plantation with a sign that read "Larsch Farm" emblazoned in gold on a fancy overhead arch. Feeling an urge for solitude he drove around without stopping at any of the plantation houses or agribarns. It was late night and dark and all there was to see was the tiny guide lights along the edge of the roads, the striking and beautiful sprawling spot-lighted landscaping around the many plantation houses, and night time lighting of the robotic field harvesters slowly spiraling around the circular farm areas. John One smiled remembering the many happy times out here as a boy chasing around with his cousins aboard the farm's many hoverbikes. He had a sudden urge to stop and lug one into the storage trunk of the car and bring it with him to old Earth. That would be fun, he thought excitedly, zipping around on old Earth on a modern hoverbike, watching the natives stare in wonder! But then he remembered admonishments of his Family mothers warning him that travel into the past could be dangerous to the fabric of the Universe and that it was best to disturb things as little as possible -- the Universe quickly 'healed' from the wounds of change caused by travel into the past but

there were theorists who constantly warned of too great an effect on the past causing an irreparable tear that would affect the future in some dismally cataclysmic way. John's male relatives had winked at him and grinned, taking him aside to reassure him that the women were over cautious, that the great Adventuring men of Infinity City had been bouncing back to the past throughout the long, long history of the City with hardly ever a catastrophe. Nevertheless, John knew there were many Grand Dames that had sworn to eventually outlaw travel into the past. And when he thought about it, trips to the past were rare indeed; there had not been one since he was born. If there was so much money to be made -- as his uncle assured him -- why weren't "back-bounce" trips to the past common?

John One left the family farm and continued heading west toward the edge of Infinity City. To dispel the slight anxiety he now felt over his impending trip into the past, he slid open the car's large moonroof, took the car up to full speed, and enjoyed the roar of the cool, night wind overhead -- the car's computer diligently watching ahead with radar eyes for oncoming traffic or obstacles in the road. Just before the gates to the Militia Guard's West Base, John slowed and turned right onto the periphery road that encircled Infinity City. He took the car up to full speed again and sat watching the far away little lights from all the distant farms. You could spend hours at night on the periphery road slowly circling Infinity City watching the multi-colored jewel-like lights of agribusiness and passing by the great Militia Guard base complexes with the brooding snouts of the huge defensive photonic canon rising upwards.

At night the road was popular among the younger set cruising along on the prowl for rendezvous with their fantasies, and romantic couples already living theirs. John passed other cars

from time to time and found himself remembering the young ladies he himself had brought out to the periphery road for a 'spin.'

John grinned in fond recollection of a certain embarrassing incident during his Militia Guard Academy days when his lecherous older friend Jason had talked him into coming out for an 'orbit' or two along the periphery road. He had shown up with two girls and a large jug of local wine. The girls worked at one of Jason's favorite lounges just outside the space port, and were impressed almost to the point of swooning over one of the Family's larger saloon cars John had borrowed for the drive. And what a night that had been!

He continued curving from north to east along the periphery road, the tiny far away lights of Infinity City to his right, and to his left the blackness of space just off the edge of the Big Dime. There were stories of adolescents modifying their cars to exceed the computer controlled established speed limits along the periphery road dangerously close to the edge of the great disk. Some had lost control and gone flying off Infinity City, out past its atmosphere, dying in the vacuum of surrounding space, to be eventually sucked down through the second event horizon.

As he approached North Base John One thought of the Star Admiral of all the Militia Guard who was headquartered there. John's strong natural sense of duty took hold of him, he turned to the right, off the periphery road, and onto the North Road heading south back toward the center of Infinity City, back into the quietly regal Canterbury District, and back home to 'Old Rumble.'

At the entrance to the Family's garage bays he left the car and turned the car's hand-held command unit -- or 'key' as they were referred to -- over to the garage bay supervisor who looked inside the car then grinned over at John One and asked, "No GUESTS tonight, Master One?"

John smiled. "No, Halvers," he had a knack for remembering the names of everyone working for the Larsch whom he'd ever met. "I just wanted to take a last drive around Infinity City."

"Yes, sir! We'd all heard you were leaving on an Adventure tomorrow. Best of luck to you, young sir. But, don't be calling it your 'last drive'! That's bad luck, I hear, begging your pardon, sir."

"Very well," John called as he began walking away. "I'll call it just my 'last drive for a while!'"

"Very good, sir!" supervisor Halvers cried merrily as he tapped the return code for the appropriate garage bay into the car's command unit and watched as the car slowly rolled off to put itself away.

CHAPTER 3 - LIFT OFF

On the day of departure, his uncle, reclusive father, and three generations of grand-fathers, all chauffeured in one of the

family's prestigious antique electric cars, delivered him to his ship all the way out to the far end of the launch field reserved for private astrogation -- last minute sage advice, tips, and tricks of the trade flowed continually until John One, with a wan smile, a nod and a wave slid fast the main hatch.

The ship was small, modern and shaped like a bullet with its tip pointing toward Infinity City's sky. The sky was currently the same shade as Earth's, though the color of the sky of Infinity City was artificial and controlled by the Infinity City civil engineers. An amendment to the Infinity City constitution limited changing the color of the sky to only once a year, and then only by popular vote. Over the centuries, this yearly event has grown into the SKY COLOR FESTIVAL in which light-hearted political "color parties" spring up trying to convince the populace to vote for their color. Naturally, a great deal of wagering goes on over the final outcome. The most popular colors through the years have been Earth sky blue, soft lavender and the breathtaking chromium yellow.

The ship had its engine room at the bottom, a cargo hold in the middle and John One's combination living quarters and piloting room at the top. The three rooms were about the same size, though the walls of the pilot room converged together. Going about his final checkout of systems and supplies, he felt an unusual welling of incredible excitement within himself. He thought about the riches he was bound to find and how proud his family would be upon the announcement of his return and discoveries in the "INFINITY CITY JOURNAL OF RECENT ADVENTURE." For the first time he would be completely out of touch with Infinity City and his family for, perhaps, several years. He suddenly realized how much he dearly loved both.

John One strapped into the pilot seat, verified his automated departure program with the on-board computer, gave the computer the instruction to activate the launch systems, and when all astrogation system telldatales showed green he signaled launch field control to request take-off: "Launch control, this is John One piloting the EXCEPTION -- requesting launch synchronization."

The communication screen lit up with the crest of the family that managed Infinity City's main launch field. A male voice replied, "Acknowledged, EXCEPTION. Switch in your computer for flight program verify." Partially covering the displayed crest, a window now appeared on the screen with the title: "FLIGHT COM STATUS" and below this, the flashing yellow message: "PROGRAM VERIFICATION..."

John asked launch control, "Busy up there right now?"

Launch control answered, "Negative, EXCEPTION. Last launch occurred 2 hours 23 minutes ago. None tentatively scheduled." John realized he must be speaking to the launch control computer, the human controller probably too busy with other duties to bother with a private launch on a quiet day. John thought to himself, it would have been nice to hear one more human voice before passing out of radio range beyond the event horizon. He asked, "How's your wife and kids?"

The launch computer replied, "I have heard that one before."

The controller suggests I respond with: Fine, how's your voltage and checksum?"

John chuckled. Soon the FLIGHT COM STATUS changed to the green message "COMPUTERS LINKED. AWAITING GO..." and the launch computer ordered, "Launch program now running. Launch field all clear. Raise your sails."

John activated the overhead gravitonic launch arms that would support the ship's launch sails between them. As the launch arms extended above the ship, the whine of the gravitonic field generator rose and then fell as the couplers received a maximum charge for launch. Once the launch arms were extended, he loosed the launching sail and leaned forward until he could see it through the nose cone view port. And, there it was, between the launch arms, unfolding, billowing, and shimmering in Infinity City's artificial nuclear sunlight. The port he was looking through was at least a foot thick but perfectly transparent, though with liquid crystal doping for controlled translucence and opaqueness. It was about one foot wide and went all the way around the cone to form a ring shaped panoramic view.

After satisfying himself that the sail was secured to all of the arms, John checked the flight board telltales for any problems and seeing none he reported, "Launch control, this is EXCEPTION. Ready for automated take off."

"Acknowledged. Initiating take off now." And, with that, the communication screen changed to the message "COMPUTERS LINKED. LAUNCH GO..."

Automated commands began to scroll across his on-board computer's screen. The ship creaked and groaned as the sail couplers sent a high energy burst of special sub-atomic particle/waves of just the right characteristic to make the sails react to gravitons. The gravitonic field generator rose to a scream in response to the demand on it to overcome Infinity City's local "storm" of gravitonic forces designed to simulate Earth's gravity, contain a local atmosphere, and also provide enough meteorological chaos to generate weather for agriculture.

John gripped the levers for manual gyro-override and as he watched the commands flying across his on-board computer screen, the ship lurched upward, rising in a straight line. Looking out, he eye-balled the launch sails billowing with the peculiar saddle-shaped launch configuration. Looking down, he saw the

launch field drop away; saw other merchant ships, mostly tear-drop and bullet shapes of various sizes; and several Infinity City crab-like men-of-war down for provisioning or refitting.

Soon, all Infinity City could be seen spreading out away from the launch field. He could see the tall buildings of the nearby metropolitan sector, the quaint and colorful dwellings of the "oldtown" at the city core, and the grid-like structure of highways leading out toward the geometric patterns of agriculture with green, yellow, and russet crops, and the distant, spreading estates of the large Families.

On the other side of the launch field the black barrier of

space at the edge of the blue atmosphere could be seen curving around the horizon, merging with the blue artificial skies and fluffy clouds.

John looked down at his excellent view of the different zones making up the immediate City. He could see municipal zones with mixed single and family apartments and shops, one, two, or three stories high; the nearby prestigious Canterbury zone with mansions and gardened grounds of some of the most powerful families; and the industrial zone of warehouses and automated manufacturing plants. The closest thing to Utopia that anyone knew of, John thought to himself.

He neared the boundary of Infinity City's controlled gravitonic field and could see one of the huge suspension generators that held up the egg-shaped envelope of protective force, keeping at bay the maelstrom of gravitonic forces coursing between the black hole's first and second event horizons, keeping Infinity City forever floating right in the middle of the first cycle of the black hole's infinite singularity wave.

He quickly began the procedure to extend the ship's mainsail rigging. Manipulating controls, he sent the various mainsail yards extending out in a crown pattern about the bow of the ship. He energized the piezoelectric plates in the molecular laminations of the sail yards causing them all to bend inward until they all touched. Then, he ran up the mainsail field pump setting its efficiency phase at 10% and backed off on the sail yard piezopower unfurling the shimmering mainsail between all the sail yards until a beautiful, gossamer crown-shaped mainsail was spread before the ship.

Evenly, he switched the gravitonic generator's power over to the mainsail. He then reefed the launch sail back in and retracted its sail arms. The gravitonic generator was wining loudly now as it filled the mainsail to its maximum thickness of slightly less than a single millimeter.

John checked all systems for readiness. He was about to leave the black hole for some point in Earth's second Christian millennium. He took a deep breath. Then reported to launch control, "This is the EXCEPTION. Ready for arc and vector." *1. (See footnotes at end of chronicle.)

"This is launch control. Acknowledged EXCEPTION, your request for arc and vector. Checking for previous conflicting use of vector... None. Checking for traffic due... None. Computers performing final vector program verification... Completed. Awaiting your go, EXCEPTION."

And, John One said, "Go!". With that, he twisted the microelectronic phase of the mainsail to maximum efficiency and felt the familiar vertigo as the mainsail bit into the storm of gravitons between the two event horizons and propelled the ship into an arc, positioning it for the vector out through the first event horizon point that would correspond with Earth's second millennium. Manual guidance through the black hole's gravitonic storm to an accurate vector was impossible by manual steering.

John began hearing sharp whines from the gyro as the computer made automatic directional compensations for the vagaries of the gravitonic storm. The static gravitonic field left over from Infinity City was beginning to wear off slightly. He felt lighter and checking the readout found it had dropped to 85% of 1G. But, there would be enough remaining until he was well out of the black hole where he could spill some of the mainsails gravitonic effects over the ship, giving it artificial gravity. He preferred zero-G but it would be unhealthy for so long a trip and he must be prepared for Earth's strong gravity.

John switched the on-board computer's display over to an overview of his course. It showed a white curved line, tangentially intersecting a short, straight line with a red dot at the end, the first event horizon exit point. His ship was a green dot moving along the curved line toward the straight line. He was used to the rugged militia ships and felt slightly nervous about the delicateness of this merchant ship. But, this was a completely modern vessel, a model with a particularly excellent reliability record. The sail yards were even equipped with molecular piezo-laminants over-control to reduce the turbulence of that final, wrenching transitional swap of the time-space of the black hole into the space-time of the universe.

The little ship straightened out of its arc and was now traveling along the vector, the angle of which, to the normal line between the two event horizons, would determine the time he would arrive at outside the black, though accurate only to plus or minus about 500 years.

The red disk of the first event horizon grew brighter in intensity through the view port. John One could now see the strange black lines that meandered out from the center of the red disk. Gravitonic turbulence and eddies of "uncertainty" -- due to matter being crushed into a different kind of existence -- required periodic adjustments to the ship's controls. The launch control comm. screen now showed a communication integrity percentage that was decreasing. At 50%, the screen changed to the flashing message:

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EXCEPTION ON COURSE.  
USE RETURN PASSWORD: 113322  
IMPENDING LOSS OF SIGNAL.  
LINK TERMINATED. GOOD LUCK!
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Soon the red disk of the event horizon grew so intense that the view port automatically began to opaque. At one second to transition, John gripped the arms of his pilot seat, closed his eyes, clenched his teeth, and held his breath. Transition struck with the immediacy of a hammer striking an anvil. He felt himself spread apart, but held on ignoring the feeling until suddenly it vanished. He opened his eyes, checked the ship's systems, and had the computer's screen report a simulated rear view from the ship. The angry spiraling vortex of the black hole was rapidly receding behind.

John now had the on-board computer begin scanning for familiar landmark stars and patterns of stars. It only took the computer a few moments to analyze and report the vector coordinates of Earth and that the time was roughly the thirteenth

century. (The randomness of the intervening gravitonic currents of space made back-dating planetary positions inexact.) John One smiled in satisfaction. His ship had survived the transition without damage and he would arrive at a time that was early enough to sneak down to the surface of Earth undetected, but late enough to have plenty of riches to choose from.

He spilt some of the mainsail fielding to provide artificial gravity then settled down for the long trip to Earth. Depending on the slowly ever-changing gravitonic currents, a trip to Earth would take two or three months. He was about 20 degrees off course for Earth, but he would remain that way for a day or so until he was sure that no unfriendly force was following. This was an Infinity City regulation to prevent any aliens that might be lurking around in a past era from following an Infinity City sailship to the home planet.

His great adventure had begun!

CHAPTER 4 - THE TRIP TO EARTH

The trip proceeded. John One spent much of his time studying maps of Earth, the peoples of the various places and eras within the second millennia, historical information regarding ancient works of art, and the geographical locations that would yield the greatest values for his uncle and himself.

Periodically, the gravitonic currents, along which his ship was sailing, would begin to veer away from Earth. When this occurred he would have to watch for gravitonic eddies which indicated a nearby, usually turbulent, intersection to a current branching off in a new direction. He would maneuver the ship over to the current if its course was more direct to Earth than the one he was in. Certain intersections were so turbulent, he would miss them completely, and have to raise all sail, and tack back and forth, back up the gravitonic current and try to make the other current again.

Also, he used the on-board computer to coach him in pronunciation of all the language allophones he would possibly encounter. He would not need to really learn any of the major languages since the on-board computer had the capability to speak, understand, read, and write all the known languages of Earth. This was a standard program for any merchant ship dealing with Earth or any remote human colony. He would wear a remote device inside each ear, like a hearing aid, that would be linked to his ship's computer. In the event of lost communication, each remote device had enough computer processing power to carry out the translation of a single language and perform a limited set of utilities. The remote devices also contained specialized sensors to inform the wearer of location, heading, altitude, and changes in the weather. They also were equipped with visual scanners with infra-red capability for night vision. The wearer had to turn his head sideways for the remote devices to "see" forward.

To John's surprise, he discovered a small weapons locker containing a hand held explosive projectile weapon, or 'handgun' as they were still called; an extremely destructive weapon

outlawed -- as were all hand weapons -- on Infinity City. John marvelled at his uncle's disregard for Grand Dame law, but understood the need Adventurers had for such weapons on the many lawless worlds about the Galaxy.

Toward the end of the second month of the trip, the ship was close enough to Earth so that it could proceed on a direct course

to Earth's solar system. John set all sails, brought the sailship around and pulled out of the strong gravitonic current it had been following -- progress slowed considerably as a result. John, in his growing excitement and impatience, took the helm for longer and longer periods each day, using his superior human intuitive abilities to pilot the ship; seeking and exploiting the mysterious transient gravitonic fields found between the great, never ending main currents. John was reminded of the soaring birds of Earth he had read about that would seek thermal after thermal in their efforts to attain higher altitude.

Finally, Earth's Sun could be seen. The home star of the home planet. A shiver of excitement ran through John as he realized he would be visiting the original planet of human evolution. Some of the people he would meet could even be remote ancestors!

Day by day, as the Sun grew in brightness, John scanned the solar system for planets. Scanning a circular area around the Sun took several hours. Finally, two small dots appeared on the scan printout on either side of the Sun and were labeled JUPITER and SATURN, automatically by the computer. Now he was able to calculate the angle of the solar plane. This allowed him to limit the scan area to an ellipse, reducing the time required to scan considerably.

The following day URANUS and NEPTUNE appeared. A few days later MARS. And then the next day, EARTH! The Sun's gravitonic field was growing in strength. Setting the ship on a broad, tacking course, he rapidly bore down on Earth. Three days later, Earth was looming blue and bright before him.

John One was struck by the majesty of the "home planet." Chills ran up and down his spine as he beheld -- through the nose cone view port -- the wondrous planet he had studied and heard so much about all his life. All the citizens of Infinity City dreamed of visiting Earth. An adventurous trip to Earth was always the most prestigious accomplishment of a Adventurer's career.

Sailing at a significant fraction of the speed of light, John One had not been gazing at the Earth for long when the computer issued a request for authorization to begin the automatic braking maneuver that John One had setup earlier. He typed it in. The computer automatically reefed in the sails and John heard the whine of the gyros rise up to maximum -- the ship slowly rotated about. The sails were then unfurled again.

He could have piloted manually but the gravitonic fields about the Earth and its sun were mild and without turbulence so there was little chance of any trouble. He could easily perform manual override at any time. Also, he did not want to take his

eyes off the beautiful shining blue planet. How extremely bright its colors were against the absolute black of surrounding space! The continents were mysterious looking; veiled here and there by bright white cloud patterns.

The ship slid smoothly into a polar orbit from which he would be able to scan the surface for an optimal landing site. The ice caps reminded him of tight fitting ancient Arabian hats.

He reefed in all the sails and ran the sail arms back in. His artificial gravity began to dwindle so he initiated the procedure to prevent this. Using the gyros to swing the ship around he aimed it directly at the Earth. Next, he instructed the computer to keep the gyros slowly turning in such a way to

keep the ship pointing at Earth's center. Then he let out the small launching sail, setting its phase to artificially generate equivalent Earth gravity within the ship.

But first, he had the computer scan the coordinates of several known stars, comparing these with their locations and velocities stored on file to determine his arrival time in local units. The computer reported the Gregorian date 1887 plus or minus four years. Looking through his families' secret list (given him by his uncle) of time versus valuable commodities which had been jealously accumulated by and handed down through many generations of Adventurers, John decided to begin his acquisition with late nineteenth century European art treasures. He had decided on paintings. Since they were flat, requiring less storage room, he could bring back more value in paintings than other artifacts.

Using the computer, he determined that he would not be above Europe until the night. He spent most of the rest of the day preparing a local costume. The travel kit he would carry on the surface he had prepared over a month ago -- he went through this again anyway.

He felt excited about the adventure ahead, and also fearful of the risk he would be taking entering a primitive human society...

CHAPTER 5 - DESCENT TO EARTH

He prepared his ship for the descent to Earth. Sails were set and the orbit slowly braked back using the launch sail until he hovered above late nineteenth century France. He decided to begin his collection of rare art with works of famous early French impressionists or whatever else of value he could find.

With launch sail reefed and landing sail carefully set he began the descent. The power of Earth's trade winds vied with the power of Earth's gravitational field, singing through the rigging of his gravitonic sails. Descending aft first, he could no longer see Earth from the nose cone view port. He would use the computer view screen to find his way down. Though it was nighttime the computer would amplify images until they were as bright as day.

The clouds parted and he saw land, an adjacent large body of deep blue water, and a complex coastline between the two.

He typed a quick command to the computer and names appeared superimposed over the land and the water, different colors representing bodies of water and rivers, land areas, and the names of towns. The land was labeled FRANCE; the water MEDITERRANEAN.

The image moved closer and closer. Soon, more names appeared. The closest part of the sea to the land area he was now above was labeled GULF OF LIONS. A river appeared which was labeled RHONE.

There were no clouds below him now and few above. Below, he began to make out green forests and the artificial boundaries and various colors of agricultural areas. Manipulating the viewing angle he searched for somewhere safe and hidden to land finding an outcropping of boulders at the top of a low hill. They formed a convenient crown which would easily hide his ship.

Soon, the outcropping loomed below. A clearing toward the center appeared and he slowly, gently took the ship down the final distance and landed with a gentle thud.

He has arrived! His heart is pounding and everything seems to be in slow motion as the wonder of what awaits him lifts his spirit to heights he has never experienced.

On Earth! John leaps from the pilot seat with a surge of youthful excitement and heads down to the main hatch. It is night and he does not care about changing into local garments. His gray coverall covers him from neck to wrists, to included shoes. Enough. He wants Earth! To walk on the Original Planet! The most prestigious adventure imaginable. The background of his culture raises an almost religious fervor in his soul.

He reaches for the main hatch controls on the adjacent bulkhead and pauses. The military trained part of his brain automatically runs through possible dangers. There are no diseases at this time in Earth history in France that his ship's medical supplies cannot handle. However, he opens a supply locker, unclips the explosive projectile hand weapon he had discovered during the journey over, and prudently fastens it to his belt.

He then activates the automatic hatch cycle. The inner door slides to the side and he enters the tight way between the inner and outer door. When he is clear, the inner door automatically closes. There is a pause as the hatch system equalizes pressure with the outside. He forcibly unclenches his jaw. He finds his mouth has dried out. His palms are damp. He hears the outer lock begin its release cycle. His heart is now thudding like a drum within him. He realizes that this is the biggest step in his life so far. He pictures himself telling the story to his grandchildren, great-grandchildren... Time has turned into slow motion.

The outer hatch motors begin to whirl and the thick outer hatch begins sliding away. A moment later a gap pops into being. A growing, black vertical line into the local night. John's trained instincts take over and he crouches slightly, his eyes widening, prepared for the unknown.

As the hatch slides all the way open, he feels a cool breeze carrying scents from the meadows and local agriculture surrounding his rocky hideaway. John steps out and down to the sandy ground of the clearing around the ship. Earth! An amazing feeling of safety and tranquillity sweeps over him. This is home! And, he knows there will be no historic danger in this region for many years. The air, the temperature, the gravity, everything he senses seems perfectly natural, delightful, normal.

There is no moon. The night sky is only partly cloudy and the stars he can see shine with a clean brilliance -- there is not enough light for him to safely maneuver through the rocks to leave the outcropping and explore. He could get his computer-ears and have them guide him, but he decides to wait until morning. He returns to the ship...

* * *

Too excited to get to sleep, John decided to put together a costume to wear outside during his explorations. First, he requested any information regarding clothing around 1887 A.D. in France from the on-board computer. Before leaving Infinity City, he had down-loaded from the Infinity City Library as much information as his ship's memory could hold regarding his target time on Earth. The computer spent only a few moments searching then began displaying digitally stored copies of photographs from late nineteenth century France.

The photographs were in poor shape, perhaps having been handed down through Infinity City families for many centuries. However, John One discovered an effective image enhancer in the ship's software library which turned the poor black & white images into sharp, colorful three dimensional representations, as realistic as if he were looking into a hand-held window into the past.

Next, John brought out a sophisticated sewing machine, supplied by his uncle, and a bolt of the generic synthetic cloth specially designed for it. He placed both on the deck of the pilot room. The sewing machine was a gray, rectangular plastic box about three feet wide, one foot high and about half a foot deep. He activated the sewing machine by pressing its only button located on the top near the carrying handle. Its little display screen on the other side of the handle showed the number of the wireless communication channel and device identification code that the sewing machine is "listening to" in bright, blinking green numbers. John went to the ship's computer terminal and typed in the channel number and identification code of the sewing machine. He then instructed the computer to download to the sewing machine the dimensions, color and texture of the clothing in the photographs.

It takes over a minute for the two machines to work out a mutually understandable communication format. When when they eventually do, all the information regarding the clothing is successfully copied to the sewing machine.

He then pulled up the spindle for the cloth and mounted the bolt of cloth on the spindle. Next, he pulled open the plastic front panel of the sewing machine revealing a long slot toward the top of the front side for the raw material cloth and another slightly wider slot for ejecting the finished product. John inserted the synthetic cloth into the hopper slot.

Next, John looks the sewing machine over for a control panel but finds none. He puts his hands on his hips as he leans over the sewing machine frowning at it. He doesn't know how to start it. There is no control panel, he has never used one before, and it did not come with an instruction watch. *2. He presses the activation button again but the display screen just displays "ALREADY ACTIVATED."

John asks, "Ship computer, how do I make this sewing machine manufacture something?"

The computer replies in a flat voice, "Unknown."

John feels slightly guilty at having left on his voyage without checking out this piece of equipment. He had been excited about this, his first Adventure. Though, to those who knew him back at Infinity City, he seemed as calm and cool as ever.

He once again spoke, "Computer, ask the sewing machine over its comm channel how to start it."

A few moments later the ship's computer reports, "Communication acknowledged by the sewing machine, but no data reply."

"Computer, ask it for instructions."

Another few moments, "Communication acknowledged, but no data reply."

"How do I start you?!" John asks the stubborn sewing machine, as he looks it over once again.

He sits back and calmly strokes his chin while staring at the silent gray box on the deck. He has never let uncooperative behavior by computers anger him. He needs a local costume that will "fit in" here and that means he has to get this machine working.

Suddenly, he yells, "Computer! Order this damn sewing machine to start making the clothes!"

"Acknowledged," the computer says.

The sewing machine whirs into life and begins feeding in the bolt of synthetic cloth. The bolt stops feeding then starts

again, then stops, then starts. This process continues accompanied by all sorts of interesting sounds from the inside of the sewing machine. John begins to smell a slight melted plastic odor.

The sound of a little bell goes off and out of the bottom slot for finished products slides a floppy, brown hat, just like in the photograph. The machine whirs back into life, rolling in more raw material synthetic cloth.

John watches with satisfaction as the machine produces one by one: coat, trousers, socks, underclothes, a thin necktie, a neckerchief, a belt, and boots. BOOTS! The boots are rather floppy and more cloth-like than leather-like, but John discovers they are big enough to fit over his regular foot-gear. Some of the clothes are the same color. Some different. But, all surprisingly match.

Amazingly, all the clothing fits just fine. Upon quizzing his ship's computer he learned that it had initially sent the sewing machine only relative dimensions of the clothing in the picture, not knowing the exact dimensions of the pictured clothing. The sewing machine had then asked the ship's computer for the dimensions of the person who would be wearing the clothing. The ship's computer had fortunately predicted that the person would be John.

It had gotten quite late. John yawned, feeling very sleepy. He would venture forth in the morning. He donned night clothes, happily climbed into his bunk, and drifted into an exciting dream about returning to Infinity City to the adoration of his family with an incredible treasure he had brought back from France...

CHAPTER 6 - EARTH

In the morning, the ship glints in the new sunlight. The outer hatch slides slowly open and a young man emerges, dressed in ordinary (for the area and era) country clothes and a cap. However, if anyone looked closely they would see a small, strange

object inserted inside each ear. These are his COMPUTER-EARS. Miniaturized, portable computers that let him understand and be understood by the local French and also let him maintain contact with his ship.

His pockets contain pieces of gold, silver, and small quantities of synthesized precious (for the time period) gems. In a secret belt around his waist: emergency medical supplies and food rations. In his pocket: the deadly explosive projectile hand weapon.

A little smile plays across his lips as he jumps to the ground and jauntily sets off across the clearing. He picks his way carefully through the rocks and finds himself in a grassy wild meadow with small red and yellow wildflowers waving in the vigorous morning breeze. The light scent of flowers, the AROMA of Earth, almost intoxicates him.

A dirt road, almost a trail, can be seen a short way off. In the direction in which the road leads he sees the geometric shapes of agricultural divisions as well as some strange long, low object in the indeterminate distance, perhaps part of a village. John One decides to follow the road.

Just as he sets out through the gently waving grasses, he looks back and sees the sun reflecting off the silvery nose of his ship, conspicuously sticking up from amongst the surrounding rocks.

Nervously, he looks around expecting to see a crowd of pitchfork wielding villagers descending on him. But, there is nothing but the surrounding, rolling countryside underneath a brilliant, clear blue sky and a few moving clouds. He hastens back to his ship to take care of the problem.

Back at the base of the ship, John whispers to his computer-ears the command to open the ship's main hatch. It slides open, he jumps in, smacks the "CLOSE" button, and leaps up the spiral stairway, two steps at a time. Once up in the pilot room, he pulls down on a handle in the ceiling and a large section of it tilts down to the floor revealing the inner cone full of the sail control electro-mechanical systems. The back of the tilted "ceiling" has ladder rungs allowing him to climb up into the inner nose cone. Once there, he unscrews the restraining cone "dogs" and deactivates the magnetic air seals. He then flips open a small covered button located on a thick, power hinge and presses the button. This causes the emergency nose hatch to slowly swing open.

John cautiously peeks over the edge and begins turning completely around. He sees nothing more than the surrounding countryside, the rough road tangent to the small rocky outcropping and the strange object on the far horizon. It is a wall surrounding a large town! But, there is no sign of anyone nearby.

John then ducks back inside, backs down the rungs of the "ceiling" ladder and goes one level down the ship's spiral stairway to the storage hold between the pilot room and the lower engine room. From deep within a storage bin of various provisions for this voyage he pulls a coil of thick, dark green tubing which is actually a sack for a sophisticated camouflage device. He also pulls out its small, hand-held control box which he leaves on a shelf beside the spiral stair. He quickly takes the tube back up to the nose cone.

Once inside the nose cone, he finds enough room to brace his feet on either side of the hole and stands up through the emergency hatchway until he is halfway out of the ship. He unwinds the spiral tube, dangling it down the outer side of the ship until it is roughly straight, then carefully he smoothly pulls off the dark green sack to reveal the camouflage mesh. In the sunlight, the tiny interlocking links sparkle and reflect like diamonds. The liquid crystalline structure within is in its base state, which is transparency.

The mesh was doubled before it was rolled, like a piece of paper folder over once and then rolled up. John separates the

two edges and then starts unrolling the mesh with one edge draping down over one side of the ship and the other edge descending down the other.

Once it is all rolled out from the top of the ship all the way down to the ground, he carefully re-closes the escape hatch not bothering with the mechanical hatch "dogs," but prudently reactivating the magnetic air seal to keep out any rain. He descends to the pilot room and tilts the ceiling ladder closed. He makes his way back down the spiral stairway, grabbing the camouflage mesh's control box on the way.

Once in the engine room, he smacks the main hatch's "OPEN" button and waits for the hatch to slide open. Once open, all he sees is the shiny glassiness of the camouflage mesh rustling slightly in the breeze. It was "cut" to fit his ship back at an outfitting shop in Infinity City, so he is able to grasp its bottom edge just below the hatchway and easily lift it up and slip through.

He looks around at the surrounding clearing and the rocky outcroppings jutting upwards. He lifts the camouflage mesh control box. It is black and rectangular with a bulging circular lens at one end, a display panel in the middle of one side, with some buttons at the far end. The panel reads in black letters on a white background: "Mesh Status: DEACTIVATED/TRANSPARENT." Below that, in flashing green letters: "Press <1> and scan."

John, familiar with the operation of the device, through his militia training, presses and holds the button marked <1> at the end and walks all the way around the ship swinging the camouflage mesh controller this way and that so the bulging lens can record all the immediate colors, textures and shapes.

Once around the ship, the device is so intelligent that it emits a soft chime letting John know that it has seen everything. The small display panel now reads in flashing yellow letters: "Touch to mesh and press <2>."

John holds the device up so that it is pushing the camouflage mesh against the side of the ship and presses the <2> button. The device begins transmitting the color and texture data down to the camouflage mesh. Each crystalline, hexagonal link of the mesh covering the ship has its own tiny microcomputer with an individual identity. Each will be given a specific color and texture program. The programs will even contain time parameters to make the color and texture fit the slant of the sun and nighttime conditions.

As this process takes place, John watches the little display show percentage completion: "10%... 20%..." and finally "90%... 100%." There is another soft chime and the ship suddenly turns into a hard, dirty yellow. John jerks back in surprise. Then

looks up and backs further away. His ship has become an outcropping of rock! He smiles in satisfaction.

Going over to the "rock", he lifts up a fold of the mesh, finds the main hatch, slides the control box inside and lets the mesh fall back into place. He tells his computer-ears "Tell the

ship to close the main hatch" and hears this occur.

Walking all around the ship again, he satisfies himself that it is safely camouflaged. He then leaves the outcropping of rocks and walks over to the road. This time, looking back he sees nothing but rocks. He smiles and heads off down the road in the direction of the town in the distance whistling a brisk march, popular with the Militia Guard of Infinity City.

CHAPTER 7 - ARLES

Surrounded by the rolling green hills, the bright blue sky with billowing white clouds and the warm scented breeze, John began to feel he was in some sort of enchanted land out of a childrens' fairy tale. Birds wheeled overhead in the late morning sunshine. He saw a rabbit run into its hole at the base of a tree. There was a small cat in the nearby grasses pouncing after mice. So much life everywhere! He thought how artificial Infinity City was in comparison. A complete creation by man.

Beyond the wall, the structure in the distance grew larger. It was round and the color of stone. Behind it, he also began to see some of the town's church towers spring up. Curious, he quickened his step.

The road went through a wide unguarded opening in the wall. Once through the wall, he began to see people walking along a road from the nearby town and entering the structure. He stopped and stared. The structure looked like a large arena or coliseum. It was made of stone. This was a Roman coliseum! There could be no doubt. He asked: "Computer-ears, is the communication link with the ship established?"

"Yes, normal function," it replied.

He turned his head so that one of his ears was pointed at the coliseum and ordered, "Computer-ears, scan that building, send the image to the ship computer and ask it if that is a Roman coliseum."

"Acknowledged... Ship computer reports, 'Yes. Earth Roman coliseum from estimated year AD 50 plus or minus 80 years."

John was struck with confusion. He must be in the time of ancient Rome, but all his celestial calculations had indicated the nineteenth century! He decided to investigate and continued toward the coliseum.

When he was only a few hundred yards away, he stopped and could see the details of the clothing being worn by the people. He was relieved to see similarities to his own garb. He smiled to himself at the excellent job of camouflaging both the ship and himself.

Then he squinted and frowned. French peasants from the nineteenth century entering a Roman coliseum? His eyes grew wide. What if what the Grand Dames had been worried about had come true?! What if the Infinity City Adventurers' meddling with

Time had finally had a chaotic effect? It was like universal order was unraveling. Maybe different points in Time were converging!

All the cosmological theories taught by Academy professors had always seemed unimportant to John. But, faced with seeming proof of a catastrophe beyond comprehension he wished that he had paid more attention to the endless lecturers and late night discussions during his Academy days regarding the chaotic effect theory.

The last few people entered the immense structure and there were no more. John frowned wondering what to do next. He checks: "Computer-ears, is the French language translation program ready?"

The computer-ears replied quietly, "Program ready," using John's own voice.

John directed the computer-ears to slowly translate anything he said into French. He would then repeat the phrases. He had practised this on the voyage to Earth and had familiarized himself with the current French allophones. He once again chastised himself for not actually learning French on the way over. But, he had disliked the few courses he had been required to take in non-English languages at the academy and Infinity City Adventurers swore by the usefulness of computer-ears which had been around for centuries.

He said, "How do I say, 'What is happening here, today?'" The computer-ears immediately responded in his own voice with the French equivalent. He repeated the phrases, enjoying the rolling, musical quality of the language. The Infinity City accent of English seemed so terse in comparison.

"I think I'm ready," he said to himself. The computer-ears once again translated exactly what he had said in French. He smiled a little to himself and proceeded once again toward the road leading to the structure.

He got to the road, which was just black dirt, hard packed from years, maybe centuries of use and walked into the coliseum through a tall archway of some ancient kind of wood. He was in a passageway between the entrance behind him and a bright exit before him to a sunlit area in the center of the building. The building smelled very musty and primitive.

Suddenly, there was the sound of several horned instruments through the sunlit opening. He also heard the sound of metal and wood banging and then the cheers of a large crowd. He crept forward.

At the end of the passageway, a man shorter than John stood with arms folded peering over a wooden wall a few feet in front of him. John looked around. Behind the wall, and curving around in both directions, was row upon row of primitive seating partially filled with people. There was also a large, shabbily dressed man with an easel painting the scene not too far away.

John came up beside the man in front of him. He wore peasant trousers and a soft, red official-looking jacket with matching low cap. At his waist, was slung an ornate sword. The man looked at him, nodding with a big grin then looked back over the wall. John asked in French, "What is happening here, today?" The man spoke without looking at him, "Bullfight, of course!"

Puzzled by the answer, John looked over the wall and was shocked at what he saw! A man in a bright green suit, with flashing sequins all over, wearing a square black hat, stood at one side of the open area facing a gigantic black bull at the other side of the area. A sword dangled from the man's belt. He was just standing there holding a large piece of material the same green color as his suit. The bull looked menacingly at the man, its head lowered almost to the ground. It had been stuck with several small swords which dangled from its sides. Blood could be seen glistening in the bull's coat.

John looked around. The open area with the man and bull was encircled by the wooden wall at about John's chest height. Around this was row upon row of wooden benches, almost full of people excitedly leaning forward, all eyes on the man and the bull.

Suddenly, the crowd yelled and John looked quickly to see the bull charging forward toward the man who was still just standing there holding the piece of material. John felt panicked and thought the man was going to be trampled. He reached into his pocket for his handgun, but hesitated. If this was all some chaotic problem with Time, he could make things worse by interfering with a device from a different technological era.

The bull was closing the gap rapidly. Was this some kind of sacrifice? But at the last second the man nimbly and with almost formal grace stepped to the side without moving the large green piece of material. The stupid bull roared toward the material ignoring the man. The man quickly lifted the material just as the bull went into it. Seeing the wooden wall just a few yards away, the bull ground to a halt, coming to a stop inches from the wall. The crowd roared with acclaim.

Immediately though, the bull pivoted around with amazing agility and charged the man again who once more fainted the bull with his piece of material.

This went on again and again. Charge and feint, charge and feint, the crowd growing louder and more excited all the time. Soon, the open area of the arena began to grow cloudy with the dust the bull had been kicking up. The high sides of the coliseum prevented the breeze from blowing the dust away.

The man in the arena led the bull to the opposite side where he and the bull disappeared in the growing dust. John could hear the cheers of the crowd from the other side rising and falling. Suddenly, the man emerged from the cloud of dust, running along the wooden wall to John's right. He looked scared and it was clear that he had lost track of the bull.

Then, catastrophe struck! The bull came charging out of the dust faster than John could believe any animal could run,

coincidentally heading straight for the running man. Its head was down and turned slightly to the side, as if it didn't care what was in front of it. But it saw the man and actually increased its speed until its legs were a blur of flying hooves.

This was so close that John could now feel the rumble of the mighty galloping bull through his feet. The man stumbled to a halt and, with awe-inspiring bravery, raised the material directly before him with his back inches in front of the wooden wall.

And then, with almost magical swiftness, the man once again skipped to the side. With a flash of bright green, the bull

burst through the material and smashed into the wooden wall with an explosion of sound and flying wooden splinters.

The nearby crowd, seeing what had happened, cheered and yelled in hysterical excitement and began to applaud. The people on the other side of the wall screamed in panic. As the dust cleared, John could see the bull only a few paces away actually now stuck halfway through the old wooden wall. The bull was snorting loudly and digging his hooves in the dirt, driving himself forward. People in front of the bull were leaping off the benches, climbing over each other in panic, knocking over the benches and falling over until no one was getting anywhere.

An elegant older lady and a young girl sat on the bench closest to the bull, staring at it with hands raised to their faces, frozen in terror. The girl was closest to John. On the other side of both of them, a small gentleman in a dark suit was frantically pulling at the older lady. John could hear him shouting, "Marian! Run! Run! The beast is almost free! Come on!" He finally pulled the lady up and began dragging her into the crowd trying to escape.

John realized with shock and greater confusion that the man was shouting in English, though with a strange accent.

But, now the bull was pulling itself forward, out from the planks of the wall, toward the poor frightened girl still staring at the bull only a few feet away.

John took a step toward the bull, his fists clenched in frustration. Should he interfere? Should he use a gun from Infinity City?

John was a man from Infinity City, a product of his family's timeless honor and trained by the centuries old proud and brave Infinity City Militia Guard. He could not stand there and watch this girl get killed, even if this was the past where this had already happened.

John went into action! He spun around, grabbed the handle of the sword worn by the guard, who was just staring at the bull with a wide-eyed disbelieving look. John yanked the sword out. The man mumbled something incoherent and stumbled away. John turned toward the bull.

The bull lunged forward and people watching from the

panicked crowd screamed hysterically. Some women were crying and John could hear a man chanting some religious sounding litany.

Some planks that had made up the top portion of the wall had collapsed down, trapping the bull's hind quarters. It crouched its hind legs and at the same time extended its front legs, lifting up the front part of its body to tip its rump down and out from the restraining planks. John saw his chance!

Bracing the sword under his arm, with the blade parallel to the bull's ribs, he lunged forward. The sword stabbed cleanly into the side of the bull's rib cage and John drove it in with all his might. The bull bellowed a terrifying roar! John slammed against his hands holding the hilt of the sword again and again, burying it inch by inch through the beast's chest. Finally, it came to a stop, pushing against the ribs on the opposite side.

The bull was now standing quite still. John leapt back. Looking down, he saw his handgun lying on the ground near the

bull. He had felt it bouncing around in his pocket while he had been lunging against the hilt of the sword, driving into the bull. It must have bounced out of the pocket! The bull turned its head to stare at John with a stupid, almost indifferent look, then collapsed to the ground, on top of the gun, its final breath blowing up a small dust cloud from its muzzle lying in the dirt.

John turned toward the girl on the bench just as her eyes, momentarily meeting his, began to close and she swayed to the side. But he quickly reached forward and caught her before she could fall from the bench. Lifting her slight form in his arms, he looked around wondering what to do next. He found his thoughts distracted by the warm, soft body he held -- he had been away from Infinity City and female companions for a long time. Her perfume filled his nose...

Some of the people around him began to clap and cheer. He saw they were looking at him!

Now that the bull was dead, the panicked crowd began to regain its composure. Men picked up their hats and shook their fists threateningly at the motionless black body. People began crowding around him. He was being clapped repeatedly on the shoulder.

The man, who had been with the girl and the older lady, came over from where he had found a place for the lady to sit down. He turned to John and said something in French which the computer-ears translated as, "That was a very brave act, young man!"

John replied, "Thank you," in English, forgetting that he only needed to whisper for his computer-ears to hear. They whispered "Merci," but before he could mimic this, the man surprisingly began speaking in English:

"Ah! You aren't French, you're English! Wonderful!" the man said with delight. He continued, "That accent sounds American, sort of. You just saved several lives, I believe.

Including perhaps, mine, my wife's, and her maid, there in your arms. Here, let me gather up my wife and let us all leave this barbarous old place." He left John, went over to his wife, gently took her hand and led her back to John. "Come, young man, out through the passageway..." He led his dazed and bedraggled wife past John and into the passageway. John followed him, still holding the unconscious girl.

As he followed the other two out, he looked down at the girl. She was very pretty, and light as a feather it seemed to John. She felt so warm against him. It was a nice feeling.

Once outside, the man speaking English led his wife and John over to a tree where he and his wife plopped down in the grass under the shade of the tree. As John gently lowered the girl, her eyes fluttered open and she stared with surprise into his face. She said something softly in French which John's computer-ears translated as, "What happened? Who are you?"

The man said brusquely and in English, "No need for French, Yvette. This is an American. He speaks English." And, then to John he extended his hand and said, "How do you do, my gallant young hero. I happen to be Edward Rothchild, England's ambassador to France. Who might you be?"

John took the man's hand and the man moved it vigorously up and down. Hand shaking was not an Infinity City custom, though John had seen this ritual in old digitally recorded movies from Earth, which his mother was fond of. A man of Infinity City greets another man usually by reaching forward both hands and taking hold of the other's hands or wrists, forearms, upper arms, shoulders, neck, or head, depending on how familiar the two are and how excited they are to see each other. The women of Infinity City tend toward a more dignified embrace, with a gentle kiss on the cheek or, with the immediate family, the mouth. Between men and women there was no established custom. It was left to the mood of the moment.

John said, "My name is John One." His computer-ears kept translating in French, but quiet enough so that John did not need to turn them off. "I'm a stranger here. I just arrived. Can you tell me if this is Rome?"

"Rome?!" the ambassador said humorously. "Young man, I think you had better sit down. You must be a little befuddled." John sat down on the soft grass near the ambassador's maid who was smiling at him.

John said, "I has trying to get to France," and he gestured at the coliseum, "I came across this coliseum and thought I was in Rome. But, you speak English."

"Hah! Young man, this IS France. This arena or 'coliseum,' as you put it, was built centuries ago BY the Romans to feed the locals, Christians of course, to the lions. They use it now only for bull fighting from time to time. You don't have bullfighting in America, do you?"

John mumbled, "There's no bullfighting where I come from..."

The Englishman chuckled. "What a mess we all are! Marian, look at yourself. You look as though the bull got to you."

The ambassador's wife replied, "Oh, that disgusting beast! These wretched French and their wretched customs!"

"Spanish, dear. Bullfighting is Spanish in origin, you know," he admonished.

"Well, where ever it is from, I shall never attend again! Barbarous! Typical of the Spanish, of course. Oh, Edward, let's go back to your cousin's home and get cleaned up. Just look at my dress! How could I ever have let you talk me into attending a bullfight. A bullfight!" She gathered herself together and stood to go. "Come along, Yvette!" she looked thoughtfully at John. "Young man, why don't you come and call this evening after we've all cleaned up? We are staying at the home of the ambassador's cousin, the house just beside the little art gallery on the main street of town. We shall expect you at eight o'clock!" She looked toward her husband, raised her nose into the air, arched her eyebrows in a regal fashion and said, "Come along, Edward! I think it's high time for a nice pot of tea!" And with that, she swirled about and headed off.

The ambassador looked at John and shrugged with a good-natured closed-mouth smile that made his cheeks bulge out like red apples. "Come by later, John! See you this evening." And with that, he turned to follow his wife marching away with her maid obediently following behind.

John said to himself, "This IS France! And, with a Roman coliseum!" He chuckled and shook his head, relieved that there was no cosmic catastrophe after all. He looked around. Some people were milling around, but most were returning home toward the town in the distance.

He decided to return to his ship and clean himself up. He had an invitation from the English ambassador to nineteenth century France. Amazing!

Then, John remembered their beautiful young maid. Yvette! He hurried off toward the ship, delighted with his adventure. What a dream come true! How proud his family would be when he returned with all these adventurous stories!

CHAPTER 8 - FRENCH CAFE

The sun was high overhead when John reached his ship. He slipped through the camouflage netting, entered the ship, went up to the pilot room and living quarters, and began preparing himself a lunch of ship's rations. Then he stopped, thinking to himself, 'This is nineteenth century France! They must have restaurants by now!' So, he put away the ship's rations, checked the gold, silver, and gems in his pockets, then left the ship for the local town.

He followed the same route as before. It was afternoon when he walked past the coliseum where his bullfight had taken place. No one was in sight. John, feeling great excitement, followed the road into the little town nearby.

He found himself on a small street paved with rounded stones and lined with a variety of shops, most with a second story containing what looked to be living quarters. Here and there, oldsters sat on rickety old chairs in the warm afternoon sunshine, watching John walk past with mild curiosity. A black enameled cart with bright red seats being pulled by a horse went by. It was driven by a man wearing a fine white suit with a wide-brimmed hat. To John, the cart made a great deal of noise as it bounced along the stone street with its steel shod wheels. He noted curiously that someone had nailed steel to the bottom of the horses hooves. The man flipped the reins controlling the horse. The horse flipped its tail and increased its speed.

All in all, it was a quiet town and no one paid him much heed.

At the very next street corner, John found a little cafe with three sets of tables and chairs outside on a covered porch made of dark red painted wood. A thick, timber post at the corner of the porch supported the roof and was decorated with baskets of bright flowers: red roses, orange marigolds, white lilies and soft blue irises.

At the far table, a skinny man with a red beard and close cropped hair emphatically lectured another man who was nodding sagely. Their voices were low, but John's computer-ears translated bits and pieces of their interesting conversation.

John looked around wondering what the proper custom was here. He decided to do what he would do at an Infinity City cafe. He sat down and folded his hands on the table. He felt self-conscious in spite of the fact that no one was paying him any attention. He hoped his small ingots of gold and silver would be negotiable so he would not have to figure out the value of local currency.

Eventually, a portly middle-aged man wearing an apron and wiping a glass came strolling out of the cafe. He turned to John with a sleepy look, his thick black wavy hair hanging down and dangling before his eyes. He began speaking in French with an air of bored authority. John's computer-ears began translating: "Yes, sir. Tell me what you want."

John looked down at the ground and mumbled to himself, "Something for lunch, please." His computer-ears told him what to say in French and he repeated this to the man who was the proprietor of the cafe.

His computer-ears translated the proprietor's response: "Ah well, sandwiches are very popular these days. I have several already prepared for my afternoon guests. Would you like a sandwich, a bowl of soup, a bottle of our delightful local blanc wine?..."

"Yes, that would be fine," he replied, mumbling first to the computers ears and then in French.

The proprietor tilted his head and squinted at John, "Ah, you are an Englishman, no?"

John said, "Oui," but then thought he had better keep his story consistent with what he had already told the ambassador. "No, I am from America. Far away."

"Ah, America! My only son left and went away to New York last year. We have just received a letter from him! What tales he tells! Are they all true? They must be. He has no imagination." He looked up into the sky, "Ah, if I were young again I suppose that I, too, would wish to visit another world."

John looked up into the sky wondering what world the man was referring to.

The proprietor looked back at John, shrugged and asked, "Well, I have not been young for a long time. I will continue spending my days feeding people. And what brings you here to our little town?"

John could be honest, "I am looking for works of art to purchase and bring back to... my home world."

"Ah, you are an art merchant! Well, well," he glanced in the direction of the two other guests, lowered his voice, "Do you see those two gentlemen over there? The one with the red beard is a painter. The one with him is a doctor... HIS doctor." He leaned close and whispered, "Stay away from the one with the red beard! He is crazy -- a crazy Dutchman! He has been here since the bullfight. I ask him who he is; he looks at me with eyes on fire; and he does not even know! A crazy man! So I telephone the insane asylum at St. Remy. You know what? THAT is where he is FROM! They send a doctor, the man he is now with. CRAZY DUTCH!" He shook his head, straightened and suggested, "For marvelous works of art, go see Monsieur Raton! He is our art dealer with a fine little gallery at the end of the street," and he pointed the way.

John leaned forward looking in the direction he was pointing. "Is the house just past the art dealer where the English ambassador is staying?"

"Yes, yes! How did you know this?"

"I have an invitation for dinner there this evening."

"Ah! How lucky you are, my friend. My YOUNG friend. For the maid of the house is the prettiest girl in all of Arles!"

There was something familiar to John about the name Arles. "Arles," he repeated. "Is that the name of this town?"

The proprietor looked at him in surprise, then with an exaggerated gesture felt John's forehead for fever. "My young friend, of course this is Arles! The fairest town in all the

south of France!" He winked and teased, "Maybe you are a little crazy like that painter over there." And he jerked a thumb in the direction of the two men at the other table.

John One improvised, "There's been so many towns I've visited since leaving, uh, America that I just got confused."

"Understandable! Quite understandable for a young world traveler such as yourself!" He waved a finger in the air, "But first, a magnificent lunch for you, so you will have strength for this evening should you chance to meet the fair Yvette." He winked, turned and strolled back into the cafe.

John was in the town of Arles. He thought to himself. What was it about this town that he should know about? He just could not remember.

Shortly, the proprietor re-appeared with a tray and laid before John a plate of little sandwich triangles, a bowl of steaming dark brown soup with the rich aroma of mushrooms, a dusty bottle of white wine and a glass. He set the tray down on the nearby vacant table, took the wine bottle in both hands, bit down on the exposed portion of the cork with his gleaming white teeth and with an experienced jerk of his head, popped the cork right out of the bottle.

Next, he poured into the glass and while doing so amazingly quickly lifted the bottle high above the glass and then back down without spilling a drop. "Enjoy, enjoy, Monsieur!" He smiled, bowed and went back inside the cafe.

John ate his meal while listening to the other two men discussing art, as translated by his computer-ears. Eventually, they both yawned, stretched and slowly moved off down the street. The proprietor eventually came out and cleared away their table, pocketing with surprise the generous number of coins they had left behind. He nodded to John with a friendly smile as he carried a tray containing the remains from the table back into the cafe.

It was a lazy afternoon. The soft, French wine relaxed him and made life seem to glow. He sat for a long, long time just watching the simple easy life of the nineteenth century going by. The proprietor drifted over now and then to see if there was anything he wanted or just to chat. For a while, he saw many people going by carrying baskets of food stuffs, long baguettes of French bread sticking way up out of every basket. Then, there was no one and the town seemed itself to fall asleep for an afternoon nap.

Toward midafternoon a delightful turn of events took place. Looking across the street, John spotted the ambassador's pretty

French maid: Yvette. She was strolling along slowly, as if out for a walk. She looked over toward the cafe and saw John regarding her. She came to a stop and smiled. Then, she turned toward him, took a step, but then stopped and looked back down the street.

Finally, she looked back at John and with a shy smile

proceeded to cross the street. She was wearing her maid's uniform: short sleeved black blouse, short black skirt, white frills all around with a large white bow about her waist, all fluttering in the warm, floral scented afternoon breeze.

As she stepped up to the cafe's porch, shyly approaching John, he rose to greet her. Taking her hand and gazing into her soft dark brown eyes she seemed twice as beautiful as before. She had a wide mouth with very red lips and an easy smile. Her brunette hair was braided together in a circle on top of her head, a pleasing style John had never seen before. Her little maid's uniform complimented her exceptional figure. John wondered if she were married...

In English, forgetting to use his computer-ears, he asked her to sit down. However, she understood and immediately took the chair he offered. He asked, "Do you speak English?"

"Oh yes, ever since I was a little girl!" she replied with an exquisite, almost musical French accent to her English. She went on to explain that her father's second wife -- her mother -- was English.

Then she asked him his name. "I'm John. John One", he said, entranced by her beauty and simplicity of nature. Her face was without imperfection and aristocratically pale though John noticed a slight, naturally warm hue as if it was reflecting a golden sunset. Her thick eyebrows, forming a straight black line above each eye, were most alluring. "You are Yvette?" he asked.

"Yes," and she grew serious. "You were so brave. I cannot believe what you did. That animal was terrifying!"

"I'm lucky that man with the sword was standing nearby! What a strange activity?" He shook his head looking at the table. Then, looking at her, "What were you all doing there?"

"What? It was a bullfight! You have not seen one?"

"No, never."

"Oh, but you could be the greatest of all bullfighters, monsieur! Never have I seen such courage. You must be a bullfighter already! You are teasing me!" And she turned her head to give him a sideways glance and blinked the long lashes of her eyes. John felt his heart beating strongly.

"No, I have never been to a bullfight!"

"Yes your accent is strange. You are a foreigner. You are not English?"

"I'm... American."

Her eyes lit up and she lifted her face with a broad smile. "American! You are from America? Oh, America! Tell me about it. I would love to go there!"

Now he was on the spot. He hated lying. However, the

Adventurers in his family had advised him not to tell people in the past about Infinity City or anything that was beyond their understanding. He tried to remember what he had learned of America from school. In the Militia Guard Academy, they had studied some American military achievements and of course the constitution-based democratic government system; Infinity City's own constitution, the original one itself written by the Original Builders, was sealed in a glass chamber rumored to be the very one that stored the original American constitution. There were many ancient original documents proving that Infinity City had been founded by the last of the Americans, fleeing from some impending Earth disaster, long forgotten. But, the greatest of all Infinity City mysteries was the nature of this impending disaster. All electronic records of this time had been erased by the Original Builders. Only a few secret paper-based diaries mentioned it, and only with terrified generalities.

He tried to generalize, "Um, America is a wonderful place. Very modern. They have a constitutional government, you know."

"Yes, but what does America look like? What city are you from?"

"Well, um, I'm from Infinity City."

"Infinity City? I have never heard of it. You must be from a small town, no?"

"It's not small. But, it is way out in the frontier. Are you from this town, um, Arles?"

She sat back and sighed, "Oui, this is my little town. Here I start, and here I stay. My father was killed in Africa many years ago. I take care of my mother here. She has no family in England. She lives with an old friend who is also a widow. We have many friends here in little Arles..."

They talked about the different people around town. She seemed to know the most amazing facts about everyone. The proprietor of the cafe served them a bottle of light, festive wine from Italy. John had paid for his lunch in nothing less than gold, so the proprietor had decided that here was a customer that would expect the best. Fortunately for John, the proprietor had a weighing scale from an era long gone by and was able to weigh John's small ingots of gold and exchange some for local currency, keeping a modest 'exchange fee' for himself.

The wonderful afternoon proceeded. John gazed into Yvette's eyes as she talked about Arles. She was happy to dominate the conversation and enjoyed John's undivided attention. John felt a strange excitement deep down inside and he realized that he was falling in love with this lovely young French girl. His serious side told him, "YOU CAN'T FALL IN LOVE WITH A GIRL THAT DOESN'T EXIST ANYMORE!" But he thought to himself, "I AM AN ADVENTURER NOW. AND, THIS FEELS LIKE ONE OF THE GREATEST ADVENTURES ANY MAN FROM INFINITY CITY HAS EVER HAD!"

She was telling him of some little old man with an art shop next to where the ambassador was staying and her hand was holding a wine glass on the table. John, listening with half an ear,

reached forward and gently stroked her fingers. She stopped talking and released the glass, allowing him to take her soft, feminine hand in his. They looked deeply into each other's eyes, knowing that each was enjoying the same feeling.

She smiled and said, "You are an interesting man."

"You are a beautiful woman," he said with sincerity and felt his face flush.

She pursed her lips, her eyes twinkling, and asked slowly, "You are not married, John?"

"No!" he said quickly, shaking his head. With a pang of sadness, he thought of the girl he knew back on Infinity City that he wanted to marry. She, however, was not the marrying type. Would she ever be? But it did not matter now... He looked up and said lightly, "I've never been married! I'm too young!"

She laughed gayly, "Too young?! I was already eight years old when Papa was the age you appear to be now." Then, she sadly looked down. "That is when we received the letter telling us that he had been killed on the frontier." She looked up and sighed, "How nice it would be to have parents to take a young man like you home to meet."

"I would love to meet your mother!"

"Ah, I would love for you to meet her, but you see, my mother is bed-ridden and cannot be excited. After we heard about Papa, she grieved too much. She took sick during a terrible outbreak of pol... How do you say? 'Poliomyelitis.'" She pronounced the difficult original term for 'polio' slowly. "I took a young man home to meet her once and she became hysterical with the fear that I would leave her. So, I can't do that now."

A young man? John felt his heart beating in his breast again. "Yvette, is there another right now? Someone else?"

She slowly smiled. To John, it was like a brilliant sunrise. "No. He is no more." She paused to watch the color return to his face. She was delighted with such open interest he showed in her. She patted the hand he was still holding her with. "Ah, but let us not let things move too fast, my new friend. It grows late, now..."

"Oh no, stay!" John beseeched her, taking both of her hands in his.

"I would sit talking with you forever, but now I must hurry away to help with dinner. It will be nice to see you again tonight! Come early. They will not mind. I am so fond of that silly old Englishman, and his wife is very kind to me and my mother." And with that, she rose suddenly, and with a smile so bright John felt his heart bursting in his chest, she leaned over and kissed him on both cheeks then hurried off down the street, in the direction she had come from, turning now and then to wave and throw more kisses.

John thought to himself, "SHE IS THE MOST BEAUTIFUL OF ALL FLOWERS. COULD I BRING HER BACK HOME?" He decided to put off thinking about that and just sat basking in the wonderful feelings warming his heart. He asked his computers ears for the time. Finding out it was almost evening, he frowned realizing that he would have to go all the way back to his ship to wash himself and build new clothes (his present attire was slightly soiled due to the altercation with the bull), then come all the way back.

The proprietor noticed him frowning and perceptively asked, "Monsieur, do you have a place in town as yet?"

John turned to him in puzzlement, asking, "A place?"

"Yes. To stay. If not, I have some very comfortable rooms upstairs. I even have what I call my Suite Royale with its own private bath. My brother works with the new lead plumbing!"

John slowly realized with all the gold, silver and gems his uncle had synthesized for him, life would be very easy here. All were molecularly accurate and no one in this century would know they were of artificial structure. He said slowly, "I will need some fresh clothing..."

"Ah! Our tailor is right next door! While you enjoy a hot bath, I will purchase for you robes and another set of clothing. Do I have your permission? Yes?... Good! The tailor will come after your bath. He can perform miracles in the wink of an eye! Wait right here for a short while. My wife will arrange your room and I will prepare a hot bath for you by simply pumping hot water up to your room from a tank of water that is being heated beside our stove. Ingenious, yes? My brother will grow rich with such ideas!" He winked at John, "You should take him back with you to America!" After receiving, with great delight, a generous payment on account from John in pure gold, he bowed deeply then hurried off to make preparations.

John checked his pocket to make sure there was plenty more gold...

Soon, the proprietor came to lead him to his room. The proprietor's name was Custeau and this sounded familiar to John. He seemed to remember this as the name of some famous Original Builder with remarkable genius in creating the artificial environment of Infinity City based on experience from ancient Earth building... What was it? Underground or undersea cities? Well, he could check with the computer later...

CHAPTER 9 - HOME OF THE AMBASSADOR'S COUSIN

It was a warm and pleasant quiet evening when John stepped off the porch of Custeau's' cafe wearing fresh clothing that the tailor had indeed custom fit at a moment's notice. He headed toward the house of the ambassador's cousin. He carried a bottle of wine as a gift that Custeau had insisted would guarantee a festive evening.

He walked past several quaint buildings trimmed in glossy red, yellow and green then finally came to the residence that had been described to him as belonging to the Ambassador's cousin, a rich land owner. A fine old two story house with white stucco facade and a little walkway bordered with colorful flowering bushes leading up to the doorway.

He was greeted at the door by lovely Yvette who took his hand for a moment, smiling brightly up at him, and then led him into the parlor where the Ambassador and his cousin were sitting enjoying cigars and cognac. They rose and greeted him warmly, the Ambassador introducing John as "Our dashing American hero!". The ambassador was dressed in a business suit of the time, and his cousin, as old as the ambassador, in a white uniform from some branch of the French military service. He had cool, piercing eyes and very short, rough gray hair.

Next, the Ambassador's wife Marian came sweeping into the room wearing an informal pink dress. "Ah, our young hero!" she said with a merry-cheeked closed mouth smile. She offered her hand to John who took it and on impulse kissed it as he had seen done in some old movie from ancient Earth. "And such a gentleman, even though he is from America," Marian said looking admiringly at John. She took his proffered bottle of wine. "Thank you, John, but you didn't have to bring anything. Especially wine. The basement of this house is well stocked."

The ambassador chuckled and said, "Just something to help keep us warm during next winter." He chuckled and puffed up his cigar until he disappeared behind a cloud of thick smoke.

Mrs. Rothchild made an exasperated sound then looked over at Yvette who stood with a wide smile, blushing, eyes all a glitter watching John. "Yvette! Open these windows and let out all this awful smoke," and then to her husband: "Honestly, Edward, I simply DON'T know how I put up with this foul smelling tobacco habit of yours!" The Ambassador just chuckled.

They offered John a chair and a glass of cognac which he accepted. They talked of pleasantries and the local doings, and whenever the conversation turned round to where John was from he generalized and evaded much description about America.

Yvette served a platter of little sweet treats at one point -- she and John exchanging a warm glance. John was surprised at how comfortable and close people could be from completely different backgrounds. There was a small fire crackling in the fireplace now. John noticed its reflection in the cognac glasses and also the ambassador's spectacles.

Presently, the ambassador asked, "You are a very pleasant and likeable young man John One. So charming in fact that you've been here over one hour and I have not even asked you your line of work." He gave John a penetrating look, reminding John of his uncle.

At least now John could be honest. "I'm purchasing art... For sale in the... new world."

The ambassador leaned back satisfied, "Splendid! There's such a market for the niceties over there in America. I've heard they are even buying up pieces and parts of castles from all over Europe. I'm not sure that even Buckingham and Windsor are safe!" His cousin and wife laughed at this.

Then the ambassador's cousin raised a finger and exclaimed, "Ah! Just the man you need to see is right next door."

The ambassador's wife said, "Of course! Monsieur Raton the art dealer! Shall we send Yvette next door to fetch him 'round?"

"Splendid idea, my darling, splendid!" the ambassador agreed and they sent Yvette next door to invite Monsieur Raton over.

After Monsieur Raton arrived he was introduced to John, and provided libation, though he refused a cigar. John explained that he was going to travel around France using Arles as a base of operations and acquire works of art that he felt would be popular back in the "new world."

The art dealer, a very lean and old man, burnt brown from years of painting in the bright sun, asked pointedly, "What exactly is your price range, young man? And also, how many pieces can you manage back to America?"

"Well, as many as my ship will hold and as many as I can buy with these..." and John brought forth a handful of shining, small precious metal ingots from one pocket and a handful of sparkling red, green, and transparent gems from another.

"Good Lord!" shouted the ambassador leaping to his feet, the ash of his cigar cascading down the wide lapel of his smoking jacket. The ambassador's wife gasped, her eyes wide with astonishment.

John said, "I have much more -- back in my ship!"

The ambassador's cousin leaned close, then looked up at John and commented suspiciously, "That is a remarkable fortune in treasure you hold in your hands. Was it obtained legally?"

"Philip!" barked the ambassador. "He's not some Mediterranean pirate. The integrity of this fine fellow is unimpeachable. He saved our very lives today at the bullfight!"

Monsieur Raton the art dealer commented, "Yes, I heard of that." He stared at John's treasure with envy, commenting with a slight bitterness, "These rich Americans are all over poor Europe these days. They're buying up our heritage and enticing our youths to emigrate away." He then sighed heavily, "Still, I am sure Monsieur One, though American, is an honest businessman."

John, taken aback by their reaction, quickly asserted, "Yes, of course I am honest! My family is one of Infinity City's most reputable."

"'Infinity City'?" the ambassador's wife asked. "It sounds

like one of those gold-rush towns in far away California."

"That's where he's from!" cried Yvette, who had been peeking in through the doorway to the kitchen.

Marian twisted around in her chair and directed, "Yvette! The kitchen cannot possibly be cleaned up yet. Away with you!" She waved her finger and Yvette disappeared back to the kitchen. "Well, I hope SHE didn't see these treasures. She'll tell that boyfriend of hers. I'm sure he and all his friends are thieves!"

"Now, now, Marian, my dear. She doesn't talk to him and has nothing to do with him. HE just will not take no for an answer. Had to chase the young fellow away from her window just the other night. Remember, Philip? The young blade was prowling around out back like a cat!"

"Yes, yes. There's so many like him these days. They should all be pressed into the service!"

The art dealer had not taken his eyes from John's handfuls of sparkling gems and gold and silver. John put them back in his pockets and the spell was broken. Monsieur Raton looked up and offered, "You must see my small inventory next door, young man. I'm sure there will be something that interests you."

John responded, "Yes, I'll start there. Do you think I have enough to pay for it right here? I have much more in my ship..."

"More!" exclaimed the ambassador.

The art dealer smiled at John, "My friend, you are so wealthy! Not only do you have enough there in one handful for my entire stock, but I must tell you that there is no need for you to travel around at all. I can arrange to purchase the finest works from all over France and have them sent right here. I shall be discreet, of course, so that we do not suffer a plague of amateurs harassing you day and night.

John looked at the ambassador and his cousin who both smiled and nodded. He shook Monsieur Raton's hand. The ambassador said, "Well, it seems a most equitable business dealing has now been struck. Gentleman, and lady, let us toast to the good fortune of both young John One here and our good friend Monsieur Raton!" And with that, the ambassador's cousin Philip broke out an especially dusty old bottle of local wine and the evening proceeded in a jolly fashion.

CHAPTER 10 - AN ENCOUNTER

It was late when John finally departed the residence of the ambassador's cousin Philip. It was a cool, brisk night and so quiet and still. He headed down the little walkway and into the street where he turned toward the cafe. He began walking. After a few steps he heard the sound of a door closing and looked over to see Yvette emerge from the darkness at the side of the house. John was near a gas street-lamp. When Yvette had moved within its cone of light, he saw that she was wearing a soft, olive

green sweater with her arms wrapped tightly around her to ward off the chill night air. John instantly thought about putting his arms around her to keep her warm. She walked up to him, smiled happily up into his face and then began to shiver. He slowly leaned forward and put his arms about her. She leaned into him, her head contentedly against his chest.

She said, "Oh John, you are such a very nice friend to have." Her hands had been clasped to each other, but now she slipped them anxiously into his open coat and about his waist. The sensation filled him with an almost electric flow of pleasure. She was soft and delicate and so very feminine. He could stand with her here all night long. He slowly, gently began swaying with her, back and forth, and she let out a sweet sigh of pleasure.

All too soon, she slowly pulled away, looked up into his eyes and sadly said, "There are things I still have to do. I must go now, John." With her eyes half closed, she gave him a dreamy smile and drifted back to the house. His craving to stay with her ached within him. Maybe to follow her into the house. But, that would have been out of place. He watched her disappear back into the gloom. The side-door of the house opened. He saw her beautiful silhouette in the light from within, then heard her lovely voice, "Good night, John!" And then the door closed.

John sighed and headed back to the cafe, thinking of his cozy little room. He had experienced a wonderful evening with these fine folk, especially with Yvette peeking in from time to time to catch his eye. He was caught by complete surprise by what happened on the way back to the cafe.

He walked slowly back along the main street the way he had come. He had not had much to drink, disliking being in less than complete control of himself. Some of the buildings along main street were free-standing with narrow alleyways between them that were inky dark at night. John moved to the smooth stone walkway along a building to avoid the rough stones of the street and peered into one of these alleyways after he thought he had heard a rustling sound. Nothing. He continued on.

When he reached the cafe, he noticed a man at one of the tables holding a glass. There was an empty bottle of wine before him. A few lamps had been hung from the overhanging roof and John could see him clearly in the flickering light. But the man's dark cap hid his face. John proceeded toward the door of the cafe. Then, he heard the man say, "Monsieur! Come here. I want to talk to you!"

John turned slowly toward the stranger. The man was looking up at him and appeared to be young, no more than John's age. He motioned with the hand not gripping the bottle for John to come closer. John's instincts raised the red flag.

John walked over to the table warily and asked, "Yes? What can I do for you?"

"Monsieur... That girl. She is mine! Stay away. Stay away from her!" He was slurring and obviously drunk.

He thought that the man must have mistaken him for someone else. "You don't mean Yvette the English ambassador's maid, do you?"

"Yes, yes, of course I mean her, you FOOL! Stay AWAY from my girl. She is for me only!" His voice was taking on a vicious tone.

John One was not a drinker and had little experience dealing with drunks. He decided to try reasoning with him, "Yvette has no relationship with anyone else right now, so she cannot be your girl. You must have me mixed up with someone else."

Hearing John repeatedly mumbling English for his computer-ears then speaking French, affected the man oddly. He twisted his head and his face contorted into a disgusted look, "What is wrong with you? You are mad! I think I should beat some sense into you!" He rose slowly, weaving a little, and grabbed the wine bottle with his right hand. He swung it backward, obviously preparing a mighty blow for John.

John felt disbelief at how intimately circumstances were turning out, even though he was thousands of years back in the past, in an era that should already have been past and turned to dust. However, he was a well-trained fighter with excellent reflexes; a supreme warrior of Infinity City's Militia Guard. John relaxed into combat mode as the man swung the bottle toward him. He shot out his left hand in a lightening fast knife-punch to the wrist of the man's arm that was wildly swinging toward him. The man's hand sprung open and the bottle flew away, shattering across the cafe porch.

The man snarled and then made a drunken lunge for John with both hands. The table was already in the man's way so John quickly swung his right arm up to the right side of the man's neck and, pressing in, deflected the man's lunge so that he went painfully crashing over the table which tipped over tossing him down to the porch which he rolled off of, falling down into the dust of the street.

There was a shout at the cafe doorway and the owner appeared holding a lantern and waving a blunderbuss in a threatening manner. "What is going on out here? Ah, Monsieur John One!

What is happening?" Then, he saw the young ruffian rising shakily out of the street. "Louis Igrette! I might have known! Causing more trouble I see. Monsieur One, are you all right?" he said looking at John.

John replied, "Yes, I'm fine. I think he's drunk. He threw a bottle at me. It seems he doesn't want me to be friends with Yvette, the English ambassador's maid."

Custeau looked around his cafe porch, seeing the overturned table and broken glass. He pointed the large gun at Louis Igrette, "Off with you, young hoodlum, before I call the gendarmes. You are lucky you broke nothing more than a bottle. There are too many of you young trouble makers around these days."

The drunken Igrette ignored Custeau and made a clumsy leap at John from the street, but smashed his shin against the edge of the porch and toppled over to fall at John's feet. Custeau shouted, "Tap his head a few times with your boot, Monsieur! He cannot think straight!"

John reached down to the man and offered his hand, "Here, now. You've had too much alcohol. You are inebriated." But the man pulled himself painfully up, brushing away John's hand. He shook his finger at John, "Just stay away from her, you fool!" He turned toward the cafe owner, spat on the porch, whirled drunkenly about and reeled away into the night.

"Young raging bull! Why doesn't he find honest work like yourself, Monsieur One? Here, let me get you a relaxing drink..."

"No, no thank you, Monsieur Custeau. I'm very tired and just want to sleep." He left Custeau to clean up the cafe porch and went up to his little room where he tugged off the strange fitting local clothing and fell into the bed, going to sleep almost immediately.

CHAPTER 11 - AT THE GALLERY

John saw Monsieur Raton's fine collection of paintings and drawings the next day. Based on what John had learned from the historical section of his ship computer's atomic memory regarding ancient art, it was a fine collection. They discussed the business of art collection until John had a clear idea of what he was looking for.

Monsieur Raton now got busy contacting various dealers and artists around the country. John found himself free to explore. Monsieur Raton leant him a rickety but workable bicycle allowing John to tour around the little town and the surrounding countryside. It also let him discreetly quickly shuttle back and forth between the town and his ship.

Every few days when something interesting would arrive at Monsieur Raton's shop, John would purchase it, carefully roll up the canvas artwork, wrap it in burlap, then ride off with the bundle stowed in his bicycle's basket, storing the precious ancient relic back in his ship. He told those that asked, that his ship was docked at a secret place, not too far away downriver.

And he began to see Yvette regularly at the cafe each afternoon during her mistresses' nap. Holding her hand at the table, that soft delightful touch and her gay conversation, made him feel alive in a way he had never felt before. When he would look up and see her approaching the cafe smiling, his whole world would burst into brightness, as if the sun had just come out from behind a dark cloud.

He found himself trying to think of a way to be alone with

her. Unfortunately, between working at the ambassador's residence and tending her helpless mother, Yvette was left only an hour or two each afternoon.

One afternoon however, they were both over at the art dealer's gallery and John was showing her some amazing new works that had just arrived. The local telegraph boy rushed in with a message for Monsieur Raton. It seemed that an important contact in Paris had the chance to buy out an entire collection from a gallery that was going out of business. The art dealer translated the telegraph for John:

"Dallet Gallery to go out of business. Dallet has immediate opportunity abroad. Will sell entire collection but only today. Will wait one hour for reply. -- Gaston." He waved the telegraph in the air and spoke excitedly to John, "This is a marvelous collection! I have seen it myself. But it will be very expensive, Monsieur One. That fool Gaston! Purchasing so many costly older pieces himself instead of selling on consignment... I TOLD him it would one day be his ruin!"

John still had plenty of treasure left. So, making a suave gesture with his hand he cried, "Buy it, Monsieur Raton!" He grinned over at Yvette hoping she would be impressed, and found her looking up at him with such open admiration that he felt slightly embarrassed.

Monsieur Raton hurried out the door with the telegraph boy. John and Yvette watched them go then looked at each other. Yvette said, "So, we are finally alone, Monsieur One." And, she tilted her pretty face up toward his and looked deeply into his eyes.

He took her hands in his and felt a hot burst of excitement flash through his body. Her lips were full and inviting, and he was so very much in love. He gently leaned down, touching his lips to hers. They were soft and warm, and so very full and yielding. The moment was a magic experience. They gazed into each others eyes while they kissed. Her eyes slowly closed as if she was being overwhelmed. He experienced the soft, sweet moistness of her breath and felt intoxicated by this intimacy that he had been longing for.

She pulled his arms behind her and he wrapped them around and slowly tightened her up in his strong embrace. She moaned in delight at being completely in his control.

She broke from the kiss and nuzzled into his neck where the warmth of her breath sent electric shivers of pleasure through him. Then they kissed again. And, again!

After a time, John thought of the little studio in the back of the gallery with a couch used by Monsieur Raton's infrequent models.

He had just begun to lead Yvette in this direction when he heard a cough from behind him. They both turned to find that

Monsieur Raton had returned. Yvette blushed with embarrassment and announced that she had to go and help prepare dinner next

door at Monsieur Philip's. She slipped past Monsieur Raton and disappeared.

Monsieur Raton announced that the purchase of the art gallery had been made. He broke out a bottle of wine to celebrate and John worked hard at acting pleased...

After the large shipment of paintings, drawings and frames arrived from the Dallet gallery, John found himself very busy carefully wrapping everything and transporting it out to his ship. He was making so many trips a day that his route became conspicuous to a certain undesirable observer.

Late one evening, the third day of his frequent trips to his ship, he set out with one of the last loads. It was a warm humid night and he quickly broke into a sweat as he maneuvered the primitive bicycle along the road to the ship.

He approached the dark gloomy shape of the coliseum and it loomed up before him. He looked inside the archway entrance remembering when he had first seen Yvette there, but he could see nothing in the darkness. For some reason he suddenly felt apprehensive and moved on, turning into the road leading through the wall and back to his ship.

There were not many trees in this rural pasture-land and he was approaching one of the few. Night had fallen, giving the tree the appearance of a gigantic black mushroom against the starry night sky. He had just passed the tree when he spotted a log placed across the road. The primitive bicycle had no brakes so John turned quickly to try to avoid crashing against the log. He lost balance, but easily jumped off the bike still holding the handle bars to prevent the bike from tipping and possibly damaging his delicate cargo. Unfortunately, his foot caught on a branch stub sticking out of the log. John tripped forward over the log and had to let go of the bike as he hit the ground. His reflexes turned the fall into a shoulder-roll, saving him from landing on, and possibly breaking, his wrist.

But, as he picked himself up, he heard a grunt from behind and someone crashed into him, sending him smashing back into the ground. It was a heavyset man who roared with delight as he pinned his victim below him. John felt his left arm scrape the road pretty roughly as he broke his fall. His right arm was free so he gathered his strength and jerked it backward in an elbow smash. It hit something soft and the man on top of him gave a deep grunt. John twisted over and the big man toppled off.

John jumped up to find three other dark menacing shapes encircling him. One said in a low, scratchy voice shaking with passion, "We will see who is the best now, my friend. I warned you! Now, you will pay me all that I want from you. Your money and your life! My friends and I will say that we saw you sailing away down the Rhone. But really, it will be your dead body floating away!" John started to reach for his pocket, then realized with shock and frustration that he had forgotten to recover his handgun the day of the bullfight -- Yvette had so

filled his mind...

The scratchy voiced one was addressing his associates: "He has gold and silver and jewels all over him, my friends. He is ours for the taking!" With that, they were upon him!

John leapt to the right and smashed into the man closing in on that side, surprising him. The man didn't lose his balance though, and began to grab at John who quickly balled up his right hand tightly and back-fisted the man in the face. John crushed the man's nose. The man screamed, letting go of John to grab at his face. John grabbed him about the waist and swung him around between himself and the other assailants.

The remaining two just threw their cohort aside and jumped simultaneously at John who was just getting his footing. They grabbed at him. The one on John's left began pummeling John's side. John heard "I kill you! I kill you, now!" as his computer-ears dutifully translated each guttural yell from the man who John now recognized as Igrette. The other man was wrapping his hands around John's neck.

They were both in front and slightly to the sides of him, and in so close that he could not get his fists free enough to punch. The man on the right was beginning to squeeze John's neck hard. John could not get his hands up to fight off the choking grip. But his legs were free. He shifted his weight to his left leg, lifted the right leg and snap-kicked down onto the top of the man's foot. The man shook with the pain that burst up from his smashed foot, though he held his grip around John's neck.

John's left side was going numb from the pummeling of the other man. John suddenly arched backwards and lifted his knees to unbalance the two attackers. It worked! They began toppling over onto him. With incredible spit-second intuition, John jerked both arms back then pushed his fists up against both men's solar plexi. They all fell over; as John's elbows came to an abrupt stop against the grassy ground the full falling weight of the men slammed John's rock-hard fists into the extremely vulnerable soft spot in the middle of each chest, between the diaphragm and the sternum. He heard both of them sharply exhale a wet cough and each fell away from him, gasping for breath.

John leapt to his feet. The two that had fallen away were moving slowly, coughing wetly and making horrible breathing sounds. They would not have their breath back for many minutes! The one who's nose John had smashed was kneeling a short distance away holding his face and sobbing in pain. But where was the big one that had first attacked him?

From behind him he heard a sickeningly gleeful voice, "And now, I cut you, Monsieur!" John looked over his shoulder behind him to see an arm raising a large throwing knife high in the air, the blade glinting ominously in the moonlight and starlight. John was dizzy from being choked; his body stiff from being pummeled and fallen upon by two men. He tried to move out of the way as the powerful arm sent the knife down on its swift decent toward his back.

Suddenly, a tremendous explosion erupted with a fire-burst from the side that momentarily lit up the big man's leering face and hairy knife arm. Then, a terrible scream and John heard the big man crash down to the ground on his other side. There was a horrible choking, gurgling sound -- and then silence.

John turned toward the source of the explosion. Someone turned up a lantern and John could see three other men. He crouched and brought his fists up before him. Then he heard a familiar voice shouting, "Monsieur One! Monsieur One, it is I, Custeau!" And with over-whelming relief, John recognized Monsieur Custeau standing in the lantern light, holding his still smoking blunderbuss. John relaxed, took a deep breath and waved at his rescuers.

"Monsieur One," Custeau cried. "Are you all right? Are you hurt?"

John's throat was very sore and his side was bruised and also sore, but he felt no sharp pains anywhere. "I'm all right. These men were behind the tree there..."

Custeau came forward, "Yes, yes! My friends -- our two gendarmes -- and I followed them all the way out here! I saw them watching you today, all day long. And yesterday, also! I knew they were up to no good. When I saw them getting together tonight, I went out my back door with my blunderbuss and found my two good friends Jacques and Paul here and we followed them, perhaps almost at too safe a distance for you, eh? Heh, heh! I never went to America, but there is still a little adventure here in France, eh?"

One of the gendarmes held the lantern up and closely peered at the big man on the ground. John saw a gory mess. The gendarme grunted, "This one is dead. Good! One less to tie up and send to the bastille."

The other added, "Monsieur Undertaker will be busy all night building a big, big box for that one, huh?" The other one chuckled and they set to work tying up the remaining three assailants.

But suddenly, Igrette leapt out of their grip, ran to the corpse of the big man and yanked the big knife out of the dead hand that was still clutching it. He turned toward the gendarmes, his face a mask of vicious hatred in the lantern light. "You turds, Jacques and Paul. You have always sickened me. You parade around and act so righteous, fooling the girls so that they always look at you! You! YOU!" His voice had risen to an eery, high pitched scream. He began his attack of the two gendarmes, who stood frozen in slack-jawed confusion.

Just before Igrette was upon them, there was another explosion and burst of fire as the Custeau's mighty blunderbuss went off again.

John heard one of the gendarmes exclaim something in a whisper and John looked down to see the fallen body of Igrette

without a head. John looked over to where the remains of the head were spread through the grass, and then quickly looked away. He looked over at Custeau who smiled happily, began nodding and said, "Hah! Look inside the bell of my blunderbuss. There are two barrels!" He grimaced seriously. "So. No more trouble from these worthless rats. Arles is no place for young no-goods."

One of the gendarmes said shakily, "Monsieur Custeau, you make a lot of work for 'Monsieur The Undertaker' tonight!"

The gendarmes tied up the other two and led them away, one limping with a broken foot, the other still holding his bloody nose. John and Custeau followed them back to town.

* * *

John and Custeau sat on the porch of the cafe each with a strong drink and indeed heard 'Monsieur Undertaker' in his woodshop sawing and hammering late into the night.

CHAPTER 12 - THE PARTING

The incident with the young ruffians, and their resulting deaths, caused John a great deal of inner turmoil. He was causing an awful lot of change back in this time. What if it resulted in some kind of cosmic problem like the Grand Dames always warned the Infinity City Adventurers about? He began feeling the urge to leave.

But there was sweet Yvette. What a pretty, delicate flower! So full of inner music and love! He wanted to take her back and had even began telling her, in general terms, how wonderful life was in Infinity City, his home. Sensing the direction of his thoughts, however, she would remind him that she had her mother to take care of.

He thought about leaving the remainder of his treasures with her mother, but even with her mother taken care of, how would he explain to the authorities who Yvette was? Someone brought from the past? That would cause extraordinary trouble. The Grand Dames would be furious! And for what reason? LOVE?! Deirdre, Grand Dame of his own family, would be greatly upset over such irresponsible behavior from a Larsch.

One day, he was touring the countryside on the borrowed bicycle pondering these dilemmas and also admiring the beautiful country side of mother Earth. The brightness of the blue sky and the puffy clouds. The lazy waving grasses of the meadows and fields. A multitude of animals always here and there, up in the sky and on the ground. He stopped to watch a farmer guiding a team of horses pulling a shiny, steel plow. He paid John no heed and just kept turning the ground over and over.

John's treasures had dwindled down and it was too late to offer to support for Yvette's mother. With a deep sigh, John realized that there was nothing he could do but tell Yvette it was time for him to go, and time for them to break things off.

He heaved himself up on the bicycle and peddled for Arles.

It was the afternoon and as usual he waited for her on the porch of the cafe. There was a huge welling of emotion inside him. He thought about just taking her aboard his ship and flying away to live on some other world. But at this time, no other human worlds existed yet! To take her to another world, he would have to sail back to the black hole to Infinity City, enter it, then immediately leave again taking the 90 degree vector back into the universe at the point in time of the ever unfurling present; or even a different vector into the recent past. But such a strange maneuver would arouse the Militia Guard to send up fightercraft to follow, rendezvous and investigate... It was all too complex for John who preferred life to flow smoothly and without complication.

He could stay here, but then his supply of the PILL OF LIFE would run out -- he would 'catch' aging and eventually die. And what was worse, he would have to watch sweet Yvette catch aging, grow old and die. He shivered. How could they all live so pleasantly with the inevitable prospects of aging and dying? What a tragic time!

Then suddenly, strong feelings of discipline clamped down. He thought about his uncle who was counting on him, and the other Adventurers in the family awaiting his triumphant return. And how triumphant it would be! His ship's hold was near to bursting with valuable relics of the past. Also, the video scanners in his computer-ears had recorded all the beautiful scenery and all the interesting people and conversations, storing it all permanently in atomic memory. John made a mental note to edit these recordings on the way home, erasing away any foolish scenes of intimacy that no one needed to see.

Yes, it was time to say good-bye to Yvette. He took a deep, sad breath finally feeling at peace with his decision. But where was Yvette? It was well past the time when she usually came by. Why, it was almost sunset! He stood, walked to the edge of the porch of the cafe and looked off down the street. Parked in front of the residence of the Ambassador's cousin, he saw a large coach with a team of eight horses swinging their heads and stamping their feet. Footmen were loading trunks and boxes. Was the ambassador going away?

John One hopped down to the street and began walking toward the coach. The footmen were climbing aboard. Now, the ambassador himself hurried from the house to coach, turned, beckoned to the house rapidly with his arm and climbed inside. From the house came his wife hastily followed by Yvette carrying a satchel and some boxes.

John called out, but Yvette just looked blankly in his direction and then followed the lady into the coach. Where were they going in such haste?

John broke into a trot and arrived beside the coach just as the coachman was settling himself into the driving seat, tugging loose the brake lever. The stately coach was painted glossy black and decorated with ornate brass fittings. The wheels and spokes were bright yellow.

John looked into the open window nearest him just as Yvette looked out. "John!" she said with a harried but sorrowful look. The ambassador leaned over toward the window and raised his bushy gray eyebrows, "My boy, a serious affair of state has developed back in Paris and we must return immediately! Just received word barely two hours ago. Don't know how long we shall all be gone," and he looked at Yvette significantly, then back at John. "Hope to see you again someday. Nice to have met you and good luck with your art!"

His wife also leaned forward, "If you are ever in Paris, young man, do drop by the embassy!"

John stood stunned. This wasn't the way he wanted to say good-bye. It was all out of his hands. He stammered, "Yvette, you're going?..."

Yvette looked into his eyes and whispered, "I know I won't see you again!" Then her eyes filled with tears and she turned away.

The ambassador ordered, "Coachman, away!"

There was nothing John could do. He dug his hands into his pockets, grabbed what remaining gold there was and cried, "Yvette, take this!" thrusting what ingots he had through the window. Yvette turned to him, her eyes blinking with tears. She took the ingots. "Thank you, my good friend. I shall never forget you!"

The coachman shouted at his team and cracked his whip. The coach and sweet Yvette pulled away, loudly rattling off down the street, the rear of the coach brightly ablaze with the reflection of the sinking golden sun.

John waved his hand slowly and said aloud, "Good-bye, beautiful Yvette, my love." His computer-ears reported, "No audience detected..." And, John thought: 'Yes, there's no one to listen anymore.'

He stood for a long time looking in the direction the coach had disappeared. The sun had set. Stars came out. He looked up and sought out the little constellation in which lay the black hole to Infinity City. It was time to go home...

CHAPTER 13 - THE RESCUE

The next afternoon, John returns to his ship with a few local works purchased with his few remaining silver pieces, all strapped to the back of his primitive bicycle. The artists are unknowns but he has become charmed by local works and believes they will sell equally well back at Infinity City.

His bicycle bumps along the road toward the ship. The afternoon sun is warm and the pastoral countryside is aglow with life. Then, the nearby firing of a gun! He leaps from the

bicycle and rolls into the grass beside the road, again instinctively reaching for his own side arm that he had forgotten to recover after losing it under the bull! He curses himself silently for not recovering the weapon. Why had he been so negligent? Yvette...

Nothing is heard except the spinning back wheel of the bicycle as it lays on its side and the rustling breeze through the grass. The shot came from the left of the road. In that direction he sees the meadow rise to a low nearby hill with a broken down barn-like structure at the top.

History has been written and he knows he is not needed in this time. This matters not to John who, with automatic youthful compassion, jumps up and heads toward the hill at a crouching trot, face grim, wishing he had his hand weapon. He is convinced someone is being attacked and is in need of help.

He stops frequently and listens but hears no one. When he gets to the low hill he looks all around but sees nothing unusual. He begins circling, keeping his eye on the barn structure. Then, on the other side of the barn he sees a painter's easel fixed with a canvas and on the ground nearby a crumpled, dark shape. A shiver creeps up his spine and the hairs on his neck rise. He crouches lower looking all around him but sees no sign of anyone else. John quickly looks to the barn. Most of it is collapsed with thick green moss growing over the shady side. No one could easily retreat inside. Most likely, if the shape on the ground was someone who had been shot, the assailant would have run off. Suddenly, John hears a barely audible groan from the direction of the easel and the fallen figure. He looks around then trots off toward the easel.

John finds a man on the ground. The man is large framed though lean, almost frail-looking. His long legs are sprawled this way and that. His face is contorted in pain. His hands shakily clutch his belly. Blood can be seen between the quivering fingers. The shabby clothing is soaked in it.

With a whisper John instructs his "ear computers" to begin scanning for anyone else while he tries to help the man on the ground. He crouches to his knees and reaches inside his shirt for the medical kit in a belt about his waist. The kit is very thin and light, but carries an astounding assortment of survival items especially for medical first aid. He first takes a pain relief crystal from its holder, presses it to a rapidly pulsing vein in the man's neck and waits while the crystal's on-board computer analyzes the man's body then administers a dosage of pain killer. The man quickly relaxes into unconsciousness. The cauterizing instrument in the medical kit begins chiming softly. The pain relief crystal has broadcast its findings to the other devices in the medical kit. As John removes the cauterizing instrument, it begins speaking instructions to him in a high pitched little voice. He pulls the man's hands away, unbuttons the blood-soaked coat, revealing a deep ugly belly wound. As per instruction, he lightly begins stroking the area of the wound with the cauterizing instrument, back and forth. The blood pulsing out quickly thickens into a solid, rust-brown covering mass as the cauterizer introduces a chemical agent and irradiates

the wound after setting its operating frequency, phase and intensity for sterilization and healing properties.

His EAR COMPUTERS, monitoring the medical kit communication channel, inform him that the man has suffered fatal internal damage and must be brought back to the ship for immediate surgical attention and removal of the bullet. Deeply worried the man will die at any moment, John hurriedly removes a stretcher-net and its harness from the medical kit. He begins pulling out the elastic struts of the netting this way and that. The struts harden to the strength of steel with exposure to the air. He pulls the netting over the struts until he has a thin but strong white stretcher-net, long enough and wide enough to fit the man.

Gently, he moves the man onto the net. He is very thin and frail for a man his size. John quickly stashes the survival kit back in his shirt. Then he squats down, grabs the stretcher-net harness, turns around and slips into it. When he laboriously stands and the stretcher-net -- bearing the unconscious victim -- lifts off the ground behind him. Leaning forward, he marches off down the road. Passing the easel his eye is caught by the half finished, colorful work, but he has no time to think about it.

At the road, John begins trotting toward his ship -- at least a kilometer away -- with the stretcher-net swinging slightly in rhythm with his gate. With the will power typical of the amazing people of Infinity City, John trots the whole way, shaking with exhaustion as he picks his way through the rocks to the ship, carrying the unconscious stricken man.

Through his computer-ears he radios ahead to the ship's computer to open both outer and inner main hatches. He sets the stretcher-net down, pulls aside the camouflage mesh, lifts the stretcher-net back up, and staggers inside.

Getting the man up the stairs is a challenge. John fastens all of the stretcher's body straps securely. He pauses to catch his breath. Then, he tilts the man and stretcher up against the stairs, climbs above, twists around until his back is to the steep stairway, and begins lugging the heavy burden up to the combination pilot room and living quarters. With great relief he deposits the litter on his bunk. Quickly, he goes to a storage

locker, removes a portable medical surgical unit, and lugs it over to the bunk. He fits it over the man's wound and activates it. The unit, wider than a man, rests on the edges of the bunk and covers the man from chest to crotch. Its display screen comes to life and John hears mechanical whirring sounds as the machine's robotic devices prepare for surgery. And the surgery begins!

John pays close attention to the screen. For each step of the surgery the machine displays the related details and then requests manual authorization before proceeding. A medical doctor would use his training, experience and intuition to guide the machine, but John can only keep punching the AUTHORIZATION button letting the machine's default programming handle the wound.

Suddenly, the screen displays a cryptic medical question in

ominous, blinking red characters! It makes no sense to John. He has no idea what the answer is! He hits the AUTHORIZATION button, but the machine just displays a small line reading: 'RESPONSE REQUIRED!'

Frantically, he looks about the pilot room as if seeking the consultation of a doctor. But of course, he is alone, except for the unconscious man lying on the bunk, breath coming in ragged gasps.

The machine begins chiming softly and John looks down at the display to find another line displayed reading: 'DELAY OF PENDING STEP NOT ALLOWED. PROBABILITY OF DEATH WILL BE GREATER THAN 50% IN: 25 SECONDS.'

And, the display of seconds begins to count down. 24... 23... John looks at the patient whose face is now deathly pale. He looks back at the machine. What can he do?! 15... 14... 13...

The control panel! He looks closely at the key pad buttons that activate special functions. There is one marked RECOMMENDATION. John stabs the button. 5... 4... 3... "The machine must be thinking up a recommendation!" he hoarsely whispers out loud.

Suddenly, the screen shows a little window of text containing instructions. 2... There is too much to remember! 1... He cannot type all that in! 0... The control panel! He spots the familiar editing commands CUT, COPY, & PASTE!

The blinking red message above the text window changes to: 'PROBABILITY OF DEATH: 58% '

John presses the button marked COPY. The text window disappears leaving the display as it was before, awaiting instructions. 63%... He punches the button marked PASTE. The display changes to: 'INSTRUCTIONS ACCEPTED. IMPLEMENTATION IN PROGRESS. PROBABILITY OF DEATH: 75% '

John holds his breath. His heart beats so hard he feels it from head to toe. He hears a rushing sound in his ears. He stares at the display screen until the characters begin to swim. The death probability is not changing! And then: 'PROBABILITY OF DEATH: 63% '

And, a few moments later: 'PROBABILITY OF DEATH: 50% '

And then, no change for a great many seconds. This is maddening! John clenches his shaking fists, lifts them slowly up underneath his chin.

Then, the ominous messages on the screen disappear and it returns to the old pattern of displaying details and authorization requests. John quickly moves his finger to the AUTHORIZATION button, presses it, and leaves his finger resting on it so that he can grant authorizations as fast as possible.

The surgery continues for a long time...

Finally, the machine announced completion of a successful surgery with a 100% recovery forecast! It also requested immediate replacement of its surgical waste sack. John leaned back with a great sigh. The surgery had taken over two hours and John found himself drenched with sweat, stiff from his cramped position crouched over the bunk, and exhausted. John wearily replaced the machine's clear plastic waste sack, noticing the shiny bullet in the disposed bag.

He looked at the man's face. The man was pale and so still that John double checked the surgery machine's readout to make sure he was alive. John took a deep breath and tried to talk himself into a shower before a long sleep in the auxiliary bunk.

Suddenly, he jerks over to stare at the man's face again. Short red hair. Red beard. The year is 1890, near Arles, France. Could it be Vincent Van Gogh, the most famous ancient artist of all time? VAN GOGH! Adrenalin blasts away fatigue. Realization lifts his mind to a state of youthful excitement. The shot! Van Gogh shot himself in the stomach in 1890 in a suicide attempt. The village nearby was Arles. The easel. He was definitely a painter. Paint was even smeared here and there on his clothes!

It was impossible! To just happen to be nearby when Vincent Van Gogh fired the shot that ended the work of the most famous artist of all time!

But maybe this wasn't him. He had not seen any smoking gun. Maybe just the victim of a jealous lover. He forced his sleepy mind to think. Arles? Something was wrong with that. He tried to remember what he had learned studying the annals of ancient art on the voyage over. John's exhaustion seeped back into him. He would have to wait for the man to regain consciousness. No, this probably was one of France's many, nameless artists. He pulled down the spare bunk, climbed in to sleep, foregoing the shower.

CHAPTER 14 - AWAKENING

John awoke suddenly at the sound of an exclamation from the opposite bunk where lay his rescued stranger. The stranger was looking around in wide-eyed awe. But there was no fear...

John got up slowly so as not to frighten the man, raised his hand and smiled. The man stared at him. Obviously, he was recovering well from his wound and surgery.

John proceeded slowly to the machine over the stranger. It reported excellent progress and could be removed from the patient if the patient remained quiet. John had no intention of removing the medical machine!

The patient asked John something in an awful sounding language. John instructed the ship's computer, "Computer,

translate what this other man has said and anything he says in the future."

The computer responded, "Acknowledged." Then, switching to a likeness of the stranger's own voice, "What is happening here. I don't know any of this."

John asked, "Computer, what language is he using?"

The computer replied, "Language called 'Dutch,' used by indigent population of the country Netherlands and its colonies."

The man lying on the bunk lifted his head and said, "I speak English. Who is the other? I cannot see him!" *3.

John thought fast. "He's in another room. We did not want to bother you with too many people. How do you feel?"

He looked at John for a few moments then sank back into the bunk and heaved a deep sigh. Looking straight above himself, he said, "I feel I am not dead."

"No, you are quite well. I found you lying near a hill. You had been shot... Can you tell me who might have shot you?"

The man now looked very tired. He stared at John, then after sometime looked around and asked, "Where is this place? Is this hospital?"

John said, "A small one. A place to heal you. Can you tell me what happened to you?" The man just stared at him again with a tight-lipped burning intensity.

The medical unit signaled John with a soft chime. Its display reported that the patient was undergoing stress and that sedation was recommended. John pressed the AUTHORIZATION key. After a few moments, the man was asleep.

John went over to the control console and said, "Computer, show any pictures of Vincent Van Gogh, one at a time, for five seconds each."

The computer paused, searching its atomic memory, then slowly paraded two black and white boyhood photographs; several self-portraits of the haunting, gloomy Vincent Van Gogh, some in odd colors though all reflecting Van Gogh's mysterious genius; and finally one more low quality black and white photograph showing a tall man wearing a dark suit and tall black hat standing in a field. John said, "Show and hold the very last self-portrait he painted." The computer went back to this picture -- the general features and characteristics looked like the man on the bunk, though the portrait's eyes seemed larger. Then John ordered, "Computer, show the last photograph again." He stared at the rough image. "Computer, enhance image. Remove inconsistent video data. Extrapolate any valid detail." An instant later, the picture cleared up considerably though with little added detail. "Zoom in and just show the face of the man wearing the hat." The face expanded to fill the viewscreen. It was barely a face at all with so little detail. John One had an idea. "Computer, copy all facial details from the man lying here

on the bunk onto the face on the screen; filter out any details that are inconsistent with the image already on the screen." This time, the image turned into the face on the bunk, though younger looking. John One nodded to himself.

Next, John spent several hours scanning any information related to Vincent Van Gogh. He found a transcription of the hundreds of ancient letters written between Van Gogh and his family and friends, all stored in the computer's vast, archival atomic memory. He then read over a biographical synopsis. His cause of death was definitely from a pistol shot to the stomach, just like the man in the bunk. Why he had shot himself was open to speculation and most sources believed there were several contributing factors, both psychological and physical. He also learned that Van Gogh had died in a town called Auvers-sur-Oise far away from Arles, clear on the other side of Paris! This could not possibly be Van Gogh.

John had an idea. He went over to the medical unit and requested a complete body scan of the man. A small panel slid aside in the unit revealing a hand scanner. The display instructed John to scan the body. John scanned the unconscious head, still lying on its side, from several angles. The medical unit chimed softly and the screen reported a massive left inner-ear infection. A window of text was also displayed full of complex medical terminology. Some of it he could understand. "Other massive pan-cranial viral infections. Cirrhosis of the liver. Massive buildup of various poisons and toxins. The beginnings of emphysema." It was a wonder -- no, a miracle, a tribute to his amazingly strong constitution, that the poor man was alive!

And then, he remembered the ear. The man's head was on its side. The exposed ear was perfectly fine. John could not remember anything unusual about the other ear when he had rescued him, but then again, his attention had been on any possible attacker and then the struggle of getting him back to the ship for surgery. He gingerly turned the head over. Where there should have been an ear he saw only a grotesque flap of flesh.

John thought to himself, "This IS Van Gogh! I know it!" The history record must be inaccurate. He must have lost his mind and shot himself outside of ARLES! With everything that was wrong with him, especially the viral infections within his very brain, it was no wonder he had become a madman. Then, a wildly adventurous thought popped into his mind: "I could have the medical unit cure the infections and then bring him back to Infinity City!" He looked at what remained of the left ear and felt sure it could be successfully rebuilt by synthetic surgery. Why had he cut it off?! The historical facts he remembered were vague; something about a woman... If he brought Van Gogh with him, he would have the chance to ask.

Or, he could leave him here on Earth to continue his painting. But once John left the universe, re-entering the black hole to Infinity City, all changes he had caused back on Earth would cease to exist -- phenomenally, all objects brought into the black hole from the past would remain in existence. Van Gogh, if left behind on Earth, would be alive one moment and then

as soon as John One entered the black hole's event horizon -- maybe even sooner according to some theories -- Van Gogh would once again be dead and buried, exactly as if John had never come to ancient Earth.

John One was the primary cause for all changes he brought about in this temporal slice of the universe. The moment he left it, all would be as it was when the ancestors of Infinity City's population originally lived here.

One theory held that the universe began 'repairing' the changes due to a time traveler before he left through a black hole -- like someone tearing the fabric of a tapestry with a knife and the tear magically mending itself just few inches behind the ripping knife; the 'repairs' to the universe due to a time traveler might only be a minute behind him, or a second, or a day -- no one on Infinity City had ever dared any experiment to prove the theory.

In any case, John imagined that a Van Gogh producing new works back on Infinity City would be far more valuable than anything else he could find here on Earth. He decided, as many young men would, that any plan this exciting must be the right one to take. Once he and Van Gogh passed into the black hole all would be as it was back on that ancient Earth; Yvette would have no more memory of John; the hoodlum Igrette would be alive again to perhaps one day win Yvette's heart; all the paintings John had purchased would again be back in their original art galleries and studios. But Van Gogh would be alive again, on Infinity City! And with his maddening disease cured and the PILL OF LIFE available, he would go on painting forever!

He began giving the computer instructions to ready the ship for ascent. By the time the man on the bunk was conscious again, the ship would be in deep space sailing for Infinity City! He quietly opened the hatch in the pilot room ceiling and went up to begin taking in the camouflage mesh...

CHAPTER 15 - UP FROM EARTH

Up rose the struts! Out billowed the gravitonic sails! The whine of the gravitonic field effect generator rose as it overcame the tremendous gravitational mire of Earth. The telltales on the computer display spun numbers up and down as the computer automatically compensated for all the stressful affects on the ship. Then slowly his beautiful sailship rose gracefully into the sky.

Up and up, until the bright blue and fleecy clouds gave way to darker indigo, then the brilliant stars and the stately perpetual blackness of space. John One swung the ship around to catch the sun's mighty gravitonic stream. Soon, the Earth began to dwindle behind and he reduced power to the gravitonic field effect generator as the rough affects of Earth's gravity well lessened and the smooth steady flow from the sun sent the ship flying out at greater and greater speeds. He left the computer in control. It was programmed to head toward the nearby major

gravitonic current that would eventually lead him back to the black hole to Infinity City.

For the next day and a half he worked with the computer now interfaced with the medical machine to diagnose and repair the maladies within his passenger. The medical machine kept Van Gogh asleep as it injected dozens of biobots that swam through the patient's body killing viruses, chemically pulverizing toxins into inert constituents, and repairing what damage they could. Back on Infinity City, John would get him an immediate prescription for the PILL OF LIFE and then his own immune system, working like he was only 20 again, would fix every thing up as good as new. His teeth were in terrible shape; many missing, even in the front! Fortunately, back on Infinity City there was

a reliable treatment for missing teeth. The control genes for growing adult teeth were simple and easily stimulated. Any missing tooth could be regrown as good as new, much to the relief of many a brawling Infinity City Adventurer.

John realized with a shock that his own body must be crawling with the viruses and bacteria of Earth. He quickly injected himself with a platoon of the biobots and was relieved after a few hours when they reported to the computer that they had found nothing. His own immune system, kept at maximum efficiency by his youth (and in a year or two by the PILL OF LIFE), had killed anything he had been exposed to.

The sailship's ventilation and cleaning system were designed to filter and destroy any airborne microscopic threats.

Finally, the computer announced it was working on a solution that would require cranial surgery. After several hours of computation it signaled John that it was ready to perform an operation with a 95% success forecast. John prepared the patient as instructed by the medical computer, then moved the machine forward until it was over the prone figure's head.

While the operation was carried out, there was little for John One to do. The medical computer would signal if it needed anything. John sat on the bunk opposite, thinking about how amazing and wonderful this situation was. He went to the computer and again began studying the biographical notes about Van Gogh.

After an hour, he checked the medical computer's readout which reported that the operation was 85% completed. This time, authorization for each step of surgery was coming from the ship's computer instead of John.

John wondered what he would do next. After the operation, he was sure the medical computer would keep the man sedated for a significant recovery time. But what to do once he awoke? John suddenly snapped his fingers as a very logical idea popped into his head.

Heading to a storage locker containing more of the works he had gathered in France, he rummaged through the canvases until he found some blank ones that he had planned to use himself on the long journey back. There was a professional set of paints that

he had acquired in another locker along with an easel. He set all this up behind the co-pilot chair, then swivelled the chair around to allow anyone desiring to paint to sit comfortably.

The medical computer chimed softly. John One went over and reviewed the report on the operation now displayed. Everything had gone well. The infection had been eradicated and most of the severe damage to his brain had been repaired using synthesized tissue. The patient would remain sedated for another 12 hours. It was sleep cycle time anyway, so John crawled into the auxiliary bunk...

CHAPTER 16 - BACK IN SPACE

When he awoke, he went about his standard routine around the ship, waiting for the man to recover. The medical computer finally signaled him that it had begun the awakening process. When the medical computer was finished, announcing complete and safe recovery, John removed and stowed it back in its place. He sat down on the opposite bunk the patient to await his awakening.

It was not long. The man stirred and blinked open his eyes. He looked around, saw John, and his eyes began widening with fear. John quickly said in a friendly manner, "Do not be afraid. I am a friend. Do you remember me?"

The man, visibly calmed at hearing John's voice, said, "Yes, I remember. A hospital, this is..." He looked away. "My head, it is strange. It is lighter..."

"We healed a serious ear infection that you had."

"'Infection'?"

"A disease, a sickness deep inside your ear. Did you used to have headaches?"

"Yes, many. I would wake up at night. Again and again. It was miserable... It is now gone from my head? It is all gone! Yes, I can feel it! It... Feels fine. It feels fine!" He grinned and slowly rose to a sitting position. Looking around he said, "But, this hospital is so strange. Am I in Paris?"

"Not really. I will explain everything. But first, I have a special favor to ask."

"A favor? From me?"

"Yes. In return for healing your ear, will you paint my portrait? As you can see, I have some materials set up over there."

Van Gogh looked at him and asked suspiciously, "How do you know I am a painter?"

John One thought quickly. "There were painting supplies where I found you in a field beside a barn. There was an easel.

Your red beard. You are... Are you... Mr. Vincent Van Gogh?"

The man with the red beard looked away for moment. Then he looked back at John and nodded. "Yes, I am Vincent Van GOGH," he answered, stressing the correct Dutch pronunciation of his last name. "But you can call me just VINCENT." Then looking confused, he folded his hands before him and suddenly began talking rapidly, "Monsieur, painting is the only favor that I could possibly grant. I have nothing else. And, I was thinking: Do you expect money to be paid by me? I have no money. But I would happily paint. I feel very good. I feel better and better as time passes. Maybe a miracle has happened." And a timid smile came to his face. Then it vanished. He looked down at the floor with a tragic frown. "My head was so hurting most of the time. I had become so useless, such a burden on my poor brother Theo. I kept thinking about the end. I DID end it." He looked up at John in shock. "I do not recall coming to you. How did I get here? Where was I before... before..."

John was stunned. It was indeed a suicide. This was certainly Van Gogh. How could such a talented man commit suicide? He answered, "I found you lying on the ground. You had been shot. I thought someone else had shot you. Did you shoot yourself?"

Clenching his fists, he shook his head with his eyes tightly shut, "I do not remember! Such an act is horrible! But I had been thinking of this many times. The pain had been unbearable!"

John tried to soothe him, "It is over now! Try to relax. There will be no more pain." He improvised, "You must relax after such a serious surgical procedure. Please, I set up the easel for you to occupy your time while the surgery heals. Do you feel like painting?"

Van Gogh took a deep breath and let it out with a sigh, visibly calming down. "I would paint every waking hour, if I had the time, and the energy. It is my life now. Yes, let me paint, let me paint..." And with that, he stood from the bunk, looking around at all the strange technology, shaking his head. "I must be in a hospital for the very, very rich. This is all beyond my means. Why did you help me?"

"It is God's will for man to help fellow man." John knew of Van Gogh's strong religious background and convictions. His father had been the pastor of a church.

"Yes, yes. You are English, not French... What a strange chair. So much metal..." He sat slowly, taking up the unused palette in one hand. With the other hand, he picked up a tube of paint and deftly opened it. He inhaled from the tube deeply. "You can smell color, you know. I always know exactly what the color will look like when I am done, by the smell." He smeared some of the pigment onto the palette, then frowned up at the indirect lighting elements. "This light, it is pale. There are no windows to let more light in?"

"I will bring more light." John went to the computer

console and typed in a command to bring the lighting up to circadian synchronization intensity. "This is as bright as it is... outdoors."

"Yes, it is so bright. Is there gas?"

"Gas?"

"Gas. You know, to burn to make light."

"No," John answered. "It is electricity. Something very new."

"Wonderful. But I have heard of this 'electricity,'" He squinted at John. "Please, lean against that wall... Fold your arms. You can look at me, if you wish. This never bothers me!" With that, he smashed the end of the tube against the canvas and rapidly began creating an image.

Something occurred to John. "Mr. Van Gogh! You speak English and very well. But you are Dutch, I thought." *4.

He was silent for a few moments while he painted. Then he responded, "I went to England to learn." Then he mumbled significantly, "...and I learned what I did not know I would learn..." Then with irritation, "Now be still, young man, and let me paint you!"

He switched to other tubes frequently, only using the palette to check the color of the pigments, never using a brush. After a while, he even set the palette down and held several tubes in his left hand, rapidly swapping with the active one in his right. His vigor rose. His eyes blazed with tense urgency, for he seemed in a great hurry. He constantly glanced at John with short, sharp looks. His face flushed a bright red and his lips moved as he muttered to himself. Sometimes, he would utter short, terse comments in French -- John wished he still wore his computer-ears to translate.

After about two hours, his pace began to slow. Soon, he no longer looked at John, but would study the painting for long intervals without activity, then suddenly make a sharp jab with a tube here, or tilt his head back, squint and delicately enhance there. Finally, he took the brush that had sat unused, looked up with his red eyebrows raised high, and asked, "Your name, Sir?" "John!" And he made some marks at the bottom. Beckoning, he cried, "Come see. You may hate it; you may like it." He took a deep breath and swivelled the easel around.

Before John was a blazing likeness of himself. Alive! Motion without movement. The face held such relaxed confidence, such boldness, yet with dignity. He was embarrassed by what he saw and how it made him feel.

An intense shiver ran up his spine. There could be no doubt. This was genius standing out like a super-nova. He let his eyes move down to the signature... and more! A rare, exclusive message with the signature: 'Thank you, John. Gratefully, VINCENT.'

And John felt tears leave his eyes.

CHAPTER 17 - VINCENT

Yes, it was Vincent Van Gogh. The greatest artist of them all was alive and well, had been rescued from time, and was now heading toward a virtually immortal life of fortune and fame back in Infinity City. After several days, John decided that Vincent had healed enough to withstand the shock of hearing the truth. So one morning after breakfast, during Vincent's third cup of coffee, he announced: "I have some shocking news for you, Vincent". John's military influence led him to brutal methods of communication.

"Yes, John?" Van Gogh frowned from across the table.

"You are aboard my... ship, and not in a hospital. I did this to save your life; to keep you from dying. We are heading toward a land you have never heard of, but where your art is already well known."

Van Gogh raised his eyebrows, then lowered them and frowned. "Yes, I was sure I was no longer in the World. I feel alive, but I must be dead and this is where I have gone. But this is not Hell. You have shown mercy by making me well. God's mercy. You must be an angel. I knew when I first saw you that you were no ordinary man. You look too perfect. You act with such control. You are taking me to heaven, I think." And he sipped his coffee.

"No, you are not dead. You were dying but I saved you. I am not an angel. I am a human like yourself. But Vincent, I am not from your world. We are in a sailship heading toward my world. Have you ever looked up into the night sky and wondered about the stars?"

"I have stared at the stars at night until I heard them beckon to me. They are alive, I think. But what world are you from? How can I go back to France?"

"Vincent, those stars are all other suns, with worlds going around them, just like the Earth goes around the sun. I AM FROM ONE OF THOSE WORLDS. I came to Earth in search of valuable art. I was the man in Arles who was collecting all the paintings." He paused to see Vincent's reaction.

Instead of shock, Vincent's eyes were sparkling with delighted excitement at the realization that this man was a wealthy art collector. He had, after all, always been looking for a rich patron. He was just too much a burden on the meager resources of his poor brother Theo...

John continued, "Anyway, as I was about to leave, um, Arles, I found you... DYING!" At this point, John began a fabrication he had thought up days before, "But, there is a tide between worlds that I had to follow immediately or I could never return

home. I had to decide to either leave you to die in France, or heal you aboard my ship on the way back to my world. You are alive but you cannot go back to your world. The tide goes only one way. The ship can only flow to my world now. But there, your kind of art is greatly popular. You will have so much work!"

Van Gogh looked at John One in amazement. Then, he looked around the ship as if for the first time. He looked back at John, squinted, and asked, "This ship we are in -- it is going toward a STAR?"

"Yes! There are many ships that go between stars. Like the ships that go between Europe and America, only much more complicated, and much faster."

Van Gogh laughed a little nervously, "I am confused. But only a little. I feel I understand. I heard this theory of other worlds when I was in Paris once, at a little party in my brother Theo's apartments... But I don't know how this is happening. I remember thinking many times that I never belonged to the world. Everyone else did. But I never felt right. Sometimes I thought it WAS Hell and I had sinned in my real life. You are not a demon or an angel?"

"No, I am an Adventurer. My uncle owns this ship. He sent me to Earth to gather valuable art to sell back at our world. I found you. You are very talented. I do not think you agree, but just look at what you have painted! Look at it as if you were not the artist. Vincent, look at it as if you were from another world!"

And he did. Strangely, he cocked his head to the side, then straightened and chuckled. "I painted and even lived with a crazy man named Gauguin once. He said once that he was born in the wrong part of the world and that he began painting to discover where he really belonged. Was he from your world?"

"No, though I have heard of him. There is no one from my world that you know. It is very far away, at another star. It will take us a long time to reach it. But I have blank canvas. Can you paint from memory until we arrive? There is not much else to do."

"Yes, yes. I have seen you looking through that window at stars. I have never seen the stars look that way. They do not flicker. I find this inspiring!"

And so, the journey proceeded. Van Gogh did indeed paint the stars as seen through the view port. When he grew bored with this, he tried to paint from memory, but grew frustrated when colors would not turn out the way he wanted. He resorted to sketching the odd shapes he found about the ship or displayed on the computer screen. John showed him how to simulate painting by changing the glowing colors on a computer screen. But Van Gogh was disgusted by colors that he could not touch or smell and quickly lost interest.

Vincent was much interested in Infinity City. John told him it was the capital of the "other world." To explain the possibility of a non-blue Infinity City sky, John said the sky would look strange "due to weather conditions."

From time to time the ship would near a junction in the current gravitonic current and John would take the controls to steer the ship along its proper course. Sometimes, gravitonic turbulence caused the ship to swing or jostle. During these times, Vincent would kneel and pray himself into a strange trance-like state. When the turbulence was over, Vincent would sometimes begin sketching with paper and pencil while still in the trance-like state.

His sketchings always eventually displeased him and he would angrily rip them or ball them up and throw them away. John, however, would quietly gather them up and stow them away. Later, when Vincent was asleep, he would take them out and look at them. The shapes and movement he discovered were disconcerting and made him think of a view from within a storm or a tornado. Still, he considered them valuable and hid them away. Even an original autograph from Vincent Van Gogh would be priceless on many of the worlds within Infinity City's mercantile realm.

CHAPTER 18 - THE JOURNEY TO THE BLACK HOLE

Though there was not much space within the little sailship during the long voyage, neither John One nor Vincent Van Gogh grew bored. Both were single minded men who could spend long hours on a single absorbing interest. While Vincent painted, John studied with fascination the almost endless knowledge contained in the ship's atomic memory. He was particularly fascinated by the military history of the Galaxy. He strongly felt his responsibility for the security of his home world.

Sometimes, Vincent would give John painting lessons. He was extremely critical but always patient and fair. To John, it was a little like military training.

John showed Vincent how to access the computer's vast atomic memory so that he could learn about Infinity City. He was amazed as Vincent voraciously absorbed all he could. His command of English was stunning. He was a natural linguist, a brilliant man, yet sadly born ahead of his time -- until now.

John One found enough room down in the hold to perform his daily routine of vigorous exercises and training. He tried to coax Van Gogh into a regimen but was lucky if he could just get him to ride the fold-out exercise bicycle every few days. The

man existed exclusively in his mind. Except for one evening when John was rearranging a locker in the hold to store Vincent's finished works. He found a backpack he had worn when bicycling to and from Arles. Inside was a bottle of local wine he had purchased to share with Yvette on a picnic. But she had gone away.

Van Gogh spied the bottle and chortled with glee. John had never seen him so animated. Vincent insisted that they at least try to put together a meal from the somewhat austere ship's fare, to do justice to the wine, which, with a rare smile, he assured John was a good vintage. With the help of the ship's computer, for neither had culinary talent, they prepared a meal that was palatable enough and definitely satisfying in quantity. Then, John ordered the computer to play some relaxing music and display some pastoral scenes of Earth on the display. Vincent dumped a mattress on the floor and sat down with the bottle of wine on a small table that slid out from the wall. He brought forth two glasses and -- enthusiastically rubbing his hands together -- asked John for a bottle opener.

John, sitting in the pilot chair close by, looked confused and asked, "Doesn't the cork just twist off?" Van Gogh stared at him. Then John remembered seeing the cafe owner Custeau using a shiny screw-shaped device to open a bottle. "Wait a minute," he said. He went to the medical locker, brought forth a an extremely sharp surgical knife, and gouged through the cork with it. He poured two glasses full of a strong red wine. Van Gogh drank his down rather quickly. He sighed deeply with satisfaction.

Vincent looked at John with a very tender expression and said, "John, my friend, I cannot begin to tell you how thankful I am to you for what you have done. I feel myself again. Completely! Gone are the voices in my ear. Gone are all the dark depressions. As we head for your Infinity City, I feel like I am being reborn. As if I had died back on Earth and now am being reborn to a new world. Thank you again, my friend!" And he lifted his glass in salute.

John touched his glass to his. This was a wonderful man, he thought to himself. He had been apprehensive about how well they would get along in the little sailship for such a long voyage. But Vincent was always courteous and had remarkable self-control, now that the maddening viruses and toxins and their damage throughout his body had been removed. Also, using the threat of jettisoning his painting supplies into space, John had forced Vincent to begin bathing on a daily basis. Vincent had reluctantly complied.

Vincent looked thoughtful. "You know, I read the historical account of my life today. Most interesting."

John stiffened. He had not told Vincent they would be returning to the future or that Infinity City was located outside the time dimension of the Universe, allowing time travel into the past. Somehow he seemed to have discovered this for himself! "Really? How much did you learn?" John asked nervously.

"I learned that I have been reborn in another time as well as another world. It is a miracle! Perhaps the very miracle I strove for in my youth. The historical account was shocking." He looked down at his glass of wine, swirling it around. "I learned that my poor brother Theo will die in only a few months. And from a most disreputable disease. At this very moment,

according to the history file, he must be going mad with it and

attacking his poor family. Fortunately, no one will be seriously hurt. My nephew even grows up and lives for 90 years! It is such a pity we could not have rescued Theo."

"That would have been impossible," John hastily commented.

"Of course. I understand. This ship is very small, and Theo and I have a difficult time living with each other, though you must know that I love my brother very much. All of that is now over..." He poured more wine. John only sipped at his.

Vincent continued, "The file described my suicide in Auvers. But you found me near Arles. Your ship must have been located between Arles, and Saint Remy where I lived in the asylum. Do not look uncomfortable, John," he said, reaching across the little table and patting John's arm. "We have been sailing for weeks and I have not once felt an attack coming on. I feel perfectly calm talking about all of this. It is fascinating! I believe I am cured." He refilled his glass. "A toast to your wonderful medical machine!"

After the toast he continued. "You know, I had heard of a doctor in Auvers-sur-Oise who was adept at treating cases like mine. Dr. Gachet. I had been thinking of traveling to see him. But then, I began hearing stories of a wealthy American in Arles who was buying every work of art in sight. Local artists were working day and night producing pieces for him. I did not know if I could manage it or not, but I just had to travel to Arles once again to see if I could meet him. Perhaps he would have financed a local artists' colony. Gauguin would have come again, I am sure, in spite of what he did to my ear." While John, greatly surprised by the statement, looked at him, Vincent touched what was left of the ear. "And my old friend Bernard. And many more I am sure." He smiled slightly, looking off into the distance as he contemplated the fantasy. Then he suddenly frowned. "Ah, but it was not to be. My last time in Arles had been too traumatic." He shuddered at the memory. It had been a beautiful day, just before I began hearing the stories of the American. I foolishly went to a bullfight at the arena in Arles to paint one more time. The bull broke through the wall! It was terrifying! I remember being frozen with fear and watching the bull try to free itself. Then someone stabbed it to death!" He had become quite agitated, and sat back suddenly, as if waiting for something to happen. Then he relaxed and smiled. "Nothing! That old anxiety is completely gone! Anyway, I remember nothing after that. My next memory was being back in the Saint Remy asylum. And it was many weeks later. Imagine weeks of you life disappearing like a puff of smoke from a pipe! Then, I remember having found a pistol after they had removed the bull from the arena. That day, I went outside the asylum to paint the olive trees and suddenly remembered hiding the pistol among some rocks at the base of one of the trees. This began to upset me very much. Then... My memory is gone again. I remember nothing more. I was here next. That was my very last attack, I hope and pray. Yes! My last attack forever!" And he took a long gulp of wine.

John One felt struck. It was HIS pistol! The one he had lost under the bull. Vincent had found it and used HIS pistol to shoot himself! Where was the pistol now? It must be lost back

in the grass where Vincent had fallen. Would it hurt anything to leave an object from the future in the past? The way the Universe worked, as he had been taught, anything changed in the past would "heal over," and again revert to proper history. But

what happened to atoms and molecules left there from the future? Did they just disappear? He would have to ask someone about this upon their return. Then again, maybe he better not. If Grand Dames found out, they would only raise the old fuss over the danger of Adventurers traveling into the past. Later, during the trip back to Infinity City, John One, out of curiosity would read through the computer's historical records, discovering -- to his great surprise -- that Van Gogh had actually committed suicide near the town of Auvers-sur-Oise in northwestern France. It had been John's strong effect on local time that had caused Van Gogh to linger near Arles and attempt suicide there with John's own gun.

Vincent had begun singing a bawdy barroom song in French. John was glad they had only a single bottle. What would Vincent be like back on Infinity City where there was plenty of wine. And women, too. Infinity City women! He began, "Vincent, you may meet many people back on Infinity City. Your art remained popular throughout history." John, never a diplomat, had difficulty finding the right words, so he asked bluntly, "Vincent, what if you meet many women? Will you be able to handle this?"

Vincent looked at him in surprise. "Ah, women! I have had far more luck with art. But perhaps I will meet a nice girl, and finally settle down like my brother did. My infant nephew was quite precious to me. Yes, that is what I want. To paint and to have a little family!"

"I hope you'll find just the right girl in Infinity City," John said hopefully. "Just be careful. They can be quite sophisticated and won't always do what you want."

"Humph!" Vincent puffed up, elated by the wine. "I, too, am sophisticated. I have lived in London AND Paris where the girls are also too sophisticated. I will charm your Infinity City girls with my magic paintings! My canvas shall become a magic carpet to sail them anywhere I choose to go! I shall fill their hearts with my bright and warm colors!"

John was slightly concerned that he was getting so elated, but it was amusing. Vincent was very charming. "You'll have to give all that up if you want to settle down and be a family man, Vincent."

"I will do anything to have a little one again!"

"You have children?!" John said with surprise. He thought he had read that Van Gogh was childless.

Vincent hung his head and said, "Almost." Then he changed the subject and said as if to himself: "But if I were to marry again, would it be in a church? There does not seem to be any strong sense of religion in your world, John. At least not from what I have read. I have seen only passing references to

something called the 'One True Belief.' What is this?"

What a question! John thought. Infinity City was so old that all of its social institutions, including theology, had all settled down to a state of equilibrium with each other. It was a peaceful world. Anyone desiring extreme excitement was forced to look to the Galaxy outside the black hole.

The One True Belief was a very basic theology all grade school children were required to master. It was a theology of convenience, there when it was needed: at birth, marriage, and death; good times or bad. Some took great joy in it or relied on it heavily and worshipped at the temples or prayed as often as they desired. Some daily, some weekly, some yearly. Some rejected it.

John One's family was the Larsch, and their Grand Dame Deirdre was currently the head of the Great Council of Grand Dames. As such, she was also nominal head of the state theology and the final voice regarding any dispute over the interpretation of the One True Belief. Fortunately, all the bugs had been worked out of its theological system eons before, so it required little of her time. But since the Larsch family was responsible for ministering the One True Belief, its children received a slightly stricter indoctrination than average. Even so, theology was completely beyond John. In school he had done well memorizing all the chants and hymns and sayings, but never truly understood the purpose of it all. To him, there was Infinity City, and his purpose was to preserve its security. He enjoyed this responsibility.

So now, he found himself straining to remember how to describe the One True Belief. He took a bigger sip of wine. "Vincent, that is a difficult question."

"Well, is it a Christian religion? Do you believe in our Saviour, Jesus Christ?"

"Who? No. It's not a belief system at all. It's more of a scientific theology, I suppose."

"How can there be no belief? My father was an ordained pastor of a protestant church. There was so much we were forced to believe. It was all for nothing. God turned his back on me. In my depths of despair when the madness would take me, I had nothing," he sadly shook his head of red hair. "Nothing. What do you have? How does your One True Belief explain the universe? Is it there for you when you need it?"

"We are taught it is impossible to refute because it is simply based on universal logic and common human definitions." In his own words there was no way he could explain. But John remembered the chants from his childhood. Looking directly at Vincent he quoted, "'What do you experience upon awakening? Existence! your ONLY true possession. Second, your senses reveal the patterns of a Universe that ITSELF desires to exist. Third, you observe the patterns growing, for our Universe shall FOREVER desire creation. Rejoice, for this you shall experience upon EVERY awakening.'" How does that sound?" Strangely, after

only a few drinks, John noticed the wine giving him a light, happy feeling.

"Profound! Simplistic yet irrefutable! And you quote as if from scripture. Does the One True Belief have a divine book such as the Christian Bible or the Islamic Koran?"

"The copy our Family has is version 5.00. The date of origin is very, very old. Computer! Display the first three edicts of the One True Belief for my friend Vincent here." The computer displayed the text of what John had just recited on the nearby computer screen. Vincent scrutinized this.

"John, what is meant by 'awakening'? Birth?"

"BIRTH?! No. Well, maybe. I mean, to me it means waking up each morning. The first thing I know is that I exist. They

say, 'Suppose it was pitch black, and there was no sound, and your body was numb,' et cetera, et cetera. You would only know that you exist. Let's see, they also say 'suppose you didn't know if your brain was inside a computer or still inside your body and the computer was synthesizing reality. You would not know if you were experiencing reality or not. All you'd know for sure is that you exist.' How's that sound?"

"A computer? Like this one controlling your amazing ship? You can place a human brain inside it?!"

"No, I don't think so. It's just a hypothretical... hyperthetical... It's just a kind of story, okay?"

Vincent stared at the display. "Fascinating! Wonderful! 'Existence,... the only true possession.' Of course! That is why the Christ chose poverty, to strip away the FALSE possessions, all the foolish trappings of false value! I never saw it that way! EXISTENCE is the highest value!"

"Poverty?" John asked with puzzlement, after wiping wine from his chin after a big gulp. The bottle seemed to be endless. He would have to study this optical confusion tomorrow. "Well, maybe it means that. They don't talk about VALUE as much as they talk about RELIABILITY. Everything you experience, except your own Existence, has a certain probability of unreliability, doubt, or unsurety. The One True Belief says, 'Take comfort! Your existence shall always be there for you, at each waking moment of your entire life. All else lies slightly in doubt.' It means if you were captured by the enemy and held in a prison cell and they gave you nothing and tortured you, then the one thing, the ONLY thing they couldn't take -- or even touch! -- would be your existence. It's at your core! You can FEEL it. I mean, it's ME. It's the main thing that will always be truly me!"

Vincent smiled at John's rare display of passion. Then he slapped his hand against his chest. "To me, that is my soul, my spirit."

"Ah, the spirit! The One True Belief says, 'Your Spirit is your desire to exist.' It keeps you existing, okay?"

Vincent shook his head. "It is all very simplistic, but it makes sense. If I was a miner working underground at the Borinage back in Belgium from before sunrise until after sunset; getting paid a pittance; only enough to stay alive; no possessions; always the threat of cave-in or explosions; my own existence would be the only thing worth clinging to. I wish I could go back and tell them that, those poor people. No, it is too black and white. Your belief is too simple."

"Hey, in bad times, Vincent, simple thoughts have the most strength. How would you like to be out in a scoutship with one of the Neighbors' destroyers bearing down on you, trying to stay calm and get away knowing at any moment that a particle beam or gravitonic torpedo could turn you into gas?! That's when the One True Belief goes through your mind. I can tell you that, for sure!" John drew back suddenly, surprised at his outburst. He should not have drunk this wine. But he felt so free with his thoughts. What a novel feeling!

Vincent was staring at the display. "It seems your One True Belief regards the universe as God. I remember a similar discussion with my father one evening. In Christianity, we are

taught that Our Lord is omniscient, omnipotent and omnipresent..."

John gazed into his glass, mumbled, "Omnivorous?" and chuckled to himself.

Vincent continued as if John was not there. "I asked Papa 'If God is everywhere, then is he not then everything?' Papa just said 'It is not in the Bible so it is not an important question.'"

At this, John nodded sagely, poured another glass of wine and consumed half of it at a gulp.

Vincent again looked toward the screen and read, "'The Universe desires to exist. The Universe desires creation.' God's desires? But with your belief, the universe IS God. So, your belief says that God has desires regarding Himself. Never have I heard or thought like this." He pulled thoughtfully at his short beard. "If I were God, I suppose I, too, would want to continue to exist. And to grow! God growing! What would He grow into?"

"Tomorrow," John mumbled. "He grows into tomorrow." He began quoting, 'The Universe is a wonderfully colored carpet that is unrolling forever. It weaves itself, but only using the threads that already exist; threads branching endlessly, creating new patterns. It's DESIRE to grow moves the shuttle.'" John leaned toward Vincent, winked significantly and said with great seriousness. "We're the threads, you know."

Vincent grinned at his swaying, inebriated friend. "Perhaps it is time to call it a night, John."

"Yes, I feel very sleepy. Did the ship slow down or something? Computer! Status normal?"

The computer replied, "All ship functions normal. No external or internal threat."

John rose unsteadily to his feet. "Whoa! I think we've hit some turbulence. The deck's not steady! Vincent, I can't balance!"

Vincent jumped to his feet, well experienced with the sensation. He put his arms around John's shoulders and led him toward his bunk.

John smiled at Vincent. "I'm sure glad I found you and made you live again!"

Vincent guided him down into his bunk and covered him with his blanket. "From what I've read about myself, John, I shall be eternally thankful that you found me, too. Tell me, does your marvelous medical computer have a remedy for inebriation?"

"Ebriniated?! Who's Briniabrinated? Not me! I'm just little bit tired. It's wine. It makes me little a bit tired, that's all. Vincent, I wish you were my brother. This trip has been so much fun. You are so different from Infinity City people... I'm so sleepy..."

"Go to sleep, John. I am very happy to be your friend. Without you I would not even be alive. You are my personal savior! Good night." John One had already fallen asleep.

CHAPTER 19 - THE BLACK HOLE

As the time neared to pass through the black hole and return to Infinity City, John One thought it best that Van Gogh be sedated during the disconcerting passage through the first event horizon. So he slowed the ship's speed just enough to have it rendezvous with the black hole at night. On that night, he wore his computer-ears and instructed them to silently awaken him when it was time for him to take control and guide the ship through the maelstrom.

After he awakened to the gentle chiming in his ears, he removed a tube-shaped device from his pocket, left his bunk, and crept over to the sleeping, snoring figure of Van Gogh. He brought the device near Van Gogh's nose and during the next inhale, a particularly loud one John thought, he activated the device and Van Gogh breathed in a potent sedative.

After a few breaths of this, John held the device near Vincent's temple and a green light blinked on the side of the device indicating that the drug had taken effect. Van Gogh's breathing became more regular, though still loud enough to drown out the black hole itself. John turned Vincent's head to the side and the snoring stopped altogether.

He went to the controls and switched the view to the enormous, swirling black hole looming before him. Strange

ribbons of color would drift out from the center as various elements were accelerated into oblivion, leaving behind only bursts of multi-spectral radiation. What a thrill this operation always was for him. His cool headed military training took over and he deftly worked his computer and ship preparing to beat his way in through the black hole's gravitonic storm, back to Infinity City.

He depolarized the mainsails to bring the ship to a stop before the black hole and drew them back significantly, for great speed would not be necessary. On all sides of the ship, he ran out heavy duty struts to support the complex arrangement of maneuvering sails necessary to guide the ship through the upcoming torrent of twisting gravitonic currents. He started the computer running final system checks while he went over to Van Gogh to strap him in.

Back in the command chair, John harnessed himself then ran up the gravitonic field generator to maximum output in preparation for the rapid lateral course adjustments that would be needed. He swung the ship around toward the nearest current that, at the moment, was heading in toward the very center of the black hole; the "eye of the storm"; the safe entrance to Infinity City. Any other angle would mean the unknown fate: OBLIVION!

John polarized the mainsails forward just enough to give the ship movement to ease it into the entry-current. Once in the small entry-current, the speed of the ship built up rapidly and John reduced the mainsail polarity to yield power for just bare guidance.

On the screen, the computer automatically displayed the nearby currents using different colors to denote their various qualities and directions. Bright red for too rapid; fiery orange for too unstable; flat black for undetectable which meant an

"oblivion vector"; dull white was a stable vector leading inward but not directly toward the center of the black hole; bright white indicated a stable vector that led to the center of the black hole and out of the first event horizon. The thick border displayed at the edge, framing the screen, indicated the status of the current the ship was already in. It was now a dull white, meaning they were on course. But they would need to maneuver into a better current. The true center of the first event horizon could only be traversed through a current indicated with bright white!

John would be astrogating by the screen, since what would be appearing through the view port would make no sense at all.

Suddenly, the ship jostled to the side as their current abruptly ended, to be replaced by a dominating unstable current indicated by the border of the screen suddenly turning bright orange. A few dim white currents adjoined the center of the screen and John manipulated the power feeds to his maneuvering sails to work the ship sideways through the unstable current and over to the most promising looking dim white current. The ship lurched this way and that. Back and forth. It would suddenly shift rapidly toward the dim white current he was after, then

shift back away. Little by little, however, through quick reflexes and cool persistence, John brought the ship over and slipped into the stable current.

John was a superb pilot. He had to be. These currents were too chaotic for a computer to forecast.

The ship's speed lessened as it matched the strength of the stable current, now indicated with a dim whiteness bordering the main display screen. John glanced at the ship's telltales at the computer display and was pleased to find all system functioning perfectly. He felt a sudden closeness to his uncle's taut little ship...

A bright white current loomed in from the left side of the screen. It was large and that meant it would remain stable for a long time, maybe right through the center. But between it and John there was a twisted rainbow of rapid and unstable currents. Also, an oblivion current was ominously descending from the top of the screen. It slowly meandered back and forth like a serpent, indicating high instability. John would have to keep one eye on that current. He continued his present course along the stable current hoping to encounter another, closer bright white current. However, the screen border grew dimmer and dimmer, and finally began blinking which indicated that he was at the end of the little current. The bright white current was slightly closer but he would have to go through some undesirable rapid and unstable currents to get to it. But there was no choice. He sharply brought the ship over, leaving the dim white current and plunging into the adjacent rapid, though fortunately narrow, current.

The ship jerked ahead violently. Wave after wave of accelerating gravitons swept through the ship. The force of John's internal organs pressing against each other in one direction and then in another made him queasy. But he knew from experience that he could take much more than this. Fortunately, this current, though rapid, had no instability. Checking the screen he found he was making good lateral progress through the rapid current. The dim white current he had just left had dwindled to a narrow line. Then, something happened that sent a cold chill down John's spine.

The blank oblivion current still dangling above, but at a tolerable distance began undulating rapidly, like a lariat being spun around. The little dim white current compressed from a curved line into a meander and also began undulating. Then suddenly, it turned black, skipping the unstable phase and going completely to oblivion -- right next to John's current!

Sweat broke out on his forehead as he realized the danger of the present situation. However, his maneuvering sails were already pitched completely over. One jerk of that adjacent black meandering demonic current would slide it over and wipe the ship right out of the universe!

He decided to take a big risk. Though the next current he had to go through was unstable, he decided to use his mainsail to get away from the oblivion current as fast as possible.

John ran the mainsail out to 50%, diverting power away from the maneuvering sails. Rapidly, the little ship skipped through its present current toward the unstable one and away from the imminent peril of the black oblivion current.

The black oblivion current suddenly bent deep within the red rapid current John was traversing, slicing down almost all the way over to the orange unstable current, leaving only a narrow curved red band. The effect was catastrophic. The power of the gravitonic force within the rapid current tripled, slamming against John's ship. The incredible force snapped against the mainsail, pulling the ship sideways through the current, swinging the ship around and plunging it straight along the narrow rapid current. Fortunately, this threw the ship past the destructive limb of the black oblivion current.

The alarm buzzer went off at the computer console. Yellow telltales began flashing at the computer ship status display indicating dangerous strains in different parts of the ship. John heard the sickening groan of metal being torn and blinking red telltales indicated damage to the mainsail strut supports and control systems. John tried but could no longer control power to the mainsails. The ship was careening out of control down a rapid gravitonic current, heading closer to the black oblivion current now dangerously dangling halfway down the screen!

John popped open a special panel in the bulkhead beside the main display. Smashing open a glass safety cover, he exposed a red button for explosively jettisoning the mainsail struts in an emergency just such as this and jabbed his finger at the button. A horrendous explosion vibrated through the ship as the mainsail struts were simultaneously exploded away. Instantly, the acceleration lessened. All of the yellow telltales indicating strain winked out except one. Power was still being diverted from the gravitonic field generator to the mainsails which must now be just dangling cables shorting against each other and the ship. But why had not the emergency circuit breakers cut out the mainsail supply? Checking the display, he was sickened to discover that even though the gravitonic field generator was at 100% output, the maneuvering sails were receiving less than 5% of this power. The ship was virtually out of control, shooting down a rapid gravitonic current toward oblivion within the black hole!

John would have to go aft and manually cut the wasted power to the ruined mainsail struts. He smacked a large button to switch the computer to audio control mode. The computer began reporting: "Warning! Warning! Maneuvering power below red critical limit. Mainsail unavailable. Gravitonic field generator beyond yellow thermal limit. Warning! Warning! Maneuvering power below red critical limit..."

"Computer," he interrupted as he unfastened himself from his cockpit chair, "switch to exception reporting."

"Acknowledged."

"Computer, automaneuver toward left-hand orange current."

"Acknowledged. Maximum maneuvering power from gravitonic

field generator will be required within 75 seconds to avoid entry into above black oblivion current."

MY GOD! he thought to himself. DEATH IS ONLY A COUNTDOWN AWAY AGAIN! He dashed to the back of the cabin, down the steep, narrow stairway, down to the engine room. The gyroscopes began wining as the computer automatically employed them -- in lieu of the maneuvering sails -- to swing the ship around, aiming it once again out of the rapid gravitonic current.

"Mayday! Mayday! Maximum maneuvering power from gravitonic field generator required within 65 seconds." The computer was now in "Mayday" mode. It would take any action it could to save the ship. Yet, all it could do was warn the human running the ship.

John stopped at the engine room looking around, not knowing where the problem was.

"Mayday! Mayday! Maximum maneuvering power from gravitonic field generator required within 60 seconds."

He thought hard. WHAT WOULD PREVENT THE MAINSAIL CIRCUIT BREAKER FROM CUTTING THE POWER?! WHAT?! WHAT?!! The main power buss went directly from the generator to the mainsail power terminals. The circuit breaker was between the generator and the main power buss. The mainsail end of the power buss would just be fused metal after the jettisoning explosion. But the circuit breaker was foolproof! It just could not malfunction. It was too simple and reliable a design.

"Mayday! Mayday! Maximum maneuvering power from gravitonic field generator required within 55 seconds."

John had never felt his heart beating with such intensity! The ship was swaying this way and that. The sailship must be nearing the unstable gravitonic current! His head was swimming. He felt himself tottering on the brink of some blank mental oblivion...

"Mayday! Mayday! Maximum maneuvering power from gravitonic field generator required within 50 seconds."

WHAT WAS THE PROBLEM?!!

His vision was distorting. He could only see directly in front of him. Everything was red!...

JOHN. JOHN. It was the voice of his family matriarch -- Grand Dame Deirdre -- softly inside his head! YOU ARE A MAN OF INFINITY CITY. YOU ARE OF INFINITY CITY! INFINITY CITY... The voice trailed away...

Yes, he was from Infinity City. His people had conquered the black hole. HE would also conquer THIS black hole! He shook his head and began breathing deeply. He shouted, "I AM A MAN OF INFINITY CITY! I AM IN CONTROL!"

"Mayday! Mayday! Maximum maneuvering power from gravitonic

field generator required within 25 seconds." WHERE HAD THE TIME GONE?! AND, WHAT WAS WRONG WITH HIS SHIP?!!

The circuit breaker control circuits! There had to be something wrong with them. He opened the panel at the generator end of the power buss. It was hot and buzzed loudly with the abnormally high current expenditure. However, the circuit breaker connection was secure. He could try physically rupturing it, but that might ground-out the generator power right to the ship's hull, blowing out the generator.

"Mayday! Mayday! Maximum maneuvering power from gravitonic field generator required within 15 seconds."

The ship lurched violently to the side. John had to grab a stanchion to stay on his feet.

If not the power buss end of the circuit breaker, then it must be one of the control ends. The emergency mainsail cutoff was supposed to have triggered the circuit breaker. It was right beside the stairway leading up to the pilot room. He popped it open and a pile of Van Gogh sketchings fell out rustling loudly. What?! This was where he had hidden Van Gogh's sketchings that the artist had been tossing aside. He had inserted them into the metal instruction pamphlet envelope attached to the panel cover. The rough jostling must have sprung the over-stuffed metal envelope open.

"Mayday! Mayday! Maximum maneuvering power from gravitonic field generator required within 10 seconds... 9 seconds... 8 seconds..."

He ripped out the remaining papers from around the control board -- the last drawing was actually a little burnt. The circuit board was very hot; its microprocessor must be malfunctioning. It must still be reporting normal function to the main computer! That would explain why no trouble was being reported at the ship's status board.

"7 seconds..."

He looked around inside, not being intimately familiar with such an obscure circuit, and discovered a manual override button on the back, brightly labeled: "WARNING - MAINSAIL KILL".

"6 seconds..."

John reached in and pressed the button! Suddenly, a hissing, crackling sound came from back over inside the opened main power buss circuit breaker box. The breaker wasn't opening!

"5 seconds..."

John raced over just as the ship lurched sideways again. He was tossed against a stanchion, bruising his left arm and left leg. He dove for the circuit breaker box.

"4 seconds..."

Reaching in, he grabbed the extended manual wipe lever and tried to yank it back -- it was fused!

"3 seconds..."

Magic adrenalin fired through him. Time slowed down. He felt he had all the time in the world. His hand tightened around the lever. He braced himself painfully against the power buss tube with his other sore hand and pulled back with every ounce of physical strength; the band-iron lever cutting, slicing deeply through his hand -- he cried out in pain and anguish... And then, the lever gave! The arc from all 95% of the generator's output suddenly exploded across the circuit breaker points, blinding John with the flash and exploding the point cover which went flying out, bouncing off John's skull, leaving a deep gash.

"2 seconds. Maneuvering sail power increasing. Now at 25%". GOD, he thought, THE PHASE HYSTERESIS TIME DELAY! WOULD THERE BE ENOUGH TIME?!

"1 second... Maneuvering sail power increasing. Now at 50%. Mayday! Mayday! Maximum Maneuvering power from gravitonic field generator required within 1 second... Holding steady at 1 second due to normal analysis error... Maneuvering sail power increasing. Now at 75%. Mayday! Mayday! Maximum Maneuvering power from gravitonic field generator required within 1 second... Maneuvering sail power at 100%. Brace for unstable current insertion..."

OH, NO! He thought. NOT WHILE I'M DOWN HERE! I'VE GOT TO BE AT THE CONTROLS. NO COMPUTER CAN HANDLE A MANEUVER THROUGH AN UNSTABLE CURRENT! He put his unbruised arm around the nearby stanchion. His hand was wet with his own blood and he still couldn't see due to the after image caused by the flash of the exploding circuit breaker.

Then, the ship crashed into the unstable gravitonic current. Gravitons smashed into the ship's maneuvering sails violently, causing rapid deceleration back down from the perilous rapid current velocities. John was flung around the stanchion, further bruising himself as he crashed against its other side. The ship swept up, then down. It twisted. Turning, moving, lurching through insane motions. Through the noise of the gravitonic generator, the gyroscopes and all the other noises he thought he heard laughter coming from the stairwell. Van Gogh might have awakened, he thought. The poor man must be lying there strapped in thinking the ship is shaking apart. He must be going mad!

John dived toward the stairwell. He had to get to the computer or the ship would be doomed. He felt for and grabbed the bottom step just as the ship began yet another set of insane motions. Now the laughing again! And louder than ever. Suddenly, the ship twirled sickeningly and then faster and faster until John couldn't believe he or the ship could take the strain anymore. This must be the end. The end!

But it kept going on and on. He couldn't tell if it was seconds now or minutes...

Then, instantaneously, it stopped! No more motion at all, like it had never happened. His heart was pounding.

Quickly, John struggled up the steps. His vision was returning, though blood from where the circuit breaker panel cover had glanced off his head was now getting in one eye. He felt nauseous, yet knew he could control it. He had to save his ship. He must! He was an INFINITY CITY MAN!

He got to the top of the stairwell and lurched into the pilot room. There in the pilot chair was Van Gogh, staring intently at the main display screen. He was holding his finger in front of him pointing toward the center of the display. Every now and then he would jerk it slightly this way or that and say, "This way... Now that way a little..." And the computer would obey! Normally, it would only obey John, but the MAYDAY emergency must have overridden this. Van Gogh had awakened and gotten to the pilot chair. How could he have known what to do?!

And then, John looked at what was on the display screen. No more orange unstable gravitonic currents. No more red rapid currents. No black currents. Not even dim white currents. What he saw were several curving bright white bands spiraling in toward the center of the display. The border around the display was bright white. They were safely on their way in!

He stood dumbly watching a nineteenth-century artist pilot his sailship through a black hole. This couldn't be happening. Hallucination? He felt lucid, though dazed...

Then, at the center of the display a white disk rapidly grew covering the entire display until it was all white, indicating that the ship was in the center and there was no where else to go now. Van Gogh sat back and looked over at John with a curious blank look. John said, "Close your eyes. We're about to enter our... harbor." The transition through the first event horizon made things look awful for an instant. Many found it disconcerting. Van Gogh smirked and closed one eye. And then they left the universe...

John had closed his eyes and when he opened them again, Van Gogh's closed eye was open and his opened eye was closed and his mouth hung open in stupefaction. John looked around and everything was mirror reversed from before. However, he knew this was an hallucination, a psychological phenomenon that often happened during the transition; something about the subatomic particle structure of the brain that processed visual data. People usually got over this in a day or so. They would awake one morning and everything would be back to normal...

This had been a strange voyage. But there on the display screen before them, floating in the middle of black nothingness, lay his familiar multi-colored Infinity City. More peaceful and home-like to him than Earth itself!

"Mr. Van Gogh, may I present to you my world called Infinity City." And then, John collapsed on the closest bunk and called, "Computer! Hail Infinity City using password: 113322. Request

emergency grappling assistance... And medical care..."

"Acknowledged."

And then he passed out for awhile...

CHAPTER 20 - WELL OF THE WISH

When John One awoke he was still lying on the bunk. A woman in a medical uniform was standing next to him reviewing the display of some portable medical device that had been wheeled

into the cabin. She looked up, smiled and said, "Welcome back home, Adventurer! And how do you feel?"

He looked down at himself and discovered he was wearing a clean and undamaged uniform. His hand was bandaged and not hurting at all. As he raised his brow in surprise, he could also feel a bandage on his head. He nodded and said, "I feel fine. We had a rough entry. Am I okay internally?"

"Just fine," she said, patting his hand reassuringly. "No major damage at all. I injected a minimal amount of synth-blood, plus a few microbots that will fix anything minor. As a matter of fact, I'm not even recommending hospitalization! If you can stand and walk, I'll let you sign this release..."

John got up stiffly, walked around the cabin and smiled, "I thought I was half-dead! How long have I been out? Do you know if there were any problems getting us in?"

The woman was at the beginning of her mature years. She stood, admiring John's youthful resilience, with that serene, smilingly calculating look of the women of Infinity City when they are contemplating how a particular man can add to the power and security of their Family. She responded, "I was sent up with the recovery team after your computer reported that your mainsail was out. They decided to use a control net because repairs would have taken too long. Once your ship was stabilized, I boarded and found you and that other fellow. He was in passable shape, but loaded with toxins due to mild immune system dysfunction, understandable as behind as he is on his anti-aging. But, nothing that couldn't wait until hospital and the Pill. I got to work on you right away. Your friend sat and watched the whole time. Strange fellow... Very concerned about you, though.

"I administered a sedative to keep you asleep, and with nothing else to do tried to talk with your rather odd friend. He just sat at the controls there with his arms folded, staring at the display screen. Finally, he crawled into his bunk, stared up at me with a strange look for a moment, then went to sleep. You Adventurers bring in some strange cases from the colonies!"

John was thankful she did not know they had returned from the past. He asked, "Where is he... Where are WE now?"

"Space port. As I said, they didn't want to repair your mainsail system in space and said that this ship was such a

sturdy model that it would easily take the net, so they lowered us that way. I even stayed on board, though strapped in, of course. Your friend was quite startled when he awoke to find me strapping him in. He said he didn't want a WOMAN touching him. Is he from a gender-polarized colony?"

John said, "Yes, quite." And then teasingly: "Almost as bad as you ladies keep it here."

She gave him a sideways look of admonishment, but still smiled. "Oh, we keep you virtually roped down, don't we. I'll bet YOU can't wait to go off on your next Adventure, young man." She said YOUNG MAN in an interesting way, John thought.

"I've nothing planned, actually," and then ruefully, "I'll be here in City for a while." And then thoughtfully, "Actually, I've a very interesting cargo to dispose of. Where is Vincent, anyway?"

"He's been out on the tarmac for hours -- painting the ships. Is he an artist? His style is so awful! What world did he come from?"

"'Awful'? You think so?! He's from a place called... Arles."

"Well, it's a place I'VE never heard of. New discovery?"

"Sort of. I better go find him before he wanders into the City and gets lost. Where's that release form?..."

John signed the screen of her medical computer with his finger, then called the control tower to request transportation for himself and the medical lady. He changed his mind suddenly and ordered regular ground transportation for the lady to take her back to the hospital, requesting instead an excursion-skiff for himself and Vincent.

Next, he checked the status display of his ship, made a mental note of the repairs he and his uncle would have to schedule, then wheeled the lady's medical device out of the ship for her. He locked up his ship, then looked around for Van Gogh, and found him off in the distance, near a huge interstellar transport. Well, he'd let him paint until the skiff arrived.

He discussed local news with the medical lady, who kept turning the conversation to men and women in what John suspected was an almost flirtatious way. He had learned that a man could never presuppose the intentions of one of Infinity City's women. When her ground transport arrived, John stowed her medical device into the little cargo space. She kissed him on the cheek formally, smiled warmly and was off. All of a sudden, he felt such joy to be home and realized that he loved his Infinity City with all his heart.

Then, he felt frustrated that an officer of the Militia Guard should have such sentimental feelings and resolved to be off on another Adventure just as soon as Mr. Van Gogh was settled and producing art for his uncle. At John's early age he had not

yet come to expect the inevitable revolting development that came to every grand project...

Hearing a buzzing sound, John turned to discover an excursion-skiff floating down, suspended below its colorful billowing gravitonic sails. It partially resembled the hot air balloons of Earth because passengers rode in a small, basket allowing them to look out over Infinity City. But the sails differed from a balloon in shape. They were tall and tapered, and more like banana peels. They separated and opened when up or down motion was required. This one's sails were bent all the way open now as it gently landed -- like a sky-filling gigantic flower. Then they slowly closed up to form a tall floating stately tapered tower.

A chubby, balding man, whose head was tucked down safely between his shoulders, was at the controls of the skiff. He dramatically swung open its little door, jumped out and extended his hand with a jovial manner. "Hello! I'm Ed Unity! My skiffs are the newest in town and the smoothest you'll ever ride! Got experience?" Then he noticed John's Guard uniform. "The Guard! Well, there's nothing I can tell you! Except, I know how you boys love to sail close to the edge. But if you get to the edge of the City, and the rim alert goes off, don't get any closer or she'll land automatically... The cost is only 300 Riyals per hour. *5. Cheapest in town! Keep her out as long as you like --

just don't forget the meter's running!... What in the world is that guy doing?" He pointing over John's shoulder, and John turned to find Van Gogh eagerly setting up his easel a short distance away.

"Vincent," he shouted. "Come on! Come over here! I'll show you something to paint!"

Vincent grabbed his gear up again and slowly walked over to the basket, craning his neck up at the spectacular, multicolored sails. He was very excited. "Balloon! Is this a balloon?"

"Yes, it is. Just like back in your world, Vincent," John answered.

The skiff owner leaned over to John and muttered, "Where's this guy from? Some COLONY?"

"He's from a far off land."

"Yeah? Hey listen -- you space boys gotta stop bringing these guys in. They work for peanuts and put honest Citizens outta work! My brother Sam had a cleaning service and a bunch of Cetus opened up shop in the same area... Next thing you know, Sam's living with me unemployed! Four more hungry mouths! But I do all right. Best skiffs in Town, you know!"

When he was through with his rant, he opened the door to the basket with a bow and a flourish. He admitted John One, Van Gogh and himself, then snapped the door closed. He gestured to the controls, "It's all yours, Commander. Just drop me off at the South East corner of the field. Then, keep it as long as you want. You want it overnight? Fine! No problem! It's cheaper

by the day."

John had flown the excursion-skiffs many times before, usually taking members of the Family on tours during the holidays. He looked around and sure enough, there was a small snack and liquor vending machine attached to the wall of the basket, halfway between the floor and lip -- liquor was illegal for the pilot, of course.

"Commander! You want a drink to relax? No problem! Here the first one's on me..." He started fumbling for a key, but John interrupted, "No, no thanks. After we land, perhaps."

"Never touch the stuff when I'm flying, either." He belched. "Excuse me..."

The gravitonic field generator was already humming away at idle to keep the sails floating aloft. John spun it up to lift off power, checked the computer radar screen, eye-balled the sky himself, then slowly unwound the sails. As the sails blossomed out above their heads, they were shaded from the artificial sun-source overhead out beyond the atmosphere; the sails were translucent, changing the sky from its current bright blue to the rainbow colors of the sails. "Astonishing! Astonishing!" murmured Van Gogh, squinting up at the sails bending down. John was secretly glad that the blue sky had not been "voted out" while he was away.

As the skiff lifted off smoothly, they watched the space port drop below. At a few hundred meters, John wound the sails back up to their fixed altitude position, then eased over the polarity of the sail, facing it toward the desired destination of the owner of the skiff. The space port below began to slide by in the opposite direction.

Van Gogh was clutching the lip of the basket staring wide-eyed at the ground passing beneath. He looked over at John and asked, "Please, could I have some... liquor?"

The owner said firmly, with a trace of condescension, "Colonials have to pay for all drinks -- let's see your cash."

"Give him the drink you offered me," John suggested.

"Free drinks are for Citizens. Colonials have to pay!"

"Please put it on my Family's tab."

The skiff owner shrugged. "Sure, Commander. Whatever you say." He brought out a notebook and stylus. "What's your name and Family name."

"John One of the Larsch."

He looked up sharply. "The Larsch! Well, well. Well to do, well to do. Commander, your wish is my command." He took his key and opened the liquor and snack machine revealing rows of small bottles and stacks of snacks. Cordially smiling and spreading his hands wide, he asked Van Gogh, "What will be your

pleasure, Sir? A friend of the Larsch is a friend of mine!
Absolutely! Absolutely!"

"A glass of wine. Or schnapps or brandy, if you have that."

"Wine and brandy, we got. 'Snaps,' whatever that is, we don't have. You want colony specialties, you bring 'em along yourself, friend. How about a nice glass of brandy??"

"That would be fine, sir."

"...good manners for a colonial..." he mumbled while pouring a goodly portion. Van Gogh took a good pull and let out a sigh -- he seemed more relaxed already.

Mr. Unity pointed the way to his establishment. When they were near the warehouse and several frameworks supporting Mr. Unity's fleet of excursion-skiffs, John One depolarized his steering sails, then unwound them for the descent.

When they touched down, Mr. Unity popped open the door, hopped out, snapped it closed again, then backed away bowing and gesturing. "Bon voyage, gentlemen! Have the time of your lives. Go pick up some ladies; they love the sky; really thaws them out!"

John waved at the man as they ascended away, amused at his salesmanship.

Infinity City was roughly disk-shaped. The main urban area was in the exact center with the space port just beyond the Eastern edge. He now swung the skiff to the West and brought it up to a much higher altitude. There were rarely clouds in the artificially maintained atmosphere. No weather in general. The agricultural areas were sprayed with hydroponic liquids from mist geyser fountain nozzles on the ground.

The sky was a constant bright sky-blue. The artificial sun looked real enough. It was actually a nuclear furnace, directed magnetically across the sky by drone sailships. During the day, it would be ignited as it was magnetically dragged across the sky from East to West. After "sundown" it would be shut off, then dragged back, underneath Infinity City, to the Eastern edge of Infinity City's disk to await "dawn" and a repeat of the cycle. On special occasions, just before dawn, fine dust of colored crystals would be blown up into the atmosphere near the Eastern edge, providing a spectacular and glorious sunrise. Children would be told that the black hole was smiling on that day.

Many streets and open terraces across Infinity City were covered with translucent awnings of subtle colorings: pleasing mother of pearl, light yellow, striking indigo. The public transportation system was an above ground light-rail system, termed the MOVER, whose cars were painted in subdued colors with interesting patterns, very pleasing from an aerial view aboard an excursion-skiff.

Flying across these amazing tapestries of varying color and shapes had a profound affect on Mr. Van Gogh. "Astonishing!"

This city is a painting itself."

John had been waiting for a chance to bring up the subject of having Van Gogh paint for his uncle and himself. "Would you enjoy painting this city for awhile? You can paint down in the streets, out in our fields, or you can come up here whenever you like."

"Yes, I would enjoy painting this amazing land very much, but... How will I live here? Before, I lived from the charity of my dear brother. But what will I do here?" A plaintive look of fear began to spread across his face.

"Vincent, please, do not worry! You are the guest of my Family. You were as soon as you set foot on our ship. Please accept our patronage and support. In return, we only ask you to do what you do best... Paint!"

"This is like a strange dream. But so my life has always, always been. I will accept. I cannot go back to France, you say? Well then, I will not require much at all. Just a little room, some simple food, and painting supplies... Is there a church, a Christian church that I may attend?"

"Well, the Grand Dames only allow the One True Belief. But only officially. People from colonies are still allowed to practise their own religions at home, as long as they don't try to convert others. You'll at least FIND some Christians somewhere, if not an actual church." Van Gogh nodded, satisfied.

The artist turned back to the amazing canopy of colors sliding slowly below. They spent the next hour or two lazily floating over Infinity City -- Van Gogh marveling at his new world; John One marvelling at what a successful first Adventure he had completed.

Another excursion-skiff floated past with a young couple aboard waving and lifting champagne glasses. Out over the agricultural fields, another skiff was floating stationary while two technicians on board were scanning the crops below with special cameras for monitoring overall growth characteristics. They emphatically waved John away so the shadow of his skiff would not ruin their findings.

Finally, they returned to the skiff ranch, where John paid for their time -- hearing many a "Please come again!" from Mr. Ed

Unity. John ordered a rent-a-car and when it arrived they took off in search of an apartment for Mr. Vincent Van Gogh, newest Citizen of Infinity City.

The next days were spent familiarizing Mr. Van Gogh with modern gadgets, transportation about the City, and dealing with the people of the City. He was delighted with the amazing array of gadgets for ease and convenience in his apartment and about the City.

The Grand Dames appreciated a comfortable life-style demanding intuitive, easy to use gadgetry. Also, public

facilities had to be easy to use by the colonial laborers. Any gadget too complex to figure out would have a built in computer with the ability to converse in English, the ancient language of Infinity City -- a language so adaptable to cultural change, it was difficult to give up. Van Gogh had very little problem getting by.

John One showed him how to get around the City aboard the ubiquitous MOVERS, (though, John himself, preferred his own electric car) and introduced Vincent to various shops and merchants.

To make purchases, Van Gogh was given a Larsch credit card with a 500 Riyal-per-day purchase limit, and a few other preprogrammed purchase limitations to keep him out of trouble.

When the painting supplies from Earth ran low, they both went out one morning in search of a local supply. This was challenging. In spite of the amazing variety of color, Van Gogh did not care for the acrylic paints because he could not "smell the color." He demanded the old-fashioned Earth pigments because each one "smelled like its color." John One simply used the computer terminal aboard a MOVER to tie in to the City's vendor directory, finding a little shop that carried traditional and imported art supplies. It was located in OLDTOWN, the only place ODD little shops could afford to do business. Rent was cheap in OLDTOWN due to lack of modern facilities. Reconstruction was not allowed so as to preserve the first part of the City ever built. It was here, in the dead center of the stasis between the first and second black hole event horizons that the original Infinity City founders had begun the City.

At the exact center, overlooking and dangerously open to the second event horizon, they had built the WELL OF THE WISH cistern. It was open to the public, though a circular wall of about 100 meters diameter around it forced anyone desiring entry to pass a single guard station. This was mainly to prevent unsupervised children from entry. And, it had become quite a formal rite of passage -- upon reaching one's sixth birthday -- to be finally allowed in to see down into the phenomenal second event horizon.

After leaving the paint shop and moving off on the MOVER, Van Gogh saw up ahead the strange circular wall with the well-like structure in the center, and inquired to John regarding this interesting structure.

John said proudly, "That, Vincent, is the heart of our City: The 'WELL OF THE WISH'."

"It looks very interesting. Please, let us stop and see it!"

"Sure. But we can't stay long. You have been invited to the Grand Dame's table this evening, for dinner, and we cannot be late..."

They left the MOVER walked over to the guard station. John waved at the old man sitting in the booth reading a book. The old man looked up, squinted at them, and seeing John's Militia

Guard uniform, nodded, stood stiffly and saluted. Then, he waved them through, and gratefully returned to his seat. John felt sorry for the old man -- obviously one of those poor, unfortunate souls whose DNA structure had some fluke making it immune to the Pill of Life.

And then John made a remark to Vincent he would regret forever:

"Actually, you can come here by yourself anytime. Just walk on past the guard. He's just there to keep out the kids. People come here to be alone, but not very often. They say that the second event horizon soothes the spirit and will take away any turmoil. See? No one's ever here... Eerie, isn't it."

Though the sun was overhead, a canopy of translucent white provided a subdued, tranquil light. The smell of age was in the place. Van Gogh went over to the black and dark red brick cistern and slowly and carefully peered over the edge. His hands had been behind his back, but suddenly with a sharp intake of breath he flung them out sideways and leapt back, bringing his hands up in front of him as if warding off something dangerous. He took several steps backwards then turned to John, "Is that hell, John?!"

"Maybe, to some. I've heard that a long, long time ago they used to execute incorrigible criminals by tossing them in. It's really just the second event horizon. Don't drop anything down into it because no one knows where it goes, and some worry it may bounce back someday... Anyway, we must go now so that we aren't late for dinner."

They left with Vincent muttering, "I have seen my miracle!"

CHAPTER 21 - THE COMMISSION

John One's uncle was at first apprehensive of John's enterprise and doubted the identity of Van Gogh. However, Van Gogh had been painting every day since their arrival and the authenticity of the stunning works he was producing could not be doubted. Van Gogh's productivity was amazing. He had invented a style of often painting directly from the tube, using it like a pen and sometimes -- in fits of creative fervor and frustration bordering on madness -- would swipe at the canvas, as if the tube he was holding was a sword!

When his uncle voiced doubts about Van Gogh's sanity, his nephew assured him that what he observed was mere artistic temperament and that all the historical stories about his madness were due to the ear infection, which John One had cured and which the doctor on board their sailship had validated.

Van Gogh, grateful to his patrons and delighted with his new world, began amassing a significant volume of paintings and drawings; the paintings included landscapes from all over Infinity City, portraits of anyone that caught his fancy who would sit still long enough, and several works from his memory of

what he had seen during their voyage between Earth and the black hole to Infinity City.

John's uncle finally burst forth his amazement and gratitude to his nephew, "John, I'm convinced. It is almost unbelievable! Truly you have worked a miracle! What amazing luck and perfect execution. To not only have found and brought back your stock of art treasures of Earth, but to have brought back one of the greatest Artists of all time! If only your father were here to take pride in his son's first and most esteemed adventure!"

At this, John's expression tightened and he looked away, controlling the surge of emotions he always felt when the subject of his unreliable father was mentioned.

His uncle, who often discussed with others the possible whereabouts or fate of his younger brother each time he would disappear, in the hopes of one day putting together a party to go in search for him, changed the subject to spare John's feelings: "John! We have a lot of work to do to fully exploit your legendary artist. A gallery! I want you to open a gallery to show his works. Rent one of the buildings down in OLDTOWN in a busy location. We'll take advantage of all the people who already go down there looking for oddities..." He offered much more advice on how best to exploit their new artistic resource.

John found a spacious vacant store with a sizable back warehouse. It was located in OLDTOWN along a street made popular due to its proximity to the WELL OF THE WISH. The strange, animated patterns that could be seen in the "WELL" often inspired peoples' artistic fancies, which were easily gratified at the curio and art shops along the thoroughfare. All in all, it was a good location for an art gallery. There was even a nice little cafe conveniently located at the end of the street.

John and Vincent were soon hard at work preparing the gallery for opening. Vincent was amazed and delighted with the electrical lighting that John supplied. Vincent would spend hours, often most of the night, arranging the lights just so, and then minutely adjusting their brightness, spectral content and even subliminal phasing (the psychological effect of this still largely under debate throughout the established art community of Infinity City).

Even before the gallery opened, people began dropping in, drawn by the eye-catching works of art seen through the windows: the ancient works John had brought from Earth, Vincent's recent Infinity City work and his mysterious work from the sailship journey; even the drawings he had made then discarded aboard the sailship, uncrumpled by John. Van Gogh was inspired by the fantasyland of Infinity City. His resulting works were amazing to behold.

Or, people were drawn by the rumors floating around Infinity City that an Adventurer had "time-napped" a famous Earth artist. John's uncle suggested keeping Vincent a secret until the gallery's grand opening, giving the enterprise a dramatic introduction to society, thus raising sales through the legitimacy of such an admirable start. Though "Van Gogh" was no longer a house-hold word, since the artists of Earth had to

compete with the artists of Earth's countless colonies throughout the Galaxy, much of the art community of Infinity City still held the artist Vincent Van Gogh in rapt regard, some believing him the greatest painter of all time. Though most were unconvinced as to Vincent's authenticity, many dropped by the gallery to see for themselves.

Whether or not he was Vincent Van Gogh, his talent was seen as genuine, and Vincent revelled in pride as connoisseurs and other artists began dropping by to seek out this new, local genius and to discuss various aspects of art. Often, John could find Vincent at the cafe at the end of the thoroughfare, nearest the WELL OF THE WISH, in heated discussions with one or more of his growing league of admirers.

CHAPTER 22 - MANDY

One evening, while John was constructing partitions in the gallery, the grand opening only a few days away, an old friend of his entered the gallery. She secretly watched him from the door for a few moments, admiring his large, well-muscled physique as he lifted and moved the heavy wooden partitions. She walked directly up to him smiling, tilted her head coquettishly and said sweetly, "Hello, John!"

John slowly put down his work, turned around and stared. Then delight spread across his face like one of Infinity City's Celebration Dawns. "Mandy..." he breathed. "I never thought I would see you again." He remembered why. He tentatively reached out and took her soft, little hand in his. She resisted not in the least; her eyes closing, she fell into his arms, "John, oh, John One! How I've missed you. I love you! I love you so much. It's been so long..."

He held her in his arms and old feelings were again there as if they had never left. He had not seen her since he had graduated from the Infinity City Militia Guard Academy and had left for duty out beyond the black hole. He thought he would never see her again and had disciplined himself to stop thinking of her. But feelings do not respond to discipline...

She wriggled in his hold on her and looked up into his calm, gray eyes. "Oh, John, to have your arms around me again! You are so wonderful! My favorite ... favorite person in my whole life. Don't let me go..."

The fragrance of her soft, flowing dark hair intoxicated him. She was a head shorter than he and would often stand on tip-toe as they held each other. Her eyes were the softest most loving brown. And natural, too! All her beauty was natural. Her dainty pleasing face with full lips quick with a winsome smile; petite feminine figure, always exquisitely attired in the latest styles, but never extravagant, just eye-catching and always so strikingly female. Today, she wore a simple lavender smock with a pretty sash, a bow tied at the side; the smock cut above her knees -- exposing the irresistible curves of her legs -- down to her delicate feet in slippers of matching lavender

with micro-hints of multi-colored sparkling liquid crystals. She was his dream come true and would always be so.

"Oh, John, this is too much. Is there someplace we can go?"

"Wait," he breathed and bent his head down to slowly touch his lips to hers. He relished at the warmth and softness that he tasted. She gave a long soft mewling sigh and slid her hands up his sturdy back to hold his powerful shoulders. Tighter they held each other, lost in a spiraling rise of passion, familiar as if they had never been apart.

He brushed his clean-shaven cheek against the softness of hers, and they touched noses, smiling into each others eyes, instantly knowing that each knew and felt and desired the same.

"Mandy, you are incredible!" he began in an inspired rush of words. "You make me feel so much. I'm just a cold nothing without you. You fill me with such... amazing feelings, like a huge sail on an interstellar merchant ship."

"John, what a way with words you have! I feel just the same about you. You're my knight in shining armor. While you were out doing battle amongst the stars, I thought of you all the time. Could you not sense my love for you?"

He smiled and laughed a little. "Let's go have a nice little intimate dinner, right here in the gallery. I've fixed up a nice private showing-room in the back of the gallery with table and chairs and... nice furniture and... a nice couch... There's a cafe at the end of the street. I'll order up something... nice."

"You're a perfect host, my love!" she hugged one of his arms to her like a favorite teddy bear, then stood on tip-toe, giving him little kisses all over his cheek.

He gently disentangled himself, then slowly walked over to the telecom, feeling as if he was walking on two awkward easel legs. How strange that his feelings for Mandy were still so torrid after so long!

He remembered sweet Yvette, though returning through the event horizon had restored all he had affected in the universe back to the way it had been. Like he had awakened and little Yvette had been nothing but just a warm, loving dream. If, however, he could ever find his way back to that exact time, it COULD happen all over. But different each time he returned... He dismissed such an improbable occurrence. He had Mandy again!

He touched the recognition plate and spoke, "Cafe, end of the street..."

The telecom hummed on and off as it rang the cafe. The owner answered, "Yes, yes? 'Cafe of the Well'..."

John placed an order for a simple dinner for two. The owner, old and wizened, was fond of John and Vincent, and especially of all the increased business Vincent brought to his

cafe. He said warmly, "Ah, my friend. Good Vincent is out on my corner lecturing yet another neophyte, so you must be entertaining perhaps, someone special?..."

"Yes," he answered looking warmly over at Mandy, who was staring with a puzzled look at one of Vincent's works hanging on the wall of the private showing-room. "I have someone very special over here that I haven't seen for many years. Please bring us something appropriate. And, a bottle of your finest."

The owner was only too happy to oblige such an open request by one of such substantial means: a Larsch! "Ah, your wish is my command, my young buccaneer! I happen to have just acquired a rare and dainty delicacy from the seas of New Rome off Rigel."
*6.

"That will be fine. Perfect, in fact! Will it be long? Are you busy?"

"Not at all!" he lied, having a full-house, it being the weekend. However, for an Adventurer from one of the top houses, everything was Priority One. "I'll have everything there within just half an hour! One must placate the mood, eh, my young friend? Never fear! I am your man of the hour! The HALF hour!..."

John and Mandy sat and talked, holding hands, occasionally touching each other's cheek or stroking each other's hair; laughing at witty little remarks; smiling at memories of their long relationship during John's years at the prestigious Academy.

Soon, there was a knock at the door. John walked out through the gallery and opened the door. There, suspended gravitonically, was the cafe's delivery robot, good for local deliveries within a street or two of the cafe. A display screen lit up and there was the face of the owner. "Hello, John! I'm 'live' right now..." as opposed to his prerecorded advertisement tape... "Wait till you experience the masterpiece I have created just for you two. Tonight, I found myself as inspired at the stove as Vincent at his canvas!

"I told the robot to stay until you sent him home. He's great! Just ask him for anything. He'll clean up after you're done. Send him home as late as you want. Have a good time, my young friend!" He faded from the screen nodding and winking.

John led the robot into the showing-room and asked it to set up. It was slow but understood commands easily without requesting clarifications, and even made a few amusing, even suggestive comments, undoubtedly set up by its owner, an old romantic it seemed.

They ate the wonderful meal; savoring each morsel, glancing into each others eyes, sighing; then winking; then laughing. John felt she could be everything for him.

And, they drank from the bottle of an effervescent local wine of an exceedingly delightful vintage. As the bubbles rose in their long, fluted glasses, so did their youthful passions until they soon found themselves in each others arms on the

couch, letting go all the energies kept in check so down low. Such caring they felt for each other. Even with passions quaking, fire burning within, making them shake and quiver with explosive urgency, still they, especially John, were so gentle, cultivating a glowing essence of love, living tonight just in their own private intimate paradise.

Oh, he let the leash he held on himself go! How could such an animal live within his high-caste, disciplined self? And yet, she thrived on him, and gave herself completely over to him. And, he felt as a gentle monster, his love for her exploding from his energies and movements, ALMOST INSANE.

And on they voyaged through the night. He, exploring this amazing, beckoning, inviting woman that was Mandy. She, yielding herself happily, excitedly to this newly re-discovered awesome young, conquering hero...

* * *

The next morning, very late the next morning, they found themselves languidly enjoying a light breakfast that the robot just happened to have stored within, having been prepared last night with someone's uncanny foresight. He looked at her, but strange! Maybe not so strange, she was not meeting his gaze like she had the night before.

It was just like before, though he HAD hoped the years may have changed her.

"Oh, Mandy! I still love you so. Be my wife! Join the Larsch!"

"John, I love YOU so. Sweet John, you ARE precious to offer. But, my life is my life. I like doing whatever I want. And you KNOW that I'm good at it! I don't want to become a busy-body old Grand Dame! Meddling in everybody's lives. Trying to be so perfect all the time. Always judging everybody else!" Her eyes were flashing and John remembered her telling him once that her mother had been or still was a Grand Dame with some obscure Family. He wondered what family it was?

She collected herself, embarrassed at her momentary rant, "Let's forget all this sort of talk. You'll see me again! And now, don't you have a 'gift' for me???"

He hung his head at the thought of what was to come. She had rejected him again, or at least his honorable offer, though he could not say that he felt surprised. Maybe if he just gave her more time. But, he wanted her so! "Yes... yes. Let me give you one of Vincent's works. Here's one that was done on our voyage home." He rose and reached for one of Vincent's dazzling, incendiary scenes from space.

"A painting?" she asked, skeptically.

"Yes! Of course!" He grew excited at the thought of maybe winning her over through Vincent's art. "It's a beautiful work he did based on his perceptions of outer space... What he saw

through my ship's viewscreen. It will be priceless someday!" He was struggling with the painting's wall catch. It wouldn't release.

"'Someday'? What's it worth NOW?"

"Well, the gallery hasn't even opened yet. He's not completely accepted yet. But he will be! Then his work will be in highest demand. He's so productive! We plan to open galleries in all the older, established Galactic colonies. He's really the greatest artist of all time, you know!" He could not get the painting free from its catch, and though he felt like breaking it free with force, he did not want to damage it, so he dropped his hands at his sides and faced her as she stood innocently smiling up at him.

"John, dear, I'm not interested in investments. I have bills to pay. Why don't you just pull out that wonderful Larsch credit card of yours and bestow a donation based on... my own artistic achievements, of which I seem to remember you claiming as the 'greatest ever'..."

John looked deep into her soft, dark eyes, but saw not what he longed to see. With a deep sigh and eye-brows arched philosophically, he pulled forth his huge wallet and withdrew his Larsch card of ivory with its flowing designs and legends embossed in gold. He tapped into the card's miniature keypad his authorization code and an amount, then asked, "Where's yours?"

Smiling, she presented a simple utility card, drawn on one of the long established Infinity City banks. "Here it is, my generous friend. You are feeling generous today, aren't you?" and she pulled the card back a little, suddenly pouting and looking so helpless.

John could feel himself yielding to her charm. He was a fool, he knew, to dearly love this kind of girl so. But, life was infinite and he felt sure that someday he would win her over. She was young, almost as young as he, in Infinity City terms, or so he thought. "I'll always be generous to you, Mandy. I'll always do anything for you that I can." This made her blush, but she did not break from his sincere gaze. He paused, then added another zero at the end of the amount, took her card, which she was happily offering, and placed it beneath his so that they both touched at the transfer point. Then, he pressed the button marked TRANSFER to send an electronic voucher for the specified amount from his card into hers, good at any local bank. He slowly offered her back her card.

She took it daintily -- her dazzling smile returning -- and looked at the amount of the voucher displayed in glowing numerals. Her eyes widened. "You ARE feeling generous today!"

He said, with a little sulkiness, "That's nothing compared to what one of Vincent's paintings will be worth."

"His stuff is really worth all that?" she asked thoughtfully, looking around at Vincent's paintings all over the private showroom, while then storing her credit card safely back

into her purse. She shrugged, stood once again on her tip-toes to give him a peck on the cheek and said impishly, "Thank you, Johnny! Now I'm 'off to see the wizard'!" And with that, she skipped out the back door, which closed automatically behind her, leaving a young man staring after; his feelings all astir; his thoughts arguing amongst themselves. He seemed to recall reading that Vincent had long ago suffered days like these...

The robot stirred and asked, "May I clean up the mess, Sir!"

He grinned ruefully, "Go ahead and try..." and stalked out into the gallery, where he threw himself back into the work of preparing for the grand opening...

During the next few days, John One tried several times to get in touch with Mandy. Every time he called her apartment, however, and told the computer who he was, it would repeat the same disappointing message informing him that Mandy was all booked up for the foreseeable future. Unable to bear the rejection any longer, he gave up. She just did not want him to be a part of her life.

CHAPTER 23 - FRIENDS MEET

It was a quiet evening at the CAFE OF THE WELL. The owner Mr. Manfretti was standing within the wood-framed bar. He was a plump man, average in height with black curly hair above a receding hairline, glittering dark brown eyes above an enormous nose, and a large mouth usually smiling graciously. He was busy dipping wine glasses fresh from the dishwasher into his new glazing machine, which left each glass sparkling as if coated with microscopic diamonds. Actually, the machine simply coated each glass with a harmless layer of carbon only a few molecules thick. Some believed this even improved the taste of wine.

Business was light, it being a weeknight, with only a single family at an inside table and a few couples relaxing outside. Mr. Manfretti was quite happy, though. Business in general had doubled since Mr. Vincent Van Gogh had become a regular, almost a fixture at the cafe. Sometimes Vincent would even bring canvas and easel, then paint Mr. Manfretti's pretty little seven-year-old daughter, dark-eyed Angelica.

He sighed happily at the thought of her, his newest daughter, and her mother his newest wife, so young she was not even taking the PILL OF LIFE yet. They had met, fallen in love and married only four years ago. Mr. Manfretti was 255 calendar years her senior. Though he was, of course, on the PILL, he still looked much older than her, because he had not started taking the PILL OF LIFE until he was in his calendar 50's. All those years ago... He had immigrated to Infinity City from an obscure planet colonized by ancient Earth; a planet with medical technology that had not developed to the point of solving the problem of natural aging yet.

However, his people WERE fantastic cooks and Mr. Manfretti had wangled himself a berth on an exploratory sailship operated

by an Adventurer from Infinity City. After eating continually at Mr. Manfredetti's restaurant there on the planet, the Adventurer could not bear to spend months and months in space eating standard ship fare. Offering Mr. Manfredetti the PILL OF LIFE and a generous wage, he talked him into selling his restaurant and hiring on as ship's cook. Mr. Manfredetti's wife of over 30 years had died a year before of cancer; they had been childless; and, he was tired of all the memories the old restaurant caused -- he gladly agreed and signed on board.

The sailship's doctor prescribed a saturation dosage of the PILL OF LIFE. The very next time the sailship put in at Infinity City, the Adventurer lived up to his promise and paid for the expensive custom prescription. This was meant for people starting the PILL late in life, already suffering from the effects of aging. Unfortunately, due to the immune system's inability to repair scar tissue, and other similar problems, people Mr. Manfredetti's age could only expect partial rejuvenation, though they would age no more. He had been in good health, a little heavy, and after a few months the doctor's medical computer reported all internal organs had rejuvenated to an acceptable level. He would never be a tennis star, but would be up to any activity a healthy man of 45 could handle. He was satisfied with that. MORE than satisfied!

His flesh got clearer; age spots disappeared; however, he remained looking middle aged. The doctor offered plastic surgery but Mr. Manfredetti just chuckled and said, "I want to open up another restaurant someday. Nobody's going to trust a young looking cook to be any good, you know what I mean? Look at me... I got a little paunch -- I eat well! I look a little old -- hey, I been around. Good for business!..."

When the sailship returned to Infinity City after five ship years traveling around the Galaxy, Mr. Manfredetti had saved enough from his percentage of the ship's profit to purchase his current little cafe near the WELL OF THE WISH. He soon married his second wife and had several children. Life could be so good! What a paradise Infinity City really was!

Unfortunately, he fell victim to a strange problem that was really a benefit for Infinity City. After his children grew up, most grew bored with the 30-mile wide Infinity City, and one by one each berthed out aboard whatever sailship was available --

"in search of new event horizons" (as the saying went). His wife missed her children very badly and was not as suited to the life of a restaurateur as Mr. Manfredetti. Their relationship became strained and they agreed to part ways; he continued with his restaurant and she went off to live with her favorite son, who had become a respectable banker on some obscure world up in the Galaxy.

This same pattern occurred with his third, fourth and fifth wives, and would probably occur, he sometimes thought sadly to himself, with his present sixth wife. "But," he would say to his friends, "What can you do, you know what I mean???" Such a philosophical man, Mr. Manfredetti...

The Infinity City sibling-to-parent ratio was extremely high

due to its most modern of medical sciences and an extreme cultural affinity toward children. However, the children continually grew up, grew bored, and left. Some came back, but most either settled elsewhere among the spreading planets of human colonization, or were killed, it being a dangerous Galaxy.

So, the high birth rate of Infinity City was balanced by the emigration rate. There was some immigration, like Mr. Manfredetti, but few people up in the Galaxy were interested in the idea of moving into a black hole. Rarely did the Infinity City engineers have to add on to the disk-shaped superstructure of Infinity City, though the original engineers had obviously designed the girder system for endless expansion, and there was actually plenty more room between the black hole's first and second event horizons for even more Infinity Citys.

Mr. Manfredetti looked up to check on his daughter, saw her peaking over the table at the posttemporal Vincent Van Gogh and his partner, Mr. John One of the Larsch, who had just sat down. They had been showing up every evening during the long days readying the gallery for its grand opening. Mr. Manfredetti swelled with pride at the thought of his restaurant being the haunt for these two, who had become the talk of the town. Vincent was the strangest character he had ever known in all his years of restauranting. Thoroughly likable, he was though. Such a caring young man. So full of the passion of life. He should marry and have many children, Mr. Manfredetti thought. LOOK HOW HE ADORES MY DAUGHTER. HOW MANY TIMES HAS HE PAINTED HER, I FORGET!

And, John One captured his imagination. This young man, barely older than a cub, fresh out of the Militia, had such a magnetism in his relaxed, quiet demeanor that made him seem capable of anything. Such a handsome, trim-looking lad, too. Mr. Manfredetti often noticed girls at other tables eyeing John One who never seemed to notice -- just had eyes for that brunette that came by with him now and then. Easy to see why, though. What a beauty SHE was!

Mr. Manfredetti was certain John One was destined for the greatest of all lives. Manfredetti secretly fantasized about a time several years down the road, when his latest daughter, Angelica, was of age. Imagine John One of the Larsch sweeping her off her feet and asking her to be a Larsh wife. And she would rise up and become one of their Grand Dames, bringing the most famous people of Infinity City to her father's little restaurant. And then, he would extend the franchise all over the Galaxy and maybe beyond, the first human restaurant in the Andromeda galaxy, the Magellanic clouds, even! The WELL OF THE WISH CAFE!...

"...Papa, Papa! Mr. Vincent and Mr. One asked me to ask you if they can have a drink!" His pretty little daughter with long brown hair and rich green eyes was pulling at his trouser leg. He blinked his eyes as he put his frequent little fantasy back on its mental shelf, and nodded and smiled over to Vincent and John One. He began mixing their favorite drinks. He knew their favorite drinks and favorite meals by heart. It was early evening. The sun would set soon. Let's see, Vincent would be famished, but John One never ordered dinner until after dark...

John One and Vincent were chuckling as they sat outside the cafe in the high-backed, wicker chairs and watched little Angelica Manfredi tugging at her father as he stood with his elbow on the bar grinning up into nowhere. Leaning on the glass topped bamboo framed table, from his high-backed bamboo chair, Vincent said, "I am fond of that old man. I want to paint him, but every day that I come to the cafe to paint him, I leave with another portrait of Angelica. Her hair so many shades of brown, some bordering so close to yellow that I go mad! Ah, but the sweetest of all children!"

"Yes, she is," agreed John. "Looks like her father must be thinking up some new delicacy. He's an incredible cook! The restaurants of France back on old Earth were impressive, but I wouldn't want to have any but this one next to the gallery. It seems like this cafe attracts more people every day."

"Yes, his food has the richness and delight of the tastes that I seek with colors on my canvas."

John looked at him, then scratched his chin and looked back inside the cafe, "My uncle might be interested in franchising Mr. Manfredi. He's been talking about franchising the gallery if it's a success."

From behind them, someone commented: "Why not a combination gallery and bar?! Get 'em drunk then sell 'em your crazy paintings!" John and Vincent whirled around to find a young man standing at their table with hands on hips, grinning down at them. He was tall, solidly built, with messy dark blonde hair, and blue eyes. He had a small but dashing scar on the left cheek of his clean-shaven face (from his active Militia days), and a face-splitting, mischievous grin.

John leapt to his feet. "Jason! It's you!" And he grabbed the other's arms.

"In the flesh, old blast-off buddy." He began harmlessly pummeling John's stomach with both fists.

John grabbed his wrists and looked around embarrassed. "Come on, Jason. We're not in the Militia anymore."

"Okay, Mr. Serious ... Mr. Out-rank-me!"

"Hey, you always got higher marks on every Academy exam we ever had together. You graduated at the top of the class!"

Jason waved his hand. "Bah! All that head stuff! What's that matter out in space? You're the one that zoomed up the ranks. You were amazing in the Belatorian Skirmish! I played back your battle tapes. How can you think so fast? You got a black hole in your head? Or are you outside of time or something?"

"It was just the academy training, nothing more," he said,

grinning at the memory of his first, hot battle. "You could have done as well, if you weren't so old!" John teased. Jason had mysteriously avoided the militia draft until his late 30's. It was a feat he had successfully kept secret for years and had only confided in John One. Though Jason had been far older than all the other school-aged plebes, no one knew since he was on the PILL and looked just as young as all the others. Somehow Jason's computer file had been doctored and even the Academy itself had never been wise to his actual age. His secret advantage of much greater age, maturity and experience resulted in him becoming the ring-leader of his class. He had lead the rest of his young, naive cohorts through year after year of mischievous, outrageous, even scandalous activity, especially during that strange unusual and never-to-be-repeated year when the Grand Dames had decided to try a mixed class of young men AND women. If only they had known that a lecherous man of 39 had been lurking in that year's class...

"Yeah, right..." Jason looked over at Vincent, who had been delightedly observing the two old friends. "I've been reading about your interesting little adventure digging up this fossil back on old Earth."

Vincent adored listening to others interact and wanted the two to continue. To Jason he said, "Your friend saved my life by bringing me back here. I owe him everything."

Jason looked at John. "Grateful little bugger, isn't he? I'm crashing your party," he said as he pulled up a chair and sat down. Looking around he scowled, "How's a fellow get a drink around here, anyway?"

"Don't worry, Jason," John said, sitting back down and patting Jason's famous drinking arm. "Here comes the owner."

Mr. Manfretti came bustling up to the table, holding a tray of drinks with one hand, a towel draped over his arm. "Ah, gentlemen, my apologies for keeping you waiting!" He was wearing a baggy, shiny satin yellow shirt, which ruffled impressively as he swept his free hand about in flourishes, moving the drinks to the table. John's was just a glass of the house wine. Vincent had a glass of his favorite synthesized Chablis. And unexpectedly, Mr. Manfretti plopped down a synthesized scotch on the rocks for Jason.

Jason looked down at the drink, looked up at Mr. Manfretti dubiously and asked, "Scotch?"

"Of course, young buccaneer! The favorite of all Great Adventurers!"

Flattered, Jason smugly arched his eyebrows, smirked, wagged his head smugly and commented, "Of course!" He took a thirsty pull at his drink. "Ahhh! That's scotch, all right!"

Vincent and John roared with laughter. John slapped Jason on the back and ordered, "Mr. Manfretti, don't let his glass empty and you'll have a customer for life!"

They all laughed and Mr. Manfretti smiled, bowed and asked,

"Can I get you fine gentlemen something to eat?"

"I'm waiting for my friend Mandy to show up. I'll order with her. But you two can go ahead..." John said looking at Vincent and Jason.

Jason declined, frowning, "Nothing for me. I just had a huge meal over at the space port hotel."

Vincent looked at John amusedly, "John, how can you go another minute without eating. We've been working constantly since this breakfast. And no afternoon meal! You people of Infinity City with this 'big meal after the sun goes down'! This is my only complaint. Please, Mr. Manfredetti, my usual before I atrophy!"

"Certainly, Mr. Van Gogh! And, I know what you mean. On my home planet, the biggest meal was in the afternoon. And then, a nice nap. That's how to live life! But here: work, work, work! Half my customers fall asleep during dinner."

"It must be the half that drink as much as Jason does," commented John One, gesturing at Jason's now empty glass.

Jason grinned and cocked an ear toward his glass, "Hey, do you hear that?! My ice cubes are crying: 'Help! Save us! We're drying out!'"

Mr. Manfredetti threw out his hands in mock alarm. "Good Lord, I let your glass get empty! I must be aging. Where's my PILLS? A thousand pardons, young sir! I shall refill forthwith and that first one is on the house!" And with that, he scooped up Jason's glass and flew back to the bar, the three men chuckling behind him.

John remembered that he had not made introductions. He turned to Jason and gestured at Vincent, "Jason Jason, I would like you to meet Vincent Van Gogh. Did I pronounce it right THIS time, Vincent?"

"Closer, my friend, you get closer every day," Vincent said smiling.

"I thought I had it that time. Oh, well... And Vincent, this is an old dear friend I went to school and served with in the Militia Guard: Jason Jason."

Jason quipped, "You can call me by my first name!"

John groaned, "How many times have I heard that one?!"

"Yeah, with a name like this, I never know if a lady's being passionate or just courteous..."

John looked at Jason, his eyes wide, pretending he was shocked and admonished, "Jason!"

Vincent frowned in puzzlement, then shrugged and asked, "My

friend, your full name is 'Jason Jason'? Is this a custom where you come from?"

Jason was watching with concern as Mr. Manfredi walked over deftly swinging the tray with Jason's drink in great arcing loops; the tray actually upside down at the top of each loop, yet not spilling a drop (250 years of practise). "Huh, my name? Oh, I'm from here, but dad gave me his first name, so I took the patronymic instead of my father's surname. Just my sense of humor -- and I didn't want to be called 'Junior.'"

"He's lying, Vincent!" John put it, grinning, "Two different names would have been more than HE could remember!"

Jason said smugly, "Hey, John, the ladies never forget."

They all chuckled some more, except Vincent. They sipped at their drinks -- even Jason, who had been served his second.

John looked at Jason and inquired, "Jason, you're staying at the hotel. On your way out or in or staying for awhile?"

"I've been in for a few weeks now. 'Wanna get going soon, but Mom and Dad are having their 100th anniversary. Can you believe it? I'm throwing them a party tomorrow night. Just family and close friends -- there's a difference, you know! Why don't you both come? Mom would love to meet you, Mr. Van Gogh. She's just as excited as everyone else about you. I started hearing about you on the newsnet, just in from the event horizon."

Vincent looked at John helplessly. John explained, "Jason! Tomorrow's the grand opening of our new art gallery. I was just about to invite you! We have to be there; it's business. What a shame we can't make their 100th! Is it exactly tomorrow?"

"Yes! You know how traditional they both are. But, don't worry! They won't mind."

"How soon are you off again?"

"Any day now. There's nothing new for sailships lately, so I've got no refitting to do; the ship's in perfect shape. I'm footloose and fancy free, especially regarding the ladies. And, I can't wait to get back to work. God, I love space! Just want to be back up there in my ship, sailing all over the Galaxy."

John shook his head, "Oh, Jason, what about your family? You're visiting your parents for only a couple of weeks? You're their only child, aren't you?"

Jason bristled, "I am no child! Can a child rescue a reaction-drive cruise ship with 100,000 passengers?!"

"Whoa! Settle down! I'm just asking if your parents have had any more kids."

Jason looked apologetic, "Sorry. No they haven't, and I wish they would. They STILL treat me like I'm five years old or

something. Drives me nuts! Gets on me nerves! Every time I'm about to blast out of here it's 'Oh, Jason! You're our only son! Why can't you work with father at the store?! You'll get killed trying to rescue everyone!'" He shook his head and looked at his drink.

Vincent looked at John, then back to Jason, and leaned toward him, "Mr. Jason, whom do you rescue?"

Jason just shrugged, rattled the ice in his glass and answered simply, "Anyone."

John One explained, "Jason rescues disabled space vessels that are stranded in space, Vincent."

Vincent was impressed and looked at Jason with surprise and then puzzlement, "Back on Earth, the seas and oceans are vast. A vessel in trouble has little chance of being found. I am told that the space between the stars is billions of times larger than an ocean." He shook his head in bewilderment. "How do you find a ship lost in something so large?"

Jason shrugged, "It's the perpendicular time thing about Infinity City. I have the library archive computer search through news headlines from all the papers it has on file. They've been getting electronic dumps from the colonized planet's late periods for years now. When it finds anything about a missing ship, like where it left from, where it's going, what kind of propulsion system it has, then I up-ship, fly to its home planet and follow its course, listening for radio distress calls. I even went back in time, once, and followed a ship right from its takeoff, so I'd know right where it broke down! It's a lot of fun, exciting, and there's money in it. Grateful folks pay a lot of money after being rescued. Also, there's trading in it, too.

"Like I say, I'll be going out again as soon as I can." *7. He looked up, his eyes brightening. "You can't believe how many lives I've saved! These people are so grateful. They all start crying and promise the world if I even visit them on their planets -- I've got millions of business cards!"

Then prodding John with his elbow, he leered, "And, oooh, the ladies are so grateful." Something to the side caught Jason's attention. "And speaking of ladies, look at what we have here! Mm, mmm."

The three turned to see Mandy getting out of a robot cab a few steps away. She smiled over at John, turned to the cab and said, "Just charge the Larsch account."

The cab loudly announced, "Immediate authorization required for verbal charges!"

Mandy pranced up to the table and asked sweetly, "Johnny, would you be a dear and make this nasty cabby go away for me?"

John hastily got up, went over to the cab, and spoke in a subdued voice, "Charge authorized by me, John One, Larsch son."

A moment later, the cab spoke in an equally subdued, conspiratorial voice, "Identification validated. Charge cleared. Thank you, sir, please choose our line again next time." It then smoothly drifted off down the street.

Mandy, meanwhile, had taken John's chair. However, Mr. Manfretti, almost telepathically aware of everything going on in his restaurant, had already grabbed another high-backed chair from an empty table and deftly planted it at their table before John had walked back. With uncanny diplomacy, the chair had been inserted between Mandy and Jason, with Vincent now next to Mandy.

John One sat hunched over with his arms folded on the table, gazing at Mandy. Next to him, Jason was leaning forward with his chin almost in his glass, smiling past John at Mandy from ear to ear. Vincent maintained a dignified posture and was staring at her intently out of the corner of his eyes, his face now a frozen, serious mask -- never had he seen a woman of such alluring beauty.

John said, "Hello, Mandy!" He wasn't sure if he should kiss her in front of people she had never met before -- it had upset her whenever he had in the past.

Mandy smiled at him, as if waiting, and after a few moments sighed, "Dear John..." then looked around the table. "I see everybody has drinks..."

John awkwardly stammered, "Oh, I should order something... I should have had something waiting. I... I..."

Mr. Manfretti materialized. "Ah, an angel has ascended from the second event horizon! My dear lady, it is indeed an honor, yes it is, to have your lovely presence gracing my poor, little establishment. May I serve you a liquorious libation, or are angels forbidden anything that might 'loosen the tongue and make us feel young' ???"

Mandy batted her lustrous eyelashes at Mr. Manfretti and said, "Charming man... I would like..." and she tilted her head, looked around the table, and seeing Vincent and his glass of wine, said "Give me what he's having, but make it pink!"

VINCENT SAW HIS DRINK TURN INTO A PINK DOVE. IT ROSE FLUTTERING FROM THE TABLE, TO CIRCLE AROUND AND AROUND OVER HEAD WHERE A HUGE SILVERY SPACE SHIP, SHAPED LIKE A FAT WATERMELON, FLOATED IN THE SKY. IT SUDDENLY SPLIT OPEN ITS FAT BELLY, DISGORING 100,000 MORE DOVES, ALL WHITE. THE ORIGINAL PINK DOVE FLEW UP TO THEM AND LED THEM ALL AWAY TO SAFETY DOWN INTO JOHN ONE'S GLASS. THEY ALL HAD HIGH PITCHED VOICES LIKE LITTLE GIRLS, AND LAUGHED AND CHATTERED UNTIL THEY DWINDLED INTO NOTHINGNESS...

Still offering her hand, Mandy again said, "Pleased to meet you, Mr. Van Gogh!"

Vincent took her hand. Where was Mr. Manfretti? He thought

he had been standing right there between himself and this lovely lady. He mumbled, "Pleased to meet you, mademoiselle..." He let go of her hand and stared down at his drink. He thought he saw a dove BUT IT MUST BE JUST A BUBBLE...

Mandy folded her hands under her chin and sat thoughtfully looking at Vincent. Jason, who had been looking at Mandy with various thoughts on HIS mind, caught John One's eye, gave him a playful wink and began swirling the ice around in his glass.

John smiled slightly. Then, sensing that Jason would start teasing him at any moment, decided to head him off: "So, Jason, where are you off to next?"

Jason leaned back, looking up into Infinity City's bright blue artificial sky. "Oh, I think I've tracked down a big one, this time. A famous, lost space-liner full of colonists from a planet around Rigel. The 'Heaven,' it's called. Lost only eight years ago. Search ships found nothing between its origin and destination. No debris, no trace, no radio distress messages. Must have gone off course. I have an idea of what happened, though. Its course was near one of our main militia patrol routes, around one of our dear NEIGHBORS, and also near," he leaned forward, looking at everyone slyly, "near one of those gravitonic whirlpools -- caused by anti-gravitons, if you believe the theory. Anyway, the whirlpool is on our maps of the area and I think it knocked them off course," he leaned back with a smug look, tapping his fingers together. *8.

John asked, "How could anything be left to find?" He turned to Mandy, "Anti-gravitons in a gravitonic whirlpool hitting the gravitonic sails of a ship can cause a nuclear explosion."

Jason raised a finger, "That's just the dominant theory! Some believe the gravitons may pop back out somewhere else in space or time. Maybe within a Second Event Horizon! Anyway, the HEAVEN wasn't even a sailship. It had some kind of primitive nuclear propulsion. I think the whirlpool just tossed them up, close to the speed of light, then shot them way off course. Now, their local time is too slowed down for them to get things under control. So I'll go out and rescue them. And I don't want to just back-bounce. *9. I want my rescues to STICK." *10. The one time Jason went back in the past to find a lost ship, he had decided to rescue it anyway. Though he had returned to the present and Infinity City with a huge reward from the ship, it bothered him immensely that now, since the Galactic past would have reverted back to the way it was, the ship would again be lost.

John smiled and said, "That means CURRENT history reports that you didn't find them. You'll be taking the Horizon Normal route out and be looking in the PRESENT time. But, I can tell you that there's nothing like traveling in the past with all of history to help you out!" John looked significantly at Vincent. Jason shrugged. He was more idealistic than his friend, and felt leery about traveling in the past.

Mandy interrupted, "What in the world are you two talking

about? You men do nothing but talk about prowling around history. The Grand Dames are right! You men are going to mess around with Time one time too many and it's going to cause the Great Contradiction. Then, the next time you go sailing out of the black hole, you aren't going to find anything but nothing!"

Jason began shaking both of his index fingers in the air, "Not 'nothing'! The theory is that the Great Contradiction will cause EVERYTHING! It will all be white, everywhere!"

John added, "Unless there are black holes duplicated everywhere."

Jason retorted, "But infinite black holes would reduce the temporal dimension down to just a single point, contradicting the Great Contradiction in the first place!"

John frowned in concentration, trying to imagine it all. Mandy said, "Oh, this is all too much! Where is my drink?" She began looking around just as little Angelica Manfredi arrived with a small tray with Mandy's bright pink drink on it. "Here you are, Ma'am," she said, as seriously as can be.

Mandy smiled down at her, "What a sweet little girl! Thank you dear. Is the proprietor your father?" Angelica nodded with her brown eyes wide and solemn. "Good! Go tell him we're ready to order." Little Angelica ran off to find her father.

Mandy turned to Vincent who, with his hands behind his head, was dreamily looking up at the First Event Horizon, which could be seen as a small red dot, now that the sun was setting. She said, "Well, at least YOUR excursion into Time was a tremendous success, John darling." John One smiled with pride. "I read in the INFINITY CITY JOURNAL OF RECENT ADVENTURE that you even saved Vincent's life back there on Earth. Vincent, is this true?"

Vincent looked at her and his eyes grew wide...

VINCENT WAS SITTING ON THE EARTH, AS IF IT WERE THE SIZE OF A DESK-TOP GLOBE; WATCHING ALL THE STARS IN THE SKY TURN INTO BRIGHT RAINBOW COLORS, AND ONE BY ONE, DROPPING TOWARD AN INKY BLACK HOLE. THE STARS WOULD THEN SWIRL AND DANCE AROUND IT UNTIL EACH FELL INSIDE. WHEN THEY WERE ALL GONE, THE EARTH SUDDENLY SLIPPED OUT FROM UNDER HIM, SPED TOWARD THE BLACK HOLE, BUT GOT STUCK IN THE EVENT HORIZON, BEING TOO BIG TO FIT THROUGH. VINCENT WAS TERRIFIED AND TRIED TO GO RETRIEVE THE EARTH, BUT THERE WAS NO GROUND FOR HIS FEET TO PUSH AGAINST. HE FLAILED HIS ARMS AND KICKED HIS FEET BUT COULD DO NOTHING AND GO NOWHERE...

"...Mr. Van Gogh! John, what's the matter with him? He's staring at me. Make him stop!"

John looked at Vincent, then at Jason who was looking at Vincent with a puzzled expression. Then, John leaned across the table toward Vincent and said, "Vincent? Vincent! What are you doing?" Jason began snapping his fingers in Vincent's face.

They had all been staring at Vincent and had not noticed Mr. Manfredi walk up to the table. When he brightly said, "May I

take your order, folks!" Mandy, who was staring at Vincent, almost hypnotized by Vincent's wide-eyed staring, dropped her glass in surprise, exclaiming, "Oh!" The glass fortunately did not tip over, but did make a rather loud bang.

Vincent noticed that Mr. Manfretti had mysteriously appeared next to him and that everyone was now staring at him. He turned to Jason quizzically, who stopped snapping his fingers, and then turned to Mr. Manfretti, deciding everyone was waiting for him to order. "My usual, Mr. Manfretti."

"Okay, Vincent," Mr. Manfretti answered. "One vegetarian salad," He bowed slightly toward Mandy, "And, dear lady, my apologies for startling you, and what would you like to order?"

"Well, I'm not that hungry, but I am in the mood for something special. What would you recommend?"

"Ahhh! I have many specialties from around the Galaxy, fresh off the sailships daily. Today, I have just received a supply of a rare delicacy from a planet called Euclid. A pheasant-like bird, that one sautes and serves rolled in crepes..."

"Oh, that's called Monsha! I haven't had that in months! That would be perfect."

"Ah, you are a lady of cultivated taste. Now, I must let you know that coming from so far away the cost of such delicacies can be surprising..."

Mandy turned toward John, opened her dark eyes wide and tilted her head sadly. John, looking into their soft, brown depths, found himself wonderfully charmed up and down, once again. "My treat tonight," he said softly, still gazing into Mandy's beautiful face. "And, I'll have the same..."

"Very good, Mr. Larsch! You both are in for a taste experience you will not soon forget. And," he raised his eyebrows looking at Jason.

Jason was grinning slightly, watching his friend John out of the corner of his eye and sensing the obvious relationship. "Oh, I want the rare delicacy, too. And give me a lot of it. And, look!" he said, raising his glass and pouting. "It's empty again!"

"Ah, I have been remiss!" cried Mr. Manfretti. "My good sir, I shall make amends immediately. So, that's one vegetarian salad and three Monshas. Mr. Van Gogh, would you like to try Monsha tonight?"

Vincent watched John and Mandy gazing at each other. ON A PLANET FAR, FAR AWAY, HE RAN THROUGH A FIELD OF LOW GRASS. HIS WINGS WOULD NOT ENABLE HIM TO FLY. OTHERS COULD, BUT HE COULD NOT. AND, AS HE WOULD APPROACH OTHERS OF HIS KIND, THEY WOULD EITHER RUN OFF ALONG THE PILED STONE WALLS THAT ENCLOSED THE FIELD OR THEY WOULD FLY UP TO LAND ON THE STONE WALL, STARING

DOWN AT HIM CURIOUSLY. HE JUMPED AND JUMPED, AND TRIED SO HARD BUT COULD NOT FLY AT ALL. HE CHASED AFTER THE OTHERS AROUND THE FIELD, BUT ALWAYS FOUND THEM ON THE OPPOSITE SIDE, GATHERED ALL ALONG THE BASE OF THE STONE WALL, STARING BACK AT HIM, AS IF HE WAS SOME SORT OF ODDITY.

"...Mr. Vincent, excuse me, my daydreaming friend..."

John interrupted, "Just bring him the salad, Mr. Manfretti." Mr. Manfretti bowed, turned, and was away.

Jason leaned back, enjoying the warm buzz from his scotch, and regarded Vincent staring off into nowhere again. "Our dreamy friend here has come a long way, AND a long time from home. How's he adapting to our little city?"

John also looked at Vincent and shook his head a little. "Quite well, actually. He's very busy painting. He goes up in the excursion-skiffs often and stays up there for hours, just drifting around, usually painting. He comes to this place everyday now, for most of his meals. Seeing him at a table talking with other artists reminds me of when I back in his Nineteenth-century France."

Mandy added, "John and Vincent are opening a gallery, very soon, patterned after old France. Isn't that right, John?"

"Yes, sort of. That was the original intention. But, Vincent keeps bringing in more and more sophisticated lighting equipment. The gallery is looking more like a laser store. He has these multifaceted, reflective feedback lighting systems that actually lets him fine-tune the colors of all of the paintings. It's amazing. He didn't like the color of an excursion ship's sail in one picture, so he actually changed it from orange to yellow without affecting any of the colors in the rest of the picture. At least I convinced him to let me mount the units on the ceilings so our guests won't trip on them."

"These light machines give me so much more control over what I want to show," said Vincent, no longer daydreaming. "The technology here lets me do more than I have ever dreamed possible. I do nothing but paint. When I have to stop to eat or sleep, I think of nothing but painting."

Mandy said brightly, "John says they'll sell Vincent's work all around the Galaxy and make a fortune!"

John shrugged, "Well, my uncle is very enthusiastic about this. We've already sold a few pieces around the City. Vincent has a good following here already. Once the Gallery is opened, though, I really want to get back to space -- like you, Jason."

Jason sighed, "Yes, you can't keep me away from it for long. Ah, the excitement of sailing the gravitonic currents!"

Mandy said, "John, how can you talk of going back to space? Who'll guard poor Vincent?"

John looked at her quizzically, "Guard him? Guard him from who?"

"From those guys, for example!" And, she pointed to a black sedan that was now parked down the street on the opposite side. They all looked over at it. The interior was darkened, but John could make out several individual silhouettes.

Vincent nodded, "Yes, I have seen that car parked there several times this week. Mr. Manfredetti went over yesterday to see who they were, but they drove away. He says he thinks it's suspicious and will call the authorities if the car keeps coming back."

John chuckled, "Mr. Manfredetti... They're just more of your secret admirers, Vincent."

Jason murmured, "Looks suspicious to me! That's a rented limo' from the space port. I rented my car from a yard that had plenty just like it. Probably used mostly by off-worlders."

"Off-worlders that maybe are interested in enticing away your art-producing gold mine," Mandy said with a narrow gaze toward the mysterious car. "YOU go see what they want, John. Are you armed?"

"Oh, Mandy, come on. Vincent has a good following, sure. And, the Gallery will probably be a big success. But, I just don't think it's all worth enough to attract any off-worlders." He gestured toward Vincent, "No offense, Vincent, but you're alive now. And, art just doesn't sell as much from a living painter."

Jason laughed and said jokingly, "Hey, I know how you could make a bundle. Just have Vincent jump down the WELL."

Mandy grimaced, "That's terrible! John, your friend is morbid. And, Vincent won't have to jump down anything to make a fortune because," and she smiled at Vincent. "he's the greatest artist of all time."

Vincent looked at her beautiful face smiling at him and felt his heart begin pounding in his chest. He was ashamed at what he felt... THE SUN WAS BEFORE HIM. THERE WAS NOTHING ELSE AROUND. THE BLACK HOLE BEHIND HIM HAD SUCKED IT ALL AWAY. THE SUN WAS SO BRIGHT AND SO HOT. HE WAS SLOWLY FALLING INTO IT, BUT THERE WAS NOTHING HE COULD DO TO STOP. IF HE TOUCHED THAT SUN, HE WOULD BURN AND THERE WOULD BE NOTHING LEFT BUT ASH TO BE SUCKED DOWN THE MAW OF THE BLACK HOLE. HE FELT LIKE HE WAS FALLING FASTER AND FASTER...

Mandy took hold of John's arm. "John, dear, here comes the waiter with our dinner. Please be a dear and make that black car go away -- I just won't be able to enjoy my meal with those awful people watching us!"

John looked into her dark, soft eyes and would do anything she asked of him. "Yes, of course, Mandy." He got up out of his chair.

As John began walking away, Jason asked with a tone of amusement, "John! Shall I come along and assist?"

John shouted back over his shoulder, "No! I'll take care of these guys. YOU stay there and guard Vincent from Mr. Manfredti." Jason laughed and took a long pull from his drink, then set it down and rubbed his hands together as Mr. Manfredti laid down their plates with the steaming sauce-covered crepes of Monsha; Jason's was a triple portion.

But, as soon as John set foot in the street to cross over to the car, it quickly slid away from the curb, past him and the restaurant, and on down the street, turning at the first intersection and disappearing from sight. He shrugged and returned to the table.

Little Angelica Manfredti was carrying over a basket of dinner rolls and lifted it up to their table very carefully. "Monsha is the best thing Papa makes," she said seriously. "Eat every bite or he'll get mad and his face will turn red!"

"Angelica!" Mr. Manfredti admonished. "Go back to the kitchen and help your mother!"

Everyone at the table chuckled, then set to eating. Except Vincent, who was once again staring off up into the sky. Jason reached over, took Vincent's plate of salad with vegetables and fruits of all sorts of glossy colors, and lifted it up to Vincent's nose. Vincent looked down at the plate, then around at his companions. Avoiding Mandy's gaze, he murmured, "I was... thinking of painting again. The beauty of it is always on my mind..."

Jason set down Vincent's plate and said, "John, this guy's definitely an artist," He began wolfing down his Monsha.

"Good heavens, Jason!" cried Mandy. "Monsha is to be savoured, not devoured as if you're some hungry beast that's just made a kill."

Jason grinned up at her between mouthfuls. He swallowed. "Hey, babe, the faster something goes down, the better it tastes! This stuff's great! I'm gonna get seconds, for sure..."

Mandy sighed, "Some men have such amazing appetites."

John chuckled, "Back in the Militia Guard Academy, they used to say 'Jason has the appetite of a black hole!'" They all laughed.

All enjoyed the meal immensely, finishing about the same time, even though Jason had ordered "thirds." Mr. Manfredti and his daughter Angelica were clearing the table and putting the used plates and utensils on top of a serving robot, when suddenly they all heard a great screeching sound, and turned to see the mysterious black sedan come sliding to a halt in the street right

in front of them!

Both doors of the sedan opened on the cafe side of the car. A single door opened on the car's other side. Three large men got out of the car with one man remaining inside at the car's

controls, frowning out. Everyone at the table watched in surprise. The serious looking men were all wearing dark suits, not at all like the current fashions around Infinity City, evidently off-worlders.

John and Jason both moved their chairs back and stood up slowly, facing the men who were just a short distance away. Mr. Manfredi quickly picked up Angelica and hurried back to the door of the restaurant.

The three men headed toward Vincent. Jason, standing beside Vincent, watched suspiciously. John moved from beside Jason, around Mandy to stand on Vincent's other side. Vincent and Mandy sat bewildered watching the approaching group.

The first two men, both with short dark hair were of enormous build and came to a stop on either side of Vincent, ignoring Jason and John. Vincent looked up from one to the other in complete bewilderment. The remaining man came up behind them and said, "Your car is waiting, Mr. Van Gogh. Come along!" And with that, the others grabbed each of Vincent's arms and heaved him erect. Vincent was dwarfed by the size of the two.

John could not believe what was happening. There was little crime of any sort in Infinity City.

Jason narrowed his eyes and said menacingly, "I don't think Mr. Van Gogh wants to go with you guys."

The third man said with a sneer, "Stay out of this, boys. We have business with Mr. Van Gogh." He failed to realize that John and Jason were not ordinary men; they were part of the Infinity City Militia Guard, trained and even psychologically conditioned to be warrior killing machines, to defend Infinity City and its people against any threat, especially from the unpredictable and dangerous Galaxy. Vincent, now a resident of Infinity City, was under attack. John and Jason were 'programmed' to respond...

The strange man next to Jason, holding Vincent with his right hand, brought his huge left arm back, then took a swing at Jason, who nimbly jerked back out of the way. The man's fist came swinging around over the table; he lost his balance and brought his hand down on the table to steady himself. But, the table was only supported by a center column and tipped over on Mandy, tossing her back over her chair, with a cry, to the ground, with everything on the table sliding and spilling down on to her. John quickly knelt to help her as she struggled out from under the table.

Jason said quickly, "John, I think I need your assistance."

Mandy looked up at the men pulling Vincent toward the car. "Oh, John, I'm all right! But, look! They're taking away

Vincent!"

John turned to see the two men brutally pull Vincent out of his chair. The third was looking nervously back and forth at John and Jason, and backing away. Jason was pulling at his chin thoughtfully and frowning, as if contemplating a game of chess.

John looked down at what they had done to Mandy, then looked back at them dragging the helpless Vincent away against his will; John's anger started to rise. He felt his brows come slamming together as he frowned and his teeth clenched. His hands closed into fists, as he rose from beside Mandy. He moved out from

beside the table step by step and felt incredible power rising within him as he watched the men pulling the struggling Vincent toward the car. Ignoring the third man for the moment, John lowered his head and charged toward the other two like a tiger.

Jason shouted, "About time!" The man on Vincent's right side took another swing at Jason as they passed him. Jason once again tilted sideways to his right, avoiding the blow. But this time Jason kicked his left foot forward, driving off his right leg, heel first into the man's right knee, smashing it. The man let go of Vincent as he lost the use of his right leg and began falling over. On his way down, Jason helped him on his way by slamming his left fist into the man's kidney from behind.

John was almost on the other man holding Vincent. He slammed his fists together, leapt into the air and brought his fists down on the man's head, slamming his body down on the man's back. John heard something in the man crack and the man groaned, let go of Vincent's arm and went over, crashing to the ground with John's full weight on his back. When the man's head hit the pavement, he went limp.

The third man swung his foot, giving John a savage kick in the side. The man laughed and began delivering a second blow. But John saw it coming and shot his left arm backward to deflect it. The man began to stumble over John. John rolled onto his back, braced his body with his right leg and shot out his right fist, smashing into the man's solar plexus, driving the punch as hard as he could up from his leg. The man gasped explosively, was tossed up into the air like a rag doll, then fell back down onto John.

John disentangled himself from the man and struggled to his feet. He was breathing hard and his side ached. He found Jason rubbing his hands together, grinning and commenting, "Amateurs, amateurs..."

John looked around, opening and closing his fists in rage. The first thug he had jumped was out cold. The one he had punched in the chest lay trying to breathe. The one Jason had knocked down had vomited and was holding his leg with the battered knee, but slowly creeping toward the car. The man in the car was now pointing a gun at them. He shouted, "Vincent Van Gogh! Come here. Get over here or I kill your friends!"

Vincent had been backing away from the fighting, but now began slowly walking toward the car, as if in a trance.

Mandy, crouching behind the table, began shouting, "Vincent stop! Don't! They want to enslave you!..."

VINCENT FOUND HIMSELF APPROACHING A VERY DEEP, BLACK HOLE. NOT AN ASTRONOMIC BLACK HOLE, BUT A FRIGHTENING LOOKING HOLE IN THE GROUND, BIG ENOUGH TO SWALLOW A MAN. THE GROUND WAS WHITE AND EXTENDED IN ALL DIRECTIONS. THE SKY WAS AN INTENSE BLUE. HE COULD NOT GET AWAY BECAUSE HE WAS SURROUNDED BY A RING OF BLACK CARS. THE CARS WERE DRIVING SLOWLY, THE RING TIGHTENING AND TIGHTENING, AND VINCENT WAS DRIVEN CLOSER AND CLOSER TO THE OMINOUS HOLE...

Mandy cried, "John do something! Don't let them take Vincent!"

The thug in the car shouted back, "Shut up, bitch, or I start shooting!" He waved the gun threateningly.

John and Jason both stood crouching slightly, staring intently at the man with the gun. They were both within point-blank gunfire range. Neither was armed.

Vincent walked slowly between them toward the car. Jason hissed through his teeth, "Vincent! Stop! You can't go with him. Stand still, damn it. He won't dare shoot you. He wants you alive!"

That gave John One the solution! He jumped behind Vincent, wrapped his arms around his lean chest and lifted him off the ground. He then began moving rapidly sideways to his right, putting the windshield of the car between the gunman and Vincent and himself.

In the meantime, Jason started creeping to the left and back behind the car, unnoticed by the gun-waving driver who was bouncing up and down in the driver seat with frustration trying to decide what to do.

John saw Jason inching behind the car. John knew Jason had a lightening fast mind and also could move as fast as a cat. He moved with Vincent until he was in front of the car; then began looking around, pretending he was confused and didn't know what to do next.

The man in the car smiled with vicious glee, popped open his car door, put the gun in his left hand, and stuck it out around the windshield, shaking the gun at John and Vincent. Then he stuck his head out, as if to get out of the car, but hesitated, afraid of John. He shouted hoarsely, "Let him go! I'll shoot you both! If I can't have him, no one gets him!"

Suddenly, the driver-side door of the car smashed inward, the window delivering a stunning blow to the man's head, knocking him back inside, the jam pinning and crushing his wrist. The gun dropped from his hand to the street.

Jason let go of the back door which he had used to brace himself for the full bodied kick that smashed the door shut. He snatched up the gun. Jason opened the door, evincing a cry of

pain from the man as his crushed wrist fell from its pinned position. He thrust the gun in the man's face and snarled, "Gee, I wonder if this thing's loaded. Guess I'll test it out on your face, ugly!"

The man cried, "No!" and began whimpering.

The faint sound of police sirens could now be heard. They grew in volume, coming from different directions. Mr. Manfredi appeared in the doorway of his cafe wringing his hands. He shouted, "It's the cops, boys! I called the cops!"

John let go of Vincent, went around to the side of the car, reached in, and viciously yanked the whimpering man out of the car by the lapel of his dark suit; then roughly slammed him up against the side of the car. "Who are you? What the hell were you trying to do? Tell me right now, or by the time the police get here, you'll be dead!"

Jason shouted, "John, don't kill him! You've got too many accidental deaths on your militia record already. You've got to stop killing anyone you're angry with!" He was just making it all up.

John demanded, "What did you want with Vincent?! Answer me!" He shook the man violently. The collar of the man's suit suddenly burst open, revealing a small metal band around his neck.

Jason stood next to John. Seeing the visa-torque, he exclaimed, "An off-worlder! What do you want with Vincent Van Gogh?" *11. Jason gave him a painful jab in a sensitive area. The man, already holding his broken wrist, howled and closed his eyes in renewed pain. "Answer!... All right, here comes another," Jason made a fist and cocked his arm back, aiming a blow for the man's face.

The man opened eyes, saw Jason's fist aimed at him and cried in terror, "No! No more! No more!"

John shook him again and demanded, "Who are you? Where are you from?"

The man gasped, "My name is... my name is Axon Brice. I'm just a space trader..."

John yelled at him, "What did you want with Vincent?"

Jason swung his fist in little circles, "Let me smash his face a few times!"

The man howled in fear. John shouted, "What did you want Vincent for?!"

The man stammered, "To... to... to sell. To the highest bidder. There's art guys... Rich art guys offering a fortune for Van Gogh. News is all over the Galaxy about him. I couldn't resist. Me and these guys were gonna share all the money. I couldn't help myself!" He began sobbing, "I'm broke! I'm can't

make any money. My ship's falling apart. I haven't been able to afford the PILL for months. Look at me! I'm aging! I'M DYING!"

John let him sink to the ground where he fell over sobbing in pain and despair.

The sirens of the police cars were very loud now. At each end of the street, police cars appeared with flashing multi-colored lights on their roofs. The first came screeching to a halt in front of the black sedan. The second came up behind it. Police poured out of the cars, weapons at the ready, holding bullet-proof shields before them.

Mr. Manfredetti came running down to the street waving his hands. "It's all over, officers! There's the hoods lying all over the ground!"

Two more police cars arrived. An officer got out and looked around appraising the scene. He walked between the black sedan and the first police car and frowned at the thugs: one unconscious; two writhing in pain; one sobbing hysterically. "He said to his assistant who had followed him, "Fly in an ambulance." Then he looked around, "Who made the call? Where's a Mr. Manfredetti?"

"Right here, officer!" Manfredetti replied happily. "These four thugs just tried to kidnap Vincent Van Gogh over there. But these two friends of mine; both officers in the Militia; beat the hell out of them!"

The officer looked around at Vincent, standing off to the side, having moved back up onto the cafe patio to avoid the first police car. "Are you Vincent Van Gogh the painter?"

"Yes, I am," replied Vincent quietly.

"Is this true? These guys lying around tried to kidnap you?"

"Yes, they tried to force me into their car."

"And these two guys here..." suddenly the officer paused and looked closely at John One. "Say, you're the Larsch fellow who BACK-BOUNCED to get Van Gogh. John One, of the Militia?"

"Yes, officer," John replied wearily. The kick in his ribs was hurting again. He winced and held his hand to his side. Mandy had gotten up from behind the fallen table and, seeing John One in pain, came up to help him.

She cried to the officer, "Get an ambulance for him right away! He's a Larsch..."

John One held up a restraining hand, saying, "No, no... It's just a bruise. I'm okay."

The officer turned to Vincent. "Mr. Van Gogh, these two weren't part of the attempted kidnapping?"

Vincent's eyes grew wide and he shook his head, "No, no, officer! These are my friends. They risked their lives for me!"

The officer looked down, "And the guys on the ground were the ones trying to get Van Gogh?"

"Yes! Yes!" everyone agreed. Jason added, "Just a bunch of scum spacers who thought they could get rich kidnapping someone famous and selling him into slavery. But that won't happen on Infinity City!" Mr. Manfretti and some of the police shouted agreement.

The officer agreed also, "You bet that won't happen in Infinity City. Okay boys, round them up! Note down those off-world torque numbers. Take them downtown and toss them in the TANK."

The officer supervised as his men got to work. Mr. Manfretti shepherded John, Jason, Vincent, and Mandy over to a nearby empty table. There wasn't anyone else out on the cafe. The thugs had waited until Vincent and the others had been alone before attacking.

Jason plopped into a chair, "I need a drink! Bring us all a drink!"

Mr. Manfretti purred, "Anything you want! On the house! You boys were magnificent! 250 years I've served the public and never have I seen anything like I saw today. And look at my robot over there by the door. He scanned the whole thing. It's all recorded. We'll all make a fortune when I start selling copies! I'll need a release from you all first..."

"Later, Mr. Manfretti," John said wearily, "Later."

Mr. Manfretti bowed courteously, then hurried away while the four silently watched the police check the thugs for weapons.

John leaned over toward Jason and whispered, "Jason! The pistol! Do you still have it?"

Jason whispered back, "Yeah, of course. I'm keeping it. You know how rare those things are?!"

"Jason! It's a weapon. They're illegal, you know that. You should turn it in."

"No way. I need weapons like this for my line of work. You know that they don't let any weapons into the City. I don't know where that guy got it from -- if he brought it in or got it here -- but I'm keeping it!"

John shrugged, too tired to argue, "Just be careful, Jason. Don't get caught."

"Never! I'll be sailing off as soon as I can, anyway. This place is just too wild for me!"

Mr. Manfretti brought them drinks and a tray of chocolates and sweets. No one was very hungry, though. The four just

sipped their drinks and watched the police work.

The ambulances soon arrived and took away the off-world thugs. All the police cars except the officer's, slid away one by one. The officer came up to Vincent and asked him to verify his written report presented on a clipboard.

Vincent looked very tired and sad, saying, "Always, I am the cause of trouble for others." But he read over the report, nodded without a word, signed it, and handed the clipboard back. The officer thanked them all, complimented John and Jason on the job they had done on the thugs, and winked at Mandy. He got back into his car and sped away.

Mandy rolled her eyes and complained, "Why couldn't they have gotten here sooner? We could have been killed!"

"Hey, Mandy," Jason said with a smile. "What do you need cops for when you're around John and I?"

She ignored him. "John," she began, leaning toward him. "You should start sticking closer to Vincent. Better yet, you should hire a guard. Use Jason. He probably works cheap..."

"Cheap!" cried Jason, in mock outrage. "I know when I've been insulted! I'm leaving!" And he got up to go.

John cried, "Hey wait, Jason! She was only kidding!"

"No, seriously, I really have to get some sleep. There's some outfitting guys I'm meeting tomorrow morning. There may be a lot to do to prepare for sailing. I want out of here. And that space port charges too much per day for private craft... I'm going back to my ship to bed!" He waved wearily, turned and headed back up the street to his car.

Vincent shouted, "Good bye, Jason! Thank you, my friend!" Then looking at John and Mandy, "And, to you, my friends, a good evening. I, too, want to go home and go to bed... With my door firmly locked." He rose and headed up the street toward the Gallery, to use the couch in the showing-room.

John called after him, "I'll call Infinity City security and have them program the visa-torque computer to monitor for any more off-worlders that get near you. You'll be safe!"

Vincent turned around as he walked away, "Thank you, John! You are my one true dear friend!" He turned back and headed away.

"Some friend I am," mused John. "I should have realized this might happen. I should have had him monitored from the day he set foot here."

"Come on, John," Mandy consoled. "You can't predict kooks like those guys. Come on over to my place. I'll give you a nice massage and make sure you get a nice, restful night's sleep."

John smiled at her, "Oh, Mandy. You're everything to me!"

She rolled her eyes, "Whatever you say, John. Now, whistle for your hot new little car and let's get out of here..."

He did and off they went into the night, leaving behind Mr. Manfredi, who moved outside to one of his tables, where he sat late into the night worrying about what was ever to become of poor Vincent Van Gogh.

CHAPTER 24 - GRAND OPENING

The sound of champagne bottles clinking against champagne glasses along with an excited murmur of formal conversation surrounded John One the night of the gallery's grand opening. Vincent was surrounded by admirers and was emphatically lecturing about his latest techniques using the local artificial paints he had finally begun using, due to the scarcity and cost of natural pigments. The gallery was subtly lit, according to Vincent's meticulous taste. Soft, baroque music issued from a corner by a trio clad in formal apparel. Caterers were sliding amongst the many guests, serving sweet treats and filling champagne glasses. It was a huge success. There was tangible excitement in being surrounded by so many works of one of the most famous artists of all time. And, to actually be in the same room with him! They had received offers on nearly half the work, within only the first hour!

John's uncle, with eyes twinkling, was discussing sales network possibilities with several off-world businessmen. He had told John that he would be hiring an army of painters and photographers to begin making second generation duplicates of Van Gogh's present works, to be sold around the Galaxy through a franchise of up-scale galleries that he and John would set up. John's next mission would be to fly from world to world, starting a primary sales network of "primary nodes" on each planet. John was very excited about the prospect of visiting so many worlds. His uncle was convinced that the income from the "Rebirth of Van Gogh" (the name he had picked out for the franchise) would make their family the strongest of Infinity City. Sometimes, when his uncle talked of this matter, his voice took on a strange, hard, chanting quality, and he would stare off into the distance while predicting how great and powerful they all would become. This sent chills down John's back, but he was one who found comfort in following a strong leadership.

The gallery had been sectioned off according to Vincent's subject matter. One section had his many 'scapes from the space port. This drew the largest crowd. Vincent had a way of capturing the mystery and urgency of a pending space mission, with the sailships seeming to vibrate in anticipation of launch, right there on the canvas. Another section had the works from his rides above Infinity City in the skiffs. His aerial views were mesmerizing. Van Gogh would twist and skew the perspective

in all sorts of mind-bending fashions. In one popular work, the perspective was impossibly "inside out" tending toward four corners, making Infinity City look like the inside of a box.

In another, he had done the same thing, but Infinity City now looked like it was inside of the WELL OF THE WISH. This painting had a peculiar effect on many guests. They would lean toward the painting, trying to get the gist of the perspective, then as soon as they saw the analogy with the "WELL," they would pull back suddenly, sometimes with a slight gasp, and move away to another section of the gallery. A puzzling reaction, thought John. Sometimes, he noticed Vincent watching this reaction by a guest; and then, when the guest would move hastily away from the strange picture, John would see a funny little grin play across the artist's face -- then, Van Gogh would then turn quickly, engaging once again in conversation.

There were a few other amazing sections. Van Gogh had redone his paintings from their Earth voyage many times. Especially, the pictures of the black hole itself. This warranted a section of its own -- one of the most popular. He had done several portraits and some sketches -- these were grouped in another section.

Yet, perhaps strangest of all were his paintings of the WELL OF THE WISH, done from many bizarre angles and perspectives. Perhaps it was the sacredness with which the people of Infinity City regarded this, their "shrine," that resulted in this section drawing no crowd at all. Ironically, though no one stopped to regard these works for long, most that did had made significant offers to John for these affecting works.

Before the opening, John had predicted to Vincent that paintings of the WELL might make some people uncomfortable, but Vincent insisted that his pictures of the WELL be given their own section. And, towards the front of the Gallery, as well. John, easy-going in matters not involving Adventure or battle, easily acquiesced with a sigh. With his popularity had come ever increasing assertiveness on the artist's part.

John looked over toward his uncle and found him enthusiastically shaking hands all around with the off-world businessmen. Then, his uncle turned toward John, smiled and beckoned. John made his way over, working his way slowly through the guests. Some congratulating him on the success of the new gallery, and some introducing him to their unmarried daughters. When he reached his uncle, the older man put his arm around John's shoulder and introduced him to his associates.

"This is the young man who pulled it all off! What an Adventure! Can you believe it? Someone from HIS generation actually finding one of history's greats! Ah, it reminds me of the grand old times when I was young! This could be the start of another golden age for Infinity City. No one has successfully brought back anyone from history in my lifetime. That's 250 years, friends. I tell you, we stand to make a fortune!"

One of the gentleman said to John, "Son, I hope you understand what you've started here. That little friend of yours has a God-given talent that comes along only once in a thousand

years!"

Another added, "You're going to be famous! You Infinity City people have pulled off some wild moves before, but going back in time to fetch famous people is mind-boggling! Now, how come you can only ever get me back to my world with accuracy of only plus or minus two Earth years! Good thing I raised a clone-brother to run things!"

John was embarrassed by all these beaming admirers. "It was mostly luck, really. I wasn't looking specifically for..."

His uncle quickly interrupted, "Oh, John, stop! You're too modest. Listen, boy, we've struck an agreement on one of the greatest business ventures of all time. I have something very important for you to do. Take that hot sports car you just bought, race over to our family solicitor's house, and find Ockman... The Elder Ockman, not his son. I happen to know he's working late at home. Grab him and bring him back right away! He'll know what for..."

John smiled, happy to get away from all these eyes that were bulging with greed. "Certainly, uncle. I'll return as soon as I can."

"Good boy, John!" He turned back to his associates. As John turned away, he overheard: "And, this is only the start, gentlemen! On his next mission, he has his sights set on Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. MOZART HIMSELF! We're all on the ground floor of the biggest enterprise of all time!..."

Once outside the gallery, John found himself tingling with excitement. The recognition he was receiving from the Family was a dream come true. So much wealth and fame at such a young age was rare. He suddenly wished, however, to be away in space again. Thinking about "hopping" from world to world for his uncle made him even more excited. Maybe Mandy would go with him! How could she resist a tour of the Galaxy. He would show her everything! She would fall so deeply in love with him that she'd never want anyone else. He would show her how gallant a man of his Family could be. She would want nothing more than to be his wife! They would return triumphantly to Infinity City with endless riches from the business and would announce their infinite marriage. They would have the greatest marriage celebration in Larsch history! He and she would have so many children, they would found a new Larsch dynasty! She would be his companion and friend and lover for ever and ever!

He now found himself traveling along one of Infinity City's major radial transit arteries, not even remembering getting in his car and keying in the Solicitor's house code into the car's control computer. The houses and buildings moving past him were darkened shapes of exotic angles and curves. Little lights were twinkling in some windows and along the road; animated liquid crystal billboards flickered eye-catching activity. He saw an ad for Mr. Unity's excursion-skiff business, with Ed Unity in flowing white robes, bowing and inviting a young couple into one of his skiffs.

Along the road, on either side of the car, light strips

glowed brightly, extending off into the distance. Currently, they were changing from white to a soft orange, a feature designed in to the Infinity City road system for sheer aesthetic

affect. Up in an excursion-skiff, the night view of all the interlacing, ever-changing threads of color was stunning. The patterns of color-change were controlled by Infinity City's process control computer but could be overridden by a complex control board that the designer had installed over 100 years before. Each night found different "light artists" taking turns orchestrating the City's complex traffic light coloring. Some had particular talent, becoming quite popular with Infinity City's younger set, who often went aloft at night for romantic reasons.

The weather was in summer-phase so John pushed a button that made the plastic top slide back and recess neatly behind the back seat. John put his hands behind his head and gazed up into the wild night sky of Infinity City while the car automatically drove on. The first event horizon of the black hole was a tiny, angry red point directly overhead, with faint multi-colored streamers of wrenched matter drifting down on all sides until out of sight below Infinity City's horizon.

He thought of the many nights years ago, during his academy days, when he and Mandy would go aloft in an excursion-skiff to view nighttime Infinity City. She would get so excited by the breathtaking panorama of twirling and twisting colored road lines spreading as far as the eye could see. On one particular night, a light-artist conducted veritable warfare, beginning by turning off the lights across the entire City. Then, an army of parallel bright green propagations began sweeping in from the West. From the East, a similar pattern of bright blue. When the patterns met, they caused explosions of colors, with expanding circles of deep purples and rippling browns, with lightening bolts of bright oranges and yellows... Apparently, he had maneuvered the supervising engineer away from his post and had gained complete control of the road colors.

Sipping champagne and exclaiming their amazement again and again, they watched till the end of the show, then held each other close and drifted around over the City for hours. Even back then, John had tried to persuade Mandy to be his wife, but she would always laugh gaily, acting as if he was joking, then begin talking about something else.

He thought it might be pleasant to take Van Gogh hopping from world to world, maybe after a few years. The artist loved new and strange subjects for his works. And, John had grown quite fond of the energetic, dedicated fellow. It would be he, Mandy and Vincent Van Gogh, the toast of the Galaxy. What an exciting vision this was developing into! What a wonderful future there was in store for him!

The car now veered off the main route and into a residential section, turning here and there until finally coming to a smooth stop before a mansion-house covering an entire block. The entire Ockman family resided here, and all were solicitors, traditionally. That is, any young Ockman NOT choosing to be a solicitor was asked to live somewhere else. The house was

separated from the street by only a narrow, neatly kept lawn. The mansion-house was very old and constructed out of old-fashioned dark brown and red earthen bricks with its windows recessed deeply within, giving it a powerful, brooding appearance.

John leapt out of the car on the side toward the mansion-house and proceeded up the main entrance walkway, between a pair of ancient oak trees with gnarled branches holding up bunches of tiny leaves. The major-domo, an old man who was short, thin and

bald with penetrating bright blue eyes and a sour expression, opened the great door himself as John was walking up to it. Then, leading John along a hallway, explained that his uncle had called and the elder Ockman was expecting him. He was led into an immense study with portraits of famous Ockmans along walls -- mahogany wainscotting covered the lower half of each wall -- a thick, soft-pile aqua carpet covered the floor. Over-stuffed chairs were set here and there before a huge fireplace burning real firewood. The elder Ockman sat before the fire, and wearing spectacles, was reading over some papers, frowning slightly. When he saw John, he quickly got to his feet and extended his hand.

Taking his hand John recognized the old man from several previous Larsch family functions. The elder Ockman was a serious looking gentleman, very tall, with a paunch indicating a comfortable life-style. What was left of his hair had turned a distinguished silver. He said, in a deep voice, "Hello, John. Your uncle just called and expressed great urgency. We had better be on our way..."

John agreed and they made their way back out to his car. On the way back, the elder Ockman revealed that John's uncle had been keeping him up to date regarding the whole Van Gogh enterprise, from the day that John had first left Infinity City for Earth until the present. The elder Ockman asked a great many questions about Van Gogh, many seeming only to assure himself as to Van Gogh's authenticity. He paused, then began asking questions about how well Van Gogh was fitting in with Infinity City society.

John responded that he felt Vincent was fitting right in. The solicitor frowned at this response, as if unexpected, then mused about how amazing it was that a man from nineteenth century Earth could suddenly adapt to Infinity City, especially one unstable enough to have attempted suicide. John could only shrug his shoulders.

CHAPTER 25 - DISTURBING DISCOVERY

By the time they arrived back at the Gallery, it was late and all the guests were gone. They found John's uncle in the showing-room with his business associates, sampling various local wines and nibbling at cheeses and little cubes of sweetmeats from a tray offered by one of the serving robots from Mr. Manfredi's cafe. The little robot immediately rolled up to them to offer refreshment. They both declined. The robot rolled off to

refresh a gentlemen who was beckoning and pointing to his empty glass.

John's uncle saw them and rose to his feet smiling. "Ah, you're back, John. Ahned! Good to see you! Let me introduce you..." He introduced the various off-world businessmen, then rubbed his hands together, "Ahned, do you have the papers prepared?"

The elder Ockman replied, "Of course. Where's your network terminal?" He was led over to John's desk where, using the gallery's network terminal, he tied into his family's computer, back at the mansion-house, and had the forms printed-out right there at the gallery.

While the off-worlders were reading the forms and discussing various legal questions with the elder Ockman, John commented to his uncle that he was surprised that all the guests had left already. It wasn't even midnight.

His uncle looked at him wryly and replied, "Well, I had expected and hoped that it would go on all night, AND into the wee hours, myself. It would have been the talk of the town if everyone would have stayed until we toasted in the dawn. But, one of your "friends" came by and, not finding you, she went off with Van Gogh. With him gone, you gone, and me busy with these guys, all our guests grew bored and one-by-one left. Young man, I am not so old that I don't remember the urgencies of youth, BUT please instruct your vixen vendors to stay out of your formal life."

John was extremely embarrassed and ashamed. He had purchased a few relationships since he had been back, but had never told any of the girls about the Gallery. He wondered who it had been and asked his uncle.

"Oh, you're keeping more than one?! A regular harem you're got going! Well, I didn't see her leave with Van Gogh, or I would have stopped them, so I can't tell you who she was or what she looked like. One of the guests just mentioned that a young lady was looking for you, and then she left with Van Gogh. I sure hope he knows what kind of girl he's getting involved with. Didn't he have some kind of trouble with prostitutes back on Earth?"

John remembered what he had read about Van Gogh's sordid past. Moving in with a pregnant prostitute, contracting a venereal disease from her, court records accusing him of harassing prostitutes in Arles during his periods of madness, and, of course, the horrible episode of cutting his ear (which had been recently repaired by an Infinity City plastic surgeon) and giving it to an Arles prostitute.

"Uncle, I'm worried."

"Yes, I am, too," his uncle agreed, frowning and rubbing his chin. "You better find him and explain some of our less than obvious customs here."

"But, I need to know the name of the girl!"

His uncle turned to the off-world businessmen, "Excuse me, gentlemen. Did anyone catch the name of Van Gogh's lady-friend? The one he left with?"

They looked at each other, shaking their heads. Then a voice from the robot server spoke out. The cafe owner was tied in to the robot and was taking an order for more refreshments, "Mr. Larsch! I just overheard you asking about that pretty young girl out with Mr. Van Gogh. They stopped by my cafe a few hours ago and I served them myself, out at Mr. Van Gogh's usual table. She was that nice young lady you had over here a few weeks ago for dinner and, er, breakfast, and of course, yesterday, during the incident with those off-world hoodlums. Hey, Mr. Larsch, I don't want to cause any trouble or anything, but I don't know if you and she are "one and no others," as they say, but she was getting along PRET-TY well with Mr. Van Gogh, if you know what I mean, and maybe you should look into things, or maybe things have changed; I don't know..."

John exclaimed, "Mandy?! He was with Mandy?!"

"Yeah, Mr. Larsch, Miss Mandy. He was holding her hands in his, saying her name over and over, and staring at her. Well, 'gazing' I suppose I should say. I hope she's no one special, Mr. Larsch."

By now, all the off-worlders were listening to the conversation. John looked around, then said quickly, "Special? No, no, she's a professional. It was just a professional thing a few weeks ago, nothing important. I, uh, gave Vincent her card..." He winced inside at making such a flippant remark. He looked over at the off-worlders. They had been staring at him, but quickly looked back down at their copies of the legal agreement, pretending not to notice him anymore. The situation was growing very embarrassing. But, he had to find Vincent and get him away from... Mandy. He looked over at the image of the cafe owner on the robot's screen and asked, "Are they still there?"

"No, no, they left hours ago."

"Do you know where?"

"I have no idea..."

John thanked him and told his uncle, "Please excuse me, I have someplace to go."

"Yes, you certainly do. And John, let's get things straightened out right away. You KNOW how much is riding on all this!"

CHAPTER 26 - IN SEARCH OF VINCENT

John left the showing-room, made his way through the

darkened gallery, and left the gallery. He jumped into his car and keyed in the navigation code Mandy's apartment: "01". Expecting to visit her frequently, he had stored her code using the two-key quick entry code, so that he wouldn't have to enter her entire location ID each time.

The car wound through OLDTOWN, away from the gallery and the WELL OF THE WISH section, then accelerated onto a main artery, currently with its coloring a pulsating hot pink. John One detected irony in this and felt irritated. After a short while the car pulled off into an older though well-to-do residential section and came to a stop in front of a high wall protecting a court-yard that could be seen through a gate in the wall, which formed a high arch-way.

John jumped out of the car and dashed up to the gate. He pushed the button next to her name on the shiny, brass-framed intercom panel and said impatiently, "John One to see Mandy!"

"Just a moment..." responded a computer voice. John waited for an answer. There was a cool breeze that night and it rustled the ivy leaves growing up around the archway. He heard subdued laughter from the courtyard within the wall and gate. He looked inside. It was dark, but ground lighting lit the walkways that wound around the trees and fountains of the courtyard and connected the apartment buildings surrounding the courtyard. There were ornate benches here and there along the walkways, and he could see the dim shape of a couple sitting and talking, not to far away.

Finally, the computer voice reported, "Mandy welcomes you, John! Come right in!" and the gate chimed softly and swung slowly open.

John proceeded along twisting and turning walkways until he was at Mandy's door, cream colored, circular and trimmed with brass filigree. The door swung open and there was Mandy, wearing a long, flowing blue silk robe with pleasant floral patterns from neck to ankle. Her hair was braided in a long tail, starting from the back and dangling over her shoulder in front, meandering down to her waist. "John! Hello, darling. Come in!"

John looked over her shoulder, then back at Mandy, and asked, "I'm not intruding?"

"No, of course not! My door computer would have said I wasn't home. That's a little secret I'm sharing just with you because you're so special. John, you look upset. Come in. Can I get you a drink?"

She turned and led him into her parlor. Not anxious to reveal why he was there John answered, "Yes, a drink would be fine. Whatever is convenient for you to make."

"Well, I myself was just about to have..." she paused, giving him a curious look with her head tilted to the side. Then she whirled around and examined her liquor trolley. "I need something strong! You look like you do, too." Then she looked over her shoulder at him suddenly and squinted. "Maybe for the same reason..." Then, she looked back and picked up a bottle,

examining the label. "Well, here's something interesting I just picked up. An off-world brandy called... AL SIDIK. Hmm." She poured two drinks, offering one to John, who took his, frowned at it thoughtfully, then took a sip.

Mandy took a long pull from hers and leaned against an armchair with one hand. She looked at John. "Well, you don't look like you're in a romantic mood. Is there something you would like to talk about?"

John took a deep breath and through clenched teeth breathed: "Yes," He looked at her and suddenly felt very nervous, though he did not understand why. She hadn't really done anything wrong. At least not from her viewpoint. He took a good swallow from his drink and began, "Well, this is embarrassing. I... Um, did you... Well, I just want to know..."

"John," Mandy interrupted. She came over to him, took his arm and looked up into his eyes. "You and I are good friends. You can talk to me. Just talk."

"All right. It's about Vincent..."

Mandy suddenly let go, gave an exasperated groan, then flopped down into an easy-chair. "Hey, HE'S the one who wanted us to leave together. I don't care what he may have said to you, HE'S the one who came apart at the seams. What a nut! I think that guy is crazy, John. He's really CRAZY! You better watch him."

CHAPTER 27 - WHAT HAPPENED

John came over to her, went down on one knee in front of her chair so he could look into her eyes, then said, emphasizing each word, "Mandy, you must tell me what happened. We haven't seen Vincent for hours... since he left with you."

"I left with HIM. And, I don't know where he went. And, I'd just like to forget the whole thing," she said, turning her head and looking up at the ceiling.

"Mandy, what happened?! Vincent has had problems with... He can't deal with the kind of... He just has special problems! Please, tell me what happened. We're worried about him."

"YOU'RE worried about your investment, I'd say." But she looked at him, sighed and gave in, "Okay, I'll tell you. It won't take long. And good luck trying to find the little goof. Anyway, here's what happened..."

"I came to the gallery to see how your opening was going, but you weren't there. So, I went over to MR. Van Gogh to see if he knew where you were. He took one look at me and obviously wanted to fall in love. I had a free night and I assumed -- based on what YOU said, John -- that he was a man of means, so I let him take me out for a bite and then we came back here.

"He really loved the game and played very deeply, but he took it too seriously, especially after... Well, you know. A 'serious turn of events.' Anyway, after that, he wanted me to move in with him. I declined. And then he wanted to move in with me. I declined again.

"All of this went on for several hours and there was a lot of talking, everything not coming out as fast as I'm telling you about it. You know how conversations bounce back and forth and go in loops sometimes." She was looking at the ceiling while she told him the story, flipping her hand back and forth with an attitude as if she were telling him about some trouble she had had with a grocery clerk.

She took another sip from her drink and continued, "Well, he got more and more agitated and I couldn't calm him down. Finally, when I asked him to leave, his eyes bugged out and he just stood there staring at me... Glaring at me! Then, his face turned all red. And then," she looked at John. "Then, he turned kind of white and started to shake all over. He started saying that he 'wanted me forever. Wanted me and nothing but me.' All that sort of thing. He even said he wanted me more than his art! I told him you don't always get everything you want. I told him that there's a lot of things I wish I could have had but never got. I said, 'Wishes don't come true, Vincent.'

"And then... This is really creepy. This sent a chill up my spine. He takes a few steps backward, with this really wild look, and says: 'Wishes DO come true! If you have FAITH! If you really believe enough!' Then he turned and stormed for the door. He grabbed my car keys from the shelf. I was following him and asked: 'Hey, where are you going?' He didn't have a car, since we came here in mine, so I thought I'd let him take mine, drive around, and cool off. I'd call the car from my terminal later and tell it to drive itself home as soon as he parked it somewhere.

"Anyway, he turned and gave me this really weird grin and said, 'I'm going to make a wish!'... You know, that's the only time I can remember him grinning. He never smiled the whole night... Hey, excuse me! Where are you going?"

John had been struck by the story and knew all too well what must be going through Vincent's mind. He was up and dashing for the door. As he passed through Mandy's foyer he spotted one of Vincent's drawings hanging on the wall. It was one of the uncrumpled ones from the sailship, with several little burn marks. John stared. It was the drawing that had fouled the sailship and caused their near disaster during re-entry. He shook his head and headed toward the door.

He raced out through the courtyard to the gate, hammering on it to open. It opened automatically, its computer voice telling him to 'Be quiet! It is nighttime!' He raced to his car, jumped in and ordered, "Go to the WELL OF THE WISH! Emergency priority and speed." The car took off, wheeled around 180 degrees then accelerated down the street. John added, "Car, load Militia priority code," and he rattled off his private Militia Guard code to be used only for personal life threatening emergencies.

The car shot down the road, swerving completely to either side of the road as it went around curves as fast as it could without losing control. When it gained the main traffic artery, it accelerated to a terrifying velocity. He had never heard the sound of the wind shrieking like this as the car roared along. Soon, John could see the road lights for the turnoff for OLDTOWN. He was almost past it and was worried the car wouldn't turn when it suddenly slammed on the brakes and cut over onto the exit ramp.

Again the car raced through the streets, screeching around corners, narrowly missing an old man on a street corner. The car turned a corner; now he was tearing down the street of the gallery. It flashed by on the left. Then he went past Manfredi's CAFE OF THE WELL. Then around a final curve, and there was the wall around the WELL, with the guard house outside. John ordered, "Come to a stop right at the entrance!" The car was still accelerating toward the wall! John's heart was hammering in his chest. He was drenched with sweat. He felt an empty feeling of terror.

The car suddenly slammed on its brakes and it ground to a halt, only a few feet from the door. John leapt out, raced to the entrance -- the old guard calling at him from the shack. The entrance was dark, but inside sometimes at night, a ring of light went around the top edge of the wall, about 10 feet from the ground. Tonight, it was on.

John stumbled to a stop halfway between the entrance and the ancient brick cistern of the Well. He looked first one way then another. The light was very subdued and it was hard to see through the gloom. He ran around the well, but saw no one. No one! He looked toward the cistern and felt sick.

And then, he noticed an out of place object leaning against one of the four ornate knobs on top of the cistern. It was a small canvas! Freshly painted, for he could still see the glossy gleam of the wet paint. He rushed up to it, took it, and turned it this way and that until he could see it in the wan light.

It was a picture of the Well itself, just painted, obviously done by Vincent with his rapid style. In the painting, on the ground before the WELL, he saw several tubes of paint. John One looked around, down at the ground, and there! Four tubes of paint, uncapped, the glint of paint oozing out.

He looked again at the painting and noticed no typical signature in the lower right corner. Vincent had signed the painting on the wooden arch that went over the Well. John looked up at the actual arch above the well, and there, painted on the beam in red, was Vincent's signature.

John felt as if he was watching this all happen from a distance. Everything would fall apart for him now! He leaned over and looked into the WELL'S darkness. He could see the point of the Second Event Horizon surrounded by mysteriously moving little lights that twinkled in different colors.

But, what was that!? The inside of the cistern was very roughly made and some of the bricks were large, jutting out from the cistern wall. The gloom within the WELL made it difficult to see, but there, sitting on a brick sticking out about one foot, John thought he could make out the figure of a man.

John froze. He whispered, "Vincent? Vincent, is that you?"

He saw the figure move. John's eyes were growing accustomed to the darkness. He saw the figure slowly look up at him. And then it looked back down again.

John found his voice. "Vincent! What are you doing?! Stay there. I'll go get help. I'll get a rope!"

"Why?" said the voice of Vincent Van Gogh sadly.

"Great God, Vincent! You're sitting above the Second Event Horizon! You could get killed! I mean... Look, just don't move. Let me get help!"

"John, my friend, you have been so good to me. But everywhere I go, it is always the same. I can have nothing without making life tragic for others." His voice began to shake. "Back on Earth, I was such a burden on my poor brother Theo. Another mouth to feed. I could not even afford to house myself. Do you know why I first tried to take my life, John? You have never asked me that."

"Vincent, don't talk this way. Just take it easy. Everything will be all right. Just let me go get help. A rope!"

"My brother had just become a father again. My little nephew was so beautiful." He paused and then John heard him raise his voice for the first time, "WHY HAS GOD ALWAYS DENIED ME BEAUTY! HE WOULD NOT LET ME NEAR IT! HE WOULD NOT LET ME PRODUCE IT! NOTHING! Always nothing..." He let out a sigh, then spoke with great despair in his voice, "And how did I reward you, my savior, for saving my life? I tried to take your love from you!"

"No, Vincent! It's okay. Love is her business!"

There was a pause, then Vincent said very slowly, his voice rising and beginning to shake, "What...do...you...mean? She is a... a prostitute?"

"No! No, Vincent. It's okay here. I mean it's not the same thing at all. It's just love!"

"I KNOW EXACTLY WHAT IT IS! I HAVE ALWAYS KNOWN EXACTLY WHAT IT IS! But for me there has always been something wrong with it! Like painting scenery from the wrong point of view -- the wrong aspect. But, this magical well will change it all for me." His voice took on an idiotic sound of glee. "I am in no danger here! Love is eternal. I am full of love, so I, too, am

eternal and am in no danger here. But for me, love has always been wrong. But it was really just the aspect! And this magical well will carry out my WISH. It will change the aspect of my

love so that all the sorrow will finally be gone. I've been sitting here thinking it all through. It is all so clear now! I am in no danger," he repeated, his voice breaking hysterically. "LOVE IS SOMETHING ETERNAL - THE ASPECT MAY CHANGE, BUT NOT THE ESSENCE! AND, NOW I GO TO JOIN THE ETERNAL, TO GET MY WISH!" And with that, Vincent Van Gogh, to many the greatest artist of all time, slid from the brick he had been sitting on.

John shot an arm down to grab him, almost tumbling in himself, his other arm grabbing hold of the lip of the cistern wall. But it was too late. Vincent disappeared silently into the gloom, falling down toward the oblivion of the Second Event Horizon... and to peace.

John screamed, "VINCENT! No!! Nooo!!!"

And then, he suddenly noticed that the familiar pattern of distant, little dancing lights around the Second Event Horizon had changed. They had all become a bright white, with some taking on the pattern of eye-catching swirls, like spinning stars in the night sky of old Earth...

CHAPTER 28 - FINALE

John found himself slowly driving aimlessly around the quaint streets of Infinity City's OLDTOWN district. Vincent's last painting and his tubes of paint were on the seat beside him. The car was on automatic, in random touring mode. John stared down at the painting wondering helplessly how had everything gone so tragically wrong so rapidly.

Vincent was gone. All his insoluble troubles with women and life and love, he had finally ended forever. He was gone, as if John had never rescued him in the first place. John felt so empty.

He gave a heavy sigh and instructed the car's computer, "Go back to the Gallery, normal speed." The car took the next turn and wound its way back to the art Gallery, pulling up to the curb directly in front.

All the lights were still on. He opened the door, got out of the car and then aggressively slammed the door closed, not really knowing why. He did not feel angry, just so very empty...

"John!" his uncle appeared in the Gallery doorway. He came rushing forward, followed by his off-worlder business associates, all looking anxious. "What happened? Where's Vincent?"

John looked at his uncle, not knowing where to begin the ending. Then he looked up. Mandy was in the doorway. She came slowly forward, staring at him with her dark eyes, the lights from inside the gallery, so carefully placed by Vincent, shimmering around the edges of her flat black suit like ghostly glowing hands ecstatically caressing her.

Someone called and John turned to see Mr. Manfretti rushing over from his cafe, wringing his hands and asking about Vincent.

They all stood around him intently asking questions, all at the same time. Where was Vincent? Was he all right? Was he coming back to the open house celebration? John raised his hands in front of him, palms outward for silence and then said simply, "Vincent chose the WELL." He slowly hung his head.

"WHAT?!" cried his uncle.

"Oh, no, no! Not that!" moaned Manfretti, slamming his fists against his head.

Mandy just stood to the side watching John. Was there guilt in those dark eyes? She was so hard to read...

Manfretti wailed up to the skies, "This is a tragedy!"

John's uncle reached forward, grasping John's shoulders. "John, are you sure? Did you SEE him jump?"

John pushed his uncle's hands away and said with irritation, "Yes. Yes, I saw him jump! It was sick. I don't know why he did it! I tried to stop him, but he wouldn't listen to me!"

"This is the worst!" cried Manfretti loudly. "In all my hundreds of years this is the absolute worst. Why such a loving, kind man?" he ground his fists into his eyes. "Oh, Vincent, come back to us!"

"Oh, shut up and get a grip on yourself," John's uncle said angrily to Manfretti. Then, to John he emphatically asked, "Is he gone?! Vincent Van Gogh is gone?! We had Vincent Van Gogh and now he's DEAD?!" his voice was rising in anger. Mr. Manfretti moaned out loud, covering his face with his big hands.

John lowered his head and said quietly, "Yes, Vincent Van Gogh is gone, uncle. I am sorry."

"Sorry? SORRY?!" his uncle balled his fists, ground his teeth and started shaking. He looked around, saw Mandy, glared at her and snarled, "YOU! YOU took him away from here! YOUR kind are the worst trouble makers around Infinity City. Your scum profession should be outlawed. YOU should be outlawed! You monster! I'd like to throw YOU down the WELL!"

John's head snapped up, his eyes blazing. "Uncle!" he commanded, his voice ringing with the authority of the GUARD, "Enough! She did nothing. Leave her alone!"

His uncle whirled on him, his lips drawn back from his clenched teeth in an insane grimace. "Oh, she did nothing, eh?" he said in a low sinister voice, that John had never heard him use before. "She has cost us everything! We have lost a fortune! How could you be so stupid as to let a goddamned girl screw you up like this?"

Then, the off-worlders joined him in deriding John, "Young man, you have cost us all a great deal of money!" "You should have been careful with someone so unstable!" "You don't let a freaky artist go off running around by himself!" "Why don't YOU dive into that Well after him, you incompetent boy!"

Even Mr. Manfredetti sadly begged of John, "Wasn't there ANYTHING you could do? Couldn't you stop him?"

Everyone was shouting at John One. Except Mandy, who looked on at the crowd of shouting men with disgust. Looking at John, the center of all the abuse, she sadly shook her head.

John just stood with his head once again lowered.

His uncle raised a shaking finger to John's face. "An officer of the GUARD indeed! No real officer of the GUARD would ever do anything so stupid! You've ruined everything! All my plans. We could have been the biggest, greatest Family of all time. We could have been..."

And from the doorway of the Gallery, a quietly low, feminine voice said simply: "Enough. Silence now, you men." John looked up to see Deirdre, the Grand Dame of his family Larsch, walking slowly toward them all. She was wearing a long, flowing white gown, highlighted with thin-lined silvery patterns. When and HOW had SHE arrived??

Everyone had become silent at the sound of her quiet voice of authority. Mr. Manfredetti whispered, "The Larsch Grand Dame!" He nervously bit his knuckles, then hurriedly scuttled back up the street to his cafe. The off-worlder businessmen, familiar with and wishing to avoid the adversity of a Grand Dame, bid John's uncle a quick good-night, hopped into their rented limo', and drove quickly back to their hotel by the space port.

Turning to John's uncle, the Grand Dame chidingly said, "Zacharia Larsch, your greed is offensive. It is unbecoming of a Larsch. We are DISPLEASED."

She turned to John and said imperiously, "We are aware of the situation. You must know that Infinity City is great, but there are greater forces beyond our control. Young man, did you have any idea that this tragedy would occur?"

John respectfully went down on one knee, "No, Mother. I still do not understand why it happened. He was so happy, I thought."

"Some accuse you of kidnapping Van Gogh. How do you answer this?"

John One had gone over this in his mind many times. It was technically, at least, kidnapping -- though it had not occurred to him until well away from Earth. He had taken Vincent aboard his ship without asking him. Van Gogh, however, had never wished to return. Besides, he would have died forever if left behind! It did not FEEL like kidnapping. And it did not matter anymore anyway. He looked up at her and answered: "Vincent came here of

his own free will."

She peered down at him for a moment, eyebrows arched high, her soft, white face calm and unreadable. "We feel you are not responsible," she judged. Turning to John's uncle she commanded, "Accept this, Zacharia. Your nephew is not responsible for what has happened. And neither is that girl. This is fate!"

John's uncle hesitated for a moment then bowed his head and grumbled, "Yes, Mother. I accept your verdict. I... lost control of myself. I was disappointed." Then, turning to John, he said sheepishly, "Nephew, please accept my apology. You are the finest of the finest. I know you did all you could do." A complex look suddenly distorted his features. He turned, and with head bowed and his hand covering his face, walked hurriedly away toward his own car to drive away.

Grand Dame Deirdre said, "Very good!" Then she turned to Mandy. "My girl, why do you waste your beauty and time at such an unproductive... vocation? Seek the challenge of starting a Family, a House! You may have Our assistance."

John was amazed at such a generous offer. But, Mandy said angrily, "I don't need your CHARITY! And, I do not ever want YOUR kind of life!" She stalked away.

Looking after Mandy, the Grand Dame commented, "Childish girl. And yet, so spirited!" She turned to John and took a deep breath, sighing: "Young man, take heart. Perhaps only the aspect of this situation has changed. Perhaps the essence is, after all, eternal!" She smiled ever so slightly.

Suddenly, John heard a sound behind him. The Grand Dame's Imperial Excursion Skiff had just landed, its billowing white sails floating above, the golden door to the luxurious salon opening.

He watched as the Grand Dame walked in a stately manner toward her beautiful skiff and boarded. The skiff lifted up into the night sky, and she was gone.

John One rose to feet and stood looking after the dwindling skiff, wondering and wondering. The Adventure was now quite over.

He locked up the gallery and looked in through the window at all the wonderful works of Vincent Van Gogh. He shook his head. He had had enough of art. He would let his uncle sell off everything; the enterprise had been his idea anyway.

John One climbed into his car. Where to go? He instantly thought of Mandy. But he could not face her now. Was she to blame? He could not decide. Why could they never get along?

He set the car in manual pilot mode to get his mind off all the recent dismal events and drove home to his Larsch family estate.

EPILOGUE

And so, what became of the remarkable Vincent Van Gogh? Had he discovered a new world where his reality-transcending artistic talents gave him amazing new powers that Infinity City and the entire Galaxy would eventually depend on for their very survival? Or was he truly just dead?

And the devastated John One? Was this Adventure indeed over for him? Or, would he and Vincent be once again united by a shattering turmoil of such mind-bending multi-galactic scope that the very foundations of the Universe itself would tremble from the inescapable conflict?

What of Jason the Rescuer, and Mandy, and the Grand Dame Deirdre? How would their lives and lusts all intertwine and resolve the as yet undiscovered secret threat growing like a dark storm on the horizon of Infinity City's destiny?

THE END

Read the next exciting book in the Infinity City series!

"JASON THE RESCUER" - Infinity City Book #2

FOOTNOTES

1. Excerpt from "ELEMENTARY ASTROGATION - Course 1A" from the Infinity City Militia Guard Academy...

"Time within a black hole's first event horizon is independent of time outside the black hole, due to the reversed relationship between time and space between the Galaxy and the inside of a black hole. That is, Galactic time corresponds with black hole inner space, and the Galactic spatial dimension corresponds to a black hole's temporal dimension. When leaving a black hole, the point in time at which a ship arrives outside is dependent upon the angle between the ship's trajectory vector and the normal line between the first and second event horizons, the Horizon Normal Line. (Within the black hole, both of these horizons appear as points.) The farther a sailship's angle of trajectory from the normal line within the black hole, the farther back in the past it arrives out in the Galaxy. The closer to the normal line, the closer to the actual, unraveling Galactic present. When returning from the Galactic past, a ship entering the black hole always arrives back to the present time, though just as much time will have passed within the black hole as passed on-board the ship while it was outside (an interesting phenomenon explained by the current temporal momentum field theory). There is no known way to travel into the future, since, according to all reasonable theories, and especially according to the One True Belief, the Universe is constantly unfolding, but only in the present time, and no future has been created yet. We are not fatalists! The future is exclusively dependent on the present. Your destiny within the Militia Guard is in the palm of your own hand!"

2. Excerpt from "VISITORS' GUIDE TO INFINITY CITY VERNACULAR"...

"Instruction Watch - Striving to do away with paper as a media of data representation, Infinity City Law requires electronic media for all consumer product instruction booklets. What resulted was the development of little plastic instruction watches that accompany all consumer products. The typical model consists of a speaker to announce instructions, a small, color liquid crystal display screen to show pictures and a microphone to receive questions from the user."

3. Excerpt from "ASTON'S GLIB HISTORY" stored within the atomic memory of John One's sailship...

"Vincent Van Gogh was fluent in Dutch, French, and English. A voracious reader, he could read and write in these languages, also. His fluency in idiomatic English was due to the time he

spent living and working in London, England ancient Earth where he unsuccessfully tried to win the heart of a young pretty English girl. One day, however, she announced her engagement to another. Devastated, Van Gogh returned to Holland (also on ancient Earth) where he learned the 'art' of borrowing money to purchase love."

4. Excerpt from "VISITORS' GUIDE TO INFINITY CITY VERNACULAR"...

"Infinity City, like most modern worlds of the Galaxy desiring a common language, adheres to the ancient standard for English, beginning with strict teaching in early low school. Computer feedback systems used the English standard to train children in exact pronunciation, grammar, and syntax -- easily overriding parental influence. The digitally recorded format is the exact same as when first recorded back in ancient times."

5. Excerpt from "VISITORS' GUIDE TO INFINITY CITY VERNACULAR"...

"Riyal - The standard unit of Infinity City currency, sometimes humorously referred to as the 'credit' (origin unknown). The value is generally steady since the Infinity City Monetary Council (composed exclusively of Grand Dames) closely monitors and controls the size of the local money supply to maintain maximum business productivity and efficiency. For ages, visitors from the governments of other worlds have come to Infinity City to learn the secret of such a stable fiscal system. Visitors from male-oriented cultures usually leave in disgust at the suggestion by their Grand Dame hosts that they implement the principle of Political Gender Exclusivity; that is, put their women in charge."

6. From "MCNAB'S EXCITING GALACTIC TOURBOOK"...

"New Rome off Rigel - One of the oldest of Earth's colonies, and also certainly one of the most developed and cosmopolitan. Covered mostly in ocean, the physiology of the denizens within were not only edible to humans but irresistibly delicious and varied."

7. Refer to Book Two of these Chronicles of Infinity City...

8. Excerpt from "VISITORS' GUIDE TO INFINITY CITY VERNACULAR"...

"The residents of Infinity City refer to the few other cities within black holes as their Neighbors. All have degenerated into unstable regimens of tyranny. Without the political stability to foment sophisticated biogenetic technology, they have no ability to produce the Pill of Life. They continually raid Infinity City merchant ships for plunder and also foolishly for the Pill, which these ships carry in abundant quantities for their crew, though each prescription of the Pill works only for a single person.

In the past, when the raids grew in daring and number, Infinity City set up its famous Militia Guard to protect itself and its main routes of trade."

9. Excerpt from "VISITORS' GUIDE TO INFINITY CITY VERNACULAR"...

"Back-bounce - Infinity City slang for a sailship voyaging back in time and then returning with everything in the past reverting to its exact original historical configuration by the time the sailship re-enters the black hole, as if it had never left. However, any object brought back remains in existence."

10. Excerpt from "VISITORS' GUIDE TO INFINITY CITY VERNACULAR"...

"Stick - Infinity City slang meaning any change to the universe outside the black hole that is permanent, that alters the future. Only possible if a sailship leaves the black hole along the Horizon Normal Line, between the first and second event horizons causing the ship to emerge in the present universe (the highest point in time so far)."

11. Excerpt from "VISITORS' GUIDE TO INFINITY CITY VERNACULAR"...

"Visa-torque - A device put around the necks of non-VIP off-world visitors to Infinity City, which constantly transmits their location and visa identification code, allowing easy tracking of their activities. The use of torques on Infinity City citizens is forbidden, even if they have a known criminal past."
