

# Before & Beyond

All rights reserved © 2002 Patrick Welch

Bought from Fictionwise and released on #bookz by dongquang. Enjoy :)

No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, graphic, electronic, or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, taping, or by any information storage or retrieval system, without the permission in writing from Double Dragon Publishing.

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

Cover design by Darcy Douglas

ISBN: 1-894841-76-X

First Edition eBook Publication August 22, 2002

## Before & Beyond

*Patrick Welch*

### Introduction

I volunteered to write this preamble for no other reason than I love the fiction of Patrick Welch. It really is that simple.

I met Pat quite some time back, on the Jackhammer bulletin board. We both had stories that month in Titan Ezine. I had posted a message to the Jackhammer board about my piece. Patrick responded by saying (and I'm paraphrasing here), "You shouldn't toot your own horn like that in public. It's not polite. Allow me to do it instead." He proceeded to tell everyone how much he liked my story and mentioned his work as well.

Off I surfed to Titan to read the first Patrick Welch story in a long list of titles... The Ganymede Incident. Immediately I was struck by three points that would continuously assail me about Pat's work each and every time I encountered it.

First, I liked his style. Second, I enjoyed his mind (twisted as it was). And third, I was reading the work of a man who would one day enjoy a much larger audience.

Patrick Welch became my favorite web author, after reading the first Westchester Station excerpt, when it appeared in Jackhammer. I loved the feel of the piece. His work etched itself even deeper into my admiration, when I read my first Brendell story in Eternity Online.

But it wasn't until I read his book *The Thirteenth Magician* that I really appreciated the true scope of his genius. It was that book and his Westchester Station stories that propelled me to write these words.

Patrick Welch, over the years, has become a friend. His humor and his intelligence have added to my enjoyment of life on the web, even if he did heckle me at my first Cybling Chat. His easygoing nature makes him a pleasure to chat with. And his consummate professionalism (in spite of an excess of

semicolons) makes him a good man to work with.

What can you expect to find within this volume? I won't even try to describe it. Nothing I say can prepare you for Patrick Welch. Even a man of words like me, can scarcely think of the appropriate adjectives to heap upon him. And being the modest fellow he is, it's unlikely that he'd do more than blush and turn away in any case.

At least on one level, I truly envy some of the people reading this intro. Those of you that have yet to experience your first Patrick Welch story ...because you have no idea of what's in store for you.

Those of you that have read him, know exactly what I'm talking about.

**Steve Lazarowitz**

## **Author's Foreword**

This is the updated version of *Before/Beyond*, originally published by Crossroads Publications. I've rearranged the collection so the science fiction and fantasy stories are kept together. Those of you who prefer one genre can more easily read only that half of the book (although I would like to think you'd be cheating yourself). I've also added some new stories in both areas.

Just a bit of a run-down:

“Demon In a Box” and “Second Stage” appeared in *Twilight Times*

“Bingo” appeared in *Planet Relish*

“The Man Who Tuned the Glacier” appeared in *The Orphic Chronicle*

“Cold Spell” and “The Ganymede Incident” appeared in *Titan*

“Unfair Trade” appeared soooo long ago in *Analog*

“The Chronograph,” “Festival of Forgotten Dreams,” “The Good Little Boy,” “Last Call at the Dew Drop Inn,” “Routine Maintenance” and “Frozen Assets” appeared in *Jackhammer*

“Good Provider” appeared in *Dark Muse*

“Ghosts of Dawn” appeared in *Alternate Realities*

“Rock of Wages” and “The Hidden Princess” appeared in *Pegasus Online*

Incidentally, “Ghosts of Dawn” is a Doakes/Haig adventure that occurs after the stories chronicled in my anthology *The Casebook of Doakes and Haig*.

Enough foreplay. The stories await. Enjoy.

**Patrick Welch**

## Dedication:

*To Barry H., Steve L., Kate S., Robyn W., Lida Q., Mark P., Rachael M., and so many more who have supported my writing efforts. And, as always, to Jessica.*

## BEFORE

### DEMON IN A BOX

Ahlbhenzer hid behind the outcropping of rock and watched as the knight warily approached. The man looked so proud and uncomfortable in his metal suit, the sun reflecting brightly off its surface and eliminating any possible element of surprise. Ahlbhenzer wondered briefly if the man was suffering as much from the heat and sun as he was, then decided it must be worse for his prey. Ahlbhenzer, after all, wasn't walking around in an oven. His claws drummed nervously on the boulder, his tail stirred up dust behind him. The magician's orders were clear: stop all from approaching my castle.

It shouldn't be this way, he thought sadly; a demon under the thrall of a human. Without warning or explanation, his lord Fhennezel had plucked him like an apple off a tree and unceremoniously handed him over to the magician Cylydar, then vanished without another word. Since then he had been the human's to command and no matter how mundane or distasteful the task, Ahlbhenzer had little choice but to obey.

The knight was getting closer now, closer to the trap Ahlbhenzer had set. He must be getting tired by now, and discouraged, Ahlbhenzer thought smugly. Struggling up a rock-strewn path, laden with heavy armor. *Did he have any charms? An enhanced blade, anything that might actually prove dangerous?* The young demon forced the thought aside.

Ahlbhenzer pushed against his shielding rock one more time. Yes, it would roll quite nicely. Down the mountainside and into the narrow path leading to the castle. How fast can the knight run in his armor? he thought. *Time to find out.*

Ahlbhenzer let out an ear-piercing, soul-freezing scream, one that echoed and re-echoed off the walls of the canyon until it sounded like a virtual army of demons was preparing to attack. Then he dug the claws of his feet into the dirt and shoved with all the strength of his three-foot demon frame. The boulder resisted only briefly, then began its journey down the mountainside. Ahlbhenzer followed, his wings flapping, his screams of rage still resounding off the rock walls.

The knight stopped and withdrew his sword, then reconsidered when he saw the boulder coming his way. He quickly began a clanking retreat, one Ahlbhenzer encouraged by spitting an occasional ball of fire at him.

The boulder finally wedged itself firmly in the narrow opening, effectively blocking that entrance, but Ahlbhenzer continued his increasingly slower pursuit until he reached the end of the magical tether the magician Cylydar had placed upon him, the tether that bound him hopelessly and helplessly.

By now the knight was beyond the magician's territory and showing no signs of slowing his loud retreat. Ahlbhenzer released one more blast of fire before proudly flying back to see what havoc he had created.

The boulder protected the path from any more incursions. Only magic or an army of men would be able to remove it. Or a demon. He rested atop the boulder and shrugged his wings. He would put it back later. Now he was tired from the hot sun – it was the harsh light, not heat, that troubled him -- and his adventure.

*Time to go back.*

The magician Cylydar was waiting for him. "I take it you have disposed of the nuisance?"

"Yes, he will not be bothering you again."

"Where is the body?"

"The body?" Ahlbhenzer frowned, although because of his horned and knobby brow it was difficult to tell. "The man fled. There is no body."

The magician nearly dropped the scrying glass. "You let him *live*?" The mage's rage was terrible to behold and Ahlbhenzer shivered. "Since when do you let trespassers live?"

Ahlbhenzer's tail fell in dejection. "I saw no reason. He was no longer a threat."

"Don't question me or my orders, Ahlbhenzer. I told you to dispose of him."

"I *did*." But he knew his protestations would have no effect on Cylydar.

"I like this not. I see I will have to reeducate you on your proper station. Into the box with you. Now!"

Ahlbhenzer gave out a keen of rage and panic, but even as he tried to flee he could feel the magic tether tighten around his throat, could feel himself contracting until within seconds he was ten times smaller ...and completely helpless. Cylydar reached down and plucked him off the floor as if he was no better than a mouse, then opened the lid to a large ebony box on his desk and dropped the demon inside. "Reflect upon your past indiscretions and how you have failed me," he said as he shut it. "You do not question your master."

Ahlbhenzer huddled on the mirrored floor of the box and mewed in terror. The walls and lid were mirrored as well, the light provided by Cylydar's power. Everywhere he turned his visage looked back at him in endless and devolving repetition, stretching onward to seeming infinity. "Fhennezel, why have you abandoned me?" he whined as he fought to maintain his sanity, fought to remember what was down, up, left and right. He would have closed his eyes but, being a demon, was not graced with eyelids. Instead he could only stare back at the accusing Ahlbhenzers around him while continually vowing he would never disobey Cylydar again.

When Cylydar finally deigned to release him it was evening. Ahlbhenzer wasn't sure if hours had passed or days, but the time had not served to soften the magician's anger. "Make yourself presentable, we have visitors," he said as he reversed the spell. Ahlbhenzer groaned in pain as he slowly reverted to his original size; between his time in the box and the agony of regrowth, he was in no condition to meet anyone. Protesting, however, was out of the question.

"Shall I dress as a valet?" he asked between gritted teeth.

The magician tugged at his goatee. "Unnecessary. This is not a social occasion. How you appear now will do."

Ahlbhenzer gasped as he was yanked by the invisible leash out of the study and down the hall. Who would visit Cylydar? he wondered as he stumbled behind the magician. The mage lived alone, by necessity and preference. Except for Ahlbhenzer no others shared his castle. And guests had only visited several times in the past three years, emissaries of the king and several magicians. There was also the odd hostage or two but Ahlbhenzer didn't believe those counted. But he did recognize the being who greeted them in the magician's dining hall. "Fhennezel," he blurted and collapsed to his knees.

The demon lord looked at him, sniffed, turned to Cylydar. "Is this why you summoned me?" He flicked his tail in disgust.

"You have not fulfilled our agreement," Cylydar said as he took his seat. Then he glared at Ahlbhenzer. "Stand up, idiot!"

Ahlbhenzer rose slowly, his skin turning from green to sickly yellow as he wilted under the stares of both the demon and the magician. His tail, normally erect, rested limply on the floor.

"I'm sorry," Fhennezel said as he cradled a glass of wine in one taloned hand. "Why are you upset?"

"This demon," and Cylydar nearly jerked Ahlbhenzer off his feet, "continues to disobey my orders! He is more than worthless."

"Is this true?" Fhennezel said to Ahlbhenzer in their own tongue. Demon speech is in ultrasonic frequencies; Cylydar could only assume they were merely looking at each other.

"He told me to stop an intruder. I did so. He was upset I didn't kill the human."

Fhennezel addressed the magician. "You demanded a demon, I gave you one. There were no other conditions."

"This one is as dense as the village idiot! Even when I give him precise instructions he defies me! This is not acceptable," and he slammed his fist on the table.

"You've had him three years. He should be housebroken by now."

"Please, Fhennezel, take me with you! I cannot bear any more of this!"

"Shut up and stand up straight, you craven fool. What Cylydar does to you is none of my concern." Fhennezel finished his wine and crushed the golden goblet, then tossed the remains to Cylydar. "I see no justification for your complaint. He is your responsibility now."

"Fhennezel, you have cheated me for the last time."

Fhennezel smiled. "On the contrary. I'll cheat you at every opportunity. Just as you will cheat me. If you'll excuse me, I have more important matters to attend to." He glared one more time at Ahlbhenzer. "And you," he hissed in their tongue, "start acting like a demon." Then he was gone in a blast of acrid smoke.

Cylydar swore, then sneezed. "Clean this up," he said and stalked from the room.

Head and tail down, Ahlbhenzer obeyed. He retrieved the ruined goblet and cradled it lovingly. His high lord and master had been here, had actually touched this goblet! Ahlbhenzer shivered with delight at the thought he possessed something that had once been used by Fhennezel.

Then his thoughts shifted. "*Start acting like a demon.*" What did Fhennezel mean by that? It certainly wasn't a philosophical question; after all, he was a demon and could only act as one. How had he failed

them, both his lord and his new master? His thoughts returned longingly to the granite caverns of his youth, the lava flows where he and others cavorted, the delightful smell of brimstone that permeated everything. He hadn't even minded the constant tormenting from his instructors as they tried to show him The Way. And then Fhennezel had given him to Cylydar.

But he could not hold his master accountable. It must be Cylydar, he concluded. The mage was still angry he had not killed that knight. But that was not The Way. Only the humans killed for enjoyment or cruelty. Surely Fhennezel knew and understood, surely he could not want Ahlbhenzer to violate such a basic principle.

Now back in his own chambers, Ahlbhenzer settled himself on the block of granite that served as his bed and tried to sleep. But with so many questions to ponder he knew he would get none this evening.

"Don't leave any dust on that mirror. Place that book back where you found it. Leave the candlesticks alone. Be sure to refill the lamp."

Ahlebhenzer sighed and gave a withering glare to the stuffed owl perched on the mantle in the library. It continued its string of instructions unaware and undeterred.

Ahlebhenzer hated housecleaning as he was too short to reach mantles and such without a stool and his claws were ill-equipped to handle a broom or feather duster. But, being the only help, he was the only option.

"Don't open that book," it hooted as he wiped dust off a large tome. Ahlebhenzer glanced at it with growing interest. This was the first time he had been allowed in Cylydar's library. Usually Cylydar maintained this room himself, but today the magician claimed more pressing matters and ordered him to perform the pedestrian duties. The thick book was covered with runes and appeared to be made of something other than leather. *A book of spells perhaps?* he wondered. *Or just the family diary?* Knowing what was certain to happen, Ahlebhenzer nonetheless flipped over the cover ...and was rewarded with a jolt of pain as the magical tether tightened around his neck.

Gasping, he let the book close and stepped back. The pressure relaxed immediately. *The tether.* He cursed the magician for imprisoning him with it. The invisible leash was with him always, ensuring he would remain in the servitude of Cylydar. *If somehow I could remove it ...*

But not today, he knew. The owl began its string of instructions once again so Ahlebhenzer quickly returned to his labors. But not before lingering several more minutes over the forbidden book.

"Quit standing there and make yourself useful. Bring me that trunk."

It was evening of the following day. The magician had been working on a formula in his laboratory while Ahlebhenzer cowered in a corner. The magical bright light that flowed from the glowing globe high in the ceiling was blinding him, and without eyelids he could only use his arms to shield himself. He hated being around Cylydar while the mage was experimenting. Too often he was the subject.

"I said now!" and Ahlebhenzer felt an insistent tug on his leash.

Chastened, he walked to the trunk the magician pointed at. It was large and wide and he had a struggle getting his arms around it even at the sides. Even with his great strength it was going to be difficult to move. Ahlebhenzer sank his claws into it and managed to lift it off the floor. Using his tail and wings for balance, he started slowly toward his master.

His clawed feet, so helpful when outdoors, were nearly useless on the smooth granite floor. Something shifted within the heavy trunk, jeopardizing his balance. Ahlbhenzer tried to compensate but lost his footing. As he fell backward, he found himself looking straight at the glowing globe. He screamed then and dropped the trunk as he tried to shield his eyes from the searing light. The trunk crashed majestically on the floor, scattering paraphernalia everywhere.

"What kind of moronic incompetent idiot are you?" Cylydar raged as he turned to see Ahlbhenzer rolled up and shaking on the floor, the telltale wreckage about him. "You have ruined my experiment!" Muttering curses, Cylydar approached the cowering demon. "You will pay dearly for this, Ahlbhenzer. To the box with you!"

Ahlbhenzer felt himself jerked to his feet, then the terrible pain of compression, then the magician's cold fingers squeezing his now-minuscule body. "Fhennezel and I will have another talk," the magician vowed. Minutes later Ahlbhenzer was back in the box, looking at a myriad of Ahlbhenzers stretching endlessly in all directions.

He huddled on the floor and stared at the images staring back at him. You are an idiot, he imagined them saying. You are a worthless incompetent disgrace. *Be a demon*, came the voice of Fhennezel, unbidden.

*Be a demon.* Ahlbhenzer rose slowly, awkwardly. *A demon wouldn't allow himself to suffer such indignities at the hands of a mere human.* He flexed his wings. He had never tried this before, never tried to fly while in the confines of the box. But his prison was large enough. He leapt and flew toward what he hoped was the top of his mirrored cage.

He rammed solidly into it, fell back, tried again. Within seconds he was completely disoriented. With reflections on all sides, Ahlbhenzer wasn't sure if he was flying into the sides, the top or the bottom. Think, you idiot, he chastened himself as he caromed once again off a wall. *You can always find the bottom.*

He stopped flying, let himself fall into an ocean of onrushing Ahlbhenzers. He picked himself up, shook himself, then looked up. If this was the base, the lid could only be directly above.

Steeling himself, he flew up with all his strength into what had to be the lid. He bounced off, allowed himself to fall, then tried again. The second time he felt something give, just slightly. Encouraged, he tried again. Yes, he did feel the lid move. He tried again; this time he saw a slight separation on one side, a small glimpse of darkness in the all-encompassing light. Ahlbhenzer dropped to the bottom, then walked in that direction until he ran into the wall. Then he flew straight up and was able to raise the lid just a sliver.

But it was enough. He was ready this time, he managed to wedge his claws into the small opening so when the lid quickly closed they were wedged firmly beneath it.

Ahlbhenzer would not be denied now; he scratched at the mirrored wall with his clawed feet until he was able to obtain a perilous purchase. He arched his wings and lifted the lid nearly an inch, allowing him to get one hand under the lid. Now he had enough leverage to use most of his strength. Another five minutes of painful effort and he was out of the box and flying free in Cylydar's study.

Ahlbhenzer was exhausted and aching everywhere from his countless collisions and wanted only to rest. But being free of the box did not make him free of Cylydar, not with the tether which still bound him. He was not used to viewing Cylydar's residence from aloft, having never flown indoors before. It took him several moments to recognize his surroundings, then find the door and leave. He stayed near the ceiling as he flew into the hall. It was doubtful Cylydar would still be up, but then he had no idea how long he had been in the box.

Not sure how much time he might have, he flew quickly to the library. Would the watch owl see him? he wondered. Did Cylydar have magical alarms in place? He suspected not. All of the magician's defenses he was aware of were designed to prevent trespassers from entering. He was already inside.

His eyes adapted rapidly to the lack of light. He saw the large tome resting so invitingly on the table and landed next to it. But even as he began to open it he felt the magical leash tighten around his neck. Ahlbhenzer stepped back and felt the pressure ease. *Not that way.*

He did a rapid reconnaissance and found a small wand, one which even in his minuscule condition he could wield. Hovering above the book, just beyond the point where he felt the leash tighten, he wedged the wand under the cover then forced the book to open. He quivered as the cover hit the table; *could Cylydar have heard that?*

Ahlbhenzer couldn't worry about that now. He read the first page and realized with delight that this was indeed a book of spells. Using the wand again, he turned to the next page, then the next. Until, after what seemed like hours, he found the spell that had bound him for these past few years. And the words that, once spoken, removed the tether forever from his neck.

One more thing to do; now that the tether no longer interfered, he quickly closed the book and returned the wand to where he had found it. Then back down the hall and to the box. To wait for Cylydar.

"Wake up, worthless. You and I are going to see Fhennezel," Ahlbhenzer heard Cylydar say as the lid flew open. Ahlbhenzer tried to scuttle away but the magician grabbed him quickly, then threw him to the floor. "I shall tolerate no more of your incompetence."

Is he going to keep me like this? Ahlbhenzer wondered as he followed behind the magician. He was tempted to fly but thought better of it. Instead he used his wings to help him scuttle across the floor as rapidly as his even shorter legs would carry him. He wondered if the magician knew he had thrown off his magical chains, but by all actions Cylydar seemed unaware.

"Now sit and be still," and Cylydar set Ahlbhenzer roughly on the great stone table in the laboratory. Ahlbhenzer folded his wings around himself in total servility as Cylydar began to intone an ancient ritual, then made arcane gestures. There was a puff of crimson smoke and Fhennezel suddenly appeared. And was none too pleased.

"You dare summon me again, Cylydar?" He glared at the mage, then at Ahlbhenzer.

"I can tolerate this one's insolence and incompetence no longer. This game has gone on long enough. I demand you live up to our agreement."

Fhennezel picked at his fangs with one giant claw. "We had this discussion before."

"This incompetent has totally ruined my most delicate experiments, destroyed my most valuable equipment." Cylydar pointed to the overturned trunk and damaged contents that still remained where Ahlbhenzer had dropped them. "I demand retribution."

Fhennezel glared at Ahlbhenzer. "What have you to say for yourself?" This time he spoke in human tongue, not their language.

"I couldn't help it. I lost my balance. I did not intend to drop it."

His lord waved him silent. "I fail to see how an imp could be expected to carry anything that large,



Cylydar."

"He was in his regular size. His current condition is merely for punishment." He made another gesture and Ahlbhenzer suddenly found himself growing. He managed to jump off the table before it collapsed under his regained weight.

"It took you long enough," Fhennezel said to Ahlbhenzer in demon speech. Then he looked at the magician. "Thank you for returning Ahlbhenzer to what he was; I doubt I could have done as much. Now I am pleased to say our agreement is concluded. We'll be leaving now." With that both Fhennezel and Ahlbhenzer disappeared in a cloud of smoke, leaving the magician coughing and swearing.

"What did you mean, took me long enough?" Ahlbhenzer asked. They were back in the granite caverns of his own world, and while he wanted only to luxuriate in the burning heat and delightful smells of brimstone and lava, his curiosity had to be satisfied.

"To graduate, fool. To escape from the magician."

Ahlbhenzer stared at his lord. "To graduate?"

"Absolutely. It is necessary you learn how to deal with humans, learn about their true nature, their power and weaknesses. All my underlings go through such an apprenticeship."

*An apprenticeship.* Ahlbhenzer quivered with delight that he had pleased his lord. "But what if I hadn't ...passed?"

"You'd stay with Cylydar until the end of time. I have no use for demons who cannot free themselves from a magician as weak as he."

"Did Cylydar know this?"

"No, and there's no reason for him to. He has his uses, as do most humans. When the time is right I'll send him another student. Hopefully," he glared at Ahlbhenzer, "they won't cause me so many headaches. Now be gone with you. I have matters of much greater importance to address."

Ahlbhenzer was smiling as he left his lord's quarters. *Graduation. He was now a demon of full standing!* He stretched his wings and let out a roar of delight. Fhennezel would surely be summoning him soon for some assignment or another. Until then, a refreshing dip in the lava pools would be nice.

## Cold Spell

Dartallon sat at his bench waiting impatiently for the transformation to begin. Around him, the tools of his trade were neatly arranged for easy use: clay jars filled with eyes of bat and tongues of newt, flasks of dew collected during the full moon, vials of quicksilver and dragon's blood, a miniature casket filled with dead man's dust, and a basket full of rare roots and herbs he had personally amassed from every clime. The standard tools of alchemy.

His attention was focused on the bowl before him. Inside rested a single roc's egg, painfully (and perilously) collected the previous eve. Dartallon had prepared the philter and spoken the incantation, now it should be a simple matter of time until the egg was transformed into gold.

But not *this* much time, he thought as his stomach grumbled in protest. He had planned on enjoying

breakfast after completing the morning's work. Now he regretted it. He glared at the recalcitrant egg, still resplendent in its blue speckled shell. *Have I done something wrong?* He mentally retraced his steps, then shook his head. He had performed this simple spell a hundred times and he slammed his fist on the bench in frustration. There was simply *no reason* why the egg shouldn't be gleaming, solid gold by now.

"Enough," and he walked to his cooking pot, where his meal of potatoes and leeks was boiling merrily inside. "At least *you* work," he addressed the pot. It required no fire, just Dartallon's commands to function. He dined quickly, almost tastelessly, only enough to satisfy his hunger. Then he returned to his vigil.

For the first time that morning he smiled. There was no doubt; one section of the egg was noticeably yellow. Soon the entire egg would be solid gold and his work for the day completed. Perhaps some of my ingredients have lost their potency, he decided as he glanced at several vials. He would have to replenish his apothecary, and soon.

He was making a list when he heard a knock at his door. "Who could that be?" he muttered as he reluctantly answered the summons. He was greeted by a very irate and wet Gazperan.

"Why didn't you answer my call?" his magician guest asked as soon as they were inside out of the rain.

"Call?"

"I've been trying to contact you all morning!"

Dartallon looked at the deer's head mounted on a wall. He used it to converse with other magicians. "It never spoke. Why are you wet?"

"Because it was raining outside and my shield spell wouldn't work." Gazperan stalked to the nearest chair and collapsed in it. "Ever ride a carpet in the wind and rain? I thought it would unseat me the entire trip!"

"I'm sorry." Dartallon hastened to a cabinet and returned with a flask of wine and two flacons. "What is so important that you came to see me personally?" he asked after pouring two hearty portions.

"There has been a summons. The High Council is meeting in five days. Matters of utmost seriousness. Your presence is... demanded."

"A meeting? Of the High Council?" Dartallon frowned as he sat down. Meetings of the High Council, the ruling body of the magicians, were rare. For him to be summoned was unprecedented. "What does this concern?"

"Magic, of course," and Gazperan snorted, followed almost immediately by a sneeze. "There appear to be difficulties."

"Difficulties?"

"Yes, difficulties." Gazperan paused to take a hearty swig of wine, but his anger remained unappeased. "Spells don't work, or aren't working properly. Do you think I would subject myself to this," and he pointed at his soaked clothing, "if there wasn't a serious problem? A shield spell is about the easiest spell to cast!"

*Difficulties with magic?* Dartallon frowned as he swirled his own drink. *The transmutation spell.*

"Yes, I've noticed that as well. Just this morning ..."

Gazperan waved him quiet. "I still have four more to contact," he said and rose. "But this matter is of utmost importance. We have to find out what is going on. If our magic stops working..."

Nothing more needed to be said. Dartallon walked him to the door and waved as his comrade rose majestically and soared slowly away on his carpet. The implications of this troubling news were staggering, and he shivered as he settled back in a chair.

*Me. They want me at the High Council meeting.* He should feel privileged. He did not. He considered himself a competent magician, knew more spells than most. To those of the High Council, however, he would rate no higher than an apprentice, a lackey to fetch ingredients while they executed machinations of the most wondrous kind. Dartallon performed no more rituals that day. Instead he remained in a chair lost in contemplation. And anticipating the upcoming meeting with no small measure of anxiety.

The High Council normally held its sessions in a manor etched into the side of a towering rocky pinnacle, one unreachable except by exceptional magic. When Dartallon finally arrived, however, he found his fellow magicians mingling angrily at the base of the cliff. Dartallon had not planned on arriving late; he had summoned a griffin with every intention of making a leisurely journey to the rendezvous. The beast, however, had been recalcitrant and he had finally, reluctantly, allowed it to depart. He instead had been forced to appropriate the services of a centaur, which resulted in a mind-numbing trek as the creature prattled endlessly about matters that held no interest for Dartallon. He had finally dispatched his mount and made the last part of the journey on foot.

He quickly realized that his frustration was shared by all in attendance. Magicians both male and female were gathered in small groups, their conversations focused on the difficulties they had experienced traveling. "My butterfly net collapsed before I was halfway here," he overheard one woman complain. "I nearly broke my ankle when I fell."

"I planned to travel as a whale," her companion said. "Instead my transformation spell turned me into a sea turtle. It was mere luck the sharks didn't find me."

I was fortunate after all, Dartallon thought as he walked on. He searched among the slowly growing crowd for Gazperan, but as yet one of the few magicians he knew hadn't arrived. He satisfied his growing hunger at one of the many cooking pots scattered around the plain, then decided to approach one of the white robed men scattered among the participants. Only members of the High Council were allowed to wear the color and he adopted an appropriately obsequious air as he timidly tapped his superior on the shoulder.

"What is it?" the man scowled as he turned.

"I am sorry," he bowed. "I am Dartallon. Gazperan invited me here. I wanted to know why."

Dartallon could only guess the man was frowning underneath his full beard. "I know no Gazperan. But that matters not. You are a magician?" Dartallon felt his knees shake as he nodded in affirmation "Then that's all that matters." The man turned to go.

"But why are we," and he waved toward the horde around them, "here?"

"Because we are performing a Summoning." The man glared at him as if he was as dense as a tree. "What did this--Gazperan?--tell you?"

"That there have been difficulties with magic."

“Then look around you. Do you think we *planned* to hold our assembly in this plain?” He pointed to their castle high above them. “At the very least we would have constructed a grand stairwell to our sanctuary. But we cannot; our power is too unpredictable. Now be off with you. When the requisite number of our members has arrived, we will begin.”

Dartallon frowned as he walked away. *Even the High Council was powerless?* Their situation was much more perilous--and pervasive--than he had imagined. There was little on the rocky plain except several cooking pots and rock outcroppings. The Council had created no shelters for those attending, so he made himself as comfortable as possible on a large stone and considered. Everyone used magic, from the simplest farmer to most potent wizard. What could they do without magic? *And what was this Summoning he had talked about?*

As the day lengthened the temperature dropped and a strong wind came in from the east. Dartallon wrapped his inadequate cape around himself and began walking among the crowd, hoping the bodies and his movement would keep him warm. His companions tried to summon fire but with little success, the spells dissipating almost immediately. Even the cooking pots gave off little warmth. He was huddling with a group of shivering strangers when a clap of thunder caught his attention. Was it going to rain? he wondered and cursed at the prospect.

Instead the sky began to glow and in the center of the plain a flaming shape began to rise until it hovered a good fifty feet above the plain. Dartallon gasped as he realized he and the others were staring at Albegron, the leader of the High Council. The knowledge filled him with awe and fear; awe that he was in the presence of the most adept magician in the world, fear because he understood that it required all the grand master's concentration and power to maintain such a simple teleportation spell.

Albegron's voice rang out like the cry of an elephant. “The quorum has been reached; the Summoning may begin. Take your positions.”

Suddenly the ground below them began to glow, revealing a pattern that stretched nearly across the plain. Now Dartallon understood why so many magicians had been summoned: their presence was required to form the necessary rune. He walked along the glowing lines and noticed that at certain places the uniform yellow was replaced by a circle of green. That's where we are to stand, he realized. He chose a circle and complied. The others did the same and in a relatively short time the magicians were all in place, their attention now totally focused upon their leader.

“Repeat my words,” Albegron spoke again. “Quiella enza procia.” Five hundred voices spoke in unison. “Doesha une distanzo.” The spell continued, the call and response lasting nearly an hour until, when Albegron finally stopped, the sun had fallen and the plain was in near darkness except for the pattern on the ground and the glow around the floating magician. Dartallon stood shivering, all the while wondering what they were trying to accomplish.

Then the sky parted with a burst of lighting and acrid smoke. It appeared to him that the firmament had been rent apart by the claws of some unimaginable creature. A figure slowly stepped through the crimson gash, a towering figure of glowing green scales, great leathery wings, long fangs and talons, a forked tail that stretched behind it like a train. A figure that made Dartallon gasp in understanding. *A Summoning. Demons.* And Dartallon shivered again, this time not from the cold.

The demon walked on the very air until it stood within a few feet of Albegron. “Why do you dare interrupt me?” Its voice was a strident trumpet that could be heard by all.

“Great Fhennezel, we call you here to beg your assistance.” Albegron's voice betrayed no nervousness and Dartallon felt renewed admiration for the master magician. He was certain he would be cowering in

abject terror if confronted with such a presence.

Fhenezel reached out with one taloned hand and grasped Albegron. It held him effortlessly, as if the human was nothing more than a mouse. The demon's forked tongue flicked out within inches of the wizard's face and Dartallon was convinced he was going to consume Albegron as if he were nothing more than a mid-morning snack.

Instead the demon released him and Albegron floated back to his original position. "What assistance are you seeking?" Fhenezel asked.

"The return of our power, the return of our magic. We are here to demand you continue our agreement."

"You *demand*?" Fhenezel spread his great wings and suddenly flew above Albegron and began to circle the plain like a bird of prey. "You puny humans have the effrontery to make demands on *me*?"

Albegron remained where he was and continued speaking in measured tones even though Fhenezel was now behind him. "One thousand years ago we contacted you. One thousand years ago we made a pact, one signed with human blood and souls. You do not have the right or the power to take our magic from us."

"Really?" Fhenezel returned to his original position in front of Albegron. "I obviously must since you are asking for my help. And why should I grant it?"

Dartallon quivered when Albegron answered, "We will pay whatever price is necessary." *Is that why we're here? To become sacrifices to the demon?*

Fhenezel was not assuaged. "Yes, one thousand years ago I made an agreement. I gave you the access to magic. That agreement has run its course and I see no reason to renew it."

"You must," and for the first time Dartallon heard anger and fear in Albegron's voice. "We *must* have our magic."

"And what have you done with it, human?" There was anger in Fhenezel's voice as well. "From what I have seen, and I have seen much over the centuries, you have only used the power I granted you to amuse yourselves. Have you used your magic to educate and enlighten? No. It has become a means of avoiding knowledge and understanding rather than the means of unlocking the secrets of your world and the others."

"We have used your gift to conquer our world!" Albegron said. "We have created fantastic creatures to assist us: unicorns, manticores, griffins and more. We have created edifices of diamond and granite and onyx," and he pointed to the castle on the pinnacle beyond them. "We have made rivers flow with wine, meadows flourish with delicacies of rich delight. We have made our world a paradise!"

"The wonders you have created are no more magnificent than the wonders your world already possessed. They are mere shadows of what could truly be yours, toys in the hands of children. You have abused the right to the power I ceded you. You shall have it no longer."

"Fhenezel, no! We will force you!" And Albegron began to chant.

"I think not." The demon made a gesture with one taloned hand and Albegron's voice stopped. The glow

around him vanished and within seconds he was back upon the ground. Fhennezel then spoke again, this time to the assembled magicians below him. “You have not earned what was originally given to you. The pathway between your world and those beyond is now forever closed unless and until I determine you are worthy.” With that the skies once again ripped asunder and Fhennezel vanished into the rift.

The silence lasted for what seemed forever. *No more magic*. Dartallon nearly staggered at the thought. Then there was a terrible groaning roar and he and the others looked at the pinnacle. High on its insurmountable face, the great meeting hall the High Council had created was caving in upon itself, sending shards of granite down to the plain below. People screamed then and tried to escape the approaching avalanche, but not all were able. Dartallon then looked down and noticed the glowing pattern had disappeared. *The demon has removed our power*.

There was no longer any reason to remain. In small groups, the impotent magicians began to leave. On his way Dartallon paused at one of the great cooking pots. It was now cold to the touch but it still held potatoes and bits of meat. He ate a potato and put several more in his pocket. He knew it was going to be a long walk home.

Dartallon sighed as he pushed himself away from the table, his small meal of nuts and berries finished. Since the tragedy, his days had become endless toil. All the fabulous creatures the magicians had created had vanished, along with the rainbow waterfalls, wine rivers and other wonders. In some ways he considered himself fortunate; his humble home had been constructed with only minimal spells. Other magicians he knew now dwelt in caves or equally crude dwellings as their manors had quickly succumbed to the lack of magical support.

But he did not consider himself *too* fortunate. His home was cold and drafty and totally bereft of the creature comforts to which he had been accustomed. Dangerous wild animals roamed outside, his gardens now offered little save thorns and thistles. Each day he scavenged for food and firewood in the morning, then spent the afternoons trying to keep his small abode in one piece. Whenever it rained, water poured in from the roof and he had no idea how to stop it.

*If magic won't work, what will?* he thought morosely. Right now he was exhausted and wanted only to sleep on his straw bed. Instead he threw more wood on his small fire so it wouldn't burn itself out, then returned to his work bench. His collection of magical ingredients was useless now and he had thrown most of it away. But there has to be a way, he thought as he looked in a bowl where a single robin's egg lay. Thus far, despite every potion he tried, it had refused to transform into anything more than a spoiled egg.

Frustrated, he set one of his mixing sticks across another and tried to get them to balance in an effort to take his mind off his problems. They refused, and one end of the top rod slipped under the bowl. He idly pushed down on the other end and the bowl lifted easily. He tried his game again, with the same results. This time, however, the sticks were farther away from the bowl and when he pushed down it appeared to take more effort to free the stuck end.

He frowned as he looked at the two sticks, then at the bowl. He experimented again and after a few tries realized that the nearer the sticks were to the vessel, the less effort it took to push down on the other end and move the bowl. Dartallon sat back and pursed his lips. *I wonder if there is some way to use this knowledge*. He certainly intended to find out.

HHHHHHH

# THE MOST WONDERFUL GIFT

"I'm bored," she said to no one. The silver faun, noticing her distress, approached and nuzzled her neck, but she pushed it aside. "Go away," she ordered. "I don't want to play." The faun obediently returned to its grazing nearby.

Frustrated, she walked to the edge of the crystal blue lake, removed her frock and dove into the cooling waters. Floating on her back, she allowed the sun to warm her budding breasts, flat stomach, freckled thighs. A few golden carp swam near inviting her to play, but she ignored them. When she was younger she had enjoyed chasing them into crevices underwater, where they would hide and stare out at her while she tried to chat with them. No longer.

She gazed up at the clouds and watched a herd of great flying horses waft by, probably on their way to a secret grazing ground high in the mountains. For a moment she considered calling one down to take her with them, then thought better of it. They were amusing in their own way, but amusement was not what she was seeking.

\*And what am I seeking?\* she wondered as she swam back to shore. The tranquility and fantastical denizens of the valley had always been enough before. But not today. Not on this of all days. Not on this her birthday. She stepped from the water and lied down on the cushioning carpet of grass, remaining thus a good half hour to let the sun dry her completely before redonning her frock. She knew her mother would chide her if she returned carrying it rather than wearing it. Sighing once more, she left her friends by the lake and started back to her home.

"And how are we today?" her mother greeted her in the kitchen. "Did you have fun in your garden?"

"I guess." She sat and nibbled at a Phoenix egg her mother had cooked her for lunch. Normally its sweet essence would invigorate her; today it was so much sawdust in her mouth.

"What is the matter, dear? You look unhappy."

"Not unhappy. Bored."

"You don't like the garden your father built you any more?"

"I like it well enough," she admitted. "It's just... I'm fourteen today. I'm too old for that sort of thing!"

"I see. Well then perhaps you're too old for having birthdays and presents as well."

"Mother!"

The woman laughed. "Maybe you should go to your father's workshop. Maybe he has your present ready for you."

For the first time that day she felt excitement. "You really think so?"

"Run along. He's in his workshop. I'll clean up the dishes."

With a scream of delight she ran from the kitchen and down the lane toward the small outbuilding where her father was. Rarely was she allowed to visit him at work, but when she was something wonderful always happened. Once he had given her a unicorn. Another time it was a special telescope that enabled her to watch the funny little creatures on the world below. Today, on her birthday, something truly extraordinary had to be waiting!

He was working at his bench when she entered. "Daddy!" she yelled and bounded to him.

He embraced her in his huge arms and hugged her to his leather tunic and apron that reached almost to the floor. His eyes glowed as he looked down at her. "My beautiful princess. And how are we this happiest of all days!"

"Not very."

"Do I see a frown? No, no, that must not be." Shaking his great bearded head, he turned and searched through his workbench. "Aha, what be this?" He turned, clutching a small stone carving. "Would this thaw thy frozen heart?"

She studied the small sleeping dragon etched in the marble. "Is it real?"

"When you say the magic word, it will awaken and cavort before you."

She examined it further, then sighed and placed it back on his bench. "I'm fourteen now, father."

He put a finger to his lips. "Oh, I see. Yes, such a bauble is not meant for someone as ancient as you. Perhaps a handsome prince?"

She giggled, then made a face. "Only if I can turn him into a frog!"

"You'll have to kiss him first. In that case you must want the special birthday gift I am making you."

"Oh, yes, father, yes!"

"Shh. Cease your jumping and yelling. It is not yet finished. Run along and play with your friends. It shall be ready for you come this evening."

She obeyed--reluctantly--and found some enjoyment in chasing a moonbeam around her meadow. But even her favorite unicorn could not shatter her restlessness and ennui. She bided her time as long as she could bear before running home, hoping every step that her father had finished her present.

Her parents were beaming proudly when she entered. "Happy birthday, my darling daughter," her mother proclaimed and hugged her.

She endured it for a second then escaped. "My present. Do you have my present?" she half begged, half demanded.

"A present? Let me think." Her father made a great show of going through his pockets. "No present here," he opened one. "Nor here. But I do remember something." He turned around and suddenly he was holding a small wooden chest. "This, I think, is what you're looking for."

"What is it?" she asked, holding her breath.

"Open it and find out," her mother encouraged.

She undid the clasp and slowly forced open the lid. Inside was a large pile of carved figurines. She chose one and gazed at it. The squat figurine had large pointed ears, a gaping jaw and long grasping talons. On its bulging stomach was carved the word "Avarice." "What is it?"

"One of the evils of the world, Pandora. Each of the figurines represents a different one."

"Just say it's name and you will unleash it upon the world below," her mother added.



"Really?" Her eyes glowed with delight as she rifled through the pile of carvings. "Can I try one?"

"Of course," her father said. "But just one. We are giving you this to teach you patience."

"Prudence," her mother added.

"Responsibility."

"You should save them for only special occasions."

"Only times when you really need to use them," her father concluded.

She only half listened as she studied the array of figurines. "I choose," she paused, "this one." The doll was curled over onto itself, its face grimacing, its body covered with wounds and welts. "What does this say?" They told her. "Pestilence!" she ordered gaily.

The figure glowed and curled in her hand, warming her and then disappearing in a shower of sparkling light that caused her to tingle and sneeze. "Now what?"

Her father handed her the special telescope. "Look."

She gazed out from her world onto the world below. Its denizens had undergone some transformation since the last time she had peeked in on them. Many were lying in beds or on floors, seemingly wracked in pain; others were weeping as they stood over still bodies in wooden boxes or near mounds of freshly dug ground. She gazed on the vista a good ten minutes, admiring her accomplishment. Then she giggled and slapped her hands in delight. "Oh, Daddy," she exclaimed, running to him. "This is the best present ever!"

*Pandora sat on the bank of the crystal blue pond and dipped her toes into the pleasantly chill water. Beside her rested the chest she had been given on her fourteenth birthday so many many years ago. Now only one carving remained. She occasionally regretted her profligate youth; the figurines could have provided her renewed pleasure throughout the eons instead of just a few centuries. But she had been easily bored then.*

*She gazed upon the single carving with only mild interest. Today it would remain like it had all these years. Patience. Her dear father had been correct; the chest and its treasures had indeed taught her that. Still she was becoming distressingly restless; the varying amusements of the garden, her enjoyment from gazing upon the world of Man, were paling day by day. Soon, she promised herself, looking once again at the word carved on the figurine. Armageddon would come soon.*

## **Bingo**

"Will you stop that racket? I'm trying to take a nap."

Billy Porter looked up from his sandbox, his toy steamroller still in his hand. Was that Mr. Harrison who said that? he wondered. He looked at the fence but couldn't see if there was anyone on the other side. And except for Bingo, his beagle, lying nearby in the shade, there was no one else around. Maybe it was his father, he decided, although that certainly didn't sound like his voice. He looked but his dad's car wasn't in the driveway. Finally he shrugged. Must be someone's television or radio, he decided. He returned his attention to the mound of sand he was smoothing. "Brrrrurppp, vroom, vroom," he said,

mimicking as best he could the sound of the heavy machinery.

“I asked you nice. Keep it down or do I have to chew your leg off?”

This time Billy dropped his toy. “Who said that? Who’s there?” he asked, a tinge of fear in his voice.

“I did.” Bingo slowly rose and shook himself. “Can’t you play quietly?”

Billy stared at his pet. “Brad, is that you?” he asked after a long pause.

“Your brother isn’t here. Probably out copping a beer or a feel with his friends.” Bingo slowly approached the sandbox. “I’m asking you nice.”

Billy leapt out and grabbed his dog. “Bingo, you can talk!” He rubbed the dog’s head roughly. “You can really talk!”

Bingo stepped back. “Yeah. Big deal. Now stop shouting. It hurts my ears.”

“I gotta tell mom!”

“No,” and Bingo bit his hand lightly. “I’ll tell her when I’m ready.”

Billy sat on the grass, confused and frustrated. “But why didn’t you talk before?”

“Had nothing to say I guess. I’ll explain later. Go back to your sandbox. But keep the noise down.” Then Bingo waddled off to sleep in the shade.

Billy complied, but he was too excited to play now. His dog could talk! He shivered with excitement at the very idea. He didn’t care what Bingo wanted; he had to tell someone! So he did when he went in for lunch. “Bingo can talk!” he greeted his mother.

Jaymie Packer smiled down at her son. “Can he now?” She looked at Bingo, who was standing next to Billy. “And what do you have to say, Bingo?”

Bingo just stared at her.

She tousled Billy’s hair. “Cat must have his tongue. Eat your lunch, dear. Then it will be time for your nap.”

Later, in his room, Billy sat on his bed pouting. “She didn’t believe me,” he wailed.

“I told you to keep a lid on it,” Bingo said.

“You could have said something,” Billy said and balled his hands into fists. “Then she would have believed me.”

“You don’t listen very well, do you? Maybe that’s why you’re doing so poorly in school. I’ll tell them when I’m good and ready.”

“This isn’t *fair!*” and Billy buried his face in his pillow, fighting back self-righteous tears.

“Neither is getting neutered but you don’t hear me complaining about it. Now take a nap like your mother said.” With that Bingo rolled on his side and closed his eyes.

Billy tried but without success. Who could he tell? he wondered. His older brother? No, Brad would just laugh at him, probably hit him for good measure. His mother didn’t believe him and he was sure his father

wouldn't, either. Maybe one of the neighbors? *Somebody* had to believe him.

He still hadn't thought of anyone and he was getting more frustrated by the minute when the family convened around the dinner table that evening. "So, did anything exciting happen around here today?" Ray Parker asked after finishing grace.

"Nothing special," Jaymie said. "Pass the potatoes to your father," she told Brad. Then she looked at Billy. "Unless you have something to say, Billy."

*Now? At the dinner table?* Billy looked down at his plate and shook his head.

His father smiled at him. "Come now, son, it can't be that bad. You can tell us. What happened today?"

"He found out I could talk." With that Bingo jumped onto the empty chair, then atop the table. "Bit of a surprise, isn't it?" He sat and looked at each of the family members in turn.

Ray was the first to recover. "Brad, is that you? Have you been practicing ventriloquism or something?"

Brad shook his head, his fork still halfway to his mouth.

"This is impossible," Jaymie whispered.

"I *told* you Bingo could talk!" Billy said and glared at his mother.

"You can really talk?" Ray asked Bingo.

"Isn't it obvious by now?"

"For all these years?"

"Since I was a pup."

"Why didn't you talk before? Why are you talking now?" Jaymie asked.

Bingo stretched out on the table, something he normally only did when the family wasn't home. "It was time. I'm getting older. My eyesight and sense of smell are fading. I can't catch the Blaketon's cat anymore. I figure I've got only a few years left. There's just no reason not to anymore."

Ray pushed his chair slowly away from the table. Then the stunned look on his face slowly transformed into a huge smile. "My god, do you realize what this means?" He looked at Jaymie. "Honey, we're rich!" He began counting on his fingers. "Television talk shows, commercials."

Brad broke in. "Music videos!"

Bingo stood and shook himself, then looked at Ray. "If you hadn't been so politically correct when I was younger, I could also do doggie porn. But none of that matters because none of it is going to happen."

Ray's smile froze. "Just one second. You're our dog. You do as we say. If I say you're going on Letterman, you're going on Letterman."

"Try it and I'll just stand there and hump his leg. I've been a parasite all my life. I see no reason to change now."

Ray's eyes clouded over in anger. "You listen up. All these years we've fed you, given you a home, taken you to the vet, the whole nine years. It's time you repaid us. And get off the table!"

“That’s right,” Bingo said. “All those years. In all those years I’ve learned *everything* about each of you.” He looked at Brad. “What do you think, Brad? Should I tell your parents about that shoe box you have hidden in your bedroom?” He wagged his tail as Brad paled. Then he turned to Ray. “Go ahead. Put me on the Tonight Show. I’ll be happy to talk. The IRS might find what I have to say very interesting. If not them, your neighbors will.” He walked to the end of the table and jumped to the vacant chair. Then he turned. “Oh, and from now on I eat what you eat. That dog food you buy sucks.” With that he jumped to the floor and walked out of the room.

The Porters sat at the table, their uneaten dinner growing colder by the minute. Finally Jaymie broke the silence. “Honey, what are we going to do?”

“I guess,” he said, wiping his forehead, “we start feeding him the leftovers.”

\*\*\*\*\*

“This has to stop.”

Ray grunted, then rolled over. Jaymie’s comments didn’t wake him up; sleep was impossible thanks to the blare of the television coming from the living room. Bingo claimed he was nocturnal and insisted the set be left on so he could entertain himself. “I know. But what do we do?”

“Did you hear what he said about my meatloaf tonight? The gall of that... dog.”

Ray didn’t want to go there since he hadn’t liked it either. “We should just take him to the vet’s, put him to sleep or something.”

She gasped. “We can’t do that! Billy loves Bingo! He would never forgive us.”

“I know,” and he sighed. “I love him, too. But he’s become unbearable!”

Bingo’s commandeering of the television was just the latest in his ever-growing list of demands. They had fenced in the entire yard, including the front, so he wouldn’t be constrained by a lease any longer. Bingo had told Brad not to have his friends over anymore because they played their music too loud. He insisted he go with them on every trip, severely curtailing visits with their friends. Every protest, every argument had been ignored.

Jaymie nestled against him. “I don’t know how much longer I can deal with this. I’m heading for a nervous breakdown, I know it.”

Ray put his arm around his wife and pressed her against his shoulder while, below, the television continued its seemingly endless supply of infomercials. Held hostage by the family dog, ridiculous, he thought. Yet that was exactly what had happened. And there was no one they could talk to, no one to turn to for suggestions since no one would believe them. He looked at his sleepy wife and wondered: *what does Bingo have on you?* They had found Brad’s shoe box with the small baggie of marijuana. Ray knew what discretion Bingo could reveal about him, an oh-so-brief dalliance with a neighbor three years ago. Should he tell his wife, admit to it? But then he would expect her to tell him *her* secret, and he wasn’t sure he wanted to know. And he wasn’t sure it would matter in any event.

Ray sighed. He could understand – even appreciate -- Bingo’s demands not to let anyone else know of his abilities. The dog would be poked, prodded and dissected by scientists and the government. Ray smiled at the possibility of the government using talking dogs as spies, then forced the thought aside. He had to come up with a solution, and soon. It was during a spiel for another exercise machine when the idea hit him. “Honey,” he said, nudging her gently. “Wake up.”

She groaned. "What is it? What time is it?"

"Can you get the dog collar off him?"

She opened her eyes reluctantly. "I suppose. Why?"

"I have an idea that just might work. Make sure you have the collar with his license off him when I get home."

"Aren't you going to tell me why?"

"Let's just say I want it to be a surprise."

\*\*\*\*\*

Jaymie yawned as she looked at the clock. It was almost four, which meant her husband would be home in another hour. She would have to start supper, but she had to do one thing first. "Bingo, Bingo," she called out and clapped her hands. "Come here, boy."

There was a grunt, then the scratching of claws on linoleum. "What do you want?" he asked as he came into the kitchen. "I'm missing Oprah."

"Just to check something, dear." She bent down and ran her hands along his collar. "This is getting quite raggedy isn't it?"

"I don't know why I have to wear one in the first place," he said. "It's humiliating."

"I think it's about time you got a new one. Hold still so I can get it off."

"What's that I smell? Are we having fish?"

"Why, yes." She stepped back, the collar now in her hand. "There we go. We'll pick you out a nice new one tomorrow."

"Don't hurry on my account. Are we done now?"

"Yes, you can go back to your show."

"Good." He stopped at the kitchen door. "I don't like fish. Give me a hot dog or something."

She shivered in anger but kept her smile. "Of course. Microwave okay, or raw?"

"Raw is fine. I wouldn't want you to go to any extra effort on my account. Fish." He snorted and left the room.

Jaymie set the collar near the sink. Her mission was accomplished. Now she just wanted to know why.

\*\*\*\*

"Where's dad?" Brad grumbled. "I'm getting hungry."

"I don't know, dear." Jaymie looked up at the clock. It was nearly six and supper had been ready for almost an hour. "Maybe he got hung up in traffic. Eat a slice of bread."

"I'm hungry, too," Billy chimed in.

“I’m sure he’ll be here soon. Just be patient.”

“But Bingo’s eating,” Billy said.

She looked at the dog happily chewing on a wiener. “We have better manners than he does. We can wait a bit. The food is in the oven so it’s still warm.”

More complaints were stilled when they heard a car pull up into the driveway, then the slamming of a car door. “Bout time,” Brad said.

Jaymie smiled. “There, you see. Just need a little patience is all. I’ll get our suppers.”

They heard the front door open, then Ray call out from the living room. “Bingo, come here a minute. I have a little present for you.”

Bingo looked up from his bowl. “Now what do you want?” He started for the living room, the rest of the Porters right behind him. “What is... what is that doing here?”

Standing next to Ray was a full-grown rottweiler. “This is Prince,” Ray pointed at it. “This is your new playmate.”

“What kind of game are you playing anyway, Ray? Get that fleabag out of here.” Prince let out a loud bark, then began straining at the leash. “I’m warning you, Ray, get rid of that animal.”

Ray only smiled. “I just thought you needed a companion, Bingo. Someone to protect you. After all, it is a dog-eat-dog world.” With that he dropped the leash. Seconds later Prince was after Bingo.

Bingo howled as he raced out the front door, the rottweiler close behind. The two dogs ran out the open gate and down the driveway, then out into the street. The Porters stood in the doorway and watched until the two animals were out of sight. “I don’t think we’ll be seeing Bingo anymore,” Ray said.

Billy was in tears. “Dad, what have you done? That dog ate Bingo!”

Ray hugged him. “I’m sorry, son, but it was something we had to do. Bingo just can’t live with us anymore. But I’m sure he’ll find someone else to take care of him. And now you have a new dog to play with.”

Within a few minutes Prince returned. It walked into the yard, past the Porters and straight into the living room, where it sat on the couch. The family followed it inside. “Family, this is Prince, our new dog,” Ray said.

The rottweiler looked at them for a few moments. “First thing, we have to establish some ground rules,” it said.

## **GHOSTS OF DAWN**

Why is it that just when you think things are returning to normal, someone throws a spanner in the works? Haig had finally returned from his vacation in the American colonies and once again taken up residence in our store and apartment. His clansman had returned to Ireland, as relieved at his leaving as I was. Doakes and Haig Recipe Sweetener was selling briskly and we had settled back in our comfortable routine. Then, as inevitable as the tide, someone had to roil the waters.

It started with a simple letter, a request for the services of Doakes and Haig, Criminal Consultants. It arrived by post one Tuesday afternoon and with the pile of flyers and bills and such, I never noticed it or read it until that evening when we were finished with our supper. "What have we here?" I said as I was leafing through the mail.

Haig looked up from the paper he was walking on. Being a leprechaun and only a hand high, it was the easiest way for him to read it unless he was sitting on my shoulder. "What do you have, Sean?"

"A letter addressed to Doakes and Haig, Criminal Consultants." I held it up.

Haig failed to stop from smiling. We had not had a case since his return. "It isn't from Inspector Amberbee is it?"

"Doubt it," I said as I opened the missive. "He just shows up at our doorstep when he wants something." I removed the letter, read it quickly, then set it on the table so Haig could as well. "What do you think?"

Haig walked across it several times, then returned to his thimble and sat. "Rather curious," Haig offered. "You would think a thief would steal everything at once, not just a few items at a time. I can see why Mr. Grammet and the police are puzzled."

Mr. Leslie Grammet was the originator of the correspondence beseeching our assistance. "Indeed, unless the person happens to be in his employ and wishes to avoid suspicion. But what is most curious is his claim that the items have all been locked in his safe." I gazed at Haig. "Who do we know who can break into a safe at any time?"

Haig didn't hesitate. "A leprechaun, of course. Although why one of my people would want to continually harass Mr. Grammet is beyond me. Even if it were a matter of simple revenge, that is not our way."

I had immediately thought of leprechauns as well, especially since I have first-hand knowledge of Haig's unnatural way with locks. "Do you wish to assist me? Since one of your people may be involved?"

Haig grinned. "As you told me once, Sean, our card reads 'Doakes and Haig.' Besides, I could use a bit of a break from the kitchen."

I could appreciate that. Unfortunately, only Haig could prepare our sole product. Without the assistance of one of his clan, our business would have been forced to close during Haig's six month stay in the Colonies. "Then I shall inform Mr. Grammet that we will do what we can to help him."

So several days, cables and contract negotiations later we were on a train taking us to Brackfield, a village outside Liverpool. Haig was in human guise now, no reason for him not to be, and I noticed with varying degrees of relief and disappointment that he was taking our train journey with unusually good tolerance. He has always hated trains--all machines actually--and typically complained loudly over every railed mile.

When I commented on it he merely smiled. "There is something to be said for progress, Sean."

"Agreed. But from you it was always a curse."

"Well, it has its uses. To be honest, after traveling by horse and wagon, it is relaxing to be borne by something that requires no effort from me."

Haig had never discussed his stay with Mordecai Harmes and his family in any detail since his return and I hoped our time together would encourage him to. But when I inquired he abruptly changed the subject. "You don't suppose they might have some good barley whiskey on this train, do you? I could do with a

jot just about now.”

Another change rendered by his American adventure. Before, Haig had always preferred stout or good old Irish whiskey. Now he occasionally pined for a taste of Charitable Harmes’ homemade moonshine. “I suspect not. But we won’t be far from Liverpool. Perhaps there.”

Haig grunted and folded his arms.

“So do you think we should meet with Mr. Grammet together or should I pretend you’re not here?” Frequently during our initial client contacts, I had appeared to be alone, with Haig in his real size tucked securely in one of my jacket pockets.

“I see no good reason not to go together. We can always find an excuse later if I have to investigate... as me.” There was no sense trying to plan any further since we knew so little, so we relaxed and enjoyed the scenery the remainder of our journey. I was certain a few surprises awaited us.

The first came when we arrived in Liverpool. There was a man waiting at the station carrying a sign “Doakes or Haig.” Good, I thought, our employer has arranged for transportation. “I’m Sean Doakes,” I greeted him. “Are you Mr. Grammet?”

His response startled me. He laughed heartily before shaking my hand. “No, but I am here to take you to Brackfield.”

“Excellent. Then Mr. Grammet will meet us there.”

That laugh again. “Yes. Let us get your luggage and we’ll be on our way.”

“What do you think that’s all about?” Haig asked me as we followed him to our waiting hansom.

“I have no idea. We’ll find out soon enough.”

A leisurely hour or so later our hansom pulled in front of a modest home on the outskirts of Brackfield. “Follow me,” our driver said as he took our bags. “*Mr.* Grammet is waiting for you inside.”

Now I knew. So I was prepared when we were led inside and introduced to Leslie Grammet. “Pleased to meet you, Mrs. Grammet,” I greeted her promptly. “Or is it ‘Miss?’”

“Miss,” she said with a smile. “You are Mr. Doakes I assume. And you,” she turned, “must be Mr. Haig.”

“The pleasure is mine,” Haig said and bowed as he took her hand.

“Thank you for coming. Please, come this way for a spot of tea. I’m sure you must be tired from your trip.” She led us to her library in the back of the house, where we found a tea service and finger sandwiches waiting. “I didn’t know exactly when you’d arrive; I hope these will do.”

“They will do fine,” Haig assured her.

We each sat and noshed lightly while studying each other. I guessed Miss Grammet to be in her mid-40’s, thin, attractive but not overly so. Casually dressed and not one, apparently, concerned with making an extra effort to impress anyone. In some ways she reminded me of the Harmes women, straight-forward and honest. “You say you’ve had items stolen,” I began after a suitable interval.

“Indeed. Most puzzling. A few at a time over an extended period. Small jewels, rings, a few coins. As I said in our correspondence.”



“All these items were in your safe?”

“Most. Or in locked boxes.” She forced a smile. “Maybe what they say about this house is true, that it is haunted.”

“Haunted?” Unwelcome memories from our stay in the Colonies crawled to the surface. “You hear unexplained noises? See apparitions?”

“Sounds yes. Like someone far away talking in a soft voice. Only at night, and rarely at that. Nothing more.”

I glanced at Haig. He had admitted during our American adventure that occasionally leprechauns would “haunt” a house, chiefly as a lark. “I don’t suppose you noticed a connection between the times these voices were heard and items came up missing?”

She frowned and appeared to be concentrating. “Not that I recall.”

“What about your employees?” Haig asked. “Could any of them be the thief?”

“I only have one. Chester, who brought you here. I am not a rich woman by any means. My parents gave me and each of my sisters an annuity before they died. I have enough to live rather comfortably but not extravagantly. And I *certainly* cannot afford to continue to have my valuables stolen.”

“The police have found nothing?” I asked. “They haven’t found any items pawned or so forth?”

“No, and they are extremely reluctant to assist me. ‘We have more important matters to concern ourselves,’ they told me! Which is why I have retained you. I want this to stop!”

“We will do what we can. Now if you’ll excuse us, we need to find an inn for the evening.”

“No need. I already have the guest room ready for you.” Then she frowned. “You can share a room, I trust?”

Haig grinned. “We’ve done it before, lassie. No never mind to us.”

“Excellent!” She stood and we followed suit. “Let me show you the room. Then I have work to do. Breakfast will be at eight, if that is agreeable?”

“Indeed.” We followed her and soon found ourselves in a large and well-appointed bedroom. Fine mahogany furniture and I suspected the high-backed chair was a Morris. There was only one bed and she apologized but I told her Haig and I had often shared accommodations. That wasn’t a problem when he was in his leprechaun form; a drawer would be more than adequate. There was also a bottle of Irish whiskey sitting on a table, which pleased Haig no end.

“Your bags are in the closet,” she said. “I’ll see you in the morning then.”

“Yes, and thank you. Good night.” After the door closed, I looked at Haig. “A haunted house?”

“I don’t believe in spirits, lad. Except these, of course.” He had already poured himself a glass of whiskey.

“A leprechaun then? Did you sense a leprechaun?”

“If so, he isn’t here now.” His eyebrows furrowed. “We don’t leave a spore, you know. If a leprechaun is nearby, I’ll know it. But there isn’t one. Except for me, of course.”

I joined him in drink. "So what do we do?"

"Tomorrow we'll find an excuse for me to leave. Tomorrow night I'll examine her home. Glad I am she has no cats!"

Cats consider leprechauns a tasty snack. They had caused us difficulties more than once. "Good. That will give me time to chat further with Miss Grammet."

"A comely lass. You *will* act more the gentleman with her than with the Harmes women I trust." And he chuckled.

It was the ladies who had acted far from that, not me, but I saw no reason to discuss it. "I think your visit to the Colonies has had a negative effect on you."

"Perhaps. Let us enjoy more of this fine beverage," and he handed me his empty glass. Which we did, until the bottle was empty and it was time to sleep.

Miss Grammet was as good as her word. We were roused at 7:30 by a knock and a male voice telling us breakfast would be served shortly. We made our toilet, then went downstairs to find her already at the table, with plates of sausage and eggs waiting for Haig and I. "I trust this is satisfactory?" she asked.

"You are a most generous hostess," Haig said. "There is no breakfast finer than this."

Conversation was held until we had all finished. Then she looked at me. "So when do you begin?"

"I want to do a tour of your home if you don't mind. Check out your safe and all. Mr. Haig has decided to spend several days in Brackfield proper."

"Tour the pawn shops and such," he added. "Visit the pubs in the evening. Criminals do talk, after all."

"I see. If you think that's best."

"Tried and true," Haig said.

"Then I will have Chester take you to the village."

"I can walk. Exercise will do me good." Haig rose. "I will return tomorrow morning. Sean, I expect you to work hard as well."

"Of course." I noticed Grammet stifle a chuckle. "Take care."

"Always." Haig nodded to each of us and left.

"So," she said after she patted her mouth with her napkin and pushed her plate away, "where do we begin?"

"The safe."

It was in her study, hidden behind a painting. It was a standard wall safe with a combination lock. For Haig, or any leprechaun, it would pose no difficulty. "Open it," I told her, then turned my back so I couldn't see the combination. The safe held a small collection of jewels, currency and several documents. "When was the last time you found something missing?" I asked after she closed it again.

"Just last week, actually," she said. "A jade ring. Which is why I contacted you."

“I see. And you are sure Chester does not have the combination?”

“Absolutely. I would trust him with my life.”

*Don't delude yourself.* “Show me the rest of your home.” So for the next several hours we went from room to room, basement to attic. This was more for show than anything as Haig would do the real investigating that evening. Still I dutifully checked windows and exterior doors and such but found nothing that suggested a break-in and robbery.

At last we found ourselves in her library. The shelves were well-stocked, and most of the books appeared old. I idly perused some of the titles: *Voices in the Shadows: a History of English Haunted Houses*; *The Faerie Folk of the British Isles*; *Clans and Totems*; *Spirits, Sprites and Other Magical Creatures*; *Folk Tales of Eire*. “So you are interested in the spirit world,” I said, stepping back. “Is that why you choose to live in a haunted house?”

“Spirits, yes, but not from beyond. The spirits that live among us,” she said. “Elves, imps, fairies and the like.”

I raised my eyebrows as I sat across from her. “You believe in them?”

“I have a scientific curiosity. Don't you?”

“I believe in what I can touch, taste, feel,” and I rapped on the nearby table for emphasis.

“I find the folklore most delightful. I just think it makes life more,” and she shrugged, “exciting to think that there are other fantastic creatures sharing our world.”

*If you only knew.* “That is your hobby then? Studying folk tales and mythology?”

“More than that. I have published several monographs. I even occasionally teach at the college in Liverpool. A fascinating subject, fascinating creatures.”

“Yes, I suppose they are.” I rose. “I'm going to poke around a bit outside, if you don't mind. I'm sure the police have checked but one never knows.”

“The police did nothing. Try to be careful around my flower beds.”

“Of course.” So I went out into the hot mid-day sun and was soon sweating profusely as I wandered around her hedges, house and garden. None of the ground floor or basement windows showed any signs of being pried open and there were no footprints in the sod and loam except my own. After a thorough circumnavigation of her home, I was certain that the thief had to enter through one of the doors. Each had a dead bolt, and I knew from experience that those were effective in thwarting leprechauns. A standard lock would fall to Haig in seconds, but not a dead bolt. Maybe, I decided, it wasn't a leprechaun after all. Which made me think more and more that Miss Grammet had much too much faith in her servant.

There was a small shed in the back next to the garden. The shed was locked so I peered in the window. Garden tools from what I could see, pots and bags of seed. I decided I would ask for the key later, just in case Chester might be hiding his stolen loot somewhere inside. Then I spent a few minutes admiring her garden. Grammet certainly had unusual tastes, I thought, as it was mostly herbs, with one large section devoted to clover and Queen Anne's lace. I picked a sprig of clover and found a four-leaf one. Good, I need some luck, I decided and headed back.

Grammet was just sitting down to tea and biscuits and I joined her gratefully. “Find anything?” she asked as she poured.

“Not really. No signs anywhere of a break-in. I would like to look in your shed, if you don't mind. And your stables.”

“I'll get you the key to the shed. The stables are down the street. Actually I rent the use of a hansom, since I don't use it very often. A bit expensive, perhaps, but more reliable than waiting for a carriage to come by.”

“I'll check it out anyway,” I said, although I now doubted Chester would keep his stolen loot there since the stables were owned by another. “Tell me, do you have any regular delivery men come by? Iceman? Grocer? Acquaintances who visit frequently?”

“No,” and she gave a sarcastic laugh. “I guess I am far from a social butterfly. I prefer my solitude. The postman would be the most frequent, I suppose.”

“Well,” I said, finishing my tea. “Perhaps Mr. Haig will find something. May I have those keys?”

“Of course. Dinner will be at six.” And she handed me a key ring with perhaps twenty keys.

The rest of the afternoon I spent in the shed and the stables down the street. I couldn't spend much time at the latter, but I didn't consider it a prime prospect in any event. The shed was barren as well, although I would have Haig check it out just in case there was a hidden trapdoor or something similar. When I returned for dinner I was convinced we had to look in Chester's room. I wasn't sure if Grammet would cooperate or not, but if I asked him to take me to Liverpool on some foolish errand, Haig would have time to search it.

So the lady and I--and Chester--enjoyed a leisurely meal and light conversation after. “I'm rather tired,” I excused myself around 9:00. “I'll be going to my room if you don't mind. Catch up on a little reading.”

“Not at all. I have some work to do myself. Sleep well, Mr. Doakes,” she said, looking up from her book. Chester, seated in the far corner, merely grunted.

I was pleased to find another decanter of whiskey waiting in my room. Haig would appreciate that, I knew. I opened the window and then turned off the gas lamp and went to bed. But not to sleep. I expected to have a visitor shortly.

I heard a slight knock at around midnight, but it wasn't from the door. It was outside. I went to the window and looked down. Haig was standing there. “Give me your hand, laddie.”

I bent over and reached down. He grabbed it, then changed to his real form. Seconds later I was pulling the leprechaun into my room. “Learn anything?” I asked him after he returned to his real height.

“Fortunate this room is on the first floor, no? As for the thefts, not a whisper. And you?”

“I am certain Chester is our thief, despite her assurances otherwise. Tomorrow I think you'll have to search his room.”

“Aye. And tonight?”

“Search the home. Especially the study. Look for hidden rooms, trap doors, the usual. I haven't found anything but you might.”

“As good as done. But before that,” and Haig walked over to the decanter, “something to warm the heart.”

We talked quietly through a glass or two, then I went to the door and walked out as if searching for the loo. No one was around and Haig, once again a leprechaun, darted out behind me and into the shadows. Then I went back inside to wait.

I had planned to stay up until he was finished, but I suddenly felt extremely tired. From nosing around the hedges and such, I decided, and went to bed. When I awoke, the sun was high in the east, the birds singing loudly and my head was pounding. I looked at the clock and groaned; it was well past 11:00. "You must have drank too much last night, Sean," I scolded myself, although it's been a long time since two glasses of spirits affected me so.

I looked around the room, but Haig wasn't there. Perhaps he's already with Grammet, I thought and dressed hurriedly. No one was in the kitchen and it appeared no one had been there all morning. The library was empty as well, so I tried the study. And ran into Chester. "Good morning," I said.

He was busy dusting the shelves and only grunted.

"Has my associate, Mr. Haig, arrived as yet? I was expecting him today."

"No."

"And Miss Grammet? Where is she?"

He turned. "She had to go on an errand this morning. She asked that I give you her apologies, but she expects to be gone several days. She told me you are allowed free run of her property while she is gone." The way he said the last made it clear he didn't agree with that.

That information surprised me. During our conversations, she had given me the impression she rarely left her grounds. "Did she say where she was going?"

"No. I merely took her to Liverpool as she ordered. She did say she expects you to remain and do... whatever it is you are doing."

*He doesn't know. She never told him.* Perhaps, I decided, she *did* suspect he was the thief. "I won't trouble you then." And I left him to his dusting.

I was troubled, however. I went to the kitchen and fixed myself some tea, then repaired to the library. Where was Haig? I could guess what had happened. He had investigated, returned to my room and, finding me asleep, went back out the window. That way he could present himself at the front door in the morning to corroborate the story we had fabricated. *But he should be here by now.*

The hot tea was clearing the dullness from my mind. Then I noticed a book sitting on a table, presumably one Grammet had been perusing the night before. It was *Clans and Totems* and I opened it idly, wondering what it was about. One page was dog-eared and I turned to it. The heading read "Leprechaun Clans of Ireland" and I felt a chill as I glanced down the short column of names. "Haig" was on that list.

Grammet's fascination with folklore, her massive library; *Could she know?* My heart was sinking past my knees as I began searching through the titles on the shelves. There was a section devoted to books on leprechauns and I pulled an armful out to study. I was returning to my chair when I felt something break underfoot. Dropping the books on the chair, I reached down and picked up a small object, now hopelessly broken. I felt hopeless as well when I recognized it: it was Haig's pipe. Then I noticed something else, a bit of green on the otherwise brown carpet. I retrieved that as well, and now there was no doubt. It was a piece of clover.

I recalled our encounter with the murderous leprechaun some time back. Haig had bound him with a cord woven from four-leaf clovers, a bond he was unable to break. *And Grammet has clover growing in her garden.*

I didn't need to read the books now. Everything was a sham, I realized. There had been no thefts. It was all a ruse to get us--specifically Haig--to Brackfield. Her entire plan had worked flawlessly. The drugged whiskey from the night previous had put me out for hours; Haig, in his leprechaun form, would have succumbed even more rapidly. No doubt she had found him unconscious in the library, bound him with the clover cord. *And they could be going to only one place.*

Did Chester know? I would find out soon enough. He was completing his housemaid's duties when I entered the study. "I need you to take me to Liverpool," I told him. "There are some things I need to investigate, items in the press. I cannot do that here."

He frowned, apparently his favorite expression. "Miss Grammet wants you to remain here."

"No, Miss Grammet wants me to satisfy my contract. I can, but I need to do some research in Liverpool."

"Why didn't you just go with us this morning?"

*Because I was drugged.* "I had been working late the night before. I had no idea she was planning a trip today. She did tell you to assist me in any way, correct?"

He sighed. "Yes. After lunch I will take you to Liverpool."

I wasn't going to get him to move any faster, but it was necessary I maintain the charade. So we ate and a little after two we were in Liverpool. "Should I wait for you?" he asked.

"No. In fact I might have to spend the night. I can get a hansom back in the morning."

He nodded, obviously relieved, and left me in front of the newspaper office. Which I had no interest in. I hailed another driver and was soon at the docks. There was only one place Grammet and her prisoner could be going: Corlewagh. The ancestral home of my family, the place where we had first found Haig.

The place where he kept his pot of gold.

I found passage on a steamer to Dublin and spent the entire voyage cursing my stupidity. Our names were well-known because of our product and our occasional appearances in the press. She knew of the power of a clover cord, doubtless from one of her books. She knew about the pot of gold. Once she had that, Haig would be totally in her power. Meanwhile I had been totally blinded by her fabrication and my desire to fulfill our contract.

In Dublin I stopped only long enough to obtain a pistol, then it was on the first train heading west. They had a substantial head start and I had no idea if Haig would be able to resist her. I had to go on the assumption he could not.

So I arrived in Corlewagh the following afternoon. The mount I had rented at Goodwin, the nearest train stop to Corlewagh, was exhausted from the ride and I was stiff and sore as well. I have never done much horseback riding and I had almost fallen more than once. But it was the fastest way. I didn't waste any time in the village proper; instead I went directly to the rocky outcroppings and caves that ringed the village. My ancestors had lived in one of the caves and that was where Haig still hid his pot of gold. I had to hope I would arrive before they did, else it could be too late.

I did not. I found a carriage waiting outside my original homeland. Perhaps they had just arrived, perhaps Grammet had not forced Haig to unearth his treasure. But the relaxed breathing of the horse convinced me that was not the case. Still I entered the cave, gun drawn.

I could not make a dramatic entrance, being forced to crawl inside and all. In fact, Grammet was laughing when I finally entered the chamber. Beside her stood Haig, in human form. He did not appear to be a happy leprechaun. "Good afternoon, Mr. Doakes. I see you are not one to follow instructions. I wanted you to remain in Brackfield."

"Perhaps I would have if I had drank more of your drugged whiskey. Let Haig go."

"I can't do that," and she held up a small pot proudly. I had seen one before, courtesy of former client Aloysius Leek. He had been a leprechaun and had given Haig his pot of gold. Now Grammet had Haig's.

"You have no need for that."

"On the contrary. Oh, I admit there is very little wealth to be had. But then," and she patted Haig on the back, "I now have the services of your friend for as long as I see fit."

"The folk tales are wrong. Having his pot of gold means nothing."

She shook her head. "Some of the legends were incorrect to be sure. I never suspected a leprechaun could appear in human size, after all. But you knew that, didn't you?"

I ignored her. "Haig, come with me."

"I can't, laddie," and the sadness was heavy in his voice. "I am bound to the lady."

She smirked. "See? Not *all* the legends were wrong. My rope of four-leaf clover worked wonderfully. Now what are we to do about you?" She snapped her fingers. "I have it! We were exploring these caves and attacked by a gang of hooligans. They tried to rob us but you two fought them off. Unfortunate you suffered fatal injuries in the battle."

I grimaced, then aimed the pistol at her. "Give me that pot."

"No. Haig." He stepped in front of her. I held my aim. "It's getting cold in here. It's time we leave. Haig, remove him."

"I'm sorry, laddie," he said. "I have no choice."

"Neither do I," I replied. And fired.

Haig changed to his real size just as I pulled the trigger. The bullet went right through where he was standing. Right into Grammet.

I didn't hesitate. I leapt forward, actually *over* Haig to the fallen woman. My bullet had struck her in the shoulder, knocking her back and to her knees. I wrested the tiny pot from her grasp and turned to see Haig, now in human form, standing behind me. "This is yours," I said and returned his pot of gold.

He looked at it, still stunned. "Sean," he managed to say, "how did you know? How did you know I would change?"

I grinned weakly. "I didn't. I could only hope. We can talk about this later. We have to get Grammet out of here."

It was difficult moving her out of the cave because of her wound, but we managed. Haig then looked at his pot. "I'll have to bury this elsewhere."

"Do what you must. I'll stay with Grammet." While Haig returned to the cave, I attended to her.

The bullet had struck her high on the shoulder, not too serious from what I could tell. "You shot me," she said through clenched teeth.

"And what did you plan for me? Self defense I would say."

"I will tell the police."

"Tell them what? That you kidnapped a leprechaun? Were planning to have him kill me? Or that we were attacked by hooligans and you were shot by one as Haig and I fought them off." I knelt beside her and stared into her eyes. "Mr. Haig and I are well-respected in some circles. Specifically Scotland Yard. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

"Yes," she said after long consideration.

"Good. Let me help you into the carriage. We'll get you to Corlewagh and a doctor."

Which we did. Afterwards, when asked by the police, we all agreed that a small band of ruffians had tried to rob us while we were exploring the caves and in the ensuing fight she had been shot. The constable assured us they would do everything in their power to find the outlaws. We pledged further cooperation if necessary, then took Grammet to Goodwin and saw her off on the train. We stayed the night at a nearby inn.

Both Haig and I were lost in our own thoughts, so it wasn't until much later that evening when we were relaxing over pints in our room when Haig asked what I knew he would. "You would have shot me, wouldn't you, Sean?"

"Yes." I looked at him and fought my tears. "I knew you could never bear life as a slave to her."

"I see." He stared into his pint for what seemed forever. Then he looked at me and grinned. "You are right, Sean. And you came to my rescue. For that I shall always be in your debt. Still," and he shook his head, "I never thought you would shoot a woman."

"I never did either. Perhaps our stay in the Colonies changed me more than I thought."

He nodded sullenly. "But now Grammet knows. What do you think she will do with that information?"

"A monograph or two. No one will believe her in any event, since no one believes in leprechauns. Still, you might want to alert the clans, in case she tries to capture another."

"I will." Then he raised his glass. "To freedom."

"To freedom." Even as we drank, however, I knew our relationship would never be the same.

## **ROCK OF WAGES**

It was the noise that attracted me. A thunderous rolling sound followed by a crash. A stream of curses



and grunts. A scuffle of feet, more grunts, loose falling stone and then the thunderous rolling sound again.

I stopped my wagon at the side of the steep hill. The last few days had been extremely unprofitable, my recent stay in the village of Imogen a complete loss. The townsfolk had expressed no interest in my elixirs, curiosities, mechanisms or other, even more exotic wares. It would seem prudent to avoid the hill and whatever waited on the far side. Instead I dutifully lowered the canopy proclaiming "Dr. Forturo's Traveling Emporium Of Miscellaneous Marvels" and donned my work clothes: a tall silk hat, patchwork jacket and gold-encrusted trousers. Literally tooting my own horn, I urged my team forward.

I rounded the hill as another crash erupted. The cause: a large, round boulder--at least three times the size of my wagon--which had rolled into a strand of trees lining the main road. I stopped playing my trumpet and watched as an equally huge man, stringing a steady stream of curses, manhandled the boulder out of the grove and back toward the imposing hill. Positioning the stone on a well-worn plot of grass and dirt, he bent down, leaned a great shoulder into the boulder and began to push. He managed to advance it five or six feet up the steep grade before his sandaled feet began to lose traction on the gravel. He continued to struggle thus for another five minutes, then lost his balance entirely and the boulder bounded inexorably down the hill and into the severely abused woods below.

The man was wiping away dirt and gravel from his hands and tunic as I urged my wagon forward. "What ho, friend?" I greeted him. "So how are we faring this most lovely and propitious day?"

The man/mountain favored me with a glare. "None too well, me thinks," he responded in a surprisingly soft, lilting voice.

"Why, may I ask, do you persist in your labors upon yon boulder?"

He sighed. "The curse of the gods. I must spend my days trying to roll that stone onto the crest of this mighty hill. Only when I have completed my task will they lift the enchantment. It is a burden I fear I shall never discharge."

"My friend, I do believe that this day shall turn out most fortuitous for you. I just might possess, among the many wonders within my coach, an item that will make your onus less onerous."

He frowned and studied me. "I am charged to accept no assistance. And you do not appear to possess the strength necessary to help me."

"Not strength, my mountainous friend." I went to the back of my wagon, opened the door and wrestled a trunk to the ground. "Knowledge is quite another matter." I opened the lid and made a show of rummaging through its contents. "Here we are." I stood and brandished a pair of wooden clogs. "These should assist you greatly."

"Shoes? I see not..."

"Not just shoes, good sir. These are special shoes. These spikes," and I pointed them out, "will enable you to get purchase on this rocky soil. Here, try them."

He accepted them reluctantly. They fit perfectly. He resumed his position behind the boulder and began to push. Almost immediately he noticed the effect; instead of slipping constantly on the loose gravel, the shoes allowed him to dig in and use both his mighty arms and legs to advance the rock. It appeared almost effortless; the boulder began to roll smoothly up the incline. Even though the hill was steep and expansive, I estimated he would achieve his goal before sunset.

"Tell me, my huge friend; what will you do when you get to the top?"

He paused and leaned against the boulder, which moved not a whit. "I know not. I never thought I would succeed before."

I pointed toward the road just beyond. "If you leave it up there, it could eventually dislodge and roll back down this hill. That would pose a danger to any innocent wayfarers. I suggest you let it roll down the other side. There is nothing there." *Nothing save the village of Imogen.*

"Most sound advice, good stranger. I thank you greatly for your assistance and I will do as you suggest!"

As I rode away I saw that my friendly giant was continuing his excellent progress up the hill. I would have stayed to admire his efforts but I had additional business in Imogen.

The village greeted me no more warmly upon my return than during my first visit. The town constable approached me before I even had time to disembark. "We told you to leave. You and your kind are not welcome here."

"But I have most important and distressing news!" I forced fear and desperation into my voice. "I *was* leaving, just as you requested. But on my way I met a mountain of a man pushing an equally large boulder up yon precipice." I pointed to the east, where the steep hill was easily seen. "I fear what may happen when he reaches the crest."

The official laughed. "That fool will *never* succeed! He has been struggling thus for ages. Easier he grasp a handful of sunlight than push that boulder to the top."

"That may not be accurate. When I left, he was making remarkable progress."

The man snorted. A few curious townspeople had gathered nearby to listen so I addressed them. "Dear innocent dwellers of Imogen, I implore you to heed me! I fear greatly that your lovely village may be in danger!"

"And why is that?" several voices asked at once.

"The giant told me that once he reached the top, he would push the boulder down the other side of yon hill. As you can see," I pointed, "this lane leads straight to it. That boulder will roll right into, and destroy, your village."

"Nonsense," the constable said. "This man is speaking lies. Good people, we have nothing to fear."

"Perhaps. But would it not be prudent to have one of your residents verify my veracity?"

"I'll go," a lad of about nine offered. The constable nodded and we watched as he ran down the street toward the imposing hill beyond. The constable gave me a ferret smile. "If you are lying, we will confiscate your belongings and throw you in the stocks. Our village will greatly enjoy the entertainment."

We waited silently, he confident, myself feigning nervousness. The townspeople started to laugh when we saw the boy approaching. Their amusement died quickly. "It's true, it's true," we could hear the boy yelling well before he reached Imogen. "The giant is halfway up the hill!"

I fought back a smile as I saw their concern and alarm grow. The constable was the first to speak. "This is impossible! Quickly; we must see for ourselves!"

The news spread through the village like fleas. I sat patiently in my wagon while everyone in Imogen

made their way toward the hill. Let them observe, let them plan, let them panic. I let nearly an hour pass before I urged my team forward.

When I arrived at the hill, the villagers were congregated at the top. I joined them and looked down. The man and his boulder were over half-way up, and while his progress was slowed, he was still moving inexorably onward. I noticed a group of men standing by themselves, conversing rapidly. I assumed they were the town leaders and approached.

"This is most serious," I heard one say. "What are we to do?"

I allowed them to plan ineffectively for a few minutes before speaking. "If you don't mind, I might offer a suggestion."

The constable glared at me. "Now what do you want, thief?"

"Thief? I am no thief. I am your benefactor. Who, after all, alerted you to this looming tragedy?"

"You are at best a charlatan."

Another interrupted our discussion. "Is this man telling the truth?"

"I doubt if it happens very often, but in this case, yes," the constable said.

The man, whom I recognized as the tavern owner, appraised me. "I remember you, you tried to sell me some fake philter."

"There is nothing fake about it. However, I doubt we have the time to debate its efficacy. Would you like my assistance or no?"

"We are prepared to listen."

"I suggest you pour boiling oil down the hillside. It will make it impossible for him to go any farther. Indeed it should prevent him from progressing entirely."

I watched the men confer rapidly among themselves. "That might work," the tavern keeper said as spokesman. "But we have none."

"Fortunately I do. And for a most reasonable fee I am prepared to offer it to you."

The constable frowned. "And what would you consider reasonable?"

"50 gold crowns. Paid in advance, of course."

"That is outrageous!" screamed five voices at once. "We can buy an entire vat of oil for only five," the innkeeper added.

"Fine." I turned and looked down the hill. "But you best hurry. Yon giant is rapidly approaching."

They looked, then initiated a heated discussion. Finally the innkeeper approached. "30. We can only offer you 30."

"You have it with you?" The small group looked at each other then nodded reluctantly. "Wait here." Whistling, I entered my wagon. I returned with a cask of heated oil. "Just pour this down the hill," I said after they gave me payment. "You should have no more concerns."

The constable did as suggested. We watched as the oil flowed and spread down the hill, quickly intersecting the approaching peril. The boulder began to slip, then spin as it became covered with oil. My laboring friend held out admirably, but the spreading oil soon loosened the soil under his feet. With a groan and a curse, the man fell back as he lost his grip. The boulder rolled merrily down the hill and stopped with a resounding thump against the trees below.

The townspeople let out a cheer and congratulated each other. I quickly returned to my wagon and drove away. I was tired and it was nearing time to set my camp for the evening; I had plenty of work planned for the following day.

"What ho, friend?" I called out. It was now morning; after a quick breakfast I had made my way back to the giant and his burden.

"I am lost!" he greeted me.

"Why so morose, my colossal comrade?"

"Yonder hill. It has become befouled with some unknown substance. Even with the sandals you graciously provided I can no longer move this rock more than a foot or two without falling. I am lost!"

"Perhaps." I pretended to commiserate and contemplate this unfortunate turn of events. "Tell me," I continued after a suitably long ponder, "what exactly is your obligation?"

"Why, to get this boulder upon the top of that hill. I told you that."

"But do you have to *push* it?"

He frowned, the small gears inside his head struggling to turn. "I understand not."

"Those spiked shoes still provide you sufficient purchase, do they not?"

"Yes, but I cannot push the rock without losing my grip, now that it is covered with that foul substance."

"So much the better. Perhaps you should *pull* it."

"How?" he asked, trying to grasp the concept.

"Most simple, really. I happen to have a very strong, very long rope in my possession. We merely harness it to the boulder and you... pull it up the hill. Since the ground is now moist, the rock should slide easily."

Finally a smile appeared as the dim light dawned. "You are most correct, friendly stranger. If you have such a rope, that would indeed be possible!"

Of course I had the rope. We tied it thoroughly around the boulder; a few sample tugs convinced him that my suggestion would work. He started pulling his load toward the hill, then stopped. "My friend, your largesse has been great. Yet I have nothing to repay you with. How can I thank you?"

"Just helping a fellow gentleman out of a most trying circumstance is reward enough. May you enjoy success this day and may your burden be finally lifted!" His stream of benedictions faded behind me as I rode away. Back to Imogen.

I paused outside the tavern long enough to decompose myself, then burst in. "The giant," I yelled. "He's coming!"

The innkeeper looked up from the glass he was cleaning. This early in the morning, the business was otherwise deserted. He was unconcerned and most unfriendly. "It's you. What are you prattling about now?"

"The giant. He's coming back up the hill!"

"And how is that possible? You assured us the oil would prevent him from succeeding."

"He's not pushing the boulder. He's *pulling* it!"

The innkeeper set down his glass, his attention finally mine. "He cannot." Then he glared at me suspiciously. "Unless he is obtaining assistance from someone."

"It matters not now. Come. Something must be done to stop him and protect your village."

The innkeeper followed. Soon nearly the entire village trailed behind my wagon as we made our now familiar journey up the hill. The townsfolk formed a crown on the crest as we all gazed below. The giant was making steady progress. As I had promised, his cleated shoes still afforded excellent purchase in the oil-stained soil. The strong rope stretched taut behind him as the boulder slid rather than rolled over gravel, dirt, oil and the occasional patch of grass, making his task much easier. I glanced up at the sky. At this rate he would reach the summit within the hour.

The townspeople recognized their peril as well. The innkeeper approached me. "More oil. We must have more oil!"

"I am afraid you have exhausted my supply. If you had been a bit more conservative in your use of it..."

He grabbed me. "We must do something!"

I pulled his hands away and stepped back, disgusted. "Control yourself. We must think clearly in this situation, not allow our reasoning to be clouded by rampant emotions." I looked anew down the hill. "I should have something ..."

"What?" The entire village was gathered around me now.

"Wait here," I ordered, and went to my carriage. I returned dragging a small chest.

"What is it? What is in there?" a buzz of conversation rose among the townsfolk.

I ignored them and instead pulled the innkeeper aside. "This is a very valuable chest. In order to accomplish what we must, it will be destroyed. I expect suitable compensation."

"How much?"

"70 gold crowns."

"But, but we have not that much wealth in our entire village!"

I had heard false pleas of poverty before. "I cannot part with it for anything less. Of course, I can leave you to your own devices ..."

"And if this fails?"

"Fair enough. I will be out one very old and valuable chest."

"We must discuss this." I remained silent and stoic while the village elders discussed my offer. The innkeeper was ashen when he returned. "We have no choice. If you succeed, 70 gold crowns it is."

I nodded. "I need two of your strongest men to assist me." The innkeeper returned with two brawny young lads. Not nearly as brawny, however, as the fast approaching giant. "One of you on either side," I ordered. "I want you to pick up this chest and fling it down the hill as far as you can."

They looked at each other, frowned, then did as instructed. I held my breath as the wooden chest arched out and down the hill, then crashed resoundingly and burst apart. Immediately a black buzzing cloud arose from the wreckage and started down the hill. Toward the man struggling upward.

"Gnats," the innkeeper whispered as he stood next to me, watching.

"Yes. And quite hungry and vicious." Which indeed they were. They descended eagerly upon the man, an army that was too vast and small for him to defeat. He struggled against them valiantly, but in the end he had no recourse but to release the rope while he attempted to drive them off. The boulder careened down the hill and he soon followed, trying to run and discourage the stinging insects at the same time. Part of the horde remained hovering along the hill while the remainder followed him to level ground. The giant would not succeed in climbing the hill this day.

Imogen treated me to a well-deserved hero's welcome. The constable even allowed me to set up my wagon and offer my amazing array of merchandise to the townsfolk. By eventide my coffers were fully replenished.

I was enjoying a glass of the innkeeper's finest wine when one of my earlier customers stormed into his establishment. "There you are!" He threw something on my table. "This chronometer does not work!"

I glanced down at the offending mechanism. "That is odd. It functioned properly before. You saw so yourself. What did you do to it?"

"Nothing! I demand repayment. At once!"

"Sire, if there is a problem with my wares, I assure you I will rectify that. I should have another suitable timepiece in my wagon."

"I don't want your 'wares.' I want my money!"

My response was cut short by angry voices outside. The doors to the inn flew open and no less than a dozen townspeople, led by the constable, burst in. None of them wore pleasant demeanors. "He cheated me." "He's a thief." "He sells fraudulent merchandise." Those were just a few of the libelous accusations hurled at me.

The constable approached menacingly. "You are no longer welcome in Imogen."

I glanced at the half empty bottle of excellent vintage on my table and sighed. "I am sorry you feel that way," I said, rising. "However, I do not wish my customers be dissatisfied. If you will follow me to my wagon, I will repay each of you. Then," I addressed the constable, "I will be on my way."

They cursed me as they followed me out the inn; they cursed me as I repaid them; they cursed me as I drove my team down the street. Imogen denizens were tireless cursers. I made my slow shameful journey out of town, down the lane and around the hill. I soon reached a clearing and found the giant staring forlornly into his fire. I drove up and stopped.

"I see even a giant needs his rest," I greeted him. In the firelight I could see the ugly red welts that

covered his body. The gnats had dined well.

"I am lost," he groaned. "Those insects. I can fight a man. I can fight a dragon. I cannot fight them." His voice trailed off into self-pity.

I joined him by his fire and commiserated. We had both been treated harshly by Imogen. Reparations were called for. "My friend, insects need sleep as well."

"How does that information assist me?"

"Could you not conclude your labors at night?"

Again the pause was pregnant before the concept was delivered. "Yes. But I have to see the ground beneath me, the hill before me."

"That is a resolvable enigma." I reached into the satchel at my side and handed him a hat. "This is a special helmet," I explained. "Here," I pointed, "is a small oil lamp and lens. Miners wear these. It will provide sufficient light so you can successfully navigate yon hillside. There is enough oil to keep it lit for several hours, enough time, I wager, to reach the summit." I lit the wick and was rewarded with a piercing beam of light. "Try it."

He complied and beamed as bright as the lamp when he realized how effective it indeed was. "Your benevolence is beyond compensation," he assured me warmly. "I will commence this very instant!" He was as good as his word. He grabbed hold of the ropes and started hauling the boulder smoothly up the hill. As I had predicted, no buzzing insects attacked him as he confidently progressed.

He had traversed a good quarter of the terrain when I called out to him. "Remember," I yelled, "when you reach the summit. Be sure to push the boulder down the other side. We don't want to imperil any innocents traveling this road!"

"I will, kind stranger. And thank you."

I watched for a few more minutes, then returned to my wagon. I would have liked to get some sleep, but I had dallied too long in Imogen. My horses snorted in protest as I urged them out onto the road. I had obligations in Hamelin.

## **THE HIDDEN PRINCESS**

"Come closer, ladies and gentlemen, friends and neighbors, and enjoy the challenge of the Hidden Princess!" Smiling faces gathered around my wagon as I spread three shells on my overhanging platform. Above it, the banner reading "Dr. Forturo's Traveling Emporium of Miscellaneous Marvels" flapped in the small breeze.

"As you can see, our princess is indeed shy." I held up a small round stone and placed it under one of the shells. "So shy is she that she is determined to remain hidden from all but the most discerning eye." Smoothly and rapidly--but not too rapidly--I rearranged the shells left, right, above, below, all the while maintaining my spiel. "Now." I stopped and stepped back. "Our heroine believes she is safe and secure

under one of her protective canopies. Would anyone care to guess where she has gone?"

The herd chattered among themselves, first pointing to one, then another of the possibilities. Finally a farm boy with markedly bovine features stepped forward. "I think she's here," he said timorously, touching the one on the left.

"The lad says the left. Let us discover how discerning he really is." I lifted up the shell and was rewarded by a round of applause as indeed the princess was nestled snugly below. "Excellent, my young friend," I patted him on the head and handed him a trinket. "For your troubles. Now, is anyone else up to the challenge, one that can be enjoyed for a single lead coin?"

Indeed they were. One after another they offered their wealth to prove their eyesight was more adept than the flashing hands of Dr. Forturo. One by one they were proven wrong. One by one my coffers grew in size, much welcome since the villagers had been particularly immune to my presentations of elixirs, potions and mysterious machines that my Traveling Emporium was famous for.

I didn't win every time of course; that would be foolish. It is easier to shear the flock a few skeins at a time than all at once. And ultimately more rewarding. But all good things must come to an end; mine ended when a tall man dressed not at all like the villagers stood before me. "You wish to try your skill, young man?" I said and smiled.

Wordlessly he set a gold coin in front of me and nodded. I finished my routine and he pondered his predicament. "I will say," he paused another moment, "in the center." Before I could react he overturned the shells on the left and right. Both were empty. He then looked at me and smiled. "It would appear I guessed correctly."

"It would appear so."

"Let's gaze upon her lovely countenance, shall we?" He reached for the center shell.

I reacted first this time. I turned it over... the princess nestled comfortably under her hiding place. "You have definitely earned your prize this day." I maintained my pleasant demeanor as I paid him. "Would anyone else care to try his mettle?"

"I would," a former player stepped forward. He also put down a gold coin. "We will play the game like this gentleman did. I will lift the two shells that I do *not* choose."

"Sir, that is not the way the Hidden Princess is played."

"If you cannot accept those rules, then perhaps you have not been playing honestly with us," the tall stranger said. "It should matter not which shells are turned over if indeed the princess is under one of them."

The crowd agreed ominously, I reluctantly. The carnage began. I was able to win a few when my patrons became overconfident, but within the hour I had repaid all that I had gained and quite a few coins more. The villagers walked away laughing with greedy delight when I finally put down my canvas and closed for the evening. They were still laughing when I steered my reluctant team out of the hamlet of Gadmir to find a refuge for the evening.

A small clearing by a crystal stream proved adequate. I built a campfire, fed my animals and stared into the flames. My appetite had disappeared along with my coins. I had been most fortunate to slip the pebble back under the one shell, otherwise the evening would have proven to be even more embarrassing. One thing was certain, Gadmir was no longer fertile ground. Tomorrow I would have to



ply my trade elsewhere.

"Elsewhere" proved to be Fremound, a fishing village a good three days' travel from my previous target. My top hat, gold trousers and merrily painted wagon proved immediately to be the most exciting event to strike the village since their last flood. It was difficult to determine which was worse, the smell of the crowd or the stench of rotting fish. Yet they proved eager enough and I was able to sell several love potions and charming mechanisms before nightfall. That did not cover my losses from Gadmir, however, so I encouraged them to return after their dinner hour to amuse themselves further at my carriage.

That evening I introduced the villagers to the game of the Secret Assassins. "As you can see," I said and smiled, gazing down at their unwashed faces, "you have three caves in which you can find refuge." I pointed to each of the shells in turn. "In one of these," I lifted the empty shell, "you shall find safety and treasure. The other two, however, are guarded by demons who will slay you instantly." Indeed the other two shells covered small pebbles. I smoothly rearranged the shells. "Would anyone care to seek their fortune?"

Indeed they did. I can only imagine it was a result of their fishing activities because they quickly proved to be formidable at the game. But not as formidable as I. The first several times they were able to find their sanctuary without difficulty. Which only meant I had to make it slightly more difficult. Within half an hour the tide had turned strongly in my favor and their coins were flowing rapidly into my coffers. I was feeling quite pleased with my success when an unwelcome but familiar figure stepped forward.

"I would like to try my fortune," he said coldly and placed a gold coin on the platform.

With difficulty I managed to maintain my smile. "A new player! We are indeed fortunate this evening." I quickly rearranged the three shells. "You may begin."

He ignored me; instead he addressed the crowd. "Good citizens of Fremound, there are two ways the game of Secret Assassins may be played. One is an honest test of eyesight versus dexterity. One is dishonest thievery. The quickest way to discover if Dr. Forturo has been using magician's tricks is simply to do this."

Before I could react he darted forward and upturned all three shells. There was a gasp from the crowd followed by angry curses as not one, not two, but three small pebbles were revealed. I won't go into the ensuing details except to say that all my customers received full refunds--and some even more--and I was forced from Fremound in disgrace.

The scent of rotting fish trailed me as I made my forlorn voyage out of the village to the sanctuary of the surrounding woods. I spent a good hour cleaning fish parts from my wagon and myself, then made a small campfire and planned. The stranger, whoever he was, was doubtless following me. Why I had no idea. His continual interference in my commerce was unacceptable, however. I needed to learn more.

When I reentered Fremound later that evening I was dressed not in the gold and sequined regalia that was Dr. Forturo but in a simple brown jerkin and phony beard. I was confident the townspeople would be feting their savior somewhere, and it did not take me long to find them. The third seaside inn I entered was particularly full; in one corner a large crowd was gathered at a table by the hearth. A voice I now recognized, feared and hated rose above the rest. "Quite simple, really. As you can see, I merely palm the pebble like so as I set down the cup. And now it is as empty as the rest!" A burst of applause followed immediately.

I ordered a cup of local wine and approached to get a better view of the proceedings. My enemy sat smugly at the table, three gold cups in front of him. As I suspected, he had been demonstrating the secrets of the Hidden Princess to his fawning entourage. "It's a very easy game for deceit," he said. "I feel

most fortunate I was passing by your village lest Dr. Forturo steal all your hard-earned fortune."

The crowd cheered lustily and tankards were raised. Seething, I joined in and took a hefty swig of wine... which I immediately regretted. Apparently the villagers used fish in their wine-making as well.

"Are there any legitimate games of chance?" one foolish villager asked.

"Indeed there are. The only truly fair competition involving sight and skill is the game of the Three Kings."

Someone had to ask it so I did. "And what is that?" I called from the back, making sure to adopt a deeper voice as disguise.

"One of startling simplicity and infinite challenge. We begin with a simple deck of cards, which, it so happens, I have on me." He withdrew them and spread them on the table. "We only require three; the King of Spades," he separated it with a flourish, "the King of Clubs and the King of Hearts." He held them up so the sheep could see. "Three kings, good folk of Fremound." He turned them face down on the table and rearranged them slowly. "Two of these kings are impostors, pretenders to the throne if you will," he intoned as he continued rearranging them. "Your challenge is to select the King of Hearts, the only true ruler, from the three. Would anyone care to try?"

A chorus of eager voices rang out, pointing and calling out the various cards. "The one on the left you say?" he asked, then turned it over as several agreed. The King of Hearts did indeed appear. "Most excellent. As you all can see, a fair challenge of skill and luck. Shall we try again?"

The flock agreed. I watched as he rapidly mixed the cards, rapidly turned over the losing kings and just as rapidly took in their money. I noticed how he repeatedly ignored correct answers while choosing players who were wrong. I noticed how several times he palmed the King of Hearts only to replace it after a suitable interval. I noticed how he let small bettors occasionally win while the larger wagers continually lost.

But that I kept to myself. Instead I returned to the bar and ordered another glass of wine. *So that was his game*. He was following me, using me as the wolf so he could come in and shear my flock! And following me was not difficult, burdened as I was with my wagon of wares while he doubtless rode alone. This financial assassination was going to have to stop, and soon. I nursed my wine, wincing at every cheer and more frequent groan arising from the crowd nearby. By the end of the evening I knew what I had to do.

One week later I pulled my tired team into the Hamlet of Glenfallow. It was far from the more popular trade routes, which would make my offerings even more appealing. My wagon was quite a spectacle as I entered the village; gold and red and yellow ornamentation, my huge banner wafting in the breeze, I sitting tall in front in my silk hat, gold trousers and checkered vest, tooting my trumpet to signal my arrival.

The curious villagers looked out as I slowly guided my team to the village center. "Come on, come all," I called out cheerfully. "Sample for yourselves the bountiful treasures that Dr. Forturo's Traveling Emporium of Miscellaneous Marvels has brought to you!" I disembarked, opened the side of my wagon and I was ready for business.

The good folk of Glenfallow were not, not initially anyway. Several children approached first; I appeased them with some tricks and a few trinkets. An older resident followed. I sold him an elixir for the soreness in his joints and he limped away satisfied. A few curious housewives, the innkeeper, and soon I had all the people in the village crowded around me.

All but one. I noticed him tethering his horse and relaxing in the shade of a nearby tree. He wore a beard

this time and his clothes were those of a poor farmer. But he could not disguise his height; my nemesis had arrived, just as I knew he would.

I immediately turned my attention to the crowd before me. "Ladies and gentlemen," I raised my voice, "the Emporium of Dr. Forturo will now be closing for a brief period. Please return this evening as we will again be available to dazzle you with our array of miscellaneous marvels available no where else in our fair land. We also promise you an evening of entertainment you shall not soon forget!"

There were a few good-natured grumblings but the crowd dispersed as I put away my sign and closed up my establishment. Then I went inside my wagon, locked my door and sat down. To practice.

As promised I reopened promptly after the dinner hour. A small but enthusiastic crowd soon was herded before me. Among them, in the rear and ducking behind others to shield himself, my enemy waited.

"Good fellows of Glenfallow," I started my spiel immediately, "as promised, I shall endeavor to entertain you tonight with a game that challenges the eye and the mind. A trifling enigma I like to call the Hidden Princess." I reached down and set three gold cups and a small leather ball before me. "Your task is a most simple yet rewarding one..."

The villagers got into the spirit of the game very quickly. Just as quickly I got into their purses. I was enjoying a small yet steady profit when he finally walked forward. "I believe I am up to the challenge," he said, placing a gold coin firmly on my platform.

"A gold coin? That is a hefty wager dear squire. Perhaps a smaller bet would be more appropriate until you become accomplished in the game." He laughed and shook his head as I hid the ball under one of the cups and rearranged them. "Choose."

"Good citizens of Glenfallow," he called to the crowd, ignoring me, "the Hidden Princess is a game that is often performed by charlatans. There is one simple method for determining the honesty of the player." He turned back to me. "I choose the center," he said as he grabbed the two cups on either side and turned them over.

The Hidden Princess rolled out from under the one on the left. "I am indeed sorry," I said as I dropped his wager into my till. I replaced the ball and began rearranging the cups. "Would anyone else care to try their skill?"

"Hold," my nemesis ordered. He looked at the cups, then at me. "So that's it." He placed another gold coin on the table. "Again."

"As you wish." I rotated the cups a few more times and stopped. "Please select."

"On the left." He then tipped all three cups over. The ball rolled out from the center.

"Perhaps a smaller wager next time."

"No," and he shook his head fiercely. "Again." Another gold coin. This time he focused alternately on my hands, on the cups, on the platform.

I performed my maneuvering longer this time so he could get a better view. "Are you ready?"

He scratched his head, then turned to the crowd. "Often a charlatan will use sleight of hand to remove or insert the ball under the cup. However, we can prevent that. Madam, would you assist us?" A spreading farmwife blushed but stepped forward. I smiled, my hands at my side, and stepped back from the cups. "I claim the ball is under the left cup. Would you please turn all three over?" Giggling, she complied. The

ball was under the right.

He stared at the ball, then at me. "This is impossible! This man is a charlatan. I have seen him before. He is cheating all you good townspeople of Glenfallow!"

I retained my equanimity. "Would you please explain how?"

"It's the cups. It has to be the cups!"

I picked up two, clanged them together. "Simple brass cups. I have them available for sale here if you wish."

"No! I will prove it!" He forced his way through the crowd, which parted with a combination of curses at his rudeness and chuckles at his lack of skill.

"Some people take defeat poorly," I observed. "Now, would anyone else care to test themselves?"

I had won four more games and lost two when he once again stood before me. He was laden with three simple pewter tankards. "Now I will prove that you are indeed a charlatan!" He set them firmly on my platform. I studied the containers; identical in every way. I shrugged and removed my cups. "One more thing," he stopped me. "The apparatus is often the secret of the fraud." He glanced through the crowd. "Sir, you are wearing a ring. Would you be so kind as to let us use it for this demonstration?"

The farmer shrugged and passed it to him. He in turn set it on the platform. "We will use this, not the leather ball you are so fond of."

I nodded and placed it under one of the tankards. It slid smoothly over the platform; the small click it occasionally made I could cover by maintaining my spiel. "Your rules are acceptable."

"Then," he reached in his pocket, "let us begin. 75 gold coins is my wager."

I paled slightly. "That is a very large sum. I am not sure I have those resources available."

He smirked. "Further proof, citizens, that the man is a fraud, a cheat! An *honest* man would not hesitate!"

I noticed the crowd begin to grumble. 75 crowns. If I lost I would be near ruin. "Fine. I will accept your wager." I looked out at the crowd. "As I promised, dear friends of Glenfallow, I have indeed presented you with a most singular evening of entertainment!" I maintained some mindless patter as I smoothly and rapidly arranged and rearranged the three mugs. I shuddered as I heard a slight click when I finished. Had *he* heard it as well? *No turning back now*. "If you will."

He waited only a second. "On the left."

The crowd held their breath as he tipped over the three tankards. Then let out a cheer as the ring was revealed... under the right.

"Thank you one and all," I called out cheerfully as I raked my hard-earned wages into my coffers. "Night is fast approaching; I am afraid Dr. Forturo must close his emporium for the evening. Please visit us tomorrow and sample our collection of elixirs, mechanisms and other treasures from around the world!" I watched with a smirk as my enemy staggered through the crowd. I found the jeers and laughter that followed him nearly as rewarding as his wealth.

I was enjoying a glass of wine in Glenfallow's one inn when someone tapped me on the shoulder. It was him, this time without his beard and homely attire. "You must tell me how you did it."

"I could," I said after due consideration. "But there must be reciprocity."

"I cannot pay you. You have all my funds."

"Not that. I just want you to stop following me. It will be more profitable for both of us if our paths never cross again."

He sat next to me. "That is acceptable. Now, how did you cheat me?"

I smiled. "I did not."

"What are you talking about?"

"The game of the Hidden Princess? I conducted it honestly. No sleight of hand, no hidden ball drop, no doctored apparatus. It was a legitimate challenge of hand versus eye."

He stared at me, trying to comprehend. "Impossible! You've never done that in your life; you are not that good!"

Truth be told, until that evening he was correct. "I knew you would be expecting some sort of fraud. You were concentrating more on how I might be perpetuating one than on the movement of the cups. You're right; I'm not that good. But I am better than you."

My arguments convinced him not. "You're lying, Forturo. You had an accomplice. Perhaps magical assistance. I am going to learn the truth. And when I do I will find you!" Others watched and snickered as he stalked from the inn. I shrugged and returned my attention to the wine and my thoughts. I understood his skepticism; I would not have believed my explanation if our situations were reversed. Odd, I decided. For the first time in my life honesty had won out over deceit. I shrugged; it would probably never happen again.

## **ROUTINE MAINTENANCE**

"Here he comes," one of her fellow waitresses called.

"Must be three o'clock," said the bartender.

Jane Cauley glanced at the clock. It *was* three o'clock, once she compensated for bar time. Now curious, she looked at the customer entering the restaurant. The man was casually dressed in khaki slacks and plaid shirt, hair neatly combed, clean-shaven. Not particularly attractive, just a normal customer. Which made her wonder about the reaction he had caused among the crew. She watched him take a corner booth; not her station, so she decided to ignore him.

"Shit, he would sit there," said Sally Makowski, the sole brunette among the waitress staff.

"What's the big deal?" Jane asked. "Does he cause problems?"

"You're new here, aren't you?" Sally said. "He's here every day. Same time, same order. Pain in the ass."

Jane looked at the man again. "Plain vanilla" was the best way to describe him. Yet he showed no sign of impatience as he waited to be waited on. "If he's that much of a problem, don't let him in here anymore." Although this was her first day at Caravan's Restaurant, Jane had worked at quite a few others and that

was s.o.p. for unwanted customers.

"Not that at all." Sally started toward him with a tall glass of diet cola, then stopped. "Here, you serve him. Then you'll get the idea."

Jane shrugged, accepted it, then forced on a smile as she walked to his table. "Here you go." She set it in front of him.

Head down, he merely nodded and began sipping noisily from the straw. Jane hovered another minute, but he gave no sign of wanting to chat so she returned to the serving area. "Social butterfly, isn't he?"

"Butterfly isn't the word," said Gus Wilkins, the bartender. It was still early, a good hour before the after-work crowd and there was no one else in the place. "He comes in here every day. Once at opening, once at three. Real creature of habit."

"And he orders the same thing," Sally added. "Diet cola. One. Now watch. He'll drink it in fifteen minutes and leave immediately."

She was right; the man didn't look at the TVs on the wall, the menu, a newspaper. Just sat and steadily sipped his cola until, at exactly 3:15, he rose, set a dollar on the table and left without a word. Jane was frowning when she returned to the station with the empty glass. "One hell of a tipper," she said, having earned 11 cents for her efforts.

"That never changes either," Gus said with a chuckle.

"So what does he do? He just taking a break from work?"

"No one knows," Sally said, looking up from the napkins she was folding.

"I don't think he does work," Gus said. "You know what he does after he leaves here? He goes across the street to Bacon's and has another diet Coke. Then over to Samson's for another diet Coke. It's the same routine every day. He hits every bar and restaurant around here and has the same thing. Weird."

Jane frowned. "There has to be some reason."

Sally shook her head. "He's just crazy. Harmless. But crazy."

Further conversation stopped as a group of office workers paraded in, harbingers of the upcoming rush. But one customer stayed on Jane's mind throughout the rest of the day.

"Diet cola, right?"

The customer looked up reluctantly. "Yes."

Jane radiated her brightest smile as she set it down in front of him. It was 3:00 the following day and she had his order ready when he walked in. "I'm new here and I like to get to know all our regular customers. My name's Jane."

He merely nodded as he sucked on his straw.

This won't do, she thought angrily. "Tell me, didn't you use to hang out at Tom Jones? I used to work there and you look familiar."

"No," he said after a moment's silence.

She touched a finger to her lips. "Could have sworn. You look so much like Ralph. You don't have a brother named Ralph, do you?"

Another long silence. "No brother."

She waited another minute but he refused to offer more. "Well, call me if you need anything. Name's Jane, remember?"

"Yes. Jane."

Quizzical stares greeted her when she returned to the wait station. "You actually talked to him?" Sally shook her head.

"Tried to. At least I know his name isn't Ralph. And he doesn't have a brother."

"You're nuts, girl. Leave that one alone."

"And what fun would that be?" Jane pretended to dry glasses while watching the quiet man. But he repeated his routine from the day before, leaving promptly at 3:15 and one dollar on the table. Still she was grinning while she cleaned up after him. No one ignored Jane Cauley! She was going to unlock this man and his secrets no matter how long it took.

When he walked in the following afternoon she was already standing at a table with his order. "Over here," she waved.

Shrugging, he obeyed. "We've been waiting for you," she beamed as he sat down. "So how are you today, Ralph?"

He frowned. "My name isn't Ralph."

She pretended to be embarrassed. "I'm sorry. I thought you said yesterday your name is Ralph. My mistake. What is your name?"

He pondered the question as if he were selecting a mail-order bride. "Bryan."

"Bryan. And my name's Jane. Pleased to meet you." She stuck out her hand. He looked at it, then finally up at her. It was the first time she had actually seen his face this close and the age it showed startled her. She guessed immediately he had to be in his mid-50's, at least. The firmness of his grip surprised her as well, that and the coldness of his touch. He said nothing more after shaking hands, merely returned his attention to his cola as if it were the only attraction in the room. "Enjoy," Jane said brightly and triumphantly walked away. This little game was making these long, slow afternoons much more enjoyable, she decided smugly.

The next few days she purposely didn't wait on him, curious to see if he would notice. There was no outward sign he did, although once, she was sure, he had ever so briefly looked her way. Instead she bided her time until her first day off. That afternoon she made sure to enter Caravan's a few minutes after three. She saw him almost immediately and walked directly to his table. "Hi, Bryan. So good to see a familiar face. Mind if I join you?" She was already placing her coat over an empty chair. He glanced up, frowned, then nodded. "This is my first day off, and I still come in here! I must be becoming a creature of habit!"

He merely continued to sip his drink.

Which only encouraged her more. "So, tell me, Bryan. I see you in here all the time. What work do you

do? An office nearby?"

"Work?" He gazed at her with eyes of an indeterminable color. "This is my work."

"Drinking colas? Or do you work for the restaurants or the health inspector? Sounds exciting. Tell me more."

"I can't. You wouldn't understand."

"Sure I would." She smiled and reached across to touch his cold hand. "Try me. I am going to college, you know."

"Really? And what are you majoring in?"

*Trying to change the subject are we? At least, she thought proudly, she was getting him to talk.*

"Graphic arts. Eventually I want to get into advertising, maybe open my own studio. What about you? What wouldn't I understand?"

"It's just..." He stopped and his face darkened. "What time is it?"

"Time?" She frowned. "I'm not wearing a watch. Bar time says it's about twenty to four, but they set that ahead fifteen minutes or so."

"I'm late!" The fear in his voice and face was obvious. "I have to go."

"Relax." She tried to hold his hand even as he jerked away. "What's the hurry? Let me get you another soda."

"I have to go," and he jumped from his seat and ran out of the restaurant, leaving her growing angrier and more confused by the minute. And sticking her with the check.

"Sunovabitch." She threw a dollar on the table and stormed out. "If you think you're gonna stiff my ass you've got another thing coming," she swore as she walked across the street to Bacon's.

What she found inside surprised her. The restaurant was in an uproar, with the staff and customers talking excitedly amongst themselves. All except one. She found him hunched over a soda in the corner, pointedly ignoring what was going around him. "You owe me a buck," she greeted him as she seized the seat across from him.

"I'm sorry. Jane." He pulled out his wallet and gave her a five. "I had to get over here."

She wanted to ask him about the commotion inside, but decided he wouldn't have even noticed. She was too angry and insulted in any event. "Why? What's so important that you can't be five minutes late once in your life? That was rude!"

Her expression would not be denied. "I had to be here. I had to close the door."

"The door? What door? What are you talking about?"

He pushed away his drink. "The door to the other world. If they see me they won't try to enter."

Her friends were right, she realized. "Door to ... hell, you *are* a nut case. And how long have you been guarding this 'door' anyway?"

"Doors, actually. All my life. We've been doing it... all our lives."



"We?" She frowned. *Was he dangerous? Was he serious?*

"There are doors everywhere throughout the world." His voice was heavy now, weary. "My order, if you will, guards them. It is what we were born to do. What we must do. Otherwise..."

She lit a cigarette, needed a cigarette. "You need help, you know that? Counseling. You seem like too nice a man to suffer such delusions."

He managed a wan smile. "I was late getting here, you know. They almost got through."

"Through the door. Right," she said and smirked.

He glanced at the clock, then put a dollar on the table. "I have to get going; I have to be in Samson's in five minutes. Before you leave, check out the pool room."

"I'll do that," Jane said. She finished her cigarette, ordered a beer, finished that. "Pool room, eh? We'll put a stop to this nonsense." She paid her tab then went to the back where the pool tables were. Usually the tables were busy, but not today. Instead someone had strung a rope across the entrance with a "Closed for repair" sign dangling from it. Jane looked back but no one was watching, so she ducked under the rope and turned the corner.

She saw immediately why management had shut it down. The back wood-paneled wall looked like it had begun to melt. It bulged in several places as if someone had tried to break it down from the opposite side. She touched it tentatively then jerked away as the unexpected heat singed her fingers. "I was late getting here..." his words came unbidden and unwanted. Almost too late, she realized as she quickly left the room.

"Your favorite customer's here," Gus called.

Jane turned, then looked up at the clock. Three o'clock on the button. "I've got him." She hurried over with the diet cola. "On the house," she said as she handed it to Bryan.

"Thank you, but that's unnecessary." He sat down and sighed.

"As long as I'm working here, you drink for free."

"Again, thank you."

She dallied another minute then, realizing there was really nothing more to say, returned to the bar. "What's up? Lover boy and you have a tiff?" Sally teased.

"You were right, he is a nut case. Better he be left alone."

Better for all of us, she thought as she began drying glasses.

## **FESTIVAL OF FORGOTTEN DREAMS**

So began the Festival of Flowers. In rich array the people came, returning to their original home from the farthest corners of the world. Some arrived riding unicorns, manticores, elephants and giraffes. Others were borne on the backs of rocs and griffins and even more elaborate creations. Several rode flying

carpets or merely commandeered the wind to carry them.

They were greeted by a sparkling city of diamond and carnelian spires, crystal fountains and golden footpaths, trees laden with emerald and ruby leaves interspersed among flowering gardens which emitted the rich aromas of cedar, orange, pine and cinnamon. Peacocks in full array, leopards with coats of constantly changing colors, singing swans and playful gazelles strutted amongst the revelers.

These marvels, however, paled next to the wonder of the attendees themselves. Some were clad in flowing silks that shifted hue in every passing second. Others wore tapestry coats upon which ancient battles played out. Some wore nothing at all, merely adorning themselves with transparent wings, sparkling feathers, glowing furs, shimmering waterfalls or dancing lights. Each tried to outdo the next in his or her choice of raiment or lack of it.

In the center of the city, amid all its myriad wonders, rested an onyx and gold platform where the council of elders sat and waited. The most powerful conjurers of all, they had created the city and its wonders just days before, just to amuse the others. At Festival's end they would return the desert to its pristine sterility.

The Festival may now commence, they proclaimed upon the arrival of the last. The dancing waters within the crystal fountains were immediately transformed into wine and mead. Manna poured from the heavens onto the grateful crowd below. The towers around them began to vibrate and hum with an ethereal melody, one that both soothed and stimulated. And the people were made joyous.

Thus the festivities progressed long into the afternoon. Then one single bolt of lightening screamed across the darkening sky and the thunderclap brought everyone's attention to the council. Their platform rose slowly yet gracefully until it floated commandingly above all the revelers. "Let the competition begin," their voices rose in unison.

This was the moment all had waited for, the competition to discover which amongst them would be deemed the best magician and take his or her rightful place in the council. Each of the contestants waited their turn as, one by one, they stepped forward and demonstrated their imagination and talent. The crowd cheered as one woman summoned from the earth a tree which rose in majestic height until it nearly towered above all the other wonders. They laughed as a man created an arcing rainbow and walked across from one side of the city to the other. They gasped as another created a shower of swords which transformed into rose petals before reaching the ground. Each competitor performed, then stepped aside to await the decision of the council.

"Does anyone else wish to command our audience?" one of the rulers asked after the queue had ended.

"Yes," came a voice from within crowd. They looked, laughed and made way as he stepped forward. He was an old man, too old, most onlookers reasoned, to have the talent to win the contest. Unlike them he wore only a vest and pants crudely made from hide and cloth. Unlike them his face was adorned only in rough beard and unkempt hair and his feet were bare of flowers or fur. He was ridiculed or ignored as he dragged a wooden contrivance through the crowd toward the onyx platform and the watching elders.

"You beseech our audience?" the elder asked.

"Indeed. I have created most marvelous wonders with which to dazzle and amaze."

They nodded solemnly although reluctantly. By their own rules anyone could compete for a seat among them. "Begin."

With great difficulty he removed a heavy rock from his conveyance. "A simple stone," he began. "One

that is nearly beyond my ability to move." He set it on the ground. "However," he quickly returned with a smaller stone and large pole, "witness this!" So saying, he placed the smaller stone a few feet from its brethren, then stuck one end of the pole under the larger so it ran atop the smaller stone and stuck up in the air. "Watch as I push down on the end of this pole." He did so and the larger stone was easily raised off the ground. "With my lever, you can move the world!"

The elders whispered amongst themselves, then one addressed the man. "Why should we go to so much effort when we can do this?" Immediately the larger stone floated upwards until it hovered several feet above their heads.

"Wait. Observe this!" and he proudly brandished a disk with a needle in the center. "This compass always points north to aid you in your travels!"

"We know where we are. Is that all?"

The man was chagrined only for a moment. "Not at all. I think you will find this most astounding." He pointed to one of the large wooden disks on either side of the conveyance he had used. "I show you the wheel. A most useful tool that allows easy and rapid travel and transport anywhere you desire!"

"Yet you had to pull it," one said. "Hardly a satisfactory solution to a problem easily solved when griffins or unicorns are always available."

The crowd was now bored and they talked and tittered among themselves as the odd old man flitted from one unusual object to another. He created a small fire by striking a stone and bar of something he called iron together. An elder created a much larger one by simply pointing at a nearby bush. The stranger brought up water from a pool by using a wooden tube. An onlooker emptied the entire pool with a mere gesture. The stranger produced a device which took threads of cotton and turned it into cloth. An elder transformed that into gold with but a smile.

"Enough!" the elders proclaimed. "You have shown us no wonders here, no powerful magic! Nothing to amuse or entertain or confound."

"But this is not magic," he said. "It is knowledge. Science. Anyone, even without magic, can perform these wonders, use these tools."

The council rose as one even as their platform begin to sink back to the ground. As one they spoke. "What you offer is of no interest to us. Begone with you. We must make our deliberations and declare our decision."

The onlookers could not contain their amusement as the stranger reluctantly loaded his many objects and made his slow, meandering way through the crowd. Later that evening the elders allowed the purple and golden clouds to dissipate so the stars could gleam down upon them. Only a few of the attendees bothered to look up; what above them could possibly compare with the wonders their own powers could create? Only the odd stranger dreamed about what was in and beyond the speckled canopy. And thought of means to reach it.

## **FROZEN ASSETS**

"How are you feeling?"

"Tired. Very tired."

"To be expected." Alphonso Moraeia set a plate of steamed vegetables before his patient. "Eat these. They will help you build up your strength."

"Does it really matter?" Still, George Ridenower forced himself to sit up. "Why did you wake me if you haven't found a cure?" he asked between bites.

"We are doing everything we can, I assure you. Magaden's Flu was designed to resist all remedies."

Ridenower grimaced as he swallowed some boiled cabbage. "Don't you have any meat?"

"That would just exacerbate your condition. Even in the suspension chamber the disease continues to progress, albeit slowly. I've told you before, you must be wakened from time to time to eat so your system can fight it."

"A waste of time," Ridenower sighed and fell back into the bed. "Why not just let me die and be done with it?"

"Don't talk like that," and he patted his patient's hand. "Your condition has at least stabilized for the most part. We have made some minor progress. Finish your meal; you need to build up your strength." Moraeia watched patient and silent until Ridenower was done, then removed the tray. "Get some sleep. I will see you tomorrow evening. Shall I turn off the lights?"

"No. I want to stay up a bit."

"Fine. Tomorrow then." Moraeia left, locking the door behind him.

Ridenower turned his head to look out the window, but as always Moraeia had closed the curtains and he was too tired to get up and open them. Too tired to do much of anything, actually.

Magaden's Flu. Such an innocent name for such a deadly virus, he thought. The war had broken out in the Middle East, but conflicting alliances had allowed it to spread throughout the world. And when one of the warring factions found itself losing to the superior weaponry of the other, it unleashed the Flu.

In a way, he thought wryly, it was an appropriate name. It spread like the flu, rapidly and indiscriminately. He wasn't sure when he caught it or where. Just that he had woken up one day and found himself in this institute, under the care of Doctor Moraeia. And how long ago was that? he wondered. It was impossible to determine the passage of days, to remember how many times he had been put into suspension, then wakened for another treatment.

*If only I could leave.* But he couldn't leave, was too ill to leave. He should consider himself fortunate he was receiving treatment because, as Moraeia had told him, so many millions had not. But, Ridenower thought as he stared at the ceiling, it was impossible to feel fortunate. Not when everyone he knew had surely fallen victim to the Flu.

He closed his eyes, trying to shut out the harsh overhead light. If only he had someone to talk to. But there were no other patients, at least in this room. He had seen no other staff except for the Doctor. Perhaps they were the last two on earth. He would have to ask Moraeia that some day. If he remembered. Now he was too tired to think, too depressed to remember or plan. Now he needed to get some sleep.

The squeaking wheels of the gurney woke Ridenower. He opened his eyes and saw Moraeia pushing it alongside his bed. "Already?" he asked groggily.

"We can't keep you out of the suspension chamber any longer than absolutely necessarily. Let me help you." With a little effort Ridenower managed to slide across and onto the gurney. "How are we feeling today?"

"Better. Not as tired as yesterday."

"Good. The food helped."

Ridenower said nothing, merely laid back and counted the overhead lights as they made their now-familiar passage back to the suspension chambers. On the way they passed the hydroponics section where Moraeia grew the vegetables. He had told Ridenower that the Flu was still prevalent in the atmosphere and only food grown in this sterile environment was safe. "As you can see, we don't have the room to raise cattle or sheep," he had explained with a smile.

*What about fish?* Ridenower wanted to ask but never seemed to remember in time. Unfortunate, he thought as he was pushed into the freezing room. He was getting so tired of cabbage and carrots and kelp. The room was vast, the walls lined with cryonic chamber after cryonic chamber. Even from his present position he could see that every one was empty. Once, he was sure, there had been more bodies stored here. Victims to the Flu, Moraeia had said when asked. *And why not let him die? Why should he be the only one?* But no matter how many times he had broached the subject Moraeia had rebuffed him. He was too tired to ask again.

"We'll be ready in a minute," Moraeia said as he prepared the drugs needed to put Ridenower under before he returned to his frozen sleep.

"Of course." Still, despite everything, Ridenower had to feel admiration, if not true affection, for the dedication of this man. Who else would have worked so hard to keep him alive?

"Are you ready?"

Ridenower nodded. The doctor bent over him, he felt a sharp stab of pain, then nothing at all.

Alphonso Moraeia sat on the verandah and looked out over his estate. As always the skies were overcast but the breeze was pleasant. In another time he would have been soaring through the skies or loping through the woods, on the prowl for prey.

Impossible now, now that the stupid humans had destroyed the rain forests, destroyed the ozone layer, turned their Garden of Eden into a garden of death. Only lichen on the rocks and algae in the ocean grew now. Even the pleasant breeze would kill him almost immediately... if he needed to breathe.

And once they had ruined their own planet, the humans had turned tail and ran. He couldn't join them; in space it was always night and he needed daylight so he could get his necessary sleep. Ironic, he thought as he sipped at his carefully hoarded wine, that sunlight, his mortal enemy, was now his savior. Fortunate indeed he had found this building, home to a self-contained cryonics depository, one abandoned and forgotten in their mad rush to save themselves. The builders had been wise to choose this location; solar panels and geothermal turbines provided the power necessary to keep the enterprise functioning.

When he had arrived he had discovered over 40 bodies in suspended animation. Even now he cursed his carelessness; if he had been more conservative in his use of them he could still have a dozen or more available. Instead of just one.

Now Moraeia had to do everything possible to conserve his food supply. Feed only once a month or so, and that at the minimum. Place himself in a suspension chamber as well so he could successfully battle his

own hunger. Tend to Ridenower so the man would continue to survive, continue to believe the story of Magaden's Flu, a fabrication that made him easier to control.

He looked up at the stars. They twinkled mockingly at him, a refuge he could never enjoy. *But someday they have to come back. They have to.*

The vampire roused himself and started back inside, back to the suspension chamber that had become his cold casket. He would be waiting for them.

## THE CHRONOMETER

You appear to be a discriminating gentleman. Might I interest you in taking possession of this unusual time piece?

No, I assure you, I am not trying to sell it. I just have no further need for it and it is too valuable and unique to be thrown away or found by a vagabond and pawned for a mere bottle of wine.

I understand your reticence, believe me. I was equally cautious when a stranger approached me with the same offer. He was a very well dressed man much like yourself, a man who wore his success proudly. He offered me the watch for the same reason I am offering it to you... he no longer had need for it.

Yes, this timepiece is quite striking, isn't it? You see, this is a *true* time piece. Oh, indeed it keeps most accurate time, but it does much more than that. With this chronometer you can actually see into the future.

No, I am quite serious. It is a property that I discovered quite by accident, but I see no reason for you to go through the same experimentation I did.

My discovery happened totally by chance. After I obtained this watch, I thought nothing more about it. Later that same day, sitting in my apartment and watching the news, I was idly toying with it. Setting the watch backwards had no effect. While resetting it, however, I inadvertently went a few minutes past the proper time. And I noticed that the weather report had abruptly shifted to the sports.

Now that is something I might not have paid attention to normally. But I also saw that I had incorrectly set the time by a few minutes. When I readjusted it, the weather report was back on.

Keep in mind that this was a live news broadcast. The weather *always* precedes the sports report. There was no reason to return to the weather. I thought perhaps it was just my imagination... until the scores came on.

Ever have that feeling of *deja vu*? I've experienced it often since I obtained this chronometer. I knew *immediately* what the sportscaster would say, what the scores would be. I was puzzled by this, naturally. I have never had any extraordinary perceptions or insights before. I played over in my mind what had just happened and finally realized that the only action I had done differently was to reset the watch.

So while a commercial played during a late night talk show, I set the watch forward a few minutes. Immediately the commercial disappeared and I was again watching the talk show, although this time with a different guest. I set it back and--voila--the spiel for a sports car was on the screen.

As you might imagine, I played with the watch throughout the evening. I discovered that if I adjusted the time very slowly, I enjoyed the effect of watching a video tape on fast forward. I also discovered something more painful. I assume it must have something to do with the very nature of time itself. If you move the watch forward about five minutes and return, the physical effect is almost unnoticed. Adjust it fifteen minutes and, upon returning, you'll feel like you've been running very fast for five minutes or so. I made the mistake of setting the watch forward a half hour. When I readjusted, I felt like I was in free-fall from 1,000 feet. Fortunately I was seated in a well-padded chair, otherwise, upon my return I might have caused serious injury to myself. As you might imagine, I have refrained from excursions any longer than 15 minutes into the future ever since.

Now that I had some understanding of how this chronometer worked, I had to decide how to use it. My first thought was the stock market. Unfortunately, until I came in possession of this timepiece, my means were quite modest. I had no knowledge on how to invest and the mere 15 minutes of extra knowledge I would possess were not going to earn me huge profits... at least not immediately.

The most obvious and fastest alternative for profit was gambling. So the following day I went to Atlantic City and entered the casinos. I considered blackjack and poker briefly, then decided roulette offered the most immediate means of verifying my theory.

It proved very easy to travel forward a minute or two, see the results, return and place my bet. The most difficult task was remaining inconspicuous. I quickly resorted to a strategy of winning small, losing a few, winning several more and so on. I also left that casino after I was ahead a few thousand and plied my trade at another. By the end of the evening--including time to eat supper and change clothes--I was more than \$20,000 in the black.

You don't believe me, of course. I would expect that. But let me prove my veracity. Take a quarter from your pocket and flip it. I will wager you anything I can call ten tosses in a row correctly. Ready? Heads. Heads. Tails. Heads. Tails. Tails. Tails. Heads. Tails. You see? All correct, and you never noticed that I was gone for the few seconds I needed each time to travel forward and observe the results.

That is one of the powers of this chronometer. You can return to the exact second you left this time frame to visit the near future. It can be quite addicting, I assure you. I've gotten into the habit of traveling forward several dozen times a day. Sometimes it is most amusing and entertaining. But not always.

Why would I be willing to give away this valuable item? It all has to do with what I have discovered about time. As I said earlier, this chronometer will not take you back into time... time is inviolate. Even traveling forward, observing what I have, I soon discovered that I could change nothing, have no effect on anything. That coin would turn up heads no matter what I did. The roulette ball would roll into 24. Future events are as etched in stone as any memorial in a graveyard.

My benefactor discovered the same truth. That first night, when I was watching the news, there was a brief notice of a fatal robbery. The victim was the same man who had given me this watch. The police said it happened one block and mere minutes after I had met him. As he had told me, he didn't need the chronometer anymore and, soon, neither will I.

Within five minutes I will cross this street. A moving van with failing brakes will go through the stop light and strike me. It will be a painful death, I assure you. And there is nothing I can do to avoid it.

So I ask you again, would you take this watch?

# THE PRACTICE OF VENGEANCE

Kharfon stood just beyond the small clearing, his sword at ready, and gazed warily at the path before him. Above, the moon was red and full, satiated perhaps by the blood of the small party which had set out with him on this journey of vengeance. Once there had been five: Alnikov, his younger, impetuous brother; Dhanik of the flaming red hair and temper, the twins Brun and Cahrn, and himself. Five young, strong and brave warriors determined to reach the foreboding castle of the dark magician Lyvorese. To avenge the kidnapping of Kharfon's sister.

A journey of five months it was, five months in which his friends and comrades had fallen victim to the various traps and obstacles the magician had set in their way. Brun to a winged assassin attacking from the tree tops, Dhanik to a deadfall set in an otherwise peaceful stream, his only brother to the sword of one of Lyvorese's undead guards. Just that afternoon, Cahrn had joined the others as he fell into a spiked pit. Kharfon's knuckles whitened on the haft of his weapon. Now he had five to avenge. He swore to the uncaring and unhearing stars that his vengeance would be total and terrible to behold.

Kharfon studied the clearing once again. The path beyond was invitingly clear. But a warning rang within him, one that had sounded several times during his journey. One that had been eerily and unerringly correct. Stepping back, he hacked off a branch from a nearby tree and tossed it well into the center of the small glade. Almost immediately he felt a tremor at his feet. Seconds later the ground erupted and the head and gaping maw of a giant whurm shot up into the air... directly below where the limb had landed. Kharfon smiled coldly as he ran into the clearing, bringing back his sword with both hands, then swinging it across and through the body of the unholy creature stretching out into the moonlight. Green ichor exploded from the profane beast, covering him with slime. The creature tried to turn its head, tried to find its prey with its senseless eyes, crushing jaws. Kharfon avoided it easily as he brought his sword down once again, this time severing the head completely. There was no sound, no death knell; instead the body slid back swiftly into its underground lair. Its head remained, the limb still clutched uselessly in its mouth. Kharfon managed a smile as he wiped his sword clean as best he could: one less minion of the magician to trouble him. He resumed his journey.

Resting on the limb of the tree, Kharfon gnawed at the haunch of the rabbit he had caught. It was morning, yet the forest remained deathly still. He had learned early on that daytime was the most dangerous for travel. Lyvorese had littered the way with sentries and guards, living and otherwise. They were nearly impossible to avoid during the sunlit hours. At evening, however, their senses were dimmed. At night they could often be avoided. Odd, he thought, that the magician's power seemed to wane in the darkness. Never completely, but enough to give him hope. Hope of freedom for his sister, revenge for his comrades.

From his lofty perch he could see the mountains beyond. The magician's aerie sat halfway up its face, seemingly impervious from attacks from above or below. Kharfon smiled sadly; the magician may indeed be correct.

His ruminations ceased at the sound of muffled voices below. He stretched himself along the sturdy branch and peered between the camouflaging leaves. A cadre of guards--five in all--appeared below him, dressed in leather armor with a blue crest on the front. They could only be under the employ of Lyvorese, no one else save a fool would be in these haunted woods. He watched as they passed below and beyond him, completely unaware of his presence. Possessing one of their uniforms could be useful



later, he decided. He waited until their footsteps had disappeared before quietly climbing down. And quietly hunting them.

He trailed them a good twenty minutes before they took respite in a small clearing. A bow would be most useful now, he grimaced, but he had exhausted his supply of arrows two weeks previous. The soldiers remained oblivious to his lurking eyes as they busied themselves making a small fire, confident in their safety. Kharfon fingered the knife at his side. It would take care of one, surprise would allow him to dispatch the second. Which would leave him three to fight.

The guards turned in shock and fear as the loud scream erupted behind them. Even as they were drawing their swords Kharfon sprang into view, burying his knife in the throat of the guard nearest him, then slashing at the guard on his right. His sword dug into the man's side, toppling him immediately to the ground. Kharfon wrested the weapon free, then brought it up in time to deflect his first attacker's thrust. Kharfon ducked under, grabbed the man's hair with his free hand and head-butted him savagely. The guard's face erupted in blood from his broken nose. He gasped in pain and reached for his face, providing Kharfon the opportunity to strike him on the head with the flat of his blade. Kharfon didn't pause to determine if the man was dead or merely stunned, he spun and jumped toward the remaining guards, swinging his sword in rapid, ever widening circles before him.

They tried to separate themselves but the clearing was too small, the undergrowth too near, to provide the space they needed. One began to reach for his knife and Kharfon attacked him instantly, driving him backward by the savagery and strength of his blows. The guard forgot the knife then and gripped his sword with both hands to defend himself. Then he backed up another step... and lost his balance as he hit the log he had so recently been sitting on. Those few seconds gave Kharfon the opening he needed, a quick slash opened the man as easily as a door.

Kharfon screamed then as a sword cut across his arm, ripping through skin and tendon. Kharfon spun to his right, his weapon up for the next blow. The last guard spun his sword, flicking his blade at arms, chest, legs. Kharfon deflected each attack easily, but he knew he couldn't delay; one of the other guards might still be alive. Instead he smiled. "Are you ready to join your comrades?" he asked as he swung his own weapon and advanced.

The remaining guard stepped back, glanced quickly at the carnage around him, then at the enraged figure in front. Kharfon brought his sword down on other's. Even using only one arm he nearly drove the man to his knees. The guard took two steps back, then roared a curse and hurled his weapon at Kharfon. Kharfon deflected it easily, then threw his own sword. His aim was much better; it buried itself to the hilt in the chest of his enemy.

Kharfon stood for a moment, gasping for breath, trying to calm the blood rage he had summoned within to provide the extra strength and speed he had required. Now that he was regaining control of himself he could feel the intense pain from the guard's blow, but he still had work to do before he could tend to it. He retrieved his knife and sword, then studied his victims. Only one wore a uniform that was not ruined by his attack. He undressed the guard whose nose he had broken, then slit the man's throat. Kharfon frowned as the clothing was too small for him, but it might provide him a few seconds of disguise. It would have to do, he realized. Then he tore his own jerkin apart to wrap his bleeding arm. He grimaced as he looked in his small pack since only two healing charms remained. How many did I waste? he chided himself, but recrimination was useless now.

Searching the dead guards uncovered nothing save several throwing knives; useful, but not as useful as additional charms. He had no choice this time, the wound was too severe. Muttering a soft curse, he pressed one of the charms against his damaged arm, then wrapped it tightly. He smiled as he felt the now-too-familiar flare of healing fire surge through him. Within hours all that would remain would be a

scar, one of many he had earned on his trek. But now he had only one charm left.

The small campfire still burned merrily so he squatted before it and warmed his hands. A fire was something he rarely permitted himself in these woods and he basked in its pleasant glow for several minutes. That was all he could allow himself he was sure. Sighing, he returned to the path, leaving the fire and dead for the minions of Lyvorese to find.

Three nights later he found himself at the bottom of the cliffs leading to the mage's hideaway. He had been forced off the path two days previous, first by the increasing number of guard patrols, then by the growing number of snares, traps and other dangers. Even travel by night had increased in peril, if such were possible. Twice he had been attacked by were-bats which had mistaken his silence for sleep. He had dispatched both, but not before he had endured numerous bites and scratches on his bare legs and arms. Even now blood continued to seep from a deep bite on his sword arm. Only a healing charm would close it but he was reluctant to use it as yet. Better to endure the pain now, he had decided, then spend his last, possibly life-saving gift, later.

He seized the nearest rock outcropping, pulled himself up, stretched across to seize another. The jagged cliff face offered ample toe- and hand-holds and he was able to reach the first ledge within a matter of minutes. From here the magician's castle jutted defiantly from its stone background. Lights glowed in its two towers, the path to the front gate was invitingly close. Dark figures patrolled the parapet but from this distance it was impossible to determine if they were human. Kharfon sighed; a rope would be useful right now. He edged his way along the narrow ledge, stretched and pulled himself up to another, even smaller ledge. Then to another, then another, climbing upward until after three hours he was above the foreboding edifice.

From his small perch he studied the defenses the magician used. It wasn't only guards who patrolled the perimeter. Black winged forms circled slowly above and beyond the residence, searching below for easy prey. But not searching above. He grinned. The magician was certain he could never be attacked from above and behind. He began a slow, perilous ascent.

Hunger burned at him, a persistent flame which he could not as yet extinguish. Kharfon had spent the day well hidden in a small niche in the cliff face, still wary about attacking the castle in sunlight. He was just above the parapets now, studying the patrolling guards, trying to gauge their pattern. The winged sentries maintained a perimeter beyond the manor walls, their attention focused outward, not in or behind.

Confident in his own power the magician was, and rightly so, Kharfon thought. Only one guard patrolled each section of the wall, and their concentration surely had to be centered on matters other than protection. He climbed as low as the foot and handholds allowed, but that still left a 20 foot drop to the stony surface. He needed something to break his fall and decided a guard would do nicely. But he had to draw one close.

He nearly hugged the cliff face as the guard approached on his endless rounds. It was not time yet and if the man looked up he would be immediately discovered. Kharfon willed himself still as the guard finished his round at the base of the cliff and started back. He waited until the man was ten paces away before tearing a large brass button off his jerkin and dropping it. It clicked softly on the parapets below, but not so softly that it didn't capture the guard's attention. The man turned immediately, sword drawn, peering into the darkness to discover the cause. He approached slowly, his attention still on the ground. Kharfon held his breath. One step, two steps. The guard stopped nearly beneath him, his attention attracted by something shining in the dim moonlight. He reached down to examine it..

...when Kharfon pushed himself away from the cliff and came crashing down on top of him. He landed on the guard's back with both feet, then bounced off and fell painfully on the parapet. It took him seconds to

catch his breath but when he finally regained his balance he discovered there was no need to hurry. The guard had been smashed against the stone walkway by his attack and rendered unconscious. Kharfon didn't hesitate, he withdrew his knife and slashed the man's throat, then turned as he heard a voice and approaching foot steps.

"What was that?" the approaching guard asked.

"Just a rat. Surprised me," he responded as he quickly walked forward.

In the moonlight the man saw first the white symbol on the blue uniform and immediately relaxed. "You should be careful, Stiron. You could wake the dead. Or worse, the master." Then Kharfon was close enough where the guard could see him fully. "Wait, you're not..."

His attempt at his sword was stopped by Kharfon's own running him through. "I hope so," Kharfon muttered as he stepped back from the collapsing, lifeless sentinel. He cleaned the blade quickly on the man's cape, then returned his weapon to its sheath. It only took him seconds to open the door to the turret and walk inside.

Torches along the wall illuminated the winding stone stairway. Kharfon didn't know when his presence would be discovered so he moved as quickly as possible. At the bottom door he paused and placed his ear against it. Silence. Taking a deep breath, he opened it slowly and stepped across the threshold to find himself in a narrow hallway. The left disappeared into darkness, but the right appeared to lead into the heart of the castle. Grasping his sword, he turned almost instinctively to the right.

Kharfon noted immediately the austerity of his surroundings. No lavish tapestries or portraits adorned these walls, no exotic statuary interrupted the monotony of bare stone and wood as he progressed. When he came upon a suit of leather armor standing in a notch in the wall, he became wary.

The attack came not from that quarter, however, but from behind. He heard a door open and turned just as a figure he recognized sprung at him. "Dhanik," he gasped as he parried the blow. The face was nearly unrecognizable, but the tattered clothing and the way the animated corpse held its head to one side, the result of the broken neck that killed him, left no doubt. "I will avenge us both, I swear," he said as he dodged another sword stroke. His attacker said nothing, merely maintained his slow yet steady onslaught.

Kharfon cursed as he retreated. He couldn't allow this distraction to continue much longer, especially if more animated guards were nearby. The Dhanik he now faced was stronger than any human, but also much slower. "I'm sorry, my friend," he whispered as he parried another blow, then brought his own sword down. The blade went completely through the dead attacker's sword arm, severing it from the body. The corpse stood and trembled briefly, then bent down and reached for its weapon. Kharfon brought his sword down once again. This time he decapitated his deceased friend. "Rest in peace," he whispered to Dhanik's remains, then turned and hurried onward.

Muffled voices caught his attention as he found himself in another hallway, this one stretching north and south. Was Dhanik the only guard? he wondered while he slowly approached. *Was Lyvorese that confident in his exterior defenses that he saw no need for protection inside?* Kharfon shrugged the questions away. He would find out soon enough.

He paused at the closed door and strained to listen. Only two people seemed to be on the other side and his breath caught as he recognized the soft muted tones of his sister. The high, mocking tones of the male voice were familiar as well. The voice of the man who had laughed at him as Kharfon stood chained and helpless while his sister was seized and taken from him. Lyvorese. Kharfon reached out and grabbed the handle. A slight turn proved the door was unlocked. Taking a deep breath, Kharfon burst into the room.

He found himself in a cavernous library. In the center of the room stood Lyvorese while Kharfon's sister was seated primly near him. Both turned at the sound of his entrance. "What is this? How dare you enter my sanctuary!" the magician roared.

"You've taken something of mine," Kharfon whispered as he advanced, sword at the ready. "That cannot be permitted."

"Do you really think you are powerful enough to threaten me within my own home? Your effrontery is an intolerable insult!" With that the magician raised his arms and began to chant.

"As is your continued existence." Already Kharfon could discern shadowy forms beginning to appear around him. He was still too far from Lyvorese to threaten him with his sword. But a knife...

With one motion he grabbed it from his belt and hurled it. Too late the mage saw it, too late he recognized his danger. Then the knife buried itself up to the hilt in his chest. He let out one high pitched scream before collapsing to the floor.

The cloudy forms disappeared as quickly as they had arrived. Kharfon approached his fallen enemy. "You have preyed upon us for far too long, Lyvorese. Your death will be celebrated far and wide."

"I think not, Kharfon." the magician's voice came from behind him.

Kharfon gasped and spun. The person sitting primly in the chair was no longer his sister, but the grinning, confident mage. With a sinking heart he turned back to the still figure at his feet. Before his eyes its features were changing; the hair darkened and lengthened, the facial features softened, the clothing and torso altered. Kharfon groaned and fell to his knees as he realized it was not the magician he had just slain, but his own sister.

"She was becoming quite tiring. Complaining everyday, having fits of the vapors. Better this way, don't you think?"

Kharfon rose slowly then stared at Lyvorese. "You have cost me everything, magician. My friends and now my sister. Kill me now. For I most certainly will kill you!"

Lyvorese merely sat with folded hands. "We could do that. But I have other plans for you."

"You will have nothing." With that Kharfon let out a scream and charged.

"Enough."

The simple command struck Kharfon with the force of a deadfall. His body froze as firmly as if he were suddenly immersed in a glacier. He could only listen as Lyvorese stood before him.

"You've performed excellently, my friend," the magician smiled coldly. "This time you nearly won our little game. But, of course, that can never happen."

Inside Kharfon memories began to tremble, to slowly awaken and burrow toward his consciousness as he watched the preening mage pour himself a glass of wine.

"I see I have much to do to fortify my defenses," Lyvorese said almost to himself. "Imagine, you actually managed to reach, and enter, my manor! And if you could do so, so could my real enemies." He sat and swirled his drink. "You must tell me how you did it."

Never, Kharfon wanted to say. Instead he found himself describing every detail of his journey, including

the scaling of the cliffs and his attack from above. When he finished Lyvorese nodded sadly. “A whurm you say? Pity, they are so difficult to propagate. Yes, your efforts have given me much to ponder. I see I have much work to do.” Then he turned his gaze on Kharfon. “You are starting to remember now, aren’t you?”

If Kharfon could scream, he would. If he could cry, could make any movement at all. Yet the spell was too powerful. He could only tremble from the rage and terror inside him as the memories *did* return. Memories of his other assaults on the mage’s domain. Assaults that had been fatal to so many, futile and, ultimately, without purpose. Each under the command of the magician before him. Each with the sole purpose of testing the mage’s defenses.

Lyvorese approached him, touched the seeping wound on his forearm, the result of the were-bat attack. “I could heal that, I suppose,” he whispered. “I could perhaps heal her,” he pointed to the still form of Kharfon’s sister on the floor. “But that would serve no purpose. Better my enemies see a man beaten and nearly destroyed by his efforts, then cast aside like a sodden crust of bread. That is what you shall tell them, my friend. That you failed.” Lyvorese stepped back. “My minions will return you now. All that has happened here will be forgotten when you awake. Except, of course, for your failure.” He paused. “You have another sister, I believe. Yes, she will do nicely.” Lyvorese patted Kharfon on the back. “When I am ready, I will call for you.”

## BEYOND

### THE GANYMEDE INCIDENT

“Sir, everyone is aboard.”

“Thank you, Mr. Ryan.” John Baron, captain of *Hunter3*, accepted the manifest and scanned it. “Tell Mr. Mitchell we can leave immediately. Assemble our guests in the conference chamber at once.”

The officer saluted and left. Baron juggled the manifest. The supplies, the extra weaponry, the equipment brought by the passengers, everything was loaded. He just hoped it would be enough.

Besides his crew, all military, there were only two other passengers on this mission; Dr. Amos Frunhomme and Dr. Thoran Dru. He had read some of Frunhomme’s theoretical work; it *had* to be theoretical since he was an exobiologist and as yet no exo-life had been discovered. Although that could change by the time their journey was completed. *But Dr. Thoran Dru?* “Since when did you become a doctor, old friend?” he said to himself.

He felt a slight shudder, signifying *Hunter3* was leaving the dock. *Good, we’re five minutes early.* He retrieved the packet of what little information they had and headed to the conference room, where he found his officers waiting for him. The man he didn’t recognize had to be Dr. Frunhomme. The scientist towered over Baron as he rose to greet the captain. “I demand to know why I was denied my assistants!”

“Dr. Frunhomme,” he offered his hand. “I am John Baron, captain of this mission.”

The doctor ignored it. Instead he looked down at the encephalic folds, the leathery skin, the thick tongue and the coarse spare hair on his head. *My God, this mission is being led by a mongoloid!* He bit back an insult, he understood how effective the Stimulator was in negating the mental retardation caused by

Down's Syndrome. He would not challenge the man's competency because of an extra chromosome. He would find another reason. "You have not answered my question," he said instead.

"Admiral Sharkey put together this complement. You will have to take your objections up with him. Now," Baron continued, looking around the room, "I see we are missing someone. Mr. Ryan, where is Dr. Dru?"

"He was still supervising the unloading of his equipment in his stateroom when I left. He said he would be here shortly."

"Fine." He took the seat at the head of the table. "While we're waiting we can go through the introductions. Officer Marinovich," he pointed to the sole woman at the table, "is our science officer on this mission. She will offer you all the assistance you need, Dr. Frunhomme."

"My assistants were trained by *me*," the doctor said. "I doubt your officer has the training this mission requires. No offense intended, Miss Marinovich."

Her response was interrupted. "I am sorry I was delayed. Have I missed anything?" Thoran Dru smiled shyly as he entered the crowded room.

Dr. Frunhomme watched coldly as the short, stout and balding man took the open chair across from him. *Doesn't he know that suit is eight years out of fashion?* "You are late, doctor."

Dru tugged at his goatee. "Unavoidable. I apologize for the inconvenience."

Baron broke in before Dr. Frunhomme could retort further. "You're here now. Let's get started. Please study the computer screens in front of you." Baron pressed a button on his own and the computers sprang to life. "This is station Ganymede," he described the scene on-screen. "It is a research facility in orbit around Neptune. Less than two days ago we received a transmission. They reported they were under attack, then the signal stopped." He gazed at the assemblage. "We have received no communications since."

"What about the asteroid colonies? They're closer, have they heard anything?" Marinovich asked. "Or any vessels in the area?"

"Nothing. There are no vessels in the vicinity. Considering the content of Ganymede's original and sole message, the Navy decided it would be best not to send an unarmed craft. Other vessels have been warned. We will be the first to investigate."

"Being attacked. Being attacked by what?" Dr. Frunhomme asked.

"We have no idea at this time," Baron responded. "Pirates? A mutiny? Or an unknown race? That is why you are here, Dr. Frunhomme."

"I am well aware of that," the scientist replied coldly. "But why," he looked at Dru, "are you?"

Dru played with one of the many rings on his hands. "I am here strictly in an advisory capacity, doctor. I assure you I will not interfere with your work."

"You already *have*," the doctor rejoined, rising. "Thanks to you I had to leave my assistants behind!"

"Admiral Sharkey insisted Dr. Dru accompany us," Baron interrupted. "I apologize that the living quarters on this ship are limited, but a full complement of military personnel are necessary if we find ourselves in a hostile situation. Again, Dr. Frunhomme, I suggest you take up your concerns with him

when we return.”

Dr. Frunhomme sat grudgingly. “What else do we know?” The anger was still in his voice.

“Very little, I’m afraid. First and foremost we are on a rescue mission. Ganymede is a research facility only. Against any armed force it will be defenseless. We will be arriving within three days. Other mission information is already logged into your computers. I suggest you study it. We will reconvene in 12 hours. All other questions and suggestions will be honored at that time. Now if you’ll excuse me, I have other duties to complete.”

Baron hurried to his stateroom. Because of the importance of this mission, he had foregone his regular sessions with the Stimulator for far too long. The damage Down’s Syndrome inevitably caused would, in an earlier age, have doomed him to an institution or sheltered employment for life. The Stimulator allowed him to learn and remember. But, like a diabetic, he had to take treatments frequently.

He sat in the special chair and attached the helmet. He would have an excruciating headache later, he knew. While the Stimulator did its magic he read the dossiers. Despite the doctor’s abrasive manner, he remained impressed by Dr. Frunhomme’s qualifications. Doctorates from three different and prestigious universities, head of the exobiology department at Stanford, dozens of theoretical papers and several honoraria. He wondered if the doctor would finally get the opportunity to use his knowledge and training on this voyage. He hoped not.

Then he turned to Thoran Dru’s resumé. He frowned as he read the sparse information. He knew Dru had attended the Space Academy; they had been classmates and, later, crewmates. A short and unspectacular stint in the Navy, an unexpected resignation. And then - nothing. “Why are you here, Thoran? Why did Admiral Sharkey insist you accompany this mission?” *And what have you been doing for the past 15 years?* Baron closed his eyes and tried to ignore the hum of the machine and the familiar fire inside his head. He had many questions to ask his old friend.

Dr. Frunhomme studied the chessboard as he relaxed in the otherwise empty lounge. It was their second day out and as of yet no other information, no other communications from either Ganymede or headquarters had been received. He could hardly make realistic theoretical conjectures with such sparse data. All he could do was sit and wait, an activity he did not particularly enjoy. Chess, at least, would help him while away the hours. Since he had been forced to abandon his assistants and since he had no confidence or confidants in the crew, solitude was his only recourse.

This particular end-game problem had perplexed him for the past three weeks. He cautiously advanced the white knight, considered, then took back the move.

“Try advancing the queen’s bishop pawn to the sixth rank. It puts it in danger but it also opens the board for an effective counter-attack,” a familiar voice suggested from behind him.

Dr. Frunhomme turned and found Thoran Dru standing behind him. He forced an insincere smile. “Ah, Dr. Dru. So nice to see you again. I take it you play?”

Dru took a seat across from him. “On occasion. Not as much as I would like. I believe if you follow my suggestion you can checkmate in five moves. Sometimes, as in life, one must make sacrifices for the greater good.”

“Well said. One of the great delights of the game. Care for a match?” The scientist began setting up the board. “Tell me, doctor, what is your specialty?”

Dru positioned his own men. “You give me black. I assume you prefer the offensive position.”

“Yes,” he replied, advancing a pawn in a standard opening. “Passivity rarely leads to success. Again I ask, what is your field?”

“Religion, I would guess. History. Some might say mythology,” Dru answered as he responded with a standard defense.

“A minister? A minister on a spaceship? On a mission as important as this? While my assistants had to remain behind?” Anger crept into Dr. Frunhomme’s voice. “Where did you earn your degree?”

Dru smiled. “Mine would be considered honorary, I confess. I doubt any recognized university could bestow a degree such as mine.”

Dr. Frunhomme set his knight solidly on the board, safely threatening the black pawn. “Then I ask again; what are you a doctor *of*?”

“Alchemy.”

Dr. Frunhomme stared at his opponent. “Is this some kind of joke?”

Dru shook his head while he studied the board. “On the contrary. Alchemy is as much a science as quantum physics or your own field.”

“Eyes of newt and tongue of toad? That’s a science?” *And my assistants were left behind because of you!* “You try my patience, Mr. Dru.”

Dru advanced his queen’s bishop as assuredly as he responded. “Alchemy functions the same as any science. If you are trying to create a particular distillate, you mix certain chemicals in predetermined amounts, treat them with the proper temperature or pressure and you arrive at the desired result. The same is true of alchemy, even if our ‘ingredients’ might appear a trifle unusual to the uninitiated.”

Dr. Frunhomme snorted. “You sit there and tell me you can change lead to gold?”

“If I had a dragon’s egg, yes. Unfortunately many of the items required for successful alchemy are difficult if not impossible to obtain.” Dru leaned forward. “I understand your skepticism even if I do not appreciate it. But please remember: alchemists were successfully mastering the secrets of the universe while your ancestors were still arguing whether or not the Earth was round.”

“Superstitious claptrap,” the doctor snarled as he captured a pawn. “I had to leave two assistants behind while a self-styled magician is given a berth on this mission. This is ridiculous!”

“Again I say that alchemy is no more magical than any science once you understand the principles,” Dru replied evenly. “I am not a magician. I do not make human sacrifices or covenants with the darker gods. I am sorry you are inconvenienced by the lack of your assistants. But it was absolutely necessary I participate in this mission.”

Dr. Frunhomme fought his anger. “And why is that?”

“Because I know what we are dealing with.”

Dr. Frunhomme snorted again, then advanced a rook. “And how do you know that? Are you also an expert on exobiology? Or did you merely read the entrails of a goat?”

“A lamb is more effective, but no. Actually, it started 15 years ago...”

I was assigned to collection duty. When you’re fresh from the Academy and mired in the middle of your



class, you can't expect high profile postings. And there's few lower than collecting Cans.

Cans were giant interstellar trash collectors. Somebody got the idea that perhaps among the flotsam and jetsam of space we would discover evidence of other space-faring civilizations. The Cans were little more than giant dumpsters with lids that were triggered when something stumbled into them. The lids shut and a transmitter went off telling us that something, usually a small meteorite or other debris, was inside. Our job was to collect them.

Collection ships weren't much more complicated. Small living quarters in front, engines in the rear and a lot of empty space between. John Baron and I were the crew. I was on duty when the signal came in. A Can in the vicinity of Io had collected something.

It didn't take that long to find it, maybe six hours or so. But what we retrieved was something totally beyond my experience. You must understand, Cans were *strong*. Titanium-reinforced carbon/resin compound almost a foot thick, these things were designed to catch a comet. But when we brought it into the docking bay and checked it out, we found this Can had been virtually torn apart. There was a gaping hole in the side where something had ripped through it from the *inside*. When we returned, John and I were de-briefed, then taken off collection duty. Our report was buried. The program was canceled three months later. Not long after I left the Service.

"A pleasant story," Dr. Frunhomme offered. "Obviously an explosion."

"No. The damage was too localized. The scratches we found on the inside were parallel and very deep. Like claw marks."

The scientist paused, his bishop still in his hand. "You are claiming that something *alive* caused the damage? Something that could actually exist in space?"

Dru nodded. "There is one aspect of the incident I didn't put in my report. I was still on duty after we retrieved the Can. I was monitoring both our instruments and our cameras, hoping I would discover *something*."

"Unfortunately I did. It came out of nowhere. It just *appeared*, with no warning from the instruments. It flew right at my ship; giant wings and claws, gaping jaws and fangs. It actually seemed to hover in front of me, it actually seemed to *laugh* at me. Then it turned and leisurely flew away." Dru gazed at the scientist. "You can understand why I didn't say anything."

Dr. Frunhomme grimaced in disgust. "A hallucination. Otherwise instrument records would have supported you, no matter how fanciful your report."

"Our instruments are not designed to sense organic material. Not in space. Although I doubt this creature was organic." Dru moved his queen out of danger. "Frankly, I thought the same as you. Then, about a year later, I was vacationing in Europe. And I saw them again, in Paris, in Germany. Then I knew what we were dealing with. Gargoyles." Dru paused. "That's when I decided to leave the Service, to study the alternate sciences."

"That's the most ridiculous story I've ever heard." Dr. Frunhomme stated firmly and moved his knight. "And you're in check."

"I would expect that response. And," he replied with his bishop, "I expected that move." Dru stood. "I am here to help, Dr. Frunhomme. Don't forget that. If you'll excuse me, I have some preparations to make. By the way, you are checkmated in three moves."

Thorán Dru left the scientist studying the board, vainly searching for an escape.

“You will remove that man from this ship immediately!”

John Baron rubbed the pain from his forehead. That and abrasions on his brow were a regular aftereffect from a session with the Stimulator. “I take it you are referring to Dr. Dru.”

Dr. Frunhomme was livid. “He is no doctor! He is a charlatan, a sham, a fraud. He has no business on this vessel!”

“We are less than a day from Station Ganymede. You know time is critical on this mission.”

“Then throw him in a transport and get him out of here!”

“He is here at the expressed request of Admiral Sharkey.” Baron smiled at the raging scientist. “Again I suggest you render your objections directly to him.”

Dr. Frunhomme leaned across the desk. “You little moron. When I’m done, I’ll have your hide hanging on my wall!”

Baron allowed a slight frown to cross his mongoloidal features. “Technically, my unenhanced intelligence quotient puts me in the ‘idiot’ category. The Stimulator makes that moot, of course.”

Dr. Frunhomme grinned evilly. “I would suggest you have your mechanics fine-tune your equipment. It seems to be doing nothing for your common sense. Besides, you certainly don’t deserve your captainship. The only reason you have come this far is because the Stimulator force-fed you all your knowledge.”

“The Stimulator allows me to retain what I have learned,” Baron replied tiredly. “It does not give me the knowledge, that I have to earn myself.”

“I’ll tell you something…”

“No, I’ll tell *you* something,” he retorted, standing. “My assignment is to investigate the incident at Station Ganymede. To assist you and Dr. Dru in every way I reasonably can. My crew and I do not have the time or patience to baby-sit a prima donna.”

“He is *no doctor!*” Dr. Frunhomme turned red with rage.

“I don’t care if he’s a janitor. Admiral Sharkey thinks he can help. More importantly, *I* think he can help. Now unless you have something to discuss that is relevant to this mission, I must ask you to leave. I have a lot of work to complete.”

“I won’t forget this,” the scientist said as he left.

*I’m sure you won’t.* Baron sighed and returned his attention to his reports.

Thorán looked up when he heard the knock at his door. He had been carefully positioning the candelabra and its seven black candles, each made from the fat of a new-born calf slaughtered during a full moon. “I am quite busy. Who is it?”

“Captain Baron,” came the muffled yet familiar voice.

“A moment if you will.” Thorán threw the bones, dead spiders, and other tools of his trade hurriedly in a drawer; he let the candles be. “Please come in.” Dru greeted Baron with a hearty handshake as soon as

he entered. "So nice of you to join me. It has been a very long time."

"Too long." Baron glanced quickly around the small room. "I trust the accommodations are acceptable?"

"It's been several years since I've been off-world. I had forgotten how space can be a premium in space. A drink?" Dru poured then handed a glass of wine to Baron, he contented himself with fruit juice. He noted the red marks on his friend's forehead. "Still using the Stimulator, I see."

"I have no choice. Not unless I want to spend my days in some institution. But," he set his glass down, "I see you haven't changed."

"Really?" Dru looked down at his expanding waist. "If you consider a lot less hair and a lot more weight status quo."

"I was referring to your unequaled ability to piss people off. You've lit quite a fire under Dr. Frunhomme."

"Unavoidable, I'm afraid."

Baron gazed at his old comrade. Actually Thoran *had* changed, and in manners beyond the physical. *But how? Who are you, Thoran Dru?* "He raised some valid objections, however. He claims you are a magician or alchemist or suchlike. Is that true? Thoran, why *are* you on this trip? Why would Admiral Sharkey want you here?"

It was a fair question, Dru realized. *How much can I tell him? How much will he believe?* "Do you remember the Can we retrieved near Io?"

Baron nodded. "That's one of the reasons I was assigned to this trip. Although as yet I find it irrelevant. I assume you do not."

"Something happened that I didn't tell you about. Perhaps now is the time."

Baron sat silent after he finished. "Now I understand why Dr. Frunhomme was so upset," he began after collecting his thoughts. "Frankly, so am I. You want me to deal with whatever we're dealing with with *magic?*"

"Not magic. Alchemy. It is as much a science as any other, even if its guiding principles and precepts are different." Dru's voice grew cold. "Believe me, John, I hope I am wrong. I hope that was just a hallucination I experienced 15 years ago. But if I am *not*, then we are in serious danger."

Baron finished his wine. "I confess, Thoran, that I agree with the doctor. I would not have you on this mission, either. However, I have my orders, which I shall obey. We should reach Station Ganymede in one more day. Or whatever is left of it. I suggest you stay out of Dr. Frunhomme's way during the interim."

"I plan to. His dialogue is tiring and his chess game unimaginative. I have plenty of preparations to complete anyway."

Baron gnawed on a fingernail as he walked down the hall, a habit he adopted unconsciously when troubled. *Thoran Dru an alchemist!* At least he could now appreciate the scientist's anger. *Why had Admiral Sharkey insisted Dru be on this mission?* He would have some questions of his own for his superior when he returned.

Dru sighed heavily after Baron left. He understood his old friend's predicament perfectly. He would feel

the same if it wasn't for what he had learned in the ancient and forbidding Tsa Zhayn monastery in Tibet, at the hidden sacrificial altar deep within Chichén Itzá, at the unholy obeah ceremonies in the Louisiana bayous, inside the burial cavern of Liu Wu in China's Lion Mountain, during the ceremony of the White Bear atop the Black Hills of South Dakota and so many more sacred and profane locales.

He hated lying to his old friend, but it was necessary. For in truth he *was* on this mission under false pretenses. Admiral Sharkey would have never allowed him on this voyage, in truth if he had ever heard of Thoran Dru. Dru had been forced to visit the admiral during a dreamwalk, planting his orders deep within the sleeping man's subconscious. Sometimes, Dru admitted, the ends justified the means.

Dru had lied to Dr. Frunhomme as well. He was an alchemist but he was much more than that. His other, more arcane talents would be required on this mission. He reached in the desk and pulled out the grimoire of Crispian Peters. Dru rubbed its surface, covered with tanned human skin and etched with ancient runes. He had found it in the Caspian Mountains, hidden in the vault of a crumbling castle rumored to have once been owned by a vampire. The truth, he knew, was more terrifying.

He turned to the chapter on demonic evocation and eviction. There was a rift between dimensions, he was convinced of it. The gargoyles were only the vanguard for even more ferocious demons which could soon emerge. Unless he could close it first. He began to read.

"We should arrive at the station within half an hour, Captain," the navigator said.

"Good. Have we received any messages from Ganymede?"

"No, sir," said the communications operator. "No communications since before we left."

Baron frowned as he prowled the operations center. *What has happened at Ganymede? What were they going to find? A natural disaster? Sabotage? Or an attack by another space-faring race?* He prayed he would not need to use his armament. "Where are Dr. Frunhomme and Dr. Dru?" he asked a lieutenant.

"Dr. Frunhomme is in the lounge, Dr. Dru is in his stateroom."

"Tell them both we will be arriving within the hour. They should both join us on the bridge."

The lieutenant saluted and left. Baron took his captain's seat and sighed; he was not looking forward to having the two together, but, thanks to the admiral, he had no choice. "Time you two earned your keep," he said under his breath.

Dr. Frunhomme appeared five minutes later. "Where is Dr. Dru?" Baron asked his lieutenant.

"He said he would be here in about ten minutes. The doctor had some preparations to complete."

"Do *not* refer to that charlatan as a doctor!" the scientist raged. "He has no right to be on this mission and certainly no reason to be on the bridge!"

"Now play nice, Dr. Frunhomme," Baron admonished him gently. "We've discussed this issue before."

Dr. Frunhomme glared at the mongoloid, then reconsidered. "What have you found so far?"

"No communications. We're still too far away to pick up anything on our sensors."

"Have the probes been released?"

Baron glanced at his science officer. "We've been waiting for your instructions, sir," Marinovich

responded, pointedly omitting his title.

Dr. Frunhomme bit his tongue. "Release them." He sat down heavily in the chair next to Baron. "No communications?"

Baron shook his head. "No signals or signs from any transport ships either. I do not like this, Dr. Frunhomme."

The scientist nodded grimly, his fingers dancing mindlessly across the computer console in front of him. "Are we still going at maximum?"

"Of course."

"We might want to back it off a bit. We have no idea what we're barging in on."

Baron frowned. "Time is of the essence. I feel confident with our weaponry. If there are any survivors ..."

"The chance of survivors are minimal at best." Dr. Frunhomme glared at the captain. "If this is indeed some type of assault we need to protect ourselves. The purpose of this mission is to obtain information and return. Intact. Save the cowboy crap for another time."

Baron was preparing a retort when Thoran Dru entered. He appeared exhausted, as if he had not slept in two days. In truth he hadn't. "Dr. Dru, glad you could join us." He glanced at the scientist and repressed a grin as he noticed the man's stifled rage.

Dru stood beside the captain. "When will we arrive?"

"We could be there in less than twenty minutes if we maintain our current speed. Dr. Frunhomme has suggested, however, that we approach more cautiously." He made no attempt to disguise his sarcasm.

Dru sighed. "I concur. If what I suspect is correct, an hour or so will make no difference."

"And what do you suspect?" Dr. Frunhomme could no longer control his anger. Then he looked at Baron. "Does he have to be up here?"

"As I've said before, you can take your complaints directly to Admiral Sharkey when we return," Baron said heavily. "Helmsman, cut our power to half." He ignored the questioning stares of his crew even as he understood their resentment. Some of the men and women on the station were classmates, friends, at the least fellow members of the military. He and his crew were honor-bound to do everything they could to rescue them. But his orders were clear as well, the scientist had to be accommodated.

"Sir, we've just received a signal from one of our probes."

Dr. Frunhomme looked at the science officer. "What has it told us?"

"Very little. The signal didn't last long enough."

Baron frowned. "What do you mean?"

She threw up her hands. "I mean it didn't last long enough. We made contact and then almost immediately the transmission stopped."

Dr. Frunhomme rose. "Was it jammed?"

"They destroyed it more likely," Dru said under his breath.

Dr. Frunhomme glared at Dru. “What are you talking about? Those probes are designed to study Jupiter, Saturn.”

“I told you what they did to the Can.” Dru shrugged. “They did the same to the probe. I doubt you would have learned much in any event. Your sensors aren’t designed for them.”

Dr. Frunhomme looked around the control center. Most of the crewmen were listening, curious. “My esteemed colleague,” he motioned mockingly toward Dru, “believes the space station is under attack from gargoyles.”

“I hope I am wrong,” Dru offered in mild defense.

“I told you he doesn’t belong on this mission. He *especially* doesn’t belong up here!” Dr. Frunhomme folded his arms and smiled smugly at Baron.

“Sir,” Marinovich broke the embarrassed silence, “a visual signal is coming in from another probe.”

“Good. Put it on the screen,” Baron ordered, relieved for the diversion.

The low hum of conversations ceased as the camera broadcast appeared overhead. In the middle of the screen the space station Ganymede hovered. Around it floated bits of wreckage, sections of the great radial arms that had been ripped apart, parts of a radio telescope, a supply pod. But that was not what brought the gasps from the officers.

“What are those?” Dr. Frunhomme asked in wonderment, staring at the creatures which were crawling around the outside of the edifice. “What are they doing?”

Thorán Dru chilled as he viewed the destruction before him. “I was right,” he said softly.

“Zoom in,” ordered Baron.

As the magnification grew, the crew could see there were indeed creatures crawling across the outside of the station. Noticing the probe, one detached itself and came closer to investigate. The camera focused on a creature the size of a English sheepdog, but with gaping jaws, pointed ears, bulging eyes, giant leathery wings and sweeping tail. It seemed to grin as two powerful, clawed arms reached out. Then the signal went dead.

“Creatures that can live in space,” Dr. Frunhomme said, stunned. “I cannot believe it possible. But, how can they fly? There is no air to provide resistance. How can they fly?”

“They are not bound by the laws of our universe,” Dru said sadly.

“We have to capture one,” the scientist demanded.

“We have to destroy them,” Baron returned. “After what they’ve done to that station, what they did to that probe.”

The scientist shook his head vehemently. “They are too valuable. What we could learn.” Dr. Frunhomme faded off as he allowed himself to consider the repercussions: a new species named by and after him, the scientific accolades and prizes which would follow. “We have to get closer, we have to capture one!”

Baron looked at Dru. At least he had been correct about living creatures in space. *What else is he correct about?* “What is your opinion, doctor?”

He frowned. “These are the same creatures that destroyed the Can years ago. There is nothing on this

ship strong enough to contain one.”

Dr. Frunhomme glared at Dru. “*I* am in charge on this mission, doctor. Remember that. Yours is an advisory capacity, only. And I certainly do not want *your* advice.” He looked at Baron. “We *must* capture one of them. Marinovich, what other readings did the probe send? Spectroanalysis. Magnetic. Thermal. Anything.”

The science officer frowned. “Our readings registered the space station, of course. But the creatures did not register at all. Except on the video.”

“That’s impossible! There has to be *something*. Our instruments cannot be malfunctioning. We can’t all be experiencing a mass hallucination.” He looked at Baron. “We have to get closer.”

“I do not want put my ship in danger. But I cannot allow whatever those are to attack elsewhere. Helmsman, go to one-eighth power. Arm all weapons.”

“You must excuse me,” Dru told Baron. “I can do nothing more here.”

Baron frowned but finally nodded.

“Good riddance,” Dr. Frunhomme offered as Dru hurried out of the command center.

Thoran Dru went directly to his quarters, locking his door securely behind him. Once the gargoyles saw their ship, they would attack. And there were no weapons that could protect them. Except his.

He had spent the last two days making final preparations. The pentagram was drawn, the spells memorized, his arsenal ready. First he lit the black candles, speaking an arcane phrase over each. As he set the timer for his tape recorder, he had to admit there were some advantages in practicing magic in the scientific age. Normally at least one assistant would be required, but thanks to modern technology, he would be able to perform the ceremony by himself. Of course, if there was an accident--a power outage perhaps--there would be no one nearby to bring him back.

The rest of his tools were at the recently-unpacked suspension chamber, the cross, the caul from the seventh son of a seventh son, the goat’s foot, a cup of his own blood, freshly drawn. The last he had used to sketch the pentagram on the table. Dru stood in front of a mirror and, again using his own blood, drew runes on his nude body while the tape recorder recited his voice in the background. Next he ingested the potion - an extract of black widow venom, wolfsbane and swamp hellbore. An interesting combination, he thought as he forced down the bitter potion. A poison, a stimulant and a cardiac depressant: a concoction similar to that used by voodoo priests to induce zombieism. In combination with the suspension chamber, he would be brought to a flatline state. Only then could he enter the other dimensions... and the battle would truly begin.

For that had always been the purpose of the human sacrifice: the fleeting soul opened the doorway between the worlds, allowing the shaman or magicians to communicate and interact with those existing in the other realms. With the suspension chamber, he would be able to do it by himself. If he was fortunate, he may even be able to return.

The tape recorder continued reciting the necessary spells as he clambered into the chamber, one, he thought, that was uncomfortably like a coffin. He could feel the effects of the drugs as he positioned the caul over his face. The chamber, also computer-controlled, closed and he could faintly feel the temperature dropping. If he was successful, the chamber would revive him in fifteen minutes. If not, then he would have enjoyed a more comfortable death than the crew. Because Dru was certain none of their weaponry would be effective against the demons outside.

“What do you mean, you are receiving no other readings?” Dr. Frunhomme glared at the science officer.

She bit her tongue as she looked at the input from the third probe. “Sir, the only thing we are picking up is wreckage from the station. There are no radiation readings, radio waves, spectral readings, thermal readings or anything else that cannot be attributed solely to Station Ganymede.”

“What kind of incompetency are they teaching at the Academy these days?” He pushed her out of the way and bent over the control panel. “This is insane,” he said after studying the instruments. “There *must* be something wrong with your equipment.”

“I have complete confidence in my officers, especially officer Marinovich,” Baron barked sharply. “Please, doctor, conduct yourself in a professional manner.” Then he looked up at the screen. They were now close enough where their on-board cameras could pick up the catastrophe. At this distance the station reminded him of a piece of candy covered with ants. There had to be thousands of the creatures attacking the station. “Magnify.”

The image grew. Now they could clearly see the creatures swarming the station. Gaping, ragged holes on the station were everywhere. Most of the exterior devices - antennas, telescopes, storage pods - had been ripped away and orbited forlornly near the larger craft. Below it a shuttle drifted, powerless. Someone had tried to escape, but the creatures had attacked that as well.

“Captain, what chance is there that there are any survivors?” his second officer asked.

The station held a contingent of 90. Baron pointed at the destruction. “What do you think?”

Dr. Frunhomme looked up from the silent instrument panel. “We have to get closer. We have to capture one.”

Baron snorted. “And how do you propose we do that? Look what they’ve done to that station! Dru was right; we have nothing on this ship strong enough to hold them.” He looked at his weapons officer. “Sergeant Myers, are the weapons ready?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Arm the torpedoes and fire them at the station.”

“You can’t *do* that!” Dr. Frunhomme roared. “There *might* be survivors.” But even he knew that possibility was small.

“Dr. Frunhomme,” Baron replied tiredly, “we have received no communications from Station Ganymede in nearly a week. You even said no one was alive.” He looked around the chamber at his crew. “From what we are seeing now, can any of you honestly believe anyone on Ganymede has survived?” Their continued silence was his answer.

Only the scientist protested. “The purpose of this mission...”

“...is to discover what has happened at Station Ganymede,” Baron finished. “We now know that. These creatures, whatever they are, cannot be allowed any farther.”

“But the scientific knowledge...”

Baron stood and glared down at the scientist. “The hell with knowledge! Dr. Frunhomme, the mining conclaves on the asteroid belts are not that far from here. Would you care to imagine what damage these creatures could do there? Sergeant Myers, you have my orders. Fire the torpedoes; destroy the station.”



*And God forgive me.*

The ship shuddered as the weapons were launched. The crew silently watched as the torpedoes streamed toward the helpless research facility. They silently watched as, one by one, the weapons exploded at various parts of the station. They silently watched as the reactor within the station erupted, destroying what little remained of Station Ganymede. They silently watched as the creatures rose out of the fire. And began flying toward them.

“My god,” Marinovich whispered, “they’re still there.”

Baron looked at Dr. Frunhomme and smiled sarcastically. “Do you still want to capture one, Dr. Frunhomme?”

The scientist stared at the screen, at the destruction the explosions had wrought. And how ineffective the weapons had been against the creatures. “What are we dealing with?” he asked no one.

“Officer Ryan, send a message to headquarters. Tell them what has happened. Tell them,” Baron watched as the creatures approached, “we may not be coming back.”

*Thorán Dru stood at the entrance of a foreboding cavern. Within the ebony sky flashed streaks of oranges, greens, yellows and reds. Rivers of lava from erupting volcanoes curled around his feet. In his spirit state he could speak and hear only, so he was oblivious and impervious to the stench of ammonia, the overwhelming heat, the tang of sulfuric acid in the air. The premonition of evil beyond, however, was nearly overwhelming. Dru walked into the cave.*

-

*Unholy screams erupted sporadically as he made his way through the passage. The phosphorus on the walls gave sufficient light to guide him, although the screams would have been enough. Time held little meaning here, he felt he had walked for hours when the light before him grew in intensity. He turned one more corner and found himself in a vast chamber.*

-

*It was familiar from the description in the Grimoire. On the walls hung paintings of ghastly scenes which, he knew, had been inscribed on the tanned hides of humans. A large oval table dominated the center; made of obsidian, its surface was decorated with silver symbols. A giant throne built of bones dominated the far back wall. On either side chained gargoyles stood guard. The demon Bhashthelia occupied the throne. On his lap an infant gargoyle was playfully pulled apart some smaller creature. Those were the screams that had guided him.*

-

*The demon watched as Dru took a chair at the table. His forked tongues slid out from between his great fangs. “Look what has come to us, Paheson and Idderya. A poor wayfarer who has lost his way. Be sure to guard the silverware.”*

*The gargoyles snarled while Bhashthelia laughed. Dru ignored them. Instead he picked up the scrying crystal that set in the center of the table. Looking within, he could see the remains of Station Ganymede, his own ship, the gargoyles beginning their attack. He glared at the demon.*

*“You have broken the covenant.”*

*“And you have broken my meditation. I shall have to destroy you for that.”*

-

*“Some other time. Why have you broken the covenant?”*

*“The covenant?” He flicked out a taloned hand as if swatting away a fly. “Ah, a mere piece of paper, nothing more.”*

*Dru maintained his cold yet level tone. He knew he could not show any emotion save total confidence in his own power. Otherwise he would be lost. “The pact was made in blood and souls. You have not the right nor the power to break it.”*

*Bhasthelia rose and shook his wings and tail. “What do you know of the covenant, mortal? You I do not know. You have never had the courtesy or courage to visit me previously.”*

-

*Dru returned the crystal to the talon that served as its stand. “You may call me master. That will suffice. Now answer me. Why did you break the covenant?”*

*The demon shrugged his wings. “My minions were bored. I decided to grant them a holiday.”*

*“Their vacation is over. Summon them back.”*

*“But why? As you can see,” he continued as he took a seat across the table, then pointed to the crystal, “they are enjoying themselves. They’ve worked hard for me. They deserve their relaxation.”*

-

*“Is it necessary I summon Merlin? Crispian Peters? Shi’an Liu? Abdul Monhannan? Mosubatu? Prester John?” Dru began to recite the memorized spell.*

*The demon’s inner eyelid folded over. “That will not be necessary,” he interrupted quickly.*

*“Then recall them.”*

*He leaned forward. “And what do I receive in return? You have no soul with you to barter. Except yours, of course.” He leaned back and arched his tail. “But that will be adequate recompense.”*

-

*“For obeying me you earn your continued existence. Fhennezel would be most interested in your little adventure. Perhaps I shall tell him of your insubordination.” Dru sat back and folded his hands. “My silence is your only reward for compliance.”*

*Bhasthelias wings shook slightly. “You have no right, mortal. You have no right to be in my realm, to threaten me on my world, within my own chambers!”*

*Dru picked up the crystal and held it before the demon. Within the glass he could see the gargoyles swarming closer to his ship. He knew he had little time left. “Bring them home. Now.” Again he began to recite the spell. The air began to shimmer around them as other human spirit forms began to appear.*

*“Enough!” the demon roared. “I acquiesce, human.”*

*“Master.”*

*The demon spat out the word.*

*Leaning over the scrying crystal, Dru and the demon began to intone together. “Agrus driscanto candistra...”*

-

*“Our weapons are having no effect, captain. And we’re still receiving no readings from our instruments.” Marinovich slammed her fist on her mute sensors in disbelief.*

*Dr. Frunhomme sat drenched in sweat as he watched the scene broadcast by the shipboard cameras. The creatures, hundreds of them, seemed to be flying at a leisurely pace, almost as if they were mocking him and the crew. Occasionally there would be a flash of scarlet as another projectile exploded among them, but *Hunter3*’s weapons did little more than knock them backward. Then they would gather themselves and continue their advance. “What matter of creatures *are* these?” he continued to mutter to himself. He looked at Baron. “Captain, you have to get us out of here. Now!”*

“I will take that under advisement.”

The scientist jumped from his seat? “Are you *mad*, you moron? We can’t stop these things! We have to get out of here!” He grabbed the mongoloid by his lapels. “I *order* you to get us out of here.”

Baron grasped the doctor’s hands and pulled them slowly, firmly off him. “I cannot allow these creatures to attack the asteroid settlements. Helmsman, maintain our position. Sergeant Anderson, will you please escort Dr. Frunhomme to his stateroom. Make sure he stays.” He stared into the scientist’s eyes. “For his own safety.”

Baron paid no attention to the curses as the scientist was led away. “Officer Marinovich, the good doctor was lacking in useful suggestions. Do you have any?”

“Sir,” she said, exasperated, “I have no idea what they are either. Obviously brute force isn’t the answer.”

“Perhaps we can outwit them.”

“Sir?” Marinovich favored her captain with a puzzled look.

“Just a joke. Mr. Myers, what haven’t we tried?”

The weapons officer looked up from his console. “About the only thing besides the kitchen sink is the frequency silencer. But that’s just used to jam sensor input on other ships. I can’t imagine it would do anything more than tickle them.”

“Sir,” Marinovich interrupted nervously. “They are getting very close.”

“Duly noted.” Baron looked at Myers. “Try it. Full strength, blanket signal.” he sighed. “Maybe they’ll laugh themselves to death.”

Ryan adjusted the dials, then reached for the activation button...

*“...phrestero omdium.” The two finished the spell in unison. Almost instantaneously a brilliant flash erupted in the scrying glass. When Dru looked again, the Hunter3 was floating alone in space.*

*Dru stood. “I will leave you now, Bhasthelia. Do not force me to visit you again.” The demon made no reply as he walked calmly from the chamber.*

...when almost immediately there was a great explosion of blue light. When the cameras readjusted the crew found itself staring only at the wreckage of the Ganymede.

“Marinovich, what has happened?” Baron managed to ask after he caught his breath.

“I, I don’t know.” She stared at the overhead screen. “They’ve just... vanished.”

“Yes.” *But where? How?* “Officer Ryan, inform headquarters what has happened. Congratulations, Mr. Myers. Your suggestion worked.”

He blushed. “Thank you, sir, but I have no idea why.” He paused. “I’m not even sure the signal was activated.”

“You must have, Mr. Myers. That is what we’ll put in our report.” It would be a report which, deep down, he could not believe himself.

Thorán Dru was cold and exhausted when the suspension chamber revived him. He crawled out, then immediately entered the ionizer shower and vacuumed himself off. He was certain Baron would be there soon, if for no other reason than to check on him. He had enough to explain and bloody symbols painted all over his body would stretch his friend’s already fragile confidence in him.

He had managed to restore most of his more arcane tools to his packing cases or his desk when he heard a familiar knock on his door. “Come in, John.”

Baron entered and immediately raised a questioning eyebrow when he saw the suspension chamber. He pointed to it. “You find our beds uncomfortable?”

“I find it revitalizing. When used discretely. I’m sorry I couldn’t have been of more help.”

“Dr. Frunhomme wasn’t, either. But we destroyed them.” He paused. “Or at least I think we did.”

“Congratulations. How?”

He shook his head. “It makes no sense. We hit them with everything we had and they just laughed at us. I could have ravaged an entire *planet* with what we threw at them. A simple signal jammer. It just doesn’t make sense.”

“I think you’ve earned this.” Dru handed him a glass of claret. “An excellent vintage I’m sure you’ll agree. What does our doctor friend think?”

“He’s going over the visual reports now. We still have no other readings. He thinks perhaps they generated some type of dampening field. Somehow our radio signal countered it, altered the phase or something. Or maybe it just hurt their ears. He thinks they can generate warps in space, that’s how they disappeared so quickly and completely.”

“Maybe they were called home,” Dru offered softly.

“Pardon?”

Dru smiled and shook his head. “Nothing.”

“In any event we have informed both headquarters and the asteroid colonies. The necessary equipment is already being transported. I just hope they never have to use it.”

“They won’t.”

Baron stared at his friend for a moment, then reached a decision. He reached in his jacket pocket and pulled out a communiqué. “This came from Admiral Sharkey. It’s the real reason I came. Would you care to explain?”

Dru scanned the message. The admiral was angry and upset because Dru was present on the mission. He had never *heard* of Dru, had never *ordered* Dru to be present, and *demanding* Dru be held in confinement until the *Hunter3* returned. He suppressed a smile. Obviously the influence of his dreamwalk had worn off. “I guess my charade is finally over. I will comply with your orders, I promise you. I will remain in these quarters until we return.”

Baron retrieved the message. “Why?”

“I told you. I *had* to be on this mission.”

Baron took a sip of wine. “You aren’t going to tell me what really happened, are you?”

“The issue is complicated.”

“Right.” Baron set down his half-empty glass. “Fortunately,” he said, rising, “you are no longer in the military, so we can’t court-martial you. At the minimum, however, I *can* guarantee that you will have a very difficult time getting clearance to go off-world again. I will see to that.”

“I’ve lost my taste for space. There are plenty of other places to visit.”

“I will have an officer posted outside your room. He or she will have orders to detain you.” He stuck out his hand. “I’m sorry, Thoran. Despite everything, I’m glad to see you again.”

He accepted it gratefully. “Someday I’ll tell you. I promise.”

Baron favored him with one more lingering look. “You look like you’ve been through hell, Thoran. Get some rest.” Then he left, locking the door behind him.

Dru sighed. His old friend would never believe him, of that he was sure. “I wonder what they serve prisoners these days?” *I hope it’s more than bread and water.* He took another sip of wine.

## Second Stage

Casian Porteau sat on the edge of the brook, dangling her feet in the water. She could easily spend the rest of the afternoon relaxing in the warm breeze, perhaps get a bit of a tan. Then she looked down at her computer pad and sighed; wouldn’t do, wouldn’t do. Her instructions were clear; this planet was too promising for a leisurely evaluation of the native life. The voice of her superior came unbidden and unwanted. *Make your report. And soon.*

This was *not* how exobiology worked, she thought. According to all the textbooks, the lectures and case studies, a reasonable evaluation of a planet’s flora and fauna required years, not weeks. But then, her employer was not concerned about being reasonable. The Federation directive was clear: a planet with intelligent life had to be avoided at all costs lest human interference affect the natural development of the native race. Scientists applauded it, the corporations did not. And Magus 7 Prime offered outstanding profit potential... if it could be exploited.

Casian activated her computer and scanned the initial data submitted by the first wave of explorers. Most of the native life had already been catalogued, with nothing of interest found. There were no relics that suggested tool-making capability or any other recognized signs of notable intelligence. She was tempted to merely follow the company’s wishes and declare the world open for exploitation, but that would jeopardize her career if her findings were later proven wrong. So for the dozenth time since her arrival, she studied the list of fauna and reached the same negative conclusions for each. Flora she ignored completely; the Federation had yet to discover any intelligent plant life and she had no way to test it in any event.

A scream of pain interrupted her musings. An animal was being attacked, she realized. What I do in the name of science, she thought as she went to investigate. It didn’t take her long. She found several weasels

in a nearby clearing ripping away at a smaller animal they had just killed. They weren't weasels, of course, but the name fit them well enough. Small and furry and particularly vicious. They ignored her as they continued their feeding frenzy. She had observed them several times and they had been indifferent then as well. They did not consider her a threat and, she was relieved, not prey either.

Which, to her, spoke volumes about their potential intelligence. The more intelligent the animal, the more cautious and curious it became. These creatures appeared only interested in killing and feeding. Still she waited until the weasels had finished, then reached into her bag, retrieved a piece of raw meat, and threw it several feet from her.

One warily approached her offering, almost immediately joined by the others. After a few seconds they attacked it and each other, ignoring her completely. Casian sighed. Again they revealed no concern for their safety, no instinct for self-preservation. They were merely eating machines and not worth more consideration. Unless, of course, they tried to eat her.

She glanced at her watch. Watching the weasels had made her hungry. The post would be serving mess in half an hour. Gathering her equipment, she started back.

The post commander joined her at her table. This was a corporate operation but they maintained an air of military organization to simplify the chain of command. "Miss Porteau," he greeted her brusquely as he sat down. "Have you anything new to report?"

She paused, her fork halfway to her mouth. "I've hardly been here a month. You certainly can't expect any revelations that quickly."

Petr Jenowitz merely grimaced. "We were given six solar months to determine the suitability of this planet. Your department is the only one that has not made significant progress."

She stifled a laugh. Her "department" consisted entirely of herself, the corporation not willing to invest any more than necessary in a venture that might prove fruitless. "Determining whether the air is breathable or the water potable is a much easier task than discovering intelligent life forms. Especially since nearly anything can be intelligent."

"Surely you've made some progress."

"Some. At least I've identified quite a few forms that are not intelligent."

"Excellent. Keep me apprised." He rose and picked up his tray. "If you'll excuse me, I do have to talk with our engineering group."

She shrugged as he left. She understood he was under a great deal of pressure from the corporation to provide a positive report. This assignment could make or break his career. Of course, she mused as she returned to her own meal, it could do the same to hers.

A chorus of squeaks, growls and chirps greeted Casian as she entered her lab. It housed her latest collection of native life. It was more by necessity than anything else; the larger carnivores she had observed lived in resolute solitude, as did the birds and very few primates. Socialization and species interaction had long proven to be a prerequisite for intelligence and learning and, what she had discovered thus far, these creatures acted mostly by instinct. Still she dutifully attempted a few tests on the small furry primate in the chance its ability to grip objects might be a sign of increased brain power. After half an hour, however, she stopped in frustration. The creature refused to imitate any of her gestures and seemed only concerned with the native fruit she gave it.

A few cages away, a large insect clamored over a ball. Nearby was an aquarium filled with several species of fish. She shook her head as she glanced at them. If they were intelligent she would never know because it had taken years to make breakthroughs with Terran dolphins and she only had months.

She walked past several more cages and paused in front of a small herbivore. It looked a bit like a deer, although smaller and shaggier, and everyone at the camp called it that. It stared back at her, openly curious and not at all afraid. Casian had seen them frequently in the woods near the camp, gathered in small herds. In her studies, herbivores rarely were promising choices, their chief concerns in life eating what was readily available and avoiding being eaten. This specimen she had collected three days previous and, until now, ignored except for requisite feeding. "So, how are we today?" she greeted it.

The creature shook its head and snorted.

"This shouldn't take too long," she said as she pulled up a chair and sat across from it. She reached through the bars and set three large cards on the concrete floor, one a circle, one a rectangle and one a triangle, each a different color. Although she doubted the colors would matter much; she was quite certain the creature was color blind. She watched as the animal sniffed each card in turn and half-expected it to eat one. Instead it returned its attention to her. "Okay, class, listen up." She held up a card with a triangle, pointed to it and then the matching card on the floor. Then she did the same with the other two shapes. "Okay, get the idea?"

The animal merely looked at her.

"Not much of a conversationalist, are you? Here we go." And she held up the card with the circle.

The creature looked at her, the card, then the ones on the floor. And placed a foreleg on the card with the circle.

Casian nearly dropped her cards as a tingle of excitement ran through her. Just chance, she thought as she caught her breath. This time she tried the triangle, and the animal responded correctly again. She quickly conducted the test more than a dozen times, even adding several additional shapes. The creature never missed.

It could just be the colors, she thought as she set down the cards. But even that wouldn't matter. "Let's try this." She held up one finger, then tapped her foot one time. She held up one finger again and the creature responded correctly. "Try two," and she tapped her foot twice. Again the creature copied her. Next she held up all five fingers but didn't tap her foot. The animal tapped its hoof five times.

"Enough for today," she said and nearly staggered as she made her way to her desk. She sat and stared at her computer. Yes, she knew one could argue. The animal had done nothing more than what a Terran horse could be trained to do. But this animal had needed no training, did not require food or punishment to perform. It had *wanted* to respond to her.

"How intelligent *are* you, my friend?" she whispered as she watched it in its cage. It seemed to know she was observing because it stopped eating and looked at her, its ears cocked forward, its tail erect. Casian sat back and considered the possibilities. Problem-solving, that would be the first battery of tests she would run. The standard battery of O'Hara/Diego short-term memory evaluations. Beyond that...

She quivered at the possibilities. How did this species communicate amongst itself? Could it be taught to communicate with humans? *Discovering an intelligent alien race. Casian, you've done your momma proud.*

But, she brought herself back to reality, not her employer. If future testing bore out what she was



beginning to expect, to pray for, then this planet could be declared off-limits. "So, girl, what are you going to do?" she whispered. In the morning, she knew, she would have to inform Jenowitz. The news would not make his day.

As she expected, her report was greeted with cold skepticism. "You really think those 'deer' are intelligent?" The commander blew angrily into his coffee.

"My initial tests are very promising. Quite stunning, actually."

"The corporation will require much more convincing proof than what you have told me so far." He pointed at the offending manuscript. "What I see are parlor tricks a mouse could do."

"Not tricks I assure you."

Jenowitz pushed his breakfast away. "This planet offers great potential. I won't risk it over one talented animal."

She remained nonplused. "You know the Federation mandate. Do you or the corporation plan to defy it?"

"Of course not." He sighed. "How soon will you have a definitive report?"

"I would hope within a few more months."

"You realize that we can't approach the Federation for an extension. We could lose our exclusivity arrangement if we delay beyond the regulations."

"I understand your concerns. And I share them." Which, she realized, was the truth.

"In that case I am putting any further development on hold. I won't spend any more of the company's funds on a venture that may become a dry hole." He stared at her. "You better be right."

I am, she thought. "I'll get to work immediately. If you'll excuse me." She took her tray and headed back to the laboratory.

Casian stepped away from the cage and smiled as she studied the results of the test. True, they were conducted under less-than-ideal lab conditions, but the results were stunning. Symbol recognition, short-term memory, basic problem-solving... each and every standardized test had been passed with flying colors. She glanced over at the deer, which was now contentedly enjoying a well-earned drink of water. Unfortunate, she thought, that it could not manipulate objects with its paws. Or, from what she could tell, communicate with a verbal language.

Still the possibilities fascinated and excited her. What kind of civilization could these creatures create? Where would the physical limitations they were burdened with take them, or how far? Unfortunate, she thought, that the Federation prevented them from assisting directly with the native's development. Prosthetic limbs, robots... the possibilities were endless on how their physical limitations could be overcome.

Enough testing, she decided and set the results on her desk. *Time for direct observation.* Grabbing her computer pad and some of the native fruit to eat, she headed for the nearby forest. It didn't take her long to find a family of the deer grazing in a clearing. It surprised her that they were all roughly the same size; unless the young grew very rapidly, this group all appeared to be adults. Perhaps the young were hidden elsewhere, she decided. A common practice for many animals.

They continued to graze unmindful of her presence. She tried to look for signs of socialization and interaction, but right now their sole interest was in feeding. That was fine with her. She sat down next to a tree and watched and waited.

She had almost fallen asleep when an animal's cry roused her. It was a cry of pain and very close. Another successful hunt? she wondered as she roused herself to investigate. She looked at the herd but they ignored it. *Since it's not you, you don't care, right?* The keening guided her to another clearing. She stopped in disgust when she saw the cause: a deer was being attacked by the weasels. It was lying helplessly on its side as the tiny creatures crawled over it, slashing at it with their tiny claws and teeth. The deer, still alive, cried out and shuddered.

Casian cried out as well. Then she turned and staggered from the clearing.

"You are absolutely sure?" Jenowitz tapped the report on his desk. "Your opinion was much different yesterday."

Casian sat stiffly across from him. She was still unnerved by what she had discovered and she had been up half the night finishing her report. Now she was exhausted. And deeply depressed. "My opinion of the deer hasn't changed. My opinion on how to use this planet has."

"I'm not sure I understand."

"The deer *are* intelligent. But they'll never have the opportunity to develop it."

"Why?"

"I came across a deer giving birth yesterday. Their offspring are the weasels, vicious, nearly mindless creatures who will eat nearly everything, including their parents. Including the parent they destroy when they are born. Obviously at some point the infants mature enough to reach a stage where they are transformed into the deer, like a tadpole into a frog. But when doesn't matter. Because of their life cycle, there is no hope the deer can pass down from generation to generation whatever they learn, or ever develop beyond what they are now."

"In that case I will forward your report to the Federation and the corporation. They will be pleased. Thank you, Miss Porteau." He rose. "And I'm sorry."

So am I, Casian thought as she left his office. *So am I.*

## **THE MAN WHO TUNED THE GLACIER**

"And you are convinced that this, indeed, is our final destination?" I swirled the sundew in my goblet and watched as patterns of light formed and dispersed according to the immutable laws of physics. The question, of course, was rhetorical.

Grenya pirouetted like a butterfly trapped in an updraft, then reached over and pinched my cheek. "Yes, oh yes my dearest. I can feel it already. The rhythm, the electricity, the pull of creative gravity. There I shall be fertilized and from my womb will burst forth my masterpiece." She patted her stomach. "My seed is straining to be planted within Paglinowski's icy soil!"

I winced at the biological inaccuracy of her metaphor but refrained from correcting her. For the most part Grenya was tolerable in conversation, enthusiastic and experienced in bed. Still naive enough to be amusing, and normally an appreciative if not well-versed audience. I could probably tolerate her a few more months before passing the threshold of boredom.

Tolerating Paglinowski's Planet, now that was a cat of a different color. The name was intolerable enough: why the discoverer has total liberty when christening his world is incomprehensible. Where is the poetry in "Paglinowski" or "L-35" or "Bagels" (named after a woman's dog if you can believe it)? The classic characters of mythology, historic figures, some outstanding characteristic of the planet itself--those and those alone should serve as the dictionary for planetary designations. Although if I were renaming Paglinowski's Planet, I confess I would choose something most mundane, like "Icecube" or "Pass-Me-By." Something more in keeping with the attractions the world offered.

Grenya must have seen me frown because she draped her arms around me and nibbled on my ear. "Oh, dearest, you are so kind to me, so thoughtful and patient. This time I promise. I know that here I shall create my final, grand masterpiece. You will be so proud, my mentor and patron!"

I had heard that before, of course. First was Circe and the universe's highest waterfall--"I will dance beneath the Waters of Life and compose my reflections upon the Rainbow of Diana," she had prophesied. Then came Samson with its dunes and salt pillars and dried-up seas. Some sort of religious epic she prattled about. Finally we had visited good 'ol Terra; "My gypsy blood; I am part gypsy you know. I must bow to the callings of my soul."

Naturally she had produced nothing of artistic merit. I expected her latest masterpiece would be stillborn on Paglinowski as well. Her talents lay between her thighs, not her ears. Yet I have tolerated all with indomitable patience. I have the wherewithal; after all, I am hailed by all save the basest philistines as the poet laureate of the galaxy. And our little sojourn, now reaching its third Solar year, had given me time to complete my history of the exploration of the universe. All written in iambic pentameter.

Yet even indomitable patience has its limits. And I was sure Paglinowski's Planet would severely try mine. A world discovered by a merchant with a defective computer who turned left at the 4,397<sup>th</sup> star instead of right. And what a find it was! Ice, ice and more ice. No flora, no fauna (except of the microscopic kind). No valuable minerals.

Paglinowski was understandably disheartened. History is littered with now-famous names who made their fortunes by unlocking the secrets of some brave new world. All Paglinowski could see was ice. Ice that just happened to be the purest, clearest ice available anywhere in the universe.

I must accept the blame--or credit if you'll be so kind--for what happened later. I have devoted my life and considerable talents to reviving the classic expressions of the written word. The many forms of poetry--blank verse, haiku, found verse, limericks. The short story, the libretto, the two-act play. Graffiti. My popularity has inspired those of far lesser ability to explore other archaic art forms. Now there is a Renaissance in tapestry, etchings, macramé, quilting, candlemaking and batik. Grenya had chosen ballet. My opinion is that most lost art forms deserve to be so and most of what has been produced is drivel. Including, and especially, ice sculpture.

The fad did make Paglinowski's Planet suddenly valuable, however. I believe ice must be one of the easiest materials for the unimaginative to work with. Once enclosed within a stasis field, the resulting messterpiece can last an eternity. With the purity of its ice beyond dispute, the single natural resource of Paglinowski became much in demand. Of course by then Paglinowski had sold all commercial rights to

another firm. I imagine he spends most of his time in some hideaway on Smith's Sanctuary drinking too much and bemoaning his luck.

"How long before we arrive?" Grenya asked, always the impatient child.

I roused myself from my reverie. "About three days I would guess."

She smiled and reached for my crotch. "Then we have some time for a little relaxation. You do look so tired, my sweet."

I will cede Grenya this; she knows how to extricate me from my more morose moods.

Paglinowski's Planet doesn't look like much from above. Mostly frozen rock and water, with just a stretch across the equator remaining ice-free. Thus far it had resisted all attempts at supporting life and I felt it would be equally successful in resisting Grenya's creative spasms. Not surprisingly there were few residents, a small mandatory Space Corps defensive space station (it had to be a punishment assignment) and the even smaller contingent of ice miners on the surface. I trusted Grenya would find--and lose--her muse soon. My supply of sundew would not keep me amused long.

Grenya, of course, was all atwitter when we approached within viewing distance. "It's beautiful," she breathed, ignoring the evidence before us. She began to shake like some forlorn puppy. "I can feel it calling me already! Oh, darling," she turned in my arms and kissed me. "Here indeed is the inspiration I've been searching for!"

I merely nodded and turned toward the controls. I had heard the same drivel at Samson, Circe and so many others so I doubted her enthusiasm would last the week. Instead I said, "We should notify the Corps. No doubt they are curious."

"Of course," she replied mindlessly, her gaze still on the ice and rock below us. "How soon can we land?"

"That's up to them." I sat down at the communications console. My yacht is built for space travel, not landings. It would be the responsibility of the Corps to shuttle us to the planet proper. I expected no difficulty in negotiating for such a boon.

The commander was delighted and surprised to receive my call. Doubtless his enthusiasm was genuine, considering how popular Paglinowski is among the tourist trade. His voice betrayed his youth and it would be interesting to learn what indiscretion forced this assignment. I accepted his dinner invitation with feigned grace and turned off the transmitter. "Dust off your dancing shoes, dear; we have a ball to attend."

She left the viewscreen reluctantly.

The station was final evidence on just how valuable Paglinowski's Planet is. There were no luxurious lounges, no observatory or shops or relaxation areas for visiting VIP's. The bathroom on my yacht offers more amenities. The man who greeted us was in his early thirties, with doubling chin and watery brown eyes and whining nasal voice. His admiration was painful to behold. "Mr. Habersham," he pumped my hand in a moist grip, "I can't begin to tell you how great a pleasure this is to meet you. I've admired your work for some time."

"Yes," I answered absently and extricated my hand. I wiped it on my slacks as I pointed to Grenya. "This is my companion, Grenya."

His eyes widened as he stared at her and I really couldn't blame him. She *is* beautiful; why else would I tolerate her? She had chosen a red tunic cut low to reveal her left breast. She had also shaved her head

for this occasion--an unwarranted bow to convention, I felt.

There were apparently no women on this detail because the young fool had difficulty looking her in the eye. "Randall, Lieutenant Randall," he stammered as he shoved his hand forward.

"Lieutenant Randall," she said with a smile, taking his hand with both of hers and pressing it against her bared bosom.

"You had invited us to dinner, I believe." I tried not to chuckle as I interrupted his fantasy.

He withdrew his hand reluctantly. "Yes, of course." He bowed awkwardly. "Please, this way." I ignored his small talk as he led us to his quarters. Thank the gods I had brought a bottle of sundew to temper the awaiting tedium.

The meal was all I had expected, which was nothing. Now we were enjoying my gift of sundew and engaged in the smallest talk possible. The lieutenant had surprised me in one fashion, he did have a copy of my *Incomplete Works* and I had dutifully signed it for him. Despite his overtures, however, I refused to ask if he tried to write himself. Instead I forced the conversation to more practical concerns. "How soon can you take us to the planet?"

"To Paglinowski? Why would you want to go there. Don't you know ..."

"...Paglinowski has a circumference of 8,493 kilometers. The day is 36 standard hours long. Temperature remains at freezing or below year-round except at the equator. The atmosphere is breathable if an oxygen-booster is used. It is virtually uninhabited and uninhabitable. It is a very boring place to visit. I wouldn't want to live here. What interesting data can you add to my computer files?"

"It's just that..." He stopped, afraid to challenge me. "We will accommodate your wishes in any way we can," he offered finally.

"Excellent." I downed the last of my sundew. "If you will excuse me, I am tired. Grenya?"

She smiled. "I would prefer to talk with Lieutenant Randall about Paglinowski a little longer, my darling. Perhaps he will give me that one bit of information I need to create my masterpiece!"

I bid my leave and hastened to my ship and the more relaxing companionship of my liquor supply. Grenya's planned indiscretion bothered me not in the least; the knowledge might provide useful leverage later. Besides, she was always more enthusiastic after she had bedded another man. I was whistling as I opened another decanter of sundew.

"I can't talk you out of this?" the lieutenant whined like the guilty dog he clearly was.

"Grenya has a will like a mountain. Once set, only the strongest forces of nature can move it." I made no effort to hide the impatience in my voice, his fawning having long ceased to amuse.

The man grimaced, then acquiesced. "Just be careful of Hancock. He has worked alone on Paglinowski for the past dozen years. Hasn't left the planet once. Only contacts us when ice is ready or he's low on supplies."

"He sounds like a veritable social butterfly. You contacted him of course."

"Yes, of course." He attempted a smile. "He was not pleased but after some negotiations he agreed to

meet you. I don't know what else to tell you. I don't believe he'll harm you."

"I believe he sounds fascinating," Grenya said as she struggled into her form-fitting heat suit. We were forced to borrow two from the station, and they were not designed to accommodate breasts. I decided she had earned her discomfort.

"I am sure if we face any difficulties your cavalry will arrive in the proverbial nick of time."

"My what?" he asked but I refused to educate him. So he turned his attention to my paramour. "Be very careful. Paglinowski can be dangerous. I wouldn't trust Hancock otherwise, but if you are out there with him, do what he says. No one knows more about Paglinowski than him."

"Than he. Yes, of course. Come, my dear." I brushed past the chastened soldier and pulled us into the shuttle. I could tolerate the lieutenant no longer; even the creature awaiting us should prove better company.

Our shuttle was not built for comfort. Three seats, a computer, an engine... fortunately, the ride would last only 45 minutes. There was not enough sundew in the universe to keep me sane otherwise. Grenya, of course, was excited by the novelty of it all. Of course she was also excited by the ghettos of Griswold, so there you are. "It takes your breath away," she said as she stared at the barren rock rushing toward us.

"I do hope you recapture it. A shame to perish this close to paradise."

She kissed me on the cheek. "You're always thinking about me; you are so sweet. Fear not for me, my love. Here the greatest ballet in the universe shall be created. I can feel my inspiration stirring already!"

What I felt stirring was a knot in my stomach. I sat in one of the cramped console seats and made my mind blank, a talent honed after years on the banquet circuit. I lost all sense of time until a gentle bump and a scream of excitement warned me we had entered Eden. We unstrapped ourselves, rechecked our suits (imagine the humility of freezing to death because of a loose fastener) and opened the airlock.

A lumbering figure in a dirty heat suit stumbled up to us. His long unkempt hair tangled in the breeze and he wore a beard if you can imagine. I cringed involuntarily at the sight of him. Grenya was enthralled.

"What do you want? Why are you here?" he demanded in a rusty voice.

"The pleasure of your company, of course." I forced a smile to cover his poor manners. "I am Dannel Habersham. This is my compatriot Grenya. We have heard so much about your beautiful world we thought we would drop by for a visit."

He studied us with a long insulting silence. "The Space Corps said I have no choice."

"An accurate assessment of the situation."

"You will not like it here," he promised and started to walk away.

That is an accurate assessment also, I thought as we hurried after him.

"What do you want?" he repeated himself after we had made ourselves reasonably comfortable in his quarters. Outside his heat suit he wasn't nearly as formidable. Just over two meters tall, dressed in denim and flannel, fabrics long out of fashion in the civilized worlds. Rugged features well-hidden by his full, unsightly beard. An asteroid miner or freighter rat, long ago perhaps a lumberjack. An anachronism to be sure. The lieutenant was correct, the man had to be mad.

"My daughter has always been fascinated by ice sculptures. She wanted to visit the world that has contributed so much to such a fascinating art form," I lied smoothly.

"Your daughter?" He turned his icy gaze on Grenya. She looked much more attractive out of her heat suit. She favored him with a smile that should thaw the coldest heart. It had no impact on him. "You will not find me a good host," he turned back to me. "I am a very busy man. My employers impose a demanding production schedule. Now what do you want?"

Grenya spoke for the first time. Until now she had been sizing up our surroundings and Hancock like a thief. Which, in a sense, she was. "My father may have misled you. I am an artist, Mr. Hancock, an artist following the ebbs and flows of my creative soul. They have told me to come here. To you and this world. I shall find the inspiration I seek upon this frozen soil. Here I shall create my ultimate masterpiece!"

Hancock sipped his coffee and studied me. His thoughts were as obvious as his breath. "How long may I expect the pleasure of your company? Since I have no choice in the matter."

"That is up to Grenya and her reluctant muse. I assure you we will stay no longer than necessary."  
*Believe that.*

He gnawed on a hangnail, then came to some kind of decision. "I have work to do. If you will excuse me."

"Oh, let us come with you," Grenya gushed like a love-struck geyser. "I must experience the wonders of Paglinowski's Planet!"

"I have much work to do and no time for guided tours," the brute snapped. "It is not pleasant outside."

Nor in, I decided after a hasty survey of the shambles that were his living quarters. "Your company shall take the bite from the arctic air," I said, rising. "Coming, dear?"

Our conveyance was an open-air mining tractor with caterpillar treads. We sat in front with Hancock, unfortunate but unavoidable since the four cargo pods behind us were not equipped with seats.

Hancock proved as hospitable as the terrain. He said not a word as we passed mile after mile of rock and ice. Even Grenya, for all her charms, could not elicit a smile from her new Prince Charmless. I chuckled as she finally sat back in disgust, crossed her arms and sulked. Our adventure in this winter wonderland might prove short after all.

I swear to this day that Hancock spent the next few hours driving in circles. The glacier he finally chose to mine looked no different than dozens we had passed previously. Not that we were uncomfortable, our heat suits performed excellently. But it was so *boring*. Still I was grateful to get out and stretch.

Grenya, ever the curious child, shadowed Hancock while he readied his equipment. There wasn't much: several anti-grav plates, some rope, metal spikes, a hammer, and something that looked like a hand laser but wasn't. He ignored all her chattering. Instead he removed his helmet, set it carefully within the tractor, then walked toward the huge glacier before us. With nothing better to do, we followed.

I will admit the glacier was impressive. It would have been more so if floating in an appropriately-sized goblet of sundew. "He's not going to climb that thing, I hope," I said to Grenya over the radio in our helmets. "We'll be here all day."

He wasn't. Instead he stood on one of the anti-grav plates and let it lift him gracefully in the air. He hovered before the massive ice sheet, studying it. Then he withdrew his odd pistol, adjusted it, and pointed it at the glacier. I expected to see some kind of ray emerge. Instead I saw nothing except an

occasional puff of snow erupt as he drew a giant square on the frozen surface. Next he attached a smaller anti-grav plate to the ice, then moved on to another section and repeated the process. And another, and another. Until four plates were stuck to the glacier.

"Isn't this fascinating?" Grenya asked as we watched him float to the very top of the ice.

"And me without my opera glasses." I've seen bowel movements that were more interesting.

"You... sometimes!" She hit me on the arm in childlike exasperation and turned her gaze upwards.

Hancock appeared to be pounding something into the ice, although from our vantage point it was hard to be sure. If there was anything nearby more entertaining I would have watched that, but, unfortunately there wasn't. So I was a reluctant audience as he floated back to the surface and strolled toward us, dragging the heavy rope. He didn't say anything as he passed, merely motioned us to follow as he made his way to the tractor. He tied the cord to the last car, then jumped into the driver's seat. Assuming we were to follow, we followed.

He had put his helmet back on, and for the first time during our trip deigned to talk to us. "You might find this interesting," he said over the radio as he started the engine. "Watch the glacier."

I looked back and noted that the cable stretched far and high onto the top of the glacier, where it split into four separate segments. Then, even through the insulation of my helmet, I heard a low, rumbling sound. And suddenly the side of the glacier was erupting and tumbling toward us.

I heard someone (probably Grenya) gasp in fear and awe as part of the massive ice front fell. Now I understood the simplicity of ice mining; the cables, attached to spikes on the top of the glacier, were pulling the giant chunks of ice forward. The ice separated cleanly, as if carved on a lathe. As the great blocks tumbled, the anti-grav plates turned toward the ground. So rather than shattering on Paglinowski's rocky soil, the blocks now hovered silently and unharmed mere inches above the surface. Ready to be loaded into the cargo bins for destruction by some talentless artistes off-world.

Satisfied, Hancock stopped the tractor and clambered outside. He herded the giant ice cubes into their respective trailers, no great task thanks to the anti-grav plates. Grenya, bless her, continued her mindless adorations throughout the mercifully short ordeal. I was more interested in his technique; now I understood why he was the only miner on the planet. In truth they needed no one else. The question was why he was content to be so.

"Interesting," I offered over our evening meal. Some reconstructed mush or somesuch and I would not grace it with my precious supply of sundew. "That is no ordinary laser, I take it."

"Not a laser at all," he muttered between mouthfuls of gruel. The sight did not encourage a vigorous appetite. "The flute works by ultrasonics. Once I tune it to the glaciers, I can cut as large or small a block as I want."

Grenya's eyes brightened; from interest, surely not intelligence. "You tune the glaciers! Do you talk to the glaciers? Do you hear them sing?"

He avoided her gaze. "I don't tune them and I wouldn't call it singing. Yet if you listen, you can hear them even in here. They are never silent, never still," he added unnecessarily.

"I told you!" she exclaimed, turning her attention to me. "The song of the glaciers. That is the inspiration I have been seeking. They will create the rhythms for my grand ballet!"

"The chorus of ice on rock, the melodious air of friction. Yes, I believe the galaxy at large will be in awe."



"Actually the voices of the glaciers can be melodic, haunting even," the oaf chastised me with a raised eyebrow.

I accepted the gauntlet. "Oh, really? And what do you know of music or art? Of the ultimate blending of intellect, emotion and craftsmanship that creates a work that speaks to one man and All Men? Exiled as you are in this," I gestured at the walls around us, "eclectic tundra."

"Perhaps I am like your daughter. I found my muse here as well."

"She is not my daughter!" The nerve of that simpleton! I set down my coffee before I hurled it at him. It was too valuable to waste on a fool.

I could feel the barbarian studying me like one of his glaciers. I determined then and there I would stay no longer on Paglinowski's Planet. "You are renowned as an expert on art, Mr. Habersham," he muttered. "In my own way I am something of an artist myself. Would you honor me with your presence at my exhibition?"

"Why, I would be delighted, Mr. Hancock. I am sure it will prove most enlightening." *And amusing.*

"If you really want to hear the glaciers, you shouldn't wear the helmet," Hancock told Grenya as we entered our heat suits. Then he glanced at me. "Don't worry, we won't be going far."

I've always believed that the ability to avoid all unnecessary physical discomfort was one of the boons of our advanced society. Grenya looked at me, the eager student awaiting teacher approval. I set my helmet down. "Of course. Let us not miss nature's lovely chorale."

Grenya, the minx, clutched his arm. "I will feel much safer if I'm close to you," she breathed.

Hancock looked my way with a raised eyebrow, but I ignored him. It would be amusing to watch her continue to ply her charms on this iceberg of a man.

It was very cold outside. And, as Hancock had promised, very noisy as well. There was a constant low-pitched groan coming from the mountains and the glaciers beyond, as if some unseen giant were suffering intestinal distress. The lovebirds stopped, and Grenya began to sway awkwardly to some primordial rhythm. I had to smile despite the cold as Hancock tried to pull Grenya forward. The fool had yet to learn that one must tolerate her mulish whims.

Besides, the cold soon discouraged her and we managed the short distance to Hancock's storage shed with little more than frosted earlobes. "You are an artist, I will be curious about your opinions," Hancock said as he fumbled with the lock. An unnecessary precaution, I thought, since he was normally alone. Then we were inside and he threw a switch. Light flooded the building. Grenya gasped and I finally knew how he had spent his wages.

This storage shed was three times larger than his living area. Some of it held the tools of his trade, but the majority displayed his avocation--ice sculpture. There were perhaps fifteen frozen sculptures scattered around the room, each protected within its own stasis field. A stylized lion, rampant, rose above us. Two men engaged in an endless game of chess. A woman nursed her infant. Grenya paused longest before two embracing lovers. Her eyes were a gleam when she finally spoke to Hancock. "You created these?"

He shrugged, trying to hide his pleasure. "I have lots of time."

"But you should try to sell these! They are so beautiful. Don't you think so, my love?"

"They appear competently done," I offered finally, not wanting to encourage him.

"Competently done," she said and snorted. "I think they're beautiful."

Hancock surprised me. "I tend to agree with Habersham. If I were to pursue regular sculpture, I would prefer to work in stone. A single stasis field costs me three months wages."

"Ask for a raise," I said.

"But he could sell them," she insisted.

Once again I felt it necessary to enlighten her. "Some artists pursue their muse for personal satisfaction only. Perhaps our host does not wish his art brought before public scrutiny. Some so-called artists should not." I approached a carving of a tree bending to the force of some unseen wind. Inspired by a holograph, obviously. "There is technique here, I agree. Competency. Still, technique does not make art. Technique does not make a statement. Technique is the key to the door that reveals the truth, the soul, within. What I see and feel below the surface is what I see on the surface. Craftsmanship, not inspiration."

I expected Hancock to protest, but again he surprised me. "I have no more qualms about commercializing my art than you do, Habersham. In fact, if I am successful, I will create the most commercial work of art of all time."

I had to accept his gauntlet. "Until patronage by government or the elite again becomes standard practice, then I see no reason why an artist should not be properly reimbursed for his talents. I hardly would call that 'commercializing my art.' If you have followed my career at all, then you know how often and eruditely I have spoken upon that subject. So pray tell me, what art work are you planning? Surely not these," I gestured to the cold whittlings around us.

"In a fashion, but one that involves an entirely new technique. An entirely unique approach to ice sculpture. Come this way."

We followed him to a darkened corner of the storage shed. He turned on a light and we found ourselves before another stasis field. This one, however, held a giant cube covered by a black tarp.

He picked up an oddly-shaped device resting on a nearby table. "This is similar to the flute I use to mine the ice," he said, brandishing it. "The one I use for work uses ultra- and subsonics to cut through the ice. This flute, however, cuts *inside* the ice. Let me show you." And he threw back the cover.

What we saw was one intact cube of ice, perhaps four feet per side. But it was intact on the surface only. For etched inside the cube was an entire city. It was as if the ice had engulfed a miniature 19th century village. There were people, trees, clouds, birds, bicycles, a train, grass, buildings, smoke, streets, dogs, children with kites and hoops, horses, fences, benches, sidewalks. Factually inaccurate of course, and uninspired. Yet as real and as colorful as a hologram.

"Watch the steeple," he said as he stepped to one side. "The challenge is to find the right frequency and signal strength to cut the ice at the proper depth." We heard a low humming sound, and then saw a fogging in the ice that slowly cleared and changed into a cloud. He turned off the flute and smiled. "Light diffuses along the cracks of the ice, creating an illusion of color. If the light hits that rainbow at the proper angle," he pointed toward a far corner, "you'll be able to see it in its full glory."

Grenya, ever the foolish one, sighed. "You are a genius," she declared. "On Hellson, on Homeworld, on K-8, on any of the planets where art is truly appreciated, you would be hailed as a master."

I could not let this charade continue. "I think our young friend would find the hordes of sycophants

disquieting. Once again, your enthusiasm has blinded you. An interesting technique to be sure. Highly original and well-done. But technique, nothing more."

"You are an antiquarian, Mr. Habersham. Tell me, what do you think of my village? Even if, as you say, it is only an exercise in technique?"

"'Historically inaccurate' immediately comes to mind." I have no patience for amateurs, so I studied the block of ice intently. "I take it this is based upon a village in the country America, Terra, the 1900's?" He nodded. "I believe that if you do your research properly, you'll learn that trains of that time were still pulled by teams of horses. Kites only existed in China. You have no stream running through the village square. They always built their villages around a stream. And you have no power lines for electricity." I straightened and offered a false smile. "I repeat, your technique is interesting. Given the fire of inspiration and several more years of practice, yes, I could see your work displayed elsewhere than on Paglinowski's Planet."

"But I did..." he began to protest, then realized how ridiculous it was. "An artist is entitled to make mistakes," he finished lamely.

"Not entitled. Nearly everyone does."

"I still think it's wonderful. Very wonderful," Grenya interjected. She rubbed against Hancock like a kitten. "I would like to learn your technique. If you would teach me."

He peered down at her unwelcome intrusion. "I don't have time for an apprentice. I am lucky to steal a few hours a week to come out here."

"Your dedication, at least, is commendable," I observed. "But this cold is damnable. If you'll excuse me, I'm leaving." I stared at Grenya.

She knew better than to protest. "Of course." She turned once more to Hancock. "I want to see your work again."

"Depends on how long you plan to stay."

Not long at all, I vowed as we returned to the cold hospitality of Paglinowski's Planet.

"You were a little fool tonight." We were lying in our "room," if such I can call it. A large cot and heat wall. A curtain for privacy. Prisoners endure less. The joys of primitive life indeed. "The man is an idiot, my dear. Worse yet, an untalented idiot."

"He's an artist," and she was genuinely angry. "His work, like nothing else I've ever seen. It spoke to me. I could hear it from deep inside my soul."

"What you heard was your stomach demanding a decent meal. All he offers is technique. After all this time, haven't I taught you the difference between craftsmanship and Art? Between skill and Vision?"

"He agrees with you, you know."

I laughed. "He does? When did he tell you this?"

"After you left us with your 'headache.' He respects, well, some of your opinions anyway. What he's working on now is only practice, a rough draft. His ultimate intention is truly amazing."

"You have aroused my curiosity. Tell me, dearest, what great gift does he propose to offer the universe?"

"He plans to carve an entire glacier! He told me he already has one selected. People will be able to view it from space, or take tours across its surface. Can you imagine? It could make Paglinowski's Planet the greatest tourist attraction in the galaxy. And he will be the most famous artist ever!"

I lay back and shuddered. The nerve of the man! And such an affront to Art and the universe. But it would be a success, I ceded that. The horde is always impressed by size.

And he was right, there would be shiploads of tourists scurrying to admire this frozen Mount Rushmore. A ring of space hotels and other necessary amusements would soon follow. Resorts on the surface itself. Hancock would reap the tremendous rewards. He would need no monetary gain from the glacier itself. That would come from him traveling the banquet circuit, the guest of honor at world upon world. Lectures, interviews, bio-vids, tri-d exposure. He would be famous all right. If I had any hair left I would have pulled it out.

"I'm staying, Dannel."

"What?" Her pronouncement shattered my nightmare.

"I'm staying. Here. With Hancock."

I laughed. "So the Beauty has fallen in love with the Beast. In literature that occurs in reverse. Is it his artistic soul that intrigues you, dearest, or his artistic member?" I let my disappointment in her creep into my voice. "How long do you suppose you will enjoy this frozen Eden? Four weeks? Six? That seems to be the standard length of your infatuations."

She remained surprisingly calm. "I want to learn, Dannel. I want to learn--ice sculpture? Dance? I don't know. But I do want to learn. From him. I am not learning from you. Or what I am learning I don't want to know."

I sat upright; the nerve of the woman! "The fault is with the student, not the teacher. I leave tomorrow. If you want to remain with this Neanderthal, you may do so. I will not be back to retrieve you."

"I don't plan to leave. I will help Hancock with his work, he will help with mine."

"I'm somewhat surprised Hancock agreed. Or did he ask you?"

"I asked him. He was reluctant. I assured him I would not bother him, I would pay my way."

"That will be a first."

"I never asked you for anything!" The ungrateful wench snarled. "Besides, I have paid you, and not just with sex. Do you think your company is always pleasant?"

I was tired of her tirade. I had much to think about, much to plan. I needed solitude. "If then I am to journey unaccompanied, I best get in practice. I suggest you spend your evening with your new paramour. If you can stand the smell."

She stared at me with her large, empty eyes. "I think I know why you hate him so much," she said after a long, boring silence. "You saw the talent there. You are just afraid to admit it. You are afraid of anyone who has talent." She stopped. "I think," she continued, "you are even afraid of me."

"That's enough! I have tolerated your childish tantrums for the last time. And your indiscretions. And your mindless chattering about your 'art.' You have only one talent, Grenya. I hope for your sake you find a rich patron before you lose it."

She rose. "And you, Dannel, have the warmth, wit and charm of a sea slug. Although I do disservice to the creature."

"Aha, you have learned something," I called out as she parted the curtains. "You could have never responded so imaginatively before you met me!" She had no retort. Instead she left me to my musings. And me without my sundew!

The fawning lieutenant was surprised when I alone stepped from the shuttle. He had to videophone Grenya to be convinced she was remaining on her own accord. "Your friend must be a very brave woman," he offered after he broke connections.

"That is one of the reasons I married her," I replied. I had to hide my smile behind my goblet of sundew as I saw his reaction.

He paled. "I thought you said..."

"I care not what you thought. But that's neither here nor there." I handed him a message I had composed on my flight back. "Please send this immediately. I could do so from my yacht, but military channels are much more efficient."

He stared at me, shaken. "I can't do that," and he dropped the note on his desk. "You must know military communications are reserved for military use only."

"Of course." I sat down and rested my feet on his desk. "I also know many in the military. Many who are superiors of yours, in fact. I hope you enjoy this assignment because it will be the only one you ever have. Once I tell them what you did to my wife!"

He pondered my threat, then read my missive. He gave a low whistle. "Why?"

"I believe that is none of your concern." I swirled the amber liquor and admired its flashes of brilliance. "I really don't have the time or energy to entertain you. You send my message, or I will send another one. One concerning your untoward behavior. Which do you prefer?"

To his credit he only waited seconds. "I will take care of it personally."

"I've always felt that our instinct for self-preservation was one of our most enduring and endearing attributes. I'm glad you agree." I stood and lit a cigar. "I will be in my yacht; contact me immediately when you receive any information." I turned and walked gaily from his office. Lovely little Grenya, thank you so much for your lascivious ways.

Business negotiations are slow even when ultra-light communication is used. I spent the better part of two weeks orbiting that damn station which orbited that damn planet, waiting for closing confirmation. I visited the station several times, but after bearing the lieutenant's sniveling for the fourth or fifth time, I settled on sundew and solitude and an occasional sonnet.

But the message finally came, as I knew it must. No one really wanted Paglinowski; it's profit margin was minimal and then only because of Hancock's questionable sanity. My advisers had questioned mine, but it was my money. I could afford it. At worst I could always use a tax write-off. So when I again entered the lieutenant's office I was chairman of the board and sole owner of Paglinowski's Planet. And this was one enterprise I was going to take personal control over.

His delight at my appearance was nonexistent. "Aren't you through with me yet?" he whined. "I've already

been disciplined by my superiors for improper use of military channels. They are withholding my wages until I have paid for all of your messages."

"Hardly my concern. I want this message sent to Paglinowski's Planet immediately. If the terms are not complied with, I request that you, as resident military commander, send your troops and evict the afore-named parties as trespassers."

He read my order, then whistled softly. "Now I understand. You did all this because your wife left you."

"Grenya is not my wife! As the sole and rightful owner of that planet, I demand your full cooperation."

The lieutenant stared at me as comprehension dawned—a slow process. Then he rose stiffly. "You are a bastard, Habersham."

I smiled at his puny wrath. "Hardly. I full well know my parentage."

"They must be granted asylum."

"I'm sure you have room for them until another supply ship arrives. Hancock does have a substantial amount of back wages available so he can travel anywhere he pleases. I don't know, or care, about Grenya. Just remember, I own everything on that planet. They take nothing with them. Nothing."

He nodded, then smiled. "I know my duties. I don't have to do them in your presence. This is a military outpost and you are a civilian. If you do not leave immediately, I have full authority to arrest you."

"I would never question your authority, lieutenant. I was just leaving." I whistled a happy tune as I made my way back to my ship.

The troops weren't necessary. There was shock and outrage, of course, and much bad language over the video-com. I enjoyed my eavesdropping immensely.

"Why?" Grenya asked again and again.

"You'll have to ask the new owner. I am only following orders."

"Who would do this?" she raved on.

"I think I know," I heard Hancock say in the background.

"My men will be down to retrieve you within the hour. I trust that will be sufficient for you to be ready," the lieutenant replied tiredly.

Hancock's bearded face filled the screen. "Of course." The screen went blank.

"I've saved you," I toasted the frozen globe beyond my viewscreen and enjoyed another sip of sundew.

"This is outrageous, impossibly insane. What type of madman is responsible?" I could hear Grenya's braying even in the lieutenant's office. An impressive performance, but then she always performed best when angry. Even in bed.

"I think all your questions will be answered shortly," the lieutenant responded. "If you will come in here, please."

"Trespassing! Of all the..." Grenya stopped when she saw me. She was still wearing her ill-fitting heat suit. Northern exposure had done nothing to enhance her beauty. "Hancock was right."

"You shouldn't carry on so, it causes wrinkles," I greeted her.

"I understand, I really do." She settled awkwardly into an empty chair. Hancock, ever the frontiersman, preferred to stand. "It was jealousy, wasn't it, Dannel? You saw his talent. It scared you. Heaven forbid the star of Habersham be eclipsed by a true artist."

"You lack the intelligence and taste to be a critic, Grenya. I do not fear Hancock here 'eclipsing' my talent. Perhaps someday he will produce another Mona Lisa or Man on Thorns. However, I cannot allow him to violate an entire planet, create some gargantuan doodle to amuse the mindless. Such massive egotism must be checked."

"You won't even allow me to work there." Hancock spoke in questioning tones.

"For your own good. You have been too long locked away from the association of man. You cannot create great art without experiencing life. Discover what the rest of the galaxy has to offer. Then pursue your craft."

"The galaxy has nothing to offer him," Grenya said. "It will only pervert him, ruin his vision, make him like you. Small and vindictive. A voice without a vision. An actor, a sham. No wonder you're afraid of him. No wonder you want to destroy him."

"I won't condescend to defending myself before a creature like you." I turned to Hancock. "I say again, work on your technique. Eventually, you may have the wisdom and inspiration to put it to proper use."

"You made me leave my work, my tools behind."

"Technically, they aren't yours," I explained patiently. "The contract you signed gave all rights to anything you developed on Paglinowski to your employer. I now own that company. I now own your sculptures and your flute."

"I think that's disgusting," Grenya snorted.

"That's business."

Hancock, at least, had the sense to know when he was beaten. "When can we leave?" he asked the lieutenant.

"A supply ship will be by within a week."

Grenya piped in. "You promised us sanctuary. Please show me my room." She glared at me. "I need a breath of fresh air."

"This way." The lieutenant led her out.

Hancock remained, staring out at the frozen rock below. For the longest time he stood there, and I wondered if perhaps he, too, had turned to ice. Finally he spoke. "You never heard, did you? Grenya heard, she understood. But you never could."

"I'm tone deaf." The truth, actually, but he would never believe it. "You should thank me. The galaxy has much to offer. Trust me. After you have walked among man as long as I, your artistic eye will open, your soul will blossom, you will be able to create your masterpiece." *And fish can fly.*

He studied me carefully, although I detected no light of understanding in his eyes. "But not on Paglinowski."

"Not on Paglinowski."

He stared out the viewscreen a few minutes longer, and I swear I saw a tear in his eye. "Grenya is going to surprise you," he said without turning.

"How? By keeping her legs together longer than five minutes?"

He shook his mangy head. "She has the soul and spirit of a true artist. Something," he finally worked up the nerve to look at me, "you know nothing about."

I was tired of his self-pity. I threw an envelope on the desk. "Your last wages and severance pay are in there. Spend them wisely." I left him to his silent communion with a worthless piece of rock.

Paglinowski's Planet proved my advisors correct. Without the foolish dedication of Hancock, the expense of ice mining quadrupled. My new employees lacked his skill and diligence and soon there were complaints about the quality of the product. When Johnson's Hard Mud hit the market, that signaled the end of further interest in ice sculpture. We shut down operations and I took a healthy tax loss.

The station remained, however. The military decided the planet would be useful for sub-zero training and leased it from me for a pittance. Because of his serious breach of military protocol, the lieutenant was forced to remain, without hope of transfer or advancement. He serves as a powerful object lesson for incoming recruits.

I have no idea where Hancock went, although I became curious when some unknown artist began displaying sculpture carved within cubes of artificial diamond. However, I've seen several and they display too much wisdom and inspiration for an oaf like Hancock to ever create. Whoever the unknown man is, he deserves his current popularity no matter how fleeting it surely will prove to be.

And Grenya? I lost track of her as well. But I have heard an intriguing story. A dancer on Paradise No. 4, with movements as slow, so they say, as melting ice. She blends the erotic and the mystical into a dance that tells the tale of two artist/lovers struggling to create their vision within a society blind to and ignorant of their true genius. Standard stuff, but the audiences seem to love it. If I'm ever out that way...

## **SIN OF OMISSION**

The fire glowed cheerily in the hearth, warming the room and the goblet of 25-year-old brandy that sat invitingly on the lamp stand. At the present, neither the fire nor the liquor was having its desired effect on Father Wenington. Instead he sat scowling at the blank sheet of paper before him.

"Our sermon next week shall address how we can protect ourselves and our loved ones against the lure of evil and sin," he had confidentially proclaimed the Sunday previous. You should be able to compose this in your sleep, he scolded himself. He had a particularly arousing speech already written liberally quoting the Bible, Shakespeare and Ann Landers, and he had originally planned to dust it off for this weekend. The events in the news had changed all that. A serial killer caught in Montana. An investigation into a land development scam that had bankrupted hundreds of retired investors. The sexual abuse charges brought against a deacon in Memphis. Four local junior high students suspended because they were caught bringing guns into school. His canned sermon, brimming with platitudes and witty quotes, now appeared totally inadequate against such an onslaught from the hordes of Evil. His pen traveled wordlessly across the paper. \*Get thee from me, Satan.\*

There was a quiet knock on his study door. "Come in."



His housekeeper entered timidly. "There is someone here to see you. One of your parishioners," Mrs. Bachman said.

He frowned, then glanced at his grandfather clock standing regally in the corner. "At ten o'clock? I have an office. Couldn't he make an appointment like everyone else?"

"He seems quite upset. He said he didn't want to trouble you but it was very important."

*It had better be.* Father Wenington set down his notepad and sighed. "Send him in."

She left, then returned quickly with a short, squat man dressed in ill-fitting suit and jacket. Worried eyes peered out from glasses much too small for him; sweat beaded on his expansive forehead. "I do apologize for visiting you so late, Father," he offered his clammy hand. "But I really felt I had to talk to you as soon as possible."

The priest forced a smile. "I always have time for my parishioners, Mr.?"

"Dr. Carter," he filled in the blank quickly.

*The Carters.* After a moment he placed them, irregulars who usually sat quietly in the rear pews. She occasionally helped with fund-raising and other activities; her husband seemed to attend mainly because of her. But they tithed properly. "Yes, Dr. Carter. And how is your wife, Mimi?" he asked as he led the man to the chair across from him. "Can I get you anything?" He glanced at his glass of brandy. "Coffee perhaps? Soda?"

The doctor shook his head. "Coffee, if it isn't too much trouble."

"Mrs. Bachman, coffee for Dr. Carter." He took his own seat and studied his visitor. The man had not removed his jacket. *Good; he won't be staying long.* "And what can I do for you this evening?"

"It concerns something that recently happened at the lab," he began, then smiled weakly. "Perhaps I shouldn't be troubling you with this at all."

Father Wenington nodded as he remembered. Carter was a biologist at Epison Pharmaceuticals. "No trouble at all. Please continue."

"We have been working on a possible AIDS vaccine"

"A laudable goal."

"And highly profitable," he said with a laugh. "Not as laudable as one might think."

"Go on."

"Anyway, one of our experiments became contaminated. Totally irreproducible. We should have just pitched it but then the tests don't take that long. You never know what you might find."

Father Wenington nodded as he sipped at his brandy. *Get to your point.*

Dr. Carter sensed his impatience. "Although our tests are not complete, the results still appear incontrovertible. What we seem to have discovered is a serum that produces immortality."

Father Wenington nearly jumped from his chair. "You *what?*"

Dr. Carter reached in a jacket pocket and pulled out a small vial. "As I said, totally irreproducible."

Because of the ramifications, especially from a religious standpoint, I felt it best to discuss the situation with you. I really don't know what to do with it."

"I'll tell you what to do with it," the priest said, jumping from his chair. "How you could even think of bringing something as foul as this into our world!" He seized the test tube from the stunned scientist's hand and nearly ran to his fireplace. "After I destroy this, I demand you burn your notes and make no attempt to ever recreate this evil!" With that warning he emptied the vial in the raging fire. He was shaking with anger when he retook his seat.

"I'm sorry," the doctor offered after a long silence. "I was concerned about the religious ramifications of an immortality serum, which is why I wanted to consult with you. I did not intend any offense to you or God."

The priest paused, his drink halfway to his lips. "Excuse me, what did you say?"

"About the immortality serum? That it could possibly be an affront to God's will or our purpose in life."

Father Wenington ceased hearing the rest of the man's apologia. Instead he set his drink down with a heavy hand. "Heaven help me," he said dully. "I thought you said 'immorality.'"

## **THE VALUE OF PATIENCE**

Adam watched silently as the bird struggled to conquer its prey. He liked sitting by the creek in the afternoon. Most of his friends at the Home didn't like to walk this far, so he had the trees and shade and water to himself. And, currently, to a bird trying to wrest an earthworm from its underground lair. He wondered briefly if he could help it, but he had no idea how.

He heard a whuffling sound from behind, then felt a familiar tap on his shoulder, turned and saw a warden standing beside him. It made clicking sounds with its beak while one thick eyestalk gestured behind it. Its intent was clear; he was wanted back at the Home. He stood and started walking even as one tentacle circled his wrist. Wardens always appeared in a hurry; he half walked, half jogged behind the bulbous furry creature as they made their way back up the trail. He wondered briefly about the bird's plight but forgot it as they neared the Home.

Several of his friends were playing on the swings and slides outside, but they ignored him as he approached. Tony was sitting by himself on a teeter-totter and Adam wanted to join him, but the warden wouldn't allow it. Instead he was pulled inexorably toward the large brick complex that appeared out of place on the island. Adam was sure, now, that Grandma wanted to see him.

The warden stopped at the revolving glass door; its wide hairy torso prevented it from using the entrance. It released Adam and stepped back. Adam had difficulty using the door himself but reluctantly forced his way inside.

The coolness struck him and he shivered. Grandma had explained that it was air conditioning. The wardens don't like it, she had told him; that was the reason she kept it so cold. Adam's torn shirt and pants were ill-suited for it as well, but he decided not to complain. It was rare that Grandma wanted to see any of them privately. Perhaps she had a special treat for him!

Although the corridors were long and confusing, he knew exactly where he should go. He only had to backtrack once before he found her room at one end of the darkened complex. Shivering, he knocked timidly on her door. "Come in," the wrinkled voice called out and he entered cautiously.

He had not seen her for several weeks, but it appeared nothing had changed. She sat in her wheelchair staring out a window, then looked up at him and smiled. “Adam, my dear, so good to see you again! Come here and give your Granny a kiss.”

Adam dutifully shuffled over and kissed her forehead, then hugged her. “Not so tight, dear,” she admonished gently. He reluctantly released her.

She patted the bed next to her. “Sit here, please. You’re much too big to sit on my lap anymore.” He complied. She studied him a moment. “You need a haircut,” she said firmly after a moment. “Have the wardens been treating you okay?”

He nodded.

“They should, they owe us that much. Do you get enough to eat?”

“Oh, yes,” he answered eagerly. “We had pineapple and bananas for breakfast today!”

“You’ve always had a good memory for meals,” she said glumly. She opened the drawer in the table next to her. “Have you been studying your lessons like I asked?”

“Yes.”

“What’s five and five?”

“Ten,” he responded almost immediately with pride.

“Very good,” she smiled. She handed him a small book. “Read this.”

He opened the familiar story book and recited, almost verbatim, the saga of the cat and the hat. He only stumbled over a few words. She nodded in encouragement. “Much better than last time. At least you understand what you’re reading. Cindy can fly through it, but the words have as much impact as wind on a rock.” She studied him another minute. “I’m getting tired, dear. You probably want to go outside and play with your friends, don’t you?”

Adam nodded. He liked to see Grandma, but the visits were always so confusing and tiring. Besides, the air conditioning was particularly strong in her room. He wanted to go somewhere warm.

She gave him a smile. “You may go. Perhaps we can see each other again next week. I’ll have the wardens get you when I need you.”

Adam gave her one more hug then left, nearly running down the empty halls to get outside. He was also getting hungry, which meant it was nearly time for dinner!

She sighed as the door closed, then returned the story book to the desk. She pulled out another, thicker volume, her diary, and moved her wheelchair closer to the window for better light. She didn’t bother retrieving her reading glasses; her eyesight had degenerated to the point where glasses were nearly useless. She needed a new prescription but, of course, that was impossible. Holding the book close, she began to read the handwriting of a much younger woman.

*The attack had been rapid and devastating. I was only three when they appeared, but my parents told me everything. We knew they were there, of course; they couldn’t destroy our telescopes, not from that distance at least. They destroyed everything else. The Goddard space station, the moon settlements, our entire satellite network. In just a matter of a few short hours the invaders had entirely eliminated our space defense capabilities.*

*“It was like shooting ducks in a barrel,” my father described it. Several countries--the US, China, France--tried to fight back. Every launched missile or rocket or plane was successfully intercepted and destroyed. Armies were mobilized around the world as we prepared ourselves for the invasion. Unfortunately it never came. It was something far, far worse.*

-  
-

The warden chirped as it set a plate before Adam. Around the picnic table his friends, six in all, sat and fought playfully over the brimming baskets of sliced pineapples, coconuts and bananas. They always ate outside unless it rained. He didn't know why, but the wardens hated the rain. They never joined in when he and his friends would splash around in the nearby creek, either. Instead they remained stoically on the bank, maintaining a safe distance from the participants.

Another ring of pineapple dropped on his plate. “For you,” Mary said and smiled.

Adam nodded to her. “Thank you,” he said between mouthfuls. Grandma had insisted that they show good manners to each other. It was one of the rules she had taught them rigorously: Be polite. Even to the wardens, she had insisted. After lunch he and Mary played on the swings together. He didn't even retaliate when, in a pique, she kicked him. He didn't cry, either.

Grandma sighed as, through the great glass doors, she watched the wardens watching the children. “Are we some kind of game preserve to you?” she muttered. Although the aliens were virtually indistinguishable to her, she was certain that their captors changed frequently. She grimaced as she watched a shorter warden approach the children. It set a plate of fruit nervously on the table, then hastened back to the others. Its actions caused a reaction which she could only equate to amusement. “Just like a zoo, you bastards. Don't try to pet me. I bite,” she said and wheeled quickly away into the hallway.

She unerringly navigated the aisles to another section of the complex, one she had stopped letting the children enter. She input a code word on a recessed panel and a hidden door slide open. Inside, a massive network of machines awaited her. She wheeled herself over to a table housing a computer, microphone, monitor and several CD drives. Even though more advanced technology was available, her group had chosen the CD format because it was simpler to operate and maintain; a vital concern when centuries, not just years, were a prime consideration. She coughed, trying to clear her throat, then turned on the computer. This would be the sixth CD she had recorded in the last few weeks; its title, “The Conquering of Earth.” Suppressing a tear, she began to recite from her memorized diary.

[\[PW1\]](#) She

*They remained in our upper atmosphere for nearly a day. We watched them by radar and telescope as everything that left the ground was immediately destroyed. Civil unrest was rampant across the globe as we waited for them to Do Something. Not realizing that they already were.*

*Our world let out a collective sigh when they left as abruptly as they had appeared. Only one vessel remained, it's clear intent to prevent us from regaining our outer space capabilities. Otherwise it ignored us while we tried to come to grips with our situation. It was nearly nine months later that our true situation became clear...*

-  
“Tony, take your hands out of your pants and pay attention!”

The blonde, surprised and embarrassed, looked up at Grandma. Reluctantly he did as he was told. Smiling, she turned her attention to the others. “Now, let’s go over our numbers tables once again.”

Adam recited the numbers mechanically while he stared out the window. He did not like these sessions with Grandma, inside where it was always cold, away from the sun and the breeze. He did not like the lessons, either. He would rather play with blocks or color in the books.

Tony stood. “Granny, I have to go,” and he grabbed his crotch for emphasis.

“Go ahead,” she sighed, then looked at his classmates. “Does anyone else have to go? Maybe we should take a potty break now. But don’t dawdle,” she called out quickly as they hastened to the restrooms. “When we come back we’ll have Story Time.”

Only when they had returned and seated themselves around her in a circle did she deign to open the book on her lap. It was the one she read from constantly. Adam didn’t like or understand the stories, but he listened patiently nonetheless, otherwise she would smack him across the back of his hands with her ruler. She waited until the last giggle was giggled, the last squirm squirmed, then she peered over her glasses at the pages before her. “I was just a little girl,” she began.

After reading from her diary for fifteen minutes, she closed it. “Who were those people?” she asked.

“The wardens,” they replied en masse.

“And who are we?”

“Humans.” Adam mouthed the word along with the others even if he wasn’t sure what it meant.

“You must remember that, each of you,” she stated firmly. “Once we were the rulers of this planet. We built this home, and many other wonders which, I fear, you will never get to see. No matter what happens, I want you all to remember that. Is that clear?”

They all nodded solemnly.

She smiled at them. “Okay, now we’ll have playtime. Each of you go to your play stations. You’ll find your special toys waiting for you there.”

Adam’s initial frustration changed to bright delight when he saw what she had set out for him. He opened the case carefully and hit the switch. A smile crossed his face when the monitor on the laptop sprung into life. He giggled as he sat at the table and began entering commands on the keyboard.

The others were equally pleased. Cindy was presented Grandma’s diary; she squatted under a nearby light and was immediately engrossed in the pages. Johnny was given a collection of broken clocks, motors and other small equipment which he began to expertly disassemble. Tony found a calculator, which he didn’t need, and a series of complex calculus problems to solve. Mary was given art supplies and pages of engineering diagrams which she painstakingly began to copy. Susan sat before a wall of gauges and dials which changed constantly; her fingers flew across a keyboard in front of her as she attempted to correct the alterations.

In the back, silent, Grandma watched them. “I wanted to wait,” she told them softly. “But, dear ones, I don’t think we have much more time.” *Not much time indeed.*

She called them to end their tasks five hours later, which they did, reluctantly. “That will be all for today. But remember to keep working at your lessons. Johnny, will you please check out the air conditioning unit? It’s been making a lot of noise lately. Adam, please take me to my room. The rest of you are excused.”

Adam reluctantly shut off his laptop, then frowned as he watched his friends run toward the exit and sun and fun, laughing every step. He so wanted to join them! But he always obeyed Grandma. He guided her through the swinging doors and down the corridor toward her room.

“This cold is uncomfortable for you, isn’t it?” she asked as she wrapped her shawl tightly around her. Adam nodded. She patted his hand. “I’m sorry, dear. It’s uncomfortable for me as well. But it’s even *more* uncomfortable for them. Now slow down or we’ll miss the corridor.”

Adam obeyed. This area of the Home was unfamiliar to him.

“Turn right here. No, right, dear. Your right.”

Adam corrected himself and they started down the darkened hall. “I’ll have to ask Johnny to replace those lights,” she mused. “If we have any left. Do you like the wardens, dear?”

Adam stopped and considered. “I guess so,” he said carefully. “You’ve always taught us to like everyone.”

“I want you to like your friends. The wardens are not your friends. It’s almost funny, you know,” and she sighed as they neared her room. “The wardens don’t like cold or water. Do you know what a desert is?”

“Yes.” He understood that had to be his response even if he didn’t understand her question.

“We have plenty of deserts, totally useless, worthless deserts. We would have given them to them. We could have *shared* this planet! The greedy bastards!” She began sobbing. Adam tried to hug her, to comfort her and make her stop but she pushed him away. “No, none of that. There is no reason for me to force my hatred of them upon you. It’s not your fault, there’s nothing you can do about it anyway. Not now at least. Push me near the window.”

He guided her into her small room. They looked outside where his friends were playing. “I wish I could join you,” she said softly. “But if I go outside they’ll come to me. I just can’t bear to be around them.” She gazed into his eyes. “You’ll make sure that Johnny keeps the air conditioning running?” He nodded. “You’re a good boy, Adam.” She patted his hand. “You can go now.”

He nearly ran through the corridors trying to escape back into the sunlight. What she had said confused him. The wardens treated him and his friends kindly. Or at least they were fed and clothed and watched over so they wouldn’t hurt themselves. Once outside, he walked over to the swings, ignoring Mary’s plea to join her. He did not like seeing Grandma angry. Was it something he or his friends had done? They had to call him three times before he realized it was time for dinner.

*The irradiation had been total and devastating. At first the tremendous number of infants born with Down Syndrome was considered a statistical anomaly. Within a month we knew better.*

*The genetic damage the visitors had imparted reached every corner of the globe. Even preserved ova and sperm were affected. Governments around the world forgot about the spaceship hovering just beyond our atmosphere as they concentrated on this new disaster. Research on AIDS, cancer, muscular dystrophy and all other medical concerns was abandoned as scientists*

*and geneticists tried desperately to find a solution. Without success.*

-

*One chromosome; one extra chromosome! That's all that was necessary to bring us to our knees. The drain on the world's economy became tremendous as nations tried to deal with the problem of feeding, clothing and teaching so many mentally handicapped. A few nations, Asian nations in particular, took the most drastic and fatal steps; the infants were simply killed. Others fought among themselves in the misguided belief that their imagined enemies had fertile men/women hidden away in underground laboratories. While our real enemy remained above, waiting patiently.*

-

*Within 30 years our society in general was in complete collapse. International cooperation was no longer a possibility. Nearly the entire continent of Africa shut itself off from the rest of the world as warlords fought for control of a population shrinking dramatically through disease, famine and tribal retribution. Central America suffered a similar fate. A last, great Holy war raged in the Middle East. Nations prohibited travel into and out of their borders. Even the Internet disintegrated slowly but inexorably. The general population shrunk inevitably as well, through war, disease, illness and plain old age. But now there was no way it could be replaced.*

-

She closed her diary and sighed, then coughed a shuddering cough and covered her mouth with a handkerchief. It was stained with blood when she removed it. It didn't alarm her; she had known for months she was dying. She had lost feeling in her legs long ago and in another time, in another place, they would have been amputated. Instead she set her diary on those useless limbs and stared out the window where the children were playing.

*The last hope of Earth, she thought bitterly. Playing outside in the sunshine, most half naked, being dutifully watched by the wardens. "Why?" she asked aloud. "Why do you care? Are you just curious? Are you here to gloat in your total victory?"*

Even when they finally arrived, landing after 60 years to claim their prize, secure in the knowledge that the remaining humans were too weak and disorganized to fight them in any way, the wardens never tried to communicate. "You never told us why, you bastards!" she said then coughed again. Spasms shook her for several minutes, rivulets of pain swept through her veins. She was gasping and weeping when the agony finally ceased.

She knew then she had waited long enough, maybe too long. She felt confident the wardens would not interfere with their plans, not after so many years of benign neglect. More from habit than hope, she reached over and turned on the ham radio. Commercial television and radio had long since vanished from the airways so ham radio operators scattered across the planet had become the last reliable source of news. But even they had to succumb to the increasing lack of power, failing equipment and failing health. As she had expected, all bands were silent.

She turned off the radio. When was the last time she had heard another voice? Five years ago? Four? Was she the only human left? "Stop it," she scolded herself. "The children are human, too." And, for better or worse, they would be the ones who would initiate the plans her group and begun 20 years previous. Gritting her teeth, she wheeled herself out the door. It was time.

The children screamed with delight and ran to her as she made her painful way through the front door and

out into the sunlight. Mary tried to sit on her lap but she pushed the child away quickly. “Adam, I need to see you. The rest of you go back and play.” She saw the wardens approach. “Quickly, Adam, get me back inside. Now.”

Adam pushed her through the glass doors into her air-conditioned sanctuary. She smiled briefly as she saw the wardens hesitate, then stop at the entrance. “If you weren’t so fat, you could get through that door, couldn’t you?” She looked up at Adam. “We’re going somewhere different today. Go down the corridor to your left.”

Adam followed the unfamiliar path. Except for Grandma, they all slept, dressed, played and, when necessary, ate in the same large room near the entrance. The teaching room, lavatory and Grandma’s room were the only places they were allowed to frequent. She had warned them that the other rooms were dangerous and after several spankings he and the others had obeyed. He felt apprehensive as he pushed her down the dim hallway. Where could they possibly be going?

“Stop here.” He pushed her before a closed double door. She leaned forward and painfully inserted a key into a panel on the right. The doors opened into what Adam imagined was an extremely small room. “This is an elevator,” she said. “Push me inside. Press that bottom button,” she continued after they entered. Adam started as the doors closed and long dormant machinery sprung into life. He looked at her and trembled as he suddenly felt like he was falling.

“Don’t worry, dear,” she patted his hand. “This is a very short ride. We’re going down to the basement. There’s something I want you to see.”

The elevator stopped with a jolt, then the doors opened onto a vast, well-lit room. Adam gazed without comprehension at the multitude of tables, equipment and other paraphernalia that awaited them. Grandma wheeled herself into the complex, Adam following reluctantly. She stopped directly in front of a large console, Her fingers flew across the control panel and the screen in front of her sprang into life. “This is a computer,” she explained as Adam walked up behind her. “The big brother to the one you’ve played with. It may be the last working one on our planet, I don’t know. Sit in this chair next to me. I want you to type your name.”

Adam obeyed. Without thought he entered his name, not even looking at the keys as he typed.

She smiled and patted him on the back. “Do you remember this room? It’s been over 15 year since I brought you and the others down here. When the wardens came, I had to stop that. I didn’t want them becoming too curious. Not that it would have mattered much, I guess.”

Adam looked around the room. Other memories stirred in the fog deep inside his mind. “Where is Doctor Adams?” he asked, suddenly recalling the tall, gentle man who had spent so much time with him.

“He died a long time ago, dear. But I am glad you remember him. Now, do you remember how to turn on the equipment?”

Once again his fingers moved unbidden. The controls, the screens, everything looked like the lessons he had practiced and enjoyed on the laptop during playtime. Seated at the console, other memories returned, as if the lid to a locked trunk were opened and a century’s worth of dust had erupted. He didn’t need any instructions now, his command of the computer was nearly instinctual. One by one the lights of the machines around them glowed as they revived from their dormancy. He smiled at her when he was finished.

“Do you remember what all these lights mean?”



“No,” he admitted reluctantly. The glow of his achievement was dimmed immediately by her question.

“No matter,” she smiled and patted his hand. “Susan will.” She pointed to one of the panels. “That registers the output from the thermoelectric generators below us. We built this complex here, near a volcano, so we could easily generate electricity. Of course, if we had known how the wardens abhor the cold, we would have chosen another, less friendly location. But at the time we didn’t know anything about them.

“Did you know,” and she laughed bitterly, “that we built this all for you? And your friends, of course.”

Adam didn’t reply; he was entranced by the display on the computer panel. His fingers continued to fly across the keyboard, opening files, issuing commands, turning on one piece of equipment after another. He was beginning to remember more about the many months he and his friends had spent down here, being taught to operate the equipment.

“You were our last great hope,” she continued. “Our last great experiment. The geneticists had run into one dead end after another. From what we could determine, every person on earth, even those preserved by cryogenics, had been affected by the wardens. They must have been studying us for many years to understand that mongoloids are sterile. And to develop whatever they developed that so successfully and totally ruined us.”

She paused. “Do you know what an ‘idiot savant’ is?” His continued silence was his answer. “It was our last, great hope. We collected those we could identify from all over the world. Cindy can read and memorize anything, even if she has no idea what it means. Tony is a mathematical genius. Johnny can repair just about anything mechanical. Your talent, obviously, is with the computer.

“At one time there were a dozen of you here. As well as a small group of scientists and teachers. But, over the years, especially after the wardens arrived, there were no doctors or medicine available.” She squeezed his arm. “People die, Adam. All the other scientists, the teachers, some of your friends... they all died. Just as I am going to. Very soon, I think.”

His fingers paused on the keyboard. “Dr. Granger is dead? Mrs. Mockingstern?” Forgotten names and faces hovered dimly in his memory.

“Yes. We’ve kept them in a cryogenic state in chambers deep below us. To preserve their DNA if nothing else.” She patted his arm. “I’m sorry, my dear, but we didn’t keep your friends. Because of the wardens, their DNA has been irrevocably altered. It would have done us no good to continue our cloning experiments on them.”

She glanced up at the monitor. “All the continuing genetic experiments will be conducted and monitored by the computer, with Susan’s help. Statistical estimates establish our first signs of success occurring in 457.8 years with our current equipment. I won’t be alive, then, of course. But you and your friends will be.” She pointed to his chair. He hadn’t noticed the array of dials, gauges and devices he couldn’t recognize, let alone name, that were embedded within each arm. Once connected, the machine would nourish him, pump his blood for him, provide electrical stimulus so muscles and nerves wouldn’t atrophy, fight infections and the cancer that was growing inside him... even breath for him if necessary. “We did have some success. The Sustaining Process was developed late in our experiments. Too late for us, unfortunately. Not for you.” She paused. “You enjoy the computer, don’t you, Adam?”

He nodded. He tried to pay attention but the lights and monitors in front of him fascinated him. He could stare at them for hours.

She opened a drawer near the console. “This is my diary,” she said as she placed it carefully within. “I

want Cindy to read it to you and the others frequently. I never want you to forget. And when the others are finally born, I want them to know as well. Everything of what we were. And everything the wardens took from us.” She patted his hand. “Now I want you to go back outside to get the others. Bring them here. Don’t tell the wardens. You will do that for me?”

Adam nodded and reluctantly left the console. “I’ll be upstairs, waiting for you,” she called as he entered the elevator. There were only two buttons inside. He pushed the top one and felt a jolt as the doors closed and it began to rise. It took him fifteen minutes to find his way outside.

She watched his process through the monitors. “We’re asking you and the other children to do so much,” she whispered. Children, she thought bitterly. Each of her charges was at least 40, yet cursed with the emotional and intellectual maturity of a 12-year-old at best. *The last warriors of Earth.*

She wheeled herself over to another section of the underground complex, one much larger than it appeared on the surface. Even after the aliens had arrived, it had taken them a good 15 years before they had even bothered to land on the island. “No hurry, right, you bastards? You knew you had won.” *Maybe not.*

-

By now Adam had reached the others. The wardens huddled in their little group, basically ignoring the “children” at play. Her hand paused over the activation button. Could she do this? Once this project was initiated, there was no turning back. Below this room was another, a miniature refinery poised to produce vast quantities of chlorofluorocarbons. Increasingly infrequent short-wave reports had confirmed that the invaders preferred desert regions to the near exclusion of all others. Only slowly had they ventured into other climes, yet much of Earth they totally avoided still. Her group had located their complex on a small tropical isle; it was the heat, not the humidity that the aliens enjoyed enough to visit.

Their climactic preferences had been the inspiration for this final, desperate response. Once generated, the CFC’s would be released into the atmosphere. Over time, her group had hoped the chemical would completely destroy the protective ozone layer. Over time, the Greenhouse Effect would begin, gradually raising the planet’s temperature, increasing the cloud cover, generating violent storms. Increasing rainfall throughout the planet. Including the deserts. Perhaps hastening the appearance of the next Ice Age.

She noted the others following Adam reluctantly back to the Home. “I didn’t want to do this,” she whispered. But she had waited as long as she could. “And what am I doing to our planet? And what legacy, dear children, am I leaving you?” she asked the monitors.

Adam and his friends were inside the building now. The wardens paused at the doors, then wandered slowly back toward the hive-like structure they lived in. “Show’s over,” she said and pushed the button.

-

Back upstairs, she found the children aimlessly wandering the corridors. They entered the elevator reluctantly, but once in the laboratory they went willingly to their separate workstations almost by instinct. Mary cried as the tubes and sensors were inserted into her, but the others were so engrossed in their respective tasks that they took little notice as the Sustaining equipment was started. Each now also wore headphones connected to the computer. The machine would guide them through their tasks when they needed it.

Satisfied, Grandma went upstairs and locked the great glass doors leading into the complex; other doors had been barred for years. The locks wouldn’t stop the wardens, of course, so she turned up the air conditioning throughout the complex to discourage them further. Convinced she had isolated them as

much as possible, she returned to the elevator.

She smiled as she wheeled back into the underground laboratory. Adam remained entranced by the computer, entering commands almost unbidden. Johnny had a panel opened and was joyfully checking the pipe fittings. Susan had taken her station in front of the control panels for the genetic equipment and was already initializing the first experiments. Cindy sat by herself in a far corner. It contained a vast library of information on CD's, nearly every morsel of human knowledge the scientists had been able to salvage; she was currently staring at a small monitor, engrossed in an encyclopedia. It was fortunate, Grandma thought as she wheeled herself unnoticed to the back of the complex, that their attention could remain so focused so long once they found a diversion they enjoyed. Because they would be working by themselves for many years to come.

She entered a number on a keypad and a hidden door slid open. It closed behind her and locked solidly. "One more task," she whispered. "One more task and I can rest." Around her were the bodies of her fellow scientists, each entombed within cryogenic chambers. They were not there for any hope of revival, they would provide the raw genetic materials that the machines would require for the cloning experiments.

Her own chamber lied open in a far corner of the room. She wheeled herself over to it, locked the wheel chair, grabbed the corner of the cubicle and slowly, painfully pulled herself in. She had difficulty moving her senseless legs so she could position herself properly within the cramped container, but finally succeeded. She pulled a worn photograph from her pocket and stared at it one more time. It was of her and her infant son, taken over 40 years ago. "Good-bye, children. Good-bye, Adam, my son," she cried, then closed her eyes. She didn't notice the mechanical whisper as the metal top closed over her, but she did notice the pain as the needles and tubes penetrated her body. Then she noticed nothing at all.

"It's story time; it's story time!" The children gathered around Cindy, eager to end the lessons on agriculture, basic medicine, construction and other topics they were bombarded with daily. Within her chair she remained linked to a series of tubes that fed her, tubes that cleansed her, tubes that had enabled her and the others to survive well onto a thousand years deep below the complex. Her charges formed a circle, each smiling face lacking the encephalic folds, thick tongue, scraggly hair and other physical attributes that were part of Cindy's legacy from Down Syndrome.

She opened the well-worn diary carefully. So many times she had read it, first to her fellow guardians, then to the new-born, she had it memorized by now. Still she enjoyed the feel of the stiff, yellowed paper, the now-faded and barely legible handwriting. Several tried to climb onto her lap but she brushed them away. Despite the Sustainer, she was losing circulation in her limbs.

Adam and Susan ignored the clamor, their focus remained on their respective monitors. Johnny still labored at keeping the equipment running smoothly. Mary and Tony remained in their chairs and at their stations as well, but they had died years ago.

Outside, a force-nine hurricane, the fifth of the new year, was rampaging across the island and the nearly destroyed surface complex. The inner area remained, however; the elevator to the surface still worked. Thanks to the continuing efforts of Johnny.

The hive of the wardens was long removed. As the global climate had gradually changed, the aliens had retreated increasingly to the remaining desert areas of the planet. Their scientists had finally discovered the reason for the weather changes, but they had determined that the costs necessary to stabilize and restore the original climate could never be recouped.

The venture had never proven that profitable anyway. The fumigation had gone as planned, the deserts

were alien and inviting and the remaining native life entertaining. But tourists had lost interest in the planet as newer, more exciting worlds were established. The investment group had finally decided this particular world no longer offered a sufficient return and the planet had been abandoned.

Those living in the underground complex were unaware of this, their exterior monitoring system being destroyed long ago. "Can we hear the story now?" one of the children, Cindy thought it might be Susan but wasn't sure, asked impatiently.

She nodded. "The attack had been rapid and devastating. I was only three when they appeared, but my parents told me everything," she began.

## **IN THE BELTWAY**

*Finally!* Gath Pason sighed as the mining colony began to recede in the viewscreen. For the past three months their small trading ship had been hopping from one asteroid to another, delivering supplies to the widely scattered enclaves scratching out an existence in the Beltway. Now their holds were empty except for some equipment that was being shipped back for major repair or disposal. By all rights he and his crew should be able to relax.

Not this time. Their route had taken much longer than expected. Inoperable loading machinery at one colony, a recalcitrant, argumentative administrator at another; nearly a week had been unnecessarily added to their itinerary. And their employer fined heavily for supply ships that were late. "What do you think, Al?"

Al Feinstein, the navigator, peered up over his charts. He knew full well their situation... and the fact he would be fined as well. "If we had more fuel we could just blast away and make it up."

"But we don't." The unnecessary delays had forced them to use more than allotted, not enough to endanger them, but enough to eliminate that alternative.

Feinstein sat back from the computer screen and stretched. "Then we have no choice; we have to go through the Belt. I've entered most of the data. If we follow the buoys and are careful, we should do fine."

"How current is your data?"

He pointed to the computer screen. The display was similar to a sailing navigational chart, except the markings denoted asteroids and beacons, not shoals and sea lanes. "Upgraded when we left. But you know how quickly things change out here."

"Go as fast as practical without endangering maneuverability."

Feinstein nodded and returned to his work while Pason went to his quarters in the back. It was not going to be an enjoyable ride back for him or his small crew, he knew. Normally they gave the Belt a wide berth until it became necessary to enter and service their employer's settlements. A twenty-five percent penalty, applicable to all three members, made the risk necessary.

Pason spent another hour finishing paperwork, then went to the engine room that was home to their mechanic, Jac deVeaux. Over the speakers a Bach Concerto filled the room. deVeaux was in the middle

of it, miming the conductor. He blushed when he saw his captain. "Beautiful, isn't it?"

"You know what I think about music." Which was little, since he was tone deaf. A fact deVeaux knew as well. "Anything I need to know?"

"Everything's fine. Why?"

"We're taking the Beltway back. We have to make up time."

He raised his eyebrows. "Didn't realize we were that far behind."

"Blame that idiot on A-127. He alone cost us three days."

"We should have no problems from this end. Just try not to run us aground."

Pason smiled as he walked out. "I'll take that under advisement."

Pason stared at his unappetizing lunch. After more than three months the prefab food was getting old. deVeaux had joined him in their small common room which served as their eating area, recreation center and meeting room. Feinstein was still at the controls; even though the computers could steer the ship safely by using the buoys for guidance, he preferred a more hands-on approach. As they got deeper into the Belt it would only become more demanding.

"Have you talked to Central at all?" deVeaux asked while forcing down a mouthful of brown something.

"Won't do any good. They made it very clear when we left our last delivery that no excuses would be tolerated. You know how they are, always looking for a way to screw us."

"Maybe they'll feel different if we leave our mark on some rock out here."

"We'll piss them off more if we get back in time."

"That we will," deVeaux laughed. "How we doing?"

"Made up about two days so far." Just then they felt a lurch and heard the unmistakable roar of the guidance rockets. "Course correction," he commented after a few seconds. "Might as well get used to it."

deVeaux looked sadly at the front of his shirt, now splattered with brown and green. "Al's going to pay for this."

Pason returned his attention to his meal. "Care for a game of chess later?"

Two days later Pason was on the bridge, checking internal ship readings, when Al called to him. "What do you make of this?" He hit the speaker button and the room was filled with the unmistakable beep of a buoy, the underlying constant crackle of space... and something else. A faint whirring sound, oddly melodic, changing in pitch with surprising regularity.

"Never heard anything like it. Just space noise?"

Al shook his head. "Not likely. Not changing like that. Listen, it's repeating itself."

Pason concentrated but wasn't sure. To him it sounded little different than the hum of an engine or buzz of an insect. But he was willing to take his navigator's word for it. "Malfunctioning buoy?"

“Doubt it.”

He glanced at his own instruments. From what they displayed, he could only assume there were alone. “Not another ship. Can you pinpoint it?”

“Too general. Too faint.”

“Well, they don’t pay us to be explorers. I’ll note it in our logs.”

Two hours later Pason was in the common room when Feinstein called. “Gath, that noise. It’s getting louder.”

“Be right there.” When Pason arrived he found deVeaux there as well. The command area vibrated from that steady, varying hum. “What do you think, Jac?”

“It’s not from the engines, any sympathetic resonance or anything like that. New to me.”

Through the speakers the now-distinct hum nearly drowned out the space noise and the beeping buoys. Pason glanced at Feinstein. “Is this going to cause a problem?”

“Shouldn’t. The buoys all have assigned frequencies. This doesn’t seem to be strong enough to interfere on those wavelengths once we narrow the band.”

“Turn it down, it’s annoying.”

“Be glad you don’t have to listen to it through these,” Feinstein pointed at his headset.

“I am, believe me.” Pason turned to deVeaux. “Check your equipment anyway, just to make sure.”

deVeaux frowned but rose reluctantly. “Anything you say, boss.”

“Will this slow us down?” Pason asked after deVeaux had left.

“I doubt it. We’re nearly half-way through. We’ll be entering the uncatalogued area soon, but once past that we should make up any time we lose.”

“Uncatalogued? Didn’t know there was such an animal.”

“The Belt’s been bagged and tagged for the last 60 years or so. But it’s still pretty damn big. There are still areas surveyors or miners haven’t reached.”

“Think that could come from some type of settlement? Someone who lost their way? Or some Belt anomaly we haven’t seen before?”

Feinstein turned a knob and the soft sound of the modulating hum again flooded their chamber. “That isn’t from any equipment I’ve ever heard about.”

Pason looked at the sensor array. Nothing suggested they were in the company of anything except rocks. “Avoid it,” he said after a ruminative silence.

“Plan to.”

“I’m going to talk with deVeaux again. Maybe there’s something out-of-phase with the engines that’s causing this.”

“Fine. I’ve got it at this end.”

Pason hurried back to the engine room. The unexplained signal bothered him; they didn't need any distractions while tiptoeing through the minefield that was the Belt. He found deVeaux checking instrument readings. "Find anything?" he asked upon entering.

deVeaux favored him with a frown. "Not according to these," he pointed at the readouts. "But this makes no sense. Put your hand here."

Pason obeyed, and was surprised to feel a slight yet steady vibration through the hull. "Engines out of phase?"

deVeaux shook his head emphatically. "No. We're going at such slow speed they shouldn't cause it anyway. It's like it's coming from outside."

"Impossible. There's nothing out here except us and the Belt. I don't like ..."

His response was interrupted by a sudden abrupt shudder felt all through the ship. Then the alarms began screaming. "We've been hit," Pason realized. The two ran to the front of the ship, where they found Feinstein making frantic course corrections. "What happened?"

"Came up too fast, too small to avoid," he muttered. "I think it knocked out our right guidance system."

Pason activated the external monitors. Feinstein was correct, the right guidance rocket bore the unmistakable imprint of an asteroid collision. A cloud of crystallized fuel hovered near the gaping hole; broken wiring sent out sparks into the blackness. Nearby, a small asteroid was leisurely progressing away from the ship. Pason turned to deVeaux. "Think you can fix it?"

"Have to if we're going to get home. We don't want to steer through the Belt without it." He swore in French. "I'll have to go outside."

"Do it. AI, shut off all power and fuel to that wing." Pason looked back at deVeaux, who was already donning the suit. "Need an extra set of hands?"

"Let me check it out first. I'll let you know."

Pason helped him gather the equipment; within five minutes the Frenchman was ready. "Be careful out there."

deVeaux grinned. "This is what you pay me the big bucks for. Overtime!"

Pason helped move the equipment into the external access chamber, then secured the airlock behind him. "Keep in radio contact."

deVeaux nodded and activated the external door. Pason turned to Feinstein. "What happened? That's a pretty large rock to miss."

Feinstein shook his head. "I don't know. I was distracted, I guess. It's that damn *noise*." Even now they could hear the endless, modulating hum echoing faintly through the control room.

"Turn off the speakers. We don't need to hear that shit right now."

"They're not *on*."

Pason frowned. "What? That's impossible! Sound can't carry through space. Did the collision somehow cause this?"

“How? That engine is shut down.”

“Jac, can you hear me? Something odd is going on,” Pason spoke into the microphone.

There was a burst of static, then the interminable humming. “... stop... yes, I hear... so beau...” The signal broke up again.

“Jac, can you hear me?” Pason turned to Feinstein. “What is wrong? Why is our signal being jammed?”

“I don’t know! I’ve never... hell, what’s he doing?”

Pason looked up at the screen. The monitors showed deVeaux bent over his umbilical cable. After a minute the cable separated and deVeaux began to float free in the blackness. “Jac, what are you doing?” Pason screamed into the microphone. There was no reply. Instead the two men inside could only watch as the suited figure began to shrink on the screen.

“Christ, he’s firing his rockets. Al, we’ve got to catch him!”

Feinstein stared numbly at the screen. “We can’t maneuver. Not in all this shit.”

“Keep trying to signal him. Try to contact anyone. We need help.”

Feinstein worked at the control console, then sat back. “We can’t. Every signal on every bandwidth is being blocked. It’s that damn *noise!*” He was white when he turned to Pason. “It’s got to be something on the ship. We’ve got to go out there and find out what.”

“Check the monitors again.” Feinstein complied, but the cameras, heat sensors, every tool they had revealed only their damaged ships and the asteroids hovering perilously around them. “This is impossible!” Pason snarled and slammed his fist on the console.

“Listen, do you hear that?” There was no fear in Feinstein’s voice this time.

“Hear what?” Pason strained, but all he noticed was the unworldly humming emanating all through the ship. Emanating impossibly all through the ship.

“It’s beautiful,” Feinstein whispered.

“What’s beautiful? What the hell are you talking about? Turn off those speakers!”

Feinstein ignored him. “Yes, I can see you now. Yes, I can hear you,” he said to no one.

“Al, what are you talking about? Al?” Pason reached forward, grabbed his friend by the shoulders and turned him around. Feinstein stared at him blankly, a beatific smile pasted on his face. “Al, what is wrong?”

Feinstein looked right through him, his gaze and attention focused almost entirely upon something else. “She’s calling us. She wants us to come to her,” he whispered.

Pason felt ice rush through him. “Al, who are you talking about? Who is she? Where is she?”

“She’s out there, waiting for us,” his answer floated above the growing hum inside the ship. “She’s calling us home.”

“Al, snap out of it. You’re not making sense. Don’t touch that!”



Feinstein was groping for the controls to activate the engines. "Al, what the hell!" Pason grabbed his arm. "Damn it, you'll kill us!"

Feinstein said nothing as he tried to shake himself free from Pason's embrace. He swung his elbow, striking Pason across the temple and knocking him back. Pason staggered to his feet and seized his navigator in a bear hug, pulling him roughly from the console. The humming grew louder as they struggled, Feinstein trying to break free, Pason trying to drag him from the command room. Feinstein cried out in more than pain, then bit Pason on the arm. Pason yelped and hurled Feinstein away. The navigator fell against the airlock door and to the ground. Then he staggered to his feet. And reached for the activation button on the airlock.

"No!" Pason's head was throbbing from pain and the unearthly keening. He staggered forward and struck Feinstein on the back of the head. The navigator merely pushed him aside and tried once more to open the airlock. He's insane, Pason realized. And he had to stop this battle soon, before their unguided ship crashed in the thickening Belt. The panel to the tool locker was still open. Feinstein had already managed to open the inner door of the airlock and was going inside. Pason seized a wrench, then leapt forward and struck Feinstein on the arm with it. Feinstein turned and stared at him. There was no pain, no reproach in his eyes. Or understanding. Just desperation. When Pason struck him across the face, he did not make a sound. Instead he collapsed and fell across the airlock.

Pason had no time to attend to him; he ran back to the controls and frantically took command of their ship. Already an asteroid was approaching directly ahead. He hit the reverse thrusters to slow them, then the left and top rockets to guide them around the peril. He gritted his teeth as the humming continued to grow in intensity, distracting him, causing his head and heart to pound. He turned on their ship's radio as loud as he could, hoping recorded music would help drown out the terrible keening, allow him to guide his ship through the maze that was the Beltway.

He had no idea how many hours he had spent at the controls when he realized that the humming had stopped. He turned off the screaming radio to make sure. In the sudden quiet all he could hear was the mild undertow of the engines and the shallow breathing of Feinstein. He checked their progress. They had passed through the uncharted section and reached a relatively less dense area of the Belt. He sighed in relief and placed the ship on automatic. The buoys would guide them now, even without one guidance rocket.

His back was aching and his hands were cramped when he stepped back from the controls, then went to check on Feinstein. The navigator remained where he fell. His breath was shallow, his face was pale and covered with sweat. Pason knew then he had given his shipmate a concussion. He carried his friend to their living quarters in the back and wrapped him securely in one of their beds. Then he returned to the bridge and radioed for help.

"You lost your mechanic and nearly killed your navigator and this is all you can tell us?" The owner of the supply company slammed the report down on his desk. Next to him, a representative of the United Stellar Fleet sat impassive.

"I still have no idea what caused the actions of my crew. Or anything about the anomaly," Pason said. After their rescue, he had been given only an hour to prepare his report. Feinstein was still under treatment and had yet to waken from his injuries.

"A noise, a noise coming from nowhere. This is your explanation for nearly destroying my ship and losing an employee?"

"I have no other."

The USF representative spoke for the first time. “You blame this anomaly. Yet you offer only this evidence,” and he pressed the button on the recorder. Pason shivered as the room was filled with the familiar yet unrecognizable hum.

“We didn’t know what it was and saw no reason to gather more information,” he said. *Until it was too late.* “We are only a supply ship.”

“But you do have the coordinates?”

He nodded and pointed at his report.

“Yes, your report.” The officer glanced at it briefly, then set it aside. “I for one am prepared to charge you with gross dereliction of duty and ensure that you never command another vessel. However, since you work for a private company I lack that jurisdiction.”

“I concur,” Pason’s employer said. “You are no longer a member of this firm!”

The USF officer rose. “In that case, this inquiry is over. I’ll take this report with me.” He glared at Pason. “Be thankful you are not under my command. A court martial is too good for you.”

Pason sighed. His career was in ruins. He had perhaps killed one of his best friends. *And I still don’t know why.*

Outside, the officer placed the report in his briefcase. There was no doubt; the man Pason was at best lying, at worst a murderer. But they had the coordinates; tomorrow he would send a scout ship to investigate.

*Above her, around her, the cold white stars hung silent on the endless black tapestry of space. Once it had been different, once she had gazed upon white clouds and clear blue skies from her rocky perch. Once a roiling ocean and treacherous rocks had rested far below. But that was before the other, younger Gods, the Gods of Science, had seized control and driven her and her kind to this desolate sanctuary.*

-

*She looked down at the strangely clad figure at her feet. The helmet had been broken on landing; now only the remains of instant decompression remained. Yet this troubled her not. Long had it been since another had joined her in her unwelcome solitude. To sacrifice himself as his pledge of eternal devotion, it brought a fleeting smile to her face. She demanded that of all her lovers, how else could they prove they were truly worthy of her?*

-

*An unexpected flash of light caught her attention, but only briefly. She sensed immediately that the others she was calling would not arrive. That troubled her only briefly. Only once before had humans been able to ignore her summons. That was when she and her kind were the rulers of their world.*

*She glanced once more at the ruined figure at her feet. She had one lover now, she was confident more would join him. Tilting back her head, the siren began to sing.*

-

## rites of negotiation

As usual it was raining. Sheets of rain, torrential rain, battering rock and soil into helpless submission. Driven by winds that threatened to uproot everything in their path.

Merchant Prince Dabna Paruh gnawed on a gilwort root as he watched and heard the downpour batter his ship. His mood was as dark as the clouds above. "God, I hate this planet," he swore to no one. How long had he endured this mission? 42 Celestial days at the minimum. And nearly every one had been haunted by rain.

The 'hoppers--not what they called themselves but their speech was nearly indecipherable without his assistance and he didn't care in any event--had assured him that the weather was normal for this time of year. Which did little to appease him. Which meant that he was a near prisoner in his small vessel, entertained only by his small and shrinking entourage, what supplies he had brought with him, and the infrequent negotiating sessions. If the latter could be called entertainment.

On the table near him rested enticingly one of the crystal pentahedrons that were the goal of his assignment. Even now it's unique beauty, the ever-changing flow of colors radiating within it, took his breath away. He held it up and stared through it at the storm without. Even the rain and barren landscape of the planet was awe-inspiring when viewed this way. Obtaining them under an exclusivity agreement was worth every sacrifice.

The thought roused him to action. He glanced at his list of drones. His supply was dwindling rapidly, the result of the stubbornness of the natives. But the next session was scheduled for the following day, just enough time to prepare another. "Summon Number Seven to my quarters," he radioed the suspension chambers, then sighed. He had plenty of work to do.

The boy shivered as the rain tore around him. If not for the drugs he would have been terrified. Despite the heat he wrapped his coat tightly around him, although the material could never hope to ward off the onslaught.

Just a few steps ahead, although nearly indistinguishable through the downpour, Paruh slogged forward. In another time and another place he would never have suffered such an indignity. He would have insisted the meetings be held in *his* arena at *his* convenience. The 'hoppers, however, preferred their stuffy caverns to the surface, especially in the rainy season. The fact he was willing to make sacrifices for *them* had to put him in a stronger negotiating position, he continually tried to reassure himself. Not always successfully.

"This way, boy," he said, pausing long enough to wave before veering to his left. The child obediently stumbled behind him, nearly fell, caught his balance and continued slowly forward. Paruh had spent most of the morning briefing his companion on the task ahead, since the child would serve as his translator during negotiations. Like the other drones, Paruh had plucked him from the streets when he was no more than three. A child much older than that would be too experienced, have too many memories, to function properly in his or her role. All the boy needed to know--all Paruh wanted him to know-- as what he had been told.

Ahead Paruh could see the lighted entrance to the cavern. The technology of the 'hoppers was extremely primitive. He understood why they wanted to negotiate for the scientific advances he could offer. His task was to offer as little as possible.

Paruh had to stop twice to assist his companion before they finally walked out of the storm into the cave entrance. Two ‘hoppers were waiting to lead the way. They were unarmed, but they didn’t need to be; they towered over the humans, their thorny arms arched forward, their mandibles clicking constantly. They could easily dispatch the unarmed man and boy if they desired. As always, one took the lead, one trailed. Paruh wondered if it was the same pair of aliens which greeted him each time; without apparel or ornament of any type, it was nearly impossible for him to tell them apart. Only the creature he was negotiating with adopted any appearance of a personality.

They quickly traversed the now-familiar path to the meeting area. The child squeezed Paruh’s hand nervously as they entered the vast natural cavern. Paruh cooed to him softly, trying to calm him as they approached his counterpart. Except for their escort, there were no other ‘hoppers present.

The two parties stood silently facing each other several paces apart. The ‘hopper gazed at the humans with its multi-faceted eyes for a moment, then lunged abruptly forward. This was the moment Paruh always feared: would this be the time the alien decided to choose him? He let out a heavy sigh of relief as the insect enclosed its pincers around his companion, drawing him up, bringing it to within inches of its always-moving mandibles.

Would the boy scream? Paruh wondered. It had happened before, but this time the dosage was adequate to keep the child’s fear to a minimal. Paruh watched, as always fascinated and horrified, as possession began. Tendrils emerged from the ‘hopper’s mouth, seeking and entering the boy’s nose, ears, pupils. Inside him now they snaked through soft tissue and within blood vessels, seeking the centers for speech, spreading themselves within his cranium, taking control of his entire nervous system, his neuro network. His brain. The child shuddered once, then became stiff and still as control was completed. “Greetings, Paruh,” the child said for the ‘hopper negotiator.

“And most bounteous greetings to you this lovely day,” he replied. He still did not know the name of this creature, wasn’t even sure if it *had* a name.

“You have brought us a counter proposal?”

“As I promised. Yes I have. One I think you will be quite pleased with.”

“Please begin.”

Paruh sat cross-legged on the rocky floor. Now that the actual session could begin, he decided to make himself comfortable, although he wished the creatures would learn about such amenities as furniture. The ‘hopper could stand erect for hours, but it never complained, never gave any sign of taking umbrage at his casualness. “Let us begin with the portable atomic power plant.”

It was actually unnecessary for Paruh to speak aloud the list of equipment he was willing to offer. The ‘hopper could access all that information within the mind of the drone, information Paruh had spent hours painstakingly committing to the child. Other information the child did *not* possess. That the technology and equipment being offered was nearly 200 years old, hopelessly antiquated. That much of the equipment would break down quickly and was irreparable. That the actual value of the technology in no way was fair compensation for what the ‘hopper was prepared to offer. Which was why he was forced to use his drones in these sessions.

As he read through his list, he was sure his counterpart was comparing it to the information the boy contained. If there were conflicts, the session would end quickly. Terra-forming equipment, for example. Explaining that to the technology-challenged ‘hopper could take days. Imprinting it within the child, however, was another matter: it simplified and explained the concept in a matter of seconds. By the time Paruh was completed, his throat was sore and parched. Yet there were never any refreshments offered in

these sessions either. He wondered sometimes if the ‘hoppers had any concept of expected amenities, or merely used his discomfort to further their cause.

There was an extended silence as he reached the end of the list. “This is little changed from your last proposal.”

“My last proposal was an extremely fair offer.”

“For 10,000 of our crystals? They are extremely rare and difficult to excavate. You would nearly exhaust our entire supply.”

“You have a counter proposal?”

“3,000.” Even though the voice was of a young child, the finality was clear.

Paruh rose and stretched his legs. “That would barely cover the expenses I have incurred in traveling here, let alone in later distribution. I cannot accept that.”

He waited while the ‘hopper perused the boy’s memory. It would find only confirmation of his story, since he had taught his drone that as well. The ‘hopper, through the child, spoke again. “Your profitability is not our concern. 3,000.”

“On the contrary. If I cannot make a profit, I cannot afford to continue trade negotiations with you. And you will receive nothing.”

“There are other traders.”

Yes, there were, Paruh thought. But his family had exclusive rights to this planet. Rights which they were prepared to defend. At any cost. And the ‘hopper had been given that information many negotiations ago. “7,000. For everything I have promised.”

“3,000.”

Paruh looked at his watch. “Then I must consider this session over. You may keep the drone.” He started to leave.

“Wait.” Paruh suppressed a smile as he turned. “I must consult with the One. I shall return shortly.” The ‘hopper set the boy down and withdrew his tendrils. Immediately, without a sound or movement, the child collapsed on the rocky floor as if he had forgotten how to stand. The negotiator retreated into a rear corridor, the other ‘hoppers remained but paid little notice as Paruh helped the boy to his feet. Looking into his blank eyes, Paruh knew immediately his drone would not survive another session.

But then, they never did. Once he had brought a drone back to his ship, but the child lacked nearly all brain activity. After that he had left the drones for the ‘hoppers to do with whatever they wished. “Just a little longer, boy,” he whispered encouragement. The boy made no response, merely stood and wavered on unsteady legs. Don’t let your speech center be gone, Paruh prayed. Otherwise he would have to condition another drone, and another day of negotiations would be wasted.

This was the part of the sessions Paruh hated most. Every time the ‘hopper had left him to consult with... whatever and every time it had returned with a refusal. Leaving Paruh to sit in the hot, humid chamber to sweat and, eventually, make a solitary return to his ship. This time he was confident he had sweetened the pot considerably. Whether they agreed was another question.

Hunger was beginning to gnaw at his stomach when the ‘hopper reappeared. The translator was

immediately seized and control established. “We have considered your offer. We find it acceptable.”

*Excellent!* Paruh gave no outward sign of his elation, however. Although he doubted the creature could read his body language, it was better the ‘hopper consider him a reluctant participant rather than a jubilant victor. “When may we begin transfer?”

“We may begin as soon as possible.”

“In that case I will return to my ship and make preparations.” He bowed and abruptly left the cavern, leaving the hoppers to dispose of his drone. By the time he reached his ship he had forgotten about the boy entirely.

The Third wended its way quickly to the caverns deeper underground. Unlike the one it had just left, these were not lit by torches. Instead lights powered by the technology they had obtained from the outsider flooded the vast chamber. Since the soft ones had arrived over six cycles ago, its technicians had been learning the secrets of the alien science and adapting it to their physical requirements. Already mining and metallurgy were proceeding nicely, two skills the ‘hoppers had not possessed before human interference. If Paruh could see what they had accomplished, he would be quite surprised, if not alarmed. But that, the Third knew, was never going to happen.

It made its way directly to the chamber of the One. The guards quickly determined its ranking and granted it admission. Once inside, it ceased walking on its hindquarters in deference to the One. Meekly it crawled forward and sought an audience.

Her attendants made way reluctantly as it approached. The Third stopped before her and stretched forward. It allowed Her tendrils to envelop and possess him, to prove to Her satisfaction that it merited its continued existence. That determination made, She withdrew and allowed it to regain control. “Has an agreement been reached,” she asked.

“Yes. The alien will take 7,000 of the crystals.”

“It would not take more?”

“It is necessary the soft ones continue to believe the crystals are rare and valuable to us. Otherwise we will obtain nothing of value in return.”

“Why did you wait so long?”

“Again, necessary. We must maintain the position of power in all negotiations. I have been able to deduce through his underlings how greatly he desires the crystals. By delaying, we have increased his desire.”

“When will the disposal be made?”

“Soon. Transfer should be complete within the day.”

“You have performed most excellently. I am pleased to see that I was correct in appointing you my Third.”

While her attendants were removing the crystal eggs which She laid constantly, the eggs which the soft ones, for some unfathomable reason, valued so highly, the Third hurried back through the tunnels, its work not yet done. It wished to be present during the unloading of their new technology.

For the aliens were providing an unexpected solution to a vexing problem. When their world had been

young, propagation had been their chief means of survival. But as they had evolved and conquered their natural enemies, their queen's fertility had become a danger. As long as they were bound to their world, their resources were limited. Most of Her nearly indestructible crystal eggs were allowed to remain unfertilized; cannibalism helped control the population of those which were. Hopefully that would soon change. Now that they knew off-world flight was possible, their technicians were adapting the alien technology to help them escape their world. Once they did, population control should no longer be a concern. Then they would no longer need to trade for new technology. They would simply take it.

On its way to the surface it passed through the negotiating chamber. The body of a soft one still lied where it had dropped it. The creature still lived, still breathed. But all upper brain functioning had now ceased. Eventually it would be removed and consumed. The Third gave it only a cursory glance. It would prefer to negotiate with the alien, but that was impossible. The brains of the adult creatures were too developed, too burdened with conflicting and chaotic memories and emotions, to be safely controlled. During their first meeting they had tried direct communication. The encounter left the soft one in a screaming, vegetative state. It's own mediator had fared no better; it had simply collapsed from sensory overload and attempts at further linkage had resulted in the same effect on others of its kind.

The current method of negotiations, while not completely satisfactory, at least made direct communication possible.

It found the soft one and its drone waiting by its ship and supervising the unloading of the equipment. The Third seized the drone and quickly obtained control. "How long will it take?"

"Not long. Everything has been crated and ready for removal since I arrived. And the crystals?"

"They are currently being transported. They should arrive shortly."

Paruh nodded. "I shall be leaving immediately. Please inform your workers for their own safety."

"Of course." Since no further conversation was necessary, it released control of the drone. It paid no attention as Paruh led the girl back into his ship, its interest solely on the equipment it had obtained. In exchange for something that was completely worthless. Yes, the One should be quite pleased.

Paruh opened a bottle of Farin wine and poured himself a healthy portion. A reward well deserved for such a successful trip. He gave the crystal one admiring glance, then sat back and sighed. His cargo bay now held 7,000 of the treasures. A portion, perhaps a third, would be sold on the open market, where their unique beauty would fetch his family a handsome profit. The others would be fertilized and the eggs shipped to the mining colonies on Pordenon. The 'hoppers were well suited for toiling in the steaming jungle planet. Hard working, dependable and most of all disposable.

How fortunate, and lucky, they had been to discover exactly what the crystals were. Even if the 'hoppers couldn't reproduce, they still made excellent slaves. Which only made that business venture even more profitable.

He lifted his glass and toasted the hologram of his family. Yes, they would be quite pleased.

## **The Good Little Boy**

"Now did you put all your toys away like I asked you to?"

"Yes, Mommy," Joey Bradley called from the living room.

Susan Bradley came out of the kitchen wiping her hands on a dish towel. "In that case you deserve a reward. How would you like a nice scoop of ice cream with sprinkles on top?"

"Oh, yes, Mommy, yes." Joey jumped up and down and grabbed his mother's hand as they returned to the kitchen. "Can I have chocolate sauce, too?"

"We'll see if we have any," she said as she opened the freezer and pulled out the ice cream. Seconds later she was setting his reward in front of him. "Now tuck the napkin under your chin; we don't want you dripping anything on your clean shirt now, do

we?"

"No, Mommy," he nodded eagerly as he dug into the dessert.

"Such a good boy," she tousled his hair, then returned to her dishes still beaming.

A few minutes later Joey brought his empty dish up to the sink. "Can I go out and play?"

She looked outside but saw no one through their tall fence. "I suppose, but be sure to stay in the back yard, okay?"

"Okay, Mommy. Love you," and he gave her a quick peck on the cheek before rushing outside.

She grimaced slightly as the door slammed behind him; she thought she had broken him of that habit. Then she shrugged. Boys will be boys. But she did make a mental note to talk to him about that during their lessons.

"All done, Mommy. Come look!"

Mrs. Bradley stopped mashing potatoes and walked over to the kitchen table to admire his accomplishment. "That's excellent! All the letters are nice and neat. And within the lines! I think you deserve a star for this." She took an orange crayon and drew a big star on top of the page, then added a smile for good measure. "You're daddy will be quite proud of you."

The mention of his father shifted Joey's attention to more immediate concerns. "When's Daddy coming home? I'm getting hungry."

She looked up at the clock. "Any minute now. He might have had to work late at the office."

"He works late a lot," Joey pouted.

"He works late so we can have everything we have. Including you," and she kissed him on the forehead. As if on cue they heard a car pull into the drive-way. "Speak of the devil. Go wash up; supper will be ready in a few minutes."

With a whoop Joey jumped out of the chair and instead raced to the front door. Seconds later she heard the door open, then Joey yell out an enthusiastic greeting. Her husband came into the kitchen carrying their son. "Look what followed me home," he said with a grin, then set Joey down. "Can I keep him?"

"Not if he doesn't wash up for supper," she said with mock severity.

"I'm going right now," Joey said and dashed to the bathroom while his father sighed and set down his briefcase.

"Busy day?" she asked as she set the food on the table.



"The Corcoran account is becoming a real bear. How was yours?"

Before she could answer Joey was back and standing in front of her, hands outstretched. She checked both sides, smiled and nodded and they sat down to eat.

"So what did we do today?" Mr. Bradley asked while spooning out gravy on his plate.

"Mommy let me play outside for a bit. And I worked on my ABC's!" Joey replied proudly.

"Really?" He glanced at his wife before returning his attention to his son. "Can you recite the alphabet for me?"

"A, b, c," Joey began and got all the way to "P" before hesitating. "Z," he finished proudly.

"Not bad, I'm proud of you," his father nodded. But the look he gave his wife said otherwise.

Mr. Bradley pulled out the Disney video and turned off the TV. "Time for bed, little man."

"Oh, Daddy, do I have ta?" and Joey kicked his feet in frustration.

"You know better," he said, looking at the clock. "It's nearly eight and good little boys need their rest. Now give Mommy and Daddy a hug and put on your pajamas and get in bed. We'll tuck you in in a minute."

Fighting back tears, Joey gave each of his parents a quick kiss and plodded off to the bedroom. Mr. Bradley was shaking his head when he sat down. "Every night it's the same thing." He rustled the newspaper for emphasis.

"Now, dear, all children are like that."

"He shouldn't be." Then he set down his paper. "And what's this with his lessons? And letting him outside?"

"No one was around. It's not good for him to be cooped up in the house all day."

"Still we have to be careful. After what happened last time."

She shuddered at the memory. "You know that can't happen. The Embryonics Institute assured us of that."

He threw the paper on the floor. "There is no guarantee, you know that. Especially when you're giving him lessons!"

"Dear, he should learn to read and write, don't you think? It's only natural he would want to learn."

"Natural?" He snorted. "Reading, writing, where does it end? You know where it ends. He'll be like our last son, an ungrateful, lying, thieving son of a bitch!"

She couldn't argue with that, so she considered her words carefully. "The Institute gave us exactly what we asked for."

"And charged us plenty for him, too!"

"Not so loud! He shouldn't hear us fighting."

"I'm not fighting. I'm just... stating my opinion." Still he said the last more softly.

She decided it best to change the subject. "You know Joey's got a birthday coming up next month. He keeps asking me for a bicycle."

"And having him racing around the neighborhood? Riding in the streets?" He shook his head. "Isn't safe."

"Charles, he's a child. He has to grow!"

Her husband glared at her. "That's not what we paid for and you know it."

Her response was cut off from the back bedroom. "Mommy, will you tuck me in?"

"Coming, dear." She walked to Joey's bedroom and found him already under the covers. "Good night, dear, and sleep tight."

"And don't let the bed bugs bite!" he responded with a giggle.

She turned off the light then stood in the doorway and gazed lovingly at him. Almost 23 and he didn't look a day over five. Her husband was right, she had to agree. The Embryonics Institute had given them a very good little boy. The best money could buy.

## **GOOD PROVIDER**

"Good morning, doctor! So nice to hear you this day. Yes, I can tell it is you, not one of the nurses. Nurses swish when they walk. But you, you walk with a firm tread, a confident foot. A man going places.

"I bet I can guess how you look, too. 'Bout thirty-five, but a young thirty-five. Dark, neatly trimmed hair and a mustache. Looks good on you, too. Say six-two, 185 pounds. Popular with the ladies.

"I knew I'd be close! I've gotten pretty good with my ears since you took my eyes. Bet you wish you had taken my tongue, too!

"So tell me, what are you using this time? Take it all, I don't mind. I'm proud to be a good provider. Did you know my right leg is helping build the station at Callistro? Yes indeed. Why, I'm a very important part of some very important people, I'll have you know. My kidneys sit on the Supreme Court of Malmont. My eyes and liver are exploring the 14th quadrant even as we speak. I'm mighty proud of my liver, believe-you-me!

"Let me ask you something, a little favor if you would. Would you graft my penis onto one of those sex-vid stars? Just joking, just joking! So what are you taking this time? My heart, my thyroid gland, my lungs, what?

"Oh, just go ahead and surprise me! As long as I'm being a good provider and helping out someone who really needs it, I don't mind. Actually I'm proud that I've been able to help so many. I didn't smoke when I was young, no way. Didn't drink much, never caught a disease of passion. No broken bones, no rheumatism or allergies or arthritis or cavities or anything like that. I'm sure you don't get any complaints when you install one of my parts!

"I can feel you putting me under. No more talking, eh? You just go ahead and take what you need. What was that old song? 'All of me, why don't you take all of me?' I don't mind; I don't mind at all."

"Pretty crazy. And pretty spooky," the intern offered as he washed up.

"Not as unusual as you might think," the doctor in charge replied, drying his hands. "We do condition them to the provider concept at an early age. The more willing they are, the healthier the organs and the better the transplants. But his rationalization is a bit extreme."

"Still; thinking he's contributed to an astronaut. And a judge!"

"He may be right, we'll never know. We get the order, we select the most appropriate provider, snip and ship."

"So what are we taking this time?"

"Burn victim needs skin and nerve grafts. While we're in there we may as well take his spleen and lower intestinal tract as well."

"Might as well take everything."

The doctor shook his head. "No, best he remains alive. Organs stay fresher that way." He dried his hands. "He's been with us two weeks; he's good for another few days at least."

"I wonder what he did," the intern said as they made their way to the operating room.

"To become a provider? Jaywalking, mass murder; does it matter? You break a law, you become a provider. That's the way it has to be."

## THE CAGE WITHIN

The roaches have decided to feed me today. They are so amusing, these peasants lost within their tattered uniforms. They have no understanding how to wear one. It must become part of you, an extra layer of skin if you will. It must infuse your soul and mind with the responsibilities it signifies. It is the history the uniform represents that is significant, not the man or woman who dons it. These little men have no comprehension of this.

It disgusts me to see them strut like peacocks in front of my enclosure. Of course I could escape if I desired. But that would imply that I was wrong in performing my duty, meeting my obligations to my country, my uniform, history. Such an admittance is unacceptable.

Their rations are adequate, such as they are. I have fared better, of course. If our positions were reversed, I would surely offer harsher treatment. Enemies of the state should expect no less. I have offered less.

The young guard is watching as I eat. A farm boy surely, with totally inadequate training. He should be standing silent and at attention as his superiors dine. This one slouches against the wall, an arrogant grin on his bovine face. You think you have won, don't you, child? Yes, watch me, a dull rooster trying to guard the henhouse against the marauding fox. Are you afraid I will steal the silverware? As if you could stop me. As if any of you could stop me!

Have you never seen a man write while he eats? A feat beyond your limited capabilities I am sure. Perhaps someday you will read this. Perhaps you may even be able to understand it. Doubtful.

I smile at him as I place my dirty service in front of my door. He remains at his station until I retreat to the

back of my room. Foolish boy; I have no interest in you. Does the eagle concern himself with the ants beneath his claws? No, you are not worthy of my attention. None of you are.

\*\*\*\*\*

They have given me clean clothing to wear, but I refuse. The socks and underwear I will change, of course, but not my uniform. They claim they want me to look "presentable" for my trial. As if they are in any position to sit in judgment of me!

Was it not Churchill who said the Right of Rule is Right Absolute? Or perhaps Clemenceau. If I had the resources I could research the quote exactly. They must believe that by isolating me from my people, my country, that they will silence the uproar that surely is erupting beyond these walls.

That is what most offends me about this incarceration: the enforced isolation. How can I help lead my country when I am so brutally prevented? The roaches understand so little about leadership. What must be done must be done; a true leader has the courage and vision to do what is necessary. These men--and I am reluctant to call them so--lack both.

And why has this "trial" not started? Do they keep me thus in order to break my spirit? They are mistaken if that is indeed their intent. Or perhaps it is fear. Yes, fear; fear that their tribunal will understand the necessity of my actions. Any man, especially a strong leader, would find me blameless of anything save bad luck and a slight mistake in judgment. Yes, that I must admit to. Putting my trust in men who weakened under the pressure of war.

Yes, it was my mistake not to fully educate a few of my followers on the obligations of the military. But in the final analysis it was their weakness, not mine. The tribunal will understand that as well. When I am released, those traitors will be the first to feel my wrath. The roaches will follow.

\*\*\*\*\*

They tell me the trial will finally begin. They have amassed their evidence, they claim. Evidence! Is it not evident that I am the victim, not them? A victim of traitors within and without.

What can they accuse me of? In war, all is necessary. Our history is the ultimate proof of that. How many times have the roaches proven their own culpability? How many times had they slaughtered my people, ignoring our humanity, befouling our shared land? They have no right to share our land in any event. I remember vividly the stories my grandmother told me, the stories her grandmother told her. The roaches came here weak and beaten, thrown out of their own country by a stronger, more courageous enemy. We welcomed them, succored them in their pain and anguish. And they repaid us many times over by trying to dominate us, persecute us, destroy our sense of country and destiny.

That is what we fight for, to regain the glory and promise of our past. To take back our land from these pitiful invaders. And they claim that I slaughtered the innocent?

There are no innocents in times of political repatriation. The bootblack or the die maker is as much the enemy as the soldier or the politician, sex and age is not a consideration. If the men who have the effrontery to judge me are truly fair-minded and right-minded--if they have not been blinded by the propaganda of the roaches--then they must understand this. I believe I will ask them to clean and press my uniform before I enter the chamber.

\*\*\*\*\*

I did not recognize anyone on the tribunal. Their names were strange-sounding; some were of foreign

skin. The roaches lack the courage to judge me themselves, so they call in a panel of aliens. As if anyone save the most feeble-minded could find me guilty of any crime!

They had "appointed" me a representative. The boy is young and undisciplined; it is evident he lacks the benefit of military training. He is an additional obstacle, nothing more. I ignored him throughout the formalities and will continue to do so throughout my "trial."

The judges wore a sufficiently sober demeanor, trying without hope to legitimize these proceedings. Since I must consider myself a prisoner of war, I offered only my name, rank and serial number. Other questions I declined, citing the Geneva Convention.

They began by reading the litany of charges brought against me: the slaughter of over 5,000 "innocent" civilians, torture of prisoners, ordering the destruction of an entire village. "War crimes" they called them, as if such an act were possible! I must give the roaches some acknowledgment for seeking and finding small-minded men like themselves. Which means, of course, that they are not qualified to sit in judgment of me or my men.

The "prosecutors" contented themselves this day with parading a series of so-called "victims" to speak out against me. Each was more cowardly and unworthy than the one before. They asked if I regretted my actions. My only regret was that I had allowed these roaches to live. That, of course, I did not say.

One event did trouble me. One of my men, one of my own men, was brought in to testify. It was obvious, watching him on the stand, shaken and pale, all courage and military bearing drained from his body, that the roaches had been particularly thorough in their indoctrination of him. I recognized him as a lowly private with whom I had had few direct dealings. He was young as well.

I could understand why they would choose one of his ilk to speak against me. An older officer would never have permitted himself to be swayed by their transparent arguments and psychological torment. He would have understood and approved my actions.

I noted that journalists were present. What message would they disseminate to my followers? I took extreme care to maintain my focus on the judges and, occasionally, the witnesses. Surely they could see that I was in command of the situation even as I sat shackled like a common criminal, a prisoner of the court. Surely at least one would understand the travesty that was being committed in the sullied name of justice. At the day's end they paraded me through the court as if I were merchandise on display. I ignored their inhumanity as I walked outside proudly, accompanied by camera flashes and reporter's questions. Let them take their photographs. Let the world see a man as heroic in captivity as he is in freedom. In particular, let my followers see me. Let their spirits be energized by my own undaunted soul. For prevail we shall!

\*\*\*\*\*

I have begun to lose count of the days. My trial has become mind-numbing in its predictable, endless repetition. Each new day unveils another parade of the enemy, sitting behind the safety of the lectern as they spew their unwarranted accusations at me. The mothers of sons, the fathers of fathers... the list goes on and on. After each, the tribunal asks if I am guilty as charged. Such effrontery. Clearly the only crime I am guilty of is laxity. If my soldiers had truly carried out my orders, then those accusing me would be incapable of doing so!

The judges have offered no reaction to the charges, but those allowed to view the proceedings do far too often. I never believed so few could weep so freely for so many. The roaches, I must conclude, are a particularly emotional tribe. That is their fatal weakness and why they are unworthy to share our land. I will remember that when this charade is complete and I once again regain my command.

\*\*\*\*\*

The end: finally! My vindication was at hand. I walked into the familiar courtroom proudly, my many medals glowing in the flash of the cameras, the glare of the lights. I had spent several hours polishing each for its full effect.

It was amusing, the formality they pretended to. Armed soldiers stood at attention throughout the hall, whether to protect me or my erstwhile judges was unclear. I stood at attention as well, my back razor-straight, my head held high and proud. Anyone could see how thoroughly my demeanor shamed the roach military, which could never hope to emulate me. Again I was struck with the unworthiness of these little men to wear the uniform of my homeland. It is an insult that must be avenged!

Once more I was asked to explain the actions of my underlings, to explain myself. I repeated patiently that I was a prisoner of war and as such was required only to reveal my name, rank and serial number. This charade was repeated after each charge against me was read. The list seemed endless but throughout I remained proudly at attention, a sterling example of the internal strength and endless determination of my people.

It had become apparent as the trial continued haphazardly that the roaches had chosen my judges well; weak, spineless and unimaginative each. Not one revealed any understanding of patriotism, the slightest consideration for the plight of my people, our years of oppression, our overwhelming and righteous desire to breathe our own air as free men and women.

Even in their verdict they revealed their lack of courage. Exile! A pariah to the civilized world they called me, or some such nonsense. Of course they could not hope to imprison me within my own borders, my followers would free me within hours. They dare not execute me lest I serve as an eternal symbol of my people's indomitable courage.

Again my contempt for these small men surged unbounded. If our positions were reversed, I would have summarily executed each of them as mortal enemies to the people and the state. Yet such is the difference between the mouse and the lion. The mouse, despite its numbers, must always live in fear of the predator and can never raise a paw against it. Just as my captors must now live in fear of me and my final retribution.

I maintained my silence as I was led from the chambers, the roaches around me celebrating their hollow victory, journalists trying vainly to pry away my innermost thoughts. I wondered: is this how Napoleon felt? Exultation, rebirth: that was what their "verdict" had provided me. I waved to the cheering crowd as I allowed myself to be placed in the limousine. Let my followers know I was unbroken and unbowed. Let them know I would be back. Yes, I will be back!

## **A Frozen Moment**

"You have your time machine completed?" Professor Prump couldn't keep the admiration from his voice.

"Indeed I have," his colleague, Professor Cumberbund, pointed proudly at the black box resting innocuously on his work bench.

"It's really that small?" Prump continued as he approached the machine. The top was open and he could see hundreds of circuits and solder connections. A power cord ran to a wall outlet and an unmarked switch was on the side of the box. But there were no dials or gauges or anything else to suggest what the

device actually did.

"Size only counts in matters of love, my dear sir."

"Indeed. Still." Prump gnawed on a fingernail as he gazed at the machine. "How would you use this time machine of yours? It's too small to sit in. Does it send objects forward into time or backward? Or does it retrieve objects? Allow you to peer into the future or the past?"

Professor Cumberbund shook his head. "None of the above, my good fellow. My machine *stops* time."

"Stops time?"

"Yes. As thoroughly and totally as a concrete dam checks a raging river, a dangler from the nose deters a heated kiss."

"But why?"

Professor Cumberbund pondered the question as if choosing a chocolate from a sampler. "Because I can."

Professor Prump nodded in total agreement. "And how long will time be stopped?"

He shrugged. "Since time will, for all intents and purposes, cease to function, I would say that question is moot."

"Most interesting," Prump rubbed his hands vigorously. "Have you tried it yet?"

Professor Cumberbund laughed. "If I had, my good sir, we would not be holding this conversation! No, I wanted you to be here to witness this most historic event."

"I am most honored," he said and blushed.

"Then join me in a toast and we shall commence upon Man's greatest experiment!" So saying, Professor Cumberbund took two tankards and a wine of excellent vintage from a nearby shelf and poured healthy portions for he and his friend. "To no future, no past, only the present."

They clicked glasses... and disaster struck. Prump's tankard had a small crack. The slight contact of glass on glass was enough to cause it to break, and wine poured down onto Professor Cumberbund's time machine. Within seconds, sparks and flames shot out of the machine and before the academicians could react the device was in smoking ruins.

"Imagine," Professor Prump mused as he gazed at his broken tankard, then at the broken machine. "A niche in stein saves time."

## **LEGAL TENDER**

"... and we'll have your weather in a moment." Immediately a commercial touting the benefits of attorneys Smith, Weaver and Kline erupted from the tiny radio. Haley Pryce ignored the spiel but hummed along with the background music as he placed two eggs sunny side up on his plate, then took his seat at the table. He ate tastelessly as he perused the want ads. "What to do, what to do," he mumbled, scanning the list. Openings for lawyers, legal secretaries and court transcribers were everywhere. Research assistants and legal interns. He shook his head sadly; wouldn't do, wouldn't do.

But he had to do *something*. It had been nearly a year since his last job, when his company relocated their manufacturing facility to another country. Since then nothing but frustration. He had training and skills, he could learn, he tried to convince himself and prospective employers. To no avail. He turned the page. As usual, there was a raft of openings at fast food restaurants, but their promise was empty; they only hired teens and college students. And it had been years since Haley could lay claim to either title.

After twenty minutes his breakfast was cold and his enthusiasm as well. Nothing else in the want ads appealed to him, nothing at all. Which meant he had no choice: he would have to drive to the city. Before going to the garage, he checked himself thoroughly. His jacket fit tightly, with no protruding buttons. He removed his belt and watch ...just in case. His proof of auto insurance was in his wallet. Taking a deep breath, he opened the door, checked to see if anyone was approaching, then walked into the hallway.

His neighbor, Sally Peterson, was just entering the elevator and was kind enough to hold it for him. "Did you hear the good news?" she asked as soon as the door closed.

Security monitored the elevator, so they both had to place their hands on the electronic waiver clause on the wall before the elevator activated. "No, what?"

"I just passed the bar!" She held up an envelope proudly. "I just got the word this morning!"

He managed to smile. "Congratulations! So now what?"

"No more waiting tables, I'll guarantee that. Say, if you ever need any help." She began digging in her purse.

"That's okay," he stopped her. "My brother-in-law is an attorney. So's my three sisters. Keep it in the family."

She made a moue. "I understand." The elevator stopped and the door opened to the apartment complex's underground garage. "If you ever need something done quick, though, don't forget I live right down the hall."

"I won't," he nodded to her retreating back. Sighing, he went to his own car, first checking that no one was hiding on the other side or underneath before getting in. He had heard stories of street people doing just that and then filing law suits. Even though the apartment garage was secure, Haley felt his vigilance was a small price to pay. He drove up to the exit, put his thumbprint on the electronic form clearing the building owners of any liability in case of accident or damage, and headed toward the city.

And regretted it almost immediately. Cars were everywhere, some roaring along as fast as 20 miles an hour. Haley worked his way into the inside lane where traffic was moving at a more secure five miles and breathed a sigh of relief. But why are so many people out today? he wondered. Then he turned on the radio to one of the ubiquitous automated stations and found out: it was Thurgood Marshall Day. He swore then and immediately considered returning to his apartment. No, he decided, he had come this far. In another hour he would be in the city.

But it was nearly two hours before he finally pulled into a parking lot. There had been a minor accident, nothing more than a fender bender, but he and all other potential witnesses had been detained while the police obtained signed depositions. Attorneys for each of the parties involved had also talked with him; only after assuring them all that he had seen nothing of the incident was he allowed to leave. Although he was given nearly a dozen business cards by the lawyers "just in case," each had assured him.

Haley drove around the parking lot three times before admitting the obvious; he was going to have to park between two other cars. Holding his breath, he guided his vehicle in slowly. The onlookers walked



away disappointed when he navigated successfully. When he got out of his car the attendant was waiting, Polaroid in hand. "For insurance," the man explained as he took photos of all four sides of Haley's car. He handed them to Haley. "Please look these over and sign on the back."

Haley complied, then was handed a standard release form exonerating the lot in case of any damage to his car, falling and hurting himself while on their property and similar standard disclaimers. He signed that as well, then headed toward the employment agency.

He had hoped to stop by his bank but that was impossible now. Finding a time a bank was open was getting more difficult by the month as new legal holidays were declared: Johnny Cochran Day, Roe Vs. Wade Day, Clarence Thomas Day, Ken Starr Week. Haley sometimes wondered if the law makers would run out of attorneys to honor before the year ran out of days, but he knew the answer to that: they would never run out of lawyers.

The employment office was open and after only a twenty minute wait he was ushered in to see a Mrs. Robacher. While she perused his resume he looked around her office. On her desk were photographs of her smiling clan; behind her, prominently displayed on the walls, were certificates and diplomas. The one proclaiming her law degree was most prominent.

She set down his document with a thump, then studied him over her glasses. "What are you looking for, Mr. Pryce?"

"A decent job, one with benefits. I'm willing to learn or take whatever training is necessary," he added quickly.

"Your factory experience hardly counts for anything anymore, not with the way the economy is. And your degree, or lack thereof. It says here you started law school but quit. Why?"

He blushed. "I tried, but I just didn't enjoy it. I get nervous speaking in front of people; I tend to, to stutter."

"Well, if you had some type of law degree I could help you. Have you thought about going back?"

He shook his head.

She returned his resume. "In that case I can think of only one area of employment you could try."

"Which is?" She told him and he shuddered. No, he vowed, he was not going to do *that*! "Thank you for your time." He grabbed his papers and left her office, the emptiness within threatening to engulf him. A familiar voice stopped him before he could leave the agency, however.

"Haley! Haley Pryce! How you doing, good looking?"

He turned and smiled at Sylvia Williams. He hadn't seen her since they both lost their jobs at the factory. "Sylvia, you're looking fine as always. What brings you here?" He walked over and sat beside her.

"Same as you, looking for work. First chance I've had since I went back to school."

"Really? What are you taking?"

"Pre-law. I'm here to see if I can get in somewhere as a legal secretary or assistant. Tide me over 'til I pass the bar."

Further conversation was interrupted when a secretary approached. "Mr. Babcock will see you know,

Miss Williams.”

“Thank you.” She turned and smiled at Haley. “Good luck.”

“You, too.” Haley’s mood was dark as he walked down the stairs toward the street. *Was everyone becoming an attorney?* He leaned against the building outside and thought about his friends and acquaintances ...and was brought up short when he realized that just about everyone he knew, even casually, had a degree in law or was working on one. Maybe his employment counselor was right, he thought sourly as he started walking, maybe he would have to go back to school. But to pay for it...

His train of thought was interrupted by a slight bump and grunt of surprise. He turned and smiled weakly at the man he had brushed against. “I’m sorry.”

“Sorry?” the man erupted. “You almost knocked me off my feet. You could have hurt me!”

Haley had to suppress a laugh. The man was six inches taller than he and outweighed him by more than 100 pounds. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to bump into you.”

“You saw it,” the man turned and addressed the gathering crowd. “That man tried to knock me over.”

“You’re right,” someone raised their hand. “He definitely attacked you!”

“No,” another said. “He lost his balance on this sidewalk. The city shouldn’t be so lax with their maintenance. He should sue the city.”

Haley grimaced as the voices rose in argument for and against his innocence. A dozen men and women stepped forward and addressed his accuser, assuring him they would defend his accusations of personal attack most vigorously. An equal number were telling Haley that they would take his case and counter sue for false accusation and character defamation. The crowd continued to grow, hemming him in with their bodies and words, until a police officer forced his way in amongst them. “What is happening here?”

“This man attacked me,” Haley’s accuser pointed at him. A chorus of agreement and disagreement arose immediately.

“And you?” the officer asked Haley.

“I just was walking and brushed against him accidentally. I certainly had no intention of hurting him.” The chorus rose again.

“I guess we’ll have to file a report,” the officer said and pulled out some forms. “First I need your names.”

Forty-five minutes later Haley reached his car, incensed and depressed. In his coat pocket was the citation summoning him to court in two weeks, along with over 20 business cards from attorneys eager to represent him. What I really need now is a lawsuit, he thought as he made his way out of the parking lot and started back to his apartment. No job, no prospects, and now he was going to have to go to court. “Now what do I do?” he asked the radio as he carefully negotiated the traffic. When he reached his apartment nearly two hours later he had reluctantly made his decision; his employment counselor was correct. “If you can’t join them, beat them,” he said to himself as he reached for the phone.

Haley sat behind the desk in his new office. He now sported a new haircut, a new suit, new shoes and new title. Training had taken no time at all; now it was time to work on his first case. He dialed, spoke to the secretary and was quickly transferred to his quarry. “Good morning, Mr. Simonson,” he tried to sound cheerful. “This is Haley Pryce with the IRS. We need to set up a time to go over your latest tax

return.”

## UNFAIR TRADE

The wind tore across Gren’s face, ripping away at his lips and eyes. He snarled, but it couldn’t be heard long above the storm. The Aldian pulled the fur collar tighter around his neck and checked to see if his companions were all right. Inside a copious pocket the Llyl trilled softly and burrowed deeper into the warmth. He closed the flap with a swift tug – it would be secure the remainder of the journey. Bre, just behind and to his right, was almost hidden by the swirling snow. He flicked his tail and kicked his mount forward. Fjen, the last, waved and adjusted the packs on his back. Ordinarily the three felines would not be out in weather like this. It was not good for hunting or traveling: such times were best spent drinking *stek* and fornicating before a warming fire. But it was the time for the Trader, and they had been chosen to take the furs to him.

Gren couldn’t see it now, but somewhere on the plain below stood the six-foot cube the Trader called home. He cursed and thought of the warm lodges and his friends’ activities. Still, someone had to go. Just their luck the gods had decided to storm. Gren’s mount shook its head and ice fell from its mane. The *cherae* did not like such weather either. Gren kicked it in the ribs. The animal squealed, then continued into the frozen blast furnace.

One moonset later the travelers stood in front of the Trader’s ship. Gren had seen it before, but still the vessel amazed him. The ship was no taller than he, gold and smooth-walled. Yet he knew that inside it was as large as two of his people’s lodges. The Trader had said something about “non-Euclidian space” when questioned; then he had laughed and admitted most of his people didn’t understand it.

Bre and Fjen looked at Gren for orders. He nodded and they dismounted. He tied the animals securely to a nearby tree while the others removed the packs and jogged quickly to loosen cramped muscles. Then he guided them through the opening that appeared suddenly on the golden wall before them.

Inside it was as warm as summer. Bre and Fjen had never visited the Trader; they stood in wonder at the doorway. A thick red carpet ran from the door twenty feet to the spacious banquet tabled manufactured from rare alien woods. Art works dotted the walls and the table was piled high with delicacies, all from planets the Trader frequented. Gren was used to such miracles; he calmly doffed his traveling clothes and bid his fellows do the same.

“Welcome, my friends. I hope you found your journey not too unpleasant,” the unseen Trader’s voice called in their tongue. “I shall be with you in a moment. Relax yourselves.”

The Aldians sat and hurriedly sampled the banquet. Gren had learned long ago that anything the Trader offered was safe and oftentimes delicious. He first tried a round, red fruit. It tasted like toasted sawdust. He spat and threw the offending vegetation on the floor. The carpet closed over it and seconds later the litter vanished. Bre and Fjen started; Gren merely grabbed some green and gray berries. They were more to his liking and he munched contentedly until their host made his appearance.

He arrived with the whistling of an opening panel. The Earthman, John Ma-lud, was five feet tall, fat and greasy. His hair hung in perfumed braids and rings sparkled on each stubby finger. His gold embroidered indigo robe stretched to the wall even as he sat at the table. The Aldians towered over him, six feet of gold-furred claw and muscle. But he was not intimidated. “Welcome again my friends,” he began

cheerfully. "I hope you have not waited too long?"

"Not too," Gren purred softly. The others ignored him.

"I trust your village had a very prosperous year. Very prosperous."

"Thank you." Gren continued eating, waiting for the Trader to open negotiations.

Ma-lud decided the time was not yet right. "I see you have brought some new friends. Tell me, what do you think of my humble home?" Bre and Fjen made no acknowledgment. His smile did not quiver. "Well, I see you are in a hurry. Shall we dispense with the formalities?" He pressed a button on the side of the table. Immediately all signs of the banquet vanished and they were faced with a bare bargaining area. Bre snarled, but a quick look from Gren put him back in his seat. "May I see the pelts?"

Gren nodded and Fjen emptied the packs on the table. The merchant chose one and examined it. The fur was soft like chinchilla and long like mohair, yet each strand was a crystal rainbow, changing color with every ray of light. They were the rarest, most prized furs in the galaxy. The Trader ran his fingers through the pelt while staring at the pile before him. There were enough to make him a very rich man, a very rich man indeed.

"Excellent, my friends, excellent. I am sure we can do business." He pressed another button and mugs of steaming ale appeared before all. "How many pelts do you have?"

"Forty-five."

The Trader smiled and calculated rapidly. On the open market they would bring him almost two million solar credits. He pressed another button. "My friends, you deserve something special for this year's work." He chose three gold collars from a tray and presented one to each Aldian. "For you troubles getting here."

Bre and Fjen looked to their leader. He nodded and they placed them carefully in the packs. Meanwhile Gren opened his pouch and released the Llyl. The creature was only half a foot tall, a miniature kangaroo save for the single eyestalk and a beak. It hopped around the table twittering to itself, then took a perch on Gren's broad shoulder. Gren's gaze narrowed. "What do you have for us?"

The merchant watched the Llyl with little interest. He had seen them before – accursed creatures as far as he was concerned. But every Aldian party had carried one with it. For the life of him he couldn't understand why. "Whatever you desire." He opened another panel on the table, revealing bolts of brightly colored textiles, cooking utensils, jewelry, boots, jackets and other clothing designed for the Aldian frame. "Help yourselves, my friends."

Gren's eyes widened at the booty, but he remembered his orders. "No, no more, not this time." The words were edged with ice.

The merchant smiled quizzically. "What is wrong? You don't like what I have to offer? It is not enough? There are other things; medicines, food, luxuries if you prefer. Ask and you shall have."

"Weapons."

"Weapons?" The Earthman scratched his forehead. "I don't have many swords, or crossbows, but I can get..."

"Not ours. Yours."

With difficulty Ma-lud kept his composure. It was against Federation law to sell anything to aliens they could not produce themselves--in theory at least. Supposedly this was to allow the cultures to develop at their own rate. In practice it kept them at the mercy of the Traders, a situation he applauded. Giving the Aldians weapons would alter it considerably. "My friends, I am sorry but I cannot. My people forbid me. But I'm sure that if you look through my other merchandise..."

"No!" Gren stood and his companions followed. "If we don't get your weapons, we don't trade." He told Bre and Fjen to repack.

The Trader paled. If he gave them weapons and the Federation found out, he would lose his license and spend years on Alomar. But the pelts were valuable. Even on the black market, they would bring more than enough for him to live in exile comfortably.

Something else bothered him also. The Aldians were insistent upon weapons, *his* weapons. Someone else, a pirate or young wayfarer beginning his fortune, probably had found this world and talked to them. He disliked competition, not only because it was illegal but also because the felines might have learned the true value of what he gave in return. Whether he capitulated or not, these might be the last pelts he would ever see. And Ma-lud had no other prosperous territories.

The furs were packed and the Aldians donning their clothing when he spoke. "Do not be so hasty, my friends. I have always treated you fairly, have I not? I have always given you everything you desired? If it is weapons you want, it is weapons you shall have. If you will excuse me." The Aldians had not moved when he returned with an armload of assorted guns. "This," he chose one, "is a rifle. With it you can kill at one hundred yards."

He fired at a vase. Bre and Fjen jumped at the explosion and the Llyl screeched, but Gren was unimpressed. "Insufficient. Show us something else."

The rotund merchant chose an oddly-shaped pistol. "How about a laser?" A picture burst into flame for their benefit.

"No good for game." Gren's orders were clear, he was honor-bound to follow them. "The distorter."

The Trader froze. He had been right; someone else had landed and talked to the Aldians. The distorter was the most sophisticated and powerful handweapon the Federation had yet invented. His garments, flimsy though they seemed, could stop any projectile or temperature ray, but nothing could be shielded from a distorter. When he left, he would have to warn the Federation--anonymously, of course. "I don't have one," he lied. "But I'm sure you should find these sufficient."

Gren turned and the Aldians headed for the door. The merchant made a swift calculation between greed and exile. "Just one moment," he said heavily. He disappeared and returned carrying a pistol with a prism for a barrel. "This is what you came for."

"Show me how it works."

The merchant carefully adjusted the dials. "Watch." He pressed the trigger. A vase quivered violently, then became dust. "You wouldn't want this. It would destroy your game, not just kill it."

"Yes." Gren snatched it away.

Sweat poured from Ma-lud's forehead. "I have always been your people's friend," he began, almost pleading. "Have I not always given you what you wished for? If the distorter is what you want, then it is yours."

"Thank you," Gren said quietly and pressed the trigger. The distorter does strange things to flesh. The Trader's insides--bones, organs, blood--turned to jelly. His eyes exploded and blood poured from his gaping mouth. He made no sound as he collapsed on the floor. Gren placed the weapon carefully in his tunic and the now-content Llyl in its pouch. The carpet was already closing over the Earthman when the Aldians left, carrying their packs with them.

When they arrived at their village, another six-foot cube was resting in the square. Its occupant, a lizard-trader from Xnglia-5, was relaxing in the lodge and greeted them when they entered. "I'm glad you didn't let John cheat you this time. What did he have to say when you told him?"

"He was surprised," Gren answered.

"Congratulations on keeping your wits about you. He always had a silver tongue."

Gren sat and quaffed some *stek*. "Are you still interested?"

The lizard gave his equivalent of a smile. "Definitely. I'll let you and your men have a chance to warm up and relax. I'm sure that was quite a cold journey you had. When you're ready, come to my ship and we'll talk business."

"We know what we want."

"Really?" His enthusiasm was obvious. "I can guarantee you'll find me more than generous. Clothing? Metals? Medicine? Name it and it's yours."

"We want you to teach us how to fly your ship."

The merchant started. "Why? I mean, of course, but what good will that do you? After all, you don't have any."

Wrong, Gren thought as he sipped. *We have one. No.* He fingered the distorter inside his tunic, the weapon the lizard had mentioned one careless, drunken, bragging night. *Two.* He had no idea what would be done with the ships, but then it was not up to him to decide. He finished his *stek* and purred. The Llyl would think of something.

## **Last Call at the Dew Drop Inn**

"What'll it be, Jasmine? The usual?"

I sighed as I took a seat at the bar, then forced a smile for Daryl the bartender. "Sure, why not?"

Within seconds he had a draught sitting in front of me. "So what do you think?" He held up his right arm. Instead of flesh it was now silvered steel. The hand had four fingers instead of five, each encased in chain mail. It looked good on him.

"New?"

He nodded. "Cost me a pretty penny, too. But you should see the attachments! Knife, laser, automatic pistol, can opener."

I laughed along with him. "So you decided to be a cyborg. Last time I was here you were leaning toward lycanthropy."

"Thought about it, read the brochures and all. Even went to a seminar. But they only come out once or twice a month. Don't sound too safe to me. What about you? Decided yet?"

"Still debating. I'm not sure..."

Daryl broke me off with muttered curses as two ogres entered. "No weapons," he pointed at the heavy clubs they carried. "You know the rules." The ogres glared at him, then mumbled amongst themselves. Finally they reluctantly handed the clubs to Daryl, who put them behind the bar for safekeeping. I grimaced as I watched them order. Clubs or not, they would still likely cause trouble. Their temperament naturally leaned toward mindless violence.

They were among my least favorite additions of the last Change. A dimension rift, some had called it. Our world had been thrust into another time, another universe, another reality; the scientists didn't know and it hardly mattered now. The results of the latest had been nearly catastrophic. Planes wouldn't fly, atoms wouldn't split, water ran uphill and creatures which never were suddenly appeared. Vampires, satyrs, succubi, dragons and others even more wondrous and dreadful now shared this world.

Daryl had returned, his mood permanently darkened. "Damn, I hate waiting on those things. Ever get up close to one? They stink."

"Hose them off or throw them out." I pointed to a sign behind the bar. "Says there you have the right to refuse service to anyone."

"True, but they tip well. As long as they don't try to mess with me or my patrons." He patted his metal arm for emphasis.

"Don't rely on that too much, now. Who knows what will happen next."

"Perhaps. Better those purple skies than this." He was referring to the Change that had happened a good year or so previous. One day the skies were suddenly awash in all shades of lavender. Attractive in a way, and once everyone realized there were no other consequences they pretty much got along with their everyday lives. It lasted for about a week. "When do you think things will go back to normal?"

"What's normal?" I sipped my beer and glanced around the bar. The crowd in the Dew Drop Inn wasn't large but it was definitely varied. A succubus and a vampire were plying for the affections--and life--of a single man at a table near the jukebox. My money was on the vampire. A troll was having a heated debate with a harpy. A minotaur and a dragon were arm-wrestling. All in all, a typical evening. Boring.

"You're going to have to, you know."

Daryl's remark snapped me out of my spectating. "Do what?"

"Decide. A young woman like you, you're going to have to choose. Protect yourself. I think you should choose vampirism, myself."

"Why? And lock myself in some stuffy coffin all day long? Just my luck the next Change will be 24-hour sunlight. Then where would I be?"

"Maybe this will be the last one."

"Maybe." There had been nine of them in the past three years. Abrupt, unpredictable, no apparent reason the scientists could discern. Some had been benign, like the purple skies. The day electricity stopped working, or the week the oceans turned to fresh water... *those* had been most unpleasant. "Or maybe we've finally reached Armageddon."

"Even so you have to protect yourself."

I patted him on the arm. The metal was warm to the touch. "I appreciate your concern but I can take care of myself."

The door opened and three zombies entered. While Daryl hurried off to wait on them I sipped at my beer. The last Change had been exciting. At first. The panic, the chaos, the overwhelming fear and uncertainty as everyone tried to cope with the new order. After the initial confusion, however, people and society adapted. The river of life once again returned within its banks and flowed on mindlessly, pretty much as before.

The scream briefly caught my attention. I turned and saw the succubus rising triumphant from her latest conquest, the vampire next to her grimacing in disgust and defeat. Several ghouls converged immediately on the dead man; the sight of their feeding didn't interest me. "You've got to do something about your clientele," I called out to Daryl.

"As long as they pay." He pointed to another sign above the bar: "Management is not responsible for loss of personal possessions or life."

"Come now, you can't be that prejudiced," the werewolf who suddenly sat next to me said.

I only gave him a cursory glance. "Doesn't it get hot in that get-up? What do you do about fleas?"

The hair on the back of his neck stood up. "I'll have you know I chose to be thus. Considering the alternatives." He pointed at one of the trolls. "Who would want to be like that?"

I studied it. "I don't know. Kinda cute and cuddly, if you ask me."

"I can be cute and cuddly."

"Don't waste your time." I finished my beer and signaled Daryl. "I'm not looking for a pet."

His civility vanished. "Be careful, Little Red Riding Hood. I could rip out your throat in a second."

I patted my purse. "I have a gun in there and it's loaded with silver bullets. Go fetch a stick or something."

"He bothering you?" Daryl asked as he set a fresh beer in front of me. The lycanthrope had left to approach the female vampire sitting by herself and lamenting her defeat.

"He was just taking the 'wolf' part too seriously. No biggie."

Daryl shook his head. "I tell you, Jasmine, you gotta do something. You've got to choose something. Just being human isn't enough anymore. Why not be a cyborg like me?"

"I don't know. I kinda like the parts I already have."

"A siren might work," he pointed to one sitting in the corner.

I grimaced. "I have seven friends who became sirens. Rather predictable if you ask me. But then, all this is becoming predictable."

He shook his head. "You're a mighty hard woman to please, Jasmine."

"So I am. Maybe I'll become a goddess or a queen. How's that?"



"Darling," he caressed my arm, "you are already a goddess to me."

I jerked back. "Go hump a troll." He laughed as he walked away. Still, my mood was permanently soured. Even the scuffle between an ogre and a gnome, one that ended when the ogre drove his foe through the floor with a table, failed to interest me.

*Everything* failed to interest me now. This Change had gone on too long. I glanced up at the clock. It was near closing. Unless I left soon I would get caught in the inevitable melee that erupted nightly among the various groups. I threw a ten on the counter. "See you," I waved to Daryl as I walked out.

Tomorrow, I decided as I started my drive home. Tomorrow I would evict the monsters, turn all brick into gingerbread, all steel into cotton candy. The results should be amusing. It was certainly time for a Change.

[\[PW1\]](#)