

Fade to Black

By

Stephen L. Antczak

Six years Federal Police Force, last two on Homicide. Done it all...murder bars where a shooter's more than a drink, psychotrips when the poor bastard who'd just hacked up a family comes down on death row and finds out he'd been tripping on Kill Pills. And now this stuff, Arties getting wiped by some sicko who wants to play Old Testament.

"I mean, they're not even *real*."

"Yes they are, they're real as you are." Lydia ran her fingers across the edges of the plastic disc casings, each the size of a quarter. Everything had already been scanned for prints. "Those are *people* in there, Mickey. People who think and dream and want to live just like anyone else."

"Yeah, but anyone else doesn't have to be booted up to think and dream and live. Can't just turn *me* off with a flick of a switch," I said.

"If that switch is on a zap gun, and that zap gun's pointed at your head," Lydia said, and I involuntarily flinched at the tone of her voice. I'd seen her do it, up close, face-to-face when she took 'em down without blinking. Cold. Wondered why she let this, of all the shit we had to deal with, why *this* did it to her. But every cop has that one thing that gets to him, or her. With most of us it was little kids, murdered without really knowing why or even what dead meant. That wasn't what got to Lydia.

These games, for lack of a better word. They got to her.

"Guess we might as well do our job," she said, removing one from the shelf. We had to watch one, just one. We needed the evidence. We needed eye-witnesses. So that was us. It gave me the chills, why I don't know, and I regretted taking the promotion from the street to this. Give me hard tarmac and the stinking breath of real people over *this*. Any day.

"This one's called *Fade To Black*," Lydia told me, showing me the case. Like I cared. That one, the one beside it, any of the damn things would do.

"Fine," I said. "Let's earn our pay."

We wore standard virtual reality gear. No plugging directly into the brain, like some damn swell-head. Besides being illegal, it was just stupid. The brain constantly changed. Plugs didn't. Do the math. A plug that sent you into Wonderland one day might rob you of your sight the next, or worse. Lots worse.

The standard VR gear was bad enough for me.

Static, then a rather impressive looking mansion, or castle, or something. Like a combination of an antebellum plantation house and a castle overlooking the Rhine. There was a party going on inside, music, laughter, party voices talking about things people never talked about anywhere else but at parties.

And we were invited, me and Lydia.

"This is a good one," she whispered as we went up the gravel walk, the little stones crunching beneath our feet. Presumably we'd just left a limo or a fancy Italian sports car down the driveway somewhere. Those details were fuzzy, but they didn't matter. What mattered was ahead of us.

"Ah, there you two are," came a voice, pleased.

A young man waited for us at the top of the stairs, leaning against a fluted column, in front of a wrought iron portcullis between us and the front door. His face was soft and round, eyes brown, lips thin, and he wore a silk robe and slippers. His hair hung limp across his forehead, and I imagined he tended to move it out of his eyes with a toss of his head. "I'm so glad you could make it."

"Yes," I said, trying to stay just plain old me amidst what was obviously a part of society that would just as soon spit on a cop as call one for help. "We're glad we could make it, too."

"Do come in, then," said the chap, whose name didn't filter through. Maybe no one here had names. Wouldn't be the first time. Chap suited him fine, though.

The portcullis rose, and we followed him in.

"This is *really* good," Lydia whispered to me, an odd sort of giddiness in her voice. "I think we've hit a major operation, with real money behind it."

I just nodded, but frankly I couldn't tell a good show from a half-rate job. Oh, sure, sometimes it was obvious, like the people flickered, went out of focus, or the words that came out of their mouths didn't match how their lips moved. Anyone could spot those kinds of defects, which were typical for the operations we usually came across.

The people nodded and acknowledged us with smiles as we passed, and they were everywhere, all beautiful young men and women, sipping champagne and eating hors d'oeuvres, laughing, flirting.

"Okay," I said. "Now what?"

"I guess we just...enjoy the party," Lydia said. There was an oak bar at the far end of the room. We walked over to it. The rules varied with these games, but there the action always depended on the players. On us. Something would happen, and our actions would begin the process of...whatever the process was. These people would die, somehow.

"Isn't there supposed to be a way for us to trigger it?" I asked her in a low whisper.

"Yes, but let's wait a minute and enjoy ourselves."

Enjoy ourselves?

The chap led us to a group who all turned and grinned as we approached. One, a stunning red-headed woman with big, green eyes, said, "Oh, Charles, you brought friends!"

Charles. My, weren't we stuffy. I decided to see about that. In real life nothing gave me as much pleasure as to put some snooty rich asshole in his, or her, place.

"Yeah," I said, "We just got here. Chuckie here met us at the door." The others looked nervously at me, and I felt Lydia's hand on my arm suddenly. She gave me a tight squeeze. I was forgetting myself, getting drawn into the faux reality of the game. A sick game, but a game nonetheless. Of course, if that were true, if it really was just a

game, then we wouldn't have busted the place that was selling it.

Charles broke the ice by laughing. "I rather like that," he said. "'Chuckie'. Has a relaxed, laid-back ring to it, don't you think?"

"Indeed," one of the other men said. "And you can call me 'Mickey'. Or better yet, how about just 'Mick'?" This time they all laughed.

"Well, ahem," the woman said, fluttering her eyelashes. "We were just in the middle of a discussion. Perhaps you'd like to join us?"

I knew this was what we were supposed to do. I half wondered what would happen if I said no, but the urge to join was almost too strong to resist, like I was dying to hear what they all had to say.

"We'd love to," Lydia said, and the next thing I realized the circle had expanded to include us and Chuckie.

"Since you two just arrived, as you say," the woman went on. "Maybe you can help us figure something out."

"What's that?" I asked.

"It's actually rather embarrassing," she said, blushing slightly. Her eyes were also brown, though darker than the chap, than Chuckie's. And large. Her face was roundish, but high cheekbones gave it a friendlier quality than it would've had otherwise. She was tall, too, my height.

"You can tell us," Lydia said. "We're all friends here."

I glanced at her, and realized she didn't look like the Lydia I knew, the one in the real world. Here she was a little taller, and thinner, and her hair was blond and straight instead of brown and wavy, and her eyes were bright green instead of dark green, and her body was, well, not the one she normally had on. She caught my gaze with her own, frowned just barely so only I could see it. I guess I looked like some leading man or male model to her, but I couldn't see myself. There were no mirrors anywhere.

"You were telling our guests, Carolyn?" Charles said to the woman, who nodded with a weak grin.

"We were just discussing this odd feeling we all seem to have here, all of us at this party that is, that, well, none of us can remember a *thing* before the party. Nothing. Not last year, not yesterday, not waking up this morning, not arriving here as you two have. Nothing before standing, drink in hand, and chatting with our friends."

"As if we simply didn't exist before this party," Charles said. "As if this party, in this house, were all the universe consisted of. Yet we know better than that, don't we?" This last he asked of his friends, the ones all standing around sipping and nodding and looking worried.

"What do you think?" Carolyn asked Lydia. "Are we all mad?" It was apparent, from the tone of her voice, Lydia was supposed to answer "yes." And then they would all laugh and joke about how far over the edge they'd gone this time, and everything would be all right. As if all that hinged, all that depended on Lydia saying *yes, you are all mad*.

Lydia shook her head. "You're not mad at all," she told them. She took a gulp of air and then said, "You're right."

"God," Charles said with a short, sharp laugh. "I'd rather be mad!"

"What do you mean we're *right*?" Carolyn asked. "What's that supposed to

mean? Of course we're not! How can this be all there is? What, am I supposed to believe that I'm to spend the rest of my life at a party?" She was upset, though her bearing didn't permit it to really show through.

"You're all going to die here," Lydia said. "Soon."

No one responded. Something in them, maybe a subtlety in their programming, maybe intuition, if Arties can have intuition, but something in them had to be saying *yes, this is the truth*. I caught the look on Lydia's face as she said it, although to be honest I'd been eyeing this new version of Lydia since I first thought to look at her, trying to keep my mouth from hanging open. But seeing Lydia's face as she told them they were all going to die soon, I learned something new about her.

This shit didn't get to her. She *liked* it. She was one of them, one of those sick mothers who bought these programs to see what were supposedly artificially created, sentient beings murdered. Right now a programmer of this stuff could get coldsleep fifty to a hundred, a user five realtime to fifty cold. The jury was still out, so to speak, on whether or not they were real, actual, living, intelligent, sentient people. Artificial life, definitely. Artificial intelligence, that had been proven. But sentience was the key. Sentience could get a first degree murder rap for some of these programmers, as well as kidnapping, assault, false imprisonment, and a whole slew of other charges we couldn't touch them with yet.

"What's going to happen to us?" Carolyn asked Lydia. "Is there a bomb? Is the champagne poisoned?"

"All I can tell you is this," Lydia said. "This, all this, is a game called *Fade to Black*."

"Oh my God!" another one, one who hadn't yet said anything, cried. He pointed to the wall. We all turned to look. The wall was disintegrating, melting away, crumbling into fine powder that miraculously hung in mid-air.

"Everything's getting darker!" Carolyn screamed. She dropped the champagne glass, it shattered musically on the floor. Everything was getting darker and disintegrating. Fading to black. Carolyn lunged for Charles, to throw herself into his arms no doubt, but they passed right through each other. Bits of them were already gone, little pockets of nothing, holes in their very being. One woman turned to face me, sobbing and arms outstretched, hands opening and closing, grasping for something to hold her, or *someone*, her eyes gone, blackness wiped across them.

"Why?" Charles asked. Amazingly he was able to keep his demeanor, square-shouldered and straight-backed, as he regarded me with a quizzical expression. "Why is this happening to us?"

I wished I could tell him, I really did. But I didn't know how to say that it was somebody's sick idea of fun. All I could do was watch, stare at him as his body disintegrated, oh so slowly, into static. Virtual dust to virtual dust. Glasses shattered as they were dropped, the effect never stopped during the whole thing as one by one the party people faded away. They stumbled around like zombies, some crying, some incapable of it because they didn't have mouths anymore, or even faces. Charles and Carolyn gradually were unrecognizable among the others, just two more vaguely human shaped Rorschach blobs.

And then it was over. I removed the VR gear and discovered I'd been sweating.

"They were real," Lydia said, a faraway look in her eyes like she could still see

them.

"Yeah," I said. " Christ, this was one was sick."

She looked at me to explain. "What made this one any sicker than the rest?"

"These people knew," I told her.

"Knew what?"

She knew *what*, but she was trying to get me to admit it, that they were sentient.

But I couldn't.

"They knew they weren't real," I said. "And when they started fading out like that...they knew it was all coming to an end. They weren't just dying, they weren't being killed, they were being wiped from existence. Just like that. The End. They didn't even have the dignity of dying the way living things are supposed to die."

Lydia snorted.

Fade out, the End, *finis*, ON/OFF...the wave of the future of life on Earth. You think, therefore you are, or so you *think*.

I didn't know what to think. All I knew was after that, after *Fade To Black*, I wanted nothing more than to die like a flesh and blood man, natural, honest, with dignity.

Fade to black.

The Second Queen

By

Yvonne Eve Walus

Dearest Father,

Planet Olympia – am I letting the name influence me? – truly reminds me of the mythical Mount Olympus you told me about when I was little. Intrigue and power-games abound. My new husband is the firebolt-hurling Zeus, while his first wife fits the slippers of the scorned Hera. I'm not sure what role I'm supposed to play in that metaphor, I, the newcomer of whom everybody is curious yet whom nobody approaches for fear of aligning with the wrong faction.

For factions I do see here, as obvious as I see Olympia's two dying suns. There is the Prince: a ladies' man and a seducer. He has most of the female court wrapped tightly around his little finger (or around his big tool, as rumour would have it). He is the logical heir to the throne, although the way politics work in this place, the Vizier who commands the armies might have a claim to at least half the kingdom should he lead the nation into a successful war.

Speaking of war...no, better not. Not until I have the facts. Such matters are too important to gossip about.

I shall write again when I find my footing. You know I'm no fool, my beloved father, so fear not. The First Queen is treating me with politeness and she ordered my quarters in a far-away wing of the castle to preserve my privacy. Also, she was kind enough to allow me to use her login to write to you and to receive your replies via e-post.

Your devoted servant,

Atana

Princess of Crett, Second Queen of Olympia

In her cold bedroom chamber, Atana re-read her letter, then pressed the send button on her console. The electronic link between Olympia and her treasured Crett was fairly reliable. Her father should receive the message when he awakened. Starship post would have taken weeks.

"Are you quite finished, my dear?" The King's voice was soft, but it echoed like thunder in the almost-empty chamber.

Atana's heart thudded, but she managed to control her voice. "Yes, Sire."

"In that case, perhaps now is the time to go over the reasons I've taken you on as Queen."

"As you wish, Sire." Atana stood up and tugged at the silk ribbon that gathered her night tunic at her throat. She was sure her face revealed nothing.

The king stopped her with a gesture.

"Save that for the Prince, my dear. I'm sure he'll be along by and by. You know, the whole thing would have been a lot less complicated if you'd married him instead. To begin with, the Queen – the First Queen – and I are absolutely devoted to each other - as I'm sure you'll discover." The King paused and rubbed the frown line between his greying eyebrows. "Circumstances forced me into this arrangement quite as much as they undoubtedly forced you. But here we are, and we must make the best of it, don't you think?"

"Sire?"

The King sighed a long, ostentatious sigh. "I've been told that you're beautiful, neat about your affairs, and innocent. I hadn't been informed that you lack intelligence."

Atana kept her thoughts silent.

"Perhaps I should have deduced that myself." The king's amused gaze brushed hers. "Nobody with an ounce of brains would consent to the pre-nuptial agreement that you signed. *What's mine and yours, is now ours*, isn't it how the wording goes?"

"Yes, Sire."

"I see you're not a great conversationalist. But then, I didn't marry you for your verbal skills. What I need is your dowry. All of it. Right now. I have armies to build."

"As you wish, Sire. Of course, you will recall the terms of the dowry arrangement: two coffers every six months for as long as I'm Queen."

Even in the feeble glow of the electric candle, Atana could see the angry purple hue surface on the King's cheeks, then spill all the way to his throat.

"You know, it's not as though I was going to poison you on our wedding night, my dear. There was no need for such a clause. You do trust me, my little dove, don't you?"

Without a word, Atana turned to the computer and logged into her bank vault. Several passwords later, as they both watched the funds flow from the treasury of one planet to the other, a knock reverberated on the door.

"Enter," commanded the king absently. "Ah, here you are, my son. I shall bid the two of you a good night, then. My business here is done."

Dearest Father,

You will have noticed that the first installment of my dowry has already been claimed. The King has put it to a good military use of which, being female, I naturally know little. The Vizier looks mightily pleased though, and, as the Prince told me in an unusual spell of confidence, his – the Vizier's – only problem, now that the armies are strong, is which planet to attack. Olympia doesn't have any natural enemies (those she long ago managed to conquer and swallow) and her neighbours, being so much weaker, endeavour to stay on good terms with her.

Speaking of the Prince, he is indeed a women's man, as I had the honour of discovering first-hand, even if the rumours regarding his tool don't quite reflect reality. As a matter of fact, the boy-man seems a bit overshadowed by the authority of his royal father and would probably welcome a chance to have a say in the planet's affairs. Should one of the

power figures take him under their wing, methinks they would gain a loyal ally.

Your devoted daughter,

Atana

Princess of Crett, Second Queen of Olympia, Concubine to the Prince of Olympia

The Prince's private staircase was winding, gloomy and freezing. Atana couldn't get used to the temperature on Olympia. At home, the single sun was gold-white and the Princess was used to its leisure-inducing heat penetrating the palace walls. Here, however, everybody seemed content with the climate created by the two oranges that masqueraded as suns in the grey firmament. The castle's chambers were as cold as the air outside, yet nobody else seemed to be bothered by it.

Ever since her arrival, Atana had wandered through the castle come dawn, noon and dusk. Nobody forbade it explicitly, and she asked nobody's permission. After a while, her strolls became part of the routine that flowed through the castle's arteries, and even the most diligent of the court's spies could see nothing wrong in the Second Queen's visits to her husband's or her lover's quarters.

She paused outside the room which would have been the Prince's library had he ever bothered to read books. Insulated against noise, it could have been used as an office for a prince more involved in the kingdom's affairs. Instead, the room's bookracks held an extensive collection of wine, ale and spirits.

The door didn't make a single sound when Atana pushed it ajar.

"...dungeon. Third cupboard on the left," she heard the First Queen's smooth intonation. "You will find a leather pouch and the poison within."

A deep voice muttered its consent.

"We must ensure at all cost that the Second Queen doesn't—" continued the Queen.

Atana moved a fraction to peer through the crack. She wanted to see the Queen's interlocutor. She took a small step, then another.

Her slipper squeaked on the stone floor.

Beloved Father,

In your letters, you keep enquiring how I am. Rest assured, I'm treated with politeness if not kindness, and the First Queen goes out of her way to make me feel welcome. Just a couple of days ago, she graciously suggested that I might like to get to know my new planet. Might I!

The excursion was a family affair, with most of the high court participating. I had the pleasure of riding in the same carrier as the Prince and the Vizier. Therein I observed the generosity with which the military man shared his knowledge of the kingdom's politics with the royal successor.

While they talked of the imperative for Olympia to find a new domain to conquer and colonise, and of the shortage of living space, I took the opportunity to look out the window and take in the unfamiliar scenery. Father, this planet has so many people! It's a true blessing to see them

lining the roads shoulder to shoulder. Not a single tree in sight, not a blade of grass, just people: a sea of people wherever you look. How magnificent! When I think back to my adored Crett and its sad shortcoming in that respect, my heart fills with sorrow.

The excursion would have been a huge success, had it not been for an unpleasant episode during our repast.

We had stopped at a roadside inn for a late-morning meal and, just as we were nibbling on the sweet dishes, a household draco burst into the eating chamber through a portal I'd inadvertently left ajar. The King was amused (I don't know much about my husband, but I do believe he is fond of animals) and when the animal begged for a treat, the King splashed the desert wine from his full goblet onto the floor for the draco to lap up. The poor creature took one lick and collapsed.

The King was much distraught, more so, I feel, because of the death he'd caused than because of the death he himself had avoided, and he instigated a regular enquiry. It was easy to establish that we had all left the table after the main repast to stretch our legs in the cement garden, so practically anybody could have tampered with the King's chalice.

In the old days, I suppose, the owner of the inn would have been executed, but now that we need every able male to perform the country's duty, the king was satisfied with a conscription slip from the owner and all his sons.

I'm not sure what to think about the whole affair. Suffice to say, the King now has a Royal Taster whose services he employs at mealtime. It's not one person, but a random selection from the court: somebody different every time. The Vizier was none too pleased when his only daughter was asked to perform the role yesterday morning.

Despite his disturbance, the Vizier was kind enough to lend me his afternoon and educate me in the needs of my new kingdom. He also enlightened me as to the politics of the castle itself and what an easy scapegoat somebody as innocent and oblivious as myself would make.

Take the First Queen, for instance, said the Vizier. Is she jealous of me, her fresher substitute? The Prince, does he feel ousted by his father, not only out of the crown that should have gone from father to son years ago, but also out of the latest bride? And the King himself, how does he feel about his second wife in his son's bed?

The intrigues seem to grow beyond the petty squabbles of the mythical Mount Olympus. Perhaps the comparison would be more fitting to the mythical Earth Rome of the Caesars?

Yours,

Atana

Princess of Crett, Second Queen of Olympia, Concubine to the Prince of Olympia

The Earth Rome of the Caesars indeed, thought Atana as she hurried across the tiny lawn. That means the First Queen is like the dangerously ambitious Livia who had

poisoned her husband and—

"Atana."

The girl stopped mid-stride, turned around and bowed. "Yes, My Queen?"

"I've seen you in these gardens often. Do you fancy them? Or are they just an escape from the activities of the castle?"

"The gardens are very beautiful, Ma'am. I hope it's all right for me to retreat here from time to time?"

The First Queen regarded, as though for the first time, the circle of meagre lawn, bordered by a grey stone wall. "I've never liked them much myself. They terrace over the military enclosure, and I can never rest properly here with all the noise coming from below."

"I, I rather like it myself."

"And so you should. It's your dowry that's paid for the armies." The older woman paused. "I've neglected to give you a wedding present, so let me offer you this garden instead. Would you like that?"

"Oh, thank you, Your Majesty. I'd like that very much."

"Surely you realise, my child, that there is much in this palace that belongs to you now? By signing your prenuptial agreement, the *what's mine and yours is now ours* clause, you've acquired many such gardens already."

Atana curtsied. "I haven't thought of it that way, Ma'am. Besides, I like this garden the best."

The First Queen laughed. "Say, Atana, with all your passion for things military, you haven't fallen in love with our military man, have you? The Vizier?"

Atana scrutinised the First Queen's face, then shook her head firmly.

"That's good. Beware of him, my dear child. Don't spend much time in his company. He may appear helpful enough, but he's no friend of yours."

Beloved Father,

Thank you for the news from home. It's good to hear that Crett's army is taking its well-deserved vacation. If I may say so, it would do you good to take a holiday too, get away from Crett and its heat.

Myself, I am well and making new friends. Just the other day, the Vizier himself forced his sexual favours on me, as, I believe, is the custom of this planet. He says it's an honour to be chosen in such a way. I hope I can count on his support because not everybody is as friendly as I'd initially hoped.

The Vizier may not be the galaxy's greatest lover, but what he lacks in bedding skill, he makes up for with words. And so, after our coupling, he was eager to share the latest gossip with me. Among them is one that upset me: it seems that the whispers around the court have it that I'm to blame for the attacks on the king's life. For it transpires that the attacks have been multiple. In addition to the wine incident I described in an earlier communiqué, there was also a stone sculpture that fell from a great height to miss my husband's head by mere centimetres as he was walking through the halls; also a thin piece of strong string tied to the top of the stairwell leading from his personal chambers; and even a torn stirrup on

his favourite riding horse.

To put the end to any doubt, I've volunteered to take up the role of the King's Personal Taster on a permanent basis.

Your faithful daughter,

Atana

Princess of Crett, Second Queen of Olympia, Concubine to the Prince of Olympia, Personal Taster to His Royal Highness the King of Olympia

The King's private conference chamber had a handsomely decorated fireplace, although no fire had ever been lit in it. Nobody would dream of increasing Olympia's natural icy temperature. Atana shivered on a narrow ledge inside the blind chimney. Her nightgown was insufficient protection from the cold, but at least her hiding place protected her from the draughts that travelled the castle's corridors like ghost warships.

Her stomach was not feeling too great, either. Atana tried to ignore the metallic taste in her throat.

"The choice is obvious," said the Vizier. "Crett will be unprotected while its army is enjoying the hot springs on Rotor. I say, let's attack now before they've had enough of the sulphuric atmosphere."

"But we get Crett anyway," reasoned the King. "What's Atana's is mine as per the nuptials, remember?"

"Except that Crett isn't hers yet. Not as long as her father's alive. And we need to colonise another planet right now."

"So wouldn't it be more logical to get rid of Atana's father and make her Queen of Crett?"

Atana could hear the irritation in the Vizier's voice when he replied. "Yes, it would have been, Your Majesty, if the Second Queen's father hadn't retreated into some vacation hideout himself." The briefest of pauses for effect, then the army man continued. "Look, Olympia's empire is running out of resources. Our rivers are dry and we have no more soil to farm, what with all the land taken up by housing. Crett, on the other hand, is empty and unprotected. Even with its army all in place, it would have been an easy picking. They simply don't have the manpower for a military force."

"I've heard it's very scenic, Crett." Atana suddenly recognised the First Queen's voice. Another wave of nausea hit her. "Green hills, they say, blue seas, fjords and virgin jungles. It would be a shame to spoil its landscape with in-fill dwellings."

"Ma'am, with all due respect, our people -" the Vizier's impatient tone belied the deferential words.

The First Queen sighed so loudly that even Atana's chimney-concealed ears caught the sound. "I know. Do what you must. But remember, you're on probation. This is your last chance to make up for the unfortunate incident with the Second Queen. One wrong step..."

"Yes, Your Majesty. In my defence, may I just say that I never forced—"

"You may not."

"But I stand falsely accused—"

The First Queen's voice whipped the air. "Silence!"

Dearest Father,

I'm glad to hear you're back from your holiday, rested and full of ideas for Crett's future. And what wonderful news that the war left our planet unscathed and enemy-free! I don't know, I'm sure, what motivated Olympia's army to perform its military manoeuvres in Crett's part of the galaxy, but what a fortunate coincidence that they were there to vanquish the hateful Aquariens who were forever threatening our peace. I feel proud to be Queen of the victorious Olympia and proud to have founded its brave army with my dowry. I'm also glad that Olympia decided to colonise the defeated planet Aquarien and that my two planets will thus become neighbours.

The Vizier, I'm sorry to say, did not receive his just reward for leading the army into glory. He was posted to one of Olympia's distant daughter planets. The First Queen says it's better this way. While he was out waging war, she found in his sleeping chamber a leather pouch half-filled with poison. It's not enough to accuse him of any wrongdoing against the King, of course, so his secondment turned out both timely and prudent. Suffice to say, the King feels confident he won't be needing a Royal Taster any longer.

Your faithful daughter,

Atana

Princess of Crett, Second Queen of Olympia, Concubine to the Prince of Olympia

Atana was perfuming her hair with the icy fragrances of Olympia – another gift from the First Queen – when the door to her bedroom chamber flew open. The Prince slammed the door shut behind him.

"It's all your fault!" he hissed. "B-b-b-utter wouldn't melt in your mouth, that's how you act, all in-in-innocence and fluttering eyelashes. B-but you're a scheming, conniving, devious b-b-bitch—"

"Enough." Atana didn't raise her voice at all. She picked up an ebony hairbrush and began to brush her hair, spreading the scent of ice flakes and frost. "'Scheming', 'conniving', and 'devious' are all synonyms. I get the point. As to the butter melting, I've never understood that saying. Nor do I understand *you* right now."

"Don't p-pretend. You got the Vizier b-banned. You and your false accusations about rape."

Atana shrugged. "I thought you'd be glad. With his being a contender for ruling Olympia, surely it's a good thing he's out of your way to the throne?"

"Who cares about ruling Olympia? I would have been happy for him to have the c-crown. He promised that if he became King, I c-could be his harem's Chief Overseer! And now it's all spoilt. Thanks to you."

The door closed behind the Prince with a bang. Atana closed her eyes. She was exhausted.

Dearest Father,

You ask, now that my task here is done, whether I would like you to seek an annulment for my marriage, based on the fact that it's never been consummated. Thank you, Father, but no thank you.

You see, I'm very much in love with my husband the King (in a lot of ways, he reminds me of you, beloved Father). I've loved him ever since we started studying Olympia as our potential partner in the war against Aquarien. That's why I didn't shy from the role that you'd given me, and that's why I insisted it be the King and not the Prince I marry, even though the status of Second Queen is inferior and there are no prospects similar to those for the First Princess.

Matters are much more settled now that the Vizier is gone and the Prince no longer favours me. I would therefore like to spend the foreseeable future on Olympia, despite the climate...the planet's climate, I mean.

Your daughter,

Atana

Princess of Crett, Second Queen of Olympia

It was the first time ever that Atana ventured into the First Queen's apartments. She never dared to trespass here on her nightly wanderings through the castle, but now, she came invited.

The opulence of the First Queen's quarters contrasted with the austere design of the rest of the castle, but even here the silks and the gold were bathed in clouds of chilly air. Ice Queen, thought Atana, she should forego tapestries in favour of icicles and snow sculptures.

"Atana." The voice was clear. Like ice crystal. "I'll come straight to the point. You said in your letter, and I quote, that *the status of Second Queen is inferior and there are no prospects similar to those for the First Princess.*"

"Yes, Ma'am," said Atana.

"Did you mean it as a threat to me, my child?"

"Yes, Ma'am."

"Why? You can't possibly be in love with the King."

Atana simply stared.

The First Queen raised her eyebrows. "So what do you want?"

"Power," replied Atana.

"In that case, why did you help me get rid of the Vizier? Why did you lie about the forced advances? Surely, with him out of the way, you won't be able to implicate me in the attempts on the King's life."

One corner of Atana's mouth moved up in a quick smile. "I wouldn't want to do that. The King would be quite devastated. He loves you very much, you know."

"How magnanimous of you." The First Queen's mouth mirrored the smile, but the eyes stayed icy. "And of course, it has nothing to do with the fact that the Vizier was interested in the crown? With him gone, who's left as a contender? Not my son, that's for certain. Not the King either. He's old and contented and not interested in ruling the Olympian Empire."

"There's you, Your Majesty," said Atana softly. "You want the crown too. That's why you tried to murder the King."

The First Queen shook her head. "If that were my goal, you could rest assured that I would have succeeded. No, I simply wanted to get rid of the Vizier. He understands, or thinks he understands, the reason for his exile, and he won't try to return. But you're right that I want the power," she regarded Atana quizzically. "So here we are. The two queen bees, duelling for the hive. Fighting to the death. Is that what you want?"

"If need be. Especially as you wouldn't want to kill me, Your Majesty. You need my dowry for many, many years still. But I have a proposition. A compromise."

The First Queen winced. "Co-ruling? It's never worked in the past."

"That's because the co-rulers were men." Atana paused for a second. "What I was thinking was this: the King will need advisers now that the Vizier is gone. The two of us could fulfil that role."

"And if we have incompatible points of view on an issue?"

"Then it's up to the individual queen to manipulate the King in such a way that his decision is to her liking."

The old woman considered for a moment. "All right. You have a deal."

"Thank you, Ma'am."

"Don't ma'am me, child. If you want to show your gratitude, tell me this: why did you insist on the *what's mine and yours is now ours* clause in your prenuptial agreement? No, don't open your eyes wide with innocence - tell me. What is it you desire so much of the King that you were willing to sign that? I've been puzzling over it and I can't work it out. It is our son you want? The armies? You can't mean the Empire. That belongs to the people, as you must be well aware."

"It's not what *you* have that I want," grinned Atana. "It's something *I* have—"

"That you want to get rid of?" interrupted the First Queen. "It can't be a financial debt. You're the rich one. So what is it? A cursed jewel? An obligation towards a developing planet?"

Atana placed her hand on her belly. "A child."

"You mean, you're pregnant? That's impossible. The Prince would never allow himself to be compromised in that way. And our diplomats did their research thoroughly: no children, no previous relationships...they guaranteed you were a virgin at the time of conducting the wedding negotiations."

Atana inclined her head. "At the time, yes, I was indeed. But by the time I came to Olympia, I ensured that I carried life within me. I suspected – and rightly so – that I wouldn't be allowed that privilege here."

She could have added, "My baby will be the King's according to the prenuptial agreement, and one day it will inherit the Crown."

But she didn't. She preferred the innocent silence of her victory.

Carom Shot

By

R. Edward Main

"So what's the crisis?" Duram Karr sighed as he slid into a lounge chair in the VIP Room of the Commander's Club. Across the table sat The Honorable Everal Blum, Representative Third Class to the Galactic Council. "I'm not even due back to work until tomorrow. Couldn't this have waited?"

Duram had shuttled down to Terra City, Earth's major center of galactic politics, not more than thirty minutes ago. He had not been happy to find the priority message from his boss waiting for him.

The round little man smirked at his aide, looking as pleased as if he had just inherited a pleasure satellite. "Have a drink," he said with a careless wave of his hand. "How was the ice boating?" Blum held a quark slush in his hand. From the redness of Blum's face and the slight slurring of his words, Duram decided his boss was already several drinks up on him.

"The ice-boating was great if you like temperatures that never get above minus thirty Celsius. But I assume you didn't call me here to talk about the wonders of Jarl as a vacation planet. Your message said it was urgent that I meet with you tonight. What gives?"

Blum leaned forward. "I just had to tell you the good news. I've pulled off a real coup."

Duram held back on his what-have-you-gone-and-done-now look. His boss was no more incompetent than the usual sub-representative to the High Council. Most such officials relied on their aides to keep them out of trouble. Duram was Blum's top advisor precisely because of his effectiveness at doing that. Duram didn't mind the work. He rather liked the little man, naïvely optimistic as Blum was, but every now and then, the sub-representative couldn't resist dipping his finger into the pot. Then, there was usually hell to pay until Duram could straighten things out.

"Suppose you tell me what this is all about," Duram said, making an effort to control his impatience.

"I'm to address this year's High Council of Primes!"

Duram stared at Blum dumbly.

Blum's abundance of rounded chins bobbed up and down. "It's true. The Earth Prime himself selected me for the honor."

Before Duram could respond, a short, chunky robo-waiter wheeled over to the table, its face a cartoonish facsimile of human features. Blum insisted on buying. Still stunned by Blum's unexpected news, Duram ordered a glass of house wine. He eyed his boss through narrowed eyes as Blum held up his right hand for the waiter to scan

the credit chip in his forefinger.

"Why should Cronos do you such a favor? He hasn't been exactly cordial in the past." Duram had had it on good authority that the Prime often referred to Blum as an imbecile and a bone-head.

"It's the Harkorians," Blum confided in a low conspiratorial voice. "You know the problem."

Duram was indeed familiar with the Harkorian situation. Although a member race of the High Council, the Harkorians often ignored its dictates. Recently, there had been rumors of unidentified ships in the vicinity of Epselon-2, one of the planetary systems under Earth's jurisdiction. It appeared they were checking out the systems defenses, a decidedly hostile act forbidden by interplanetary law. The Harkorians were the only logical suspects.

"What about the Harkorians?" Duram asked, frowning.

"The Prime says it's time to take them to task – make a formal protest before the Council. He asked for volunteers. None of the other sub-representatives spoke up so I saw my chance. 'There's no doubt in my mind', I said, 'that those bad-tempered boors need to have the riot act read to them.' That's what I said, right to his face. The Prime positively beamed at me. 'Would you be willing to submit Earth's protest at the next meeting of the High Council of Primes?' he asked. Of course I told him I'd be delighted."

Duram's hand came down flat on the table, making his wine glass jump. "You didn't!"

"I did," Blum said. "It's a wonderful opportunity."

"Tell me, did the Prime offer any evidence that the Harkorians entered our system?"

"Well, no, not exactly. Our sightings have been too distant to allow for a definite identification. But it's got to be them. They are the only ones who have challenged us on our holdings."

Duram took a deep breath. "Representative," he said, giving the title an ominous emphasis, "please believe me. You don't want this assignment. We should be able to get you out of it without too much political fallout. But we need to do it quickly before the media gets wind of it."

Blum's features puffed with indignation. "Get me out of it? Why should I want out? This is the first real recognition I've received from the Prime since I was appointed to the Council. Besides, I've already held a news conference. They ate it up. If you had gotten back a day earlier you'd have seen the headliner leading off the video release: 'Blum Socks it to the Harkorians!' I tell you, this will get me second-class status for certain."

"Undoubtedly," Duram said. "Only it will be awarded posthumously."

Blum stiffened in his chair, his eyes widening. "What are you talking about?"

Duram leaned back, allowing his body to go limp and his mind blank as he assumed his biologically programmed state for automatic data retrieval.

"'Prerequisites of the Harkorian Delegation'," he recited. "'Volume III, Chapter IV, Paragraph 6, High Council's Rules of Conduct for Representatives. In accordance with the treaty of 2296, and in recognition of the high value placed on personal honor by the Harkorian Confederacy, all members of their staff are granted the right to

challenge any Representatives who cast aspersions on their personal integrity or that of their government. If those challenged cannot support their accusations with hard evidence, the offended party may issue a death-duel invitation. Refusing to accept will be deemed tantamount to an admission of perjury and the offender will be prosecuted accordingly'."

Blum's mouth had fallen open during Duram's recitation. For several seconds, he stared at his aide in disbelief. "But this isn't possible. Surely, the High Council doesn't accept the legitimacy of a Harkorian death-duel."

"I'm afraid they do," Duram said. "It was the only way the Harkorians would agree to the High Council's jurisdiction. They're a pretty violent bunch, derived from predatory stock if I remember correctly. Have you ever watched a holo of their death-duels? Bloody affairs. They fight naked with whips tipped with razor-sharp blades. The point of the match is to disable your opponent and work him over at your leisure. Properly done, the duration of the kill indicates the severity of the insult."

Blum drew back as if he could hear the metallic snap of the Harkorian whips in Duram's words.

"This is disastrous," he said, his voice two octaves higher. "There's no way I can deliver the Prime's reprimand under these conditions. We'll have to notify him immediately."

"Do that and your next assignment will be a fourth-class diplomatic position on Plutarch where the main form of recreation is hunting giant sand lizards with spears."

"What choice do I have? I can't put myself in a position to receive a death-duel challenge."

Duram toyed thoughtfully with his glass. "We need some face-saving way of getting you out of this. The High Council meets in a week. Not much time. Still, let me see what I can come up with before you start packing for Plutarch." Duram rose. "Just one favor."

"Anything!"

"Try not to volunteer for any more special assignments over the next few days."

Duram entered the Tri-Dee Hall and looked for Madeen. He saw her leaning over the holo-pool game machine trying a down shot. She had a habit of twitching her rear when going for a particularly difficult combination. "Gives it a little extra English," she had claimed.

He watched appreciatively as she made the shot. The cue ball angled downward, careened off the bottom, and smacked the two ball, sending it into the front target disc. The two-ball vaporized.

"Nice," Duram said, registering appreciation for the shooter as well as the shot.

"Just warming up." Madeen glanced at him under an arched eyebrow. "You're late," she said.

"Couldn't be helped, love." Duram bent down to kiss her but she turned so his lips only grazed her cheek.

"And what was critical enough to justify my wasting a half-hour waiting for you?"

"I have a serious situation here, really serious. I've spent the whole day in the Archives, reviewing historical data on the Harkorians. I got so damned frustrated. I lost all sense of time."

Madeen cocked her head. "I don't believe I've ever seen you this flustered by an assignment. Want to talk about it?"

Duram grinned. "Yeah, I do. But I'm hoping you can provide a bit more than just a sympathetic ear."

"Looking for free legal advice again." She sighed. "And I thought it was my girlish charms that keep you coming back for more beatings at holo-pool."

Duram snorted. "Just reset the game. I'm due for a break. I sure as hell haven't had one yet today."

Madeen energized the control button to erase her current game. Duram laid his right forefinger on an opaque glass square. "This one's on me," he said. He held his breath, hoping his vacation spending hadn't completely wiped out his savings. The holo table set up for a new play, clustering the numbered balls in the center of the holo in the form of a rough sphere. It positioned the cue ball in the middle of the front side, approximately a meter from the cluster.

"Your break since you're buying," Madeen said with an evil grin.

He raised the free-floating bar and rested his cue stick on it. Lining up on the cue ball, he drew back his stick then shot it forward, driving the cue ball into the center of the cluster. Balls scattered in all directions bouncing off sides, top, and bottom. Three of them hit scoring discs and disappeared. A display at the top of the holo registered balls one, five, and eight as scored by First Player.

"Lucky shot," Madeen said, and flicked her tongue at him.

"I told you I was due." Duram adjusted the front bar for his next shot. He sent the cue ball directly into the six. It hit the rear of the holo and bounced back to the front, missing a target disc by centimeters.

Madeen took over. In rapid succession, she hit target discs with the four, two, and eleven balls. While she was shooting, Duram gave her an account of the mess Blum had created. She paused and frowned. "This sounds like a no-winner. Is there any way you can transfer out from under him before it all comes to a head?"

Duram shook his head. "Aides who bail out in a crisis are seldom well thought of. And even if I could jump clear, I probably wouldn't. The guy isn't half bad, just lacks survival genes. You don't see any fine points we could raise to avoid a head-on with the Harkorian Representative?"

Laying down her cue stick, she stiffened for a moment, eyes glazing. Speed reviewing, he assumed, the legal data she had encoded on Harkorian law. Giving an involuntary shudder, she relaxed. "Not if your boss accuses them of unlawful acts without proof. The regulations are very specific on this point."

"I still find it incredible that the High Council agreed to such terms."

"It was the only way they could persuade the Harkorians to join. They are an aggressive race, conditioned for centuries to respond to insults by committing great bodily harm. The death-duel challenge gives their representatives an alternative to immediate acts of violence. Without it, they wouldn't be able to restrain themselves. Because of it, other Representatives take great care in how they address Harkorian issues."

"Wonderful," Duram groaned. "Anyone provokes the Harkorian Prime with an unproven accusation – no matter how justified – and the Harkorian has the right to flay the skin off them."

"I'm afraid your boss's only recourse is to withdraw from the meeting."

"And be black-balled by Earth's Prime."

Madeen shrugged, picked up her cue stick, and examined the lay of the remaining balls. Giving her bottom its customary twitch, she drove the cue ball against the edge of the six. The six angled off aimlessly and Duram thought she had muffed her shot, but the cue ball caromed off the six and into the three, sending it into the target disc on the left side of the holo.

"Yes!" Madeen said, clenching her fist.

Duram grimaced at the obvious satisfaction she derived from showing him up. Then, his eyes widened. "Madeen, I love you," he announced, taking her into his arms and kissing her full on the lips. She stared at him as he released her, mouth open, arms limp at her sides, cue stick dragging on the floor.

"Gotta run," he said and dashed toward the exit.

"But we haven't finished our game...." Her voice faded behind him.

The meeting of the High Council of Primes was held in the great assembly hall at Nute-Gia, capital of the neutral planet Zorenda. The Primes sat in a semi-circle, raised up on a floating dais high above the hoards of life forms that filled the seating areas of the vast domed hall.

Duram stood to one side of the dais, two paces behind Blum, as the Representative read over his presentation – not the one given to him by Earth's Prime but a paper carefully crafted by Duram. Blum's bald head glistened and he held his arms stiffly at his side, but the sub-representative would play the role required of him. At least Duram hoped he would. Both of their careers depended on Blum's performance and, of course, the Harkorian Prime's reaction to it. These volatile types were hard to predict. Duram sought reassurance from the hard barrel of the stunner, pressed against his side under his formal diplomat's jacket.

His gaze wandered over the Prime Representatives. On his far left the Ebonite Prime perched, bird-like but without feathers, staring with solemn dignity down its long, beaked countenance. Next along the half-circle of seats, a Narton floated in a water-filled container, its tentacles moving over a control panel at the bottom of the tank. Beyond the Narton sat the Prime of the Kiliads, a weighty blue-black mass supported by stumpy appendages, its eyes and mouth half buried in its cascading folds of dark flesh. At the center sat a black, cylindrical container, covered with sensors and mechanical appendages. No more than two meters in height and one in diameter, it held the Prime of the Voorjuns. The Voorjuns' bodies lacked the supporting bone and muscle tissue to withstand the three quarters Earth-norm gravitation on Zorenda, but these flaccid creatures were the originators of the Galactic Council and presided over all High Council meetings.

Closest on Duram's right sat Mark Cronos, the Earth Prime, representing Earth and the growing complex of worlds inhabited by humans. Next to him sat the Prime of the Tineris, a small, slender creature with a bluish skin and large yellow eyes. In the last chair sat Dak-Shar, the Harkorian. To Duram, Harkorian features incorporated the worst characteristics of a tiger and a wart hog. A protective field surrounded each Prime like a giant bubble. The field could withstand the force of a high explosive from the outside but was easily penetrable from within.

Council proceedings were carried out in Galcom, the language used for all inter-species exchanges. One after another, the Representatives addressed the Council on issues of trade, cultural exchanges, research findings and galactic explorations. The Harkorian Prime, paid little attention to these presenters, and scowled down at Blum. Duram had seen to it that Blum's upcoming attack on the Harkorians had been well publicized. He wanted Dak-Shar to be aware of the verbal attack to come. If looks could kill, Blum would already be a mutilated corpse.

Duram started when a flat mechanical voice rising from the cylindrical container of the Voorjun Prime called for Blum to stand forth and address the assembly. Blum looked back at Duram once, swallowed several times, and approached the dais.

"Honored Primes and distinguished fellow Representatives," Blum began in an oratorical tone. "The origins of this august body go back unimaginable eons, to periods of history that predate the first ancestors of some of the life-forms present today. Its authority extends to the very boundaries of our galaxy. To be granted membership within this body and to participate in its functions is a great and noble privilege." He cleared his throat.

"By the same token, however, it is a vile and despicable act for a member race to ignore their pledged word and violate the just laws established by the High Council."

The audience stirred. Several of the Primes glanced toward Dak-Shar, whose features contorted into a predatory snarl.

"But respected beings," Blum continued, "when a member race performs such violations in secrecy, behind the backs of the Council, then its behavior is not only despicable, but cowardly. I stand before you to accuse a member society of a most deceitful violation of one of Earth's planetary system annexations."

The murmuring of the spectators had increased to the point where Blum had to shout his last few words to be heard. Dak-Shar rose to his feet and grasped the carved crystal railing that curved around the Primes' seating section. The Harkorian's massive body shook with anger. Blum gave a quick glance in Duram's direction and Duram nodded. It was now or never.

"With the authority vested in me by the honorable Prime of Earth's Representatives, I hereby lay an accusation of territorial violation."

Dak-Shar pointed a sausage-sized finger down at Sub-Representative Blum. "You dare accuse the Harkorians of deceit and cowardly actions and offer no proof of your claim? This may no being do in the presence of Dak-Shar and live. I to you the death-duel challenge issue. I will take great pleasure in tearing the flesh from your bones."

Blum's round face took on an expression of wounded innocence. "You are mistaken, Honorable Prime. It is the Tineris I condemn for so flagrantly violating our territorial boundaries."

Immediately, the great hall filled with multi-lingual chatter. The diminutive Tineris Prime looked alternately shocked and perplexed. Duram understood his confusion. The only Tineris violation of Earth sovereignty had been an emergency landing by one of their spacecraft on the planet Balboa for repairs. The landing had occurred several months ago and there had been no question of a violation. The incident had been largely ignored by the Earth press and all concerned.

"Insignificant fly dropping!" Dak-Shar roared in a harsh version of Galcom. "Think you I have not awareness at whom your pathetic complaints are directed? It is full well known by all where your intentions fall. Accounts have we witnessed in your corrupt media. My people are enraged by your accusations."

"No formal complaint has been lodged against the Harkorians," the flat, mechanical voice of the Voorjun Prime interjected. "The death-duel challenge is void and need not be accepted."

Duram took a deep breath. This was the moment of truth. Had he assessed the Harkorian's character correctly? Goaded him into losing any semblance of self-control? If not, the Earth Prime would be all over them for making unfounded accusations against the Tineris and their diplomatic careers would be finished.

The Harkorian Prime shook a hairy fist in the air. "This insult will not go unanswered!" he bellowed. "If my right to the death-duel is rejected, then die he shall here and now." The protective bubble surrounding Dak-Shar fizzled as he pressed through it to vault over the rail fronting the dais. He landed balanced in a crouch, ready to leap on his tormentor and tear him with tooth and claw. He never had the opportunity. Even before his feet touched the floor, Duram had his stunner out from beneath his jacket. He had practiced for this moment all week and his draw was smooth, his aim unwavering. Still in his crouch, Dak-Shar's body went suddenly rigid. Like a felled tree, the Harkorian Prime toppled to the floor.

On his return to Earth, the first thing Duram did was call Madeen to apologize for deserting her on their last date and invite her to dinner at the Commander's Club. Madeen was incredulous when, over dinner, Duram described the scene at the High Council.

"You mean you actually got away with stunning the Harkorian Prime?"

Duram shrugged. "It was, after all, a case of self defense. As an aide, I have a permit to carry a protective weapon. And he did attack Blum without provocation. Actually, the Harkorians were grateful to us for not imposing the full penalty against Dak-Shar for an unwarranted life threat. Having one of their highest officials imprisoned would have been a terrible embarrassment."

"You let them off the hook?"

Duram grinned. "In return for an admission that some of their spacecraft might have inadvertently entered planetary systems under Earth's jurisdiction. They assured Earth's Prime they are taking steps to see that no more such 'incidents' occur."

"What about the Tineris Prime?"

"He was all for us once he realized what we were up to. He thought it a great joke on the Harkorians. Apparently, they have violated Tineris systems as well."

"Pretty clever," Madeen said. "But how did you ever come up with such a tricky scheme?"

Duram flashed her a knowing grin across the table. "How about some holo-pool after dinner? I've been giving a lot of thought to that carom shot you pulled on me last time we played."

Sub-Tracks

By

N. E. Chenier

*I am the voice of the World Soul crying out in the wilderness.
My sweet prima materia, you will be golden or you will be burned off as dross.
--Kalypso, "Bahuchara Mata" liner notes*

"Who gives a shit what the surface track is?" asked Kalypso. "It could be your Aunt Frieda playing 'Love Me Tender' on the accordion, and they would still love me." The beautiful intersexual half-reclined on a marina-blue velvet chaise.

Big Mike wanted to bring in guest performers for the audio, but the sub-tracks would more than make up for any flaws in top tracking. The raw emos--that was what mattered, that was all that mattered. Kalypso knew it. We all knew it.

But producers, as a rule, didn't get it. "You're losing the mainstream," Big Mike complained.

"Wake up, Mikey. *That* mainstream is nothing but a trickle," Chari said. "No one loads albums for listening anymore." With her tapered fingers, Chari wove Kalypso's tresses into slender braids. She drew golden beads from a box and threaded them onto the ebony plaits.

I sat on the sofa with Scaler, who doodled caricatures of the producer on his magna-slate. The graffiti-like scrawls emphasized Mike's lumpy face and buggy eyes. He'd flash the image toward Chari and Kalypso when Mike wasn't looking, erase it, then begin again. Chari and I made little effort to muffle our snickers, but Kalypso allowed only the barest hint of a smile to flicker across hir coolly composed expression.

Kalypso dismissed Big Mike with a wave. "My ship awaits," ze said.

The magic words. Hir "ship" was a chamber at the top of the stairs whence all musical mystery voyages commenced.

Chari and I followed Kalypso on a slow procession to the sanctuary atop the mansion's tower. Chari continued to fuss over Kalypso's hair, but I knew it was just an excuse to touch hir. By the end of the day, one of us would be dismissed.

Fortunately, Kalypso needed me.

We'd grown up together on Arcadia. Located at the Arc-8A cross-point, it was not just a tourist trap, it was a tourist tar pit. Only glam-folk, casino employees, and members of the Piranha Syndicate actually called it home. Our mas used to make a living sanitizing dormers down at the Feenix Fyre. Since I was the older cousin, I had to keep an eye on Kalypso, which was no easy task. We wouldn't have had such a hard time in edu-core had it not been for the tears. As a genetic intersexual, Kalypso

was a mild curiosity, but as a cry-baby, ze was an irresistible target.

Chari waited until we had just about reached the upper landing before she remembered the jewelry box.

"T-boy, could you go back and fetch it?" Before I could tell her to get the damn thing herself, she added, "I have to redo this part." Again, her hand lingered at Kalypso's temple, brushing hir high, prominent cheekbone.

I stomped back down the long winding stairway, a slow burn spreading up from my stomach. Antoine was my real name, and I never had a problem with it, but you know how things happen. I wasn't crazy about T-boy, but it was a hell of a lot better than Tony-Tone, which Scaler tried to attach to me when the posse first formed, so I left it alone.

"Down already?" Scaler asked. He fiddled with the recording equipment arrayed along the wall under the stairs. A hook-net dangled over one ear.

I grabbed the stupid box and headed back up.

"Hey!" Scaler said. He tossed me a sealed pack of anti-m tubes. "Save yourself another trip."

"Thanks," I said, genuinely grateful. There were exactly 999 steps up to Kalypso's studio sanctuary.

The emotional outbursts and episodes that funded the Kalypso empire used to get hir butt kicked on a regular basis. If hir mother had been an Arc-8A legit, she could've taken Kalypso to the clinic for a good dosing, just as all the other parents with problem children did. Good thing she didn't. Who knew Kalypso'd be able to parley hir disadvantage into a career? Hir ma sure couldn't complain about the aerial suite her moody little golden goose scored for her.

Half way up the spire, I exchanged hands between the hefty box and the lighter package of pinkish tubes. Kalypso used AntiMatter to amplify the emos, to get hir into that Oz space where ze could weave hir magic. With its special ability to pry open the subconscious, hir audience also bled on anti-m. Any musician with a shelf-life had to include sub-tracks. Kalypso was a blear-and-hooker's dream; ze could produce everything from the raw edge of rage to the sweet complexity of melancholy. Ze made the others look like amateurs who lay down nothing but cheap, recycled mood-spurts with all the subtlety of a porn-site hook.

I was wheezing by the time I reached the outer court. On the stair side of the archway, a fountain spilled into a basin where entrants had to wash their hands and feet. Kalypso insisted that it was to preserve the sanctity of the place. I say it was to keep the wine-colored silk shag that carpeted the interior in pristine condition. Dutifully, I removed my socks and ladled the cool water over my feet.

Chari's voice issued from inside. Was that desperation I heard? I shoved my damp feet into a pair of slippers. Kalypso and Chari were in the washroom. I waited in the central chamber counting my heartbeats.

"Call Ishiguro, then," Kalypso said. "We can all eat cotton candy and pretend we're blue clouds."

"But--"

"Not what I need right now, Char."

Yes! Game point goes to T-boy.

Chari's jaw was clenched when she emerged from the washroom. She

glowered at me as she gathered up her daybag. The purple and scarlet ribbons that festooned her head made her look like a petulant doll. She'd have to set up camp downstairs with Scaler.

I smiled sweetly in return.

The mansion, with its lofty tower, perched on the upper fold of Arcadia so it overlooked the Ring. Three turrets with bow windows took full advantage of the metropolitan view. Pale marble columns rose from the deep ruby carpet. A domed skylight serving as the ceiling had an open view of the sky. Outside, Arcadia's artificial sun poured onto the base, but the sanctum was veiled in golden shadows. The day-shade for the windows was set to "Fields of Gold." It approximated sunrise on a real planet. Sunrise, new beginnings, creation--Kalypso liked to surround himself with symbolism.

Without acknowledging me, Kalypso padded barefoot across the main chamber. Ze wore purple and gold gypsy pants that rippled when ze moved, granting me a glimpse of hir tawny, muscular legs. Chari had fixed hir hook-net so that the tiny filament wires and their attachment nodes were hidden beneath beaded braids. Ze took hir place in the central turret where ze often composed hir symphonies to the waiting universe.

Away from the windows, the sanctum's sensors and recorders huddled unobtrusively on shelves inset in the back wall and picked up signals from the tiny antennae in the hook-net. The equipment detected the slightest shifts in the tides of hir emotions and recorded them. Only the dancing display of the equalizer indicated the translation from mood to music.

"How old are we?" ze said. The ship was moving.

"You were ten, I was eleven." I'd already decided on the scene. It was what made me valuable. Kalypso had unparalleled emotional capacity, but it was unfocused. Chari's input might be fine for the experimental tracks, but the quality emo-tracks came from the past. Our past. A past Kalypso had sacrificed to anti-m. Ze'd been hanging with Auntie M for so long that ze'd forgotten the way to Oz. Anti-Matter smeared out all the scenes and left behind only amorphous moods.

"Bird and Rico came after us in the playfield. We ran as fast as we could, but they caught us anyway." Bird and Rico were serial thugs from the class ahead. They had been getting more and more violent. There was no malice in the pursuit--that would have required a level of zeal long-drained from those two dead-blocks. It was fascination. Rico slugged tears out of Kalypso just so he could observe them.

"Bird had me pinned. I couldn't get to you. Rico had you pushed up against the volley-wall. He wore a new jacket, and we could both smell the packaging it came in. When he hit you, I yelled at him, but Bird shoved his gym-sham in my mouth. You tried to hold it in because you didn't want to give him the satisfaction of making you cry, but he wouldn't stop. You couldn't help it; you cried out."

"She comes to my rescue," Kalypso said. Ze started to fill in the bleared-out portions of hir memory with my prompts. The equalizer spiked and rolled as ze latched onto the attendant emotion.

"Like the Amazon of the story," I said.

"Atalanta," ze breathed.

The daycare supervisor, a towering copper-skinned woman and retired show-

femme, had intervened more than once. I always saw the incident as a woman doing her job; Kalypso saw it as a warrior queen descending from Olympus bent on deliverance. In hir mind, she was every bit as legendary as the constellation that stood at the pinnacle of the sky every three AM over Arcadia. Ze had used this one before. It was on both best-ofs, which were still selling. Another track based on *profound gratitude* was a guaranteed draw.

I avoided anti-m, not only because keeping the memories whole gave me access to the sanctuary, but because I didn't like it. Emos were okay for Kalypso. They made hir deca-platinum. Emos had never been okay for me. I had to stay in control; I had to protect my cousin.

Later that night, we lay side by side in the dark, watching the laser-scape of night through the arching skylight. It was my favorite part of the recordings, when Kalypso wasn't too far adrift for words. Ze was blearing and wanted to know about *fervor*. I recalled the first time we snuck into the Zone and hooked in at one of the booths. We were around ten. It made me sick. I threw up all over the chrome-webbed glass floor and got us kicked out. ut Kalypso loved it, crazy loved it, wouldn't stop talking about it.

"What about my hands?"

"You couldn't keep them still. I always knew you were about to bring it up when you started clenching and opening your fists. Like butterflies trying out wet wings." Ze loved details like that.

"Yesss . . ."

I felt hir body stir next to mine. Ze writhed, dancing to the invisible music of hir feelings. Hir hands began their butterfly undulation. Weeks from now, klub kids everywhere, down all eight legs of the cross-point, would be swaying beneath the same impulse. They would borrow Kalypso's heart for an hour. Ze would fill in the gaping anti-m holes with vibrant spells of color. Then, they would unhook and go back to the dead-grey real, carrying hir rainbow inside them.

Kalypso's overt displays of emotion enthralled me as much as they used to scare me. Most people believed that Kalypso's ability to spontaneously generate emos was a special quality of true hennadites. That was the romantic version. They never heard about the two capsule-cleaning women who couldn't score so much as a rit-supplement for the kid who was allergic to fortified synth-milk. They never saw the fight scars cosmetically sealed beneath the best dermal regeneration money could buy. They were never there to help me carry hir home from edu-core.

The next day we hit a snag. Leaning against a column by the back wall, I tried to make myself unobtrusive.

"There is not enough gold in the spectrum," ze said through hir teeth. "I need to go deeper." Ze clung to the sheer drapes as if deliberating about whether to yank them down. I wondered if ze was doing this for the recording or if it was spontaneous. *Restless frustration* was pretty much old hat. Even a slug-band could pull off a convincing rendition. "So much bullshit. There is no adequate reason for this much *red*."

"Do you want me to change the shades?" I offered.

Ze threw hirself across a divan, scattering the cushions. "Ugly lions. All of them

falling onto self-sharpened spikes in self-dug pits," ze moaned, one arm flung across hir eyes. Hir usual velvet tenor overflowed with bitterness. "I'm so sick of the track-one: sorrow. Track-two: elation. Track-three: fill-in-the-blank desire. Track-four: guilt. It's so nauseatingly predictable."

"You are never predictable."

A sigh and ze was up again, flitting from curtain to pillar. Ze spun and fixed me with a glare. "If I want someone to lick my toe jam, I'll call Chari in."

Right. Deeper.

"Obliterit?" I asked. I didn't really think ze'd go for it, but hir distress threatened to push me out of the tower.

Hir impatient silence was assent. It was also a signal that I had best get my ass downstairs and start that ball rolling. I cursed under my breath. Like shoes, all comm-links had to be left outside. They weren't even allowed in the outer court--again, ostensibly to preserve the sanctity of the place, but I knew Kalypso enjoyed having us trot up and down the stairs at hir command.

Obliterit was liquid anti-m and way more potent than the inhalant, more...permanent. Mystics and extremists dabbled in it for kindred reasons. Funny how those who sought to open up to reality and those who wanted to flee from it took similar routes.

I wound down the spiral staircase yet again.

Chari was in the corner, tears streaking her cherub face and a broad grin curving up her sharply drawn fuchsia lips. Hooked in and blearing. It looked like a good ride. Scaler was half-hooked in, absorbing the new material and laying down loose sketch-tracks.

"Kalypso wants obliterit," I said.

Scaler frowned. "Ze's never done obliterit."

"Get it," I said.

Chari emerged from her blearing session. "Hey, T-boy, what's up?"

"Kalypso just put in for an oblit cruise," Scaler answered.

"Cool!" she said. "Could you imagine what ze could do soaring on O?" She did a few pirouettes around the room, humming a track from "Bahuchara Mata," the first album.

Scaler looked skeptical but shrugged. "If that's what Kalypso wants, that's what Kalypso gets. Check the fountain tonight."

Before I could slip back upstairs, Chari pumped me for the particulars she had missed out on. What was ze wearing? Where was ze standing when I left? When was the last time ze slept and for how long? She consumed each detail as if it were aphrochocolate. It was pathetic, but I ran the gamut of her questions because she asked politely. I enjoyed having the cute little viper kiss up to me for a change.

I started back up the 999 steps.

"What about the tint?" she called up to me when I was at thirty-two.

"Twilight Rose."

"Ha! I *knew* it." Satisfied, she flopped onto the couch. She reached for one of the AM inhalers that littered the surface of the mirrored coffee table and took a long drag. Re-affixing the hook-net, she sank back into the bright pillows to continue her blear with rose-colored visuals.

That evening, Kalypso sat cross-legged on a fat midnight-blue cushion. Without preamble, ze twisted the stopper off the oblit. I held my breath while ze drained the vial. Ze closed hir eyes and inhaled deeply. The muscles along hir angular jaw clenched then relaxed.

"This is the final voyage," ze said.

Ze stood shakily. I reached out to help, but ze brushed my hands aside. I kept close watch as ze teetered from pillar to pillar.

"We shall enter the great abyss," ze said. "The universe has accepted the sacrifice." Ze was not talking to me, but ze expected me to remember. Ze'd ask for the details later--verbatim.

"We are going there," Kalypso declared. Ze pointed at the skylight.

"The S-curve?" I asked. It was the brightest, most noticeable constellation through the studio skylight this time of night.

Ze nodded as if captivated by the sight. Without Chari's ministrations, hir trinket-adorned hair no longer camouflaged the hook-net. Silver light glinted off crisscrossing filament. The recording equipment, alerted by an auto-start signal, blinked to life as hir emos became more substantial.

"Delphi's Daughter," I told hir, "the serpent that Apollo killed before taking over the oracle for himself."

"That bastard," ze said. The equalizer display bulged.

"Yeah, solar gods are pretty tyrannical."

We'd had this conversation before, almost word for word.

"I remember...such loss." ze said, and just like the previous times, the emotion behind it was genuine.

"We went out to the Needle. The star-guide told us about Delphi. You were so moved, you cried...as if you'd been there and saw it happen. You scared the tourists."

"All that beautiful magic stolen...the sword pierces her heart." Kalypso started to shake, hir gaze still fixed on the constellation. "All magic has fled the mortal world." There went the hands. Ze began to dance to hir silent music through the glade of hir sanctuary; hir fingers strummed a harp made of air and shadow. I guessed it was no longer too red for hir.

I let my anxiety subside. Maybe oblit wasn't so bad. This would be a superb sub-track.

I awoke in the cool pewter darkness of filtered daylight. The windows were at "Silver Moon." The brighter stars could still be discerned through the concave glass of the skylight. Arcadia's artificial sun, as bright as it was, could never quite lift the midnight shroud of space. I cursed myself for nodding off. How long had I been asleep?

The smell of decay swamped my nostrils. I bolted upright. *Kalypso!*

I stumbled through the grey shadows. *Gods, please, no.*

Ze was curled in the alcove of bay windows overlooking the Ring. Outside, laser lights and luminescent shafts stabbed into the sky from the boisterously competitive casinos. The musky odor hung more thickly in the enclosed space.

"Kalypso!" I fell to my knees next to hir body. My heart never beat so fast.

Still warm, still breathing, still alive. Then, what was that smell...? Oh.

Grimly, I lifted hir under the shoulders and cradled hir in my arms. The spider wire laced through hir serpentine braids, glinting platinum amid the black and gold tendrils. A glance at the equalizer showed wild activity, so I had to be careful not to disturb the settings. Hir face drooped against my chest as I carried hir into the spacious washroom. A circular hot tub was raised three marble steps above the floor in the center of a column-encircled rotunda.

I stripped off hir soiled clothes. Hir wide-set eyes were still half-open, dark pools ringed with gold and fringed with long lashes. Hir lips pouted beneath hir elegant nose, but ze didn't stir. It took some time to unravel all the gold cording and the knots of silk, but eventually hir body was free of the costume.

Dark nipples crested hir eternally juvenile breasts. Hir long torso tapered into narrow hips and a hairless pubis. I rolled hir onto hir stomach. With a perfumed cloth, I swathed the swelling mounds of hir ass until they were once again immaculate and amber-scented. My hand lingered in the depression where the spine gently dipped at the small of hir back. Hir skin was softer than the silks ze wore. Shuddering, I withdrew my hand. I brought out a royal purple robe and wrapped hir in it. I had to get hir back out into the studio.

Kalypso needed me. I took care of things so ze could be free to create.

I decided I didn't like hir on obliterated. Ze didn't dance to invisible music. Ze didn't ask for anecdotes. Ze didn't have tantrums and demand that Delphi's Daughter appear in the skylight. Ze was barely cognizant of hir surroundings, let alone me. Scaler assured me it was typical, but it still made me uncomfortable. I had to help hir drink. Scaler sent up some supplement boosters so ze wouldn't starve. Puncturing the tender flesh in the crook of hir elbow was almost more than I could bear. After the third day, I went down to put in a call to Big Mike.

"Kalypso's not moving."

Mike was ecstatic. "The feed over here's going haywire. We might have a double album on this one." I glanced over at Scaler, who nodded in confirmation. Chari was so involved in gorging herself on the new tracks that she didn't even know I'd come down.

"Ze hasn't moved in three days, ever since the obliterated--"

"Look, T-boy, whatever you guys are doing over there, keep doing it," said Big Mike.

I'd never heard him so vehement. I wondered if Mr. Granite-ass was blurring.

"Mike, ze's drooling," I tried. "What if he keels?"

At least it got the slug-man's attention. "Yes, well, ze's still conscious, right?"

"If you can call it that."

"Ze's pumping out quality tracks, T-boy. Isn't that what ze was going for?"

"It's on your head, man." I cut the connection and went back up. Maybe I should call the medics. Screw Mike and his fucking label. Freaking parasites.

The track counter still whirred non-stop. I returned to my vigil over Kalypso, searching hir face for a trace of my cousin in there. When it became too unnerving, I watched the equalizer spike with vivid color and tried to convince myself that all was going according to plan. It was where ze wanted to go.

We were in hir favorite turret, which I had lined with pillows and a quilted satin coverlet dragged from hir bed chamber. With a damp face cloth, I dabbed the saliva collecting at the corners of hir mouth and the sticky mucous gathering on hir upper lip.

Marine Depths sheltered us from the sudden Arcadian dawn. As the sapphire shade replaced the natural dimness of night, I decided it had gone on too long. I had to go after hir.

It took me awhile to affix the spare hook-net to my head. Two hours passed before I actually worked up the determination to loop in to Kalypso's feed. The pulses beat against my skull in synch with the equalizer. Since I was hooking sober, the emospikes were almost impossible to differentiate beyond poking sensations that alternately attracted and repulsed me. When the inevitable nausea rose in my throat I forced it away by focusing on hir slack face. The spikes were Kalypso. I sat down with what was left of the obliterated. A few drams of the magenta liquid remained at the bottom. I stretched out next to hir and dabbed the last droplets onto my tongue.

A slow fire spread over my taste buds. It slid down my throat like a fuse and detonated in my gut. A steel trap clamped down on my stomach and I couldn't breathe. Dark blobs oozed through my vision. *I'm coming, Kalypso, please wait for me....*

I was dying. Darkness. My body was not responding. I had to think. It took all of my concentration to inflate my lungs. Panic receded. Dark, dark eyes flecked with gold. I needed to find Kalypso. The urgency of the thought startled me.

Then, my pulse slammed me into awareness. I was alive. It was the oblit. My head hurt. Throbbing pain that erupted into colors.

Something moved in the darkness, hulking presences, almost colors, but not colors. I felt them rather than saw them. Blobs like whales drifted toward me. I couldn't tell if their motion was deliberate or random. Something was familiar in the drifting blobs.

Kalypso, where are you?

As if through fish eyes, I saw us: Kalypso and me. We lay side by side in the sanctum under the glass umbrella dome, web-headed, wired together. Together. A purple-not-purple globe sucked me into it, and I panicked, flailing and gulping for air.

Once upon a time Antoine threw his lunchbox at the bullies chasing them. So Kalypso shared hir lunch with him. They sat hunched over a single box, parceling out chips, dividing the sandwich squares and fruit leathers. They took bites at the same time and chewed and swallowed in unison. It was the best lunch ever. Together.

Belonging. Happiness.

My submission to joy disturbed me. *That is how it was.* I struggled against the memory. It wasn't like that. We just shared a lunch because I didn't have one. No big deal. Another behemoth bobbed toward me. It had me in its emerald embrace.

This is Kalypso's world, I told myself, reminding myself to breathe in the green.

Once upon a time Kalypso and Antoine went to Lotus Land. They rode no-hands on the plunging jet-coaster. They laughed and shrieked so loudly the attendant almost stopped the ride. They laughed and laughed with wide-open mouths.

Joy! Joy!

My heart felt like it was about to burst. But I didn't laugh out loud back then. That was Kalypso. I was different.

Kalypso's mother and Antoine's mother are in the med-centre. They talk behind their hands. Hir ma cries into his ma's shoulder. Antoine can see ma and ma through the aquarium glass. He couldn't stop the boys. They were too big. They hurt his cousin.

Fear mixed with guilt.

More carnival eruptions. I was drowning. *Kalypso where are you?*

We are atop the Feenix Fyre picking out constellations. You are impressed I know them. I have them all memorized because you love them. The star-guide wore a cowboy hat with glittering studs, a star hat. He put it on you, and it covered half your face down to your nose. I memorized the stars so you would look at me the same way you looked up at him, with admiration in your eyes. I tell you the stories behind the stars so you will like me.

Happy pride. And more....

I didn't resist it. I let it wash over me. It was gentle as it was all consuming. Soft, like lotus unfolding on a still pond.

Love.

It was you. It was why you let me into your sanctuary, into your soul. I understood. Finally, I understood. The end of our search. You were there, with me. Together. I didn't care where we were going, where we ended up. I sank with you into the unfathomable depths.

After the darkness, there was light....

Pale blurs swam in black waters, like albino cavefish, blind and senseless. The waters smelled like puke. *Where are we, Kalypso? Kalypso? Panic.*

It was not Kalypso. When the blurs resolved into faces, the first one I saw was Scaler – or his teeth anyway. He only grinned that big when someone was in trouble. Next to him was Chari, and my vision didn't have to clear before I could tell she was pissed off. Her garishly outlined features fixed me with a cartoon scowl. Her nose seemed to grow sharper and longer, stretching out to impale me.

"Good going, moron, you almost trashed the entire thing." That was Chari.

"Fucking greenies," Scaler put in.

Confused shame....

Kalypso was in the alcove of the left turret, leaning against the glass.

Relief...stifled by caution. One long beaded braid cut a dark line down hir face, dividing hir faraway smile. The distance in hir gaze was not one of consciousness receded and coiled around the maw of oblit, but the distance of the sage from the maddening crowd. I wanted to close that distance, to rush to hir and catch hir in my arms. I wanted to press my cheek against the warm skin of hir breast and find my pulse in hir heartbeat. We went through it together, didn't we? We conquered the chaos and came back triumphant, right?

At least to touch hir and share that moment of recognition: I understand. But hir gaze stayed on the other side of the galaxy. The alert tension around hir searching eyes had eased. Kalypso had finally found peace in hir own skin.

"I love you."

Scaler's whooping laughter made me realize I'd spoken aloud. I didn't care. It was the truest thing I'd ever said. Why should it embarrass me? Embarrassment.

It was okay. I knew Kalypso understood.

"Final Voyage" was amazing whether blaring or not. To listen to it was like having a crystal shard thrown into the pool of your heart that sent ripples to the shores of your being. It was hir masterpiece, and I got to be there during its gestation and nativity. Pride. Seven nights and softly filtered days. Caring tinged with anxiety.

The posse treated me with spiny contempt after that week. Their grumbles rehashed how I almost contaminated Kalypso's magnum opus with my unrefined emotions. They were just jealous that I got to be there, really there. Besides, Mike & Co. were able to edit out all traces of my intrusion.

They could complain all they liked. Kalypso needed me.

"Don't you want to hear about that time we went to Lotus Land?" Joy suffused with childlike awe.

Kalypso shrugged without turning from the bay window. In the reflection, I could see hir small, private smile. Hir hands were still.

"It was the break between first and second studies, and we...." I stopped. I'd recounted it dozens of times for the appropriate tracks.

"I don't need it," ze said. "It's in the pools."

Where was it? I cast about desperately. I remembered the story, the words I'd used, but there was a smudge where the actual day had been. Ze was going to call Chari in, I just knew it. She'd breeze past me with her hair baubles and improvised fairy tales. I'd be exiled to the netherworld. I had to do something, had to engage hir.

"Remember when we stowed away on that tour cruiser? The lifters started up, and we thought we'd pee our pants...." Shit, where was the image? Fear, excitement, endless possibility.

Beyond hir, the silver city gleamed beneath the lofty white brilliance of synthesized sunlight. Kalypso was a shadow outlined in radiance. I stared, mesmerized by the light that slid along hir jaw line down hir slender neck and over the slope of hir bare shoulder. Inviolable, the play of light and flesh. Suddenly, all I wanted in the world was to trace my fingertips along that curving ecliptic. Ze sighed and broke the spell.

Kalypso needed me, but I had to remember more than just the words. "We were so scared we almost—"

"I don't need it anymore," ze said more quietly but with more finality. Without moving, ze had drifted leagues away from me.

The ship was departing, and this time I wasn't on it.

The One-Legged Assassin

By

T.W. Williams

My hand brushed the shoulder of his jerkin before he twisted away. Even with his limping gait, he was soon lost in the crush of the market crowd. I was that close.

By the Immaculate Calf's steaming feces! I was that close!

As I cursed and pushed and tried to peer through the sea of sweating faces and unwashed bodies, I felt something clench the sleeve of my robe. I looked down, expecting a beggar brat or inept pickpocket. Despite the sun baking the bazaar, I shivered – so close that I had to die.

A neck-seeker, its gleaming red-brown body almost as long as my hand, was crawling up my right arm. If it reached the great vein in my neck....

Suppressing a shudder, I reached down with my left hand, grasped the thing and tugged. Unclean magic tingled against my palm. Although I had a firm grip, it would not come free, moving as if my hand wasn't on it.

Continuing to tug at it, I shoved through the crowd. Gooseflesh pimped the spot on my neck where I expected to feel the piercing bite at any moment. I slammed into a bent, old woman, spilling the platter of flarefruit on her head and shoving her against a snake charmer, who, flailing wildly for balance, sat down abruptly in his basket of vipers.

I reached the well and, vaulting its low wall, jumped in feet first. I didn't know how deep it was, but if the fall killed me at least I wouldn't die from the neck-seeker's bite. Bouncing off the stone-lined walls more times than I cared to count, I finally plunged into water, its coolness a shock after the desert sun above. I treaded water for a moment to catch my breath. A small reddish-brown body floated beside me, its unnatural shell of metal-blended chitin gleaming faintly in the dim light.

That part of the lore was right, at least: water killed neck-seekers. I had no desire to confirm the rest: that a neck-seeker's venom rushed to a victim's brain, killing it off, bit by bit, a roulette of agony and insanity. Sight would fail, then the ability to control bladder and sphincter, then speech, then memories – a hard death, a death that could take weeks.

I picked up the neck-seeker and stuck it into a pocket of my sodden robes.

Even if I hadn't been battered, chimneying up the well's slime-slick walls would be a challenge, so I yelled for someone to throw a rope down. It came with a bucket still attached, narrowly missing my head. A few curses floated down after it. Someone didn't much like people diving into the public well, I guessed as I half-climbed and was half-pulled from the shaft.

A sergeant of the City Troop was waiting, his squad arrayed behind him. I had seen this one around town. I didn't remember his name though he recognized me.

"Agent Morala!" He quickly put his hand behind his back, but not before I caught a glimpse of the leather bindings intended to pinion the well-jumper's wrists. I smiled up at

him and his name came to me. "I don't think those will be necessary, do you, Sergeant Dallek?"

"No, ma'am...I mean, no, Agent Morala...S-S-Senior Agent Morala!" Whistling up his squad, Dallek shoved his way through the crowd that had gathered, knocking the snake charmer back into the vipers. The man picked himself off the ground, cursing, but I had little sympathy for him. His snake-charming was entertainment without risk, and what sort of entertainment was that? The vipers, no doubt, had had their fangs pulled, or he wouldn't have gotten up the first time. He had the audacity to shake one crushed reptile in my face as I followed the sergeant. "You ruined my snakes!"

Sore, wet, and frustrated, I pulled the serpentine dagger from its sheath and waved it back in his face. "Mine has a bite left!" I snarled. The words made me think of the dead thing in the pocket of my robe, which made me think of the assassin who had eluded me again. My anger became a cold, heavy weight in my gut. Sheathing my blade, I pushed past him, deliberately angling my leg behind his ankles and thrusting my shoulder into him so that he made a third trip into his snake basket. He was still sitting in it, cursing, when I reached the horse that Dallek was holding for me. The squad was trying with little success to hide their guffaws.

By the time I swung into the saddle, the crowd had dispersed. There were wares to be sold, scams to be sprung, wine to be drunk, stories to be told – no doubt one of them would be an exaggerated account of the well episode. At least there wouldn't be any stories today about the One-Legged Assassin escaping from Morala the Imperial Agent. Again. I would tell that story to myself as we rode back to the palace. It wasn't a very entertaining tale.

My blue-and-white robes were steaming and the sun was hot on my head as we entered the palace grounds. My blue silk turban with its scale-mail lappet, distinctive of the Corps of Imperial Agents, was drying on the saddle horn.

"By the Bull's Blessed Balls! You're quite a sight, Morala!" The Emir's plump adviser, Xinko the Eunuch, was watching from the shade of an arched doorway. He looked downright girlish in his sequined caftan and crimson slippers.

"What would you know about balls?" I asked him as I slowly climbed down from the horse. Even though the ride had been short, every joint in my body was stiff.

Xinko had always treated me fairly and deserved better than a sour comment, I thought, as I stamped down the hall toward the barracks, wringing my turban as I went. He hastened to keep stride, the caftan's glittering weave threatening to split at each sashay of his broad hips.

"About as much as you do, I'd say," he answered. "At least I had 'em until I was six, and that's a half-dozen more years than you ever had any."

I stopped, mouth agape, and looked at Xinko. He was grinning, and there was nothing left for me to do but laugh. "I'm a mess," I told the eunuch.

"You're a mess," he agreed, chubby fingers straying to smooth his caftan. He turned back toward the main hall. "And the Emir wants to see you."

I didn't ask when, because when the Emir wanted somebody, there is no *when*, there was only *now*. I squelched after Xinko. "What about?" I asked in a low voice.

He could have ignored me, but I had served the Emir for a dozen years. Xinko had served him twice as long, so he whispered back, "About what do you think? The One-Legged Assassin, of course." He hustled ahead of me, signaling for the slaves to throw

open the tall bronze doors.

There were the usual dozens of court functionaries, sycophants, guards, wives, and slaves gathered in the high-roofed hall, talking in small groups by the fountains, lounging idly on the benches, or running to and fro on a variety of missions secret and mundane. At least there weren't any Screaming Priests present. They might be favorites of the Holy One, but their carryings-on always stretched my patience. It was a fine thing to respect religion, but being devout at the top of your lungs was wearying to others' ears.

Amid the usual bustle, there was one unusual thing, and I felt my brows draw into a frown. Karanya. In blue and white with her mailed turban under her arm, she stood in a position of honor on the dais, no less, only a few feet away from the Emir's divan. I knew where she should have been: making the rounds of the caravans, trudging through mounds of mule dung, breathing in camel flatulence, keeping her eyes peeled for smugglers. I had assigned her there.

Karanya – sleek, cold-eyed, five years younger than me. As ambitious and ruthless as any fire eagle's hatchling. I had been her mentor when she joined the corps, close as sisters, close as lovers, and now bitter rivals. Her hair shimmered like a desert mirage in the hall's lamplight. Even if protocol hadn't demanded her to be bare-headed before the Emir, she would have found an excuse to remove her turban. Karanya was overly proud of being the only blonde in the corps.

We used to laugh at the sight of her golden locks mixed with my own dark hair. Did she love me then? Did she ever love me, or was I just another rung on her ladder? I shook those thoughts out of my head. I was still Senior-Agent-in-Charge – at least for now – answerable only to the commandant and the Emir. The One-Legged Assassin would be mine, I vowed. And when I threw his head down in front of the Emir, perhaps this grasping slut would weep tears as bitter as I had when she had moved out.

I made my obeisance to the Emir and remained kneeling, waiting for his permission to rise. It seemed much longer in coming than usual, and I felt his dark eyes and her gray-blue ones on my back the whole time.

"Well, Morala, what have you to say for yourself?" The Emir's voice was as rich and cold as *sharbat*, a confection of ice, sugar, and limes that had recently become the rage at court. The thought of that sickly dessert, as well as something in his voice, set my teeth on edge.

"I had my hands on the One-Legged Assassin, My Lord," I heard the pleading note in my voice and hated it. "I had been tracking him for a week, and caught up with him in the South Marketplace today.... He slipped away and left me this." I pulled the dead neck-seeker from my still-damp robe and tossed it in front of the divan.

In retrospect, it was a rash act. Those closest to the dais gasped and drew back, except for Karanya. Well-trained, I thought bitterly, as her long dagger flashed from its sheath and arced to a halt an inch from my throat.

The Emir's eyes narrowed, but he didn't flinch nor cry out. "By the Bull! Where did that thing come from?"

Xinko squealed. "My Lord! I had no idea! She—"

"Quiet, Xinko," the Emir snapped. "The unholy creature is dead." He steepled his fingers, bringing the tips to rest on his bottom lip. "If the One-Legged Assassin is in league with the Magicians' Guild – and where else could a neck-seeker come from? – then that makes him even more formidable than we thought."

"I can find him again," I said, my voice rising despite my best efforts to control it. "I was so close. Let me go, before the trail grows any colder."

"Colder than the water at the bottom of a well?" Karanya sneered. "You've had your chance, and then some."

The unfairness of her comment re-ignited my frustration. It was under my leadership that the Corps of Agents had harried the wizards, had thinned the ranks of their banned guild until only a few remained scurrying from hole to hole like the vermin they were. "It's not your place!" I shouted.

"If I wanted to hear bitches caterwauling, I would go to my harem!" the Emir yelled. Immediately, the hall fell silent. The only sound was the tinkling of the fountains, and even that seemed hushed.

He waved his hand impatiently and continued in a quieter tone as the conversations and activity resumed. "The Holy One is supposed to make an appearance in Beggars' Plaza tomorrow at midday. There will be hundreds of people gathered. You know the Holy One won't tolerate the City Troop or the Royal Guard or any overt show of weapons." The Emir humphed. "Clashes with his message, he claims. I had to argue for days to get him to accept a half-dozen Imperial Agents as escort." He turned to Karanya. "You will lead them."

"But I am—" I sputtered.

"If you had done your job, it wouldn't have come to this," Karanya said.

I felt like continuing the argument, in truth, felt like pulling a handful of blonde hair from her scalp, but I heard the Emir growl again, and I took my leave. The distracted wave of the Emir's dismissal was just another bruise on what was turning out to be a black-and-blue day.

I lingered outside the hall a long time, waiting to intercept Karanya as she headed back to the barracks. When she saw me, she scowled.

"Kari, listen," I said, falling into step with her. No problem, that, I topped her by a good three inches. "I know we have had our differences of late, but I'd like to be part of the escort tomorrow."

She laughed scornfully. "Not a chance."

I grabbed her arm and forced her to stop. "Then at least think about what you'll be up against, Kari. Hundreds of beggars, both the normal kind and the professional ones. Dozens of maimed war veterans. Rich, old dowagers in covered palanquins. That plaza is a warren of windows, doorways, alleys, street booths. There will be scores of opportunities for the One-Legged Assassin, and, don't forget, he can wear a thousand different faces." I knew I was talking too fast, my words stumbling over each other, desperate to be understood before she turned away.

Karanya's eyes narrowed and her beautiful face set in hard, alien lines. "I know what I'm up against." She shook herself free. "No thanks to you."

She strode away, stiff-backed with arrogance. Karanya had a right to think she was good. Her talents and my teaching had made her formidable indeed, but I hadn't spent a dozen years working my way to the top only to be tossed aside. Before this was over, I told myself, she would realize that there were worse duties than caravan inspection.

The rough fabric of the homespun robe itched, and the heat of the midday sun

beating down didn't help matters, nor did the fact that my hair was braided and piled up under layers of dirty rags that swathed my head and passed for a turban. At least my disguise allowed me to scratch as much as I wanted, although the pig testicles in my hand had begun to stink in the hot sun.

Some butcher's boy had thought it a great joke. "Hoy! Would you like to hold the jewels?"

As I imagined a village idiot would have responded, I drooled and grinned and made some grunting noises of assent. He slapped the pig testicles in my hand. The crowd around me had got a great laugh out of it. I had been carrying them around for an hour and noticed that the crowd had thinned out a bit, so that was to the good. At least he hadn't tried to put *his* family jewels in my hand.

I was beginning to get weak-kneed from thirst but I was only a half-dozen paces from the street the Holy One would be using, and didn't want to lose my spot. Putting on an even more slack-jawed expression to complement the dirt and bits of hair I had glued to my face, I whistled to a group of street urchins lolling nearby. One of them came over. Acting thick-tongued and stupid – not much of a stretch after hours in the sun – I pantomimed and grunted that I'd like a drink. I held up two coins, but when he went to grab them both, I snatched the larger one back. "Wineskin," I slurred.

I figured greed would win out, and I was right. His return with the wine and my enthusiasm to grab the skin allowed me to drop the pig's balls without anybody noticing. I purposely spilled a third of the wineskin down the front of my robe, which drew more laughs and hoots from those standing nearby. All the better, I thought.

Acting as clumsily as I could, I squeezed a sloppy mouthful from the skin. As much as I wanted to gulp it, I let most of it dribble down my chin. The wine the brat had bought was cheap, red stuff, even more vinegary and bitter than I expected. Perhaps the boy had been ignorant, or maybe he was trying to increase his profit margin. No matter, the wine was wet and I was thirsty. Besides, I didn't want to reveal myself by getting into a noisy squabble with some urchin, so I grinned foolishly and handed him not one, but three more coins. He turned and waved the coins at his friends, and they all enjoyed another laugh at the idiot. I took a long, sloppy pull, again purposely causing most of it to run from the corners of my mouth and down my neck.

Acting the idiot saved my life.

My tongue went numb and fiery pinchers stabbed my throat. Red waves of pain lashed the back of my skull. Poison!

"Boy!" I grabbed him so hard that his eyes bugged in pain and fear. I don't know what frightened him more, my hand clenching his throat or the fact that the village idiot was speaking in sentences rather than drooling and grunting. "Where did you get that wineskin?"

"T-t-there!" He pointed. Not relinquishing my grip, but lessening it a bit, I turned and looked. I must have turned too quickly because the drug in the wine made my vision swim and I almost lost my balance. The awning he indicated, set up against the plaza wall, was deserted. "He was there!" the boy blubbed, tears tracking down his dirt-stained cheeks. "An old man with yellow teeth, a patch over his eye!"

"He's not there now," I snarled as my eyes watered. "Did he ever exist beyond your imagination?" My grip on his throat tightened again.

"He couldn't have got far," the boy gasped. "He had a wooden leg."

Reeling, I released the urchin. Despite being half-throttled, he scurried across the plaza and disappeared around a corner. I tried to scan the crowd, but the poison was gripping my belly and I staggered to a wall. Leaning against it, I stuck my finger as far as I could down my throat. I was still retching when I heard the Screaming Priests in the distance.

“May I help you?” I looked up dizzily.

Bauda, a jewel merchant who favored bright red robes splashed with golden highlights, was bending over me. He was a kindly man, I recalled from past encounters, though even in my pain, I found myself surprised that he would stoop to help someone as lowly as a village idiot. He looked at me with pity, and kicked the wineskin away. “I never touch this stuff, man, and neither should you. Plain water or Mother Cow’s Blessed Milk is all you’ll ever need to slake your thirst.”

One of those, I thought. New converts were often the most enthusiastic. That explained his kindness, and his presence in Beggars’ Plaza. The idea of warm milk on a hot day made me want to gag, but it probably would help coat my stomach and maybe absorb some of the poison. Bauda looked on in no little surprise as I drained his flask of milk and half of his water skin. Some of it came right back up, but I felt a little steadier, as long as I didn’t move.

The dozen or so Screaming Priests – just a fraction of the Holy One’s Herd – had stopped near my spot and were dancing and screaming their praises, punctuating each leap with “Blessed Bull!” “Mother Cow!” and other such claptrap. I weaved toward them, my throat and gut still on fire, catching glimpses of the Holy One’s open litter held on the shoulders of eight patient slaves, and the six mounted Imperial Agents around it. I noticed the flash of golden hair peeping from under the edge of the front left rider’s mailed turban. Karanya’s face looked harsh and old in the bright sun, like a stranger’s. My eyes watered uncontrollably. The poison, I told myself, wiping furiously.

The Holy One was leaning over the side of the litter, talking to people, touching babies, grasping hands. I edged as close as I could, just as a Screaming Priest pranced by yelling praises in a voice already going hoarse. Our eyes met and, for an instant, it was no longer priest and village idiot. In that timeless moment, it was Karanya and Morala staring intently at one another, just like old times. And if Karanya was here, scrutinizing the crowd, then the mounted figure couldn’t be a blonde agent....

The Holy One was still leaning over, his back a broad target for the One-Legged Assassin, who was reaching across the horse’s neck toward him, turban and blonde wig slightly askew, sunlight flashing off the steel in his hand.

Whirling at my shout, Karanya reacted with a speed that surprised even me, leaping for his arm. I took a deep breath and threw myself under the horse’s front legs.

The horse reared up and then a hoof crashed down on my head and everything became a series of disconnected blurs: Imperial Agents forming a wedge, the Holy One waving and smiling as the slaves trotted briskly away, a horse careening riderless through the plaza with a boot and wooden leg still dangling from the stirrup, a splash of crimson spreading across the robes of.... I was still weeping bitterly for Karanya when the sights and sounds dimmed, then faded to gray.

Xinko’s round face beamed over me like a happy, though indescribably homely, full moon. “Well, Morala, the Holy One is alive, thanks to you. You are to be guest of honor at

a banquet tonight. In fact, within the hour.” His lips made a wet, blubbery sound as he smacked them together. He shook me again. “Come on, sleepyhead! Get up! They have had teams of slave runners bringing ice from the mountains so that we can feast on *sharbat*. Not just made with limes, but with oranges and strawberries, too!”

Just imagining the icy sweet made me grit my teeth. I groaned and rolled over, my mind still dull from the drugged wine and the hoof blow, my stomach still griping over the potions of the Emir’s physicians that had emptied me from both ends. “You can have my share, Xinko. I need my sleep.”

The eunuch pulled me into a half-sitting position and started to strip off my robes. “All right, you old pervert,” I said, slapping his hands away. “Vaina will help me. Come back in half an hour.”

Vaina, a recent recruit, had a firm but very gentle touch. We dallied longer than the time I had allowed, but eventually I was clean, massaged, and scented with oil. The robes she picked were so brightly white that even her peach tones seemed dark against them. Vaina’s hair was darker than Karanya’s, I thought with a pang as she helped me into the robes, but her eyes were a pure blue. Her Agents’ turban would set them off well. Those eyes were brimming with tears as she tied the mourning colors on my sleeve. It wasn’t until I saw teardrops fall on the front of my robe that I realized I was crying too.

“Come, come!” the eunuch said, stamping his red-slippered foot with impatience as I came out of the barracks. We started down the corridor, when I heard a call behind me and Vaina came running. “Your dagger, Senior Agent Morala,” she said breathlessly, holding out the sheathed weapon. I thanked her with a kiss on her fingertips.

“It’s a banquet,” Xinko fussed. “You won’t need that.”

“You are such an old woman, Xinko,” I said, strapping the sheath to my belt.

“One of us has to be,” he retorted as we resumed our walk. He was fairly dancing with impatience.

“The guest of honor should be allowed to arrive a little late, Xinko,” I said, deliberately slowing my pace.

He sighed and rolled his eyes and fretted about our tardiness – and about his *sharbat* – all the way to the main hall.

“Have you ever thought that if the Blessed Bull wanted us to mix ice and sugar and fruit, then sugar cane and fruit trees would grow on mountaintops?” I said, avoiding the question I really wanted to ask and the answer I knew would follow. The words forced themselves out anyway. “Any word yet on the One-Legged Assassin?”

“None,” he said soberly. “The dungeons are full tonight of one-legged beggars and war veterans. The Imperial Agents are examining them, but he’s probably not among them.”

“‘Probably’ not? Most assuredly not,” I said, my stomach cramping again.

The hall, furnished now for the banquet, was crowded. Judging by the rainbow of pastel silks and the gleam of precious metals, it appeared that the whole first rank of wives was present, as well as the oldest of the princelings and the whole officer corps. The air was thick with perfume and greed, incense and ambition.

The city’s wealthiest merchants had been invited to fill out the lower tables, and as we went in, they were filing in front of the dais to make their obeisance. The Emir seemed in a good mood and was allowing the guests to brush lips against his ringed hand. The Holy One sat beside him, nodding and smiling benignly. At least there were only two

Screaming Priests present, and their clamor thankfully was drowned out by the hubbub of the crowd.

Near the front of the line, I noticed the crimson and yellow robes of Bauda, the jewel merchant. The dozens of lamps hung about the hall were making the material flash as bright as the jewels he sold. I noticed just the faintest bit of a stagger as he approached the dais, and hoped his head start on drinking didn't make him do anything embarrassing. He was a kindly man, and didn't deserve the Emir's ire.

Then, I remembered the taste of warm milk under the midday sun and the look in Bauda's eye as he kicked away the wineskin. I yelled, but the noise was too great.

The aisles between the tables were clogged with people coming back from greeting the Emir and those still trying to pay their respects. I took the only shortcut I could see – across the table tops. Yells and curses and the sound of breaking glass followed in my wake as I reached the last table and launched myself through the air. I crashed into Bauda and knocked him sprawling face first onto the dais, practically onto the feet of the Holy One, who muttered some shockingly un-holy things as a carafe of ruby-colored wine spilled in his lap.

Rolling to my feet, dagger in hand, I spun Bauda around. One quick glance to his face was all it took, and I buried the dagger to its hilt in the One-Legged Assassin's heart. Or tried to – he was quick. Seizing my wrist, he managed to deflect the blade away from his heart, deep into his shoulder. A murmur of pain escaped his lips as his grip on my wrist tightened. My fingers were going numb by the time I managed to bring my other hand up and twist the dagger in his shoulder.

I heard his cry of agony, and realized a heartbeat later it was not from my blow. Red-brown gleamed an instant at his throat before a neck-seeker, trailing a ribbon of blood, leaped free and scurried toward the Emir.

I almost lost my grip on the hilt as the One-Legged Assassin fell twitching, his false leg coming free and clattering across the floor. Wrenching my dagger out of his shoulder, I pinned down the creature, which only seemed to make it angrier. It buzzed loudly and had almost worked its way off the tip of the blade by the time I flipped it into a finger bowl on the Emir's table. As it struck the water, the neck-seeker made a sound like a sizzling coal and fell silent.

It was then that I heard a moan, and turned just in time to see the Holy One swoon, his head bouncing off the table. Holy headache, I winced.

Noting with satisfaction that the Imperial Agents had reacted the soonest, arriving ahead of the Royal Guard to whisk away the Emir and the Holy One, I returned my attention to the One-Legged Assassin. He had voided his bodily wastes and was drooling and clawing his face as I cautiously probed his clothes and body with the tip of my dagger. It would have been a mercy just to slip the knife in deep again, but then I wondered briefly if kindly Bauda had merely been diverted or was dead. Most probably dead. I set mercy aside and continued probing.

My search turned up three razor-edged knives, half a dozen throwing darts with discolored tips safely sheathed in cork, a braided copper garrote, and four different vials, three holding powders and one with a noxious-looking green liquid. I found no more neck-seekers, and left the rest of the examination to the officers who were now crowding the dais. The One-Legged Assassin was puking blood and trying to sing a child's lullaby when I turned away.

Tables had been overturned as the panicked guests fled; cushions were strewn everywhere. Rounds of bread soaked up sauces spilled from the gold and silver tureens and the floors were sticky with spilt wine and pulped fruit. I kicked aside a roast suckling pig and almost sprained my ankle tripping over a flock of honey-broiled fowl. Amid all the mess, I saw, nestled in a broken bowl, one perfect pear. Its smooth skin gleamed with rosy highlights; its fullness was a promise of the delectable juices within.

As I picked it up, I noticed Xinko's fat face peering between the curtains. He looked positively stricken and I followed his gaze. Three huge bowls had been upset and the contents – shaved ice, sugar, and fruit – were melting on the floor in a great puddle of green, orange, and red.

I was still laughing as I made my way back to the barracks, cradling the perfect pear in my hand, the vision of a long, hot, shared bath hastening my footsteps.

Behind Enemy Lines

By
Derek Thompson

“Sol, its time. They’re ready to see you now.”

There was no warning, no inkling of their purpose, just a dire sense of immediacy. But however bad things were, at least the waiting was over.

The faces along the corridor were friendly as Sol passed by. Maybe they were too friendly. This time he must have really rocked the boat because they showed him straight to the upper level, flanked by seniors who escorted him in silence. He’d never realised before that silence could be sinister.

Inside, the light was so bright nothing was visible. Light permeated everything, absorbing all shape and definition. One authoritative voice rode the air, sharp as a blade and clear as a note.

“We have a mission for you.”

It took a moment to register. So that was it; he almost felt relieved. How long had it been since the last mission? He couldn’t remember, aeons it felt like.

“We’re expecting great things of you this time....”

This time. Was that a hint of accusation? So, Sol asked his questions, just to show he was paying attention. A wasted effort if it was anything like the previous missions because no answers would be forthcoming. He didn’t remember a great deal about the last offensive – a design of the debriefing – but that particular recollection was vividly constant. It was always on a need-to-know basis, and they never needed him to know.

“What are my orders?” he wondered aloud, accepting his compliance as readily as they had.

“Re-establish communication lines. Determine what happened to the last contact.”

It was always defection, only no one was allowed to call it that.

“Specialist skills?”

“None required. This is simply a routine operation.”

Sol knew that wasn’t the case or they wouldn’t have sent for him, but he let them savour their secrets.

“What about local knowledge?”

“You’ll pick it up, along with the local dialect when you get there. Other agents will meet you when you’re settled. It may take some time though.”

A touch of remorse there, perhaps? Best prepare for an extended tour of duty, again, and tie up any loose ends on this side. How long had this state of affairs existed? They get one of ours; we get one of theirs. It seemed like it had

gone on forever, neither side budging, each asserting its right to the territory.

The training was brief, a recap of the fundamentals. Time was of no consequence. All attention was on the mission and what he would do when it was over – if he made it back.

They came to see Sol off before the big drop, wish him luck and all that. But only the trainer stayed for the final descent. They waited in the darkness, huddled together, mindful of the need for a precision delivery. Mis-time the descent and who knows where you'd end up. Not with her though, she was a professional. She'd trained numerous brave souls just like him. By all accounts she was something of a veteran herself. She never mentioned it though, and he respected that. He'd miss her, if that made any sense, given the short time they'd worked together. She was a kindred spirit; she understood the job.

The tension increased to a deafening silence and Sol knew he was over the drop zone. This was the worst part. So many missions and he never got used to this bit. She gave him the clear signal and he moved forward for the big push. There was no turning back now; he was committed.

Sol launched himself free in a last exhilarating rush of freedom. Then, he felt himself falling, falling, headlong to his destiny. That same, awful sense of constraint and helplessness gripped him as he struggled to stay conscious. The terrible realisation of the drop was almost too much to bear. The last thing Sol heard before the light blasted away the darkness was a baby's cry, as he was born into the world again.

WELCOME TO CYBERMATE

By

David E. Hughes

WELCOME TO CYBERMATE, THE ONLY WESTERN HEMISPHERE GOVERNMENT-SANCTIONED MATE CERTIFICATION SYSTEM. PLEASE AUTHORIZE 15,000 CREDITS ON YOUR ACCOUNT CHIP AND FULL ACCESS RIGHTS TO YOUR BIO/SOCIAL DATA CARD.

I spat into the DNA verification cup even though the 15,000 credits were going to bring my balance down to just over 100,000. Allen Colby next door always was complaining that finding a mate was expensive, but I thought he had been talking about the face-to-face meetings: dinners at nice restaurants, tickets to holoplays, that sort of thing. I'd never thought about the expense of the first step. It was almost enough to make me want to join the Naturalists. They dated whomever they wanted. Then again, when they got serious they were never approved for a qualified marriage, which was essential to obtaining a procreation license. I wasn't sure if I wanted a kid one day, but it was probably worth 15,000 credits not to limit my options.

THANK YOU. THE FOLLOWING DATA, ALONG WITH YOUR HOLOGRAPH, WILL BE DISPLAYED TO POTENTIAL MATES:

NAME: MYRON [LAST NAME WITHHELD]

SPECIES: HUMAN

AGE: 35

HEIGHT: 5'5"

WEIGHT: 170 LBS

FITNESS INDEX: AVERAGE

HEALTH INDEX: ABOVE AVERAGE

HAIR: BROWN

EYES: BROWN

RACE: CAUCASIAN

PROFESSION: ACCOUNT CLERK

SEXUAL ORIENTATION: HOMOSPECIES HETEROSEXUAL

Stupid biochip. Cybermate made me sound as sexually alluring as a paper bag. Maybe I had a bit more flesh around the middle than I had in college, but I didn't look that bad – at least with clothes on.

YOU MAY NOW CHAT. IF YOU AND YOUR POTENTIAL MATE APPROVE OF THE MATCH AT THE CLOSE OF THE CHAT SESSION, YOU MAY BEGIN SANCTIFIED FACE-TO-FACE DATING. ARE YOU READY?

It was 11:30 PM, and I had to go to work in the morning, but what the heck? I took a bite of the cold pizza leftover from dinner and keyed in yes.

GENERATING MATCH NUMBER 1...DONE. YOUR FIRST POTENTIAL MATE IS KELLY, AGE: 28, HEIGHT: 5'4", WEIGHT: 100 LBS, HAIR: BRUNETTE, EYES: GREEN, FITNESS INDEX: AVERAGE, HEALTH INDEX: AVERAGE.

Her holograph flashed onto my desktop. She looked like the kind of girl it was fun to flop down on your couch with on a Sunday morning. I wondered if she owned a pair of those fuzzy dorgel slippers with pink ears.

YOUR SESSION BEGINS NOW. REMEMBER – BE YOURSELF!

What was I supposed to say? It felt like the time my mother managed to get me a family-approved date in high school. We had sat in the holothheater, both knowing what the approval meant. Our proximity implants had been set on low, permitting a fairly high level physical contact. So, what did we do? We watched the holoplay as stiff as a couple of display window robots. We didn't so much as hold hands. After the date, I couldn't sleep. My erection wouldn't go away.

Hello?

I'd been waiting too long. Kelly was getting impatient. *Hi*, I typed, *I'm Myron. I know. Cybermate provided your name along with some other traits.*

Damn, she looked at my fitness rating. *I'm really in very good shape. Just yesterday I carried six bags of groceries up five flights of stairs and I wasn't even winded.* It was two bags up three flights, but who was counting?

Are you for real?

"For real"? What did she mean? This wasn't going as well as I'd hoped. I changed tactics. *Let's just forget about the fitness rating. I mean, you got an "average" just like me and I don't care. I took one look at your hologram and knew you'd look good in some flannel pajamas. You know, the kind with—*

MATCH NUMBER 1 HAS DISAPPROVED.

"I wasn't finished!" I yelled.

WOULD YOU LIKE TO BEGIN WITH MATCH NUMBER 2?

I wanted to pull my computer from my holocube and hurl it into the matter destabilizer. A pop-out ad materialized in front of me. It was a guy in a old-fashioned-looking top hat and tails with a smile so white he must have had tooth implants. Kitschy music played in the background.

"Are you tired of Cybermate rejections?" asked Top Hat Guy. "Does it seem like you'll never find someone who'll meet you in person? Let me help! I'm Drew Dreer, owner of Personality Enhancements Limited. I can transform you from drab to dapper in just one easy session. So, call or stop by today at—"

Top Hat Guy dissipated when I flipped the off switch. I was sure glad I wasn't *that* desperate.

Holding a carton of mint chocolate chip ice cream, I sat down in the holocube. I took a big bite, and the ice cream dripped onto my lucky brown bathrobe. I didn't care. I'd gone through a gallon of ice cream in the last three days. Cybermate was making me fat.

WELCOME TO CYBERMATE. GENERATING MATCH NUMBER 17...DONE. YOUR NEXT POTENTIAL MATE IS ARIANNA, AGE: 33, HEIGHT: 5'9", WEIGHT: 145, HAIR: AUBURN, EYES: BLUE, FITNESS INDEX: EXCELLENT, HEALTH INDEX: AVERAGE.

Her holograph revealed a thick but well-proportioned woman. She wore shorts, showing off her shapely legs. Her red hair fell to just below her broad shoulders, and her face was freckled.

YOUR SESSION BEGINS NOW. REMEMBER – BE YOURSELF!

Hi, Arianna. I'm so happy to meet you. I pulled up your holograph and I was blown away – you're so beautiful! Of the first lines I had tried, this one had been the most effective.

Tx. I try to stay in shape. I luv volleyball & swimming. U?

I was a horrible athlete. When I was ten I'd managed to break my nose playing badminton. In high school, I'd tried out for the soccer team and got laughed off the field when I shot the ball into the wrong goal.

Anyhow, I sensed this question was a trap, and I tried to avoid it. *I haven't done any organized sports in awhile, but I've been thinking I should get back into something. Maybe—*I thought fast, something she wouldn't be interested in so she wouldn't ask me to do it with her —*skiing.*

Skiing? I LUV skiing. I tried 2 tele but it was 2 hard. 2 much time on greens and I wanted 2 get back 2 blues. So now I'm back 2 shaped Nordic skis. What do U like 2 do?

Uh oh. I felt my ship slowly sinking, but I tried to paddle anyway. *Pretty much the same thing. I like blues, too. Maybe the occasional red.*

Red?

My nimble brain told me I'd screwed up. Too much improvisation. *You may not have heard of a red. They're pretty rare, only occurring on the winter solstice when the moon hits the snow just right and gives it kind of a crimson glow.*

MATCH NUMBER 17 HAS DISAPPROVED.

Damn.

WOULD YOU LIKE TO BEGIN WITH MATCH NUMBER 18?

"No, I wouldn't," I said. I was depressed and out of mint chocolate chip. I disconnected and Top Hat Guy showed up again.

"Are you tired of Cybermate rejections?" he asked in the annoyingly cheery voice. "Does it seem like you'll never find someone—"

I cut him off, but I had to admit I was getting tired of Cybermate rejections.

I'd gained five pounds in the last thirteen days. My cramped studio apartment was littered with candy wrappers, empty doughnut boxes, and ice cream cartons. My eyes were dry and red, and I had a constant headache. Diagnosis: Cybermatitis. I should take out the trash. I should get some exercise. I should throw my pesky computer out the window.

What match number was I on? I was pretty sure it was under 100.

"You have reached your destination," chirped the autocab in a low, synthetic voice. "Total trip length, sixty-two miles. Please authorize 30 credits on your account."

I spat into the cab's DNA cup. Thirty credits! Autocabs were such a rip-off. I would have taken the bus if I could have found one that traveled to this remote, industrial part of the city.

"Thank you," oozed the autocab. "Please ride with us again."

The door opened with a hydraulic hiss.

At first, I was convinced the autocab had made a mistake. This couldn't be the building. It was sandwiched between a green plastone edifice advertising "Sensual Robotic Massage" and a dilapidated My Burger restaurant that filled the air with a scorched-something smell. The prefab concrete walls of the building were splotched with peeling brown paint. A single metal door was centered in one of the walls and a three foot square sign hung next to it. "Personality Enhancements Limited" was printed in purple letters on a white background. I was in the right place after all.

Inside, there was a reception desk, several chairs, and a coffee table with three e-magazine modules flashing the cover pages for *Sports Illustrated*, *Human Male Weekly*, and *Western Hemi News*. I hoped I wouldn't have to wait since I hated all three of those rags. The room was brightly lit despite having no windows. It was carpeted with that multicolored commercial grade carpet that hides stains well, and the walls were painted a subtle shade of violet. The furniture looked relatively new, but it was the cheap, industrial kind you can order out of a catalogue.

"Hi, there!" blurted the blonde woman beyond the desk. The metallic nameplate pinned to her pink blouse read, "Gwen." She was the only other person in the room. She looked young, in her twenties, but her face and her breasts were almost too perfect. Probably surgically enhanced. She could have been 50 for all I knew.

"Uh, hi. I have an appointment with Doctor Dreer."

Gwen giggled.

"What?"

"Drew's not a doctor!"

"Oh."

"That's a good one. Your name?"

"Myron Lynde."

"Myron Lynde is here to see you," she said to a holoplate. Then, she looked at me with a big toothy smile. "Have a seat." She gestured toward one of the industrial-looking chairs.

"Do you have access to any other magazines?"

Her smile didn't fade. "Sorry."

What the heck was I doing here? I didn't do these kinds of things. I ate fast food and instant pizzas. I got to work on time every day but left five minutes early when my boss was gone. I rented holoplays and watched them twice in one night to make sure I got my money's worth. I avoided eye-contact with women, people of authority, and strangers. I bought lottery tickets, exercised hopeless sexual fantasies about the woman I sometimes saw on the elevator at work, and broke all of my New Year's resolutions. I didn't go to places like Personality Enhancements Limited – or anything "Limited" for that matter.

I sat and picked up *Human Male Weekly*. I pressed the "select" button and the table of contents showed it had two articles on improving sexual performance. A lot of good that would do me since I had no place to perform – unless you counted solo performances.

"Mind if I ask you something?" Gwen held an emery board poised above one of her long nails.

"I guess not."

"How come you didn't try hitting on me?"

"I..."

"I mean, you're obviously interested in meeting a woman, or you wouldn't be here. Am I right?"

I nodded.

"Most guys think I'm attractive, but you read a magazine you don't like instead of making a move."

Was she really implying that I'd have had a chance with her? I mean *me*, Mr. Average Fitness Index? "You are...very...attractive." I swallowed. God, I was worse in person than I was in keyboard. "But I'm...not a Naturalist." For her, I think I would be. Cybermate be damned.

"Too bad," she returned to her nail filing. "You seem like a nice guy."

A nice guy! That was the best compliment I'd gotten from a woman since my dental hygienist told me I had nice bicuspid. Maybe I should ask her out. I could offer to buy her a drink when she got off work. If it worked out, it wouldn't be an approved match, but it would be a whole lot better than what I had now.

A man emerged from the doorway just behind the reception desk and stood close behind Gwen. He did something with his hand, but I couldn't tell what it was because my view was partially blocked by the reception desk.

"Oh!" Gwen bounced in her chair, turned around, and narrowed her eyes at the man, who returned a wolfish smirk.

The man looked familiar but I couldn't place him. He was around six feet tall. There were bags under his puppy brown eyes and he was in need of a shave, but he held himself in a relaxed, confident manner. A white lab coat, unbuttoned in the front, partially covered a shirt with a loud Hawaiian print. His sizable belly hung over his wrinkled, khaki slacks. "Mr. Lynde?"

"Yes?" I put down the e-mag.

He smiled and exposed a set of teeth so white they almost glowed.

I realized who he was.

"I'm Dwayne Dreer. Come on back."

I stood. "You look different than I expected."

"I get that a lot. I had the holographers take off thirty pounds and ten years. The tux did the rest."

I followed him to a small white room that was filled with computers, electronic equipment, wires, and monitors. In the center, a black, simuleather chair that looked like a dentist's chair was bolted to the faded, yellow, vinyl floor. Suspended just above the chair was an upside-down metallic bowl with green wires and clear plastic tubes coming out of it that led back to the console of machines. I expected the room to have a sterilized, antiseptic odor, but it smelled vaguely of tuna.

"Sit down," said Dwayne.

I eased into the chair and tried not to look as nervous and uncomfortable as I felt.

"I'm sure glad you're here, Myron. Okay if I call you Myron? I believe you'll look back on today and realize it was a turning point in your life." Dwayne's speech sounded a bit canned. I had no doubt he had said the same few sentences hundreds of times. He gestured with his left arm and I noticed he was wearing one of those antique watches that work without a battery. It could have been a fake, but if it wasn't, it was worth a bundle.

"I haven't decided anything yet. They said on the phone I could come in for a consultation."

Dwayne grinned. "Of course. We're not rushing into anything. I'm here to help. You only go through with the procedure if you decide it's right for you."

"What, exactly, is the procedure?"

Dwayne sat down on a small stool with metal legs and a round leather seat. "Well, you've experienced the frustrations of Cybermate. You wouldn't be here otherwise. It's like this. Cybermate makes it nearly impossible to successfully meet a woman. You're already behind the ball. Your hologram and bio/social data are already displayed for your potential mate. There's no mystery at all. You're like one of those frogs pinned down to a lab tray ready for dissection. What's attractive about that? Nothing. The impersonal atmosphere of the Cybermate messaging session makes it even more uncomfortable. It's almost impossible to get to the next step – meeting the woman of your dreams in the flesh – without our help."

I began to relax a little. What this guy said made sense. "So you give me a script of what I need to say?"

Dwayne shook his head. "I'm afraid it's not that simple. That's the concept I started with, but it didn't work."

"Why?"

"Cybermate admonishes: 'Remember – be yourself.' That's not just advice, that's a *requirement*. Cybermate won't let you cheat. If you're using a script or having someone spoon feed you answers, the program will call you on it and terminate your account."

"That can't be right." I'd lied about being able to ski and, in one particularly strange session, I'd greatly overestimated the length of my penis. "I've...stretched the truth a few times and Cybermate let me get away with it."

"Of course you lied. Everyone does. That's not the problem. Cybermate let you lie because it was consistent with your personality to lie. Lying is fine as long as it's *you* lying and not someone else lying for you."

"How could it know?"

Dwayne shrugged. "The programming is incredibly sophisticated. It can sense identity through word patterns, fact data, and so on."

"So how do you get around it?"

"That's where Personality Enhancements Limited comes into play. We don't change your words to make it appear that you have a different personality. We actually change your personality. Your words come out in a way that attracts a mate."

I studied his face to see if he was serious. "You're going to change my personality?"

"Now, don't be alarmed." Dwayne closed his eyes for a second and nodded knowingly. "I know it sounds radical at first, but it's really not. People get cosmetic surgery, wear make up, and change their hairstyles all in the name of attracting a mate. But it's still them underneath. This is no different. In fact, it's completely painless and take less than ten minutes."

"I don't know. It sounds strange. I'm used to the personality I have."

“Of course you’re used to it, but just because you’re used to it doesn’t mean it’s good for you. What has your current personality gotten you? Wealth? Fame? A happy family life? If it had, then you wouldn’t be here talking to me, would you?”

I wasn’t exactly leading a charmed life. I had the bare necessities, but who was I kidding? I was lonely, bored, and sexually repressed. My personality wasn’t doing anything to help change all that. “So, how does it work? It’s not surgery?”

Dwayne winked. “No surgery. As I said, it’s painless. You may have some headaches when it’s all over, but that’s about it. All you do is sit in this chair, put this device on your head,” he gestured to the silver bowl, “and a few minutes later, you’re a new man.”

“Yes, but how does the device work?”

“Oh, it’s just a series of electrical impulses and chemical infusions. Very minimal really.” Dwayne stared at me eagerly.

“I suppose that might be okay.”

“Excellent!” Dwayne got up from the little stool, walked to the counter, and brought back a DNA cup. “Did they tell you about the price when you inquired? One hundred thousand credits. Authorize the transfer and we can begin.”

I took the cup. “One more question. What if I don’t like it? What if I want my old personality back?”

“You’re gonna love it! I wouldn’t worry.”

“But what if I don’t?”

Dwayne shrugged. “If you change your mind in the next 30 days, I’ll bring you back to where you were through the same process. No charge.”

It had taken me years to get 100,000 in my account. “I don’t know about this. It’s an awful lot of money and—”

“Let’s cut to the case, Myron.” He sat back down in the stool and looked at me with a steady, serious expression. “When was the last time you had sex?”

No words came to me. Ten – no – thirteen years ago? Had it really been so long since that awkward, strange, but amazing night in Sheila Peterson’s dorm room?

Dwayne nodded as if I’d answered. “If you go through the procedure, you’ll have a woman in your bed by the end of next week.”

I spat into the cup, authorizing the transfer.

Dwayne lowered the bowl over my head and flipped a switch.

That Dwayne Dreer is a fucker. He said there’d be headaches after the procedure, but he didn’t warn me about the goddamn brain-splitter I had last night. I thought I was gonna puke it hurt so bad. I ended up going to bed without even trying to log on to Cybermate.

Tonight my headache wasn’t as bad, so I took a couple of aspirin and switched on my computer.

WELCOME TO CYBERMATE. GENERATING MATCH NUMBER 78...DONE. YOUR NEXT POTENTIAL MATE IS JUNE, AGE: 28, HEIGHT: 5’10”, WEIGHT: 120, HAIR: BRUNETTE, EYES: BLUE, FITNESS INDEX: EXCELLENT, HEALTH INDEX: EXCELLENT.

Her holograph appeared. She was thin but not too skinny. The bulge in her sweater showed that her tits were a nice size, and I could see from the skirt she was

wearing that she had an incredible ass. Her chin was a little pointy and there was a glimmer in her eyes that made me wonder if she was bookish, or maybe she was too smart for most guys. I could deal with that if she was good in bed.

YOUR SESSION BEGINS NOW. REMEMBER – BE YOURSELF!

I laughed. "It's me, baby! It's all, one hundred percent genuine, grade A me!"

The cursor appeared. I was sick as hell of coming up with the first line. I'd force what's-her-name – June – to make the first move.

Is anyone there?

I smiled. *Is that the best you can come up with?*

What?

Is that the best first line you can come up with? Cybermate is all a big game and we're supposed to figure out how to entice one another. How was that first line supposed to entice me?

Are you really this much of an asshole?

I laughed. This should be fun. *That's better. What you really want to know is why I'm not playing the game like everyone else, why I'm not deluging you with compliments. Shouldn't I be proving to you I'm a nice guy? Well, that doesn't work. I'm interested in the truth. If you can't handle that, then terminate the session now. You're not worth my time.*

The cursor flashed for a second or two. *What do you mean by "the truth"?*

I jumped up and pumped my fist. I had her hooked.

You have reached your destination," chirped the autocab. "Total trip length, twenty-two miles. Please authorize 50 credits on your account."

I frowned and spat into the cab's DNA cup. Fifty credits! Autocabs were a rip-off, but I wasn't going to take a fuckin' bus. You never know what kind of asshole you have to sit next to on a bus.

"Thank you," oozed the autocab. "Please ride with us again."

The door hissed open.

Was this the building? It was a black-glass monstrosity that stretched into the sky, one of those high-class joints where only the rich folks with golden underpants worked. The place I remembered was a prefab concrete structure next to a dilapidated My Burger.

I walked into the lobby and found a directory. "Personality Enhancements Limited, Floor 122."

My ears popped in the elevator on the way up. When the door opened, I was floored. Sitting at the reception desk was the same hot piece of ass that was working here ten years ago. I couldn't believe it. And damn, if she didn't look even better than I remembered her!

I strolled up to her. "Hey sweetie," I said. "I've just been thinking. I've never done it in an elevator before."

She glared at me. "Why doesn't *that* surprise me?" she said.

Strange, I remembered her being nicer.

"Is there something I can help you with, or should I just call security?" she asked.

"Chill, Chiquita. Name's Myron. Here to see Drew Dreer."

"He's expecting you. Down the hall to the right. I'll buzz you through the security door."

Drew looked a hell of a lot better than last time I saw him. He wore a nice-fitting suit, he'd lost weight, and he must have gotten a face enhancement – he looked younger than me. He sat behind a big desk, and he had me sit down on a nice, white leather couch. I didn't see any wires or weird computers.

"Myron. Good to see you again." He smiled with those bright, white teeth. "What brings you here again?"

"I want my old personality back."

"I could do that for you, but you'd need to pay. The 30-day satisfaction policy expired some time ago."

"I know. I've got the credits."

"Very well. What changed your mind?"

I shook my head. "I don't understand it. I loved it at first. I got laid all the time. I can still get laid pretty much any time I want. But that's as far as it ever goes. Whenever I try to get serious, the relationship falls apart. I'm just as lonely as I was when I had my old personality."

Drew nodded. "I'm not surprised."

"Why?"

"I changed your personality, but, deep down, you're the same man. Your new personality attracted the women you wanted but repelled the woman you need."

"But I tried Cybermate before the change. I never found a match."

He met my gaze. "Haven't you gotten it by now? Cybermate is more than a game or a precursor to courtship. It's a filter, determining who will be allowed to procreate based on genetic and socio-economic profiles. The government doesn't think your genes are up to snuff. Cybermate wasn't going to match you with someone who would really be interested in a serious relationship with you. With your old personality, it made you appear unattractive. With your new personality, you were attractive, but only on the most superficial scale. Either way, no procreation license."

This guy was really starting to piss me off. "And you knew all this when I paid all those credits to change my personality?"

"Yes, but you wouldn't have believed me if I told you then. Plus, you got what you paid for at the time – sex. I didn't promise anything beyond that."

"So, you're saying I'm just stuck."

"No. I'll give you your old personality back if you pay for it. Then, my advice would be to forget about Cybermate. Join the Naturalists. You'll find your woman and have a great relationship. No kids, but hey, we can't have it all."

I thought about that piece of ass out the reception area. I could be happy with her, even if we couldn't have kids. Or maybe someone like her, someone who wanted to be around me when I got old.

Drew passed me a DNA cup. Two hundred thousand credits – the price had gone up. I spat.