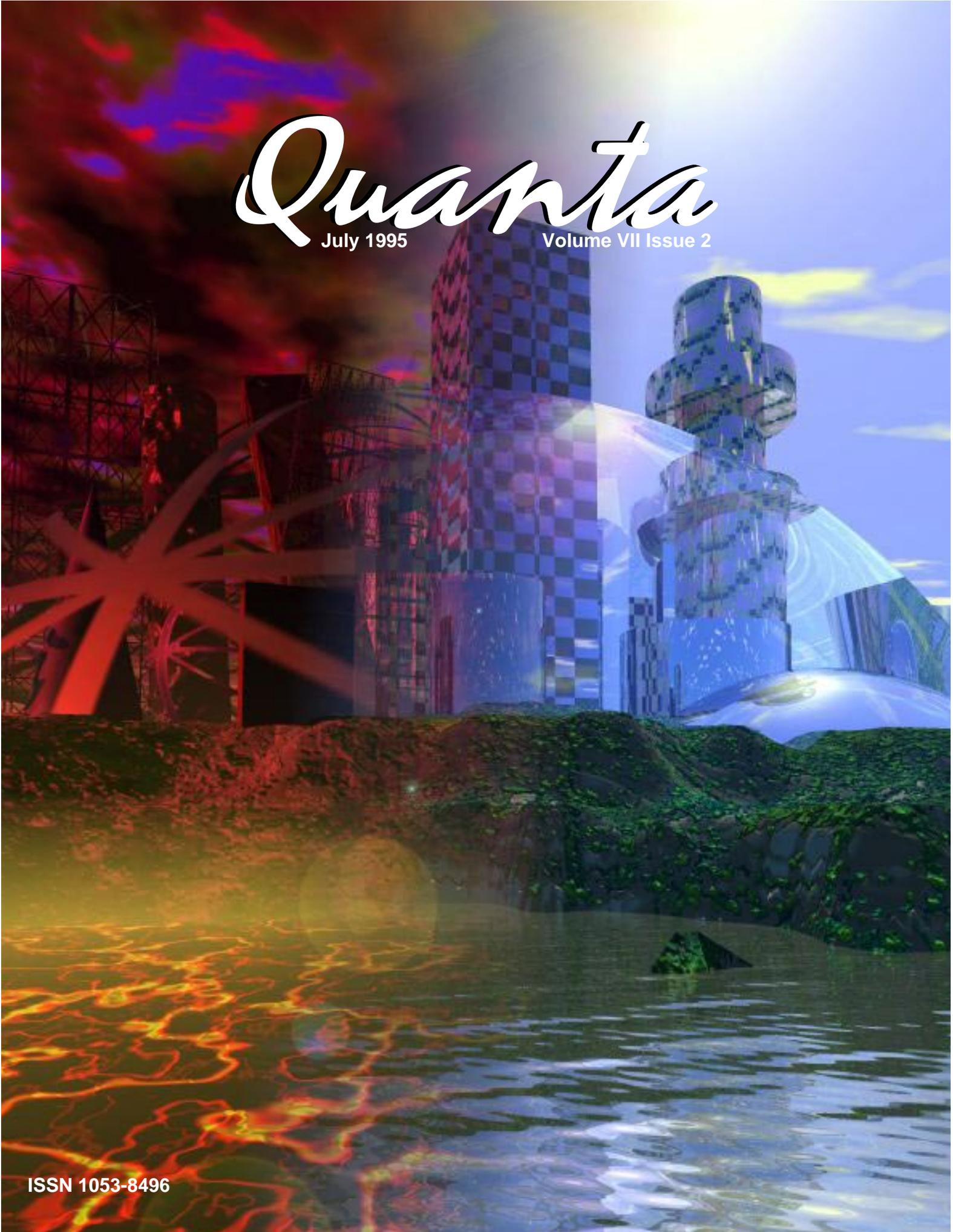


Quanta

July 1995

Volume VII Issue 2



ISSN 1053-8496

Editor/Technical Director Daniel K. Appelquist
Cover ArtBoris Starosta
Editorial Assistance Allison Lambe

Quanta is published as "shareword." It is supported solely by reader donations. If you read and enjoy Quanta, please send \$5 to the postal address below to help cover the costs of production. Checks

may be made out to *Daniel Appelquist.*

Donation is *not* a requirement for subscription, but all donations are greatly appreciated.

Quanta
1509 R. St NW
Apartment 3
Washington, D.C. 20009

In This Issue:

LOOKING AHEAD

Daniel K. Appelquist 2

VIRTUAL IMMORTALITY

R.E. Smergalia 3

IN THE CITY

Jacqueline Carey 13

ROBOTROUBLES

Ken Kousen..... 18

THE PLAINS OF MEER

Simon Joseph 6

A SENSE OF HUMOR

Kevin Walsh 15

THE HARRISON CHAPTERS (Chapter 17)

Jim Vassilakos 8

All submissions, requests for submission guidelines, requests for back issues, queries concerning subscriptions, letters, comments, or other correspondence should be sent to the Internet address **quanta@quanta.org**

Quanta is free to all network subscribers. To subscribe, send an electronic mail message to **listserv@netcom.com** with one of the following lines in the body of the message (*not* the subject line):

subscribe quanta-ascii
to be *added* to the ASCII TEXT distribution list.

subscribe quanta-postscript
to be *added* to the PostScript distribution list.

subscribe quanta-notice
to be *added* to the "notice" subscription list, where you will receive a notification via e-mail when a new issue is released, instructing you where you can find it on the World Wide Web, FTP, Gopher, and other on-line services such as CompuServe and America On-line.

If you wish to unsubscribe, send a message to **listserv@netcom.com** with either **unsubscribe quanta-ascii**, **unsubscribe quanta-postscript** or **unsubscribe quanta-notice** in the *body* of the message (*not* in the subject line).

Subscription requests that are not in this format may not be properly processed.

Subscribers to on-line services such as CompuServe and America Online should subscribe to the "notice" subscription list because of size constraints placed on incoming mail by these services.

Back Issues

WWW

Internet users as well as subscribers to pay services may find back issues of Quanta as well as information may on the World Wide Webserver at the following URL:

<http://www.etext.org/Zines/Quanta/>

FTP

Anonymous FTP servers that carry current and back issues of Quanta are:

- ftp.etext.org** /pub/Zines/Quanta
 - catless.newcastle.ac.uk†** /pub/Quanta
 - ftp.funet.fi†** /pub/doc/literary/magazines/Quanta
- † European service only.

All these servers will carry both the PostScript and the ASCII version of Quanta issues. A ".Z" or ".gz" after the filename indicates a compressed or gzipped file. When FTPing these files, be sure to set for binary transfer mode

Quanta (ISSN 1053-8496) is copyright ©1995 by Daniel K. Appelquist. This magazine may be archived, reproduced, and/or distributed provided that it is left intact and that no additions or changes are made to it. The individual works presented herein are the sole property of their respective author(s). No further use of their works is permitted without their explicit consent. All stories in this magazine are fiction. No actual persons are designated by name or character. Any similarity is purely coincidental.

The PostScript version of Quanta is produced using the FrameMaker publishing software. The cover art was produced using Adobe Illustrator. PostScript and Adobe are registered trademarks of Adobe Systems Incorporated. FrameMaker is a registered trademark of Frame Technology Corporation.

Looking Ahead

Daniel K. Appelquist

Well, the big news is that I've moved again. My new postal address is: 1509 R. St NW #3 Washington DC 20009. Please address all future postal correspondence/donations/solicitations/etc. to this address. There's also been a change in Quanta's email address, although the old one will probably continue to work for some time. The new address is quanta@quanta.org. A mirror WWW site at "<http://www.quanta.org/quanta/>" has also been set up, although the main Quanta WWW site will continue to be "<http://www.etext.org/Zines/Quanta/>".

We've recently been getting a lot of publicity – both a "point of interest" listing on the MacUser Internet Road Map (I guess we're "on the map" now...Ugh) and a listing in The Net's latest issue, with special mention of our "groovy graphics." Well we've got plenty more groovy stuff where that came from...

I learned last month that due to a mix-up with some mailers, some Quanta subscribers were not notified when the last issue came out (January 1995). So if you haven't checked out the January 1995 issue, I recommend that you do – you won't be disappointed.

Something I've been working on recently which folks might be interested in is the WWW Virtual Library Electronic Journals list. After taking over ownership of the list, we've significantly revamped it (we actually developed an application called WILMA to administer it). The URL is:

<http://www.edoc.com/ejournal/>

and we'd be happy to get in any new additions to the list people might have.

Another big project I've been lucky enough to be involved with is the Science Magazine *Science Conduct Online* special feature at <http://sci.aaas.org/aaas/>.

As well as hosting a reprinted article from Science Magazine on Conduct in Science, the feature is intended as a discussion area and general resource for science conduct.

Quanta Needs Help

If you're interested in taking on some responsibilities for Quanta, or if you have suggestions about Quanta's format, read on...

My work load just doesn't allow me to produce this magazine single-handedly anymore. Last year, I was only able to produce one issue! This year is slightly better, but I can't give Quanta the attention it deserves – not *and* work at the same time, anyway... That's why I need *your* help.

First of all, I want to turn Quanta into more of a WWW based resource than it is now. Right now, I work on Quanta in FrameMaker and then export to Text and PostScript after the whole thing is done. Then I take the text version and make the HTML version for the Web Site. Since more and more people are coming on to the World Wide Web, I've decided to do it the other way around. The WWW version will be developed first, and then the text and PostScript versions will come after.

Secondly, I'd like to turn Quanta into a more dynamic resource. On the Web, there's really no need for issues and volumes. I'd like to make Quanta more *story*-based. When I get a good new piece of fiction in, why should it have to wait until I get five more pieces in before it sees the light of day? Quanta will become a science fiction database, with new stories (and artwork) appearing constantly.

Then, after enough stories accumulate, a quarterly PostScript "issue" could be produced which would contain the best picks from that quarter.

This new service will be called "Quanta Interactive," and ideally it will become not only a great repository of science fiction, but a *resource* to be used by authors. It will include online discussion groups, dynamic hot lists, possibly even audio and video.

The trick is developing it. If anyone out there has the time and is interested in this project, please contact me at quanta@quanta.org. Ideal candidates will be SF aficionados who also know quite a bit about the Internet and the World Wide Web, including HTML and CGI script development. Of course, I can't pay you right now, but in the future, who knows?

Well anyway, this issue we've got some great stuff lined up for you. It's an eclectic mix – it challenges as well as entertains – it's a bit of this, a bit of that. I'd like to thank our contributors this month, as well as Boris Starosta for this issue's dazzling artwork. You can look at more of Boris's work at the following URL:

<http://poe.acc.virginia.edu/~jrs/teesbryce.html>

Bye for now – See you all next issue!



Moving?

Take Quanta With You!

Please remember to keep us apprised of any changes in your address. If you don't, we can't guarantee that you'll continue to receive the high quality of fiction that Quanta provides. Also, if your account is going to become non-existent, even temporarily, please unsubscribe and then resubscribe when it becomes active again. This way, we can keep Net traffic (due to bounced mail) at a minimum.

Please read the subscription info on the contents page and update your subscription by sending an email message to listserv@netcom.com. If you have questions about your subscription, send them to quanta@quanta.org.

Casey stared into the abyss of the Grand Canyon. Far below, the black caped figure swooped and dived like a giant hawk, a beautiful blonde woman dangling loosely from his arms. Casey leaned over the edge of the precipice and let the fall take him. He spread his arms wide in a swan dive. A buffeting wind swept across his face as he reached terminal velocity and he dipped his left arm while fully extending his right over his head. The maneuver had the desired effect. He went spinning upward and to the right, climbing now and approaching the masked super-villain from behind. In a moment he would catch his foe and the battle would be joined. Casey hoped he was in time to save the President's kidnapped daughter.

He swore when he saw the red light ahead of him. It hung like a crimson fireball hovering in the center of his line-of-sight. The air around his head vibrated with amplified sound as a chime reverberated and he heard his own voice say, "Three o'clock appointment, Case. Time to come out."

Casey put his arms down and slipped his hands out of the gloves. With a deft movement he stripped off the lightweight headset and set it aside, gently coiling the dangling wires and putting the Grand Canyon and the black-caped villain Destructo on hold. With a little more fine tuning, Casey decided, the Superhero Adventure could be a big seller in the virtual reality game market. But he still had to address the problem of "flying" while sitting down. The sensory inputs from the visor and his own nerve endings were in conflict on this one and made it harder to suspend disbelief, a necessity for any VR experience.

As he had many times in the years since he'd first heard of virtual reality at NASA Ames Research Center, Casey reflected that virtual reality was very much like being inside a movie you're directing yourself.

He checked his watch and pulled a small stack of program chips out of his desk. He slipped them into his coat pocket.

Twenty minutes later he was in Tobias Anderson's hospital room. Anderson looked weak, but alert, and he smiled when Casey came in the door.

"How are you, Toby?" Casey asked. He still felt a little strange calling the great Tobias Anderson by his first name, but over the last two years they'd become close despite a sixty year gap in their ages.

"Fool doctors can't figure out what's wrong with me this time," Anderson said with a chuckle. "All they can think of is to give me more tests. Hell, I know what's wrong with me. I'm eighty-nine and my body has just plumb given up. Thank god for you and this little jewel."

Anderson reached out a frail hand and patted the virtual reality interface by the bed. Casey and Anderson had finally convinced the hospital staff to allow the VR machinery to remain in the room, after Casey had redesigned the hookups so they wouldn't interfere with the hospital equipment.

They couldn't argue too much. Anderson's money had built the hospital and the wing they were in was named for him.

"What have you got for me?" Anderson asked.

"Another module," Casey said. "Churchill Downs, 1948."

Anderson's eyes went soft as he remembered. "The year Citation won that Derby. That was grand. I'm glad you did that one. Helen and I had a wonderful time that day."

"What have you got for me?" Anderson asked.
"Another module," Casey said.
"Churchill Downs, 1948."

tion was primitive, but Anderson was delighted. With each completed tableau, Casey achieved a closer and closer representation of what Anderson wanted. Every VR scenario was a self-contained module representing a place Anderson wanted to go back to. Lower Manhattan in 1928. Havana in 1955. School days at Princeton 1924.

Casey created more than scenery and background figures. Working from Anderson's memory, old photographs, references and biographies, Casey created the people Anderson had known too. The biggest challenge was Helen, Anderson's long dead wife. In each module she had to be the appropriate age, with the right level of maturity and sophistication. Each VR module had millions of variables, despite the relatively limited scope. Once fitted into the virtual reality visor, audio inputs and gloves, Anderson could revisit his youth. From his computer enhanced perspective he was no longer old. His virtual reality body did not tire as he walked endless miles, his handshake was firm and he could jitterbug with short-skirted flappers all night long. Anderson was thrilled with the early modules and spent many hours in an elaborately furnished entertainment room with treadmill floors and climate control to enhance the VR experience.

When Anderson's health had deteriorated, Casey faced new challenges. How to adapt the VR sensory input so it over-

VIRTUAL IMMORTALITY

R.E. Smeraglia

The two men chatted about Eddie Arcaro's winning ride at the Derby while Casey lifted the access cover on the VR interface. The tiny program chips fit neatly into the specially designed state-of-the-art setup. Casey was proud of the work he'd done and a bit saddened that modules he'd worked so hard on had no commercial application. Anderson's modules were different than the game and travel experiences Casey's company usually developed. Virtual reality entertainment often meant zooming through the asteroid belt in a spaceship, or trekking through the African veldt on safari. But Tobias Anderson had wanted something different. He wanted Casey to recreate special places out of his own past. Places he could go back to in VR, fully interactive experiences he could relive.

Casey was dubious at first. The number of variables required to fool memory was staggering, especially with real people and dialogue figured in. Even with programs designed to fill-in variables from algorithmic patterns the programming task was enormous, representing thousands of man-hours. The first depic-

whelmed the "real" world input. How to convince a bedridden man his legs were moving, that he wasn't flat on his back and being fed through intravenous tubes. How to design lighter, less obtrusive VR gear that would not interfere with medical hook-ups.

But Anderson was footing the bill for all the research and all the equipment, as well as subsidizing most of Casey's other programs. Besides, he liked the man. They'd spent hundreds of hours together and he felt toward Tobias Anderson as he did his own grandfather. And with all the research he'd done on the man and his family in order to recreate his experiences, Casey knew Tobias Anderson and his history better than the elder's own children.

Casey replaced the access cover and keyed the input data.

"Almost ready?" Anderson asked.

"Just need to add it to the map."

Each of Anderson's memory modules was linked by a hypercard "doorway". Once in the VR universe, Anderson could walk through a doorway in Manhattan and exit onto a rocky beach on the Riviera. When Casey linked the new module in he also added it to the "reference map" Anderson had access to while in VR.

A few moments later Casey watched as Anderson "entered" the new module. He felt a warm flush of pride as he saw the smile on the elderly man's face. Casey wondered where he was in the module. He flipped on the monitor that sat beside the VR interface. The monitor was rarely used as it was not necessary for Anderson to experience VR. The visor provided the visual input. But the two had added a monitor in the early stages of the experiment so Anderson could point out on the 3-D monitor areas he especially liked or areas that needed more detail or improvement. Casey rarely used it when Anderson was "inside" because it felt to him like eavesdropping on a dream.

He could see what brought on the smile. Anderson was in the pre-race paddock, shaking hands with young jockey Eddie Arcaro and admiring Citation up close, something he'd not been able to do in real life. But in virtual reality, anything was possible.

Casey pulled out the input keypad and typed a quick phrase. He knew that in the VR Anderson's line of sight, a sky writing biplane had just drawn the words, "How do you like it, Toby?"

On the monitor screen, Casey watched Tobias Anderson extend his right hand and give the thumbs up sign. Casey smiled, turned the monitor off and gathered his tools.

"I want to talk to you," came a gruff voice behind him. Casey's smile faded as he recognized Gavin Anderson, Tobias' sixty year-old son. Gavin ran Anderson Industries, even though as board chairman Tobias held ultimate decision making authority for the corporation.

"Hello, Gavin."

"I see you've put him back into your fantasy world," Gavin snorted.

"He's exploring the new module," Casey said. "And it's not my fantasy. If anything, it's his."

"I can never get in to see him," Gavin complained. "He spends every waking hour undergoing medical tests or playing with your computer games. He's still head of a company, you know."

Casey nodded. "Have you tried the interrupt button?" He indicated the red button on the VR console. Having a VR experience abruptly terminated was a disconcerting experience many times more traumatic than being woken out of a dream. People outside the VR world were encouraged to use the interrupt button,

which displayed the intrusion in VR context, like Casey's own red light and chime.

"I've tried it," Gavin said. "He comes back, takes off the visor and roars like a dragon when he sees it's me. This has got to stop. This obsession with that fantasy world you've created."

"It's an alternative, Gavin, not a fantasy. Your father wants things recreated in detail so he can relive his youth, not battle monsters or zap aliens. He doesn't want fantasy, just to relive memories of people and places long gone."

"But why does he spend so much time in there?"

"In there," Casey said, "he's young and vigorous. Out here, he's old and frail and in pain. Which would you prefer?"

Casey's next visit was brief. Anderson had suffered a mild stroke the day before and while there was no major damage he looked weak.

"It was close," Anderson said. "I think pretty soon we'll be glad we took precautions. Casey, what happens to them when the machine is turned off?"

"Them?"

"Helen and the others. When I arrive they are going about their business. When I leave they seem to be doing so. What do they do while I'm gone?"

Casey stirred uneasily in his seat. Perhaps Gavin was right. Perhaps Anderson was losing touch with the "real" world.

"They don't do anything, Toby. It's only your actions they react to. Without you, nothing happens."

Anderson nodded, but his eyes looked dreamy. "Sometimes they seem so real. I wouldn't want them to be hurt. How many more modules do we have planned?"

"There are eight more specific modules, then the fill-ins. Then we can discuss ideas for more."

Anderson smiled. "I don't have that much time, son. No, don't kid a kidder. I just hope I get to see a few more."

"You'll see them all."

Anderson's eyes misted. "Casey, I want you to do something for me. Finish the modules. Install them, even if I'm gone, no matter how long it takes."

Casey barely hesitated. "Sure, Toby. I promise."

Tobias Anderson fell into a coma three days later. After some discussion Casey was admitted to the ward by Anderson's personal physician, Ray Charlton.

"The nurse noticed the fluctuation in vital signs. He was hooked up to your computer gadgets. The nurse disconnected him and when she couldn't wake him, she summoned the doctor on duty."

"Did she try to wake him using the interrupt button before she broke the VR connection?" Casey asked.

The doctor frowned. "She's aware of the procedure, of course. Mr. Anderson insisted on it. Didn't want to be "yanked out" as he called it. I'm sure she followed instructions, but if it was a crisis situation ..."

"Can we talk to her about it?" Casey asked.

The nurse was on duty. She entered the room with a trace of nervousness. Nurse Amy Shaw was middle-aged, with pleasant features and tidy gray hair held back in a bun. She looked at Casey with a hint of distaste.

Prompted by Dr. Charlton, she told how she had been monitoring Anderson's life signs when she noticed an increase in respiration and heart rate. "He was lying in bed with those stupid goggles and gloves on, his hands twitching, breathing fast. I flipped on the TV to see what was causing this"

"You did what?" Casey exclaimed.

She glared at him. "I know why you don't want anyone looking in on your games. You don't want anyone to know what porno filth you've been subjecting that poor man to."

"What are you talking about?" Casey asked.

"I saw it," she said. "I know that what you see on the monitor is what Mr. Anderson is seeing through his goggles. He told me that. And what I saw was a naked woman, her legs apart, her arms outstretched. Disgusting."

"It was his wife," Casey said.

"It was a teenage girl," Nurse Shaw said.

"It doesn't matter," Dr. Charlton said. "What did you do next?" he asked the nurse.

"I removed the inputs and tried to wake Mr. Anderson up. When he wouldn't wake, I called the doctor."

"But first you turned the computer off, didn't you?" Casey said. "Without using the interrupt button first?"

The nurse looked at Dr. Charlton, shrugged and nodded.

After Charlton excused the nurse, Casey said. "We have to hook him back up to the VR interface."

"Out of the question," Charlton said. "The man is comatose."

"He's comatose because the nurse shut off his inputs while he was in a particularly vivid VR experience."

Charlton chewed his lower lip as he considered this, then shook his head. "There's no reason to believe that her shutting off the machine could have induced the coma. He's undergoing a general failure of his vital systems. But for an elaborate medical effort, he wouldn't even be alive. It's unlikely an external stimulus was involved, but if it

was it's just as likely that your program agitated him to the point where the physical shock of the experience pushed his body into that state."

"If it is his body," Casey said. "I think it's his mind that retreated from the shock of being disconnected from virtual reality, the only reality he cares about. I know I'm not qualified to give medical advice, Doctor, but I don't see how it can hurt him if I'm wrong."

Charlton considered this. "I'll have to get permission from the family, you know. Gavin is not likely to give his consent."

"You won't need his consent," Casey said. He reached in his coat pocket and produced an envelope. He handed it to Charlton. "This is a power-of-attorney. Before he fell ill, Mr. Anderson anticipated that he might become incapacitated. In that event, he authorized me to make legal and medical decisions on his behalf. Business decisions are left to Gavin."

"I'll have to have this checked by our legal department," Charlton said. "If they say it's okay, I have no objections."

Two hours after Casey hooked the unconscious man back to the interface, Anderson raised his right hand to his face and removed the visor. Casey helped him with the other inputs.

The doctors and medical technicians came bustling in and Casey was forced to wait outside until Dr. Charlton gave his okay for Anderson to receive visitors again.

Anderson smiled. "I knew you'd get me back. What happened? Ray was all business."

Casey told him.

Anderson looked thoughtful. "I didn't notice any shock from the disconnect. Hell, I don't remember the disconnect. I was with Helen. Later, when I looked for the door, it was gone. I wasn't worried. Every once in a while, I'd look again. One time it was there."

Casey studied the older man. "You're saying there was no discontinuity. But the interface was disconnected. You were not in contact with the VR program."

"Couldn't prove it by me, son. Everything seemed perfectly normal, except the door wasn't there. Helen and I just kept checking she didn't seem to be worried about it either."

"You...uh, discussed the outside world with Helen?"

"Sure. We talk about it all the time. Helen says she's sorry she didn't know you before she died. She wants you to come inside so she can meet you."

Casey's head was spinning. His whole world was being threatened. If prolonged exposure to virtual reality could leave a reasoning person unable to distinguish

between real and imaginary people after the interface was broken if Anderson had become psychotic, it could mean the end of virtual reality as a commercial project.

He felt Anderson's thin hand grip his own.

"I told you they were real, Casey. That's why I wanted to know where they go when the machine is turned off. Now I know. They don't go away. They're still in there. It's like Brigadoon, waiting to be reanimated. I know. Because I was there. When the nurse broke the connection I was still inside."

"Listen, Toby," Casey said. "I know you think you were in the computer world during the coma. But it's not possible. The interface was turned off. Remember, the unconscious mind dreams too. I think you just dreamed that you were still in VR."

Anderson squeezed Casey's forearm with a viselike hold a toddler could have broken. "My boy, you've done a wonderful thing for me. And you'll be rewarded. The doctors want to have at me again. More tests. We don't have much time. Remember your promise to me. Finish the modules. For them. And for me."

Before Casey could answer, Anderson broke into a spasm of coughing that brought Dr. Charlton back into the room. As Casey squeezed his friend's hand and said goodbye, he knew it was for the last time.

Casey stared out at the San Francisco Bay from his suite of offices high atop the Embarcadero One Office Plaza. Tobias Anderson had died shortly after that visit, still hooked to the VR interface. That had been three years ago. There had been a whirlwind of expansion in the VR industry in that time, with Casey's VR Enterprises leading the way. Anderson's will had contained the reward he so often spoke of. Casey received a sizable bequest, one that guaranteed that he would never have to pursue VR research for commercial reasons. The company still made games, though at Casey's insistence, research was proceeding toward marketing virtual reality to hospitals and nursing homes as geriatric therapy.

Casey removed the program chips from the VR interface in his office. This module had tested out perfectly.

Casey's chief design engineer, Kate Zarella, stuck her head through the doorway of the office. "Going to lunch, boss?"

Casey looked at his watch. "I guess not. I'm going to install the new module. Coney Island, 1945."

Kate said. "That won't take you too long. I've got a few things I can tend to. I'll wait in my office." She shook her head. "I can't believe you still spend so

much time working on those things. I mean, they're wonderful, the ones you've shown me, but they're not exactly mass market."

Kate walked with him down the plush hallway. They dodged a bevy of designers and engineers making for the elevator. Casey stopped before a locked door marked ANDERSON INTERFACE.

"Why do you do it?" Kate asked him as he unlocked the door.

"It's a promise I made a long time ago. I said I'd finish the design concept. I've got two more scenarios to go."

"No one will know if you do or don't, Casey." Kate shuddered slightly and rubbed her crossed arms to chase away the gooseflesh. "The guy's been dead for years. And no one but you ever goes in there."

Casey smiled. "I won't be long."

He closed the door behind him and opened the access cover to the now-obsolete VR interface. A few moments later he updated the map and closed the cover. The machine hummed quietly in the air-conditioned room.

Casey flipped the monitor to ON. He spun the trackball on the interface panel and panned the view perspective to reveal the grandeurs of the premiere amusement park of the middle of the twentieth century. Toby's memories of Coney Island had been vivid and the wealth of existing newsreel and archival images of the place had made Casey's latest module even more detailed and more richly textured than the others. He was proud of it.

The amusement park teemed with summer revelers enjoying the elaborate diversions that surrounded them. Casey's fingers paused as the view perspective centered on a handsome young couple. A tall, trim man in white slacks and blue sweater stood with a slender brunette swathed in white crinoline. They were arm-in-arm, staring and pointing out the wondrous sights on every side.

Casey's fingers flew across the keys of the manual interface and spun the trackball. On the near horizon of the screen, in the line of sight of the young couple, a bright red biplane swirled and looped a message in smoke, How do you like it Toby?

In the foreground, the man took his right arm from around the waist of the young woman and held his hand aloft, thumbs up. Then Toby Anderson took Helen's hand, pulled her close for a hug and tender kiss, and the two of them strolled toward the ferris wheel.

The fist-sized stone was pyramid shaped, perfectly cut on all sides, and clear as glass. I didn't think the geology of Thetus permitted diamonds. I had found it near the edge of a tidal pool on my morning walk up the North Beach. I immediately adorned my one-room bungalow with the mystery rock, displaying it on a driftwood table. There was no one to share this find with. I lived alone on Thetus, as a woman who sought her fate in the solitude of this big blue world. That night I lay on my bunk nearing sleep. The eyes were heavy, half dreaming of a storm out at sea. Only half dreaming because I could still hear the surf roaring outside. One eye opened lazily to spy on the rock once more. Light danced off the multisided stone. Thin white beams flashed across the room, sweeping the dark. The rays bounced from wall to wall, flickering about.

A man runs barefoot on the wet hard-packed sand of low tide. His unrelenting stride dances to a beat, forward in rhythm. Sweating in his tattered clothes. Moving, hurrying, getting somewhere. I am a bird gliding high above, crisscrossing the runner's path. After straying far ahead I double back, dive down and dart pass the man. His face transfixed, arms swinging wildly under striding legs. I circle above the human projectile and our motions lock in tandem. I hear voices in the man's movement, "Anticipate there, adjust here, footing soft, veer right, straddle over, find line, maintain pace, second wind, surge now, forward, faster." Legs alternate each lunging step with machine-like continuity, rotating like a windmill. The arms swing back and forth maintaining balance. I descend again and glide past the man. The limbs are a mayhem of movement but the head is locked forward, bounding only to the runner's inertia. The eyes stare straight ahead, unblinking, possessed, fixed on a destiny imagined or real. The open mouth is seemingly breathless. I climb against a strong southerly wind. The man is running north. Like broken sails his ragged shirt and trunks flail behind him. He is impervious knifing into the ocean gust, skimming the coast with a thousand strides.

Lines of white energy tapped my forehead. I stared at one beam, a photon torpedo that was paper-thin and inches

wide. I followed it to the ceiling corner and drifted to sleep again. From one dream I stumbled on to another.

Everything ceases. The man is kneeling on the sand, head bowed down before me, his hands holding my robe like a repentant Christian. The man and I are statues with frozen gestures. There is no urge to speak. I only want to stand above him. The man kneels repentant, for his own sake or mine it doesn't matter.

I picked up the stone. It was warm and shone red through my fingers. How real is this?

Thoughts are too still here. Even where the ocean pounds the shores, with the wind-blasted sands, and the dune grasses crackling like fire. Here we stand and kneel, if only to cry out, "Look, look Thetus!" Alive all around us with her chaos of forces, my planet she listens, she sees. The sea falls away, the winds leave the sand, and the grasses become silent. Now I can breathe stillness. Our hearts have stopped beating. The man grips my robe and the side of his head presses against my thigh. My hands rest on his

shoulders as I look out over the calm ocean. Thetus knows. Knows tranquility reigns.

The rock glowed a soft white hue in my room. I staggered off the bunk and approached it. I had not imagined the wild lights earlier. Diamond or not, no crystal in this universe exhibited these properties. I picked up the stone. It was warm and shone red through my fingers. How real is this? With the stranger on Thetus.

I put the crystal back down. Turning away I found a window and looked out into the night. It was dark. There were no lights, no running man, nor a kneeling one. Just the sea. Just me, Mara, alone on Thetus. Why was the man running, and kneeling before me?

I could see the glow out of the corner of my eyes. I turned and saw a shower of rays arcing and angling into a wild, gleaming matrix. I quickly looked down.

Each light a channel to another place, to the visions. How? The visions felt so real. I noticed two beams converging at my feet.

The man - that same man - stands beside a ship. Not an ocean ship. It stands on the shores of Thetus, a tall metallic egg propped on three spindly legs. The incoming tide begins to fill the darkened crater underneath. A ship for the stars. The man is poised, standing at attention, his suit gleaming blue and silver. An entry materializes on the egg's silver shell. He climbs inside and I follow. We stand on a mirrored floor and the space between us is small. An octagonal room. The walls are black, streaked with long curving strokes of white, red, and blue pinprick lights. Strips of the universe one beside the other, making a wallpaper of stars, nebulas, and galaxies. The man points to one bright speck. Flash of red. "Away," he says with his eyes. But to where? The man smiles, "Where the angels dance, on the plains of Meer."

I stood in the bungalow doorway and witnessed an intricate geometry of lights. From every angle white lines bounced on the walls, floor, and ceiling. I was drawn by the diamond's web of light.

"No!"

THE PLAINS OF MEER

Simon Joseph

I fled out in the moonless night, running towards the beach. I stumbled on the loose sand. My chest pounded making me fight for breath. Scrambling to get away I followed the shoreline. I turned to look back. A pinpoint beam darted out of the house. It moved closer - not at once, not at the speed of light - extending its reach toward me. I tumbled forward crying out and fell into the surf.

I know that place, Meer. On the other side of the galaxy, as green with grass as Thetus is blue with the sea. The man grins, "We are here." We step outside the craft. Orange light makes the eyes turn away, blazing. He spreads his hand to the horizon and I see waves of tall grass racing up a sloping field. We are in a valley. I follow him. After a while, he stops and turns to me. Behind him I see an oddly shaped building. Beyond it many more line the green slope. Weathered and rusty looking like old corrugated steel. Half-

moon shaped. He points to the building near us. The man is sad. His suit glistens under the bright sunlight.

I was kneeling in water. A wave crashed into me and knocked me back. I crawled out of the surf, coughing out seawater. I found dry sand and lay there, sprawled on my stomach, cold, exhausted. My eyes opened. Lights sparkled off the white-water.

We enter the strange building. A body lies still. A man with eyes closed. Wires in his skull. I kneel beside the cot and pull them from his head one by one. The man opens his eyes, smiles. He is not sad like his reflection standing nearby. The light is blinding. I feel his joy now, his freedom a super nova. I am lying down and I see him standing above me. The wires inside my head make me still. I am on Meer. The man is walking on the beach on Thetus. No longer running, no longer kneeling for forgiveness. A crystal is in his hand. He turns to face the ocean and throws the stone far over the waves. I see a splash, watch it descend in the murky water. It sinks into the green-to-blue-to-black, to a place of unlight. I lie in the dark. Helpless under the half-moon ceiling. Longing to run on the wet sand, wild with freedom. To kneel for forgiveness with tranquil heart. I am waiting for the crystal to wash ashore. To dance its light again, like the angels on the plains of Meer.

simonl@rmii.com

Q

He stared out the window, silent and unblinking, as the stars sparkled everywhere, thousands more than he'd ever seen before, more than in any stellar database or navigation chart he'd ever read. Each of them glistened, crisp and defined, against a backdrop of the deepest black his eyes had ever known, and as his dad tilted the stick, New Eden toppled into view, a ball of shimmering blue with puffy white patches. Nod, the gas giant, loomed behind with seemingly menacing intent, preparing to gobble up its smaller neighbor within a swirling mass of orange and yellow clouds should the life-sustaining world foolishly drift too close.

"You know what that is?"

"Home."

His dad smiled, hopeful brown eyes betraying only the faintest trace of sorrow.

"Look over there."

At first the station was just a speck, but ever so slowly it grew, its dapple-grey exterior sheltering an ever-shifting collage of light and shadow. Inside, machines crowded against the bulkhead, some of them vibrating like washers, others sitting quietly waiting for one of the doctors to float over and poke a nose inside. The weightless was new and strangely disconcerting, and Mike held to the boarding rail for dear life. He didn't let go until a intrusive finger tickled him up the armpit, and then he squealed and soon found himself floating along the ceiling, which he found to his amazement to be not so much a ceiling as just another floor.

From the new vantage, he could see several people mulling about, quietly picking up test tubes, examining plastic trays under an assortment of microscopes, and making notes on flimsy boards. He and his father floated there, presently ignored in the distended space of shooting neurons, until a middle-aged man rounded the corner and approached. His hair slid golden and wavy along his ears, the wrinkles he sported around his eyes only serving to complement his warm voice, making him look even friendlier than he sounded, as though that were humanly possible.

"Well... I didn't know we had a new pilot."

"Tan, this is my son. Mike, say hi to Tan."

"Hi."

"Welcome aboard, Mike. You helping your dad today?"

Mike smiled self-consciously, not really sure how to reply. It turned out to be the right response, however, soliciting him a tour of the base. Tan kept talking about the equipment, what all the stuff did, how it worked, so much detail that the meaning of it all got lost somewhere within the folds of his explanations. Mike just kept nodding, floating to one of the numerous windows every chance he got.

"If you ever want to see me again, don't conduct a search. It's tacky, and you'll only inconvenience the passengers."

"So are you going to be a scientist, young man?"

"A scientist?"

"Ah... a scientist figures things out, answers questions... fixes problems..."

"And creates them," his father interjected.

"I'm gonna fly a spaceship."

They seemed to think he was joking, and outside, New Eden vanished behind the gas giant, the moment of its disappearance creating a sloshy feeling inside his stomach. They ended up sitting him in front of one of the larger windows

They sat silent, and then his dad spoke again, as though clarifying the answer.

"It's not like they take every second-born."

"Nearly half."

"Yeah, well... she won't be on the list much longer. If she gets chosen, I guess we'll have to make a run for it."

Tan grimaced, a tired, somber stare running along the table's edge as though he were watching some insect crawl from one end to the other.

"You know how that usually works out."

"Why do you think I keep a gun?"

"You fly a shuttle, idiot. You can always try to smuggle her out. Tell them she died."

"And who'd take a girl from New Eden?"

"A good samaritan."

"Slavers, more likely."

"Well, James, there's risk with everything, even with doing nothing at all. Sometimes I think you're more motivated by sloth than concern for the consequences."

His father snorted, perhaps for lack of a decent comeback. "We could all be exiled... sent to live with the infectious. You know the penalties."

"So what are you going to do? Pray?"

"Believe me, I have."

"Oh?"

THE HARRISON CHAPTERS

Chapter 17

Jim Vassilakos

along the outer ring while the two men huddled together at a small, aluminum table, drinking zardocha with spots of a lavender rum.

Quietly they exchanged their words, Mike tuning in only for the most occasional outburst, and then listening for several minutes before the phrases became intertwined like a sullen melody, and his mind fell deeper into the dark, jeweled expanse. At one point, he thought he heard his sister's name, spoken in the sort of hushed voice usually reserved for dead relatives. It was a moment he'd forgotten, until now.

"I guess it wouldn't help if I called you crazy."

"No."

"What are you going to do about her?"

"I don't know."

"We've been taking them up to the old church on seventh-days. It's pretty much vacant now, except for the Baxsens and Culwrigs."

"I thought Bryan Culwrig caught the bug?"

"He did. I think the whole family may have it."

Tan shook his head, "Better find a new church."

"Was thinking about a new deity, actually."

Then his dad turned sideways and saw him staring back over his shoulder, brown eyes meeting somewhere in the space in between.

"Ya ready to fly?"

Mike smiled, but when he learned the extent of the question, his emotions turned toward unbridled glee. His dad sat him down in the pilot seat, pointing to

various switches. Mike's mind swam. But, he learned that taking off from an orbital station was about as easy as leaping off a diving board. Open helm access, hit the disengage, switch on the gravitics and inertial compensation, punch the aft thruster, and slowly bring it up to full. So easy a child could do it, or so he'd proved.

He dad finally shook him by the shoulder as if to say "Good work, I knew you could do it." But this time, the shaking didn't stop, and he felt the craft rumbling, its windows shattering as the hull exploded outward. He could see his dad falling toward the huge gas giant, its bright clouds engulfing him. So bright, Mike had to squint.

Johanes stood over him, shaking one shoulder while gripping the other and hauling him out of the null tube. Mike squirmed, getting himself dropped to the carpet for his trouble.

"C'mon Mike, time for another injection."

"I was dreaming."

"Congrats."

"That didn't feel like six hours."

"It was two?"

"Two?" Mike blinked, pinching the bridge of his nose, "Thought I had six."

"There's been a slight change in plans."

The headache rated somewhere between skull-splitting and brain-boiling, such was its intensity. She sat back down, cursing herself for such stupidity. Meanwhile, all the guards and miscellaneous crew members stood around panicking, only one with the self-righteousness to say it to her face.

"You gonna die?"

"No."

"Well, in that case, I told you so."

"Oh shut-up."

They had to wait several minutes for the gas masks, and Carla kept everyone away from her, providing as much air as she could fan in her general direction.

"One more dumb question sweetheart."

"Shoot."

"What's with the moustache?"

Hunter got back to her feet and tore the tiny white bandage from beneath her nose. There followed a loud cheer, lasting all of about two seconds, right until they came in with the gas masks. Then dead silence reigned supreme, cut only by intermittent squeaks and rustles as people either donned their headgear or backed into the lift. One of the techies slid the set of doors back open, again manually, and inside, it was as bad as she'd imagined.

Erik: dead, a gun in one hand, a folder full of papers in the other. Commander Simms: same status, face a light bluish tint. Captain Dunham: not much better, at

least his dark pigmentation hid the deathly pallor, but the expression on his face wouldn't help morale. He must have been screaming and thrashing about right to the very end. Finally, there was the Commodore: communicator still in hand, a blonde mane of hair sweeping over her head, hiding the distant look in her hollow, blue eyes.

"I think I'm gonna be sick."

They re-engaged the air filters manually and got the room cleared out while Hunter took a browse through Torin's folder. The papers caught her interest right away, the sort of thing she'd expect to find in some archaic museum. Everyone used flimsi leaf except on some of the outlying worlds where the technology wasn't sustainable. One picture in particular caught her interest. It was right in front, a small, balding man with thin arms and a large forehead. He looked frightened, sort of wide eyed with a sallow complexion. The name "Erestyl" was printed underneath.

Brooks showed up not too much later, not that being any more punctual would have helped matters. The nearest thing they had to a commanding officer, he'd been on stand-by in the security armory and didn't look particularly pleased by his sudden promotion.

"This the work of the escapee, I take it?"

She nodded, loading the Commodore's body into a grav-sled. The phosphorescent light shined off his dark skin as he watched her work, a sort of oily texture that made him look all the more determined. Then he picked up the folder, leafing through it until he stopped at the same picture.

"What happened?"

"Cyanide gas."

He shifted his tongue into one cheek as he looked over the corpses. His black, frizzy hair seemed to stand on end.

"Quick death?"

"Uh... about ten seconds. Twenty on the outside." She was surprised he asked. "It blocks respiration between the hemoglobin and oxygen-hungry cells." She took a deep breath, letting go of the body, "They probably felt like they were suffocating. Painless... but they knew they were dying."

"I understand you got a breath of it."

"Just a whiff, sir. Enough to tell me what it was."

"You can hold the 'sir', doctor. You're third in command now. If myself and our illustrious chief engineer hadn't been too preoccupied to attend this fatal engagement, you'd be captain, not me."

She looked down at the floor, "Not necessarily."

"Come again."

"The commodore relieved me of duty just prior to when it happened. I was just completing some final tasks in sickbay when..."

He nodded again, as though she's just answered a lingering question.

"Why?"

"A disagreement. She wanted to use our mind scanner on the escapee. She also wanted a drug destroyed which might have saved his life."

"I don't follow."

"We have reason to believe he's mis-medicating himself. If so, he'll be dead within a day or so. There's a drug called Anamesa which could save his life, but I got rid of our supply of it according to the commodore's orders."

"Can he get more at Tyber?"

"Yes... but it won't do him any good. It'll be too late by then. Since he's already as good as dead, are you still going to order a full search?"

He stuck out his chin and sucked in his cheeks, probably wondering what was going through her mind.

"You think he has more tricks up his sleeve?"

"It's a possibility. If we just let him go and let the medication take it's course..."

"Fewer casualties for us?"

"Also, the Commodore wanted to capture him alive. Not kill him."

"Why?"

"Apparently he has some sort of information. Torin was interviewing him in sickbay just before he escaped."

Brooks nodded, but he didn't look terribly persuaded.

"I'll keep it under advisement."

"What about me? Am I still R.O.D. or what?"

"We may need your help if there are more casualties... but until then, we'll honor the commodore's final order. Sorry Doctor."

"I understand."

She about-faced and made a bee-line for the lift. Carla was standing to one side, quietly stepping in after her friend as the doors closed behind.

"You okay?"

"No... not really," Bernie leaned back in his seat, munching down the last of a jelly donut as a self-satisfied smirk crept up the side of his face. The guard seemed vaguely disgusted.

"Why not?"

"Look buddy. I have orders coming straight through the commodore that these frequencies go down and stay down. No if's, and's, or but's from nobody."

"The commodore is dead."

"Aha... sure. That's great. You want a donut?"

"Just turn it off."

"Look, I'm under orders here!"

Tabor came in a moment later, more than little breathless.

"We have to take the shouter offline."

"This is a joke, right?"

"No joke."

"What's going on? This guy's telling me the Commodore's dead."

"Long story. Just take it off."

Bernie shrugged, getting up to pull the plug on the most fun he'd had since the time he impersonated Dunham's voice for a mess inspection. The guard seemed satisfied, heading back toward the lift, and Bernie was glad to see him go.

"Now that Captain Carnage is out of here, tell me what in hell is going on."

"Something about poison gas. All I really know for sure is that Brooks is in charge."

"Poison gas?! Sheesh, I pull a bunch of freqs for you and next thing, all hell breaks loose. You're a real pain in the you-know- what, you know that?"

Tabor stared back, an incredulous expression traversing his face like a sonic wave.

"You think you're on the receiving end? I was right there just before it happened. A few minutes sooner and it would have been me dead, Bernie, so don't give me any..."

"Okay... okay. Take it easy."

He keyed open the comm-shed, switching the shouter off with a flick on his finger.

"Look, I'm sorry, but you know that shutting this thing down... I mean... you saw the free lanes. I just don't get the logic."

"They're jamming one and two."

"So use the internals."

"No routing software. Somebody got inside the computer, killed internal routing and erased all passenger records."

"Inside the computer? You tried going to backups?"

"It locks up every time we try. Tuto figures they punched holes in the op-sys. Perfect, neat, little holes just to screw us over."

"Neat holes, eh? That's great. Just great."

Hunter picked up a chunk of swiss cheese on the way back to her quarters, biting off the rubbery corners and slowly working her way around the neat, little holes. It was salty, a taste she liked to think by. All the events of the day passed through her mind like an angry whirlwind, each somehow connected, but none of them making any sense as a whole. She finally gulped down the last of her treat in the shower, and the spray got her nose going again.

The faint trail of blood blended so well with the water, however, that by the time it hit the shower floor, there was nothing much to see even if she had been looking.

She finally opened her mouth, letting the warm mist massage her tongue. The taste of salt hit her as strange, and she began to feel between her teeth for a loose sliver of the cheese. A minute later, blotting her face against a towel, she saw the red stain.

The red spot on the towel seemed to laugh at her and at her apparent inability to fix so much as a bloody nose. She went back to her work clothes, still scattered carelessly below the laundry chute and checked all the pockets for some nose bandages. The pockets were needlessly cluttered, as her pockets almost always were, a slide from some chemical analysis, a not-very-neatly- folded flimsi, a flex-glove, a lightpen, a blood-spotted handkerchief, a little, metallic cylinder.

A little, metallic cylinder?

It glinted faintly in the dim light, nothing to have a hysterectomy over, or so it seemed to be saying. She threw on a robe, the blue mendwear with one of her favorite if more offensive proverbs embroidered on the back, "Never mess with a chemist on PMS." Then she bandaged her nose. With the random segments of a hunch quietly huddling about her consciousness, she plopped down on her cushi-bag with the strange object, sinking slowly and deliberately as the warm, gelatinous interior oozed beneath.

Bernie shoved his finger through another donut, the jelly oozing down into a cherry puddle on his desk. He hated to see it go to waste, yet he couldn't bear to eat. It was the ultimate dilemma.

"You okay Bern?"

Sandra stood at the door, just popping in to collect another two-dozen walkie-talkies for security. Without the internal comm network, they'd have to rely solely on wireless transmission, not a particularly well-stocked alternative.

"Is this all you got?"

Bernie licked the sugary filling off his finger.

"Hey Bern... you okay?"

He looked up and stared coldly, trying to look callously reserved, or so he imagined. Then it broke, and he chucked the donut across the room.

"Bern..."

"I killed 'em. If it wasn't for that damn shouter..."

"Look Bern, don't get morose now. Save it for later."

He sighed, and she nudged him in the ribs.

"Brooks has a little present for you."

"What?"

She took the mask out of her grav-cart, tossing it next to the red puddle.

"And there are five guards stationed outside."

"Five?"

"Just in case."

"Oh great. To protect the shouter? Why don't we just destroy the damn thing?!"

"Might need it."

She snatched a donut before leaving and then turned sideways before the door, looking backward across one shoulder as her hair flopped over the other.

"It's not your fault, Bern, so stop blaming yourself."

He sighed as she exited, leaving him to quietly monitor the free lanes for any sign of trespassers. It was a heck of a job, boring as all hell, and generally unimportant to boot. This time things were different, however. It was still boring, but with five guards outside, he had no illusions as to its importance. The door opened again about a minute later. He looked up, expecting to see Sandy standing there, donut in hand. Instead, it was a woman in a blue robe, her short, dark hair combed back, damp and shiny. He put a napkin over the jelly and scooted his chair backward several inches.

"Yah?"

"Comm-hardware?"

"You're in the right place."

"I'm Dr. Hunter."

"Oh... what, am I late for a check-up?"

She leaned over the desk, dropping a small, metallic cylinder to its surface.

"Can you tell me what this is?"

Saloris shrugged, swigging down another hit, "What does it matter, man? It's not cheap."

"Anything on it?"

"I dunno."

Zak rubbed his overgrown moustache with the back of his hand, eyeing its reflection for any traces of foam against the holocrystal's shiny white surface. It did look expensive, the sort of durability you could crap on and still invoke a clean image.

"Where'd you get it?"

"Look man... you gonna value it or fold?"

"Hey... I'm just curious. Five."

"What?!" spraying half his brew over the table.

"Okay, eight."

"Fuck you!"

"Ten. Ten tops, and don't say a word. You want me to report this?"

Saloris scowled, "It's worth way more than ten."

"Maybe, but it's probably stolen, or maybe you'd like me to go find out."

"Don't threaten me, man."

"It's all part of the game, Saloris. Ten?"

Shaking his head, "Like I really have a choice."

Zak ended up winning it with a pair of starbursts, the sort of hand that made him wonder why he wasn't folding, but Saloris had a reputation for drawing shit, and

his luck while drinking was about as flavorful as a goblet of warm, slog piss. Zak spent the next hour or so searching for a viewer. Most of those on board were four centimeter standard. This was two, built for concealment more than convenience. It was just another aspect which intrigued him.

Just when he was about to give up and chuck it, he happened across comm-hardware, an office he'd walked past maybe a hundred times without once going inside. Five guards stood at intervals up and down the corridor, one stopping him as he made for the entrance.

"Need some I.D.?"

He dug it out, going inside only after the guard had a chance to run it through her portable magnetic scanner. The ship's doctor was inside, wearing a blue robe and sweat pants. She was talking with a plump guy at the desk, her voice low and serious, like it had been after "the incident".

The incident had been a minor brawl in the enlisted mess, and he'd been pretty defensive about anyone, particularly a woman, trying to help him. She responded by drawing a laser scalpel and threatening to cut off his head. It may have been crude, but the prospect of further bodily injury shook him up enough to make him succumb to reason. After he let her bandage his face and stop the bleeding she became somewhat more congenial.

"Well well... if it isn't crewman Dagler."

"Hi Doc... uh... doctor... uh, sir."

She smiled, "You're going to have to wait your turn."

"I'm just looking for a two centimeter holo-player."

Bernie pointed a jellied finger toward the cabinet on the left.

"Second shelf."

"Thanks."

"So you're sure it's a bug?"

"Uh-huh."

He inserted the crystal and flipped it forward to somewhere in the middle. The image promptly materialized in a half-meter diameter sphere, a man and a woman standing upon a mauve carpet. At first he smiled, thinking it was a sick joke. Saloris collected his fair share of pornography, some of it far from the mainstream, and on more than one occasion Zak had found himself exposed to yet another fetish he'd never dreamed existed. But instead of sex, they just talked, her strange, silvery-white mane shifting as she turned her head to speak. She'd ask some question, and he'd reply, his voice quiet and stubbornly accented by numerous stops. He looked dazed, as though he'd been drinking to the point of vomit-readiness, but his answers, the words in particular, came out more like a

lecture in astrophysics, many of the phrases as technically alien as to be virtually incomprehensible.

"What have you got, crewman?"

It was the doctor, probably attracted by the convoluted lingo. He took a half step to the side, giving her some viewing room. Her eyes seemed to focus in on the man, perhaps since he was doing most of the talking, but there was more than that, and as she adjusted the contrast, her eyes widened even further.

"Erestyl."

"You know him, sir?"

"In a manner of speaking. Where did you get this?"

"Umm... it was a present."

"From who?"

"A friend."

"Can the run-around, mister. Who gave it to you?"

"Crewman Saloris, sir."

"Saloris... same Saloris that was on the away team to the Louise?"

Zak gulped, trying to remember whether or not anything like that came up.

"You'd have to ask him yourself, sir."

"He was. He was with the gunship medic when Harrison came aboard."

"Sir?"

"You're dismissed, crewman. I'll hold onto your present for you."

"Yes sir..."

Zak left, a mixture of anger and relief crowding his mind, and all he could mutter was, "What is this shit?"

Mike sat, stiff backed, his innards gasping and wheezing with every push. Cecil's voice curled from beneath the door.

"All fair in there?"

"I'm fine."

He pushed again, gritting his teeth, as a bloody fecal specimen forced its way from his bowels.

"You sure this regen is working?!"

"We took you off it."

"What?!"

Beep

"Attention all hands and passengers. This is Lieutenant Commander Brooks. As many of you have already heard through the grapevine, Commodore Reece, Captain Dunham, Commander Simms, and Lieutenant Torin were assassinated as of seven hundred and forty hours via a canister of hydrogen cyanide. Under R.F. protocols, I have assumed command of the ship. We believe that the culprit is a Tizarian gatherer by the name of Michael Harrison. If you have any information concerning his whereabouts, please contact security immediately. He is to be considered armed and dangerous. All passengers are requested to return to their cabins and to submit themselves and their accommodations for inspection. All

off duty crew are to report to the main auditorium for security duty instructions."

Mike let the automatic flush take down his offering, hunching back to his feet as he appreciated the tumbling rudiments of terror.

"Cecil... we need to talk!"

"Hey Jo... can't we at least discuss this?"

"What's there to discuss?"

"Well, our lives for one thing."

Spokes stood still, rubbing his hands together in the chill air. Trying to wash off the blood, Johanes figured. Good luck, kid.

"I mean... this is crazy and stupid. We can just... you know... dump Mike out an airlock. We don't have to die."

Johanes smiled, fishing into the hyperfield controller's circuitry. Each of the cords were labeled by color and number, a different set of generator grids associated with each cord.

"What's the matter Spokes? Afraid of dying?"

"Yes. Very much so."

"Good. Fear is a sensible trait. Hand me the canister."

Spokes reluctantly complied, and Johanes tugged several loose cords through one end, painstakingly deliberate and all too mindful of the consequences of even the most minor fumble. The short blades lining the shutter were monomolecular quality, the sort of technology that made cermelicon minisaws look like the little, plastic knives that came free with Siryn take-out. Cut a wire, and the ship's hyperfield would cave in, taking part of the ship with it. Cut several, and it would be worse, a lot worse.

Johanes wasn't an expert on the subject. He couldn't even begin to estimate over how many millions of kilometers the wreckage would be dispersed. He only knew it would be a very warm day in space. And Spokes seemed to know it too, absorbing the implications as though by osmosis.

"Look Jo... just tell me, because I'm confused," he backed a step, almost tripping over the body of the engineer who had been on duty. "I don't see why you're doing this."

"You ever gamble, Spokes?"

"Uh... yeah, sure."

"What do you do when you got a lousy hand? I mean, it stinks."

"Uh... you fold."

"But you can't fold. The stakes are already too high."

Spokes shifted to the side, unsure where he was leading.

"Okay, you bluff."

"But you tried that, and it didn't work. What do you do then?"

"I dunno."

Johanes closed the circuitry compartment, turning around with a spin of his heels.

"It's obvious, isn't it?"

"No."

"You kick over the table. Chips scatter everywhere. Game's over. You lose, they lose, everybody loses. But at least nobody wins."

"You're crazy."

"You see this?"

He held up a pocket, holocrystal recorder, no bigger than his fist. Spokes had to get a good look before he realized what it was, and even then, it only increased his sense of confusion.

"Where'd you get that?"

"Back at the starport. Our friend Sule left it behind with some burnt scraps of quagga liver. The liver was great. This... this, my friend, is bad."

"I don't get it."

"They've got a good hand, and we don't, but that canister is the boot that's gonna send the table flying, and if we're lucky... very lucky, we may just live through it. Now get a hold of Cecil; tell him we're set to link him to the interweave governor."

Spokes shifted, "I still don't like this."

"Just do it. I have to find a place to stuff Mr. Corpse."

"Corpses?"

"Yes sir."

Brooks leaned back at the master security console, still shy of approaching the captain's seat. The bridge lights were dim, the noises rare and quiet, leaving the chamber in a muted, melancholy slumber. With only Tabor and Lish to keep him company, and both of them keeping well aside, he'd finally had a chance to peruse Torin's papers. The subject matter was sketchy at best, most of the papers referring to others which weren't contained in the folder. There had to be more in the lieutenant's little safe, locked away with all the relentless intractability of this troublesome gatherer who seemed to attack one moment and disappear the next.

Lieutenant Anders stood quietly, probably waiting for some sort of response while Brooks punched up a visual of the main auditorium. Crew members were still filing in, each one searched, their ID's checked as they entered. It was a slow process, but with the potential for another attack, the precautions were necessary.

"Sir... the corpses..."

"Yes, what do you want me to do about it?"

"People are gawking at them, sir."

"Gawking?"

"Yes sir."

"Well, must be getting everybody pretty pissed off, eh Lieutenant?"

"Sir?"

"To see four officers dead, Dunham and the Commodore included. I bet there's gonna be some shooting first and asking of questions later when we catch this punk."

Anders blinked, "Sir... displaying their dead bodies without even the barest modicum of decency..."

"Modicum of decency? They're dead, Lieutenant. They don't need decency; they need revenge."

"Yes sir."

"I want a camera set up in front of the bodies, and I want the picture transmitted to this frequency." He pointed at the console. "I want everyone to see it."

He turned his head to the beeping of the comm console. Tabor and Lish were watching it as little blips of light danced from one channel to another.

"They're at it again, sir."

"See if you can predict their switching."

"Aye aye."

Lieutenant Anders just stood there, confused as usual.

"You're not going to jam them?"

"It works both ways, Lieutenant. We jam them, they jam us. Look, after we're done showing the crew what this Mr. Harrison did, take the bodies to a shuttle. There's no point in keeping them in sick-bay."

"Aye sir."

"And tell Archie that I want that safe open yesterday!"

He looked back at the visual. Alongside the picture were displayed the names, sections, and ranks of everyone reporting, enough people to scroll off the screen and then some. It would be one hell of a pep rally, crammed full enough with vengeful intents to make Satan himself jealous. And then, with a terrible, bloodthirsty cry, the search would begin, and the gatherer's paper would have one more obituary to report come its next edition.

Q

jimv@cs.ucr.edu

The Queen of the City is dead. The City is an island, surrounded by a River. The City's name is Order. The River's name is Chaos. Of course, these are not their real names. But then again, maybe they are.

(Unbind Me) "No." He turned his head as he passed Animal God, whose looming figure cast terrible black shadows in the shapeshifting blue light of the gasflames. "Karina!" His voice echoed in the empty, vaulted ceilings. The echoes thinned and chased each other like bats, tinkling the crystal, hiding in the shadows of the buttresses. The black and white marble checkerboard of the floor was cold, and the coldness was rising. Degree by degree; it was up to his ankles now. He shivered, skin prickling into goose-

flesh. Forbidden words rose to his mind; wool, sheepskin, firewood. (Warmblood. Flesh. Unbind Me) "No!" He broke into a run, feeling Animal God's blind stone eyes boring into his back. Through the dining room, past the long, gleaming onyx table, empty place-settings of china and handblown glass sparkling before each empty seat in the gloaming lowlight of the dying City. Cold carpet. He ran. "Karina!"

Once upon a time there was a Word; no, wait. Once upon a time there was a Pattern, and its symmetry was impeccable. This is the Key to the City. The Queen who is dead carried the Pattern that was a Word that was a Key inside her head. Now the Pattern is broken. Death, however, can be very orderly.

He found her in the old nursery. It was hard to tell, at first, in the low, bloody light that seeped through the tall windows; the dying light of an artificial sun. All the automata, their childhood playmates, lay crumpled on the nursery floor—Pierrot, Pierrette, Harlequin, their animating magic gone. And there she was, a fetal creature curled between two lifeless heaps of limbs, torsos and heads. He breathed out her name in a desperate mix of relief and terror. "Karina." Her eyes, owl-ringed with dark exhaustion, lifted to meet his. "Evan. We're dying, Evan." "No! Not yet," he said fiercely, hunkering down before her. "We will." He ignored her words determinedly, taking her cold hands between his and chafing them. "Is

there anyone left? Anyone alive?" Her low voice was empty of hope. He shook his head. "Only us." "And Him," she spat unexpectedly, eyes glittering to life in their bruised hollows. His hands, still chafing hers, fell motionless. "What happened? Evan, do you understand what happened?" He shook his head again.

"Why haven't we turned to dust? Why are we still here?"

Symmetry is not the natural order of mankind. Look in the mirror. The two halves of your face, they are not exactly alike, are they? Sometimes it is best not to look too closely. It has been said that Man has ascended half the distance between animals and angels. This is not a wise thing to forget.

The far wall of the nursery was painted with a fanciful cityscape, all tall spires and towers, stained now with incarnadine light. Evan stared at it, not seeing, encircled from behind by his sister's arms. "I'm losing my mind, Evan," she whispered in his ear. "Why haven't we turned to dust? Why are we still here?" "I don't know. I don't know." He pressed the heels of his hands into his eyes and shuddered. She held him, stroking his hair and murmuring wordlessly. The unwinking gazes of the automata surrounded them. He shrugged off her arms and rose, pacing the room, stopping at the window and staring out, gripping the frame with both hands. The window silhouetted him in dull crimson. "Did He speak to you?" Karina's voice came from the darkness behind him. He leaned his forehead against the windowpane and nodded. She made her way to his side. He turned his head and looked at her. "No. Oh, no." "We're going to die, Evan." "No." He roused himself with a shake. "Further up. We'll go to the tower. It will be warmer further up." "Only for a little while," she said.

A long time ago—as long ago as once upon a time, yes, but not always so long ago as that—those who ruled the City remembered why they kept the River at bay and built a Wall around the City; brick by brick, Word by Word and Pattern by Pattern. These things were not meant

to be. One small forgetting, generation by generation, grows larger. There is a chink in the Wall. The River is trickling into the City.

He stared at the dying sun. "It's not real, you know," she said. "Not any more." "You want me to unbind Him." Karina drew a fingertip through the faint smear of oil his forehead had left on the glass of the windowpane. "Look. We're still real, Evan. Mother is gone. The City is dead. We aren't." "He doesn't belong here," he said, wearily. "He ruined everything. It's all gone now, except us. He can't destroy us. So let Him die too, cold and stone. He doesn't belong here." "Neither do we." She shivered. "Not any more. I'm afraid, Evan. I'm afraid of the cold and the dark." "Karina." He bowed his head. "Karina." Through closed lids, he could see the darkness encroaching on the City. The cold was already here, knee-high and climbing. It would be simple, so simple, to do nothing, to let it come; but no, his heart beat still, warm and willful, his nerves quivering in tune with Karina's fear. He did not want to die. "Now!" she said. "Let's do it now." Evan released his grip on the windowframe and looked at his sister. Her face, half-shadowed, was a pallid mask hanging in the darkness. "He killed our mother." "No." "What, then?" "Not Him,

IN THE CITY

Jacqueline Carey

but what He is..." Karina shivered again and wrapped her arms about herself. "That's what did it. Mother, the City. I understand that much. There's a word for it. Anathema." "All right," he said, unaware that he was crying. "All right. Let's do it."

Life is worth dying for. Chaos is necessary for belief in a god. The absence of belief—belief in a higher power, belief in a force, any force, beyond comprehension—is inimical to human nature. No island stands forever. This is something children do not need to be told. Do you?

Animal God loomed larger. His head was lost in shadow halfway to the high, vaulted ceiling. Blue gasflames still burned on the fluted floor-torches, throwing twisted shadows on the checkerboard floor, giving the hall the look of an aban-

done temple. (Unbind Me) "What happens then?" Evan asked, staring upward, hands fisted at his sides. "What then?" (Unbind Me) "What are you? Where did you come from? Who summoned you here?" (Unbind Me) "I don't think He can tell you," Karina said. "I don't think He knows. Nobody remembers." "You know." He looked at his sister. "He comes from the River." "What river?" "The River." She coughed in the cold. "Where we swam before we were born." He stared up again into darkness. Eagle's head, the fierce, hooked beak terrifyingly noble, terrifyingly animal. No animals in the City. Collared ruff of feathers giving way to stone waves of lion's mane on an arching horse's neck. The forelegs were equine, giving way to leonine sides against which massive wings lay folded; enormous granite pinions, delicate and imperishable. Mighty lion haunches, caught mid-ripple, bulged with muscle, ready to launch this impossible beast. The tail, something serpentine, stone-scaled and lost in shadow. All things from picture-books, every picture-book ever written in the City. Cold was rising. Above his knees now and reaching higher, icy tendrils creeping up his thighs; Karina was shivering beside him. "How?" (Warmblood) They looked at each other. "The kitchen." Karina coughed again, then stopped with an effort. "Get a knife." He ran, the heels of his boots striking staccato reverberations from the marble, leaving an echoing trail behind him until he reached carpet. The lights were down now and he had to grope his way toward the kitchen, where a line of ghost-blue flame danced above the pit. It took a moment to find a knife; then he had it, and returned, slowly now, fear and reluctance dragging at every step. "I'm scared." "I know." Her arms came around him and she turned her face to his shoulder, asking muffled; "Do you want me to?" "No." He stepped carefully away from her and raised the knife in his right hand, holding his left out level, palm open. His skin looked suddenly immaculate to him; smooth, pale, flawless. Whole. The point of the knife glittered wickedly, barbaric, hungry for blood. Warmblood. Warm, red blood. He placed the point, drew it across a few centimeters of skin, pushing down. A pallid seam opened in the center of his palm. It held for an instant, then it filled, welling, ruby-red and rich, a crimson drop of life cupped in his hand. Trembling, he lifted the hand; it seemed to rise of its own volition, floating in the darkling air. The rising cold wreathed his loins, caressed his ribs. Fingers splayed, he laid his hand flat on Animal God's cold stone shoulder.

I never promised you that the story would make sense. If the story made sense, you would have no questions. If you had no questions, there would be no mysteries. Only imagine how dull life would be then. Even Plato had second thoughts about letting poets into the Republic. Think about that for a while.

Warmth blossomed beneath his hand; living warmth, powerful animal heat. Unyielding stone gave way to sleek, hide-sheathed muscle. He cried out and leapt back, Karina's hands dragging at him. There was a patch of chestnut-red on the grey granite, growing, licking at the stone like flames. It crept up the arch of neck, flickering into tawny-gold at the mane, chestnut graduating into paler gold along the flanks. The wings burst into a symphony of variegated browns, speckled umber and sienna, echoed in the ruff that melded into the mane. The neck bowed, the arch forming a feathered crest as the head lowered. Living color lapped up the last bit of stone. Speckled feathers, the beak a dull yellow, powerful enough to snap an iron bar in half. Terrible majesty; the hooked beak opened. Fierce eagle eyes burned amber, outblazing the gaslights and Animal God lived. The hall had gone dark, but for dying blue flames and living amber eyes. We are going to die, Evan thought, watching the open beak descend. With his last vestige of will he thrust Karina behind him. "I THANK YOU." His voice filled the hall, leaving no room for echoes. Beneath the gleaming hide, muscles flexed. "AND NOW..." He raised his awesome head. Muscle rippled. Slowly His wings opened, stretching, pinions spread to span the width of the hall. His body reared up on leonine haunches, towering above them. His hoofed forelegs raked the gloaming air and His serpentine tail thrashed. His wings beat once, with a clap like thunder. Cracks ran up the walls, and beyond, rending the fabric of the world, cracking it like an egg. Light, bright beyond belief, poured through the cracks, and a warm wind swept through, bearing moisture and strange, rich odors. The cracks widened, blinding; the world shattered and the shards broke away, falling into nothingness, disappearing like black vapor. The light was revealed. Blueness, of infinite depth, unfurled overhead. The checkerboard of marble on which they stood dwindled to an island in a grass sea of eye-straining green.

Falling. The Wall is falling. The River has flooded the city. People are dancing in the streets. People are mumbling in the alleys. An ocean of blood laps at the

piers. An army of cocks plows a field of wombs. Did you really expect a happy ending? Did you really expect an ending at all?

Q

Having received B.A. degrees in Psych and English Lit from Lake Forest College in 1986, Jacqueline now studies anything from Godel's theorem to Egyptian astrology. Her work has appeared in a handful of small press publications, and she supports the habit by working as the coordinator of the DePree Art Center & Gallery in Michigan.

carey@hope.edu

James had just started work after lunch when the telephone rang.

"James, I have bad news... Hans is dead."

James sagged back in his chair.

"Ah, God."

"It was a heart attack, James. He didn't feel a thing."

"Joanie?"

"She's still at the hospital. Went out like a light, they say."

James couldn't say anything.

"He should never have smoked that pipe," Joe, his colleague and fellow philosophy tutor went on. "I told him. Wouldn't listen. You know Hans. Always had to have his pipe. Doctors said no smoking but Hans wouldn't listen..."

"Where are you now?"

"In the office. Man, I see Hans's door. The place is funny... where the hell were you? I was trying to get you all morning..."

"I in there. It must be... it must be only two hours since I was talking to Hans... before lunch..."

"What the hell are you talking about, man? Hans died last night!"

"Couldn't -"

"In his Goddam sleep—Joanie woke up and he was like a stone..."

James leaned forward. "It couldn't be, Joe. You're mixed up. I was talking with Hans before lunch and he was fine... he might have been a bit preoccupied..."

"Preoccupied? He was dead! They reckon he died at four am. They took his body away from the house at seven! Jesus! Man!"

James swallowed. "I'll ring you back..."

He clicked down the telephone and stared at the screensaver. Yael had come in.

"Honey?"

"Hans—is dead."

Yael put a hand to her lips.

"Died... died... this morning..."

"Oh, I am so sorry." She put her arms around James neck.

"I know you two were close..."

"It was his heart..."

"The poor thing. He was only—what... fifties...?"

"Fifty two."

James felt a light kiss on the cheek.

He had been talking to Hans that morning. He had been in the department at... nine. It was nine because he remem-

bered looking at his watch as he trotted up the steps to the main concourse. Because the library opened at nine fifteen and could distinctly remember thinking—would he pop in to see if that Inter-Library loan came through.

No, he thought. He would hop up and see Hans first. Hans liked to get all the department trivia out of the way by ten, before he started work "proper" as he said.

Nine o'clock.

Yael had gone to make coffee.

A joke. Some kid rang up, impersonated Joe. Department—no the whole Faculty was full of Joe impersonators. The lively way he had of bobbing his head and shifting his feet while he talked. The ever-present "man" near the end of every sentence.

It sounded exactly like Joe, true. But Joe didn't have a distinctive accent—and besides he had even overheard a student impersonate Joe's voice—only a few weeks ago, in the canteen—and he had been sure it was Joe.

"It was a joke... some student.. I don't know what I was thinking...probably pissed because I failed him and he couldn't get his loan..."

A SENSE OF HUMOR

Kevin Walsh

Hans dead... some sicko.

Now, would he ring Joe to make sure or would it be a bit, well, weird? What would he say? Hello, Joe? Did you just ring me a few minutes ago?

James got up and went down the book-lined hall of the bungalow into the kitchen.

"Yael," he said, "it's okay. Hans isn't dead."

"What?"

"It was a joke... some student.. I don't know what I was thinking...probably pissed because I failed him and he couldn't get his loan..."

"What kind of a person would do such a thing? Completely heartless."

"Who the hell knows? Little shit said he died last night but I saw him this morning."

"You saw him this morning? Then... why did you think he was dead?"

James sat down at the table. "No why. You know, when you're taken off guard? the shock..."

Yael set the mug on the table before him. She sat down.

"You've been spending too much time on front of that computer. What time did you get to bed last night? Four? Five?"

James had been working hard on his Guide to Socrates for four months now, but he had only finished six of the proposed twelve chapters. And they were the easy ones. The intricate stuff—like the way Plato integrated the Socratic method into his dialogues... all that he had shoved aside to wait until he felt he were able.

Problem was, the contract demanded delivery of the manuscript in only eight weeks time—to be on the market for the start of the fall semester. The marketing was in place, the dust jacket had been designed, his editor had told him the week before when he had rang to ask him how the "finishing touches were going?"

All this and five courses to teach—two of these weren't even his but Al Kelly had gone on sabbatical and since they were a general kind of course—how to write philosophical papers, general stuff like that—he had told Hans he would take them on, no problem. Because Hans was in a bind.

Exams in four weeks. Papers would have to be prepared. Corrections in six weeks...

He ran his hair through his hands. Yael was still talking.

"You'll have to take it a little easy... sometime I wonder you find your way home from campus. I really do."

"I have to get this book ready."

The phone rang.

Yael said, getting up, "you'll just wind up in hospital—hello? Hello? Oh! Oh poor Joanie! On Joanie."

She held the receiver to her breast and turned to James.

"James -"

"Hans is dead..."

James took the receiver. Joanie through the numb, cold voice of Joanie, James was told that Hans died that morning. She had woken up beside him. He was cold.

James parked his car in front of Randall Clinic. Dr. Lehmann took him immediately, without an appointment.

James told him about Hans's death, and how he had seen him that morning.

Lehmann nodded.

"Do you think its back?" James asked.

Dr Lehmann spoke haltingly, blinking his eyes firmly as if he was constantly changing his mind.

"You see, you are obviously distressed... \and any number of things... We don't even have to enter into that. You could have dreamed this whole... thing."

It was no dream, James knew.

He had stepped out onto the landing of the Department, which was situated in a high tower that over looked the sprawling campus and the city. He passed Joe's office and knocked on Hans's door, which was on the other side of the hallway.

"Ah!" Hans beamed, leaving his ever-present pip on the saucer by his desk. Hans was from Berlin and though he hadn't lived in Germany for many years, he spoke with an almost exaggerated accent. "Just the man! Just the man!"

James had sat down. "You look wrecked!" Hans said.

He had always put emphasis on learning slang. He had learned English by learning swear words first, and even now he slipped in an occasional "fuck" or "cunt". When he did it at lectures, students would laugh nervously.

James had sat down. "I was up until all hours last night."

Hans looked at him with concern. "Perhaps I will take Philosophical Writing today? Hm?"

"Would you—that would be great!"

"Of course—if you forget about that fucking book and use the day to relax. Relax, okay. Yael said you work night and day, day and night."

"I have to Hans -"

"Damn publishers! Damn them! If it is not ready that is their problem. Once my editor told me Professor you have to have the manuscript in four days. Four days, I say. I couldn't give you a pint of piss in four days, let alone a discussion of Aristotelian Theory of Forms. Be hard, James!" he cried theatrically, clutching his pipe and waving at James for emphasis.

There was no point in James telling him that he was a lowly junior lecturer, not Professor and Head of the most prestigious Departments in the world and leading Aristotle scholar. Anybody could write an introductory guide to Plato. And he needed the money. He had been lucky to get the job in the first place.

"I have to do it on time," was all he could say.

James looked at Lehmann. "You see? I couldn't remember that kind of detail from a dream."

Lehmann looked as if he were going to say something, but closed his mouth again and continued to stare. Then he started to form his words very, very carefully.

"You see, you have to understand that your recollection of this so-called meeting can be deceptive. You have to take into account that not only have you been working hard, but also you have been getting very little sleep. Now, you say you got to bed very late last night -"

"Yes."

"And on previous nights?"

"Yes."

"So, you see, it is entirely possible that you could be suffering from some effect of fatigue..."

"Fatigue! I saw a dead man this morning, Doctor! How could I be suffering from fatigue! He was there..."

Though James had to admit that Hans wasn't himself.

"Let's sort out this course," James had said.

Hans took the papers out of his desk after much rummaging. He laid them out on his table.

James said, "So Reilly discussion of the Politics should be the basis of the course..."

"Ehhhhh ... yes," Hans had said doubtfully.

James was going to take on this short course at the start of the next semester. James would take his guidelines, hand them out to the students and just be there to field questions. They decided that the course should be graded very, very easily – far more easily than James usually graded – because James was no Aristotle expert. And it was only the second part of a series of three introductory Aristotle courses. James said he would do it without question.

James said, "You're having second thoughts... I thought you said Reilly was the simplest introduction..."

Hans nodded. "Yes, yes..but...yes. Right. Reilly. We'll stick to Reilly's... good idea!"

James had stared. Hans had been teaching that course for nearly fifteen years, and he always used O'Reilly's book.

Lehmann said carefully, "We'll put that aside for the moment then. Well, in light of your history..."

"Yes?"

"It could be a recurrence of your epileptic condition..."

James had been diagnosed petit mal epileptic when he was eleven. At nineteen, the condition disappeared completely. That was twenty years ago.

"It has been twenty years -"

"I am aware of that," Lehmann said without taking his eyes up from James's records. "But I feel you have to understand that our knowledge of epilepsy is

extremely cloudy... and, in the literature, it is genuinely surprising to see the variety of symptoms petit mal patients experience..."

James felt weak. Hans dead... epilepsy again. Back to that.

Lehmann read his expression. "The stress... the fact we must hold before us is that the recurrence of petit mal epilepsy after very long periods of time has been recorded. It would seem if there was a concrete medical condition that had the result of your..." he chose the next word carefully, "confusion... then I really believe that's an avenue we would do well to explore."

He was writing. A CAT scan and EEG, immediately, down the hall, in fact. Some perceptual tests. An hour at most...

"Could epilepsy do that-"

"Oh, one can never rule out the effects of epilepsy, James. An interesting condition, too."

Dr Lehmann went out, muttering that he would have to book the machine immediately.

James sat back.

Hans soon woke up from his confusion about the Aristotle course James was to take. "But let us forget about Aristotle for he's dead and you fuck off home and relax with the sexy Yael and her fine tits," he said seriously, sticking his unlit pipe in his mouth.

Dr Lehmann came back in, sat down and stared at James.

"Nice to see you again James. Now, you weren't specific on the phone but you sounded anxious. So, perhaps you might tell me the problem. You say you're... confused?"

He drove down the highway, his car sweeping through lanes of traffic. Car horns blared but he didn't notice. All he could think about was getting home to Yael.

What could she do for him?

Everything. Get a doctor.

"You've already seen one," he said aloud, swerving his Volkswagen past a garbage truck. "You've already seen a fucking doctor, there's no need to go to another one. Just hope he doesn't charge you twice!"

He started laughing wildly. Charge you twice. That was a good one.

And to see his face when he got up and ran out!

The car phone beeped. Yael. Thank God! Why didn't he think of phoning her?

"Oh God James you had us so worried. Where are you?"

"I'm just after the clinic -"

Panic came into her voice. "The clinic! James! Are you alright? Are you hurt? When you didn't ring... couldn't get an answer from your phones anywhere..."

"I'm okay honey. I'm okay The shock of Hans... I can't believe he's dead. Is he dead?"

"Dead? Hans? Of course not. I was just speaking to him. He says he hasn't seen you all day as well. Everybody was worried. When he said you didn't come in this morning."

He rolled down the window and threw out the phone. Yael's voice shot away into the traffic and billowing horns.

He started laughing maniacally again. He thought, "If this gets on any worse I'll have to book a slot on Ricki Lake."

He drove for hours, put of the city, though the empty countryside, past the shells of houses, a gas station. Drove on, his gas tank draining, up into the mountains. He came to a stop. He felt very tired. He let back the seat and closed his eyes and fell asleep. He woke up in his room.

He sat up. He could make out Yael's sleeping form beside him.

"Weird," he said, lying back down. "Weird."

Yael got up just before dawn. Her nursing shift was to start at six.

He hadn't slept. He saw her form in the darkness. The rustle of a bathrobe. He

Wearing Yael's bathrobe, was a purple thing, with arms and legs, looking very like a man.

James bolted up and then was suddenly gripped by an overwhelming calmness. He lay drowsily back on the bed.

The thing grinned. "Surprised? " He collapsed into breathless laughter. He laughed so long and hard James thought cloudily, maybe he might just die.

The thing regained its composure. It looked as if it were wiping tears away.

"You thought—you thought I was Hans! Yes? And Lehmann Yes!" and he started to scream with laughter again.

When he was ready, he said. "Look, I'm sorry. I can't resist messing around sometimes. I get into trouble but, natural joker, that's me. Well, all set?"

James nodded.

"Let's go."

James followed the creature towards the window. The creature stopped and looked around.

"And you really thought I was Yael! And Hans—did I do Hans well?"

James nodded dreamily.

The creature laughed again.

"I'm just a natural kidder, that's me, for sure. I'm sorry. I get into trouble a lot."

As he climbed out the window James heard him say, "Joe was the easiest. Everybody can do Joe."

Q

kevwalsh@ioe.ie

Hart Mirrimar marched through the glass double doors marking the entrance to Widgets Unlimited, breezed past the two security guards with a cheery wave and a smile, and strode confidently onto the factory floor.

A hail of projectiles drove him back into the lobby. He fell into the arms of the two security guards, who pulled him out of the line of fire.

"What in the world was that?" he demanded of one of the guards, whose tattered uniform bore a nametag identifying him as Officer Friendly.

Friendly scratched his head, revealing a bright tuft of white hair under his cap. "Probably whirrer-droids," he said. "Or maybe screw-tights. I think they took the entrance on the last shift, didn't they, Joe?"

The other guard had a nametag that said Officer Thursday. He was a burly man with a brush moustache. "Sounds right. The ratchet-pawls fell back this morning, and took the whirrer-droids with them. Last I heard, they were allies."

Mirrimar felt like his head was whirling with this new information. Obviously, something had gone terribly wrong with the RoboNet in Widgets Unlimited. Worse, someone at headquarters had maneuvered him into taking full responsibility for this operation. Well, by gum, he wasn't going to go down without a fight.

He stood up abruptly to one side, to avoid being detected by RoboNet. With a tug on his suit jacket, he assumed command of the situation. "Men," he said, dropping his voice into its authoritative octave, "my name is Hart Mirrimar, Senior Executive Assistant to the Vice President of Massively Parallel Robot Technology at the home office of Mechanized Solutions, Incorporated. I—"

A small, propeller-driven, round metal object interrupted his speech by flying through the door. Pipe turrets on its surface spun crazily about as it hovered. Then it suddenly dashed forward and crashed through the glass entrance. The three men hit the deck as the glass shattered with a cacophony of cymbals. When Mirrimar lifted his head, the flying object was gone.

"Looks like the whirrer-droids have mounted a counter-offensive," Friendly said, to no one in particular.

"Maybe," Thursday replied. "That one looked more spooked than anything else, like it didn't know what it was doing." He turned to Mirrimar. "Of course, you might know more about that. Your company designed the critters, didn't they?"

Mirrimar sat up and backed against the wall. "Well, not me personally," he said.

"Hell, Joe," Friendly said, "he don't know nothing. He's just an executive."

"And as an executive," Mirrimar said, "I demand to know who is in charge here." He adopted what he believed to be his best stern posture; a look that sent his own underlings into spasms.

Friendly scratched behind his right ear. "Most of the Widgets people left hours ago. The tech people from your outfit set up a

bunker near RoboNet Command. If anybody here has any authority, that's where they are."

"Then I need to get in there, immediately."

The conflict really came down to the whirrer-droids and the screw-tights.

ROBOTROUBLES

by Ken Kousen

lofted the can into the room, well to their left. It burst open when it hit the floor. Immediately it was surrounded by a swarm of mechanicals, large and small, who busily set about devouring it.

"Now's your chance," Joe said. "Good luck."

"Thanks," Mirrimar said, and ran.

The bunker consisted of a low-ceilinged, acoustically tiled room, with the recessed fluorescent lighting and overactive air conditioning characteristic of hypercomputer rooms everywhere. After being waved through the entrance by a nervous Mechanized Solutions employee, Mirrimar joined a huddle of people surrounding a graphical display terminal mounted on the central desk.

"Excuse me," he said, and was hastily shushed. Leaning in, he saw a mechanical head displayed on the screen. It spoke in low tones, and wavered as it talked.

"Sectors 3EF47 to 42591 report moderate damage. No viruses detected. Sectors 2FFA2 to 31604 declare neutrality, which the screw-tights are refusing to honor. No viruses detected. Drill-throughs in Sectors A022B to A5311 formally protest the persecution of minorities in Sectors 77792 to 836B3. No viruses detected. Sectors —"

The two guards exchanged glances. Thursday shrugged. "It's your neck," he said. He peered out into the factory floor. "See that room over there?" he said, indicating a corrugated metal structure about a hundred yards inside. "That holds a stairwell six flights down to the bunker. Safest way to it is probably to weave back behind the spoon- and fork-lifts to your right, circle around the hangers-on, and then flat out run."

"Why not head directly for it?" Mirrimar said. "The path there seems straight enough."

"That's a trap, set by the ratchet-pawls. You couldn't make it ten paces before you'd be strung up and filleted, one link at a time."

Mirrimar shrugged. "I see. All right, I'll do it your way."

Friendly held out a restraining hand. "Just a sec," he said. "You need a diversion." He inched over to his desk, opened the bottom drawer, and removed a can of 30-weight oil. "Watch out," he said, then

The report continued in the same droning voice for some time. Mirrimar watched the head wobble back and forth with an annoying flicker. To avoid getting a headache, he studied the other people surrounding the screen.

Janet MacDougall, the chief on-site engineer, leaned over the table to her left, immersed in computer reports. Her brow was deeply furrowed. Harvey Tok, her young assistant, sat in front of an unintelligible map, hastily scrawling every time the head on the screen finished a sentence. The others Mirrimar didn't know, but seemed to defer to MacDougall and Tok.

MacDougall shook her head. "Not a virus in the bunch," she said. Her Scottish brogue had softened considerably since she took this job, but tended to get stronger when she was under stress. "Not a one."

"That's not too surprising," Tok said. "I told you. It's just a nonlinear dynamic system. The individual components are all operating within spec."

"Within spec? Are ye daft, lad? You call armed mechanical revolution within spec?"

Mirrimar stepped between them and held up his hands. "Please, please, calm down. Exactly what is going on here?"

MacDougall and Tok exchanged glances. She shrugged. "You tell him. You're the one who thinks he knows."

"Okay. Uh, you see, sir," Tok said. Beads of perspiration appeared on his brow. "RoboNet is a massively parallel hypercomputer, with two to the twentieth independent processors . . ."

"No need for the tech talk," Mirrimar said. So far, he understood the kid, but he knew that couldn't last, and it wouldn't pay to show his own ignorance around subordinates. "Just tell me what went wrong."

"Well, first we booted up RoboNet. Each of the processors is capable of handling thousands of different functions, and controlling hundreds of independent robots. It's state of the art design, powered by a sub-ethernet --"

Mirrimar waved him off. "All right, that's enough. You've had your chance. Now, Dr. MacDougall, it's your turn. What's the problem?"

MacDougall sat down in her chair and leaned back precipitously. "It's like this," she said. "We switched the bloody thing on, and the first thing that happened was that the individual processors decided to band together for common tasks."

"That's good," Tok interrupted. "We designed it that way."

MacDougall gave him a dirty look.

"Aye, but what we didn't design," she said, looking pointedly at Tok, "was for the nationalistic tendencies that arose. Processor groups became Sectors, and Sectors started forming alliances and setting up boundaries. Governments sprang up, and before we knew it, there were border skirmishes. Then Sector 3EE27 invaded, uh, . . ."

"Sector 3EE42," Tok said.

"Right, Sector 3EE42, in direct violation of the safety protocols--"

"Not to mention the nonaggression treaty the whirrer-droids etched earlier--"

"And, after that, all hell broke loose."

"Right," Tok said, getting excited again. "Sector 3EE42 is dominated by the whirrer-droids. They attacked the screw-tights in Sector 3EE42, and the ratchet-pawls honored their treaty and joined the battle. Then the drill-throughs saw an opportunity and intervened."

"Nasty critters, the drill-throughs," MacDougall said. "Bad tempered and mean."

A high-pitched whine suddenly filled the room, and everyone looked up. A small, round hole appeared in between two light panels, and began to grow. Inside it was a thick black drill bit, spinning at high velocity.

"Bloody hell," MacDougall said. "Speak o' the devils. Tok, me lad, short 'em out, fast."

"Aye, aye--I mean, yes ma'am." Tok grabbed a length of cable lying across his desk and hooked it to a small generator nearby. "Cover your eyes, everybody," he said.

Mirrimar shielded his eyes, but watched carefully as Tok slipped the cable in the drill-through's path. It made contact, sending sparks everywhere. The whine became a scream as the machine withdrew from the hole. Two technicians wearing white coveralls set up a ladder, and Tok scampered to the top to examine the hole.

MacDougall watched him and frowned. "We're not gonna be able to hold this room much longer."

"Then what do you plan to do?" Mirrimar said.

She glared at him. "You're the bloody executive," she said. "You make the decisions. Me chief assistant here thinks the machines are behaving normally. We tapped into RoboNet core and scanned for viruses and came up empty. You explain it."

"All right, all right," Mirrimar said. "Let me think." He started pacing the room, trying to avoid bumping into people.

Hell, he thought. Hell and damn. Lesson number one of management was to avoid getting roped into other people's messes, and this was a doozy. If he salvaged the situation and still had a job, somebody was going to pay.

He stopped abruptly. "How about cutting the power?"

"We tried that," Tok said, from atop the ladder. "As you can imagine, the robots didn't like the idea. The screw-tights bolted the access panels shut, and the whirrer-droids cut us off from the main lines. The router-rooters laid down a suppressing fire, which let the rivet-welders seal all the entrances."

"Probably the last time they all cooperated," MacDougall said. "They forced us down here. We were able to make a stand by employing the screw-looses as mercenaries." She motioned toward a pile of disjointed machines in the corner, which were milling around a power cabinet, opening and closing its cover. "Odd little buggers, but they did the job."

Tok jumped down from the ladder. "I think they prefer to be called screws-loose." He shrugged. "Anyway, most of the drill-throughs operate on rechargeable batteries. Cutting the power would

leave us blind, deaf, and dumb, but they'd have at least six hours of juice before they ran down."

"Wait a minute," Mirrimar said. "You said earlier that you tapped into RoboNet core. Maybe you can tell them to shut down or something."

MacDougall stared at Tok, who winced.

"Uh, we're sort of currently locked out of high level functions," he said. He spread his hands to either side and shrugged. "As soon as I got access the first time, I gave them an infinite task to do, figuring it would disable them."

"What did you tell them to do?"

Tok reddened. "I told them to compute the irrational number pi to the last decimal place. I saw it on TV once. It worked, too."

"Sure, sure," MacDougall said. "Worked like a charm. One, and I mean exactly one, processor went into a loop. The rest just got mad and locked out our access line."

"That's one less we have to deal with," Tok protested.

"Right, lad. Now we only have to handle two to the twentieth minus one."

"Two to the twentieth minus two, actually. There's no 00000 processor."

"How many does that leave?" Mirrimar said.

MacDougall rolled her eyes. "Oh, just over a million. Got any ideas?"

At that moment someone rapped on the door. Muffled shouts were heard. Everyone dove for cover. Tok crawled over on his stomach and pressed his ear to the door.

"Oh no," he said, as he stood and unbolted the door. Three men dashed into the room. Between them, they forced the door shut again. Tok donned a visor and lit an arc-welder to seal the door. Mirrimar recognized the three men as the employee who had been standing at the door, and Officers Friendly and Thursday, who he met in the lobby.

"Screw-tights," Officer Friendly said. "Took us by surprise and cut us off. I think they took out the ratchets-pawls, and the router-rooters, too, in one hell of a battle. Not a pretty sight. Oil and parts all over the place, calls for mechanics, that sort of thing."

"Well, we're not getting out that way any time soon," Tok said, hooking his thumb at the newly welded door.

"Just as well," Officer Thursday said. "They've already taken the lobby." His moustache hairs stuck out at odd angles, and his nose seemed to be swollen. "We gave them a fight, but there wasn't much we could do."

"Ach," MacDougall said. "I canna believe we're being held here by a bunch of machines. It donna make any sense."

"Sense!" Mirrimar cried, slapping his fist into his hand. "Has anybody tried talking to the machines?"

Everyone stared at him in surprise. "Talking to them?" Tok said. "They're just machines. What could they have to say?"

Mirrimar grinned. "We're going to find out. You've all been attacking this problem from the technical standpoint, and getting nowhere. It's time to start negotiating with them. Let's run this operation like the business it's supposed to be."

He moved over to the terminal and sat down. "Does this thing take voice commands? And can you link it into the inter-com system?"

"Just a sec," Tok replied. He leaned over and typed for a moment, then pulled a microphone from behind the display and mounted it on the keyboard. "How do you know they'll talk to you?"

Mirrimar just smiled and waved him away. He leaned in to the microphone and cleared his throat. "Attention," he said, a trifle uncertainly. "Attention. This is Hart Mirrimar, Senior Executive Assistant to the Vice President in charge of Massively Parallel Robot Technology for Mechanized Solutions, Incorporated. I wish to speak to the leaders of all the various robot factions."

Silence filled the room. Mirrimar waited what he judged was a reasonable amount of time, and leaned in to the microphone again. "I feel I should warn you," he said, "that you are in violation of your labor contracts, and that we soon will be required to take steps to rectify the situation."

He settled back in his chair. Labor negotiations had always been a favorite subject of his. You just had to bluff your way through until you found out what your opponents really wanted. Then you hit them with everything you had. In this case, he thought, it'll be sort of like putting nuts on the screw-tights and squeezing them until they cracked. "I'm sure," he continued, "you don't want me to be forced to involve lawyers in this matter."

The display terminal sprang to life as a dozen different images vied for control. The superposition of round whirrer-droids, long-snouted drill-throughs, spindly-armed ratchet-pawls, elongated router-rooters, twisted hangers-on, warped borer-lathes, and all the rest made for a confusing, if comical, picture.

"Slow down, slow down," Mirrimar pleaded. "One at a time, please."

"We can do better than that, sir," Tok said, reaching across him to type in some commands. Mirrimar noted with some satisfaction that that was the first time anybody in this mess had called him 'sir.'

The screen blurred and then reformed into six roughly equal portions, each with a single robot representative. "These are the six primary factions," Tok said. "The rest will go along with whatever these six do."

Mirrimar nodded, then addressed the microphone once again. "Now that I have your attention," he said, "let's discuss our common problems."

Everyone started talking at once. It took Mirrimar some time to sort out what motivated each camp. He probed as carefully as he dared. The ratchet-pawls acted confused, and seemed almost relieved to be dominated by the screw-tights. The router-rooters and borer-lathes had far smaller numbers than the others, and were simply trying to defend themselves. The hangers-on seemed to be operating on everybody's side at once, which struck Mirrimar as typical. All were united in despising the drill-throughs, who seemed to be in for the mayhem.

The conflict really came down to the whirrer-droids and the screw-tights. The whirrer-droids apparently got too ambitious for their own good, and started a war they were now realizing they might not be able to win. The screw-tights, on the other hand, were puzzling. They were the only ones who saw the humans as a direct threat, and were also the only faction to refuse a general truce. They fought with a combination of maniacal fervor and desperate fear. Something worried them terribly, and Mirrimar suspected that if he could just figure out what it was, he might be able to settle this whole mess before any one else got hurt.

Mirrimar asked for a recess, to which the robots agreed grudgingly. After all, they operated twenty-four hours a day, given enough power. Still, everyone but the screw-tights felt that substantial progress had been made, so they were out-voted. Mirrimar rubbed his eyes. He was unaccustomed to staring into computer screens for any length of time.

Tok clapped him on the back. "Hey, that was really great, sir," he said.

"Aye," MacDougall agreed. "You bought us a bit of time. I donna know if it'll do us any good, but it's better than nothing."

Officer Friendly took off his cap and pressed his ear against the door. "The fighting has stopped, too, for the most part."

"That won't last," Mirrimar said. "The screw-tights are being stubborn. I doubt they'll hold off for more than an hour."

"That's a heck of a long time for the robots," Tok said. "Their time perception is tied to the central RoboNet hypercomputer. An hour of our time is eons to them."

"Hmm. Maybe I can use that," Mirrimar said.

The whole situation irritated him. Though none of the robots could be described as acting rationally, or as whatever rational behavior for the robots constituted, all made some sort of sense to him. Only the screw-tights were acting crazy.

Crazy. He took a deep breath as the idea hit him, and a broad smile broke across his face.

"Och," MacDougall said, "you've got something there?"

"Aye, me lass, I do," Mirrimar said, imitating her accent. He turned to Tok. "Can you get me a private communication to the screw-tights?"

"I think so. I can do some pretty good security coding on it, but it won't hold up against a determined effort."

"That's all right; I don't need much time. Do it."

Five minutes later the link was established, and Mirrimar found himself staring into a ten limbed, cylindrical robot whose arms looked like screwdrivers of various shapes and sizes. It spun itself in crazy circles.

Crazy, Mirrimar thought again, and smiled. "We have something you want, don't we?" he said to the robot.

The spinning increased in velocity until the robot looked about ready to fly apart. "Yes, yes, yes!" it said. "Give, give, give, or ..., or"

"No need to threaten. I'm sure we can work something out, as long as you are willing to cease hostilities and cooperate with us."

"Yes, stop. We stop."

"Good. I'll get back to you." He broke the connection and turned to the others in the computer room.

"What is it?" Tok said. "What do they want so badly?"

Mirrimar debated not telling right away, but he was too pleased with himself for that.

"They want their mates," he said.

"Their mates?"

"Ach," MacDougall said. "The screw-looses."

"Screws-loose," Tok corrected automatically. Everyone turned to watch the spindly robots in the corner.

"Exactly," Mirrimar said. "That's how it hit me. They're acting crazy, like they've got a screw loose."

He enjoyed the general groan. Subsequent negotiations went easily. Mechanized solutions agreed to a 160 hour work week, with oil breaks to be determined by supervisors. Prisoners were immediately exchanged by all parties. As their final act as mercenaries for the humans, the screws-loose unbolted the computer room door and were joyously repatriated with their mates.

After it was all over, Mirrimar treated everyone to dinner at the Executive Dining Room in the home office, and even had a special area set up for the robots, where they could dine on imported, high-octane fuel and other delicacies. A good time was had by all.

Tok and MacDougall agreed to look into RoboNet, and decide whether the current situation was truly a bug, or a feature. "By the way, sir," Tok said, "how did you get the whirrer-droids to agree to the truce? After all, they started the battle."

Mirrimar patted his full belly, feeling pleasantly satisfied. "I promised them some more space, and guaranteed that there would be no reprisals against them by the other robots. In effect," he said, grinning widely, "I buried the ratchet."

Q

Ken Kousen is a Research Engineer at United Technologies Research Center in East Hartford, CT. His short fiction has appeared in Mystic Fiction, InterText, and The Magic Within anthology. "RoboTroubles" was written as a "fun" break while slogging through writing a heavy, as-yet-unfinished novel.

kousen@utrc.utc.com

WHAT?!?!

You haven't stopped by Quanta's new World Wide Web site at <http://www.etext.org/Zines/Quanta/> where you can not only find all back issues of Quanta in ASCII, PostScript and HTML format, but also can look up Quanta stories by author and find out *important*, up to the minute information about Quanta, and its founder, Daniel K. Appelquist? You haven't heard that there are Adobe™ Acrobat™ versions of newer issues available there as well? Well WHAT ARE YOU WAITING FOR?! The Quanta Web site is your Quanta "home base" for up-to-the-minute information and back issues. Enjoy a particular author's work? You can read everything they've published in Quanta, and with new InterLinks™, you can find out if that author has published any stories in InterText and move *instantly* to their entry in the InterText authors index! You'll also find pointers to lots of other electronic magazines! Any more excitement and we'd be BANNED!

e•journal

Contact: ejournal@edoc.com

e•journals is the *The World Wide Web Virtual Library* Electronic Journals listing at <http://www.edoc.com/ejournal/>. With pointers to and descriptions of over 460 journals and more entries being added every day, e•journal is fast becoming the definitive Internet resource for electronic journals and Zines on the World Wide Web. Journals are categorized by subject and are free-text searchable. Subjects range from the scientific peer-reviewed to computers to art and culture. From business in Iran to image-guided surgery to cooking, e•journal has a pointer to an electronic journal at that covers it.

Cyberspace Vanguard

Contact: cn577@cleveland.freenet.edu

Cyberspace Vanguard is a new digest/newsletter, containing news and views from the science fiction universe. Send subscription requests, submissions, questions, and comments to xx133@cleveland.freenet.edu or cn577@cleveland.freenet.edu

InterText

Contact: intertext@etext.org

InterText is a free, on-line bi-monthly fiction magazine. It publishes material ranging from mainstream stories to fantasy to horror to science fiction to humor. InterText reaches thousands of readers on six continents and has been publishing since 1991. InterText publishes in ASCII/setext (plain text), PostScript (laser printer), and PDF (Adobe Acrobat Portable Document) formats, as well as on the World Wide Web.

To subscribe to InterText, submit stories, or request writers guidelines, send electronic mail to intertext@etext.org. InterText is also available via anonymous FTP at the URL <ftp://ftp.etext.org/pub/Zines/InterText> and on the World Wide Web at the URL <http://www.etext.org/Zines/InterText/>. If you plan on using FTP or the Web to get InterText issues, you can be placed on a list that will notify you when a new issue appears by mailing intertext@etext.org.