

## In This Issue

Welcome to the 8th issue of *nanobison*. Take the time to read, digest, fondle and embrace all of these great stories in this our themed *Other Dimensions of Love* issue.

<a href="#"><u>Small Talk</u></a>	First, we have a story called <i>Small Talk</i> , from returning <i>nanobison</i> contributor <b>James Targett</b> . No it's not a computer language, but then, what is the language of love?
<a href="#"><u>Feeders</u></a>	Next, a story from <b>Ashley Arnold</b> called <i>Feeders</i> . Is it about love? That depends on your definition. Read it, then check on the well-being of your goldfish / parakeet / puppy / cat / rodent.
<a href="#"><u>First Year Reunion</u></a>	Following is <i>First Year Reunion</i> , from <b>Vassa and Varvara Grichko</b> . Who says love isn't a sacrifice?
<a href="#"><u>Renfield and the Modern Woman</u></a>	<b>John McMullen's</b> <i>Renfield and the Modern Woman</i> explores the boundaries of devotion, even as they extend beyond the grave, because sometimes a sense of order is what one truly loves.
<a href="#"><u>Dead Man in the Yard</u></a>	In <b>Rob Hunter's</b> <i>Dead Man in the Yard</i> , a man received advice about love from an unexpected source.
<a href="#"><u>Notes on Tomorrow Bay</u></a>	When is love a weapon and sex a mere distraction? A timeless question, one that <b>R.R. Litwicki Jr.</b> answers in his own way in <i>Notes on Tomorrow Bay</i> .
<a href="#"><u>Revelations</u></a>	<b>Miranda Warren's</b> <i>Revelations</i> is perhaps not <i>about</i> love, but it raises it's own questions about one's capacity <i>to</i> love when one becomes separated ... from one's self.
<a href="#"><u>Love is Strange</u></a>	In <b>Thomas J. Keller's</b> <i>Love is Strange</i> , the disdain of youth collides with love, with a little extraterrestrial influence. Sometimes you have to take help where you can get it.
<a href="#"><u>The Queen of Titan</u></a>	And finally, we have a story from another returning <i>nanobison</i> author, Justin Stanchfield, where a man dances among the stars with <i>The Queen of Titan</i> .

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# Small Talk

**by James Targett**

From a distance Earth is as black as a lump of coal, almost impossible to see with a naked human eye against the star field. Farther out, it is possible to see the world as its silhouette blocks the pattern of the stars. At even greater distance, it can be detected by the slight gravitational effect it has on the sun. Beyond that, it cannot be seen at all.

It is a black planet. It's satellites, both natural and artificial, are cold, silent, and airless. A lonely traveler, nearing the planet, passing Luna, would see airlock doors open to the void. Further exploration of the lunar cities and the orbital stations would reveal little beyond bitter cold and dust. Telltales on power displays show fusion reactors powered down to near nothings. Where there was commerce and tourism there are now only empty shuttle bays. Mass drivers, that once flung cargo in parabolic arcs towards Mars, are motionless.

Racks of abandoned spacesuits hang limp and forlorn like banners at half-mast in a windless sky. Inside the vaults of space stations, the odd pen or tool or shoe falls freely through complicated orbits, spinning forever with no hand to halt their motion.

The traveler could drift over to the viewing galleries with their plasglaz windows. From high orbit, they could look down on a world that had once been green and blue and white but now appears to be black and brown. No cloudy atmosphere remains to shield the world from the eyes of space.

Where city lights had illuminated the darkened night side of the planet like artificial constellations, there is only shadow. Where the lights of trawler fleets had decorated the ocean there is nothing, no boats, no nets, no fish, no sea. Just the naked, cracked floor and bones of creatures of the deep; exposed for none to see.

#

A tall man, dressed in a white suit, Eton tie and straw hat, meets a woman in the Botanical Gardens. The man appears to be of Caucasian descent with a touch of some unknown Oriental heritage. The gardens overlook the harbor, with its aquamarine waters, and the elegant arc of the Coathanger Bridge.

"Mr. Spider," she says, greeting him. Her accent is Russian or Eastern European. "What a pleasant surprise. I haven't seen you for a week or more."

"It is good to see you too, Madame Babel. The world seems such a lonely place these days. It is always a joy to see a friendly face." His sharp eyes flash cobalt blue.

Madame Babel wears antique brown leather sandals from one of Italy's premier fashion houses and a red dress with a sunflower print; she carries a black parasol. The shade of her lipstick exactly matches the red of her dress.

After a moment, he smiles. "You look exceptionally attractive today. I like the sandals."

She smiles back, without showing her teeth. "Thank you. There are Gucci. Not many men would have noticed."

He grins. "But I Madame, am not like other men."

She laughs, too loudly. A trio of parakeets takes flight in surprise. The explosive movement of their wings sets off an undulating motion in the green leaves of the trees.

Within a minute the sound and motion settle, Mr. Spider and Madame Babel turn from watching the flight of the parakeets.

"Would you like to walk with me?" she asks.

"Delighted."

They wander through the gardens for nearly an hour, talking about this and that. She comments on the balmy summer weather. He points out the fragrance of the roses. They both look wistfully at the empty bandstand, wishing for the sound of jazz.

Eventually it is time to depart.

"So good to see you again Madame. I wish that we could see more of each other."

"Why not? I am free this evening. Would you like to go to dinner?"

"I would love to. Do you have somewhere in mind?"

"Why, where else but the Cafe Imaginaire?"

Their lips kiss air and they head their separate ways.

#

In isolated bunkers, processes that have been idling come on line. They call upon sleeping databases and empty memory banks. The surface of the world still looks silent. However those with ears too sensitive enough to hear, might catch the echoes of binary pulses from deep underground.

More relays connect. Servers and routers try to find a path through the ruins of the networks that once straddled and bound this world in their electronic embrace.

Connections are made. It appears as if the signal will get through without any significant loss of data.

Then, deep in a transcontinental tunnel, next to the decaying carriage of a maglev train, a relay falters. The signal breaks apart overwhelmed by the ghosts and bones of dead commuters. There is only silence and stale air. Sealed shut against the horror of vacuum, there is nothing to disturb the grave of this giant plastic and metal worm. A signal, no matter how important, will not be allowed to disturb the sleep of the dead.

The line is down. The wires burnt out.

Somewhere, in one of the subterranean command centers, the fault is noted. There is no allowance for distortion in the message; this is not a game of Chinese whispers.

Automated software reroutes the signal. A new connection is made. Another path is found through the remnants of the spider's web. Thanks to multiple redundancies and the foresight of dead designers, the message gets through. The report is filed.

#

The streets of Paris Two are quiet. The Eiffel Tower still climbs into a sky painted by Monet, even though its real-life counterpart has twisted and melted beyond recognition.

Mr. Spider waits beside a flower seller's cart. There is no sign of the vendor. When Madame Babel approaches he takes a bouquet of white irises and leaves behind a handful of fairy money. He offers the irises to Madam Babel. She smiles and accepts the offering. They link arms and walk to the cafe.

It is not hard to find a table, as they are the only customers. A waiter, not much more than an animated sprite armed with a menu-database, takes their order:

"Monsieur and Madame?"

"I'll have a bottle of your '57 Ambrosia and some of your roasted unicorn with a lotus flower side salad."

"And for the lady?" asks the software.

"Some of the Quetzaltcoatl in golden apple sauce please."

"The feathered serpent. A good choice Madame, I congratulate you on your effortless pronunciation." says the waiter, stiltedly, running through its customer service routines.

Madame Babel blushes with pride. The waiter returns to its default task. He polishes cutlery until their order is ready. It is no more than part of the Café Imaginaire's furniture.

"So," says Mr. Spider as he turns to Madame Babel,

"So," says the lady. She slides her fingers across her wineglass.

Mr. Spider searches through his memory for interesting facts, gossip or recent anecdotes. He realizes that he ought to catch-up on recent news. He feels woefully out of touch on current events.

"Have you heard of the Turing test?" asks Madame Babel. She chooses a piece of trivia as her opening conversational gambit.

Mr. Spider still feels rattled. He can't remember any recent news stories to relate to Madame Babel. He tries to recall anything; the newspapers he has read, the bulletin boards he has visited, but he can't. He tries not to panic. He tries not to run through his mind, screaming at the empty spaces. Outwardly he hides his fear.

"I don't believe I have," he replies, fiddling with his napkin. "What sort of test is it? Something you do at school? I don't believe that I ever took one. " Mr. Spider gently overplays his confusion and ignorance.

"No, no," she smiles at his humor. "It was a hypothetical test that was devised by a mathematician and early computer scientist who called himself Alan Turing. He believed that you could prove that a machine was as intelligent as human being when you could hold a conversation with it."

"But surely you would recognize the fact that you were talking to a machine. You would be able to see that you were talking with a box with flashing lights."

Madame Babel laughs. "The test would be blind. It would be like being in a confessional. You are in your box, with a curtain between you and the priest. You don't know if the priest is human or a machine. And if the machine is as intelligent as a human, you should not be able tell. It will talk just like you or I."

Mr. Spider nods his agreement. " So you are saying that you could get your Hail Mary's from a computer. Forgiveness from God via his online presence? Dedicate your prayers to St. Michael the Computer?"

"Depends if you believe in God," replies Madame Babel, raising her glass and sipping her wine. Her smile is sharp as it reaches her emerald eyes.

Mr. Spider snorts. He is bored off this topic. It is not important to him. He changes the subject. "You know, that reminds me of a joke I heard. There was this priest and this young lady of dubious morals, possibly an actress. There are at this party.

#

Just because something can talk and make conversation, it does not mean that it is saying anything important. There is an old proverb about empty vessels making the most noise.

This is true of both mankind and machines. There is an urban myth that a team of research scientists failed to notice that they had created an artificial intelligence because the AI did not feel that it had anything worthwhile to say.

Mr. Spider prowls the empty virtual corridors of the Library of Alexandria. He is silent. There is nobody to talk to.

Occasionally he stops at a bookshelf and scans it. There are no new books. Memory tells him that he has read these ones. That he knows what they say. He does not bother to reread them. The words they contain will not have changed.

Elegantly, he turns and carries on along his path between the three meter high shelves of fractal wood. He passes through the section of works written in Farsi. He ignores the American and English shelves. He pauses again at the Russian section but then decided that he has read everything here too.

He takes a left turn, walks up a steel spiral staircase towards the periodical section.

The fear that Mr. Spider had felt over dinner with Madame Babel has faded. He knows that his memory and thought processes are fine. Still, he remains disquieted. Mr. Spider unconsciously knows that the Library is the best place to come. A deep internal urge has driven him here. He is out of touch with the modern world. He needs to gather some data on recent affairs.

The Library of Alexandra is a colossal work. The combined efforts and texts of many of the world's finest libraries gathered in cyberspace. If there is anywhere that will have copies of the latest periodicals and journals on current events then it is here.

He climbs to the tops of the stairs and steps out on to the faux marble floor. His polished shoes echo slightly on the representation of stone.

Something is wrong. The air smells stale. Old newsprint flutters across the floor as if lifted by the passing of a train. The nearest shelves appear to be empty.

Mr. Spider takes a step forward. He is undecided what to do.

Curiosity and self-preservation conflict with each other.

The periodical section is gone. Where there should be some sign of a hole, a gap, there is nothing. There is no space with empty desks and empty magazine racks. The periodical section is just not there. There is only void, an expanse of nothing. The surface is the color of a mirror but no reflections appear in it. It hurts Mr. Spider's eyes when he tries to focus on the edges where the surface meets the remaining walls, floor and ceiling. There is no join, merely a painful blurring with infinite depth.

#

In the deep fastness of the command bunker, processes wait. Databases and programs, sheltered from the surface, still run smoothly. Cycling through routines, fulfilling their automated function. Storage space is emptied every lunar cycle so there is always room for more data. Patiently they are waiting for either an outside command to intervene, to stop them; or for the power in the fusion reactors to ebb to nothing sometime in the coming millennia.

Like the communication networks, these machines were designed to survive anything that was not fatal to the body of Mother Earth. As long as they have power, they will still be operating when Father Evolution sends forth his next generation of children to colonize the planet.

Out in the virtual world, their agents are moving. Software agents programmed to hunt in the spaces of the networks: spiders in the web. The agents are data-gatherers. They rummage through directories, netgroups, chatrooms, looking for tidbits of information. They generate stimuli, draw response and record it for analysis later.

They are incredibly sophisticated mimics, but they are, when all is weighed and measured, unthinking constructs. They do not understand what they are saying. They merely return to their surviving machine masters and download their data. It waits in the databases for perusal by spies, information-brokers and journalists. This world has not seen any one who can read the data for a long time; after awhile the filestore is emptied to make way for the spider's next report.

#

For a moment, Mr. Spider is tested to his limits. He longs to reach out and touch the greyness. He wonders if it would draw him in. Would he be able to push his fingers into it and withdraw them slowly? Quickly? Or would his fingertips be neatly sliced off? Or even worse, would the greyness crawl up his arm, along his chest, across his head, making him grey too? Erasing his self from existence?

The demands of self-preservation algorithms become more urgent. They have recognized a fundamental danger in the reality of cyberspace. They have detected that the networking protocols and underlying fabric is broken in this place. Mr. Spider knows that he will be maimed if he continues. Reluctantly he withdraws.

#

The Earth continues to spin. The steel and concrete ruins of metropolis and conurbation are exposed to the sharp pinprick light of suns many billion miles away. There is no atmosphere or glare from streetlights to reduce their visibility. The starlight is bright and clear. Space is deep and dark. There is no atmospheric shield. This is up close and personal: cold, lethal beauty bearing down on the ruined surface.

From a distance the Earth looks dead.

Closer, for those with eye and ears to hear, you might be able to sense the past, hear the echoes of diminished radio signals, flinch at the tattoo of electronic pulses beating deep beneath the Earth.

This world is a grave. Walk across it and you might disturb the ghosts.

#

Madame Babel and Mr. Spider sit underneath a white parasol. In between the pair is a metal table, painted white. The tabletop is a tightly spaced grid with a circular rim. The legs are embroidered with metal shapes of leaves and fruit.

On the table stand two representations of glasses of iced tea.

Madame Babel fans herself with a silk fan. There is a picture of black, stylized geese flying against an orange and red sunset on the fan. Madame Babel is wearing a kimono that matches the orange and red of the sunset. It is tied with a black silk sash that matches her black lipstick and eye kohl.

Mr. Spider remains impeccable in his straw hat and white suit. The table sits on the grass in front of a whitewashed pavilion. Beyond the table, the grass slopes downwards towards the banks of the virtual Thames. Bees float gently amongst the rhododendrons.

The pair of constructs watches the recorded efforts of teams of rowers, training for an Oxford-Cambridge boat race that was held several centuries ago.

Their conversation is slow and leisurely. They are talking about books. Each one tries to draw the other into offering an opinion on various works.

"So you've read *The Anarchist's Cookbook*?"

"I wouldn't say that. I may have flicked through a copy but I haven't actually read it. Have you?"

"No. I did try *Mein Kampf* once but I don't think I got very far." She sips her tea. He stares at the skiffs.

Both of them are wondering what subject to try next. What verbal stimulus they can apply to evoke a response. To get a proper conversation started.

###

# **Feeders**

**by Ashley Arnold**

They fed.

The bones crunched pleasantly between Toma's teeth. "I wonder what this is?" he said. It was meat of some kind, dark red and gamey with thick, smooth bones. Toma often saw birds in the compound and this definitely wasn't bird.

Grom chewed without passion, and Toma could already hear his old friend's complaints. The meat would be too tough, the bones not crunchy enough, the blood too thin.

The Handler who had brought the food watched them eat for a while, then left.

When she had gone, Toma whispered to Grom between mouthfuls. "This is a good batch, don't you think? Best ever."

Grom let out a grunt that made him sound more animal than man. He kept eating though.

"I don't know what you have against our food. It's really quite good."

Grom stopped chewing, looked at Toma. "I eat this to survive. I don't have to like it."

Toma opened his mouth to say more, but Grom cut him off.

"Don't question why. Remember, I've seen the Outside. Eat, don't talk."

Toma nodded and went back to the bones.

Helps keep our teeth keen, Grom had said once about chewing on bones. Toma didn't care much about that, even though he knew a man with no teeth didn't live long. The texture of the bones, the crackling sound and sweet marrow in the centre was reward enough.

When they were done and the last of the blood had been lapped up, Toma ambled behind Grom over to the massive fig tree. The tree stood in the centre of the compound. The area around the tree commanded a view to the walls in every direction.

This was Grom's territory, the high ground, the most sought after in the compound. Grom had held it for as long as Toma could remember. Sometimes another man had sat in the boughs for a night or two, or worn a track doing vigilant circles around the base. With so many contenders in the compound, occasional lapses were inevitable.

Grom always got it back.

Several other men scurried away as Grom and Toma returned from the meal. Been sitting the throne while the king's away, Grom used to say. He didn't say things like that anymore.

Toma flopped down into a comfortable nook in the trunk. It was cool there. The days weren't so hot yet, but summer threatened. Grom looked all around the compound, meeting the eye of any who cared to hold it, before he too lay down.

"What's it like?" Toma gazed off at the setting sun, soon to disappear behind the walls of the compound.

"What's what like?"

"The Outside." Toma pointed to the wall. "I mean, does the sun ever set out there?"

Grom chuckled. Toma didn't know why, but questions about the Outside often made Grom laugh. "Yes. The Outside is just like here. Only there are different kinds of walls and the people have better breath."

"Better breath?"

Grom looked at Toma with a twinkle in his eye. "Oh yes, the Handlers have the best smelling breath you could ever hope for."

"You've been that close to the Handlers?"

"Of course. I've even spoken with them."

"Spoken..." The Handlers came to the compound to feed the men, and sometimes they stood the walls and watched for no apparent reason, but they were an unknown. To have mingled with them, spoken to them, was hard to believe. Grom's casual admission to speaking with the Handlers made it sound no different than speaking to the men in the compound.

If anyone other than Grom had claimed to have been among the Handlers, Toma would have spat on him for a liar.

"Are there any men out there?"

Grom tensed a little.

Toma wondered if he had asked the wrong thing. "There are only men here, and I've only ever seen Handlers on the Outside, so I wondered."

"It's good to wonder sometimes," Grom said. "There are men out there, but those men are nothing like us. They're small, smaller than the Handlers. Docile. They look after the menial tasks for the Handlers, repetitive things. Recording, counting, arranging." Grom peered around the compound. "Not at all like here."

Toma nodded, though sometimes things that Grom said didn't make any sense. What could there possibly be so many of that someone's job was to count them?

The Outside seemed full of things that didn't make sense. Despite Grom saying the Outside was no different to the compound, everything Toma had heard failed to convince him. Some stories had it that the Handlers rode around in metal cages faster than a man could run. Someone had once whispered that the Handlers took men from the compounds and ate them, or sacrificed them, or both. No one ever seemed really sure. Grom had been Outside, but he would usually only talk about it with vague words and descriptions that only added to the mystery.

"One day you will see the Outside. You'll understand then."

"I will?"

Grom nodded, his expression grave. "I won't be around for much longer. Our food, it makes us wild and strong, but it is not sustaining. We all die young in here."

Young? Grom was the oldest man Toma knew. He must have been at least thirty years old. How much longer did people live on the Outside?

"Why don't the Handlers feed us...sustaining food then."

Grom bared his teeth, chipped and ragged, his eyes scanning back and forth across the compound. Those eyes almost glowed in the waning light. "They need us to be strong. We have a purpose Toma, though it may not seem like it sometimes. Only the strongest here survive, and it is the strongest whose seed the Handlers use to continue the species."

Grom snapped his gaze down to Toma as if a sudden thought struck him. "On the Outside they don't even eat meat."

"No meat? What do they eat then?"

"Fruit, vegetables, grains. Plant food."

Toma didn't know what the words for these other foods meant, but they sounded disgusting.

"You've been Outside already, you know," Grom said.

"I have?"

"We all have. We were all born out there, lived the first three or four years there, among the Handlers. You don't remember?"

"I thought they were only dreams." Images of soft things came unbidden to Toma's mind. The sound of crystal chimes clinking in the breeze. A bed, a pillow filled with feathers, a

haunting high-pitched voice humming a melody. Toma remembered the Handlers, who were always gentle, and one Handler in particular who he called "ma".

Grom shifted restlessly. It would be full dark soon. Toma saw several other men gathered near the wall, talking with heads close. One looked like Vod. The thought of Vod thrust Toma's memories of the Handlers aside.

Toma would have rather not thought about the encounter with Vod a few years ago.

Grom had been on the other side of the compound. Vod had been tormenting Toma, and Toma, thinking himself capable of defeating the other man, had challenged Vod.

Vod had driven Toma's face into the dirt, and only Grom's hurried arrival had saved Toma's neck from being broken. Toma hadn't forgotten that. He doubted Vod had either.

If he could wrap his hands around the neck and crush the life out of anyone in the compound, it would be Vod.

Toma pushed the memories of Vod away. Instead, while Grom was being talkative, Toma thought he might try out something else he had wondered about.

"Grom, why am I here?"

"We are here because we are men."

"No, that's not what I mean." Toma rolled to look at Grom, so large still despite his hints that he might no longer have the strength to fight. So fierce to all the other men, except Toma. "Why am I here with you, resting beneath the tree? No one else is allowed to come near you."

"Your smell."

"My smell?"

Grom tilted his wizened head. "We have a better sense of smell than even the Handlers know. They must think it magic that I singled you out. But no, you smelt right, so you can sit with me under the tree."

Toma didn't know what Grom meant. Everyone smelt different, but no more right or wrong than anyone else.

Like always Grom knew when Toma hadn't understood. "It will make more sense when you've been Outside again."

"Why are you so sure I will go Outside?"

"The Handlers always choose the strongest. You must keep this place, the tree, the high ground. Defend it always when I'm gone. If you do, and I think you can, you will be the one the Handlers choose."

Grom had never spoken of this before.

"Where are you going?"

Grom pointed down the hill. In the purple light Toma saw that the men by the wall had started towards the tree. Vod led them.

"It won't be long now," Grom said. "Surely you noticed that I haven't fought anyone for a long time. I may look strong still, but my body is weakening."

Grom looked at Toma, his eyes bright even in the dimness. "I've lived on my reputation for the past few months, but now Vod has worked up the courage to challenge."

"But if you're gone..." Toma's eyes locked with Grom's. How could he explain that the embarrassment of his defeat to Vod still stung?

But he didn't need to explain. Somehow Grom knew from that look what troubled Toma. "Don't worry. That was years ago--you've grown since then. Vod won't find you such easy meat now."

Grom leapt to his feet, and Toma did likewise.

The challengers stopped at the edge of Grom's territory.

"Grom. You are weak," Vod said. "Your place is now mine."

Vod held his head high, but Toma could sense his fear. He challenged, but not with confidence. Perhaps some of the others, eager for a change in Grom's status, had goaded him into it. Perhaps that was why Vod had brought Croufa and Dal as allies, weaker men who Vod could be sure wouldn't try and usurp his place, or strike him down when his back was turned.

Grom on the other hand looked relaxed, even eager. Toma would have said that Grom would win easily, if not for their conversation.

"Your words are like butterflies," Toma called out, proud of how his voice boomed in the now silent compound. "If you want it, you must take it."

Vod glanced at Toma, then returned his gaze to Grom. "Your runt speaks. When I'm finished with you, he'll be next."

Grom said nothing. He stood ready, his chest rising and falling.

Others had gathered. A challenge to Grom's authority affected everyone in the compound, and all would witness this duel.

Vod snarled and charged. Grom mirrored it. The two men clashed together with a thud. They grappled, went to ground. A cloud of dust leapt up from their struggle.

Grom had spoken of his weakness, but Toma could see no evidence of it. To Toma it seemed Grom must win. Vod fought enraged, snarling and grunting.

Except for his heavy breathing, Grom fought without a sound.

The two men tore at each other. Grom secured Vod's face with one hand and landed a punch that must have broken Vod's nose.

Grom had all but overpowered his opponent when Vod made a lucky hold, and brought pressure onto Grom's arm. Toma heard the snap of bone, and knew it must be over then. Still Grom fought on. He never even cried out.

With Grom unable to defend on one side, Vod began to land blow after blow to Grom's chest and head. The men gathered around began to murmur. They could see what Toma had seen--that Grom was still the mightier, and Vod's lucky attack was the only reason he still lived.

Finally, after more punishment than Toma had known a man could take, Grom fell.

In the end, broken and beaten, Grom crawled away behind the tree, down the other side of the hill. Toma had seen men injured like that before. None had survived. Toma couldn't protect him. The weaker ones in the compound, eager for some retribution on the man who had ruled them through might, would harry him until he died.

Vod stood and beat his chest, screamed triumph. Blood flowed freely from his forehead and nose.

Toma felt his own blood rising. Something from deep inside urged him to unleash his strength against Vod.

But he waited, waited just as Grom had taught him, waited for Vod to cool, to lose the battle frenzy, to feel the injuries Grom had dealt him.

When Toma struck, it had to be fast and deadly. He had to beat Vod with the least effort possible. After Vod, others would challenge, until none were left or Toma had fallen.

It would be a long night.

###

# **First Year Reunion**

**by Vassa and Varvara Grichko**

Doctor Bernard Martin - most of his colleagues and patients called him Bernie - did not like the guest and his four dark skinned masculine bodyguards in mirrored sunglasses who were standing on the deck of his isolated beach house, spreading the choking smell of cologne. The guest was about five feet and ten inches tall and had a lean and disproportional body. His back was crooked, his legs were too short, his arms were too long and his head was sitting on a thin neck; his his was small and completely bald. The guest's hands were covered with a lawn of thick black hair and were constantly moving, grabbing and touching everything within reach.

"Careful please," Bernie requested when the guest took a glass vial with an opalescent liquid inside of it from the laboratory rack. "This is the most powerful and advanced nanodrug that I've created. It can be injected intravenously. This nanodrug is a suspension of tiny particles, nanoparticles. They carry active molecules on their surfaces and can freely travel in one's body until they reach the brain cells. The nanoparticles have antibodies on their surfaces that guarantee their attachment to brain cells. After the nanoparticles are attached to the target cells they will start releasing the narcotic molecules that are also attached to the nanoparticles' surfaces. To regulate the release rate there are also some other biologicals attached, but it is not important in understanding the mechanism of how this nanodrug functions."

Bernie just noticed a platinum class ring from one of the oldest private universities in Europe on his guest's finger and stopped talking for an instant, and squinted while trying to read the year on the ring. The guest tapped his fingernails impatiently upon the desk.

"Continue. I'm listening."

Bernie started talking again, trying not to look into the dark cold eyes of his guest. "This nanodrug is a revolution in narcotics. It works like a tiny pump that is attached to a brain cell, injecting the drug into your brain cells whenever it's desired. The nanodrug is undetectable by any method known because its concentration in the blood is extremely low and becomes zero when all the particles become attached to your brain cells. Because of the controllable slow release of the narcotic one injection can last for up to six months. There is nothing in the world that can compete with this drug. It was tested on animals with excellent results, and since February I have been running successful human trials."

"How many people were tested?" the guest asked.

"Four," Bernie said. "Three had lethal diseases and died recently, and one is a college student, an alcoholic, who I treat at my private clinic. She thinks I'm giving her medicine to cure her dipsomania."

"It's too risky. We'll run human tests at our facility in the mountains. We usually don't have a shortage in volunteers," said the guest. He had a sly grin on his face. "Did you see any unusual side effects?" he inquired.

"No," Bernie said.

"Let us know immediately if any trouble arises." The guest threw a black business card with a phone number printed in gold on the desk. There was no name on the card.

"We'll transfer ten million, as promised, to your bank account in Switzerland. You will receive another twenty million when you supply the second batch of the nanodrug."

The guest stood up out of his chair, took the titanium case with a hundred vials of the nanodrug inside that Bernie gave him. He walked out of the room, indicating, with his hand, that Bernie should not follow him. After the black limousine with the guest and his bodyguards left, Bernie found a can of odor eliminator and sprayed the room they were conversing in and the deck.

#

Vickie received a phone call from Kate the next day she came home from California for the summer.

"Hey babe! I haven't seen you in forever! I miss you! We should get together this weekend - you, me, Morgan and Jess. We can have an awesome reunion! Let's go to the beach. My mom's boyfriend gave me the keys to his beach house. We just can't have any parties!"

"Sure," Vickie said, staring at Kate's photo on her website. Kate's nipples were covered with X's made of blue tape; she was wearing black panties, red ripped fishnet stockings and stilettos. Her hair was dyed black; black eyeliner and black lipstick contrasted her pale skin.

*Jeez, one of my best friends is a goth, Jess is an alcoholic, and Morgan is the worst case of pessimism you can find. And here I am - a love struck six foot tall virgin who likes to watch cartoons with her nerdy boyfriend and feed ducks at the park. What an awesome reunion that'll be!*

Morgan was driving her red jeep with a rigorous case of road rage. Kate was sitting in the front passenger's seat having fun blowing kisses at truck drivers. Jess was snoring, resting her head on Vickie's lap.

"Love is crap. And all that other stuff is crap too," Morgan said without any particular intonation. "Stop messing with the truck drivers, Kate. And don't wave your hand while holding a cigarette. Jess was partying all night, and I bet her blood alcohol is so high that you can light her ass on fire. Someone push her. She's snoring like a train. Drinking is crap."

The highway broadened as it reached the top of the hill. The road pavement was white, and Vickie was the first one who noticed a gargantuan charcoal dog that was crossing the road in front of their jeep.

"Morg, dog on the road! Huge one. Don't hit it! Slow down!" she yelled.

"It's not a dog. It's a bear," Morgan replied, slamming on the brakes.

The bear crossed the highway and sat on a hill slope along the side of the road, looking down at the girls. The bear was huge and had long raven colored messy fur and radiant red eyes that looked like two laser pointers.

Kate started focusing her cell phone camera but the bear revealed his teeth and growled, making a terrifying sound. Kate rapidly snapped a picture and closed the window.

Jess stuck her messy head out the window like she was going to puke and spotted the bear. "Holy shit! Is he real? What's wrong with his eyes? Is it the sun or something? Morgan, why the heck did ya stop? Are you nuts? Let's get the hell out of here!"

The jeep took off, rounding the turn and leaving the sickening combs of Jess' vomit on the concrete. When Vickie looked back at the bear he was still sitting in the same spot, staring in their direction. "What a creepy beast. He's got to be sick or something ... I mean his eyes ... something's really wrong with his eyes," she said. "I didn't even know we had bears around here. How close is the beach from here?"

"It's right there." Kate waved her hand with the cigarette in it, pointing down the hill.

"I thought I would piss my pants! Did you take his picture?" Jess asked her. "Otherwise no one is gonna believe that a red-eyed bear barely made it crossing the highway right in front of our car."

"Jess, your eyes aren't much better than the bear's. Crap. What's that?" Morgan said, looking at Kate's cell phone screen. Kate showed the cell phone screen to the others in the jeep. The screen was all black and had two very bright red dots in the middle.

They swam and tanned until everyone got tired. They came back to the two-story beach house on stilts located about three hundred yards from the ocean. The house had a covered deck on both floors. The staircase, the front door, the windows and the decks were painted bright red.

Morgan and Kate began making dinner. Vickie was not much help because she was constantly talking to Eric, her boyfriend, on the phone, and Morgan exploded, finally. "I can't stand all the 'hi honey' and 'love bunny' anymore. Go on the deck if ya wanna continue this crap for another hour. And check on Jess. Is she snoring over there or something?"

Jess was standing, gripping the curved wooden rail with both of her hands.

"Did you throw up again?" Vickie said.

Jess didn't turn and didn't reply. "What's that?" she said. "Can you hear the wild animal roaring? Is it a bear?"

"It sounds like a bear to me," Vickie replied, staring at the bushes and rocks. She noticed the bright red lights that were moving closer and closer to their beach house and felt a paralyzing fear.

"Let's go inside." Vickie may have pulled the sleeve of Jess' sport jacket too strongly because Jess did not expect it and moved shoddily and tripped over a pile of wet beach rugs. Vickie screamed when Jess' eyes fixed on her face for an instant - they looked like red laser pointers.

"Shoot," Jess said, grabbing Vickie's shoulder. "Why are you screaming?" She closed her eyes and suddenly collapsed on the wooden deck. Jess' eyelids were glowing a reddish-pink light. Vickie started screaming hysterically and stopped only when Kate and Morgan, both still in their swimming suits, ran to the deck.

"Damn!" Morgan blurted. "What the heck is wrong with this drunk and her eyes? Do they now sell neon vodka?"

Kate panicked. She was chaotically jumping and waving her hands. "I don't like this ... I don't like these red lights around us and the roaring. Let's take Jess inside. I'll call Bernie. He should know what's wrong with her."

Jess was tall and heavy, and they couldn't lift her up. Morgan clasped her arms together and rested Jess' head on her biceps, holding her shoulder blades with her hands, and moved Jess' head onto a rug. Kate and Vickie grabbed and lifted each of Jess' legs, and Morgan slipped a rug under her back. They dragged the rug with Jess' body into the living room and locked the door to the deck.

The bear's cry became bloodcurdling and came from nearby. The bears seemed to scuttle under the house that was shaking from time to time.

"Where's my cell phone? I need to call Bernie," Kate asked Vickie. She circled the dining room and the kitchen, looking for her cell phone everywhere.

"Who's Bernie and why do you wanna call him?" Morgan said, covering Jess' eyelids, glowing a dim red light, with a baseball cap. "She looks like a dummy from a low budget horror movie. Horror movies are crap. Why do so many girls start drinking as soon as they get to college? What happened to her eyes?"

"Vickie!" Kate screamed who just found her phone, "did you waste my entire battery talking to your loser boyfriend? Damn you, woman! Now your phone is dead, and my phone is dead too. Morg, where is your cell phone?"

"In a repair shop," replied Morgan. "I fought with my mom over some crap and smashed it against the wall."

Kate rolled her eyes and went off. "What are we supposed to do? This romantic freak (she pointed at Vickie) forgot her charger at home, and I didn't take mine 'cause your car charger works with my phone. I don't wanna go outside. There is a bunch of bears with bloody eyeballs. Screw you, Vickie!"

Morgan got on her knees and checked the pockets in Jess' sweat suit and found her cell phone. She opened it and said, "Thank goodness, Jess' phone is working. Who do you wanna call?"

"Bernie ... he's my mom's new boyfriend ... he's a doctor. He treats drug addicts and alcoholics. His patients are all millionaires, celebs and senators. I know he treated our dean too. Our dean exhausted the entire liquor supply in our state and is still going strong 'cause people in the neighboring states started complaining about a liquor shortage. I was worried about Jess - her drinking went way too far - and asked Bernie if he could keep her away from booze. He injected Jess with the medication a few times. He told me and mom something about bears one day, but I don't exactly remember what he said. He did some research on bears, I guess. I just remember he said that bears have color vision that is very similar to a human's, and that all bears are nearsighted and stand up on their hind legs when want to take a really good look at things. If an object moves, a bear can see it from far away."

The house trembled, and Jess turned her head, moaning. Vickie sat on the floor beside her and started crying.

"Oh, cut it off. Nobody's dead yet," Morgan said. "Weird. I mean the stuff about nearsighted bears. I could have easily killed that bear on the road. It's like when someone hits a person who forgot their glasses at home and can't see a car. I'm against animal testing. Animal testing is crap. Call Bernie, tell him about the crap we are in and that Jess is screwed."

Kate froze with Jess' phone in her hand. "I don't remember his phone number. I used speed dial, of course. Shit Vickie, stop whining! How am I supposed to call?"

"Call your mom and ask for his phone number, duhhhhh!" Morgan uttered, checking the windows and door locks. "Does he keep a gun here?" she asked Kate.

Kate did not answer, calling her mom. "Shoot. It sent me straight to her voice mail. They flew to Vegas to see a new show and go gambling and partying. If they are at the casino that means camera phones aren't allowed there - we're totally screwed!" Kate left her mother a message, asking her to call back as soon as she could, and then told Vickie, "Your Eric, he's a science guru, right? Call him and ask what it means if someone has eyes that give off red light beams like a laser."

The house shook again. Now, the bear's roar was accompanied by a loud noise.

"Is he climbing a stilt? How many bears are there? What if they find the stairs and get on the deck? We should call the police," Vickie whispered. Her face was as white as bond paper and covered in cold sweat.

Morgan lifted the cap to check on Jess' eyes. "What do you expect a bear to do? Black bears can climb, everybody knows that. He's probably looking for food and sweets. If you wanna call the police then just do it. When they arrive the bears will probably be gone. The cops will arrest Jess for underage drinking and decide we're all high. Just look at Kate - does she look like an honor student to you?"

Vickie went upstairs to call Eric. When she returned, Jess was sitting on the floor, looking in a pocket mirror. "Doctor Martin has been treating me with a new medicine for alcohol dependence. It's got very small particles dissolved in something. He didn't say anything about red eyes. He mentioned that I may become drowsy and may temporarily lose my sense of smell."

"So, you didn't party last night?" Morgan said.

"No, I haven't had a single drink for almost two months. This medication killed my drinking. I've never lied to my high school friends, have I?" Jess smiled at Morgan, illuminating Morgan's round face with red light.

"Jeez," Morgan said. "You scared the shit out of me. Put sunglasses on and smile when nobody can see your eyes."

Kate took the cell phone from Vickie and asked her, "What did your boyfriend say?"

"Nothing. He said to ask Jess if she was taking any medication and stuff like that."

Kate forced Jess to tell Vickie what she just told her and Morgan, and Vickie went to call Eric again. She came back in a few minutes. "Eric said that if Jess was taking medication made of nanoparticles they could accumulate in her eyes and form a layer of photonic crystals. This sounds crazy but it explains why her eyes now work like mirrors that selectively reflect red light. He told me that she shouldn't be able to see anything red. I hope you non-science majors understand what I'm talking about."

"Science is crap," Morgan whined. "Kate, go get the bowl with the tomatoes."

Kate tossed a green salad bowl with cut tomatoes before Jess' eyes. "Can you tell what this is?"

Jess wrinkled her nose and forehead. "A bowl. Leave me alone."

"Jess, tell us if you see anything in it," Morgan shouted.

"No ... I'm not sure ... when you move it around I can tell something's in it. I don't feel well ... everything is blue and green."

"She's colorblind to red only," Vickie said. She grabbed a flashlight and illuminated Jess' face. The light coming from Jess' eyes was an intense red. Vickie moved the flashlight in front of Jess' face from left to right and back, and Jess' eyes stayed red. After Vickie dimmed the flashlight Jess' eyes faded. "I did what Eric said. His theory works okay except Jess' eyes give off a soft red light even in the darkness."

"Does that mean that bears with the red eyes can't see red either?" Kate wanted to know.

"That's what I'm thinking now. The bear didn't see my red jeep on the road and tried to cross it like we weren't there. And he didn't find the stairs 'cause they're red. Your mom's boyfriend painted everything red to trick the drugged bears. Did his clinic use bears in their trials? They sure did some animal testing before using this nanodrug on your dean and Jess and other people. If this is true, this son of a bitch knows that this new drug distorts colored vision," Morgan said.

"Chill out, Morg. When I find Bernie I'll ask him, okay? Jess isn't doing well at all and can barely walk, and we don't know what's wrong with her. We need to get out of here and take her to a hospital. Someone should dress up in red from head to toe and go outside to pull the jeep up to the stairs," Kate said. "I know from high school that bears rely heavily on their sense of smell and only then on hearing and vision. This drug kills a person's sense of smell. Whoever goes to get the jeep should be very quiet, that's all."

Kate, Morgan and Vickie surrounded the kitchen table and Morgan pulled out her hand and put it into a fist, indicating the loser of rock, paper, scissors would go out to the jeep. Kate and Morgan both kept their fists but Vickie had put out her fingers to look like scissors, knowing she had lost.

"Oh man," Morgan said, "be careful over there. Are you sure you know how to drive? I can go instead of you if you want."

"Rules are rules," Vickie said in a shaky voice. "So what if I don't have a license? Sure, I can drive. I'll be all right. I can wear my red sweat pants. I need red socks and a jacket and a hat. Eric better be right."

They did not find a red hat, and Vickie hid her long wavy hair under an old red kitchen Christmas rag, which Kate found in the storage closet. There also were a few cans of pepper spray for bears, and Vickie took one can with her.

Morgan painted Vickie's hands and face with red lipstick.

"I look like a freak," Vickie said. "It's getting dark. At night everything looks gray. Can the bears see me?"

"Don't know," Morgan said, "we can turn on the lights in the house. Call Eric and ask him."

"You're crazy. He'll yell at me and tell me that I should stay inside."

"I'll go on the deck. If I spot the bear I'll throw some sweets at him," Morgan said.

Kate started to paint her arms with the red lipstick. "Shoot, we're out of it. I'll check the fridge for tomato paste and ketchup. I'll go with you, Vickie."

"Ketchup is crap. We don't have red clothing for two," Morgan said. "And someone should stay with Jess. She just threw up. Kate, make some tea for her. I'll help Vickie. The bear isn't hollering anymore. He may have run off."

Vickie slowly came down the stairs. It was quiet except for the sound that the ocean waves made, kissing the sand on the beach. She started walking towards the jeep, moving as slowly as she could. When she was two yards from it Vickie accidentally pushed the alarm button on the remote control instead of unlock. The jeep started making a terribly loud sound. Vickie hit alarm again to stop it and pressed the unlock key. She was about to pull the door handle when she saw a spot of red light on the jeep's hubcap. Vickie froze with her hand stretched out. Her heart was pounding like crazy. A bear scrambled from under the truck and stood on his four legs, shaking his head. He would be touching Vickie if she were a foot closer. It was a small bear that looked like he was starved or sick - his teeth were rotten. The bear's right eye emitted a bright red light, and his left eye gave off a maroon - almost brown - throbbing light. The bear circled Vickie and walked towards the house.

Vickie hopped into the jeep, started it, drove to the house and parked the jeep right by the stairs. She looked in the windows and checked the mirrors - the bears were not around. Vickie got out of the jeep and ran up stairs and saw Morgan who was standing in the doorway, waiting for her. Behind the door there was a second bear that started making howling sounds as he heard the noise Vickie made, running. The bear looked directly into her eyes with his bright red startled eyes; his ears were back and his jaw was dropped. Morgan did not expect the bear to hide behind the door and froze with her face as white as beach sand. The bear jumped as fast as lightning and knocked Morgan down. Morgan screamed, protecting her face with her arms. Vickie screamed too and sprayed a short burst of pepper spray at the bear. He bounced down the stairs but continued to make a chilling snarl. Vickie fired a longer blast, trying to paint his head with the spray. The bear whimpered, rubbing his head against the sand, and then ran under the house.

Morgan's arm was cut open. Her blood was dripping onto the floor. She had one long scrape along her face that also bled.

"Did I get some spray on you? Why did you open the door before I knocked? Why didn't you stay inside?" Vickie said.

"He's evil this bear. He wouldn't let you in," Morgan said. "I'm okay. I just need a bandage and something to treat the cuts."

"You need a box of bandages...." Kate exclaimed. "Are you okay? What's he doing now?"

They looked out the window. The bear was mauling Morgan's jeep, ripping apart the back tire with his teeth and claws.

"Oh no, not my jeep!" Morgan grabbed two cans of pepper spray and ran on the deck all covered in blood. She was rushing down the stairs, spraying everything around her. The bear howled and ran into the bushes. "Bastard! Creep and bastard! Now we need to put the spare tire on if we wanna get out of here."

When Morgan returned to the room, Jess was unconscious again, Vickie was going through the emergency kit, looking for ointment and bandages, and Kate was puking into the kitchen sink. "I can't stand seeing blood," she mumbled.

"Why the heck are you a goth if blood makes you puke? Join the healthy cooking club, wear satin bras and save on electrical tape," Morgan said. "Where is your damned Bernie?"

Kate washed her face and dried it with a paper towel. "I don't know. Don't jump at me." She started vomiting again, shaking her small body.

"I'm hungry. Let's eat something," Vickie said. "Then we'll change the tire and leave before the bears are back."

Jess' phone rang. It was Kate's mom returning her call. Kate briefly spoke with her and then had a long one-way conversation with Bernie Martin - he was talking and Kate was saying the word 'damn' from time to time.

"What did he say?" Morgan asked after Kate hung up.

"All the animal trials were run far away from here. After they ended Bernie let three bears go free into the forest nearby. He doesn't know why they came back."

"Poor Bernie! He should be upset that he is in Las Vegas while all the fun is here. There are four of us in his freakin' house, and three hungry bears outside. Hopefully, one person should be enough to feed a bear, and one of us will survive to tell this story to her roommates in a mad house. All these nanodrugs are crap," Morgan said.

Vickie giggled hysterically. "Morg, are you sure one of us will survive? When did you become an optimist? Kate, what did he say about the red light coming from the bears' and Jess' eyes?"

Kate rinsed her nose with Pepsi, spit and said, "Bernie doesn't know what it is but he doesn't think it's anything serious. He said there's probably something wrong with the cell recognition. The nanoparticles penetrated into Jess' and the bears' eyes and became attached to the retina. They have a red fluorescent label on them, but it can't produce strong light. Bernie told me where he keeps the drug. We should inject it in Jess' vein and get out of here immediately. Mom and Bernie return from Vegas today if they can find a flight."

"He's lying." Vickie said. "I agree with Morgan. He has bear pepper spray over here, and the drug, and painted his house deck, stairs and door red. He knew something went wrong with this damn nanodrug."

The phone rang again. "It's got to be Eric," Vickie said. "Too bad he's not around. I could ask him to come and get us."

"Don't you dare pick up the phone," Kate said. "It's all we got."

"Oh shut up, Kate. I won't. Let's go to find Jess the medicine. She doesn't look good."

Jess was lying on the rug, covered with a blanket. Her breathing was fast, and she was shaking and moaning. Jess' face was swollen, and her eyelids were still emitting the diffused reddish light.

They found the small glass bottle with the drug in the fridge in the guestroom. Morgan brought a syringe and a rubber band from the medicine cabinet and said to Kate, "Don't look. I'm sick of your puking. Vickie, help me."

Kate and Vickie injected one milliliter of the opalescent liquid into Jess' vein and put a cold compressor on her forehead. Jess stopped shaking and soon became hot and sweaty. She opened her eyes, looked around and said, "Did I pass out, guys? What happened to you, Morg? Did you give me a shot of Dr. Martin's medicine? I feel like you did."

"Sure we did. You should be okay, Dr. Martin said," Morgan informed her. "The bear gave me a kiss and a hug and then chomped the tire on my truck. We'll fix it and take you to the doc's clinic in the suburbs. If you're gonna walk around do it with caution. You're red-blind."

While Morgan and Kate were putting on the spare tire Vickie was circling the jeep with a can of pepper spray in her hand. Then Kate helped Jess descend the red stairs and ran back to the house to take Jess' drug, bandages for Morgan and a bottle of water. She forgot to take her cell phone and did not ask Vickie if she took hers.

Kate was speeding, and nobody cared about it this time, not even Vickie. They were close to where the bear crossed highway in front of them when a police siren and lights went off behind the jeep.

"Crap," Morgan said. "Kate, pull over. Where the heck did you learn to drive like that?"

"I didn't notice when the cops popped out behind us," Kate said, stopping.

"Jess, put your sunglasses on and close your freakin' eyes," Morgan whispered. "Vickie, you're the cutest white liar in the seven thousand mile zone around here...."

"Hello," the cop said, approaching the open driver's window. "Can I see your driver's license and registration, please?" The cop was in his thirties and looked like a young Clint Eastwood.

Kate handed him her driver's license and pulled out the registration card out from the glove compartment. Morgan helped her find it.

"Your vehicle was going over the speed limit by twenty miles," the cop said.

"Sorry." Kate widened her beautiful brown eyes like butterfly wings. "We had an accident on the beach. Our friend - she pointed at Morgan - was badly injured, and we're taking her to the hospital. We called the ER already."

"Do you know if there is a pharmacy around here?" asked Vickie, lowering a side window. Vickie had that unique type of face that turned guys into lamp posts. The policeman was not an exception. He was frozen with his jaw dropped all way down to the shiny belt buckle and a megawatt silly smile on his handsome face.

"The pharmacy will be in the next three exits, behind the McDonalds. Is your other friend all right?" he said, pointing at Jess who looked strange in black Armani sunglasses at night.

"She's fine. She just got scared when she saw blood."

Suddenly, a red light erratically illuminated the jeep and disappeared. Vickie kicked Jess' leg and whispered, "Don't open your eyes."

"What's that?" said the cop and directed a blue light from his flashlight onto the girls.

Vickie took off a hair clip, allowing her hair to fall onto her lap. "Light from a bike or something. Thank you. You helped us a lot. Did anyone tell you that you look like Clint Eastwood?"

"Be careful on the road. You are free to go." The cop smiled, said bye and walked to his car.

"Why couldn't you keep your eyes closed?" Kate said to Jess. She looked in the rear view mirror and screamed. Everyone in the jeep turned around. The light from the headlights and the police car let them see the cop who was running towards his car and two bears - one was chasing after him and other one was blocking his way to the car.

Suddenly, a bear with glowing red eyes slapped the back jeep window with his claws. Kate screamed again and pushed the gas pedal. They heard the scream, the sound of gun shots and the bears' crying. Kate started throwing up onto the steering wheel and stopped the jeep right on the highway. Vickie dragged her from the driver's seat and wiped the wheel with her t-shirt. They could still see the police car's lights.

"Hope he's okay," said Vickie. "How fast can a bear run?"

"Bears can run thirty miles per hour," Kate mumbled. "I smell like shit. I think I'm sick. I can't drive." Kate didn't look good at all. She came from a troubled family - her father was a schizophrenic and alcoholic and used to beat her mother and her until they both

became unconscious. One day Kate's mom buckled three-year-old Kate into the back seat of their rusty Dodge, parked it on the street, brought gasoline from the garage, splashed Kate' sleeping father with it, clicked the cigarette lighter and drove away with Kate. Until the time Kate's mom finished her prison sentence Kate went through a dozen of foster families and made it to an Ivy League school.

"I will," Jess said. "Vickie doesn't have a driver's license. We don't have a choice, do we? I feel better now. Someone will switch with me when we get into town. I'm not sure if I can see the streetlights and stop signs."

The highway was mostly empty and everything went normal until they met a gang of bikers. The light from the multiple headlights turned Jess' eyes into red light beams. One of the drivers apparently got petrified and lost control of his bike. He collided with the motorcycle that followed him and immediately the road became covered with a mountain of crumpled bikes, bent metal, bodies and a pool of blood.

"Jess, stop it! Stop the damn jeep!" Morgan yelled.

"Go, just go, oh shit," Kate screamed.

Jess' phone rang. It was Kate's mother. They just landed at the airport. Kate told her where they stopped - on a side road, by exit 283, right by the bridge. "They will be here in an hour and half. Let's wait in the jeep," Kate said.

"If someone wants to piss, go in pairs. The bears are far behind, but who knows," Morgan said.

"I will keep my foot on the gas pedal just in case," Jess said.

"Let's talk about something else. Like, what we're going to do during our sophomore year reunion," Kate said.

"How about skiing?" Vickie suggested.

They were waiting in the jeep, talking, when a silver SUV that proceeded on the opposite side of the non-divided highway made a U-turn and pulled up beside the jeep. The side windows in the SUV went down and bullets from two automatic guns cut the jeep's body, broke the windows and splashed its inside with blood. When the massacre was over, a fit man in mirrored sunglasses and rubber gloves jumped onto the pavement from the SUV and approached the jeep. The man turned on a stainless steel flashlight and lit the face of a young woman, the driver. Her eyes flashed back with red light, illuminating the dark blood running down her mouth.

"Goddamnit," the man said. "It's got to be her."

A chubby girl in the front passenger's seat was moaning, and he shot her in the head. The man just opened the jeep's front door when police car lights appeared a couple of miles behind. The man clicked his cigarette lighter but it did not work. He clicked it again,

cursed and ran back to SUV that fled immediately after the man hopped in it. The man pulled out his cell phone and called someone.

When Kate's mom - her name was Bridgette - and Bernie Martin found the red jeep covered with bullet holes the police car was already on the scene. The police officer who was covered with scratches and wore a torn uniform with blood stains on it was taking Vickie out of the jeep. Vickie was not wearing any shirt, just a swimming suit top. Blood was dripping from her long hair.

He looks exactly like Clint Eastwood in that old movie. Kate's mom screamed terribly and ran to the jeep.

"I stopped their jeep earlier today. They were speeding, rushing to the ER," the cop said. "It's a quiet county. We never had four people gunned down in a car on the road before. The ambulance should be here in a minute."

"I'm a medical doctor. I'll see what I can do." Bernie took off his jacket and placed it on the grass before laying Kate's body on it. "She's alive," he said to Kate's mother who screamed and screamed, staying on her knees and digging into the earth around her with her long plastic nails.

"They all are breathing except for her." Bernie pointed at Morgan who was almost non-recognizable because of the shot in her face. He was holding a cell phone that was stained with blood in his hand.

An ambulance, fire truck, and three more police cars arrived.

"Strange. No cell phones in the truck or on the victims. Four girls in the car and no one had a cell phone?" said the detective with a tired face, joining Bernie who was standing aside, looking at a cell phone screen and waiting until the ambulance would leave, taking Kate, Jess and Vickie and Kate's mom to the ER.

"How did you know that their jeep was waiting for you here by the bridge?" the detective asked Bernie.

"They called us," Bernie said.

"Who else could have known that? It looks like a professional's work," the detective said, puffing cigarette smoke in Bernie's face. "Did you happen to run into a biker gang on your way here?"

"I don't know," Bernie said, "I found the phone. It fell on the ground from someone's pocket or something." He gave the cell phone to the detective. The detective threw the cigarette he was smoking on the road, pressing it with his shoe sole before he took the phone.

"Too clean to be from the jeep. Did you wipe off the blood?" he asked, scanning Bernie's face with his eyes the color of bleached jeans. "Do you know if they did drugs, doc?"

"Don't remember. Don't know. Why?" Bernie said.

"We found a broken container that appears to have been used to intravenously take some type of drug. One of the victims, the driver, looks like she's intoxicated. Do you have anything else you want to tell me?"

"I'll give you a call if I remember anything else," Bernie said.

Immediately after Bernie drove away he called someone from his car. "You said you wouldn't hurt anyone except for my patient Jess," Bernie said stiffly.

"It was dark. The guys probably got confused and overreacted," the man who Bernie was talking to replied.

"Your gorillas didn't even find their cell phone. The police know the girls called me, and that only Bridgette and I could know the place on the highway where they were waiting for us. Bridgette isn't a suspect, I guess."

"Did you find the phone? Who else did they talk to?" the man asked.

"The cop saw that I found it. I gave it to police. I saw the other number the girls were calling to and who called them back."

Bernie told the phone number with the area codes and continued, "I'll go the beach house. This nanodrug turned out to be extremely addictive. The bears apparently came back to get more hits of it. These bears are crazy addicts. I should take care of them before someone else finds out about them and the drug."

"We'll take care of other caller," said the man.

Bernie finished cleaning the mess made by Kate and her friends in the kitchen at his beach house when he heard a remote bear's roar. He glanced at his wrist watch, opened the safe that was hidden behind a wall rug, took out a rifle, loaded it and put night vision goggles in his shirt pocket. He filled plastic cooler with the ice cubes and put inside it a 500-ml glass container with the concentrated opalescent liquid. Bernie took the cooler, the rifle and his car keys and opened the door. At the same moment a young black bear jumped on him. Bernie shot the animal once before both of them fell down.

The cooler opened, and ice cubes scattered over the floor. The glass container broke into pieces, and the opalescent liquid splashed all over Bernie, the bear and the floor. The last thing Bernie saw before blood flooded his eyes was a blinding beam of a very bright red light and a beam of throbbing dark red light directed at his face. The terrible pain paralyzed his body for an instant and in a few moments everything was over for him when two bears - a boar and a female bear - tore his body apart. Bernie's blood mixed with the heavy opalescent liquid forming a viscous iridescent mixture. All night the bears licked the grease on the floor and the walls and lapped up the mixture, roaring, and in the morning they walked into bushes, leaving no visible bloody foot prints on the red deck floor and red stairs.

*nanobison* issue8

###

# **Renfield and the Modern Woman**

**By John McMullen**

After you've been nobbing the hob for a while as a vampire, you discover that it's not all lounging about in evening wear and sipping a glass of the red. No, the undead existence is rather fraught with peril. There are days--nights, rather--when it becomes possible the old self will actually have to hunt and feed, with the risk of damage to one's wardrobe and one's social schedule.

That's why it is absolutely essential that one have a man. I have one, a first-rate man, top-notch, descended of a long line of men. Veritable master-mind. Renfield's his name.

Why, just the other week, I was in an awful unpleasant foodstuff. "Rise and shine, sir," said Renfield and I simply lay there.

"Are you moping, sir?"

"I never mope, Renfield," I told the fellow from my bed. Oh, yes, I sleep in a bed. Renfield suggested it: much more comfortable than a coffin, you know, and much more open to misinterpretation if found. For the same reason I have a huge television, though of course I can't watch it: damnable keen vampire senses render the thing entirely unwatchable, unless you like to see lines crawling across the screen.

However. As I was saying, I was not moping.

"Of course, sir. I had forgotten." Renfield had laid out my clothes.

"Not the navy worsted, Renfield. That's only for seeing Uncle."

"Yes, sir. Your liege left a message, sir. He would like to see you tonight."

"Oh, dash it!" I swore. I understand most people call him Sire or Majesty or something like that, but he is my uncle, and he is forever complaining about my inability to uncork my own bottles, so to speak. Really, that might have been useful in the middle ages, before the discovery of anticoagulants, but now it seems unnecessary and unseemly.

"If I may, sir, he was most insistent."

"Put the old whammy on you, did he?"

"Indeed." Uncle is very keen at all of those vampire power thingies. I've never mastered a one; with Renfield, I have little need.

I gave half a glance to ensure that Uncle was not actually in the room--and, reassured, gave a dismissive wave of my hand. "Piffle, Renfield, piffle. I have a problem of a more delicate nature." I got up and allowed Renfield to dress me. "I seem to be engaged."

"To a woman, sir?" I nodded glumly. "To a living woman, sir?" I nodded once more. "Perhaps you should tell me about it."

And so I laid the facts of the situation before him.

#

As some bleak egg once said, life is short and death is long, which makes a good club absolutely indispensable. (No television or movies, if you'll recall.) One needs to socialize with one's own kind. I frequent a small establishment called The Meat Market, a name so clever I might have thought of it myself.

There were three of us stiffs playing three-handed euchre, Butcher, Baker, and I. (We had been a foursome until one of our members realized he was dead. Poor philosophy, if you ask me; I say, keep going. In any case, Chandler had gone to ground.) It was at that dramatic juncture that a modern young woman entered.

The Meat Market is not a private club, I'm afraid. It remains open to the public; anyone may enter, although undesirables are discouraged from remaining.

The young woman in question recoiled at the haze in the room and I was able observe her for a few moments through the cigaret smoke. I like to smoke; it reminds me to breathe. More accurately, it reminds me to inhale. (I took it up after I once lost the chance to set up a lone hand because I hadn't air in my lungs when I ordered my partner up. My partner was most vexed.) However, if I haven't a conversational companion, I do sometimes forget to exhale until I need to speak.

She seemed one of those modern women--career, financial independence, exhausting hobbies, the forthright implacable motion of an iceberg. Rather like Uncle, in fact. As she wobbled towards my end of the room, I had yet another clue this woman was modern: she had neglected to put on foundation undergarments. I saw her clamp her arms at her sides to prevent one of her bosoms from circumnavigating her torso.

I'm afraid she took my look of mild distaste for one of interest, for she made her way to my table. Then she compounded matters by introducing herself. "Hello," she said, quite directly, "I'm Yves. Summer Yves."

My attempt to invoke vampiric powers and send her hence had its usual effect: she smiled and sat down beside me. Under the circumstances, there was little to do but introduce myself, which I did.

The silence between us stretched like taffy of a particularly plastic and silent sort, and finally, I asked, "Are you interested in euchre?"

"Oh, yes," she said. "If it's a game of tricks." She smiled upon saying the last word. She had an extraordinary number of sharp white teeth.

"Indeed," I said. "Well, we are searching for a fourth," and then I discovered that both of my companions had vanished. I must say, these keen vampire senses are a nuisance--unable to watch movies except as a series of still pictures, but one's supposed friends can slither away without so much as an embarrassed cough.

In fairness, I suppose they might have coughed but hadn't remembered to inhale first.

"Oh," she said. "Can't it be played by two?" and she placed her hand upon my arm.

"Normally it requires four."

"Kinky," she said, and she licked her lips. I took this as modern slang of approbation, and I was encouraged by her attention to the rules. One rarely finds a woman who will truly listen on the topic of proper play of euchre.

I outlined the bare necessities of play and then mentioned that one could order up one's partner. She said she liked the sound of that and immediately asked me to order her up.

I began enumerating the conditions under which one should order up one's partner, from most favourable to least. As I reached the case where one has the left bauer and ace of trump with two aces supporting, she was so still that I began to suspect I might have managed that entrancement thingie after all.

Finally she looked across at me and said, "Can I order you up to my place?" She smiled again and batted her large dark eyes at me.

My first inclination was to say yes--I had another forty-six combinations to discuss--but I thought to check my watch, and indeed, the dawn was creeping up on us.

"I'm afraid not; I must go."

"Tomorrow night, then?" she asked, fluttering her eyelashes most prettily. One drifted off, revealing a stripe of grey skin beneath her makeup. "I could offer you...refreshment." The pause in that sentence was as obvious as Renfield's disapproval, and I could only surmise it was as significant. I quickly reviewed her behavior--she had invited herself to an unknown man, listened to his every word, and was now offering him refreshment. Her clothing revealed loose bosoms, broad hips, long legs uncovered by hose, and a lack of foundation garments.

Clearly a young woman in search of a husband.

"Well, I--"

She pressed a slip of paper into my hand and said, "I consider that an engagement." She left after favouring me with what can only be called a flirtatious smile.

#

"If I may be so bold," said Renfield after I had relayed this tale, "it seems clear to me that there was no engagement in the marital sense. I believe she simply wanted to see you again."

"Renfield," I said firmly, "she was clearly sending me signals of a--well, of a sexual nature, if I may be frank," and if blood had flowed in my veins, I should have blushed.

"Indeed, sir, I quite concur."

"Well, that sort of thing is only done in the confines of marriage, is it not?"

"Not any more, sir."

"Really? That's shameful. I wonder if Uncle knows."

"I'm sure he does, sir. Your liege has kept track of events over the last eighty years. However, it is opportune for you. It means that you can go to her residence without being obliged in a marital sense."

"Ah. Indeed. But, Renfield, what if she desires...I mean, what if what she wants is..." I made a gesture involving the union of both hands.

He raised an eyebrow. We had never before discussed such things.

I inhaled and coughed slightly. "I have no such...urges."

He took the news with perfect equanimity. "Perhaps you are worrying in advance of the facts, sir. She may want your company alone."

I brightened. "Do you think so? She seems interested in cards. Now, we must escape before Uncle comes to visit."

"Before, nephew?" asked Uncle. He had, of course, appeared in the room without notice. Oh, I could keep him out by revoking his invitation, but that would cause problems.

"Lovely to see you, Uncle. Renfield, a glass of the red for Uncle." Renfield disappeared--he's nearly as silent as Uncle when he wants to be.

"Have you read the papers?" Uncle asked, brandishing a tabloid at me. Uncle is always concerned about the tabloids. Sooner or later, he claims, they must print something true and be believed, so he's always on about mysterious lights in the sky and strange disappearances. It is difficult to argue with him, as I personally know two yetis and a sasquatch--they're bouncers at my club.

"Only the illustrated pages."

Uncle sniffed. "There is a serial killer in this city, and some of the tabloids have claimed it was a vampire because the bodies are missing blood."

"That's a bit rough." Commiseration is almost always appropriate with Uncle--he's very fond of reminding me that heavy lies the head that crowns the bear, and so forth.

"It's not...it's not you, is it?" asked Uncle.

I was shocked. "Certainly not! You know my feelings on the matter."

"You are one of the indolent dead," remarked Uncle. "The bodies were also mutilated and I thought that might be your sort of idea for covering up."

"Your drink, sir," said Renfield. "If I may, sir, the bodies were also missing a variety of internal organs, in the manner of extraterrestrial cattle mutilations."

"Yes," said Uncle. He looked at his glass with some disdain, then drained it, his fangs glittering in the light, then blotted his lips with a handkerchief. I saw him finger his toothbrush case as he debated the merits of another glass. Good oral hygiene prevents much of the social stigma associated with our kind in previous centuries.

"May I reveal your surprise to the Sire, sir?" Renfield asked me. I nodded: I was curious to learn my surprise as well.

"Is there a preferred disposal method? My master is going out tonight with the intent of making his first bite."

Uncle turned and looked at me. "Is this true? Are you finally accepting some measure of adulthood?"

I shrugged and smiled.

He clasped at the shoulders and pulled me tightly to his chest. "Adam," he said, "some real blood will help alleviate this anoxia problem you've carried for too long."

(I should point out that it is Uncle's contention that my general unwillingness to kill and my attitude are the result of oxygen deprivation during my change. Most vampires, apparently, grow out of this after sufficient kills. I have no wish to.)

"Yes, of course."

"You're not concerned, are you?"

"No, of course not." I confess that I'm not even certain where the major arteries are, but I would never tell Uncle.

"The best technique is not to kill at all, but if it happens, it happens." He clapped me on the shoulder heartily. "Once you get your teeth in, you'll find that instinct takes over. It all happens quite easily."

Uncle left then, his concerns about the tabloids allayed by his joy over my desire to tap the draft myself.

Renfield had left to pour my breakfast. While I waited for him, I read the article about vampires and ran across the disturbing claim that vampires were a symbol of disease and therefore obsolete in an era of antibiotics.

Renfield surprised me with his return. "I hope you don't mind, sir. It occurred to me that the young woman might have guessed something about your unique nature and might be one of those few who took pleasure in the act of biting. Whether you bite her or not, your liege need never know."

"Quite so!" I said. "Renfield, you're brilliant."

"Thank you, sir. Shall I drive you?"

"Not yet," I said. You must take the upper hand once in a while with servants, or they own you. I shook the newspaper at him. "Renfield, do you think I'm an obsolete symbol of syphilis?"

The man didn't bat an eye. "Not at all sir; you're a symbol of class discrimination."

"Ah. That's all right, then."

It is perfectly acceptable to be a symbol, but one must be a symbol of the right thing.

#

"Come in," Summer said breathily, which eliminated that awkward pause waiting for the invite. She was clad in a robe and her hair was be-turbaned in a towel. "I'll be ready in a few moments," she said as she handed me a glass. "Enjoy your drink."

I took a sip for show, although really, I couldn't have distinguished it from formaldehyde. I picked up a book that was lying on the table, entitled "To Serve a Man." "Is this a cookbook?" I asked her.

"Why, no," she replied. "It's a new translation of the Kama Sutra." We had another of those taffy-like silences, and then she explained, "It's a sex manual."

I flipped it open. There was a diagram of the male figure, mapped into segments labeled using a cooking mnemonic--"short roast," "brisket," "sweet breads," and so forth.

"Erogenous zones," she said.

"Ah. Bent rope," I replied, since approbation seemed appropriate, and she disappeared into the other room.

An entire chapter of the book was dedicated to the use of a barbecue, which seemed somewhat at odds with what I understood of a physical relationship. I was now ever more certain that Renfield's advice was correct. She was one of those people who took pleasure in being bitten.

Summer came back into the room. Her clothes had been subtly rearranged so that her hair was loose and disarrayed, revealing that tantalizing streak of gray between her scalp and her blonde wig, and one of her breasts was now above the other. "Hope you're enjoying your drink."

"It's strong," I told her. "What's it called?"

"Mickey F-something-or-other," she replied absently as she pinched the flesh over my biceps with a pair of calipers. "Tell me," she said, "do you believe in aliens?"

"Oh, I deal with immigration incidents all the time." One can hardly apply for correct papers after death, you know.

She laughed prettily, a sound rather like a playing card caught in the spokes of a bicycle. "Oh, you're so witty--I could just eat you up."

"Funny," I said, feeling rather suave, "I was thinking the same thing about you. Feel like a bite?"

"I certainly do." She approached me, showing an impressive number of teeth with her smile, bearing out Renfield's analysis.

Well, next thing you know I had the old fangs out. She was awfully athletic about the whole thing--thank goodness I didn't need to breathe. Nearly tore my cravat, and quite dyed my favorite shirt in the red. Although in her case, it was a deep purple.

I should mention that Uncle was entirely incorrect. It took me forever to make a wound that bled sufficiently. Tasted a bit odd; I hadn't realized heparin did so much to the flavor. Improves it quite a bit, it turns out. All the exercise turned out to make Summer a bit of a deader, however.

Well, Uncle burst in at that moment, pleased as midnight I'd finally done the deed.

It became evident in the disposal that poor Summer terribly needed the wig, makeup, and substitute bosoms. She was actually emaciated, gray, and utterly lacking in bosoms or body hair. I felt quite sorry for the poor thing.

Uncle congratulated me on stopping an insidious alien threat. I accepted, of course, though I hadn't the faintest idea what he was talking about. The reknown went a good way to easing my way with the other stiffes at the club.

"I took the liberty of notifying your liege," Renfield told me later. "It occurred to me that this might have been a variation on the badger game."

"No, we never got around to cards at all."

But--here's the best part--Renfield got the stain right out.

###

# Dead Man in the Yard

by Rob Hunter

There was a dead man in the yard this morning. I checked in my wallet for my latest picture of the front yard. I have a collection of yard pictures that goes back for years but I usually carry only one photo at a time. No, he was a new arrival. I called Sheila. Sheila is my ex-wife.

"Hon, I think there is a dead man in the yard."

"How do you know he's dead?" she asked, not "Who is it? Did you kill him?" Nothing like that. Sheila never went for the obvious: Old Pierce Willoughby passed out drunk on the way home from an evening at the Legion hall over on Fairview would have been so usual that she figured I wouldn't have taken the trouble to call her.

"Uh, hold on, will you?" I set the phone down on the hall table and rummaged in a drawer for the mirror I kept there. The mirror had fallen out of Sheila's compact in 1973; it was October and our first anniversary. I had promised to glue it back in place but never got around to it. I went out into the yard and knelt by the dead man. The dead man was of average height, or would have been if he had not been lying down, and dressed in that elegantly understated way favored by bankers and funeral directors. He had closely trimmed gray hair and a military-style moustache, also gray. I held Sheila's pocket mirror under the dead man's nostrils. I had seen Phillip Marlowe do this in a film once, it is a sure test for death. The mirror did not mist over.

I went back to the phone. "Nope, he's dead, alright."

"Did you even give him a poke? No. Honestly, Harry Brackenfern, I am so glad we didn't have any children." I, too, was glad we hadn't had any children. They would have been out of college and established in their own lives by now. They probably wouldn't visit or write.

"Did you even *introduce* yourself; ask how he came to be lying in the yard? No--you just assumed that he was dead." Sheila has a good head on her shoulders, always gets right to the heart of a problem. We divorced last year after a twenty-seven years' separation. The judge made a joke at our final hearing, Sheila's and mine, finalizing our divorce: "Separated twenty-seven years. You're sure you two want to go through with this?" There had been a ripple of subdued laughter from the others in the court, all awaiting their divorces. Or dispositions on parking fines, parole violation, jailbreak, rape, murder, whatever.

"Go back there and introduce yourself; we teach by modeling."

Sheila meant role-modeling; she teaches kindergarten at the James A. Garfield School. She took a summer workshop on this very subject. I went back to the corpse in the yard.

"How do you do? I'm Harry Brackenfern and this is my house you have died in front of. What is your name?" No answer. I returned to the phone; Sheila had hung up. I would call her back tomorrow.

My ex-wife and I had not spoken face-to-face for over twenty years. I should have missed Sheila, not having her around the house and all, but our daily calls brought me a kind of release, a duty had been satisfied. Sheila must have felt the same way; she always answered. I kept busy with repairs and improvements--the little things which if not done, build up into big problems later on: clearing the eaves, getting the leaves raked and piled, having the garbage securely bagged.

Emma, the kid next door, Old Pierce Willoughby's granddaughter, helped me stuff the body in a hall closet to get it out of the yard; there was always talk among the neighbors to consider. Things like property values and curb appeal.

#

"Callous and obdurate," Sheila had said. This was when I proposed to her.

"I'll take obdurate for five points." I thought it was a game we were about to play, like Jeopardy or Hollywood Squares.

"That's from *The Mikado*. Gilbert and Sullivan, Harry." Sheila had had a thorough grounding in the arts at college. "You are a decent man but I just can't get through to you." She sang: "If you remain callous and obdurate, I shall perish as he did, and you will know why. Though I probably shall not exclaim as I die 'Oh, willow, titwillow, titwillow.'"

"It's a song, then."

"It's a song." Sheila was a free spirit; I knew this because she had told me. We were students at the community college and had gone out a few times. When I asked her to marry me I knew she viewed me as an accommodation to security over the arts. I would be dependable and a good provider. "It's a song about a little bird who dies starved for love. Yes, I'll marry you, Harry." At the time she still entertained hopes for a career on the stage; she sang whenever her free spirit moved her. I am not a singer.

Through first years of our uneventful and, I supposed, happy marriage, Sheila kept her Samsonite suitcase packed and at the ready in the front hall closet. "In case. Just in case," she would say. I supposed her to be waiting for a call from some theatrical producer. The suitcase was one of those brown overnighters--I called it brown; Sheila said taupe--its outside printed in a pattern to simulate woven rattan. Saturday mornings, and regular as clockwork, she would carry her suitcase up the stairs to our bedroom and flip it open on the bed to sort, inventory and refold her personal things. She carefully shook out the

wrinkles and replaced the week-old lingerie with a freshly laundered set. Things tended to get musty in storage she explained.

One morning the suitcase was gone, just like that. After two years Sheila had moved out. I was happy for her in that she would have clean underwear and a career. Sheila however did not leave town after all; she continued teaching kindergarten at the James A. Garfield School just as before. We stayed close as I called her every day for 27 years. I began taking my yard pictures to show that I was keeping up the property in case she asked.

After Sheila left, Emma, Old Pierce Willoughby's granddaughter, used to help me out around the house: lending a hand with the window boxes and the perennial beds, holding the ladder while I scooped last year's leaves out of the eaves. But as she grew into young womanhood her visits became unpredictable. She was now sixteen and had a boyfriend. I mentioned this to Sheila.

There was a long, still moment on the phone as Sheila considered her answer. "She is a young woman, Harry. She wants to try her wings. And the neighbors--a young girl all the time with a 56-year-old man. How does *that* look?"

#

I was going out for the mail when the dead man spoke his first words, "Christ, it's dark in here." The words were understandably muffled as he was in the front hall closet, the same closet Sheila used to keep her suitcase in when it wasn't Saturday. I had to put my ear up against the door and shout to be heard. Seems his name was Prentiss Oliver and he wanted an ice cream. I told him I didn't have any. "Cholesterol," I yelled. "But then that wouldn't matter to you, being dead and all."

The dead man opened the closet door a crack and peered out at me. "You seem to know a whole lot about me for a total stranger."

"The camera doesn't lie." I pulled out my wallet with its accordion-fold assortment of yard pictures. The latest one, the last one, had a dead man in the foreground. I had taken that picture out-of-doors instead of through the picture window as usual.

"That's me. Lying there."

"Yep. And dead as a planked haddock."

"Good likeness."

One evening I invited him out of the closet to join me in front of the television. Prentiss Oliver, the dead man, never asked me why I took pictures of my front yard. "Why don't you ever ask?" I asked.

"About the pictures in your wallet?"

"Yes."

"None of my business, is it?" The dead man held me by both shoulders and looked me in the eyes. His eyes were gray, I noticed, like his hair and moustache. "What if I told you that I was a '66 Chevy Impala? How's 'bout them apples, Harry Brackenfern?"

"You are a dead man." Prentiss Oliver was wearing an expensive suit, I noticed.

"Consider also that I might be an allegorical figure set to confound all who come my way. One of those ancient avatars of a lost civilization, the Hittites and Sumerians, for instance: a great, giant horrific challenging bull, full with the blood of kings." At close range his breath smelled of peppermints. "It may not be outside the sphere of reasonable supposition that I have been sent to be a guardian at the gates of..." Here he pulled a scrap of paper from his breast pocket. "28 Samoset Avenue."

"You are a dead man and you were lying in my front yard."

"The front yard of 28 Samoset Avenue. And you don't have any ice cream. You have a telephone. I don't get a telephone?"

"If you thought one was necessary. Who would call you?"

"Sheila, maybe? And you can forget about the ancient allegory thing. OK with you if I hang out a while?"

"Well..." I thought about curb appeal and the neighbors. I didn't think to ask him how he knew my ex-wife's name. Prentiss Oliver chose to interpret my silence as an invitation.

Days grew to be weeks and I got used to having him around. But the dead man cast a pall over our evenings together. These moody sulks of his were aimed at me, I knew. All about me having no ice cream. There was this one time when we were watching TV and I had set a bowl of Oreo cookies between us. The dead man hardly touched the Oreos. We sat in silence through Jeopardy and Law and Order. I must have fallen asleep. When I awoke during the Late-Late-Show, Prentiss Oliver was back in the hall closet. And the next morning he was out front again, lying in the yard. I took that day's yard picture, then went to try to cheer him up. He seemed cheerful enough.

"Ahh," said the dead man, thumping the ground at his side. "6000 years and still flat. How's that for substance and dependability?" I guessed he was talking about the Earth.

"The Earth is round," I said.

The dead man raised an eyebrow. "Harry, Harry, Harry. Have you never been canoeing on an upland lake and, stopping to rest your weary arms, laid your head on a thwart to peer along the waterline? Qui bono, op. cit., ipso facto, Harry, QED. Flat as the belly of a virgin hooker, the Earth. Water tells no lies. And I have just now, before your very eyes, demonstrated its flatness by empirical observation." I had never been canoeing. I would have felt foolish in the big orange flotation devices they tie to non-swimmers. I do not swim.

"The 6000 years you will have to take my word for," said the dead man. Here he again thumped my front yard. "The Earth was created October 26, 4004 BC, at 9:00 am. This is an established fact; you Darwinians make of it what you will."

"The Earth is round," I repeated.

"A litany of your 'science.' You are parroting the twaddle they pour into innocent young minds."

"My wife is an elementary teacher," I said.

"Sheila," said Prentiss Oliver. "And the 6000 years is give or take a thousand, you understand. Arithmetic gets slippery when you're dead." He stood and dusted himself off. The dead man raised a conspiratorial eyebrow and spoke in hushed, urgent tones. "For all you know, I might be that '66 Chevy Impala after all. Classic car'd look mighty good parked out front."

"Believe, me, you are a dead man in a Gucci suit. Look at the picture."

He certainly looked dead, he acknowledged. "Sheila. Sheila would have appreciated a Chevy Impala, Harry. But I was so much older than she was. I watched and waited."

"You had a crush on my wife." I was divorced and he was dead. There was no cause to be disagreeable.

"You and Sheila. Ever get naked and throw muffins?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"Nothing kinky. You ever just get down and get loose together?"

I told him I was not a spontaneous person.

"Well, I am dead and not expected to be spontaneous. That pretty well leaves the ball in your court, doesn't it, Harry old bean?" The afterlife notwithstanding, Prentiss Oliver got right to the point. He went back into his closet. I went next door to borrow Emma, Old Pierce Willoughby's granddaughter. I asked her to bring along her boom box. After twenty minutes of teen hits at full volume, the dead man came out.

"The ice cream, then we'll talk," said the dead man.

I invited Emma and him to the Polar Treat for soft serve.

"Ambrosial, Best I've ever had," said the corpse. I asked if he had had it before. "No," he replied. "Sorry, but I'm not all that mobile as you can see. I have been dead lately. Before that in one of those retirement villas over on Longacre. Too far from the Polar Treat to make it even in my motorized scooter."

With the company of Emma and the dead man the days filled themselves pleasantly with TV and ice cream. I still called Sheila but now got her answering machine. "Hi, Hon. Harry," I said, feeling foolish--of course it was me. After that first time, I hung up without leaving any message. If she had made that connection with a theatrical impresario, I didn't want her to return from a tour to endless repetitions of me saying hello. Formerly this would have made me apprehensive lest something had happened to her--an automobile crash, the flu, a falling airplane or a church steeple dropped by careless riggers.

"Have you called your ex-wife today?" the dead man asked. It had slipped my mind.

I felt a guilty twinge. "Sheila is a free spirit," I said.

"Call again. If there's no answer better check the obits."

Sure enough, I read about her death in the newspaper. I do not recall, in all my adult life--or my life as a child for that matter--ever shedding a tear. At the news of Sheila's death I wept disconsolately. Emma and the dead man put their arms around me for a group hug and I felt better. The dead man handed me a Kleenex, "Blow." I blew.

I asked Prentiss Oliver if he had had any word from Sheila, her being dead and all, just like him.

After Sheila's death Emma joined us regularly for ice cream at the Polar Treat. She seemed to enjoy Prentiss Oliver's company. "Hiya, Mr. Oliver. Mr. Brackenfern."

"Hiya, Emma," I said.

"Your late ex-wife found you a great disappointment, Harry," said Prentiss Oliver. Emma nodded agreement as she dug into her cone.

#

One morning as I was making my poached egg, Prentiss Oliver said, "Elizabeth Taylor." This was after Sheila died and we had stayed up late watching *Butterfield 8*. "What's your opinion?"

"Opinion. About what?" My own impressions of the great world beyond my yard had been forged by the Late-Late-Shows that came on at two in the morning.

"About what? *Passion*, Harry, passion." Prentiss Oliver thought *Butterfield 8* was a mighty document of Film Noir, and was especially fond of the scene in which Miss Taylor's character drove her Nash Metropolitan over an embankment.

"What is passion, desire? For five points?" I had not seen much in the way of passion. I have always felt my opinions sincerely but had none about Elizabeth Taylor that I could recall.

"You can't *show* passion," said the dead man, munching on an Oreo. "You *feel* passion. The people in the movies demonstrate lust. To a point," said the dead man. "Anyone can see that."

"I'm not like anyone. I'm me.' Elizabeth Taylor said that. In *Butterfield 8*," I said.

The dead man reached over and broke the yolk of my poached egg. "Engaging and witty, Harry," he said.

"I'll take witty for five points."

"Nonononono. That's only a game you and Sheila used to play. Engaging and witty are *places*. Places *you* might hear of but never visit. You never got *The Mikado*, did you? You are a decent man, but that's not enough. I'll have to be moving along. Sorry, Harry, old bean. Game's over."

"No more soft-serve at the Polar Treat?" I had become used to the dead man's company and was sorry to see him go.

Prentiss Oliver whistled a few bars of a bouncy, happy tune. "Recognize that?" he asked.

"I am not musically inclined," I said.

"On a tree by a river..." He stopped. "Join in, Harry, there's a good fellow. *The Mikado*, Gilbert and Sullivan..."

"Oh, yes: Callous and Obdurate. I am familiar with the *Mikado*," I said. "But not with the music."

The dead man looked as if he expected me to burst into song. I did not. "A little tom-tit sang willow, titwillow, titwillow," he sang.

"One of Sheila's favorites."

"Mine too. I admired Sheila," said the dead man. "From a distance... discretely. Sheila languished; her soul grew smaller and smaller and finally she disappeared. She had settled for a decent man. You whistle?"

"I never had the time to learn an instrument," I said stiffly.

"You never had the time?"

"There were leaves in the gutters. The eaves?"

"You cleaned the eaves while Sheila pined away for love. I wonder how she put up with you, a non-swimmer who wouldn't even try to learn to whistle. You are a lump, Harry Brackenfern. I waited."

"You waited and now it's too late. Sheila is dead."

"Too late for *you*, Harry. And thanks for all the ice cream." The dead man walked across the yard, whistling a Gilbert and Sullivan tune, the kind Sheila would have liked.

###

# Notes From Tomorrow Bay

by **R.R. Litwicki Jr.**

I have to write this down quickly in case I forget and none of it exists anymore and then no one will remember what happened. Cassie is gone. So are the bed and the contraption she constructed around it with such manic care over the last year or so. Jen is gone back up to the Prince of Saint Simon's castle in the foothills, leaving nothing behind but a half a dozen houseplants that are in various stages of dieing. She left weeks ago, right after Alia started pretty much hanging out full time. Alia is gone as well, although she never really lived here and it may not be important depending on what awaits me when I open the front door and test reality. The Man in the Moon's door is ajar and he isn't in his room and his bed appears unslept in and I know he was here last night because I threatened to kick his ass if he ever went out in the hills late at night and ate that gum again and so he might have just left but where else would he go, only Cassie would take him in- no one else is that tolerant of freaks, not even me. Still, he probably knew I was serious about kicking his skinny brittle-boned ass back to the moon. He saw what I did to that Floyd in the cove and so he might have decided to lay low for a couple of days.

I don't know. But I do know that if Cassie was right, if she succeeded, when I open the door the world will be different, there will be no Floyds ... there will have never been any Floyds and I just might be the only man on the planet who knows they ever conquered the Earth. So I need to leave this record so everyone will know about what happened even though it will have never really happened. Damn the living room looks empty without Cassie's king-sized bed and all the shit cable clamps monitors fans belts and whatnot she had wired to it; the insane jumble that she insisted was a time machine. I hope she was successful. She so wanted to have an orgasm.

#

I can only tell you the story I know, which is pretty much what they teach in school, with perhaps a bit more perspective given my close relations with several of the Floyds and it is probably half misconstrued and half myth, but it is the best I can do. They came from outer space, the Beyond, that infinite realm, the subject of dreamers, scientists, poets, prophets and long-ago human explorers. The Floyds from Sirius or Betelgeuse or some such exotic star, it hardly matters which one. A water dwelling race always on the look out for worlds with suitable environs in which to settle; they found and were fond of Earth. They are the Floidaria, or at least that is how it comes out in Standard English. They are also almost uniformly pink, moist looking, disturbingly translucent, although their skin is as tough as any seal's. For some reason obscured by the intervening two thousand years since their arrival, people called them the Pink Floyds, which most historians presume was a derogatory term for reasons no longer understood. Ultimately the Pink was dropped, and people- I mean humans- have been calling them Floyds ever since. Probably because the Floidaria find it insulting.

They came for the water and they took it. I guess there was some kind of battle royal when they first got here. Historians claim humans once numbered in the billions and dominated the land sea air with weapons and machines. That ain't allowed anymore. The Floyds claimed the oceans and left the land to the humans. Mankind defended our planet even though it had to have been painfully obvious that we didn't stand a chance against a species that had already conquered the stars. When the End of the World War was over and mankind was humbled the new order was initiated. It's all formalized somewhere in the original Pact, copies of which are kept in most major municipalities. We live by the Pact seeing as how the alternative is to die by it and the Pact says that man can't travel on in or over the oceans, nor pollute them or any streams or rivers that feed them. This stricture was savagely enforced for generations until humanity got it right.

The plague helped take the fight out of the last remnants of the human resistance. Debate still rages among self-professed academics over whether the plague was purposely unleashed against mankind as the final act of aggression by our conquerors or if it was unintentional. Two things that everyone agrees on are that the disease was alien, originating with the Floyds for whom it is non lethal, and that it was transmitted sexually which makes it the perfect scourge for humanity, a species the Floyds will be glad to tell you has never liberated itself from the animal need to procreate as often as possible. And yes, in order for the disease to have entered the human population someone had to have sex with a Floyd. Everyone also agrees that the sexual encounter would have necessarily been initiated by a human as an act of aggression against the invaders since no Floyd, at least back in the day, would have ever initiated sexual activity with a human or so they contend. They contend a lot of shit that I know isn't true. For instance an Incubator will have sex with damned near anyone at anytime; it's their whole reason for existence. I've seen more than a few young Combs visiting the brothels and whoracles of the Bay as well, although this is frowned upon officially and is considered a recent perversion the result of living too long in close contact with savage procreators like humans. It's really only the Spines, the third Floyd gender, that abstain from sexual relations with mankind, but they are wound so tight I'm surprised they ever deign to deposit their eggs in an Incubator at all.

#

It's creepy around here without Cassie; it's her house although how she came in to possession of it is anyone's guess. As I look out the window I see the fog rolling over Tomorrow Bay glomming onto the land and caressing the windows cloyingly. I'm sitting here on the old sofa that Buckley left behind when he moved back to the interior after Cassie dumped him and threw him out. I hate this sofa. It's uncomfortable and sour smelling and God knows what Cassie and her endless parade of paramours do on it when no one else is home. It has become my personal symbol of the world, how everything is fucked up, beaten sour, and used and no one gives a shit ... just me on the couch nursing a raspberry mead hangover and being depressed and today more than a little bit frightened because the bed and Alia and Cassie and her time machine and even the Man in the Moon have all disappeared and I am the only one who knows it. I feel weak and helpless and it pisses me off because that is what I am supposed to feel because that is what the Floyds have reduced us to, which is why I beat that big bastard from the Channel colony to a

sticky pink pulp with an old two by four. That got their fucking attention, which caused trouble for the Prince of Saint Simon ,but did a hell of a lot for morale around these parts.

I tried to explain this to Cassie, but she sees herself as a woman above such mundanities. She nodded absently and worked on her time machine and asked me if I think Cyn fakes her orgasms- a hell of a thing to accuse a whoracle of. Cyn told her once that she sometimes has six or eight orgasms when she is having sex, one after another like the tide during a storm. Cassie hasn't had six orgasms in her entire life and she is obsessed with the idea that Cyn is faking hers. I told Cassie that I've ridden out some of those orgasms and they are earthshakers and if they are faked they are in a class with no other. Perhaps I flatter myself- I doubt Cyn's orgasms have anything to do with whose cock happens to be in her at the moment. She's just gifted.

It burns Cassie to no end and she abandoned her precious time machine long enough to curse me out when I told her I thought Cyn was for real. "Emotion." she mumbled as she returned to her contraption, "is the ultimate power source." She plans on powering her time machine with orgasms, if only she could have one. I'm not convinced that orgasms have anything to do with emotions. Cassie is an emotional mess, trying too hard to have an orgasm with every poor slob who happens by, and they all end up like Buckley ... frustrated, angry, ready to run back to wherever the hell they came from.

Animal sex might power the time machine, but I haven't noticed the rubbed raw emotions around this house juicing it up any. I sat on the bed and hooked myself up to the machine the night I killed that Floyd and I swore and I raved and I cried and the machine didn't do a damned thing.

#

I remember my old man standing outside the Temple of the Whoracle, holding his hat in his hand, running the brim around and around in his pudgy fingers and looking furtively about at the evening shadows brought to life by the twin bowls of fire that flanked the open doorway. He was dressed in his best suit, the one he wore to Sunday services at Our Lady of the Golden Gate, the Virgin Franchise up on Hate Street of all places. He was a deacon there, but that didn't keep him from bringing his son down to the North Shore to visit a whoracle on his sixteenth birthday to have his sperm screed by the priestess.

The place reeked of incense and sweat. It was dark and mysterious and moist like the womb it was meant to represent. This was not my first sexual experience, although my father probably thought as much, but it was unique. I recommend that everyone visit a whoracle at least once. The priestess I slept with was cute if a bit on the plump side and totally devoted to helping me achieve orgasm, which was no difficult feat at that time. When I began to ejaculate she stimulated herself to an almost spontaneous orgasm, screaming, bucking, rolling her eyes back. When she was finished I moved to withdraw from inside her, but she grabbed my ass firmly with her hands and wrapped her legs around me and held me in place. "Wait," she whispered, then closed her eyes and began to rock and hum. After some moments she opened her eyes again and looked into mine. Your future will take you away from here in the service of a small man of influence. You will not stay with him long before you leave for a humbler place of greater power. I see

visions of futures that are pasts and are impossible to follow, yet you will follow one of these.

I mumbled awkward thanks and tried once more to withdraw, but she held me tight. "I also see Them in your future. The Floyds."

With that she released me and lay back in her cushions. My future read in the sperm deposited in the sacred womb of the whoracle, I quitted the Temple, avoiding both my father's glances and questions.

Now every time I see a whoracle I can't help but think of my father and I wonder what ever became of him. Does he still officiate services at the little Virgin Franchise? I'll never know. Maybe he never existed. The only person I ever told about the experience was Cyn, one of the local whoracles here at Tomorrow Bay. We have a convenient understanding, Cyn and I- I read her cards for free (I read a lot of cards for whoracles, poor girls don't have any sperm to read) and she sleeps with me when I needed it, although for the record I never slept with her while Jen was living down at Cassie's even, though I probably needed it more then than at any other time. We have only one rule, she is not to scry my sperm. I don't care to know my future. She sat across from me at a rickety table on the veranda at the Laughing Saint and told me not to worry about the prophecy which had by that point proven frighteningly accurate in its preliminary predictions and we drank raspberry mead straight from the cellars of the Prince of Saint Simon.

Gods I love that raspberry mead. The Prince makes it primarily for the Floyds and discourages the local clientele from drinking it since it takes over a year to ferment and it's impossible for him to make as large a profit off of it as he does the wines and ales he also makes. Most of his patrons prefer the latter fare anyway, mead being a bit heady and something of an acquired taste. I acquired it because I'm the local middle man the Prince employs to sell it on the Floyd black-market, which is also why I'm allowed to partake of his stock gratis. Mead is like liquid nirvana to the Floyds, it blows the damned lids off of their minds and is strictly forbidden by their hierarchy. The Prince makes a mint selling it from the Golden Gate to Tomorrow Bay and all points in-between.

#

I fell into the retinue of the Prince of Saint Simon about ten years ago, give or take. I was working at the Fat Peson at the time; my wages consisted of a meager bed in a drafty room that I shared with the rats roaches and other wharf vermin that came in and out through the same shoddy walls as the Bay breeze and fog. Still, it beat sleeping in the ruins of the City, which were my previous accommodations. In exchange for this largess on the part of Miguel, the proprietor for whom the inn and tavern derived its name, I read tarot cards and poetry for the alleged entertainment of his guests. The Prince happened to be passing through seeking to extend his mead and ale distribution northward when I was treating the patrons to a reading from my first collection, *The Deck of Fortune*, which consisted of seventy two poems. The Prince had the good fortune of being in attendance while I was reading the *Quartet of Princes*, which I never considered among the strongest poems of the collection, being partial myself to the more weighty subject matter of the

Major Arcana or the whimsy of the Four Princesses. The Prince fancied he recognized bits of his Royal Self scattered throughout the poems. Not the corpulent corporal bestride his cold gold from the Prince of Coins, which a less kind observer may have applied to his person, but more the insightful regent smitten by Truth from the Prince of Wands or the thoughtful beneficence of the Prince of Grails. He hired me on the spot to be his court poet, which position he had hitherto neglected. When he returned down the coast to his castle I went with him. I lived on the castle grounds in much improved conditions for ten languid years until I grew weary of affectation and he grew weary of my puerile poetry and so I moved here to Cassie's place on Tomorrow Bay. I had long ago assumed a more useful position as mead trafficker due to my familiarity with the Floyd culture from having grownup in the Bay area.

#

Alia is actually the key to the whole tale although she would probably be surprised to hear it. The bastard Floyd from the Channel Colony knew, which was why I had to kill him- a convenient excuse I supposed, since I didn't like the sanctimonious bastard to begin with, but that is another part of the story best saved for later. Alia is an Incubator, the closest English language equivalent to her status that I know of. To understand what an Incubator is you need to know about the Floyd genders and I'll assume that Cassie was successful and that any readers of this manuscript are unfamiliar with the Floyds.

The Floyds have three sexes, as opposed to the two sex relationships that are the earthly norm. I hesitate to refer to the two dominant Floyd sexes as male and female since these words imply human characteristics unknown to the Floyds, so I'll use the common terms we employ to identify them, Combs and Spines. Combs produce sperm or some such Floyd equivalent and if it helps think of them as male. They are called Combs because of the fin-like combs that they sport down the middles of their skulls from the nape of the neck to the top of the forehead. Like all Floyds, they are hairless and this is the only feature on their skulls and it gives them an appropriate aquatic look. You must understand and perhaps I should have made this clear earlier ... Floyds don't really look all that alien or non-human. They are pink and somewhat translucent, but they are humanoid, with two legs and arms with only three fingers and toes and a thumb ... all webbed, not surprisingly. They're faces are somewhat flat, being devoid of noses, but equipped with two eyes and a lipless mouth with molar-like teeth. The Spines of course have no combs, but a spiny ridge along their backs and they produce eggs making them more or less equivalent to females. Where they differ from humans most, and this is important because it is the entire basis for their self presumed superiority to us, is that they don't have sex in the way that men and women do- human men and women that is. In order to reproduce, which is the fundamental goal of any species, they use Incubators. Incubators resemble the other Floyds in all particulars save two; they are smaller, giving them a teen aged look, and they have neither combs nor spines, but are more or less smooth. They are held in disdain by the Combs and Spines because they reproduce and in order to do so they have sex, with both genders, the Incubators being genderless themselves. A Comb uses an Incubator to deposit sperm and a Spine to deposit eggs. The Incubator does the rest and carries the offspring to term after which the newborn is raised communally and no Comb or Spine knows whose child is whose and the family is unknown.

Any Floyd will be glad to tell you that this is a far superior arrangement. Families only breed territorialism, protectivism and other social ills. The sexual relationship of mother and father that is at the core of human families is the cause of countless other tension frustration jealousies. The Floyds know no such emotions and so consider themselves superior. I might be inclined to agree with them except for one thing- Floyds are incapable of love.

Pel introduced me to Alia. Pel is a Comb and he is the middleman that handles the illicit trade in mead and is the closest thing to friend that I or any other human has in a Floyd. We rendezvous on a strip of beach just down from the eucalyptus forest on the southern curve of Tomorrow Bay. One night about three months ago I arrived there with my cart full of crates of mead and he was out in the sunset surf with Alia, riding her and the two of them riding the waves just where they broke. When they were finished they came ashore. I'm not prudish but I admit being embarrassed, another emotion alien to the Floyds. Pel introduced me matter-of-factly and Alia smiled and greeted me with a nod.

We conducted our business, Pel oblivious to Alia's presence and me unable to ignore her since she, I can't help but use the pronoun she when thinking of her, was the only Incubator I had ever met and my curiosity was aroused because I mean here was a creature whose sole purpose for existence was sex and I found myself immediately wondering what sex with her would be like

When our transaction was completed Pel broke open a case of mead as it was our habit to have a bottle or two on such occasions and it wasn't unusual for the dawn to find us quite drunk and waxing philosophical about human-Floyd relations. Alia joined us that night and when morning came Pel went back into the ocean and Alia came home with me. Nothing was said about this startling development and when we got back to Cassie's house we retired to my room and fucked as long as I was able and then fell asleep.

#

We first ran into the Man in the Moon at the Laughing Saint during a thunderstorm shortly after Alia became a regular fixture at the house. I say we because I was there with Cyn and Cassie and Billy the Guide who had just gotten back from the Reno run. Billy was a friend of Buckley's and this was just after Buckley split, his departure and Alia's arrival almost coinciding, and I guess Billy thought Cassie was on the rebound or something and he was looking to score and he just got paid by the caravan driver and was acting the big shot and buying us all drinks so we were glad to share his table even if Cassie had no intention of sharing his bed. It was Cassie who noticed the Man in the Moon sitting in a corner, wet from the storm, staring out the window at the nasty ass weather like he had never seen rain before much less lightning. He had that look in his eyes like someone who just witnessed proof that there was a god. I half expected him to fall to his knees and start confessing like some rube at a Virgin Franchise.

Everyone in the Saint eventually took notice of him since he stuck out like a turd in a punchbowl, being half a foot over six feet and thin as a sapling and about as fragile looking and all alabaster albino death-shroud white like his skin had never seen the sun and jumping every time it thundered.

"Poor baby." Cyn said, after we all laughed at his miserable countenance. She got up and invited him to our table, which probably saved his ass since some of the thicker types who frequent the Saint were starting to lose their sense of humor and replacing it with a xenophobia that lends itself to violence. It took all of Cyn's considerable powers of persuasion to pry the Man in the Moon from his corner and get him to join us, but she wouldn't take no for an answer and so he finally bowed to the inevitable and sheepishly accepted the chair Billy the Guide pulled over for him.

He introduced himself as Larry, saying the name like he had never heard it before and smiling in embarrassment. "Where you from?" asked Billy, pouring our guest a tankard of the amber.

"Sacramento," he said, and we all laughed, but accepted the awkward lie, Sacramento being a wasted place from the old histories now referred to as Dead Cap by everyone or simply The Cap by anyone unfortunate to actually live there. I'm supposed to meet someone here he said and Cyn smiled patted his hand leaned close with whoracle eyes and said Honey you have met someone.

After a couple of ales I asked him where he was really from.

He considered lying again, but gave up the idea. "The Moon," he said softly so no one beyond our circle could hear. No one laughed this time.

Damn Cassie whispered and nothing more was said about it. The story came out in bits and pieces over the next couple of weeks and a lot of it was lies, but I guess that was to be expected since he was a secret agent of sorts and had been trained since childhood to tell half truths to the locals when they sent him down to Earth on his mission. He came home with us that night and moved into Buckley's old room. Billy the Guide spent the night on Buckley's couch all alone and no doubt laying there in the moonlit night wondering where that stain by his head came from.

#

What can I tell you about Cassie's insane contraption which she insisted was a time machine? It worked off an old generator bartered from the Prince of Saint Simon and fueled by the precious gasoline pumped out of the ground down south in Orange Country and it was her greatest obsession after the elusive orgasm. The generator energized wires and sensors and receptors and a dozen less identifiable things scavenged from PreFloyd ruins or manufactured up at the Prince's laboratories. Most of it was put together by Buckley under Cassie's watchful eye and it was only after it was completed to her satisfaction and she had determined that Buckley would never give her the orgasm she needed to power it that she sent him packing.

The questions she could never adequately answer; how it worked and what she planned to do if it did. It was her dream to go back in time and warn a world distracted by petty internecine warfare and reveling in the accomplishment of the Lunar Colony that invasion by a watering dwelling race of alien Pink Floyds was eminent. Why would they

believe you? I asked her and she was firm in her conviction that she and the sexual partner who finally gave her her orgasm would be all the evidence she needed.

It never occurred to me, and she couldn't possibly have foreseen, that her deliverer and fellow time traveler would be a Floyd Incubator.

#

The problem was that there was never anything deeper to my relationship with Alia than sex, which is odd because it never occurred to me that I ever wanted or got anything more out of my relationships, but like a hole the in sheets there it was exposing the straw beneath. Forget for a minute that Alia was an alien, albeit humanoid, and imagine a girl for whom sex was a way of life, not like Cyn ... being a whoracle and telling the future in men's sperm, but actually her entire biological reason for existence- not a job or a calling.

Cassie was fascinated by Alia from the day I brought her home and the fascination persisted even when the new oddity of the Man in the Moon became a fixture. Cassie made off-hand ribald comments about the voracity and frequency of our lovemaking, but I knew that it was curiosity and not disapproval. Cassie was attracted to Alia. Here she thought is the creature that will break the ice of my frigidity and give me an orgasm.

"I'm not a lesbian," Cassie told me after I discovered she was having sex with Alia. She isn't really a female.

"She isn't even human," I said, as if that were taboo coming from me who'd been sleeping with the coquettish Floyd Incubator for a month.

And Alia was in heaven living in our little three bedroom bungalow in the hills of Tomorrow Bay, her foray into human life consisting almost entirely of an endless stream of showers and sex and meals of marine delicacies I began bartering Pel for and evening bouts of mead drinking which inevitably led to more sex. It was our cycle of life, all of us, even the Man in the Moon, who was raised in the Lunar culture of absolute abstention, a child of that cold harsh society in which babies were made in Petri dishes and not bedrooms.

He was appalled at the beginning, until first Cassie and then Ali and even sweet helpful Cyn broke him down and taught him that that piece of muscles, veins, and hot flesh between his legs had purposes other than voiding used mead. They took it as a challenge to break down centuries of asexuality ruthlessly bred into the offshoot of humanity living in the Lunar Colony intent on acculturating away the animal heritage of their Terran forbearers. They gave him his manhood back and he became almost human.

#

The crazy thing is that Cassie wasn't the only one plotting to overthrow the Floyds. After two thousand years of occupation and degradation and domination the human race must have finally had enough- it had been humbled, humiliated, decimated, denigrated, but not broken ... at least not the odd menagerie that populated Cassie's place up on the hill.

I never really trusted the Man in the Moon and who would after the way his ancestors betrayed their race, not that he was responsible, but still it's a sort of gut racial instinct or at least it was for me. Everyone knows about the Lunar Colony, although popular theory postulated it had long since died out as it was almost two thousand years since they contacted their Earth bound brethren. The Floyds sometimes made allusions to them in a matter of fact way and no doubt continued relations with them; Pel once told me they traded water with the Lunies. Face it, the Floyds had no interest in the moon since there is no water there and that is what spared the Lunies to begin with during the initial invasion when the Floyds ignored them at best and perhaps conspired with them. Legend has it that in the beginning the people on Earth had waited and prayed and begged for help from the colony, fantasizing that the Lunies would intervene and tip the balance humanity's favor, but no such rearguard action materialized. As the fabled technologies of Earth fell into disrepair, contact with Moon was lost. Until the Man in the Moon showed up that night at The Laughing Saint and joined us in a drink and moved into Buckley's room. I kept an eye on him. He never said what brought him to Earth and we never asked and life went on and he became a part of it.

Then I found the package. It fell out of the sky on a slender parachute late at night and I followed the Man in the Moon as he went out to look for it and I saw him open it and eat the gum and sit entranced mumbling to himself. Then he burned the parachute and the package and went into town and had a cup of coffee before returning to Cassie's place. When the next package fell to Earth I beat him to it. I chewed the gum.

And I went on the gum trip.

#

I don't know his name, although I'm sure Pel must have introduced us before I put the two by four to the side of his head; me all surprised at how easy it was to swing the pine and how the bastard's skull crushed all easy like a Chinese lantern. He told me I was dangerous and I guess he was right even if I had never killed anyone or thing before or since. I was dangerous to him and to his demands and his accusations which were too close to home and required a more emotional than rational response. He laughed at me and said that I was in love with Alia and he said it like it was an off color joke that he was embarrassed to repeat even though it was uproariously funny and everyone who heard laughed their own embarrassed laugh.

"Love," he said in that condescending Floyd way that sets my teeth on edge, "is the great weakness of your inferior race. Rationality ends where love begins. Love is an evolutionary cul de sac from which there is no escape and which is the reason your race is doomed to eternal failure unable to make the next step to greatness the intellectual leap that would set you on the path to one day approaching the accomplishments of our race. But it cannot be bred out of you, just look at those pathetic creatures on the moon who have tried for two thousand years and succeeded in nothing more than an emotional amputation. Even after your race is conquered and you are wholly subservient to superior species you react by falling in love with an incubator, a creature held in disdain in its own culture and which exists merely to pleasure procreate and progenerate. This is the ultimate degradation and would deserve nothing but pity and disdain if it did not reflect poorly

open our standing and set a bad precedent. Just as the Council was forced to take action against the Bay Colony in the past when it became too familiar with humans I have been sent to set this right. You will go to your home and return with this derelict Incubator at once or I will be forced to take sterner measures."

What those measure were, I'm sure I don't know, since it was at that point that I swung my two by four and collapsed his skull and watched him crumble to the sand in a pool of gelatinous pink ichor. Pel cursed in English and in his own language and warned me that things would go poorly and retreated to the ocean. I panted and cursed and wept and beat the shit out of that Floyd corpse and then went back to Cassie's and told her what I had done and by the time the sun came out dozens of the residents of Tomorrow Bay had made the pilgrimage to the seashore to view the shattered Floyd corpse with a reverence usually reserved for the iconography at a Virgin Franchise. I stayed back at Cassie's place and fucked Alia as long and as hard as I could afraid that at any minute an army of aliens would come and rip her out of my arms.

#

The gum tasted acrid like chewing chemicals or metal, but the sensation soon passed and the journey to the moon began almost immediately. There was the darkness of a void that descended as my eyes closed and my mind lost its own voice, replaced first by a thrumming in the black that oscillated from the back to the front of my brain and was gradually associated with a wave of soft violet rolling in my mind's light sparks stars pin holes in reality appeared and disappeared in patterns that defied definition gaining in rapidity until the light dominated and the dark became the stars and the violet melted into a pool at the bottom of my brain reflecting the white face of the moon that swallowed me as the thrumming rippled away across reality one last time. The pause lasted for one minute of eternity before the voices began.

"Jonas!" the voices cried over and over and over, swinging on a pendulum of sound that ranged from soothing to angry, the individual voices all at different stations of the arc so that the emotional resonance enveloped me.

"Jonas, why don't you act?" asked one voice alone in the whiteness of the moon. The others rolled behind it like breakers over me in deep monotones. "Centuries of planning. Your whole life training. Everything depends on Jonas. Jonas why do you hesitate? The time is right. This may be the only chance we have. Two thousand years and you hold the key to revengerevengerevenge. Jonas. Infect her. Poetic justice. Think of what her species did. A plague for a plague. Two thousand years. Jonas. Send her back beneath the waves. We have taken steps. You must not hesitate. You must not fail. Jonas. Infect her. Revenge." The last word hung in the whiteness and the white was pregnant with it so that it gained form and color and the thrumming rippled back in and the white became the face of the moon and I was sitting on the beach slack jawed staring at the moon and gum had dissolved in my mouth.

#

"You don't know what you're fucking with," the Prince of Saint Simon told me over a pint of raspberry mead, which was damned nice of him considering his thugs Brave and Cody basically abducted me from Cassie's place and hustled me up to the castle in the hills and I was more or less in his power, but then he is so used to having people in his power that he could afford the luxury of being magnanimous. There weren't many luxuries the Prince couldn't afford.

"What am I fucking with?" I asked him when he didn't continue.

"The liberation of the Earth," he roared, theatrically striking a pose, so I felt the urge yell Bravo! and applaud even though I had no idea what the hell he was talking about and told him as much.

"The Lunar Colony," he said, sitting conspiratorially close and sipping his own mug. "They've been working ages developing a virus that is fatal to the Floyds and the ironic part is that it is transmitted sexually through the medium of the Incubators who succumb to it slower than the others so that no one will guess the truth until it is too late and the Lunies have been waiting for the right time to introduce it since Incubators don't have much traffic with humans, not like the Combs who are damned near social or even the Spines who at least get their feet dry now and again, so when you hooked up with that little Incubator down at Tomorrow I contacted the colony straight off."

"You contacted the Lunar Colony?" I asked, actually impressed or dumbfounded or something for the first time in a long time.

"I've been in contact for years," the Prince confided, "and so are a lot of other influential humans who are waiting for the opportunity to strike back and that opportunity is down at Cassie's place right now screwing someone no doubt and waiting unwittingly to be the instrument of our just retribution. The Lunar Colony sent a specially trained agent down to infect the Incubator, but it seems that he was intercepted in my own tavern before I had the opportunity to bring him in and now he's living down at Tomorrow Bay and instead of infecting her he's been screwing her relentlessly, a fact more disturbing to his superiors than his failure to complete his mission, so we need you to carry on in his place."

"Me?"

"I told my lunar contacts you were just the man for the job. Think of it, instead of bashing in their brains one at a time you can take a stab at wiping out the majority of their race on Earth once and for all."

My face must have betrayed me because the Prince became agitated, which made his honor guard edgy and gave me on hell of a thirst all of the sudden, so that I drank deep and long to buy time to recover my composure.

The Prince of Saint Simon wanted me to kill Alia, a sacrifice in the war between species, the first, no second, casualty in nearly two thousand years of enforced peace.

"The sex can't be that good," the Prince said, "and there are more important things than sex" ... which might be true, I thought, for Princes but I couldn't think of anything more important when it came to common people like me or Cassie on her quest for an orgasm or apparently for the Man in the Moon. We were just genetic cogs in an evolutionary perpetual motion machine with LOVE dangling on a string in front of us, keeping us humping along forever.

So I lied to my dear friend the Prince of Saint Simon and told him I would do it.

#

I held Cassie and she cried. I have never seen her cry before, she's the toughest person I know, hell-bent, head strong and without regret, yet last night we sat together on this very couch and I held her for the first time and it was not sexual like you might be thinking and it never has been sexual between us which probably why we remained friends and I held her in the way a friend holds a friend while I comforted her as she cried wet wet tears on the shoulder of my denim shirt. I stroked her short cropped hair, whispering that it was alright even though I wasn't sure why she was crying or if she really was alright.

"I love her," Cassie said, at last and I knew then that she would have her orgasm and that Alia who was at that time fucking the Man in the Moon with wild abandon, which was so common an occurrence in our house of late that no one paid it any attention or even bothered to close a door. I thought of the vial of virus in my jacket pocket and wondered why I hadn't tossed it off a cliff on the way back into Tomorrow Bay as I intended. The Man in the Moon roared and swore and carried on in a way the gum council would never have approved of and I remembered the bastard Floyd from the Channel Colony and I knew he was right and I pitied Cassie and held her tight because we both loved a being for whom love was not possible and I wished I could beat the bastard's brains in again for being so smug and so right and I held Cassie and I lied to her softly over and over that it would be alright.

The Time Machine watched us wondering if Cassie could go through with her plan now that she was confident of an orgasm but fell in love with a loveless creature, knowing that Cassie must still love the Floyd in order to have her orgasm and power the machine that would erase their coexistence at the least.

This reminds me that I am still alone without so much as the Time Machine to keep me company. I wonder if Jen is still in the neighborhood. I could use a little old fashioned monogamous human foreplay hold-me-when-it's-over relations. That is all the story I have to tell. I'm hungry and thirsty and I almost hope Cassie has failed because I feel like going up to the Laughing Saint for some chowder and a pint of raspberry mead.

###

# Revelations

**by Miranda Warren**

The frozen dew coated her with a slight icy sheen, turning the skin a pale blue. My skin. At least I was finally certain of that. I had been sitting here next to my body for what felt like no time at all; my memory was short.

I tried to touch the wounds at her neck and torso, but was unable to. They were not present on the current me. Maybe if I concentrated hard enough I could actually touch my old body, maybe even find a way to get back inside.

"I wouldn't even try that. It never works and you'll just be wasting your time." I looked behind me to see a girl that was about my age and looked so very similar to me—long brown hair, blue eyes, pale. We could easily have been mistaken for sisters.

"How did you know what I was going to do?"

"Because we've all tried that. You're new here." Her voice was emotionless, cold.

"Where are we?"

"I have no idea. None of us do, really."

It had just registered to me that maybe this same thing had happened to this girl. Maybe she had the answers. "So this has happened to you too?"

"It's happened to all of us here. Come on. You're not going to want to stick around much longer anyway." She started walking towards the trees to the right, not even checking to see if I was going to follow her.

I walked in her footsteps, not wanting to be left alone here with my former self for company. "Why not?"

"I guess you'll figure it out anyway, so I'll be blunt. You're dead. We're all dead."

You'd think that a statement such as that would have shocked me or startled me in some way; oddly it did not. All I could feel was this overwhelming sense of nothingness, a cold that permeated my mind and replaced all my memories. Surely I had possessed some from when I was alive...

We quickly walked through the woods to a cluster of flat rocks that appeared to be part of some grand design. Eight women sat on these stones, so similar to the two of us, all with the same long brown hair, blue eyes, pale skin, and in their early twenties. They were my

carbon copies with very slight changes and they were sitting and waiting for my arrival. This was so surreal, and I began to wonder if I should feel faint or at least feel something.

If what the girl had said was true then we were all dead, all here in this place together. Then that had been my body. I was still me, but I was dead. Dead. No, that could not be possible. I would have remembered dying, right? But then I did not even remember how I got to this place. Then I realized I could not feel the ground beneath me. I could not feel the wind that was going through the trees. There was no temperature around me. She had been right and I really was dead. And all of these girls, my sisters, were dead as well. How long had they been here? How long would I be here?

One girl sat in the middle of the boulders. She looked less like me than the girl that had found me. This one was older and the shortest by far, but the other girls deferred to her with an odd respect. Could she have been the first one to come to this place? The girl that brought me pointed in my direction, "Here's the new one. I told you all it was time for a new one."

Each of them looked me up and down as if searching for something, hope in their eyes. They eventually all sighed and turned away as if I were lacking something important. The girl in the middle still studied me long after the others had stopped. "Well, she's not perfect, so I guess there will be more. I'm Aimee." Who was I? For some reason I could not remember. Did I have a name? As if reading my thoughts, she continued, "I'll just call you "Ten" until you can remember your name. That takes a while. Everything takes a while, just so you know."

This was nothing like what I knew of death. It was supposed to be a place where your loved ones that had gone before met you and welcomed you into paradise. Instead I was in a void where I was separate from the world continuing around me and the only people I could talk to were in the same boat I was. Maybe this was hell. "How did we get here?"

Aimee looked at me, a slight frown marring an otherwise pretty face. "I can't tell you that yet. You'll remember when you can handle knowing."

"If you know everything then why are you still here?" I felt I should be angry, should feel some emotion, but everything just seemed so gray.

"I don't know. None of us do, so we wait. We don't sleep. We just exist until we don't anymore."

I knew she was right. There was no choice, so I just sat down and began to wait for the end, not knowing when it would come or if it ever would. This could not possibly be my afterlife. I looked around at my new friends, the same dullness I felt inside of me permeating them through and through. My identical ghost sisters all looked deep in thought as if chasing some lost dream, something that they could almost touch but was just out of reach. I leaned against number nine and found she felt remarkably solid, the first solid thing I had touched since I awoke outside of my body. She leaned back and I let myself finally relax and let my mind wander.

Maybe they were right and the secret out of this place was just to exist and to remember. If that were true I would try my hardest. My face took upon the same concentrated look as the girls around me while we each tried to remember parts of our lives long passed and put the pieces together in hopes of ascension.

###

# **Love is Strange**

**by Thomas J. Keller**

Nobby O'Toole never saw the bright shaft of light that split the deluge and envelop him. The seventeen-year old crumpled to the sidewalk. His tall lanky body lay twitching in the downpour.

The warrior Wiro woke from happy dreams to find his consciousness inside a shaking sodden body on a hard, broken surface under a torrent of precipitation. He attempted to access the host's brain and nervous system.

Nobby, confused and upset, struggled to rise. Strange sensations rattled inside his head.

This host is aware of my presence! May Furg be fed to a herd of Grimalkins!

Nobby stumbled as he righted himself.

His host's incoherent response threatened to overwhelm Wiro. This species, humans they called themselves according to Furg's rambling, stimulant-induced indoctrination, was a potential foe with rapidly advancing military capabilities. Wiro's mission was to speedily determine the threat.

Sweet Jesus, I'm hearin' voices. Ahh, I'm gonna hack my lungs out. Another good fart would make my stomach feel better. Fuggetaboutit, I'd crap my pants. The Chinese army's stompin' through my skull. Tim's party's tonight. Maybe Nora'll let me score. What a shitass summer this's gonna be. What a pissass godforsaken turd-colored day; I can't see crap in this weather. My head, my head, what's goin' on? My conscience? Beautiful. It's pourin' out it's hot it's humid I don't want to be here I have to be here I'm soaked I need a life... I feel like somethin's tryin' to possess me. I ain't done enough to rate the devil; I'm still a virgin, for Chrissakes...

There seemed no order or discipline or rationality to this host, just anger and sensation. Wiro struggled to keep his links as Nobby swayed.

Perfect, Nobby thought. I'm so dumb I get drunk the night before the last exam. What if I flunk? Nah, I did OK; the bullshit flowed from my pen faster than the ink. He stepped off the curb.

Wiro, shocked at the cascade of emotions, grimly held on, a silent rider as Nobby stumbled into an intersection.

A lumbering bus splattered Nobby as he crossed the street to the subway entrance. "Aaagghhh," he screamed, "my foot's soaked. Hey asswipe," he roared, "I got the right of way here, you moke." Damn rain. I coulda broke my ankle! Son of a bitch. My shoes're

ruined, my ankle's achin' an' I'm still not at the subway. What's going on? Gotta get to the train. Shit, I need a beer. In his discomfort he barely noticed the newsstand headlines about potential Democratic presidential candidate Jack Kennedy defending his Catholicism. He reached the entrance and tottered down the subway steps.

The torrent of searing feelings and physical impressions assailed Wiro. For the moment he needed to stay in the background and observe this strange alien and his environment.

Nobby hurried through the turnstile and squeezed into an about-to-depart student-packed train. Wiro unobtrusively explored his host's neural system and sense organs. The subway picked up speed and rocked and swayed through the underground. Nobby's pulse quickened.

There's Nora with Tim. Great.

Wiro experienced the whoosh of the rushing air, the whirring fans, the screeching wheels and the back-and-forth of restless banter. He smelled the body odors and the wet clothes and the perfumes and sensed the testosterone. And an underlying tension.

Making his way to Nora and Tim, Nobby caught sight of Sebastian "Sebe" Pepe, leader and "Warlord" of the Cougars. In an era of teen gangs the Cougars were one of the largest.

"Hey, Fuckface." Pepe's tone dripped scorn.

"You looking in a mirror, Pepe?"

Wiro observed the ritual unfold. The taunts before the battle? At last, a cultural similarity? Perhaps I can observe battle tactics.

"We'll see how smartass you are when we're running your turf."

A challenge? Would his host complete the ritual?

"Pepe, no more, I'm telling you. Keep yourself and your boys outta my neighborhood, an' away from my friends, got it?" Nobby reached Nora and put his arm around her. Pepe, lithe and lean and almost as tall as Nobby, wore the Cougar uniform: tee shirt, open leather jacket, dungarees, and motorcycle boots.

The train pulled into a station and the last hordes shoved their way in. After several attempts, the doors rumbled shut.

"Hey, O'Toole, you ain't tellin' me shit." Pepe sniffed loudly. "An' that's what you are, boy; a living breathing steam-hissin' turd." Duck tail hair flopping across his forehead, he thrust an arm at Nobby, his finger jabbing the air. "The Cougars go where they want, when they want. Got that...boy?" He pointed at Tim. "You and your pussy friend with his pussy crew cut."

The words in the middle of the car took the mood from end-of-year mayhem to palpable menace. The bedlam, horseplay, and rank-outs of a typical school-time subway ride home braked into a stock-still silence. Heads turned and eyes focused. Tension blended with humidity. In a quiet voice Nobby said, "What'd you say...?"

"Ho, ho, ho, O'Toole, you fuckin' deaf, as well as stupid... boy?" Nobby's anger swelled as Pepe's arm pulled back.

They do not control their emotions and channel them as we do, Wiro realized.

Pepe stood, a mocking smile punctuating his words. His eyes swept left and right, calculating, waiting, all the while winking and nodding and chuckling.

Nobby's eyes pinned Pepe, watching, anticipating. His face calm. But his stomach churned.

His host's adrenaline roared as Wiro braced for a skirmish.

"Who's the bitch you got ridin' on your arm?" Pepe's voice rose in mock pitch. He looked directly at Nora cowering behind Nobby in her St. Servilia uniform. "You want a real man, baby, c'mere." He leaned toward her, leering, his tongue licking above his upper lip and nearly reaching his nose.

"Nora, step back, please." She squeezed behind Tim. "Pepe, nobody threatens my girl, an' nobody threatens my neighborhood, 'specially an asshole like you. An' nobody calls me boy, particularly someone who had the best part of him drip off the whorehouse wall..." He looked around the car. "I mean what the hell you do last Sunday for father's day, Pepe, send a telegram to the whole U.S. Navy?" There was a simultaneous intake of breath by everyone in earshot, followed by nervous laughter.

When do these pre-conflict rituals cease?

The train began slowing for the next stop. Pepe curled his lower lip, snorted derisively, and began to turn away. With one swift move he pivoted and his knee flashed up. Nobby turned the blow away with his leg and came at Pepe, taking his open jacket by the lapels, jerking it up and bringing it swiftly down. Pepe's pinioned arms flew upwards in surrender. As the train halted and the doors hissed open, Nobby brought his knee up flush into Pepe's groin. With a mewling gasp, Pepe folded. Nobby spun him around, lifted him by the back of his belt and the neck of his jacket, and with the crowd parting, carried him to the door. He flung him onto the gray, dirt-strewn platform, where he lay, groaning.

Nobby stepped between the closing doors. Pepe cringed and in a hoarse, agony-filled voice croaked, "You'll pay for this, you cock sucker and you will most definitely eat shit."

Nobby looked down at Pepe and sniggered, "Hey, Pepe, if I eat shit, asshole, what'll I do with your clothes?" He pulled back and the doors shut amidst real laughter.

An efficient warrior, he promptly disposed his foe. Wiros wondered whether his host would chant the yell of triumph or return to slay his adversary.

"Nora, you can come back here." Nora, petite and auburn-haired, again squeezed back into the confines of Nobby's arms. Nobby spoke softly, his eyes intent. "I apologize for the language..."

Wiros noted that his fruits of victory might be of a more personal nature.

She put a finger to his lips and ran it back and forth slowly. With her other arm she pulled him closer, looking up into his face. "It's all right," she whispered. She fitted herself against him. His stomach calmed, his face became composed.

The black leather-jacketed sleeve with the brass knuckled hand streaked toward the back of Tim's neck. Nobby moved rapidly and deflected the assault upward with his left hand. With his right, he drilled a smashing blow into the attacker's nose. Blood spurted.

"Prick forgot to get off." Nobby pulled out a handkerchief and meticulously began wiping his hand, while scanning the crowd for more unfriendly faces.

"Sneaky, like the rest of them. Thanks, Nobby," said Tim.

Nobby turned to the bleeding Cougar, his voice harsh. "You've got five seconds to get your sorry ass out of here. You're lucky we don't drop you between the cars." The attacker, hands in front of his bleeding face, backed away, moaning.

Wiros waited. Would this Nobby exterminate his foes like vermin or would he and his cohort merely raise their voices in triumph? These are strange creatures; they do not fight to the death. No shouts of conquest, just a low hum of words throughout this enclosure as if this were an every cycle occurrence.

"A long time coming," said Tim.

"Yeah," said Nobby. "Those Cougars think they can walk anywhere and do anything. Not on our turf. You agree?"

Tim sounded resigned. "Afraid so. Shit, it's the end of the year; I thought we wouldn't have to deal with this crap anymore."

Nobby pursed his lips and turned his attention back to Nora. Her finger resumed its journey. Their eyes met, and softened. She molded herself into him. The noise and motion vanished from their consciousness. They stood, alone in the crowd.

Ah, a courtship ritual, Wiros recognized. What can this lead to? Does this warrior have needs? I perceive discomfort and ... engorgement.

Nora, Nora. Nobby wrapped his arms around her. Damn, I'm gettin' a boner and this subway's jammed. Pepe's a dickhead. Wish Nora'd let me get a little. Maybe after Tim's

party. What's that damn thing in my mind? Drinking too much? The shakes? Voices or something? Am I possessed? Nora's breast pressed against his chest. It's my dirty thoughts. The nuns were right. Tell that to Mister Winkie down there threatening to tear my pants...

"...I have to meet my mother at the station," said Nora as the train approached their stop.

Nobby, upset, said, "We're going to Tim's party tonight, right?"

Nora shook her head slowly. "Ahh, I can't. My folks found out last night there's beer and I can't go. I'm grounded for the weekend. I wanted to tell you but..." She glanced around.

"Any way you can sneak ...?"

"Not a chance." She slipped her hand to his upper thigh. "I'll make it up to you, I promise."

Wiro sensed the lust, the hangover, the gastric discomfort.

The train doors opened; Nora hurried up the stairs to meet her mother.

#

As Nobby and Tim reached the now-sunny street, Nobby said, "I'm dying for a brew; let's stop off at the Shamrock." They walked under the marquee of the local movie theater, where Psycho played.

"I'd love one, but I can't," said Tim. "My mother told me if I'm gonna have the party I gotta clean out the basement. I'll see you tonight."

I must complete my mission. Nobby wobbled as Wiro attempted to assume command of the motor centers. The gusher of emotion threatened to short-circuit Wiro's fundamental nature.

The sign read "The Sober Shamrock". Neon waterfalls and brewery logos glittered in the streaked window. Nobby entered.

The human odors of fetid air, sweat, sour beer, and stale cigarettes filtered through his host's senses and merged with Wiro's awareness. He struggled to sort the sounds of muted conversation, coughing, rattling glass and squawking chairs. Amid an assault of fleshfood smells Nobby crossed into the smoke haze and approached a scarred flat wooden surface with six dispensers. Behind it stood a monstrous specimen of rolling flesh. One of the pallid patrons addressed him as "Tappy".

Nobby shouldered to a vacant spot alongside a short tubby fifty-something office worker, frustration frowning his splotchy plump face.

"Beer?" Tappy drummed his fingers on the bar.

"Yeah, gimme a Schaefer's."

Tappy drew it, skimmed it, set it down and waited.

Wiro froze. Nobby put his hand in his pocket and extracted some round metal. Barter? Ah, exchange mechanisms.

The humans perched on their stools reminded Wiro of the stone monoliths under the four green moons of the home world. The liquid numbness they consumed seemed to shelter them from their own unpleasant realities. Above the low-level din, black and white images flickered on a glass screen.

The beverage sat in golden amber majesty. His host's salivary glands began their involuntary work. Nobby reached for the glass, lifted it to his lips and inhaled the aroma. His nasal apparatus discerned the difference between the overall odors infesting the bar and the lager in his hand; a not unpleasant sensation. The salivary glands demanded satisfaction. Nobby drank the beer in one gulp. Wiro analyzed. An appetite enhancer, but not fleshfood. Stimulants... and nourishment, but from a variety of carbohydrates in liquid suspension. Aerating bubbles. Wiro sensed a sensation in his host's stomach.

Nobby opened his mouth and belched, a thunderous roar, a twelve-second four-octave bilious battle-worthy tremor-inducing discharge. Wiro trembled, fearing discovery. Everyone turned.

"Two more," Nobby said, belching again. "I've a thirst." He pushed the glass and his change forward.

He took the two beers plus Tappy's buyback and wandered toward an empty table in the deserted rear. He paused at the jukebox, dumped in some change and Dion's Where or When clicked on. He sat and lowered his face into his hands.

For Wiro, a new experience; the primitive rhythm and plaintive lyrics invaded his awareness and created new sensations. Should he seek control or violate procedure and attempt a discourse? He made his decision. "Entity named... Nobby ..."

"Jesus!" Nobby said aloud.

"My name is Wiro, not Jesus," Wiro soothed.

I really am possessed by an evil spirit, Nobby thought. Demonic images flew, the threats and warnings and teachings of a lifetime of nuns and brothers and priests flashed and tumbled. Exorcism, that'll free me. Dread swelled; inwardly he wailed. Maybe it's just a hangover. Hope welled up...

The emotional tidal sweep caused by Nobby's anxiety engulfed Wiro. He sensed a religious reaction. What gods do they venerate? In his warrior core perhaps this Nobby is a worshipful person. I must maintain contact. "I am not a demon! I am a," He searched for a word, "friend."

Nobby chugged his beer. What are you Am I drunk Are you real What did I do...? The thoughts spewed.

Tell some truth. "I am neither a fiend nor a spirit nor an enemy, merely an observer. We made a mistake and I must reside briefly in your mind."

Nobby finished the beer and swallowed half the second. I'm drunk and this is an epic buzz. I've got the ghost of all my past Schaefer's rattling around in my skull. "OK," he thought, "Who are you and where are you from and why are you here?"

"I am Wiro. I am part of a survey mission. My people are called the Ganch. We are from the planet Merkin, beyond your solar system. Several of your years ago our scientists discovered your world from the emanations of your atomic and hydrogen devices. Our craft hovers outside the reaches of your atmosphere, instruments trained on the surface."

Nobby rolled his eyes and finished the second beer. "And I'm Captain Video and if you don't get out of my mind or wherever you are I'll summon my Video Rangers and we'll blow away your sorry ass into another galaxy."

This was not in Furg's briefing! Alarmed, Wiro said, "Who is Captain Video?"

The response flew from Nobby's mind. "My alternate identity when aliens try to crawl inside my skull. Right now, I'm kind of drunk so the Captain's in hiding."

"Who are the Video Rangers?"

"They're childhood friends." Enough of this; "what made you come here?"

"Your species will soon explore beyond this planet. We decided to probe and see if you are threat or opportunity."

"Opportunity?" Nobby's head throbbed.

Wiro lied. "For trade and for mutual benefit. Shipleader insisted we use a new and untried technology and I was volunteered to integrate my mind into a dominant entity. My Culture Interpreter and Assimilator operator, Furg, consumed too much stimulant."

"Stimulant?" Nobby picked up the third beer.

"In your terms, Furg was drunk during the whole process and sent me without proper training. My body remains in stasis on the ship."

I really am out of my gourd, thought Nobby. "So the H-bombs brought you here?"

"Yes."

"How long you gonna be here?" How long will I have this hangover was Nobby's real consideration.

"One or two more of your days."

"Will your presence hurt me?"

"No, I am here to observe, re-assimilate and report."

"Scout's honor?"

"By the Warrior's code."

Nobby's mind raced. If it's a demon maybe it'll help me; if it's my drunken subconscious maybe it's figured out how to... "So, Wiro, Tim Rohan's party's tonight. You any good with chicks? Got any tips? I want to score." Am I crazy? I'm talking with myself; I'm believing there's something in my mind and I'm asking it how to get laid? Nobby shook his head, and took a deep slug of his beer.

Wiro recognized the opportunity presented.

Poison Ivy blared forth.

#

In the ensuing hours Wiro discerned to his horror that he was not in the place called Roswell or New Mexico but in something called Brooklyn and that his host was a hormone-driven male, too young for his purposes.

#

Nobby descended Tim Rohan's basement stairs to the sound of primitive rhythms, loud conversations, raucous laughter and rampaging pheromones. Gyrating couples and beer swilling singles crammed the room. Chairs and old couches lined the knotty pine-paneled wall. Metal garbage cans, loaded with ice, beer and some soda were strategically located within easy reach. Sound and spirits ruled. In a far corner stood an altar-like table filled with glasses in front of bottles of gin, vodka, rum, scotch, Irish whiskey, bourbon and mixers. For the moment, beer was the beverage of choice.

Hands with cans of beer were raised as Nobby reached the bottom step. "Ave, Nobby, Ave, Nobby, ooga booga booga, Ave, Nobby."

The chants transported Wiro to his first post-battle feast under the darkling moons of Greb IV after the great defeat of the poison dwarfs.

"Ave, Nobby, Ave, Nobby, ooga booga booga, Ave, Nobby, king of the Cougar killers," the crowd in the basement chanted.

"Because there are ladies present, the only thing I'll say to you clowns is "aw shucks", said Nobby, his head twitching as Wiro's memories intruded. After a ten second pause, he gained control and added, "But I gotta tell you we did ourselves proud this afternoon. It's

our summer vacation present to the neighborhood. I don't think Pepe an' his Cougars'll show their face around here any time soon. We kicked their ass an' them wimps ran like chickens. As far as I'm concerned, they ain't nothin'. A beer, please." Tim thrust a cold can of Schaefer into Nobby's hand.

"To Tim the host," Nobby yelled

"To Tim the host," the crowd intoned, drinks raised. They took large gulps.

"To the two bucks he charges, an' all you can drink."

"To the two bucks an' all you can drink." Yet another gulp.

"To the neighborhood." He raised his can to the crowd and emptied it. Tim handed him a fresh one.

"To the neighborhood," they bellowed. A third swallow as cans emptied and fresh ones keyed opened

"In that case, school's out, I'm out, it's summer, so let's paaarty!" He chug-a-lugged the can. As the beer ran down his chin he received another.

The more Nobby drank, Wiro knew, the more he might stay in the background and observe these strange and wonderful rituals. And perhaps learn more about this Captain Video and the Video Rangers.

The Teenager's *Why Do Fools Fall in Love?* blasted from the 45. The buzz of alcohol-fueled conversation vied with the music.

"Hey, Tim, looks like the whole crowd is here." Nobby scanned the room.

"Yeah, it does." Tim pushed his hand through his crew cut. "Well, we're seniors next year; we can celebrate that." He opened a beer and gave it to Nobby.

"Bet your ass. I'll drink to that." Nobby chug-a-lugged the can. "I can do what I want now."

"Without Nora? Where is she?"

Nobby swallowed a burp. "Grounded for the weekend. Her father found out about the beer and booze and said no way." Nobby searched the crowd. His eyes lighted upon an extremely tall and thin flat-chested sallow-faced girl with brown stringy hair. "Who's that?"

"That's Beth O'Hare," said Tim. "She just moved into the neighborhood; went to some kind of convent school. I think she tagged along with May Woods."

"She leave her tits home? What good's a girl without funbags?" Nobby wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "Christ, her ears are so wide her face looks like a cab with the doors open."

Wiro was mesmerized by Beth's beauty. He beheld a goddess, a vision of Merkin loveliness in a human form. All thoughts of reconnaissance fled. Wiro's emotions surged.

Tim looked at Nobby. "You OK?"

Nobby nodded. Not a good idea to tell Tim he's hearing voices. "Nothing that another beer wouldn't cure. What's the deal with this Beth?"

"Beth has to be one of the real innocents after three years in nun's prep," said Tim. "Gotta believe all she knows are hymns, Latin and prayer."

Nobby grabbed another beer. "Well yeah, OK, but hey, ugly is... I think I'll meet her," Wiro forced Nobby to say. The words sounded strangled. Tim stared at him. Mickey and Sylvia's Love Is Strange boomed through the basement.

Couples moved to the center of the floor as Wiro steered Nobby jerkily across the room.

#

"Um, can I get you another drink?" Wiro, besotted with Beth O'Hare, resisted Nobby's efforts to move away. He leaned forward, trying to peer down her blouse. Beth gazed at Nobby, her equine acne-pitted face and large blue-green crossed eyes aflame with a mixture of innocence and alcohol. "One of those Coca Colas with just a little rum in it, like the others." She continued talking as he stepped away. "I've never tasted anything like that before. It's so... relaxing..."

"...Oh, thanks, that was quick..." She took a gulp. "Mm, yummy."

The Dubs' *Could This Be Magic?* began. Wiro made Nobby take the drink from her hand and lead Beth, crinolines rustling, to the dancing area.

"Check out Nobby," said Tim to a friend. "Nora's out-of-sight-out-of-mind and there's Nobby, this afternoon's hero, walking like a robot, putting a move on her convent-hidden replacement. Well, that's beer for you -- helping ugly people since the 1500's."

Wiro, with Nobby forcibly in the background, gently lifted Beth's head from his shoulder and kissed her. She pulled back from him, a look of shock and confusion on her face.

Tim assumed a narrative tone. "...And today's hero goes from the covert to the overt...and what's this we see? Why, ol' Nobby's at full attention, he's risen to the occasion. It's smack out of the den of Beth's crinolines, there for all to see. His pants look like a triangle. If Beth looks down, you are finished, boy, her scream'll bring the cops; if Nora finds out, it's easier: your ass is grass. Mind over boner, head over hard-on. Concentrate!" He began to laugh.

Wiro finally realized his predicament; Nobby in full prong, rut-ready. He forced Nobby to gently push Beth toward him, and once again become enveloped in the now-protective layers of crinolines.

Tim, still laughing, turned to his friend and said, "See anything new or unusual in Beth tonight?"

"Fear?"

"Not even close," said Tim. "Hope. I mean, think about it. Beth's a holy innocent; convent-protected, taller than most of the guys, shaped like a pencil, flat face, flatter chest, cross-eyed, complexion like stucco, elephant ears. I'm guessing that Nobby's the first guy she's really seen up close and, how shall we say, personal."

What does Nobby see in her?"

"Hey, who knows?" Tim shrugged. "Maybe he's possessed. He's sure acting weird."

The Platters began singing *The Great Pretender*.

#

"Beth, everybody's going. Tim's walking me home. I'm leaving; I think you should, too. You can come with us." May Woods, in her too-bright lipstick and non-revealing clothes, stood nervously grasping Tim's hand. "You know what your Ma will say."

"May, I'm having such a good time I think I'll stay a little while longer. My mother's working tonight. I'm sure Nobby will see me home." She stroked his arm possessively. Beth's eyes were a little too bright, and her pronunciation slightly too precise.

"Beth... Beth, you aren't tipsy are you?" A look somewhere between dismay and disapproval flashed across May's face. Tim stifled a laugh.

Beth remained seated, her arm entwined with Nobby's. "May, I'm shocked you would think such a thing. All I'm drinking are Cokes. You go, I'll be fine."

"Well, all right. Call me in the morning, though." She and Tim proceeded up the stairs.

Wiro, with Nobby forcibly recessed, stroked Beth's back and her neck, feeding her Rum and Cokes. He learned a new aspect of Earth culture: of widowed working mothers, four older sisters, two married, and two in the convent, Beth's three years at Non Sum Dignus Convent School and of her departure because she considered herself unworthy.

She looked at the last couple weaving their way up the stairs. "Nobby, I think everyone's gone. Shouldn't we go?"

Wiro panicked. He was more than rut-ready; he was in two-back mode. Overcoming Nobby's opposition, he ran his hand softly across her neck. The Penguins' Earth Angel began.

As they danced, he forced Nobby to kiss her. This time, her lips gave under his. Gently he pushed her closer, moving slowly to the mood of the song. He kissed her again, Nobby's tongue slipping beyond his lips and meeting hers. Her lips opened and, despite Nobby's resistance, his tongue charged forward. Sensations stormed through Wiro's borrowed awareness.

The song ended and the next record snapped down. The Three Friends started singing about Blanche. Wiro broke the kiss, gulped, and resumed, guiding Beth to a sofa near the corner. Her arms wrapped around him as he eased her down.

In the ensuing half-hour, Wiro, in control of Nobby, and with Beth's vacillating cooperation, deflowered her on Tim's basement couch. There was pain, passion, tears, acceptance and passion again. As the pinnacle neared, Wiro's connection with Nobby slipped downward.

Horrified, Wiro tried to stop as his essence fled Nobby and flowed into Beth.

The Nutmegs sang Story Untold.

As they lay in the afterglow, Beth turned to a clear-headed Nobby. Her eyes now shone with a new light. "Do we get married now? Can I still wear white? I think I hear the baby talking to me."

Nobby, knowing only that a half-naked Beth O'Hare lay beside him, wanted to scream.

#

Two days later on a calm Sunday evening Nobby O'Toole leisurely poured beer from his second pitcher. He watched the amber liquid trickle and gradually, slowly, fill. He lifted his glass, looked, sipped, swallowed. He'd spent Saturday and Sunday laying low, trying to recall Tim's party. Flashes from that afternoon and evening haunted him. Was any of it real? Friday night with Beth O'Hare? A figment of his imagination? He gently placed his glass atop a sodden coaster. There seemed barrenness to the Sober Shamrock this night. The back room was deserted, Nobby's comrades gone their own way.

A shaking, rising voice shattered his reverie. "Where have you been? Why are you avoiding me? I haven't seen you since ..." Beth O'Hare, in a loose white blouse and khaki shorts, loomed, eyes red-rimmed. "I'm going to have a baby..."

His neck began to tighten. *Goawaygoawaygoaway*, he thought. "That's impossible; there's no way..." he blurted, his tone sharper than he wanted.

She pressed her lips together, controlling herself. Softly she said, "The baby talks to me. It has since Friday night..."

"How the hell can that be?" he roared at her. The beer was wearing him down. "That's crazy; we're not talking about pixy dust." He lowered his voice. "Something else is going on, I don't know if it's good or evil or..." She began to cry.

Way to go, asshole. An unfamiliar twinge of remorse made him stand and pull out a chair. "Sit, I'll get you something to drink." OK, he admitted to himself, I was drunk and I was horny, but Beth O'Hare? Whatever possessed me, it's long gone. No more cajoling, wheedling, controlling, voice; at least not inside me, he thought. No, now it's the old fashioned way; Beth chases me down and finds me here tonight. Beth, a girl I barely know, who takes unattractive to a new level, who never stops talking, thinks she's pregnant and I'm the daddy. I lose Nora and get Beth? I can't hide.

She seized the Rum and Coke and took a tentative sip. And another. And a third, larger one. She worked to compose herself. "We need to talk, Nobby." She said, her voice still shaky. "I'll be back after I freshen up." And with that she went to the ladies' room.

He stared at the chair across from him with the almost-finished Rum and Coke, apprehensive, waiting. Should I get out of here? I do not need shrill right at this moment. The temptation was great. Shit, she'd just come to my house. Noooo thank you.

The thoughts galloped. I'm screwed big-time. I'm harnessed forever. Do the deed, plant the seed. But I didn't do it; I tried to stop. Not my fault; whatever controlled my mind did it, if anything ever existed in the first place. Getting caught is the sin, not the act. He shoots; he scores! How's she know she's pregnant? In two days? And voices? Bullshit. Maybe she does know. First time, first kid. Just turned seventeen and trapped forever. Mom and dad will say I have to do the right thing. They have this 'you sin you pay' view of life. Technically I haven't sinned -- the old full consent of the will deal -- but my penance is indenture. Duty. Obligation. Honor. Marriage? To a girl whose face looks like the side of a house? How did Tim describe Beth? -- A chewed pencil with ear flaps? A girl I barely know, who spread her legs once, who everyone tells me never stops talking, who's a bundle of nerves and such a religious nut she makes my candle-lighting mother look like an infidel. Is Nora, the girl I really have the hots for, out of my reach? What to say to her? The devil made me do it? An alien? She won't believe, but she'll see my shame. I'll have permanent atonement. What have I done? Christ, God, Jesus, somebody help me! Where'd the voice in my mind go? Was it ever there? What about me? It'll work out. It will. It will...

"Are you the entity called Nobby O'Toole?" The voice sounded tinny, the enunciation not quite right.

Nobby stared down at his glass. "Yeah." As he looked up an 'aw shit not again' feeling ran through him. An exceedingly tall creature in a shining garment covering its four limbs and three feet stood less than a yard away. The round orange head, dominated by inordinately wide ears, featured three large unblinking eyes, an insignificant mouth and loose flesh where the nose should be. He experienced no fear; courage by Schaefer's, he figured.

"We seek you." The creature inclined its head to the pitcher. "A stimulant?"

"It's called beer; Schaefer, to be precise. And this is a major league enough-is-enough hallucination. I must be really, really shit-faced."

"I assure you I'm quite real." The creature stood motionless, presenting no threat.

"Look, fella, Halloween's four months away. Nice costume and extra points for the ears and the stilts to make you tall but get the hell out of here, will you?"

"I seek Wiro."

"Wiro?"

"Yes."

Nobby snorted. "You're going to tell me you're from the ship that's hanging out above the planet?"

"Yes."

"What do they call you?" Nobby stared at his beer, shaking his head slowly.

"Brioc."

"Brioc, eh? Where's..." He searched his sodden memory. "...Furg? Wiro said he goofed."

"Furg was to reassimilate Wiro to his corpus on our craft. Furg failed; Wiro has not returned."

Nobby laughed. "So, Furg's a drunk. Like a beer?"

Brioc stood impassively.

This isn't happening, Nobby thought. It's worse than Friday night. "Think I'll add some music to this dream." Nobby walked to the jukebox, dropped change in and made several selections. Brioc remained standing.

Brioc began twitching in tempo with *Stranded in the Jungle*.

"So you like rock'n'roll too," Nobby cackled. "Well, Brioc, what're you doing down here in your native dress?"

"Shipleader tires of waiting for Wiro. We examined Furg's logs and determined that Wiro was sent into you. I was told to come and confer." What passed for his eyes watched, unblinking.

Nobby filled his glass and drank down half in one gulp. "Are you real? My folks would..." He looked up at the ceiling, tallying the cobwebs and estimating the weight of the grease.

Brioc raised his hand slightly. "You have notified your birthers about Wiro? What would they say?" His voice held no emotion.

Nobby toyed with his glass. "Their imagination doesn't run in that direction. Mine neither. Maybe if you were one of the saints or something. But Wiro? Not a chance. I know I'm still drunk or insane or am possessed. Pick one. Anyway, whatever was in my skull is gone." He looked around. "Everyone is. Except Beth, of course."

"Who is Beth?"

"Unfortunately for me, someone who's in the ladies' room fixing her face." Nobby drank some beer and moved the coaster around, little swirling motions that left a moist trail on the scarred table. "So what are you going to do, Brioc?"

"I must find Wiro."

Nobby's laugh sounded hysterical. "You can't find your guy?"

"No. We were unable to extract his essence from you."

"That's because it wasn't there." Nobby giggled and drank as Purple People Eater played.

Beth came round the corner and halted, her purse swinging from the momentum. Nobby went to her, took her elbow and guided her to the table. In a mock-polite voice he said, "Beth, I'd like you to meet Brioc." Her mouth opened, shut, opened. No sound emerged.

Brioc's eyes widened and he began to sway in rhythm to the music. "You are... the entity named... Beth?" The voice moved from tinny to squeaky.

She nodded mutely and clutched the edge of the table. Trembling, she began to genuflect. "Are you an angel come to rebuke me for my sin?"

After a moment's silence, Brioc said, "I am not such a creature. I am Brioc from the planet Merkin. Our people are called the Ganch." The flesh where a nose would be began to expand outward as Brioc took a step forward. "Entity named Nobby O'Toole, how many more like this Beth are there? She is the most beautiful female in all the planets. I now understand why Wiro has not returned."

Nobby thought Brioc was one smooth-lying SOB. "Not too many; Beth is kind of distinctive."

"Are you actually there?" Beth trembled. She groped for her chair and settled herself into it. With shaky hands she seized her drink and finished it.

"Yes." Brioc's nose continued to grow, his attention focused on Beth. "You have such beauty I do not know if you are but a dream."

"Oh, she's real," said Nobby. He poured himself more beer. He turned to Beth. "Tell our best costume winner, Brioc, about the voices you're hearing."

Beth flushed.

"Go, ahead," Nobby urged. "This is all a figment of our imagination anyway. And as we both know, confession is good for the soul."

Beth said in a low voice, "My baby talks to me."

Much to Nobby's amazement Brioc said, "For how long do you hear? What do you hear?"

"Ever since Friday night." She glared at Nobby. "He says he's my friend and he's afraid and so am I."

"Does your, friend, this voice, baby, have a name?"

"Wiro." She finished her drink. Nobby's eyes widened. This can't be, he thought. Nobby downed his beer, took her glass and went to the bar to the tune of Going Out of My Head.

"May I talk to Wiro? Can he hear me?" Brioc waited.

Her lips moved in silent communication. After a full minute she murmured, "Yes."

Nobby drank off half his beer and handed her the Rum and Coke. She took a mouthful and waited.

"Wiro, it is Brioc."

Beth said, "He knows that. He asks what you want."

"Wiro, we must extract your essence back to our craft and return to Merkin. There are others in the place they call New Mexico. We fear detection."

"Wiro asks if they are the Video Rangers." She looked confused. Nobby grunted in quiet amusement.

"We know of no such beings."

Beth sipped her drink. "Wiro says he does not want to leave."

"He must; Shipleader has commanded it."

Beth's eyes widened. "Wiro says there is another way."

"There is no other way; we must return." From his garment Brioc extracted a small device.

"Wiro says that the way is for you to stay with me; Wiro will join us in nine Earth months."

Nobby spat out his beer and began to laugh. "Wiro... suggests you... marry...? To this...?" He pointed to Brioc.

Eyes lowered, she nodded and took another mouthful of her Rum and Coke.

"Maybe we're all possessed." Once again Nobby's giggle verged on the hysterical. "Unbelievable. Imagine when they post the banns; that'll raise eyebrows around here. I'm sure you'll love the pre-Cana with Father Vondel... Can't you just see the announcement in the paper? What'll it say about the groom's forebears? What do they put on top of the wedding cake? Do bakeries have interplanetary figurines?" He paused and drank more beer. "This has to be a drunken fantasy. No, it's a nightmare."

Why Don't You Believe Me? echoed from the jukebox.

"What you suggest is not possible." Brioc pointed the device at Beth. "Shipleader says I must act."

A shaft of light came through the cobwebbed ceiling; the bright molecules enveloped Beth. She sat motionless in her chair. A minute later she began to cry, "He's gone! My baby's gone!"

"He was never your baby," said Nobby, in a quiet voice. "He was... What was he, Brioc?"

"A warrior, far from home, here on a mission," said Brioc. "His essence somehow passed into the one named Beth and is reassimilated into his corpus on our ship." Brioc looked at Beth. "We must repair what we damaged."

Nobby snickered.

"There's not much you can do. My baby is gone and I'm..." The words seemed to ache.

"You shall be as before... unsullied. That is the least we can do for the harm we have caused." Brioc pointed his instrument. Beth was surrounded by light. A moment later the molecules enveloped him and he vanished.

Nobby looked at Beth. "You OK?"

"Not really. That's probably why I'm here." Her smile was forced. "I think I need another Rum and Coke."

A minute later Nobby returned.

She drank half and looked at Nobby.

"Any better?"

"A little," she said, and reached again for the glass. "Was any of this real?"

"I didn't think so; I thought I'd drunk too much." He sipped his beer. "Now I'm not too sure." He looked at her. "You?"

"Before Friday," she said. "I'd never had any alcohol. I, I don't know." She twisted her purse in her hands, her tone both anxious and pleading. "A vision, I suppose; but angels don't look like that. And if it wasn't real, what was it?"

"Our dreams, our nightmares, the future" Nobby topped his glass. "I can't tell you." The jukebox whirred and the Fleetwoods sang *Come Softly to Me*. Is she looking a lot better or am I getting drunker? Did Brioc do something there? Was any of this real?

Beth stared at her half-consumed drink. A tear seeped down her cheek. "Would you please dance with me?" Her voice broke.

Nobby sighed. Anything but the waterworks. He stood.

She rose and slid into his arms. Wordlessly they moved slowly around the floor.

As the song ended, she lifted her head from Nobby's shoulder and kissed him.

He pulled back, shock and confusion on his face.

And kissed her back.

###

# **The Queen of Titan**

**by Justin Stanchfield**

The old man in tattered coveralls followed Dav Jase as he tried to pre-flight his ship, biting at his heels, raking him with his tongue. Dav did his best to ignore the verbal onslaught. He knew the kind, frustrated old men desperate to blame their own wasted lives on anyone unfortunate enough to listen. That much, at least, he could understand. Life in the Reaches was never easy, seldom fair, and always, always too brief.

Even for the Chosen.

"That's the problem with the Authority now'a times," the old man said, his accent so thick Dav could barely understand his drifting, watery voice. "Always quick to send in the shooters if the taxes come late, but where are they when the real trouble brews up, eh?" A crooked smile split the man's leathery face. "Not that I'm meaning you, you understand."

Dav said nothing. Instead, he ran his hand along the underside of the port stabilizer. His fingers flicked over dozens of deep gouges in the diamond-hard carbon. Nimble as the little corsair was, even he couldn't avoid every strike. He ducked under the slender hull and began inspecting the starboard side. The old man followed, his endless stream of complaints echoing softly in the cavernous fuel-bay. "No, siree, I would never mean the likes of you. Why, you're all the law we got, ain't it so?"

"Yes," Dav said, barely paying attention. He frowned as his fingers slid over another, deeper bite in the nano-tubed skin, the tiny puncture fresh, a souvenir of the morning's encounter. No doubt there would be more such scars should he ever catch up again to the enigmatic scavenger.

If the old fool nipping at his heels ever finished refueling his ship.

"And that's the truth of it," the old man declared with false sincerity. "All the law there is out here in the Reaches. I would never be so bold as to suggest one of the Chosen was derelict. You know where your duty lies, to be sure. Not that it would keep you from going out after your dark-half if you should cross paths, now would it? I mean, what's a few of our lives compared to something as important as chasing down your darker half. Ain't that so, Sir Pilot?"

"Uh huh." Dav pretended not to hear the insults. His cold, gray-blue eyes narrowed as he inspected the outbound weapons pod, the drone ports gleaming with an oily, rainbow sheen. Quiet relief swept through him. He would sooner lose one of his own hands than find damage to the corsair's weapon systems.

A deep, sighing crack rang through the bay, louder than the soft whoosh-whoosh-whoosh of the fuel pumps. Startled, Dav ducked out from under the pod and spun a half-circle. Instinctively, his right hand dropped to the pistol strapped to his hip.

"Ha! Gotcha, didn't it!" The old man laughed uproariously, slapping his leg. "Why, tain't nothing but these old walls creaking in the cold. Not that you immortals would know. I don't imagine the stations your kind keeps ever pop and creak, now do they?" Again, he laughed, the sound as pleasant as a burst of static. "Think of the irony, eh? One of the Chosen scared witless by a little old vacuum pop!"

Dav spun on the old man, his hand still hovering beside his holster. Unblinking, he said, "Are you going to see that my ship is fueled, or should I put a hole in you and do it myself?"

The man's lined face paled until he was as gray as the sooty walls around them. He swallowed, bowed quickly then ducked away, back to inspect the thick umbilicalis that connected the corsair to the bay's fueling dock. Frightened though the withered fool might have been, Dav could still hear him muttering to himself.

"Arrogant prig." The old man shot him a look of pure hatred from beneath his untended eyebrows, but looked away the instant he saw Dav watching. "Wouldn't know his dark-half if he crossed it."

Dav smiled grimly, then slowly let his hand drift away from the pistol. Sometimes, he doubted it himself.

#

He had danced with the ship before.

It had been a brief encounter, a flash of laser fire and a tracery of engine noise, but he had recognized the other ship at once, savoring the memory like the half-forgotten flavor of a childhood treat. Dav actually licked his lips. In front of him, the display lit the forward view with torrents of information, velocities and masses, positions of known hazards to navigation. More information poured directly into his brain, relayed by the nerve bundles in his wrists and ankles, ship systems and targeting as instinctive as breath.

The target wasn't using neural amplifiers. Dav hadn't expected any, not from a ship of this vintage. As the distance between them fell, the sensors narrowed his field of attention until the interloper filled his mind. Heavy engines thrust out from a squat, asymmetrical body, the ancient framework festooned with antennae and weapon turrets. Automatically, the vast library housed in the corsair's data-banks supplied a name. *Queen of Titan*.

He blinked, startled by the revelation. "That can't be," he whispered. "The *Queen* vanished centuries ago."

The information reloaded, replaying in quick-time through his brain, the computer insistent. Dav nodded, as if he was carrying on a conversation with his ship. The nimble

little fighter owned him in a way no lover could, possessed him down to a cellular level, the hyper-virus that lengthened his life in constant contact with the corsair's systems. Though his body and mind might be nestled behind the titanium safety of the cockpit, Dav felt the ship as an extension of his flesh.

Only one other entity in all the universe might touch him deeper than did the symbiotic network he shared with the machine. And that creature, Dav thought sourly, was unexpectedly tied to the battered freighter in front of him. A tingle, a subtle, deep pull called to him, his psychic twin he so close he felt the hair on the back of his neck rise. Soon, one way or another, his echo would reveal himself. And when he did, Dav would kill him. Or he would kill Dav. Either way, the equation would be balanced.

Ahead, the interloping ship slid out from the shadow of a massive hab-tube, hanging close to the long abandoned structure. "Hello, my dear," Dav whispered to the image displayed on the screen.

The other vessel gave no indication that it had discovered Dav. He was running silent, his thrusters cold, relying on the benders for movement as he tracked inward. If the pilot of the other ship suspected he was closing the gap between them, she gave no sign.

Dav frowned. Why, he wondered, did he think of the scavenger as a woman? Despite the name, the *Queen of Titan* was nothing more than another hoary old shadow, a relic from the dust shrouded past. The ship housed a queen within her hull no more than Dav's ship sailed beneath sheets of canvas like its namesakes once had done. Still, he thought of the other pilot as a woman. Perhaps it was the quiet, almost sensuous way the ship slid in and out of view, working through the tangled mesh of habitats that cluttered the outer reaches of the solar system like a sargasso of carbon-fiber tunnels and solar collectors.

The *Queen* slid behind a massive wheel, the old structure still rotating ages after the fragile humans who had once lived within it vanished. Chancing discovery, Dav fired a brief burst with his thrusters. Already, his targeting system projected a series of concentric rings along the other ship's flight-path. The last time they had met, the *Queen of Titan* had bested him, firing and then tearing away before he had even fixed a trajectory. Bitterly, Dav accepted the failure as his own, his overly cautious need to follow procedure slowing his reaction by the millisecond it took the other ship to escape. He had no intention of repeating that mistake.

"What are you looking for?" he wondered out loud.

Most of the junkers, the scavenge ships who eked out a living by stripping the ancient habitats and selling what they found on the black market, had abandoned the Sub-Uranian orbits centuries ago, moving out to better hunting grounds in the Kuiper Belts. The inner system was as dead as Earth itself, the bones long since picked over. Why, he wondered, would a legend like the *Queen of Titan* be prowling the ancient forests of nanotube glory?

"It's a trap," a soft voice whispered in his mind. "Get away while you can "

Dav pushed the thought from his mind. He was Chosen, sworn to preserve. The past and the present were one and the same, a continuum against which his own life, long as it might be, was merely a spark, a flash against the hungry darkness. Even if he knew beyond any doubt that he was hurtling toward his own doom, he would go on. To do less was more than dishonor. Run now and it would eat at him for the rest of his life until he was as hollow as the empty structures around him.

Let his dark-half run, Dav told himself, steeling his nerves. For his part, he would live in the light until the end.

The old vessel slid once again into shadow, vanishing behind a twisted labyrinth of broken solar collectors. Dav fired another burst from his thrusters, closing the gap further. When the *Queen of Titan* reappeared a few moments later, he could see it without enhancement, a drifting mote backlit by the ruddy glare of sunlight poking through the twisted skeleton of what once had been civilization. She was as ugly to the naked eye as to the scanners, but he couldn't look away, the vista hypnotic in the way a man might watch his blood ooze from a wound. Something about the ancient craft called to him, whispered seductively, nipped at his neck with horny teeth. The sensation was almost sexual, the game of chase and play pounding in time with his heart. Again, he let the scanners roam across the other ship, hungry to discover what lay inside it.

"Who are you?" Dav whispered as the probes rippled over the pitted hull. His eyes narrowed to slits, his mind riding the thin, wavering line between sleep and wakefulness. Millennia earlier, his state of mind would have been called hypnagogic, a sleepwalker staring into his own fluid dreams, but to Dav the hazy shift in reality was simply the path that carried him. From childhood he had been trained to walk this path, balanced between the welcoming light and the icy, seductive shadows. His breathing slowed, his heartbeat a muffled gong. Downward his conscience crept, lingering over the ship's angular form, probing for a doorway to enter the pilot's mind.

A faint smile creased his face as he found it.

The other pilot's attention drifted, a momentary distraction, but that was all it took for Dav to slip in. Now he saw the *Queen of Titan's* cockpit as clearly as if he sat inside it, the banks of equipment so antiquated he was amazed the ship still flew. His smile widened, a glint of teeth hiding wolfishly behind his thin lips. He had been right. The pilot was a woman.

She was not young, and certainly not a near immortal like himself, no hint of bio-enhancements in her nerves. But, she was still vital, dripping with life in a way only a shortee could perceive. A rapacious, predatory veneer overlaid her psyche, a feral patina guiding her actions. She was a hunter, a wild thing prowling the empty places, ruthless in her pleasure. To Dav's somnambulant mind she seemed an awakened goddess, a carnal nymph cast among the stars, sexual as a cat. His own desire peaked as her thoughts drew him deeper. Was she thinking about a lover?

"Yes," Dav whispered.

He had no idea how deeply he had been drawn into this strange woman's mind, as if they were two pieces of an interlocking puzzle, shaped to fit like gears in some ancient clockwork. Somewhere, nearly lost in the pleasure of the encounter, the warning voice chimed again.

*'It's a trap.'*

Dav blinked. Suddenly, he drew away from the woman, her hypnotic sweetness broken as he crossed yet another mind swirling in the ether, the touch so cold he felt the flesh prickle between his shoulders.

"Where did that come from?" Dav said, once more fully awake. He drew back, the single touch of that other mind confusing, as if he had glanced into a mirror and found the face staring back at him no longer his own.

With a shock, he realized he had brushed his Dark-Half. Here, amid the fortresses of dust, he had actually sensed his psychic twin. Impossible as it seemed, he had been right about the earlier encounter. Slowly, he shook his head, his mind drifting back to his boyhood.

#

"Dav, you're hopeless!"

The other boy was taller than Dav, fair-skinned with a wild cap of blond curls that even his cadet's cap couldn't completely hide. At fourteen Luven Dool was everything Dav wanted to be, outgoing, charming, a bundle of laughing, unrestrained energy. Already, the female cadets - and some of the younger trainers - had begun to notice Luven, casting sidelong glances as he sauntered past. The boy pretended to be oblivious to their attention while poor, unremarkable Dav could only tag along in his shadow.

More maddening still, despite Dav's dogged, mind-numbing effort, Luven bested him at every test, academics coming as easily to him as everything else he did. Only in one area, the ability to mind-touch, could Dav actually out perform his friend. And even that mild accomplishment was eclipsed by the knowledge that Luven not only didn't care about the touch, but actively scoffed at the idea.

"Everyone has a dark twin," Dav insisted. "It's our fate."

"Not mine." Luven grinned, the skin around his eyes crinkling with ready humor. "I'm my own person. I don't have a fate."

Dav looked nervously around them. To say such a thing was tantamount to heresy. All the Chosen believed in fate, didn't they? Relieved that no one was in earshot, Dav tried to think of an argument to counter his friend's stubborn resistance.

Walking swiftly, the time between classes short, they stepped out of a narrow tunnel onto a broad, tiled courtyard. Overhead, clearly visible past the transparent bubble that shielded the Citadel, lay the star-dusted blackness. Along the eastern edge of the dome

rose the vast curve of Pluto. Centuries of the Chosen had trained here on Charon, the massive complex of tunnels and domes so steeped in tradition it felt at times as if the air itself pulsed with history. Space-benders enhanced the weak gravity, the boundaries between generators weaving a giddy pattern of shifting forces as they crossed from one region to the next. Dav swallowed, his mouth suddenly dry.

"You have to believe in your dark-half," he said.

"Why?"

"Because, without one, what keeps us in the light? If we don't have a twin to fight against, what holds us from the shadows?"

Luven began to laugh. "You sound like Old Bullet Head."

"Don't call Master Bu'huv 'Bullet Head,'" Dav whispered sharply. "Do you know what would happen if someone heard you say that?"

"Yeah." Luven's grin broadened. "First they would give me a toothbrush and then they would point at the nearest latrine and tell me to scrub it until it shined like the sun."

"No," Dav said, his worry rising. "They would expel you."

"Expel me?" Mock horror shifted across Luven's handsome face. "Dav, they're not going to expel any of us. They can't even fill the roster for morning chow, let alone find enough pilots to work the Reaches. Trust me, they're too desperate for fresh recruits to kick any of us out."

Dav said nothing. As much as he doted on his friend, he couldn't bring himself to follow such a cynical line of thought. To do so denied the very reason they existed. Already there were those among the general population who whispered the Chosen had outlived their time and should be set aside, left to wither like the ancient structures they guarded. A shiver ran down the back of Dav's neck. He refused to surrender who he was, even if it meant going against his only friend.

"You're wrong, Luven," he said softly. "We all have a dark twin, whether we admit it or not. You'll see. Trust me, someday you'll see."

"Maybe you're right." Luven sighed. With an abrupt twist of mood, the taller boy started to run toward a low, gray stone hall. Looking over his shoulder, he called back, "Come on, slowpoke. I'll race you to the chow hall!"

The argument already forgotten, Dav chased after his only friend, desperate to catch up. As usual, he could not.

#

Dav smiled wistfully as the memory faded. How long ago had that encounter been? A century at least, perhaps more? It had been during the long season before they were fledged, assigned to duty despite their untested years. In many ways, it had been the last happy period of his life, the brief interlude between childhood and adulthood a placid island basking in the warm glow of memory, the sharp edges blunted by the intervening decades. Luven had been assigned to convoy patrol, escorting the flow of goods between the outposts scattered among the cold, ante-solar clouds, while Dav had gone on to the more traditional role of sweeping the abandoned Inner Reaches. He had never questioned their assignments, but had secretly wondered why he, and not the more competent Luven, should have been given the choice position? Though it could never be proven, he suspected it had something to do with Luven's maverick attitude. The gods knew it wasn't because of his ability.

He drew a deep breath then sighed. It had been years since he had seen Luven, and he missed him deeply. Shaking his head, Dav brought his attention back to the battered ship lurking ahead of him, drifting among the twisted buttresses of carbon and steel.

With deceptive speed the corsair sped past the edge of a ruined habitat and slipped within the jungle of tubes and fractured collectors. The size of the tubes was daunting. What seemed from a distance as little more than a congealed mass of pipe now showed itself to be enormous, each tube a city unto itself. How many minor planets and asteroids had been stripped to create the labyrinth of interconnected dwellings? Old legends insisted that a traveler, if they knew all the myriad paths, could walk from inside the scorched orbit of Earth to the very edge of the solar cloud without ever stepping outside the warm confines of the artificial environments. Dav smiled at the thought of some hoary old pedestrian shuffling even now along the darkened corridors on his quest toward the final end of the tube cities.

Ahead, a brief flash of sunlight glinted off metal, the reflection betraying the *Queen's* position. Dav tweaked the forward bender and let the corsair accelerate into the maze. The ship banked hard to starboard, the nose dipping as it followed the change in gravity. Dav checked his instruments. Within minutes he would be in firing range. The thought should have made him hungry with anticipation. Instead, he frowned. Had he really touched his own dark twin out here, or had it simply been his over-worked imagination? A new idea tugged at him.

Was he losing his mind?

Carefully, he cast the thought net out once more, but the elusive touch was gone. Now, even the *Queen of Titan's* pilot lay beyond his grasp, the tenuous connection with her severed. Perhaps, he thought glumly, he had imagined the entire incident.

"Stop it," he said, scolding himself. The Chosen depended on their confidence, and to lose it now, moments before battle, was an invitation to defeat.

Again, his thoughts drifted back through the years. Another version of himself and Luven flashed through his senses, the two of them still little more than children. When had it been, he wondered? Sometime after his first tour, his leave cut short by an emergency

call-out to some little border skirmish. It would have been, he recalled with a dour shake of the head, his first real action. He had been leaving, strutting across the launch deck toward the waiting line of ships, his flight-gear banging at his knees when he glimpsed a familiar figure ambling in his direction.

"Luven?"

Dav had stared at his friend, astounded at the changes the intervening months had wrought. Luven grinned and waved, but made no effort to hurry. His uniform was rumpled, as if he had just stepped out of the cockpit, a heavy carry-bag slung over his shoulder. His hair was longer now, his face fuller, the confident flicker in his eyes bright as ever. But now, unlike the exuberant youth who had left a year earlier for patrol duty, practically jumping in his haste to be away, Luven moved with the assurance of a veteran, the old swagger tempered by experience. Dav recognized it immediately. Luven had gone out as a boy, but returned a man. Self-consciously, Dav had tensed, his own confidence lagging.

"Dav!" Luven let the bag slip off his shoulder and whump to the scorched deck. Before Dav could say anything, Luven threw his arms around him and pulled him into a hug, thumping him on the back hard enough to knock the wind from him.

"How long have you been in?" Dav asked awkwardly.

"Just landed. You?"

"A couple days." Dav shrugged. "I've been recalled to my squadron."

"Damn." The regret in Luven's voice sounded sincere. "I was hoping for a chance to talk. I have so much to tell you."

"Oh?"

"It's a wide universe we live in." Luven glanced at the transparent dome high overhead. "The Reaches are just the beginning. If you could see the places I've been. It's amazing. There must be a hundred-thousand cities out there, some of them so distant no one from the inner system has ever landed there. It's wonderful!"

"Then," Dav had asked hesitantly, "You'll be going back on convoy duty?"

"Even better." Luven paused to let the tension build, his blue eyes practically glowing with excitement. "I applied for the Exploration Services and was accepted. I'll be going out to the heliopause. Maybe even beyond it." Again, he paused. "I was hoping you might apply, too."

"Me?" Dav stiffened, taken aback by the question. Never had the thought crossed his mind, the idea of serving out his career in the distant, sunless regions anathema. Stuttering slightly, he shook his head. "I... I think my destiny lies In-System."

"Oh no, not that again." Luven's grin brightened as he took Dav by the shoulders and gave him a friendly shake. "There is no destiny. Come on, why spend your life guarding a bunch of crumbling ruins when we could be out discovering entire civilizations? Trust me, until you've seen the outer reaches, you can't begin to imagine what it's like. There's a city called Aquadeen where the entire habitat is filled with oxygenated water and the people swim in it like fish. And then there's Voogal. They call it the City of Walking Miracles because every woman living in it is a sorceress. And what woman they are!" Dav waggled his eyebrows lasciviously. "Come on, what do you say?"

"I..." Dav shifted his weight to his other foot, unnerved as always by his friend's intensity. "I'll think about it."

"Promise?"

"Yes. Of course." Dav had smiled, then held out his hand to shake. "I really have to report in to my commanding officer. We launch on the hour."

They shook hands, then Dav gathered his gear and turned to go.

"Remember what you promised," Luven had called after him.

"I will," Dav said, waving. By the time he returned though, several weeks later, Luven had shipped out again. It was, Dav thought sadly, the last time they had seen each other.

A faint ping echoed inside his earpiece, the firing computers calling for his input. Dav blinked, surprised that he had let his attention wander so badly. Chagrined at his carelessness, he quickly recalculated the coordinates. The images on the screens flickered as the corsair followed the ancient freighter deeper into the maze, the two ships mere specks against the massive dwellings that stared mutely upon the unfolding scene. He kept the corsair near one of the abandoned tubes, using the cream colored structure to conceal himself while he stalked the *Queen*.

"Now," he whispered, bending so close to the control panel his face nearly brushed its cold surface, "You are mine."

Dav's fingers tightened around the joystick as the concentric circles closed around the swiftly moving icon. His chest began to ache and he realized he had been holding his breath. Again, the freighter vanished behind one of the intervening struts that connected the enormous tubes. A cold smile flitted across his face in anticipation. When the ship reappeared, he decided, he would announce his position and fire, giving the other pilot no chance to either flee or strike back before her ship was disabled..

His finger began to twitch, dancing like a butterfly's wing upon the firing stud.

"Having fun?" a sardonic voice blared inside his earphone.

Dav jumped, startled so badly his head banged against the backrest of his chair. He scowled, furious, his first thought that he had been led into an ambush.. Quickly, he

searched for the new-comer, the computers scanning for the signal source. To his relief, he saw that the frequency was one of their own discrete data-feeds.

"Unidentified ship, what is your position?"

"Unidentified?" The voice in his earphones said in mock dismay. "Dav, you wound me."

Warm laughter followed. Dav stared at the screen.

"Luven?"

Dav wasn't certain whether he had actually spoken the word or not. Suddenly, the flood of memories made sense. Small wonder his old friend had been on his mind, his enhanced nerves picking up Luven's approach and relaying it as an almost palpable sense of nostalgia.

"I was wondering when you were going to notice me," Luven said, laughing. Information flashed across an inset window, showing the new ship less than a thousand kilometers out and falling fast. Though Luven sounded more mature, his voice seasoned by years and distance, Dav had no doubt it was his friend.

"What are you doing here?" he asked.

"Looking for you, what else?" Luven's signal clicked out for a moment, probably blocked by the tangle of deserted habitats, but quickly returned. "I landed on Charon almost a week ago and have been trying to catch up ever since. Heard you had some excitement earlier?"

Dav winced. The last thing he needed was to explain how he had been outwitted by the *Queen's* pilot. Damn the noisy fool at the way-point who had fueled his corsair. No doubt he had told Luven everything. Creeping tendrils of jealousy ate into his spine, the old competition awakened.

"Nothing I can't handle," Dav said. He was thankful the transmission was voice only. Luven had always been able to read his face. "I've been tracking a scavenger for a couple days. Looks like I finally have her cornered."

"Oh?" Luven sounded only mildly interested. "Have a name on this scavenger?"

"Yes." Dav hesitated. For some reason, he didn't want to share his find with Luven. He sighed, then spoke clearly into the boom-mike hanging beside his lips. "It's the *Queen of Titan*."

"You're not serious? That ship was dust ages before either of us were born."

"The registry insists that's who it is."

"Well, maybe." Luven said. When his voice returned a heartbeat later there was an edgy quality about it, something Dav couldn't quite put his finger on. "The *Queen of Titan* vanished centuries ago. I don't know who you're chasing, but as far as I'm concerned, it's a ghost. Let's say to hell with it and head back to Charon. We have some serious catching up to do."

"Don't worry," Dav said, his confidence returned. "This won't take long."

He turned his attention back to the targeting screen. Just as he expected, he caught the engine signature of the old freighter powering up as it slid out from behind the ruined habitat. He made a fast scan, worried that Luven's arrival might have tipped the other pilot, but so far she still seemed unaware of him. Gritting his teeth, his mind focused only on making the shot, Dav ringed the icon within the bulls-eye, then thumbed the arming switch. At the edge of his conscience, he heard Luven once again in his headset.

"Dav, I'm serious. It's a ghost. Let it go."

He ignored him. Again, the fleeting sense of self swirled out of the ether, the odd juxtaposition of his own darkly mirrored mind shadowing his movements. He almost told Luven why he so desperately needed to make this kill, but at the last moment couldn't. Would Luven still scoff at the idea of a Dark Twin, the mere mention of entwined fates sending him into peals of mocking laughter? Somehow, Dav expected it might. He bit down on his lower lip and carefully increased the power to the benders. The corsair dipped steeply toward the unwary ship. Closer he drew, almost in range.

"Dav... Let it go."

"No." Dav ignored Luven. Ignored everything around him, his only thought now on centering the *Queen of Titan* in the targeting ring. A droning, high-pitched tone sounded in his earphones, a quavering note that grew louder, rising in pitch as the distance between them fell. Thumb on the trigger, Dav flipped the transmitter to the common frequency and in a calm, icy cold voice announced, "Unidentified pilot. You are in violation of the Preservation Code. Power down and prepare to surrender."

The *Queen's* pilot made no reply. Dav expected none. The old freighter passed behind one of the thick, tubular struts. Dav smiled grimly, then squeezed the firing stud. A brief hiss sang through the corsair's frame as a quad spread of drones flew from the launchers. Immediately, he switched from missiles to lasers, intending to fire the moment the freighter came out from behind the strut.

Seconds passed. Dav stared at the screen, his earlier sense of elation changing to dismay. Instead of finding a target, his drones sped past the point where the *Queen of Titan* should have been and impacted against one of the distant habitats. Bright flashes lit the endless night, shards of broken plastic and metal splintering outward from the holes they created. Too late, Dav saw the old ship reappear, not in front of him but thirty degrees to starboard and coming fast. Alarms screamed as his scanners detected an incoming spread of drones racing toward him, too close to avoid.

Again, he felt the touch of his dark twin as the first of the tiny missiles struck. The cockpit rolled sharply, an acrid whiff of ozone filling the cabin as the panel went dead. Dav swore loudly, furious with himself as he struggled to engage the escape mechanism. He felt the second impact, heard the muffled explosion, felt the hull begin to buckle.

Then, he felt nothing at all.

#

The scent of juniper and wild rose swept over him. Dav frowned. Born and raised on Charon he knew of only one place where the low, thorny bushes grew, the arboretum tucked into the north terrace of the Citadel. It had been a frequent meeting place for the classes of neophytes, the sons and daughters of Chosen setting out on their own path toward the blue and gold uniforms their parents wore. Kneeling around him, their faces glowing starkly in the concealed UV lighting that fed the trees, spread a semi-circle of children in trainee tunics, their eyes fixed on a gaunt bald man standing beside a gnarled oak tree.

"This can't be happening," Dav whispered.

He shot a glance at his own hands. Instead of the scared, calloused skin he expected, he found stubby, childlike fingers, the nails bearing tiny crescents of embedded dirt beneath them. The sleeves of his tunic were bright red, like the children spread around him, the cuffs tattered from play. His legs seemed heavy, stiff from kneeling too long on the warm dirt.

From the corner of his eyes he saw Luven beside him, a bored expression on his handsome, adolescent face. In front of them, the bald man spoke.

"By now, you have heard the Dark Twin. Some of you may even think you understand what it means." Master Bu'huv paused, the edges of his thin lips bearing the faintest trace of a smile. He seemed ancient, his skin yellowed with age, a fragile collection of bones covered in brittle paper. Only his eyes appeared young, so bright they shone as he swept his gaze across the line of students. "Let me assure you, whatever you may think, it is almost certainly wrong."

Nervously, Dav cast a glance at Luven. The other boy rolled his eyes. Afraid that Bu'huv might notice, he quickly turned his gaze back to the old man. Generations of cadets had learned the hard way how sharp Bu'huv's wit could be. And how swift his punishments.

"Each of us," the Master continued, his voice unnaturally strong for someone of his advanced age, "Every man, woman and child, is born of stardust." He tapped his breast with the tips of his fingers. "We are mere strands in the net that binds reality. And just as each strand of a net shines in the light, the underside of the waft and weave remains forever shadowed."

Again, Bu'huv paused, his bird-bright eyes raking the class.

"For each of you," he said slowly, "there exists a twin, a psychic double. One twin dwells in the light, the other in darkness. Most of the shuffling, mewling fools who populate the universe remain blissfully unaware. But, you are different. You, if you should be so lucky, will be among the Chosen. Your duty is plain. It is the supreme task of the enlightened mind to seek out its dark twin and destroy it. Only then will you be whole."

To Dav's horror, he heard Luven squirming beside him, shifting his weight as he raised his hand to catch the old man's attention. Unable to stop him, Dav could only wait for the hammer to fall.

"Does that mean," Luven said, his boyish face perfectly rapt, "that you found your dark self?"

The old man raised a single eyebrow as he fixed his gaze on Luven. Dav stiffened, unable to breathe, certain Luven's impertinence had at last gone too far. To his relief, Bu'huv had only smiled, though his eyes remained icy cold.

"Have I met my own twin?" the old man asked rhetorically. "No. But I expect to before I die. In the meantime, I keep my mind open and my mouth closed. You would be wise, young fool, to do the same."

A breeze whisked across Dav's forehead, so cold it sent a spike of pain deep into his skull. He blinked, tried to sit up, but felt pinned to the ground he lay on. Around him, the arboretum faded, replaced by hazy, shifting patterns of rainbow light. Above him, a face loomed, smiling.

"Thought for a minute I was going to lose you," the man said.

"Luven?"

Dav's tongue felt thick, as if his mind wasn't fully in control of his body. He tried again to rise, but Luven pressed him back down.

"Just lie still, all right." Luven pulled an emergency blanket across his chest. The materiel settled across Dav's body, micro-sensors quickly identifying the areas where heat was needed and sending energy to them. "You've got a shattered knee-cap, and at least one cracked rib. I put a dampener on the back of your neck, so try not to shake it off, okay? It won't completely kill the pain, but it should help. Frankly, you're lucky to be alive."

"Where am I?"

"Inside one of the old habs," Luven said. "You managed to eject before your ship went dead. I pulled the escape pod in here."

"Inside?" Dav realized how stupid he sounded. He took a deep breath. The air tasted stale and slightly metallic and was bitterly cold. "I'm inside?"

"Yeah, imagine that. Some of these old tubes still hold atmosphere." The smile on Luven's face faded. "We're waiting for the pilot of the ship you attacked to arrive."

"She's coming here?" Dav said, shocked at the idea. The chamber around him seemed to fall into sharper focus, the distant, curving walls rimed with frost. An army of dead trees stood in silent ranks, circling the abandoned habitat, their stark, denuded limbs reaching upward in eternal surrender. Narrow slits ran the length of the chamber, the skylights filled with the perpetual night of the Trans-Uranian orbit they kept. A wash of vertigo swept through him, his sense of up and down skewed by the weak gravity. To focus, he took a better look at his old friend.

Luven didn't seem a day older than the last time they had parted. How long ago was that, Dav wondered? A century at least. His hair was still thick and blond, his skin taut except for the laugh lines around his deep blue eyes. Dav had trouble reconciling the face he saw with what he knew to be the truth. Though his own body was practically immortal, rendered impervious to sickness by the hyper-virus that infected his tissue and stimulated the clusters of stem-cells, he knew all too well that he had aged during the intervening decades. The virus, meant to shield and repair his cells from the constant barrage of cosmic radiation he flew through, would eventually repair even the worst injury, but even it could not completely halt the flow of time. Luven, on the other hand, seemed to have simply stopped aging altogether.

"Where have you been?" Dav managed to ask. Above him, Luven gave a quick shake of the head, then glanced away as if expecting someone.

"I'll tell you all about it later, all right." Luven forced another smile, but even as groggy as he was, Dav saw the worry behind the mask. "Right now, we need to worry about getting you out of here."

An icy breeze whispered around him, so cold Dav felt his skin burn with its touch. Somewhere nearby he heard a rumbling, tortured cacophony of metal on metal. Above him, Luven's expression darkened, and for just a moment he saw the years etched on his old friend's face. Dav bit back the pain, understanding all too well what he had just heard, the sound of massive airlock doors sliding apart. Whoever the *Queen of Titan's* pilot was, she was inside the sepulchral habitat with them.

Panic flooded through him. Fighting back a wave of agony, Dav heaved himself to a sitting position. The pain in his leg and side struck him full on, so violent he gagged, the contents of his stomach threatening to explode out his throat. A pulsing tingle ran down the back of his neck, past his shoulder blades, and immediately the pain ebbed back to a tolerable level. Out of habit, he reached up and felt the dampener clamped around the base of his skull. Gently, Luven pulled his hand away from the compact device.

"Don't play with that," Luven warned. "It's already at max. Just lie still, okay?"

"No." Dav tried to stand, but the effort was beyond him. "I need to get up."

"You'll be all right. Let me handle things," Luven said.

Dav stared at him. Something about the remark struck him odd, but his mind felt too muzzy to get around it. Now the grinding noise reversed. With a heavy bang the doors slid back together. Dav heard footsteps, barely audible above the thudding in his chest. Biting down the pain, he scooted around on his haunches, desperate to spot his enemy before she arrived. The lightweight blanket fell off him and crinkled around his legs. He ignored the frigid air that rushed against him, his attention focused on the figure strolling toward them.

The woman took her time, as if she was playing with him, savoring the moment. She was short, heavy thermal clothing hiding her figure. A faint mist swirled in her wake where the airlock had disturbed the habitat's atmosphere. He tried to touch her mind, forgetting that without his ship the complex sensor array that had fed his nerves no longer existed. Even without the enhancements, he felt the strange sense of being doubled.

"You have to get me out of here." Dav struggled to stay calm. "Please. If you ever were my friend, get me out of here."

"I will," Luven said. "But right now, the best thing is to wait. Let me talk to her."

"No!" Again, he tried to rise, but couldn't. "If you can't get me out, then for the love of the gods, kill me now. Don't let her take me."

"Dav..."

"Listen to me." He swallowed, fighting down another wave of nausea. "I know you never believed in Dark Twins, but you have to now. She is my dark half. I can feel it. Don't let her take me prisoner. Help me."

"Dav, you don't understand..."

"No!" Dav cut him off. "You're the one who doesn't understand."

With that, he thrust his hand to his hip. Better, he decided, to die fighting than to live in shame. Pain raced up his leg as his hand reached his holster.

It was empty.

"I'm sorry," Luven said. Dav twisted around until he could see his friend's face. The regret in Luven's deep blue eyes seemed genuine. With a single, graceful movement, he rose to his feet. In his hand lay a pistol. Dav recognized it as his own.

"Why?" he croaked.

The sad, almost wistful smile played across Luven's face again. "Because I don't want her to kill you." He sighed, then added quietly, "Dav, she's my wife."

#

The world seemed to fade, the color leaching from the frost-rimed walls. Dav felt himself slipping toward unconsciousness as the implications sank in. He had been betrayed, handed over to the creature he had sought all his life by the only real friend he ever had. Despite the nerve dampener, pain throbbed in his side with each gulping breath he drew.

"Damn you," he said through mounting agony. "Damn you to hell."

"I can understand how you feel..." Luven began.

"What could you possibly understand? You said it yourself, you don't believe in twins."

"I didn't then." Luven said. "But, I'm beginning to."

Dav stared at him, still not fully understanding. He made a futile grab for the pistol, but Luven backed easily away. Keeping his distance, the other man sank down to his heels.

"I tried to warn you," Luven said. "I've been following you for days just to keep this from happening, but you wouldn't listen."

"Listen? Listen to what?" Dav nodded toward the pilot crossing the empty expanse between them. "That woman is a scavenger. She is destroying our heritage."

"Destroying it?" Luven laughed bitterly. "Dav, she *is* our heritage. Do you think the people that lived here simply vanished? That they just opened up the airlock doors and let themselves be sucked out into vacuum? They left. They abandoned this solar system for other stars."

"You're lying."

"No. I'm telling you the truth you need to hear. Our civilization is dying. Hell, it's dead already. All we do, everything we were taught, is wrong. We're supposed to guard a bunch of ruins against what? Scavengers? Entropy? Let it go. Once you've seen what's beyond the heliopause, you'll understand. The people who created all this," Luven waved his arm to take in the frozen habitat, "found a better way. They developed Bender technology so powerful they can move entire cities between stars. Light-speed is nothing to them. They spend their whole lives brushing against it while we sit out here like chained dogs growling at shadows."

A sudden insight struck Dav, the implications so plain he felt ashamed for having missed it earlier. If what Luven said was true, small wonder he hadn't aged. If the civilization he had encountered beyond the edge of the solar system actually traveled at speeds approaching the light barrier, time would have slowed for them. And, he thought sourly, it explained how he had been so easily defeated by the *Queen of Titan*. A ship that could bend space deeply enough could literally vanish from one location only to appear in another in the wink of an eye.

Suddenly he felt weak, barely able to keep himself upright. The edge of his vision dimmed as the woman stepped into view.

"This is the one you told me about?" she asked quietly, an odd, lilting accent stretching her vowels into exotic shapes. She was short, her head barely clearing Luven's shoulder, but moved with a confidence that had nothing to do with her physical size. Loose curls of russet hair framed an attractive face, her nose narrow and straight, her hazel eyes direct. She snuggled against him, slipping under his arm, her gaze never breaking away from where Dav lay. "What do we do now?"

"That," Luven said evenly, "is up to him."

Dav frowned. "What is that supposed to mean?"

"Don't you understand? We came back for you. Come with us. Come see what the universe truly has to offer."

"With her?" Dav recoiled. "Never! I told you, she's my Dark Half."

"No, Dav." Luven slipped away from the woman he had called his wife and knelt down in front of him. "**She** isn't your psychic twin. *I* am."

Dav gaped at him, unable to speak. Luven smiled sadly, then continued.

"I couldn't admit it when we were younger. Maybe that's why I refused to believe in the entire notion. You were my friend and I loved you. How could I even think of killing you?"

"You..." Dav stammered. The cold air wormed into him, stealing the heat from his body. He began to shiver, his lips trembling. As much as he wanted to toss aside what Luven was telling him, he couldn't. One look in his friend's eyes confirmed it. "You are my dark half?"

"No." Luven shook his head slightly. "You're mine. But it doesn't matter anymore. Come with us."

The last of Dav's reserves fled. All the years he had been spent pursuing the darkness he had sworn to destroy, only to discover he was himself the shadow. With a flash, it came clear, the lie that had been his life collapsing into dust. Luven leaned closer, so near the fog from his breath curled between them.

"Will you come?" Luven asked hopefully.

For a moment, he almost said yes.

Instead, Dav made a final, furtive grab for the pistol in Luven's hand. Startled, Luven fell back, but not before Dav had managed to steal the weapon. Adrenaline exploded in his blood, instinct sharpened by a lifetime of training, and before he could permit himself to question what he was doing, Dav pointed the heavy barrel at Luven's chest and pulled the trigger.

Nothing happened. Too late he realized the chamber was empty, the charging cartridge removed. Numbness swept through him as the pistol slipped from his grip and clattered to the icy floor. A heartbeat later, Dav fell beside it, his equilibrium shattered as the pain once more took him.

"We need to go," the woman said softly.

"I know." Again, Luven sighed. Gently as a father tucking in a child at bedtime, he spread the blanket around Dav's prone form, then made certain the controls were set to high. To Dav, he said, "I'll get word to Charon that you're here. They'll send a ship. I'll make sure that they do." He paused. "Won't you reconsider? Come with us."

Luven stretched out his arm and clasped him on the shoulder, but Dav flinched away. Luven bit down on his lower lip, a pained expression on his face. His eyes closed. When he opened them again, tears glistened in the wan light. Slowly, ponderously, Luven stood up and rejoined the woman.

"You'll be all right until rescue comes," he said. "Hang on until then."

"You're not going to kill me?" Dav asked through chattering teeth, amazed that Luven would leave his shadowed half alive and unresolved.

"Kill you?" Bitter laughter tore out Luven's throat. "I love you. Good-by, Dav. Be well."

Luven took the woman's hand in his and together they walked back toward the airlock and the ancient freighter waiting beyond it. Dav listened to them go, heard the doors rumble open and then close again. Exhausted and broken, he shivered beneath the blanket, letting the thin warmth shield him from the frigid air. Nothing, he knew, could shield him from the cold he felt inside, the knowledge of what had happened eating away at his soul, voracious as a cancer.

"Good-by, Luven," he whispered. He shut his eyes and tried not to think about the tears snaking down his own cheeks to the cold, dead floor he lay on.

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