

Absolute Magnitude

SCIENCE FICTION ADVENTURES

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Fall 1995

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Editorial Notes

by

Warren Lapine

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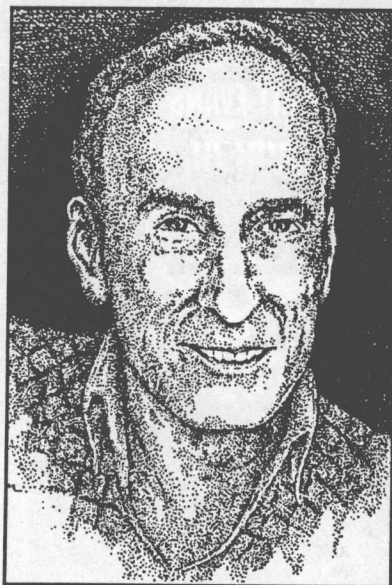
This month's editorial is without a doubt the hardest editorial that I've ever had to write. I had already finished a different editorial, had it copy edited and ready for the printer, when I received the sad news that Roger Zelazny had died of colon cancer. I'm not sure if I can convey, with words, just how deeply this has affected me.

I discovered Roger Zelazny's work when I was fourteen years old. At the time, I was a street punk trying to find a way around the Massachusetts state law that would not allow me to drop out of school until I was sixteen. The only difference between me and the other punks that I hung out with was that I have always loved to read. Therein, I realize now, was my salvation. One day I picked up Nine Princes in Amber and my life changed forever. I realized even before I finished the book that I wanted to be a writer, no, that I had to be a writer. Had I not stumbled onto Roger's work, I don't believe I would have ever been compelled to become creative. My life would have been much poorer for it.

*I was fortunate enough to meet Roger and tell him just how greatly he had affected my life. He was one of the most gracious and kind people that I have ever met. Not only did he grant me an interview before **Absolute Magnitude** had proven itself, but he also gave us permission to print a book of his poetry.*

Roger was only fifty eight years old when he died; the premature loss of his genius rivals that of Shelly and Keats. I can't imagine the science fiction field without him. It is truly a sad time for science fiction and for all of us here at DNA Publications, Inc. It is with heavy hearts that we put the final touches on this issue. Roger Zelazny was not only a giant in the field, but a kind and wonderful man, we are all the poorer for his passing.

This issue is dedicated to the memory of Roger Zelazny.



Absolute Magnitude

Science Fiction Adventures

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Absolute Magnitude

Science Fiction Adventures

FALL 1995

ISSUE #4

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All artwork by Jose B. Ortiz, except rocket ships by Tim Ballou, and portrait of Roger Zelazny by Jim Zimmerman.



Chris Bunch, writing with Alan Cole, is the coauthor of such books as *Sten* and *Warrior's Tale*. Chris has recently gone solo and will have a solo book out from Warner books soon. Chris would like to say, "Thanks to Robert Silverberg, from whom I stole the binary language."

AMP

by Chris Bunch

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The zero hour came
and the Tellurian Armada of
eighty one sleek space-ships
spurned Earth and took its place
in that hurtling wall of crimson...

Failure, I've decided, smells like a sterile urinal.

You see, it's not hard at all, not hard, not hard, not hard. I tried dictating, but I couldn't pin my thoughts long enough, feeling them scroll past and away. So I shall pull the symbols out, slowly, slowly, but they shall come. I can *feel* them, just as the surgeons *felt* my nerve endings as they stripped them.

I traded this old keyboard from Seth for one of my backup screens. I guess he thought he was getting the vantage, but wait until he tries to put a full load on it.

Clot him. Clot all of them. I don't owe them.

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1001011 them, as they used to say.

Only part of me hangs here.

Part of me is...somewhere else.

I'm not concerned with all those who're running around in black today, putting on mask faces of mourning, like they were backnumber posers or really gave a damn whether Vax is alive or not.

I certainly don't.

I haven't chosen that way, nor shall I.

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1001011 Vax, too. The only reason anybody cares is he was one of the few of us who went Out. Not just Out, but on the bridge, until he broke and they took him offline to The Ward and then sent him here to zoo-rot with the rest of us.

Or maybe they're empty about him because his mods didn't show as much as they do on some of us. He'd been able to keep his legs, for instance. He came into The Program later than I did, so they'd found a way to run a crossconnect from the coccyx into the converter, and kicking became analogue for thrust.

I wonder why modification, and being "ugly," at least in the holies' eyes, didn't matter to any of us when we entered the Program. I can't even remember whether I knew. I guess if I did, I wouldn't have cared much. Maybe if I thought about it, if any of us thought about it, it was so what? We're in transition, aren't we? Learn to think a new way, so why not change your body to match?

I don't know if I care now either.

So the ears are gone, so the eyes are flat white discs? So what?

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1010101 if you don't like it. As they used to say.

Besides, I see you in a marvel of near-transparency, while you sludge about with your redyellowgreenblue. Not that I give a shit what you look like. My eyes were built, were meant, for things beyond, to see the coil of the docking whip waiting as the ship approached, to read input broadcast on a dozen freqs beyond those slaved back to you, lying on your couches in the cabin, wrapped like so many hung hams and hoping your pilot was still trans/rec/apping and the ship wasn't about to dentist's-drill right on through the station.

So now The Quarter's filled with fools who want to know What It Was Like. What It Is Like. I stayed inside, and didn't get into my cart and go down to the triangle where I always park, not that I thought they would approach me. I'm not spectacular enough, not like Cater, who had gone the full gilldip before her bones necro'd and they pensioned her off to sit in her tank alternately crying and moving her hand back and forth, plate to mouth, like one of the burleys she was supposed to be, down in Mindanao Deep. I guess she dreams of squids and whales and all that kind of slimy shit.

Do you wonder what I dream about?

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1010101. As they used to say.

Not yet. Maybe not ever. I remember, back on the Ward, when there was still some hope, or anyway they said there was, maybe just to keep us from ripping the feed tubes out of our veins, that we could get back into The Program, they were real interested in what we dreamed about. Some of us told them. Some of us didn't.

I tried. For awhile.

But how do you describe color to a worm that's blind? Even though the only time I saw those real colors was on the two training runs before I...before what happened to me happened. Anyway, I knew them, and could name them, those secret names they had when timespace folded and you were on the Path.

What a crock. I just read what I wrote. Capital letters, even. The Ward. Don't dignify it like that, call it what it was—a whole bunch of rubber rooms with guards outside and attendants who got picked as much for their skills with hype and pressurepoint as for understanding.

The Path. Einstein would've laughed his ass off, and then tried to come up with the mathematics of subspace.

The Program? Laugh at that? Can I say what I think, what I should think, what I must think to continue, what my circuitry should auto-respond? After all, I pride myself on my logic, whether or not it transfers.

No. Not yet. Maybe not ever. I thought I could write it, seeing the cold words holo in the air above the keyboard. But I can't. Not yet. Maybe not ever.

Amp.

Amphibian.

But what happened to the poor damned fish that crawled out, got sand stuck in his gills and couldn't get back, and couldn't breathe either?

He died.

Maybe they should've let us die. That would've been 'kay. Or maybe find something we could've done that wouldn't have made

absolute Magnitude

us walk down here with the worms, feeling the ground claw at us, trying to pull us down, make us blink in sunlight when we should've been able to stare, unblinking, into the heart of a nova, screens unfiltered.

That would've been all right.

But instead...

Poor damned Vax.

No. Clot him.

As we say right now.

If I can stick, if overgross Cater can stick, if all of us can stick, then Vax had No God Damned Right.

god?

Why did I use *that* word? I know better. Even as a groundling, a worm, with only the beginning circuits sketched, I knew better. I didn't have to go outsystem to know.

I looked down just now, where the clear tube runs in and out of the back of my wrist, and saw the numbers whirlwind up. Stop this. Stop now. Shut down. Go somewhere.

The sky was water, drifting like curtains, the color of the night began in what I would've called gray once, but now named vwan. That's my own word.

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1010101 if you don't like it or understand.

As they used to say.

The ways were slick, greasy, and so I plugged into a fourleg cart and went on out, surefooting in the darkness and slime.

I am writing this five days later, if it matters to you. There have been changes since I input the first symbols.

I guess I pre-ran what I thought of Vax before I knew anything. But it shall stet. I must have a startpoint.

The place doesn't have a name, even to us. Every nowthen one the owners asks if we have anything we want to call it. So far, everybody's come up with something so total even those limps know we're not being straight. Who needs a name, anyway? All of us in The Quarter know where it is, what it is. Those who matter.

Somebody said, well, if there's a name on it, it'll be easier for any of your friends to meet you, if they're from away.

Friends? That's another symbol that doesn't matter, isn't it? Or, not I guess matter may not be the right word, but a concept that isn't there now, along with things like earth, home, country and all the rest of the baggage we shed along with pieces of ourselves as we moved through The Program. None of it was that hard for me, but I came from a creche. Maybe if you were a *real* oldie, and had like a mother and father, it might've been different, harder. Maybe you would've washed even earlier than I did.

At least I got offplanet and Out before I saw what...before what happened, happened.

Still, the place exists, and the real reason the people who own it want to put a name outside is to plug it on the vid and get even more of what we call the holies in.

Holies. Like in whole. There's other symbols for those who've never been out or if they were, were back in the Can, buzzed out. Caterpillars. Tadpoles. Hairless apes. But holies doesn't start anything, so that's what we use.

What we gave up we more than got back even if we're hanging here, waiting for what will never happen.

Amp.

Like in Amputee.

There's always a line of holies outside, from about ten on until somebody decides to pull the plug and shut down. Generally about dawn. Nobody cares about the law. Not down here. Not even the cops who patrol the streets.

Poor bastards. It's worth a laugh to see them, walking along, and always they have this Look on their faces, like somebody that's paid for a few minutes in a *really* good sim, and seen a fakeup of what somebody thinks I-space looks like. They never get used to us.

I tried to explain once to one of them, all nylon armor and blond blankness, not knowing why, maybe I'd had one or two c-pop over, that we only live partially here, that what he saw wasn't all there was. It was as if he was a drawing on paper, and those of us we Amps, were sliding through in three-dee.

Except more, of course.

He didn't get it. I said orbifold and realized I was talking to the blind worm again. I quit trying.

We don't have to use the holies' entrance, of course. We go in the old loading dock. There's a man at the door to make sure none of the limps get in that way.

He knew me, said some ultra jibber greeting he thought was empty but was complete total. I didn't sneer—it's always good to have somebody his size on your side. I happen to know he carries a nasty little prod he powerjumped so it puts out anything up to deathjolt. Sometimes the holies get pissy. Also, he could've made me park the cart at the door and crip inside to a table. Which don't do. Ever.

We don't pay, ever. The owners know what's the real draw. I started to change that to who, but the hell. *What* was our goal something we wanted to become, wasn't it? Isn't it, if any one of us could find a way back?

But there's never a way back into The Program.

There'd be no point, after all.

That's what we're told, anyway.

The place, inside, doesn't look like much if you see it in daylight, although I have no concept why anyone would want to do that. It's big. Very big. Maybe it was a warehouse once. On the ceiling are some constructs, I guess that're supposed to simulate the Portal and entering I-space, I guess. They don't. There's a bar along one wall for those who drink. A big dancefloor, and there's always somebody *that* limp. There's tables, although it takes a minute to realize it, since some of them are stands, some are tankracks, and some are just round pillars.

Those are for the visitors we have sometimes: Those who've crossed over, full-mod, those who swim in that other sea, like we were supposed to do, until we...

Failed.

Don't shit around on yourself. You *failed*. Don't use the soft symbol. Otherwise you wouldn't be dirtside, feeling gravity drag and the whole damned solar system pull at you, like you were in the center of an old-timey clock, gears yanking and tearing as you still feel, out there, the moon twist in its orbit, and even, just an echo even the gas giants sounding, like perhaps you might have *felt* a bassline if you played music.

Each table's got a console, for those who c-pop or stim, a cardslot and a button to call for a real live waitress if you want.

There's a group on, working from a center-ring hanging from the ceiling, sometimes freeform, sometimes oldstyle audible-band logic-progression music, but mostly tech. The sound wasn't bad this night, working with a lot of subsonics and even a keyboard in the near edge of the ultras. Usually that puts my teeth on edge, or that is the ghostmemory—they're gone too, and no loss, and I think it's because ultras were one of the emergency shipsignals we learned, so the association isn't what it should be.

I found out later I was real lucky I didn't go past the front entrance, since some limp had put up a sign that this was a MEMORIAL FOR VAX. He was *dead*, dead by his own hand, not listening, never hearing.

Amp

Worse, the group, two women, one man, were narish enough to name themselves P'an Ku. Not a chance. They aren't any divine embryo, and the place sure doesn't touch chaos, even at its peak-curve. If I'd known, I would've slid, most likely, and found one of the other joints in The Quarter, even though that'd be even more a blatant suckin for the holies.

But I didn't find out about the baffazz until later, so I parked at a stand, and looked around. Somebody waved hello, but I didn't reply. I realized I was on a downcurve, and took a c-pop, sliding the pot about halfway up. It helped, a little. But I still felt the out there.

That's another thing Amps don't think about when they're reverbing about modifications. One of the first mods we got was the cortex plug. That was intended for the basic inputs, of course, but it also took all of us off the mouth-gut-butt way of getting up up and away. Holies either have to pay for the mod or else wimpit and hold the jolt button to the base of their skulls, which isn't even a real hit.

I took another pop and let myself slide around the tones of the music, feeling it like shipsound. After awhile I was empty, through. Empty is the word we use for happy, but that no more describes it than color does what our ferrod sensors pick up.

After awhile I came back to here and a woman was sitting there, staring at me. I am what I am, and so god damned what if I've been called lemur, but that was real total, and I was now dirtside.

"You're staring," I said, which was pretty total of *me*, so now it didn't matter her error. If you're supposed to be let alone in the place, you give the same back. "Listen to the tech." That made it twice in one speech.

She was maybe fifteen, maybe less. Somebody'd call her girl, but there aren't any girls on The Quarter, any more than there are boys. Babies, maybe. I heard somebody decided to give birth on the next block over, but never went to see if I was right.

She was a holie or anyway no visible mods. Naturally she had the plug for c-pops though, and she'd already wired herself into the console. She wore her hair short on top and on the sides, parted in the middle and brushed flat. In the back, it was long, and curled down, to either side of her plug, and then was stiffed in two curls that went under her ears and curled up around them. She wore it natural—the colorwheel glitter was last cycle, although most of the holies who rolled into The Quarter haven't heard yet.

She was skinny. Not much of a chest, not much of an ass from what I could see. Tight features and thin lips. She'd been kicked, like the rest of us, and it showed.

She wore a green/black/green alternating tube that started below her breasts and ended where her lap stopped. I didn't see any coat or hat.

"You're Lir." She wasn't asking. Back to being empty, I just wig-wagged my finger—this cycle's way of saying yes, particularly when the tech is spiking your eardrums.

"I'm Su. I used to screw Vax. When he'd let me."

I'm sure nothing showed on my face. But that was fresh 'put to me. As far as I'd heard, Vax slept alone. Not that he did much sleeping, any more than the rest of us. But I'd never heard of him inouting with anybody, boy or girl.

"He said after he went, I was supposed to go to you."

"What's that mean? I don't own things. Nobody owns people. And he never said shit to me." I guess I was a little confused. Maybe that last c-pop had been a little fatter than I thought.

"Wrong word. Think about it." She stretched out her hand, slid her pot up to max and banged the button. I wondered who was paying her freight, and then saw she had a free-ring like she was an Amp. I guessed she screwed somebody than Vax to get it. Su didn't say anything more, but her face showed she was empty.

I took another jolt and tried to let the tech grab me again. But it didn't. It started getting on me, and all I could think of was decoding the shipsignals it was ending out: DRIVESYS OUT OF

VARIABLE LIMITS...CLEAN AVAILABLE MEM, NAVSYS SATURATED...INBOARD SENSORS REPORT LOAD SHIFT...

The hell with it, I decided, and unplugged. I'd go somewhere else, or maybe just back. I wasn't holding the same mindset I came out with, anyway, so what else did I need?

I turned the cart on, and Su came back down.

"You want me to go with you?"

I should've said no, I guess. But I didn't.

On purpose, I went down the alley, past the main entrance, where the holies still waited to be vetted on being total enough to get in. They saw me, and I heard murmurs. But I didn't bother logging that—I was watching Su. She just walked beside me. Didn't toss her chest back and strut, like those holies who're into freekshows with Amps do. That sent her up a notch.

Halfway back to my apartment, she asked, "Are you still tissue down there?" Without waiting for a response, she went on. "If not, I've got things to comp, where I pad."

I shook my head. I'm cut. Not that it's anybody's damned business, but if I'm willing to strip these words out, like ancient wire coming out of insulation, it all's got to be logged. I guess that was considered a favor, done about the time my legs came off, and I guess when they put an efficient urine system in, and replaced my balls with testerone-synths, they were supposed to take the sexdrive out of circuit, too. Maybe that was the first mistake they made with me.

Su didn't see my gesture, in the darkness. She peered at me, close.

"I can manage," I said. "We can manage. If you want."

Then they sat and talked.

**Not idly, as is the fashion of lovers,
of the minutiae of their own romantic affairs,
did these two converse, but cosmically,
of the entire Universe and of the already existent conflict
between the cultures of Civilization and Boskonian**

Eventually, we both came back. I lay with my head pillowed on her thighs. She ran her hand back and forth across my head, behind the receptors, where I'd once had that annoyance of hair.

"Why were you supposed to come to me?" I asked.

"Vax said we'd know. But not at first."

"Why'd you take his orders?"

Nothing.

"You think you're staying here?"

She didn't say anything, and I didn't either. After awhile, her breathing changed, and she started snoring slightly.

Somehow that sound was comforting.

I shut myself down.

When I came back up, there was daylight on the screen linked to the outside, yellow, rawn, purple, melachthia.

She was gone.

Sometimes limps think it was the numbers that wash you, that spinning, reeling dance of mathematics that you must have and if you lose it or it isn't enough you'll get dumped from The Program.

It wasn't that, isn't that, not for me, not for any other Amp I ever knew.

Numbers, mathematics, just *are*. They aren't numbers, those are the labels, just like violet is a label, not a color. You can wrap yourself in the numbers, the letters, the symbols, and they carry you up and up and then out.

Out to where space folds on itself, and then opens, and triple stars in Coma-Berenices fill the sky with lilac/blue.

For some, anyway.

I could do that then, I can do that now.

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It was still raining, pissing mist to be exact. Rain is one of the things I still like about dirtside. Again, I used the fourleg cart. If there'd been sun, I would have chosen the twoleg—enough limps stare at me already. But no one, or almost no one would be out.

I went to the triangle, which is the open-air place we meet in.

There were a few of us scattered around, no one paying attention to the weather.

The State, in its infinite wisdom providing for us, had set up chessboards, graven in stone, on pedestals through the area.

I watched a game for a few moves, but it wasn't much. There were no more than four moves to mate, but since neither player could see, it'd probably cycle on for another ten or so.

I rolled away. A few meters away was Yan. He's one of the luckiest of us, and again I spin past that word luck, when there is none, is none, is none. At least he's lucky because he failed early on, so the only mods he shows are the rad-resistant heavyskin that shows bleached white like all of us have, and a flesh-looking bulge below his chin, like an inflated wattle. He was in mod for shuttlehip pilot, so They didn't want him to look too strange, since he'd have to deal with the holies mewling and whining up to a station just to say they'd been out-atmosphere.

Yan's one of The Quarter's caches—anybody whispers anything, no matter how random, and it'll end up with him, or one of his fellows. Need to know haps, or what could maybe be haps, empty, ultra or total, Yan knows. Or says he does. And who cares if he does not.

"Did you vamp the latest?"

"No. You're the first I've talked to. And I shut down early last night."

Yan snickered, so obviously he knew Su had companied me last night. But, as always, he burned more to output than receive.

"They're losing ships," he said, his voice low, looking about, as if he'd just been given a Classified fiche by The State to network.

"They always lose a ship or two," I said. "Two, maybe three last year I can call up."

"No. I mean a lot of ships," he said. "Ten, maybe fifteen this quarter."

I suppose I did look like a lemur then.

"Why? How?"

"Don't know," he was honest enough to admit. "But something's running, because they aren't letting the holies know."

"How'd you hear?"

Yan started to answer, then looked puzzled.

"Just...heard. Some people talking at the place, some others out this morning. Guess everybody but you...and the holies...know by now."

Input very low quality, which was strange for Yan, or anyway admitting it was strange. Usually his data came from the highest highest highest—to hear him talk.

Not that it mattered. I'd never ride out or see the Portal open again.

I said failure smells like a sterile pissar. I wasn't being artsy.

The State takes very good care of us failures, or so it would like to think.

We are all pensioned, credits enough on our card so we're hardly poor, and the accounts handled by a computer that won't let any of us draw down enough to get into trouble.

We're given housing. A lot of us chose to live here, in The Quarter, and there's other places in other cities. I've heard some Amps go back to the ground, like straight-quill country, where there's nothing but holies around them.

Power to them. I could not crawl back into the worm colony.

The standard apartment is mainroom, bedroom, fresher, and tiny galley. They're compact, newly-built and self-cleaning. They smell like the toilets did, in the barracks we first lived in, in our first, testing week in The Program.

To me, that smell is failure.

We don't have to work, but I suppose if someone wanted, and They could find some holies with strong stomachs to hire us, you could if you wished.

Mostly you just wait.

Wait for it to be over.

There's no reset for this kind of failure.

Of course we're not held to realspace. We can access computers, games, vids and so forth, all at a level the holies don't qualify for.

We can lie flat on our bunks, c-popped until our ears ring, staring up at the proj built into the ceiling, sound-surrounded, plugged into the main room's box, and almost feel lift, almost feel the Portal, almost feel the universe crawl against your skin and the out there begin.

Almost.

I very seldom go up to that net.

Su came back that night. After we connected, we talked. I told her what Yan had told me.

"Old data," she said. "I heard that three weeks ago."

"From where?"

"Vax."

"What did he say about it?"

"He said...no. I don't think I'm supposed to show you yet."

Cater, who never had any use for out-and-beyonders, had the next part of the file, which, full of glee, she dumped on me.

"You heard about the ships," she said, the sound of a laugh in her voice but with no humor.

"Yan told me."

"Prog he didn't tell you the real feed." Cater tried to hang on to the tidbit, but it was too tasty. "They aren't being destroyed. They're just going out, and not coming back."

"I don't understand."

"I heard Central's picking up signals a'ter they blank off th' plots. I heard one trans was just CLOT YOU CLOT YOU CLOT YOU, signoff and then set shutdown. That's what I heard."

"That's an old old tape," I said. "There's been stories about ships being one-wayed out since year one, hijacked by their pilots since even before mods were on the comdeck."

"Don't mean it can't happen," she said stubbornly.

"Sorry. It does. There's so many controls there's no way a single mod could override," I explained. "Could you, if you'd finished the program, have taken a sub-miner and ripped a domecity apart?"

"Course not," Cater said, hot. "I'd have power cut on th' machine, on me, and prob'ly on anything else minin' in th' sector."

"There's even more limits on a ship," I said.

"Then where's the story coming from, if there's nothin' to it?" she wanted to know.

I didn't bother answering.

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1001011 her. As they used to say.

"Can I ask," Su said.

"Maybe I don't answer."

"What happened?"

I started to sit up, then stopped. Why did it matter if she knew? So I told her, and now it doesn't matter if whoever scrolls this knows.

Clot you, anyway.

I palmed a control, and the ceiling projed a alpha-vispattern, swirling lines that held me in control, and I told her.

There wasn't much data to transfer.

I'd been one of the top five percent in my year's class in The Project. I'd been picked for mods early, and the mods took, except

Amp

maybe that one that should've turned my the sexslot of my brain into a little electro-pleasure pickup. I went out, un-modified, as far as Mars twice. I started the full suite of mods that'd fit me for pilot.

Then it was time for the first jump. Riding sidesaddle, they called it, linked via box with the pilot, the singledome one, since all my systems weren't installed. We broke from the station. Next was be routine. I had to use words to expand this with Su, just as I'm tapping them on this keyboard now, frowning as they hang in the air in front of me, wrong, wrong, wrong. But they're all I have.

Tied to the pilot, I was supposed to feel out, to feel my bearings, my coordinates, although in I-space those things can't exist, of course, and try to feel where we were going, and reach back and push with my ship into the Portal, and then toward and out the next one.

Pure routine.

We'd unfold into normal space somewhere off μ Bootes. All props good, all boards green, all dataflow normal.

We did, flickering star past star, although those weren't "seen," weren't in our space at all, but on the outside of what some of us called the Tunnel.

I had a moment to "feel" something, but the jump was short, and we were back in normal space.

I was a veteran. I'd been out.

I don't remember the return jump—I was too busy this time watching shipsigns, listening to the ship. Perhaps I felt that "something" again, but truly don't remember it.

The second jump was a few days later.

Again, pure routine, just a little longer. Link with the pilot, "feel" the ship, thrust, hyper-drive, just routine, just routine.

Then I started to scream.

"Why?" Su asked.

Again, I had a hard time explaining, but I *felt* something out there, something that was alive, in a manner, not like me, not like us, something that lived always in that beyond, in I-space. It *ouched* me.

"What was it? Some kind of...of monster? Something living between the stars?"

I didn't know. I don't know. Is a man a monster to a Flatlander? Is a mod a monster to a holie? But I couldn't stop screaming.

They tranked me hard from the aidbox, and we aborted. I went back dirtside that same day and onto the Ward.

Of course none of the doctors believed I saw anything, not after the first scan. Nothing showed up in my mind, they said, that suggested I'd had *any* external input.

Agoraphobic, they said it used to be called. I couldn't take the overload, about to walk out beyond the warm comfort of the sun my genes knew so well.

They let me try once more, and again, I *felt* that something, and again I began screaming.

That was the end of that, and the beginning of my trip to The Quarter.

"So you can never go out," Su said. "I never wanted to, blessgod."

No, no, that wasn't it, I tried to say, feeling tear ducts that had been cut away years ago and were no more than ghost-memories try to fill in anger, frustration, and I heard the alarm on my wrist buzz but paid no mind.

I *had* to go out. That touch changed me more than the mods, more than The Program. Now I belonged out there, in I-space, where I could never never go, not as a pilot, not as passenger, forever tied to this ball of shit under a yellow sun.

"I don't track," she said, voice flat. "If it was that total, and it happened to me, I wouldn't even walk out under the stars at night."

"I know." And I did know.

"Did you ever hear of this happening to anybody else?"

I wasn't sure. Sometimes, on The Ward, when they wanted to know about dreams, I tried to bring it up. But no one wanted to hear about that, not the hulks with the nerveblocks and hypes, not

the headborers, not anyone who'd been out, anyway, although I swear once or twice I saw a green flicker, back behind someone's eyes, but then they'd look away.

"Clot it," I said. "But now you know. Did Vax ever tell you what dumped him out of space?"

Su didn't respond. I waited, but nothing came. I should've waited for her to go to sleep, but I shut down fast. I'd recycle the impurities in the next morning.

Su was still there when I came back up, naked, crosslegged on the bed beside me. She was coiling the input lead to my console back and forth, but, from her eyes, hadn't taken a c-pop.

I felt the poisons, and just lay there, letting the process cycle.

"Can you talk," she said. She never seemed to have time for greetings or small words.

"I can."

"Do you know how Vax killed himself?"

That sent the cycle into hold, and I snapped up.

"I heard he poisoned himself."

"No. I was with him that night. He pirated a spineblock from a quack, and blanked his body. I hooked up an IV, and fed hypno into it, a little at a time. He said to go slow, and he kept talking. He said if he sounded slurry, to cut the flow down. When he told me to, I...I hit him, right over the heart, with a powercord he'd stripped the contacts off of. The electricity was supposed to stop his heart instant and I guess it did. He'd told me...he had to go Ready."

She got off the bed and walked to the screen and stared at the streetscene it was showing, her back to me. I said nothing.

When she turned around, her eyes were dry.

She came back to the bed and slid over me. This time we connected harshly, strongly, she trying to drive one memory out, me trying, I suppose, to end another that I knew I couldn't.

We dressed and went out. I asked her if she wanted a c-pop. She didn't and neither did I. We went to the fringes of The Quarter, not far from the field, where you could stand and hear drive-rumble and sometimes a mach-shatter from a transport as it climbed for the ionosphere.

"Ready for what?"

"He didn't say."

"You said you never wanted to go out, last night. Why do you lurk with us mods? Most..." I caught myself before I said holie "...most unmods wish they could get into The Program. Or think they do, anyway."

"Because you...none of you *fit*. Like I didn't fit with my sisters and brothers or anybody else in the Brethren. So I left. I belong in The Quarter."

There was a third question.

"What was it Vax said about the ships disappearing that you wouldn't tell me?"

"It was something he gave me, and said to show you if I thought it was right." She reached inside the waistband of the overdress she was wearing, and took out a tightly-folded bit of paper. I opened it. It was a printout of a list. It had no heading, beginning or end.

It looked like this:

<i>XR128</i>	<i>Gamgree</i>	<i>Evans</i>
<i>Ceres</i>	<i>Hendricks</i>	<i>Mowdrath</i>
<i>DoubleDelta</i>	<i>Edmunds</i>	<i>Montoya</i>

And so forth for two full pages.

"Shipnames and pilots," I said, pretty sure I was tracking.

"Yes. Vax said, if I was going to show it to you, for you to see if you knew any of the names. He said you were almost ready to graduate from The Program, so he thought you maybe would."

I read closely. I guess I started shaking my head.

"What?" Su asked.

"This is a garbage feed," I said. "Names on the left are ships, right? The middle row, I don't know who they are. There are three names I reckon on the right. Two of those names are Amps who

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busted out of The Program in training, and the other is somebody who made it through and his ship exploded, right over here, at this field, five years gone."

Su's eyes had a glitter.

"All the names on the right are deaders," she said. "The ones in the middle are the log-pilots of the ships on the left. Those ships are some of the ones who've gone off into the black and not come back." Backbrain noted that Su, I guess from her time around us mods, used flight-words.

"The list is one Vax got from...from somebody who remembers him from when he was a shipcaptain."

"Now I'm not tracking."

"The woman told him that Central got signoff messages from all the ships, as they went offscreen...and the sigblock was *always* from a deader. Either a deader pilot, or most often, somebody who'd washed from The Program."

"Shit! Vax believed *that*?"

"That's why he killed himself."

I started to dump out, "So he could go back...?" but stopped.

I looked into Su's eyes again, but the glitter was gone.

"Is that all?"

"Let's find a meal," she said.

This is being dictated. I'm in the corridor outside my apartment. Su is asleep inside, or is pretending to be.

Su told me a week ago. I wrote what's inside, on the box, just to dump data that same day, when we got back to the apartment.

Since then, nothing. We went to the place. We connected, though never as fiercely as that morning. We ate, we drank, we popped.

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It was like moving in a fog.

I wish The Quarter had fogs. But weather-con wouldn't permit that, of course.

Vax was at the end. Data overload.

For cert.

He must have been.

So he was crazy.

Who says crazy can't be right?

To want to go out again, that is crazy, too. To be able to...

Of course it can't be the truth.

The roof is cold at this hour, just short of dawn. The city sits below, going on and on, world without end amen, to the horizons and beyond.

Vwan sky, vwan ground.

No stars reach through.

For our safety, the passage to the roof is sealed, of course. Also of course, it's been jammed open since I came here.

There are only three steps to take.

For some reason, I'm unplugging myself from my cart, and sliding down onto my hands and knees. A fool should look the part. The rooftop is hard, gritty under my hands.

Is Vax out there now?

Beyond the Portal?

I swear I can feel something. Something I felt before. Something waiting.

Live a fool, die a fool.

1000110

1010101

1000011

1001011

0100000

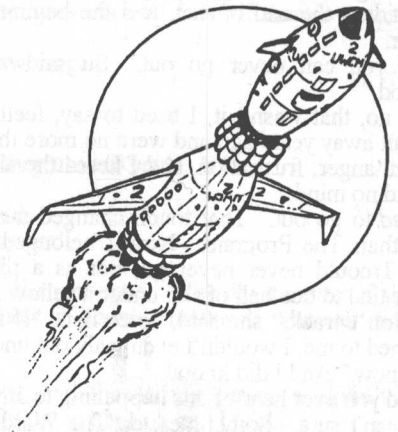
1011001

1010101 if you can't take a joke.

As they used to say.

End feed. Lir. Offnet.

...And the massed Grand Fleet of the Galactic Patrol, remaking its formation, hurtled outward through the inter-galactic void.





This is Allen Steele's second appearance in the pages of **Absolute Magnitude**. His novel *Jericho Iteration* was a recent hardcover from Ace and his next novel, *The Tranquility Factor*, also from Ace, is due out soon. Allen tells me that we should keep an eye out for Mr. Chicago in a future novel.

WORKING FOR MISTER CHICAGO

by Allen Steele

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One hundred and two years after he choked upon a McDonald's cheeseburger and died at his office desk, Paul McLafferty found himself on his hands and knees, polishing the floor of the Grand Hall in Mister Chicago's palace.

The Grand Hall was a large rotunda whose walls were draped with priceless tapestries and whose dome ceiling, supported by tall Doric columns, was painted with a reproduction of Michelangelo's Cistine Chapel mural. The floor was a mosaic comprised of thousands of tiny pieces of multicolored ceramic and quartz, with long threads of hammered gold outlining its elaborate patterns. When he sat up on his haunches to rest his aching back, McLafferty was able to see that the mosaic formed a heliocentric map of the solar system, the orbits of all the planets and major asteroids forming spirals around the Sun, with the major constellations of the Zodiac placed in the background.

McLafferty scrubbed the floor of the Great Hall once a week, squatting on all fours with a horsehair brush and a pail of soapy water, working at the dust that found its way into the tiny cracks between the tilework, polishing every inch of the mosaic until he could see the reflection of his rejuvenated face. Although he always came away from this chore with chaffed fingers and sore muscles, he had never ceased marvelling at the craftsmanship that had gone into the making this beauty.

"Must have taken years," he murmured.

"I'm telling you, it only took four hours," Yeats answered. He was arranging flowers in the Grecian urns that stood beneath the columns. "One of the chambermaids told me. It was nano...nano...it was little bitty robots. They spilled a bottle of 'em on the floor, threw in the raw materials, stood back..." He raised a arm. "Fwoosh! Off they went! Four hours later..."

"Instant masterpiece," McLafferty finished, unconsciously reiterating the same line Yeats always used. They had discussed this many times before, although neither man had more than the barest recollection of having done so. He shook his head. "I understand what you're saying, but I still don't accept it. How can you program something smaller than a dust mote to make...something like this?"

Yeats didn't look up from his work. "Hey, you're the rocket scientist," he murmured. "You tell me. I just..."

"Do stocks and bonds," McLafferty finished. He shook his head again, this time in faint bewilderment. *Deja vu*. Had he heard this before? "Where did you say you used to work?"

"Umm..." Yeats had to concentrate for a moment. "New York Stock Exchange. Munici...municipals? Does that sound right? And you..."

"I used to work at NASA. Right" McLafferty frowned. Sometimes it was so hard to think. "Some place in California."

He snapped his fingers. "Pasadena. JPL. That's it."

"Like I said...a rocket scientist." Yeats gave him a sharp look. "Hey, have we talked about this before?"

"Probably." McLafferty picked up his brush and bent over again to hide his embarrassment. "Maybe last week."

"Yeah. I think so, too. Are you...?"

The faint sound of approaching footsteps, coming from the upstairs corridor leading to the master's private chambers. Both men fell silent as they pretended to concentrate on their work, neither of them daring to glance up. The footsteps grew louder until they entered the circular balcony overlooking the Great Hall. There they paused for a few moments, and McLafferty could feel contemplative eyes at his back.

Then the footsteps turned and receded, going back down the corridor. Mister Chicago had come to check on them; satisfied, he had left them alone once again.

Neither of them spoke after that. The message was clear. The master was having his party tonight, and wouldn't tolerate anything that interfered with its preparations.

McLafferty was almost grateful for the interruption. It saved him the further embarrassment of having to admit that he couldn't even remember Yeats' first name.

The only reason why McLafferty knew his own name was that someone had told it to him, during the long days of re-education that had followed reanimation.

This much he knew for certain: his name was Paul Joseph McLafferty, and he had been born at Worcester City Hospital in Worcester, Massachusetts, on 21 July, 1946. His father's name was Bruce, his mother's name was Emma, and he had an older brother named Richard and a younger sister named Catherine. He had earned his B.S. in engineering from Worcester Polytech, then gone on to earn his M.S. and Ph.D. at Stanford. He had married a woman named Elizabeth...he faintly recalled knowing her as Liz, and that she was a blonde and very pretty...and they had a son named Bruce, whom he had last seen playing with some toy figures called Mighty-something-Power Rangers on the kitchen floor.

And then he had died on February 21, 1995. Cause of death was accidental choking, or so he had been told. He had the vaguest memory of the taste of a cheeseburger, of helplessly fighting for breath, of a dull roar in his ears and darkness closing in around him...

Everything else was a mystery, his only clues a few barely glimpsed forms and shadows swathed in thick black smoke that parted only for a moment at a time. Sometimes, when the long work day was done and he lay awake in his bed in the servant quarters—the lights dimmed, the silence undisturbed except for someone snoring in his sleep—he would stare at the ceiling, struggling to remember his former life.

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A dog he had once loved. He didn't know his name, but he cried one night when he recalled how he used to bound on his bed every morning and lick his face to wake him up. A best friend—another teenager, the features of his face only barely remembered—who had his own car and was the coolest guy in town. An associative remembrance of the scent of marijuana, smoked on a warm summer night. A girl—not Elizabeth, although she had blonde hair, too—who also liked some TV show called *Star Trek*; they used to screw on the couch of her parents house while Mr. Spock watched. He thought her name was Shelly, but he could be wrong; it might be Sally or even Shelby. Another TV image: cheering along with a roomful of college kids as they watched a spacecraft rise from a distant launch pad, wishing more than anything else that he could be aboard... *Columbia?* was that was it was called?...right now.

Like shards of broken seashells, he collected scenes and voices from his past during those midnight strolls down the alien beach that was his mind. A long corridor of office doors (*third floor, five doors down, one o'clock sharp, Mr. McLafferty*); a classroom chalkboard filled with equations (*a Hohmann trajectory, simply stated, is...*). Taking a dump while studying a textbook (*goddammit, Paul, are you dying in there?*). Cool autumn wind in a graveyard (*he would have been proud of you, son...*). Someone shaking his hand (*welcome to the team, Dr. McLafferty, we're glad to have you...*). A gold ring slipped on his finger (*you may kiss the bride...*). A first glimpse of palm trees (*dammit, Liz, where's the map, I can't...*). A baby crying (*he's beautiful, what do you want to...?*). A long row of tall, cold metal tanks (*we call it cryonic biostasis, Dr. McLafferty, not...*). Liz, pissed off, shouting at him about something that he had signed (*what are you wasting money on this for, we can't...*).

The taste of a fast-food cheeseburger.

Choking. Grasping at his throat. Fumbling across a desk for the telephone. Chair tipping over. Collapsing on a carpeted floor. Limbs growing numb, head pounding, ears roaring, vision becoming grey. The long, slow plummet into darkness...

Then, quite suddenly, the harsh white glare of resurrection.

And now here he was, in a hollowed-out asteroid called Zappaf Frank, working for Mister Chicago.

Evening came, not as a sunset upon a western horizon, but as the gradual brownout of the elongated filament that ran down the asteroid's axial center. In the forests that lined the cylindrical walls of the biosphere, crickets and nightbirds struck up their nocturnal symphony, while lights glowed from the windows of the stone palace that had been built at Zappaf Frank's internal equator.

Mister Chicago was holding a dinner tonight, and it wasn't long before his guests began to arrive, walking up the lighted paths from the dachas surrounding the palace to the open doors leading into the Grand Hall. Most lived in other terraformed asteroids of the Main Belt, but a few had travelled from as far away as Mars, Callisto, and Europa. If one visited the asteroid's main control room, located in a sub-basement deep beneath the mansion, and peered through the large oval portal in its floor, their vessels could be seen in orbit around the potato-shaped rock.

No one McLafferty had spoken with seemed to know exactly what Mister Chicago did or exactly how he had amassed his fabulous wealth. Most of the servants believed that he was an entrepreneur of some sort; others claimed that he was an exiled prince, although no one knew from which country. There were also whispered rumors that he was a gangster, a hermaphrodite, even an android. Whatever he was, he had enough money to buy an asteroid and have it turned into a private estate, and sufficient power that when he threw a party, rich people traveled hundreds of thousands of kilometers to accept his invitation.

After he had finished preparing the Great Hall for the festivities, McLafferty had been allowed a few hours to himself. He had used them wisely; after showering and catching a nap, he ate a quick meal in the kitchen along with the rest of the servants. Then, as his master required, he went back to the servants quarters to put on his attire for the evening.

Twentieth-century white-tie formal: tails, bow-tie, vest, striped trousers, faux-pearl studs and cufflinks, patent-leather shoes. Examining himself in a mirror, he decided that he looked as if he was ready to conduct a symphony orchestra. Liz should see him like this; he hadn't looked this good since...

Liz, in her wedding gown, in his arms as they waltz across a parquet floor. "Ow," she whispers, trying to maintain her poise. "Paul, you're stepping on my feet."

The moment simmered at the edge of memory, then was gone.

He winced, then hurriedly walked away from the mirror.

The kitchen, calm earlier, was now in a state of chaos: cooks preparing salads, stirring kettles of lentil soup and grilling skewers of lamb more precious than gold. Waiters hastened back and forth, carrying out trays filled with drinks and indescribable appetizers. The air was filled with smoke and succulent, untouchable aroma.

The *maitre'd* handed him a pewter tray of champagne glasses. "Remember," he murmured, "don't offer any to the googles. They don't drink anything alcoholic, and take offense if you even offer it to them. Okay?"

Okay. A word from his century. He felt a momentary feeling of reassurance. "Okay. Got it."

The *maitre'd*—whose face was familiar, but whose name escaped his memory for the instant—favored him a quick nod with a pat on the shoulder. McLafferty backed through the swinging doors leading out of the kitchen.

The Great Hall was filled nearly to capacity. All the guests had finally arrived, and they mingled on the mosaic floor, the balcony, and the outside terrace overlooking the asteroid's inside-out vista. They wore loose, brightly-colored robes that changed hue with each movement, elegant strapless gowns that briefly turned translucent before becoming opaque again, military uniforms decked with insignia and medals, capes and codpieces and vests and kneeboots and brassieres. Clothing that would have been considered outrageous, hideous, or downright bizarre in his time. In comparison, his white-tie tux was as drab and archaic as sackcloth.

Keeping a fixed smile on his face as he tried not to stare at the guests, balancing his tray on one hand at shoulder height, McLafferty maneuvered through the crowd, speaking as seldom as possible when he stopped to give someone a drink. It wasn't hard to pick out the googles and avoid them; the bioengineered Superiors—as they preferred to be called, and as they were in polite company—generally stood a head taller than baseline humans. With thin, almost avian bodies, whose double-jointed legs ended in long, hand-shaped feet that wore glovelike shoes, they looked a little more like raptors than *homo sapiens*. Proud and somewhat remote, their faces tattooed with intricate designs, they regarded McLafferty with oversized dark-blue eyes as he passed them by, their disdain for the barbarian in their midst evident from the pinched expressions on their narrow faces.

He caught a brief glimpse of the master of the house when he walked out onto the terrace. Pasquale Chicago was holding court by the wrought-iron balustrade, surrounded by a small cluster of friends, business associates, lovers, and those who wished to be one or more of the above. As he chatted easily with a beautiful woman whose outfit was gradually fading into invisibility, Mister Chicago's right hand rose to casually toss back his braided, waist-length white hair from his albino face.

When he did so, his cool pink eyes happened to glance in McLafferty's direction. The look he gave him was enough to make the waiter retreat back into the hall. In the six months he

Working for Mister Chicago

had been working here, McLafferty had talked with Mister Chicago no more than a couple of times, and then only briefly. Although he frequently observed them from afar, Mister Chicago seldom spoke directly to his servants, preferring instead to issue directives through message screens in their quarters.

The guests were thirsty tonight. His tray was empty in no time at all, and McLafferty returned to the kitchen in hopes of getting a moment of rest, only to handed a platter of *hors d'oeuvres* that faintly resembled raw squid wrapped in blue spinach leaves and smelled like much the same. He nearly collided with Yeats on the way out.

"Having fun yet?" Yeats whispered.

"Please kill me."

"Hey, check out the babe with the..."

The rest was lost behind the swinging doors. McLafferty grinned as he carried the tray into the Great Hall. When this was all over and done, at least they would have something else to discuss besides the floor.

Circulating through the party-goers, he found three people standing alone near the entrance to the dining hall, carrying on an animated conversation. Two men and a woman, each of them young and beautiful. He would have liked to have known what they were talking about, but they shut up as he approached them.

"May I offer you an *hors d'oeuvre*?"

One of the men gazed at the tray with arch disdain. "I'm not sure," he said. "What is it?"

McLafferty smiled. "I'm not sure, m'lord, but I'm certain it's quite good."

"I'm not sure, m'lord, but I'm certain it's quite good." The other man mimicked McLafferty's voice as an effete whine, causing the woman to titter behind her gloved hand. "Oh, my word..."

"Then what are you doing offering one to me?" The first man's haughty gaze travelled from the platter to the servant carrying it. "If you don't know for yourself, then how can you be so certain?" He regarded the appetizers as if they were dog turds. "Have you sampled any yourself?"

McLafferty felt his face grow warm. "No, m'lord, I haven't," he confessed. "These are for the master's guests, and I've eaten already, and..."

"Give up, Ronald." The second man sipped his champagne glass. "This is one of Pasquale's deadheads. He wouldn't know the difference between *macedoine* and *pomme de terre* if you shoved it in his mouth."

"A 'bot might," the woman mused, "but they're not as much fun, are they?"

"Pasquale doesn't like 'bots, Clarity," Ronald replied. "That's why he has deadheads instead."

If this was a joke, it must have been funny, because all three laughed out loud. Feeling uncomfortable, McLafferty put a plastic smile on his face and started to turn away, only to be have his right arm snagged by the second man.

"Oh, so you're one of Mister Chicago's pets!" This was proclaimed with false astonishment, as if he had just learned some new and unique fact. "I don't think I've ever met one of your kind before," he went on as he forcibly dragged McLafferty back into the circle. "A man from the twentieth century!"

"Well, I..." McLafferty looked away, trying to find a reason to escape this unwanted attention. "Yes, well, that was when I was born, but..."

"But you must have witnessed so much history!" The second man circled his arm around McLafferty's shoulders. "Please, tell us all! Did you...?"

"Did you ever meet the Beatles?" Clarity asked, as she cast a sly wink at Ronald. "I've been studying classic music recently. They were so adorable."

"What about William Faulkner, or Hemingway? Vonnegut?" The second man snapped his fingers. "I know! Stephen King! He was around then! Did you ever meet him?"

"John F. Kennedy..."

"Jeffery Draper...no, I mean Jeffery Dahmer. Was he someone you...?"

"Charles Manson!" Clarity had a smoldering look in her eyes. "Were you a member of his group? They were so deliciously evil..."

"L. Ron Hubbard, perhaps? Now there was a maniac..."

"Who?"

"I'm sorry, but I didn't know any of these people." McLafferty felt suffocated. "I never met them. They were all... they were famous people. I heard of them, sure, but you never..."

"Certainly. We understand, don't we?" Ronald cast a broad look at his companions. "It's been so many years, and our friend here spent the last century with his poor, decapitated noggin floating in liquid nitrogen. No wonder he doesn't remember anything."

Clarity tisked with false sympathy. "Poor, dear deadhead." She stepped forward to run the back of her hand across McLafferty's face. Her breath was redolent with liquor. "I wonder if you even remember your name."

"McLafferty..." he began.

"McLafferty," she whispered, looking into his eyes. "That's such a nice name." Her fingertip trailed down from his face, across his throat and chest, down towards his stomach. "And such a fine new body Mister Chicago has cloned for you," she sighed. "Tell me, do your only duties for him include simply serving canapes to his dinner guests? Or do you also...?"

Startled by the touch of her fingers at his groin, McLafferty instinctively jumped back. The platter toppled from his hand; he lurched forward to catch it, but it crashed to the floor, the appetizers spilling as an oily mess across the orbit of Neptune.

"Oh, now, look what you've made him do!" Ronald cried out.

As the trio shrieked with laughter, McLafferty fell to his knees, trying to scoop up the slippery food with his hands. Only this morning he had slaved for hours to make this floor spotless, yet this wasn't what made him hiss between his teeth.

He was the manacled primitive, the captured savage in loincloth, the barbarian put on parade. His humiliation was complete; as the first man had said, he was a pet...

With this, unbidden, another memory: a small boy, bigger than he was, pushing him down in a muddy playground, and pushing him down again when he tried to get up.

(*c'mon, four-eyes, put down your stupid books and...!*)

"Come now," the second man said from behind him. "I'm sure he means no harm."

(*get up, you sissy...!*)

Then he felt fingertips lightly caress his raised buttocks. "If we speak to Pasquale, perhaps he'll lend him to us for a little sport..."

Without thinking, balancing himself on his hands, McLafferty blindly lashed back with his right foot. His sole connected with something soft and fleshy, and he heard a high-pitched shriek.

"Oh, my!" Clarity screamed. "He attacked Willie!"

Suddenly, conversation around the Great Hall fell away as all eyes turned toward him. Embarrassed, McLafferty started to rise. "I'm sorry," he murmured. "I didn't mean it, but he..."

"Animal!"

Ronald's left hand sailed about, catching McLafferty in a savage backhand that knocked him off his feet.

The other guests cried out in fear and outrage, and the rest was lost in pandemonium.

Clarity's face, captured in a moment of absolute terror as she backed away.

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The second man curled up on the floor, moaning as his hands cupped his injured testicles.

Ronald standing above him, kicking McLafferty in the ribs. Then another guest joined him, and another, until there was a solid mob of Mister Chicago's friends surrounding him, beating him with their shoes and fists, until he sank into a dark, jagged womb of pain.

His last conscious thought was the hope that he finally dead, for once and for all.

But he didn't die again.

When he awoke, he found himself in the infirmary.

He knew this place, located in another part of the palace, from an earlier visit for a sprained wrist.

The lights had been turned down low, but sunlight filtered through an open window; the fresh air carried with it the scent of Zappafrank's perpetual summer. The sheets around his naked body were cool and crisp. The autodoc hovering near his bed—one of the very few 'bots in Zappafrank—was withdrawing a syringe-gun from his bare right arm.

"Good morning," a voice said from behind him. "I trust you're feeling better."

As McLafferty raised his head and looked around, Mister Chicago stepped from the shadows.

He was dressed differently from the last time McLafferty had seen him. Now he wore the white cotton robe he usually donned in the morning, when he was being served breakfast in the garden. In his thin, long-fingered hands he held a china coffee cup and saucer.

Although he felt exhausted, McLafferty started to sit up, but Mister Chicago shook his head. "Please, lie down," he said, raising a hand. "You've suffered some severe injuries, I'm afraid. The nanites have healed most of the internal damage, but the nasty concussion you took will take a little longer to get over."

"I'm..." His throat was parched; McLafferty swallowed what felt like a ball of lint and tried again. "I'm sorry, sir. I...I didn't to cause a..."

"A scene?" The master shook his head again. "Think nothing of it. I witnessed the entire incident. Petersen is a rude chap, one who I should not have invited in the first place. He had what was coming to him, nothing more or less. I'm just sorry his companion got to you before I did."

Stepping closer, Mister Chicago reached up to touch the keypad on the medscanner above the bed. "Good," he murmured absently, peering at screen with his strange pink eyes. "The left kidney's recovering quite nicely. You took a nasty kick there from Ronnie duBois...I doubt you recall it, but he's hardly a gentleman in a fight...and I was worried that we might have to replace it."

McLafferty remembered, but that was beside the point. "I thought...you would be angry," he rasped.

"Throat dry?" He glanced at the autodoc. "A little water, please." The 'bot floated away, and Mister Chicago laughed out loud. "Angry? I'm actually rather thankful. The party was becoming such a bore. If anything, it gave everyone something to talk about."

Stepping away again, he located a carved wood stool beneath a counter. "Of course," he said as he pulled it out and settled down on it, "we'll have to keep you out of sight for next couple of days. I informed my guests that you have been taken down here to be lobotomized."

Noting the expression on McLafferty's face, he favored him with a droll wink. "If you want to play the part, of course, I could have you make a reappearance just before they leave. Just

shamble around and drool a bit...I'm sure they'd enjoy it. But I have no intention of doing so, believe me."

McLafferty managed a wan smile. The autodoc returned with a paper cup of water, and the bed flowed into a reclining position. McLafferty accepted the cup gratefully; the water was cool, and tasted vaguely of lemon.

"But we do have a few things to discuss, you and I," Mister Chicago went on, turning more serious now. "Because this occurrence wasn't your fault, I'm not going to discipline you...but you do need to be reminded of where you stand in the grand scheme of things."

Mister Chicago paused to sip his coffee. "Please understand, though," he said as he put the cup and saucer aside, "that whatever you were in your time, you are no longer now. I understand from your biographical records that you were once an astronautical engineer, employed by the..."

He frowned, trying to conjure a name. "NASA," McLafferty whispered.

"That's it." Mister Chicago snapped his fingers. "National Aeronautics and Space Administration, correct?" McLafferty nodded, and the master shook his head. "Long since vanished. Decommissioned more than eighty years ago, if I recall my history tutelage."

Surprised, McLafferty opened his mouth, but Mister Chicago waved him off. "It's a long story. At any rate, your former position in life is null and void, yet before you deanimated...or died, if you prefer to call it that...you spent a considerable amount of money to have your brain preserved in neural biostasis."

He paused. "In short, your head was decapitated and placed in a tank of liquid nitrogen by a private company that didn't last very much longer than NASA. The Immortality Partnership, I believe it was called."

McLafferty blinked hard. Shards of memory, recovered piecemeal over the last several months, were beginning to come together, as if they were parts of a broken sea shell that were being painstakingly glued back in place. Cold steel tanks...his wife shouting at him...the taste of a fast-food cheeseburger...

Mister Chicago intently searched his face. "You're beginning to remember some of it now, aren't you?" he said softly, less a question than a statement. "Your memory is incomplete, isn't it?"

"Yes..."

The master nodded with great sympathy. "Cryonic biostasis was something that went in and out of vogue during the late twentieth century. About a hundred or so people signed up for it before the whole idea fell out of fashion."

Obviously enjoying his role as lecturer, Mister Chicago leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. "You see, the long-term problem with cryonic biostasis wasn't reanimation. That was solved many years ago, by the same biotechnology that allowed tailoring the human genome, which in turn gave us humankind capable of living in null-gravity environments...the Superiors, of whom you met a few last night." He sighed. "Of course, the practice isn't completely widespread, so there's a few random mutations still lurking about. If my parents had only chosen to..."

As if something had reminded him not to reveal too much about himself, Mister Chicago stopped short. "Never mind," he said, quickly shaking his head. "The point is that nanotechnical repair of frozen brain tissue isn't faultless to the point that someone can be revived with their mental facilities completely intact. Certainly, we're capable of producing clones of their bodies...you, for instance, are a near-perfect duplicate of the man you were at age twenty-one...but the mind is far more delicate thing than a heart, a lung, or even a thyroid gland."

He hesitated. "Are you following me so far?"

McLafferty slowly nodded.

Working for Mister Chicago

"The Immortality Partnership possessed a little more than a hundred sleepers from the twentieth century," Mister Chicago continued. "Their heads had been transferred from California to a space colony in Earth orbit before the company went bankrupt. Some of these sleepers had established trust funds in their name, and that's what had kept the company marginally solvent until it finally went bust in the middle of the century. Now, what do you think happened to all those heads?"

"You...bought them?" McLafferty said hesitantly.

"Excellent." Mister Chicago smiled with satisfaction. "I knew I made a wise decision when I purchased you, Mr. McLafferty."

Standing up from the stool, Mister Chicago began to pace the infirmary, his hands clasped behind his back. "Have you met Kirkland?" he asked. "A tall gentleman who works in the kitchen?" He didn't wait for a reply. "A recipient of the Pulitzer Prize for poetry. I have a couple of his books in my collection. Now he does well if he can follow the recipe for *potage Rossini* without help...and he doesn't recognize his own verse even when I recite it to him."

Almost self-consciously, Mister Chicago walked back to the stool he had vacated. "Cerebral damage was a risk I accepted when I purchased you," he went, "but don't fool yourself by thinking for a moment that I did this out of charity. To me, you're an investment. You, Kirkland, your friend Yeats, all the others...you're damaged goods. Even then you're lucky, because most of the sleepers suffered neural damage so severe that, had I bothered to revive them, they would have been little more than vegetables. Even with you, one of the fortunate survivors, your talents and skills have been erased. Even if they weren't, nothing that you once possessed, even if you remembered it, could possibly be of any practical use to me now."

"Then why..." McLafferty stopped, then went on. "Why have you...?"

"Why did I purchase a collection of decapitated heads from a bankrupt company and have them reanimated in cloned bodies?" Mister Chicago shrugged. "Because I can afford to do so, just like I can buy a mirror asteroid with a peculiar name...I don't suppose you know what it means, do you? no?...and have it transformed into my private domain. Because it amuses me to have a space engineer mopping my floors, a poet stirring my soup, a once-wealthy financier tending my garden. Robots could do the same thing..."

He nodded toward the autodoc. "But everyone has 'bots. They're cheap, inexpensive, always do as they're told...but they have no history behind them. But you, on the other hand... you're history in itself."

"We make great pets," McLafferty murmured.

"You..." Mister Chicago's voice took a strident edge; he took a deep breath, calming himself down. "A century ago," he said with great patience, "the people of your time did their best to ruin the only planet they lived on. You damned near succeeded, too. A few of you tried to find a way out through biostasis, in the conceit that the people of the future would receive you with open arms. Perhaps you thought you would be treated as ancient scholars, that we would even worship you as immortals."

McLafferty wished he could deny this, but he couldn't. He didn't know what he had been thinking a hundred and two years ago. Perhaps he had been frightened of death and all that it represented. Perhaps he had only been disappointed with life.

"I don't know," he said.

"If you don't," his master said, "then neither do I, yet the fact remains. Only out of my grace do you live again...and only out of my grace are you still alive, after what you did to one of my guests last night."

Pushing back the stool, Mister Chicago stood up once more. "And, yes," he finished, "your assessment is correct. You make great pets."

Picking up his cup and saucer, he walked toward the door, disappearing back into the shadows from which he had emerged. "And if I were you, I'd watch out..."

"Where the huskies go," McLafferty said.

Mister Chicago stopped. "Pardon me?"

"And don't you eat that yellow snow," McLafferty finished.

Hesitation. "Sorry? I don't..."

"Dynamo hum." McLafferty sat up in bed. "Shut up and play yer guitar. Joe's garage, parts one and two. Hot rats. Weasels ripped my flesh."

He smiled and added, "Rzzz..."

"What are you talking about?" Mister Chicago demanded.

"Just answering an earlier question." McLafferty shrugged, then glanced over his shoulder at his master. "You remember, don't you?"

Long silence.

Then Mister Chicago melted further in the shadows, his footsteps hinting at dark puzzlement. "Get well soon, Mr. McLafferty," his voice said, no longer as warm as it had been before. "You need to help the others clean up from my party."

Then he was gone. Footsteps receding down a short corridor, finally disappearing.

McLafferty sank back beneath the cool sheets, his hands clasped behind his head.

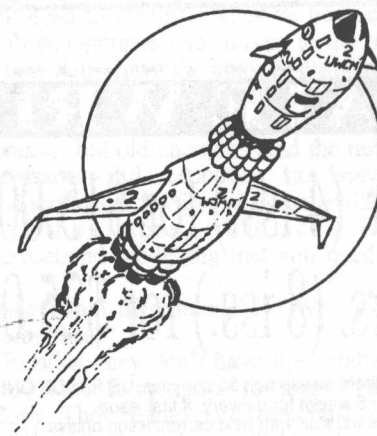
Now the broken seashell was intact again. Before now, he only had a few scattered pieces. Mister Chicago, in an unguarded moment of arrogance, had supplied the glue.

He would scrub floors. He would clean tapestries. He would water the flowers in the garden and rinse the dishes in the kitchen and rake the compost bins, and all the while he would smile and play the part of the barbarian imbecile.

Meanwhile, he would bide his time, and learn everything he could, starting with the map of the populated solar system in the Great Hall.

One way or another, there had to be a way off this goddamn rock: Asteroid 3834, discovered in 1980 and formally named during a conference of the International Astronomical Union in 1994 in honor of a deceased rock musician. Because if Mister Chicago didn't know his name, then this was evidence that he wasn't as omniscient as he pretended to be.

"God bless you, Frank Zappa," he whispered, and then he went back to sleep.



This is Daniel Hatch's third appearance in the pages of **Absolute Magnitude**. He is the author of *Den of Thieves*, *Den of Wolves*, which appeared in *Analog*.

The Human Art (Part Two)

by Daniel Hatch
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EIGHT

Blast them all! Blast all the arrogant men and their lying eyes and faces and recycle them all back to atoms! And Magda Grant too!

Ellen Brindamour was furious.

The only thing that held her in check, however, was that she wasn't sure where to direct her fury.

Westwall was the prime suspect. At least that's what they thought up in Scienceville. And they had every reason to think that. The animosity between the two was motive enough.

But there was no evidence to prove that Westwall was behind the moonquake and the tubeline break. Nothing in the way that Preston Griswold had acted in the council meeting, nothing in the records she had seen before coming up here from Earth.

She almost felt betrayed by Griswold's contrite manner at the meeting, the way he had finally acquiesced to the settlement, allowing access to the Westwall tubes in exchange for increased resource allotments. But she held herself back. She couldn't let the anger and the betrayal run through to completion, unless and until she knew for a fact that Westwall was responsible. And she didn't know.

But if not Westwall, then who?

Ellen struggled with that question for the next hour as she rushed to meet Patricia Claridge at the site of the tubeline break.

She didn't want to wait for the public run from Lunograd to Titania, and now that she had stepped out of her role as an engineering consultant, she no longer had to. She used the secomp to enter official transport directories and order a private moondog to take her directly to the fault. And since there was no dock at the engineers' shack there, she had to arrange for a spacesuit as well.

It seemed to take her forever to make her way from Kiroliev Prospect to the Lunograd transport terminal. There she donned the suit, all but the helmet and sleeves, then boarded the private moondog and set the navigational computer for her destination.

Her fury had hardly abated, despite the delays, and she barely noticed the greenish lunar landscape as it rolled by beneath her.

If not Westwall, then who?

Were there separatists elsewhere who stood to gain from the sabotage? She hadn't found any conspirators in Westwall—just ordinary people with strong opinions. Could Scienceville have done it themselves? But what for? They had gained nothing from the exercise.

She wanted to believe it was Westwall, to give focus to her anger. She rehearsed an intemperate speech rebuking them for their duplicity in the council meeting and for their conspiracy to undermine the community at Alphonsus. But the words remained hollow and empty as long as she was uncertain of their

guilt.

That was why she had to talk to Patricia. That was why she had to know for sure if they were guilty.

The moondog spiralled down into the shadow of the crater wall and slowed to a stop next to the engineering shack. Ellen pulled on the rest of her suit and cycled through the tiny airlock. A few minutes later, she was inside the dusty lock of the shack, waiting for it to pressurize. Then she was face to face with Patricia again.

"I'm sorry, Ellen, but I don't have an answer to your question," Patricia said.

"Why not? Can't you tell who built those things? All you need to do is take one apart and figure it out."

"It's not that easy. Sure we found them. Just like the Science-boys said. But we didn't do anything with them. For goodness sake, Ellen, they're full of explosives. No one is going to blow themselves up just to see who's to blame. We've got a good profile on the device. There's pictures from a videoprobe and some data off a mining scan—mass and composition. But it's not like we can tell you serial numbers or shop marks or anything."

Ellen fumed silently for a moment. Her stomach twisted tight and her hands grew sweaty.

"What can you tell me? Could Westwall have done it?"

"I don't know," the engineer said. "This was not an easy trick to pull off. You need more than the bombs. You've got to have a good model of what's under the surface. And some dynamic tests on that model that will tell you what will happen if you set the charges off here instead of there. Otherwise you just make a lot of smoke and noise and nothing moves."

"Does Westwall have the capacity for that?"

"Maybe, but I haven't seen it myself. They don't have the kind of facilities you need to do that. They've been collecting subsurface data for three centuries—from here to the other side of Alphonsus. But they don't have the number-crunchers to put together the kind of dynamic modelling that this requires. Most of their computers are old models—not original equipment with the settlement, of course, but old enough. And the new stuff is designed for administration and accounting, not heavy lifting. What you need is the terabyte processor at Scienceville. It's the only thing on the moon that can do the microsecond-by-microsecond modelling that you need to make this work."

"Scienceville?" she asked incredulously. "Why would they sabotage their own tubelines?"

"I don't know. Besides, they don't have the database you'd need. That stuff is too down-to-moondust for them. They're not interested in selenology. They're into pure research."

"Couldn't they get the data from Westwall?"

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"Do you really think they'd give it to them?"

"I suppose not."

"And like you said, why would they sabotage their own tubelines?"

Ellen shook her head. There was no answer to that question.

Patricia filled a bulb with coffee and tossed it to her, then drew one for herself. "Actually, I don't see what you're getting all worked up over," she said after a few moments of tense silence. "What could you do about it even if you could figure out who did it?"

"It's more complicated than you realize," Ellen said. "A lot has happened since the last time I saw you."

She told Patty about the council meeting and the concessions that she had wrangled out of the two settlements. "I was going on the assumption that this was a natural disaster and not a deliberate act. There was no evidence to the contrary. But if it wasn't, then someone is playing me for a fool. I've been betrayed—and outmaneuvered."

Patricia let a thin smile break across her face, then she turned away to avoid embarrassment.

"It's not what you're thinking," Ellen said. "This isn't personal. Well, it is, but it's more than that. I'm an Intervenor, blast it. I can't let them do this. It's not healthy. And it's not safe."

"I'm sorry. I guess I have to admit that I'm still a lunarian at heart, even if we're not supposed to be very political down in Titania."

Ellen shook her head. "This isn't good for Alphonsus, Patty. It could make things worse, not better. And until I know who's behind it, my job here isn't done."

Ellen wanted to pace, but she didn't dare—the lunar gravity was too low. So she sat at a table and twisted the empty plastic coffee bulb into small pieces. That took about twenty minutes. When she was done, she stood up abruptly. The weight of the spacesuit was all that kept her from bouncing off the overhead.

"Whoever did it had to use the computers in Scienceville and the database from Westwall, right? That means someone somewhere had to get into those systems and that means there should be a trail. And if there is, then my secomp should be able to find it."

"You really think so?"

"During the wars, they used them to penetrate security systems, communications and data networks, that kind of thing. They cut through civilian and public systems like so much tofu. They've got all the overrides and trapdoors on file, passwords and directory codes, everything you need to tap into every computer in Alphonsus. They can even invade a system through sensor inputs, radio links, and when they're cranked up to high power they can get into closed cables through inductance. The only thing they can't touch is a closed fiber-optic system at a distance. Though up close you can get into one of them if you want to break a fiber or crash through a terminal."

"Sounds handy."

"In my line of work it can be a big help."

"So what are you going to do with it?"

"We've got to find a data terminal that can get us into the systems at Scienceville and Westwall."

"That's easy. The terminal here in our shop can access any system in Alphonsus. And if your portable hacker can get past the security systems, you can probably get whatever you want from them."

"Great. Let's go."

It took Ellen a while to find what she was looking for. The subsurface selenological database was the first link in the chain. First they had to get into the accounting level for the Westwall

systems, then they had to look for users who had tapped into the database.

The secomp cracked that file without effort, revealing only a handful of users within the past year who fit the bill. Most of them appeared to be legitimate customers—tunnel diggers from every settlement, the Titania Engineering Co-op, grad students from Lunograd, and some long-distance users plugging in from Plato University and from Harvard back on Earth.

There was one user who didn't fit the innocent profile of the others. The account carried no name or other identification—just a number. And the secomp couldn't track it down in any of the logical directories. Whoever it was, they had tapped into the database only a few weeks ago and copied the entire contents to their own terminal. Onto an optical disk, according to the record of the transaction.

"This could be our saboteur," Ellen said. "Any suggestions where we can find a name to go with this number?"

"Try the credit records," Patricia said. "Copying a file that big must have cost big megabucks. I know it would kill my monthly data budget."

Ellen nodded and set the secomp to work.

"The security on those files is nasty," she told Patricia as it went looking. "If you try tampering with them, the system shoots back. Disabling commands, tracers, alarms, deep data probes, and an immediate call to the security police. There's a lot of proprietary information in the system. You can't use it unless you pay and you can't pay if the system doesn't keep track."

Patricia shuffled nervously. "We're not going to get into any trouble with the security police doing this, are we?"

"As far as the system is concerned, I am the security police," Ellen said. "At least the secomp logs into the system at their level."

Suddenly the virtual screen at the engineering terminal cleared and a single line scrolled up. There was no name, just an account number and an address from Crater City: "CAX-11341-Boulder Quad West."

"Crater City?" Patricia said.

"That's what it says. Not surprising. They're sympathizers in the cause, certainly. Do you have any idea how to find this place?"

"It's a commercial address—that's what the coding says. Shouldn't be hard to locate."

"Let's see what else they've been up to first," Ellen said. A moment later, the entire credit history for the account filled the screen. Ellen was quick to spot the most critical entry.

"Sept. 23—ACCESS TO SCIENCEVILLE PROCESSING FACILITY ALPHA—6.16385 hours—M\$ 3,345.87."

"We got 'em," she said. "What's the rest of this stuff?"

"Looks like typical library stuff. Cheap books, historical stuff, current events, Earth news—wait a minute...here's a technical design charge. A Titania machine shop specializing in tunneling equipment. They rolled up 13 hours back in early September. That must be where they got the design for the drillers."

"That's enough. Secomp should be able to find some names to go with this account and this address in the security database. Let's see what it can do."

A moment later, they had it.

"Roland Jacobs, d.o.b. 3/4/81," the screen read. "Residence unit: DRM-456821-Boulder Quad South. SSN: 9754-33-53122. Current work assignment: Sandino Labs, CAX-11341-Boulder Quad West. Status: single, educational level U-6, credit level 52,331. Labor category: Researcher."

Ellen smiled. Now she was getting somewhere.

"Have you got an image of him?" she asked the computer.

The Human Art

A holographic picture of Jacobs sprang to life, appearing for a moment as if he were actually standing beside them—until Ellen noticed that he didn't blink, breathe, or move. He was a small man with boyish features—a short nose, a pointed chin, a pouting little smile—and inviting soft eyes.

"Present location?"

The holograph vanished and the screen blinked.

"CAX-11341-Boulder Quad West," it announced.

"Patty, why don't we go pay Citizen Jacobs a visit."

"We? As in me?" Patricia asked suddenly.

"Why not?" Ellen said. "What are you afraid of?"

"Aside from the chance that he might have some of the explosives from those drillers—or something worse—still lying around? Nothing, I suppose."

"Don't worry, Patty," Ellen said. "I'm not going to let anything happen to you." But a nagging voice at the back of her head warned her not to make promises she might not be able to keep.

Once Ellen had entered their destination, the moondog lifted itself from the lunar soil and headed east, flying more than a thousand meters above the ground. Only a few minutes after takeoff, they passed out of the shadow of the crater wall and untempered sunlight splashed through the transparent dome of the vehicle.

Running on the surface below, Ellen noticed a series of long furrows from north to south, almost like a patch of cultivated land—only this field had to be several kilometers wide and an indeterminate distance long. She pointed it out.

"Oh that," Patty said with a smile. "It's a helium farm. They used to harvest helium-3 from the lunar soil to use as fuel in fusion reactors. The solar wind deposits it in the regolith. But it's just not worth the cost anymore."

"You'd almost think they were planting corn," Ellen said.

"Now that would be something to look at."

She watched as they flew over the long furrows. The lines of disturbed lunar soil rolled along the contour of the crater floor, squeezing together to avoid large craters, plowing through smaller ones, a great piece of cosmic art left over from the distant past.

Ellen was so enchanted that she barely noticed the glint of sunlight and the running lights of another moondog as it approached from the north. When she did pay attention, it was just as the secomp came to life.

"Alert!" it announced in her right ear. "Alert! Vehicle command computer is coming under software attack!"

The words were repeated in typescript that hovered in the air before her eyes.

"Vehicle is being diverted from programmed destination!" the secomp warned.

"Blast!" Ellen said through clenched teeth. She slipped into the pilot's seat and began slapping at switches.

"What's wrong?" Patricia asked.

"Shhhh!" she hissed. "I'm busy. Secomp, can you stop the attack?"

"Working...working...logged into vehicle command computer. Overriding alien software."

The other moondog was close enough now that Ellen could see the passengers. There were five of them, all clad in spacesuits.

"Alert! Alert! Secomp under software attack!"

The warning caught her off guard. What kind of system could attack a secomp?

There was military hardware, of course, but no one had access to that except the Paracops. They were faster and could crunch at higher volumes than her secomp, running through inputs

faster than it could throw up countermeasures. Eventually the attacker would break into the secomp's operating system and shut it down or keep it so busy defending itself that it couldn't function.

"Give me control of the moondog," Ellen barked. "At least I can fly us out of here."

"Working...working...unable to comply with command."

"Blast!" Ellen hissed. She pulled on the control stick fruitlessly as the moondog began to descend. "Patty, we're being hijacked. And there's nothing I can do to stop it."

"What about your computer?"

"I had it plug into the moondog's command computer and they grabbed it through there. Where are we going to land?"

"We're still a few clicks short of Crater City. Looks like we're coming down in the middle of the helium farm."

They dropped quickly, the furrowed lunar soil rushing up towards them, resolving itself into greater detail. Just before they reached the surface, Ellen caught sight of a small grey building topped by a dome and plastered with solar cells. The two moondogs swooped low and circled the building once, then slowed to a stop before settling to the ground.

Ellen and Patricia watched nervously as the spacesuited figures disembarked from their vehicle and approached. A moment later, they were cycling through the airlock.

They spilled into the passenger compartment quickly. The first three encircled the seats and control panels, while the last two were more leisurely in their movements. They appeared to be unarmed.

"She's got the secomp," said the shortest member of the group, a woman. She held some kind of electronics in her hand that looked to Ellen like a computer with a loop antenna.

"We'll take care of it later," said the last man to enter the moondog. Then, to Ellen and Patricia Claridge, he announced: "Sorry about this, but I'm afraid the two of you will have to suit up and come with us. As of now, you are prisoners of the Lunar Liberation Army."

Ellen looked closely at the face behind the flat panes of glass in the spacesuit helmet. It was Roland Jacobs.

NINE

The building was not so small as Ellen had first thought when looking down at it from above. The place was more than ten meters high, twenty wide, and forty long with high doors at the narrow end. Parked outside were several oversized treaded machines thick with scoopers, storage tanks, antennae, a plow in the front and a big container in the rear.

The party walked between two of them, passing briefly through the inky shadows before entering a portal in one of the larger garage doors. Once inside, they filed past pits, derricks, cranes, and other oversized tools and frames obviously needed to service the behemoths parked outside. Spare parts littered the floor like table scraps in the cave of some giant mechanical predator.

The short woman with the computer led them through an airlock into a pressurized section of the building. Once there, they removed their helmets.

"I want that secomp," the woman said. "Now there's an easy way to do this and a hard way. I'd prefer it if we tried the hard way, but the choice is yours."

"That's enough, Terry," Jacobs said curtly. "You don't need to scare anyone into cooperating. I'm sure you'll have what you want without the threats. You two can step out of those suits for now. We'll take good care of them—and that secomp too."

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Ellen swallowed hard with a dry throat. She wondered how much of the security computer she would have to give up to satisfy them.

They slipped out of the spacesuits, taking care to mount the hardware in the racks near the airlock door and to stow the loose parts in an adjacent locker. That left Ellen wearing a blue coverall and Patricia a similar one of red. When it became obvious that Jacobs and Terry were waiting for her to continue, she looked around for some privacy.

She saw the dressing room and did not wait for permission to step inside.

"Wait a minute," Terry said. "I want to make sure we get the whole thing."

"Surely you don't expect me to undress out there, do you?" she shot back.

"Well..."

"That won't be necessary," Jacobs said. "Bring the computer with you when you're done."

Ellen uttered a two-word command intended to lock down the secomp and seal its memory and processing centers. Then she disconnected the optical fibers that linked the separate sections of the computer and peeled the thin modules from her thigh, waist, and shoulder.

A few minutes later, the coverall back in place, Ellen emerged from the dressing room and deposited on the work bench the three thin plastic sheets contoured to the curves of her body. For a moment, she was surprised with the way they echoed her own femininity.

Then Terry scooped them up, holding the articulated parts of the equipment close to her eyes for finer inspection. She plugged a fiber cable into her own computer, and watched as data scrolled across a virtual terminal. Ellen felt a sudden rush of fear—the woman shouldn't have been able to do that! Not after she had disabled the secomp. They must have blocked the internal security functions during the fight on the moondog.

Terry disconnected fiberlink and hurried over to Ellen, where she waved a sensor around the air.

"That's it," he said. "We've got it all."

She went back to the secomp, gathered the pieces in her arms, and hurried out a door on the far side of the chamber.

"You can follow me now," Jacobs said, leading the way to a different door. They stepped into a short corridor and walked a few meters down to an open doorway. Ellen could see inside the compartment—it contained two beds, two blankets, and several discarded food containers and beverage bulbs.

Jacobs ushered them inside, smiled apologetically, then closed the door on them. Patricia sat on the bed and sighed.

Ellen kicked the wall, a satisfying gesture that reminded her that she retained mass and inertia even if her weight had fled.

"Blast!" she said between clenched teeth.

She awoke with a sudden start. She didn't remember falling asleep and realized Patricia must have covered her with a blanket.

"How long have I been out?" she asked when she stirred in her own bunk.

She looked at her ident-badge. "Seven hours. We've been here for eight. The morning watch starts in another hour."

She was grateful for the chance to rest, but surprised that she had slept so soundly. She closed her eyes and tried for more, but her nerves would not let her. Her mind, once engaged, continued to tug and pull at their dilemma. But no amount of worry could get past the locked door to the compartment they occupied or improve their situation in the least.

As it was, she had to wait the hour until the morning watch began and one of their captors released them. He escorted them

into a cafeteria and lounge containing a couch, a few chairs, some low tables, and a public data screen.

"Good watch, Ellen," Jacobs said from his place on the couch. "Engineer Claridge. Have a seat. There's something here that I want you to watch."

Ellen found a chair and waited in silence while Jacobs activated the screen. Patricia took a seat across the room from her on the couch.

"This is great stuff. You've got to see it," Jacobs said, waving his hands dramatically. The image on the datascreen resolved itself into a familiar sight, Ellen realized suddenly—the chambers of the Alphonsus Common Council.

"This was the scene of the latest assault on our independence by the Unification Government on Earth," said the narrator. The voice sounded breathless and excited and more than a little young. "This week, an agent of that government once again went behind closed doors to determine the fate of lunarians throughout Alphonsus. This blatantly domineering and oppressive act proves once more the need for all of us to rise up and demand our rights as a free and independent people."

The scene shifted abruptly to the private chambers behind the dais. Ellen recognized the faces of the council members arrayed around the table. Then she gasped as she saw her own face among them.

As she watched, bits and pieces of the meeting were replayed, mostly pictures of her issuing instructions and outlining demands. At least that was what it looked like. Ripped from the context, it looked like she had given the council an ultimatum, treating them like schoolchildren and lecturing them about their own best interests. There was nothing to see of the self-serving replies and rebuttals, the obstreperousness of the council members, and the final discussions where they worked out the consensus themselves.

Where had that record come from?

She had disabled all the rooms security monitors. No one in Alphonsus could have tapped into the chamber. A sinking feeling gripped her stomach as she realized suddenly who had done the recording....

Her secomp!

They'd cracked the memory and used her own datafiles against her.

"This is the public newsnet," Jacobs said. "People all over Alphonsus are watching this right now. What do you think?"

Ellen felt lightheaded. She didn't want to tell Jacobs what she thought. She wanted to scream. Then she took hold of herself and calmed down. The damage was already done. What could she do to keep it from spreading?

She had to know more about Jacobs and his intentions. Somehow, she had to work him into the overall solution. Even as he tried to work her into whatever plans and machinations he was concocting.

"What are you trying to do?" she asked. "Start a riot?"

"I should ask you the same thing," he shot back. "You're the Interferer. You came down here from Earth. What were you trying to do?"

"Defuse a crisis," she said, ignoring the insult. "One that you created."

"And I'm trying to liberate my society from an oppressor. One that you work for."

"How do you expect to do that?"

"I have my methods. You'll see. This is only the beginning. It gets better later this watch. Can I get you some coffee or tea? You probably would like some breakfast. Maybe it'll settle you down and put you in a better mood. You shouldn't be so quick to accuse other people of plotting sins that you commit everyday. It diminishes your moral authority."

The Human Art

Ellen frowned and accepted a bulb of hot coffee. It didn't help.

At first, Ellen thought Jacobs was a self-righteous child. His glib use of political jargon and his self-conscious radicalism set her teeth on edge.

He continued talking, oblivious to her studious disregard, acting as if she were hanging on his every word when she acted as if she were not.

After a while, she began to listen beyond her own prejudices and started to think about the character of what appeared to be the leader of a potent and well-organized effort to foment a civil uprising in Alphonsus.

"I've always wanted to meet an Interferer in person," he said. "I think Human Science is fascinating—although it's a little to steep for me to fathom the hardest parts, I have to admit. But I've read some of the classics, the early non-scientific stuff. Lucaks, Luxembourg, Hoffman. Did you ever scan 'Revolution for the Hell of It'? That's a masterpiece. Abbie Hoffman was the first real revolutionary of the technetronic age. A mix of pure theater and radical politics."

He stood up and glided over the floor in a slow-motion lunar parabola that resembled ballet as much as it did a release of nervous energy.

"His method was to challenge authority with humor, a heavy dose of the absurd, and healthy measure of the irrational. The idea was to provoke a response all out of proportion to the stimulus, thus revealing the repressive nature of the state. The authorities of his time must have read the book too, because they played right along. Staged a trumped-up political trial for Hoffman and his cohorts. The case collapsed, of course, although later on they managed to drive him out of the public arena by charging him with unlicensed pharmaceutical distribution. That was when the government used superstitions about self-administered drugs to control what they considered to be dangerous ethnic and social classes."

Ellen laughed in spite of herself. At least Jacobs was intelligent. And he had a sense of history that she found unlikely in a political rebel. She listened as he continued.

"Marx and Lenin were a good pair, too, as far as they went. Lenin's vanguard party was a great idea when it got started. Midwife to change for Marx's internal and external proletariats—the working classes and the colonial masses—the leading edge of history. Except that by the end of the 20th century, Marx's irresistible force ran head on into what had become Lenin's immovable object.

"And that was the end of revolution in world history. Ever since then, all we've had has been a series of post-modern crises and wars, driven by leaps of technology and failures of political will. There's no place in the world anymore for a true revolutionary—just rebels who find nothing wrong with the power structure beyond the woeful fact that they are not a part of it."

Ellen smiled at that. She decided she was beginning to understand Jacobs after all. He was a romantic, a throwback to an earlier age. Or at least that was how he thought of himself. She knew that the romantic facade was more the product of an incomplete education, a momentary fascination with old ideas taken from their historical context and imposed on current conditions. She told him so—if in somewhat restrained terms.

"I'm afraid there's a lot more to social change than the old radicals ever imagined," she said. "The science of it is nowhere near as clear-cut as they made it out to be."

Jacobs face glowed at the unanticipated response from his hostage. He grinned and tossed himself gracefully back onto the couch.

"Human Science is boring," he said. "Real revolution is an art—the only human art."

"And you fancy yourself as one of the artists?"

"I'll let you be the judge of that. And shortly. It looks like we're going to have company."

Ellen turned to see a crowd of newcomers, spilling noisily into the lounge, stripping helmets from their suits. They were a mixed lot of men and women, most of them younger even than Jacobs, and all excited. They greeted Jacobs and his companions with cheers and shouts and rude comments about Ellen's appearance on the morning newsnet.

The last member of the group followed at a distance and when he entered the room, his helmet in his hand, Ellen felt all the blood drain from her face and hands.

The man was older than the rest, his dark short-cropped hair and beard shot through with grey and white. He looked a little older than he had the last time she'd seen him.

Thomas Van Horn.

What was he doing here?

For the briefest instant his eyes locked with hers across the distance and she felt as if she were standing only centimeters away from him. Then he looked away, straining to hold his features still and deny the momentary recognition. She wondered if he looked pale from life under the domes or because of a momentary shock like hers.

For the second time in her life, Ellen realized that she was going to have to play out a charade to conceal Van Horn's identity.

"How did it go?" Jacobs asked.

The leader of the new group smiled and raised his thumb in the air.

Jacobs huddled with the newcomers for a while, hugging the women and clapping the men on their backs. A real politician, Ellen noticed, with a ready touch of the hand for everyone.

Van Horn lingered on the edge of the group, ignoring her and only marginally involved in the reunion. He looked lost in thought. She was sure he had a lot to think about right at the moment. So did she.

She remembered the first time she'd met him. She'd been a pilot-officer in the Corps of Planetary Engineer when Van Horn had come to Mars—dressed in the uniform a corps senior engineer. At first, she'd thought he was a bull-headed wild man determined to stick his nose into the middle of a serious crisis that was not his concern. Then she'd learned the truth.

The more she had learned about Van Horn, the more she came to respect, and even to admire the man. There had even been other feelings, though she was quick to avoid becoming entangled in them. And in the event, she'd never had a chance to follow up on them. When the crisis was over, Van Horn had returned to where he came from—and Ellen had gone on to become an Intervenor herself.

But she had never forgotten Van Horn's dark eyes, or his gentle, confident words. Nor the challenge that he'd posed to her. He was nothing like her brother, but somehow his influence was just as powerful in its effect.

But what was he doing here?

Only for the briefest moment did she dare to believe that somehow he had come to her rescue. Then she realized that he was a member of the rebel organization. A pose, to be sure, but to what end? And why hadn't she been told?

Instead of relief, and the momentary hope that old dreams could be reborn, Ellen was filled with fear, dread, and suspicion.

After a short time, Jacobs ushered everyone back around the video screen. Terry did something with her computers, then shook her head. They waited.

Absolute Magnitude

"Thomas, I have someone here you should meet," Jacobs said as Terry turned back to her machines. "This is Ellen Brindamour. She's a real-life Intervenor. You two should get to know one another."

Van Horn nodded politely in her direction, but said nothing. She shot a sour look at Jacobs, but otherwise ignored Van Horn. Jacobs turned to her and said: "Ellen, this is Thomas Van Horn. He's actually studied some of your Human Science. He tries to explain what he knows to me, but I'm just too thick to pick it up. Maybe you two can discuss it. Who knows, Tom? You might actually talk the Intervenor into leaving us alone."

"Actually I'm not much of a student," Van Horn told Ellen. "I've only read a few things on the subject."

"And you can discuss what's new up on Earth. Thomas is from Hawaii originally—right? He was here during the Riots. Lost a brother."

"Is that so?" Ellen asked, knowing that it was not.

Van Horn shied away from an answer, and was rescued by a yell from Terry.

"Here it comes," he said. "This is from Crater City."

A hand-held image of crowded lunar corridors appeared on the screens and the sound of panicky lunarians huffing and puffing and cursing quietly as they pressed against one another. Then a cloud of smoke appeared above the jostling crowd, rolling past the backs of heads and eliciting a sudden animal scream from them.

Then a second image appeared, masses of lunarians with their arms linked flowing down a broad hallway. Ellen thought she recognized the scene as the demonstration in Scienceville, but the focus shifted too quickly, cutting from one angle to another. She tried to identify the patches and badges on the clothing of the demonstrators, but that was also blocked.

"People of Alphonsus," a voice announced over the pictures. "Today your fellow lunarians rose up to protest the continued rule of our community by the government on Earth. Disturbances broke out in Lunograd and demonstrates filled the halls of Westwall—"

The voice cut off abruptly and the image scrambled. Then Terry announced: "This is from Lunograd."

Another voice, speaking in Russian, narrated similar pictures. Terry switched the feed again. Now the screen showed the broadcast from Westwall.

"—Disturbances broke out in Crater City and demonstrates filled the halls of Titania—"

Mandela Town...

"—government on Earth. Disturbances broke out in Titania and demonstrates filled the halls of Crater City—"

"Every settlement gets a different lie," Ellen said. "Is that your strategy?"

Jacobs clapped his hands in applause. "Very perceptive. Exactly. Terry and her hackers planted a different videofile in each settlement. Now the official reports will become immediately suspect. Rumors will multiply geometrically. Chaos everywhere. No one will know who to trust. But everyone will believe that their neighbors are enraged by your Intervention. How long do you think it will be before they are ready to rally around us?"

Ellen shook her head. "How long do you think it'll be before this stops being a propaganda plot and people really start hurting themselves? Do you want the Paracops to come in?"

"Oh, I'm not worried about the Paracops," Jacobs said. "They'll stay out for the time being. I may not know much about Human Science, but I know how an Intervention works. As long as there's an Intervenor on the scene, the Paracops are going to hold back and wait for orders. They won't come until you call

them and you haven't got any way to do that. And by the time they get tired of waiting, it will be too late."

TEN

After Jacobs had spent half an hour in hushed conversation with his fellow revolutionaries, he returned to the video screen and stood before Ellen where she sat on the couch. He called Van Horn over.

"There's been a small change in plans, Thomas," he said. "I'm asking you to remain here instead of leading your cell."

Van Horn showed no emotion, nodding only slightly in acknowledgement.

"We have two problems. Someone has to watch over our two guests, and I'm not sure I can trust the job to anyone but you. And I want someone here to handle communications. We may have to send messages back through you on Terry's secure channel. I know—it's a vulnerable position. The security forces or the Paracops could detect the transmissions—even if we send them in maser-burst transmissions. And that would leave you a sitting duck."

"I was thinking just that," Van Horn said, a thin smile crossing his face.

Jacobs put an arm around the older man's shoulders. "Will you take the assignment?"

"The threat of capture and the company of an Intervenor? How could I pass it up?"

"Good," Jacobs said, clapping Van Horn on his back. "You don't know how much better I feel knowing that you're here to back us up."

Ellen breathed slowly and deliberately, wondering how much of the exchange had been staged for her benefit.

Within a few minutes, the group had organized itself into two teams, Jacobs at the head of one, Terry at the other. Then, after Van Horn exchanged a brief farewell with the others, they were out the door and the small lounge was filled with tense silence.

Van Horn stepped delicately as he crossed the compartment and stood silently before Ellen and Patricia Claridge.

Ellen, tired of playing the role of a silent and submissive prisoner, rose from her seat and stretched tired arms and legs. Then she turned to Van Horn.

"Well, Thomas, don't you think it's time for some explanations?"

"Do you know this guy?" Patty said, the confusion evident in her eyes.

"Oh yes, I certainly do," Ellen said. "Patty, let me introduce Thomas Van Horn, the first Intervenor I ever met."

"He's an Intervenor too?" Patricia said with a slight frown.

"I'm afraid so," Ellen said. Then, to Van Horn, she added: "It's been a few years since Mars, hasn't it, Thomas? Now tell us, what are you doing here on the moon?"

Van Horn flashed a shy smile. "You mean no one told you to expect me here?"

"Should they have?"

Van Horn's smile turned to a frown. "Of course, but I'm not surprised. I suppose they at least had you read my reports. No? That figures. They aren't too happy with me back home right now. But then, after this they may realize that I was right all along."

"What are you talking about?"

"Our leaders in the service have made it clear to me that they do not agree with my analysis of the situation in Alphonsus. I've been here for a few months on what you might call a special assignment. Trying to get what I need to convince them."

"Does your assignment include joining a revolutionary organization and helping them conduct subversive operations?"

The Human Art

Van Horn chuckled. "Apparently it's turned out that way. But I admit that it wasn't part of the project I originally had in mind..."

"And now what?"

"And now we have to get out of here. I'm afraid we don't have a lot of time for explanations."

"How are we going to do that?" Ellen asked. "Walk?"

"Well, it's a little too far to the nearest settlement for that. I don't know about you, but my spacesuit hasn't got that kind of power reserves. But I've got another idea. Patty, you're an engineer, right? Do you think you can help us with a little technical problem?"

The technical problem turned out to be not so little when they got outside. He had them follow him out into the cavernous maintenance bay where he led them to one of the giant helium-3 tractors.

"We need to power this thing up," Van Horn said. "The equipment is still intact—power plant and all. Jacobs and I considered using them for his plans early on, but gave up on the idea. They're too slow, for one thing. But we need someone familiar with machinery to get it working."

Patricia took to the ladder leading up the hull of the tractor and clambered up into the control compartment. "It looks simple enough. I've been checked out on more modern equipment—diggers and drillers and stuff. There's not much difference in the controls from what I can see. The question is how much juice is left in the power packs. We'll need internal power to get things going. After that, the solar panels will take over."

"Let's try it out," Van Horn replied.

Patricia stepped inside the machine, settling into the seat and spending a short time in silence punctuated by mumbling and sharp remarks. Finally, she emerged and slid back down to the ground.

"No luck. She's as cold as the bottom deck of Tycho," she said. "We need to look at one of those parked outside. Maybe the sunlight has kept them going. It's been years since anyone used these things."

They ventured out into the glare of the sun and deep shadows only slightly relieved by Earthlight. The moon dust splashed around their boots like gritty water as they bounded from tractor to tractor. They inspected two of them before they found one that worked.

A few minutes later, the three of them were jammed into a control compartment designed for two, rolling across the lunar landscape at a galloping six kilometers an hour.

Thomas Van Horn dipped his helmet until it touched Ellen's. "You've changed quite a bit since Mars," he said.

Ellen felt a rush of nervous excitement, but calmed herself quickly. "You haven't," she said curtly.

He ignored the chilly tone of her response and continued. "You look older and wiser. I guess the service has kept you busy."

"For the most part. The last few months I've been working in dispatch, evaluating requests and handling assignments. I must have been started after you came up here."

"I've been here more than six months now. I still don't know why they didn't tell you I was up here. It's not supposed to be a secret. Not internally, anyway."

"I'm sure I don't know either," Ellen replied, the frost returning to her words.

Van Horn chuckled. "You're still just as friendly as you ever were, I see. But I'm afraid you've let yourself go too far. The secret's out."

"What secret?" she asked before she could help herself. She pulled her helmet away from his so she couldn't hear his reply. But it didn't matter. She felt her skin grow hot with embarrassment as she realized that she already knew the secret to which Van Horn referred. After all, he was the one who had told it to her—that inside Ellen Brindamour lurked a sensitive and strong woman and not a selfless robot dedicated the needs of the engineering corps.

She turned a cold shoulder to Van Horn for the rest of the trip. She was unhappy, though she kept her feelings to herself. Van Horn wouldn't answer her questions in any way that was useful. And she still didn't understand his role here in Alphonsus. Was he on official duty? Or was this a project of his own making, unauthorized by anyone in the service? And what was his real purpose?

True, intervenors were expected to go underground to gather information. But how far were you allowed to go? No one had ever told her that there were limits, but she had a hard time believing that Van Horn hadn't gone too far by joining Jacobs and his band. Even if it was part of an official project.

For the moment, until there was time for a more detailed briefing by Van Horn, she could only suffer her unsettled suspicions without complaining.

The helium-harvester lumbered across the lunar landscape, filling the cabin with powerful vibrations that barely shielded the tense silence. The machine moved slowly enough to let Ellen stew in her unquenched anger at Van Horn and his evasive answers, but quickly enough to get them to the nearest settlement in little more than an hour.

Ellen stood between Van Horn and Patricia as they peered over the edge of a meter-high sunroof. A few meters below the glass were long narrow tanks of churning water and white foam.

"Mandela Town waterworks," Patricia announced. "This is a sewage treatment plant."

"I thought they just turned on the vacuum and distilled the water out," Van Horn said.

"They do that eventually," Patricia said. "But first they feed the sewage to the bugs. There's a lot of chemistry that the bacteria and other microorganisms take care of—stuff machinery just can't compete with. They've even tailored stuff to take some of the ketones out of the biosystem. When they're done with the cooking, they freeze-dry the sludge for fertilizer and distill the water through vacuum extraction."

"Sounds like you know a lot about the subject," Van Horn said.

"It may be sewage to you, but it's bread and butter to us," Patricia replied. "Sorry. I guess a civil engineer down here on the moon is nothing but a supersnipe."

"Can we get in through there?" Ellen asked, returning to more practical concerns.

"No. It's not connected with the main pressure envelope. We'll have to go in through one of the agriplexes."

"Lead the way," Van Horn said.

The tree that stretched from the floor of the chamber to the dome twenty meters overhead was like nothing Ellen had ever seen before. And as she hugged its great circumference, hiding from the three ag-workers on the far side, she could see quite a bit of it.

When she was a young girl, she'd gone out into the woods around Pittsburgh on school "expeditions" and even an overnight campout. The hardwood forest around her home was thick with oaks, maples, liberty elms, evergreens, and, in the valley, fruit trees and date palms, courtesy of the greenhouse.

Absolute Magnitude

But this colossus of smooth bark and sparse leaves bore little resemblance to any of them.

Instead of a single trunk, dozens of small ones descended from its limbs, forming a bundle that bulked larger than any oak in the Appalachians.

Dozens of the great trees lined the outer perimeter of the kilometer-wide agricultural complex. Within the ring of trees, clusters of fruit trees descended in terraced plazas towards a central pool. Mixed in with them were more foreign-looking trees—canted trunks rising to a flat crown of branches and leaves.

And running throughout every vacant piece of space—with the exception of treaded pathways—were thousands of red African flowers.

Ellen could hear the breathing of Van Horn and Patricia ahead of her around the trunk of the tree. She couldn't see what the dark-skinned ag-workers were doing, but she could hear the sound of splashing water and the indistinct babbling of their conversation.

She felt naked and powerless without her secomp. It didn't matter that the computer wouldn't have been able to shield her from human monitors—official or ad hoc.

After what seemed like an hour, she heard the crew move on to the next station on their rounds, the sound of their passage swallowed up quickly by the thick woods.

"That was close," she whispered.

"There'll be more," Van Horn warned.

They briefly debated whether to stay behind the trees or to use the treaded pathway that wound through the flowering bushes between them, then decided that speed took priority over stealth. Crossing the chamber was too risky, however, and they skirted the edge, remaining close to the odd trees that Patricia identified as baobabs.

"It's not quite the same mix of stuff you saw in Westwall, you'll have to admit," she said. "These are mostly native to southern Africa. Baobabs, wild banana, flat-crown trees, acacia. The orange and lemon trees are local variants and on the levels farther down you'll find the foodcrops."

Ellen asked where they had to go to get inside the settlement proper. Patricia admitted that her knowledge of the layout of the South African complex was sketchy at best.

"I think we can make a connection about ninety degrees around the perimeter from where we came in," she said, but she didn't sound too sure.

A short time later, after ducking behind the trees to avoid a crew of workers tending fruit trees on a plaza below them, they reached their goal. The entryway to the next chamber was marked with warnings in English and Afrikaans and was clearly an airtight barrier—capable of sealing off the pressure envelope within the agriplex in case of an emergency.

Van Horn paused at the door controls and made a series of entries in the keyboard there. When he was finished, the door slid open and let them enter a long corridor.

"There are some things an Intervenor can do even without a secomp," Van Horn said. "Opening locked doors is one of them."

They hurried down the hallway and waited while the first door closed before the second opened. Ellen was only a little surprised to discover that they hadn't reached one of the sublunar habitats, but another agriplex.

The plantings in this one were different from the first chamber, she noticed immediately. A large dome lined with silvered vanes stretched overhead and the floor descended in terraces to a central pool just like the first agriplex. But instead of baobabs, fruit trees, and flowers, the plazas here were divided

up into irregular patches by rows of thorn bushes. And within the patches were clusters of carefully trimmed grape vines.

"Uh oh," Patricia said sheepishly. "I think I know where we are."

"Vineyards," Van Horn said.

"Yeah. I think we made a mistake. These are the private vineyards of the Mandela bankers. We really shouldn't be in here."

"Why not?" asked Van Horn.

"Because they are very jealous of their grapes. You don't want to mess around with these vineyards. The security here is way beyond anything you've seen in Scienceville or Titania, Ellen. Even with your secomp, you couldn't get through here."

"Maybe we should go back," Ellen said.

"Maybe we should," Van Horn echoed. "But I'm afraid it's too late."

She pointed to two pairs of armed security guards descending on them from posts to the left and right. They turned in time to see the door slide shut behind them with fearful finality.

Van Horn put his hands behind his head and smiled at the approaching guards. Infuriated, Ellen followed suit.

"The first Intervenor were appointed right after the Unification War," Van Horn said with a scholarly flair. "You had a lot of old nation-states still trying to proclaim their sovereignty—real governments and pretenders, rebel groups and revolutionaries. Things were pretty chaotic and you had to be quick and resourceful to settle things down before they reached a crisis."

Van Horn hadn't changed much in the years since Mars, Ellen realized with a flash of amusement. He could still present an impromptu lecture on Human Science or the history of the Intervenor service without regard to the situation in which he found himself.

In this case, he and the others were the only occupants of a stainless steel chamber that contained a single bench, a sink, and an overhead light. The room's only door was locked and had been since the security crew tossed them inside.

"Separatists were the reason the service was created," Van Horn continued. Patricia listened intently, but Ellen was only marginally interested. She'd heard it all the first week of school. "Someone had to go in and defuse the rebels fast, before things got out of control. Before the idea of separatism spread. So they gave us extraordinary powers—the power to overrule judges, administrators, local officials, even Unification officials. And the power to bring in military force. The army was still intact back then. Now all we've got to back us up is the Parapolice."

"The theory was that with Human Science to help us analyze things, we could make the right choices, arbitrate disputes, order changes, cut through bureaucracy and red tape, and all to avoid human suffering while advancing the greater good of the communities involved. That is still the theory—although sometimes it doesn't quite work that way."

Ellen paid sudden attention to Van Horn after that last remark. "What's that supposed to mean?" she asked.

"Only that there are limits to Human Science—and to what an Intervenor can do."

"Is that all? Or are you talking about someone in particular?"

"Well, now that you mention it, I am. Did it ever occur to you, Intervenor Brindamour, that you may have made a mistake?"

Ellen felt her face grow hot with a combination of anger and embarrassment. "Me? When? What kind of mistake?"

"Yes, you. Yesterday. And a small mistake in analysis. A simple error in Human Science."

The Human Art

She felt the fury grow within her, but at the same time her stomach began to tighten. Blast Van Horn. Blast his smug attitude. A mistake? Impossible. And yet the growing knot in her gut told her that there was more to this than she wanted to admit.

Van Horn continued to lecture. "The community here at Alphonsus has been developing for a long time—since before the War. For the most part, it's mature and healthy. Each of the settlements is complete and integrated, linear and circular forces in balance, homogenous in culture and attitude. Each of them is a tight and self-contained monad, without serious internal contradictions or external antagonisms. Oh sure, Scienceville is off in a different orbit from the rest, but not in any way that threatens the stability of the society as a whole. And Titania is still young and immature politically. But the upshot of it is that there's very little here that Human Science can get a handle on. That makes it very easy to make a error in evaluation. Easy to mistake one thing for another. Even with the best of our science to help."

"And what was the mistake?"

"Simple—you thought that settling the short-term crisis would preserve the long-term stability of the community. You were wrong. Subsequent events have proven that. Instead of releasing blocked energies and allowing the unifying forces of the society to emerge, you added to the tensions. The conflicts in Alphonsus are deeper than you recognized—and the consequences of your Intervention were harder to track than you realized."

"But..."

"But nothing. Look at what's happened. Jacobs and his people were ready for another Intervention. They were counting on it and they took advantage of it. It's a hard way to learn this lesson, Ellen, but there's only so far you can go with Human Science. After that you have to rely on the human art—a combination of intuition, experience, and on-the-spot judgment—and that's what Intervention is really all about."

ELEVEN

Ellen felt more than a little resentment towards Van Horn. She didn't like being told she was wrong. And he was so sure of himself. How did he know so much? He may have had more experience as an Intervenor, but human nature was human nature and Human Science was Human Science.

He wasn't talking about some different discipline from the one she had learned. And that stuff about the "human art" sounded like the romantic nonsense that Roland Jacobs had been spouting, only a little more sentimental.

But a part of her couldn't help but be amused at his shortcomings. When she'd first met him, a few years back on Mars, she'd been a very different woman. She'd been impressed by his sophistication and his confidence. At first, of course, she'd thought he was an unbalanced and meddling fool—but at the time he'd been passing himself off as a senior officer in the Corps of Planetary Engineers. As an Intervenor, he'd been quite an intriguing man.

And he was still. Ellen noticed a stubbornness that she hadn't recognized at their original meeting. But his melancholy over the limits of Human Science and human beings was as strong as ever.

He also gave little of himself away until he wanted to—as he had on Mars and as Ellen herself had learned to do. She didn't know if it was part of his personality, or a product of Intervenor training. A little of both, she decided. Just like her.

She turned her attention to Patricia Claridge, who sat on the bench, her hands stuffed in her pockets, a sullen and defeated look about her.

"What do you think about all of this, Patty?" she asked, hoping to rouse her from her depression.

"Me? Funny you should ask. No one seems to care what I think about it." She rose to her feet and bounded to touch the ceiling, sweeping it with an angry motion of one hand. "After all, I'm just a native lunarian. Maybe my great-grandparents are right about the separatist issue. Maybe not. But you're the experts and you don't know. How about asking the people who live down here for a change?"

Ellen widened her eyes in surprise. Where had that all come from? Patricia had seemed fairly passionless and nonpartisan in the three days she'd spent with her. "I'm sorry, Patty. I didn't realize I'd done anything to upset to you."

Patricia sighed, then scuffed the floor with one foot. "You didn't—at least not at first. I thought we were doing some good. But now I don't know. Sure, Jacobs is to blame for a lot of this. He created a bad situation by sabotaging the tubeline, but I can't see how you've made it any better with your Intervention. And everyone—you and him—have forgotten about what the rest of us feel."

Ellen felt a sudden pang of guilt at that. She knew how Patty must feel, after all the years her own older brother, the bitter Only Child, had told her how she should live her life without regard to her feelings. Being an Intervenor was always a difficult balancing act between helping people and running their lives for them.

"I'm afraid I feel exactly the same way," said a new voice in the open doorway. Ellen and the others looked up to see a tall man with night-black skin wearing a long yellow dashiki with elaborate embroidery on the front, sleeves, and hem. It took a moment, but Ellen recognized him as Amos Mugabe, one of the Common Council representatives from Mandela Town. He didn't look the same without the vest, suitcoat, and silk cravat he'd been wearing in Lunograd.

"Councilor Mugabe, I'm glad to see you," she said.

"I wish I could say the same for you, Intervenor Brindamour. But the truth, while uncomplimentary, is that my hope was never to meet you again. That is purely a political judgment, however, and I hope you don't take it personally. It was not meant that way—even if you do pose a very difficult political problem for us at the moment."

"I guess we do," Van Horn remarked.

"You are going to release us, aren't you?" Ellen asked sharply.

"Come with me and we'll discuss that in more comfortable quarters," he said. Ellen felt a dreaded but familiar tension beginning to build in her stomach as a squad of security guards escorted them down the hall behind Mugabe.

"This hasn't been a good morningwatch," Mugabe said as he slid in the chair behind his desk. The office was sparsely decorated, but the few ornaments were spectacular—an emerald-studded shield hung on the wall and a platinum fruit platter sat on the desk. Of course, until a few decades ago, emeralds and platinum were cheaper than most Earth-made items, even with the reduced launch costs of the last century. Even so, the Mandelans showed no shame over their wealth.

"Since the rebel broadcast, our corridors and commons have been filled with people. Work has come to a stop in the ilmenite mines. My superiors at the bank have had to suspend public business—and believe me they are unhappy about that. And they're also madder than a hornet's nest over the rebels penetrating our datasystems to send out that bogus broadcast."

Absolute Magnitude

"Your superiors at the bank?" Ellen asked.

"I'm third senior vice-president at the Mandela branch of the Soweto Trust Company. Politics is the least of my duties and government comes after that. But they've put me in charge of the three of you and left your disposition in my hands."

"Why is there any question over that? You're obligated to let us go," Ellen said.

"Ordinarily, that would be true," Mugabe said. "But this is not an ordinary watch. I've been through the halls and plazas and I'm worried. We've tried to pass along the truth—that no one has demonstrated in Westwall or Crater City. But the people aren't willing to believe us. All they need is a spark to set them off. And if it comes, we won't be able to tell them anymore that all is quiet in Alphonsus. It won't be."

"And what about Westwall and Crater City? How are things there?"

"The same. Maybe worse. It's hard to tell. No one wants to pass any useful information over the datanet. They're afraid the rebel hackers will use it against them. I've never seen the crater like this."

"Then you've got to let us go and quickly," Ellen protested. "We're the only ones who can stop things before they get out of hand."

"Are you? It seems to me that so far you've been more of a cause of the unrest than a solution. If I let you go, is it going to make matters worse or better? And who's going to benefit in the long run—us or you?"

Ellen wanted to scream at that last question. Us or you? There wasn't supposed to be a difference between the two. But the fact that Mugabe thought of it in those terms showed her that Van Horn was right. There were underlying tensions here that went deeper than anything she had anticipated.

She took a deep breath and looked at Van Horn. The other Intervenor seemed content to let her take the lead. At least that was a relief. She was still in charge here—and Van Horn still hadn't explained his official status to her. Once she had calmed herself, she spoke to Mugabe in a clear and measured voice.

"I think what you've got to do is look at the consequences of your choice," she said. "We're not the only ones you've got to take into consideration. The rebels aren't done yet—and they're determined to cause more trouble before they're finished. And what happens if you keep us here under wraps? Sooner or later the authorities are going to get tired of waiting. Eventually, they're going to send in the Paracops. Is that what you want to see?"

Mugabe frowned. Ellen turned and saw Van Horn's eyes narrow and his face turn ashen. She knew she'd struck a nerve.

"The cops? No one in Alphonsus is going to call them in. I was here during the Riots and anyone who remembers them would rather open the locks than ask for that. No—what bothers me is that if I release you, you might send for the cops."

The angry fire in Van Horn's eyes frightened even Ellen as he rose from his chair.

"I was here for the Riots too," he said. "And the last thing we're going to do is bring in the Paracops. You have my personal word of honor on that."

Mugabe looked frustrated and confused. He looked from Ellen to Van Horn and back as if he was trying to find something in their faces that would help him decide.

"You—Engineer Claridge. You're not one of these Earthside Interferers. You're from Titania, right? You've seen these two, been with them. What do you think? Can we trust them?"

Patricia roused herself from passivity with a wide-eyed look of surprise. "Trust them? I guess so. They mean well, at least. And I'm sure they'll try to keep their promises. The thing that scares me is that they've got this idea that they know what

they're doing—and so far they haven't shown me one scrap of evidence to prove it."

The Mandelan banker shook his head. "That's a big help. Damn it, I don't see how I can get out of this no matter what I do. All right, go—get out of here. But if things go wrong, don't tell anyone I said to let you go free. One of these days I'd like to make it to executive V.P."

Mugabe escorted them to the transportation terminal himself, logging Ellen onto a public datanet console so she could order a moon-dog. He was gone long before it was ready.

"What's our next step?" Ellen asked Van Horn as she entered commands into the datanet that would allow her access to security systems to which Mugabe was not privy.

"That's a good question," Van Horn replied. "Rollie kept his precise plans to himself. He said he wanted to take some radical action and go straight to the heart of political power. He had a lot of ideas—stage a demonstration at the Common Council, cut off communications with Earth, declare a provisional government. Most of them were little more than starry-eyed dreams. Whenever he started getting serious about his plans, he would shut up about them, keeping the details to himself."

She found the active security files and started scrolling through them, reviewing the current situation in Alphonsus. There was unrest in every settlement but Scienceville—and there the government was causing the disruption by demanding an explanation from the Council. Crowds had gathered elsewhere, overloading environmental systems and setting off alarms in half a dozen places, forcing the demonstrators to disperse. But so far, there had been no violence.

That was surprising at first, but Ellen realized after a moment's reflection that it was only what she should have expected. The rebels were not part of a general uprising—they were trying to provoke one. And while the people of Alphonsus were behind the rebels in spirit, voicing near-unanimous support for their goals when asked, very few were ready to take risks for a mysterious band of guerillas who had appeared overnight.

In fact, the security reports seemed to indicate that the one thing that motivated most of the lunarians crowding the corridors was her Intervention.

Ellen suppressed a wry remark about the irony in that, unwilling to give Van Horn the satisfaction of being right.

"What about Lunograd?" Ellen asked him. "It looks like they're gearing up for major trouble there. Full-security alert. Hall sweeps. Security personnel on double watch. And the Common Council chambers look like they're ready to hold off an army."

"That's not the smartest move in the world," Van Horn said. "If Rollie gets in there, he could use their defenses against us. That was one of his more practical plans—occupy the chambers and declare a provisional government."

Ellen shook her head in frustration. She decided to warn Vitaly Churkin, the Council president. It took only a moment to produce his face above the datanet console.

"Intervenor Brindamour, what a pleasant surprise to be seeing you once again," Churkin said in greeting.

She didn't return the courtesy, describing the situation as quickly as possible and relaying Van Horn's warning.

"I hadn't considered that possibility," he said. "But I agree. A serious error it would be to allow him to get that far. And things are already approaching a disaster worse than any we have seen since the Riots."

"I know. Any suggestions?"

"It would help to find Roland Jacobs and stop him. We would like control over our public datanets restored and a return to more normal life in our corridors and passageways."

The Human Art

"Believe me, finding Jacobs is my main priority right now. But the security systems are of little use as long as he has equipment to hide from them. You don't have any human assets that could help us track him down."

"If I knew where he was myself, I would tell you, but other than that, we have no information to pass along."

"Thanks a lot."

"I'm sorry."

She broke off the connection and turned to Van Horn. "So—do we go to Lunograd? It seems like the biggest prize should be there."

"I think not," Van Horn said thoughtfully. "Rollie would have a problem there. The Council Chambers cannot be taken or held without a large force. The Lunar Liberation Army consists only of those rebels that you have seen."

"Twelve people?" Ellen growled, making no effort to hide her exasperation. "I thought there were more than that. Why didn't you tell me this earlier?"

"It never came up."

"What ever made him think he could stage an uprising with only a dozen backers?"

Van Horn grinned sheepishly, his cheeks turning red. "I'm afraid I did."

Ellen frowned. "How did you do that?"

"That was how we met. We were in a bar in Crater City. He was talking revolution, so I figured I'd better get in close and find out why. He asked me how many people I thought were necessary to stage a successful uprising in a post-urban environment like an arcology or a lunar settlement. I told him. Judging by the results, I wasn't far off the mark."

"Great. Did you give him any other advice?"

"Nothing important. Not once I realized how serious he was. But then, I didn't really have to. He does just fine on his own."

Ellen narrowed her eyes and steeled her emotions. Once again, it looked to her like Van Horn had gone far beyond the limits of his duties. She swallowed and added this evidence to the material already accumulated, then returned to the main question.

"If not Lunograd, then where?" she asked.

"Considering their numbers and the advantages it offers, my guess is they went to Westwall. Antique security systems, sympathetic population, and a commanding position over the rest of Alphonsus. Rollie also talked a lot about seizing the high ground."

"Then Westwall it is," she said as the door to the moondog dock hissed open.

TWELVE

The moondog glided along above the lunar surface, plunging into darkness relieved only by the lights of the control deck as they crossed the line into the shadow of the western crater wall.

Ellen looked back at the peak of Mount Alpha behind them and rubbed her eyes with her hands. She was angry with herself.

Her feelings towards Van Horn had kept her from her duty as an Intervenor. She had let her questions go unanswered for too long. Questions that were vital to the nature of this crisis.

She wanted to believe in him, wanted it more than anything she had ever wanted in her life. She wanted Van Horn to be someone she could respect and admire and more. But wanting it had made her too quick to suspend her own critical values and too reluctant to press any challenge to Van Horn's position.

The time had come to correct that—before they confronted Roland Jacobs.

She felt her heart start to pound as she realized she was about to risk all the tender and complex feelings she had for the man.

But the questions were too close to the surface and too demanding of answers. She took a deep breath, calmed herself, and without warning asked abruptly: "Thomas, what exactly are you trying to do here in Alphonsus?"

At least Van Horn gave her the satisfaction of pretending to be surprised.

"What do you mean? I thought that was clear."

"Nothing about you is clear. No one told me you were already on scene when they sent me here. You haven't explained whether you're on an official assignment or some private project. You've been lurking around with conspirators against the government. Worse—you've been coaching them on how to organize their revolution. And you seem to have been in a position to know things that you should have communicated to the service, such as the role Jacobs played in the tubeline sabotage. Now from the way you've been talking, I'm really not sure who's side you're on."

"The same side you are, Ellen—the lunarians."

"Then why does it look like you're helping the separatists?"

"Probably because I believe they're right."

Ellen drew back in disbelief. "What?" she asked, her voice rising sharply in pitch.

"Don't you?"

"Of course not. Don't be ridiculous. It's one of the first rules of Human Science. There are no separate societies—only one. Separatism is an illusion, a fantasy, usually imposed on one group by another. It's an excuse to allow exploitation and oppression."

"And who taught you that?"

"The same school that taught you to be an Intervenor."

"On Earth."

"Exactly."

"Ellen, we aren't on Earth anymore."

"What does that have to do with anything?"

"Everything," he said calmly, his lack of passion making a sharp contrast with her obvious agitation. "That principle is a theory, not a fact. And like most theories, it only holds true under certain conditions and in limited circumstances. The single society you're talking about exists as a political, economic, and historical fact on Earth. But this isn't Earth—it's another world. If there is any such thing as a separate society, this is it. And if humanity is going to expand to other worlds like Mars and the Belt and out to the stars, we'd better find out now if there are any holes in that theory."

She shook her head and crossed her arms.

"Are you trying to tell me that Human Science is wrong?"

"Is that too radical a proposition for you to accept? I'm not saying it's wrong. But I am saying there are dangers involved for those of us who try to turn it to practical purposes. We use the Science like a shield, pretending that it gives us a license to interfere in human lives and social relations and communities. We pretend that we have an objectivity that lets us make life-and-death decisions. But the situation here on the moon is different.

"The problem I see is that the government and the service that employ us have a vested interest in the outcome of this crisis. They're not exactly objective on the subject of lunar separatism, you know."

"That's a bunch of paranoid nonsense. You've been listening to Jacobs for too long."

"Then why didn't anyone at the service tell you I was here?"

"Why should they? Do they even know you're up here?"

"Certainly they do. What do you think I'm doing up here—taking a vacation?"

"I don't know. Why don't you tell me. I've been trying to get you to do that all day."

Absokute Magnitude

"I didn't just take off for Alphonsus on my own. I've spent a long time thinking about this question. Almost ten years. I took my doubts and my questions to the top. Everything I've said is on the record—there's a long report on file that lays it all out. But they haven't shown it to you because they haven't accepted it. As far as they're concerned, it's an unproven analysis. The only thing I could get out of them was permission to come here and look for evidence to back it up."

"Even if you had to manufacture it yourself?"

"Nobody manufactured Roland Jacobs."

She didn't have a response to that, so she sat for a moment and fumed. Her anger was unrestrained now and she found it hard, if not impossible, to believe what he was telling her. But the doubts he planted were equally difficult to dismiss.

Why hadn't they told her about him?

She couldn't come up with an answer to that question. And the realization that there was no valid answer left her feeling suddenly cut off from all that she had believed in for years. Her anger suddenly lost its object. She was filled with fury, but she couldn't focus it on Van Horn. Instead, she found herself blaming faceless officials in the service who had told her to Intervene in a crisis without giving her sufficient information—and that was one of the greatest offenses she could imagine.

Her breathing calmed and her heart slowed its furious pounding. But her skin still crackled with electric tension and her hands threatened to shake with redirected emotion.

"What do you suggest we do? Let Jacobs carry out his revolution? Are you ready to Intervene in my Intervention? That would be a sight. I'm not sure how you would do it. I guess you'd have a hard time getting authority from Earth for something like that."

"That's not what I want to do."

"So what are the alternatives? If you've got some other plan, then you'd better explain it. And you'd better be ready to back it up with some kind of Human Science, because objective or not it's still the only thing we've got to guide us."

"Human Science is an analytical method, Ellen, not a collection of its results. Sometimes the best it can do is tell us to look at things the way they really are, analyze the underlying material realities, and take the next step—whatever it is."

"You mean play it by ear."

"Exactly."

"And if we blow it, we call in the Paracops."

"Actually, if it were up to me, if we blow it, I'd rather just let Jacobs have his way. Instead of calling in the cops."

"Are you fading on me again, Van Horn?"

"No. It's just that I was the last one to call them in to Alphonsus. That's why I'm here now."

Ellen found herself speechless, abruptly aware now of how things were connected. She felt her heart open to Van Horn as she realized what drove his apostasy. But she closed it again rather than let her feelings blind her judgment.

When they left the moon dog at Westwall, Patricia hung back for a moment and drew Ellen aside.

"Is there something going on between you two that I should know about?" she asked.

The question took Ellen completely by surprise, but that was only the beginning.

"I didn't realize my feelings were that obvious," she said.

"Well, either you hate his guts or just the opposite. He doesn't strike me as being bad enough to be hated, so I figure it must be the opposite. And he's just as obvious."

Ellen felt her face grow warm. "He is?"

"Haven't you noticed?"

But she hadn't. She had little enough experience along those lines, she realized, and was not well-versed in the cues that Patricia must have picked up on. She decided she was better off for it at the moment, as each of Patty's suggestions only twisted her insides tighter.

"I guess it makes things tougher for you, doesn't it?" Patty asked her.

Ellen just nodded.

"At least he listens to you," Patty said as Ellen started to leave. "And you seem to be listening to him."

"For the moment," Ellen said. "But only for the moment."

The Old Quadrant of Westwall was a labyrinth of narrow passageways, barely adequate lighting, and meter after meter of naked plumbing, conduits, and ducting. This part of the settlement was the heart of the administrative and commercial district and in the middle of an ordinary daywatch it should have been alive with traffic.

But this watch, engineers and security guards had blocked off access to a large part of the quadrant. The only thing that moved along the corridors were computer-controlled shuttlebugs, the rolling boxes of cargo following programs laid in before the disturbance that forced the evacuation of the government offices.

For more than two hours, those offices had been emptied of personnel and placed in quarantine—ever since Roland Jacobs and his band of rebels had stormed into Magda Grant's office and taken the administrator of Westwall hostage.

No one had made a move beyond the immediate safety measures, however. They were waiting for the Intervenor to arrive—as she had promised.

The quadrant's meager security systems were fully activated and human monitors were manning the screens, watching for any sign of action. But there was nothing to be seen or heard. Not even from Grant's office, where the security systems had been disabled since before Jacobs arrived.

Ellen Brindamour was aware of all this, having logged into the security systems herself upon arrival at Westwall. But at the moment, she was cut off from any contact with the rest of the settlement.

Her world consisted of cramped darkness relieved only by the soft green light of a portable dataset, the smell of nervous sweat, and the sound of her own labored breathing and that of Van Horn and Patricia Claridge. It was a small world, barely two meters long, two meters high, and one meter wide, and it lurched about without warning.

"We're coming up on our mark," Patricia warned in a harsh whisper.

"Thank goodness," Ellen replied. "You know, Patty, you keep finding me the most interesting ways to get around the moon."

"Do you have any idea what you're going to do when we get out of here?" Van Horn asked.

"Not really," Ellen said. "But whatever it is, I'm going to have to do it."

"Here we go," Patricia announced.

A sliver of bright light appeared before Ellen's eyes and grew to a wide rectangle, then it was filled by the shadow of Patricia's body as she scrambled out of the shuttlebug. Ellen stumbled quickly afterwards on cramped legs, blinking her eyes against the glare. Van Horn followed, almost knocking her over in his haste.

Patricia slid the doorway shut and the shuttlebug continued along its predetermined path. The three of them huddled in an alcove more crowded than the box had been, sharing the space with a firemain head. It was the closest they could get to Magda Grant's office without appearing on the security monitors.

The Human Art

Ellen knew that with Terry's help, Jacobs must have plugged into the Westwall security systems by now. That meant they served him just as well as they did the authorities. There was no way to approach him without prior warning—except inside the shuttlebug.

"Which way now?" she asked.

"It's down this corridor about forty meters, then through the atrium. We were there the other day, but we came in from the front. This is the back side—service corridors and stuff. There's a monitor at the junction up there, so I guess you want to move quickly."

"Without my scomp, we don't have much choice," Ellen said. "Are you ready?"

They were, and a few minutes later they rushed into the atrium, past potted palms, empty desks, holopics of distinguished lunarians of the past, and then into the outer office of Magda Grant.

Two revolutionaries stood watch in the antechamber, but they were not ready for visitors. Their attention was focused on a plate full of salad and a plastic bottle of Mandelan wine spread on the table before them. They looked up just in time to see Ellen, Van Horn, and Patricia barge through the doors and into the main office.

Roland Jacobs, on the other hand, was not surprised in the least. He sat in Grant's chair, his feet up on her wide desk. He didn't even flinch when they burst into the room.

"I've been wondering how long it would be before you showed up," he said with a grin.

Magda Grant, seated in the corner, wore the sourest expression Ellen had ever seen. "Miss Brindamour, are you here this watch as an engineer or as an Intervenor?" she asked.

"As an Intervenor, ma'am."

"Just like you, Thomas," Jacobs said. "Or do I miss my guess? Please don't disappoint me and deny it. I was quite proud of myself for figuring it out yesterday when I saw you and Ellen together. There was just something about the two of you that screamed it out loud. You're so much alike, the both of you."

Van Horn smiled sheepishly, and replied: "I never really noticed it myself, but I guess you're right. And there's no point in denying it. I am also an Intervenor."

"Good," Jacobs said. "Now maybe we can get down to business."

Ellen gathered her wits about her. The task before her was a formidable one. Basically, she had to talk a dedicated and committed revolutionary into abandoning his struggle—just when it seemed that his goals were within his grasp.

If she was going to convince him that he was wrong, she would have to be sure of her own beliefs.

She thought she was. In the next few minutes, she would find out for sure.

"I suppose you've already considered the seriousness of what you're trying to do?" she asked.

Jacobs smiled. "I've considered nothing else for many years, Ellen. Of course I realize how serious this is. Why else do you think I went to such lengths to prepare for it?"

She nodded. This would be harder than she hoped. "Then you've thought about the consequences of your actions? I mean the real consequences—for Alphonsus, for Westwall, and for lunarians everywhere."

"The consequences are simple. We will gain our independence. Isn't that enough? You have it, you and your Unification Government. We want the same. We are tired of having our lives directed by someone up in the sky, 400,000 kilometers away—someone who doesn't know what we are like

or what we are doing or how we feel about anything. We want our freedom, the right to make our decisions."

"And you think this is the best way to get that?"

"Can you suggest another? You don't ask for independence. You don't receive it as a gift from your oppressor or as a privilege granted by a benevolent parent. You wrest it from those who deny it to you. You create it by exercising it. You seize it by demonstrating it."

"And this is your way of demonstrating it?"

"Correct. Now that you are here, I'm ready to complete my plan. All that is left to do is to declare a provisional revolutionary government here in Westwall and wait for the revolution to spread. Once we show people that we can take our destiny into our own hands, they will follow us. A true revolution takes place in the hearts and minds of the oppressed. It only needs a spark to set it ablaze."

"And so here you sit, tossing matches at a beaker of alcohol. Aren't you afraid you might get burned?"

"Perhaps. But that's a risk I'm willing to take."

"Because you consider yourself a true revolutionary? A true practitioner of the human art, as you call it?"

"Don't patronize me, Miss Interferer," Jacobs replied with sudden coldness. "Don't think I'm not aware of what I'm risking."

"I beg your pardon. I didn't mean to do that. But to be honest, I must disagree. I don't think you realize what you're risking. Not really."

"Oh please. You're beginning to sound like Van Horn."

"I am? I suppose he warned you what might happen if you fail. What it would be like if the Paracops were called in to restore order? We both know what can happen if violence breaks out in Westwall or Crater City. There's no place to run and no way to escape."

"Spare me the details. I was here during the Riots. I know what it was like. I saw the fear in my mother's eyes and the anger in my father's face. I saw all that we owned destroyed. Are you prepared to do that to us once again? I've talked to Thomas at length and from what he says, I think not."

"That's the way Van Horn feels about it, not me," Ellen said, lacing her words with liquid nitrogen. "He and I do not agree on the use of force. Let me warn you here and now that I've already given orders to send in the cops if anything happens to anyone in this office."

Van Horn snapped his eyes in her direction, his face reflecting a quiet fury. She looked back, trying to temper his barely hidden fear with a plaintive and regretful glance.

Jacobs tensed, his hand trembling briefly. Ellen felt a brief moment of satisfaction. She had finally violated his expectations. He was vulnerable, she realized, but only if she could take advantage of the moment of weakness. The key was to violate those expectations again.

"So you've been warned about what can happen if you fail," she said. "Has anyone suggested what you risk by succeeding?"

The young rebel wrinkled his brow in a moment of unguarded surprise, then he laughed. "You're joking, aren't you? Or are you?"

THIRTEEN

"First of all," she said with renewed self-confidence, "let me point out that it is in my power to give you everything that you want. Independence, full and unfettered. Total control over your own resources. Total power to make all your own decisions. And no more Interventions. No conditions, no strings, and no half-measures. If that's what is called for, if that's what I decide

Absolute Magnitude

is necessary or sufficient, the Unification Government will go along with it and back me up."

Jacobs smiled slyly, then said: "Sounds great. What's the catch?"

"The catch is that I have to justify it—using all the Human Science I know. And the first thing they're going to ask me is to show what the consequences are likely to be. So suppose you tell me what would happen if I give you what you want. What will you do next?"

His eyes looked slightly dazzled as he spread his hands out in front of him. And Ellen knew that she had him. It was just a matter of playing him out and reeling him in.

Jacobs had not thought his actions all the way through. He was on the sharp end of one of Human Science's open curves, but his arrow only pointed in one direction. He was driven to escape, to be free and independent, consciousness going out into the world. But in order to be complete, it had to return to itself and to change in the process. Jacobs had only fulfilled the first moment of that movement. It was up to Ellen to provide the mirror that sent all the rebel's passions back on themselves....

Jacobs smiled as he looked at Magda Grant. "The first thing to do would be to reorganize the Common Council so it could make the decisions that you people have been making for so long."

"Like hell you will," Grant sniped. "No one is going to take away the Westwall's real independence by giving more power to the Council. For God's sake, boy, don't you know what started the Riots in the first place? Someone trying to take power away from Westwall and Scienceville and the rest, that's what."

Jacobs looked flustered. "We can work those details out. Once we get out from under the control of the Earth, we can do whatever we want."

"What do you mean we?" Grant said. "Who do you think is going to be running this government? We've still got a democracy here in Westwall—unless you plan to change that too."

"See what I mean, Roland," Ellen said. "You're already having problems, and you haven't even won your independence yet. And this is just politics. What about economics? Are you ready for freedom from Earth-based manufactured goods and critical elements?"

"We can get by until we come to an agreement on trade," Jacobs protested, but Ellen could see that he hadn't given the subject much thought. His problem was becoming obvious—aside from Van Horn, he'd never discussed his plans with anyone but his own supporters, and they were hardly in a position to encourage him to think critically. Van Horn had been, but Jacobs hadn't listened to him—or perhaps the Intervenor had chosen not to challenge him that way. Ellen wondered if Van Horn had been more discreet than she first gave him credit for.

"Thomas, are you familiar enough with the balance of trade to point out the flaws in that argument?" she asked.

"I'll give it a try," Van Horn replied. "You see, Rollie, Alphonsus is still dependent on Earth for a lot of stuff—computer systems, pharmaceuticals and medical technology, critical materials like molybdenum, vanadium, and copper that you can't get from local ore or the asteroids. The local economy needs that stuff. Titania especially depends on the metals and your geriatrics community on the drugs—you know the average age of the lunarian population is 57 years, don't you? A third of your population needs daily meds of one kind or another. And if you want to offer the Earth anything in return, you can't let your computer systems fall behind or you lose your competitive edge in the marketplace."

"But cutting off trade is just another form of coercion," Jacobs said. "It's worse than bringing in the Paracops."

"Perhaps, but the decision is yours, not ours," Van Horn said. "That's what you want, isn't it?"

"Don't play word games with me, Thomas. You know what I want and you know that an embargo would be—"

"Would be just like the tactical move you made to precipitate this crisis, wouldn't it?" Ellen asked barely concealing the sarcasm in her voice.

Jacobs frowned and turned away from them. Ellen wondered how the pressure was affecting him—would he lash out, crack up, surrender, or, worst of all, come up with a rebuttal she couldn't outwit?

"I see what you're trying to do here," he said, spinning around and facing them with angry eyes. "You're trying to stall for time. You're up to something."

He reached out and pressed a switch on Grant's desk. "Terry, this is Rollie. I think they're trying to slip something through on us. What do the security computers say?"

"All quiet as far as I can see," answered Terry's disembodied voice.

"We're not up to anything, Roland," Ellen said. "This is called reasoning. It's not quite the same thing as your revolutionary 'human art,' I'll admit. It lacks the passion, for one thing. But it is the heart of Human Science. You see, our discipline is all about consequences. Your art is all about actions. We have to consider what happens afterwards—and you apparently haven't done that."

"You're not the first rebel to come along and you won't be the last. But you all make the same mistake. You don't consider what's really going to happen after your passion and your action are finished. You don't take into account the real-life problems that your society has to face. It's easy, really, to seize power, demand independence, shatter political and economic bonds that you think are holding you back. But it's a lot harder to work out the day-by-day details, the give-and-take."

"The Intervenor was created to prevent your kind of revolution. Instead of great upheavals, we try to take things in smaller bites. The last thing we want to do is try to remake society in the image of some master plan. Societies are much more complex than anything we can imagine or predict or control. All we can hope to do is make sure social change flows smoothly. We try to eliminate blockages and stop things from backing up. That gives us a much different perspective on change than the one you've got."

"I can understand your problem, though. I've even suffered from it myself. You see things so clearly, and all at once. You know how they should change and you don't want to wait for it to happen. But the mistake is in trying to impose your vision on the world. Reality exists in real time. Your vision, unfortunately, does not. And when the two collide, it's usually your vision that breaks first and not reality."

Ellen stopped talking, but she wasn't sure if she was done. She watched Jacobs closely, trying to gauge his next move.

She was worried. She remembered her brother, the overbearing Only Child who had turned her youth into a dismal nightmare. Specifically, she recalled his long harangues, most of which served only to rationalize his own self-righteousness and moral superiority. They were designed to tear her down and bend her to his will, but they had never been successful. She had always been steadfast in her defiance.

The lecture she'd just delivered had been totally different in content, but she was worried that Jacobs would feel the same way she had all those years ago.

The Human Art

An opponent was infinitely more dangerous when cornered and left with no way out, she realized with dark concern. If only she could think of an honorable escape Jacobs—and for herself...

"All this talk is just your way of rationalizing your ancient world," Jacobs snapped back.

She saw the defiance she had kindled in his eyes. This was the moment of truth for the dedicated revolutionary. He was intelligent and resourceful, and appeared to have prepared his defenses in depth.

"You've had your way for a hundred years, you and your Unification Government," he continued. "What a lie! You only serve the unification of the oppressed under a cynical oppressor. You're not going to scare me. Alphonsus and the moon are the future for the human race. You can't frighten me with the threat of a long struggle—the struggle is inevitable. It might as well begin sometime. Why not now?"

"Can I say something?"

The unexpected voice of Patty Claridge was neither loud nor demanding, but its soft clarity cut through the room as if it were an environmental alarm. She stepped forward, folding her arms across her chest and taking a position between Jacobs and the Interveners. Jacobs looked surprised, then cast a sidelong glance at the young engineer.

"Of course, Patty," Ellen said. "Say anything that you want to."

"You know, I've seen a lot in the past few days and learned a few things to boot. At first, after I saw how you made a mess of things by Intervening, I didn't think much of you or Earth, Ellen. And you haven't done much to change my mind since, to be honest. Of course, I guess there's no subtle or sensitive way to step in and tell people what to do. But that doesn't excuse you."

"On the other hand, Jacobs, you and your crew are a thousand times worse. I can't believe the nonsense I hear from you. And I can't believe the amount of damage you're willing to inflict on your own people in order to get what you want. You've turned a small mess into one a whole lot bigger. And you started the whole thing in the first place by blowing that fault to break the tubeline."

"I have to admit I'm nothing more than a dumb old civil engineer, just another supersnipe. The only books I ever finished reading were full of recipes for prestressed concrete. And like you said, Ellen, folks like me from Titania aren't very political. But I do know when I'm being yanked around."

"Tell me something, Jacobs, didn't you ever think to ask us how we feel about independence before you decided to grab it for us? It sure doesn't look like it. I don't know how you explain it, but from where I sit, the only difference between you and the Interveners is that they've got some idea of what they've done when they screw up. You don't even have that."

Ellen clenched her fists to keep from breaking into a smile when she saw Jacobs's face turn bright red. Hooray for you, Patty! She had found the gap in the rebel's defenses and used it to unman him. She saw the uncertainty bloom in Jacobs as he looked quickly from face to face, looking for words.

She knew it was too much to expect him to back down—not here, not in front of everyone. But she also knew it would not be necessary.

"Look, everybody, I have an idea. It may be a way for us all to get out of this with our dignity intact. Roland, if you'll consider this, we may be able to arrange a deal..."

Vitaly Churkin's private office was a stark contrast to the opulent chambers of the Alphonsus Common Council. The ceiling was low, the lighting dim, and the furnishings Spartan and austere. There were only two chairs in front of the desk for Ellen Brindamour and Thomas Van Horn, and little leg room.

Churkin sat across from them, a cup of tea cradled in his hands. The desktop was cluttered with a portable reader, optical disks and roms, dirty teacups, and plastic dinnerware.

"Congratulations on a successful job," Churkin said. "To both of you." He raised his cup in a toast, then shrugged apologetically when he realized that his guests lacked the means to join him.

"Thank you, Mr. Chairman," Ellen said. "For a while, I wasn't sure we were going to pull it off. Roland Jacobs is a very determined man. But I made him an offer he couldn't refuse. One I doubt many lunarians could refuse."

"I confess I could not have resisted such a temptation. But a promise of no more Interventions..."

"It's a promise I know we can keep," Ellen said. "There's a limit to what an Intervenor can do. It's partly a function of the Observer Effect—as someone once explained it to me, the problems of a blind man trying to measure soap bubbles by touch." She glanced at Van Horn, who had passed that explanation on to her years earlier.

"Ellen's right," he said. "After a couple of Interventions, we start to become part of the crisis we're sent to resolve. This time, it was because Jacobs dragged us into his plans. Next time, it's likely to be more spontaneous—and less predictable."

"Next time, it's likely to be insufficient for the problem," Churkin said.

"That's what I'm afraid of," Ellen said. "Jacobs wasn't really wrong in his analysis of lunar society. He was just ahead of his time. This generation isn't quite ready for the kind of independence he wanted. It's a shame, because he is very passionate about his beliefs. He may not have gotten what he was after, but I think what we gave him will be sufficient for his purposes. And yours..."

Churkin's eyes widened in surprise.

"Mine? What purposes do you suppose I have?" He tried to sound innocent, but Ellen didn't believe it for a minute.

"I'm talking about your role in this conspiracy," she said. "You don't think we believed that Jacobs was acting entirely on his own, do you? A few days ago, you spoke to me about the difficulties of forging a consensus among the different members of the Alphonsus community. That was one of the big obstacles that Jacobs could not overcome. Since then, I think you'll have to admit that all of the settlements except Scienceville have swung around to agree on one thing—they want to no more Interventions. If that was your goal, then it certainly has been accomplished."

"Rollie never said anything explicit," Van Horn said. "But I knew he was getting support from somewhere. Besides that, he had some big bills to pay. The computer time to model the fault, the materials to manufacture the detonators, the computer equipment that Terry used to crack the security systems. He didn't have the means to do all that by himself. He had to have the backing of someone big, someone powerful."

"You hid your connections well," Ellen said. "But not well enough. There are some security files that even the Chairman of the Common Council cannot touch."

Churkin's dark eyes narrowed under a heavy brow. He swirled the tea in his cup and seemed lost in thought for a long silent moment. Then he smiled and his eyes lit up.

"Suppose you are correct and can produce evidence to support your accusations. What purpose would it serve for the Interveners to slander the Council and its chairman?"

"None whatsoever," Ellen said. "That's not why we're here."

"It's not? Then why? What do you want from me?"

"We think you owe Roland Jacobs some help," she said. "He's still in a lot of trouble."

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"He did a lot of your dirty work for you," Van Horn added. "When he called off his insurrection, our interest in him ended. But the civil authorities and security officials have a long list of sins for which he must answer—sabotage, invasion of the datanet and security computers, unlawful restraint, incitement to riot, and other charges too numerous to go into right now."

"We're not saying he was innocent of blame," Ellen said. "But there is more than enough responsibility to go around, don't you agree?"

"I agree that he should not be held entirely accountable for the events of the past few days," Churkin said. "Even the Intervenors must bear some of that burden."

"As we always do, Mr. Chairman," Ellen said.

She and Van Horn waited as another long moment of silence dragged out. Finally Churkin set his teacup on the desk, rubbed his hands, and said: "Very well, I will see what I can do to help him. Without exposing myself, you understand. There is nothing I can do if I must defend myself instead of him."

"Of course," she said. "All we ask is that you try..."

FOURTEEN

At first, Ellen wasn't sure if Patty Claridge was going to show up.

She wouldn't have blamed her. Not after the things she'd witnessed. And the things she'd said.

But there she was, gliding across the commons in a low trajectory, poking a leg down against the floor every few seconds to maintain her momentum. She adjusted her arc and bounded up a ramp to the mezzanine where Ellen and Van Horn waited. Now Ellen realized just how much of an accommodation it had been for Patty to slow her pace and match her own as they'd made their way around Alphonsus for the past few watches.

She greeted them with a broad grin and a hearty hug for each.

"I didn't know if you would come," she said.

"And miss seeing you leave Titania for good? I'm sorry, that wasn't very nice. I hope you don't take it personally. I think both of you are good people. I'm just sorry we have to end up on different sides."

Ellen frowned and took Patty by the hand.

"I wish you wouldn't look at it like that," she said. "We're not on different sides. We want what's best for you. And we're willing to let you decide what that is. I think that puts us all on the same side, don't you?"

"I guess so," Patricia said sheepishly. "I told you—or you told me—we Titianians aren't very good at politics."

"That's going to have to change, you know," Ellen said.

Patricia tilted her head as if she hadn't heard her right.

"She's right," Van Horn said. So far he'd hung back, but now he made his presence felt with a quiet intensity. "Titania is the key to the future of Alphonsus. Remember what we told Jacobs? The moon isn't ready for total separation. Not yet. But it won't be long before it is, and that's because of Titania. You and your neighbors are busy building the foundation for an independent society here on the moon. In a few years, your manufacturing and metal-refining capacity will unlock the chains that bind you to Earth."

"Perhaps," Patricia said. "The numbers are beginning to point that way. Production is up, sales are up, and we're taking over a bigger share of the market every year—or so they tell us. But so what? You and the Unification Government aren't going to let that happen. You can't afford to—or like you said, we'll end up with real independence."

"I think you underestimate the government," Van Horn said.

"And your own power," added Ellen. "That's why I wanted to see you before we left for home. You're the only citizen of

Titania to see how an Intervention works close up. You've had a unique opportunity here. It's up to you to decide how you use it. I'd like to see you turn it into something that can benefit your community. Whether you do or not is entirely up to you."

"What can I do?"

"Talk to people," Van Horn said. "Spread the word. Learn some politics and take advantage of what you learn. Maybe you're not aware of how an experience like this can change your whole life."

"Just look at me," Ellen said. "Not too many years ago, I was just an engineer on Mars. Then this Intervenor came along. My life hasn't been the same since. Yours isn't likely to be either—not without a lot of work on your part, anyway."

Patricia looked nervous, and a little overwhelmed. She held her breath for the longest time, then let it out in a loud sigh.

"I don't know. Maybe you're right. But what if it does? Do you really think one woman can make a difference?"

"That's a silly question," Ellen said. "Of course we do. Just look at us."

The young engineer looked at them, then suddenly laughed out loud.

"It's a stupid question," she said, shaking her head. "Of course you do."

She turned red before she could stop laughing. Ellen thought she looked older now than she had a few days earlier when they'd first met. She wasn't sure if it was just stress and fatigue, or something more.

"All right," Patricia said. "I'll do what I can. But what happens if I get in over my head?"

"Well, you may not be able to ask for an Intervention anymore, but there's no reason you can't call one of us and ask for advice whenever you need it."

Patricia beamed with joy, then took Ellen's hand. "Thank you very much, then, for everything you've done," he said.

"You're quite welcome," she replied, standing on her toes to kiss her lightly on the cheek.

A few hours later, after the Earth shuttle had left Alphonsus behind and the moon had shrunk to a large silver crescent, Ellen sat down beside Van Horn on a couch in the lounge. The steady push of the ship's gravitrons made a sufficient imitation of gravity. Though it wasn't as strong as Earth's heavy pull, it was at least twice that of the moon, and it left her out of breath. Van Horn, who'd spent the last six months in Alphonsus, was even more abused by the acceleration. They'd both need powerchairs when they got back home—him more than her.

"A few years ago, I met a young man from West Virginia," she began without preamble. "I was on my first assignment out in Ohio and I had a pretty rough time of it. He invited me back to his family farm and I gave him a ride there. I'll never forget the place. Animals and birds and trees as far as you can see—it was quite different from life in Pittsburgh or New York."

"I can imagine," Van Horn said. "I grew up in Idaho, myself. Mining country. A lot of machinery, but a lot of big outdoors. I can remember the snow returning to the mountaintops when I was a boy—that was a big event."

Ellen watched his eyes as he talked. They were dark, but full of light. He didn't look at her, but focused on some point in the distance.

"It was so relaxing," she said, wondering why she was talking about West Virginia and Idaho instead of what she really wanted to say. She was full of clashing thoughts and feelings—Van Horn's wide shoulders, his unshakably strong voice, memories of a lifetime of missed opportunities and hidden desires. "I've gone back there many times since then. Not to the farm, but to the valley. There's a small town not far away, full of quiet,

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simple people who live their lives without help from Intervenors or the Unification Government or anyone else. If you want to talk about independence, they're the people to talk with."

She felt foolish, prattling on about her private retreat from the stresses of the life she had chosen for herself. But she knew it was only a ploy to keep from saying things she was too frightened to say. Things that could alter her life forever if she let them slip out.

Her doubts and fears held her back for the moment. She supposed she'd always been a little bit afraid of Van Horn. Sort of the way she'd always feared her older brother. She was afraid of being engulfed in someone else's being, losing any sense of her own. As a result, for many years she had fought so hard to avoid being an echo of her brother that she'd never allowed herself to be a person all her own.

But now she knew she was strong enough to be whoever and whatever she wanted to be. And, when necessary, to take charge and make the first move...

Her heart began to pound as she realized that the words were already beginning to spill over.

"You know, many years ago, someone asked me about a secret, asked me how long it would be before the truth came out."

"Oh?" Van Horn replied, his dark, wise eyes turning towards hers.

"I asked him what secret he meant, and he said the secret that inside Ellen Brindamour lurked a sensitive and strong young woman."

"I seem to recall a conversation along those lines," Van Horn said, reaching out and taking her hand in his. "I meant it, too."

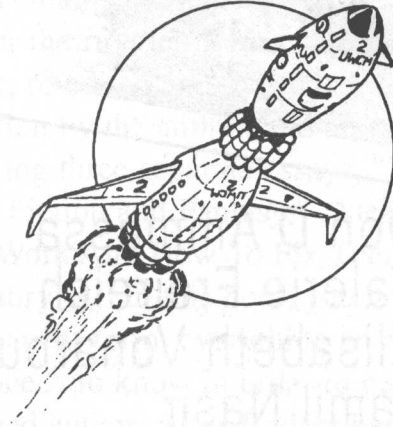
She squeezed his hand and put her other hand on top of it. "It's not a secret any more, you know."

"I suppose it isn't," he said.

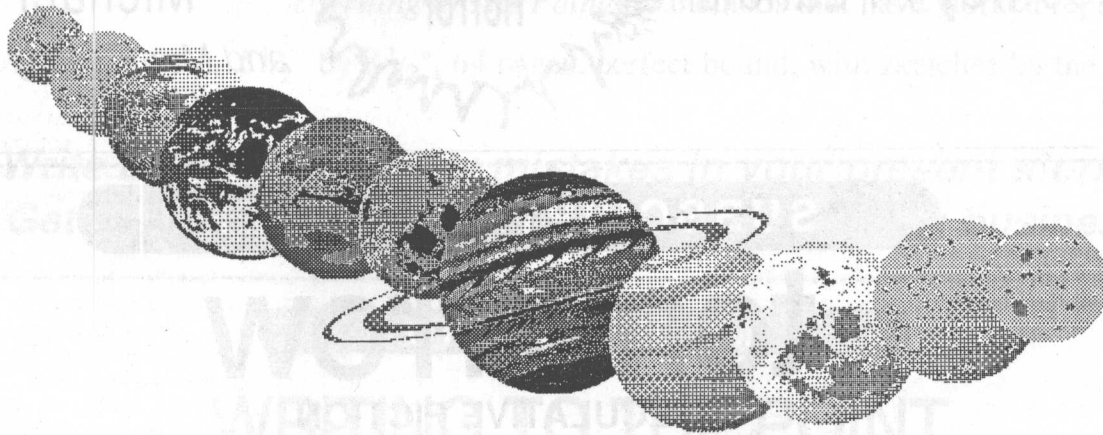
She took a deep breath, and looked down. Then she turned her face up to his and said: "How would you like to visit West Virginia when we get back home?"

"I'd love to," Van Horn replied. "I think it would be marvelous—for both of us."

Ellen smiled, and didn't say another word. There would be time enough for that later.



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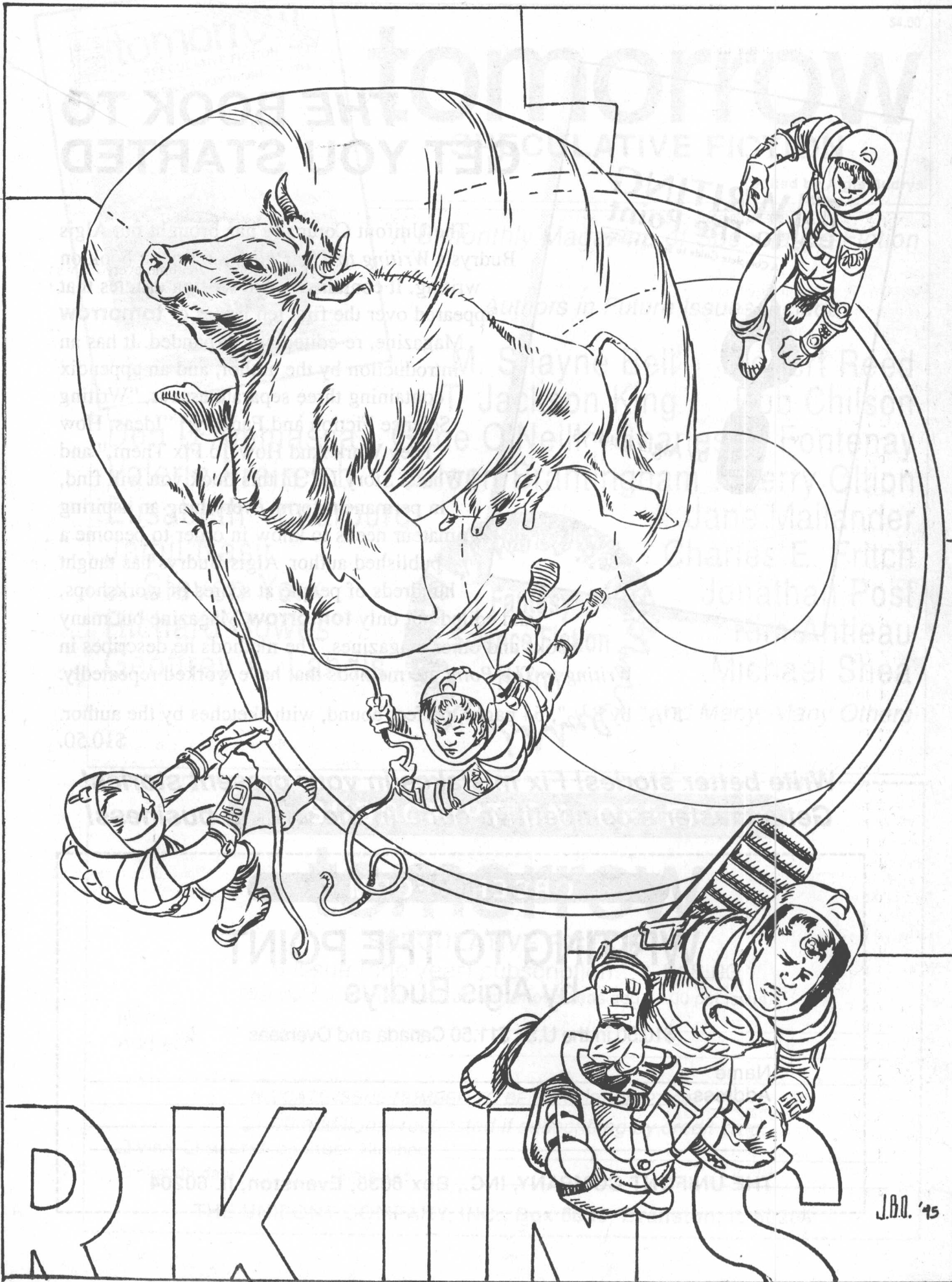
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DRINKING

J.B.O. '45

It seems that either the Wilkins or the Perkins are up to their old tricks, so we don't have a bio for Brooks.

Stealing a Zero-Gee Cow

by Brooks Peck

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It was Aunt Chris's idea to actually steal Perkins Drum's new cow. Up 'til then the discussion had just been on where we could get a cow of our own and if we could afford it. All of the adults in the drum had gotten together for a pow after lunch. I had K.P. and was listening through the big window as I did the dishes with my little cousin Toby. Bingo, who was captain that month, was sitting on the small plastic stage in front of the dining hall where the kids did plays sometimes. He was saying we should wait one more orbit through the Belt and if we made some good strikes we could get one sure when Aunt Chris just yelled from the back of the dining hall, "We don't need to buy a damn cow! If it's so important to get one why don't you just take Perkins's? They owe us anyway."

No one said a word for about a minute. Aunt Chris settled back in her chair and kept on with the suit valve she was cleaning as if she hadn't even spoken. It was she and Uncle Larn who bought Wilkins Drum sixty-eight years ago. She was almost one hundred now but wouldn't let them leave her at the Home on Vesta.

"This ain't the wild old days before Belt Authority, Aunt Chris," said Bingo. "We can't just go take anything we want."

"Ha!" Aunt Chris grunted. "Perkins do."

Bingo frowned. "Well there's no way we could do it anyway. It's not like going and grabbing a telescope or a dish or something. A cow's a living animal."

"They do owe us big," rumbled my second cousin Chuck, our navigator. "They took our rock."

"We don't know it was them for sure—" Bingo said. The whole family glared at him and he shut up. We knew for sure.

My family, Wilkins, is a prospector family. Wilkins Drum orbits within the Asteroid Belt making one revolution every year and a half. I know the Belt moves too, but for our purposes it stays still. We move around hunting for metallics and trading them in at various stationary settlements. At that time we had forty adults and twenty sixteen-and-unders.

Three orbits ago when I was ten we found a hot rock—radioactive. Bingo said it was probably worth four times as much as the whole rest of the load. Everyone was excited. After a lot of debate the family decided to use the extra money to buy a new food processor. Our old GE was sturdy, but it only turned out three basic flavors and five textures. For the rest of the time until Vesta (the biggest city in the Belt) came around we took it easy, taking only the choicest rocks and letting a lot pass. We were rich.

When we caught up to Vesta, the Perkins Drum was also passing through the vicinity heading inward. They're a big operation, almost a town really, and they usually never paid any attention to small-timers like us. Almost as soon as we were in range, though, they radioed us and personally invited us to a Softball tournament they were sponsoring on Vesta. Chuck says we should have realized they knew we didn't have enough

room to play something like that, but at the time everyone was too excited. Also, it was a challenge and the whole Belt would hear if we backed down.

We managed to upload a copy of the rules from Vesta and everyone got busy practicing, or, if not on the team, helping to make uniforms and equipment. Aunt Chris, our head coach, named the team the Wilkins Warhawks and designed an emblem for the uniforms: a silver drum with a stylish white "W" across it and large red wings on the sides. The family was so busy that the adults decided to cash in our load after the games.

On the day of the first round my dad, who was captain then, splurged and rented a shuttle to take the entire family down to Vesta. We must have turned some heads as the entire gang trooped through the corridors all in red, silver, and white. It was even more exciting, especially for us kids, than discovering the hot rock. We took up an entire section of seats in Vesta's auditorium/stadium, and we were loud. The Wilkins family was ready for victory.

We didn't even win one game. We got close except in the heat of things I guess Uncle Ramzy forgot you couldn't hit members of the opposite side with the bat. The Warhawks were penalized twenty yards and two minutes for Uncle Ramzy. The other team (the Vesta South Hemisphere Hydroponics Hellraisers) burned time until there were three seconds left and made a field home run to capture the lead. Demoralized, we slipped out of the hall leaving a gap of empty seats like a bald spot. When we jetted up to the drum our silence was broken by a gasp from the front of the shuttle. The huge round cargo door in the center aft of the drum was sitting wide open. The only thing missing was the hot rock.

Dad had to take out a loan to pay off the shuttle and cover supplies. We were lucky and managed to pay it off in just one orbit, but nothing could change the fact that Wilkins Drum had been faced, and the whole Belt knew it. Since then it was nearly impossible getting people to deal straight with us. The word was out: we were suckers.

Old Aunt Nate spoke up. "What good's a cow to us anyway? You all want to be like them Perkins and clutter up the drum with a lot of useless junk?" The beads in her hair clicked as she shook her head. "I hear they've got a swimming pool—are you going to want to rip out the control room and get one of those next?"

"Cows give milk, Momma," said Chuck, "and butter and cheese and eggs. It would really liven up the meals around here." I could see everyone was thinking about the food processor we almost had.

I sent Toby off to play, put away the last of the dishes, and stood there listening. Officially I had a year until I was allowed to the adult pow but the next-oldest kid was three years younger than me, so I was often included. Then I noticed Mom giving me a look through her purple shades. I grinned, wiped the

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counter off a few times, and ducked out of the kitchen. A meter down the hall I decided I had to hear the rest of that pow. This was big, the family hadn't done anything like this since we intercepted a Solar Mining, Inc. scout's transmission with the location of a huge chunk of ice which we found before their tugs could get there. Drum life could get real monotonous without something to break it up. I dropped to my stomach and wormed back into the kitchen below where I could be seen over the counter.

"You're talking illegal entry into a sealed environment, which gets you at least five years working the Ceres tunnels, plus stealing the cow, and I don't know how long they'd give us for that!" That was Bingo.

"If you don't get caught you don't go to prison," answered Aunt Chris. "Being scared is the reason this drum has been on the bottom of the heap for the past five years. Time to show the Belt what Wilkins are made of."

"But even if we could get to it, how could we move it?"

"Use a lifeboat. They aren't that big!"

"This is insane." Bingo sounded really mad. "We don't even know where it is."

"We could find out," said my cousin Beni. "Perkins is having an open drum all next week for people to come and see the cow." Beni was two years older than me and it was him who had been monitoring the radio and first heard all the ruckus about the cow.

"Case the joint!" cried Aunt Chris.

I looked up. Mom was standing in the kitchen peering over her shades down at where I was sitting against a cabinet. "Are you supposed to be here, Darcy?" she asked. I pretended to turn down the player in my ear.

"What?"

"You heard me," she said. Everyone says I look just like my mom. She has dark brown skin and black eyes which are almost always hidden behind her shades. She only takes them off when he's really serious or angry. Right now they were halfway down her nose. "Get, girl," she said. I got.

Perkins Drum was three times as long and at least twice as wide as Wilkins Drum. Bingo and Chuck fixed our course so that we could pass in bike range for a week. My turn to go over and see it all didn't come until the third day and by that time I was itching to death to get a look. "They have a gymnasium," my cousins said, "and a park!" I didn't even know what that first one was, and the second one I didn't believe.

I went over with Dad, Toby, Bingo, and three others. We went outside, swung onto our bikes (two people each), and jetted over to Perkins's which was almost exactly next to us at that point. The bikes are propelled by compressed carbon dioxide gas. Dad's the best biker in the family and probably the whole Belt and we got to Perkins's five minutes ahead of the others. As we flew over to the drum it just kept getting bigger and bigger. I would keep thinking we were up to it, but then it would still get bigger.

The "floors" of a drum are like tubes fitted one inside the other. The drum is set spinning so that everything inside pushes toward the outside because of centrifugal force. That gives you a floor to stand on although your feet point out of the drum and your head points to the center. Since the floor closest to the outside of the drum spins the fastest that's where you weigh the most, and that's where people in a drum live. That floor also has the biggest area. Each floor above the outside one (called the

first) is progressively smaller and gives you less weight. The center shaft is where you store supplies and, if you're a mining drum, rocks. There's a huge door in the aft center for loading. Right next to that there's usually the main airlock which opens onto a hallway in the top floor that runs the length of the drum. At the other end is the door to the control room, which is center fore.

Perkins's main airlock was the size of our dining room. Its walls were covered with suits, bikes, mining equipment and tools. It was all very clean and bright. I didn't see one dent or scratch anywhere. Their suits really caught my eye—sky-blue with chrome fittings by Ememyu, the best you could buy. When the lock pressurized we all began helping each other out of our stuff. It's hard to unsuit yourself in zero-G. A wide, round door at the other end of the lock swung open and three men floated inside. They were all really pale, not like the deep tans and browns of my family. The first one had on black slippers, white pants, and a big, blue cloth that wrapped loosely around his arms and chest. It billowed about him in the air and looked like pouring liquid. The other two wore regular blue overalls with lots of pockets.

"Hello, and welcome to Perkins Associates," the first guy said, making a big smile. His teeth were tinted to look like a rainbow spectrum. "My name is Pete Perkins, Vice President of Interior Affairs. I take it you've come for a tour of our facility?" Bingo nodded, never taking his eyes off the bright man. "Well good!" the man boomed, like he thought we couldn't hear. He smiled again. "Has everyone had their standard inoculations as required by Belt Authority?" Bingo's eyes went wide.

"Of course. It's standard—"

"Wonderful." The man looked us up and down. "Does anyone need a shower?" Bingo took a deep breath and Dad grabbed him on the elbow.

"No, thank you," Dad said, "we have plenty of water on our drum." Bingo was glaring at the man so hard I laughed. He looked like how he did the time he caught some of the kids playing with a huge glob of soap suds up in one of the low gravity storerooms.

The man showed us where to stow our gear and then led us out the door and through a round tunnel. Something had been bothering me since taking off my suit and I didn't figure it out until just then. I could hardly smell anything. Wilkins drum is full of warm, thick scents of cooking, machinery, and people. But this place was like how I imagined Earth—so big and open that all smells get spread out too thin to notice. I did catch one whiff of the Vice President. It was spicy and sweet and not at all human. Maybe all Perkins smell different.

Finally our whole group came to a shaft and one by one, the three Perkins in the lead, we started down the "down" ladder feet-first. The ladder went on and on and on. It was a weird feeling to get heavy so slowly. Finally we reached the bottom. The centrifugal was a little stronger than I was used to. The Perkins probably sped their drum up when they were near Vesta to show everyone how tough they were.

We were standing on the edge of a gigantic room, bigger than any I'd ever been in. There was something strange all over the floor and after a second I realized it was grass. I recognized it from my lessons. I could see Pete Perkins smiling as we all gawked. All of those plants in one place was just too bizarre. In the air near the ceiling big globes of light the color of the sun drifted, but never bumped. Along all four walls glowed high-resolution video portraits of hundreds of old people. They

Stealing a Zero-Gee Cow

had moving backgrounds of places all over the System and Earth.

"This is Perkins Park," said the Vice President, "a well-known attraction in the Belt. Perhaps you've heard of it. The field is ten thousand square feet and weighs twenty-five tons. It was constructed about fifteen years ago by Dara Perkins, whose portrait is here to the right." Dara was pale like all Perkins with squinty eyes. He was pictured with the Park behind him. "Over here," continued the Vice President, "is his mother Anne Perkins who once found a fossilized trilobite in a Carbonaceous asteroid..."

I could barely pay attention as we went through more portraits because we were walking on the grass. I kept trying to step light on all that wealth. I thought about getting a leaf to show my cousins but figured they would see me bend over for sure. We went all the way around the room hearing about every dead Perkins that ever lived. I mostly watched the lights and the other groups of outsiders who were being led around just like us.

Finally we got back where we started and went through a set of red painted steel doors into a dim hallway. Pete was going on about how Perkins drum broke the volume record for a single-unit operation six years in a row. I was trailing behind looking over my shoulder at the grass when suddenly I felt something touch my arm. I jumped and then clamped my mouth shut before I yelled and interrupted the tour.

"What's the matter?" There was a tall boy standing in front me. He was Perkins-pale with long curly brown hair and a bony nose. I guessed he was about seventeen.

"Nothing!" I said, clutching my arm like it was burned. He dressed the strangest of all of them. He wore a jumpsuit that was cut off at the knees and elbows and seemed to be made of pieces of metal shaped like tiny cake pans all sewn together. Clear plastic tubes wound around the little pans with marbles inside that rolled up and down his body. "What's the matter with you?" I asked back.

"What do you mean?"

"Why are you wearing that?"

"Oh." He gave a short, sharp laugh. My Dad and the others were turning the corner.

"I have to go," I said.

"No, wait. Would you like to really see the drum? Those tours are no good. I could show it to you though."

"I can't go away from them! I'll get in trouble." The boy shook his head.

"That's okay, you'll be with me. And they time it, so I know your bunch will be back here in thirty-seven minutes exactly. You can catch up to them then. Come on, it will be fun."

"Just why do you want me alone?" I asked, standing as tall as I could. The boy grinned.

"Oh, now, I just want someone new to talk to. This place can get pretty boring."

By this time my group was long gone, which was probably the idea. I had no other choice. "All right," I said. "My name's Darcy Wilkins."

"Drin Perkins." He made a rattling bow. "Let's go."

"I want to see the cow," I said. I had almost forgotten.

"The cow? Everybody wants to see that. You can see one on video." I stood there. "Oh, all right," he said. "Don't get mad."

Then we went zooming up and down and all over the Perkins Drum. Drin could really move in the low centrifugal areas, and I think he was trying to see if I could keep up. He was faster in straight stretches but I beat him in tight curves.

I saw a lot of new things that half-hour and a lot of things I didn't understand. Near the living section they had a swimming pool—that's a big pit filled with water that people can go into, like an ocean but inside. To be honest it scared me so much I wouldn't even go into the room. What if the drum stopped spinning and all that water got loose? You would suffocate in a second. We also peeked into the control room, which was huge and full of sparkling controls.

Then Drin took me to a long, wide hallway in the middle of the living section. The rooms on either side had been remodeled with large windows looking out and lots of lights and signs. They were stores. Drin called the place a Mall and said people made and sold things for money there, just like on Vesta. I couldn't believe it—they were family after all. It didn't seem very nice. Still, I had to see.

The first place had a woman who repaired suits and mining equipment, which we all just help each other with for free in Wilkins Drum. Then there was a guy who made clothes, all kinds of clothes in all sorts of shapes and colors. I had to look at it all and would have stayed forever if Drin hadn't dragged me out finally. It was the same with all the little stores: food stores, drink stores, shoe stores, a library, a carpenter store, jewelry stores. I had never seen so many different things all one place. It was like I thought Earth would be—lots of variety.

I was trying on some holo-wigs when Drin grabbed my arm. "The time!" he said and dragged me down the hall. We charged through the crazy corridors of that drum until I thought we were lost when suddenly we burst into the Park. My group and the three Perkins were waiting and Dad gave me a very funny look when I came up. I barely had time to say thanks to Drin and we whisked back to the big airlock. Halfway between Perkins Drum and ours I realized I never got to see the cow. I had totally forgotten about it. Dang that Drin, it was his fault.

I wasn't really mad at him though. It was awfully nice of him to take all that time to show me around when he didn't even know me. He was real friendly, much more so than any other Perkins I saw. I wondered why he decided he wanted to meet me instead of someone else. It must have been because we were near the same age.

When we got home the drum seemed a little small but a lot more normal. All the adults went to the dining room to pow about the cow, and they were so busy asking Bingo and Dad questions that no one noticed me get a tea and sit down. I was too tired to go anywhere else.

"Those Perkins have everything," Bingo said. "That cow's just to flaunt it in our faces." He seemed really mad. Let's just take it then, all the adults said.

Dad spoke. "Can't be done. I mean it's just in the middle of everything—there are people all around all the time. Hell, we couldn't even get through an airlock."

"Wimps!" said Aunt Chris, pounding the table. "You kids are all cowards."

"No, we would all like to go for it. But imagine someone trying to steal something from our kitchen. Someone from the outside. Of course we would notice them. It's the same way over there." Everyone was quiet when they understood. They stared either at the floor or into the kitchen at the food processor.

Beni came into the room and looked straight at me. "Radio message for you, Darcy!" he said.

"What?" I was echoed by my mother.

Beni read from an electric pad. "Drin Perkins requests the presence of Darcy Wilkins at twenty hours the fourteenth of this

month to be his companion at the Perkins Drum Softball Victory Gala." Beni looked up. "They won again and now they're inviting all sorts of people from Vesta and all around here. Everybody's talking about it."

All the adults were looking at me. I couldn't speak, my mind was spinning, torn. Did this mean Drin liked me? I had no idea. Maybe he did. There were certainly a lot of other people he could go with. This was a shocking development. But then there was also the fact that the party was to celebrate what the Perkins used to screw us out of our rock four-and-a-half years ago. If I went they would be laughing at me and my family all over again. No, I wasn't going to let them have that pleasure. Drin could just come over here if he wanted to see me.

Aunt Chris had stood up and tottered over next to me. "How about that," she said, stroking my hair. "The Perkins are having party." She looked at the rest of the adults and repeated, "The Perkins are having a party. Everyone will be busy and Darcy will be on the inside."

Mom lent me her shades, but I still felt alone. Everyone in the family down to cousin Toby had suggestions about what I should wear. I changed clothes every twenty minutes for three days solid until finally we decided on my Aunt Lea's genuine Earth jeans, which I had to roll up, Chuck's prize white glo-shirt, which was really too big, and a silver, white, and red vest that Aunt Chris made just for the occasion. Everyone also wanted to lend me jewelry, and so as not to hurt anyone's feelings, I wore it all. I was covered in pins, ear clips, bracelets, and rings. The light from the shirt sparkled off it all every time I moved. I thought Drin would like it—it was his style.

But I was scared. Not of Drin or even the Perkins' party, much. I was scared because after Dad dropped me off I would be totally alone on that big drum with no family around at all. All my life I had been within shouting distance of another Wilkins. Last time at Perkins' I had been too overwhelmed to feel lonely and anyway, I knew Dad and the others were somewhere nearby. Now I had time to think about it.

Dad didn't even come into the airlock when we arrived at 20:20. "I'm not invited," he said. "But I'll see you later." He winked. Then I had to go inside. It was too late to back out and the whole family was depending on me. Dad biked away and it was just me next to this big, swirling metal drum falling through space.

Drin came into the airlock as soon as there was air. Tonight he wore just a regular, black work jumpsuit. His hair and eyes were black now, too. I was speechless with surprise. I had expected the unimaginable. "Hi," he said, "glad you made it."

"Hi." I hung up my suit. It wasn't my regular one but a shabby, patched-up spare that was older than me. Drin didn't seem to notice.

"You look nice," he said.

"Oh, you too." I felt like a computer game next to him.

"Shall we?" He offered his arm. I was so nervous I laughed suddenly. Drin looked startled. Man, I'm going to blow it, I thought, but it was too late to do anything now. We headed down the hall side by side. Drin smiled at me and I blushed, of course. I get so mad when that happens and then it gets even worse. Why couldn't I be cool like him?

The Gala was in the Park. There were hundreds of people crammed into the room dressed all kinds of ways. I saw glo-clothes, vid-clothes, and a few with no clothes at all. A tall man had on a shoulder pack with two robot arms attached. He

gestured widely with his and the extras as he spoke. Around the edge of the Park were tables heaped with food and gallons of hot and cold drinks. I thought some of the portraits were looking down a little hungrily. I wasn't hungry, and hadn't been for twenty-four hours. In the middle of the Park there was a round platform with a ten-piece band honking out Titan-style dance tunes. Groups of two and three swung and hopped to the beat.

Drin slowly led me around the room, occasionally saying hello to someone but mostly just walking along. It was strange. I noticed a lot of the Perkins looking at us. Why did Drin want everyone to see me? I felt my face get red again.

We stopped at a table where some friends of Drin's were nibbling on vegetables. There were five of them, all webbed together with jeweled strands. One of them wore a uniform of the Perkins Softball team and was talking about the victory game. The way he put it they never would have won without him. The other kids were all wrapped up in the tale, but I was bored. It was a thrill just to look around at all the people though. I wished I could just see it all at once, take it all in in an instant. I pressed a button on one of my bracelets and a puff of yellow fog shot out. The smoke braided into four digits as it dissipated. 21:30 already! I had half an hour.

I still wasn't sure if I could really do it. What would Drin think when he found out I used him? He was very nice and he really seemed to like me. The poor guy would be heartbroken. I felt sad for him all of a sudden. Too bad we could never really be friends.

Drin smiled at me. "So what do you think?"

I smiled back. "It's too cool. You're really lucky. It would be neat to live on this drum." I gritted my teeth but too late, I had said it. Drin just blinked and grinned.

"Come on," he said.

We walked over to a group of twelve or so older people dressed in extremely fine red and yellow tuxedos. They surrounded a woman whose hair was all pulled back and trapped in a polished silver model of an asteroid. I looked down and could not believe it—she was wearing a skirt! Yes, an antique from the old days being worn out here in the Belt. I almost laughed.

Drin pushed through the crowd dragging me with him and the conversation instantly stopped. "Mother," he said, "I'd like you to meet a friend of mine." The woman, who had been staring at Drin, suddenly jerked her head towards me as if I had just appeared from nowhere. She had grey eyes and a bony nose like Drin's.

"Ahem," she said, "so you're Drin's little friend. Where are you from, Dear, Vesta?"

"She's Darcy Wilkins of Wilkins Drum," Drin said loudly as I opened my mouth.

It got so quiet I thought there was a hull breach. The woman's eyes went hard as she glanced at Drin then back to me. "Oh," she said. "Well, I'm Johna Perkins." She shook my hand. "I own Perkins Drum." And I don't talk to people like you, she was saying. I could see that real clear. Drin took my hand and we turned away. Immediately they began to whisper and someone laughed.

I could not remember the last time I was so humiliated. And he had done it on purpose. Yes, it was all clear what was going on. Drin's eyes and face danced with triumph. I wasn't the user, I was the used. I was just another tool in Drin's petty rebellion against his family. He probably did it out of boredom, I knew he didn't have to work. I felt sick.

Stealing a Zero-Gee Cow

"Where's the flusher?" I asked and he pointed down a hallway. I mumbled thanks and it took all my strength not to run. In the flusher I collapsed on the seat, breathing hard. I never felt so stupid in all my life. I never should have agreed to come to the party and I never should have trusted Drin, damn him. There was no way I was going back in there, not after that. Problem was, I still had fifteen minutes until I met my family. I'd have to just wait. Drin probably wouldn't miss me. He was finished with me now.

Out in the hall there was no one around, as Aunt Chris predicted. I found a shaft and climbed all the way to the hallway that ran parallel to the drum's center storage areas, then tugged my way along making good speed because I weighed practically nothing. The first half of the hallway was bare because it ran alongside where the rocks were stored. Large sets of double doors along the second half marked pressurized store rooms. Finally I reached the fore end of the drum. There was a single door at the end of the hall with a small window in it and a set of airlock controls on a panel. Inside was the actual airlock—a bare room three by one and a half meters—with a similar set of controls on the side wall. On the far wall was the door to the outside. The hallway turned "up" here across the center of the drum and at its end was the hatch leading to the drum's control room. I crept up and took a peek inside. No-one was on duty, not even a radio monitor.

I dropped back to the lock and, fingers shaking, worked the controls emptying the little room of air and opening the outer door. Outside, the craggy surface of Vesta drifted into view, dotted with lights and surrounded by multicolored stars.

I waited. Twenty-two came and past and no one arrived. What if they didn't come? I couldn't go back to Drin, no way. I decided I would steal a suit and bike and try to make it home on my own. I wanted to get out of there. Just as I was planning my route back to the main airlock where all the equipment was, someone climbed through the door. They were followed by four more, the last one towing a bike. They all crammed inside and I triggered the outer door shut and let air back into the room.

As soon as I opened the inside door Bingo threw me my regular suit. With him were my mom and dad, Chuck, and Aunt Edna, our doctor. I struggled into the suit and all five helped me seal it up.

"Let's go!" Bingo, Edna, Chuck, and I kicked off the wall and shot down the hallway followed by Mom and Dad hunkered down on the bike. We flashed over glowing shafts, but there was never anyone in them. At one point Bingo threw up his hand and we all grabbed wall, scraping to a noisy stop. "Thought I heard someone," he said over the suit radio. I couldn't see how he could hear anything over the bike's jets. There was no-one though, so we jumped and continued on our way.

A minute later we stopped at one of the sets of double doors in the middle of the corridor. DANGER—WARNING—HAZARDOUS LIFE FORM, it read. ENTER ONLY IF ACCOMPANIED BY AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL. Bingo waited a minute for us to catch our breath. "Ready, Edna?" he asked. She nodded, pulling a huge hypodermic out of a belt pouch. Bingo pushed open the doors.

For a second nothing happened and I struggled to see around everybody. Suddenly there was a loud bellowing like an explosion and something huge swooped out of the door, smashing Bingo and Edna against the wall. Chuck yelled and got slapped aside by a big brown and white hairy flipper. The

corridor was alive with a great, thrashing beast madly trying to propel itself down the corridor. It had a huge head but with a small mouth (for its size) and a fat round body. It also had four flippers for moving in low gravity. Between the back two hung something that looked like a big inflated glove. I figured all this out later though. At that point I was too worried for my life to be looking very carefully.

Mom and Dad rushed forward with Chuck close behind. They tackled the monster but it was way too strong for them. I heard Edna yell, "Damn it!" The cow pushed away from her and I saw her pull the hypodermic out from Bingo's thigh. She kicked off the wall and landed on the cow's back. Then she plunged the now half-full hypo into the cow's neck. It flapped off in the opposite direction of the airlock with my parents and Chuck hanging onto its sides. Aunt Edna got scraped off after about fifteen meters, smashing a light fixture with her helmet.

I slid over to Bingo, who was floating by the wall, stiff as a girder. Aunt Edna glided up a second later and took off his helmet. She checked his eyes and the bio readouts on his collar "He'll be okay," she said, refastening his helmet. "You bring him, I'll see if I can help the others." She dashed away. Far down the hall I could hear the sounds of smashing plastic and screams both human and cow. I figured we were caught for sure. The whole plan was wrecked. Five years on Ceres. Five years away from my family.

I grabbed Bingo's suit by a ring on the back and managed to maneuver him over my shoulder. I began a slow, coasting crawl after the others. In a few minutes I found them all tugging on the back flippers of the cow which had wedged itself half-way into a shaft. It wasn't nearly as active now but just kicked lazily and moo'ed softly every once and a while.

"Shoot," Chuck said over the radio, "they've heard us by now. Let's just leave it and get out of here!" The others ignored him and a second later heaved the cow out of the shaft. It turned its giant head, groaned, and vomited into the air with a belch.

"Oh, God," said my mother, who had gotten the most of it.

"Come on, let's go!" cried Edna.

Bingo stirred. "Wha?" he shouted. "I can't move!"

"Shut up!" Everything was quiet. No pounding feet up the ladders, no alarms, nothing. Dad wrapped a rope around the cow's two hind flippers. The four of them pulled it back the way we came while I followed with Bingo in tow. We stopped at the cow's doors and Chuck began tying the rope to the back of the bike which had been left there. Quickly I released Bingo and pulled three spray cans out of my leg pouches. By the time the others were ready I was putting the final touches on a huge silver, white, and red Wilkins Warhawk emblem that covered the two doors.

Mom and Dad both got on the bike and began slowly tugging the feebly struggling cow. Chuck and Edna took Bingo, and I followed, watching the rear. Every second I expected someone to yell out, but nothing happened. It was 22:20 when we got back to the airlock. Drin would surely be looking for me now. Or maybe not. Maybe it made things easier for me to just disappear.

At the airlock I thought we were home free but no, we had to wait for Chuck to cycle through to get the lifeboat which Bingo had left clamped to the hull. It was too bulky to carry along and we were afraid someone would see it if we left it inside. It took him forever. There was nothing to do but wait and get caught red-handed. Finally he got back inside and began unfolding the big yellow pouch.

Absolute Magnitude

"This isn't going to fit," Chuck said suddenly.

"What?" asked Dad.

"The lifeboat's going to be too big to go through the door once I blow it up!" Everyone began talking at once, arguing about what to do.

"Shut up!" Edna yelled. "Now. Will the cow fit through the door?" It would. "All right. Get the lifeboat around the cow, seal it in and give it just a little air, then take it outside and inflate it all the way."

But it was a lot harder to actually do. The cow was pretty calm, but it took three people to move it around it had so much mass. Also it kept getting the bag all tangled in its flippers. Minutes passed and I got more and more nervous. Eventually we got it. It was now a big, wrinkled yellow blob that moo'ed.

Dad got into the airlock with the bike and the cow. Just as the airlock finished pumping out and Dad was opening the door to the outside, Bingo, who was propped against the wall, mumbled, "Someone's coming."

Down the hall I dimly saw brightly dressed shapes moving excitedly around the cow's room's doors. I heard shouts. Edna gestured frantically through the window at Dad. He threw out the bike and then began tugging on the cow like mad.

"Stop!" someone shouted. Five men and women were rushing towards us. A few seconds later the cow cleared and Dad slammed the outer door. Edna instantly punched the controls to start refilling the air so we could get inside the airlock.

"Hurry up hurry up," I said, but there was nothing we could do but stand and wait. The Perkins were almost upon us. The one in front had a huge metal bar which he swung back and forth.

"Go!" Edna shouted. The door hissed open and we piled in, dragging Bingo. Chuck pulled it shut just as our pursuers came crashing against the door. The man with the bar pounded it and shouted but we could barely hear him. It was Pete, the Vice President. The airlock slowly emptied of gas, becoming quieter and quieter. On the other side of the door one of the Perkins frantically worked the airlock controls.

"Shit! She's going to do an emergency override," Chuck cried over the radio. "We'll never make it!"

I saw Edna nod. She turned to a small transparent rubber panel on the wall and yanked it up with her gloved fist. Then she reached inside and grabbed a large, red handle. "No!" Mom shouted. Edna twisted the handle ninety degrees clockwise.

Even through the thinning air inside the lock I heard a whooping siren. Red lights flashed up and down the corridor. The Perkins all jumped and looked at us with wide eyes. There was a terrific BANG as the airlock's outer door's explosive blew it off its frame. Then it felt like a huge hand flung me out of the airlock, my left arm slamming against the frame. I screamed as the five of us sailed out into empty space away from the drum, away from anything to hold on to at all. I thought I had died. Everything spun and my arm ached.

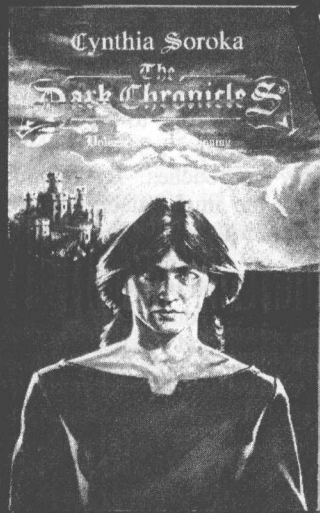
What seemed like an hour later but was actually only half a minute Mom was shaking my shoulder. We joined hands and floated together. My Dad is still the best biker in the Belt—he had us all tethered to the now fully-inflated lifeboat and was towing us back to Wilkins Drum before the Perkins could even suit up. And by then it was too late, we were long gone. In six hours we orbited out of bike range and beyond anyone's reach.

The score was tied, one-all.



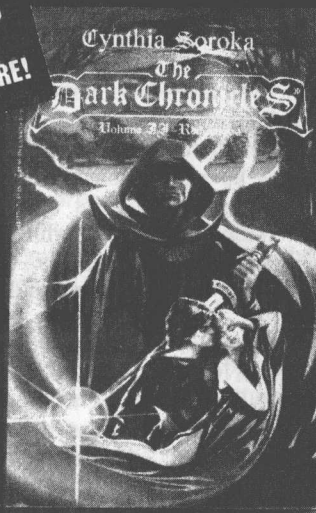
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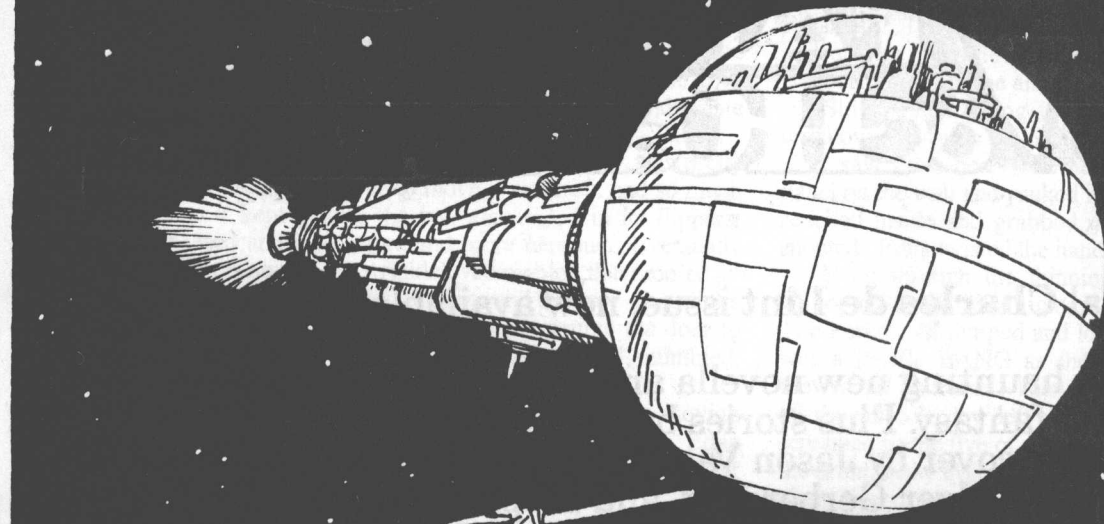
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Shariann last appeared in the pages of **Absolute Magnitude** under the byline S.N. Lewitt. She has recently given up her initials and taken back her name. Shariann has six books in print. Her next novel *Memento Mori* is a Tor book and it will be out next month.

Mice

by Shariann Lewitt

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By the time they came back here they were just a myth anyway. The rest of us had gotten on with our lives so long ago that the stories of the Going Out were hardly told. Even the paragraph or so in the history files only got accessed via hypertext, and then only by someone who had wandered into the file by mistake. No one every really talked about them.

Oh, we all kind of knew they were out there in a kind of vague way. When I was little we would go to the rooftops late at night and Pop-pop would sear fish on the grill. And all the neighborhood kids sat around as he passed out thick helpings of fresh trout with the head still on and slabs of potato. And his voice would get very low while we were eating and he'd point to the stars.

"You see them?" he always started. "Some of those bright lights aren't stars. Some of them are your cousins out traipsing around, looking out for a place to make a world. They're supposed to come back for us when they find it but they never will. Two hundred years ago they went and no one heard anything since. Seven thousand people, maybe a hundred ships with names like *Hope* and *Harmony* and *Ulysses' Pride*."

"What's a Ulysses?" asked the Mouse.

"He's a guy lives in a place called Night-town," Pop-pop said with authority. "He is the ruler of dark places, like the place they went." Pop-pop always treated the Mouse's questions like a real person had asked, and thought them through. He also served the Mouse a helping as big as anyone else's, even if the Mouse was small and scrawny.

The Mouse absorbed this information like everything else, thumb firmly planted between lips. The Mouse didn't really care, wasn't really there all the time. The Mouse was just a Mouse and had probably forgot everything anyway. Even if it was my friend the Mouse and I wouldn't let anyone treat it wrong.

"So anyway, you want me to tell you this story or you want me to call your parents and tell them that I don't want to see you on this rooftop?" Pop-pop scowled but none of us were really scared.

We knew he wouldn't ever tell on us. He might be the local crazy, but he was also the smartest person in the collective. He had been a great scientist in the Before, the time no one ever talked about. He looked at the sky because once he'd looked out the big telescopes and he knew where the others were and he was waiting for them to come back. Maybe he had lived two hundred years and remembered the Going Out. He sure looked two hundred, with more white hair in his ears than on his head that was all mottled with age spots.

Maybe he even was this Ulysses person, if such a person existed. We couldn't be quite sure, and the real little kids thought it was probably the proper name for the Bogeyman and they cried. At least 'till we told them that it was magic, and if you called the Bogeyman by his right name it was like

Rumplestiltskin and he couldn't hurt you. That shut them up.

Anyway, so Pop-pop rambled on about the Going Out, and I'm not sure how much was real and how much was his head had been cooked with too much sorrow and too many pipes and too much staring at the sky. I even went to the Library to look it up. I walked the tunnels, the long empty stretches underground where I needed a torch to see the rats. There were a million rats between the rotted wood and metal that lay deep under the city. The Mouse had shown me how to get here, crawling through the gates and jumping into the stinking inch of water that covered the bottom of the tunnel with slime. It was really gross and no wonder the grownups never bothered. But the Mouse and I are going to be explorers when we grow up. I pretend that my Mouse is going to be able to grow up so that we can go everywhere together, California, Boston, Samarkand. So the Mouse and I went exploring all the time and we finally found the Library.

I'd seen the picture before. Our collective class had gone to our own Library and there had been pictures. I recognized the lions out front. I climbed up on one of them like I was riding.

"Get down," the Mouse said.

Stupid, too-smart skinny little Mouse marched straight up the doors that were locked. No surprise. But that never stopped the Mouse from anything. Or me either, but I never did quite have the Mouse's crazy. Or maybe the Mouse just knew more than us from being a Mouse and we just didn't know. Couldn't get inside it's head anyway, Mouse wasn't like the rest of us.

Momma didn't want me hanging with the Mouse. "Those things are tech-breeds," she said. "They're all made to get cancer and none of them lives past fifteen. It's just going to break your heart."

And she'd sigh. I bet she had her own Mouse friend once. There was the more formal arrangement between the nest and the collective. We fed the Mice and they were allowed to use our power, though often they're pretty good at dealing with power sources themselves. A lot of the grid work-teams are even mixed. But we'll do what we can for the Mice in exchange for baby vaccinations.

The Mice were lab-teched to die. But they made all the immunities to the plague that we needed inside their veins. We don't die of disease anymore. It kind of seems like the Mice do all our dying for us.

So of course I hung with the Mouse tight after that. And snatched candy and desserts for it, since it didn't get except when Pop-pop felt rebellious.

The Mouse found a broken window where it could wiggle in between the bars like no real kid could do. Mouse got skinny and weird and just slid in like it was water. Then the Mouse found a way to open the side door and got me in.

Absolute Magnitude

This Library was way more impressive than the one where our collective class met in the Bronx. Here were rooms and rooms with chairs and tables and things all piled that I didn't recognize. We wandered through two floors, all the rooms had gilt letters over the door to spell out what the place was for. *Oriental languages. European History. Science.*

We looked in all of them and there were no terminals until we got to a big room without any of the ugly dark wood with green grunge on it and no gold letters. This one had black stenciling that said, *Research catalog.* I knew that was the good stuff. And sure enough, there were all the terminals and everything we could ever want only nothing was turned on.

Yeah, I keep forgetting that there aren't any collectives down here, just indies who don't have power servers on the public grid. I don't know how the Mouse did it, but the things came up after Mouse tinkered around. Maybe it was that it wasn't really human or really Mouse either, but something whose great-greats started out of some experiment that got loose.

Now Mice attach their nests to human packs for however long they'll live. They don't have parents or homes or anything, and if it wasn't for the collective they'd all die. Then we'd all die. So it does everybody good, though usually Mice and humans don't hang out like friends. There's just too many differences.

So the Mouse managed to access a power system. "I just plugged the big thing in," the Mouse said, with two fingers in its mouth. I shrugged. I don't care much how the things work so long as I can do what I want. Probably the collective had forgotten to shunt this place off their grid. They'd know someone had been draining off the facility, and if anyone was doing school work or in power mode they'd probably track me down and tan my hide.

I didn't care about that. I'd been hit plenty of times before. I started scanning the texts looking for the Going Out link-ups and how that hooked in the Mice and the Before Time when people died the way the Mice do now. I don't know why I was interested. No one else except Pop-pop and the Mouse cared. Everyone back in the gang was busy playing or foraging for the collective, or working on the plots to grow cabbage for winter.

I would rather explore than work. That was what I was going to do some day, be an explorer. Find all the stuff that Pop-pop told stories about. Like the plague times.

I was so fascinated by the plague times that I looked up the word on the hypertext and spent most of two days reading. Just after the Going Out, almost everyone on the planet died. Billions of people. I couldn't count billions, couldn't think them. But there it was, that was how many had died. They had stopped burying after a while and the bodies piled up in the streets and became good garden stuff, so Momma said.

Then someone called Griegsen created the Mice and ran all kinds of disease through them, and discovered the vaccine. So the plague was over and life went on, only it didn't go on quite as well because there weren't enough people to run things and so things started to fall apart some. The bad buildings no one wanted any more were empty, only the nicest ones got used.

And the grownups created collectives and ran power-grids through the local area for the nice buildings and the places where they wanted people to go. The boring park where only little kids played on the swings and jungle gym, the Library where we had our classes, the places where we lived so we could log into the school network for kiddie-text.

That was one great thing about the big Library we found in the next city over through the tunnels. There was no kiddie-text,

no baby passwords and grownup passwords that locked us out of the good stuff. I could go anywhere.

So I went exploring. I looked into the past, into the Going Out that Pop-pop described like he was there and that Momma said never existed. And it did too exist, I saw it right in front of me. Original documents and even pictures were loaded.

And Pop-pop was right. All the stuff he told us, even down to the names of the ships, was dead on. *Harmony* and *Hope* and *Ulysses' Pride.* (I checked Ulysses in the text and Pop-pop had been pretty out of it here. The goto said he was some Greek hero that took seven years to get home across some little dinky lake and had all kinds of adventures.)

"What does that mean?" the Mouse asked, and touched a sticky finger to the screen, which responded immediately. I wish the Mouse wouldn't do those things, especially not when it left a dribble of bright red spit smeared over the glass.

So that was what I knew and there wasn't anything else about it and anyway even Pop-pop said I was wasting my time. There were better things to do than explore and it was summer and the gardens needed weeding. So I didn't see the Mouse for a while. Like most Mice, it went off to tinker with the power grid.

Then summer turned crisp and it was September. I wasn't looking forward to winter but I felt stranger than usual. I felt all hedged in and tied down when I just wanted to go. Anywhere was fine. Away.

The collective was dull and predictable, the kids too little and the grownups didn't understand anything. No one cared about exploring, not even here on the ground. At night I went up to the roof myself and looked at the stars and wondered which ones were our cousins.

Sometimes I lay on the roof and looked out and daydreamed that the Going Out was coming back. They'd arrive and they'd realize that I was really one of them and they'd take me out of this place. This damned boring collective where all the grownups talked about was the weather and the growing seasons and the kids.

I thought about running away. Through the tunnels with the Mouse making everything smell like cinnamon candy, running away to where things were important. To where we cared about maybe Going Out again.

I lived more in my head than in the collective. Chores were only mechanical and I didn't care any more. Inside my skull I was already gone and not paying attention at all. Which is how I nearly missed it.

I was working in the garden, turning it for the season, when everyone around me stopped and looked at the sky and started whispering. Another grownup thing, I figured. A heavy storm coming and they were all worried about the last few tomatoes and squash we hadn't harvested yet.

Then I heard the noise, so big it seemed to surround the whole world. Like it was too big for my ears and so I heard it in my leg bones. And I looked up and there was something shiny bright coming down from the sky. Not here to the Bronx. Over distant a ways.

Maybe there were a zillion things it could have been, but I knew only one and there wasn't any other thing possible. Them. The Going Out had finally returned, they had come for us. And it was time to say goodbye. I stood trembling, watching the shiny spot in the sky that I had never quite believed was real.

Now I was watching them come home. I'd imagined this moment a million times. Not once had I anticipated the noise, or the grownups full of awe, or the pervasive smell of cinnamon.

Mice

Cinnamon. The Mouse was here. It shouldn't be and I'd catch hell for having it in the garden. But hell, the Mouse deserved to watch too. They were its cousins as much as mine. And no one was telling the Mouse to leave.

The pattern was glowing further from us, not nearer. I knew where they were going. I hadn't been there, but I knew of the fields out in Queens (where I had been at least twice that nobody caught me), the Mouse showing me the way in the tunnels and then over the broken fields and abandoned houses where there were no collectives for miles. The Mouse had found it—or some Mouse had found it and shown all the others and they were confused and we had to tell them about it. Only I didn't know what it was any more than they did, except it was for Going Out and coming home. Even the Mice knew that. They wanted more data than we had, more than the stories and the half-shrouded truths.

They wanted a way out themselves. Not to Go Out so much, but to live. To get the immune system the plague had left to the rest of us so they wouldn't die by fifteen. So they wouldn't have stunted and misshapen digits, so their faces would not be distorted to the familiar Mouse mask. So that, most of all, they would be able to grow up.

I wanted to go down to the field right away. It would take half the day at least and it was better to make it before dark. The Mouse could see pretty well, but there were still nasties around that I didn't want to get near. Besides, our cousins might be afraid of something that snuck up in the shadows.

Before I could slip away the grownups had called a stop-work and headed back to the collective. I went with the group and the Mouse trailed along. Everyone was too distracted to notice.

Our collective is all in one building, a very large yellow-brick thing with a gazillion apartments and carpeting in the corridors. We've got a whole power system in the basement, there is a kiddie-yard outside with swings, and we took half the top floor and turned it into collective space. Everyone in the group can fit into a corner of it, but the grownups are planning on the collective growing. When I turn sixteen, if I get voted in, I can choose any empty apartment in the building for my own. There are way more empty apartments than full ones, and even if someday we take over the whole place there are more and more buildings just like it all around. The Mouse nest is two buildings over in the same complex, all just the same only the Mouse nest has more power and air conditioning. But then, they don't have to spend that much time on gardens.

We went straight up to the meeting space. We didn't even get washed up or changed even though we were covered in dirt, and we still weren't the first ones there. The babies were all crying and the grownups were arguing so loud I could hear them outside the door.

"What the hell is going on?"

"Has anyone heard anything from Queens Three?"

"Maybe it's just some junk, you know. A meteor or something."

I didn't follow any of the talk, and I wasn't interested. I just wanted to get out, to get over to Queens and see it all for myself.

That didn't happen. I got locked in the commons with the babies. For our own protection, the grownups said. Right. Because they were a bunch of cowards and they wanted to pretend that it was all going to go away. Then they'd tell us that it had been some sky junk or maybe that there was no Going Out and we were all making it up. Or maybe there had been some

mold on the rye bread. Grownups seemed to think that every time something weird happened the food was bad.

So for three days I was locked in the commons with everyone else under sixteen. Some of us older ones tried to teach school and play cards, more because there was nothing else to do. And we were sick of the babies crying all the time. Give them something else to think about. Being a kid is really unfair. I mean, I knew exactly how to get to the landing field and no one would even listen to me.

But on the third day the adults came back to the commons. This time they were all dressed and clean and very orderly. We kids had stayed away from the public meeting area—the chairs were uncomfortable and there was enough room we didn't have to move them anyway—but the first group to arrive were a work team who straightened the seats and readjusted the podium umpenteen million times. And they wouldn't let us near the area at all.

After they let in the rest of the collective, though, they couldn't keep our parents from claiming us. So we all had seats with the families. Momma was so happy to see me and made such a fuss over me that I didn't get to ask one thing about what had happened in the outside world.

Munroe Beade, Pres Pro Tem of the collective, stood in front of the podium the way he always does. There were a few chairs facing the assembly and they were occupied by people I didn't know. I studied the faces, wondering why our cousins who had Gone Out looked so ordinary.

"Those two are representatives from Queens Three," Momma told me. I was embarrassed and glad I hadn't made any comments.

When everyone had hushed down, Munroe Beade began to speak the way he always does, way too fast and using his fingers to drive a point in like a rivet gun.

"Whatever landed over in Queens, they claim they are descendants of the Going Out. The communications facility at Queens Three has been in touch with collectives all over the world and it seems that at least fifty groups have landed. They say they have technology that we've lost, that we're degenerate and have forgotten everything important and they pretty much seem to think they're perfect. But I'll let the Queens Three people tell you about that because they've already had some heavy contact with these cousins. Well, at least they say they're the cousins, and they look it and they talk it so I don't have any reason to disbelieve them. But we'll have to figure that all out for ourselves."

I looked over the people in the seats of honor very carefully. It made sense that Queens Three was heavily represented. They've got the best comm tech in the Greater New York Area. All the collectives go through them and they rake in a fortune. They don't have to farm, even, they get produce from the others for doing their comm work.

Come to think of it, I wondered if I could apprentice over there. Either bring back some comm capability to our collective, or join over there. At least it would get me out of digging in the dirt. Not quite being an explorer, but sure better than being what I'd been.

"All the codes match," the Queens Three tech expert was saying. Her voice was dry, monotone, and made me want to put my head down and go to sleep. "I don't know how else to explain the group except they really are the cousins and they really have returned from the Going Out. I think we should listen to what they have to say."

Absolute Magnitude

There was polite applause. Then a tall dark man got up and came to the podium. He looked pretty normal to me, except that his clothes looked new and like they'd never seen hours of weeding between the rows. But even our own farmish collective would manage decent clothes for someone we sent out to speak. We work hard and we're poor, but we're not that poor.

He smiled. In his dark face his teeth stood out starkly. They were all perfectly straight, white, even. Fake teeth, they looked like to me. Just like the fake clothes and the fake too-clear face without any sun-lines or wrinkles or even the hint of beard.

"We are happy to finally return home," he started saying with a funny accent. "My great great great grandmother came from this city. It's quite a thrill for me to see the place. Our family told stories about how she went to Radio City Music Hall and Rockefeller Center."

He was lucky no one booed. That stuff wasn't in this city. That was across the water on the island, and it was pretty much gone anyway. I think there's a collective down at Rockefeller Center, but I don't know for sure.

"Anyway, in this case the fact that you call us 'cousins' is accurate. And I'm very pleased to be here."

"I can also see that you've had hard times since my ancestor left here. I know there used to be over ten million people here, and the public transportation ran all night and that there were lights everywhere. You've had to survive some rough periods. And we understand that. We've had to survive some hard times ourselves. The early days in the generation ships were difficult, people born here were homesick and later generations fought over mission objectives. But I'm not here to tell you about what we had to go through. No, I'm here to tell you about what we can offer you."

"Power, technology, medicine, all the things we've been able to develop we want to share with you." He said it and he smiled so sincerely that the Mouse gasped.

"What's in it for you?" Granny Farley yelled. "Why you want to do this anyway? Ain't from the kindness in your heart?"

The assembly got real still. The cousin's face looked frozen up in that too-perfect smile. He coughed. He hesitated. Then he began to speak again, only his voice wasn't so deep and smooth and his words didn't sound like they'd been rehearsed a zillion times.

"Well, for one thing, we haven't found a place to live," he said. "Wherever the ships of the Going Out have been, what stars and planets we've found, we haven't found a good one for human habitation. Now we want to return home, to bring you our technology and resources and education in return for a place to live. So that we can see the sky and feel the warm sun, things that people like me have never known."

I think we were supposed to feel sorry for him, but I just couldn't. There was something weird about the whole thing. Like, why'd they have to ask anyway. There's loads of empty space just waiting for folks to come and reclaim it.

"Well, you don't have to ask anyone," Leon McX said. Leon stood in the center aisle and even from a distance loomed over the visitor. Leon is not near so pretty kept as the cousin, has a scar on his forehead and more than a few on his hands, but he is the biggest person I've ever seen. Makes up two of the visitor, and wasn't on his holiday manners, either.

"Why do you think you got to ask?" Leon asked, brass like he always is. "You think we're gonna bother to sneak over in our sleep and kill you, then fry you up with some cabbage and freeze you down for winter rations?"

Everyone in the commons laughed. Even the Mouse laughed and the visitor looked real unhappy. "We had hoped to help you people," he said like he didn't know what was happening. "We can offer you a lot."

I just wanted to walk away. And that was what most of the collective seemed to do. Linny Gomez took out her knitting and rustled the stitch pattern. Jeff Towlman took out his mini-checkers game and started playing with Granddad Elkins. And finally Sarah Wheeler got up and ran her hands over her holiday skirt. "Well, I don't know about the rest of you, but we've got work to do," she announced. The rest of her harvest team followed. That was the only time I ever wished I was in a dirt brigade, so I could walk out on all the shocked stares of the too-perfect visitor and the communications group from Queens Three.

I was about ready to rejoin my old work team when Momma squeezed my hand. "I'm very proud of you," she whispered.

I jerked my hand away. I didn't want anyone to know that Momma still treats me like a baby. And besides, I had to get out with the team or else I'd get all kinds of black marks at the team meeting and then I'd really be in trouble.

So the cousins didn't ask again. They just set up in one of the nicer buildings down closer to the tunnels. And we didn't hear from them for a while and we really didn't care. There was enough to do already getting in the harvest and setting up the indoor garden in the commons area.

"Let's go exploring," the Mouse said one day in early November. I agreed right away. First off, it was the kind of day when I just had to get away from the cooperative and the babies. A day when the sky was so crystal blue it just about screamed at us. Idiot people, come on out and play while you can, because winter's coming and you'll all be stuck behind walls for days and days and eat cabbage and winter apples and shriveled up carrots. Oh yes, the November sky knows me like my old best friend.

And then there was the Mouse. It hadn't wanted to go out much recently, didn't want to explore or even stay up and watch the stars on the rooftop. It isn't an old Mouse, but maybe it had one of the Mouse diseases already. They were bred for disease, they were made to die.

I never thought of it before, but suddenly I wondered if making Mice had been a truly evil thing. I felt—I dunno. Bad somehow. As if it was my fault that the Mouse looked so ragged and seemed to drag all the time.

Maybe that's why Momma won't mix with Mice. Because we made them to die just before the Plague and studied them and used their bodies to produce vaccines. And even now, long as the Mice are around we're safe. Every baby gets a vaccine of Mouse blood and no one gets sick after that. Except the Mice of course.

So I felt really awful that the Mouse wasn't doing well and probably wouldn't live through winter. If this was a good day, then sure, I was up for some exploring.

"Where should we go?" I asked. Anything was fine with me. "Want to go to Queens? Or maybe back to the Library?"

The Mouse shook its head. "I want to get in to the cousin's collective and see how they live," it said. Then it hesitated. "I heard some scary things about them."

I shrugged. Whatever. I didn't think a cousin's collective could be all that interesting, but I didn't say so. If that's where the Mouse wanted to explore, that was fine by me. So I got on my sneaks and a sweater, and packed the tools of the exploring

Mice

trade into a small bag the Mouse could carry. I packed a plastic lighter (ten zillion, courtesy of the corner stores) and some paper and a pencil to make a map in case we needed to, a compass, and five super-big Linzer tarts from out in the kitchen. I really like Linzer tarts, and that's better provisions than the usual bread and peanut butter.

The Mouse adjusted the pack proudly and we set out.

It was a glorious walk and it was good to be away from the grownups and the collective. To be honest, the Mouse led. I didn't know exactly where the cousins' collective was and really hadn't bothered to find out. But the Mouse knew. And the Mouse was starting to slow down, hang back as if there was something it didn't want to know.

"Lunch-time?" I asked. I got out a Linzer tart and broke it in half. The Mouse nibbled delicately, not stuffing its face like I'd always seen before.

"I gotta ask something," the Mouse said, and there was a scared and jumpy look as if it expected something to explode out an alley.

"Sure," I said. "Whatever."

The Mouse's tongue lapped around its mouth, and it wasn't as pink as it was before, and it wasn't the sugar from the tart that dulled the color. "Ummm, if we find anything, you know, bad. Really bad. You have to tell the nest. You have to tell everyone and make sure they know."

"You paranoid?" I asked.

The Mouse suddenly looked real thin and scared, the way Mice sometimes do. "It's okay," I said real fast. "I'll do that. Sure I will. Only let's hope there isn't anything really bad. I mean, we never saw anything really bad before, and we've been lots of places. We've done lots of things, gone far away. So there's no reason to think of anything really bad now, right?"

The Mouse nodded, miserable. There wasn't a thing I could do.

We walked only about two more blocks before the Mouse stopped. "There," it pointed at a gaudy building that didn't look all that solid or well kept. "That's their place."

I walked up to the front door. I didn't see anyone, not cousins, not a breath of movement. Over the door there was a sign that said something about a hotel.

Who would set up a collective in a hotel? I'd explored hotels before. They didn't have nice roomy apartments. They had single rooms and ugly furniture.

I was sure this was wrong. The Mouse just didn't know. That's okay. That's part of exploring. But even though this couldn't be the place we were looking to find I went right in. The Mouse wanted to go here and I didn't want to hurt its feelings.

The bottom floor was all dead plants and smelly sofas and carpet that was breeding wildlife. "Lets go upstairs," the Mouse insisted.

We took the wide decorative stairs near the chandelier instead of the elevator. When we got to the landing I couldn't see anything but I sure could smell and it smelled evil. It smelled like peelings rotting in the compost heap and a backed up toilet and a Mouse nest that wasn't ever changed or dumped.

The Mouse began to squeak in a tiny voice. If it was human I'd call it crying. It has better smell than we do and I wondered if it knew any more.

"This is a very bad place," the Mouse whispered. "They were right in the nest, bad things happen here. Very bad for Mice."

I thought about that for a moment. "Well, maybe you should hide somewhere and I'll look around first. Then if I find anything interesting I can show you. But maybe it's not such a good idea for you to be out."

But the Mouse refused. "No," was all it said, and it stuck two fingers in its mouth and stared at the floor. The Mouse can be idiot stubborn like a little kid, not let go of an idea and throw tantrums. This looked like a tantrum coming on, its mouth all twisty around its fingers and a storm-cloud petulance in its eyes. Momma always says to pick your fights, and this was one I knew no way I'd win.

"Okay," I caved in. "But you got to stay behind me and no sneaking ahead."

The Mouse face that looked all ready to cry lit up with pleasure. "Sure. I promise. We are explorers after all."

So we went up another flight of stairs, these ones hidden behind a soda machine and all concrete and ugly. But we got to the residence halls and the smell was overwhelming. I could hardly open the door for the stench.

The Mouse crept behind me as we ventured into alien territory. We heard movement but didn't see anyone. There was only the stink to guide us. Between that and the muffled sounds I could believe the place was one of Pop-pop's haunt stories for Hallow's Eve when all the grownups try to scare us.

This was different, though. If I could believe that the dead walked, I'd believe it here.

And then one of the cousins staggered into the hall and lurched down three doors. It was a male, wearing a uniform like the one who came to speak to us before. Only this uniform wasn't so perfect and this person didn't look nearly so well-fed and sanitized. This uniform had dribbles of dried junk running down the front and the cousin was thin and off balance.

Sick. Even I could tell this was what sick meant. This was a dying thing, like the Mice when they finally succumbed to one of their cancers.

The Mouse wailed and scurried from behind me to get a better look. Mice always want to see the dying. And the cousin saw the Mouse and life got really ugly.

The cousin bellowed and pointed. "One of them, one of them," he shrieked, and a few doors came open and other uniformed cousins joined the one in the hall. They were all in some stage of sick, though some could walk better and others could shout louder. But bunches came out, lurching and staggering against the walls, and they chased down the Mouse.

The Mouse is fast and zipped down the hallway before any of those sickies noticed it was gone. It made straight for the door at the end of the hall. Must be another stairwell, I thought. I hoped. None of these cousins looked well enough to make it up or down any stairs.

I wasn't far behind. The cousins ignored me. It was the Mouse they wanted. But the stink when the Mouse opened the far door was enough that I nearly passed out then and there. And the Mouse froze in terror.

We had discovered a Mouse nest. Maybe twenty Mice or more, with the little ones and their sleeping rolls and their skimpy thin blankets huddled together. Only these Mice were dead, murdered in their own nest. Old violence showed on them, bashed faces full of blackened blood and covered in flies.

I wanted to puke and I wanted to cry. I turned around and saw the cousins were coming up behind. "C'mon," I said to the Mouse. I tugged its scrawny hand and tried to get it to move. It wouldn't budge.

Absolute Magnitude

And really, I didn't know what I'd do if it did. Even though they were sick, there were a lot of them and they were all big. And now I saw the walking sticks and long poles were weapons as well as tools. Every one was raised and ready to strike.

Nothing was safe and I couldn't see a place to run. I stood in front of the Mouse and faced them, ready to fight. They weren't getting my Mouse.

They ignored me. Or rather, they pulled me out of the way like an inconvenience. I fought, I tried. I beat my fists against their bodies and their sticks but they only passed me further down the line.

The Mouse looked at me, helpless and terrified. Maybe it was dying soon, but it hadn't wanted to die like that. The cousins beat it over the head and I guess, I hope, one blow was enough to kill it. Mice have fragile bones. But death by itself didn't stop the blows from raining down. The Mouse was dead but the cousins were still hot in their anger.

I tried to stay. For the sake of the Mouse who had been my friend I truly tried. But I was shaking and had the dry heaves and tears were dripping down my face faster than an old battery leak. They didn't even notice me go.

I don't remember going back to the collective. I don't remember anything until Momma fed me sliced apples and soup. There were a lot of people in my room, some of the collective elders and Pop-pop and a few Mice. And two people down from Queens Three who all watched me very carefully.

"So tell us again what happened. Why did you go out with the Mouse to find the cousins?" our Pres Pro Tem asked.

"We were being explorers," I said, and sighed. I didn't ever

want to go exploring again. And I told them the whole story, the sick travelers and the dead Mice. And how they had murdered the poor Mouse for no reason at all and how I had been too much of a coward to make them stop.

"You weren't a coward," Momma said. "You're still just a kid, you can't fight off a whole bunch of grown-ups. And they were armed and you were not. You did your best and we're all proud of you."

I wasn't proud of me. I was miserable that I hadn't been able to take care of my friend. And I had promised it that I would warn the other Mice.

"We can't kill all the cousins," Sarah Winter was saying. "They're all over the place and there's too many of them. And we don't have the communications."

"We don't have to kill them," I said. I could see it clear, perfect. All those bent and staggering outsiders who didn't understand. Who had already killed too many Mice.

They were all grown-ups, the cousins. They hadn't seen how much they needed the Mice. And so their own ignorance would kill them.

"All we have to do is make sure the Mice are safe," I said. "Tell the local nest. And put it out to Queens Three. They can get it around fast enough so that no new nests approach the cousins. And without the Mice and the vaccines, the cousins won't be around much longer. And we won't have done a thing. Nothing at all."

There was silence. "Kid's got a point," Pop-pop said. "Plain and simple Darwinism. If the organism can't adapt it dies. I think we've got a new scientist on our hands."

Grownups!



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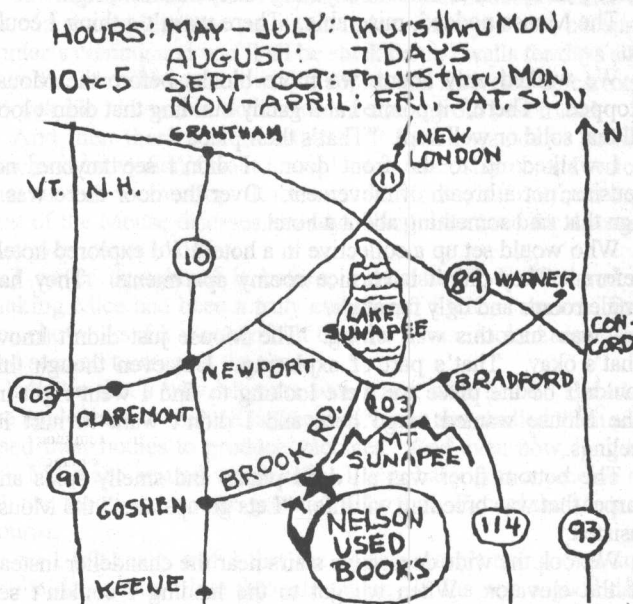
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J.B. Ortiz '95

In addition to writing short stories, Jamie Wild plays lead guitar in a heavy metal band.
This is his first appearance in **Absolute Magnitude**.

Fair Game

by Jamie Wild

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PROLOGUE:

The Rebels weren't supposed to have artillery; nevertheless, shells were falling and damage reports were coming in from all along the line. First Platoon had sustained minor losses and was dug in. A similar report came from the Second. It was Third Platoon that Major Tom Anderson was truly concerned for. They'd suffered heavy losses and the rebels were closing in on them.

"Supply, when will I have those jets?" Anderson demanded.

"Field Leader, their shuttle has just touched down. Twenty minutes."

"Not fast enough, get them to me in five."

"I'm not sure if that's possible, sir, but we'll get on it."

"Artillery status?"

"Mortar contingents up and ready to go. The heavy guns should be operational in two minutes."

"Good, start with mortars immediately and get those jets to me as fast as you can. Field Leader out."

Anderson looked over to Jack McCormick, his executive officer. "They caught us with our pants down."

McCormick nodded. "That they did, sir. The Fourth is moving in to support the Third before it turns into an overrun situation. I've moved elements from the Sixth into replace the Fourth. We're a bit thin on the left flank, but there's no activity on that flank, and frankly considering how many men they have on the right flank I don't think we'll see any activity there."

"I agree."

"Major," an aid broke in, "Captain Chen would like to speak with you on Ship to Ground."

Anderson stepped up to the console. "Field leader here."

"Prepare to abort the mission, Anderson, you have to pull out in five minutes."

"That's not possible."

"Anderson, that is a direct order."

"Captain Chen, while you are the Captain of the *Avenger* you are not a marine officer. As you are aware, the moment we touched town I became the ranking officer. It is your duty to command and see to the safety of the *Avenger*, it is my duty to command and see to the safety of the ship's marines. Unless you can give me a very compelling reason for pulling out, I'm not leaving."

"Anderson, I don't have to answer to you. Have your men back in their shuttles in five minutes."

"Again, Captain, I can't do that. I'm not in a situation where I can withdraw without heavy casualties."

"Anderson, if I have to tell you again I'll be bringing you up before a Court of Inquiry."

"Captain Chen."

"Yes."

"Go fuck yourself. Anderson out."

McCormick smiled, pulled his battle pistol out of its holster and fired into the communicators console. "Major, I believe the radio has taken a direct hit."

"So it has, Lieutenant." A squadron of jets streaked across the sky. As Anderson and McCormick watched, missiles flew out from the jets and pounded the rebel positions. Anderson turned back to the field maps. "Let's get to work, gentlemen, we have a battle to win."

CHAPTER ONE:

Anderson looked around his bare room; the only thing left to pack was his TAZ 12 assault rifle. He placed it and several pods of ammo, carefully into his traveling trunk. It was hard to believe, thirty years as a marine and everything he owned fit into one trunk. It was time to leave. Even so, Anderson lingered in the ten by twelve room that had been his home for nine years. By this time tomorrow the room would have a new occupant, and his men, a new commanding officer.

Damn it, he thought, thirty years as a marine, nine of them with my own command, and the Coalition chooses not to renew my commission. It's not right. With an effort, Anderson reined in his rising anger. "No, I told myself I wouldn't go over this again. I can't change it, I have to accept it and move on. Bull shit, who am I kidding?"

The doorbell chimed.

"It's open."

Beth McKenna entered. "How are you, Major?"

"I've been better, Beth. And I'm not a major anymore, I'm a civilian." The moment the words were out, Anderson regretted them; bitterness served only to demean.

"Tom, I just wanted to let you know that it was an honor and a privilege serving under you."

"Thanks, Beth, it means a lot to hear that from you; for what it's worth, you were a damn fine exec."

"Thank you, Sir, what are your plans?"

"I'm headed to Valmont, last I heard, Jack McCormick, was starting up a merc outfit. I figured my reputation should be of some help to him; even after the incident on New Haven."

"The Court of Inquiry cleared you on the New Haven incident," she said.

"Well, damn Chen anyway. He may be the Captain of the ship, but I was in command of the ship's marines. I never told him how to fly this boat, he shouldn't have tried to tell me how to run a police action. It wasn't his place."

"You don't have to convince me, I was there. Hell, you didn't have any trouble convincing the Court of Inquiry. You made Chen look like an ass. But then, you couldn't have done that without his cooperation."

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"Just the same, it looks like he got the last laugh."

"The Captain of a battleship pulls a lot more G's than a marine major. Still, I bet he had to call in every favor he was ever owed to do this to you. It's been eating him up inside for years, you getting all the glory. He's been nothing more than your chauffeur for the last nine years. 'Oh, there's a problem, send Anderson the Enforcer, he'll fix it.'"

"He could have had me transferred."

"I'm sure he could have, but Chen doesn't do things half way. Leaving you on Eden, though, what a son-of-a-bitch."

"We've always known he was a son-of-a-bitch. I'm fairly certain that he had something to do with McCormick's discharge."

"I wouldn't be surprised."

"So, what happens to you and the men now?" Anderson asked, changing the subject.

"Chen made me acting commander. Tom, I'm sorry."

Anderson shook his head.

"I know that he only promoted me to get at you. I tried to turn the commission down. Chen gave me a direct order. I didn't have a choice."

"God damn it, Chen's not a marine, he couldn't have ordered you to take command without authorization from someone high up in the Corps."

"I know."

"How could any marine be part of what Chen's doing. I expect this kind of treatment from a Navy officer, but Marine officers are supposed to have honor. There's no honor in this."

"Tom, I hope you're not angry with me? I'd like to think that we're friends."

"Of course we are. I know you didn't take the promotion with the intent of hurting me."

"I'm glad you understand."

"All civilians must disembark at this time," the ship's intercom announced.

"That would be me," said Anderson. "Well, at least Chen didn't come down here to gloat in his moment of triumph."

"To be honest with you, he hasn't had a chance to gloat yet. There's been a series of minor emergencies requiring his personal attention. It's the strangest thing."

Anderson laughed. "Thanks, Beth. Would you do me the honor of escorting me off the ship?"

"With great reluctance, Sir."

Anderson switched on his traveling case, it homed in on a stud in his belt and followed him out of the room. Beth lead Anderson through the ship, Anderson realized that all of the marines had contrived to be on duty in the hallways that lead to the exit ramp. They each stopped their make-work to salute him as he passed. With watery eyes, he returned their salutes.

When Beth and Anderson reached the exit ramp in the cargo bay, Gordon Lopez, the ranking noncom, approached them. "Major Anderson, on behalf of the men, I would like to let you know how badly you'll be missed; we all think it's terrible what Captain Chen is doing to you."

"Thanks, Gordon. Let the men know that I appreciated their being here for me. As for Captain Chen, well, I'm sure he did what he thought was necessary."

Gordon saluted.

Anderson returned the salute and then made his way out of the cargo bay, his traveling trunk followed behind. Anderson had always assumed that his final departure from the *Avenger* would be through an iris valve; that eventually the dangers of his

profession would catch up with him. Decommissioned and leaving through a cargo bay was simply incomprehensible.

Once outside, the stench from Eden hit him, driving all thought of the *Avenger* from his mind. Oh, dear God, I knew that Eden was a refuse planet, but I didn't expect this, he thought. His eyes watered and his stomach turned as he walked the three hundred meters to the Space Port, with no thought of dignity. All the garbage from the sector was shipped here. Knowing that intellectually was one thing, walking through it, was something else entirely. With each step, his hatred for Chen grew.

At the gate, Anderson declared his belongings. Only his assault rifle and the automatic battle pistol, that he was wearing in a shoulder holster, drew any attention. The guards checked on his permits for the weapons. It was then that Anderson discovered his Coalition weapons permit had been revoked. Holding back an anger that was as great as any he had ever experienced, he surrendered his weapons to the guards. Then he was inside the Space Port.

On this planet there was no escape from the stench, but inside, at least, it was somewhat more bearable. Eden's Space Port looked more or less like any other Space Port. There were two hotels to chose from, the Holiday Inn and the Ramada; three bars, and a lot of shops. Unlike most Space Ports, though, this one was not congested. After all, who in their right mind would be on a planet like this?

Anderson entered the Ramada and approached the counter. "May I help you?" the woman behind the counter asked.

"Yes, I'd like a room."

"How long will you be staying?"

"Two days," please God, let it be no longer.

"Smoking or non-smoking?"

"Non-smoking."

"Would you like one of our self contained, atmospheric rooms?"

"Excuse me?"

"An air tight room with its own oxygen supply. It's the only way to keep the smell out."

"Oh, I see. Yes, I most certainly would."

"May I see your credit disk?"

Anderson removed his disk from his wallet and handed it to the woman. She slid it into her terminal. The disk was a spacer's most important possession. It contained all of his credit lines, access to his bank accounts, and his entire work history. When traveling from planet to planet, prospective employers wouldn't wait for references to check out.

"Now if you would just place your thumb up to the scanner for verification, and say, 'my name is Tom Anderson, I will be staying in room 305,' We'll be all set." Anderson did this thing.

The woman handed the disc back to him. "If you follow the blue line on the floor, it will lead you to your room; your lock is voice activated. Should you need anything, just dial the operator."

"Thank you," Anderson said, leaving to follow the blue line. It was a short walk to his room. The door opened easily enough for him and he entered. The room actually smelled pleasant. Anderson moved his trunk to a corner, switched it off, and then went to the shower. He turned the water on to hot, stripped out of his clothes, and stepped into the steaming shower. The water was scalding, but it washed away the stench of the planet. He spent fifteen minutes just standing under the water.

Fair Game

Anderson couldn't understand how Chen could have done this to him. Being a Coalition officer was supposed to mean something. There was integrity involved, one didn't abuse the power for personal gain or petty vengeance. What Chen had done went against everything Anderson believed the Coalition stood for. And worse, the Corps had to have been in on it. It just didn't make any sense. Maybe his discharge had been on the up and up, maybe he had lost it. *No*, he couldn't believe that, he couldn't let himself believe that. He was Anderson the Enforcer, the best damn officer the corps had ever produced.

Turning off the shower, Anderson reached for a towel. He dried his closely cropped, light brown hair, then he wrapped the towel around his waist, and got out of the shower. Passing by the mirror, he decided he needed an application of dilapidatory cream. He spread the hotel's complimentary cream on his face and then rinsed it off. Fine blond hair filled the sink. He smiled at that, those blond hairs were the reason that he wouldn't grow a beard. He'd never met anyone who's facial hair color differed as greatly as his did from the rest of his hair. He couldn't grow a beard without it looking artificial. Anderson didn't really like the idea of hiding his face under a layer of scruff. His features were strong, the kind you might expect to see on a recruiting poster, straight nose, deep set eyes, strong chin, and ears that weren't too big. He stood one-hundred-ninety-three centimeters tall and weighed in at ninety-nine kilograms. Anderson kept in excellent condition by exercising three hours a day. His forty-eight years hardly showed at all.

Suddenly, the door to the bathroom burst open. A large man, perhaps two centimeters taller than Anderson, stepped in and leveled a pistol at him. Anderson hurled himself at the gunman, taking him to the floor before he could fire. There was a brief struggle. When it was over, Anderson had the gunman pinned to the floor and possession of his pistol. Obviously not a military man.

"What's going on here?"

The reply Anderson received was less than satisfactory. Anderson pistol whipped the man, and then went to his traveling case and got out a roll of duct tape. Moving quickly and efficiently, he taped the man firmly to a chair. Then he got dressed.

He looked at the pistol. It was a nine millimeter. An effective weapon for a close kill. Not enough stopping power for Anderson's taste, but enough to do the job. He sat down and waited for his attacker to wake up. A few moments later he got tired of waiting. A glass of water speeded the man's recovery.

"Now would you care to be a bit more cooperative?"

Again his response was less than satisfactory.

"Look, punk, I'm not having a good day. If you don't tell me why you just tried to kill me, I'll have to kill you to make sure you don't try it again. I'm not the type to go to the police."

This time Anderson got no response at all, but he could see fear in the eyes of his captive.

Anderson made a production of looking over the nine millimeter. "You know, I've never actually killed anyone with a weapon this small. I've always wondered how big a hole it would leave. I guess this is my opportunity to find out."

"Don't shoot me," the man whispered.

"Now we're getting somewhere. I'll make you a deal. I won't shoot you and you'll tell me what's going on."

"I can't."

"Look, do you want me to shoot out your kneecaps? Is that what I have to do to make you take me seriously?"

The man shook his head. "I came here to kill you."

"There's a blinding glimpse of the obvious. Care to tell me why?"

"For money, I'm a pro."

Anderson snorted at that. "Who hired you?"

"I don't know. I belong to a network. Whenever I need a job, I call up the Network's job listing. Your name was there this morning; the price was right."

"How much am I worth?"

A million and a half units."

"Jesus Christ, a million and a half units. Every punk in this sector will be gunning for me. You wouldn't happen to have exclusive rights to me, would you?"

"No, you're fair game."

"Great...great. Who runs this Network?"

"How the hell should I know. I've told you everything I know."

Anderson considered roughing up his assailant for more information, but decided against it. It just wasn't to his taste. Instead, he gagged the man. "You might be here a while, try not to get excited; that could make it a bit difficult to breathe." He slid the captured pistol into his shoulder holster, he had a feeling that he might be needing it soon; then he put the "Do Not Disturb" sign on the doorknob and slipped quietly out of the room, his traveling trunk in tow.

Anderson went to the first public computer terminal that he saw and slid his disk into it. He had to get off of this planet. Once off the planet, he would have to find out who wanted him dead. Using the terminal's directory he was able to get a listing of all the ships departing that week. There were three, but none of them were passenger ships. It had been too much to hope for. Next, Anderson checked the employment section. One of the departing ships, a courier named the *Hawk*, was looking to hire a gunnery technician. All interested applicants were to apply in person at Bay Six.

CHAPTER TWO:

The ship, as it turned out, was more than just a courier. It flew Earth colors and was armed with no less than eight laser cannons, four torpedo bays, and six multi-barrel guns. This little ship had big teeth.

Anderson approached a guard at the base of the cargo bay. "Excuse me, I'm interested in applying for the gunnery tech position."

The guard brightened up. Apparently, the Sergeant hadn't been looking forward to an interstellar voyage without a gunnery tech. She spoke into a radio transceiver. "Captain, we have a gunnery tech down here, who would like to speak with you."

"Well, don't keep the son-of-a-bitch waiting, send him up."

The sergeant looked at Anderson. "The Captain would be delighted to see you. Have you ever been on an Earth Courier before, Sir?"

"No, Sergeant, I haven't."

"Just walk on into the cargo bay and take the elevator on the port side up to the top level, that's the bridge. Captain Jackson will be waiting for you. If you would like, Sir, you can leave your traveling trunk with me, I'll keep an eye on it."

"Thank you, Sergeant."

"Don't mention it, Sir, and welcome aboard."

Anderson entered the cargo bay. It had been modified to allow for more engine space, making the ship much faster than

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most couriers. Armed to the teeth and modified engines, Anderson mused. I wonder what's going on here?

What little space that was left in the bay, was filled with unmarked crates. Anderson negotiated through the crates to the elevator, and was on the bridge a minute later. For such a small ship, it had a large bridge. The Captain was much like his bridge, bigger than one expected. He was over two meters tall and none of his considerable bulk was fat. For all Jackson's size, the jovial lines on his brown face kept him from seeming overbearing.

"Welcome aboard," he boomed. "I'm Captain Jackson, and you are?"

"Tom Anderson."

"If I may ask, what brings you to this tropical paradise?"

"Until yesterday, I was a member of the Coalition's marine core. My hitch ran out, the *Avenger* dropped me off here."

"My God, man, why didn't you re-up? Five years as a marine has got to be better than one week on this planet."

"I did re-up, Sir. The Coalition chose not to consider my commission for renewal."

Jackson's eyes narrowed. "Why do you suppose the *Avenger* was scheduled to be on Eden when your commission ran out?"

"To be honest with you, I assume that Captain Chen considered it a comment on my worth as an officer. We were not on good terms."

Jackson looked suspicious. "May I see your disk." Anderson handed it to him, and Jackson slid it into the console of his ship's computer. "If you wouldn't mind?" he said, motioning towards the scanner. Anderson showed the scanner his thumb and it came to life. The disk's directory appeared in the air before Jackson. Jackson went immediately to Anderson's work history.

"Seventeen decorations, very impressive. It's been more than twenty years since you've been a Gunnery Sergeant, though, *Major*."

"Yes, Sir, it has, but I've kept up with the field. I'm sure that a few hours of simulation with your system will have me up to snuff."

Jackson continued reading. "I thought I recognized your name, *you're* Anderson the Enforcer."

Anderson nodded, it was good to be recognized, but he wasn't sure how to respond. Being discharged was really having an effect on him.

"You were brought before a Court of Inquiry last year."

"Yes, and I was cleared of any wrong doing."

Jackson smiled. "I remember it. You got quite a lot of publicity. It's not often that a man gets taped telling his Commanding Officer to go fuck himself, and is still found innocent of insubordination."

"I was insubordinate, but I was justified in my actions."

"Could you refresh my memory on that?"

"Certainly. The *Avenger* was deployed in orbit around New Haven. The planetary government had been dealing with an armed insurrection for about six months. We were called in to put a stop to it. Guerilla warfare's not an easy thing to deal with on an urban planet; but through good intelligence and some misinformation, on our part, we were able to trick the Guerillas into committing their entire force into one engagement. Chen ordered me out in the middle of the operation. If I had pulled out at that point, my casualties would have been unacceptable. Worse, I probably wouldn't have gotten another chance to engage the enemy en masse. As the situation stood, I cleaned up the rebel forces in less than an hour. Had I followed Chen's

orders, we'd still be there. It wasn't Chen's place to radio in orders during a combat operation; so, I told him to go fuck himself."

"It seems to me that there must have been a more politic way of saying that to him."

"Undoubtedly there was, Sir."

"Do you have any idea why Chen ordered you out?" Jackson asked leadingly.

"None."

"You put me in an awkward position"

"How so?"

"I desperately need a gunnery tech, but I can't trust anyone affiliated with the Coalition."

"As of 0900 hours this morning, my affiliation with the Coalition ended."

Jackson sighed. "What choice do I have? I need a gunnery tech. Mister Anderson, I want you to know that your weapons board will be monitored closely by my First Mate. If there is any sign of deception he will take over the weapons board, and you will be held in cold freeze until we reach Earth. There, you will be tried as an enemy of the state. After a trial, you will be executed. Do you understand?"

Anderson blinked. What the hell was this? Enemy of the state? All Anderson wanted was a ride off Eden, preferable in the right direction. Something was going on here. He considered asking for his disk back and leaving immediately. Unfortunate, it wasn't that easy. Someone out there wanted him dead. His only hope of staying alive was to keep moving. A million and a half units would draw a whole lot of hit men, and some of them were bound to be better than the one Anderson had left in his hotel room.

"I understand," he said reluctantly. What choice did he have? If he wanted to go on living, he had to find his way to Valmont. There he could hook up with McCormick, and figure out what to do. Until he got off Eden, he would be an easy target.

"Here are the details," Jackson said. "The *Hawk* is headed for Tristen. Once we reach Tristen, your services will no longer be required. I'm authorized to offer you two-thousand units for the job. Before you accept it, though, you should know that we are likely to see action. We've been out for three months, and in that time we've had to defend our selves six times."

"But, Sir, this sector is well patrolled by Coalition vessels. I can't imagine that anyone would dare attempt something between here and Tristen."

"You're not from Earth, we have a different opinion as to how safe Coalition space is. If you're a merchant flying from any one of their ninety-seven planets, you can count on them, otherwise—"

"Politics."

"Exactly."

Anderson thought for a moment. The *Hawk* was going in the right direction, but the situation was getting more complicated by the moment. Damn Chen for setting me down here! "Before I sign on, could you tell me what happened to your previous gunnery tech?"

"She came down with a shipboard flu and died of complications brought on by dehydration."

Every instinct that Anderson had was screaming for him to get off of the *Hawk*, but he couldn't. He just didn't have a choice; he had to get off of Eden. "I guess I'm in."

Fair Game

Jackson smiled. "Welcome aboard. We go by first names here, Tom. Mine's Johanna or Joe, whichever you prefer. Would you like me to send someone for your belongings?"

"That won't be necessary, they're right outside. I've only been on the planet for a few hours."

"Let me assure you, Tom, you missed nothing."

Anderson stowed his gear and started working with the ship's gunnery simulator. The *Hawk's* guns were trickier than the ones that he had run some twenty-three years ago. He went through the entire array of simulated attacks. Anderson was impressed with what the ship was capable of. He was certain that it could stand up to any three couriers that he had ever seen. It might even be able to handle two destroyers. The *Hawk* was something. If Jackson was any kind of pilot, he had nothing to worry about, not with this gunnery set up.

Sweaty and tired, Anderson turned off the simulator. It had taken him four hours to qualify expert. He looked about the bridge, Jackson was still there.

"You have no idea how pleased I am by your handling of the ship's guns."

"Thanks," Anderson replied. "Are we that likely to run into trouble?"

"I'm afraid so. We've been sitting on this planet for a week hoping to find a gunner. If you hadn't happened along when you did, we would have left without one. We've spent too long here. I'm sure someone has figured out our location."

Anderson wanted to ask what was going on, what the hell was Jackson talking about? But he could tell that he wouldn't get any answers, so he remained quiet.

"It's late, Jackson said, "I'm turning in. We leave at 0600 hours. See you in the morning."

"Good night, Sir."

Anderson reported to the bridge at 0500 hours. He wanted to go over the battle procedure again before lift off. When he arrived there the entire bridge crew was all ready at their stations.

"Good morning, Tom," Jackson said, with a cheerful smile.

"Are you a coffee drinker?"

"Only in the morning."

"Let me guess, black?"

"No, Sir, light and sweet."

"I had you pegged as one of those hard-as-nails marines, who drinks his coffee black and his whiskey straight."

"I'm afraid not. I don't even like whiskey."

Jackson chuckled and got Anderson a cup of coffee. Then he introduced him to the rest of the crew, which consisted of a First Mate, Jay Rysnik; a Second Mate, Valery Stevens; and an astrogator, Dan Pain.

At exactly 0600 hours, the *Hawk* was ready for lift off.

"All stations report secure for lift off, Captain," said Rysnik.

Apparently, the first name basis disappeared during duty hours, Anderson observed.

"Thank you very much, Lieutenant Commander." Jackson activated the ship's radio. *E.F.S. Hawk* to Port Control. We are ready for lift off. Request clearance?"

"Control to *E.F.S. Hawk*. You have clearance. We hope that you enjoyed your stay and that we'll see you again soon."

"Not bloody likely," Jackson replied. "All stations prepare for lift off in one minute."

The sixty seconds elapsed and Jackson took her up. He did so expertly and confidently through tricky wind patterns. The First

Mate looked intently at his control board, but it was apparent that he didn't expect to have to take over for Jackson. Then they were in space and headed out of the system. In three hours they would be far enough out of the system's gravitational pull to engage their faster than light drive. Until that time, there was nothing to do, but watch the ship's instruments."

"Coalition destroyer entering the system," Stevens announced. "And, Sir, they're headed on an intercept course."

"Anderson, prepare to fire, on my order. Rysnik, open a hailing channel. Let's see what they have to say for themselves."

"But, Sir," Anderson objected, "that's a Coalition vessel."

Jackson turned sharply to Anderson. "If that ship attempts to interfere with a vessel of a sovereign state, it's piracy. I don't care what colors they're flying; I will defend myself. Now do as you're ordered."

Anderson began scanning the Coalition ship with the *Hawk's* instruments.

"Coalition vessel, This is the *E.F.S. Hawk*, please acknowledge," said Rysnik.

"*E.F.S. Hawk*, this is the *C.S. Treader*. Prepare to be boarded."

"Jackson took over the microphone. "*Treader*, this is Captain Jackson of the Earth Navy, I would like to speak to your Captain."

"Captain Jackson, this is lieutenant Commander Avery. I'm in command of the *Treader*."

"What is the meaning of this? You cannot board my vessel."

"Captain, we have a report of contraband on your vessel. We must inspect."

"In accordance with Resolution 101, Section D, of the United Planets, which states that 'no military vessel of a sovereign state may be subject to search by another sovereign state,' I must respectfully decline your request to board."

"We didn't request permission to board, we demanded it. There are ample precedences, under that resolution, for my actions."

"There just might be, but my ship is also protected from unlawful boarding by the Earth Coalition Treaty of 2205. To that Treaty, there are no exceptions. Any attempt to board my ship will be considered an act of piracy."

"Enough of the bravado, I've got the armament to force a boarding. You have five minutes to prepare for boarding. *Treader* out."

"Mister Avery, you have badly underestimated your opponent. Anderson, fire at will."

Anderson was hesitant to fire on a Coalition vessel, but he was familiar with both the resolution and the treaty that Jackson had quoted. Jackson was right. Anderson found it hard to believe that he was in a position that necessitated his firing on a Coalition vessel.

Anderson fired off four missiles in quick succession.

The *Treader's* anti-missile fire came to life immediately, as did their offensive fire. Anderson now had to focus on defensive fire, as well as offensive fire. He worked frantically to keep any missiles from hitting the *Hawk*. There was little that he could do defensively about the *Treader's* laserfire, that was Jackson's job. If Jackson could keep the *Hawk* out of the path of a laser beam everything would be fine, if not, then the ship's shields would be punished. A courier's shields wouldn't stand up to a lot of punishment.

As he fired at incoming missiles, Anderson felt the ship being yanked about by Jackson. It was obvious that Jackson was a

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superlative pilot. Each time that a missile exploded, the *Hawk's* sensors would be overloaded for a moment, causing a strobe effect on the weapons screen. As the fire fight progressed, the *Treader* was having increased difficulty keeping up with the number of missiles that Anderson was throwing at it. Finally, the *Treader* broke off its offensive fire and concentrated on defensive fire.

"The *Avenger* and her escort have just launched from Eden," Rysnik said tersely.

"How long until we're within range of their big guns?" Jackson asked, without taking any attention away from his piloting.

"No more than ten minutes, Sir," was the reply.

"Damn, we can't just break it off with the *Treader*, that would be suicide. Anderson, how long before you crack through the *Treader's* defenses?"

"Not soon enough, Sir."

"Can you get anything more out of the ship's guns?"

"I'm already firing at eighty percent capacity on all systems. Any higher and the weapons systems won't hold up for long."

"They don't have to hold up for long. They just have to disable the *Treader*. If we don't get out of here now, we never will. Anderson, melt the guns!"

"Yes, Sir."

Anderson keyed up one-hundred percent capacity on all systems, and went after the *Treader* with everything he had. All eight lasers fired continuously and torpedoes flooded forth from their bays. Almost immediately, lasers seven and eight went down. Torpedo bay three jammed after its seventh launch.

"Lasers seven and eight are down, as well as torpedo bay three. All weapons systems are showing systems' warnings. It's going to be damn close, Captain," Anderson said.

"Do what you have to, but put the *Treader* down," Jackson replied.

When lasers one, two, and five went down, Anderson didn't think that the *Hawk* was going to make it. Just as he was about to inform Jackson of this, a missile got through the *Treader's* defensive laser fire. The weapons screen was overloaded from the resulting explosion. When the screen cleared it was apparent that the *Treader* would never be spaceworthy again.

"Got them, Captain. We're ready to pull out."

"Good job, Anderson."

"Captain, the *Avenger* has opened fire with torpedoes." Rysnik said.

"Can we stay ahead of them long enough to get to faster than light drive?"

"I'm afraid not, Sir."

"Anderson, can you handle them?" Jackson asked

"Not with just three lasers."

"Damn, engineering, report on laser weapons system."

"Captain," came the reply. "Lasers one and five are completely fried. Seven and eight are repairable, I'm not sure about three."

"Get on the repairs, we need those lasers *now*."

"Will do, sir."

The *Hawk* sped out of the system, with an ever increasing number of torpedoes following it. Despite Anderson's best efforts, the torpedoes gained on the *Hawk*. He might have had a prayer, had he been directly interfaced with the ship's guns, but that had been outlawed after the Nano Wars. "Sir, we're not going to make it."

"Just keep at it, Anderson, we *have* to make it," Jackson replied.

Anderson was about to give up hope, when the number eight laser flashed operable. With the added fire power, he was able to slow the rate that the missiles were gaining on the *Hawk*. Patiently, Anderson fired at the closest missiles. His screen informed him that there were two-hundred-thirty-six missiles chasing them. That daunting number was growing. God, Anderson thought, they want us bad. Laser seven flashed operable. He added it to his arsenal.

"Sir," Rysnik said excitedly, "at present rate, we'll make it to faster than light before the missiles overtake us."

Everyone, except Anderson, who didn't have time, breathed a sigh of relief. Now if the lasers would just hold up, everything would be fine.

"All hands prepare for faster than light drive," Jackson voice said, "faster than light drive in sixty seconds."

The computer began a count down, and Anderson felt the syringe that was set into his chair, inject him with pre-faster-than-light medicine. The transition from regular travel to faster than light, could be a rocky one. When the transition came, it was quick. One moment everything was normal and the next, Anderson's stomach slammed into his Adams apple. The unpleasant sensation ended quickly. The only lasting effect of their increased speed was that everything had a light tint of blue or red.

"We're home free," Rysnik announced. "We didn't pull any of the torpedoes along with us."

Anderson let his hands slip away from the weapons board. He took a deep breath and said a prayer of thanks. It had been very close. Now that the *Hawk* was moving faster than the speed of light, it could not be followed effectively.

"Captain, what just happened?" Anderson asked.

"Tom, you served aboard the *Avenger*, right?"

"Yes."

"And until recently, the *Avenger* spent most of its time on or near the frontier. Am I right?"

"I don't see what that has to do with anything."

"Back here in the center, things have been heating up between the Coalition and Earth. I'm afraid war may not be far off. Both sides have been keeping it quiet, but I'm surprised to find that the Coalition is even keeping it quiet from their officers."

"Look, I know that relations are strained between Earth and the Coalition. That's a nothing new, but open combat."

"In all honesty, it doesn't happen often, and when it does the Earth vessel doesn't usually walk away."

"I can imagine. The Coalition out guns you something like two-hundred to one."

"That is a problem, but Earth is not willing to walk away from space. That's the only thing that will make the Coalition happy, a complete monopoly on all space travel and exploration."

"But Earth against the Coalition, that's not war, that's target practice."

Jackson nodded grimly. "You're right about that, but old mother Earth isn't willing to just roll over and cede all of space to the Coalition. It's that simple. They want everything, and we're not willing to give up what we have."

This put Anderson back a few paces. It had been more than twenty years since he had spent any time near the center. He had had no idea that things had become this bad. What's been going on out here? he wondered. And why didn't I have a clue that tensions were this high? After all, I was a Major in the

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Coalition's Marine Corps. You would think that I would be informed.

The rest of the trip found Anderson with nothing much to do. A gunnery technician was not needed on the bridge during faster than light travel. There were no targets at this speed and even if there had been, no one had ever invented a weapons system that could fire effectively while moving faster than light.

Anderson spent the rest of the trip trying to figure out who might have taken the contract out on him. It was a tough call, with a career like his, he had made a lot of enemies. Any number of them might want to exact some form of vengeance. But a million and a half credits worth? Who did he know with that kind of money? He couldn't think of anyone.

Well, he thought, at least I'm in space, no one can take a potshot at me here. Hopefully, I can stay alive long enough to get to Valmont. Then I can join up with McCormick and his unit. Between the two of us we should be able to come up with something.

Suddenly, Anderson was struck with another thought. Do I really want to be a mercenary. I'm forty-eight years old, I've been doing this all my life. Maybe it's time to move on. I've got at least another one hundred fifty years of life left, do I want to spend it as a soldier. Most people my age have already moved on to their second career, some even their third. Why should I stay with this? Unfortunately, he knew the answer. He was a professional soldier, professional soldiers didn't just change occupations. It was simple, he would be a soldier until he died; that was the only way out.

Two weeks later, two-thousand units richer, and with a lot of unanswered questions, Anderson arrived on Tristen. Before disembarking from the *Hawk*, he checked the computer and found that there were three passenger ships leaving for Valmont that day. He booked a first class passage on *The Betsy Lou* and made arraignments for someone to pick up his traveling trunk. *The Betsy Lou* was leaving in an hour. Anderson wanted to spend as little time on the planet as possible. He wasn't taking any chances.

As Anderson was disembarking from the *Hawk*, Jackson approached him. "Tom, on behalf of the crew and Earth's government, I would like to thank you. We couldn't have made it here without you."

"Thanks, Johanna, I appreciate the sentiment, but I was just doing the job you hired me for."

"Just the same, I put a letter of recommendation into your work file. If you're ever on Earth and need a job, look me up."

"I'll keep that in mind," Anderson said.

CHAPTER THREE:

Once off the *Hawk*, Anderson made his way through the Space Port to a pay-phone. He couldn't remember seeing a dirtier Space Port. The Port's walls were scrawled with graffiti. Most of it, racist slurs, of one kind or another. Many of the shops had signs that said 'No Trindans.' Anderson wondered what racial type the Trindans were. Would he qualify as one? Some of the stores had signs that were even stranger. They said "No Offworlders." In a Space Port? He decided he didn't like this planet.

All about the Port, construction work, of one kind or another, had apparently been started and then abandoned. It gave Anderson the feeling of walking through a war zone. Still, it was

an improvement over Eden. Finally, he reached the pay-phones. There were ten of them in a row, one was in use.

As it tuned out, only the phone in use worked. Anderson had to wait six minutes to place his call. The call to Valmont cost him five-hundred units. The phone rang seven times before McCormick answered.

"McCormick here."

"Mac, how the hell are you? This is Tom Anderson."

"Major, it's great to hear from you. Where are you?"

"I'm on Tristen en route to Valmont. I'll be arriving in two weeks on *The Betsy Lou*. I'm in trouble, Mac. I need some help."

"What kind of trouble, Tom?"

Anderson was framing the answer to McCormick's question when he noticed a man talking on the phone to his right. Instinctively Anderson's hand went to his pistol. As none of the other phones worked, something was up. The man saw Anderson move his hand into his jacket and did the same. Both had their pistols out at about the same time, but Anderson fired first. As his attacker was falling, he squeezed the trigger of his pistol. It shattered the glass in Anderson's booth, just missing him.

"I've got to let you go, Mac." Anderson said dropping the phone.

As Anderson, with his nine millimeter in hand, approached his would be assailant, he was vaguely aware of people screaming and running for cover. The downed shooter was a big man, perhaps two-hundred centimeters tall. His hair was in a military cut, and his face was pinched and harsh; it showed signs of plastic surgery. He was wearing a Kevlar jacket that had undoubtedly saved his life. Anderson shook his head, if he had still had his combat pistol the man would have been very dead, Kevlar jacket or not. Most importantly, Anderson wouldn't have been faced with the decision as to what to do next.

The shooter moaned and tried to get up. From his fingertips razor sharp, steel fingernails slid out and clicked audibly into place. He's a God damn cyborg! Anderson thought. A wave of revulsion flowed through him and he emptied his pistol point blank into the cyborg's face. The cyborg was slammed back into the ground, his face erupting into a mask of blood and steel. Still, the cyborg didn't die, the nine millimeter simply didn't have enough impact to penetrate the cyborg's armored skull. To late, Anderson realized that he should have fired into the cyborg's neck. That was its weakest point, but his conditioned response had not allowed for thought. He had been trained from childhood to hate and fear any interfacing of man and machine.

I'm in deep shit, Anderson thought. This thing's not dead and I'm out of bullets.

It got worse, two three-wheeled police cycles arrived on the scene with lights flashing and sirens blaring. Anderson threw down his pistol and ran in the opposite direction. He couldn't afford to be held for questioning. He wasn't afraid of going to jail for the shooting, after all, he had shot a cyborg; but he was afraid that he would be killed while being held for questioning. Jail would not be a safe place for him to be right now.

Anderson didn't know how he was going to get away, but he had to get away. One of the cycles stopped in front of the cyborg, the other followed after Anderson. A quick look around showed Anderson that he had only one avenue of escape. Off to his left, there was a stairway with a construction barrier across it; apparently it led down to another level. He hopped the barrier and ran down the steps four at a time. He reached the bottom of

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the stairs just as the police cycle smashed through the construction barrier. The cycles' oversized tires kept it from overturning as it came down the stairs.

Anderson found himself on an abandoned subway platform. He thought about trying to escape into the subway tunnel, but decided against it. The cycle wouldn't have any trouble running him down. He had to deal with the cop, and he had to deal with him now. Not liking the only idea that came to mind, he stepped to his left. When the cycle came roaring out onto the platform, he threw himself at the cop driving it. They both landed in a heap and the cycle rode off of the platform. Anderson picked himself up, the cop wasn't moving, his neck had been bent to an impossible angle. Anderson knew a moment of regret, the man had only been doing his job. Forcing his emotions aside, he made his way down into the tunnel and righted the over turned cycle. As it was still operable, he started it.

He was just in time, the other police cycle was on its way down the stairs. Anderson's blood turned to ice in his veins, the cycle was being driven by the gore splattered cyborg. Not wasting any time, Anderson got on the cycle and roared off down the tunnel. He thanked God that the subway system wasn't electrical. If it had been, he would already have been finished. The cyborg wasn't far behind him and was gaining. An occasional shot rang out. Fortunately, the cyborg wasn't having any luck aiming at this speed. But Anderson knew that sooner or later, the cyborg would get lucky.

When he reached a turn-off that looked to be in use, Anderson took it. Perhaps he could make his way to an open platform, and lose himself in a crowd. That was, if this planet had crowds. As he turned onto the newer section of tunnel, to his horror, he found that a subway train was headed straight at him. He looked around desperately for a means of escape as he and the train sped towards one another. He had a vision of himself mashed onto the front of the train like an insect on a car's grill. At almost the last second, Anderson saw a sharp turn-off to his right that had been hidden by the angle of the wall. It was too sharp to be taken at the speed he was traveling, but the train was too close to even consider slowing down. He locked up the brakes and took the corner on two wheels. Just before he and the cycle crashed into the wall, he heard the cyborg scream as it collided with the train. The oversized wheels of the police cycle caused it to bounce away from the wall. It took all of Anderson's strength and concentration to bring the cycle under control. Once he was sure that he wasn't going to crash, Anderson let out a sigh of relief and slowed the cycle to a saner speed.

Five minutes later he found an open platform. The people on it all gaped at him as he got off of the police cycle. No one tried to stop him as he climbed out of the subway tunnel. Once out of the subway, Anderson found that he was no longer in the Space Port. He took a cab back to the Port, and was just in time to watch *The Betsy Lou* lift off with his luggage on board.

Anderson had to laugh at his situation. Unarmed and alone on a planet he didn't know with a price on his head. How much worse could it get? A lot worse, Anderson realized. He could be dead. Now was not the time to feel sorry for himself. He had to keep moving and stay alive.

Not knowing what else to do Anderson headed back towards the Space Port's shops. He found a weapons store. Without a permit, all he could purchase was a needle gun and trunk clips. It wasn't much, but it would have to do. Next came a change of clothing. Then it was time to find a way off of the planet.

A bit apprehensively he went back to the pay phone and called McCormick again. This time McCormick answered on the first ring. "McCormick here."

"Mac, It's me again."

"What the hell is going on, Tom. Are you okay?"

"For the time being. But I've got to get off this planet, and I can't use a passenger ship."

"Why?"

"There's a price on my head. I'm afraid that if my name comes up on a passenger list, I'm done."

"Jesus, let me think. You're on Tristen?"

"Yes."

"Okay, there's a ship owner there who owes me a favor. His name's Carlson Burgess. He owns a small survey ship. Tell him I sent you, he'll get you off Tristen. From there we'll figure something out."

"Thanks, Mac. I owe you one."

"Not in a million years. You've gotten me out of more jams than I can count."

"Well, thanks anyway. I've got to keep moving, I'll see you soon."

"Count on it."

Anderson hung up the phone and headed back to the ship bays. It took him fifteen minutes to locate Burgess' ship, *The Hound*. He walked up to the open bay and rang the bell. No one answered, but Anderson could hear angry voices. Cautiously, he entered the bay.

Inside he found two men and a woman roughing up a man he could only assume was Burgess.

"Listen, deadbeat. Today we're just going to break your arms," the woman said. "If you don't have the money tomorrow, you're dead."

Anderson aimed his needler at the thugs and dropped two of them. Burgess slumped to the floor and the remaining thug spun around while reaching into her jacket.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you," Anderson said with a smile on his face. "There isn't one chance in a thousand that you'll get your weapon out."

The woman slowly withdrew her hand from her jacket. She had closely cropped blond hair and if not for her hardened expression she would have been very attractive. "Okay, I'm leaving my gun in its holster. Buddy, do you have any idea who you're fucking with?"

Anderson shook his head. "Doesn't really matter to me. I've business with Mister Burgess here, and I need his arms in working order."

"If you don't want to end up dead, you'll just turn around and forget about your business with Mister Burgess."

"First off, I can't do that. Second off, you're not in any position to threaten me."

"Listen, you son of a bitch—"

"No, you listen. I'm getting very tired of this conversation. I'm sure if I kill you, Mister Burgess will be more than happy to help me dispose of your body. I would suggest that you be a bit more cooperative. How much money does Burgess owe you?"

"Three thousand units."

"For that you were going to kill him?"

"That's the way it works. If he can't pay, he shouldn't play."

"Will you take a transfer from disk?"

"Sure."

"Then help Mister Burgess up, we'll need his ship's terminal for the transfer."

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"You're going to pay off his debt?"

"Yes, now help him up."

Fifteen minutes later the transaction was complete and the goons were gone.

Burgess turned to Anderson, "Thanks, I appreciate your help. What was the business you mentioned?"

"I need to get to Valmont, fast. Jack McCormick told me you could help me out."

"I should have known that you were a friend of McCormick's. You've got that same predatory look. When do you need to leave?"

"Yesterday?"

Burgess nodded. "I was afraid of that. I'm kind of embarrassed about this, but I can't lift off until I pay the port dues. Unfortunately, I don't have the units."

"How much?"

"Another thousand."

"Okay, but we leave just as soon as we close the transaction."

"No problem there."

Moments after the transaction, both Anderson and Burgess were strapped in and preparing for lift off."

"So tell me," Burgess said, "Why do you need to get off planet so quickly?"

"Health reasons."

"I sure know how that goes. If I hadn't owed the port dues, I would have left for health reasons myself." Burgess pulled a bottle of scotch out of a compartment in the Captain's chair and took a long drink. "Would you like some?" he asked of Anderson.

"No thanks, I'm fine."

"It's just as well," Burgess said, "it wouldn't sit well in your stomach when we transition into faster than light. I'm afraid I ran out of pre-FTL medicine on my last run and I haven't had the money to get more."

"Do you have enough fuel?" Anderson asked, only half in jest.

"I've got plenty," Burgess said, lighting a particularly obnoxious cigar.

"Great, glad to hear it."

Anderson suspected that he was not going to enjoy the trip. Nor was he wrong. Burgess had both reading material and tri-dee tapes in abundance. Unfortunately, it was all pornographic in nature. Burgess' company was even worse. The man was possibly the worst chess player that Anderson had ever met. He started every game with pawn to A-4 thereby surrendering the middle and losing the game. It was pathetic.

Anderson's only consolation was that he would soon be on Valmont, and a member of McCormick's unit. Then he would find out who had put the price on his head, and make them pay. In the mean time, he had nothing to do but think.

Who could want him dead? That was his biggest concern. In his time with the Coalition, he had undoubtedly made many dangerous enemies. His role as a rebellion specialist had ensured that. Some of his enemies might even have enough money. But why now? Why not sooner? Could it all ready be common knowledge that he was out of the corps. If it was, who was responsible for making it common knowledge. There was no point in dwelling on it now. He had enough evidence, he hoped, to find out who had paid for the contract once he reached Valmont. He could wait and deal with it then.

There were still the questions about the Coalition. Chen's and Avery's conduct did not go along with Anderson's view of acceptable behavior for a Coalition officer. But neither of the

men could have acted alone. Chen had to have had support to drum Anderson out of the marines; and Avery certainly hadn't attacked the *Hawk* on his own authority. Anderson didn't like what he thought this suggested.

Finally, mercifully, the ship pulled into port. It was with some apprehension that Anderson disembarked. He had been attacked in both of the last two ports he had been in. Tempting fate was not his style.

McCormick was waiting for Anderson with a group of men when Anderson disembarked from *The Hound*. He hadn't changed much in the year since he had left the Corps. He still wore his black hair shortly cropped and his brown eyes looked just as intense as ever.

"How are you, Tom?"

"I'll be a lot better once we're out of this port."

"We shouldn't have a problem getting you out of here. We've brought enough armament to take over a small country. Who took the hit out on you?"

"Wish I knew," Anderson said. "I'm hoping that you can help me figure that out."

"I'll do what I can. Let's get out of here."

If there had been any assassins laying in wait, they did not make their presence known. No shooters in their right minds would have taken a shot at Anderson, protected as he was. Not if they hoped to live long enough to collect their fee.

Outside of the spaceport McCormick had three limos waiting. He and Anderson got into the middle one, while the rest of the men piled into the remaining two. The cars roared away just as soon as their doors had closed.

"It's good to see you, Tom."

"You too, Jack. I just wish the circumstances were different."

"Don't worry about it. We'll find out who's responsible for your situation. And when we do, they're finished."

"Thanks, I appreciate your help."

"Are you still in the Corps?"

"No, Chen forced me out."

"Chen's a bastard."

"I thought I might join up with your merc unit. I don't know how to be anything other than a soldier."

"Sorry, Tom. The unit never became a reality. I just couldn't keep it together. I guess I just wasn't cut out to be a commanding officer. I own a security agency now. We install alarms and guard factories and colleges. That kind of thing. I'd be glad to give you a job, if you need one."

Anderson was disappointed to say the least. Jack could probably help him past the present situation. But what then? He was a soldier, that was all he knew. A security guard...never.

"Thanks for the offer. I don't think I could be happy as a security guard."

Jack smiled unoffended. "It gets old fast. Seeing you again brings back memories. There was nothing like life as a Coalition Marine. Damn, but we hit the hottest spots in the galaxy. Sometimes, I really miss those days."

Seeing the wistful look on McCormick's face, Anderson came to a realization. He couldn't live for past adventures. He had to live for what he did or didn't have, not what he had once had.

"Jack, you were one hell of an officer. I'm going to need men like you if I start my own outfit."

McCormick blinked. "You know, Major, I've been offered commissions in three merc outfits. I've turned them all down. I had commitments, I couldn't let my wife live that way."

"I didn't know you were married. I understand."

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"I was married. She left me for a race car driver. I wasn't exciting enough for her. Can you believe that? I served under Anderson the Enforcer. I did things a race car driver would never have had the balls to do. And I'm not exciting enough."

"It wasn't danger she was after. It was glamour. There's a big difference between the two."

McCormick came to himself. "I agree. Sometimes I get bitter. Especially if I've been drinking. Lately, though, I've been coming to terms with it. At first, I thought that her leaving me was a reflection on my manhood. Now I realize that it was only a reflection on our relationship. She told me I wasn't exciting enough because she knew that that would hurt me more than her infidelity had."

"Those situations are never easy. Look at it this way, a lot of men never realize what you did. They tear themselves up inside when what they need to do is get on with their lives." For a moment Anderson wondered who he was trying to comfort, McCormick or himself.

"You're right. And I am getting on with my life. I'd love to be the first man on your roster. Count me in. It won't be hard to attract men to your banner. When word goes out that Anderson the Enforcer is looking for a few good men, they'll come."

"You have no idea who wants you dead?" McCormick asked.

"None, but I do know that the contract belongs to a network."

McCormick pulled a cellular phone out of his pocket and made a call. "Shelly, hi, this is McCormick. Could you get a hold of Mister Shea and have him meet me in my office. Thank you." McCormick hung up the phone and put it back into his pocket.

"Shea is a computer specialist that I keep on retainer. He's a cyborg. One of those guys with a computer input linked to his brain. If you give him a computer with a modem, there's no place he can't go, nothing he can't find. The man's a genius"

"How could you work with a cyborg?"

"I'll admit it was difficult at first, what with all the conditioning we went through as kids. 'Man and machine shall not interface' and all that. I still get queasy when I see him uncover his jack."

"But a cyborg?"

"Tom, cybernetics and nano-technology aren't inherently evil. We were just conditioned as kids to believe that. The Coalition wanted to make sure that nothing like the Nano Wars ever happens again. I can respect that, but I will not live in fear of it just because the Coalition wants me to."

"I can see your point, but I still hate cyborgs," Anderson said shuddering. "I have a hard enough time just thinking about cyborgs, how the hell can someone become one."

"I know that Shea's parents did what they could to keep him from the Coalition's brainwashing. And even then, he had to go through some expensive reconditioning before he could bring himself to undergo the operation that placed the jack into his brain."

The limos pulled into the yard of McCormick's security company. McCormick and Anderson waited until McCormick's men had surrounded their vehicle before they got out. They went quickly into the building.

CHAPTER FOUR:

McCormick looked to his secretary. "Mister Shelly, were you able to find Shea?"

"Yes, sir, he's waiting in your office."

"Thank you. Follow me, Tom." McCormick said, starting off for his office.

The office was spacious and tastefully decorated. Deeply polished mahoganies dominated the room. The little man in a worn, full length leather jacket, waiting for Anderson and McCormick contrasted sharply with the decor.

"Thanks for getting here on such short notice I've got an interesting project for you. It should be much more challenging than your usual fair."

The little man brightened up. "Great, what do you have in mind?"

"Shea, this is Tom Anderson. He's one of my closest friends. I'm sure you've heard me talk about him. Someone is trying to kill him. We need you to help us find out who that someone is. I'm willing to give you double your normal fee."

"Sounds good," Shea said to McCormick. Of Anderson he asked, "How do you know that someone is trying to kill you?"

There's been an attempt on my life on each of the last two planets I've been on. I captured the first assassin. He told me that he was a member of a network and that I was fair game. The second assassin was a cyborg, I had one hell of a time killing him."

"Jesus Christ, what do you need my help for?"

"I want to stop these attempts on my life. If you can find out who's offering the contract on me, then I can find the party responsible and convince him or, I suppose, her to cancel it."

"Okay. Were did the attacks happen?"

"The first one was on Eden, the second was on Tristen."

"You killed a man on Tristen?"

"I killed a *cyborg* on Tristen."

"Well, Eden is too far away for me to find anything out via the computer. But Tristen is within my range. Mind if I jack into your computer, Jack?"

"Please do," McCormick replied.

Shea pulled part of his forehead away to reveal the computer jack. Anderson had to hold onto his chair to keep himself calm. He felt the same revulsion that he'd felt when he'd realized that his last attacker was a cyborg. He wanted to slam Shea to the ground and crush the life out of him. Anderson's knuckles turned white as he watched Shea plug into McCormick's desktop computer.

Once plugged in, Shea's eyes lost their focus, he seemed to sink into himself and become smaller. Less than a minute later Shea unjacked himself.

He looked at Anderson. "Do you have any idea who that cyborg you killed was?"

"None."

"You killed Lem Detrick."

"So?"

"So, he's probably the best hit man in the sector. I mean he was. He had this thing about killing at close range. I guess that's what did him in. How did you get him?"

"In the end, I didn't. He got hit by a train. If I had been holding more than a nine millimeter when I out drew him, I would have killed him. As it was, I only knocked him down."

"You couldn't have out drawn him. His nervous system was cybernetically enhanced. He had to be at least twice as fast as you."

"Maybe he missed his last tuneup."

"Jack, I thought all those stories you told me about Anderson the Enforcer were bullshit, but this guy is the genuine article."

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"Was I implicated in either his killing or the police officers."

"The report I read said that there were no leads. It looks like you're in the clear."

"Good, but now how do we find out who hired Detrick?"

"Simple enough," Shea replied. "It's common knowledge which network Lem belonged to. I'll just infiltrate their data banks and rifle their files. Nothing to it."

"Good. When can you start?"

"Right now?"

"Then let's get on with it," said McCormick.

Shea jacked back into the computer. This time he was under considerably longer. Sweat began to bead on his forehead. All at once the printer began printing. Moments later, his face contorted into a mask of horror. Without preamble, Shea tore the jack from his head, and jumped out of his chair.

"Good God, that was close."

"What happened?" McCormick demanded.

"Everything was going fine. I got into their data base without a problem. I found out who put the contract out on Anderson. I decided I could solve everyone's problem by switching Anderson's name with the name of the guy who paid for the hit. When I tried to change the data, all hell broke loose. I've never seen such a powerful defensive set up. It waited until I was completely committed, and then pounced on me. When it wasn't able to crush me, it attempted to trace me back to my source. I only just managed to divert it to a different computer."

"You do realize that whoever owns the computer you diverted the signal to is going to die, don't you?" Anderson demanded.

"Of course I realize that. I sent the program into the Coalition's data banks. Give me some credit. I'm not going to let innocents get killed. I may be a cyborg, but I'm not a monster."

Anderson was amused. "They won't mess with the Coalition."

Shea looked at Anderson sharply. "You've got to be joking."

"What do you mean?"

"Everyone knows that the Networks are sanctioned by the Coalition. In exchange for their cut, they pretend it doesn't exist. The Coalition gets a piece of everyone's pie."

"Not the Coalition that I know."

"Then you're living in a dream, pal."

Anderson started to get up. McCormick put a restraining hand on his shoulder. "We'll talk about it later. Let it go for now."

With real effort, Anderson was able to let his anger wash away. "Okay then, let's get back to business. Who took the hit out on me?"

Shea went to the print outs. "Here it is, some guy named Chen. A million and a half units; he wants you bad."

"Chen?" Anderson said in astonishment. "He couldn't afford that. He's just the Captain of a battleship."

"Well, everyone knows that the commanders of Coalition vessels make a fortune at smuggling. A million and a half units was probably just the money from one trip," Shea said.

Anderson jumped up. "Why you little shit."

"Tom, calm down," McCormick said sharply. "He's right."

Anderson turned to McCormick in disbelief. "He's right?"

"Yes, he's right. But that's not important now. What is important, is finding a way to get you out of this alive, and make Chen pay."

"I think I've got the answer," Shea said.

"We're listening," McCormick said.

"I had the right idea when I tried to change Anderson's name with Chen's. I just didn't go about it the right way. As I was exiting the Network's data banks, I realized that their system is set up so that it can only be altered from a single key board. That key board is in their main installation."

"How the hell does that help?" Anderson asked.

"Well, before I went looking for the information you needed, I stumbled onto the floor plans. I figured they might be worth something to someone, so I printed them up. Their physical defenses aren't nearly as impressive as their computer defenses. If you iron men can get me in there, I can change the data. The trick is to get in and out of there without anyone knowing we were there. If the Network finds out we broke in, they'll find out we changed the data base. If that happens we're all in for a world of pain. By the way, I want four times my usual fee."

Anderson looked over the floor plans. "There's no possible way we can get into this place without someone knowing we were there."

"Then you'll just have to hunt this Chen guy down," Shea said without concern.

Anderson leafed through the plans again. Under them he found an inventory. "According to this inventory, they have five million units, in cash, in their vault. If we broke in and stole it, might they not think to check their data banks. After all, our motive for breaking in would seem clear enough, wouldn't it."

"You've got a lot of balls," Shea said shaking his head. "Do you have any idea what would happen if the Network finds out who stole their money?"

"I'm assuming that they would be very upset with me. Hell, they might even take out a contract on me."

"I see your point, but you can't do it yourself. Anyone who goes in there with you would also be exposed to the danger of retaliation."

"They would be well paid for the risk. I think that the Network has over valued the fear factor. Fear is not an adequate defense against theft. Not when you're talking about five million units."

"But, if anyone ever talks, you're all dead."

"None of my people would talk," McCormick said. "Do you want in or not?"

"You're going along with this?" Shea asked.

"If Tom thinks we can pull this off, then I'm in."

Anderson could see a war between greed and fear playing itself out across Shea's face. "What do you think, Shea? An even share of five million units."

"How many men would be in on it?" Shea asked, still uncommitted.

"You, Jack, myself, and two others should be enough to do the job right. I'm sure you can do the math for yourself."

"A million units. Very tempting."

"We need an answer," McCormick said.

"It depends on the other two guys. How trust worthy would they be?"

"I've got five men on the payroll who served with me under Tom. I'm sure any one of them would be willing to do anything to help him out. They'll all be quiet."

Absolute Magnitude

"When do you plan to do this?"

"Tom and I can come up with a workable plan of action tonight."

"So, you're talking about doing this tomorrow?"

"Tom's up against the gun. We've got to do this as quick as possible."

"It's against my better judgment, but count me in."

"Good, meet us here tomorrow, around midnight."

As soon as Shea left, Anderson turned to McCormick. "Now what the hell is this about the Coalition?"

"Shea's right. The Coalition is corrupt. Your belief in the values that the Coalition says that it stands for blinded you. When we were serving together, I wanted to tell you. Several times I started to, but I just couldn't. You were so dedicated. Damn it, Tom, there aren't many men who believe in things as strongly as you do. I just didn't have the heart to see you bereft of your beliefs."

Anderson was shaken. "Then all those insurrections, they were justified?"

"Not all of them. You always see things in black and white."

"But many of them were."

"I'm afraid so."

Anderson sighed. "I'm guilty of heinous crimes. God, I swept into those worlds like an avenging angel. I showed no mercy. Hell, I never even listened to the rebels arguments against the Coalition. Maybe I should just let the next assassin take me."

"Don't talk like that, Tom. You're being too hard on yourself. The only thing you're guilty of is naivety, that and dedication to an ideal."

"But I was so far off the mark."

"A few hours ago you said something to me about not tearing myself up inside, about getting on with my life. Those words apply to you as well as they do to me."

Anderson smiled a wry smile. "Words to live by. Look, I'm not going to come to terms with this tonight; my will to live is as strong as it's ever been. You don't have to worry about me." Anderson wasn't sure whether or not he believed his own words. "Answer me just one more question."

"Sure."

"That time on New Haven, did Chen have some kind of arrangement with the rebels?"

McCormick nodded. "From what I understand, you cost him a lot of money there."

"That makes everything a lot clearer. Okay then, let's get down to business on this break in."

Anderson showed McCormick the floor plans. "Shea was right, this won't be a very tough nut to crack. The Network relies mostly on live guards."

"Who won't be nearly as well armed or armored as us." McCormick put in.

"I sure hope not. Now what we have to do is come in by this entrance and capture the guards control center. From there, we can neutralize all the alarm systems. It will look as if we're attempting to give ourselves more time by delaying the alarms to the police. What we'll really be doing is making it possible for Shea to get in and out of the terminal room without leaving any signs of his entry. Once we've neutralized the alarms, we go to the vault and blow the safe. I figure we can be in and out in under five minutes."

"Looks good. I just wish we had time to case the compound."

"So do I, but we don't."

"Okay, I'll get in touch with Matherson and Diaz to see if they're interested in coming along."

"Excellent choices. They're both good soldiers."

At midnight the next night, Anderson went over his plan of entry with everyone involved. By three AM they were ready to go.

"Shea," Anderson said, "your objective has changed."

"It has?"

"Yes, I don't want you to switch my name with Chen's."

"But that's the whole point of the mission."

"No, the point of the mission is to stop these attacks on my life. What I want you to do is make it look like I was killed and the contract honored."

"But then this Chen guy walks."

"No he doesn't. I'll deal with him personally. I can't let someone else do this for me. That would make me just as bad as Chen."

"So what's wrong with that?"

"A lot. Just do it my way."

"Okay, but I have to do something with the money from the hit."

"Can you just have it deposited into an account without tipping our hand, and then we'll just divvy it up with the rest of the money?"

"Yeah, I've got a program that can hide it. Even the Network won't suspect anything. I still say it makes more sense to let someone else kill Chen."

"I just can't. Let's go."

McCormick issued everyone a TAZ 12 and combat armor. They brought along three times as much ammo as they intended on using, and enough explosives to level the entire complex if need be.

Entry wasn't a problem; they rode a heavy jeep through the fence that surrounded the installation. Then they shot their way through glass doors at the main entrance and entered the building. Thirty seconds after they had arrived they were in the control room. The four guards there drew pistols and tried to drive them back. Anderson felt sorry for the guards as he watched them get mowed down by his squads automatic weapons. They had never had a chance.

McCormick went to the computer and turned the alarm systems off. "There, all's clear on this end."

Anderson took a set of keys from a blood soaked body and tossed them to Diaz. "One of these key's should fit the computer room door. Escort Shea there. When you're done, make sure these keys find their way back here. We don't want to leave any clues as to why we're really here." Once you've done that, meet us back at the jeep."

Diaz and Shea started off towards the computer room, Anderson and the rest went to the safe, deeper in the installation. It took them fifteen seconds to reach the safe, they had it blown thirty second after that. Another three minutes was required to load up the money.

"Everything's going according to schedule," McCormick said to Anderson.

"I won't breath easier until were out of here."

"You got that right."

Fair Game

All together they spent six minutes and fifteen seconds in the building. When they arrived back at the jeep, Shea and Diaz had not yet arrived.

"Where the hell are they," McCormick cursed.

"Here comes Shea, now," Matherson said.

"Where's Diaz?" Anderson demanded of Shea.

"When we went back to the control room to return the keys, Diaz bought it. There were three guards armed with automatics. We never had a chance. I was lucky to get out alive."

Anderson looked at McCormick. "We can't leave him there. The Network will have us pegged by this time tomorrow."

"You're right. We have to go back."

"Matherson, you and Shea wait here. If things get too hot, you have my permission to leave. We're going back inside."

"You can't go back in there," Shea shouted. "There isn't enough time."

Ignoring Shea, Anderson and McCormick reentered the building. When they reached the control room they found six guards. These guards were in defensive positions and ready. Both sides opened fire. Immediately, three of the guards went down. A second later, McCormick was hit. Sweating and cursing, Anderson dove for cover. He went through three pods of ammo before he got all the guards. Then he went to McCormick's side. McCormick was still alive.

"Jack, how bad is it."

"I took a nasty shot in my left hip. I'm going to need regen treatment, I think."

"Can you hobble?"

"I think so, but I'm going to be real slow."

"We'll just have to do the best we can." Anderson picked Diaz's body up and threw it across his shoulders in a fireman's carry. He then helped McCormick out of the building as quickly as possible. Which was painfully slow.

When they got outside they found Matherson and Shea engaged in a fire fight with the police. "I thought I told you to leave if things got hot," Anderson shouted, as he tossed Diaz's body into the jeep and helped McCormick in.

"Believe me, I wanted to," Shea said. "But, this bitch wouldn't leave you behind. Said she would rather burn than let you two down."

Matherson slammed the jeep into gear, the police scattered as it jumped forward. Several squad cars followed. Anderson kept up a heavy fire with his TAZ. He counted four squad cars. The police didn't break off the chase until Shea began lobbing grenades.

"We made it!" Shea exclaimed.

Anderson dropped his rifle and started to remove McCormick's armor. McCormick was no longer conscious. The wound was bad. Anderson stopped the bleeding and bandaged it as best he could. "We're going to need to get him to a hospital if he's going to make it," Anderson said to Matherson.

"We can't bring him to the hospital," Shea said. "The Network will find out who we are and then we're all dead."

"I'm not going to sit by and watch him die."

"Sir," Matherson said. "Captain McCormick has a private regen tank and a staff doctor. I never understood why he kept such an expensive thing when he decided not to start up his merc outfit, but I guess it's just as well that he did."

It was three days before McCormick regained consciousness. In that time, Anderson rarely left his side. "How

am I doing," McCormick asked. "Am I going to make it? God, it hurts."

"The doctor said you'll be fine. It was touch and go there for a while, but everything's going to be okay now."

"Glad to hear it. How long will I be in this tank?"

"Three weeks," Anderson replied.

"Three weeks, my God, that's a lifetime. I've never spent more than three days in one of these tanks before."

"It can't be helped, Jack, you took a serious hit. Don't worry about it right now. You need to get some sleep. We'll talk tomorrow."

Almost immediately, McCormick fell back to sleep. Anderson couldn't help but feel sorry for his friend. Spending even a day in a regen tank was terrible. All those tubes and wires could drive a man crazy. Three weeks, God, that would be hell.

It was two full days before McCormick was strong enough for anything like coherent conversation. "How did everything work out? I don't really remember much after we reached the installation."

"We accomplished our objective," Anderson answered. "But we lost Diaz."

McCormick grimaced. "Damn, he was a good man and a good friend."

"I agree. We've bought some time, but the price was too high."

"Tom, what were you supposed to do? Your life was on the line. You did the only thing you could do."

"I've been telling myself that for three days, Mac. It doesn't wash."

"What now, then?"

It was several minutes before Anderson replied. "I've been thinking a lot about that merc outfit. I can't see myself selling my services to the highest bidder."

"You're not going to start the outfit?"

"Oh, I am going to start the outfit, alright. I made a lot of mistakes while I was with the Coalition. I'd like to set them right. Maybe by hiring on with the other side, I might do some good. I have a long road ahead of me."

"Do you know what your saying? No one stands up to the Coalition. Not even you."

"Earth is standing up to the Coalition. I've been looking into the situation while you've been out. Tensions are high. War is inevitable. If the Coalition and Earth go to war, a lot of Coalition planets are going to succeed. I want to be on one of those planets when it happens."

"Don't you think the Coalition has made contingency plans for just such an occasion."

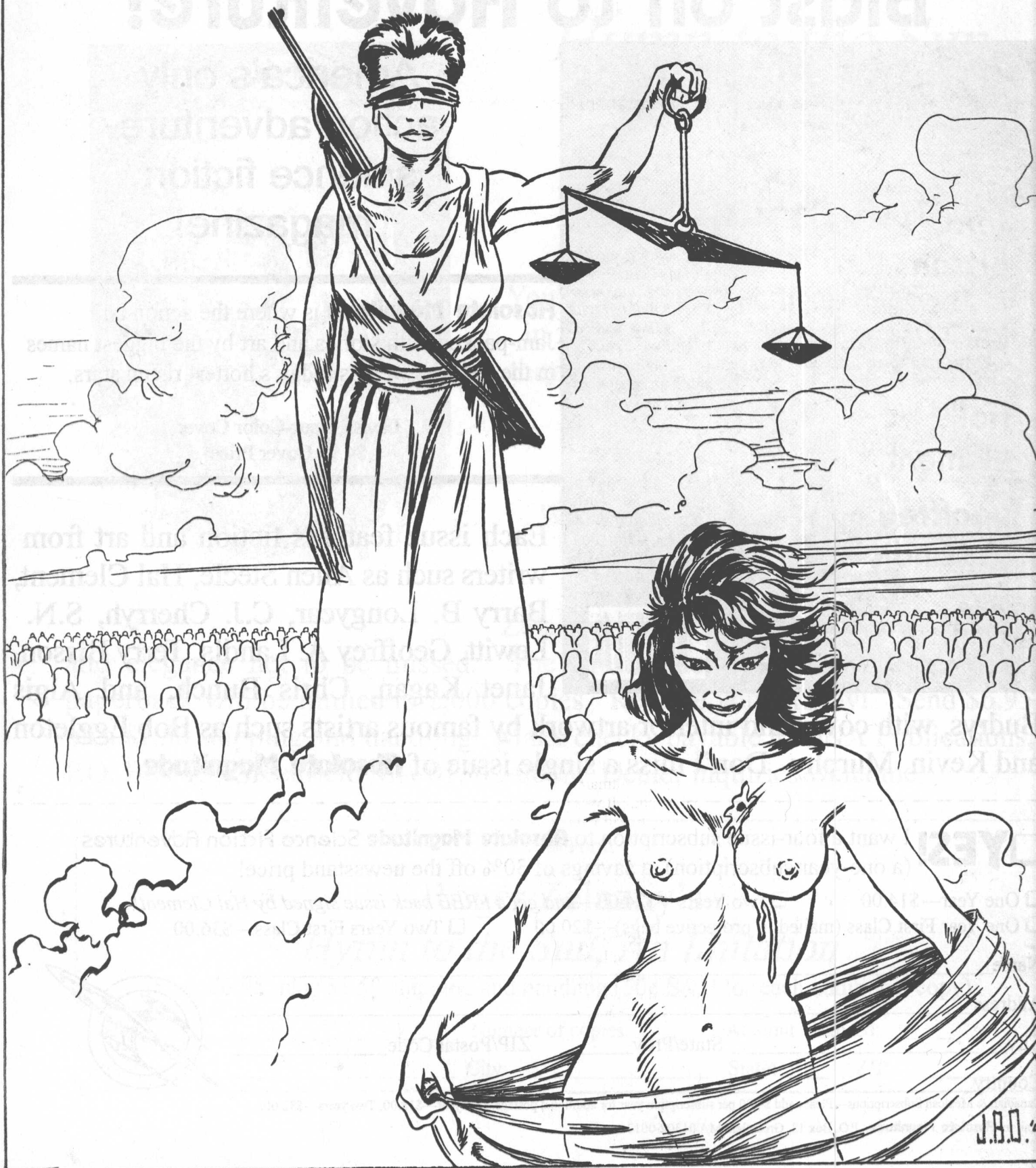
"I'm sure they have. But I'm still going to do what I can. I hope you'll be with me."

"Tom, what you're talking about seems insane, but I'd follow you to the gates of hell, you know that."

"Thanks, Mac, I appreciate it. I've got Shea tracking the *Avenger*. It'll go to the most important hot spot, especially if war is planned. Wherever the *Avenger* gets stationed permanently is where I want to be. That way, I can deal with Chen personally, and I'll be in position to inflict maximum harm to the Coalition."

McCormick snorted. "Remind me to never, never get on your bad side."





J.B.D.

Kill All The Lawyers is the sequel to Barry's 1989 Questar novel *Infinity Hold*. This book stands up quite well on its own and we are very proud to bring you the first installment of it in this issue. Barry is the author of more than a dozen books and the winner of the Hugo, Nebula, and John W. Campbell awards.

Kill all the Lawyers

by Barry B. Longyear

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To N.A.
and
Those who died along the way.

They found a planet no one desired and upon it created an unsupervised gravity well for unwanted human debris: political activists, terrorists, the criminally insane, and the insanely criminal. It was a dump in the middle of a lethal desert with no support facilities, authority, control, or law. They named the planet after the deepest of Hell's hells: Tartaros. This is the story of a man and murderer, Bando Nicos, who was condemned to Tartaros and became the planet's first police officer.

THE JOB

I looked through the eyes of a little boy. A wet winter night in the hell of South Philly's Free Fire Zone. The boy had watched as they ran the bait and teased the stain into the alley. They beat in the cop's head, ripped open his guts, and took the stain's badge, gun, jacket, gloves, belt, shoes, and wallet.

The cop's eyes were open. He had to know he was dying there in the freezing filth of that alley, his open belly steaming in the cold. The little boy pulled out his penis, pissed on the cop, and laughed at him as he died. . . .

"Hey, pigfuzz. You got a killing?"

The voice was strange. High, birdlike, and dripping with contempt. Like a little child I kept my eyes closed and buried my face in Alna's hair. It was hot beneath the desert sheet, Alna's hair stank, and at least a third of the desert's sand was in my mouth gritting between my teeth. Still, it was better than the deal I'd get from the voice that had interrupted my nightmares.

I didn't want to do a trial first thing in the evening. It was too early in the day to do ragtime, and I didn't need to kill anyone else. My cargo of ghosts already had my springs bent.

"You hear me, chili pepper? You got a stiff and a perp out there on the grit. You're the man with the star, the big talk, and the Law. You gonna cop or cop out?" I felt a docker poke me in my arm.

I rolled over, pulled the sheet off my face, and looked up at a young kid about fourteen or fifteen, with pale skin, thin lips, and all the hate in the universe sitting in a pair of gray eyes. He was wearing one of the metallic copper Mihvihtian sun sheets with his cold-time togs bundled and slung on his back. Behind him was the brassy late afternoon sky of Tartaros.

"Who're you?" I asked.

"I'm the one who's bringing the bad news, pigfuzz. You got a killing over in the left flank guard. Are you going to do something?"

I sat up, and shook the sand out of my hair and off my sheet. The sun was almost to the western horizon. The furnace was beginning to turn down. In another couple of hours the night cold would shatter our bones. We'd have to get the column moving soon or freeze to death. I reached out a hand and shook Alna. She groaned and turned her back toward me. True love.

I got to my feet, shook more sand off me, and looked at the kid. "You got a name?"

"Yeah."

A real attitude. "You want to tell me what it is?"

"Ratt. Ratt Katz."

Those gray eyes were on me like green on twenties. Go ahead, they said. Just make a crack about my name. I'll rip out your lungs for water wings. "Okay. You seen Nkuma?"

"Your mau buddy with the other rifle?"

"That's right."

Ratt shook his head. A tiny grin parted those thin lips. "I figure one of the yard monsters did him for his piece."

"You got anything to go on, or is that just wishful thinking?"

"I haven't seen him, pigfuzz. Not for days. So, what do you do now?"

"Now I wake up." I turned my back on him and picked up my cold night rags that I'd been using for a pillow. My skin was all rashed up from the sweat, grit, and no showers. I was obsessed with getting a bath when I could afford the time. Right then, however, there was a trial coming up and Nkuma was nowhere near.

Nkuma was a semi-sweetmeat mau in his late twenties. A little taller than me, he had eyes that were one step ahead of the horrors. Being responsible for a lot of deadmeats does that. I figured my eyes were a bit haunted, too. For the same reason. I didn't figure anyone did Nkuma for his weapon. Getting killed so some hunk of meat could grab his rifle would've at least made some sense. Parching out on the dunes trying to save all the new convict-exiles from the desert out of guilt was rank stupe, so that was probably where he was: exactly where I'd told him not to go.

I looked back at the squib. "Who's the perp?"

"A little haystack bit named Tani Aduelo. She thinned one of the sisters for her rations."

"She killed a mau?"

"Pushed a cutter right between her ribs. Whacked out her pump and main ducts. Witnesses, too. I'm one of them."

I'd had to handle more than one trial that was riding the ethnic edge. "Are the natives getting restless?"

Absolute Magnitude

Ratt shook his head. "Nobody cares about Misi Pihn. She's the croakee. Give the angel cake a slap on the wrist and the maus'll be happy. Tani's got a cockroach. His name is Lewis Grahl."

My evening was complete. A lawyer. I bent over and began wrapping the strips of cloth around my ankles to keep the sand out of the tops of my crowbar dockers. "What's he want?"

"He said he just wants to make sure everything's done according to the *Law of the Razai*, just the way you read it to them." Ratt gave out with one of those cynical little snickers. "I think he figures on getting her off."

"This Misi Pihn. I take it she wasn't exactly crowbar prom queen."

Finally Ratt's mouth did something beside sneer. He actually looked angry. "Misi Pihn was a snitch. Her mouth hurt a lot of people back on juve block."

"Juve?" That got my attention. "How old was she?"

"A little younger than me. Maybe fifteen. We called her the Black Wire."

"Straight to the warden's ear?"

"A one mouth news net."

I picked up my rifle and kit bag. "So what're you? The local attitude problem?"

"What do you mean by that?"

"I mean a snitch is dead, no one wants the perp in the grinder, and here you are blowholing to the cops."

"So?"

"Illuminate me, kid. What beam are you riding?"

Those eyes seemed to go wild for a split second, but the face didn't changed expression. Like most sharks in the crowbars, Ratt was half control and half gibber festival. "It's all air, isn't it? You, the Razai Cops, the *Law*, smoke and mirrors. I'll tell you what I do, pigfuzz. I find lies and I rub people's noses in them. Does that put a turd in your taco, chili pepper?"

Ratt Katz was maybe fifty kilos with a deep breath and his pockets full of sand. For the life of me I couldn't figure out how he'd lived as long as he had. Anyway, I didn't have to give in to the urge to kill him; not right then. And I didn't have to explain or prove anything to any wet-eared diaper rash with a jerk tag like Ratt Katz. There was a thought splinter though that was beginning to peeve my psyche. "This Tani Aduelo. How old is she?"

"Fourteen. She just turned fourteen."

"Fourteen." I began sweating grenades, trying to remember how big kids were at fourteen. How big, and how mean. "Fourteen years old?"

"Yeah. Pretty. Real popular, too. Maybe you can swap your mau bit and make her a deal for her young ass. You let it live, she lets you crawl inside."

As I fought down the desire to burger young Katz on the spot, I looked upon any hope that he'd get within striking distance of his sixteenth year as rank fantasy. I unclenched my fingers and wiggled them to work out the strangle strain.

"Bando," said Alna, her voice thick and sleepy. "What is it?"

I looked down at her. My mau bit. Her large brown eyes were still half-closed. I knelt and brushed a couple of grains of sand off her cheek. Her skin was the rich color of sharp chocolate. "There's trouble. I got to go to work."

I reached into my shirt pocket and pulled out the homemade star with the words "Chief—Razai Police" scratched into the metal. I pinned it on the outside of my dirty white desert sheet, kissed Alna, and got back on my feet.

"Do you want me there?" she asked.

They never call in the RCs unless there's garbage to take out. When I knew it was garbage, I didn't drag it. Slowing down the payback didn't change the smell or make it any easier to collect. Those swift justice moves, though, were hard for Alna to take. All those little splats of blush and bits of bone all over the sand and the spectators were a little tough on a shark's serenity. It'd be better for her if she didn't have to watch her little lump of brown sugar blow away some little white bread bit. Yeah, and Bando Nicos might look a little weak and vulnerable if he asked his lady along to brace his back while he went and made like a pig cop in front of all those hungry sharks. Macho was still the Spanish word for asshole.

I held out my hand. "Yeah," I whispered. "I need you there. This perp's female, fourteen, and already I want to puke."

Alna took my hand and I pulled her to her feet. We held each other and she whispered in my ear, "You're a good man, Bando Nicos. You're going to do just fine."

Yeah, I thought. I could almost hear my ghosts laughing. We held each other a moment longer, then followed Ratt Katz as he struck out across the sand for the left flank guard camp.

We stopped as the white streak of a descending prison ship's exhaust trail headed toward the east to land in the dark. That load of sharks was getting a break being landed that close to the edge of the desert. Of course it wouldn't do them any good unless they knew what direction to follow. To find that out, they would have to be told.

I glanced at Alna. She was staring back at me, her eyes carrying more than a bit of accusation in them. "We already got more than we can handle, doll. Besides, they're too far away. We can't save 'em all."

"Maybe Nkuma sees them, too." She looked at the kid and asked me, "Who's this?"

I held out my hand, "Alna Moah, this is Ratt Katz, seeker of justice."

"You came to the right man," she said. She sounded like she meant it. The kid looked at her like she was garbage. We headed north and Alna turned her head and watched the sky trail as we walked. It was only because she had watched a similar trail a few nights earlier that Ratt and the other Mihvihtians were even alive.

Alna, Nkuma, and I had met the prison ship from Mihviht to invite that load of sharks to join the Razai. After executing a nasty killer gang-boss perp named Mokk, and otherwise explaining the facts of life on the desert, the Mihvihtian sharks joined. We were bringing in sixteen thousand of them. I didn't know what had happened to Nkuma. I hadn't seen him for three of Tartaros's twenty-seven hour days. My best guess was that he had gone out on the dunes alone to work off his guilts by trying to meet more prison ships to warn them about the desert, and especially about the Green Mountain Mirage. That meant he was probably dead. What Stays called being on a sandbat sabbatical.

As we followed Ratt, I looked down and watched my dockers drag through the gleaming yellow granules of grit as I smoked my wig about Stays, the *Law*, and about Bando Nicos doing more ragtime. Another trial right then seemed like a bit on the dump side.

Martin Stays used to say the Razai was one big legal therapy group. Thrap groups were things like what they had back on Earth in Williamsburg Rehab where I did some soft moments before I was chucked into the Crotch at Greenville and climbed

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on the rock clock; before we were all exiled to Tartaros; before we were put on infinity hold.

I think I know what Stays meant about legal therapy groups, though. Nothing much can help any kind of an addict get and stay straight except other addicts of the same stripe on the mend. That's because no one in the universe knows a deadhead like another deadhead. Finding out what that circle of brothers and sisters can see in you can bring the cool down short. You sit down in one of those groups, all prepared to put in some time by putting on the heads, and the next thing you know all of your carefully constructed walls of steel reenforced bull are absolutely invisible to the others sitting in the circle. It could lay the noids on Nessie.

A few hundred thousand million billion miles away from Earth, it's easy to see why it worked. No one in a thrap group can see his own game, but each one of them have been playing the same game for a long time. That's why they can recognize when someone else is flipping those old cards.

We were all sharks, postgraduate convicts working on our P H and Ds. We all knew the cockroach court games designed to do nothing more than make lawyers rich, screw up the system, and make more cockroaches rich in fraudulent attempts at clearing up the mess, which by some strange coincidence was always a bigger mess after the attempt than before. This, of course, required putting more cockroaches on the payroll to make a study of the court and crime problem, which usually resulted in recommendations for hiring more black rags at taller rates, and upping the fees for juicer-supplied lawyers, which the cockroaches in Parliament who make the laws, curiously enough, usually approved.

It's funny to think that no one on Earth, or any other cockroach infested planet, could see the problem. Any bug man in the galaxy could've told them. If you've got a cockroach problem, you don't hire cockroaches to man the spray guns. If you're infested with rats, you don't pay a rat to study the problem and generate recommendations.

Easy? I mean, is that the original one-lobe issue? Something a flatworm could figure out? No one on Earth outside the crowbars could see it, except maybe William Shakespeare; he who wrote: "The first thing we do, let's kill all the lawyers." A yard guru back in the Crotch, Big Dave Cole, showed me that line in a book. It's from *King Henry VI* where this rebel leader named Cade is working his blowhole about how great things will be once the revolution comes and he becomes king. One of his gang, named Dick, says, "The first thing we do, let's kill all the lawyers."

It's spooky how some things, by just being, seem to vibrate some kind of fundamental chord in the universe. Some pieces of music get me that way. The great pyramids of Egypt, too. That line in *Henry VI* rang a couple of chimes. See, no matter who I told that line to, it got a laugh. Sharks, stains, even my own cockroach, when they heard it, they laughed. Not a funny laugh. It was always one of those wicked, dark, angry laughs people do to send what they really feel off sideways into nowhere.

To Shakespeare, maybe it was only a joke. The action was dragging a bit and he went for a laugh with the kill the lawyers bit. Up to your nose in the legal sewer back on Earth, however, kill the lawyers sounded like a progressive political platform that wouldn't be found wanting for votes from either the sharks or the straightmeats. Maybe it's racial memory that dates back to the beginning of life. I mean, man, even amoebas hate lawyers.

On Tartaros the sharks got dealt a new hand. The cards sucked like a wind tunnel, but we got to play a few of them our way. The hightowers sat up on that Blue Moon putting the bugger on each other and collecting the corn for letting smugglers bring in drugs, weapons, and other things to make sure Hell never froze over. The universe crawled with games and slime. But when we needed law to keep us out of each other's pockets and off each other's throats, though, there were no games allowed. We still had cockroaches. We were, after all, a planet covered with criminals. But the roach dance was over.

Our laws weren't made by lawyers for lawyers. *The Law of the Razai* was made by people for the purpose of getting themselves some of that justice thing. Justice was everyone getting exactly what they deserved as fast as possible, and there were no matches called on points. We didn't take prisoners and we weren't allowed to hold them. Payback was what you did plus a little, and the only allowable plea was the truth.

The *Law* was born in a time and place by men and women who could not spare the time and water to shuck and jive with the cockroaches. We were in the baddest desert on a bad planet with our water getting ripe and low. We were a gang of three thousand sharks with maybe twelve hundred guns gearing up to fight the half million man army east of the desert in the Sunrise Mountains called the Hand. Six weeks to select a jury? The rules of evidence? Attorney-client privilege? Check out some reality, chup.

Black rag times, our trials, were swift, uncomplicated, just, and efficient. They were also sometimes a little messy. But that was okay because we weren't real nice people. Whatever the *Law* was, it only had one real advantage over every other legal system in the universe: it worked. That confused me a crumb, because I was Bando Nicos, Chief of the Razai Cops. I didn't work very well at all, and maybe a third of the *Law* was something I made up on the spot, mostly in the middle of trials. Every shark I had to execute left behind a ghost. Every ghost had the same function. It was to crowd the dreams of Bando Nicos and keep asking him the same question: "Who in the hell is Bando Nicos to execute anyone?"

As Ratt lead the way over a dune, I could hear voices, whistles, laughter. I tried to work up enough spit to swallow as I held on to Alna and tried to wrestle my ghosts into the dark corners. It was ragtime.

PIHN V. ADUELO

The column of sharks was strung out over maybe two miles aimed toward the east and the Razai. They were organized Razai style with a main walking column headed by a point guard, flanked by wings, and brought up by a rear guard. Except for my rifle, the only weapons the sharks had were belt buckles, sand saps, and homemade cutters hand crafted back in the crowbars.

By the time we reached the left flank guard area, the sun was half under the desert's edge. The air was cool enough to breathe and everyone should've been packing up for the night's march. Instead the dunes were covered with sharks who wanted to watch another episode of "You Bet Your Life." I left Alna at the sidelines as I moved into the middle of the mob. Ratt walked with me, the muttered comments aimed in his direction drawing obscene gestures and comments in return. He'd save the ripest cracks for the biggest mokers. Either the kid was real brave,

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real stupid, or where his brain should've been he was dragging a deathwish the size of the Spider Nebula.

Tani Aduelo was easy to spot. Even in the fading heat of the day, this girl was pretty. Lovely. Beautiful. Adorable. Maybe it was part sexual, part little-girl parent protective, part I don't know what. I just wanted to wrap my arms around her, cuddle, and protect her from all the nastiness in the world, which is saying a lot on Tartaros.

She made me think of the wood nymphs and water nymphs I'd read about in the Crotch back when I was killing the clock reading Greek mythology. She was even more than that. She was the kind of deep pretty that made you need to be within sight of her, because to be in sight of her filled your heart with joy, and a crowbar shark needed that joy more than any drug.

Fourteen years old, with blond bobbed hair, bright blue eyes, and cheeks the color of strawberry cream. She looked like one of those antique china dolls. When she spoke, her voice was soft, sweet, and full of fun. When she laughed you could hear bells tinkling all over the galaxy. You just knew that when she came down the chute her parents had just sold themselves into slavery. What heartless bastard could've denied little Tani anything her little heart desired? You could tell that throughout her entire life she had been given the extra slack.

Now, there are people like Bando Nicos who get thumped by the stains even when they don't do anything simply because they look like they ought to get thumped. If I really hadn't done whatever it was, then the thump was still righteous because I had certainly done something in the past, or would do something in the future, that deserved it. If a body dropped dead from old age on the other side of the planet, the first question that would leap into the head of the cops would be "Where's Bando Nicos?" Even with me on infinity hold I was sure the stains on Earth were still asking the same question.

People like Tani, however, get to fly in a friendlier sky. You just knew that if she had been caught standing over a stiff with her feet in a pool of blush and with a smoking piece in her mitt, the first question the stain would ask was "Who handed her that gun?" Then he'd ask, "Where's Bando Nicos?"

There wasn't anything left to do but do it. "Ratt," I called out loud for the benefit of the crowd, "What's the charge?"

There was a noise from the spectators made up of laughter, snickers, rude comments, and a bunch of threats. I fired one of my precious few rounds up into the air to chill down the spectators. They iced to a low mumble and I looked around at the sharks.

"We read you all the *Law* at least a couple of times," I yelled. "You crowbar blowholes with the big mouths, remember Rule Thirteen, the 'You Say It, You Pay It Rule.' A threat is a crime, and it carries as a penalty the performance of the threat upon the threatener." At last, complete silence.

In the quiet, Ratt Katz walked over until he was standing in front of me. It was rag time. "Where's the stiff?"

Ratt looked off to his left and I followed the direction of his gaze until I saw a prone shape covered with a Mihvihtian sun sheet at the foot of the dune to my right. I went over, and as I approached I saw that the copper-colored sheet was dotted with goobers. At least two or three hundred sharks had taken the opportunity to spit on the Pihn remains. The legacy of the snitch. I would've spit on her myself, except my throat was too dry.

I unslung my piece and lifted the sheet with my rifle's front sight blade. There was Misi Pihn, former bigmouth. She was a

mau, maybe fourteen or fifteen, skinny with eyes like a snake, still open. Her crowbar jacket was stained with a small amount of blood, and I could see where the cutter had gone through the cloth.

There wasn't any point in asking where the murder weapon was. To make a good cutter and smuggle it all the way to Tartaros under guard takes a lot of work and risk. It was a valuable item, and I had no doubt that Tani Aduelo's cutter was in the possession of pretty little Tani. I glanced up at the dune facing me, and those sharks that weren't looking down at Misi Pihn with narrowed eyes were transmitting high signs to perky little Tani.

It didn't look good. If Tani had any sense at all, she'd go for a jury, which was almost a guarantee she'd get off, given the current selection of potential jurors. If the jury let a guilty perp off the hook, the Bad Call Rules required the execution of every juror who voted for not guilty. We had thirteen jurors per trial, and I only had four rounds of ammunition left. I issued a quick curse at Nkuma for running off on his jerk quest with the other rifle and the rest of the ammo.

I talked to Ratt without looking at him. "Any witnesses?"

"Twenty or thirty. A regular audience to see the Wire get hers. Like I said, I'm one of them. So, what do you do now?"

I turned my head and did a scan for the roach. My orbs picked up a chubby mau standing next to Tani. That would be Grahl. Maybe they were tying up a few loose ends to the Aduelo defense strategy. I figured there were all kinds of ways to waste time. Trying to beat a charge on points was a juicer game from back home. The *Law* was the law. Home was all done past.

"Tani Aduelo."

She broke off her conversation with the cockroach and looked at me. I felt a physical pain right beneath my breastbone. This was going to be a lot harder than I figured. "Tani, you've been fingered for killing Misi Pihn to get her rations. According to Ratt, there're witnesses. Under the *Law* I can handle it, but I suppose you want a jury."

She smiled very warmly at me. Damn her for that smile. "I don't want a jury."

As my lower jaw hung open, she looked at the roach. The lawyer raised his eyebrows and said to me, "I am Lewis Grahl representing Tani. Under the provisions of Rule Fourteen, what you call the Black Rag Rule, the defense moves to have the investigating officer decide this issue."

He was crazy. "Cockroach, are you shuffling dimensions?"

"I beg your pardon?" Grahl had smug oozing out of every pore. My first impulse was to let him go down in flames, but a glance at Tani finished that. I walked over to them and faced Grahl.

"Look, money threads, I don't know what in the hell ambulance you think you're chasing, but if this kid killed Misi Pihn for nothing but her eats, the only chance your pigeon has is a crooked jury."

Eyebrows still up, Grahl's forehead wrinkled in that eternal expression of burdened superiority sported by those princes of the blood reduced by cruel fate to having to treat with dung layers. "The way I understand your law," he said, "if the officer decides the case, new rules can be made to cover situations not already addressed by the existing rules. However, if a jury decides a case, it must be done under the existing rules. There would be no opportunity to make new rules."

I frowned as I thought about it. It hadn't registered on me before, but he was right. The pain in my chest eased a bit as I

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felt a gleam of hope. "You have something? Something that isn't covered by the Law?"

He nodded and said, "Trust me."

There it was again: Trust me. Every time a cockroach had ever fed that line to Bando Nicos, the only certain thing was that Bando was headed for the crowbars with a new asshole and a flat wallet. But maybe he knew what he was doing. He'd already seen something in the Law that I hadn't seen. Maybe.

I looked at Tani. It wouldn't be hard to get lost in eyes like hers. Jesus, she was just fourteen! I looked toward the setting sun. "I don't have to trust your cockroach, kid. You don't either." I looked back at those eyes. "You sure you want to do what he says? A jury can vote you not guilty, and you got a lot of friends out there."

"She wants to do what's right," said Grahl. "You'd have to execute a jury that voted wrong, wouldn't you?"

My voice went real low. "I don't have that much ammo."

"Sooner or later you'd have to go after the jury, correct?"

"Yeah."

Tani placed her hand on my arm. "Honest, I'll be all right. Lew knows what he'd doing." There was almost a gleam of mischief in her eyes.

I looked at the cockroach, and he said again, "Trust me."

Maybe he had something. Hell, Bando Nicos didn't know everything in the world. I wasn't exiled to Tartaros because I was gifted with great smarts. I went back to my place on the sand. "Okay, Grahl. Tani. No jury. How do you answer the charge?"

"First, there are a few things I would like to make clear for the record."

Speaking of the record, I hadn't made any arrangements for one. My old court clerk, Ila Toussant, was back with the Razai. I looked back at Alna, and she smiled as she held her hands over her head. In one hand she had a writing instrument and in the other was some paper. I nodded back and returned to Grahl. "Okay."

"Very well. To begin, the deceased was an informer. Back in prison she and Tani had had several run ins—"

"Forget that stuff," I said. "Rule Eleven. If it happened before the landing, it's done past. As if it never happened. I thought you knew the Law"

"I do. I just thought a bit of background might be helpful in making a decision."

"Facts help, cockroach. Background is bullshit."

"Very well. I should mention that, somehow, this Misi Pihn had an over abundance of rations. It has been rumored—"

"Yeah," I interrupted, "and so what? Are there any charges? Like, is Tani charging that Misi nabbed her eats?" I gave him an out if he wanted to take it, but he had to do it his way.

"No," he said.

"First Rule. What's mine is mine. It's not Misi's job to feed Tani, no matter how much stuff she has." I gave a little sigh of impatience. "Look, you know the Law. So far this has all been smoke. Do you have anything or not?"

Grahl studied me for a second, glanced at Tani, and nodded. "Very well, Nicos. Tani enters a plea of guilty and the defense makes a motion that Tani Aduelo be sentenced as a juvenile. She is only fourteen and has that right." There were a couple of giggles from the dunes.

I stood there with my teeth in my mouth for I don't know how long, waiting for him to give me the rest. After a long time I managed to figure out that's all there was.

"That's it?" I demanded. "That's your big move?" I had counted on the lawyer to have an answer. You'd think by then, standing in the middle of the Forever Sand, I would've god damned learned. "Talk to me, cockroach! Is that your sharp step, your deft play?"

"Think for a second, Nicos! This law of yours doesn't allow any grading of punishments, especially not for taking a life. The Razai cannot hold prisoners, the payback for taking a life is death."

"Yeah?" Again I waited. Again I damned myself for not learning from the time before. "So what's your point?"

He looked exasperated at the low form of intelligence with which he had to contend. "Don't you see? No provisions have been made regarding juveniles. You now have an opportunity to make such a provision. From what I understand, most of this law you're so proud of was made up by you. Now you have an opportunity to correct one of your many oversights." He glanced knowingly at the thousands of surrounding sharks. "It would also be a way to avert further unpleasantness."

I don't know. Maybe in law school you have to get certain neural centers crisped before you're allowed to take the bar exams. The juicer had lots of games, and the juve game was an old favorite. I'd even used it myself to keep down the numbers after almost beating to death that school teacher, which is why I was sent to Lancaster Juve instead of Pen State.

And everyone knew it was a game. Everyone in the crowbars, anyway. That's right. Cut his hair, put him in a suit and short pants, rouge his cheeks, promise the black rag he'll never do it again, and turn that little killer loose on the streets to bust more skulls. What about payback? What about justice?

Juicer law never was much concerned with the victim or with what was just. What was funny, though, was that everything the cockroaches, stains, and black rags did was in the name of justice and for the victim.

I began unslinging my piece. Grahl took a step toward me. "What are you doing?"

God, I was sick. I spat on the sand as I checked the load in my rifle. "You got another motion, cockroach?" I levered in a fresh round.

He walked over until he was next to me and began speaking in a very low voice. "Don't you see, Nicos? I've given you a way around your Payback Rule."

Man, the taste in my mouth was ancient and repulsive like the papers off the bottom of a legal eagle's birdcage. Yeah, I wanted a way around the Payback Rule, but it didn't have anything to do with there being something wrong with the rule. That and the rest of the Law was all that kept us out from under the big fist. It's what protected us.

I didn't want around the rule just because Tani Aduelo was young, pretty, and had an army of bone crushers who would be most unpleasant about this little chili pepper smoking her out of her sox. Why I wanted around the rule was because Bando Nicos didn't want to take out the garbage. I had the memory of the murder I'd committed on Earth sitting alongside the ghosts of all of those I'd had to execute in the name of the Payback Rule. Who was Bando Nicos to take out anyone in the name of the Law? Of course, who was anybody in the RCs to do anything in the name of justice? We were all killers. But then why was I the only one who got sick every time he pulled a perp's plug?

I looked at Tani. "You got anything to say, kid? I think your cockroach's run out of air."

"I have more to say, Nicos!" bellowed the roach.

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I turned my head until I faced Grahl. "You remember Rule Forty-eight?"

The cockroach thought for a moment. "The Obstruction Rule?"

"Yeah. The Obstruction Max Payback Rule."

"Yes. The maximum punishment under consideration in an action is applied to anyone who obstructs justice in that action. A trifle barbaric, I thought."

"Most cockroaches do. Anyway, just so you understand, blowholing for the sake of it obstructs justice. It delays things. For that you get the max."

"You call that justice? Is that fair?"

The oldest joke in the universe was justice, and here was Bando Nicos using the word just like it meant something. Back on earth you could always get a laugh from the sharks by saying that word. Not a funny laugh, like man did that ever tickle my funnybone. No. Instead, it would get one of those short cynical snorts filled with the kind of acid laugh that the sharks traded instead of raging around wasting everything in sight.

Like the lawyer who told that joke to Big Brown. The cockroach was sent to the Crotch at Greenville for dipping his fingers in the community till, and trying to cover it up with a few bribes, lots of legal moves, and eventually a couple of murders. In the yard the lawyer used to strut around like he owned the place, was better than everyone else, and was going to be back on the street in a matter of days. Big Brown didn't have anything personal against the lawyer. He just hated cockroaches.

One day in the yard Big pulled out a homemade edge, dug it into the lawyer's gut, and burgered the guy's tubes. Now, here's the funny part. As his lights were going out, the cockroach gasped out to Big Brown, "That's not fair!"

"You're right," Big answered. "That's a knife."

I guess you had to be there.

Tani Aduelo's cockroach was quiet, so I stood my ground on the sand and faced the mob of convict-exiles from Mihviht. I didn't need to read the *Law of the Razai*. I knew it by heart. But reading it meant that I wouldn't have to look at Tani. My hands trembled as I began reading Rule 15. "The penalty for all crimes is payback, and payback for taking a life is everything plus a little."

"Objection!" shouted Tani's cockroach.

"Man!" I shouted, "I told you slowing things down draws the max!"

"Then shoot me, Nicos!"

I pulled my rifle off of my shoulder and aimed it between his eyes. Every rotten money-threads cockroach sonofabitch who ever lined his pockets by running me through the juicer filled my sights. My finger tightened on the trigger. I took a breath and waited a second. The edge of rage was pushed back by knowing that I didn't have to act upon it. The image of my fellow rage addict, Cap Brady, came into my mind. I thought of the CSAs at the meetings who told me that as long as I don't give into the rage, Bando Nicos still had choices. The chili pepper was still running things. The instant I give into it, the monster runs the show.

There was another exhaust trail in the sky far to the north. I fixed my gaze on it and slowly lowered the rifle. When it was down and my aching finger was off the trigger, I looked at the cockroach. Grahl, his eyes closed, was licking his lips and trying to get his heart started. "Cockroach," I said, "I'd be damned careful about handing out invitations like that." I slung my weapon. "Say your piece."

Once he stopped trembling the cockroach looked around at the sharks as he held out his hands. "Tani is only fourteen years old. She's just a child. She didn't plan any murder. She couldn't. She's too young and immature to understand what killing another person means. In addition to that is the frightening stress of exile to this horror place. Here she is, a helpless child, condemned to a hell populated by vicious predators."

The dunes grumbled with agreement even though they were the vicious predators Grahl was talking about. The cockroach looked at me. "At best this is involuntary manslaughter, not premeditated murder. And you can't hold a child this young responsible for a murder in any event. No judicial system I know of does that. Mihviht doesn't; Earth doesn't—"

"That's enough, cockroach," I interrupted. "You're chewing old cabbage." I looked from him to the dunes. "People, it's time to wake up. This is not Mihviht. This is not Earth. This is Tartaros. Here we are responsible for our choices. All of us." I pointed at the girl. "Tani chose to steal Misi's food. Misi defended herself. Then Tani killed Misi. It was her choice, even if she only tried to scare or wound Misi. The thing she did took a life, and the payback for taking a life is everything."

The cockroach pushed his fingers through his hair then held out his hands. "What about rehabilitation—"

A wave of laughter moved over the crowd. It looked like putting on the head doctors and working the cotton candy rehabs was a popular sport on Mihviht, too.

"Damn it!" screamed the cockroach. "She can't become rehabilitated if she's dead!"

I held up my hand to shut him up. "No one's trying to rehabilitate anyone, Grahl. The only thing that concerns us here is payback." I moistened my lips, glanced at Tani, and looked back at the cockroach. "If the girl wants to improve her emotional life, she better get on with it. Her time is running out."

"Nicos, what about the lack of premeditation?"

"What about it? I never heard a corpse ask a killer how much thought went into thinning him. In the Razai, taking a life is taking a life. You take it, and you can't pay it back, you're done past."

There had already been too much talk. I faced Tani, half expecting her to run for it. The one law that most of the Mihvihtians found very amusing was the Razai's prohibition against holding anyone prisoner. Under the *Laws* she had the freedom to boogie. She didn't even have to be at the trial.

But she didn't run. She stuck it out and concern for what she was facing hadn't once crossed her face. She thought she had the cards. She really believed that she could get out of it. Somehow something was going to cut her a break.

"You got anything left to say, Tani?" My throat hurt it was so dry. She nodded and smiled at me.

Tani did have a closing argument, and it was pretty effective. As she held me with her gaze she began undressing. The sharks fell as silent as death. Piece by piece she removed her crowbar uniform down to her smalls. She slipped off her top and panties, and stood there on the cooling sand in her god-issue. She held her arms out and slowly turned around. Little pips for breasts, only a suggestion of hips, a wisp of golden pubic hair, dear God she was young. Dear God she was beautiful. I looked at the cockroach, and maybe he had a better reading on me than Tani had. His eyes were closed, his head hanging down.

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I faced the kid and Tani Aduelo was facing me, her arms still held out. I quickly raised my rifle, aimed for her heart, and blew her away. She dropped to the sand like a wet rag, her eyes wide open.

The sound of the shot faded and the scene could've been a painting. Then there was a growl, and a haystack yard monster with oily black hair started coming down the dune to my right. "BandoNicos!" he bellowed, "I'm going to kill you, chili pepper! I'm going to rip off your bit's head and shove you in the hole!"

I didn't look at Alna. I didn't even think about what to do next. Rule 13, the You Say It, You Pay It Rule, was still in the Law. Besides, when the dark horse rode me next time, the haystack's ghost would hardly be noticed next to little Tani's. I waited until the yard monster wasn't directly in front of anyone, aimed for his head, and fired. The sharks to his rear were splattered with the think goo he never used, he plowed into the sand face first, and was still.

Ratt Katz was looking at me like I'd popped up from Hell. "A threat is a crime," I recited. "It carries as a penalty the performance of the threat upon the threatener." I must have sounded dead. Like a machine. I wondered what Marietta would feel now that the rule she'd invented had finally claimed a life. Maybe it'd saved a few lives, too. I had to remember that for when the ghosts came at me with their questions.

I felt light-headed. I looked and Alna was standing at the edge of the crowd, her mouth open, her eyes wide. She tilted her head to one side and looked at me. Her eyes were full of fear. Was it fear for me? For us? Was she afraid of me?

She covered her face. I looked around at the Mihvihtians. They were looking back. What I read in their faces really threw the coal to it.

I hated them. All those faces. Right then I hated every single one of them. Back on Earth I never understood why cops seemed to have a case on against the universe. They were the man. They were on top, right? Then why did they hate the world and everything on it? As Tani's little bare ass cooled, I knew why they hated everyone.

Every garbage man tends to resent those whose garbage they haul. Killing the killers was the job of the society, the tribe, the Razai. But they use cops to keep the blood off their hands. What's even funnier, they hate the cops they appoint, and the reason why they hate them is for doing their jobs. That's right: the people who make all that garbage and hire the man to pick up the garbage, don't care for garbage men very much.

It's the same with cops. The only bunch cops hate more than the general public are their own cops: internal affairs shoeflies. That's right: even cops hate cops.

I levered a new round into my rifle. "Sun's almost down. Get the column moving."

"What if we don't want to get the column movin', baby-killer?"

I looked to the dune on my left but I couldn't make out who had shouted the question. I guess in a way they all had. "Find your own way out of the desert," I answered.

One by one, and then in little groups, the crowd began to thin. Angry eyes and nodding heads pointed in my direction. Angry lips whispered silent threats and vows. The shadows had grown long enough to cast the space between the dunes into darkness. Ratt sneered and headed east. Alna stood there for a long time, then she turned and walked away by herself, her desert sheet pulled tightly about her.

When the sharks were just about all gone, I walked over to Tani Aduelo's still form. Her face was soft and innocent. I had to remind myself that I was just looking at the outside. She had probably sold her young ass a thousand times, and no one from lock city carries a cutter who doesn't have experience in using one. The only fourteen year old kids that were sent to Tartaros from Mihviht were killers.

If the outside is all you can see, though, that's all you can look at. Her silent face still said, "It's lies, all lies." A wisp of steam was coming up from her wound. The horror of the coming night cold touched my neck. I wrapped my desert sheet about me.

"What are you doing here?" I looked up and Lewis Grahl was standing there.

"I don't know."

"Haven't you done enough? There's nothing you can do to make up for this." Tears edged into his voice. "Go away. Just go away."

"I got nothing to make up for, cockroach." I pointed at the girl's body. "Grahl, I seen thousands and thousands of dead on the sand. I splashed a few of them myself. We never bury the dead. Sometimes there's too many to bury. Usually there isn't any time." I nodded at the girl. "The sand bats. They go for the eyes first."

"Nicos, you're a monster."

"Yeah."

As the column moved on, Tani's cockroach and I knelt down and began scooping out a grave with our hands. She was still warm when we lowered her in. Grahl tore a piece from his sun sheet and placed it over her face. Then we pushed the sand over her.

The cockroach was crying, and I got this flash. It said that things would have been a lot better on Earth if, instead of just topping off their bank accounts, the cockroaches who lost cases had to bury their pigeons, or do time with them.

"What're you crying about, cockroach?"

He shook his head. "I've never lost a case before. Never. And to lose this one; it's a sin."

I pushed myself to my feet. "Your still corners." I held out my hand and helped him to his feet.

"Corners?"

"You know, all corners, perfect score. Everybody's job here today was justice. Everybody got what they deserved, so everybody won."

He held a hand out toward the grave. "This dead chiid? That's justice?"

No, man, I thought. That's a corpse. "Yeah. That's justice." "If this is what you call justice, Nicos, I don't think I can bear it."

I nodded as I slung my rifle and turned to follow the column into the dark of another icy night. "It ain't for the timid."

AS GOOD AS IT GETS

That night was the coldest I ever saw on the desert. It made the air snap. Sounds carried so far I could hear myself being cursed from both ends of the column. I swear I could hear the grains of sand grating against each other. The hoods on my sheet and parka were up and the filthy rag I had wrapped around my face was caked with my frozen breath. By the time the moon's bluish gray dot was high in the sky, we had dragged more than a hundred exhausted or dead sharks out of the column's path. A few we crutched along. I saw one carried by a

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couple of yard monsters and I gave up my lughox to let two more ride. Here and there you could see an old crowbar buddy helping an exhausted mate crip it along. The rest were meatsicles left for the sandbats. The Mihvihtians had been issued stretch gloves as part of their equipment, but by the time I got to one of the stiffes, everything was gone but the god issue. I kept my hands in my armpits and cursed at the moon.

Priorities. If we hadn't kept moving all of us would've died. The sharks understood that, most of them. Every now and then reality has a way of busting through the bullshit. What the sharks couldn't understand was the death of Tani Aduelo. That stiff little bit back there beneath the grit didn't fit any of the usual crowbar scenarios. Everybody hated the snitch, Misi Pihh. Everybody loved the little pretty, Tani Aduelo. Two plus two equals twenty-two. Everybody knows that. So how come that chili pepper RC blew a hole through Tani? Is he a proto? This his first day in the crowbars? It was all jaw tunes.

Working a mouth is one way to forget the cold. There were others. A small pack of Jesus jammers were crutching each other along singing hymns. Oh, Lord, I'm such a worthless asshole, so give me a break because I think your a chump, and other selections from the *Thank the Lord God is a Sucker Songbook*. I thought about burning Big Dave Cole's copy of Southy's *Life of Nelson* for a little warmth, but I couldn't. That book was my only connection to Earth, to Big Dave, and my past, what there was of it. Besides, during his life old Horatio Nelson had faced a few problems. He'd outlasted all of them except for that French sniper's musket ball at the end. His legend, the things he had done, and the effects of the changes he had made outlasted even that. I didn't figure I was any Admiral Nelson, but the book was something to lean on in a place that had no trees. Just feeling its weight in my kitbag gave me the illusion of not being all alone.

There was a rag head mullah who kept pointing around at the sharks on the desert, calling humans Allah's chosen of the universe. His evidence was that humans were the only known intelligent form of life. That we were the humans he was pointing at kind of made you wonder about his definition of intelligence. He was talking to himself, which was pretty common in the cold when someone was working with a bent strut. Either the cold, the situation, or something else had stroked the guy's gyros. But what he said gave my lobes the noids.

Is the human race as good as it gets? Is that sewer back on Earth the top-of-the line? It kind of made you smoke your wig some about where the Great Spirit had done his training. Did anybody ever wonder if God was qualified to do what he was doing? He, She, or It might be an on-the-job trainee filling in for someone who got fed up with the working conditions and quit. The universe might be just another blown project on the scrapheap behind the celestial vocational school.

I backed up my head and loaned a lobe to what I'd heard once father, and she'd said, "He was doing the best he could with what he had." That was her way of letting the old bastard who'd raped her at the age of eight off the hook. She called it forgiveness, and she said it wasn't something she was doing for her father. It was something she was doing for herself. It didn't make any sense to me, but maybe that was what God did with the human race: the best he could with what he had. That was an even scarier thought. You kind of hoped that God had a little bit more juice than that.

I jammed it and concentrated on the pain in my fingers. I didn't have to answer any big questions. My only job was to survive the night and keep the column aimed toward the Razai and those signal flares Stays would send up every hour.

Hours later, with the Eyes of the Spider directly overhead, I was in the middle of the walking column. I hadn't been able to track down either Nkuma or Alna. I felt lonely without Stays, Cap, Marietta, and the rest of the RCs. I needed to have someone there who was in the cops, someone who knew what it was like, someone who knew why we did what we did. I was just telling myself that it would only be a few more days and we'd be back, when a terrible scream ripped up from the direction of the left flank guard. It was immediately followed by a chorus of more screams from the same direction.

The walking column sharks froze. About the last place I wanted to be was the left guard, Tani's old buddies and all, but I took off running toward the north, wondering how many perps I'd have to chill this time.

By the time I reached the left flank guard, most of it was moving again. A few sharks were weeping on each other and getting their asses patted. "What the hell was all the noise about?" I demanded.

No one talked. One rough hand grabbed my right arm and pointed straight ahead. I went in that direction and could see the light from a fire cube burning. Surrounding it on the sand seemed to be a forest of strange little stumps, trunks, and branches dancing in the orange light. A little closer and I could see that the strange little trees were the outstretched arms and legs of long dead sharks. Hundreds, thousands of them. They had been covered by the sand, dried out, and were now newly emerged to give the Mihvihtians their special welcome to Tartaros. My skin crawled as my legs cramped from the desire to run. Grinning skulls covered with tatters of dried skin were everywhere. There were no clothes or belongings. The bodies had been stripped. "What happened to them?" asked a shadow. The voice sounded like it belonged to Ratt Katz, the people's conscience.

"I just got here."

I touched my greenstick to the fire cube and held it above my head. The corpses covered the sand as far as I could see. Here and there a dark furry thing sleeping inside a rib cage was startled by the light and scurried off. It looked like the work of a scavenger gang. Bending over I held out the light and checked out skeletons one at a time, turning over bones with my toe, until I found the evidence I was looking for. It was a neck vertebra that had been shattered by a slug that was still stuck in it.

"See that? A rifle."

"So?"

"So the lockwatchers don't arm sharks on the way out the hatch, do they? This crowd was done by one of the old, established firms."

"Who? That Kegel you told us about?"

There was a lughox carcass nearby. I picked my way through the defunct and departed and examined the remains of the lughox's raggedy hide for markings. The bleached painted remains of a colored palm print was on the mummified critter's ass end. I pointed at it. "The Hand. Carlo T's boys did 'em."

"Is that the gang in the east the Razai is going to fight?"

I turned and the light fell on Ratt's face. The kid's features were hard, the eyes gray and noided out. The kid wouldn't admit

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it if you stuck a howitzer in his ear, but he was scared. "That's the one."

"Nicos?"

I knocked the fire cube off the end of my greenstick and turned to the shadow. "What?"

"I know you and your two mau friends've been talking up the Law about how tough things are on the sand."

"Yeah?"

"Don't jerk me off, pigshit. How bad can it get?"

Ratt had a way that just made you want to do things for him.

When I realized I was biting through the skin on my inner lip, I turned back and used the toe of my boot to push the fire cube next to a laughing skull that had a black hole drilled into the center of its forehead. "Ask old Crowbar Charlie there. He won't lie."

I headed back toward the walking column, thinking that it might just be a great idea to march the whole column through the corpse forest.

Reality time. Here it is, you yard sharks. This is the real world. Grab a piece so you'll remember this is as good as it gets without the Law.

I scrapped it though. We didn't have enough fire cubes to light the show for that long, and we couldn't afford to sit around until daylight. Instead, I kept them heading for the Razai.

Along the trail, in the darkest and coldest part of the night, I came across a group of fifteen or so Mihvihtians who were in Compulsive Self-destructives Anonymous. I knew that because I heard them saying as they walked along, "... and wisdom to know the difference," the tail end of the Serenity Prayer. It goes, God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and wisdom to know the difference. Our CSA group back in the Razai began its meetings the same way.

There were a couple words in the prayer that didn't make much sense to me. God was one of them, but it's corners. That word fogs a lot of people. It's the people who aren't confused by that word that scare me.

The other word was serenity. It was something I never had in my entire life, so I didn't know what it was. I was told that part of serenity is accepting the things you can't change, but that didn't make much sense to me. It sounded like grinning while the universe wiped its ass on you.

Russ Gades, who figured pretty heavily in the Razai CSAs, told me once that acceptance isn't approval. Acceptance is taking reality for what it is. Meeting life on life's terms.

It was all farts through a hairpiece to Bando Nicos. If there's something that should be different, there's always something I can do about it, even if I can't change it. I can hate it, fume about it, and eat out my guts over it. If I'm especially sick, I can also see how many others I can make miserable about the same situation. I'd only been in CSA a few days, and I still had a lot to learn. I fell in with the walking meeting and listened to the deadheads.

There was a shadow named Dov, a powder puff, who talked about trying to keep grateful when everything is turning to shit. Things could be a lot worse, said one of the weenie-wavers. Thorns have roses.

All I could do was shake my head. That every cloud has a silver lining shit could rot the nuts off a billy goat. It was the story of the guy gleefully digging in the horseshit because, with all that horseshit, there had to be a pony in there somewhere. All of that positive stuff got a lot of vibes from the rest of the addicts,

but to Dov, exile to Tartaros did seem to be a big time signal from the Higher Power that stepping on him was still Heaven's number one form of entertainment. Dov was the one I related to.

Another shadow named Najina said, "Dov, if your Higher Power does things like punish you with this place, perhaps you should pick yourself an HP that will help you instead."

Then commenced a discussion on designing and picking Higher Powers. As the meeting continued I moved through the shadows as my head smoked. It was all thought spaghetti to me. Which god was God had always been the religion game on Earth. Was it god "A" or god "B", Jesus one, two, or three? Confucius says this, Buddha says that, the Torah says this, Jesus says that, and Muhammad says that everybody else's doing it all wrong, which is corners because everyone else's saying the same thing to the sons of the Prophet.

It was a crapshoot. Every religion seemed to say theirs was the only true one, and if you didn't shop at their stand, things in the afterlife would become very unpleasant. It sounded to me like God was running protection for the cosmic neighborhood. You know, worship me under this name and in this particular way or spend eternity with broken kneecaps.

CSA was the only bunch who'd ever told me to pick my own Higher Power, or invent a new one if that's what I needed. There were no rights or wrongs. Find out what can help you, invest your design with the power to do those things, then call your creation whatever you want. Ask it for the help you need and you'll get it. It kind of made you wonder about how many burnt brain cells the inventor of CSA had.

I looked up, and the light from Blue Moon hadn't quite wiped out the Eyes of the Spider. As I watched the Eyes, what I feared most finally reached my ears. Another shadow named Samara spoke and her words dripped with tears and hate. "Tani Aduelo was my friend."

I wrapped my fingers around the handle of my ice pick and located the source of the words as electrons skittled up and down my spine. It was black dark, but my sheet was different than theirs. I felt like I was walking around with a big "Bando Nicos, Pigshit Cop" sign on. There was a pause and Samara spoke again, her voice quiet.

"No, she wasn't my friend. No one was ever her friend. She never would allow anyone to get close to her. But I liked her. Loved her. I can't bear the memory of that bastard gunning her down. One second she was full of life, the next she was nothing but a sack of dead guts. I hate him, and my hate is eating me alive."

Samara didn't know that the shadow next to her was Bando Nicos, the bastard baby-killer. I stuck my ice pick back in my belt. Inside I was dying. As I began aiming my feet out of the meeting, Najina spoke again. "You make it sound like it's the Razai Cop's fault that Tani killed Misi." There was a rumble of laughter among the Walkers.

"I don't think Tani being killed is funny!" spat Samara. "Laughing at my pain isn't funny!"

"I don't think Tani dying is funny," said Najina, "and no one is laughing at your pain."

"What was the laughter, then?"

Najina's answer came slowly. Maybe he was choosing his words. Maybe he was just cold. "I'm angry about it, but I'm not angry at the cop. I'm like you, Samara. My addiction is rage. If I was angry at Nicos, though, my addiction would be doing the aiming. It'd just be a way to kill the feelings and keep the flames

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roaring. Tani killed Misi, and she had to take the consequences for what she did. I'm angry at Tani, not the cop."

I was grateful that the moon was so small and dim, because I was staring at Najina like he was sprouting tentacles. Who in the hell was he to let me off the hook?

Another shadow spoke. "I'm an addict, my name's Brenie."

The meeting gave her the welcome. As a joke I prayed to the Spider for a change of subject. As they said in CSA, be careful what you pray for.

"I'm a crowbar shark," she began. "There's nothin' in this world I hate more'n cops, 'less it's cockroaches." There were a few chuckles.

"I saw that Bando Nicos only four times since I stepped out on the sand. The first three times was when he read us the *Law*. The fourth time was when he smoked Tani Aduelo. He told us if you kill, you die. Tani killed, and she died. I respect that. What I respect more was that Nicos was just one little chili pepper cop in front of five or eight thousand sharks who didn't want Tani to die. All by himself he dropped the dark on Tani right in front of us. I'm not just talkin' brave, brothers and sisters. Bando Nicos is either a saint or is running with a stripped gear."

Samara had an angry response to Brenie's comment, but I didn't get to hear it. My feet were rooted to the dunes and I was sick to my stomach. Alna didn't want to be near me. I didn't want to be near me. My heart was about to explode. I turned away, ran south through the sand, and kept going until I was all alone. As one of Stays's signal flares streaked up into the cold night toward Blue Moon, I knelt on the sand, covered my face with my hands, and cried.

HEAD SMOKE

The night cold deepened. I climbed a dune to get a fix on Stays' next signal flare. As I checked the Eyes of the Spider for our direction, I noticed that the few stars toward the south were gone from the sky. It seemed a little warmer. A half hour later the Eyes were gone too. The wind picked up and it began to snow. The tiny hard flakes stung wherever they hit bare skin. Just about as soon as it started, though, it stopped. It wasn't enough snow to add any time to our water rations. It was only enough to make us wet and miserable. Once that was accomplished, the snow stopped and the deep chill returned.

Muchas gracias, Great Power of the Universe. Many thanks, Great Spider. I thought to myself, maybe I ought to pick an HP who specializes in good weather. On some of the dunes I could see the blades of that retractable grass fully extended in great clumps to absorb the moisture.

After I saw the signal light streak up in the east, I walked toward the head of the column. All along the way there were the shadows of Tani's fellow exiles to contend with, not to mention their muttered curses. As the wet soaked in and the cold grew colder, the muttering ceased.

Somewhere during the night, I felt an arm wrap around my waist. It was Alna. For some reason, it wasn't much comfort right then. "How do you feel, Bando?"

I walked along through the sand for a bit, then I shrugged. "Hell, I don't know. Who ever knows how they feel?"

"Lots of people."

It wasn't something I wanted to talk about. The lump of lead sitting on my heart told me it was probably something I needed to talk about, though. My eyes began burning and I turned it off with anger. "How does Bando Nicos feel? I feel like I want to

die, like I want to kill, like I want to take you and leave the Razai forever." My eyes began burning again and I was grateful for the dark.

"Alna, you remember that time when we talked about going off together and finding someplace with trees?"

She wrapped her hands around my right arm. "Yes. A little valley where we'd build a cabin for just the two of us."

"I been thinking about that a lot. Once we get out of the sand and hit the mountains, maybe we should head off on our own. Maybe we can find that little valley. Build that shack and fill it with a bunch of little brown kids."

I looked at her, and her dark face was almost invisible inside her hood. For a startled second it seemed like she wasn't there. That I was talking to a ghost. I stopped us and turned her face toward the moon. If our kids looked like Alna with just a dash of chili pepper, they'd be beautiful. But the universe loves to play jokes. Our kids could look like me, but with nappy hair. They'd be something only a mother could love, and I was sure Alna would love them.

"Bando, what are you thinking?"

"Me? I'm thinking that you are my nightingale. You are my heart, my anchor in the universe, the only thing that keeps me from throwing a mental shit fit."

"There's more, Bando." Her voice was dead serious.

I hate it when people try and draw me out. I was quiet for a moment, the taste of killing Tani Aduelo still in my mouth. "I'm thinking I don't like my job much."

"Maybe you can boss the Razai someday and change things."

"No, lady, no." I shook my head. "No way, Sister Crowbar. That's the one job I want less than the one I got."

She laughed and I shook off the chills her joke had brought on. Leading the Mihvihtian cons for a few days showed me that I didn't want Nance Damas's job. What the hell, I was bringing in sixteen thousand new voters to a gang that numbered less than three thousand. Chances were a new election would find us all out of jobs. That would be corners with me, I thought. After my few days as a Razai Cop, I could haul a rifle in Bloody Sarah's army through Hell as a buck-ass private with a song in my heart.

"There's something I don't understand, Bando."

"There's all kinds of stuff I don't understand." I shook my head, trying to dislodge the naked image of the new ghost. "I don't know much, Alna. If answers are what you want, I'll probably let you down."

She reached up and touched my cheek. "You know, Bando, you're not half as bad as you think you are."

"Tell it to the black rag who dropped the rock in my lap. What'd you want to ask?"

"The girl? Tani?"

I could feel invisible fingers wrapping themselves around my throat. The breathing came hard. "What about her?"

"Why did she take off her clothes?"

I nodded. "That one I can answer." I took a ragged breath as guilt filled in the words her image supplied: look at me, I'm so young, how could I have done such a thing? Look at me, I am so lovely, even if I had done something naughty, I surely didn't mean it. Look at me, certain of you men and you particular women, and you know who you are. Look at me. Feast your eyes on this. Doesn't my youthful form, my smooth skin, my tender age, excite you? Don't you feel horribly guilty about—

"It was the best argument she had."

Alna snorted, "Didn't look like much of an argument to me."

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"No. It wasn't much of an argument," I answered. It was tearing the guts out of me, though.

Alna's head turned and she pointed. "Look! Another flare!"

The white streak climbed into the sky. We were close. In another day or two, we would be back with the Razai. I looked up and saw that the two stars that were between us and the belly of the Spider Nebula had set along with the moon. The stars to the south were out and sparkling.

"The sky's cleared."

In minutes the stars began to fade as the sky began to lighten. Another engine streak burned its way down through the sky northwest of us, into the dark of the desert. There had been more than a dozen of them since we picked up the cons from Mihviht. Another shipload of convict-exiles were about to be dumped. Seventeen thousand more sharks on infinity hold.

Would they eat themselves alive? Would they fall prey to one of the scavenger gangs? Would they become a scavenger gang themselves and wait for the next load of sharks to be dumped on Tartaros?

"I wish we could help them," said Alna.

"Let's get this bunch back to Nance before we worry about anyone else."

I watched the burn trail fade from the sky and turned my attention toward the front of the column. That ship of sharks had nothing to do with us. They were too far north. Besides, I already had my hands full. So I just took what was going to happen to that new load of cons and jammed it into my mind's darkest corner along with all of my other nightmares.

I picked up a handful of the chalky yellow sand that, during the day, made up the biggest, hottest, meanest desert in the world. As the cold loosened its grip on us, the sky began filling out with that beautiful deep blue that would soon change to the color of blood. Soon it'd be hot enough to make the Devil turn on his air conditioner.

This dawning I couldn't hear any voices. On that first morning after picking up the Mihvihtians the voices complained, bitched, pissed, and moaned about fate.

"How'd I ever get here?"

"I didn't deserve this."

"This is a violation of my rights."

"I'm innocent!"

"This is not fair!"

So much bullshit, so little time. The next night the voices only talked simple survival and observation.

"How much water you got left?"

"These nights can't get any colder, can they?"

"God I'm tired."

"Can you carry the baby?"

"There aren't any stars here."

"Where in the hell are we?"

"Where are we going?"

"These days can't get any hotter, can they?"

Can you carry the baby was a question that made my head smoke. Our group of sharks from Earth didn't include any urches or pregnant bits. The bunch from Mihviht included everything from babies to an adult set of Siamese twins. They don't look kindly on abortion on planet Mihviht, so the new bunch of sharks included about sixty babies that had been delivered on the ship. Three women had died in childbirth since we had picked up the Mihvihtians. Judging from the size of some of the sisters, more additions would be along directly.

What was worse than that, about a thousand of the Mihviht bunch were urches, under sixteen. Some of them were as young as twelve. The juicer on Earth still hadn't accepted that a twelve year old arsonist and murderer could be "without hope." Mihviht didn't have that problem.

A young little bastard asking for it and getting it didn't bother me, with the exception of Tani. One thing that did bother me, though, were all of the weenie wavers, kiddie bungers, baby snuffers, and other perverts back in the Razai. There were a whole lot of problems I hadn't had to deal with up until then because the Razai didn't have any kids in it.

Of course, it wasn't just the perverts in the Razai that were bothering me. I was bringing sixteen thousand new sharks into the mix. I pretty much knew the spectacular assholes from Earth. I didn't know a soul from Mihviht. I made a mental note to bring in some recruits for the RC from the Mihviht bunch. We needed information. We needed a few Mihvihtian watchers who could point out the short fuses.

Alna held onto my arm and rested her head against my shoulder. I liked it when she did that. It said she loved me, and that was something I needed to see and feel, as well as hear. "Bando, have you seen Nkuma?"

"No. He's gone. Man, do I ever plan to lay a lump on his ass when I see him again. I can't believe he left me by myself with one rifle to thin Tani Aduelo."

"Baby, Nkuma could bust you in half if he wanted." She reached up and kissed my cheek.

I held her at arm's length. "Sister, you don't think that dumb bastard Nkuma took off by himself to meet those ships, do you?"

She quickly looked away, and I posted a mental note to remind her to stay away from poker games. Bloody hell. Was I going to have to make room for Nkuma's ghost too? I looked back toward the west. There wasn't any way I could catch up with him, even if I could figure out which direction he'd gone. "Bastard. I told him not to go."

"Rule Two, Bando. He's free to go wherever he wants."

I nodded. "Yeah. That's how he got almost three hundred sharks killed the last time. Is that what he wants?"

Alna's unblinking gaze settled on me. It never failed. The more cranked I'd get, the smoother Alna would go. "You don't have to be a brain surgeon to figure it out, Bando. What he wants is to steer the new sharks away from the things that killed the people he led before."

There wasn't anything to do with it but accept it. After a few minutes of mental flogging, Alna and I got back to putting one foot in front of another. Just her and me in a valley of our own with no one else to be responsible for, that was my fantasy.

The sky was turning red and it was getting hotter. It was time to settle down and hide from the sun. Before I could even get my sheet over my head, a shout came from the front of the column. "Nicos! Up at the point! We've spotted some riders. They're wearing stars!"

I ran toward the point with Alna close behind. If the riders were wearing stars, they had to be RCs. I just couldn't figure out why they would risk striking out across the desert in broad daylight to find us. I put Tani's ghost aside and doused my head smoke. There was a whole new opportunity to grow cranking up.

A MINOR COMPLICATION

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As Alna and I reached the limits of the point guard camp, it was a different world. Instead of everyone sitting around in clumps pissing and moaning about heat, fate, and the future, these sharks were all quiet and keeping down. They were frying in the sun like so many fish on a griddle, but they all had their aluminized sun sheets rolled dull side out and tucked away on their backs. If they had been wearing their sheets it would have been like a mirror convention to whoever was out there on the sand. The Mihvihtians hadn't shown up on Tartaros with much in the way of weaponry, but every one of the point guards was ready with something lethal. They had everything from homemade cutters and garrotes to belt wrapped fists and saps filled with sand.

The posted guards each kept an eye on his or her hunk of the perimeter, while the reserve guards crouched silently with their units. They were a bunch of crowbar jerkoffs who thought discipline was a disease, and there they were like a case of razors, unwrapped, polished, and ready to slice. I mentally slipped myself a bit of taffy for fingering Colonel Indimi to push the point.

There was a line of sharks stretched out on their bellies examining the northern approaches to the camp. I bent over, tapped one shark on his shoulder, and asked "Where's the bald Eagle?" The eagle tag had to do with the Colonel's hairless pate. There wasn't a hair on his head except for thick, black eyebrows and a matching handlebar moustache. The shark I tapped turned slowly and looked up at me like I'd just farted in his face. He was a young chop with a jaw like a granite tombstone. He lifted his hand and pointed toward the east.

"The Colonel is over there," he whispered. He then turned his back and resumed studying the distant dunes.

There was that loyalty thing again. I had no doubt in my crowbar bound mind that the little chop on guard there would happily fight and die for the Colonel should the hammer drop. I looked them over one by one and knew that they all belonged to Colonel Indimi. I felt a pang of jealousy as I turned away and headed east.

Alna was grinning as she whispered at me, "I don't think he liked what you called the Colonel."

"You wouldn't kid a cop, would you, sister?"

I gave the laugh, but inside I was turning frog green. I'd never felt that loyal toward anyone, and no one had ever felt that way toward me. It was like being unable to love or be loved. I felt like everyone else had parts I was missing.

There's something mysterious that makes someone a natural leader. I'd seen it in school, on the block, and behind the crowbars a hundred times. Some character with nothing visible to recommend him is dropped into a crowd and the next thing you know is he's making plans and giving orders and most of the people around him are grinning, nodding, and saying "Yeah, guy. That's corners. What do you want me to do? Huh? Huh? Huh?"

Nance Damas was one of those natural leaders. Sarah Hovit, the commander of the Razai Army, was another. Three of the four generals under her, Rhome Nazzar, Yirbe Vekk, and MigRojas, were natural leaders, too. The fourth General, Tao Dao, was different. You didn't want to do for Ow Dao; you were afraid not to. That was all right because the bandit chieftain never was after anyone's approval. All he ever wanted was power.

I was different, too. I didn't hold my position as chief of the RCs because of anyone's loyalty. Nance'd dumped the job on

me because I was the last in line. Nobody interfered with me for fear of being stuck with the job themselves. I was there because no one else wanted to take out the garbage.

I envied the ones who drew that loyalty from others. It was like some kind of ultimate stamp of approval from the universe. The trouble is, to get that loyalty, you had to be the kind of hairpin who didn't need it. They have to be able to see a certain something in you; something I couldn't see in anyone; something no one could see in me. I suspected to get that loyalty you had to be worth it. Was Bando Nicos worth it? The laughter in my head was a roar. The ghost of Tani Aduelo was right in there leading the rest of my spooks in a protest against the continued life of Bando Nicos. The delegation wanted its payback. It wanted me on the dark ride. That's what Bando Nicos was worth.

Alna and I climbed quietly up the backside of a dune. Habran Indimi was on top lying flat on his belly. Indimi was a big man, his skin burnt as brown as mine, his head as bald as a baby's bum. His moustache was curled down at the ends, and he was on infinity hold for making an environmental statement. To prevent his commanding general from polluting the environment with one more stupid order, the Colonel had beamed a ray though the old boy's head.

Although he saved the day, won the battle, and earned the eternal gratitude of hundreds of thousands of soldiers, dropping the croak on his general earned him the enemy's most important decoration. The general, in addition, was well connected at the front office. It was real bad press on Mihviht. The media charged, tried, and convicted him. The juicer agreed with the verdict and put him on infinity hold. That much of his story I managed to piece together from crowbar gossip. The real man, however, is always something different from what you can see or hear.

I got down on the sand and slid up next to him. Alna slid up on my right. "What you got, Colonel?" I whispered.

Without taking his gaze off the distant dunes, he pointed a finger toward the southeast. I squinted my eyes against the glare and looked. In between the dunes, trying to stay in the shadows as much as possible, was a party of about twenty mounted and armed dune sharks. Some wore plain white sheets like Boss Kegel's gang, while others had sheets with colored markings, like Pau Avanti's mob, the Hand. A couple had yellowish sand-colored sheets that I'd never seen before. They were riding the broad-backed, shaggy, six-legged lughoxen and leading an additional half dozen of the critters. The horns and tusks on the creatures were highly polished. I was totally bent.

"Look at them bopping through the sand like they owned the grit. They could be ambushed by two crips with wet noodles."

"Maybe not," the Colonel observed.

I glanced at Indimi. "I was told they were wearing stars, like mine."

"Wait a bit. They're moving into the light."

The front of the column came around a dune into the glare from Alsviid. The lead shark had a bandage wrapped around his head and there was a flash of reflected light from his chest. "Stays."

"Who is he?"

"Martin Stays. A recovering anarchist. He's my number two in the cops. They're Razai, but I'll be damned if I can figure out why they're cruising the dunes. Talk about asking for it."

Kill all the Lawyers

Colonel Indimi smiled at me as he twirled the ends of his moustache with his fingers. "As soon as you return, Nicos, I'll show you why."

Military types. They get so damned smug about their little plans and stratagems when they talk to civilians, they remind me of cockroaches. I let it go, got to my feet, and began waving my arm. The leader of the patrol held up his hand and the column came to a halt.

Stays dismounted and just stood there. "Why in the hell isn't he coming over?"

Indimi nodded and glanced up at me. "For all he knows, you're a hostage. You better go down there and talk with him."

I looked at Alna. "Let's go see what's up."

Alna slid down the dune behind me. As I reached the bottom I put up my hood to keep my melon from baking and groped beneath my sheet for the comforting feel of my ice pick. You never know what's going to happen in life, so be prepared for everything. Big Dave Cole used to say back in the Crotch. Expect everything to work out fine, but be prepared for it all to go down the shitpipe. That was Big Dave's plan for success in the crowbars. I was never much good at playing any of those let-go-and-let-God serenity games they play in CSA. My plan had always been to expect everything to turn to shit, and then watch it do just that. I wasn't often disappointed.

When we were close enough to his riding critter to smell it, I nodded at Stays and looked up at the others. The RCs he had with him were Magic Mountain Marietta and our super cop Marantha Silver, formerly of the Union of Terran Republic's Ministry of Justice. Behind them was Rhome Nazzar, former black terrorist and yard monster, the Razai's point group commander. With him was Ondo Suth, the native Tartaran we had captured in the Kegel raid who believed in a dreamland called Iargalon. There was also a squad of yard sharks I didn't recognize. The whole bunch was grimmer than last year's parole board.

During the few days we'd been gone, my number two RC had grown a sandy brown beard and moustache which were about three shades lighter than his hair. He still wore the bandage on his head from the wound he had gotten in the fight with the Hand.

Nazzar had changed, too. There was a little scraggle of something growing on the yard monster's young face, and near that old scar on the left side of his chin, the beard was coming out silver white. Marantha Silver pairing up with that chubby little con artist Herb Ollick seemed to be making her younger and prettier. For a split second I wondered what Herb thought of Marantha cutting her beautiful black hair short, but then I remembered: to Herb Ollick, Marantha was a goddess. She could've told Herb to cut off his own foot and eat it, and he would've done it, toenails bad smell and all.

Marietta was still the biggest and blackest RC the world had ever seen, and she had added a cutter to her weapons that looked almost big enough to be a sword. She had it slung from a belt on her back. Her hair was cut short, too. Ondo Suth looked the same: wiry and wary. The sharp gray eyes beneath those mousy brown eyebrows were still examining the tops of the surrounding dunes.

By the time we were in the middle of them, everyone had dismounted from their lugs and were waiting. My nose reminded me that the Razai hadn't bathed in a long time. Having arrived more recently, the Mihvihtians were a sweeter smelling bunch. If nothing else would do it, I figured the smell

might drive us out of the sand and into the Sunrise Mountains. Why worry about the Hand's half-million man army when our armpits could flatten the planet?

"What's happening?" I greeted. There was nothing but silence. "Whose minding the store?" Everyone seemed to be searching the tops of the distant dunes. "Talk to me, people. Who's doing cops back at the Razai? What're you cheese heads doing on the dunes in the daylight?"

Stays frowned as he looked at me. "Cap, Margo, and Herb are out on the dunes chasing down and maxing the perps from the Hand's rape trials."

I glanced at Marantha and back at Stays. "Herb Ollick?"

"Yeah. We needed more RCs. I appointed him. Is there a problem?"

"Nope. If they're out chasing bad guys, I take it you fingered some more RCs to stay with the gang."

"Slicker Toan and Minnie McDavies."

I nodded as I thought about the three additions. Herb Ollick was a chubby little con artist and jokester who was also a mean throw with an edge. Slicker was the best pickpocket I'd ever seen, and he looked so big, white, and stupid you just knew he couldn't find his own ass with both hands and a bad smell. The man was, however, an incredible athlete and smart as a sting.

Minnie McDavies gave me chills. She was the little mau who used to geld the men who disappointed her. Also she was very hard to keep track of. No one ever seemed to notice Minnie. What they did notice all of a sudden was that their nether parts were missing.

I said to Stays, "So we're still a going concern. It's good to see you again."

He nodded, his face still grim. "It's good seeing you again, Sherlock." He nodded at Alna. "I'm glad he found you. I was concerned. Where's Nkuma? Dom said he went on with you two to meet a pit ship."

"I don't know where he is." I waved a hand at all of them. "Why are you assholes out on the sand here in broad daylight? We were following your signal flares in all right. Are you looking for trouble?"

"We were thinking," said Stays, "some other dune sharks might've been following the signals, as well."

Rhome called from the back. "Scouts said that a big gang was heading our way. We were just being careful."

I frowned. "You kidding, man? Riding out here as big as Bozo with a nose twice as red? With only twenty sharks? You call that being careful?" I shook my head. "Don't worry about it. That big gang your scouts saw is the sharks Nkuma, Alna, and-me picked out of the sand to join the Razai." Stays glanced at the dunes and back at me. "How many of them do you have with you?"

"I pointed over my shoulder with my thumb. "We have sixteen thousand, more or less."

Stays just stared at me with a dumb expression. I looked around and they all had the same dumb expression. "What's the matter with you people? If we're planning on hitting the Sunrise Mountains and doing the Hand, we're going to need one hell of a lot more than three thousand sharks." I looked at them more closely. "That isn't it at all, is it? What in the hell is eating you assholes?"

Stays looked down at my feet. Everyone else was looking every place else except at me. Finally Marantha Silver looked me in the eyes. "It's Nance Damas," she said. "Someone tried to kill her. She's been shot."

Absolute Magnitude

Suddenly, right in the center of that oven of a desert, it became very chilly. Now that it had happened it seemed real stupid that I hadn't expected it. The truth was that it had never crossed my mind that Nance might be in danger. She was one of those people who're so tough and so necessary you just naturally assume they're immortal.

"Will she live?" asked Alna.

Stays scratched at his new beard. "Unknown. Mercy Jane was getting ready to operate when we left. Nance was hit in the left lung and it looks like the slug lodged near her spine or in it. The column's halted until she can be moved again."

I rubbed the back of my neck. "I take it when you said somebody shot her, we don't know who."

"That's right."

"Who's on it?"

"I am," answered Marantha.

I nodded. "Good. Maybe we can make some use out of all that hot shit Ministry of Justice training now." I looked at the faces. "Who's taking over for Nance? Did she appoint another number two?"

Stays nodded and half smiled. "Yeah. You."

They all chuckled at my expression. "That's not much of a joke, Watson."

He smiled all the way. "No shit, Sherlock. No joke, either."

"Me? I can't even haul the load I got. Has that bull croc lizzie yard monster been sniffing ox shit? I'm an RC. Those crowbar monkeys hate my guts. I can't do it. I won't do it."

"I told Nance that's what you'd say. She said maybe they hate you, sure enough, but they also trust you."

"Terrific." I examined the sand at my feet and shook my head. Here was some of that big time validation coming at me and I didn't want to be anywhere near it. The CSAs say that God never gives you more than you can handle. Again I suspected a clerical error and urged the Great Spirit to check over my load limit specs. Something else occurred to me.

"Why haven't you people held an election?"

"If Nance dies, we'll have to. She isn't dead yet, we don't want to, and she gave you the job."

I shook my head, glanced at Alna, and looked back at Stays. I didn't know. I was about ready to strike out on my own. The cops was already too much. Pushing the Razai could give my nightmares nightmares. Something registered in the dimness of my mind. Maybe I was off the fuzzy blue hook. "What about the cops? Am I still in the RCs?"

"Sure," said Nazzar. "Man, nobody is low enough to take that job."

They all laughed while Stays decided to have a moment. "You know, Sherlock, the way I read it, if there ever was an election, the Razai might elect you."

"Being an asshole is your choice, Stays. I don't see the point in advertising."

"No more of this blushin' modesty," Marietta commanded. "We got things to do. It's yours, down n' brown. Quit cryin'."

I glanced over my shoulder, recalled what was crouching back there in the dunes, and got a very bad feeling. I looked at Alna, and then faced Stays as a grin sprouted on my lips. "I'm bringing in sixteen thousand new voters, and these sharks really hate my guts. They've got a bunch of children with them, and yesterday I had to lay the max on a little girl. It wasn't a politically popular move."

"We've survived not being popular before, Sherlock," said Stays.

"The point is, with me as number two, all of us might be voted out of office about ten seconds after we make it back to the Razai."

Marietta bellowed out a laugh. "A vacation? We all could use a vacation."

"That reminds me." I looked over at Marietta. "I had to send a shark off to a better land riding Rule 13."

"Huh?" She thought for a moment and nodded, her face empty of expression. "Had to happen sooner or later."

"We've had a few of our own executions," said Stays. "A rape, some powder puffs killing on the freak, trying to find some stuff. I'll fill you in on the way back."

He walked his critter over while Rhome and his deadly dozen mounted up. Stays turned back and waved his hand at Rhome Nazzar. "See you in a couple of hours." As Marietta, Marantha, and Ondo led their critters over, Nazzar's people moved off toward the east. I took Alna by the arm and began slogging through the loose sand toward Colonel Indimi's dune.

Stays, Ondo, Marietta, and Marantha had squatted in my memory like close family only the night before. Now they seemed like strangers. A tide of panic was rising around me. The Law, the Razai, taking on the Hand to free all their slaves, I could get behind all those things. It's easy to join a parade. Responsibility and effort are spread around over lots of heads. When you're leading a parade, however, the cards make a different sound when they land. I was convinced Nance had made the biggest mistake of her hellish life when she fingered Bando Nicos to be number two.

I glanced at Marietta's towering hulk and suddenly I wanted to talk with my mother. It seemed silly as I thought it. My mother was dead and she hadn't had a whole lot to say to me when she was alive, but that was the feeling the Magic Mountain called up in me right then. She was huge, strong, with fists that'd souped more than one yard monster. The homemade RC star pinned to her sheet looked like a sequin.

She caught me looking at her, and her massive face fell into a frown as she led her critter over and draped her arm across my shoulders. It was like trying to carry a full grown hog on my back.

"Listen here, down and brown," she said to me. "We both in the CSAs, right?"

"Yeah? So what?"

Marietta let go of her lughox and held out a fist the size of a ham. "Don't you so what me, chili pepper! The last time a man so whated me, he spent the rest of his short life lookin' at the world through his asshole. An' that ain't no Rule 13 threat, chili pepper. That's history."

"Sorry. It's just an expression."

"There're expressions that get people killed."

"All right. We're in CSA."

"Down n' brown, I see chicken feathers growin' all over your brown bum. It wouldn't surprise me none if you started flappin' your wings, cruised right on out of here an' left the rest of us scratchin'."

I glanced at Alna, but she was looking down, her face very serious. Looking up at the dark face of the Magic Mountain I said, "So is your job to drag me kicking and screaming into camp?"

She shook her head. "Wouldn't do nothin' like that, Chief. Freedom Rule. Says you can go wherever you want, whenever you want."

Kill all the Lawyers

I looked over at Stays. "Man, what about an election being forced once we get this bunch back to the Razai? If it happens, I'm down the pipe anyway."

"Don't give your last hurrah yet, Bando. Chances are, no one would run against you."

I laughed at him. "Man, everybody wants to be boss."

"Not in the Razai. Sharks only want to be boss for self-protection, power, or money. We have the *Law* and the RCs for protection, the vote has the power, and no one has any money. There's no percentage in being Razai boss, so nobody but a whack would run against you, and even you'd vote for a cop before you'd vote for a whack." It was an ego building moment.

I took Alna's hand and squeezed it as we climbed the dune back to the Colonel. I was scared and everybody knew I was scared, which made me wonder why Nance had dumped her job on me. Even more important, why didn't Stays laugh in her face when she told him she wanted me for the deuce?

It seemed like questions without answers were getting to be my specialty. When we reached the point group commander, Colonel Indimi was standing. I did the introductions, then told him, "We're only a couple hours from the Razai. Forget about waiting until night. Get 'em on their feet and headed east."

The Colonel gestured with his head toward where the meeting had taken place. "Has there been some trouble?"

"Some." What the hell. There wasn't any reason to keep it a secret. "Our boss, Nance Damas, got shot. She's still hanging in there and they don't know who did it yet. They came out to tell me that Nance tapped me for temporary boss."

"You don't look as though you think congratulations are in order."

I could feel myself glaring at him. "You have a sharp eye."

"Speaking of sharp eyes," said Colonel Indimi, "who does the training for the Razai?"

Right about then I didn't want any criticism, constructive or otherwise. "I think they were just anxious. That's why they rushed out with such a small group like that—"

The Colonel, Stays, and Marietta laughed out loud as the Colonel pointed with both arms. "Look."

I turned around and on either side of the small mounted column there were around six hundred armed soldiers strung out across the dunes.

"If anyone had snapped at the bait, those two jaws would have bitten off his head. Who did you say does the training?"

"I didn't. But it's Sarah Hovit."

His black eyebrows climbed for the sky. "Bloody Sarah? Of the Suryian Insurrection?"

"That's her."

The Colonel nodded. "I know of Bloody Sarah." He smiled and pulled his hand across his bald head as he looked at the disappearing backs of the Razai soldiers. "I just might be able to find interesting work here after all." He looked up at Marietta. "About your boss. Does it look like she'll make it?"

"She'll make it, chump," the Magic Mountain answered. "Big Nance is made out of iron."

ON PASSING THE BUCK

On the way back, the Mihvihtian point guard surrounding us, I listened with half a lobe as they talked around me. The problems were old and new, big, bigger, and truss city. Stays was concerned about being overwhelmed by all the new

deadhead powder puffs deep in the sweat-writhe-and-heave thing. Appointing new RCs from the Mihviht load was hot up front with him. "We got some idea who to watch out for from the Crotch, Lewisburg, and the other earthside pits. We don't know anything about Mihviht."

"One thing I know," said Alna, "is that they're mostly men. Only a third women. Women put the Razai together. We did it to protect ourselves from monsters like the Hand and Kegel's gang, from men in general. What's going to happen to us when men become the majority?"

"As long as we have the *Law*," Marantha said, "we don't have to worry about that."

"What if they toss out the *Law*? They're going to be the new majority. What about that?"

There was a big silence. Losing this little spot of sanity we called the *Law* was our common nightmare. I caught myself thinking that the only reason the Mihvihtians were on their way to join the Razai was the *Law*. Then little Tani's ghost brushed the edges of my thought, evaporating it. For all I knew, the only reason the Mihvihtians were still heading east was to see the chili pepper chief of the RCs get his.

There were still voices around me on the outside, and I switched channels. Stays was grinding a couple of other blades. "Even with the sharks from Mihviht, we're less than twenty thousand with only twelve hundred or so rifles between us. Once the Hand knows about us and the shape we're in, they'll eat us alive. With a big enough force, they can put us in the maggot trough in an instant."

"I heard Sarah's got the Trolls workin' on makin' machine guns out of these popguns," said Marietta.

"Forget it, chup," said Ondo. "Every boss on Tartaros's had the same idea n' no one's been able to do it."

"What I heard is the trolls Sarah's got're somethin' special."

"Can't be done," Ondo repeated.

With a deadpan face Stays said to the others, "Maybe it'd make more sense to head south and take on Kegel's gang. That way we'd only be outnumbered five to one instead of twenty five to one." Funny. Stays always seemed to me like one of those observers of the passing scene remarking on conditions and events with philosophical detachment. A couple of Tartaran weeks in the RCs and he was a wisecracking cynic.

I listened to them talk around me, and even though they were playing their jaws to some mean stuff, it was good to hear their voices again. The problems were real and they were big. But the Razai had been in tough fights before and come out on top. Maybe after that tour through the forest of corpses the word had spread among the Mihvihtians that on Tartaros power was life, and the only place where the ordinary crowbar sharks had the power was in the Razai, and that only because of the *Law*.

By the time we arrived at the Razai camp, the midday sun was torching our lungs. Things had changed a lot. Instead of a bunch of sharks standing around filling the air with high bitch and agony, the camp was almost invisible until you came right up on it. The tents we had captured from the Hand patrol had been colored whitish yellow to match the sand, and instead of being pitched like a little house in the open, an edge was pitched on the side of a dune and again down at the bottom, leaving a lens shaped shelter beneath. With a little sand sprinkled on the edges, it looked just like just another part of the dune. Each of the sharks had one side of his or her desert sheet the same color, and with them made smaller versions of the camouflaged shelter.

Absolute Magnitude

The Hand's big tent had been colored as well and had been stretched between two dunes, leaving a very large space beneath where they hid the lughoxen-pulled sand sleds. In one of the house sleds Nance Damas was stretched out, feverishly fighting for her life. I felt a pain in my chest as I thought about Nance being down. Hearing about it was only words, and words were air. Seeing it brought the terror right up in my face.

I felt Alna's hand on my arm. "Bando. Baby, I'm going to look for Nkuma."

"Yeah. Okay."

She turned back and headed through the point guard. While Stays and the others waited, I climbed the stairs to Nance's sled, pushed the curtain aside, and entered. Two fire cubes burned in black metal wall holders filling the compartment with orange light and the plastic smell of that blue goo used for ammo propellant. There were built in bench seats along the walls, the center being taken up by a single bed hovered over by Mercy Jane, the mass mercy killer doctor who chiefed the Razai's med unit. There was also a ragheaded bit named Delia who kept squeezing water from a rag onto the sheet that covered Nance Damas. I wasn't prepared for how Nance's face looked. She was thin, her cheeks and eyes sunken, her skin waxy and yellow.

"It was bound to happen," Mercy Jane muttered. "No medical supplies, no gloves, homemade instruments, an infection was bound to set in. What's worse, I don't even know if the infection is normal Earth stuff, or something from here." Mercy shot a glance at me. "You nab who did it?"

"I just got back."

She faced down at Nance and I watched her as the terrors only she had the training to understand danced in her imagination. Without being aware that she did so, Mercy pushed a strand of reddish blond hair out of her eyes with her long delicate fingers. I never saw so much care in a person's eyes. She shook her head, went through the curtain, and climbed down from the sled.

I didn't know much about her story, but my gut feeling was that the black rags had dropped the rock in the wrong person's lap. Some people just don't belong in the crowbars. The sharks can smell them out faster than they can make an undercover stain with a badge tattooed on his forehead. When they fingered a fellow shark as innocent, the sharks were never wrong. It's something you read with your gut, and a shark's guts can always see through the bullshit. But no one ever listened to sharks unless the crowbar monkeys had hostages, and then only until the hostages were released.

I scratched my two week growth of beard and pushed it all out of my skull. It wasn't something I could change. Innocent or guilty, Jane Sheen was on infinity hold with the rest of us. It sucked muck, but that was just another lump of life's rich pageant.

Fair was to clergies, teachers, and parents like justice was to the black rags, stains, and cockroaches: drugs to occupy your attention while the pushers blow smoke and arrange mirrors to manipulate your ass to where they want it for the Frankenstein prang.

As soon as Delia was finished wetting down the sheet, she looked up at me. She had those huge black eyes that looked like they came off a cartoon. "If there's any change, or if that sheet dries out, give me a yell. I'll be just outside."

I nodded. She left and I was alone with Nance. Her tall muscular frame was limp, her breathing so shallow she could've been a corpse. With her square jaw and those heavy black eyebrows, I just knew that no one had ever called her cute, or

cuddled her, or dressed her up in something dish for a party. She had missed some. But those were her dues to the crowbar club. We had all missed a lot. For me it was okay. I was still alive, which was more than I figured I deserved. And as long as you're still alive, you got a chance to make it. Nance didn't look alive. She looked like all of her chances had been used up.

I sat next to her bed on the built in couch to her right. I felt my eyes burn a bit. The one stretched out beneath the wet sheet was the one who gave the Razai its mission. I pulled out my copy of the *Lawand* looked through the items until I came to Rule 55. "Witnesses to a crime who take no action to prevent the crime are as guilty as the perp." That was in the rape case, *Bennet v. Myerson*. I had conducted the trial where Jim Bennet handed out his payback and had drilled Vic Myerson, Huey Garret, and the three witnesses to his rape who had done nothing to stop it.

Once our scouts had discovered that the Hand's patrol was holding two hundred angel cakes that had come in with us on the ship as slaves, it was Nance who had put Rule 55 to a vote, making it apply to the Razai as a whole. If a crime was being committed, and if the Razai was asked for help, we helped. We didn't stand by and do nothing. We spring the victims. We go after the perps. We try to balance the scales. We do justice. Razai justice.

Garoit had protested to Nance, "*We can't save the whole bloody world.*"

I had told Nance that the smart thing would be to cover our own asses. "*Is that rule worth the death of the whole Razai?*" I had asked. "*The yard smarts would be to do what Garoit said. We can't save the world.*"

Nance had thought for a moment, and then said, "*I'm thinking that we're not in the yard now.*" She had smiled and looked at Garoit. "*And we'll never know about saving the world until we try.*"

That night we took on Pau Avanti, killed hundreds of his men, and rescued the two hundred angel cakes. There wasn't even a pause after that. The slave women we had freed had demanded our help in freeing all of the slaves held by the Hand back in the Sunrise Mountains. The Razai had headed east.

I sweated my lobes, but I couldn't figure it. We were a couple of thousand cons who wouldn't piss on a brother's heart if it was on fire, and now we were heading east to take on an army of half a million armed soldiers to free a bunch of total strangers from slavery. I mean, there were those in the Razai who had been slavers of one kind or another back on Earth: pimps, pushers, kidnappers, parents. But here they were marching into the sunrise to tangle assholes with the Hand and free the slaves. What was even funnier was that most of the Razai was shaded one way or another.

I mean we had lots of chops, hows, chilies, and maus, but we were a little light on rice. The slaves held by the Hand, though, were all angel cakes. The Hand didn't do anything but rice. So here were all the colors marching off against impossible odds to free whitey. Like most things on Tartaros it just didn't figure, if what you figured with was the same sack of noodles you used for a brain back in the yard.

I knew why I stuck with the *Lawand* fought for it. I felt like I was doing good. Not smart, but good. I wasn't even certain what that word "good" meant. It was just a feeling. When we went after the Hand, a lot of us, maybe all of us, would end up dead. It was a steep price to pay to feel good about yourself.

Kill all the Lawyers

Nance moaned, opened her eyes, and reached up her arm. I took her hand in both of mine and held it. She glanced at me, closed her eyes and seemed to relax everything except the grip she had on my fingers.

"Hey!" I called out. "Someone get up here!"

Delia and Mercy Jane both poked their heads in through the door of the sled. "What is it, Bando?"

"She opened her eyes and reached out. I even think she tried to say something."

For the first time Mercy Jane's face seemed to relax. "Good. That's good." As Delia's face hung in the doorway, Mercy Jane climbed into the compartment and took Nance's pulse.

"Does it mean she's coming out of it?"

Jane raised an eyebrow at me. "Coming out of what?"

"The anesthetic. What in the hell d'you think I'm talking about?"

"We didn't have any anesthetic," remarked Delia.

My guts went rigid with horror as a great empty pit seemed to yawn beneath me. "Nothing?"

"Nothing."

I blinked my eyes, trying not to accept the thing I had just been told. "Alcohol. What about the wine? The Hand camp had some wine. I know. They served me some."

"No wine," answered Jane. She shook her head and said, "The alks and deadheads wiped out the wine within a couple hours after the fight. Like it was something out of the Stone Age, when I cut her open she had nothing but a bunch of hands holding her down."

I began feeling more than a little queasy. "She was out, though, wasn't she? When you cut into her? She was unconscious, wasn't she?"

I saw a nightmare rerunning behind Mercy Jane's eyes as she looked at Nance's face. "She was fully conscious when I opened her chest. I put a rolled rag between her teeth and eight yard monsters held her down." Mercy Jane closed her eyes and whispered, "God, did she scream. My head still aches from it." She took in a breath and let it out slowly.

"Nance didn't pass out until I cut through the second rib." She opened her eyes and looked at me. "Do you want to see what I cut through her ribs with?"

"No." I only mouthed the word.

"Homemade bolt cutters. They were in the tools we captured from the Hand." She turned her face up toward the roof of the compartment. "I can't believe the penal authorities just dumped us here! No instruments, no medicines, no antiseptics, no anesthetics, nothing!" Mercy Jane lowered her head, rubbed her eyes, and sighed. "When she gets a little stronger, I'm going to have to go in there again."

"Without anesthetic?"

"Of course, without anesthetic!" For just a moment her face was contorted into a scarlet rage. In a flash it eased until she again spoke in a lifeless monotone. "Unless someone in that bunch you brought in today knows acupuncture or has something with them, it will be without anesthetic."

"I'll find out."

"Tough lady," Jane observed as she replaced Nance's arm on the bed and covered it with the sheet. "Tough lady," she repeated. Jane turned and went through the door.

I studied Nance's face. She was always so tough. Now she was soft-looking for the first time. I never thought of her as being good looking. Maybe she was the kind of woman you'd use the word 'handsome' to describe, if you were really

desperate. I could see a couple of little scars I'd never noticed before. I used to call her the Bride of Frankenstein, she was so big. Now she looked so helpless it made me want to cry.

There was so much to do and I didn't know where to start. Somehow I'd have to get the column moving again. We couldn't sit here waiting for Nance to get better. We were still in the Forever Sand, and we only had so much water. Someway I was going to have to come up with some new RCs and get them trained in how we do things in the Razai. We'd have to reorganize some, too. We had almost twenty thousand in the gang, and that's too many for a hit-and-run investigator. We needed to assign RCs to each group.

I'd have to get Marantha to update me on her investigation into the attempt on Nance's life, and then there was the army. Bloody Sarah now had more bodies, but no more weapons. Somehow the new sharks would have to be trained, armed, fed.

I brought Nance's hand to my mouth, kissed it and held it to my cheek as I muttered, "You dumb bull croc lizzie yard monster, why'd you have to go and get yourself shot?"

I felt the fingers of her hand tighten on mine until the pressure was considerable.

"Ow." The pressure increased. "Hey!"

I saw her lips move.

"Nance? Nance, what is it?"

I stood and bent over her, placing my left ear next to her mouth. "Nance? What're you saying?"

I felt a stabbing pain in my earlobe and I broke her grasp and jumped back, holding my ear. It was wet, and I looked at my hand. My fingers were wet with my own blood.

"Bitch! You bit me!" I looked down at her and her eyes were open. They were glazed with pain but she grinned at me.

"Next time you call me a lizzie," she whispered, "I'll bite off your damned head."

"Nance!"

She closed her eyes. "Get out of here. You have work to do. When it's dark, get the column moving." Her breathing became very labored and I saw her eyes glisten. It frightened me to see the Iron Lady with tears in her eyes. "Bando, get together with Bloody Sarah about our plans for doing the Hand. We need more soldiers. When Dom came in he said you were going to meet a landing. Did you get any to join the Razai?"

"About sixteen thou."

The expected pat on the head didn't come. "We need more. Lots and lots more. And, Bando?"

"Yeah?"

Her voice became a hoarse whisper. "Find the bastard who did this to me. I want him to get his payback, and I want to deliver it personally. Get going." She closed her eyes and I stood there for a moment looking down at her. That was when I realized that my purpose had been to dump the number two job back in Nance's lap. It wasn't the first plan of mine that ever went sour, and it wouldn't be the last.

WHAT'S MINE IS MINE

I just had to get some distance between me and all of that pain. Mercy Jane and Delia entered the sled as I left. When I climbed down there was a crowd waiting for me at the edge of the sunlight. Columns of the Mihvihtian convicts were entering the camp, and Colonel Indimi along with a few of the other Mihvihtians were waiting for me. Besides the Colonel and the commanders of the other columns, the only Mihvihtian I

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recognized was cockroach Lewis Grahl. Apart from them were Ondo and the RCs. Stays detached himself from the crowd and met me. "You all right, Sherlock?"

"Peachy." I pointed back toward the sled with my thumb. "You know about her not having any anesthetic?"

"Yes."

I turned and grabbed his sheet with both hands at his neck. "Why didn't you do something? Couldn't you get her some drops, save some of that Hand made vino, something?"

With his strong hands he gently pried my fingers off of his sheet. "Grab a piece, Bando. The few bottles of hootch we captured from the Hand were like raw meat tossed to the lions. Hell, I bet at least a quarter of our people are dry drunks. As for pills and powders, most of the stuff that did manage to make it to the grit was used up days ago. What's left is near and dear and there's nothing in the universe you can trade a deadhead for it."

"Then why didn't you take it from them?"

He looked at me with hooded eyes for a long moment. "Our first rule, Chief: What's mine is mine. It's the *Law*. Nance understands. Why don't you?"

"Man, this Tartaros shit is getting real old real fast."

Stays grinned sympathetically. "Welcome to the universe." He pointed toward the Mihvihtians. "You have other things to handle right now." He studied me for an instant. As he placed a friendly hand on my shoulder, he said, "I'm going to do a little survey of the newcomers and see if I can come up with something for Nance. Okay, Sherlock?"

"Yeah. Thanks." I shrugged and held out my hand. "Sorry about grabbing you. It's been—"

"Yeah. One of those days." He shook my hand and left me standing there feeling out of place. Everyone was waiting for me to tell them what to do. Rather than look at any of them, I rubbed my eyes.

"Beautiful camouflage on the camp," said the Colonel. I looked at him, glanced at the tent that covered the wagons, and walked over to the gathering. "I'm no judge."

"I am."

"So what do you want, man?"

"Where should we put them?" He gestured with his thumb toward his fellow Mihvihtians coming in from the dunes.

I rubbed my temples for a moment. When I had eased my aching head a bit, I said, "The Razai is divided up the same way I divided up your bunch: point, flank guards, rear guard, and walking column. For the time being I'm going to send each group to its corresponding Razai group. Things'll probably change once I get together with Sarah, but for now we'll do like I said." I saw a familiar face out in the sun. "Jak. Jak Edge."

The former commander of Kegel's defunct patrol turned and shielded his eyes against the sun with his hand. He walked over. Once he was under the canopy and in the shade, he said, "It's good to see you again, Nicos."

We shook hands, but I still felt like he had a sharp iron hidden somewhere. We had thinned most of his command and, thanks to our law about no prisoners, had allowed him to join the Razai. We had killed his followers and his friends, and we had made it near impossible for him ever to see his wife and children again. Of course, when you're surrounded by twenty thousand killers, crazies, perverts, and terrorists, who *do* you trust?

I turned to Ondo. "I want you and Jak to scare up some guides. Have one take Colonel Indimi and his people on up to the point. When the walking column gets here, have them park it here until it's time to crank up for the night march. Bring their

left flank guard on over to Tou Dao, the right flank guard to Steel Jacket, and the rear guard to The Match. Tell the generals to settle them in somehow."

"Sure thing."

Jak nodded toward the sled. "How's the Iron Lady?" He held up a dark green sheet of paper. It was covered with pale yellow writing. "Mercy Jane's been lean with the news."

"What's that?"

He held up the sheet. "*The Taps*. A newspaper." He handed it to me.

"Ila Toussant puts it out," said Ondo.

I glanced at Marietta. "My court clerk?"

"That's the one. Besides *The Taps* she made up maybe five hundred copies of the *Law*. She's got a way of bleachin' out old ink then usin' greenstick juice to make contact prints with the sun."

I held it so the light would fall on it and tried to read it. "I can't see a thing."

Jak pointed toward the sunny part of the sand. "Don't let the sun fall on it, chup. Read through it."

It was all in negative. In Ila's neat handwriting was the news of yesterday. The scout reports about a large gang following the Razai, no word yet from Bando Nicos, Nance Damas still unconscious, Bloody Sarah looking for sharks with military experience. There was a swap and shop corner and a list of meetings of various kinds from CSA to the Black Gay Bikers for Jesus. There was even a naive appeal in there for some powder puff to donate a bag or two for Nance's next operation.

I handed the paper back to Jak thinking about everyone being able to have a copy of the *Law*. Would it make us more lawful, or would it turn us into a tribe of cockroaches? There was something else, though. A feeling. The existence of that pitiful, one sheet newspaper seemed to give the Razai more rides on its ticket. When I saw it I knew we weren't something that would just fade away into the sands. We would have to be destroyed.

I looked up at Jak for a moment. His hair and beard were totally gray even though he wasn't more than thirty years old. He was all fog to me. I couldn't read him. "Nance'll make it," I said to him. "She's awake now and talking."

"You sure?"

I laughed, turned my head, and pointed at my ear. "I'm sure she doesn't like being called a lizzie."

Jak smiled a smile that didn't mesh with the moment, then he and Ondo led the Colonel away. All but two of the Mihvihtians went with them. Lewis Grahl, Tani Aduelo's cockroach, stayed behind along with a haystack with short brown hair, a pockmarked face, and the deadest eyes I've ever seen in a live head. He was tall and built lean like a jungle cat.

"I got a question," he stated in a voice pregnant with ready-to-be-realized catastrophes.

I glanced at Marietta and Marantha, then looked back at him. "Let's have it."

"You got any cops from Mihviht in your RCs?"

"Nope. Not yet. You want to be the first?"

Suddenly his face lit up like a cat that just discovered it had a canary in its mouth. "Yeah. Yeah, I think I'd like that. What do I do?"

I nodded toward Stays, Marantha, and Marietta. "They'll fill you in and get you a piece. Go get your stuff."

Those dead eyes crinkled at the corners, he nodded once, walked out into the sunlight, and headed toward a dune where

Kill all the Lawyers

several Mihvihtian sur. shields had been set up. He squatted down and began making his roll.

"Who is he?" asked Stays.

"Someone who wants to be a cop."

"You didn't ask him for his background?"

I snorted out a laugh. "Except for Marantha, every badge in the RCs is a murderer, including you and me. What kind of background should he have?"

Lewis Grahl was looking at me like it was absolutely beyond his ability to comprehend the depth of stupidity in the being standing before him. "Cockroach," I asked him, "who farted in your soup?"

He folded his arms and raised his eyebrows. "Nicos, after you executed that little girl out there on the sand, you remember that other fellow you killed?"

"The Rule 13."

"His name was David Ostrow." Grahl pointed back over his shoulder with his thumb at my brand new RC. "That's his older brother, Jay. He's a professional hitter with at least forty or fifty gang executions to his credit. Real famous where I come from."

"No kidding?"

"No kidding." He grinned as he waved at me. "Now you go and have a nice day." The roach turned and walked away, his moment made.

I turned and faced the others. "Remind me sometime about coming up with some kind of way of screening applicants to the RCs."

"Check," Stays answered as Marantha and Marietta gave me bad looks.

I looked around for a second. "I've done enough damage here. Where's Bloody Sarah?"

"Over there," called Mercy Jane from the back of Nance's sled. I looked and the doc was pointing toward another sled. "The last time I saw her she was in the ordinance sled."

I shook Jay Ostrow out of my head. With all that I had to think about, there wasn't any room for worrying about backshooters. Of course, not having her back covered was what got Nance an opportunity to get her chest chopped up while she bit a rag. Maybe I'd have to work up some kind of bodyguards for Nance and me. Maybe not. Considering who we were, where we were, and who we were with, what RC didn't need a bodyguard? Bando Nicos was no special case.

I looked at Marantha. "The Nance Damas shooting. You got any suspects?"

"About three thousand."

I rubbed the back of my neck and looked around at the activity beneath the shelter and in the sunlight. Right there we had the densest concentration of killers for profit, fun, politics, and just-for-the-hell-of-it in the universe. We weren't in some little English rose garden looking for the bad apple who took out the local attitude problem. We had nothing but rotten apples and attitude problems. "So what're you going to do? Just hang it up?"

Marantha's nostrils flared as her eyelids half closed and her eyebrows went up. "Now that Nance can talk, maybe I can narrow it down a little."

"What about the leftover rape cases from the Hand?"

"It went a lot faster than we thought. Under the No Prisoners Rule, everyone who was accused took off into the desert. That meant that they all entered guilty pleas, so it was mostly a little paperwork. There were forty one convictions for rape, and nine for rape-murder."

"I figured there'd be a lot more."

She pursed her lips. "I figure there are. For some reason the victims are hanging back."

I pointed toward the open spaces. "And Cap, Margo, and Herb are out chasing down the buggouts?"

"They made maggot chow out of at least a dozen perps we know of."

"Could one or more of them have gotten their hands on some weapons, doubled back, and done the job on Nance?"

She nodded. "As I said, we have at least three thousand suspects, and a few of those are dead. Once when Cap came back for more water, he said that it looked like a group of five perps seemed to be heading for a specific place. Every time they moved they ran a straight arrow course south."

"A camp? An arms dump? Food?"

"Maybe." She looked past my shoulder and said, "I'm going to see if I can talk to Nance."

"Keep me posted." I said to them all, "I'll be in with Bloody Sarah. I'll look in on Nance after awhile."

We broke up the jaw jam and I watched as Marantha headed toward Nance's sled. My head felt cross-threaded. There were at least a thousand things I ought to be doing, and I couldn't figure out a single one.

I stuffed my hands into my trouser pockets and shuffled toward the ordinance sled. On my way I walked next to the tightly parked row of water and supply sleds that we had captured from the Hand. I glanced in between two of the sleds and noticed a pair of feet sticking out over the runners of one of the sleds.

"Hey! Hey, sandman!" The feet didn't even twitch. Turning sideways, I worked my way between the sleds until I was standing over the feet. They were covered with dockers from the Crotch. I kicked one of them. "Hey, are you okay?"

There was no sound, and I thought whoever it was must be dead. I squatted down, looked beneath the sled, and saw the emaciated out-of-this-galaxy countenance of Pill Phil, a former pharmacist who got into the stock and became as lost as the sweet tooth who bought the candy store. One time when he had been frying his brain at work he did some creative prescription filling. Six people died and Phil came out of his fog sitting in front of the black rag who dropped him into Greenville. As a guest of the Crotch myself, I couldn't ever remember seeing Pill Phil awake during the couple of years that I had known him.

He had planned on floating through his eighteen year sentence, should his pills allow him to live so long. I always figured that once we hit Tartaros, Phil would be up to his baggy eyes in a reality bath, since there wasn't any way the deadheads could get their chemistry through the trip. I was obviously wrong.

I felt his wrist and couldn't get a pulse. His skin was clammy and wet. I felt for the spot in his neck and there I found a slight pulse. Pill Phil wasn't dead. He was just touring the universe by burning up the remainder of his brain cells for fuel.

That this chup could get his hands on downers while Nance had been screaming out her guts under a pair of bolt cutters was almost enough to drive me into the red rage. But I chilled it. If I offed the pill head, there were consequences I didn't want to pay, even if no one else would know. I would know.

A thought did creep in. Maybe I could do Nance a favor by doing Pill Phil a favor. Besides, maybe he hadn't come up with any product because no one had asked him the right way.

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I crawled beneath the sled until I was on my side next to him. God his skin looked awful, all gray and blotched. "Say, Phil, what's happening, my man? What you got?"

I looked around on the sand, and then I began patting down his pockets. They contained only little bits of this and that and I'd just about figured he'd used up his last when I noticed a bulge in the front of Roller's pants. Either he was hung like a fire truck or there was something else snuggled up to his scrotum.

I unsealed his fly, opened his trousers, and lifted the band on his graying whites. Nestled next to his naughties was a clear plastic bag three-quarters filled with clear caplets that looked like so many glass beads. They were major downs. On the street they were called diamond drops or thumpers. Phil had been eating them like gumdrops. "Hey, Phil. Can I have these?"

I placed my hand beneath his head. "I know someone who needs 'em real bad, man. Okay with you?" I moved my hand and nodded his head. "You sure, *amigo*?" He nodded again. "Thanks, man. I owe you."

His mouth fell open and in a voice from some kind of horror show, he said, "It wasn't my fault. Honest."

"We know, man. A bad call."

He fell silent. I pulled my hand from beneath his head and his face turned toward me. His eyes were half open revealing nothing but bloodshot whites. "If you live long enough to miss these things, Phil, drop by the CSA meeting and we'll show you how to get along without them."

I pulled the bag out of his shorts, tucked it into my trouser pocket, and crawled out from beneath the sled feeling just a bit gypped because I hadn't strangled the deadheaded bastard.

BLOODY SARAH AND THE TROLLS

Sarah Hovit, former major of the Union of Terran Republics Land Force Commandos, was an angel cake bit who was only a tad more dish than she was deadly. She was a little package, black hair cut short and frame upholstered with organ-thumping handfuls that were difficult to concentrate on when she aimed her orbs at you. Her eyes had the blue of a butterfly wing and they commanded you to pay attention. In the heat of the ordinance sled she wore only the cut down romper macho bait she had worn when we did in the Hand patrol by using our angel cake pulchritude parade for a distraction. Short shorts and less than a bandage for a top, her desert camouflage sheet draped over her shoulders, and the two crowbar sharks in the sled with her were only thinking about what she was asking and how to give her whatever it was that she wanted.

There was that natural leader thing again. She had it like no one I ever knew before had it. When you told a shark to do something, the most natural thing for the shark to do was to either slice you, thump you, or tell you to climb into your own ass and pump 'til you puke. That's why the hightowers carried all that iron; that's why the walls on the crowbar hotels were so thick. But Bloody Sarah had those same sharks running around the dunes, training to become an army, learning how to hunt, how to hide, how to kill, how to die, and the sharks were eating it up like it had a cherry on top.

They were doing it because they wanted to do it, and they wanted to do it for Sarah Hovit, although not a damned yard eagle on the grit could explain why.

Everyone in the crowbars throughout the system had seen the vids of Sarah freaking in that Suryian village where she had slit

the throats of the one hundred and fifty-six armed villagers who had promised all the generals that they would not be armed. We called her the White Slice and Bloody Sarah, and Nance Damas had placed her in charge of turning a bunch of crowbar sharks into an army. She was the one who named us the Razai after a particularly nasty desert lizard on Surya. She organized us, began training the squads, and put together our sanitation, medical, and ordinance units, in addition to a bunch called Stores that kept track of food, water, and supplies.

The ordinance people were called the Trolls and she introduced them. Emmet Stant was a squinty-eyed, noodle-built haystack machinist and bomb manufacturer for several terrorist pistachio groups on Earth. Gordo Diaz was a well-oiled, overly-padded chili pepper arms dealer who sold his peashooters to the wrong folks once too often. Gordo knew more about all different kinds of weapons than the manufacturers of those weapons knew. The rumor was that if Emmet could get his hands on the proper tools and materials, he could take what was in Gordo's head and turn it into reality. Considering the variety of sophisticated hell makers residing in Gordo's head, there was a considerable lump of potential in the Emmet and Gordo combination.

In the space of time that I had been away from the Razai, the pair of them had collected, repaired, and put into service almost a hundred rifles, which meant that the Razai now had around thirteen hundred armed sharks. They had converted one of the big sleds into a workshop, and the place was crowded with rifle parts, hunks of metal, and the crude tools that had been captured from the Hand. The cleanest tool they had was a pair of homemade bolt cutters.

When I entered the ordinance sled, the pair of them were in deep conversation with Sarah. Gordo had designed a way to convert the pump action rifles into semiautomatic or full automatic weapons. Sarah was checking out one of the conversions. After greeting me, she turned to the Trolls. "Gordo, Emmet, considering what you've had to work with, this is a remarkable job."

From the midst of their grease and metal filings, the pair of them blushed like a couple of school boys and immediately went into terminal "aw shucks" mode beneath the force of the compliment. Sarah held the rifle out to me. The pump lever was gone, the tube that held the cartridges had been welded shut for some kind of a gas operated bolt return, and they had made a clip that fed into the side of the weapon that looked like it held thirty or forty rounds. Sarah indicated a little switch next to the trigger.

"That converts it from semiautomatic to full automatic fire." She smiled as she hefted the weapon and sighted down it. "Of course, we can't afford to fire these weapons that way until we get some more ammo, but we can begin the conversions right away. Maybe by the time we face Carlo T. and the Hand we won't have to have as many soldiers as they have."

"Maybe," I said as I handed back the weapon to her. "I'd sure love to have a talk with that Quana Lido gang and find out where they get the guns and the blue goo."

"All you need is a magic carpet." Bloody Sarah handed the rifle to Gordo. "This is terrific, guys. If things look clear tomorrow, I want you to take this thing out away from the column and try it out."

Emmet Stant held his nose up in the air. "I'm afraid we've already tested it, general." He held his hand out toward a large wooden box. It had a hole in one end, and when Sarah opened

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its top, it was full of torn up rags. "With the door on the sled closed and the end of the weapon in the rags, it's fairly quiet."

I stood over the box and began pawing through the rags. In a moment I managed to find three of the slugs the Trolls had fired into the box. I looked at them, and the tips were polished, but not blunted. The lands and grooves around the slugs were sharp and clear. "You two?"

"Yeah?" answered Emmet.

"I want you to root through this box and get all of the slugs out of it. Then, every time you get a rifle in here to do a conversion, I want you to number the piece and take a test shot first in this box. Save me the slug and tag it with the rifle number and the name of the one carrying the piece. Understand?"

"Yeah," answered Emmet, looking like I had just told him to eat a dead mouse. "I understand."

"And keep your mouths shut about what you're doing. Understand?"

Gordo stood up and folded his arms. He wasn't very tall, but he was wide with muscular arms that testified to some iron time with the yard monsters. "Look, *amigo*, we aren't the stains. You are. Right now we fix and convert guns and that's all we do. Don't try and stick us in the RCs."

"Look, *amigo*," I answered, "the slug that got Nance Damas is still in her. If Mercy Jane can get it out, we have a bit of a chance to find out who drilled her. Right now we don't have any records of names and who's got rifles, and if I tried getting sample slugs on my own, you can count on the rifle we want getting conveniently lost out there in the sand. This conversion business is perfect, and no one has to know a thing about it."

"Until we have to go to trial, right?" asked Emmet.

I shrugged and held out my hands. "Only if it takes a jury to nail the perp."

"Forget it, copperhead."

I glanced at Sarah as I tried to keep my temper. "Look. A crime has been committed. Someone tried to kill Nance. Remember the trial where Jim Bennet executed those witnesses who refused to do anything? They wouldn't go for help and they refused to testify?"

"We haven't witnessed anything," Gordo protested.

"True," said Sarah. "But what I think Bando is getting at is you have an opportunity to be a witness. If you refuse to do anything, it sounds an awful lot like those three witnesses who Jimmy Bennet drilled."

"We keep our noses clean and mind our own business," said Emmet, "just like back in the yard."

I sat on my temper and said through clenched teeth, "I've said this a thousand times, dog drool. We aren't in the crowbars anymore. We are on the grit, the yard is done past, and who shot Nance is everybody's business. Keep those three witnesses of Jimmy Bennet's in mind. They only looked after their own business and kept their noses clean, and now the sand bats are eating their eyes."

Gordo pointed at Bloody Sarah. "She's my boss, cop; not you." He looked at Sarah. "What about it, general? It'll take up lots of time, lots of ammo, and we really don't want to join the squeals. If anyone found out about what we'd be doing, we'd be maggot chow."

Sarah folded her arms and ordered, "Do it."

"But—"

"Do it," she repeated. "And keep it quiet. I know how you feel, but what Bando wants is important. Besides, Nance made him number two, so he's my boss. Don't let me down."

Gordo and Emmet looked at the floor as they nodded.

As my face cooled, I nodded my thanks to Sarah and said, "I sent a bunch of the new sharks to each guard and the walking column."

"Any soldiers?"

"About seven hundred of the Mihvihtian sharks are leatherheads, for what that's worth. They were dumped out of a military prison."

"Bando, did you run across any trained military officers?"

"A few. There's a Mihvihtian colonel with the point guard named Indimi. I think you'll be able to use him. Anyway, he sure seems to be an admirer of yours. Sometime soon we're going to have to get together about how you're going to organize all the protos."

I glared at the Trolls, exited through the door, and climbed down from the sled. I was still pretty hot about their anchor dragging. It wasn't that I had expected them to jump up and click their heels or anything, or say "Gee, Bando, what a great idea." What I did expect was a little more enthusiasm about nailing the handful of snot that had drilled Nance. Again I wondered if any of us had really escaped the crowbars. Was the yard really done past? There are all kinds of prisons. The deepest pits are the ones we tote in our lobes.

"Bando?"

I turned at the sound of Sarah's voice and looked up at the ordinance sled. She was standing on the sled's rear deck, her elbows resting on the railing that supported the roof.

"What?"

"Don't be too concerned about the boys in there. You must know that asking them to help the cops is asking a lot."

"Yeah. I know." I felt it in my gut, and since I was a recovering macho there wasn't any reason not to say it. "I think Nance made a big mistake fingering me. You or Stays should be running things as number two. Not me."

Her eyebrows went up as her mouth fell open. Then she laughed and said, "You put the commander of the army in charge and the Razai would be a boss-run gang like any of the rest of the life takers on the sand. You put the *Law* together. You must know that. Don't be silly." She turned and went back into the ordinance sled, pulling the curtain shut behind her.

"What's silly about that?"

After taking a few deep breaths, I noticed that the sun was almost down. Some walking column sharks were already pulling stakes and rolling the camouflage sheets. Sarah wouldn't have to be told about getting the column moving, so I turned to look for Stays.

I could hear muffled voices coming from inside Nance's sled and I felt the bag of thumpers inside my pocket. I climbed up and entered the door. Marantha was sitting where I had been and Mercy Jane was seated on the opposite side of the bed. They fell silent as soon as I entered.

"Cheese it, the cops," whispered Nance. Marantha and Mercy Jane laughed. Nance still looked like hell in a hibachi, but much more alert. Her sheet was almost dry.

"I guess you're feeling better," I said. "You ready to take back your job?"

"Bando," she said in a stronger voice, "there's a whole lot of weasel in you, *querido*."

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"Okay, okay," I said as I blushed at the term of endearment. Looking at Marantha, I said. "You been here long enough. Got anything?"

The corners of her mouth turned down as she nodded. "A few things."

"Such as?"

"Outside with that," Mercy Jane ordered. "I can't have you wearing out my patient by dragging her through all that again."

"It's getting dark out," said Nance. "Is the column getting ready to move?"

I nodded. "It's running itself, Nance. The Razai knows what to do and the new sharks'll stumble along somehow until they learn the ropes." I turned to Mercy Jane as I pulled Pill Phil's thumpers out from beneath my sheet. "Hey, Doc, you wanna see God?" I held out the bag. "Plug a couple of these into your hard drive."

Her mouth dropped open in astonishment. "My god! Where did you get them?"

"Guy I know. Made a donation."

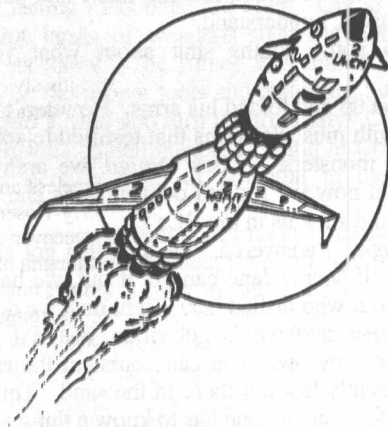
"What is it?" Nance whispered.

Jane raised an eyebrow at me, then she turned, leaned over Nance's bed, and showed her the bag. "Diamond drops, honey. Look."

Nance was silent for a moment, then she ordered, "Get out. Jane, you and Marantha get out. I want to be alone with the cop." She swallowed hard. "Go on. Get out"

"I'll wait for you outside, Chief," said Marantha as she climbed down from the sled. Mercy Jane tucked away the sack of caplets and patted my arm on her way out.

I walked over to Nance figuring from the tone of her voice she was going to bite off my other ear. I looked down at her and she was looking straight up at the overhead, the tears pooling in her dark eyes and running down the sides of her head. Her hands were in two tight fists, and I picked up one of them. We held hands for a moment, then she closed her eyes, nodded, and turned her face away from me. She let go of my hand and I left her like that.



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Book Reviews

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Pentacle by Tom Piccirilli
Pirate Writings Books, 124 pages, \$5.99
ISBN# 0-964-0168-2-6

Pentacle is one of those books that is hard to classify and therefore hard to review. For the most part it walks the line between horror and dark fantasy. Piccirilli gives us a chilling glimpse into the heart of an American darkness. The unnamed protagonist and his demonic familiar, named Self, wonder through a cursed countryside that we can only hope is the product of Piccirilli's imagination. They seem fated to encounter evil in all its many forms where ever they go. Despite the duo's origins they continually pit themselves against ancient evil and overcome it.

Piccirilli takes pains to give credit where credit is due and many of the books demons are famous Christians from the past. As he so aptly points out a lot of evil has been worked in the name of God. While the necromancer from the book uses magic in many different forms, Piccirilli goes out of his way, in the stories afterward, to state that Wicca and Satanism are not the same thing. If this novel has a weakness it is that someone who does not read the afterward might indeed confuse the two religions. I can think of no two religions that are more dissimilar.

All in all, though, *Pentacle* is a compelling read. Piccirilli has a style like no one else and his pacing is excellent. Don't miss this one.

By Lucas Gregor

The Leadership Labrynth by Robert A.M. Copenrath
Dorrance Publishing, 148 pages, \$20.00
ISBN# 0-8059-3441-3

The dust jacket on *The Leadership Labyrinth* attempts to pass it off as a work of fiction, perhaps even science fiction, but this is not really so. Copenrath gives us several pages of clunky pros out-lining characters that he never really uses. As soon as he is finished with the character sketches he launches into a rant about the state that America is in. It's the kind of thing that you expect to hear at a high school lunch table from freshmen who have just discovered that the world is a bigger place than they had ever imagined but don't quite understand it as yet. It was quite frustrating to read what was supposed to be a book of fiction only to find that it was nothing more than a group of sophomoric essays. I could go on at great length about what was wrong with this one, but I'll just tell you that *The Leadership Labrynth* was a dismal failure and leave it at that.

The Jericho Iteration by Allen Steele
Ace Books, 279 pages, \$19.95
ISBN # 0-441-00097-5

I am glad to report that *The Jericho Iteration* had none of the problems that plagued *The Leadership Labryth*. Allen Steele is a world class fiction writer and he rarely, if ever, disappoints. This novel represents a great deal of growth for Steele, and is his first non-space exploration novel. It's written with all the exuberance and sense of wonder one expects from a science fiction book, but combined with the tense page turning style of a techno-thriller.

A devastating earthquake along the New Madrid fault has thrown the Midwest into chaos. Seventy five thousand people are left homeless and St. Louis is under martial law. Gerry Rosen, an investigative reporter trying to recover from the loss of his son and estrangement of his wife, stumbles onto a plot to overthrow The United States Government by usurping the secret government project, Ruby Fulcrum. Rosen soon finds himself a wanted man and must flee for his life while people around him begin to die without warning.

Allen Steele's greatest strength is his ability to show us how the future will affect the common man. When reading his work a reader is always left with the feeling that not only could things happen this way, but that they probably will happen this way. No writer in science fiction, today, has a firmer grip on the near future than does Allen Steele.

By Lucas Gregor

A Farce to Be Reckoned With by Roger Zelazny and Robert Sheekly
Bantam Books, 292 pages, \$12.95
ISBN# 0-553-37442-7

A Farce to Be Reckoned With is the third and final book dealing with the demon Azzie and his continuing misadventures. He is between Millennial contest and growing quite bored when he discovers that morality plays are sweeping their way across Europe. Azzie decided to stage an immorality play. The forces of good immediately move to prevent Azzie from accomplishing his goals.

Stylistically, *A Farce to Be reckoned With* is handled perfectly. The light and engaging style allows Zelazny and Sheekly to make the most of Azzie's misadventures, and their treatment of the forces of Good and Evil is wonderful. It is quite amusing to watch the forces of Evil attempt to follow the letter of the law completely while the forces of Good cheat wildly. After all, they are fighting evil.

"I thought it a fine production."

Arthur C. Clarke

on the Old Earth Books edition of

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The Marvellous Land of Snergs by E. A. Wyke-Smith. A lost classic praised by Charles de Lint, loved by J. R. R. Tolkien and his children, and called by Tolkien "an unconscious (!) sourcebook for *The Hobbit*." Trade paper: \$15, 100 copy hardback: \$35

Coming Spring 1996

All-American Alien Boy. Allen Steele's second collection. Purchasers of a *Rude Astronauts* limited edition will have the opportunity to purchase a matched number. Details Fall 1995.

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Absolute Magnitude

In the end Good pulls out all the stops and Azzie loses the contest of wills, but wins something far more valuable. This one was a hell of a lot of fun.

By Lucas Gregor

Tombs Edited by Edward E. Kramer and Peter Crowther
White Wolf, 345 pages, \$19.99
ISBN# 1-56504-5

Tombs is an interesting, though, somewhat uneven original anthology. All the stories take place in, or in some other way involve, tombs. The tombs run the gambit from cryonics chambers to opera stages. There are both big name authors and lesser known authors contained in the pages of this one.

S.P. Somtow's story "But None I Think Do There Embrace" is an engaging story about an opera singer who sells his soul to the devil for one perfect performance. Unfortunately, when the performance is over not only is he caught up in his hell but his co-star is also dragged along. The two spend some time discussing the ramification of their situation before finding an eventual solution to their immediate problem. The story was a good read and I liked the not entirely unexpected twist at the end.

Forest J. Ackerman's story "Tomb Swift" was an interesting take off on William Shakespeare's work. Nothing was held, in any way, sacred and Mr. Ackerman obviously had a good time with this one.

Michael Moorcock's "No Ordinary Christian" was one of the better stories in the collection and Ben Bova's story "In trust" was oddly dissatisfying.

Despite the unevenness of this collection, *Tombs* is an interesting read.

By Lucas Gregor

The Shattered Oath by Josepha Sherman
Baen Books, 396 pages, \$5.99
ISBN# 0-671-87672-4

The Shattered Oath is billed as book one of the *Prince of Sidhe* series. As such it does an excellent job of introducing us to the lush and magical world of fairy. The brutal and violent world of medieval mankind, that prince Ardagh is wrongly banished to, plays a nice counterpoint to the beauty of fairy. Josepha Sherman is an adept writer who is at her best in magical worlds and this magical world is no exception. Future volumes in this series will be welcome.

By Ben Silver

Mirror Dance by Lois McMaster Bujold
Baen, 392pp., \$21.00, Hardcover
(also in paperback, 560pp., \$5.99)

Lois Bujold's *Mirror Dance* is the ninth novel (eighth, if you don't count *Borders of Infinity*, a collection that ties in some of the longer works) in her very successful Vorkosigan series. On the cover is another

fine painting by Gary Ruddell.

For those of you who have yet to acquaint yourselves with the saga of Lord Miles Vorkosigan, the series is set in a feudalistic, space-faring, future universe. The central character, Miles Naismith/Vorkosigan, is the young (28, at the time the action in *Mirror Dance* takes place) scion of Vorkosigan House, a powerful family on the Imperial planet of Barrayar. A nasty attempt on the life of his parents, while Miles was still a fetus, caused him to be born a cripple with brittle bones supporting a weak and twisted body. Treated like an outcast on his homeworld, due to his birth deformities, Miles forms a mercenary troop and takes on the persona of Miles Naismith (later Admiral Naismith), commander of the Free Dendarii. Though he later gains official recognition of his innate talents and is commissioned into the Imperial Service, Miles retains control of the Free Dendarii using the actions of the mercenary band as a cover for covert operations performed in the service of Imperial Security. But there's a ringer: when Miles was six, another group of his father's enemies had a clone made and subsequently trained as a surrogate. The plot is uncovered, but the brutal treatments and training have left an indelible mark on the psyche of the clone, Mark, and rather than accept the offers of welcome from the Vorkosigan family he chooses a life of anonymous squalor and restless travel. Mark's inclination to disappear quite often leaves the security forces detailed to keep track of him frustrated and uneasy.

Mirror Dance finds the two 'brothers' pitted against one another as Mark, consumed by the demons of his past and looking for vengeance, impersonates Miles and commandeers a Dendarii warship. From that point on, Bujold relentlessly carries the reader through a surprising number of plot twists and perspective shifts to a slightly unexpected, but satisfying, conclusion.

Mirror Dance is a story of dualities. Mark is, by his very nature, a dual personality. More than any of the other stories in which he plays a part, *Mirror Dance* is Mark's story. In it, the reader gains a valuable insight into the mind of the 'have not' persona and learns that the twin notions of acceptance and trust are inextricably bonded to the conventional ideals of familial love and loyalty.

I found *Mirror Dance* an interesting book and think you'll agree that it's well worth a look-see. If you're still hesitant about giving *Mirror Dance* a try, take note that this talented author has won two Nebulas and three Hugo Awards for her earlier work—each and every one of them set in the Vorkosigan universe. It's hard to go wrong with odds like that.

By Case Gallagher



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East Lansing, MI 48825 -1107

Letters Page

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Dear Sir,

I just recently received your rejection of my story, "My Boy." I wanted to thank you for your time, and I really wanted to let you know how much I appreciated your note. You are the first editor to respond to me with anything more than a pre-printed rejection slip, and as such, you are the first editor to let me know if I was even close to the mark. I hope to learn from your comments and I look forward to submitting stories to you again.

Sincerely,
Dan Thompson
Austin TX

—I try to respond to everyone that deserves a response. I can understand why most editors don't, as it doubles the time that I spend replying to submissions, but I think that if a writer's doing a good job, then even if I can't use their story, I should let them know. So few editors take the time to acknowledge the near misses. I cringe to think of how many writers may have given up for lack of feedback who were right on the edge of breaking into the field.

Dear Warren:

Absolute Magnitude is a real winner—keep it up.

All the best,
Ralph S. Blois
Woodburn OR

Dear Mr. Lapine,

Congratulations on an outstanding Spring '95 issue! It is rare for me to read an SF magazine cover to cover, but the consistent quality and drive of these stories kept my interest all the way

through. I hope you will see the steady increase in circulation your publication clearly deserves.

Sincerely,
Marcos F. Ibargun
St. Petersburg FL

Dear Mr. Lapine,

I enjoyed most of the stories in this issue, but "Planting Walnuts" was the best. Your story was also one of the better ones (good premise).

Sincerely
Joy V. Smith
Lakeland FL

Dear Editor Lapine,

I just finished reading the Summer 1995 issue of *Absolute Magnitude* and found the quality of the stories impressive. I felt most of the writers were original without being bizarre. "Fermat's Best Theorem" I thought was a wonderful tale.

Sincerely,
Michael R. Dennet
Federal Way WA

Dear Sir,

In #3, I particularly liked Linda Kepner's "Planting Walnuts," and of course, anything by C.J. Cherryh is a treat.

Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,
James A. Bailey
Sacramento CA

—Thanks to all of you who took the time to send in these kind comments. It's nice to know that were doing a good job and that our readers are happy with the magazine.

Dear Warren,

Thanks for the sample copy. For some reason I hadn't quite realized the caliber of authors you published. I was expecting excellent stories, but not big-name professional authors. It's one thing to get editorial encouragement from a smaller magazine, and another to get it from a magazine that can attract the stories of C.J. Cherryh. Thanks for signing your story, too!

Sincerely,
Brian Wightman
Barre VT

—A lot of people are surprised by Absolute Magnitude the first time that they see it. We've exploded onto the scene so fast that a lot of people don't realize just how big we've become.

Dear Warren,

I was very sorry to read in *Science Fiction Chronicle* about your car crash. *SFC* reported that you and Ms. Kessler escaped unscathed and I sincerely hope that you both did.

Very truly yours,
George L. Mina
Anderson SC

—Thanks for your concern, but we're both fine!

Absolute Magnitude wants your letters. Let us know how we're doing. If we print your letter you'll receive a copy of the issue it appears in. Starting with this issue, we want to know what stories are your favorite ones. This will help us in picking stories in future issues. Let your voice be heard! Simply fill out the ballot on this page with your three favorite stories and send us the ballot. Once we've received all the ballots for the issue, one lucky voter, each issue, will receive a free subscription.

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