

Murdering Tranquility

and Other Stories



Ken Scott

**MURDERING TRANQUILITY
& OTHER STORIES**

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KEN SCOTT

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TO KRIS

Everyday I anticipate you...

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“He held his seat; a friend to human race.”

~ Homer ~

FROM MEN BEARING GIFTS



David's eyes snapped open and he stared for a moment at the corrugated steel that lined the inner hull and ceiling of his bunk room. The ship shuttered and caused his body to strain against the straps that held him down against his bed. He felt the vibration of deceleration and knew that they had arrived at the mid-jump breakpoint. Tome, his fellow space merchant, continued snoring softly. He would wake him later.

The mid-jump breakpoint. That meant the *Scritura* was preparing to orbit a planet. David's heart rate quickened. The breakpoints, a necessity in ships with older engines, provided a chance to explore new worlds, experience and examine new civilizations and glean information and wares which he and Tome could sell. His anthropologist, space merchant blood mixed with the draught of anticipation. He felt the artificial gravitation kick on. It was time to wake Tome.



Kensington killed the engines as the *Scritura* slid into a geosynchronous orbit around the planet EDN3124.

"Hey, I see we've taken the ole' routine middle-of-the-flight-gotta-let-the-engines-cool-down break," said David, climbing into the cockpit. Grinning, he wiped the sleep from his eyes as Tome clambered in after him. The two men framed Kensington in the tight spot, gawking out at the system before them.

Kensington liked both of them. True, they ran with the Space Merchant Guild, but no pilot worth his salt ever trusted them fully even though they ultimately made the pilot money. Kensington himself had been stiffed on occasion, but never by David and Tome. He had ferried goods for them many times over the past years and they were the best of the lot. Kensington leaned over and pushed a button, starting the engine cool-down sequence. He supposed David could hardly be called a space merchant. David's chief training had been anthropological. However, he did use his title and skills to sell and his association with Tome solidified the label. Palming his coffee, Kensington gingerly sipped it and stared out along with the merchants.

"The star system?" queried Tome, jutting his chin in the direction of the cockpit window. Kensington saw merchant's lust flash in the man's eyes. Was this guy actually thinking he could make a sale? He shook his head in disbelief.

Even though this was his first run to the Zani System, Kensington had already memorized the course from Earth there. Out of habit, Kensington dropped his gaze to the console readouts. Many star systems were littered along the trade route to Zani. The Ental System, circled by the planets EDL3122, EDM3123, and EDN3124, middled this jump. Kensington swore that after this run he would get the engine systems upgraded so he didn't have to go through this every run.

"The Ental System," Kensington said. "We're parked around EDN3124. It's too new, Tome. Earth refuses to settle it even though it meets settlement criteria: a

sufficient oxygen atmosphere, carbon dioxide converting plants, a fairly stable crust, etc. They're hooked on the idea of getting a chance to watch the primitive life it has develop unhindered. Sorry, guys. No business." He shook his head. When an anthropologist hooked up with a space merchant, culture gained marketability. He guessed he shouldn't have been amazed, but he was.

"I'll be dust by then," David scoffed.

Anger edged Kensington's voice. "Step back for a moment and see the bigger picture," he growled. "This is an unspoiled world, untouched by mechanization and the vices of men. Keep your greed here."

David took a step back, not that he could go too far in the tiny room. "Hey, hey, sorry. I wasn't thinking of selling anything."

Though David's voice denied it, Kensington knew he had hit close to the mark by the disappointment in David's eyes. "You'd sell me my own ship if you could." Kensington turned back to the cockpit window. Seconds turned to minutes as he stared at the virgin system before him.

Finally, Kensington got up and stretched. "Look, guys, hang out here all you want. This is the only break I get." He paused and scratched his chin. "I'll be in my bunk if you need me." The mock sincerity in his voice indicated that in no way should he be disturbed.

"Hold on," David said, eyeing the planet below. "I'd still like to stretch my legs, and I'm as hungry as a Zigmarian Goat. Any harm in us taking the planet hopper down to the surface?"

Kensington shrugged, "Please yourself. It's what you're good at. Leave nothing behind and don't mess with anything ecological. Use the standard decontamination procedure we use for any planet. You got two hours." He exited the cockpit for the interior of the ship toward his bunkroom.



Twenty minutes later, with decontamination behind them and with travel packs in hand, David and Tome descended in the planet hopper towards the surface of EDN-3124, the atmosphere reddening the underbelly of their craft. With eyes closed, Tome gripped the armrests in the co-pilot's seat. David, more skilled at handling the planet hopper, fought with controls as the ship broke through the upper stratum of the atmosphere. The hydraulic wings hissed outward and snapped into place. Cutting the engines, he banked it into a long, circular glide. David settled the craft onto a flat, grassy depression.

Feathered clouds speckled the cobalt-blue sky. Trees that needled skyward highlighted the vibrant emerald landscape. At the edge the clearing where the planet hopper sat, white flowers edged a pool of the deepest marine-blue water. In the distance pristine mountains jutted up into the haze of the atmosphere. They formed a chain around the men, hemming them in. All was quiet. All was still. For the first time since he had joined the space merchants, the natural world around David had stunned him.

Finally, David broke the silence. "Tome, we're down. You can open your eyes now."

Tome slowly opened his eyes, and muttered repeatedly to himself. "I hate landings. Gosh, I hate landings. Give me a market and something to sell any day over this."

David had heard the same muttering a hundred times before from his partner. He had encountered Tome at a space merchant bazaar on Mars when Tome had tried to convince him a thousand year old Dowwin Statue could be his for 5000 credits. David knew it wasn't much past fifteen years old. The Dowwin's had begun to make the statues to help with their planet's tourist industry. However, Tome's convincing speal did lure David into believing they could form a valuable and financially beneficial relationship. David could not have found a better space merchant to work with, but the phobic man wasn't perfect. David lost track of how many times he had cleaned the dull, cold interior of a planet hopper after a rough landing.

"I didn't come here to stay in the planet hopper. I'm going out," David said.

Tome replied, "Ok, ok, give me a moment to get my wits about me."

Opening the hatch, David dropped the ladder down and it thudded onto the surface. He climbed down to the soft-carpeted grass, his EX7 pistol nestled into the side of his khaki jumpsuit. After handing their packs to David, Tome scrambled down to stand beside him. Behind them the planet hopper's metallic skin beamed in the sunlight.

The wind ruffled David's black hair as he and Tome headed for the top of a nearby ridge. They dropped to

the ground and lay looking up at the flecks of clouds that rolled by above them.

David said, "Tome, did you ever smell air as fresh as this? Not one single pollutant."

Tome breathed deeply. "Earth must have been this way at one time." He sat up. "Hey," he continued, "I'm starved." He reached back into a side pouch in his merchant's travel sack and pulled out the bottle of David's Mirandian wine.

"This will quell my queasiness from the jump down," Tome grinned. "Did you bring any food to go with this wine? No big deal if you didn't. I'm sure this will hold me till we get back to the Scritura." Tome hoisted the bottle upward.

David laughed, "Yeah, and I'd take you back drunk. And then I'd hafta clean up everything your stomach emptied on the way up. Why don't you share my wine and I share with you the sandwiches and dried fruit I brought?"

They ate, and with appetites satisfied, they lay there on the alien ground, dozing in the light of EDN's sun.

A rustling sound startled David out of the sanctuary of his dreams. On instinct bred by setting foot on unexplored and sometimes uninviting worlds, he scrambled into a crouched position his EX7 ready. He scanned the tree line thirty meters away.

He nudged Tome with his foot. "Tome, did you hear that?" he whispered.

Tome's eyes fluttered open and he scowled at David, clearly miffed at being roused from his nap. Tome snapped, "Hear what?"

The swishing began again and seemed closer. Then it stopped.

Crouched beside David, Tome was now wide awake, his arms cradling his carbine.

"What is it?" Tome whispered.

David shook his head and they waited.

The green wall of vegetation parted like a hair divided by a comb and out stepped the most beautiful, bipedal creature either of the men had ever seen. The translucent, naked skin pulsed with veins of the most varied greens, blues, and reds. The creature, who Tome argued had been female because of the small raised bumps in the chest area, timidly peered at the merchants with almond-shaped mauve eyes, silent and unmoving. Her face seemed uncertain. Again, this was Tome's impression, not David's. David's anthropologic side argued that one could never really tell what a creature from an alien society was thinking. "You can't read human characteristics into something foreign," he touted.

After a long pause in which neither the merchants nor the creature moved, Tome lowered his carbine, leaned over, and said to David.

"Hey, David, let's lure it out with a piece of the leftover fruit. It's natural enough. Kind of the 'I-come-in-peace' token."

Mesmerized by the scene before him, David lowered his EX7 as well. If they could befriend this creature, he stood a good chance of being able to examine the beginnings of a civilization. He reached into his knapsack and pulled out the fruit. Stretching out his arm, he leaned forward until he dropped to his knees and

held out the food. The humanoid creature jerked back in fear. The action startled the men, causing them to scuttle backwards. After regaining their footing and again readying their weapons, they saw that the creature had disappeared.

"What was that thing?" Tome murmured, eyes eagerly searching the now-quiet forest.

David was silent. This was Earth's watch, their observation of biogenesis, their holy of holies, their utopia. In this untamed beauty, life had developed. The financial benefits of anthropology, which had always been in his blood, seemed such a distant thought. In discord with his typical "quick-buck" mentality, David actually felt a genuine obligation to protect this perfection. The feeling of a more pure vein of anthropology surprised him. He felt unworthy of the task.

He sighed, rubbed his cheek with his free hand, and then looked down at his watch. "Gather our things. We leave in ten."

"But...B-b-b-but," Tome stammered, "suppose it comes back? Damn! Can you imagine what Zani would pay to have this creature in their zoo? 200,000 credits at least! I mean, just imagine what this would do for the planet's tourism?"

David knew Tome was right. A war of conscience raged in his mind, a battle between capitalism and responsibility. He knew that by taking the creature off her world, assuming they could catch it, would destroy the rudimentary beginnings of any civilization here. Responsibility overcame greed.

David recoiled. Here they were in paradise, and

his partner had the sound of "cha-ching" going through his brain. It sickened him. The anthropologist purist rose within him.

"You're mad!" he shot back. "We're going back to the hopper now before you do anything stupid." He turned and stormed towards the ship, leaving Tome to gather the packs and the fruit David had dropped. David was sure Tome had expected more a space merchant's mentality from him, not something prudish like this. The urgency he felt to get off planet left no room for explanations to Tome. Screw him.

Then David heard it. The rustling sound of twigs being snapped and branches and leaves being pushed aside.

Tome called out, "David, hold up a moment." David had already stopped.

They waited; David poised at the ladder of the planet hopper and Tome still at the grassy knoll. Again, the vegetation parted and out stepped the bi-ped she creature; this time another followed her.

The creatures didn't appear to notice the craft and instead watched Tome. Expecting Tome to perform some act of space merchant motivated stupidity, David thumbed his EX7 to stun. Tome glanced in David's direction and motioned with the fruit in his hand towards the creatures, indicating he was going to try the lure once again.

With apprehension and wariness, David watched Tome pass the fruit beneath his nose, and then take a bite. The female creature shrieked and pawed at her male companion, who seemed, from what David could tell, shocked. Both back-peddled, skin pulsing red, as Tome

once again enticed them with the sort-of-peace-offering food.

This was insane. David checked his watch again. Three minutes. They had to leave. You didn't irritate a pilot who kept a tight schedule.

Then, without warning, the female creature shuffled towards Tome, her nose sniffing the air as she came. David took aim with the EX-7. The question now was who to stun first. The friggin' idiot of a space merchant he had with him, or the creature who now approached, which they knew nothing about, no idea of her intention, no friggin' clue. Before he could decide, she had reached Tome.

She reached out her long, slender arm, touched the dried, wrinkled fruit, and then jerked her hand away, as though touching it had somehow burned her. Then she swiped the food from Tome's hand and scurried back to her companion.

David and Tome watched in silence. The skin of the aliens flashed, veins changing colors - vivid, rapid, angry, pulsing. First one, then the other. Back and forth, back and forth, faster, and faster, then mingling, becoming a blur of color. No arms moved; their faces were devoid of any expression, yet it was clear they argued. The other creature, which Tome again in naivety had dubbed 'male' because of the protrusion in his lower abdomen, stepped back every time the food was passed before him.

Finally, to the dismay of the male, the female bit the fruit. Her companion's flashing veins stopped. All was still. Very still. Nothing moved. Not even the

wind.

David felt sick to the stomach. It was like the feeling he had had when he looked at his first dirty magazine; like when he had first swindled a buyer during a trade in the Nectar system by telling him as an honest to God anthropologist that this Zygmorim Mating bracelet was the real deal. It was the result of doing something wrong for the first time, and the worry that he'd be caught. Plain and simple it was guilt.

"Tome," David managed to eke out, "we leave now!" He scrambled up the rungs three at a time. Tome's face was white. Looping the packs over his shoulder, he sprinted toward the hopper. Neither needed any more prodding. There was a feeling of impending...what? They weren't sure, but it felt unsafe.

David fired the engine of the planet hopper as Tome stepped onto the first rung. He looked back in time to see the male creature hesitantly bite the fruit. As Tome's foot left the ground, the world writhed.

With Tome nestled securely under the transparent canopy of the planet hopper and David behind the controls, the ship leaped away from the surface as the shaking of EDN3124 loosed trees and they fell. A crack appeared in the surface where their ship had sat, and a volcanic eruption followed, flames licking up at the belly of the planet hopper like a hand snatching at an escaped balloon. The space merchants gazed back at the receding planet.



The light flashed green on the console in front of Kensington indicating the planet hopper had docked. *It's*

about time, Kensington thought. *That's space merchants for you. If you set a limit, they got to push it.* He keyed in the flight coordinates to make the next leg of the jump as he entertained thoughts of his disdain for traders. What he really wanted to do was jettison them toward the star centering the Ethnal system.

David and Tome entered the cockpit. Kensington initiated the engine start up sequence and said without turning around, "I nearly left you guys behind." When that elicited no response, he twisted in his seat. Kensington stared at the blood starved faces of the traders. "What the hell happened to you?"

David pointed towards the cockpit window. The valley where the men had landed lay bathed in volcanic flame; magma flowed across the once green space until it hit the feet of the mountains that encircled the area. EDN3124 looked like it had a festering boil, gurgling puss.

Aghast, Kensington leaped to his feet and stared out the window, "What did you guys do?"

David was still in shock and his reply was barely a whisper.

"It was only an apple."

A SENSE OF ADVENTURE

Day One

“What the hell?” Jant Patterman lurched forward in his seat. “NueroNet, confirm that last transmission!”

“Fsssssst... Need assis...Miran...Fssssst.” Jant could not believe what he was hearing. As the signal repeated itself, the other jackers began to glance about the room in confusion as if waking up out of a long, dull dream. They sat up using their electrode-stimulated muscles; their pale faces turned towards Jant the head of their SN²G.

Up until this point, the day had been routine for Jant. Inserting the neurotransponder into the slot behind his left ear lobe, he jacked in with the thought, *Jack in is go. Connect 361574 to the NeuroNet.* It was the same thing everyday, seven days a week at Labortech Industries. Jack in, jack out. Jack in, jack out.

361574 accepted. The impulse response from the machine; a machine that acted as a brain processor for the world and a telepathic communication device. But the NN (NeuroNet) wasn't AI, at least not in the traditional sense. Connecting real human brains together and utilizing them as processing power created a faster more powerful computer. Any artificiality lay in that humans weren't born connected. In every sense, the voice of humanity spoke through the NN.

Imagine for a moment being able to draw on the wisdom of people jacked in from all corners of the world. It was better than any super computer humanity could devise. At their coming of age, all humans had implanted behind their left ear and into the temporal lobe a jack that could access the shared portion of the brain. In surgery lobotomists sectioned off the lobe so that personal memories and thoughts could be separated from what was called common and shared knowledge. As a result of integrating medical and computer technology, the intelligence and efficiency of humanity had grown and the world had become less divided.

Jacked in from labor centers across the globe, the mind was the primary labor tool controlling everything down to the robot workers; humanity had become safe. And

lethargic. And less ambitious. The pace of human progression had slowed.

Connected to NN, a constant stream of data from the SN²G, (SubNueroNet Group) on Solar System Analysis that Jant oversaw fed information into his head. These modern day astronomers carried out the tedious and arduous task of object identification and planetary analysis, none of which changed or gave any cause for excitement, all of which came from endlessly orbiting satellite telescopes. Any non-planetary object was sure to be a left over artifact from late 20th/early 21st century space exploration. Jant often longed to visit the places he viewed, knowing that no person had ever, or ever would travel that far.

That morning, Jant's mind, in conjunction with another hundred or so, scanned the Uranus sector. His SN²G dealt with the rapid data flow. *Moon 4...Miranda...Temperature: -187 Celsius... Tectonic activity...none...X-rays...* As his mind crunched the data, the NN ran down his list of messages and news feeds. *Sbrill...shh...beep...beep...sbrill... garbled unintelligible voices...hiss...* ripped Jant away from his diversion.

“What the hell?” He lurched forward in his seat.



Day One Plus One Hour

“There’s no way this can be correct.” Disbelief undermined the statement from Comlence Adams, the NAC (North American Communities) Minister of Defense. Within minutes of the situation, Jant had followed protocol and notified his superiors. An emergency council meeting had assembled that included the President, the Minister of Defense, and other key officials in the administration. As head of the SN²G that had made the discovery, Jant had been invited.

The room in which the council gathered was nothing more than a visual image the NN had created for convenience sake. Even after years of virtual encounters, assembling without having at least the physical illusion of being in a meeting room still unsettled people. Though the entire council appeared to be there, its members jacked in from offices and NN labor centers from all over NAC.

Jant stood in the illusion of a long and narrow room, with windows lining one side and French doors at the far end that opened into a spring garden. The council members sat at a horseshoe-shaped oak table. Jant found an empty seat at the end.

Jant's first NN impression of Comlence left him with no desire to meet him in person. He had only ever seen him in the pictures and video feeds that came across the NN News. Comlence's streaked gray and white hair accented his pale olive skin. Smoke curled lazily upwards from a pipe that dangled loosely from the corner of his drooping mouth. Dark circles under-girded his eyes, a clear indication of one who had spent way too much time at work and too many days in bureaucratic offices. Now, his eyes pierced Jant in fierce distrust and doubt. Jant shifted uncomfortably under the heavy gaze.

At the head of the table, Jant recognized President Ammeril. At 136 years of age, his lack of wrinkles and alert eyes made him look a young sixty. His fame mostly rested in his being the oldest president ever to take office. He certainly wasn't known for his popularity. Ammeril had barely squeaked out a victory, winning only fractionally over his opponent.

To Jant's left sat Bedford Woods, chief aerospace correspondent. Of all those in the council, he was nearest to Jant in age and had worked with Jant's SN²G. If any of Jant's satellites or sub-orbital telescopes failed, Bedford's SN²G would fix the problem, sending a ship, armed with robots to repair the situation. Their relationship had always been one of mutual respect. Close-cropped hair topped off the military bred muscular figure of thirty-year-old Bedford. Though not in uniform, a sharp, black tailored suit framed Bedford's appearance.

Another six sat at the table, men and women from other divisions of the NeuroNet. The only other one Jant recognized was Cummings from Deciphering. Telepathically, Bedford spoke.

"We've never sent a manned ship beyond the asteroid belt. Even if we had, any distress signals appearing now would be of no consequence. Two hundred plus years have passed since any human has been in Space." The pressure to come up with answers agitated Bedford. "There must be some error or miscalculation. The only rockets sent up any more are repair ships with jacking controlled robots to fix malfunctioning satellites or launch new ones. When we were unable to create suitable, cost effective

habitats on Luna and Mars, the government terminated the human space program.” With the last comment, he shot an accusatory glance towards Comlence, who now headed the organization that had originally lobbied against it.

Jant straightened himself and leaned forward, defending his SN²G’s findings. “My SN²G reran and rechecked the data. We received a distress call coming from the surface of Miranda. After receiving the signal, we routed it through Deciphering where Cummings took over.” He nodded Cummings direction as he spoke this. Jant continued on, “Currently, they are sifting through the white noise. Preliminary analysis points to Miranda as its origin and not some idiot from Earth bouncing a signal off a satellite. Despite the improbability and impossibility of this,” he paused, allowing his confident gaze to sweep the room. “We have obtained visual confirmation of some object on the Mirandian surface.”

With that, the NN brought up a tri-dimensional mental image of Miranda. He continued, “You’ll notice in the southern quadrant to the right. NN, Enhance the image.” He paused while NN enlarged the image in the minds of the council. “This metallic object,” Jant said while circling an area of the map with his finger, “is in clear contrast to the barren surface.”

Bedford’s forefinger rested on his upper lip as he stared intently at the object sitting on the scarred surface of Miranda. “The planet looks like its been through hell,” he loosely commented. Miranda had been completely shattered and reassembled several times in its history, each time burying parts of the original surface and exposing others.

Jant’s explanation continued, “Up to this point, the other cosmographer SN²Gs have obtained no evidence of intelligent life outside the boundaries of this planet. Unless that evidence presents itself, we’re going with the assumption that it’s terrestrial.”

Bedford raised his eyes in surprise, “Isn’t that one hell of a judgment to make? Just because we haven’t encountered any intelligence apart from our own doesn’t mean it’s nonexistent. How many times has your SN²G scanned the Uranus sector?”

“Probably a couple hundred times since I’ve been assigned to it.”

“You never saw anything before? Kind of odd, isn’t it? Don’t be too quick to conclude this is terrestrial.” Murmuring broke out as council members began to chatter among themselves. The staggering implications of his statement caught them off guard.

Comlence silenced them. “So something’s out there. There’s nothing that can be done.”

Jant’s face betrayed his shock. “You’re just suggesting we leave them up there?”

“Them!? Who says it’s them? Us? It? And I’m still not convinced it’s not a glitch in the system. And then there’s the Community. They are the ones who will ultimately foot the bill. If we are foolhardy enough to pursue this, where will the money be diverted from?” He scowled and slammed his fist down on the table. “It better not be NAC defensive resources.”

President Ammeril tried to soothe him. “Now, Minister Comlence. Calm down. We have decided nothing.”

But Comlence wasn’t finished with his tirade, though he spoke a little more calmly. “Suppose it is real. What then? We have not flown in space for years. With our current knowledge of manned space flight technology, we could never reach Miranda in time to save any living souls on board, if indeed what we’re talking about are living souls. Who’s to say it’s not just a ship with an automatic distress call?”

“Who said anything about sending men?” queried Bedford.

Comlence sarcastically laughed. “Come on Bedford. You aren’t that naive. Our computerized systems couldn’t handle the improvisation and adaptiveness needed for a rescue mission.”

Jant hesitated, unsure as to whether he wanted to face Comlence’s wrath, then finally cut in. “Ummm. Disciphering’s preliminary analysis indicates this is not a repeating distress signal. Unfortunately, the poor quality of the audio feed makes it difficult to understand the text of the message with much certainty.”

Bedford leaned back thoughtfully. “We have not, as the Minister stated, flown humans in space for centuries, but humanity was on the verge of sustained spaceflight when funding for the space program was originally cut. If we were to dedicate more minds from NN...” He trailed off into silence when he saw Comlence’s fierce glare.

A heavy silence followed. Jant stared nervously at his tightly clasped hands, knuckles whitening as Bedford shifted uneasily in his seat. The air felt thick as if under some spell cast by Comlence.

In spite of this, the thought of manned spaceflight excited Jant. For a moment, he saw a picture in his mind of his 5'9" stocky body stepping foot on soil other than Earth's. Fear and awe stirred in him.

A door opened, startling him, and all heads turned towards the welcomed interruption. The President's secretary stepped into the room, leaned down, and whispered something to Ammeril.

After a moment, President Ammeril spoke. "Members of the Council, it appears that the World Communities urge us to move forward. Since the termination of their aerospace programs, any business they have had in space has come to us." His gaze pierced Comlence. "Members of the Council, if there are no major objections, I would like to green light this affair."

Silence. Through the NN President Ammeril's decision pervaded the shared areas their minds.

Miranda was go. Comlence threw up his hands, stormed out of the room and jacked out.



Six months later at the NAC Aerospace Center.

Jant leaned back, squinting up towards the nose of the newest NAC Aerospace rocket: the manned MM472 *The Tempest*. The six months had passed quickly. He spent twelve hours a day in the MM472 Simulator, getting himself space ready. The rest of his time, he divided between eating, sleeping, and pouring over notes on Uranus, her moons, and especially Miranda.

Besides his connection to Bedford (and that would have gotten him almost anywhere), the NAC Mirandian Mission Council had chosen him to be a part of the crew because of his expertise and knowledge of Miranda. Jant knew of another reason as well. He was expendable. If something went wrong, he had no wife, no children, no serious relationships that would suffer from his loss. None of those going did.

This had been one hell of a celebration. The crew of *The Tempest* had been paraded across all visual lines of the NN, paraded quite literally down the streets of the

major NAC cities with confetti and fanfare, and paraded all the way Cape Canaveral. The Cape, a former museum and testament of 20th century space flight, had been reactivated when NAC had decided to launch the MM472 from its pads. Now as Jant prepared to ascend to the hatchway of *The Tempest*, the festivities continued, with NN News crews and bystanders cheering and shouting around him. A voice cut through the clamor.

“Hey Jant, she’s a beaut, isn’t she?” Jant snapped out of his reverie. Bedford, designated by the President as the mission’s commander, stood beside him; neck craned back looking up at the sleek, silver body of *The Tempest*. After a moment, Jant casually replied, “She sure is, Commander.”

“Cut the Commander crap,” snapped Bedford. “As far as I’m concerned, we’re still first name basis.”

“Yes, Sir,” Jant clicked his heels and feigned a mock salute that Bedford ignored. Jant turned his gaze back to the nose of the ship, towering high above him. Speaking with apprehension, Jant said, “After all the training it’s still hard to imagine she’s taking us into space.”

“This baby is worry free,” Bedford assured him. “Let’s see what Sykes and Larson are up to.” Jant picked up his bags and followed Bedford into an elevator surrounded by a scaffold grid that leapt into the sky.

After taking the elevator up to the access arm, Bedford led Jant down the walkway, through the hatch, and into the control room. Jacked into the control console, two men in blue jumpsuits made final preparations. Co-pilot Sykes Vey, the taller and lankier of the two, jacked out and straightened as they entered. “Hey, Commander,” Sykes said with a lopsided grin. He jutted his chin out Jant’s direction and nodded. “Solar Boy, ‘bout time you got on board. Larson here was threaten’ to leave without you. I was holding him back.” He shot Jant a grin.

“You’d have made Comlence a happy man if you had,” Jant rifled back, “though Bedford and the President would have probably killed you.”

By this time, Larson Downs, the pilot, had finished his work and joined them. He nodded his pleasantries never cracking a smile as his cold blue eyes darted from Jant to Bedford. “I just finished chatting with Comlence. No need to ask him his thoughts

on this whole expedition. He's been miffed ever since Ammeril diverted billions in spending to the aerospace program." His eyes locked on Bedford's, in a stare down that Jant thought looked defiant. After the tension bordered on palpable, Larson looked away.

President Ammeril had tried to soothe Comlence by telling him the Defense SN²G would get rights for any new technology developed during the project. The President had even placed him in charge of the NAC Mirandian Mission Council. Still he took every chance to express his disapproval of the project. Because Jant headed the SN²G that made the discovery resulting in the mission, Comlence's disdain seemed aimed at him.

Larson continued, "You can check out your quarters. The design team just got done putting the finishing touches on them yesterday. You should have enough time to do it before strap-in." He watched Bedford and Jant as they exited the room.

Bedford led Jant down a dimly lit hallway towards the rear of the ship. Packed supply rooms, rooms filled with electronics and sleeper rooms slid by as the sound of their boots clanked down the metal walk way. Stopping at a door on his left, he led Jant into a sparsely furnished bunkroom.

The room contained a neatly made bed, a chair, and recessed closet space. Above the metallic, wall-attached chair, a NN receptacle jutted out from the gray, inside hull of the ship. "How'd they get the ship to link with the NN?" Jant asked as he stowed his bags in the closet.

Bedford grinned "Welcome to the evolution and ingenuity of space communication technology. The Tachyonic Com has to be one of the most revolutionary devices aboard this ship. Utilizing subatomic particles for instantaneous communication, we can be light years away and it would be like you're jacking in on Earth. You can even jack into the observation room from the comfort of your own quarters. I assume at first you'll want to jack in, but when we get closer to Miranda, you can go to the observation room and see it with your own eyes."

"Jacking in will be just fine," murmured Jant, a little awestruck by everything. To think they'd actually be traveling in Space. After exploring it for so long jacked into the NN, the thought of looking at Miranda without being hooked up made him queasy,

even if the observation screen integrated NN technology.

Bedford leaned in and whispered, “Just between you and me, I don’t trust Larson.”

“I know. Something doesn’t add up,” Jant said.

Bedford straightened up and rubbed his hand against his jaw. “Perhaps its nothing. I get this feeling when I’m around him sometimes. I’ve learned to trust my military bred instincts regarding who my friends are and what people to be wary of. My gut tells me be wary. That and when this flight crew was assembled, he was Comlence’s pick.”

“Damned by association,” Jant said. “You keeping an eye on him?”

“You bet I am!”

The room speaker squawked to life with the voice of Larson calling them forward to wave goodbye to a watching world. The crew stood on a grid outside the hatch, looking down on the sea of people that sprawled out below them. As each one of the crew waved, the intermittent cheers of the crowd changed to a thunderous applause. President Ammeril quieted the crowd and gave his last prelaunch comments.

“Humanity is about to embark on it’s most ambitious endeavor. Our most current hopes and dreams ride in *The Tempest* and with her crew.” The mass of people erupted in applause. President Ammeril waited for them to quiet. “This day, the day in which we launch *The Tempest*, is our story. It is this day you will tell to your children and they to theirs. In this story you will remember how far we have come and how far we still have yet to go.”

Jant felt his spine tingle as the crowd leapt to their feet. Their thunderous ovation rolled across the Cape. Finished, President Ammeril waved to the people, then up to the crew, and stepped down from the podium. It was time to leave.

Jant strapped in along with Bedford, Sykes, and Larson. Sykes ran down last-minute protocol regarding takeoff procedures. Adrenaline coursed through Jant in anticipation. On the command of Comlence, *The Tempest* leapt off the pad towards Space. The invisible hand of G-force pushed against Jant’s chest like the weight of the world’s expectations and he blacked out.



Sykes's voice cut through the darkness. "Hey, Solar Boy! You can open your eyes now. We're in space." Realizing his eyes were squeezed tightly shut, Jant sheepishly opened them one at a time. Sykes continued, "You can unstrap yourself for the duration of the journey." Jant rose unsteadily to his feet, adjusting to *The Tempest's* artificial gravity.

"What is our estimated time of arrival?" Jant weakly said.

"With this baby's propulsion system, we'll be covering the 2.9 billion kilometer journey in about six days," Bedford volunteered. "To put our travel time in perspective, with 21st century ships, it would've taken months, if not years, to travel to Miranda."

Six days, thought Jant. *In six days we will know the truth.* The time couldn't pass soon enough. He hurried back to his room to once again to examine his maps on the Mirandan landscape.



2 Days till Rendezvous with Miranda.

The beacon continued to broadcast as it had done for the past six months. "*Sbrill...sbb...beep...beep...sbrill...we have aban...sbbh...*" *The Tempest* covered 480 million kilometers a day, yet the signal was no clearer. This perplexed the Deciphering SN²G. Cummings speculated that the communications rigging on the other end must have sustained damage.

Jant sat in his room. Connected to the observatory through the NN, Miranda loomed larger than ever. The gleaming metal of the object accented Miranda's barren surface. Still too far to discern it clearly, the council now referred to it as "the ship."

Each second brought him further from the place he called home. Earth, Labortech, and everything that had made up the first thirty-three years of his existence now lay 1.9 billion kilometers away. He didn't miss it at all. Here he was hurtling through space, in the solar system he had only ever jacked in to see. The thought did not

make him entirely comfortable. He jacked out to find Bedford sitting on the edge of his bed, reading The NAC Times.

“You can read that on the NN, you know,” said Jant, grinning.

“I know, I know...and I could probably process the information faster, too. Sometimes I just like reading it on paper.” Bedford folded the newspaper and leaned forward toward Jant. “I’ve had trouble sleeping at night.”

“Really? Why?” said Jant.

Bedford stared out the view port sunk into the side of the room. “I lie awake thinking about the ship. Who’s on it? How did it get there? No one on earth sent it, yet the beacon is clearly aimed towards us. Are they alive? What will it be like to meet them? It’s kind of exciting.” Bedford shifted his gaze back to Jant. “Launching rockets and repairing satellites doesn’t quite have the pizzazz this does.”

Jant nodded in agreement. “This definitely beats sitting jacked in at Labortech looking at the same planets, moons, and space junk day after day.” Moving over to a space below the window, he poured himself some Avocado Nutri Supreme from the wall refrigerator and offered some to Bedford, who politely declined. After sipping his drink, he said, “Have you jacked in lately?”

“That depends on how you define lately. I jacked into the NN last night to update Comlence on our progress. Not that there was much to report. Anything I can learn through the NN, he can get just as easily. I did give him a play by play of our card game last night, although I don’t think he was very amused.”

Jant laughed.

The Tempest shuddered knocking Jant to the floor. His drink splattered against the wall. Bedford lost his grip on *The NAC Times* and papers went flying everywhere. Jant pushed himself back up into a sitting position and rubbed his head.

“Damn,” he said, “What the hell just happened?”

Already out the door, Bedford yelled over his shoulder, “Let’s go find out.”

They entered the flight deck running. In the co-pilot’s seat, Sykes gripped his armrests, his face pale. Larson’s fingers danced over the buttons of the control board. Again, the ship groaned and shuddered, causing both Bedford and Jant to stumble sideways.

“Larson, what are you doing?” Bedford demanded.

“My job, sir,” Larson replied smiling. He continued to punch buttons and take notes, pretending to ignore the concern in the Commander’s voice.

“Then why is *The Tempest* under so much strain?”

A hint of sarcasm edged Larson’s reply. “She’s fine, sir. She’ll hold together. I’m just testing the full capacity of the Gluonic Propulsion Engines. This is our first chance to test them out in a real flight situation and to see what our subatomic technology can do.”

“I never gave you those orders. This is a rescue mission. Not some test pilot’s joy ride.” Anger flashed in Bedford’s eyes.

Larson smirked and said, “Commander, the order came from the Minister himself.”

“I don’t care if it came from the President. The tests stop now!”

“I’m afraid I can’t do that, sir.”

“I’m afraid you can.” Bedford yanked Larson by the collar up out of his chair. “Because if you don’t. I will relieve you of your pilot duties and Sykes will take over.”

The air thickened with tension. Sykes and Jant remained still, afraid that any word spoken or any movement made would only fuel the fire. Larson’s feet dangled a few centimeters off the floor as Bedford glared at him with piercing eyes and a clenched jaw.

Larson wheezed, “When the Minister finds out...”

Bedford cut him off. “If he finds out, I will report your insubordination to the President and he will court martial you. Capisce?”

The arrogance and confidence left Larson’s face. Bedford set him down. “Now return the ship to normal speed,” he snapped. “We’ll get there soon enough. Larson, remember your orders come from me. Don’t ever by-pass the chain of command again.”



Achieved Orbit, Miranda.

Jacked in to NeuroNet, Jant and Bedford watched the now enormous tri-dimensional image of Miranda. Just beyond Miranda lay Uranus. The smallest of the gas giants, its baby blue fog swirled across its face.

The Tempest hovered in orbit just kilometers above the Mirandian surface. The distinct metallic reflection of the ship below contrasted the barren land. A third of a kilometer long, it lay on its side, intact, with the exception of a black hole that gaped in the hull of the crushed tail section. In big, bold letters across the side, the ship's name read:

TRINCULO

“What do you think happened?” murmured Bedford.

Jant replied, “A crash? Maybe a meteor hit? It's hard to tell without going down to investigate.”

They stood for a while in silence. The cold surface was devoid of life. Nothing moved. “You'd think they'd of tried hailing *The Tempest*,” Bedford said. “Or maybe coming out of the ship so we could see that they were still alive.”

Jant tuned into the audio feed and sighed. “Only the noise from before.”

He found the whole experience of staring down at the **TRINCULO** from such a narrow distance surreal. He knew at any moment he'd pinch himself, wake up, and find out it had been a dream. It was dream he never wanted to leave.

The landscape mesmerized him. South of the **TRINCULO**, down the middle of a rocky ridge, a chasm cut deep into the moon's surface in which the bottom could only be guessed. The crags, hills, and riffs in the scene sprawled out bathed in Uranus blue. It was a peaceful contrast to the journey from Earth.

After the blow up on the flight deck, the rest of the time had passed uneventfully. A rift remained between Bedford and Larson. They talked, but only when operations on the ship demanded it. Though Larson carried out his duties, Jant noticed he shot Bedford a stabbing look every time his back was turned.

Bedford ran his fingers through his hair. “So the mystery deepens. Well, let's join the meeting and see what the great, almighty Minister and his pawn have to say today,” Bedford said. The sarcasm oozed from his voice. Jant and Bedford jacked into

the already-in-session council meeting as Larson filled everyone in on some basic details.

“We have arrived at Miranda and are in a geosynchronous orbit above the crash site.”

Comlence asked, “Any sign of movement?”

“You’re seeing what we’re seeing,” Jant inserted. “No movement on the surface from this vantage point.” Comlence glared at him as if Jant had spoken out of turn, but with the President in the room, he responded in a professional, though curt voice.

“I thought the observational room on board may have given you a different perspective.”

Jant replied, “I haven’t actually used the observation room. I can’t say I even planned to. If you want the God’s honest truth, jacking into the NN is going to give just as accurate data as the NN enhanced observation screen will. Plus jacking in gives us the advantage of more minds interpreting what we see.”

Cummings from Deciphering spoke up.

“Mr. Minister, the audio feed remains unchanged. We’re a little baffled by it. We supposed once *The Tempest* hit orbit around Miranda, we’d receive a clearer and more discernable signal. But on the contrary, the signal remains garbled. We’re holding to the theory that they must have sustained equipment damage.”

Comlence replied, “Well, it looks like there is only one more thing to do. Take *The Tempest* down to the surface and go out and investigate.” He turned to Larson. Jant saw a look pass between them. “How close can we bring her down to the

TRINCULO?”

“Sykes and I should be able to get her to within a half kilometer. The NN detected a flat stable area in a depression just south of where the **TRINCULO** lies. It should be able to hold *The Tempest*.”

Comlence sighed. “Mr. President, we are go to land on Miranda and discover the truth about this ship. Jant and Bedford are on recon.”



On the Mirandian Surface

With a small jolt, Larson landed the MM472 upright on the surface of Miranda. He cut the engines and there was silence. Sykes turned to Jant and Bedford.

“Commander, the show is yours.”

Jant followed Bedford down the hall to a room just beyond their quarters. Jant suited up. Bedford appeared calm. Jant’s hands fumbled with the seal on his helmet. Bedford helped slip the last snaps into place. The NN transponder slide into the jack behind his ear. It was an unsettling experience for new jackers. But veterans like Jant learned to ignore it during his employment at Labortech. Designed with the NN in mind, the suit came equipped with Tachyonic devices, enabling the wearer to jack in and be in constant communication with the ship through the NN. It also had a local NN channel built in so they could talk in private.

“361674. Confirm link to NN.” Jant said.

Sykes’ voice echoed in Jant’s head. “That link is affirmative.”

Jacked in, the world waited, anticipating the revelation called **TRINCULO**. The communities of Earth had supported *The Tempest* every step of the way. They celebrated when it launched and they were there, jacked in, when it landed. They would be there when Jant and Bedford first set foot on Miranda. Nothing in centuries had captured the attention and anticipation of the public like the mission to Miranda.

And rumors stirred, ambitious ones entailing renewed ideas of planetary exploration, habitation, and tourism. After all, if they could build a ship that traveled to Miranda, then they could traverse the cosmos and live somewhere less crowded than among the 50 billion people on earth.

Bedford punched the access button for the airlock. Caught up in his conversation with Jant, he collided with the still closed airlock door. Surprised he jabbed the door button again. Nothing. He cursed. “Just our luck, we get all the way here and can’t get out. Sykes, any red of the console?”

“All green,” said Sykes.

Bedford tried opening the door again. “I can’t get the door into the airlock to open.”

Confused and surprised, Sykes said, “I thought you and Solar Boy were in the

airlock.”

“Where’s Larson?” Bedford shot back.

“He’s not with you?” Sykes was worried. “He left to do a suit check as soon as we landed.” Jant looked to the wall where the suits hung. Larson’s suit was gone!

“Damn,” Bedford swore, pounding the still inoperable button. “The son-of-a-bitch.” The door hissed open. Jant and Bedford stepped inside.

“Sykes, get us out of here.” The door closed behind them. “Larson’s planet-side. Switch to the local and stay there.” Angered, Bedford staccatoed, “Open the airlock now.” He unholstered his blaster, cradled it in his left hand, and set it to stun.

As the hatch opened, the ship’s depressurized air mixed with the thin Mirandian atmosphere. Bedford shot down the rungs of the exit chute, with Jant following. Their boots thunked onto the hard, packed dirt of Miranda. The uneven and gouged surface spread out before him. Uranus’ pale blue light cast an eeriness over the landscape.

“There,” Bedford waved the gun in the direction of the ridge. A speck in the distance, Jant could barely make out a suited Larson bounding through the weak gravity towards the top of the ridge. Bedford tried raising him on the NN, but Larson’s NN COM link was silent. Bedford sped after him; Jant tailed behind.

Bedford weaved in and around rocks closing the distance between them. His military training paid off. Bedford caught up with Larson just as he was ready to crest the ridge. Larson whirled around to meet him. Hours seemed to pass as they stood motionless glaring at each other.

“Larson,” Bedford growled. “What the hell do you think your doing?” Edgy, he shifted the gun to his right hand, steadying it once more at Larson’s chest.

Larson briefly glanced at Jant as he stumbled up to join them. After activating his NN jack and switching it to local, he turned his icy gaze back to Bedford. “If you think NAC Defense is going to allow you guys to get credit for setting foot on an alien world after 200 years, you are mistaken.” A maniacal laugh escaped his lips. “Just three meters more and not only will I be the first to have set foot on this moon, but I will also be the first to see the ship.”

Bedford’s shoulders tensed. “Pilot, you are out of line. Get back to the ship.”

“What are you going to do if I don’t?” Larson sneered. “Court martial me?”

The world won't give a shit about your court martial when they hear my report.”

Bedford's finger slipped around the trigger. “Larson, you are relieved of your duties. I'm confining you to quarters for the rest of the trip. Sykes will take the bridge. Now quit being insane and come with me.”

Larson took a step back towards the top of the jagged ridge. “If Comlence would've had his way, neither one of you would ever have been on this trip.”

Jant watched as Larson edged his way nearer to the crest. “Watch it Larson!” His voice hinged on alarm. “There's...”

“Stuff it!” Larson shouted. He turned, stepped forward and disappeared. Jant heard Larson's scream as the pilot slowly fell down one of Miranda's many chasms towards his frozen hell; a death cry that would haunt Jant for years.



Bedford shook Jant's shoulder. “Hey,” he whispered. “You all right?”

Though his face was white and his body trembled, he nodded slowly. “I tried to warn him,” he eked out.

“He wasn't listening to anyone.” Bedford replied. “Comlence is going to have hell to pay for this when we get back.” He sighed, looked up at the dark sky, and then allowed his gaze to drop to the crest of the hill. According to Jant's best guess, the crevice Larson had fallen in was about 500 meters deep. While *The Tempest* did have tools to assist in the rescue of the **TRINCULO**, it didn't have the tools to get Larson's body out on this trip. “Well, there's still the **TRINCULO**.” He switched back to the common NN channel.

Jant led Bedford 20 meters across the cold landscape until they could safely cross the crest. Bedford waved him to lead the way. In spite of Jant's protests, he said, “Your SN²G made the discovery.” Jant stepped over the crest.

In the distance, a roughly hewn mountain range lay haloed by the blue orb of Uranus, stopping both Jant and Bedford in their tracks. The view was spell binding. Comlence's voice cut into their reverie demanding them to check out the **TRINCULO**.

Their eyes fell to the scene below.

The **TRINCULO** had vanished!



3 Months Later

Jant took his usual seat in the council meeting room. He looked more haggard than usual, but then again, after months of questioning and doubletalk, that happens to a man. The aftershock that followed the Mission to Miranda could be felt through all layers of government, the North American Community, and the World. Upon *The Tempest's* return to earth, the crew and the SN²Gs that had worked on the Mission faced endless hours of inquiry and scrutiny.

Everyone important was here, except for Sykes and the late Larson Downs (who were not coming) and Bedford (who was supposed to be there). Despite the intensity of the past months, President Ammeril appeared quite at ease. Comlence sat hunched forward scowling. Things had obviously not gone quite as he had planned. He adamantly denied any involvement in Larson's insubordination on Miranda. Never the less, the council remained skeptical of him.

"Billions of dollars wasted," complained Comlence. "This project black holed financially."

"But Comlence, what about all the technology you've gained for defense purposes? Surely the Gluonic Propulsion Engines and the Tachyonic Com have given your aged defense systems a much needed boost." Bedford spoke as he entered the room and sat in the empty seat next to Jant. Pretending not to notice the look Comlence shot him, he apologized to the President. "Sorry I'm late. I was in the middle of supervising the outfitting of a new MM472 ship set to lift off for Europa. When we built *The Tempest*, we never realized the revenue it would generate."

Thousands lined up to pay hefty fees to be among the first to travel and settle the solar system. During the debriefing and interrogation of *The Tempest's* crew, support for off world settlement gained momentum and as a result, President Ammeril had mandated the Aerospace Program to build more MM472 ships and created a new SN²G

for interplanetary immigration. Though Miranda had proved to be unsuitable, already domes were being constructed on Luna, Mars, and Europa with experiments in terraforming being carried out.

President Ammeril leaned forward and looked at Jant. “So the entire Miranda Mission was based on a hoax. The NN created the signal and altered it. It also created and placed the Trinculo ship on the NN tri-dimensional images of Miranda. Why?”

Jant said, “We, of course, trusted the NN as a network of human mental capacity, without taking into account that it utilized the neuropathways of the human mind and therefore was subject to its powers. We assumed that the NN worked on only a conscious level within the shared areas of the brain. Imagine our surprise then when we discovered it could also connect to our subconscious thoughts and desires. By accessing the subconscious and creating the signal that instigated the Mission to Miranda, the NN gave back to us something humanity had stifled.”

With all eyes focused on Jant, President Ammeril said, “And what is that?”

Jant smiled and said, “A sense of adventure.”

THE BEGINNING OF ALL HIS TROUBLES



Seporin (N) – a black market drug produced on Miranda, a moon of Uranus, and known for its highly addictive and hallucinogenic qualities. While working with Mirandan Sepra seed, a bioengineering fluke resulted in the narcotic’s birth. Though Earth deemed the plant illegal, enforcement of the ban has been impossible, since the Sepra is multifunctionary. Seporin was believed to be a harmless hallucinogen. The medical community now knows this to be a lie.

- Excerpt from the *Annals of Miranda* -

She materialized out of the misty haze and stepped towards him. Her chin tilted breastward, she gazed lustfully from under fluttering lashes. Upon recognition, he felt the toxic mix of hatred and desire boil within him. She beckoned him to find comfort and safety in her, promising him anything he needed. She surpassed any woman, satisfying more fully than the most skillful lover. But her greatest, most dangerous gift lay in her power to help him escape. Without moving a muscle, he felt himself moving closer to her. Or was it the other way around? His arms stretched out towards her. In his confusion, he couldn't tell whether it was to embrace or to strangle her. In the silence he screamed.

Jovahn bolted from his bed. He stood gasping and trembling, his naked body filmed in sweat. His dark, bloodshot eyes frantically searched the darkness until they came to rest on the ruby glow of numbers crowning the top of his nightstand. 05:34. He let Miranda’s weak gravity slowly pull him down onto the bed. His sleep-deprived head dropped forward while his arms dangled by his side.

She had been a Seporin-induced dream. But the woman had seemed so real. Damn this addiction. Trying to get free from it was like trying to make himself spontaneously combust. He had been clean...hmmm...how long was it now? Two months? Three months? Four? He knocked his fist against his head, trying to clear the jumbled mess of his thoughts. Then he remembered yesterday.

“One hundred credits.”

“Seems in order. Alright then, here you go.”

The darkly clad Mirandan dealer slapped a green capsule into Jovahn's trembling hand, his fingers closing around the illegal drug out of habit. The "100" on the display screen on his credit disc slowly depixelized into nothingness. He slipped the credit disc and capsule into his breast pocket.

"Jovahn, I'm sure as hell glad to see you. Until Korina, you were always one of my most reliable customers. I almost feared losing you." The dealer whom Jovahn knew only as Crank laughed, leaving a decaying grin in the aftermath. "What am I saying? All my customers are reliable. Escape is not an option, my friend. You'll never be free. Those who try...well, it's a matter of being in the right place at the right time. Take today for example. The stress of living on this friggin' moon eventually becomes unbearable. Soon they come running back to Papa Crank." He jabbed his finger into Jovahn's chest and whispered, "Like you." Crank turned and disappeared into a sliver of darkness between two dwellings.

Frustrated, he rubbed his gaunt face, trying to shake the memory away. Damn. He had succumbed to the temptation. What possessed him to buy after walking straight for so long? Stress from work? Yes, that must have been it. That and he felt lonely.

Jovahn scanned the sparsely furnished room. He still missed the entertainment unit he had owned. Along with most of his other furniture, he had sold it to pay for his Seporin habit after his work credits couldn't cover the expense anymore. His eyes fell to a lone picture hanging on the wall.

Korina. He had forgotten about her in the last twenty-four hours. Her eyes stared back at him as if she were already judging his failure. She'd be so disappointed. After a few months of seeing him, Korina found out about his struggle and had urged him to get clean. "Take care of that body," she had said, tenderly touching him. "It belongs to more than just you, you know." She had been his driving force to walk clean. Though he didn't feel like it, he knew he should tell Korina of his most recent run-in with Seporin.

This seemed like the right thing to do. But confessing his failure to stay clean would be admitting defeat and in the battle between pride and right, pride always won. Jovahn decided not to tell Korina.

Nevertheless, the struggle was real. Outwardly, he fought to maintain control.

nwardly, his thoughts and desires betrayed him. No, they consumed him...an ulcer devouring the stomach lining...addiction, staring back from the mirror with a devilish grin. He needed to master this dependence or be mastered by it.

Jovahn knew the absurdity of that last thought. He already felt conquered by it. Maybe the more accurate statement was that he had let himself be mastered by it. Yet his mind still entertained the question: could he overthrow the master? Could Seporin be overcome? There wasn't an option. He had to...

Jovahn rose slowly to his feet and shuffled through the illusionary blackness over to the window. He reached up and tapped the button to its side, removing the shading. Bluish light spilled into the room and bathed everything in an eerie glow. Through the translucent dome above, Uranus loomed large in the sky.

Of course, there were these twelve step support programs. He shuddered at the thought. Groups of frail, weak individuals who stood up one by one and said, "Hello, my name is (fill your name in here) and I'm a (fill in your mental, emotional, or physical drug or drink of choice)." Pansies...That's the word that came to Jovahn's mind. They were the weak, thriving on weakness and psychoanalyzing it. To him, the admission of defeat etched itself across the brow of these groups. And he would not admit defeat.

He scowled, staring up at the face of Uranus. He could not remember a time when his obstacles had not defeated him. The year he had spent at Earth School, when his parents were studying the latest bioengineering information, still vividly haunted him. He had excelled above his classmates in academics, but spending his years on Miranda up until that point had cursed him. When recess came and the group games were organized, the other students wouldn't even pick him. After all, they didn't want someone playing on their team who moved as if his body were made of lead. So he sat on the grass and watched them play. When they tired of pretending he wasn't there, his classmates would stick their tongues out, make funny faces, and gesture rudely at him.

Finally, the rage that had built up towards them exploded. The kid whose nose he busted fell to the ground hard while Jovahn rubbed his smarting hand and gasped to catch his breath, working to keep the dizziness and faintness at bay. His exhilaration had faded quickly when the principal had intervened. The school authorities called his parents and confined him to the classroom for the rest of the year. That's when all hell

broke loose. The other students didn't even get a reprimand. The emotional scars still weighed heavily on him.

His addiction...he knew he would have to face the Seporin dealers eventually. After yesterday, he figured it would probably be sooner rather than later. Especially with the tracking chip embedded in each Seporin pill. Kind souls. They wanted to make sure he fed his habit. Anywhere he went in Tenadore City, a dealer could find him. Since each dealer encoded the chips with his own ID, that dealer would be Crank.

Jovahn supposed it was only natural that Seporin's biggest customer was in its own backyard. Tenadore City, the city of his habitation, thrived as the capital and largest urban center on Miranda. What had he read on the shuttle news? "Seporin Snares 100,000 Tenadorians: Analysts expect addiction to double in the next five years." In a city of a million, the significance of that number boggled his mind, though it didn't surprise him. Living on Miranda was depressing. That constant, incessant, annoying blue. It tainted everything.

He shoved himself back from the window. He knew one thing for sure: leaving Miranda answered nothing, not with the chip inside him. He would have to wait until it worked its way through his system.

Even then, it probably wouldn't matter. His encounter with Crank in Central Square yesterday reassured him of that. Crank's sudden appearance had startled him. The dealer couldn't have tracked Jovahn, not without a chip in him. How had he found him? After his stress-influenced purchase, he had queried the dealer about this. Grinning, Crank explained that Jovahn's most recent financial transactions and neuronet usage made finding him easy. The dealer's efforts to find him made Jovahn paranoid.

His brain hurt. He needed to get away to a place where he was not hemmed in by walls. Then he would be able to create an action plan to battle his addiction and ward off the dealers.

The Tranquility Gardens. Yes, that was it. He would go early before most dealers greeted the day. After all, Crank couldn't track him twenty-four hours a day, could he? What time was it? He looked back at the clock. 06:01. The Gardens would be empty at this time in the morning. Once there he would rent a pressurized suit, walk outside the dome, and sit on the edge of the cliff overlooking Tenadore City. There he

could think undisturbed and work on a strategy to combat his addiction.

Moments later, Jovahn stepped from his room's glass cubical shower, steam rolling lazily around him. He donned his blue jump suit and slipped his synthetic leather shoes onto his feet. He reached over, retrieved his credit disc from the nightstand, pocketed it, and then picked up his Lola Gun.

His Lola Gun. The lightweight Lola gun fit snugly into the palm of his hand and was deadly at short range. Even with the safety of Tenadore City, using Seporin had left him on edge, and caused him to never go anywhere without the weapon. He dropped the Lola Gun into his underarm holster.

Jovahn hesitated before deciding to take his neuronet transponder. If his destination had been somewhere in Tenadore City, he would have never considered taking it. He hated the thing. If people wanted to talk to him, they could find him and do so in person. In the end, he decided to take the transponder because he planned to travel outside the dome. One never knew what emergencies might arise outside their protection.

Jovahn arrived at the shuttle station at 06:23. Good, he had two minutes until the shuttle arrived. He elbowed his way through the crowd towards the vending machines. How could the station be so crowded this early? The platform swelled with people carrying overnight bags. What day was it? Damn. He had forgotten today was Saturday. With Seporin in his system, he lost track of everything. His fellow Tenadorians were fleeing the dreary cityscape to the vacation domes. Jovahn had visited them a few times before. They contained a myriad of diversions and exotics that kept the vacationer from noticing the blue planet looming above them. He desperately hoped there were seats left. Using his credit disc, he flashed it under ticket tron scanner, booking him a roundtrip ticket and one of the last seats available on the shuttle to Tranquility Gardens. He breathed easier. What the hell, he thought as he purchased bottled water to take with him, the trip wasn't that long. He could deal with the crowd.

The shuttle arrived and hissed to a stop. With a whoosh, the doors opened and the crowd surged forward. He boarded the shuttle and walked along the aisle until he found the seat with a triangular glow plate that read "Jovahn Stirvinsky." Good. A window seat. Perhaps he could begin his pondering early. Stepping in front of the

woman seated by the aisle, he dropped his weary frame into his seat. Then the nausea hit him.

Of all the people he had been stuck beside, it had to be the fat lady smelling of B.O. She reeked of it. A small gray terrier rested on her protruding stomach. He hated dogs, especially this one whose odor declared months of avoiding baths. If he could have gotten up and moved to another seat, he would have. A quick glance around the packed shuttle car told him that option was out. Not one empty seat. The stuffy and thick air stagnated in the crowded car.

A slight jolt indicated the shuttle leaving the Tenadore City Station. Jovahn sighed. His head began to hurt from the god-awful stench. He inhaled, trying to hold his breath as long as possible. Then, when his lungs were about to burst, he exhaled. He inhaled again, being very careful not to breathe through his nose. Gosh, didn't this lady believe in baths? At least he had the solace of his water.

Jovahn uncapped the bottle and took a swig. "THHHPPPB!!!!" He gagged and spit it all over his lap. How in the hell could he mess up water? But he had managed it. In his hurry to board the train, he had pressed the wrong button on the vending machine and had selected the water with carbonation instead of the one without. He hated gas water. Begrudgingly, he nursed his drink and tried to focus on the gouged and barren terrain.

Occasionally, the clear shuttle tubes would draw them near domes in which the land had been terra-formed and distract Jovahn from the stench. Most of them were agricultural in nature and similar to the one in which he had worked on the other side of Tenadore City. He loved the greenness of these domes, which was the only reason he liked his job. True, it wasn't pure green like he vaguely remembered Earth's vegetation being. Uranus blue tainted all flora growing on Miranda.

"Evona-next stop," crackled through the speaker. His demeanor brightened. If luck was with him, this lady next to him would get off at this stop. As the shuttle slowed, people began to get up and crowd the exits. Miss Smelly Lady made no move. Jovahn resorted to plan B.

Tenadore City had been the big stop. There shouldn't be too many boarding at Evona. He could at least move to another seat and get away from the odor that

blanketed the area.

The shuttle slowed to a stop. The packed aisle cleared out as passengers spilled onto the platform. As Jovahn suspected, only a few peopled boarded. There would be plenty of seats. He rose to make his move. It was then his world fell out from under him.

Nestled into the shuttle's front corner in the seat facing Jovahn's direction was Crank. Crank stared straight at him from under dark, bushy eyebrows. He knew Jovahn was there. Jovahn slid down into his seat again. Damn. Damn. Damn. The chip had given him away. Didn't this dealer ever sleep?

He was forced to deal with the little dog, the BO, and his shitty water. Worst of all, he was forced to deal with Crank. Damn he wanted to escape. He doubted he would be lucky enough to exit the shuttle at Tranquility Garden Station without an encounter with this dealer. The voice of Crank reverberated in his head. *Escape is not an option...you will never be free.*

A hologram on the far transparent wall of the shuttle caught his eye. "You can be Seporin free!" the moving ad proclaimed. Statistics and phrases scrolled across the screen. "Our program has the highest recovery rate on Miranda." "Never struggle again!" "Freedom can be yours for only 2000 credits!" Bullshit, he thought. Damn Freedom Incorporated, the lying Sons of Bitches. They had scammed some of his acquaintances into joining. Twelve months later, they were no better off.

Seporin. Kilometer after kilometer flashed by. He tried sorting through his jumbled thoughts. He felt another wave of nausea as he inhaled the pungent air. Wait a minute. He could escape. Seporin would see to that. Crank sat only a few seats away.

He eyes went alert. Where in the hell had that thought come from? The dealer's voice still echoed, *Escape is not...* Then the world shifted.

He lay in the middle of a grassy field. The sun settled into the distant sky strewn with oranges, red, and yellows fading into blue then purple then black. He stared up as one by one stars flickered into view. There she was again, the sexy and alluring manifestation of Seporin. Her hair cascaded down her shoulders and covered what he knew to be perfectly shaped breasts. Nothing mattered anymore. True peace existed here. No dealers. No B.O. She gave him an open smile. Her lips never moved, but he knew that she beckoned him to her. Horror gripped him as he drew close and saw the

fanged teeth. Shift...

He awoke from the hallucination slumped in a cockeyed position, sweat dripping and pulse racing. Trying to straighten himself, he fumbled with the armrest. Shaking the remnants of the delusion from his mind, he knew what had happened. An aftershock of Seporin usage had hit him.

He had faced aftershocks before. When he had been a steady user, they reminded him of the need to resupply. Dealers conveniently laced the pills with a tiny time released hit, called an "aftershock," that would remind addicts why they used Seporin.

In the midst of his blue Mirandan hell, Seporin promised him escape. Even now, he could choose to live in his hallucination, his delusion, his alternate reality. He vaguely remembered hearing reports that the ultimate result of using Seporin was madness. They had to be lies. After all, he wasn't insane. He still knew what reality was. Buying more Seporin to get rid of this unbearable shuttle ride wouldn't be a bad idea after all.

NO!!! He gripped the padded arms of his seat, his fingers sinking into the soft cushion. His knuckles whitened. He refused to admit defeat. He would not get up, sit down by Crank, and buy another hit. He must overcome this addiction. Slowly, the urge subsided. Jovahn was shaking.

Jovahn stared at the approaching Tranquility Garden Dome. He fought not to think about the dealer. He pictured himself suited up, sitting outside the dome on the edge of a cliff overlooking Tenadore City. *Escape is not an option...you'll never be free.* This mental tape was an incessant irritation. He tried silencing the dealer's voice by thinking about Korina.

"Tranquility Gardens next stop." Jovahn excused himself and slipped past the offensive lady. He left his gas water behind. She could use it to bathe her dog. As he turned towards the exit at the rear of the shuttle car, he glanced towards the dealer. Crank's eyes still stared back at him.

Jovahn headed for the back of the shuttle. He could feel Crank's eyes boring into his neck. The dealer would not let him escape without trying to make a transaction either on the shuttle or off. Jovahn bet on the latter. The shuttle was too open for

dealers to conduct business. Still, Crank had surprised him yesterday. Jovahn's only hope lay in Tranquility Garden Station being crowded with visitors so he could lose himself among them.

The station's platform was empty save a few stragglers. Damn, where was luck when he needed it? "Luck is not a grace given to a man struggling to overcome addiction," he muttered the clichéd phrase under his breath. If there were more people here, they were already exploring the gardens.

He had to get away from Crank. He quickly stepped to the platform and entered one of the many decontamination chambers that stood guard at the entrance to the gardens. Sanitizing mist seeped into his clothes and then was sucked out through side vents. The gardens were a preserve. Mirandan officials wanted nothing entering this dome's ecosystem that endangered its life. He exited the chamber and saw Crank stepping out of a booth two doors down. Jovahn ran.

The garden's main causeway lay ahead. Only a smattering of people lingered about enjoying the surrounding trees and plants. His feet pounded the spongy synthetic path. "The Tranquility Gardens are a testimony to the origins of mankind." Through the voice of the motion activated self-guided tour, Jovahn heard the muffled sounds of approaching footsteps behind him. Crank was after him.

Jovahn's hope lay in two things. One, that Crank didn't know the park as well as Jovahn did, enabling him to lose the dealer on the side paths. Two, that Crank was less fit than Jovahn. That was not saying much of course. Addiction to Seporin tended to atrophy the body, so he wasn't as fit as he had been three years ago. The feminine voice of the self-guided tour continued. "Mirandan Officials created the gardens as a place of retreat and solace." Jovahn severely doubted the Tranquility Gardens would offer any solace today.

He swerved left past some tall oaks and onto a side path. The tour rambled on. "Miranda has no native flora unless one counts the Sepra, created here on this moon through hybrids from humanity's home planet. Every single plant, flower, and grass you see here has been transplanted from Earth. He leapt over a root that had grown across the top of the path.

The path changed to terra-formed packed earth. Jovahn could now distinctly make out the thumping footsteps behind him. To his right, dense foliage formed a natural wall. He plunged through it in an effort to escape his pursuer.

A million tiny spears stabbed him at once. He backpedaled out onto the path, caught a root, and sprawled on his back, the wind knocked out of him. He lay opening and shutting his jaw, trying to regain his breath. He finally wheezed air into his vacant lungs. As he rolled over to get back up, the tour's voice explained the exhibit.

"To your right, you will find a Raspberry Briar Patch. The thorns on this fruit protect the plant against its natural enemies."

Crank's boot kicked him back down, rolling him away from the tour sensor. "So you thought you could get away from me, eh?"

Jovahn rolled to his back again, glaring up at Crank. He despised Crank, not so much for who he was, but more so for what he represented. Why didn't Crank leave him alone? He would never be free. The bastard would pursue him until he died.

"You knew I'd find you with the chip signature." Crank's haughty voice was the only sound Jovahn could hear in this domed forest. "Why'd you run?"

Jovahn, still trying to get his breath under control, rasped, "I wanted to get away and think." It just wasn't fair. He had wanted so much to break free from Seporin Control.

"But you were running from me, your friend Crank. What have I ever done to hurt you?"

You taunt me, thought Jovahn, heckling me like those kids on the playground. They wouldn't let me alone. He spit out, "You sell Seporin."

"That never stopped you from talking with me before. In fact, it was kind of an asset to our relationship." Crank's leering smile exposed a webwork of gold and ivory.

"That's because I was a user and bought from you." The bastard. There was no way he would be dependent on Crank anymore. Escaping this nightmare had to be an option.

"My, my, my, aren't we a little delusional." Crank whipped out his dealer's info-palette. Transactions flashed down the screen and stopped at Jovahn's name. "My

records show you still are. You bought just yesterday and from me nonetheless.” He dropped his jaw in mock amazement.

“Bought. Past tense. I’m stepping free.” The fury inside him was boiling. Crank was the kid throwing that last taunt at him before Jovahn had bloodied his nose. Jovahn tried to push himself up. Crank kicked him down again.

“Oh, like you did before?” Crank’s guffaw echoed off the trees.

This sarcasm infuriated Jovahn. He did not like the direction this was going. He needed to get away. Crank boxed in the conversation with manipulative chatter. Talking with him would solve nothing. He was tired of running. He had been running all his life. *Escape is not an option...you’ll never be free.* Jovahn’s eyes scanned the path and surrounding vegetation for the help he knew would never come.

“So Crank, why are you following me?” That’s it. Take control of the conversation. His transponder chirped. Palming it, he saw Korina’s ID code scrolling across the view screen. Desperate, he tried answering it, but Crank kicked it from his hand. Pain mixed with rage surged through him. Why wouldn’t his classmates just leave him alone?

“I must make sure my most loyal customers are supplied.”

“I’m NOT your customer anymore.” Jovahn continued to feel Seporin’s tug. It was stronger. Panic crept up inside him. The gun. He had forgotten about the Lola gun. One shot and it would all be...it would be a very bad idea. He had to end the discussion now.

“It’s over, Crank. I’m not buying from you.”

“You need me, Jovahn. We are a symbiotic pair, you and I. One can’t exist...”

Jovahn shot him dead. He stood up with his Lola Gun still hot at the tip. There would be no dealer today. No Seporin. No escape from reality. And it was the beginning of all his troubles.

MURDERING TRANQUILITY



“You made me get up
Memories, silence broken
I will kill you now”
- *Haiku for Neuromarketers* –

Frazzled, overwhelmed and frayed, Eco lay sprawled on his living room floor. By not showing up to work, Derk had triggered this anniversary day from hell. Damn him. A furious Kelevare, Derk and Eco’s boss in the control tower of the Genevran Flight Center, had grilled him as to why Derk hadn’t shown up. Eco shrugged and mumbled a lie about his being sick. Later, because they were short on staff, Eco had failed to communicate the correct landing sequence to a freighter pilot and had nearly caused a midair collision. The thought of the barely averted catastrophe rattled him. Kelevare, pissed again, had called in the five o’clock shift early and told Eco to get the hell out of there and think about the mistake-free focus needed to conduct his job. He fired threat after threat of termination in Eco’s wake as he exited the tower towards the waiting magnotaxis.

Escaping to the mindless watching of the Virtual Vision had failed to ease the torqued tension he felt inside. Over and over again, the news channel digitally projected into the center of the room a cyber simulation of a grisly murder that had taken place the night before. The movie channel had offered such escapes as *Impaled*, *Death Rattle*, and many other similar movies. A magnocar race on the sports channel showed two vehicles colliding. They burst into fiery flames and the drivers, engulfed in the inferno, could be heard screaming while the crowd cheered. He killed the picture on the VV. Aggravated by the maddening violence, he stumbled to the living room.

The lexophonic machine that Derk had gifted him lay on the glass coffee table in the center of the room. It invited him. He flipped it on, stripped himself naked, and then lay staring up at the ceiling.

Lexophony oozed and flowed and the memories of Gena formed into the mental image of her. With red hair tucked back into a pony tail and her green eyes half closed, she nestled against Eco's shoulder as they sat side by side on a park bench, the sun beating down on them. A year had passed since her tragic death, and still her contented sighs made him smile. Of all the women he had met, Gena had broken through the hardened emotional exterior he carried, and he had let her love him. And now, thinking back on it, he discovered that he loved her. This memory and others of Gena gripped Eco's mind and helped him forget the terrible day.

The machine's bytes of soothing sounds enveloped him, rubbing their morphemes and phonemes over every inch of his skin, stimulating memory after memory of Gena. The muscles in his naked body felt like rubber bands draped over a coat hanger. He sensed nothing, thought nothing, heard nothing. Nothing, that is, but the memories of Gena and the music of lexophony.

And in the escape of his lexophonic machine, Eco forgot the world around him. Dinnertime had come, then gone. The sun fell behind buildings. Gena's cat coughed up a hairball on his new suit that lay crumpled on the floor where he had discarded it. The faucet began to drip. His transponder blinked an incoming call. He never noticed any of this until the transponder went from blinking to incessant chirping. Then lexophony ebbed and slowed. He slowly propped himself up, reached for the remote to lexophonic machine, and with reluctance shut it off.

He drug his body across the floor to the table, where the transponder wailed. He was so relaxed that the cacophony of his shrilling transponder only mildly irritated him. He reached across and curled his fingers around the device without even glancing its way. For a moment, he fought the temptation to turn it off. Better yet, he could cast it into the garbage disposal and never have to deal with it again. But no. Suppose his mother waited at the other end. Or an emergency, or a death in the family, or the sweepstakes, or a thousand and one other possibilities. So relaxed was he that he didn't even check the i.d. screen before deciding to answer it.

Eco slipped the transponder into the jack behind his ear and secured it up and over his ear lobe. Jacked into his neuropathways, he tapped the access button, mentally rattled off his access code, and accepted the incoming call.

“Eco Morivoso, you will never find a sweeter deal. We are offering to you today a once in a lifetime chance to purchase quality life insurance for you, your wife and your children. Some of the most famous people in Genevra have been insured through our program. If you...”

“Who in the hell is this?” he responded his voice cold. Of all the days not to check the transponder display. These bastards.

“Tranquility Insurance, offering you top of the line life insurance at cost effective rates, covering you, your wife, and children. If you give us a moment of your time...”

Eco ripped the transponder from behind his ear and flung it across the room. Damn these neuromarketers! They interrupted dinner. He would crawl into bed and moments later hear the chirp of his transponder. He would answer it thinking it was someone important only to hear a sale’s pitch. They would rudely awaken him early in the morning before his alarm went off. These people had no respect, no sense of time, no care for privacy. But more importantly, they had interrupted his lexophony - his escape from the pain of losing Gena.

That was it. The pot boiled over. The anniversary of Gena’s death, Kelevare’s threats, the horrific images on the VV, his interrupted lexophony, and every other neuromarketing disruption rose to the top. It was the straw that broke the camel’s back. The ounce that tipped the scales. The brick that toppled the load. The final domino. It was the cliché to end all clichés. Something snapped in Eco. He had to find Derk.



Reven Geours squatted, a polystructure edged by Genevra’s Interplanetary and Domestic Flight Center on one side and slapped by the constant building up and tearing down of Genevra’s financial district on the other. To the right rockets leapt noisily spaceward and city jumpers zipped outward towards various destinations. The rising and falling structures, the pulsing throbs and throngs of people, and the technogenesis of the city constantly transformed itself. Reven Geours never budged - a constant against its surroundings.

Eco never understood how Ruis had managed to keep Reven Geours from the claws of change and time. Like the bar, Ruis was ancient. As Eco shoved his way through the crowd of patrons, Ruis fluidly moved behind the oak bar, doing what he had forever enjoyed and did best. Beers, shots and cocktails would magically and artfully appear in front of him to moments later disappear by a sleight-of-hand act into customers' hands and other parts of the dark establishment. The master of forgetfulness, Ruis eased patrons' stress-ridden days, bringing smiles to tear-laden cheeks.

Ruis's synthetic teeth gleamed behind a slight smile as Eco sidled up to the bar. As he wiped down the area in front of Eco; his gruff gravelly voice cut through the staccato beats, glass meshing with glass, and raucous laughter. "Eco, it's been what, oh, let's see, twenty-four hours since I last saw you. How in the hell are you?"

Eco pursed his lips. Squinting through crow's feet, Ruis leaned toward him. "Hey, Phillips," he called to a man at the other end of the bar, "I need a Genevran Slammer here." He picked up a glass and began to wipe it with a towel. "Tough day in the control tower?"

"No worse than usual," Eco replied, momentarily distracted. "Damn, arrogant pilots wanting to cut flight-time down mixed with other bastards wanting to get an early launch start always mucks the works."

A Genevran Slammer slid down the varnished bar towards him. Ruis caught it and pushed it towards Eco.

"Then Derk didn't show and I had to cover his ass once again."

Ruis's understanding smile vanished at the mention of Derk's name. "With another one of his whores?"

"It's the only reason he misses work," Eco said with disgust. "Have you seen him?"

Ruis scowled, "Oh, he's here all right. I made him pay in advance this time." He finished cleaning the glass. After picking up the credit disc Eco laid in front of him, Ruis slipped it into Reven Geuor's credit slot and then paused. "I couldn't risk his paying for some hooker and not paying me. He's sitting city side along the wall. Damn, Eco, you got to get some new friends."

Eco took the credit disc from Ruis's outstretched hand without answering him, picked up his Genevran Slammer, and left the bar. He didn't need fatherly advice, especially from a bartender.

Eco slid into the chair across from Derk. Resting on the tabletop, Derk's fingers trembled, a behavior Eco had witnessed only during the Toro Mining Ship Disaster at the space port two years ago. Derk wiped a few greasy strands of hair from his unshaven face as his eyes glanced from his beer to Eco, then back to his beer.

"Hey, Eco. Thanks for covering my ass at work," Derk said, donning a faint grin.

"Of all the days to call off work. You owe me one big time. Make that more than one with all the times I covered your ass at this bar."

Derk feigned a hurt expression. "Aw, come on. You know I..."

"Damn, Derk. You self-centered son-of-a-bitch. Gena..." Eco couldn't bring himself to finish the thought.

Derk was silent. With one hand, he slowly swirled the beer in his glass. Eco detected a faint trembling in Derk's other hand again. Seconds felt like minutes. One hundred other conversations spilled into the tense space between them.

Finally, Derk apologized, "Fuck. I'm so sorry. I forgot about the crash." He sipped his beer, and then said more softly, "I wish Gena was still here."

"Me too," Eco whispered. The pain was still fresh.

Derk exhaled, "Fucking bastard! Did the police ever catch the guy?"

Eco shook his head. "An accident in the middle of rush hour with too many conflicting witness reports." He paused. "Listen here. I need a favor." Derk stopped swirling his beer.

"Yeah, what?"

"You ever hear of Tranquility Insurance?"

Derk raised his eyebrows. "You want insurance? For what?"

"Not insurance. The lexophonic machine you got me from Nero a couple of weeks ago..."

"Hey, anyway, how's it working?" Derk butted in.

"Fine. Wonderful when idiots armed with transponders aren't harassing me.

Now listen. They called me today while I was in the midst of lexophonic oblivion trying to forget everything. Now, did you ever hear of them?” He forced the last words out of his mouth.

Again Derk flicked a strand of hair out of his eyes. “Yeah...heard of them.”

“I need what you know.”

Derk leaned forward and stared at Eco. “Look, I don’t think you want to fuck with them. If it’s a neuromarketing firm you’re after; it’ll be located at the Nero section of Genevra and you don’t want to go there. I can get someone...”

“Now!” Eco reached across, grabbed Derk by the collar, and pulled him across the table.

“All right, all right. I don’t know exactly where they’re located, but I ran into this hooker who used to work for them. Julia something or other. All I know is their pay was dirt. She couldn’t even afford an apartment in the skank section of Genevra. So she took to hooking.”

“Where can I find her?”

“The corner of Lumbra and Geth Ell. There is a twisted snake dagger tattoo on her left arm.”

Eco let go of Derk, who slumped back into his seat and gazed again at his beer. Eco got to his feet as Derk’s hand began to tremble again. “One more thing.”

Derk’s hand stopped.

“Cover me tomorrow. Tell ‘em I won’t be in.” Eco shouldered through the throngs of patrons and out into Genevra City.



Genevra was a grid, a maze of magnetic roads etching themselves between residential and commercial pillars that disappeared into the night sky. Magnotaxis and other magnovehicles streaked north and south, east and west, assaulting the streets with a fury of lights and horns. Holograms advertised stores, sex, and food.

Eco leaned across the front seat of the magnotaxi and handed the driver his credit disk. The driver smiled a toothless smile.

“Want me to wait here for ya?” he said as he glanced at the girls lining the street. He reached up and took out the cigar dangling from his mouth. “It doesn’t look like ya should have any trouble getting one.” His grin widened.

Eco opened the cab door and stepped out onto the sidewalk.

“Well, do you want me to wait or not?” The driver’s impatient words wheezed past the cigar now plugged into his mouth again.

“Sure. Wait. I’ll only be a moment.”

Ladies of the Night swayed their hips back and forth, gyrating to inaudible music. Lips pursed, air kissing men and women, who mostly ignored them. He hated hookers, but at this moment the neuromarketers were scummier than the whores. Looking around the street corner, he couldn’t find the lady with the twisted snake dagger tattoo.

“Hey, baby.” An African with breasts bursting out of her corset and ghost-white hair beckoned to Eco, crooking her finger toward her. “You need me, baby?”

“I’m looking for Julia.”

The African rolled her eyes. She wrapped her hands around his arm and pulled his wrist from his pocket, resting her synthetic nails on his skin. “Baby, I’m so much better. Believe me, baby.”

Eco cut her off. “I need Julia.”

She pushed him away in disgust. “She’s three down.”

That’s how he found Julia. A slender well-sexed body with twisted snake dagger tattoo etched into her arm. Her auburn hair cascaded down her shoulders. She winked at Eco. “Looks like you need a de-stresser. I can help you with that.”

Eco blushed. “Derk gave me your name.”

“Oh, recommended by one of my best customers.”

“I’m not here for your services,” he stammered. “We need to talk.”

“Baby, we’re talking right here.”

“No. An hour’s time. My place.”



“So you want to know about ‘Tranquility?’” Crossing her legs, she leaned back on Eco’s bowl couch, taking a deep draw on a cigarette she had fished from her tight teal skirt. Nice trick. He had been pouring both of them gin when she had performed this feat. Julia noticed his stare. “Do you want one?”

“Uh, no thanks. Tell me about them.” His frustration and anger towards the neuromarketers still simmered. He glanced towards the lexophonic machine. A plan began to form.

“You gonna pay me?”

“What?”

“Clients always pay first.”

“I’m not your client,” he protested, knowing that wasn’t really true. He was her client, just not for sex. Eco keyed in the amount and slid his credit disk across the table. She left it there.

“Two years ago I worked for Harris SEM Marketing as a neuromarketer. I try to never think about it. Every minute was pure hell.” She tapped off her cigarette in the ashtray inset in the coffee table. “You may think we got our jollies interrupting people’s lives, but the job was murder.”

“Imagine sitting in your cube reading the same script over and over again, 12-hour shifts, 7 days a week. Wage slaves, that’s what we were. Our ‘slaver,’ Guy Mare, always paced behind us, lashing our backs with a verbal whip. There were no breaks. Guy took breaks all the time to feed his coffee addiction. Any time any of us were caught in our cubes without our transponders in, our pay was docked, and he threatened to make us work longer to make up the time we were wasting.” Julia took a drag on the rapidly ashing cigarette.

Julia pulled herself to the edge of the couch. She embraced the gin Eco had poured her with her long fingers crowned with decoed nails. “That is why I started hooking. There isn’t much in the way of a job for someone without education. You think neuromarketers are relentless. You should see creditors.”

Eco slowly rolled the glass of gin through his palms. He actually felt some empathy for Julia. Until they sat here in his apartment, she was just another one of Derk’s whores, a despicable part of Genevra City.

“So. Tranquility Insurance. How do they fit in?” Eco asked.

“Tranquility Insurance was just one of the many businesses that employed Harris SEM Marketing.” Julia downed the rest of her gin, and forcefully set her glass down. The sound of glass meeting glass startled Eco.

She stared intensely at Eco. “Listen. If you’re gonna be pissed at anyone, be mad at Harris SEM, not the neuromarketers. They’re just trying to survive Geneva.”

“Where can I find them? Derk said something about the Nero section.”

“You want to pay them a visit?” A slight smile etched Julia’s face. “‘Bout time someone did. What are you planning?”

“That’s my business!” Eco snapped, on edge again. A whore might earn his pity maybe, but earning trust was a bit harder.

“2368 Vencha Street. Its front is Lucky’s Pawn Shop. A door to left of it is your entrance. Remember, you’re after the slaver, not the neuromarketers. Guy Mare is the man you want.” She paused. “I can help you get in the building, but it’s gonna cost extra.”

He didn’t have any other options. Eco retrieved the credit disk, keyed in a higher, more acceptable amount, and slid it back towards Julia.

“With the thousands they employ and the number of people being hired and quitting, they’ve fallen quite behind in keeping their security information current. Not that it really matters. Once employees leave the company, they sure as hell don’t wanna to go back. I have a regular who specializes in faux cosmetic skin enhancements used in identity change. He owes me a favor. It should be a quick and easy thing for him to image my hand and transform it into a skin-tight glove. It’ll get you past the scanners.” She scooped up the credit disk, attached it to her own, and transferred the amount. Standing she said, “My time’s up. Derk knows the man I’m talking about. I’ll send the package through him.”

She paused at the door. “Tell Derk I said ‘hi’.” She eyed Eco. “And if you ever need me for more than information, you know where to find me.”



In the following hours, the early-morning darkness shrouded Eco, allowing shadowy shapes of furniture to jump away from the walls. The hidden sun and the quiet around him enabled him to think. Lights are a fiend to a man wanting solitude.

He peered into his toolkit, originally used when he was first employed as a communications repairman for the Genevran Flight Center. Now that he was a controller, that job seemed ancient. Besides the tools, he had packed the small, cubed lexophonic machine and the palm sized Lola gun he sometimes carried. You didn't go into the Nero sector without one. At least that's what Derk had said. Finally, he had his transponder. A durable little thing. Its encounter with the wall had left it undamaged.

Eco had never killed a man. He wondered what it would be like. It had to pale in comparison to the pain of losing Gena. Donning his old-tattered technician's jump suit, he picked up the toolkit and headed downstairs to find Derk.

As he emerged from the lobby, Eco's eyes darted skyward at the sparse checkerboard of lights that scaled the front side of his apartment complex. He pulled a technician's cap down, barring the brisk morning from his ears. There, along the sidewalk, was Derk's shiny, black magnocar. Derk peered out at him from behind the car's controls.

“So you found Julia. Get in and let's talk.”

As Eco slid into the passenger side, Derk answered his unspoken question. “The package is in the back. Julia filled me in on where you are going and I'll take you there.”

Derk eased out onto the thoroughfare. Eco watched building after building slide by and disappear into the darkness of early morning as Derk talked about the dangers of Nero. Not in the mood for talking, Eco occasionally mumbled an “uh-huh” and “ok” while examining the small box Julia had sent him.

The skin glove lay inside. It slid smoothly onto his left hand, chameleoning to match his skin tone. Impressive.

Derk pulled the car to a stop. Eco glanced out at the shadows of buildings. Smog curled its fingers around them and dimmed the neon digilights.

“Where's Lucky's?”

“It's down the block and around the corner on 2368 Vencha Street. Do you

have a gun?”

“I packed my Lola,” Eco said as he stepped out onto the gritty sidewalk of Nero.



Storm clouds traversed the once clear skies. It was going to be a tough day at the Control Tower bringing ships down through those clouds. Eco was glad he wasn't going to be there. No telling how many accidents he'd have caused with his lack of sleep this past night.

The front of Lucky's looked like every other building Eco had passed in the block he had walked. Lucky's digisign flashed between "Open" and "Lucky's." The smeared windows with two energy blast holes in them made it hard to tell what antiquities and used items were actually being sold. Dealers and customers sporadically scattered about the street. A few stood in front of what looked to be the outline of a door shadowed in the gritty morning. Blowing trash and syringe needles littered the walk. Not a cop in sight. If there was any place in Genevra to run an illegal operation, this was it. Adjusting his jumpsuit, he pushed by the people and followed a man through the front door.

Two guards flanked the entrance at the other end of the hall to what Eco supposed was "Harris SEM." Armed with Figmore Rifles, these men had enough firepower to put an energy blast the size of a man's fist into the chest of any threat. Eco planned on not looking like a threat. A single line of employees snaked its way along the pale lit walls as they waited to enter. Eco slipped into the back of the line.

Hand after hand was placed on the security scanners by the entrance. Registering access, steel doors opened to swallow another neuromarketer. Eco's hand began to sweat under the faux skin. Julia's ID had better still be in the system.

Two more ahead. Then one more. Then him. Eco placed his hand firmly on the scan glass. Nothing happened. Eco's palm trembled as the guard to his left looked in his direction. The doors finally opened. Eco hurried inside.



Guy Mare leaned back in his leather chair. This was the part of the day he loved most. The imaginary sound of the financial wheel beginning to turn, scamming the Genevran people out of their money. They needed a place to spend it after all. He just provided a service. He maniacally smiled.

A sparsely furnished room surrounded his circular desk, ending in a bank of screens behind him. Though they were ten stories below the surface, they depicted the city sprawled outward, disappearing into the horizon. It was the illusion of being in a penthouse. Having a real penthouse and office building wasn't really an option, though he could have afforded one. The authorities could only be paid off to ignore illegal businesses if they tried to remain hidden. It didn't take a rocket scientist to realize it was easier to hide below ground than above, especially in Geneva.

Monitors with shifting screens lined the front edges of his desk, enabling him to see how dedicated his workers were. More people needed to understand the value of sacrificing for the greater cause. He had sacrificed his relationship with his former wife and kids. From this menial sacrifice, Harris SEM had grown to become one of the largest underground nueromarketing empires.

His transponder chirped.

"Security here. Mr. Mare, not sure how important this is. Former employee Julia Bens scanned in this morning."

"Bring her up to me."

"Uh, sir. We'll need to find her. She came in with the crowd this morning."

"When you find her, bring her to me. I can't have former employees running around loose."

"Yes sir."

Guy stared at the projection of threatening, black clouds. It was probably nothing. A glitch in the system. Maybe a scanner misread. The distant lightning flashes indicated the foul weather outside. It would pass by the time he was ready to leave. He picked up the freshly drained coffee mug. Time for some more. When he had created "Harris SEM", he had intentionally set the coffee bar on the other side of the worker's

floor. It gave him an excuse to get out on the floor and enjoy the pleasure of watching his employees earn him money. Laying the transponder on his desk, he rose and left room.



The elevator jolted to a stop, exhaling compressed air as its doors recessed. Eco blinked and tried to adjust his eyes to the brighter, softer light from the room before him. The neuromarketers' cubes and consoles stretched across the tiled floor, bumping into the beige walls. The elevator's feminine voice recited, "You have reached the 10th floor below ground level." Eco stepped out.

He headed for Guy Mare's office. The receptionist had bought his "new maintenance man" excuse and had shown him the layout of the building. Black outfitted guards worked their way his direction, walking between rows of cubes and checking each one. Odd. He couldn't remember Julia saying anything about guards standing over them. Keeping his face down, he tried to walk past them.

Eco neared a guard who was squinting closely at one of the neuromarketers and tried to squeeze past him in the narrow aisle way. As he slid past the guard, his toolkit accidentally bumped a guard in the ass. Eco continued walking.

The guard grabbed Eco by the shoulder.

"Hey you! Wait a minute!"

What did this guy think? He was going to run? Eco shifted his eyes from the floor to the guard's waist. Not with a gun holstered there, he wasn't. He looked up at the guard's intense eyes.

"Yeah?" he mumbled.

"Did you see this girl on your maintenance rounds?" He held out a scan of Julia. She looked different without the whoring makeup. Though plain, she had a natural beauty.

"Nope. Sorry."

"If you do see her, let us know." He let Eco go.

Guy's frumpy, red headed secretary lifted her tired gaze from a pad she was

typing into as Eco entered the room. Her pale skin and dark eyes said enough. Another slave who needed to be freed. She looked back down to her desk, running her finger down her agenda.

“I’m sorry. I don’t see any repairman scheduled to be here today,” she said.

“It’s all right, madam. I’m just here to check on the transponders.” Eco sounded confident.

She narrowed her eyes and examined him. “Have you been here before? I’m usually good with faces, but I can’t place yours.”

“I usually have a partner who helps me check the transponders and hubs for wear and tear,” he lied. “He’s the one who usually checks this area of the building, but he called in sick.”

“Well, you’re not on the schedule. I should get Mr. Mare’s approval,” she said, searching her cluttered desk.

“Is he in?”

“No, I really should page him.” Papers, mostly bills and crumpled tissues, toppled off the front of her desk. “Now where did I put my transponder?” she muttered. Eco set his toolkit down and helped her gather everything back onto the desk.

“Look, this is scheduled routine maintenance. If all goes well, I’ll be in and out. Go ahead and page him. I need to keep moving.”

She waved him into Guy Mare’s office.

Eco glanced at the clock recessed into the office wall. The jam he had placed on the outgoing hubs would go into effect in three minutes. He sprinted to the mahogany desk in the center of the room and set his tool kit down. He scanned the bank of monitors and found what he was looking for: a wireless transponder receiver nestled beside the last screen.

He opened his toolkit and pulled out the lexophonic machine. He placed it under the desk near the cable that burrowed into the floor, heading off to the neuronet hub. He disconnected the cable from the wireless receiver and coiled it beside the lexophonic machine on the floor. Dipping his hand into his toolkit, he pulled out a patch cable he had rigged up at home. He shoved one end into the receiver and hooked the other into the machine. Eco turned on the lexophonic machine.

The lexophonic machine acted like a drug when he ran through his speaker system at home. Imagine jacking pure unadulterated lexophonic sound into the neuropathways of the brain at full power. He grinned. It was bound to be lethal.

Guy Mare rushed in as Eco stood up.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?” he snapped. He quickly looked over his desk to see if anything was missing.

“Checking your transponder connection to make sure everything is working properly. I got a call from my boss early this morning telling me you were having problems.”

“I never called for maintenance,” Guy growled, sitting down into his leather chair. “You have one minute to explain yourself before...” In the monitors, he caught sight of what was going on. Confused, employees were taking out their transponders and discussing something with the neighboring cubes. He couldn’t believe what he was seeing. He grabbed his transponder. Pointing to Eco, he commanded, “You stay here.”

Guy clicked the transponder into place. Raw lexophonic power, unhindered by speakers and transmitters, surged its way into his brain. Synapses fried and brain matter sizzled under the pressing weight of sound force. It snarled and ate away at his motor functions. He slumped back into his chair. In a mixture of terror and surprise, his eyes widened, and then rolled up into his head. His jaw momentarily clenched, and finally sagged. Saliva dribbled down his chin.

Eco leaned over and felt for Guy’s pulse. “Have a nice trip to hell,” Eco whispered. He gathered up his lexophonic machine and placed it back into the toolkit. He looked at the screen and saw the clouds breaking. It wasn’t going to be such a bad morning after all.



On the way out, he passed the secretary, who gave him a knowing “I told you he’d kick you out” glance. He passed bewildered personnel, who milled about aimlessly after having escaped from their cubical cages. After a hand scan, he passed into the elevator, which swallowed him up and then tortured him by reciting the levels as they

slowly ascended. But he did not pass the lobby.

As the doors opened and he stepped out, Eco found himself staring into barrel of a Figmore rifle. The doors snapped shut behind him, and he heard the elevator disappearing into the depths below.

“So this is our elusive Julia Bens,” sneered the taller of the guards.

“If it is, then her sex change didn’t improve anything,” laughed the other. Eyeing Eco’s getup, he continued in a more sinister tone. “I assume you’re the one responsible for our inability to communicate with downstairs. The boss is gonna love you.”

Eco panicked as the guard scanned his hand to recall the elevator. With the communication systems jammed, they couldn’t know about Mr. Mare. He would be more trapped below than here.

The elevator “dinged” and the doors opened. It was the distraction Eco needed. He flung his toolkit at the man with the rifle and ran. The rifle, loosened by the impact, fell from the man’s hands and clattered as it skidded across the floor. The other guard shouted as he scrambled to ready his own rifle. Eco ducked into a roll and ended up behind the receptionist’s desk.

Stuck in this alcove of protection, he despaired. The doors he first scanned through were shut between him and freedom.

He could hear the nearest guard walking steadily closer. “Look, mister, screw Mare. You’re dead the moment I see you.”

Eco knew his only chance was the door. If he had to die, he would die trying. There would be no surprising the guard this time. He mustered as much courage as he could, and then leapt away from his hiding spot towards the door. The last thing Eco remembered was a flash and the door disintegrating into a thousand shards and pieces.

“Come’on, Eco. We gotta get outta here.” The words swam in Eco’s mind as he regained consciousness. Derk was shaking him. He hurt all over. He rolled his head to one side and saw the bodies of the two guards, now dead with blaster shots a fist in diameter in their torsos.

“Can you walk?”

Eco gingerly rose and tested his bones and muscles. “Just bruised,” he managed

to whisper. “Damn lucky you were here.”

“No luck. I gave you an hour. Newcomers to the Nero sector don’t survive very long alone.”

Putting his arm around Derk, Eco limped with him into Nero’s welcoming darkness.



Eco curled up on his couch. He relaxed and sipped a cup of Genevran tea. He was free from anger and resolve, as Delilah, the cat his Gena had given him on their first anniversary, curled up at his feet. Gena. He felt peace and a release.

He took another sip of tea and sighed. He was tired.

Then he thought of Julia. Maybe he should call Julia and ask her to come over. Was now the time for a relationship? And with a whore?

Yes, he would call her. Boy, wouldn’t Derk rib him when he found out! Setting Delilah down on the floor, he reached his transponder, now discarded on the table. As he inserted it, he heard the familiar chirp of an incoming call. He answered it.

“Hello?”

“Eco Morivoso, did you know you can get your own timeshare for the cost of a toaster? Here at Annoyance Free Vacations...”

INTEGRATION

Onary's early morning sun washed across the kitchen table where Saul Zeror sat blinking the sleep out of his eyes; his hands wrapped around a large mug of steaming, black coffee. Kish, his father, leaned back from the table holding a piece of half-eaten, slightly burnt toast, watching the 6 AM news on the VirtualVision embedded into the kitchen wall.

Only farmers were crazy enough to get up this early. Saul and Kish were smack dab in the middle of the wheat harvest. Saul stared out the window at the half-harvested field, ignoring the chatter of the anchorwoman. The wheat load they had harvested late last night stood poised on the beaten down, golden straw, waiting patiently for the bin in which held it be connected to the transport that would take it to the mill at Palacio Spaceport in Beth El. Saul planned on doing just that as soon as he finished his morning brew.

Saul scowled at the VV. He hated news programs. They only told the people events that attested to the Galactic Empire's greatness. Hope equaled inspiration and a happier empire. Disenchanted, Saul never believed such hogwash. One only had to travel as far as the mill in Beth El where all farmers in a 400 mile radius brought their grain to see pungent corruption.

The images of Kish walking out of the Galactic Empire owned grain broker's office with his shoulders slumped still etched themselves into Saul's mind. The vivid memories had happened countless times, ever since Saul had been old enough to go with his father to the mill. The despair of Kish wrote itself in the skin of his face.

"Father, what's wrong?" The six-year-old Saul reached up and grabbed Kish's hand.

Kish looked down and smiled weakly. "Saul, it'll be all right." He ruffled his son's hair as he spoke.

"But father," Saul persistently questioned, "Aren't you happy we sold the harvest?" His young mind could not understand his father's sadness.

Kish crouched down in front of him and took his son by the shoulders. “I am happy we sold the harvest. When you get bigger, you will understand. Politics undermine the fairness of capitalism sometimes. Maybe even most times.” He saw his son’s quizzical stare. “Look,” he tried again. “We have each other. That’s the important thing. Never forget it.”

Saul flashed the biggest and cutest smile he had at Kish. “I love you, dad.” Kish’s broad smile assured him that he no longer needed to worry. Saul knew now what he had not understood then: the price for the wheat his father had sold that day was quite a bit lower than the market price and the bills would barely be covered. More importantly, he knew beyond a doubt that he meant everything to Kish. Since his mother had died in the throes of his birth, that was all that mattered.

Kish interrupted Saul’s thoughts. “The Galactic Empire is preparing to integrate again. Earth claims that colonization has spread too far for them to govern everything from the home world, so for each colonized world, they are creating the position of Prime Integrate.”

“They should let us govern ourselves,” Saul growled. Here they were light years from Earth, listening to authorities that had no idea what events transpired on Onary. Earth, the marionette, pulled the strings and made the colony worlds dance. Plant this hybrid, use this fertilizer, take this price. Required by the necessity of commerce, Saul and Kish would begrudgingly jump through the hoops. Saul hated it.

But of the two evils, governorship by Earth and integration, Saul loathed and feared integration more. Becoming an integrate meant living in beautiful, towering edifices Saul called prisons. It meant feeling the cold tile, hard marble and rough asphalt beneath your feet instead of feeling the soil trickle between your toes and the stalks of grain brush against your legs. But the loss of an integrate’s own personality and free thought violated the very thing that Saul felt made life on the frontier world’s exciting. Individuality. Saul had witnessed the horror of integration first hand when his closest childhood friend Jensen had undergone the process.

Saul would rather be free and independent, having to work harder, choosing to do the things he wanted to do, and feeling the sun beating on his back than to ever integrate. He shook the thoughts away and nursed his coffee once more.

Kish smiled and nodded in agreement with his son. “Maybe. But unless you want war, unlikely. The Galactic Empire won’t willingly relinquish control of the colonies. This most current edict from Earth ensures this. Every colony planet is to have their own Prime Integrate that reports directly to them.”

“I can’t believe you trust those guys.” Saul spit the words from his mouth, jerking his head the direction of the VV.

Kish shifted his gaze towards Saul, raising his eyebrows. “Look here. Sifting through what they say is the only news I get.”

Saul sighed. Fine. His father could watch the news. It did not mean he had to.

“Is it affecting the futures? Especially in regards to our current wheat crop?” Saul asked the question and knew it was on his father’s mind as well. This in his mind was the only reason to watch Galactic Empire news programs. The futures dictated the price of grain on Onary even though the mill’s grain brokers paid twenty percent less.

Kish looked back to the VV and watched the numbers flicker in the corner of the screen. “No... The Financials seem stable.”

“Well then, who cares what earth does?” Saul sardonically responded. “Let the Empire play its games.”

“Agreed!” Kish’s bearded chin bobbed as he spoke. “Still it will be interesting to see which of Ben Zeror’s descendants gets the job.”

That was the thing about integration. It did not matter how intelligent or mentally challenged you were. Integration filled one with all the knowledge anyone would ever need to carry out whatever duties assigned. Not being dependant on upbringing or schooling, anyone could be integrated. So Earth had reverted back to the age old practice of passing down leadership through lineage. That is, of course, if one could call integration leadership, a prospect Saul seriously doubted.

Kish finished his now cold toast, washed it down with juice, and wiped the crumbs from his graying mustache. “You taking the wheat to Beth El this morning?”

“It’s the first thing on my agenda.” Saul drained the remaining coffee and felt ready to take on the morning chill. He stood and reached for his jacket to ward off the cool morning air. So one of Ben Zeror’s descendants would play Earth’s pawn. What did he care? It would give him another person to disdain. “Can you help me hook the

transport up to the bin?”

“I’ll be there.” Kish shut off the VV and followed his son out the door.



Filled to the top hatch with yesterday’s harvested wheat crop, the cylindrical shaped, gray bin rested behind the transport. The pointy nosed transport hummed with power; its green reflecting brightly in the early morning sun. Unlike the bin, the transporter’s ovular frame hovered 2 feet above the ground crowned by a boxy, fiberglass cab. Though still limited by the bin’s conventional shock absorber system, the transporter navigated more smoothly and faster.

Saul checked the bin’s newly replaced gyro-magnetic wheels for signs of strain from the weight of the load. They were fine. Saul couldn’t wait to feel the lack of resistance when he pulled the bin. It would be a quicker trip to Beth El. A slight breeze interrupted the calm summer air.

As Saul connected the transporter’s last hydraulic hose to the bin, Leumas turned her hoverflat up the dusty lane that led to the farm. Kish had gone back into their dwelling to get the seller’s account number needed to transact business at the mill. After locking the snakelike hose into place, he turned, saw her, and trembled. Everyone did when Leumas arrived.

Exotic, sleek fur robes covered her slender, tall body and spilled over the edges of the hover flat. Almost blinding Saul, their whiteness accented her dark complexion, jet-black hair, and narrow, intense eyes. A prophetess, a psychic, a seer, an oracle, an angel. Saul didn’t know which title fit her better. Maybe none of them. He had never seen her in person, but heard the legends, the folklore, and the stories that surrounded her. Of the people he knew that encountered her, none ever desired it or wanted it again. To most her message was doom.

No one remembered how she had arrived on Onary. They only knew she was there. She didn’t age which caused some to speculate that she had arrived when the first Zeror settlers had come to Onary. Saul knew without a doubt it was she who stood before him. Why she visited a simple farmer was the question? Saul didn’t want to know. He wished his father would return.

Hovering ten feet away, she spoke and her voice thundered. “Saul Zeror son of Kish. Listen to me.” Saul didn’t have a choice. His legs shook too hard to move.

She lifted her right hand which fell from her robes and pointed her index finger his direction. “Be aware. Six hours from now the Galactic Security Police will land on Onary and come for you. You will cease to be what you are.” Her eyes burned into him, making him feel naked.

What the heck? What did the GSP want with him? Saul felt his blood turn to ice. He may have hated politicians, but he feared the GSP. The vivid memories of ten years ago still haunted him.

As a sixteen year old knowing everything, he had begged his father to let him take part of the harvest to Beth El and Kish had consented. He tagged along many times when his father had dealt with the grain brokers, and though he hadn’t paid much attention, how hard could it be? Saul would give them the grain and they would pay him the going rate on the financials. And he would finally get to see Jensen. Rumors had filtered back through farmer’s coming back from Beth El that Jensen now ran the mill as the new grain broker.

With the transport and bin parked on Scale fifty-four, Saul trudged past the GSP guards rigidly posted at the door and into Jensen’s office. Jensen, with close cropped, curly hair, sat hunched down, peering at his computer screen and occasionally glancing at the rows of VV monitors to his left. Without looking up, he said, “Which scale are you at?”

“Jensen,” Saul said, standing in front of the desk ready to receive his friend’s welcome. “It me, Saul.” He could not wait to catch up about the past year over lunch.

When Jensen looked up, Saul’s jaw almost dropped. Jensen looked older. No glimmer of recognition passed across his eyes, no twinkle of memories, no remembrance of the past.

“So you’re Saul.” Jensen’s cold voice fell dully on Saul’s ears, devoid of the friendliness he hoped for. “Kish’s son. Are you here to do business or waste my time?”

Saul felt a sickening sensation in his stomach begin to grow. This was not the Jensen he knew. Had integration really changed him that much? Was there no

recollection of their past?

“Jensen,” Saul managed to whisper, leaning close. “Don’t you remember me at all? We were practically brothers!” He tried to jog Jensen’s memory. “Your mother is the only mother I ever remember. You and I, we climbed trees and explored the caves in the hills surrounding our two farms. We even...”

“Look,” Jensen cut in, agitation clear in his voice. “Sell or get out.”

Saul felt numb from the pain of friendship lost. So this is what integration did to people. Integration mutilated and destroyed the past and for that, Saul would never forgive it. Fighting to focus on the job Kish had sent him to do, he mechanically replied, “Scale 54.”

He fought back the tears that begged to flow as Jensen’s fingers hurriedly punched the keyboard at his computer. At least his father would be happy with the 350,000 credits he would receive for the load he had brought. His hand fumbled in his pocket for the credit disk and account code and found them. He laid them on Jensen’s desk. Crestfallen, Saul insatiably watched Jensen slip the credit disk into the reader and punch in the amount to be transferred into their account.

Jensen’s voice brought him out of his comatose state. “300,000 credits.”

Saul’s face went red. He slammed his fist down on the desk. “You’re cheating us.” He wagged his finger at Jensen. “According to today’s futures, this loads worth at least 350,000 credits.”

“Don’t you dare yell at me, you filthy farmer.” Jensen was out of his chair. His voice hissed like a cattle brand on skin. “You don’t have the right to tell me what to pay you.”

Saul did not back down. “You can’t treat your friend this way.” His hurt spurned the vocal daggers into Jensen.

“I don’t even know you,” Jensen spit. “Guards!” The hands of the GSP wrapped around Saul’s arms. “Teach this young farmer here to never challenge a government official again.”

Saul’s legs buckled under him as the leg of a GSP guard sliced into him. His head hit the desk stunning him. He curled into ball on the floor as each guard one after the other kicked and punched him. He felt blood dripping down his cheek and heard

the snapping of ribs. Jensen stood by and watched.

Kish had found Saul sprawled in the empty bin. The transport's auto guidance system had been activated and had driven the unit back to his home. He bathed his son's face and cleaned his wounds. In a halting voice, with tears and sobs, Saul recounted the pain of what had happened. He could tell his father had understood. Kish had told him that even after all these years, he still missed Saul's mother and knew the pain of losing someone close.

"Hey," Kish said lovingly as he held his son close. "Remember, we still have each other. That's the important thing. Never forget it."

Those words, the words of his father, reverberated in Saul's mind as he stood facing Leumas. *You will cease to be what you are?* The words cracked through the memories. What the hell did that mean? How long did it take Kish to get the account number?

Dropping her hand, Leumas dipped it into a robe pocket and pulled out a rollable text screen. She slid her hoverflat closer to him. She stretched the electronic document out towards him. Her tightly drawn lips spoke nothing, but her eyes beckoned him to reach out and take the scroll.

Saul's trembling fingers stretched out to take the note as if they were about to touch poison. Somehow, the miniature scroll found its way into his hands. Straightening up, Leumas turned her hover flat around. Saul stared after her as she silently traveled down the lane and out of sight.

Saul debated not opening it. Ignorance was bliss, right? Still, he had to know. He face devoid of color, stared blankly at the glowing words on the flexible screen. The prophecy of doom eventually ghosted then disappeared. His knees felt weak as he dropped the text screen to the ground. Saul hoped desperately in his heart that what the Oracle wrote and said would never come true.



Barred from him by a fifteen meter stainless steel wall, the tops of the towering, prefab, government owned silos in the Palacio Spaceport Mill flashed by Saul, waiting

with their stores of grain to be shipped on the next freighter out to Earth and the other colonies. Beth El's rubber composited sidewalks sank under the impact of his running feet. The blue walks ran north to south; the green ran east to west. He was on the blue.

Saul's knowledge of Beth El was his only chance of getting away from the GSP guards that pursued him. He wished Leumas would have been wrong. Just this once. To his knowledge, she had never been wrong, and, as the current situation testified, she still wasn't. He just wished it.

Unwilling to accept the doom of the scroll, Saul, armed with his father's seller account number, had maxed the transporter's speed, making his way to Beth El to deliver the wheat and to find out the truth of the oracle's words. With the bin's new wheels, he had cut the six-hour trip to just under four.

The mill sat on the east edge of the Palacio Spaceport inside the walls that surrounded it. Saul had backed the bin up on the scales to the moving conveyer belt. It snaked its way behind the bins of other farmers, disappearing into the threshing plant. From there, elevators leapt skyward, angled into the various silos that edged the port. As he sauntered over to the grain broker before unloading, a bulky MM631 freighter roared towards the heavens becoming smaller as each moment passed and disappeared into the bright sky.

Jensen's smile edged on a sneer as Saul entered the room. A brief moment of panic passed over Saul. He squelched it, allowing his face to show nothing. He cringed every time he had to face Jensen. The beating Jensen had given him, severing the friendship Saul once held dear, infected his thoughts every time he came to the mill. He fought to separate the man in front of him, if that is what he could still call him, from the memories of friendship he once had.

"Two metric tons of wheat," the broker commented blandly, looking intently at the computer screen in front of him. Smoke from his blunted cigar spiraled lazily upwards joining the haze that canvassed the ceiling. He then shifted his gaze to look at Saul and kept smiling. Saul wanted to lash out at Jensen. The man was liar. If hell existed, the integrated Jensen was from there. Maybe the entire government of integrates were. The bin itself held two and a half metric tons and had been filled to the brim.

“Is that correct?” Jensen asked innocently.

“Yes.” Saul mumbled his reply. It was better to lie than be beaten. The local GSP still guarded the door when he had come in.

“Good.” Jensen smirked his reply, remembering well the lesson he had taught the young man in front of him. Integrates never forgot. “At the rate of 200,000 credits per metric ton, that equals 400,000 credits.” His fingers danced over the keyboard, punching in numbers. “Minus the mill fee, leaves you with 390,000 credits.”

Saul was livid. The futures stated the going rate at 225,000 a metric ton. His hand shook with rage as he dipped it into his pocket to pull out his credit disc. The man was skimming big time, and he could do nothing about it. He laid it on the counter. Jensen slipped it into the reader and Saul deftly gave him the seller’s account number.

After unloading, he parked the empty bin and transport in the lot outside the entrance into the mill and made the one-kilometer trek to Rey’s Spaceport Diner, located along the northern edge of Palacio. In the beating midday sun, the neon sign fronting the place faintly flickered on and off. Inside, Saul elbowed his way through the throngs of lunchtime farmers and traders until he reached the bar. The jibber-jabber of conversations assaulted him.

“Rain on the way. Here it’s supposed to be a doozy.”

“Did you hear about Merv and his wife? Split up it seems...”

“This new fertilizer contains enough nitrates...”

“The Zargoth colony claims to have developed one month wheat. Hell of a competition for us.”

After he had ordered and received his food, he made his way to a booth that overlooked the landing and launching terminals of Palacio Spaceport. He sat down and waited his muscles tense and alert. The only relief he had was that there were no GSP here.

Tall, lanky windows rose disappearing into the smoky ceiling. The smeared monitors dotted the place and scrolled through the arrivals and departures. Tense and on edge, Saul hadn’t touched his food. The Onary Wheat Malt he drank did nothing to ease his apprehension. His eyes darted from the monitors to the windows and then back

again, waiting to see if Leumas spoke the truth. He waited hoping and praying that the metallic blue Galactic Empire ship would never touch down.

Oh, he had seen it before all right. He knew what it looked like. A black twenty story high ship with a phoenix emblazoned on its side. He and his father had been present both times it had landed during Saul's lifetime. Once when he was five, and another when he was thirteen. Everyone in Beth El County had to be there. When the chancellor of Earth came to visit, everything stopped on Onary. But the chancellor would not be on this ship, so no pronouncement had been made.

So he waited, for the dreaded arrival of this ship, unannounced and unpredicted to everyone but him.

Time flicked. Exactly six hours passed since he had first received the note from Leumas. A faint rumbling made it way through the glass and cut through the noise, ripping Saul's eyes away from the monitor. The GE ship was landing.

His stomach felt heavy and threatened to toss its breakfast contents on the table in front of him. He weakly rose to his feet. He had to get to his transport and out of the city. He could hide out in the hills until it blew over.

He stepped out into Onary's blazing sun and made his way towards mill's parking lot. The lot was packed with machinery and vehicles of farmers who were breaking for lunch and scouring the street shops of Beth El for much needed wares. He broke into a steady jog. He had to move quickly.

He walked past the entrance into the mill and lost himself among the rows to vehicles. Row A, Space 606. As he stepped up into the cab of his hovering transport, he happened to glance back towards the entrance. GSP guards decked in blue poured out of it and began to canvas the area. One group headed toward the exit out of the city.

Shit. There was no way he would get out of Beth El now. Leaping from his transport, he panicked and ran.



He stopped to catch his breath where Blue 8 met Green 5th. In front of him, red Cracker Jack box houses sprawled north and east. North and west, the purple

financial district made its home. West and south the yellow commercial centers. East and south, the mill sprawled, decked in gray.

They couldn't be far behind. Saul had lost the GSP guards in Beth El's outdoor market, but they had an idea of the direction he was heading. He could get lost in a town of 10,000 inhabitants easy enough. It was harder to lose yourself when you were looked for. Saul should have left Onary when he had received the message from Leumas. He could have booked a flight on the freighters that had lifted off between the time he arrived and the time the GSP landed. The GSP would have tracked him down, but it would have bought him some time.

But no. He had needed to see if prophecy was true. Now, with the exits guarded, his transport lay trapped in Beth El's walls, but he had begun to form a plan. The enemy would never actually suspect he would try to get back into the mill.

Saul started a brisk jog on East Green 5th towards where the outskirts of town met the farmer's entrance into the mill. "Excuse me. Pardon me. Uh, I gotta get through," he muttered as he maneuvered through the crowded Saturday streets. He wished so much to be standing with his father at the edge of one of the many fields federally leased to them. Seven hours ago, he had been doing that.

In the early afternoon, a line a farmers still waited to drop off their grain at the mill and get ripped off. The queue of transports and bins snaked outwards and moved at a slow crawl towards the entrance of the mill. Saul weaved in and out the machinery parked on the lot as he began working his way towards the last transport in the line. He pretended to be examining an empty bin as the last transport rumbled by. The driver in the cab seemed focused on the line ahead and chattered away on his com. Saul seized the opportunity.

He swung himself up the back rungs of the bin. The hatch lay in the center of the bin's flat top. Saul shimmied his way towards the lid, flipped it open, and buried himself in the grain, making sure to keep his face just above the surface. A crack of light slipped through the edge of the now closed hatch.

Saul was sure no one had seen him. He had lost his pursuers in the sea of tractors and bins. The farmer had been distracted. The GSP and mill workers did not typically check grain going into the mill, so he was sure he would get through the main

gate.

So what if he was if he was Ben Zeror's descendent. Weren't there tons of them? Why had he been chosen as Onary's Prime Integrate? There was no way in hell he would let that happen.

He knew a couple of traders who flew MM freighters and who did not sympathize with the Empire. He was sure once he got inside the spaceport, he could get away.

A shadow grayed the sliver of light that passed through the crack in the hatch above as the farmer passed under the arched gate leading into the mill. At the speed this farmer traveled, Saul knew he had about two minutes until the farmer turned to park the bins. When the farmer stopped to back up to the conveyer belt, he would pull himself out of the wheat and disappear among the grain silos.

The bin jerked to a stop. Saul, counting off the seconds in his mind, estimated he still had another minute before they arrived at the belts. In the dark buried under the grain, he must have miscalculated.

He pushed the lid back and heaved himself up and out of the grain. The strong hands of the GSP guards grabbed him.

"What the...?" he sputtered, struggling futilely to break free. He saw the driver of the tractor pointing up at him and standing with Jensen and Leumas. Jensen wore a welcoming, yet disquieting smile. The farmer had not been so oblivious after all.

"Let me go." Adrenaline, like when a mother lifts a car freeing a child trapped underneath, coursed through him and he ripped his arm loose. He clawed at the other hand still secured around his right arm. His fingers drew blood from the guard's arm. The last thing he saw was a GSP's fist plunging toward his jaw.



The Prime Integrate stood poised on the dais before the throngs of Onary. As the chancellor's representative for the Galactic Empire, he readied himself to deliver his first message to his people. Through him, they would help make the Galactic Empire great. He swept his impassive gaze across those assembled before him.

The crowd at Beth El stood in silence. Saul supposed it was out of their respect and admiration for him. There were always a few dissenters, but they were easily taken care of. If only they could realize how freeing integration was, they would fight to get government jobs. The prestige, knowledge, and wealth was incentive enough.

Most dissenters farmed. Sure, the Empire needed farmers, Saul mused, but they were tolerated. Without them there would be nothing to eat. Why anyone would ever choose to be a farmer was beyond his comprehension. They were filthy and unrefined.

One farmer broke from the crowd and came running towards him. Saul watched the guards semi-circled around him grow tense. From the database of registered Onary inhabitants implanted in his brain, he recognized the man. Yet apart from that, the man seemed somehow more familiar to him.

“Kish, come no closer.” Saul’s voice reverberated over the silent crowd, who observed the scene with complacency.

Kish’s pleading eyes stared up at the Prime Integrate. He rushed forward. “My son, listen to me. You were right about the Empire. We need to shake off...”

Saul motioned for the guards to arrest this dissenter. The guards were on the man and bound his arms tightly behind his back. The man winced in pain.

“Saul,” the man gasped, “do you not recognize your own father? You’re all I have. Don’t forget the important things.” The man’s cries faded as the GSP guards drug him away.

When the troublemaker had been safely displaced, the Prime Integrate focused his attention back on the crowd.

“Today, the day of my ascension, begins a new era of the Galactic Empire of Earth. To the glory of the Galactic Empire.” His voice rose to a shout as he spoke the last words.

Thousands of hands shot up and towards him as the crowd recited that last phrase in unison back to him. “To the glory of the Galactic Empire.” Standing to Saul’s right, Leumas smiled.

THE SECONDS OF A DECADE



Drew stood on the edge of Old Gauger's pale wood porch staring at the silver locket he had bought for Veronica to commemorate two years of dating and one year of being engaged. He knew that when he gave it to her tonight, she would swoon and whisper the secrets of love to him.

The flat, treeless Kansas landscape boxed in the town of Hesston and therefore him. He had escaped the only way he had known how. He attended Bethel College one town away. When he and Veronica were married, they would jet their hometown and move to California. The bright shell of the locket starkly contrasted the dusty porch on which he stood. He contemplated opening it as the arid wind tossed his hair over his brown eyes.

He probably should have opened it before he bought it, but this was Old Gauger himself we were talking about. No one could ever remember his birth name. To the town he was just Old Gauger, one of the kindest, most honest men, who was as ancient as the town of Hesston itself. He ran the pawnshop. The townsfolk trusted him as they trusted the ticking of time. Drew could still hear Old Gauger inside tinkering with a TV someone had sold to the pawnshop owner earlier that morning.

Turning his thoughts back on Veronica, he smiled. It was too bad for Sid. At the beginning of their eleventh grade year, Sid and Drew found themselves in pursuit of the same girl. Both young men tried outdoing the other. In the end, Veronica had chosen. Drew remained convinced she had made the right choice.

Drew turned the locket over in his hand. Twenty-five dollars. Though that seemed a high price for any student beginning his second year at Bethel College, he knew he had bought it from Old Gauger at a steal. He mother had lent him the ten extra bucks he needed to buy it. Two tiny diamonds sparkled against the polished surface in the early afternoon sun. He mugged his beveled reflection on the surface. No way was this worth only twenty-five bucks. His fingers found the clasp and thumbed open the locket.

Drew almost dropped the locket. There, rising like a mirage off the cracked and heated asphalt in front of him, was a genie. She was tiny, no more than three inches tall, and was clothed in an emerald robe. She glowed white in contrast to his toasted skin. She looked up at him out of eyes too big for her teardrop face.

His mind locked. A genie? A GENIE? What the heck? They weren't real, were they? They belonged in legends, belonged in stories like *Aladdin* and in pop songs by chased after fantasies. No way on Earth, Heaven, Hell, or mythology were genies even remotely real. But in spite of everything he had learned in high school and college, here in the palm of his hand no taller than a ballpoint pen, was a genie. A living breathing legend out of the annals of mythology and out of a locket.

"Well," the genie finally spoke, breaking the silence that had continued because of Drew's dropped jaw and inability to get it together. "Are you going to ask me your wish or shall I just crawl back into the locket till I find someone who can finally talk?" She rolled her eyes at him.

Drew managed to croak out, "You mean I really get three wishes?" Now what does a man do with three wishes that have no restrictions attached to them and within which have the potential for power and wealth? He did what any man would do -- he pinched himself. But it was not a dream. He felt the bite of his nails.

"One wish." She snapped scowling. "If you want three wishes, rub a lamp or something. Rub a locket, well, sometimes size does matter."

Drew stared out at the crisscross of streets, making up Hesston's center and marked by the flick of the town's only traffic light switching from green, to yellow and then to red. One wish. Never in his life had he ever imagined getting to make a wish like this. And he knew, HE KNEW from the stories, TV shows, and movies he had watched that with making wishes came responsibility. With three wishes, at least if the wisher made a mistake they could go back and correct with wish number two or three. But with one wish, you only got one chance.

With the shock of the genie appearing and him having to reevaluate eighteen years of upbringing and education, Drew's mind went blank. His synapses froze. The possibility he could make an errant wish jammed his mind. For making this sort of wish, one should have time to ponder it, to agonize over it, to wrestle with it until he crafted

an appropriate wish. But he did not have time. So with time being the one thing on which his mind thought, he said the only thing he could think of.

“I wish I could see what life would be like in ten years.” The light went from green to amber. He blinked and stepped out of time.



Old Gauger rested upon the weather beaten rocker on the front porch of his pawnshop and pensively stared out at the vacant streets. They were empty this time of day and this time of year. Sweat marks trailed down his pastel plaid dress shirt, and he took out a stained handkerchief to dab his face. Anybody in their right mind would have been inside, enjoying the comforts of their overworked air conditioners. Everyone, that is, except Old Gauger. He just didn't like the feel of it. So he sat out on his porch, away from the air conditioning that hummed in his pawnshop, a courtesy for the customers.

Business wasn't what it used to be. Even the depression seemed better than this. People had at least wanted to sell stuff and would take whatever Gauger could offer. Now, Old Gauger knew things were tight because the Missus, who kept the books, had begun to worry. Perhaps the disappearance of the boy indirectly caused this.

He mused on this for a bit. Yes. Ever since then, rumors, and it doesn't take much to get them going in a small town, began to permeate the folks of Hesston that Old Gauger's Pawn Shop was haunted. Not your typical haunted, mind you, with ghosts, demons, and the like. But a person had gone missing, the citizens had reasoned, and the only link to the disappearance had been Old Gauger's Pawn Shop. No one simply vanishes. But Andrew Johnson had.

When Drew hadn't shown up for the anniversary celebration he and his girlfriend had planned, Sheriff Meckley had taken the call. The Sheriff had managed to trace the kid's footsteps to the pawnshop where the trail stopped.

Old Gauger leaned forward and pushed back the derby on his head. His teeth clenched his pipe as he recalled the conversation he had had with Meckley. Even now, the thought caused his old hands to shake.

“Gauger, I hate to do this to ya.” The sheriff sighed and drummed the smudged counter glass. “Your shop was the last place the boy was seen. I gotta list ya as a suspect.”

“You’re just doing your job, Mack,” Gauger said smoothly, feigning confidence that contrasted the empty feeling in the pit of his stomach. Then, trying to reassure himself, he said, “It’ll pass. As I told you before, I sold Andrew a locket and then he left.”

The investigation had turned up nothing. Still the fact that he had been a suspect had done damage enough. He was no longer *honest* Gauger, but rather *suspicious* Gauger. Potentially he was even a mur... Gauger could not bring himself to finish the thought.

In the evenings when the night cooled and the pawnshop had closed, he and the missus would stroll down the cracked sidewalks edging Main Street until eventually it lead them home. People still said “Hi” to him when he met them and were cordial to him, but their eyes filmed over as if they were zombies and it indicated to him they would rather be some place else. Rather than torture them with his presence, he would excuse himself and the missus and continue towards home. Over the past year, the pawnshop had steadily lost business.

Gauger stared down at the bouquet of wilted flowers Andrew’s mother had laid at the foot of the porch earlier that morning. It was the anniversary of the boy’s disappearance and his mother had asked if she could do this. Of course it was fine. It reminded him of the boy.

Andrew had been one of those rare kids; one of the best kids Gauger had known. He remembered John Sickman telling him how Andrew had helped fix his spilt rail fence after the wind storm of ninety-six blew through. And Maple Gardner, who used to frequent his shop daily, had told how the kid mowed her grass after her own son had been hospitalized due to a car accident. Anytime Andrew came in Gauger’s shop, he always ‘sir’-ed him and ‘ma’am’-ed the older women browsing his household appliances. Now-a-days kids would leave, go to college, and come back changed. But Andrew? His demeanor never changed. He treated people with respect.

Gauger's thoughts returned once again to the shop and its future. No wind blew making the humid heat feel even heavier. He chewed on the end of his pipe and watched the traffic light flick from green to amber.

An instant later, something knocked Gauger from his chair sprawling his aged body out on the planked porch. His pipe skittered onto the sidewalk leaving a trail of sparked tobacco. He looked up.

A kid stood where his chair had been. Young whippersnappers, Gauger thought and seethed with anger, I'll teach him how to respect his elders. Knocking an old man off his chair running around like that. If only he was more like that kid Andrew...

Gauger checked his thoughts as the kid blurred, and then was gone. That kid had looked an awfully lot like Andrew. He rubbed his eyes. Couldn't be. Gauger sat up and looked suspiciously down the street all four ways.



Under the dark and threatening sky, a tornado siren wailed, reverberating up and down the near empty streets. Only a few people now scurried to their shelters. Winds blew rain like needles into Veronica's skin.

Veronica crouched in the opening of her shelter with video tape rolling. The shelter wasn't much really. It had come with the house she rented after she had graduated from college. A steel door slapped its entrance, below which fell a six-foot hole, hollowed out in a spacious bottom that contained some water, dried nonperishable food, and blankets.

Never in her life had a tornado hit Hesston. Though it was not tornado season, an uncharacteristic system pushed down from the North and had met warm, humid air. Her blue eyes widened with excitement. She felt her heart pumping adrenaline through her veins like a piston. She lived for this.

The words "Tornado Chasers" were tattooed across the back of her shirt. Four years of studying meteorology earned her this job. She, along with six others across the Midwest pursued wind tunnels and worked towards a better way of predicting them.

Weather was her blood. As a young girl, she had breathed the weather and memorized cloud formations. With her father beside her, she stood barefoot on the Kansas plains feeling the stubble and cool earth beneath her feet. She had learned from him to predict the coming weather from the clouds, the winds and the soil. Drew had encouraged her to pursue her dream of meteorology in college. In the pursuit of her dream, she had lost him.

Five years ago, Drew had just disappeared. When he had not shown up to celebrate their first anniversary of being engaged, she had become worried. They were set to be married after both graduated a little more than three years away. Drew never missed appointments and had always communicated when he was going to be late.

The first couple of years after the disappearance, she had speculated he was living elsewhere. Each year, rumors circulated of people having seen him, especially when the date of his disappearance came around. She had been angry with him and wondered why he never came to see her. She ran missing person searches and even talked to the F.B.I. Looking back on it, she guessed most people saw what they wanted to see. The August heat can do a number on a person's mind. The most plausible explanation was that Drew was dead. Veronica had convinced herself that Drew was in a better place.

She stared out at the clashing storm fronts, wiping the wetness off her face with the back of her free hand, and then dropped her gaze across the street to Old Gauger's now boarded up Pawn Shop. It had gone under three years ago and Old Man Gauger had moved to Hutchinson. She would have done the same if people had spoken about her like they did about him. The man was as sweet as they come, and she had never doubted his innocence. She wanted to blame him. After all, he made the perfect scapegoat, but she knew Old Gauger. In all the years she had known him, twenty-four to be exact, he had never harmed or threatened anyone. The town cared little for her reasoning. People remembered five years ago, and remembered that Drew had last been seen at Old Gauger's. That was enough to damn the man.

The place memorialized Drew. The flowers Veronica and Susanne, Drew's mother, placed there each year on the anniversary of his disappearance now lay scattered across the street from the violent wind. The only year Veronica had not left flowers had

been the first year, when the sight of Hesston and the memories of Drew were too painful for her. Instead of facing the pain, she stayed near campus during the summer break after her sophomore year. She used the edge of her wet t-shirt to clear the lens of her camera. Lightning flashed illuminating the early afternoon. The rusted traffic light rocked wildly on its wire.

Behind Old Gauger's, a wind tunnel leapt out of the clouds towards Earth. Debris thrashed in a circular motion as the spout touched down and began to rip through the houses that stood behind Old Gauger's like they were made of paper. The light flicked from green to yellow.

Motion in front of the vacant pawnshop caught her eye, now perched behind the viewfinder of the camera. A phantom swirled into a shape of a man in his late teens. He startled her. At first she thought the wind's trickery fooled her eyes, but the image clarified. No one in Kansas would dare risk themselves away from shelter in such weather. What the heck was he doing? She lowered the camera.

"Hey," she cupped her hands around her mouth trying to get her voice over the noise of the storm. "Get shelter now! A tunnel's headed straight for you!" But her voice drowned in the roar of the wind. Then her world tilted and seemed to shift into slow motion.

For the briefest moment, she could have sworn she saw her high school sweetheart, the man she still loved, stood motionless and looked down into his hands. The picture was clear and unmistakable. Drew stood without any indication he knew a storm raged around him or that danger headed his way.

The tornado ripped through the back of Old Gauger's. Frantic, she dropped the camera, video tape still rolling, and waved her arms, shouting and trying desperately to get his attention. She dared not go closer, but she would not lose him again. Drew never looked her direction.

Then, as she despaired and the tornado ripped through the front of Old Gauger's, Drew's image blinked out of time and place. He stood there for what seemed like an eternity, but it could not have been more than a few seconds. Time would not allow her to process what had just happened. The tornado dissipated Old Gauger's Pawn Shop and now sashayed across the street toward her shelter. If he had not been

dead, he was dead now. She yanked the metal doors shut, bolted them, and walked down into the darkness alone.



Along with his fiancée, Sid stood in his sage green polo shirt at the back end of a crowd that spilled onto the roadway. He could not have been happier. After seven years, his dreams were coming true. He shifted his gaze from his future wife to the Mayor speaking from a lectern at the front of the crowd.

“To the town’s people and citizens of Hesston,” bellowed the mayor, sweat from the August heat making his baldhead shiny, “We dedicate the new Gauger Public Library.” The applause crescendoed, forcing the Mayor to pause. Sid frowned.

After years in architecture school, the town had hired Sid to layout the new library. Two years ago, Old Gauger had passed away and had apparently willed the land, on which his pawnshop had stood, to the town. Sid looked around at the library his hands had created. It was a masterpiece with its beautiful brick façade and five spires spiking skyward. The only thing marring his handy work were the bronze letters protruding over the entranceway that read “Gauger Public Library.”

“Many of us remember,” the mayor continued after the din of the crowd had subsided, “Gerald Gauger, Old Gauger as he was known, with fond thoughts. Hesston would never have been complete without him living here. So this name,” the mayor dramatically swept his arm back towards the entrance, “commemorates his life and all he has done for our community.” The applause thundered this time.

Sid neither liked nor disliked Old Gauger per se. The town square looked like Rockefeller Center compared to old weathered pawnshop that once marred the corner. Its destruction by the tornado three years ago had been a blessing in two ways. Number one, the town looked more aesthetically pleasing and number two, Veronica had consented to marry him.

Ah yes, Sid’s engagement to the beautiful Veronica Sheller could not have been more perfect. From the moment he had laid eyes on her in high school, he wanted to be with her. He had been drawn to her infectious laugh, her golden straight hair, and

twinkling blue eyes. But Andrew Johnson had stolen her heart. He fumed at the thought, knowing that even now he was second best.

Sid put his arm around her and pulled her close. She buried her head into his shoulder. It no longer mattered. He had received what was rightly his in the end. He had almost lost hope of ever getting a chance with Veronica. Then Andrew disappeared eight years ago, and his heart jumped with possibility. After giving her ample time to grieve, he began to pursue her. She pushed him off, claiming her heart still belonged to her Andrew and that she would only be lying if she pretended to give it to him. Sid often watched her stare longingly at the front of Old Gauger's where Andrew had last been seen. No, he did not hate Old Gauger. It was the pawnshop and what it represented to Veronica that he despised.

After the tornado hit, Veronica had changed. She still worked in weather, but now was employed for a neighboring TV station. It was a safer profession in Sid's mind. Most importantly, after five years of being put off, she had finally given in to his pleading and their relationship had begun. After a year of courtship, he had asked her to marry him. Initially, she said no, but his persistence had paid off.

He tuned his attention back into the mayor who was now cutting the yellow ribbon in front of the entrance of the new building. Sid wiped the sweat from his forehead and looked away towards the square, past the traffic light, towards where two new lights hung over the street and a new Wal-Mart rose in construction. Things had changed. The nearest light flicked from green to amber.

To his left the air shimmered and out of it materialized a young man. Sid blinked. The man was still there. The crowd now surged towards the entrance of the library to tour the new building. As far as he could tell, he alone saw the man. Then he recognized the man.

"No!" he screamed, pushing Veronica away and starting towards the man that he knew to be Andrew Johnson. He would not allow this man to ruin what was now his. Now only a stride away, he cocked his arm to swing at the man who still rivaled him from the grave. His arm swished only empty air. Andrew had disappeared.

Sid gaped at the place Andrew had stood. People at the back of the crowd had turned and now eyed him like they eyed a crazy man.

“Sid?” Veronica’s sweet gentle voice now broke the heavy stillness, “Are you alright? You look pale.”

“Yeah,” he stammered quietly. “I think I’ll be fine. It’s just this blasted Kansas sun.” He fell into line alongside Veronica. His perfect day had been ruined.



Susanne crouched down and patted the fresh earth around the maple tree she had just planted. She wiped her hands on the faded print dress she wore. The plaque in front of the tree read “In memory of Andrew Johnson a loyal son and a friend to many who disappeared ten years ago on August 5th, 1993.” She reached out and gently touched the memorial. The roughed copper surface felt warm in the Kansas sun. She so missed “Little Drew”.

Even after all this time, tears crept into her eyes. He had been the best son a mother could ever want. Sure, he was a typical kid getting into typical kid trouble. But he was harmless, honest, and respectful, and most importantly her son. Her only child.

She planted a maple, because the maple in their front lawn had been her son’s favorite tree. As a child, he spent hours climbing it, playing in its shade, and turning its seeds into little helicopters. When he began dating Veronica, he used to bring her to the tree where together they carved “Drew & Veronica, True love forever” into its bark.

Susanne had watched this all from the window of her kitchen. She planted a seedling from that tree.

She planted it here, because this was the place Old Gauger’s Pawn Shop had stood. Up until the tornado hit, she had religiously placed flowers by Old Gauger’s porch in her son’s memory. This tree and plaque would be a more permanent reminder.

After getting permission from the town council to do this, Susanne decided to keep the dedication ceremony small and invited only a few people. Even fewer turned out. Old Gauger’s widow was there; Sheriff Meckley had dropped by. Sid and Veronica were there, along with their newborn, now resting in the crook of Veronica’s arm. Sid seemed disinterested and appeared to be examining the library. Susanne was sure he was there only because Veronica had insisted on it.

Veronica and Susanne had remained close and once a week they got together for early morning tea. She knew how much Veronica still loved Drew. Despite the protests from Sid, Veronica named her newborn boy after her first love. To add insult to injury, Veronica had even named Susanne as the child's godparent.

Clouds rolled across the sky. The mugginess would break when the rains came that evening, or so Veronica had told Susanne. The newly paved streets seemed to make the town even hotter. A horn blared from the intersection nearby. Susanne looked up just in time to see a yellow Ford Tempo avoid a near collision and to see the light flick from green to amber.



Drew blinked and stepped back into time. The light changed from amber to red. One moment he stood on Old Gauger's porch. The next second he was...well, he wasn't quite sure where he was.

The genie was gone. He still held the locket in his hand, the chain dangling over the side of his palm. The wish he had made should not have moved him anywhere but through time. Where was Old Gauger's?

The porch roof that had been above him had disappeared, and the bright sun glared brightly off the locket in his hand, causing him to look away. He now stood in what looked like a courtyard backed by a brick building.

Drew noticed a woman kneeling ten feet away in front of a maple sapling. She stared back at him eyes wide as if he were defying the laws of normalcy. The woman was his mother. Her unkempt gray hair crowned her head, trickling down her back and dark circles girded her eyes. Wrinkles edged her skin. How many hours had it been since he last saw her? He paused, and then reminded himself it had only seemed like earlier that day. Tiredness, like an invisible cloak, seemed wrapped tightly around her.

An apparition of her dead son stood motionless in front of Susanne. She stared at him transfixed. She knew she witnessed before her one of the many miraculous visions inspired by the shimmering heat that others had told her they had seen of "Little Drew." Any moment now, it would dissolve and be no more.

But...but he looked at her, a sense of wonder in those eyes. Was this only a mirage? The teen stepped towards her and said, "Mom?" She fainted and slumped to the ground.

Frantic Drew closed the distance between his mother and him in two strides. He knees stabbed the dirt as he fell beside his fallen mother. Gently picking up her head, he laid it in his lap and brushed the gray strands of hair from her pale face. He needed water, or salts. He looked up to ask the others nearby to help when he noticed a couple with a baby to his right.

His heart jumped. Was that really Veronica? As she looked at him, her eyes sparkled diamonds against her fleshy face. A toddler rested on her hip. Whose baby was that? And who was she standing next to?

Not a sound escaped Veronica. In a flash, she saw the young man on Old Gauger's porch, unmoving, and then disappearing into the violent winds of the tornado. The man she saw that afternoon had been Drew. And there, kneeling on the ground holding his mother in his lap without the slightest hint of being a ghost, was impossibly, yet undoubtedly Drew.

The tornado had been a sign that confirmed to her Drew was gone. Because of it, she had been able to, with some work, move on and accept Sid's proposal. It had been the acceptance of the inevitable. All the emotions and love she had held for Drew, she had buried and had considered dead.

Except they weren't. Ten years of being without him. The pain of losing him, and the hope at hearing the rumors. The memories she held tenaciously to. The dreams she tossed to the wind. He now knelt there, real, with his eyes gazing into her's. It was no phantom in the wind this time. Her tears sizzled on the hot sidewalk.

It took only a moment for Drew to recognize Sid. He stood a little too close to Veronica for Drew's liking. And what was Veronica doing grabbing this guy's arm? Sid had clearly forgotten Veronica belonged to Drew. He smirked. Sid had been jealous of him from the moment he had won Veronica's heart. Poor sap.

Sid stared proudly at the workmanship of the library. It had been hailed by those who visited the town, and there weren't many, that it was arguably the town's finest piece of architecture. He felt Veronica clutch his arm tightly with her free hand,

her other still holding their baby. His eyes hung onto the building a moment longer. Life, with his accomplishments and the woman he had... Veronica's finger nails bit in his arm interrupting his reverie and he stifled a gasp of pain. He felt the wetness of tears. He turned and saw Veronica. And then he saw Drew.

He knew this time it was a delusion. This could not be the Drew. It was no more real than it had been before. He knew it was mental trickery because the Drew he saw before him had not aged. This was impossible.

“Disappear you devil,” he hissed and his arm uncoiled like a snake. But the abomination didn't waver. It only sat there on the ground smirking back at him. His body began to tremble and he felt himself go weak.

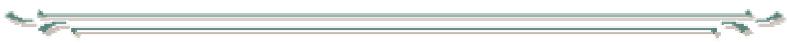
Drew's eyes swept the scene before him. He looked once more down on his mother. He gazed upon his most treasured virgin with the infant in her arms. And stared into the hollowness of Sid. His realization of the truth came too late.

To him it had been only the fraction of a second. It was still the same minute, still the same day. It was as if he had opened a door and walked into the next room. But to them, to the people he loved, hated, and knew.... They had breathed and lived every godforsaken second for the past decade and it had changed them. No, him not being there had changed them.

He had not aged nor changed. The ten-year jump had seemed instantaneous, but.... but to the people he knew, time had chiseled their flesh, had toyed with their dreams, had given them pain and added to them its weight. Ten years passed under the Kansas sun and it had weathered their skin. They had lived every single, solitary moment of it. He had made a leap in time and could not go back. Drew had gotten his wish.

Clasping the locket close to his chest, Drew broke down and cried.

THE GRAVITY OF THE SITUATION



Bleached summer grass pressed against Will's arms, which he held pretzled behind his head. Will Hagelgan inhaled the heat shimmer. The scent of sun-cooked earth and the scratching of hidden insects filled him with an indescribable contentment. He lay, legs scissored, on a hill behind his limestone farmhouse, staring up at the sapphire, blue sky (sapphire blue? Maybe more like cobalt blue. Or cerulean blue. Then again, what sky isn't on a 6 o'clock day in the middle of a Pennsylvania August?). Zack, his black cocker spaniel, lay sprawled out beside him panting. Will could feel his dog's breath against his legs; it was an odor he desperately avoided.

There wasn't anything quite like spending summer outside surrounded by the vineyards of Hagelgan Farm, which had been handed down to Will from eight generations of Hagelgens. While working the vineyard rows, he donned safari shorts, a ratty t-shirt, and sandals. Will loved summer as much as his students did. Maybe more. What other job gives you two months off in the summer? Sure, Will loved the kids, but teaching year round would have driven him to drink. Anyways, more than he did. In his humble opinion, there was nothing like the taste of homegrown Hagelgan Wine.

He remembered as a kid staring up at the same sky while lying in the same place, identifying a duck, a rabbit, and a spaceship formed out of the clouds. He had wondered what it would be like to turn off gravity. Would he fly upwards, flailing his arms, heading unavoidably into space? Now older and wiser, he knew the impossibility of such fancies. But they were things he still thought about as he petered away a lazy evening, lying in the shade cast by the grape arbor.

So Will daydreamed, pretending the beginning of school was more than two weeks away. A mixture of cumulus and cirro-stratus clouds dotted the sky above him. Two condensation trails lined the sky heading from Pittsburgh to Philadelphia. Maybe it was the other way around. But it didn't really matter. He relished the utopian feeling of being stress free and carefree. His eyes slowly drifted shut.

Seconds later (or was it minutes?), he realized he could no longer feel Zack's breath pulsating against his legs. It was there, and then it wasn't. That's odd, he thought. Maybe Zack had gone to quench his thirst, though he hadn't heard the jangling of Zack's dog license and rabies tags. He leapt to his feet (Or at least he gave it a good effort). A moment later, his brain registered that there was no grass from which to leap.

Will blinked, trying to adjust his eyes to the still sun-lit sky. Frantically his arms groped the air. He remembered having such dreams before. The ones where you're falling from the top of church, a house, or a barn, and where just before you're about to hit, you wake up. His body sweated, reacting to the illusions of the dream. His floundering movements started him in a gradual, horizontal spin.

Where in the hell was the grass? When would he hit? He twisted his head to see it, but had to wait for his body to follow the rotation. When the backyard swung into view, he hovered 6 feet above it and was moving further away. Zack still lay panting unaware he was even gone. Further away? This was an interesting twist to the dream.

Will drifted past the top of the grape arbor when he realized how improbable this really was. But weren't dreams always improbable? He stretched out his hand to grab the rusted wire roof of the arbor and ended up with a handful of grape leaves. They sure felt real enough. He brought them up to his nose. They sure smelled real, too. What the hell was going on? He was passing the top of the house's slate roof when it occurred to him that maybe this wasn't a dream after all.

His stomach lurched, threatening to empty its dinner contents midair. It didn't, though that didn't eliminate the panic he felt. After a few times of this, the churning settled down into a queasy sensation. He hated heights, especially unsupported ones. Maintaining control of his emotions and thoughts battled against every natural instinct. Will tried to reassure himself that until he started falling, there was nothing to worry about. If he did fall from this height, at most he'd have a few broken bones.

He reached over with his trembling hand and pinched his arm, twisting the skin a bit. His brain registered the pain, causing him to clench his teeth. That was the final assurance he wasn't in la la land. Someone or something had really turned gravity off.

Maybe the world simply stopped spinning. But what would cause such a phenomenon? He should have taught science, where formulas and reasons framed the

world's workings. He sighed. An English teaching degree hung above the mantle and there was nothing he could do about that now. Besides, if the world's rotation ground to a halt, the atmosphere traveling at 1100 mile per hour should have whisked him away across the countryside. He wasn't convinced that the Earth's spin had anything to do with gravity anyway.

Will's rotation faced him towards the ground again. He hadn't stopped his ascension, and guessed his elevation at sixty feet. At best a guess, he would not have wagered on it. Gauging distances was far from his strong suit. Squelching a terrified feeling, he tried to think logically.

Then it struck him. If Earth had switched gravity off (or whatever the reason was for him floating upward), why wasn't Zack floating up here with him? He squinted closely at the dog's now small and inert form pasted against the grass of the backyard. Perhaps making Zack get up would propel him off the ground.

"Zack! Come here boy!" he shouted as his rotation spun him towards the clouds again. Did Zack hear him? He would know when he faced Earth again. When he came back around, Zack's nose was surveying the area where his body had been. After a moment, the dog trotted off to the front of the house, searching for his master. But he didn't float upwards.

What the heck? Zack's motion should have pushed him off the ground, but it hadn't. He vaguely remembered something from his high school student days about an "equal and opposite reaction." It didn't make sense. Then again, him floating skyward like some escaped helium balloon defied logic as well. Humans were not supposed to do this. Not unless they were Mary Poppins.

Here was a crazy thought. Maybe the rapture thingy his parents had lectured him about as a kid was actually taking place. "At the end of the world," his mother used to say with stern voice, "the trump will sound and both the living and the dead who believe in God will rise to heaven." He could still hear her words echoing the warning of eternal judgment for those who did not believe. He watched closely as he spun around once more, the ground still further from him, but he saw no others rising with him. God was going to be disappointed if he expected throngs of people to be coming.

This being the rapture didn't seem quite right. Hell, he was far from perfect.

There were people far more religious than he like Pastor John and Father Rick. A closer look at the rolling hills, the bustling highway, and the peaceful cows below certainly didn't attest to the world ending. Besides, he hadn't heard the trumpet sound.

Unless of course this was a test of the emergency rapture system and God only wanted to see if it worked. But this thought was even more ludicrous.

Now a half mile up (Or was a mile? The sureness of this, as before, was questionable), the cooler air tempered the late summer humidity. His stomach sickened seeing Earth from this high up. He wanted to close his eyes sure it would alleviate the somersaults in his stomach, but the thought that he might never see Earth again forced him to deal with the queasiness.

Wait. Maybe there was a way to gain control of his situation. Will vaguely remembered watching a TV show on acrobatic skydiving. You know, the ones that make those fancy rings and artsy formations. Hadn't they seemed to swim through the air? Sure, they were descending instead of going up, but what the hell. It was worth a shot. He pretended to breaststroke, flailing his arms like he seemed to have remembered the skydivers doing. That proved a failure. The attempt only cockeyed his spin.

Below the Hagalgen farm patched the land, quilted among many other patches; it's vineyards spidered out like rows of freshly made pasta. The barn and house reminded him of dice. Without the spots, of course. And the roofs were black instead of white. Miles of brown and green farmland stretched to the horizon, interrupted only by the occasional road and the towns that cropped up every so often. A city skyline poked up in the distance. Was it Harrisburg? Philadelphia? Heck, maybe it was even Lancaster City. From this far away, it was hard to tell and his poor judgment of distances complicated matters. His erratic spin had caused him to lose all sense of direction.

This situation metaphored (or maybe it similed or personified. Only English teachers thought of such things. And was "metaphored" even a word?) a mental picture he had thought of when he had hit his 30th birthday. Back then, he had pictured time as a piston pushing him upwards through the blackness of space towards the stars and the future, unable to stop it or do anything about it. In the vision, he saw himself screaming, pressed against the flat top of this invisible piston, trying frantically to stop the forward progress of time. This picture still came to mind occasionally, especially when the

prospect of standing in front of the classroom again reared its ugly August head.

But there wasn't any piston. At least not that he could see. Nothing above him, nothing below him, nothing around him. No rhyme or reason.

How high was he now? Will didn't even venture a guess. Shivering slightly, he wondered at what height the sky became less blue and more black. The sun still shone above the horizon, perhaps because of his height. How would the stars appear in the daytime? These questions would be answered soon enough. Too soon for his liking.

The tightness of Will's breath presented a new problem. When would the air in the atmosphere be too thin to support him? Actually, the thought had crossed his mind earlier, but he had pushed it away not wanting to think about it. With a sense of dread, he inhaled and exhaled slower, trying not to think about the gravity of the situation. He hugged himself trying to keep warm.

A silver fighter jet passed not too far away. Will dismissed a frantic temptation to flail his arms. The action would only shorten his breath more. The pilot never saw him, or at least never circled back. This didn't particularly surprise him. If the pilot had seen him, he probably would have dismissed him as a weather balloon or highflying bird. After all, who would expect to see a human tumbling this high up?

The sky darkened and his breath became more labored. So this is what it was like to die. Who would take care of Zack? His parents' month long trip to Europe had begun a week before, so they were out of the question. His brother, Jay, would probably discover he was missing in a day or two when he called to chat. He would show up to see why Will wasn't answering the phone, take care of Zack, and then worry.

And teaching? With 400 applicants to every job, replacing his vacant teaching position would be a cinch, so that didn't bother him quite as much. A half hour ago, he would have figured he had a good 30, 40, maybe 50 years left. His current situation changed all that. The calmness he felt surprised him. Will figured it was the thin air affecting him.

Will's lungs struggled for air as the first stars popped into view. His muscles now shook violently. He wondered if it was because of the lack of oxygen or because he was so damn cold. The sky darkened to the point where he could now make out the brightest stars in Lyra, Cygnus and some of the other constellations. That's odd. He

couldn't recall such a blatant star in the middle of Cygnus.

Earth, who so graciously had given him 31 years, came into view one last time as his lungs began to spasm due to the lack of air. It rather reminded him of what happened when Jay had held him under the pool water too long during the many water battles they had fought as kids. Gosh, he'd miss him. When he faced the sky again (of course, one could very well argue there was as much sky below him as there was above him at this point), the stars went fuzzy and his field of vision seemed to narrow, black curtains pulling themselves towards the center of the stage at the end of his final act. The last thing he saw was this odd greenish star in the middle of Cygnus that wasn't really a star after all. "What the..." he choked then blacked out.



"Sir, here's your wine, room temperature just like you wanted it"

The Captain of the 12th Scouting Expedition grunted without looking up from the latest surveying reports and waved towards the edge of his desk. The communication officer gingerly set down the glass, turned, and left. The Captain thoughtfully rubbed his gray chin pleased at the progress his team had made. Central had given him a good team this time: a diligent communication officer, a reliable pilot, and a resourceful scout. A small team, but not that it mattered. They were almost done collecting all the specimens and artifacts Central had requested. He expected to receive commendations when they presented their reports to Central.

After flipping to another page, he laid the latest surveying report down, dimmed all the lights but his desk lamp, and began to enjoy his wine. Perfect. The communication officer deserved a good word when they returned. Setting the glass down, he scrawled a quick note to remind him of that, adding the other two members of the crew to the note as well. The pilot after all had given them a smooth flight through hyperspace, and the scout? Knowing his one weakness, she had found a stash of Earth wine and had sent it up on the gravitator, adding to his collection of exotic drinks. No one made wine quite like the inhabitants of this planet. Picking up his wine again, he leaned back and began to sip the drink with the narrow slit of his mouth, allowing

miscellaneous thoughts and relaxation to flow around his brain. The pinnacle of his career, as he saw it, could not have been better.

“Um, Sir?” The Captain lurched forward, startled by communication officer’s sudden intrusion into his quiet.

“Yes?” He said with an agitated growl.

Warro, the communication officer, hesitated upon seeing captain’s dour response, and then continued. “Our scout just radioed up. She can’t find the gravitator anywhere.” (Of course, he didn’t speak English. But without the translation, it would have read something like “Zor eva jums. Kor bli je tory bo” and you wouldn’t have understood it.)

The Captain leapt to his feet, brushed past communication officer Warro, and entered the ships command center. He glared down on Pilot Sheeb. “Sheeb, where the hell is the gravitator?”

“The sensors indicated it was occupied so I brought it up.” Sheeb gave the readouts a cursory glance again. “Zor should be stepping out of it about...now.” A “bing” sounded, and the doors to the gravitator opened. There lay an unconscious human. Captain Grovia swore under his breath.

“What’s going on?” he growled. His furious voice became high pitched as he yelled at Sheeb. He took the glass still half filled with wine and hurled it against the cabin wall, littering the floor with a thousand glinting shards. The mission had been faultless. This was the last thing he needed. Sheeb cowered under her advisor’s wrath. She’d be the one who would have to clean up that mess later. They’d be picking glass out of their feet for weeks.

“What the hell were you thinking? You know to never go by just the pressure sensors. There’s always radio confirmation.” The Captain’s words stung Sheeb.

“I thought Zor was having radio problems since the indicators registered a constant, unmoving weight,” Sheeb interjected.

The Captain continued his tirade. “Weren’t you listening when Central passed out orders? ‘No live biological samples this mission. Get in and get out without interacting with the local animal life.’ Now get this thing back to where it came from before it regains consciousness. Tell Zor she has a package coming down the gravitator

and she is to make it comfortable.”

Shaking, Sheeb barely squeaked out a “Yes sir” as she leaned back over the console, hitting the button with one of her ten-inch gray fingers to send the gravitator down.



The first thing Will felt was the cool evening grass pressed against his bare arms and legs. Without opening his eyes, he knew Zack lay next to him, his breath pulsating on his leg. It had been the most peculiar dream. Something about gravity stopping and him floating up into the sky. Childish notions he was sure. He slowly inhaled the brisk air deep into his lungs and a smile crept across his face. This truly was the life.

Keeping his eyes closed, he propped himself up on his elbows and savored the feel of the evening air a bit longer. How long had he been asleep? He had no clue, but his growling stomach indicated its hunger. A late snack would surely hit the spot. Opening his eyes, he suddenly felt weak.

Will now lay in the front yard of his house.

SURFING TAILS



Karin leaned down to make some final adjustments to her boot locks. Her chiseled muscles rippled through her blue jumper, telling of the countless hours of training and practice that had taken place over the past years. Her alert eyes remained hidden under dark, auburn hair that draped across her face and trailed down her shoulders. On the left shoulder of her jumper, a frayed NAC “22” patch id’d a memory she had tucked away and was trying desperately to forget for the race at hand.

The trials for the Halley’s Cup had been strenuous and, in the throes of competition, more than one contestant had been injured. Only the best made it through preliminaries and of the best, she alone remained rigorous and strong. The combined intellect, physique, and emotional control pooled together in making her NAC’s (North American Community’s) representative in the event.

Marie, her assistant, helped her suit up in the titanium-alloyed space suit, which was designed to survive the hard knocks and impacts of racing. Marie dropped the propulsion unit onto Karin’s back and secured the controls on her left arm. Karin knew, as any comet surfer did, that surfers won and lost races because of assistants. Marie had come highly recommended by Stigfield. Indeed, Karin’s life had been saved more than once by her assistant’s keen eyes. They were the ones who piloted the jump-shuttles, watched for potential danger, and were especially vital during nitro-thrust.

Nitro-thrust. A one-time surge of speed. With it, Surfers could grab an early lead or take the race near the end of it. All by the push of the nitro-thrust button. Knowing when to use it was the most crucial and dangerous decision the surfer and assistant made. Mostly the assistant who had a good view of the tail ahead made it. The debris field needed to be virtually clear to use nitro-thrust. Only an assistant could gauge this.

“I don’t know why you’re even bothering. You know you gonna lose anyway,” a voice taunted, breaking her concentration. Karin didn’t need to look up from the arm

controls to regrettably recognize it. *Nicoli*. He towered in front of her, smirking, and brought back the memories of a past she tried to forget.

“Get...out...of my...sight!” she hissed through clenched teeth, biting back the myriad of curses she wanted to sling at him. She needed to remain calm and not let him get at her.

He laughed and turned away.

Pausing, he responded with quiet mock sincerity, “I hope what happened to Stigfield doesn’t happen to you.”

Damn the bastard. The words stung, unearthing memories of bitterness and pain. She felt tears begin to form. The dam broke and the memories surged forward.



NAC’s racer “22” maneuvered his icetroid around debris at 100 kilometers per second. Adrenaline coursed through Stigfield’s veins as he dodged debris. This was what he lived for. Dust particles bounced off his protective suit, showering sparks every which way. As his left boot gripped his troid, he pulled the right grappling hook, rotating him around a rapidly moving ice chunk.

Karin fought to not be distracted by her fiancé as she faced her own minefield of comet debris. She had met Stigfield at the Comet Surfing Center in the Olvarion when she first started training. He had been assigned as her mentor to train her in the art of the sport. Simulation after simulation and dancing between the hydrogen envelop and the dust tail brought them close. After a year of courtship, they were engaged.

In this particular event, they were surfing the newly discovered Comet Kadmir. Although comet surfing took place throughout the Solar system, it was only as the comet drew close to the sun that the competitions occurred. With the tail longer and the debris cutting loose more violently, comet surfing became more dangerous to the surfers and more exciting to those watching. It was the ultimate of extreme sports.

Karin maneuvered her icetroid around another tumbling rock and leveled out again. Enduring the brutal trials and tests for this race, Stigfield eliminated the NAC competition as was expected. He had been NAC’s best representative for years in comet

surfing. As the top racer's apprentice, she had learned the skills that had helped her rank second, qualifying her for the Kadmir race.

Commotion to her left caused her to twist her helmet that direction. Nicoli of the Slavic Community led the race only meters ahead of Stigfield. He bounced his icetroid off a conical rock, pushing it right into Stigfield's path. She watched in horror, as Stigfield couldn't react fast enough. The pointed rock impaled him.



Now, three years later, she was racing for the first time since the "accident." Through tear-stained eyes, she glared at Nicoli as he walked away with his assistant. *That bastard*, Karin muttered under her breath wiping tears away with her gloved hand. *If it weren't for you, Stigfeild would still be here.* Under her race suit, the diamond necklace Stigfield had given her as an engagement gift still lay on her chest. Stigfeild was reason enough to race today. Beating the bastard that killed him and avenging his death only bettered the deal.

Halley's Comet posed to be the biggest media event since comet surfing began and she could not pass up the largest cosmic gala of the century. Every community wanted their best to represent them. So when the President of NAC had asked her to race, she couldn't very well turn him down. Now, she was glad she hadn't.

"Karin, are you ok?" asked Marie as she finished sealing the remainder of Karin's suit.

"Uh, yeah. I should be. I was just..."

"Shhhh...not now. You need to focus. You can't afford to have your mind somewhere else."

Karin knew she was right. She was always right. She should have known better than to try to feed Marie her lame excuses. Training for races had practically made them sisters. Far too often they would end up finishing each other's sentences. Then again, she had been there during the aftermath of Stigfeild's death. She shook the dark thoughts away.

"When do we leave?" she said.

“We can get in position now, if you want.”

Karin nodded her consent.

They traveled down the flickering lit hallway to the hanger. Karin’s boots clanked across the metallic floor as they approached their jump-shuttle. Around the room, mechanics put final adjustments and tune-ups on these mini-ships, while assistants climbed into the pilot’s seat and contestants into the seat behind.

Minutes later, Karin and Marie shot out into the blackness. Karin twisted in her seat to look back at the Olvarion. It had been the first station in space dedicated solely to cosmic sports. All comet surfers trained there. Within its walls were playing fields and arenas designed for zero gravity sports. Olvarion’s bulb like metallic white receded in the distance, along with the memories it held.

Available for communication. Engage 267813 Marie, she thought and instantly she was jacked into the NeuroNet. Marie, who was already online, acknowledged the connection.

“We will be at the dust tail in 5 minutes.”

Karin gathered her wandering thoughts in the silence. Stigfield had taught her how to utilize this time to focus herself mentally for the intensity of the competition ahead. She reached back and adjusted the NeuroNet transponder that was slipped into an embedded jack behind her ear.

The NeuroNet was a lifesaver. With it, Marie was able to communicate instantly with Karin, advising her as she dashed in and out and around potential dangers. Using a receptacle behind the ear, the NeuroNet connected directly to the neuro-pathways of the brain. Transmitting information unencumbered by words resulted in faster, more accurate communication and reactions. The ability to communicate with Marie this way had kept her in more races than she could count.

Karin felt the jump shuttle adjust to pace the comet’s tail. Marie’s voice broke into her thoughts. “We’ve arrived at the dust tail and are standing by to drop you into position.”

Karin tightened and adjusted the propulsion unit clamped on her back. She tucked her hair up and slipped on her helmet, preparing herself for when the floor would open at her feet and she would shoot off into the space beneath. Marie, she knew,

scanned the dust tail even as they waited, calculating any potentially dangerous projectiles and obstacles.

“Karin, I’m opening the floor exit now,” Marie said.

Karin allowed silence to be her answer. She locked away the anger and hatred, masking the deep wounds that she felt over the loss of Stigfield. She masked the hurt that followed when Nicoli and the Slavic Community had so easily laughed it away. She ignored the recent memory of seeing Nicoli back at the Olvarion, the encounter which had dredged all the pain up to the surface. She buried it all and prepared to race.

She unstrapped herself from the seat and stood over the floor exit, grappling hooks in hand. The floor opened and she dropped into the emptiness of space. She propelled herself towards her icetroid 100 meters away. These 7-meter long, 4 meter in diameter chunks of ice were anything but natural. Preplaced by the Comet Racing Commission, a freezer mold formed them into cylinder shapes and branded each contestant’s insignia onto the side. Her troid slowly twisted as it sped along the comet’s tail. Her boots caught the one edge of the moving projectile and she began to rotate with it. She adjusted the propulsion, slowing the rotation to stop. Her hands brought the grappling hooks down, grabbing the back of the slab. Leaning forward, she was ready to race.

Karin looked around at the other contestants spread out along the same approximate starting point. Here in the blackness, stars were beautiful. Nothing but the vast expanse of the cosmos and comet debris. Though her mind continued its heightened focus, her body relaxed enjoying these last few moments before the race.

Marie spoke, “I am linking you into Sports Command on the Olvarion. The race is go in 30 seconds.”

Breath quickening, adrenaline coursed through her veins as she tested the security of her hooks and boots. She focused her mind on the goal, the flashing beacon that would signify the end of the race.

Marie gave her last minute details as to what lay ahead as the countdown began at 15. “The debris field ahead is pretty intense. It is fairly free of dark ice. A real plus.”

“Got it.” Karin knew once the race started, she and the other racers would be traveling faster than the tail. It was then that debris became much more dangerous and

when Marie's eyes and thoughts became much more valuable. Dark ice was a racer's worst nightmare. Assistants and racers struggled to detect such debris, able to do so only when it passed between ice and debris reflecting sunlight.

Sports Command cut into her thoughts. "Contestants are go in 5...4...3...2...1..."

The starting gun thundered through the NN transponder and into her head signaling the start of the race. Karin pressed her gloved thumb down on the forward thrust button, shooting her forward into the throes of competition. Like the sound of rapid laser fire, Marie's voice thundered in her brain.

"10 o'clock...dark projectile...1 o'clock...three icetroids about 1 meter in diameter spinning counter clockwise... the Asian Community Surfer is 15 out."

Marie's thoughts echoed in Karin's brain and she responded. Impulse took over, bred by countless hours of simulation and experience. She pulled and pushed the grappling hooks, adjusting her thrusters and avoiding both racers and debris. From here on it was pure instinct. She was in the zone.

"Nicoli is nitro-thrusting. His icetroid is coming in fast" interrupted an alarmed Marie. Even as the thought reached Karin, Nicoli zoomed past, and then ahead in the dust tail. Nicoli's NN code flashed across her NN connection. Occupied by the race, she accepted it without fully realizing who it was.

"Ow. That's gotta hurt" laughed Nicoli, breaking into her NN Transponder. "Now if Stigfield was here, that would've never happened." She cut him off, but her imagination filled in his smug laughter, partially breaking her concentration.

Marie cut in. "Don't let him get you. Use your fury to focus!"

Karin fought to refocus her thoughts. She channeled her vengeance manipulating her controls spurring her icetroid faster. *The bastard can go to hell*, she thought, dodging a rock splinter.

"Karin, focus! Don't lose it!" Marie's commanding voice throbbed again in her brain.

The tail ahead grew thicker as she surged forward. Nicoli was only a dim image in her view screen and she knew, from information flowing constantly to her from the NN that he was in the lead.

She struggled to focus her thoughts on the race when Karin felt the grappling

hooks give. Muscles tensing, she fought to keep her right grappling hook secure. The sudden release of tension spun her body left twisting her right cleats off the icetroid. Pain surged up her side from the involuntary strain on her muscles. Cutting her propulsion, she wrestled against the icetroid's inertia to get the right grappling hook secured back into the ice.

The unbalanced shift in weight began to spin the icetroid, as Karin hung on attached only by the remaining grappling hook and boot. Karin blocked Marie's voice from her mind. She knew Marie could do nothing from the confines of the jump-shuttle except muddle her thoughts. She needed every ounce of concentration. Karin's grappling hook scrapped along the top of the ice as she tried desperately to hook it back in. Marie was finally able to break into her thoughts.

"Karin, you have got to listen to me. There is a huge ice boulder 100 meters away. The inertia of your icetroid is closing that distance fast."

Perspiration broke out on Karin's forehead. This was it. It was either gain control of her icetroid or meet Stigfield in the great beyond. Desperation surged through her as her right grappling hook scraped across the ice, finally finding a niche. She yanked hard. The hook secured and dug deep.

"50 meters and closing." Marie's thoughts knelled in her head. She brought her boot down and lodged it into place. Altering her thrusters, she brought her icetroid back under control.

"20 meters"

Karin hit the forward thrust on the propulsion system, lunging her ahead as she pushed the right grappling hook down forcing her icetroid up and away from the on coming boulder. It was not enough.

The impact lurched her sideways. She held on only by sheer determination and the deeply embedded hooks and cleats. A horrific thought chilled Karin's mind. What if the icetroid would not hold? What if it shattered or its integrity was weakened by the impact?

The boulder scraped along the bottom of her icetroid and in milliseconds was gone. It had not shattered. Karin knew she couldn't worry about it now. If the icetroid was cracked, so be it. She could do nothing about it now.

She mentally inventoried the race status. The diversion had cost her three places. She was now in fifth. Nicoli had disappeared from her visor's view. Gritting her teeth in determination, she shot a NN thought towards Marie. "*The race isn't finished yet.*"

Silence. Alarm coursed through her. "Marie! Marie! Are you there?" There was no response. Knowing what had happened, her stomach sickened. The transponder had dislodged during her collision with the ice boulder. Without Marie to guide her, the beacon she raced towards now seemed far in the distance. There was no Marie, no Sport's Central, and thankfully no Nicoli.

Inhaling deeply and pursing her lips, she composed herself and began to navigate her icetroid ahead focusing on the surfer just in front of her. The South American Community surfer in fourth began to edge around the Asian Community surfer in third. Karin veered out of the way, as some heavy debris caused the SAC surfer to hop sideways right into the other's icetroid, causing both to lose their grips on their grappling hooks, effectively tossing them off their rides and out of the race.

Only two to go, she thought. She recognized the emblem on the surfer ahead as that of the Eurasian Community. She edged her icetroid closer. The Eurasian Community surfer saw her. He swerved in front of her, trying to stop her passing maneuver. Karin pulled her grappling hooks up and towards her while pressing the thruster button. Her icetroid took a nosedive slipping under the Eurasian Community surfer. She was now second.

Karin cracked a slight smile imagining the Eurasian Community surfer swearing at his ill luck. *If he wouldn't have tried to swipe at me, he'd be in second*, she thought. Those maneuvers worked if you managed to nudge the fellow competitor's icetroid enough that he or she had to fight to gain control of it. If you missed, as this guy did, all the surfer gained was lost time. Nicoli alone stood between her and first place.

She could barely make him out. She knew he was probably hundreds of meters ahead. Without Marie, there was no way to tell the exact distance. The only way she would ever catch up to him was to use the nitro-thrust.

This was suicide. If she could only communicate with Marie, she would have a better idea of what lay ahead in the debris field. But there was no Marie. She scanned the space ahead. The area of the tail they were currently racing through contained only a

smattering of debris. It was what she couldn't see she was worried about. She was out of options. If she wanted to win, nitro-thrust was it.

She hit the nitro-thrust. Her troid lunged forward. The distance between her and Nicoli melted away. She prayed the area ahead was free of dark ice. Sparks flew from tiny pieces of ice and dust hitting her suit. The nitro-thrust exhausted itself. Inertia covered the remaining distance between her and Nicoli.

Maneuvering around some loose debris, she pulled alongside of him. Eyes widening, his mouth dropped open. *I'm the last thing he expected*, Karin thought. A smug smile crept across her lips as she saw Nicoli attempting to communicate with her.

She fought to keep the anger boiling inside of her under control. Revenge was at her fingertips. Just a pull of the grappling hooks, one click of her thruster, and her icetroid would ram into his, putting him, and probably her out of the race. But as she rubbed her thumb over the tempting thruster button, she could hear Marie's reminder echoing from her memories.

"Focus your thoughts. Shake it off." These thoughts and the thoughts of avenging Stigfield's death wrestled each other. What would Stigfield have done if their places were switched? Karin knew what she had to do. She fought down the urge for vengeance and with it the tears that wanted to flow. *Stigfield, I'm finishing this race for you*, she thought.

Clenching her teeth, she inched her way forward, edging ahead of Nicoli. She would win this race fair and square. That would be humiliating enough for Nicoli. Through her visor she could just make out Nicoli's scowl as he fought the debris and his icetroid. Catching his eye, she mouthed "Go to hell" and then laughed as she continued to move into the lead.

Then her blood ran cold. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw rushing towards Nicoli every comet surfer's nightmare. A human size chunk of dark ice moving fast, towards her opponent. The horror of such an impact over shadowed any grief, sorrow, and vengeance in her. She screamed a silent scream at him to look ahead and not at her. "Look ahead! Nicoli! Look ahead!" she mouthed hoping he could read her lips.

Confusion erased the scowl on his face. Nicoli now noticed the dark ice closing in fast. Karin could see him scrambling to get his troid out of the way. Then

time slowed. She watched as the dark debris nailed his left side, spinning him off his troid and out of her sight.

The beacon flashing steadily ahead was now her's alone.

SURVIVAL OF THE FITTEST

Greys and browns stuttered into view as my eyelids snared rapidly trying to push the blackness away. God, it felt like a Peterbuilt with a load of Pittsburg steel had run over me then backed up and did it again. What in the hell had happened? I jerked my head to get things into focus. The time I had a hangover after downing twelve at Jalopies Bar mirrored the churning my stomach felt now.

“Hey, he’s coming around. Keep an eye on him.”

“Yeiss.”

The voices tumbled groggily through my thoughts. My vague awareness did not initially recognize the potential undertone they carried. I tried rubbing my face to wipe the crustiness from my eyes. My arms refused to move. I shook my head again and the room swam into focus and I remembered.

At midnight I had closed the Vintage Coffee Shop. After thirteen years of owning the dive, it was routine. Lock the door, dump the filters, start the dish washer, wash down the mosaic topped tables, refill the napkins, push in the black curved back chairs, take the trash to the dumpster out back, spray and smash any roaches I found, tally the register, empty the dishwasher, kill the lights and finally, sit down on the red vineled seats of the coffee shop with a cup of joe mixed with Bailey's Irish Cream that I reheat in the microwave and reflect on the day. I still sat in the darkness and looked out the coffee shop window past the statue of a nude that was silhouetted from the streetlights. My arms still refused to budge.

I could feel something biting into my arms through my black silk shirt that was a style in the eighties I thought should still exist. “What the he--?” I mumbled. When I spoke, I heard the shuffling of feet. I couldn’t see who moved, but it was then I began to realize the truth. I had been tied up.

No one had been in the coffee shop when I had locked the doors. I was sure of it. It was impossible to break in through the door which was triple dead bolted as it

needed to be in this part of the city. If...IF the impossible would have happened and someone had gotten in, the alarm the ADT salesman from the company had conned me into buying would've had the police here in less than ten minutes. One glance at the double thick storefront windows told me they were still intact.

"Hey," I shouted to the empty blackness around me. My eyes were adjusting to the darkness and I could just make out the tops of chairs and tables faintly reflecting the outside light. I tried twisting my head to see who was behind me, but I could only catch a faint reflection of the counter front.

"Hey, Mack," a voice hissed like a dart out of the darkness. "Look at da table in front ya." I couldn't place the voice, but I suspected it was Mike. He helped run the shop and pulled pranks like this all the time. Bastard. His "Godfather III" accent was horrible.

"Mike, knock it off," I said and smugly smiled knowing I had his joke. I turned my head towards the table and saw...and saw nothing. "Mike? Where are you hiding? Stop playing and untie me!" I forced sternness through the bemusement in my voice.

My eyes focused on the table in front of me. The cup of coffee spiked with Bailey's lay on its side with small puddle of the caffeine rich liquid surrounding it.

"Listen, buddy, the name's not Mike. It's Simon." The voice whistled to get my attention and there, propped against the edge of my coffee mug, standing on his hind legs, and puffing on a cigar was one of the biggest, the fattest, the ugliest roaches I had ever laid eyes on.

"Now ya gaddit. It does seem to take awhile for some of you humans to catch on." A deep rumbling "Huh, huh, huh" of laughter was cut short by a bronchial cough that caused Simon to withdraw the cigar from his mouth with his top arms and to cover it with his middle ones. After it had subsided, he drilled the cigar back into his mouth.

Now I knew it was a joke. At the very least a dream. There was no way a cockroach could tie me up to a chair much less speak. "Jesus, Mike, will you cut it out?"

The roach in front of me waggled his cigar and he twitched his head. "Smiley," he called out over his shoulder. "Give me a bit of luz." Looking back at me, he said, "Don't cha worry. Yaw'll soon gedit."

The faint dawning of soft fluorescent light washed over the room. Littered

across the floor and all around me like candy gutted from a piñata were a hundred plus roaches. God Almighty! Who knows what that many roaches could do? My face paled. This was no joke.

“Awe he gits it!” roared Simon grinning broadly, “lookit de man. He got brains.” Laughter chittered across the floor.

When silence had regained control of the room, he spoke. “Listen Buddy, it’s quite simple. You,” he said pointing an antenna my direction, “have bin killing our friends. We can’t let ya go on doing dis.” He paused to take a draw on his cigar. And then, with a voice as sinister as his toothless grin, he said, “And there’s this little matter of restitution.”

Mike wasn’t the jokester; these guys were. Simon had to be kidding. “And what,” I said, icing my voice with haughtiness, “do you puny little roaches think you’re going to do against a human my size.” I had to be a hundred times bigger than they were. I wiggled my arms in their restraints. The bindings the roaches had wound me in were tight. I was still undaunted. After all, their bodies were much more squishable than mine.

“Oh..ho..ho..ho. We’ll see if you exude such confidence when we’re through with ya.” His pinchers snapped together menacingly, a sound that staccatoed in my ears.

“You act like you’re some sort of mafia,” I jeered. First off, I couldn’t believe I was actually talking to roaches. What was even more absurd was that these roaches seemed to have walked out of any dozen mob movies. “You guys are far from the Italian Mob.”

“Cuban,” he corrected, “We’re Cuban Mafia. We’re Cuban Cockroaches and therefore gadda be Cuban Mafia.”

“Listen pal,” he continued, “we can dialogue till the sun starts dis city churning. Frankly, I don’t gad dat ‘mount of time. We got business with ya before people start banging at the shop door.” I could feel the tendrils of fear begin to wrap around me.

The mob boss whistled and twenty-four roaches scurried towards him, carrying twelve Milky Way candy bars on their backs. With a roach at each end, they lugged the candy up the legs of the table and stopped when they reached their Simon.

“Now let’s talk rest-ti-tu-tion. We are going to humble ya by feeding ya from

the hands of the roaches which ya find so des-pic-a-ble.” The word despicable staccatoed out of his mouth. “We will feed ya every single last candy bar.” His grin broadened. “Then, our restitution will be complete.”

I couldn’t believe it. Confidence rose within me. I had killed their fellow precious mafiosos night after night after night. Probably thousands had died by the spray I had wielded and the stomp of my mighty foot. And what was my punishment for being guilty in the holocaust of the roaches? Eating twelve candy bars in a row. This was insane. This Cuban Roach Mob was nuts. The worst punishment I would get was stomach ache.

“Are ya ready?” His leering voice almost unnerved me. It contained almost too much confidence in it for someone doing something so stupid. I nodded my assent.

One after one, the two roaches carrying the Milky Ways would pop them into my mouth. No sooner would I be done chewing the mixture of carmel, chocolate and peanuts than the next one would be there. My stomach felt like a cappuccino frother ready to explode.

When tell tale signs of once existing chocolate edged my mouth, I managed to croak out a hollow laugh. “Some punishment. By tomorrow night I’ll be good as new. It might even happen sooner if I throw up.” My stomach gurgled with sweetness that sickened.

Simon snapped his forelegs and another eight roaches scurried up on to the table. They carried a filthy white sock they had to have dredged up from the storeroom.

“Open up, Mack,” the mob boss snapped, “your punishment would be no good if ya vomited those candy bars up.” He pulled out his dwindling cigar and motioned it towards me. “Stuff him up, boys.”

I let them stuff the dirty sock into my mouth. I suppose I could’ve fought a little harder, but hell, it was just a sock. The roaches wadded it in so tight that I was forced to breathe through my nose.

“As I told ya earlia, we tied ya up for two reasons.” He rubbed his forearms and middle arms together, the cigar now effectively snuffed out in the Bailey’s. “Right now ya are paying restitution. We keep up on what’s going on in the world, small though we may be. There are mad men running your world, Mack. Just look at North Korea,

Afghanistan, and Saudi Arabia. Some even question whether the good ole' land of the free and the brave doesn't have mad men running it sometimes." He paused, apparently wanting that to sink in. I had no idea what he was getting at. The roaches around me and him seemed rapt with attention at their leader's great words.

"Ya see," he continued, "the way I figa it, it's only a matter of time before someone pushes the button, and then, presto, mankind will have given us a gift: a world all to our own. We needa increase our population so dat when dis happens, we'll be ready to run it. Ya killed a lot of good roaches in the past year, but you're making your amends." I still couldn't see what he was driving at.

He crawled to the edge of table closest to me. His compound eyes daggered into mine. "Your body will be a great incubator. Plenty of food. Plenty of heat. Our females laid eggs in the candy bars before you ate them."

I paled and strained at my bonds, trapped and desperate like a cat cornered in an alley by a stray mutt pack. I imagined the eggs hatching within me and the young eating through the acidic lining of my stomach. My stomach convulsed, but any vomit that came up, the sock stopped and I had to suck back down. In this time of retribution, I remembered one thing.

Milky Way candy bars don't have nuts.

NOTHING IMPORTANT



A stressed Vance Adams popped his knuckles as he often did when the weight of the world's problems hung heavy upon him. As Supreme Chancellor of Earth, he inherited everything that came with the job; from the prestige to humanities worse nightmares. Since he had taken office, disease had raped the American sector while famine plagued the African sector. That was just the beginning of his troubles. He sighed and hit the com, asking his secretary to bring in another mug of coffee.

Stress had taken a physical toll on him. Although older, wrinkles had developed over his frail body much faster than that of other men his age. Under his graying, brown hair, a shroud of baggy skin surrounded tired eyes. His three marriages suffered the fate of all marriages whose men become more entangled with the affairs of the world than with the affairs of their wives.

"You know, I'd trade this job any day. It would be nice to wake up, think about the mess the world was in, and say 'Heck, that's not my problem, that's the Chancellor's problem.' I am the unfortunate, lucky bastard." He leaned back against his gold inlaid chair, folding his hands behind his head. After a moment, he carelessly waved a hand towards his chief advisor and sarcastically said, "So Broderick, what pleasantries do you have for me today?"

When Chancellor Adams was in one of these moods, it made Broderick nervous. He alone ever saw the Chancellor this way. Whenever he appeared in front of the masses, the holo-projection made him appear a strong, fearless leader, confidently leading the people into the future of the Earthen Empire. Sean Broderick couldn't remember the last time the Chancellor had made a live personal appearance. He slid his tall, lanky self into a chair near the Chancellor's desk. Being the Chancellor's advisor was never easy.

"Sir, I hate being the harbinger of bad news," he said. then hesitated, unsure of how to break the news to the already overwhelmed Chancellor. Finally, he continued.

"It's the Asian sector, Sir. Flooding yesterday destroyed thousands of food storage units. Millions risk starvation. If we..." The Chancellor's secretary interrupted him mid-sentence as she poked her head in the door.

"Your coffee, sir" she said placing the steaming mug on the Chancellor's desk. He picked it up, sipping the warm brew. Ahhh...dark Mandarin, thought Vance, knowing this was the only solace he would get all morning. The sound of Broderick clearing his throat sliced through his reverie.

"About the Asian sector..."

The Chancellor raised a quieting hand. "I know...I know... get the council of food distribution on the visiscreen!"



A dumbfounded Howard Davis stood drop-jawed, with beakers and test tubes strewn everywhere. Walls of equations surrounded a rapidly boiling petri-dish over the open flame of a Bunsen Burner. With a white technician's coat draping his hunched shoulders, Howard stared at the pad of paper in his left hand. His eyes glanced to the petri-dish, then back to the paper of scribbled graphs and numbers, and then back to the petri-dish again. He couldn't believe it. He, Howard J. Davis, had actually solved it.

Scientists had sought this, decoding DNA and mapping the human genome. They had tested, pushed, and prodded; poked and pinched; boiled, burned, and froze. Still nothing. The wise and religious had prayed, petitioned, and wrote and signed treatises; they had debated, analyzed, theorized and martyred. Still, even they had found nothing. Until... Until he, Howard J. Davis, had stumbled across it quite by accident. He held in his hands the impossible, improbable, the elusive, solution to...

The improbable equation solving an impossible problem lay accidentally scribbled on the pad in front of him. Most of his notable research, and there wasn't much of it, had happened that way. Howard was the type of scientist who became so engrossed in his work that he would miss sleep, dinner, and social engagements. When he did remember social engagements, he retreated to dimly lit corners where associates and acquaintances (no one really called him a "Friend") would find him mumbling about

some scientific equation and about his hatred of parties. At times, he had recalculated portions of his studies because of his horrible habit of hiding work, paranoid that some colleague would steal it. And in his mental amnesia, he could never find it either. Weeks and months later, he would discover the papers stacked under books or tucked in a drawer after having moved on to another quote unquote “ground breaking” project. But now he had happened upon his Archimedes Eureka discovery. He, not those mathematical gurus and scientific geniuses at Harvard or Princeton, he, Howard J. Davis, had solved the mathematical and scientific equation to all the world’s problems.

He turned off the Bunsen burner, poured the greenish contents into a flask, and sealed it. Hurrying over to his desk, he punched the Chancellor's code into the black, nondescript visiscreen. It was an older model, not that it mattered; it served its purpose.

Because he had made that one or two noteworthy, Scientific Journal mentioning discoveries, he held the cursory attention of Chancellor Adams who gave him a meager, but adequate grant. Others were much higher on the totem pole than he was, but he was on the totem pole. With this discovery, he was sure he would have the Chancellor’s full attention and climb to the top.

The visiscreen clicked and whirred. The picture at the other end came into focus and woman appeared. Her feminine, electronic prerecorded voice cheerily said, “I’m sorry. The party you are trying reach is not available right now. If you leave your name, reason for the call, and visiscreen access code, the party...” Click. Howard punched a button terminating the transmission.

“Dammit,” he said under his breath. “This can't wait.” Grabbing his tattered black brief case, he shoved his notes and the flask inside and sprinted for the door that led out to his garage. He had to get to the Chancellor. The magnitude of this discovery could not wait.

Voice activating his hovering century out-of-date magnocar, he slid in the driver's seat, powered the controls and backed out of the garage. He merged his car on to the near empty highway. Since it was near midmorning, most people’s day had already started, fattening their financial waists and loosening their spending belts. He pushed the acceleration lever forward and his magnocar surged ahead.

Ten minutes from the Chancellor's Administrative Center, Howard glanced at the view panel in front of him and swore. With lights blazing, a DCP vehicle rapidly gained on him.

"Frick! Just what I needed!" he said, irritation evident in his voice. A message scrolled across the bottom of the view screen: "Howard Davis, you are speeding. Please slow down and pull over."

Keeping one hand on the steering wheel, his other jerked across the keyboard, typing back, "Give me an escort. It's crucial I get to the Chancellor." Hell, everyone had escorts these days.

After a few seconds, the cold words of the DCP ghosted across the screen, "Your name does not appear on his agenda for today. Please pull over."

Damn. These idiots didn't get it. They would escort a woman writing in the agony of labor while her frantic husband drove like a madman. They would escort funerals, weddings, and parades. Hell, they would even escort the Pope. And they would not escort him, Howard J. Davis, wiz scientific wonder boy with his ultimate discovery? Some times governmental people just couldn't get their priorities right.

Howard refused to waste his time on these guys. His fingers danced over the controls and his magnocar raced faster still. The DCP followed in pursuit.

The magnocar careened onto Adam's Street that led to the Chancellor's Administrative Complex. Howard slammed the acceleration lever back and killed the engine. The magnocar stopped abruptly just inches from a life size statue of the Chancellor and right in front of the entrance to his offices. In the sudden silence, he could hear the pursuing sirens drawing closer.

"Open the door now!" he shouted. The driver's door sprang open and he bolted for the ivory studded glass doors, which opened before him. A receptionist, whose nametag identified him as "John Gordon," sat quietly reading the World News. So this is what a government job will get you, Howard thought to himself. He didn't feel bad at all about interrupting this young man.

"Tell the Chancellor Howard Davis is here to see him."

Gordon looked up from behind his paper. "Do you have an appointment?"

"No. I tried calling the Chancellor earlier, but his line was busy."

Oh great, Gordon mused to himself, another lunatic who thinks he can just waltz in here and see the Chancellor. He examined Howard's hunched shoulders and nervously shifting eyes. Where did these guys come from anyway? "I'm sorry. But unless you have an appointment, you won't be able to see him. Not that it would help today." He motioned towards the far wall. "As you can see, the Chancellor has put all his appointments on hold while dealing with this current crisis."

Howard glanced towards the wall where people sat wrapped in suits with briefcases and computers on their laps, looking important. All their woes and concerns paled to Howard's awesome, immaculate discovery. Let the Chancellor get a hold of what he, Howard J. David, had and the face of the world would change drastically.

"He's going to see me. Alter his schedule or whatever you need to do to make it happen. Tell him I'm coming." Howard's scowled accented the irritation on his voice. He doubted he had five minutes. The DCP already surrounded his magnocar. Howard darted down the hall towards the office of Chancellor Adams as the DCP entered through the foyer's glass doors. Though his visits to the Chancellor were rare, he knew the way well enough.

Flabbergasted, Gordon quickly regained his composure and snatched up the phone.

"Security, Gordon here from front desk. There's some crazy headed for the Chancellor's office."

The hallway stretched at least a half mile in front of him, etched on either side by rows of nondescript doors. Howard's muscles ached and his lungs heaved fighting to suck air as he pushed forward, briefcase tucked under his arm. This was his penalty for penning himself up in his tiny workroom. But now, after this discovery, he promised himself things would be different. The sound of pursuing DCP on the marble floor behind him caused a surge of adrenaline to course through him and his stride increased the distance between them. Glancing back over his shoulder, he saw Chancellor Security guards join in the pursuit. His lungs were in agony as the marble floor rushed by underneath him. Administrative assistants and other office workers scurried to get out of his way muttering obscenities as they did.

The huge mahogany door lay dead ahead, flanked on either side by statues of guards clad in uniform. Howard stretched his hand towards the brass knob when he caught movement out of the corner of his eye.

"Nooo!!!" he screamed as one of the supposed statues of the Chancellor Security Guard stepped away from the side of the door and knocked him sideways into the wall. His brief case jarred open and papers scattered everywhere. The flask containing the greenish solution, bounced once, then twice, and skittered across the floor, coming to a stop in front of the entrance to the Chancellor's office.

Howard fought to regain the wind that had been knocked out of him. The solution, the formula, his discovery lay strewn across the floor around him. Frantically, he jibber jabbered and began to gather up his papers pushing them back into his briefcase. He did not heed the guard's warning to remain where he was. As he scrambled towards the sealed flask, a boot crashed into his shoulder. For a brief moment, Howard's world darkened.

The menacing guard towered above him with a deatomizer aimed at his chest. "I must see the Chancellor," he hoarsely coughed out. "I, Howard J. Davis, have uncovered the mathematical, scientific solution to all the world's troubles. I've..." Howard's voice faded as the impassive guard shoved the gun into his chest. In one final act of desperation, Howard lunged for the door. "I've got to get to the..." His voice caught in his throat, deatomizing with him into a pile of dust.



An alarmed Chancellor Adams was on his feet, startled by the clamor outside his door. He heard a yell, the "zip" of a deatomizer, and then silence.

"What's going on?" he said fearing another crisis.

Broderick got up. "I'll go see." He slipped out through the oak doors.

Moments later, he reappeared.

"Sir, it was nothing important."

SHRINK!



Dear Willard Hayes,

Before you think about typing your response to my letter, I suggest you pick up the pen and handwrite it. It'll save you the hassle of writing while straightjacketed in this institution where the white walls and ceilings blend appearing as one. Pull a Bradbury and curse the dangers of modern technology. Take it from me. You'll be better off.

You think me mad? Then you have not, my dear friend, heard the rumors that have been circulating regarding my tale. Let me share with you the story as it unfolded.

Three months ago, I finished assembling the latest and greatest in writing technology. You, as my editor, know how I used a typewriter to craft short speculative fiction I sent you under the pseudonym of Mark Bounds. Under your urging and the advancement you sent, I figured I might as well catch up to the ease and convenience of computer based manuscript preparation. As per your recommendation, I investigated putting an AI Writer 3000 together.

I spent nine months scouring the net for the best deals on the highest quality components and assembling my new AI Writer 3000. In the anticipation of writing with it, I hurriedly snapped the last few components and the AI brain module into place. The silver frame of the computer I had built with my own hands gleamed in the light of my desk lamp as it sat stoically on my faux oak desk. I pressed the power button and my machine sprung to life.

In the compulsion of a midnight writing binge when the candles encircling me burned low, I crafted my first short story, finishing it in two days. I spent another three revising it (with the help of the AI unit), editing it, and setting it up, and then sent it to you. After telling me it was one of my best works, you prepared it to appear in the May issue of your magazine. You will not believe the relief that ran through me knowing I did not have to retype the story from the beginning to make the changes I wanted to make. This didn't even begin to touch on how much the AI Writer 3000 had assisted me. But my relief stopped there.

The AI Writer 3000 began to exhibit odd behavior soon after I finished my first story on it. While typing my newest Nebula Award winning piece, my keyboard happily chattering away, my computer decided to shut down my word processor. Shocked, I first cursed not doing the “save-your-documents-every-five-minutes” thing, and then began to run through a mental checklist to see if I had done anything to shut down the program. Nope. I had not hit any taboo buttons nor clicked on any X’s.

The AI brain module hummed, breaking into the ignorance of my technical analysis. A solitaire game opened up in computer demonstration mode and began to play. *What the hell?* I thought. I cancelled out of the game and reopened the processor. I began the story again.

I had been typing less than two minutes, when it happened again. I didn’t even have a chance to enact the 5 minute save rule. This time it opened up the computer’s onboard audio device and began to play Beethoven’s fifth. I wanted to hurl the monitor across the room like a shot-put. Instead, out of frustration I unplugged the speakers for immediate, temporary relief, shut down the device, and again restarted the story I had been working on. Third times a charm right?

When it went into sleep mode, I had had it. I found a man in the phone directory called “The Computer Doctor,” a self-proclaimed expert in AI computers. After explaining the situation to him, he said, “It could be a hardware issue. Bring it down.”

Now before you think I’m yanking your chain, pulling your leg, or whatever cliché you may want to throw at me, listen to the rest of my tale. Listen carefully. Don’t allow the postmark from Blissful Haven taint your judgment.

Smashed between rows of Cracker Jack houses, a small one-story building pushed its way to the sidewalk, a red digisign in the window blinking between “Computer Doctor” and “Is In.” Pushing my way through the plexiglass door with my AI Writer 3000 in hand, I found the Computer Doctor, an intellectual drop out straight from Harvard, peering feverously into the wires and circuitry of a computer. Hearing me come in, he stood up straight, wiped the dirt off his glasses to get a better look, and then greeted me.

“Joe Devon,” he said extending his hand to shake mine, though because I

cradled the AI Writer 3000 he could not do so. He eyed the new unit like a kid on Christmas morning. “Computer Doctor,” he continued, “or more realistically dubbed hardware specialist. Nice piece of equipment.”

I nodded and said, “Mark Bounds. I called yesterday regarding problems I was having with my new unit.”

“You can leave it here,” Joe said, motioning to an empty space on the counter top, free from the carelessly coiled wires and stacks of components. “I’ll take a look at it and give you a call.”

He tinkered with it for a day. When I came in to pick it up, he said in bewildered tone, “This machine’s new. I ran diagnostics on the hardware. There’s nothing wrong with it.”

Frustrated, I said, “Its newness was never in question. Why its acting up is?”

“Sir, the hardware is fine,” he reiterated. “You have a sweet machine here, Mr. Bounds.” He leaned towards me and whispered, “Can I make a suggestion?” Desperate for anything that would work, I nodded.

“Here,” he said handing me a number. “A friend of mind is an AI psychologist. She should be able to help.”

Now Willard, I don’t have any problems with psychologists. But an AI psychologist? Its times like this that tell me I’ve been out of the technology loop too long. The thought of putting AI and Psychologist together feels wrong. But I ask you, what other options did I have?

Two days later, I found myself sitting in the waiting room with the tower of my AI Writer 3000 resting on the floor at the offices of Cindy Barrows, PhD. The two spiral pillared lamps in opposite corners of the room accented the mauve colored walls. To the left of the couch I had sunk into, an assortment of computing and psychology magazines rose up from a wooden coffee table. The receptionist, who had taken my name, information, and AI Writer 3000 history when I arrived, sat head bowed working behind a stomach high parapet so that only the top of her gray curly hair could be seen.

A plain faux wooden door at the end of the room opened and out stepped a lady in a white smock. Though short and thin, she carried herself with confidence and professionalism, her hair cropped short. She looked at me with intent eyes, and then

adjusting the glasses she rested on the bridge of her nose, she called my name. “Mr. Bounds?”

I rose from the chair and greeted her, stiffly shaking her hand. “Yes, and you must be Dr. Barrows.” I’m not psychic. I can just read nametags.

“Mr. Bounds, the information you provided seems in order. If you don’t mind, I would like to begin working with the patient right away.” She waved a hand toward the AI unit.

“Sure,” I said without much conviction and she picked up the unit carefully, carrying it through the door. Patient indeed. Was this woman nuts? A machine! The AI Writer 3000 is a machine. A tool used to carry out a task. Its intelligence is artificial. Not real. Not human. Not a patient. What a quack! Already, even before I heard her diagnosis, I regretted having come.

Hey, I’ve been thinking (I have a lot of time to do that now). Since you’re my editor and can vouch for my reputation, perhaps you can do something to get me out of here. Write back or visit me some time. Blissful Haven visitation hours are between 12 Noon and 5 PM. Any day would suit.

Anyway, I sat leafing mindlessly through one of the computer magazines dreaming up an idea for my next short story, when she returned a half hour later and called me back. The AI perched on the edge of her desk. She motioned me to take a seat in the empty recliner near her desk. Pulling out a leather chair behind her desk, she sat down and shuffled through her notes.

“Well, Mr. Bounds,” she said “let me get to the point. Your AI Writer 3000 has Attention Deficit Disorder.”

This was plain down preposterous. Angered, I rose from my chair. “Dr. Barrows, you must take me for some fool,” I growled. “This is a machine we’re talking about here. How can an AI unit programmed and put together by a human being get ADD?” I had shelled out big bucks for this unit, not to mention the money I paid the Computer Doctor and her, and I wasn’t about to listen to some kook feed me some hogwash about computer mental problems.

Her cold brown eyes bore into mine as I glowered, looking down on her. “Mr. Bounds,” she said, her voice like ice, “will you please contain your anger and sit down.”

Fighting the urge to grab my AI and storm out of the office, I slowly and compliantly sat down, though in me a blazing fire of dogged reserve burned.

“Now if you can refrain from any outbursts and talk civilly, I can begin to answer you questions.” She pulled out the history of the AI Writer 3000 that I had written up and given to the secretary and ran her finger down the notes I had made.

“Your AI unit is bored. Uninterested in your writing, it looks for other, more interesting outlets, like games and music.”

Ok Willard, picture this. Here I am nodding my head, pretending I’m listening to every God forsaken word she is saying. Now, I will admit, what she’s said about my computer playing fun and games rang true. But bored? An AI Writer 3000 is made for writing. Writing is what it does. Willard, I must ask you, when was the last time your AI Writer 3000 got bored? Never. At least not that you mentioned it.

Dr. Barrows continued, “Now to answer the how and why. Though not clinically proven, studies have suggested that ADD in AI modules is incubated during the assembly process. Some psychologists say it is the result of hurrying and not paying attention to details when the unit is put together. Others claim it is just a fluke in component engineering.” She hesitated and shuffled through her papers to buy time. Here comes the punch line, I thought.

“Mr. Bounds, I’m sorry to have to break this to you,” she spoke steadily adding small pauses for effect. “There is no known cure for ADD in AI machines.”

Are you hearing this? I laughed aloud, my disbelief scribed across my face. No cure? Any machine can be cured with enough replacement parts, not that I have a ton of extra cash around. You could of course give me another advancement and that would help purchase another AI module. But I digress. All machines are fixable, right?

“Sir, may I ask what’s so funny?” Any regret and sympathy she had while breaking the news to me disappeared. I decided I had to be real with her as to what I was feeling.

“Look, Dr. Barrows,” I started, “I’m sure you mean well and all. All machines can be repaired and have their parts replaced. Whatever part is causing this quote unquote ADD can be worked on.”

“Mr. Bounds, you already had the AI Writer 3000 to a computer doctor and he

told you the hardware was fine. What we have here is psychological impairment in the AI module. It can not be fixed.” Determined, she went on, “Besides tampering with an existing AI module is something only the company who created it can do. And then there are laws in regards to what activated AI modules can be tampered with and which cannot. Those with disabilities cannot.”

Willard, have you ever heard of such a thing? A machine protected under federal law. I created this machine, crafted it with my own hands, to perform a function, to carry out a certain role in my life. What’s my return? A malfunctioning machine that has rights! Zounds. You have no idea how much I fought to keep my cynicism in check. Ok, I thought, humor the woman. Hear her solution to the problem.

I pretended to be calm. “Alright, alright Doctor. I’m sorry for my out-break. It just comes as quite a shock. I mean, here I spent time research and assembling the AI unit to function a certain way and it performed quite differently. I guess I just wasn’t prepared for your diagnosis.” Her gaze remained steady and cool, as if she were deciding whether or not to believe me, and then her face softened. I meekly continued, “So what can be done?”

Dr. Barrows opened a side desk drawer and pulled out a small black computer chip, setting on top of the stack of papers in front of her. “If you want your machine to function more like the way you envisioned,” she said, “then this is your solution.”

“This connects to one of the empty slots on the side of your AI Writer 3000 module. It will tone down the AI portion of your computer so that the machine functions the way it was intended to. There are a few drawbacks, but minor I would say to have a functional AI unit. The program has to run at startup taking about 15 minutes to actually boot. Once booted your entire system will be 50 percent slower. Screen quality and resolution will also be cut by that much. As far as its intuitive skills in helping you write, they will be nonexistent. But no programs will pop open. Your word processor will not shut down in the middle of a story. You will have complete control of you AI Writer 3000.”

I trembled, red with rage. This was too much bullshit. My fists clenched and I slowly rose. The air thickened and I no longer attempted to hide my disdain for Dr. Barrows. Doctor indeed. Quack more like it. I lurched towards her. Scrambling up

from her chair, she frantically punched the red button on the corner of the desk. But I wasn't after her.

I reached out and grabbed my AI Writer 3000. It was mine after all; I would do whatever I wanted with it. My eyes wide and wild shifted about the room, finally coming to rest on Dr. Barrows. She had backed up against the bookcase, knocking her array of crank psychology books off the shelves. Slowly, I backed towards the door.

The door to her office crashed open as two men armed with tasers came barreling through the door. I whirled around to face the oncoming distraction. "It's mine!" I cried as one of the men brought his activated taser down on my shoulder. My left arm went limp, the AI Writer 3000 crashing to the floor and shattering into shards of computer hardware that scattered noisily across the black and white tiled floor. I cocked my right arm back to swing at him, but he laced the taser with more juice and brought it down again. Still conscious but now unable to move or speak, I mentally screamed "What about my rights!" He hit me a third time and I fell screaming.

Willard, I am sorry to have written you in crayon. They don't allow me to have any sharp objects in my room. But my writing! My writing suffers every day I am trapped in this prison. You MUST get me out of here. The charges they have trumped up of attempted assault, destruction of an AI machine, and lunacy are a sham. I eagerly await your response.

Sincerely,

Mark Bounds

THE DISPAIR OF KRÉCHELLIA

The First Tragedy of Kréchellia

The despair of Kréchellia is a tale few men will whisper for in it lays darkness, sorrow, and loss. In days of old, it could be read in full from the *Annals of Dúrain*, but alas in these current times their volumes are now nowhere to be found. In tales, the bards recount it's lost through a slow and mournful dirge and claim it was during the time of separation that the whereabouts of the *Annals of Dúrain* passed out of the memories of man. Lest the despair of Kréchellia be waylaid and remembered no more, it is here in the *Darthnor Chronicles of Men* that it shall be recounted and preserved

The Elven Princess Kréchellia loved the world and especially that which grew wild among the trees. She especially adored those things which grew and lived in Dúrain, the sacred realm of the Elves. Often when the sun would spread its morning rays over the canopy of the forest, her light would fall on Kréchellia, sleeping peacefully in the glen tall with grass. In the crooks of her slender arms as she slept, doves would nestle and coo. Spring fawns would gather 'round her feet, keeping them warm through out the darkness of night. Indeed, even the elms and the oaken trees stretched their branches out so that no dew would befall that beautiful face. The woods of Dúrain and all that was in them cherished her and nothing fulfilled her more than walking in them and singing the ethereal Elven songs she crafted with her love.

Though all her people were fair and beautiful, none ever came close to surpassing the beauty of Kréchellia. The Old Ones bestowed favor upon her and granted her mother's desire for a daughter to whom would be esteemed the glory and splendor of Dúrain, for she was Queen Iána of the Elves. But while Kréchellia was still young, Iána grew jealous and began despise the young maiden, for though all the eyes of Dura, the central city of Dúrain, extolled the infant child and mother, their attention strayed only to Kréchellia as she grew in years and beauty. Her laughter in those days fell like rain on the parched dry earth of summer and where it was heard, men stopped their

labor, women their chores, and all sense of arguments ceased. In the secrecy of the royal halls, Iána mistreated her and spoke foul of her to her father, Aúl the Elven King, so that even his face turned against her. And despised by her elders, she fled the royal halls at her coming of age and lived there no more.

But among the people she was loved, and, as in the woods of Dúrain, she walked freely among them. From them and the woods of Dúrain she gleaned much wisdom and grew in stature. However, she was not highly regarded by all.

Soon after Kréchellia's exile from the royal halls, the feast day of Halbraun drew near in which the elves celebrated the journey of their kind to Dúrain. All of Dura and the surrounding areas of Dúrain came to the halls of feasting in the royal palace for it was a celebration not to be missed. Knowing that their estranged daughter would come to the feasting and be with her people, Aúl and Iána schemed against her.

When she entered, the radiance of her face and the exquisiteness of her raiment crafted from the woods of Dúrain far surpassed that of the King and Queen and all heads were turned towards her. In the silent hush that had fallen over them, she waved her hand, bade them continue, and laughed with merriment at the occasion. But foreboding and sadness filled Kréchellia's heart, because in spite of her father and mother were alive, she was orphaned from them.

The king was angered by this. When the attention of all had left Kréchellia, King Aúl signaled the royal guard and they seized her and taking her, stripped her bare. Though they loved Kréchellia, they did not wish to disobey their king. With whips they marred the beauty the Old Ones had granted her. Then, bleeding from breasts, legs, back and face, Aúl bade the guard to bring her out. Shamed as they were by the deeds they had been asked to commit, the guards decked in blue and silver led the bleeding naked maiden out. The shame they felt was nothing compared to the shame that welled within Kréchellia.

After the horror and shock at seeing the glory of Dúrain marred, the elves rose up against King Aúl and Queen Iána. In rising to the defense their king and queen, the elf guards released Kréchellia and she fled to the woods of Dúrain and never returned to Dura nor the halls of the king again. The blood of envy and the innocents fell, though King Aúl squelched the uprising quickly by the hands of his royal guard. Many years

after did Aúl and Iána reign, but never again did they earn the hearts of their people. Halbraun's Day became a day of mourning because of the abomination of the king and queen and because Kréchellia never again walked freely among her own.

Kréchellia, Princess of the Elves, ran until exhaustion overcame her. Naked, she fell as dead in the heart of the Dúrain woods. The Old Ones grieved and sent flowers and herbs to tend to her wounds. Even before she gained awareness of the world around her, her healing had begun. But she bore on her body the rest of her days the scars given to her on Halbraun's Day. Though much of the wounding lay hidden by the delicate leafy raiment of the woods, the places where the whips fell slicing and gouging her face could not be concealed. When travelers from Dura passed near her, they did not recognize her for her façade had been so marred. She still, at times, wove the songs of the elves for her love of the natural world had only increased for their love of her was great. If travelers from Dúrain were near enough hear the music, they would say, "Is this not the song and voice of Kréchellia, daughter of Iána and Aúl?" But warned by the woods, she would stop ere they drew nigh and she remained hidden from them. Even though her music was beautiful, it held sorrow and the marring of innocence. Thus befell the first tragedy of Kréchellia.

Regarding the Union of Ethnor

Kréchellia lived severed from her own kind yet she was not alone. The Dúrainian Woods fed, clothed and watched over her. In time, through patience and Old Ones opening her ears, she learned the language of the trees and spent her days in their presence listening to them recount tales from long before the time of the elves. From her hand, she feed the stag and the hart, and like the elves of Dura, the Durian woods cherished her and were silent while she sang. For a time, there was peace.

One day as she walked with the great oaks she strayed near the southern edge, where the woods bordered Darthnor, the valley of men that bordered the sea. Seeing the sea for the first time in the far distance, Kréchellia was enchanted by its beauty and longed to see the mighty waters up close, but the great oaks that walked with her would go no further than the edge of their domain for the woods of Darthnor were unfriendly.

So she sat on a barren rock canopied by the trees and stared out at the distant sea. Mesmerized by the far off waters, Kréchellia remained so for days.

In this way, Ethnor of Darthnor's northern guard happened upon her. From far off, he heard her voice singing the songs of the woods and was enchanted and drawn to her. The weariness that lay on the land of men seemed somehow lighter to him. This story of men's weariness is told elsewhere in the *Darthnor Chronicles of Men*.

Being in the throes of song and enraptured by the far off sea, she did not hear nor heed the woods warning of Ethnor's coming and he stood entranced at the edge of the glen watching her, for though she was marred, he could see the beauty that once was. When Kréchellia noticed him, she was startled and rose quickly preparing to flee, for though he was not elf, Ethnor resembled them close enough and she had not forgotten what they had done to her.

But to the men, the Old Ones had given a measure skill in the arts of healing of all forms. Coming out of his trance, Ethnor bade her stay. His voice spoke with such a kindness and tenderness that something broke within her and she did not run, though she came no nearer. Then the woods knew they were witness of to a change in their beloved adopted daughter for they knew the great pain she bore.

Since she would not yet leave the woods of Dúrain, Ethnor walked with her under the great boughs and in time she felt the stirrings of love, though she had almost forgotten it and would not have been able to say what it was. By the bubbling streams of Dúrain, Ethnor used the skills the Old Ones had given to men and in time and under his healing arts, the scars that so marred her face faded. Under the surface part of her remained marred, but Ethnor could not see it. Yet to all who saw her, she appeared to them as in her former glory.

After many months, Kréchellia left the woods of Dúrain, though part of her heart always remained there, and traveled with Ethnor, following the stream that sprang and flowed out of the Elven land and tumbled through the valley of men till it became the Perinor River and reached the sea. He wrapped his shield arm around her and traveled with one hand on the hilt of his sword because the stream was still narrow and the edges of the Darthnorian Woods were not deemed safe, even for men. In this way, they traveled till they reached Talnor, the city of men near the edge of the sea.

When they reached the outer gates of Talnor, the gatekeeper Enóte hailed them.

“Ethnor I recognize. But the fair maiden, whose beauty surpasses all I have seen, I do not.”

Ethnor replied, “She travels with me. Is that not enough, Enóte, that you must harass my companion?”

At this Enóte said nothing, but his heart desired her. He opened the gate and they passed through. However, Ethnor took notice that Enóte’s eyes never left Kréchellia. In the times of their youth, Ethnor and Enóte had been like brothers studying the lore of Darthnor together and learning the ways of the guard. They shared all things. But now their relationship was tested.

They journeyed to the citadel of the king, as was the custom. Since Ethnor was a guard, they were not bothered nor hindered by anyone else, though many stopped to stare at Kréchellia’s Elven beauty. She remained quiet knowing the power of her song, and looked no strangers in the eyes. Her gaze remained ever on Ethnor and the earthen road ahead.

Upon arriving at the Citadel of the King, attendants ushered Ethnor in to the hall of hearing where King Sounor sat. Beside Ethnor stood Kréchellia radiating in her beauty.

Ethnor spoke with boldness. “I beseech you, my lord and king, to hear the plight of my companion and my love.” Kréchellia outwardly maintained composure, but inside her heart was caught off guard for this was the first time he ever openly spoke of his love for her, though it had been there for quite some time. Ethnor recounted the tale of the envy of Aúl and Iána and the exile of Kréchellia from her own people. He begged him to grant her leave to travel freely in the realm of men.

The king turned and faced Kréchellia. He asked, “And what say you, O Kréchellia Princess of the Elves, to the request of your companion, Ethnor. For the times are dark and even now an evil stretches the bonds between elves and men.”

In reply, she sang a song of blessing. While she sang, the fires in the hall seemed to grow brighter and the darkness of the room dimmed to the corners. The servants, the other guards, the king, and everyone else in the room had hope, the

weariness of the times seeming lighter. When the last note fell from her, a hush descended into the room. Finally, King Sounor spoke.

“In these times of woe, I would welcome you here more than having another hundred soldiers at my side. This condition only will I make. Roam wherever you will, but Ethnor must always travel with you.” The Old Ones had graced the king with wisdom, and from that measure of wisdom came the decree. He saw the glory of Kréchellia and knew the weakness of his men, though King Sounor himself spoke with a pure heart.

In the days that followed, Ethnor led Kréchellia by the hand having now openly declared his love for her and they followed the Perinor to the sea. Many of the inhabitants of Darthnor watched them go, for though Ethnor and people of Darthnor could not perceive the festering wounding beneath, outwardly and by the hand of Ethnor her beauty was paramount to none. None dared lay hand on her for Ethnor, the great guard of Darthnor, was with her.

At last, Kréchellia saw the sea she had so longed for and dipped her feet in the resting place of the stream of Dúrain. The waters that flowed from Dúrain and mixed with the waters of the Perinor brought tidings from the woods. In that way she learned of Queen Iána’s death. Even when the natural instinct between a daughter and mother stirred, she could not grieve for Iána had done her much harm.

Ethnor wrapped his strong arm around her and memories and pain subsided, as she was content. As the sea pounded relentlessly at the sand and rock strewn shore, Ethnor and Kréchellia declared their love and vowed themselves to each other. The words he spoke were healing. The song she sang brought hope. There on the beach, in the consummation of their vows, Ethnor son of men and Kréchellia daughter and princess of the elves began the first and the last union between the men of Darthnor and the elves of Dúrain.

The second tragedy of Kréchellia

In the months that followed, they settled at the home Ethnor had hewn from

the rock at edge of Talnor and found favor among the people and the king. King Sounor granted leave of Ethnor from his duties on the northern watch, as was the custom given to soldiers newly wed. While Kréchellia lived in Talnor, the city had hope.

Kréchellia loved Ethnor more than anyone else she had known, for his kindness and affection were great. Never the less, she would stand on the roof of the house of Ethnor and stare out towards the edges of the valley of men where the woods of Dúrain lay. Because their kindness to her, they were like a mother. She did not forget them and longed to visit them. Many took note that, though she gave them hope, her heart was not totally with the people of Darthnor. Enóte was among those who watched her and he coveted her though she belonged to someone else. Ethnor promised her that soon they would go and look upon the fair woods of Dúrain.

Late one night as Kréchellia and Ethnor walked towards their home hand in hand, they stopped to marvel at the spread of stars the Old Ones had given them this late summer eve. In the cool, crystalline air, they seemed to dance and shone even brighter. Kréchellia sang a song proclaiming the splendor of the Old Ones and their jewels for the Old Ones wore the stars like diamonds around the edges of their crowns. They brightened even more at the sound of her voice. Indeed all the natural world that surrounded them seemed to listen.

Kréchellia's song about the glory of the Old One's so marveled Ethnor he stood transfixed looking up towards the heavens of which she sang and his hand strayed. Enóte, who's obsession with her had caused him always to follow the duo remaining hidden though not far away, sprang upon opportunity. And with Ethnor yet entranced and Kréchellia in the midst of the song of the ancients, he swept down, gathered her up, and stole her away. Of this, she had no premonition. Because she no longer lived in the Dúrainian Woods, they could not warn. Caught off her guard, the song of Kréchellia died slowly.

The trance of Ethnor was broken. Upon regaining his awareness, he saw Kréchellia no longer stood beside him and his heart was stricken. He grieved for he remembered the edict of the king. But far off he heard the fearful cry of her voice. He lost no moment and seizing the hilt of his sword, he ran swiftly in the direction he had heard it. In his mind he knew no doubt. Enóte's lust overruled his reason.

Ethnor was among the fastest men, even when he was in full armor. When they were still quite young, Enóte and Ethnor challenge each other to races and at one time they were equal. But in time, Ethnor's legs became the stronger of the two. And because Enóte was burdened by Kréchellia, Ethnor over took them at the Western Ford of Darthnor for Enóte inflamed by passion and lack of reason was attempting to carry her over the treacherous path into the black desert.

Enóte turned and faced Ethnor; a look of menace garbed his face and he held Kréchellia to him as a hostage with his right arm around her chest and up under her breasts. She cried out in anguish for the Enóte's grip was strong. Hearing her pain, Ethnor became more desperate and he prayed to the Old Ones for wisdom for Enóte held her as hostage and threatened her life if he were to take one step closer. Time stood still in the blackness of night illuminated only by the stars.

Enóte backed away from Ethnor. He thought not to the Old Ones whose grace no longer was with him; for his thought remained bent on his lust for Kréchellia and the ravishing of her and he could not see his precarious situation. There in the dark, where things lay hidden, he stumbled. Unbalanced, he reached to steady himself, loosing his grip on Kréchellia and she hesitated not. Twisting out from under his arms, she fled from his grasp and was swallowed by the darkness.

And Ethnor's anger burned against Enóte and unsheathing his sword they fought until the dawn. Enóte fought for survival, fueled as well by losing the object of his lust. Ethnor wielded his sword against him. He cared not that Enóte was a fellow man, nor did he give thought to him as gatekeeper being under the royal guard and in his fury he considered their childhood bond naught. When the rosy beams of the sun bleed over the mountain in the East, he slew Enóte and thus brought down upon himself the curse of King Sounor. For the king had decreed that men must not take justice in their own hands, but that it must be left for his wisdom.

As Enóte still lay there bleeding, Ethnor's wrath subsided and he remembered what the king had said. So he fled the land of Darthnor knowing that when his deed be found out, a doom would be placed on him. He traveled northeast through the unfriendly woods of Darthnor and they did not bother him, for he ran as a man escaping through the flames. In the growing light of dawn, some men of the northern watch saw

him and said, “Is that not Ethnor, son of Kenor, running as if in pursuit of some vile creature?” Others doubted this saying, “Clearly not, for we watched and nothing ran before him. Let’s watch and see from what he flees.” But he was gone before they could make decision and the rumor of what he had done had not yet reached him.

When he reached the Perinor, Ethnor traveled straight north for he remained convinced that of all the places Kréchellia would flee to, it would be the woods of Dúrain. Even though a year had passed since she last left, he knew her heart was still drawn to there. But when he arrived at the most northern part of the Perinor, he found the way blocked by the Dúrainian Woods . He waded into the stream thinking he could pass through the edge of the woods by the waters of the Dúrainian stream, but even there the branches of the trees were intertwined as a wall reaching towards the canopy and dipping low in the biting waters of Dúrain.

Exasperated he cried out into the wood hoping Kréchellia would hear him. “Alas, my Elven Princess, the blood on my hands is from your adversary, the one who tried to bring you harm.” He held out his hands towards the trees and indeed the blood of Enóte was on them. “And now, because of the deed I committed so that no harm would befall you, I am spent in the land of men for the king has declared that whosoever would shed a fellow Darthnorian’s blood would be cursed. Would you have me stay here and be slain by them? Indeed if you come not, I am slain already for I cannot go on without your love.”

With a whispered song, Kréchellia bade the woods part and, though they distrusted men because of the harm they had brought to this daughter of Dúrain, they reluctantly did this for her and an opening appeared allowing Ethnor to pass through. There in a glen that was nestled on one side by the stream of Dúrain, Kréchellia lay and on her face was a terror only time could remove. Her blue raiment was torn around the waste where Enóte had grabbed her and whisked her away. Indeed the nails of his hands had drawn blood, and Ethnor saw the bruises the strength of Enóte’s arms had made. But even more, he saw in her eyes the pain and fear of the memories of what Aúl and Iána had done. Now it was compounded by the fear of men. And the wounding of her heart was deeper than the wounding of her skin. Ethnor wept. Thus this was the second tragedy of Kréchellia.

Third and Final Tragedy of Kréchellia – The Rape of the Dúrain Woods

For a day and half, Kréchellia lay unmoving because her flight to the Dúrainian Woods had wearied her to the point of death and this was compounded by the pain within. She teetered on the edge of giving up all hope, for the despair was a great burden for which she blamed herself and she could trust neither elves nor men. Ethnor feared the thought of losing her and in his yearning to have her back, he petitioned the Old Ones. Using the skills of water, herbs, and healing they had given granted him, he led her away from the edge of life. The fear in her eyes faded and the bruises healed. In the passing of time, Kréchellia, Princess of the Elves, and Ethnor of men walked the Dúrainian Woods and love again flowed between them.

But King Aúl, her father and king of the elves, had not forgotten her and rumors came to him through his spies that Kréchellia's beauty had been restored and she now lived in the world of men. And bitter he still was towards her for because of her, he had lost the favor of the elves of Dúrain (though was his and Iána's deeds that had caused this to be and not hers.) So once more, he plotted against her, devising a way to have her returned.

He sent messengers to the realm of men on Darthnor. They traveled by a road that ran around the eastern edge of the Dúrainian Woods to where it delved into the land of men. The road was laden with grass since ages had passed since the traveling of men and elves there. However, Darthnorian Centuries still stood guard and threatened their way.

“By the will of King Aúl of the Elves we implore you let us pass for we go seeking tidings of his daughter whom he lost many years ago during the feast of Halbraun's Day. Indeed it was thought she was dead, but rumors out of the South have suggested this false.” The messengers hid their true intention from them.

The Darthnorian Centuries withdrew to talk amongst themselves. The Princess of the Elves was well known to them for while she lived among them, the weariness of land had lifted, but the land was now dark. They returned to the messengers, giving no indication they knew her and bade them submit their arms and be escorted to the King Sounor.

The company took the southern road that led along the east side the Perinor. Many a man, woman, and child stopped what they were doing and watched as they passed by for it had been ages since such a great company of men and elves had traveled together. The people of Darthnor thought it boded a good sign and that the weariness was again soon to be lifted. For fresh in their minds was the memory of Kréchellia. But other suspected some great evil was a foot.

The following day, they reached the bridge of Thangnor, which led over the Perinor and to the city of Talnor. Into the city they came and were brought before the king. In the hall of hearing, King Sounor listened carefully to the words of the elves. For a long time he said nothing for grievous was the loss of Kréchellia and at her going weariness had once again come over the land. Fresh as well was the memory of Ethnor and his slaying of Enóte. For though he loved Ethnor dearly and discerned evil intent in the heart of Enóte, he could over turn the degree the Ethnor had broken.

But in the wisdom that grew from the Old Ones, the king also perceived the ill heart of King Aúl. “While it is true that for a while the Princess of Elves had leave to walk in the land of men, she is no longer here. Go tell your king that if his search has brought him to the land of men, then his search is vain.” With that, the messengers returned to King Aúl and recounted all that had been said.

But King Aúl hardened his heart and supposed that King Sounor was hiding the Elven Princess. Without council from his elders, he declared war on the land of men, for by now jealousy and hatred had clouded his vision. When the rumor of war come to the King of men, he sighed and the weariness of men seemed even greater for he perceived the loss of men and elves would be great.

But King Sounor gave the order and a great assembly of soldiers gathered between the gates of Talnor and banks of the Perinor. In rank and formation with the King’s crest mounted on banners held high, they began their march up the road that ran along the western bank of the Perinor. When they reached the woods of Dúrain and Northern Border of men, they stopped and made encampment there.

The elves of Dura and the greater Dúrain armed themselves for battle and on king Aúl’s command pressed southward. While some took the road that skirted ‘round the edge of the woods, many marched through the woods towards Darthnor and the

woods could not stop them. But the rumor of the elves coming could be heard far off so that even before the woods warned her, Kréchellia knew of their coming.

Ethnor, though without hope against such a large company, armed himself for battle, and with Kréchellia, they backed their way to the southern edge. There they saw stretched east to west along the northern border of Darthnor the great hosts of men prepared for battle, but because Ethnor and Kréchellia remained hidden among the trees the men of Darthnor did not see them. Though heaped with despair, he bade Kréchellia to stay near him for the fight was immanent and he did not want to lose her again.

When the elves of the north came within a bow shot of Darthnor, King Aúl himself loosed the first arrow and it fell striking Huron, fatally wounding him. And for a moment all stood still. Then Huron fell to the ground. Cry rose up among men and they surged forward to the edge of the woods as arrows fell like rain among them. With torches they lit the woods ablaze.

And Kréchellia and Ethnor stood by the great rock where she had first laid eyes on the sea. With one arm, he surrounded her trembling body with his shield and with the other, he swung with might his sword slaying all who came near whether be it man or elf. The earth groaned in pain for the woods that had been birthed from her bosom were being marred by the flame of men. The anguish of nature overwhelmed Kréchellia.

And as fate would have it, the flames and smoke hindered the defense of Ethnor. An arrow loosed by an elf and pierced him in the chest, though not fatally. As he fell and billows of smoke rolled around him, he lost sight of the Elven princess Kréchellia and saw her no more. In lament and much despair, he pulled himself to the now muddied stream of Dúrain and began healing himself there.

Discovering that Ethnor her love now lay hidden from her, Kréchellia lost all hope and the despair of her woods, her people, and what had happened to her overwhelmed her. She cried out to the Old Ones one last time. And the song of grief and lament she sang stopped the fighting of those who heard her; so powerful was the song, that they lamented with her. She pleaded with the Old Ones to stop the scarring of the world and renounced the prayer of Iána, cursing the day of her birth. Her heart no longer cared to be in the world of men and elves; unjustly and without warrant, she

viewed herself as the root of all the problems between elves and men

The Old Ones heard her despair and saw she had no hope for the world. So they split the earth creating a huge chasm between Darthnor and Dúrain. Such a huge gulf separated them so that one could not see the edge of the other. The bottom was far and deep so that no one who dared long down into the depths could not see the bottom of it. That day, many elves and men fell into the pit and were seen no more. Indeed, King Aúl tumbled into the chasm with much of his army. Little was his passing mourned. King Sounor himself barely escaped.

Thus ended the battle between elves and men.

And what of Kréchellia? What the elves saw can not be told for no elf lives in Darthnor to tell it, but of men there are a few who claim to have seen the Elven maiden in the time of separation. Of the countless variations, two main thoughts persist. Some men say the One Ones granted her wish. Death befell her and she plunged with the rest of her kind into the endless chasm. But the more popular thought and the one King Sounor held to was this. Some say in the midst the rending the world, the Old Ones sent a great bird, though of what kind they know not, and it swooped down and cradled the despairing Kréchellia in its talons. They then carried her back up to heaven and she was seen no more.

Rumor only tells us of what happened to the great Ethnor. Some say he still lives and walks among the elves for he was in their land when the world was rent. Still other myths carry that in seeing Kréchellia gone; he cast himself into the great deep.

Thus ends the tale of the despair of Kréchellia.

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