



nanobison - vol 1 num 4



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From the Editor:

Welcome to the fourth issue of *nanobison*. This issue marks the end of our first year of publication. We have enjoyed working with our contributors. My sincere thanks to all of our authors and to all who have submitted their work for our consideration.

This issue is also the last issue created with the help of Pam Bainbridge-Cowan, my co-editor. Pam's work on story editing, art, and the rest of the zine has been outstanding. She will be sorely missed. I encourage those of you who have managed to forge a relationship with Pam this last year to keep up the contact.

Those of you who have recently looked at our submission guidelines or read the last issue may have been aware of our writing contest. The winning story was supposed to become the cover story for this issue. As it happens, we do have a contest winner, but we have not been able to get in touch with him. So our feature story for this issue will be Justin Stanchfield's very excellent "The Cold, Dark Empty". If our contest winner surfaces before the next issue, we will feature his story then. If he does not, then we may have another contest to locate him.

Meanwhile, enjoy the issue. There are many other wonderful stories inside.



The Cold, Dark Empty
By Justin Stanchfield

An oily, chemical tang clung to the air, the stench of spilled fuel too strong for the scrubbers to clean. James Alpin wrinkled his nose and scowled. Time was he had thought the dockside stink the sweetest smell in known space. Now, it simply left his throat raw. He limped down the long, curved passage, but hadn't gone more than a hundred paces before he realized he had taken the wrong direction.

"Help you find your ship, sir?"

Startled, Alpin spun around. A young girl, no more than ten or eleven standards, stood at his side, black hair tucked under a CygnusCorp cap. He smiled at her. It hadn't been too many years since he had been one of the dockside rats, busy hustling what work he could in hope of someday breaking onto a starship crew.

"That's okay. I know my way around," he lied, too embarrassed to admit his confusion. "Believe it or not, but I'm a pilot."

From the doubtful look on the girl's face, it was clear she didn't. Alpin tried not to let it bother him as he retraced his path along the line of gantries. The pack slung over his left shoulder drew him off-balance, his meager belongings heavier than he recalled. The virus that had nearly killed him had left its mark, his muscles weak even after a month of rest and rehab. He dodged as a loader-train rushed past, the tires nearly flat under the weight of its cargo. The loader slowed, then vanished down the nearest gantry. The bright yellow numbers above the open airlock doors seemed to jump out at him. Dock Eleven. His dock, at least until someone aboard *Javelin* had gotten careless with the bio-filters.



Alpin turned away, anxious to put the memory behind him. He had wasted far too much time already, crying over what couldn't be changed.

A thick steel girder framed the corridor, a tangle of hoses and conduits strapped to its side. The pinprick sensation of artificial gravity vanished as he crossed beneath, blocked by the heavy metal. Alpin's stomach lurched as he hurried through the null zone, the nausea worsened by the scent of burnt plastic that seeped out of the repair shops along the opposite wall. He forced the sickness down and hurried on.

Sweat covered his back by the time he reached Dock Twenty-Two. He slung the pack off his shoulder and studied the status board. 'Currently docked - *Missouri Breaks*. Refuel complete.' He took a deep breath, then started down the sloping passage, the counterfeit ID he had spent what remained of his severance pay to purchase, nestled in the breast pocket of his flight jacket. He could only hope it was as good as the forger claimed, or it was going to be a long, hungry wait on station before *Javelin* returned.

If it ever returned.

Before he lost his nerve, Alpin swiped the card through the reader slot. After several attempts the door slid open. Cool air rushed out. He picked up his pack and stepped inside, just in time to avoid the heavy door as it slid closed behind him. A man in a scuffed flight jacket stood outside the coupler, his thick arms crossed as he leaned against the wall.

"Help you?" he asked. Alpin studied the man. Short, with a powerful chest that seemed too large for his legs, the man looked soft but probably wasn't, the sort you went out of your way to avoid in a crowded tavern. Unkempt brown hair fading to gray, receded from his stubbled face while a tattoo of a small black hornet adorned his left temple.

"I'm looking for Captain Mendoza," Alpin replied.



"You found him."

Shaken by the stranger's appearance, Alpin let his pack drop to the deck and snapped a fast salute. "Reporting for duty, sir."

"We're not much on formality around here, mister..." Mendoza let the question hang. Alpin fumbled once more for his ID. The ship's officer took the plastic card. One of his thick eyebrows rose doubtfully. "Well then, Mr. Denholme, welcome aboard the *Breaks*. Come on, I'll show you your bunk."

Before Alpin could stop him, Mendoza picked up his pack and started down the jumbled corridor that led forward. Alpin struggled to keep pace as he dodged in and out of the crates lashed to the dust-grimed walls. The corridor was dim, at least half of the lights burnt out, the shadows accentuated by dozens of open access panels. A low hatchway lay at the bottom of a narrow set of stairs, and he ducked under it, glad to see Mendoza finally stop in front of a narrow door.

"Here's your quarters. Not much compared to some of the other ships you've probably served on, but it'll have to do. I'll let you get squared away before we launch." A friendly smile eased across Mendoza's homely face as he placed the heavy backpack once more in Alpin's hand. He turned to leave, then paused and looked over his shoulder. "By the way, Mr. Denholme, I hope you didn't pay too much for that phony card you're packing. If I hadn't switched off the alarms, you'd have had station blues all over your ass."

"I..." Alpin's throat squeezed tight. "I'm sorry, sir. It was a stupid thing to do."

"Yep. It was."

"Why did you let me aboard?"

"I had a crew slot to fill." Mendoza stared at him. "You can fly, right?"



"Yes, sir." Alpin hurried into a fast confession. "I was third-watch alternate aboard *Javelin* for the last two standards. I would have gone out with her again, but I lost my medical certificate."

"How?"

"There was spillage in one of our cold bays, and I picked up a flash bug."

"Bio-weap?"

For a moment, Alpin considered lying, but quickly dismissed the idea. "Yes, sir. We were hauling re-supply ordinance, and one of the canisters leaked. By the time we discovered it, I'd already been exposed."

"Are you contagious?"

"God, no." Alpin stepped back, ashamed that the other man would have to ask. "I promise. The hospital cleared me, but the paperwork to get my medical back is going to take months. I swear, I would never join another crew if I thought I might infect them."

After a long, uncomfortable moment, Mendoza nodded. "All right. Get your gear stowed, then head down to the aft hold. We need to get the ship on her feet by oh-eight-hundred tomorrow." He scratched his upper lip. "Just so we're straight, Mr. Denholme? I don't like being lied to. You've bull-shitted me once. I trust it won't happen again."

"No, sir. It won't." Chagrined, Alpin watched the heavysset officer walk away. He took a deep breath, then called out after him.

"Sir? My name's James Alpin."

"Fair enough," Mendoza said without stopping. "I'll see you in a few minutes Mr. Alpin." His footsteps echoed long after he had disappeared from view. Alpin sighed, then, feeling like a scolded child, ducked inside his tiny berth and unpacked.



The shift seemed endless, and by the time the pre-flight was over Alpin was exhausted. The six other crew members were cordial, but ignored him for the most part, the constant stream of complaints and inside jokes another reminder that he was the outsider. Happy to be alone, he slumped onto the long bench that ran the length of the narrow galley and nursed a cup of something he couldn't quite identify. The brew was hot and it was strong, and beyond that had little resemblance to anything he had drank before.

"How do you like our coffee?"

Alpin twisted around as a skinny woman with short red hair squeezed around the table toward the tap. She poured a mug, took a long appreciative swallow, then sat down across from him.

"Well..." Alpin grinned. "I wasn't quite sure what it was, to be honest."

"Good and strong, isn't it. The secret is you fill an old sock with grounds and let it perk all shift." She took another drink, then reached across the table, her hand out. "I'm Julie Simonitch. You're Jim Alpin, aren't you?"

"Yeah." He shook her hand. "I'm surprised you've heard of me."

"Heard of you? Hell, man, you were all the buzz a couple weeks ago. Matter of fact, there was a board down at Culley's to bet on what day you'd finally give up and die. Guess you showed them, huh?" She laughed, but her eyes locked on his as her smile faded. "What *Javelin* did to you was wrong. I can't believe they dumped you."

Alpin shrugged. His gaze drifted to his own mug, the coffee inside it dark as the hole in his soul. "The contract specified delivery to the fleet within ninety days. They couldn't wait for me."

"No? Well, all I know is, you don't leave crew back unless they've gone ambient, know what I mean? The cold dark empty don't



give a damn if you make your contract or not, but your shipmates ought to care what happens to one of their own."

A soft ping signaled the shift change. Alpin's fingers absently danced beside his mug. The woman's words had struck home, but not the way she might have intended. Her's was a pirate's philosophy, an allegiance to friends over ideals, the difference between right and wrong a thin gray stain. He had noticed weapons placements throughout the ship and secret holds that could be filled with who knew what. He had expected the *Missouri Breaks* to be a runner. Most of the independent ships smuggled on the side. But more and more he was convinced the battered freighter was a privateer, ready for hire to the highest bidder. He could only hope they were currently on the Federate side.

"Well, I'm off to get some rack time before launch." Simonitch downed the rest of her still steaming coffee, then rose and squirmed around the table toward the forward hatch. "See you in a couple hours."

"Uh..." Alpin looked up at her, more worried about the coming launch than he cared to admit. "Do you know what the roster is?"

"I'm sure the Old Man will sit left seat tomorrow. I'll probably sit co-pilot. It's my turn. Don't worry, you'll get your chance at the boards. Everyone does. Just so you know, everybody aboard can fly this bird." Her brown eyes twinkled. "We're all pilots. And some of us even have licenses."

He watched her leave, then sat a while longer in the galley, the constant stream of hums and rattles a discordant background. He took another sip from his mug, then poured the rest in the recycler, his stomach already on fire without the bitter dregs to stoke it. A dark thought swirled in his mind. A crew never leaves someone behind, she had said, not unless they were dead. Alpin laughed sourly as he wondered what had happened to his predecessor aboard the *Breaks*.



#

The launch went more smoothly than he anticipated, the push off and initial burn so seamless had it not been for the low pulse from the engines he might have thought the battered ship still coupled. Alpin lay on his bunk, the padded straps tight across his chest, and waited for the release siren. Instead, a familiar red-haired visage poked through the open hatchway.

"Hey, sleepy head? Captain Mendoza wants you in the cockpit."

"Damn," Alpin muttered. "I must have slept through the siren."

"Actually," Simonitch grinned. "I forgot to sound it after the burn. Most of us never bother to strap down except for jumps. Come on, I'll show you the way."

The corridor forward proved to be every bit as cluttered as the passage aft, piled high with cargo and modified equipment. Simonitch wove through the precarious gauntlet with ease, then stopped outside a sealed hatch.

"Code is 666." She rapidly punched the numbers in the lock pad. The door sighed open. "Captain? Here's the newbie." Simonitch winked at him, then brushed past and vanished back the way she came. Alpin straightened his flight jacket, then ducked inside. To his surprise, despite some obvious modifications, the cockpit was neat and orderly. Mendoza spun his high-backed chair to the side and nodded at the door.

"Close the hatch and have a seat."

"Yes, sir." Alpin hit the lock mechanism then slipped into the right-hand station. The cushions conformed around him as he snapped the restraint harness in place.

"Ever fly a Mark Six?"

"No, sir." Alpin studied the board in front of him.



"Don't worry." Mendoza pointed at various systems as he spoke. "The *Breaks's* a kitten unless she's overloaded. No surprises on the maneuvering jets, but you might watch the main thrusters. We swapped out the compressor stage during the lay-over, so keep an eye on the heat, okay? Standard scanners. Standard commo." His thick hand hesitated over a sealed panel set in the middle of the curved flight board. "This one you can ignore for now."

"Yes, sir." Alpin had little doubt the panel contained the master weapons controls. Mendoza slid his chair back.

"Okay, your bird." Mendoza crossed his arms and leaned back. Alpin took the controls and scanned the board, his eyes running a constantly repeating pattern across the instruments. After a few minutes, the captain unbuckled and stretched, then started toward the hatch. "I'll send somebody up to spell you in a couple hours. Got any questions?"

"No, sir," Alpin said. "Uh, sir? What is our destination point?"

"Two-three Pegasi," Mendoza answered without hesitation. "This is a milk run, out and back."

"Yes, sir," Alpin chewed on his lower lip as he made another fast scan. As much as he hated to, he pointed at the positional display in the middle of the console. "Maybe I'm reading our coordinates wrong, but we're six degrees off course to the jump point."

"No, you're right."

Alpin waited a moment, but Mendoza remained silent. Finally, he asked, "Shall I set up a correction burn?"

"No."

"But, we'll miss our jump."

"I know," Mendoza said.



"Then," Alpin asked, uncomfortable with the idea, "May I ask where we really are going?"

"Certainly." Mendoza grinned. "You can ask." The captain ducked under the hatchway as soon as the door retracted. The hatch slid shut behind him, leaving Alpin alone in the cockpit with a thousand questions and too few answers.

#

The weeks of inactivity left their mark, and it took Alpin the first half of his shift before he felt comfortable at the controls. As he became more confident with the aging freighter, his mind drifted back to their enigmatic flight-path. Though the deviation was minor, given the velocities and distances involved their current course would take them hundreds of thousands of kilometers away from the standard jump point between Sirius Station and 23 Pegasi.

Bored, he scanned the communication frequencies. Most of the information between ship and station was handled by computers, but ships passing within radio distance still tended to hail each other on audio. Not surprisingly, the radio remained for the most part silent. 23 Pegasi was a mining colony, most of the gas harvesting and processing automated. Few ships made the voyage, and fewer still advertised their positions en route. Hard as it was for grounders to contemplate, space travel was, for the most, immune to attack. Only around jump points, where all ships had to pass as they entered and exited hyperspace, did the skies become uncomfortably crowded. Especially now, Alpin thought wryly. The wars had seen to that.

Until hostilities broke out between competing colonies and the corporations that serviced them, piracy had been unprofitable. Even if a rogue ship managed to overtake another craft, the sheer cost of fuel and ordinance would have been worth more than most cargoes. But, with the various factions willing to put bounties on the freighters supplying their rivals, it suddenly became all too lucrative. Kill a competitor's ship and collect a



generous reward, and if a privateer salvaged the cargo as their own, all the better. A black market had sprung up almost overnight to accommodate the stolen freight and fuel. Though the Federated fleet tried to curb the practice, it had become little more than lip service now that majority of outlying systems were under indictment.

Nor, Alpin thought, a bitter edge to the idea, was the trafficking limited to things. Rumors abounded of crews sold into slavery out in the Rim worlds where few Federated ships dared venture. The idea left a sour taste in his mouth.

A sudden crackle in his headphones caught Alpin's attention. He scanned the region it had come from, a narrow cone thirty degrees off their nose. Sure enough, a minor fluctuation in background temperature glowed on screen. He waited, certain another burst would follow. He wasn't disappointed. A second, longer snap of static rippled over the bands as matter was torn apart, the energy signature perfectly matched to a ship's thruster. He paged Mendoza.

"Sir, I just picked up a ship on a convergent course."

"Are you sure?" Mendoza's voice was thick around the edges, as if he had been asleep.

"Yes, sir. I caught them decelerating. No doubt about it, they've matched course with us. We should converge in just under nine hours."

"Roger that," Mendoza said. "I'm on my way."

Within minutes, both Mendoza and Simonitch squirmed inside the cockpit. "We'll take it from here," the red-haired woman said, for once no trace of a smile on her face. Alpin unstrapped and stood up to let Mendoza take the controls. The man seemed calm, not at all what Alpin would have expected from a skipper whose ship was being tracked.



"You might as well get some chow," Mendoza said without turning. Alpin glanced at Simonitch, but she pointedly avoided his gaze. Resigned, he ducked through the hatch and started aft. Behind him, he heard the door slide shut.

"What the hell is going on?" he grumbled as he threaded his way through the maze of corridors. The headache he had been fighting for hours pounded in his temples, the virus that had nearly killed him not completely finished. More war related bullshit, he thought grimly. With too few troops and too many planets to patrol, the Federated fleet relied increasingly on bio-weapons to subdue rebel populations. It wasn't popular, but short of a full out nuclear barrage the fleet had run out of options. Now that he had been a victim of the policy, Alpin had garnered a newfound understanding of the colonies resentment.

Ahead, just outside the starboard cargo ports, he caught movement. Cautiously, Alpin joined the pair of crew members busy unrolling an inflatable umbellus. The sight only deepened his suspicion that they were on their way to a rendezvous, not an attack.

"Need a hand?" he asked, trying to sound innocent.

"Sure," a tall black man said. Vinque, Alpin recalled his name. Owens, a short, plump woman with enormous blue eyes clutched the other side of the awkward plastic ring but said nothing. Clearly, he was as welcome as the stomach flu. Careful not to step on the bright yellow fabric, he helped them attach the flex-tube to the airlock, then stood out of the way while they rigged the gas lines.

"Any idea who we're meeting out here?" Alpin asked as they worked.

"Nope," Vinque said. "The Old Man didn't say, and I didn't ask."

Finished, Vinque and Owens left the airlock and headed toward the galley. Unsure what to do, Alpin fell in step behind them, but remained far enough back to avoid conversation. At the next



junction something caught his eye, a squat, stainless-steel tank. He stared at the vacuum jug, certain it hadn't been there when he had gone on shift earlier. He stepped closer for a better look, but Vinque called over his shoulder.

"Hey, let's get some breakfast."

"Yeah, sure." Alpin noticed a warning placard fixed to the container. 'Human Tissue.' He hurried to catch up and tried to sound casual. "What's with the tissue bank?"

Vinque turned and looked pointedly at him. "Like I said, I didn't ask and the Old Man didn't tell."

#

The hours counted down to the rendezvous. Alpin joined his new shipmates in the galley, the rich scent of scrambled eggs and pepper sauce more than his tortured stomach was prepared to handle. He rolled a spoonful of the reconstituted eggs and cheese inside a tortilla and forced himself to eat. The others, apparently, didn't share his lack of appetite, as a second pan of eggs hissed and popped inside the microwave. Vinque pulled the hot dish out and quickly set it on the table. He glanced at Alpin.

"Ready for another one, Newbie?"

"Thanks, no," Alpin said, resigned to the nickname. "I think I'll see how this one sits first."

"Suit yourself." He and the others tore back into their breakfast, while Alpin scooted off the bench and started toward the door. Owens, the woman he had helped rig the umbellus, frowned.

"Where are you going?"

"To the head," Alpin replied, a little too quickly. "Then I'm off to get some rack time."

He left the galley and traced his way to the closet-sized lavatory. Finished, he started toward his tiny berth. The junction outside



the airlock lay along his path, the cryo-tank still waiting. Feeling like a thief, Alpin made certain he was alone, then knelt down beside the cylinder. The small, tapered lid was locked, but a plastic tag dangled from it. Most of the code was gibberish to him, but he understood enough to confirm his suspicions. The tank held frozen embryos harvested at a fertility clinic on Earth. Alpin could only guess how they had arrived here, but had little doubt what their destination would be.

"Find what you're looking for?"

Alpin jumped up so fast he lost his balance and had to put out an arm to keep from crashing against the padded wall. "Damn it, you startled me."

"Yeah?" Simonitch moved closer. "Imagine that."

"Don't take the high road," Alpin said, startled at his own anger. "We both know what's inside this tank. Future slaves."

"No, we don't know it," Simonitch said. "This is bound for the Rim worlds. Most of those populations are so small they need outside genetics just to stay viable."

"And you're okay with that?"

Simonitch shrugged. "So a bunch of pampered money types back on Earth don't get their embryos. So what? They've got options the people out there don't."

"I guess that makes slavery legit, huh?" Until now, Alpin hadn't realized how deeply he hated the idea of human trafficking, and the thought that he was now tangled up to his neck in it only fueled his resentment. "You can call it what you want, but forced labor is forced labor. And that's exactly the fate every embryo in this tank faces."

"What does it matter?" Simonitch blushed, her own anger clear. "As soon as the Feds find out, they'll drop a bug bomb on them



anyhow." She snorted. "I would have thought you of all people would understand what that felt like."

Alpin straightened, startled by the sudden flare of attitude from the normally cheerful co-pilot. As if a curtain had been drawn back, he saw the people around him in a new and disturbing light. They weren't simple smugglers, or even privateers. They were rebels, part of the fire sweeping through the out-systems that threatened to tear apart the fragile network of commerce.

And that made him a rebel too.

#

Begging sickness, Alpin returned to his berth to sulk, his sullen mood worsened by the fact that no one seemed to care. He lay on the narrow bunk, hands behind his neck and stared at the faded white ceiling. Not since he had emerged from the fever and found *Javelin* had left without him had he felt so betrayed. What right did Simonitch or any of the others have to look at him like a traitor? He wasn't the one willing to sell thousands of potential lives to the highest bidder.

Still, the co-pilot's words echoed in his brain. No matter how they were born, what right did the Federated fleet have to kill them indiscriminately? His headache worsened as he struggled with the question, long cherished beliefs suddenly stripped to reveal a dark rot beneath their varnished exterior. If the Rim Worlds, the scattered planets at the fringe of explored space, weren't slavers, but instead legitimate colonists simply fighting to survive, what license granted the fleet the right to attack? A slight shift in moment as the *Missouri Breaks* corrected course tied his stomach in knots. Alpin struggled off his bunk and hurried toward the head.

The exercise helped stave off the motion sickness and feeling better, he started toward the galley, hoping to find the others. Like it or not, he was a part of the crew and should be willing to do his share, at least until they made dock again. Not



surprisingly, the chamber was empty, nothing but the aroma of peppers and coffee remaining. He left the galley and wandered aft.

The lights flickered as the ship made yet another correction. Alpin steadied himself against the wall until the maneuver ended. Ahead, in front of an open panel, he saw movement. Someone in an old-fashioned excursion suit, the type he had noticed hanging from the racks outside the airlock, stood with their head buried inside the panel, working frantically.

"Hey?" he called out. "What's up?"

Faster than Alpin expected, the figure pulled back from the panel and faced him, a heavy multi-tool in their gloved hand. Alpin caught a brief glimpse of his own face in the helmet visor before whoever was inside the suit hurled the tool at him. He ducked and stumbled, and by the time he had regained his footing the figure had vanished around the next corridor. Alpin tried to follow, but he was gone, swallowed in the labyrinth of corridors. He returned to the access panel and peered inside.

"What the hell?"

An overloaded power board filled the compartment. Dozens of wires dangled loose, pulled out of the sockets. Careful not to touch any of the raw ends, Alpin leaned further inside and struggled to read the hand printed labels. A light-headed wave of sickness passed through him as he realized what had been done to the ship. Most of the weapon systems passed through this board, the missiles and defensive guns were now out of commission.

"Damn it." Alpin fumbled for his radio, but too late realized he had left it in his quarters. A quick glance at his wristwatch told him the rendezvous was less than an hour away. Not sure what to do next, he charged toward the cockpit. Somewhere ahead, a shrill siren echoed through the ship.



Within seconds, Alpin felt the deck slide beneath his feet. A throaty roar built around him as the forward thrusters came on line. He fell and rolled, stopped only by a stack of plastic canisters lashed to the wall. He grunted in pain, but managed to slip his hand inside the netting and held on until the burn ended. As the engine roar died away, he crawled back to his feet, and limped as fast as he could to the cockpit.

The hatch was locked, and Alpin fumbled with the touch pad. After what seemed an eternity, the steel door retracted. Mendoza and Simonitch glanced over their shoulders.

"What's wrong with you?" Mendoza asked, his heavy eyebrows bunched into a tight vee.

"It's a set up," Alpin said, out of breath. "The weapon systems are off-line."

"No, they aren't," Simonitch said, obviously annoyed. "I already ran the diagnostics."

"Run them again," Alpin said. "I caught someone pulling wires at the power buss."

"Who?" Mendoza asked, his suspicion clear.

"I don't know. They were wearing an E-suit"

A flash of red spilled down the center board as the weapon systems ran through their diagnostic program. Simonitch's face paled. "Shit, shit, shit." Her fingers stabbed at the panel, but the red lights remained lit. "He's right. The whole board is down."

"Wonderful." Mendoza leaned forward and hit the scanners. A long bright blotch appeared off their starboard side, a ship so close they must have been within kilometers of each other. Further out, a second, darker blotch appeared. As Alpin watched a third blip, and then a fourth washed over the screen, small and swift, on a direct course for the closer vessel.



"Missiles," he said under his breath, stating the obvious. The blips converged then vanished, replaced by a spreading debris field. He barely had time to grab the back of Simonitch's chair as she shoved the power controls forward. The ship jumped as the thrusters fired, too late to drive the *Breaks* out of danger before the hard rain of shattered metal slammed against the starboard hull. Sirens blared as more and more systems failed, knocked out by the debris. The main lights flickered, came back, then died completely, replaced by dim red emergency lighting. Mendoza grabbed his headset mike and pulled it close to his lips.

"Battle stations," he said, his voice amplified throughout the ship. "We're about to have company."

#

The crew rushed to don E-suits, then marched in file down a narrow passage tucked beside the coolant tanks. Mendoza, his helmet tucked under his arm, stopped beside a false section of corridor and swung the padding back to reveal a locker. The red light bounced off his suit, the scuffed armor scuffed and dented, a beleaguered knight errant as he counted heads. Alpin did the same. Only Simonitch, still in the cockpit, and Owens, who had volunteered to go outside and manually watch the approaching ship until the scanners could be repaired, weren't present.

"Any idea who we're up against?" Vinque asked, his voice muffled by his helmet.

"Fed clipper from the engine signature," Mendoza said, his voice flat. He punched long series of numbers into an access pad, and the locker swung open. A variety of hand arms and ammunition waited inside. The crew shuffled forward and accepted one of the thick pulse rifles from his hands, then stood expectantly to see if Alpin would join them.

"This is crazy." Alpin looked around the ring of people. "If that is a patrol clipper, we'll be outnumbered three to one. And that's



only *if* they don't dump a missile down our throats first. It's suicide."

"Better suicide than waiting around to be arrested," Mendoza said. "You know what they do with smugglers. They put control tabs in their brains and send them to rehab factories where they can work until they die. Sorry, but that's not how I intend to go."

Mendoza lifted another pulse rifle from the locker and held it toward Alpin. He hesitated, then took the rifle. It was heavy, the stock filled with batteries. Alpin checked the charge meter, then flicked the arming switch on. Beside him, Mendoza pulled out yet another rifle.

"Give this to Simonitch," he said. "You can stay with her in the cockpit."

"Where are the rest of you going?"

"Ever watch a yellow jacket sting?" Mendoza pointed at the tattoo on his cheek. "The trick is knowing where the tender spots are." He grinned, then seated his helmet and twisted it on. Without another word, he led the small group into the depths of the wounded starship.

"This is insane," Alpin muttered as he trudged toward the cockpit. The ill-fitting suit chafed against his crotch and armpits while sweat rolled down his forehead. As he moved the rifles seemed to grow heavier, each step an effort. It took a moment to realize Mendoza had increased the artificial gravity to slow the attackers. "Nice. Just what I needed."

Finally, he reached the cockpit and punched in the code. Nothing happened. He tried again, then pounded his fist against the heavy hatch. "Simonitch? Let me in."

A wall mounted camera swung toward him, then, a few seconds later, the door slid aside. Simonitch stood on the other side, suited up except for helmet and gloves. "Sorry." She took one of the rifles from him. "I changed the lock code."



"Why bother?" Alpin propped his rifle against the wall, then pulled his helmet off. "I don't think a hatch is going to hold off shock-troops."

"That's the problem with you," she said. "You give up too easy."

"Give up? We're already screwed. Maybe you've forgotten but someone on this ship is a saboteur."

"No," Simonitch said quietly. She glanced out the corner of her eyes at him. "I haven't forgotten."

"What?" Alpin drew back, shocked at the unspoken accusation. "You think I dicked the weapons systems?"

Simonitch shrugged. Alpin glared at her, but she ignored him. He hated to admit it, but her suspicions stung, the idea that he would betray his own shipmates a hard lump in his belly. He laughed sourly as he settled into the co-pilot's seat. "Great. Now I'm starting to think like a damn smuggler." Angry, his attention drifted to the console. Instead of the blurred, computer enhanced scans he had seen earlier, a sharp video feed filled the little screen, bright stars against the endless darkness beyond, the feed direct from the hand-held camera Owens had taken with her outside. In the center of the screen a dark phantom waited. The patrol clipper was hardly bigger than the *Breaks*, but it bristled with weapons, all of them no doubt locked on the crippled freighter.

"Crap," he said out loud.

'Crap is right," Simonitch agreed. "This is going to be ugly."

Alpin sank deeper into the chair, his gaze locked on the gently shifting image. He frowned and leaned closer. Something in the video didn't seem right. He stripped off his gloves and let them fall to the deck, then punched up the magnification.

"Hey?" Simonitch said. "What the hell are you doing?"



"Look." Alpin pointed at the screen and traced the area just in front of the clipper. "Check out the stars. They disappear before the ship moves in front of them, not after."

"Son of a bitch. The video is a fake." Simonitch's eyes widened. "Owens is the traitor." She tried to page Mendoza, but the speakers remained silent. "Commo's jammed. I'll give her this much, the bitch is thorough."

Alpin grabbed his rifle and stood up, then slammed his fist against the door switch. A burst of cool, ozone tinged air swept inside as the hatch retracted. Simonitch stared at him. "Where are you going?"

"To tell the others. That's no Federated ship out there. Owens and her buddies are running a bluff."

"Make certain the captain knows it's you when you show up or he might fry your ass for one of them."

"Right." He tucked the rifle against his side and ducked under the thick portal.

"Hey, Newbie?"

Alpin turned.

"Be careful." Simonitch smiled at him, then closed the hatch. Alpin smiled grimly in return, then started off. Not until he was nearly to the aft hold did he realize he had left his helmet and gloves inside the cockpit. Angry at his carelessness, he ducked inside the airlock to find a helmet that would fit the seal on his antiquated suit. He wrinkled his nose, the acrid stench of scorched metal thick around him. A sharp bang struck against the airlock as a small orange patch, white hot at the center, spread outward. Alpin froze. The airlock offered scant protection, nothing but the gleaming cryo tank, still laying where it had been left, to hide behind. Desperate now to find a helmet before the door was breached, he grabbed the nearest suit and pulled the headgear free. The empty E-suit toppled to the floor and lay



like a desiccated corpse upon the steel deck. Alpin stuffed his head inside the bulky helmet, and to his relief felt his ears pop as the seal inflated.

Another bang shook the hull. Alpin stared at the deck. The empty suit gave him an idea. As quickly as he could, his movement hampered by the suit and the over-boosted gravity, he pulled the remaining suits from their racks and let them fall. The orange patch glowed fiercely by the time he finished. Heart racing, he lay down among them, the pulse-rifle concealed under his arm.

"I've lost my damn mind," he muttered.

A flash of sparks burst from the door as the torch cut through. Glowing blobs of metal spilled to the deck, the smoke whisked out as the air inside the chamber vented outward. Too late, Alpin realized he should have sealed the safety doors. The whistle became a roar as the center of the main hatch burned away. A gaping hole, big enough to squirm through, remained. A new fire, blue-white bursts of plasma from a pulse-gun muzzle, lit the airlock as the invaders shot through the hole to clear any surprises waiting for them. Alpin fought the urge to return fire as a suited figure slid through, clumsy as a hatchling emerging from its egg. Just as he suspected, the gear the figure wore was little different than his own, hardly the state-of-the-art battle armor a Federated trooper would use.

More intruders followed the first. Alpin waited, the anticipation worsened by the cramp spreading up his leg. He wanted to shift to a more comfortable position but didn't dare. When he did move, he would only get one chance. A dull thud reverberated under him as automatic doors closed throughout the ship. Slowly the air stopped venting. Over the com frequency, he heard a familiar voice.

"There's the tank," Owens said, her face hidden behind her visor. She pointed at the cryo unit. "Grab it and let's get the hell out of here."



"What about the rest of the cargo?" a deep, male voice asked. Owens swung her torso back and forth, a broad gesture *no*. "Screw it. Mendoza's got booby-traps all over the ship. Take what we came after and go."

"Seems like a waste," the man argued.

"Trust me." Owens pointed again at the squat tank. "What's in there is enough. Mendoza would rather give those embryos to the Rimmers than sell them on the open market. That's a mistake I don't intend to make."

Owens took up position beside the ruined airlock, her rifle trained on the corridor beyond. To Alpin's dismay, she was at the edge of his field of view, any shot he might take at her almost certain to miss. He lay on the deck, his right leg full of pins and needles, and watched the men with her lug the cryo tank to the jagged hole and struggle to lift it off the deck. He took a deep breath, then before good sense could intervene, fired at the figure on the left.

A burst of static ripped through his speakers as the man's suit short-circuited. He toppled beside the airlock, thrashing madly as his life-support failed. Alpin fired at the second man but missed. He rolled over, the pain in his leg forgotten as a white glare exploded beside him. He sat up and fired again. This time, the second man joined the first, a dark patch on his shoulder quickly covered by frost as the air in his suit leaked out. Now, only Owens remained. Alpin pushed himself off the deck and fell heavily beside the first man, the tip of his rifle pressed against the cryo tank laying on its side where it had fallen.

"Drop your gun or I'll burn a hole in it." His voice clicked in his speakers. "Understand me, Owens? Drop the gun."

"Newbie?" The woman sounded more shocked than concerned. "I'll be damned. You've got more balls than I figured. Tell you what. Move away from that tank and I won't burn a hole in your guts."



"Go ahead." He hoped he sounded more confident than he felt. "If you think I won't get a shot off, think again."

"What do you care, anyhow?" Instead of lowering her rifle, Owens inched closer. "This ain't your fight."

"It is now." His finger tightened on the trigger.

"Guess what? You picked the wrong side," A trace of victory floated in her voice. A blurred reflection appeared on the tank's silvered surface, and before he could twist away, Alpin felt something click against the back of his helmet. He shut his eyes, furious at himself that he hadn't anticipated more of Owen's people coming through the hole. She squatted down out of arm's reach until their faces were nearly level. "All right, Newbie, here's the deal. You drop your gun and we'll let you live. You've got to the count of three."

"Let him go, Owens."

Despite the rifle pressed against his neck, Alpin twisted around. Impossible as it seemed, a figure hung head-first from the ceiling just behind Owens, rifle trained on her. Alpin felt his stomach flip as the gravity failed. Mendoza flipped over as he drifted further into the airlock.

"Back off, Owens," he said, his tone cold as the vacuum outside.

"Tell your boy to leave the kid alone."

"Sir..." Alpin tried to roll over, but the man behind him pushed him down. "Don't worry about me."

"Shut up, Newbie." Mendoza waited as Owens turned a slow half-circle to face him. "Take your tank, then get off my ship."

"You're in no position to bargain. There's a ship out there with enough fire power to blow you to dust, and you can't shoot back."

"Wouldn't want to bet your life on that, would you?" Mendoza kept his rifle trained on Owens. "Mr. Vinque? Have you got that weapons board back up, yet?"



"Roger that," vinque replied over the comm. "Ready to fire on your command."

As if on cue, the dim red lights were replaced by the familiar, flickering glow of the overhead lamps. Alpin felt weight return, gravity restored. Still pinned to the metal deck from behind, he watched helplessly as Mendoza moved within inches of Owens, their rifles pointed at one another. His own rifle against the cryo tank, Alpin waited for hell to brake loose.

"Looks like we've got ourselves a stand-off, doesn't it?" Mendoza sounded impossibly calm. "We can blow each other to stardust, or we can use our heads. Now, get off my ship."

"Not without what we came for," Owens said, the cockiness gone. "I want that tank."

"Fine. Take it and go."

"Sir, no!" Alpin blurted. "You know what will happen to those embryos. They'll be sold for slaves."

"None of my business,." Mendoza said. "My crew, on the other hand, is. Drop your rifle Mr. Alpin and back away. That's an order."

For a moment, Alpin considered pulling the trigger and damn the consequences, but at last let his fingers relaxed around the pulse-rifle, and he scooted away from the tank. He felt sick as he watched Owens and her companion lift the cylinder and shove it through the hole. They followed it out, their fallen comrades dead on the floor. He caught movement out the corner of his eyes and turned to see Mendoza beside him.

"You surprise me, Newbie," he said as calmly as if he was discussing last night's supper. "I can't believe you tried to take them on the way you did."

"I don't like slavers."



"No? Is that the only reason you damned near got yourself killed?"

Alpin thought about it, then grinned. "I don't like people screwing with my shipmates, either." He stared out the gaping hole at the other ship. Though it was no Federated clipper, the vessel still seemed menacing, a freighter not unlike the *Breaks*, stripped down until little more than engines and weapon placements remained. More people in suits helped Owens and her companion aboard, the cryo tank in hand. The airlock slid shut, and within seconds the privateer fired its jets and began to drift away. Alpin sighed. "Did Vinque really get the weapons back on line, or were you bluffing?"

"Damned if I know," Mendoza said softly. "Right now, it really doesn't matter."

Without warning, a bright flash lit the side of the privateer. The ship continued to drift away as a brilliant cloud formed around it, her atmosphere vented out a dark rend in the hull where their airlock had been.

"What the hell?" Alpin stared in amazement.

"You'd be surprised how much explosive you can pack inside a vacuum tank that size," Mendoza said. Alpin turned and faced the other man as the meaning sank in.

"You knew all along Owens was after those embryos."

"Had a pretty good idea she might," Mendoza sad. "Never did like that woman. Especially after Simonitch hacked her comm logs. She'd been planning this for months."

A cold thought shook Alpin, the implication clear. "You thought I was helping her, didn't you?"

Mendoza shrugged, the gesture almost lost under his scuffed armor. "Glad you proved me wrong."



"But, why go through with all this? Why not just put her off ship back at Sirius Station?"

"Because," Mendoza said. "It's what we get paid to do. We got lucky today. Owens and her buddies killed one ship for us, but I intend to take the bounty on both of them. That's just good business, wouldn't you say?" The stocky pilot turned and started toward the corridor. "Come on, Mr. Alpin. We have a lot of work to do to get this old bird back on her feet."

#

The hours stretched into each other while the crew jury rigged the damaged systems. By the time the *Missouri Breaks* went back under power, Alpin was exhausted, as much from the lingering effects of the virus as from the work. Mendoza made the initial burn, then abandoned the cockpit to Simonitch and dropped aft toward the galley. He passed Alpin in the narrow corridor with barely more than a nod. Alpin sighed, then ducked under the low cockpit hatchway and settled into the co-pilot's seat.

"Seal the door, would you?" Simonitch said. Alpin struggled back to his feet and closed the hatch.

"What happens now?" He slumped once more into the deeply padded chair.

"We go back to Sirius Station and collect our bounty. Then, I'm going to sleep for a week."

"That easy, huh?" Tired as he was, he wanted to argue, the implied insult that he might have been mixed up in Owen's plot a seeping wound. "Which side is paying us?"

"The Feds. This time." Simonitch made a minor correction to the engine output.

"Thought you didn't like the Federates?"



"I don't. I don't like slavers much either." She stared at him, her dark eyes deadly serious. "You want my personal views? What the hell gives one planet the right to tell another how to operate? Yeah, I'm a Rimmer. As far as I'm concerned, the Federate Fleet could blow itself to dust and the galaxy would be a better place for it. But, in the meantime, they pay well."

"Just tell me one thing?" Alpin leaned closer, his chest tight as the resentment boiled out. "If this had been for real, if that tank had been full of embryos instead of explosives, would Mendoza have risked everything to stop them from killing me?"

Simonitch drew back as if he had slapped her. "It *was* for real, and hell yes the Old Man would have done what he did. I told you before, we don't leave crew behind."

An uncomfortable silence settled over the cockpit, nothing to break the tension but the whir of fans and the occasional chatter of distant ships bound between station and jump point. After a few minutes, Simonitch relaxed. "Heard some talk on the comms that Javelin is due in next month."

"Yeah?" As much as he hated it, Alpin's pulse quickened at the name of his old ship, resentment and hope tangled into a single, indecipherable knot.

"I suppose," she continued, "you'll be shipping out with her again, huh?"

"Maybe." Alpin chewed on his lower lip and pretended to study the board. A thousand thoughts swirled in his head, too many questions and no easy answers. His crewmates had left him to die surrounded by strangers, while a ship full of pirates had risked themselves to save him. He leaned back and smiled. "Depends on whether Captain Mendoza is willing to let me stay."

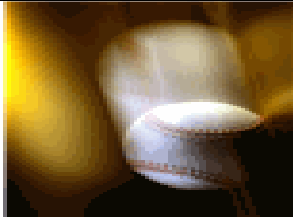
"Like I said, Newbie. We don't leave crew behind."

"That's a good thing to know." Alpin settled deeper into the co-pilot's seat, the cushions a welcome pressure around him.



Somehow, the battered cockpit felt familiar, almost like home.
"Damned good thing at that."





Souvenir Ball
by Marshall Payne

When the Earth ambassador uplinked from the surface, 9dar3 could practically taste the human's discomfiture from the holo. Could almost smell his consternation.

"9...*sir*," he sputtered in his nasally voice unbecoming a diplomat. "I'm sorry if I disturbed you..."

The Ves5ian solidified himself to an appropriate state for discourse--ah, how he loved reposing as vapors--and activated the imager. Prosaically dicephalic and sporting the appropriate number of appendages now, 9dar3 said, "Ambassador Wingate, I've been expecting your call. I hope you are well."

"Yes, yes, quite well," he replied, not quite a stammer, but not the smooth urbanity 9dar3 had noticed of the man when planetside, conversing with his own kind. "Our chief physician was preparing to return your countryman's body to you, but it seems that he's...he's--"

"I take it 2upup has reconstituted himself. . ."

"If you mean that he's come back to life--reanimated himself, as our physician called it--then yes." Wingate shook his head. Clearly a man who would perform his ambassadorial functions without protest, but it was equally clear that he rued the day the Ves5ians had downfolded from jumpspace and made their presence known. "Obviously, we have much to learn about one another, sir. It's my hope that in the future such incidents can be avoided."



"Most definitely," said 9dar3. "But I must ask, what was it exactly that 2upup did that incited such mob violence towards him. As I understand it, he was merely being friendly toward the female."

"Yes, yes, I'm sure he meant, uh..." Wingate paused to wipe his huge, wrinkled forehead. "I must admit that some of the violence was due to pure prejudice--his being an alien, a Ves5ian, that is--but the girl *was* only nine years of age. And from what I've been told, it was not a friendly kiss. It was...passionate."

"Yes, I've reviewed the orbitals, Ambassador. But in my worldman's defense, there were several other couples in the stadium displaying similar affections. A pair of Earthers two rows behind 2upup were exchanging human saliva quite freely. I still don't see what the problem is."

"Sir, it's just--"

"Please, call me 9dar."

"Certainly...9dar, but it's just that not only is there a time and a place for such behavior here on our world, but a definite age of consent as well. You can't blame the girl's father and his friends for becoming upset. I admit what they did was wrong, but..." After a pause and a deep forehead-creasing frown, he said, "Maybe you could come down so we could discuss this further. That way you can see your countryman. He's been asking for you."

"Yes, that sounds most acceptable," 9dar3 said. "I was just sitting here talking with my wife, but I'll bulbship down immediately."

When the holo dissolved, he turned to his wife on her stand beside him. "He's a strange one, 9dar," Infina-Ensuing said, her voice projecting its usual spectral quaver. Despite the syntheducer's approximation of what her voice would someday sound like, it was still only a supposition.



"Yes, I'm afraid he is. They all are, but what's one to do." He sighed fumes, shrugged.

"Since I'm unable to view the orbital surveillance, darling, describe it for me," she said.

"What is this thing they call baseball?"

9dar chuckled, letting bits of himself revert to casual vapors. "A game, my precious. It's a game. What they call a spectator's sport. 2upup--curious as always--had managed to retain a cohesive form long enough to attend one of these events. It seems that it's customary for these Earthers to keep any 'foul balls' batted into the stands. Souvenir balls, I believe they're called. Well, following the Earthers' example, 2upup did the same, and gave the one he'd caught to the young girl sitting beside him. From the orbital surveillance files, it appears he tried copying the two Earthers behind him, for after talking with the young girl for a while, he attempted to show his affection toward her with what they call a kiss. The physical pressing together of lips."

"Ah," Infina-Ensuing warbled after an uneasy moment of reticence. "I believe I can fathom it." Of course, she and 9dar had never engaged in such an activity. Not yet. That was many years away.

"In any event," 9dar went on, "the young female's father took exception to this--2upup's display of affection--and he and two of his baseball companions proceeded to beat the corporeality out of our worldman. But it was so sudden, and with 2upup completely unprepared, he couldn't revert to a gas in time, and was hence rendered to an inert putty-paste. Quite a commotion it all caused. Screaming in the stands. People throwing things. They had to call a temporary halt to the baseballing."

"How strange. And all this because he's Ves5ian?" Her quaver held bemusement.

"That, and the young female not being of 'legal age'."



"Legal age, 9dar? I don't understand."

Collecting himself, he stood, placed his hand on her container.
"I'm not so sure myself. Perhaps I can explain more fully when I return."

A lacuna of silence as she didn't reply. Again, the preternatural gulf. Maybe after her physical conception, when it finally did come, the gap between them would be bridged. For now he could only imagine: her now-empty container finally burgeoning her, providing for her embryonic incipience that would someday lead to evanescence. How he looked forward to instructing her in the ways of physical solidarity. But he wiped it from his mind--that was still a century and a half away. Regardless, he deeply loved the being Infina-Ensuing would someday go on to become, trusted the suppositional engines in her container's matrix which he dared not doubt. Parturition, perhaps, was overrated.

"I'll be back soon, my precious," he said.





Sunday Hunt

by Tom Olbert

Sam froze, his beer can poised at his lips as the auto-hound announced the proximity of human prey.

"One's close, boss," the tinny computer voice of the A.H. scratched out, as the machine floated over on its magnetic field, its radar dishes spinning like little silver gyros. "Over yonder." It pointed into the brush with one of its metallic pseudopodia.

Quietly setting the beer back in the cooler, Sam gently tapped little Sam Jr. the 163rd (at least he figured this one was 163; he'd lost count centuries ago) on the shoulder to get his attention away from the gun he was playing with. "This is it, son," Sam whispered to his son, the titillation of the hunt tickling his fat belly. His 8-year-old looked up, the boy's bright blue eyes snapping wide under the shadow of his hunter's cap, a bright, beaming smile crossing his sun-bronzed little face. "Watch your old man now."

He brought his rifle up to his shoulder and pressed the button that brought the auto sight over his eyes. He activated the infrared scanner and swept the bushes where the auto-hound had pointed. He smiled. Sure enough, the fiery crimson thermal shadow of a spare human form crouched in the brush. He brought up the audio receptors and adjusted his ear piece, chuckling at the sound of scared, rapid breathing and a fiercely pounding heart.



Linking in the laser-guided computer sighting system, he prepared a tear-gas grenade and fired. There was a puff as the rifle lurched slightly in his hands. Then, the sound of something crashing through the branches ahead, and a faint hissing sound followed by a cloud of white smoke and coughing. The prey bolted through the brush, branches swinging in its wake.

"Yeeeeeee-hawww," Sam exclaimed joyfully. "Let's go get 'im, son! Hold tight, now." He gunned the magnetic repulsion field, and the porta-camp lifted off the forest floor on its platform, tent and all. Little Sam Jr. giggled excitedly as Sam tapped in the computer coordinates and the hunt was on. The porta-camp lifted ten feet or so off the ground and skimmed along between the tree trunks, pine branches whipping past Sam's cap.

Before long, there was the prey, running along below. A tall, thin one. Brown hair. Shirtless and bare-foot. What was left of his brown shorts flapped in tatters about his thin legs. Clean shot. Sam took careful aim, held his breath and smiled. He wanted this one in one shot, to impress the boy. He squeezed the trigger. At the last second, the prey sharply changed direction, the bullet missing his heart and hitting his right shoulder blade. He went down in a sloppy explosion of blood and gore, crying out in pain.

"Darn!" Sam exclaimed. He had to grind his teeth to keep from cussing. He cut back the mag field, bringing the porta-camp down a couple of yards from the downed prey. "Cover your ears, son," he ordered, horrified at the language that was coming out of the still-living prey's filthy mouth as it writhed about in the dirt. It looked up at him with keen, hateful brown eyes and screamed at him with words that he wouldn't have used himself unless he was roaring drunk. He quickly took aim and blew its head off.

"That was keen, Dad!" Sam Jr. exclaimed. "Can I shoot the next one?"

"We'll see, son," Sam said, playfully shifting the hat on his son's head. Disgusted, he looked away from the shattered, bloody ruin



that would have made a damn' fine trophy. A strong, handsome teenaged boy it had been. Sixteen maybe, by the look of him. That head, properly mounted, would have hung prominently in the collection in his den. Sloppy. He smacked his lips and shook his head. Darn shame. Oh, well. "Let's have us a weenie-roast, son!"

"Yeah!" The boy clapped, as Sam popped the frankfurters into the micro. He slathered on plenty of mustard and relish, his mouth watering as he handed his swell little guy a steaming red-hot on a bun. He put plenty of onions on his own dog and took a big, hearty bite, greedily stuffing down a mouthful of chips and washing it all down with beer. He handed Sam Jr. a soda pop from the cooler.

"Thanks, dad," the boy said, wiping a bit of mustard away from the corner of his mouth. Sam couldn't help but study his little buddy's face as he chowed down on his dog. How much he resembled his older brother Mac at that age. Sam had loved his son, Mac. They'd been the best of pals. Hunting here in the forest. Casting for trout in the stream. Playing ball in the front yard.

He sighed and smiled. There was no beating these years, when they were still young and innocent, he mused. The smile slipped from his face as he imagined Sam Jr's face aging another five years, another six, seven. Sixteen was the absolute cut-off, he reminded himself, a cold chill creeping up his back. Mac had started sassing and back-talking earlier than that, he recalled, the fond memories turning to anger.

"You okay, Dad?"

Before he could answer, the auto-hound floated over. "Boss, there's one..." A loud, ringing clang cut off the computer's sentence as a large stone crashed down on top of it, smashing its radar dish. The silvery disk-shaped machine tilted in mid-air,



quivering on its magnetic field, its damaged circuits sparking as its voice babbled and grated incoherently. Sam looked up in surprise. The tree branches above shook. Little Sam Jr. squealed in fear as something big jumped from the overhanging tree limb and landed on the porta-camp platform, right next to Sam.

The creature stood tall and thin in its tattered clothing. It glared down at Sam with sharp, familiar blue eyes, under a tousled mane of dirty blonde hair, its teeth bared in a vicious animal snarl. He reached for the rifle. The 15-year-old boy standing over him raised his crudely fashioned wooden spear and plunged it through Sam's eye, deep into his brain.

Yep, Mac always was a clever one, he thought with a mixture of irritation and fatherly pride as his heart shut down.

#

Sam groaned in discomfort. He painfully stretched the stiffness out of his joints as he climbed out of the cloning apparatus. Disgusted, he wiped the gelatinous ooze of the nutrient gel coating his newly formed adult body out of his eyes. He felt an irritating twinge in his left eye, where he remembered Mac had ... he shivered a bit, naked in the cold lab. Must just be a residual nerve signal, or whatever, he reminded himself. The robot servitors hosed him off and handed him a towel. He hated this part. He felt like a damned jalopy going through a car-wash.

"Welcome back, Mr. Jacobs," a tinny computer voice said. "Have you experienced any ill effects?"

He sighed. How many times had he heard that now? Impossible to keep track, since the Mainframe would have erased all his transferred memories older than, say two millennia or so. Anything over that, and the brain just didn't have the storage space for it. "I'm fine, just fine," he muttered as a robot handed him his freshly pressed clothes. He stepped over to a mirror and



smiled at his considerably younger, trimmer self. He wondered if he'd looked like that the day he'd proposed to Mable.

Impossible to say, since that memory had long since been purged. He wished he could get it back. Maybe he could remember what he'd ever seen in the crabby old bat.

#

"Well, what do you think you're doing," Mable demanded, storming into the living room.

He grumbled, taking a swallow of beer. "I'm trying to enjoy this baseball video, d'ya mind?!" He spilled his bowl of pretzels as she switched off the vid. "Hey! Whadda ya think ..."

"Get your big feet off that ottoman and get your lazy butt back into those woods and find our son!" The expression on her aging face turned from anger to maternal worry. "He might be hurt! He's probably scared." She started to cry. "And, you sit there on your fat behind watching baseball! What kind of father are you?!"

Disgusted, he went into the kitchen to get more pretzels. "Jesus H, Mable, can't I relax a little? I just got killed, for crying out loud!" He felt a sharp, irritating prick from the implant in the back of his neck as the house computer chimed in:

"Reminder: Do not take the name of the Lord in vain."

"Served you right," Mable shouted at him. "Now, get yourself out there and find little Sam Jr. Now!"

He slammed his beer down, a spurt of foam geysering into the air. "Let the guard robots handle it! That's what they're for! Anyway, what are you so worried about? I mean, I miss Sam Jr. too, but...he's just a kid. We can always have more." That idea didn't sound so appealing as he thought of his wife's sagging breasts and spreading hips currently concealed under a dingy, faded brown-print housedress.



"Not on your life, Sam Jacobs! You just put that idea out of your dirty mind! I'm not having another one for at least a few hundred years more! I was just getting used to this one!" She started bawling. He paced about, desperate for something to stop that blasted caterwauling. He couldn't stand it when she got like this. "My precious little Sam!" Her voice screeched across his nerves like nails across slate. He couldn't stand it anymore. He took a butcher knife from the kitchen block and stabbed her through the heart. He stifled a curse, wiping the blood off his hands with the sports section of the newspaper. The doorbell rang.

"Some resurrection day," he grumbled as he answered the door. "Oh...good day, Pastor Wilson." He pasted on a phony smile. He hated this pasty-faced, black-frocked sleeping pill. Probably here for another blasted donation, or to ask why Sam wasn't in church this morning. He should be paying me to sit through one of his sermons!

"Good day, Sam. Uh...have I come at a bad time," the pastor asked, noticing the dead body and the spreading puddle of red on the carpet.

"Sorry about the mess, pastor. Mable and I just had a little falling out, that's all."

"Yes, I see." He glanced at the bloodied butcher knife staining the sofa cushions. "That's the fifth time you've killed her in a century, Sam. And, I've lost track of how many times she's killed you. You two really should consider marriage counseling, you know. The church provides excellent..."

"Pastor, I appreciate the offer, really..." he held up a hand, his smile becoming more painful by the second. "But, I really have to be going. See, my eight-year-old has been captured by the teens, and I gotta go find him and bring him home safe, y'know? So, if you don't mind, I've gotta get my hunting gear together and set out for the woods. You understand."



"Yes, of course. Family first, always. Well, when Mable gets back, please talk to her about that counseling, won't you?"

"I sure will, Pastor. 'Bye now." Thank goodness that twerp's gone, he thought as he stepped over his wife's corpse and switched the vid back on. He was hoping to catch the score as he got his hunting equipment together and changed clothes. He suddenly wanted to get out to the woods as quickly as possible.

He was not looking forward to Mable's homecoming. True, she'd be younger and prettier, but knowing her, she'd probably be waiting up for him with a double-barreled twelve-gauge across her lap. That was just the kind of vindictive harpy she was! Just had to have the last kill every time! He glanced over at the faded stain on the wall where the spray of his brains and blood had gone when she'd shot him last time.

He shivered. Well, maybe if he could bring Sam Jr. back alive, she'd forgive him this time. He hoped so. Getting killed twice in one day gave him a headache.

#

Sam turned away in revulsion as he saw his own bloody, severed head mounted atop a wooden pole. "Blasted, ungrateful kids," he muttered as he steered his robotic battle armor through the woods. Parts of him turned up here and there. Arms and legs...bones stripped of flesh, dripping from tree limbs like some cannibal's piñata. Disgusting. Why was he even out here, he sighed with exasperation. Why couldn't they just let families clone their kids, if they wanted to? He dimly remembered the answer to that, stashed away somewhere in the clutter of ancient memories left over from the firstlife.

Those key memories the Mainframe had saved, to remind the faithful never to forget the horrors of old. It wouldn't do for families to get too attached to their kids. They might be too tempted to let them grow up, and...well, if there was one thing



Sam remembered from the first life, it was the mess that kind of thing made of the world.

Something clanged sharply against the metal of his armor. He glanced left, startled as a wooden spear shaft broke into splinters, the stone tip clattering to the metal feet of his armor. Stones and spears pelted his armored suit from three or four directions, ringing in his ears. The little monsters were everywhere, hiding in the brush like rats! He activated his auto goggles and scanned, fixing the infra-red signatures of the attacking teens on his computer and launching tear gas grenades to drive them out of hiding.

They took off through the woods, and he followed the nearest of them, his armored feet leaving deep impressions in the forest floor. The powerful mechanical extensions covering his arms smashed small trees into kindling as he ran, leafy branches crashing across the glass dome covering his head. It was irritating, getting through this damned wood, yet the chase was exhilarating, his heart racing as his suit's hydraulics pumped away, enhancing his tired, sweaty muscles.

As he followed his prey deeper and deeper into the forest, he began to notice strange scratchings in the surrounding rock faces. Old, weird markings and symbols left by earlier generations of hunted teens and their offspring, who'd survived in these woods long enough to form tribal cultures of sorts. The skulls of the adults who'd hunted them still sat in great piles here and there, fossilized and crumbling for thousands upon thousands of years. He absently wondered how many of those skulls might be his.

At last, he came upon a small clearing, and found their camp, crude shelters of branches and leaves. Small animal carcasses roasting over fires. Filthy, bedraggled teens, barely clothed in ragged strips of cloth, armed with sticks and spears. They jeered and screamed and threw rocks at him as he approached. There was a small boy among them. Sam Jr.!



"Dad...help!" the boy screamed, waving his arms as one of the teens...Mac...held him up off the ground. Sam made for the boy. The ground gave way under him, wood snapping as he crashed through the flimsy lid of branches covering the hole they'd dug. Sam groaned in pain as his bones shook, his armor ringing with the impact as he hit the dozens of large, sharp stones lining the bottom of the pit. Branches crashed down on top of him.

A dozen or so of the wild teens roared with laughter and hooted savagely as they cast large stones down the hole. His head pounded, his ears rang and his teeth rattled as the stones crashed down on his armor. One cracked the glass bubble top, spidery lines spreading through the glass.

Now, he was mad. Struggling with the controls, while stuck on his back like a turtle, he activated the 50-calibre revolving bracket guns built into the mechanical arms of his suit. He fired wildly, his bullets punching away at the upper lip of the pit, until the teens ran away. Setting the controls for the suit's coordination, he struggled to his feet and activated the built-in jet boosters. He lurched in his control harness, trembling as he rocketed out of the hole and hovered, about twenty feet off the ground.

He was actually beginning to enjoy this! Slowly cutting back on thruster power, he activated the suit's magnetic field and gently lowered himself to the ground. The frightened teens ran for their lives as he opened fire, blasting the filthy monsters down, one by one. "Yaaaaa-hoooo!!!" he screamed, his blood racing, as corpse after corpse hit the forest floor. "How's that, you stinking little animals?!!"

Only Sam Jr. remained alive, and, Mac, and some teen girl with long brown hair who'd stayed close by his side. Mac held a crude stone knife to his little brother's throat, glaring at his father with wild hatred, his teeth bared, his face glistening with tears. "Go away, or he dies!" Mac screamed, his voice cracking. Little Sam Jr. whimpered with fear.



"Dad..."

"Shut up, little brother! You think he cares about you? Once you're a little older, he'll throw you out with the garbage just like he did me! Like he did all the others before us!"

"No," the young boy sobbed, tears streaming down his anguished face. "Dad loves me."

Sam sighed, feeling a lump in his throat and a sting behind his eyes. He had to get Sam Jr. back. Not just to appease Mable, but...he just had to get his boy back. "Let him go, Mac."

"Why, so you can do to him what you did to me?"

The hate and the hurt mingling in Mac's eyes stabbed into Sam's heart like a spear. His blood raced, his breathing growing rapid as a cold sweat broke out on his forehead. "You did that to yourself, Mac," he forced out through a clenched throat, his voice booming through his helmet speaker. "If you'd just been a good boy..."

"Liar! You don't want any of us! You want to live forever, and we're in the way!"

Sam was paralyzed with guilt. Then, as Mac started to pull his little brother into the woods, Sam's anger blasted through his guilt. He wouldn't let him take his boy. He pointed his guns at Mac's head. "Stop right there!"

Mac spat at him defiantly. "Think you can kill me without killing him?" he taunted, holding Sam Jr. in front of him. "Try, old man!" Sam's hands sweated on the controls.

"Mac, no!" the girl cried. "He'll kill you! Just let the little brat go and come with me!"

"No! He's my brother, and he comes with us! Get outta here, Molly! Get to safety. I'll find you later."



Sam smiled. Now, he had leverage. He swung the guns away from Mac and towards the girl. "Let him go, Mac, or I'll kill your little girl friend." Mac's eyes burned with rage as he pressed the knife harder against little Sam Jr.'s throat. Sam clenched his teeth as his finger reflexively tightened on the trigger. Mac let out a long sigh, and, trembling and sobbing, dropped the knife and let his little brother go. Sam heaved a deep sigh of relief as his little guy bolted from Mac and ran to his dad, taking shelter behind one of the metal legs of the armored battle suit.

Sam looked at the two of them there together, Mac and his little tramp. Mac knelt before him, crying, either in pain or hatred, he couldn't say. "Why," Mac sobbed as the girl knelt beside him and cried on his shoulder. "Why?" Sam felt cold. He thought about just taking Sam Jr. home to his mom and just letting it go at that.

"Kill 'em, Dad," little Sam Jr. shouted through his tears. "Kill those rotten teens!"

He knew he had no choice. He couldn't appear weak in the eyes of his son. It would only accelerate little Sam Jr.'s own inevitable rebellion; take him away that much earlier. He wouldn't let that happen. He would keep this one as long as he possibly could. Rubbing a bothersome little sting out of his eyes, he took aim at the two groveling teens and pulled the trigger.

Nothing happened. He pulled the trigger again, and again. Still nothing. He hit switch after switch, button after button, to get some system feedback on what might be wrong, but every light on the control panel was dark. The suit's power had gone dead. He banged away at the controls, his heart throbbing, frustration turning to anger and then to fear. The light ebbed all around him, intermittently.

He looked up. The sky was flickering on and off like a faulty TV picture, the sun sputtering like a burned out light bulb. Was he dreaming? Or, was his oldest nightmare coming true? The last of the blue, cloudy sky disappeared, replaced by the dull, metallic gray domed roof and holographic projectors behind it. It



was growing dark. The only light came from the white-hot molten burn forming in the roof, growing larger and larger, as if a huge, searing hot knife were cutting into the world from above. Brilliant white drops of molten metal fell to the ground, igniting small brush fires. Sam started to sweat, the interior of his now-useless armor becoming like an oven.

“Dad, make it go away!” little Sam Jr. cried as Sam tried to get out of the suit. His aching fingers straining, he labored at the manual release screw, twisting open the suit’s hatch and climbing out. Sam Jr. screamed as the last of the molten patch collapsed and fell in flames to the forest floor. Sam looked up. He winced in pain, searing golden light, like a new sun, stung his up-turned eyes.

Raising his hands, he tried to focus his sore, weeping eyes as the fierce golden fire softened to a gentle amber glow. He gaped in horror at what was descending through the hole in the ‘sky.’ Gargantuan tentacles, glowing with golden luminescence. The alien thing descended into full view. It was about 30 feet from end-to-end, all glowing and translucent, sunlight through viscous fluid, like a gigantic, golden jelly-fish. It emanated a tingling, strangely calming electrical current through the air, somehow quelling the small fires all around.

It settled in place, parts of it seemingly crystallizing into more solid form, until it looked more like some kind of mechanical apparatus than the living creature it had first reminded Sam of. He could only stare in paralyzed wonder. Strangely, he felt no fear. The semi-spherical bubble at the center of the radiant apparition began to resemble a control cockpit of some kind. Through the shifting shades of pinkish-amber light, he began to discern a human figure seated at the controls.

A tall, thin man, at least, he assumed it was a man. The facial features - which, inexplicably, he could discern so precisely at this distance, as if they reached out into his mind - were finely formed and delicate, neither clearly male nor female. The skin was a rich golden brown. The eyes were almond shaped, a soft



limpid blue with flecks of gold. The forehead was high and prominent. Tresses of long, ropy black hair hung down over broad shoulders cloaked in a blue metallic coverall.

"Do not fear," the creature's thoughts spoke in his mind. "We do not harm. But, we will not allow you to harm these young ones."

Gasping, he tried to find his voice. But, he found he didn't need it. The alien seemed to pull his thoughts right out of his head. "Who are you?" Sam found himself asking, without so much as moving his lips. "What do you want here?"

"I am Nath-Har-U, of the Transgalactic New Terran Assembly. I am human, like you. Although, our species has evolved somewhat since my ancestors left Earth, over 40 thousand years ago. My people have come back to re-populate our long-abandoned homeworld. We didn't expect to find anyone still living here. The primitive data records we found in the ancient ruins did mention the existence of closed, biospheric communities here on the northwest continent. But, we were astounded to find one still intact and unchanged after 40 millennia."

His heart pounded, anger boiling to the surface. "Well, you're not wanted here, outsider! We sealed ourselves in a long time ago, to keep out the madness out there." He pointed at the gaping hole in the dome, his hand trembling. "We want no part of your sick, ungodly, unnatural ways! Go away, and leave us alone!"

"We will leave you alone, if that is what you wish. But, your children will also be given the choice you denied them." The golden tentacles reached down and gently coiled about the bodies of the two teens. They smiled and laughed as they reached out their hands and touched the glowing, vibrant surfaces. The tentacles lifted them gently off the ground, high into the air, surrounding them in a nimbus of shimmering light. Another tentacle seized little Sam Jr. "No! Not my boy!!"



Sam tried to reach out, to pull the boy from the monster's grasp, but an invisible barrier of energy held him at bay. The boy looked terrified. "Dad!" he screamed, his face creased in anguish as he reached out his arms toward Sam, his legs dangling in mid-air. A split second later, the expression on the boy's face transmuted to one of happiness. He giggled and laughed, iridescent light coursing around him. "This feels nice," he said as he was lifted into the air, to join his brother. "Way more fun than the hunt. I like their thoughts." The boy looked up at his smiling 'host,' as pulses of golden light passed back and forth between them, and the two teens. "Come join us, Dad," he said, beckoning with this hand. "It's great!"

"No! Son, fight it! It's evil! Listen to your father! Fight it, I tell you!"

"But, it's not bad," little Sam Jr. assured him with a laugh. "It feels neat!"

"We hold no secrets," the outsider said. "And, we offer no lies. He sees there is no darkness in our thoughts. He will decide for himself where his path leads, once he matures. Until then, we will protect him."

"It's my job to protect him," Sam protested. "And, to choose his path for him! He's mine! It's my right as his father!"

"The path you've chosen leads only to his death. That right, you do not have."

"The heck I don't! I created him! He wouldn't exist without me! Neither would that one," he screamed, pointing at Mac. "They're my flesh and blood," he screamed, pounding his chest with his fist. "They're mine! I can do what I want with them!"

"They are sentient beings," the outsider said with a patronizing sigh. "Manifestations of the Universal One, with the same fundamental right as you or I to realize their full potential. The fact you share their genetic material does not give you the right



to destroy their uniqueness. They will come with us and find their own path, with or without you."

He strained, then cursed in his rage. How dare they? Then, he whimpered in his helplessness. He winced in disgust, seeing both his sons laughing together in that damnable light, their anger and fear of minutes ago suddenly forgotten. Finally, his anger spent, he sighed in resignation. "Take them," he grunted, waving a hand in exasperation as he turned away. "What do I care? I made them, I can make others like them."

"No," the outsider said. A golden tentacle wrapped itself around Sam's midsection, coiling around his legs. An unnerving electrical tickle passed through his skin where the alien thing touched him. He tried to struggle, but he couldn't move, every muscle in his body paralyzed. He felt a deep, throbbing warmth passing through the lower regions of his body. "You cannot," the outsider said as the tentacle released Sam.

Sam felt drained. Exhausted. "Wh-what did you do to me?"

"You have been rendered infertile. So it will be with all who live in this domed community of yours. You may remain here in your cloned immortality forever, if that is your choice. But, you will have no more children. The ability to procreate has been removed from your genetic matrix. Your ability to conceive new lives will be restored only if you elect to join us in the world outside this dome. The choice is yours." The alien craft departed as it had come, taking Sam Jr., Mac and the teen girl with it as it ascended through the hole in the domed roof and disappeared.

Sam was left agape, staring at the pale yellow sunlight streaming down through the crack in the roof. The light sliced through the now dim interior of the dome, falling on the forest floor. His feet numb, he tentatively stepped into the light, feeling cold, stinging air coming down from above, rustling the hairs on the back of his neck. He began to cry as it sank in. He sank to his knees, his fingers clutching the earth. Just this, forever? Never again to



hold a baby? Never again to have a child, a new life, a new beginning? What else was there? He looked up into the cold, forbidding sky outside his world. They expected him to go out there? Where he would have to watch everything he knew fall away and crumble to dust? Where he would have to eventually die? What kind of choice was that?

They expected him to die?





Rental Face

by A'Llyn Ettien

Never trust the body.

It claimed to be tired, eyes aching, limbs sluggish, promising complete, restful sleep in an instant if she'd only lie down. Sleep was tempting, with its temporary relief from the strains of life embodied, but then she went to bed and it just lay there, refusing to shut down, pushing subtle discomfort at her. Gravity dragging her against the mattress: must turn over. Muscles clutching, tugging, hauling weight and limbs across the fabric cover into another position, where the body once again waited and hummed and wouldn't let go of her. Pulse beating in her ears, echoing in the thin space between head and pillow. Stupid body; just turn off!

New discomfort growing near the waist--what was that, hunger? No, lower than hunger . . . oh yes, the liquid waste container was full. So inefficient, this mashing up mostly-useless substances for a few nutrients and expelling the rest. Really not an intelligently designed system, not like at home where energy was tidily collected directly and no one bothered with the extra stuff.

Nishek Hlam--as the name approximately translated from a bone-braced chest, out of a tube of throat and around a slab of tongue--thought eliminating liquid waste was fun at first. The merry splash of water was quite entertaining, as well as providing



fascinating evidence of the weird internal processes of a physical form. With every few hours the same thing, though, it had gotten old quickly, and was now just another of far too many maintenance chores to be performed. She sat up, muscles clenching again, heaving the torso perpendicular (too far to the side, head off balance, correct that), then pushing further to stand upright. Moving a body was such weird, concrete power, thought shifting matter at a whim, like telekinesis.

Balancing was tricky and unnerving still, especially in the dark they told her the body would need for proper rest--hovering off the floor, tugged down by gravity but perching up on those trembling, muscle-twitching columns of flesh, wavering a little all the time in a constant struggle with the planet not to drop flat. But it didn't fall. Trust the body, they said; it knows how to stand.

They said eventually she would get used to the relentless tug of gravity; get accustomed to existing in a state where a foot placed wrong, a nudge from outside, a movement of the foundation under her, and she would be down. Right now it just seemed as if you might as well never get off your soft belly at all. Give in to destiny, the world seemed to say: you know you'll be there someday, so hug the ground now! But it wouldn't do, the clients would be put off and she couldn't upset this deal. Humans relate better to people who behave like themselves. It's OK, the body can stand and walk and balance like an expert. You move into a body already laced through with instinct, training, muscle memory, reflexes. It's amazing what's left in a body, in the bottom of a brain, after the person is gone.

#

The meetings were going well. She was sure her handling of the body still looked clumsy and foreign to the expert eyes of the clients, born in flesh, but she felt more comfortable than in the first few days. Knowing her unfamiliarity with corporeal form, the company had arranged for a small, light body, with short, easy-care hair and an even complexion that required little



attention to look presentable. Even so it seemed like a lot of work to get it groomed and dressed in the morning, but speaking, sitting and making appropriate facial expressions was all easier than she had thought it would be. The clients seemed eager, too; another few days should have the deal certified, and she could head home.

"You manage your body very well," said one man during a break in the day's meeting. "Have you used one before?"

Nishek turned the round-boned head from side to side in negation, searching for the proper expression to show appreciation for the compliment. In the end she simply smiled. According to the books, that worked most times in this culture.

"It must be very strange for you," he said. "I'm fascinated by your world. I've read a lot about structured energy life--studied it in school, actually."

She leaned back against the chair to take weight off the spine, hands lying neatly in the lap, head briefly overbalancing to fall back from its perch on the neck. Muscles caught it up short, balanced it again. After a moment, she remembered to make a noise of polite inquiry. The man was a potential client, and had to be kept friendly. You didn't always have to actually speak, the books said, just make sounds.

"Mm," she said therefore, carefully keeping eyes focused on him, lids separated a little wider than usual to make it a question.

"I've always wondered . . ." he said. "What is it like to be so connected, and at the same time so disassociated, from others of your species and culture? It's very difficult for me to imagine."

Nishek sifted the words, seeking the part that needed her response. She had not prepared to address social issues at a business meeting. The man went on, fortunately, not waiting for an answer.



"What I mean is, with your inherent link with everyone you're related to, how can you still be distanced enough to cut off one of those relatives and leave him or her to die alone when there's a sign of weakness or pain? As I understand you do, and forgive me if I'm oversimplifying. I just don't think a human could do that."

Nishek had almost no opinion about what humans could do, but she tried to answer what she understood to be the question.

"Since we are all connected, the weakness of one hurts us all. We cut out those who suffer to protect the rest."

"I understand that, intellectually," the man said. His hands moved in supple, apparently unconscious extensions of his words. It looked roughly graceful, confusing, and completely impossible. Nishek's training advised that she not even try to incorporate gestures into conversation until she had lived in a body for at least several months. She hoped not to have any need to stay that long, so had not been practicing those exercises.

"I just can't grasp it at a fundamental, meaningful level, if you know what I mean. But I guess that's part of what makes us different species."

He laughed, and Nishek smiled politely again, not sure why such a flat statement was amusing.

"For a human, the natural response to another's pain is to try to help," he continued. Nishek began to see that this was a topic of some previous interest to him, and relaxed somewhat. If he was merely seeking an outlet for expression of his own opinions, little was required from her.

"We could never simply turn away from hurt," he said. "Basic human instinct orders us to assist, not ignore."

A woman seated across the table leaned forward.



"I don't know that that's always been true, Andis. Certainly if you read history, humanity has been capable of great coldness and cruelty towards others of its own kind. Very much is about self-interest."

"That was in the past," said the man dismissively. "We've been shaped by civilization for generations: sympathy is in the bone now. If someone hurts, you comfort them, that's just what a person does. I don't think I could live in a society where that wasn't understood."

He nodded, what Nishek read as a satisfied expression on his face, and she smiled and gave another meaningless 'mm'.

#

Feeling confident about the progress of the deal after the meeting, she decided to stop at a foodshop when the gnawing discomfort and startling rumbles of hunger caught her attention, rather than returning to the rented room and its carefully selected array of nourishing fuel. She wandered up and down the counters of a QuickEat, comparing the look and smell of a series of compact, easy-hold meals. The scents of some of them, rich and greasy and warm, made the stomach growl more than others; those were probably the ones with the poor nutrient/calorie ratio she'd been warned against. You can't trust the body--the things it likes aren't always good for it.

The rental body was well maintained and in excellent health, and fueling it with too much inferior food would result in increased upkeep fees, but she decided to try something unhealthy anyway. She'd had little enough experience with the reputed pleasures of the flesh so far on this trip.

"Lida?" a voice said, and a hand touched the arm she had folded neatly across her chest to keep it from just hanging loose, a weight strung from the shoulder. She had the sense the voice had repeated the word a few times before she noticed, and she



turned herself in a carefully balanced column, forming another polite smile with those mobile, alien lips.

A woman stood beside her, a look on her face like expectation.

"Lida! It is you!"

So Lida was a name. Nishek shook her head.

"I'm sorry, no. You must have mistaken me."

"It's Ellen," the woman said. "Where have you been? Why didn't you answer my messages? Why did you just-disappear? Damn it, Lida, how could you do that to me?"

"I'm sorry," Nishek repeated, a little dazed by the rapid passion of the words. "I'm not Lida."

A wobbliness came over the woman's face, her eyelids crinkling and mouth twisting in a way Nishek had been taught meant distress.

"You don't have to lie to me, if you don't want to see me just say it. You could have said it before. You could have at least told me, you know, if you were leaving."

Her voice faltered, the words becoming nearly incomprehensible, thick-sounding as if there were something in her mouth. Did bodily tongues swell in moments of emotion? She would look it up later.

"My name is Nishek Hlam," said Nishek. "I don't know you. I'm sorry."

She moved to resume her study of the sandwiches, but the woman didn't leave.

"I know it's you, Lida. Fine, you changed your name, but do you think I can't recognize you? The scar on your cheek from the scissors thing? Your double-jointed thumbs? I can tell it's you. Now you can just turn around and deal with me, because maybe



you could run away, but now that I've found you I'm not leaving until you explain it to me to my face."

Nishek touched fingers to the cheek, where there was a little white mark, not significant enough for cosmetic repair. The body, she thought. This woman had known someone else in the body. She should have realized.

"I'm sorry," she said again, turning back towards the woman. "This body is a rental. You must have known someone else who used it, not me."

The woman stared. "Then Lida's dead?"

Nishek hadn't thought about that. "Maybe," she said slowly. "Or she might have been a temporary tenant, like me."

"I knew you for years," the woman said. Her face wobbled again, and she bit into her lower lip, her features all fleshy contortions. "Since school. You--she--never said anything like that."

"Then she was probably the original owner, and is probably dead," said Nishek. There was no point in debating the matter.

"I'm sorry," she added, one more time, feeling vaguely and illogically responsible for the grim tremble of the stranger's mouth.

The woman's eyes half closed, blinked quickly, oozed transparent liquid. Nishek had poked herself in the eye, that first clumsy day in the body, and it had flooded and overflowed like this. She understood it was also a sign of grief.

"Are you going to order, or not?" came a question from the person in line behind her.

"Yes, yes," she said, welcoming the interruption, and she made what she hoped was an appropriately sympathetic expression at the woman and turned away.



She ordered something dense and buttery looking and went to sit at one of the little tables to eat. The woman, Ellen it was, was still standing there, and Nishek felt a moment's apprehension. She wasn't going to make a scene, was she? That would set off the body's automatic stress responses, and she didn't want to deal with that while she was feeding.

"I'm really sorry," the woman said, apologizing in her turn. She seemed calmer now, perhaps deliberately controlling her emotional reactions. "I understand you don't know me or want anything to do with me."

She paused, and Nishek looked at her sandwich, disinclined to deny it but not wanting to be actively rude.

"It's just . . . Lida was a very dear friend, and then she vanished and I didn't hear from her for two years, and now I find her dead and you walking around in her body, and it's a little hard, you know."

The only thing that came to mind to say was 'I'm sorry,' and she thought she'd said that often enough already, so Nishek merely nodded slightly, making the brow crease a little in somber concern, and took a bite of the sandwich.

"I was just wondering if there's a way you could look something up," Ellen continued, taking the chair opposite her. "If they give you records or--or an owner's history or something. If you could just check and see if Lida is really dead and--and if so how she died."

Nishek thought about it while she carefully crushed the food with teeth, and after a minute agreed. There seemed no harm in it.

"A usage history came with the body," she said. "I'll look at it."

She wiped her fingers--the sandwich was spicy and oily, an extravagance of fat and flavor she wished she had time to concentrate on--and typed her access code into the wristband record bank the body wore. She felt proud of herself, working



those bony, articulate appendages on the tiny keys; her fine motor control was getting quite good.

She scrolled through the sections on previous tenants (all identifying information removed, of course; they were so concerned with privacy and separation). Before her, a student lived there for 8 months. She'd slept little and eaten too much low-nutrient food. Before that, another business tenant, three weeks. She'd had a lot of sex. Then a series of tourists, about a week each. Another student, nearly a year. Then, the last record back, a primary inhabitant. She was listed as born in the body, living there 24 years, no travel outside. Brain death from wrylet overdose--seemingly a stimulant of some kind--body sold to the tenancy company by the legal owners, her parents. Medical disclosures, etc., all correct.

She communicated this briefly to the woman, who bit her lip some more--such disregard for physical maintenance

--and asked,

"Does it say where?"

Nishek looked. "Amsterdam."

Very far from Nebraska, as of course it would be. The agency would seek to limit the likelihood of just this sort of encounter by renting the body in a location to which the original inhabitant had as few connections as possible. It was so easy for people to move, though.

Ellen's face, at the word 'Amsterdam,' became even crinklier than before.

"We lived in Amsterdam," she said, and put her head down on her arms against the tabletop. Her shoulders shuddered, convulsions jerking the torso in a choppy rhythm of sobs. It looked very unpleasant.



Nishek, ill at ease, made a soothing noise she'd heard in a video and stood up.

"I should go," she said, and moved away without waiting for an answer. She took the sandwich out of the shop with her, but found as she walked that the novelty of it was spoiled. The stomach, so panged with hunger minutes before, now felt sullenly unsettled. Trust the body to lose appetite over something completely irrelevant to her.

She discarded the food in a recycler as she passed. It was already cooling and becoming greasy, and would probably be completely disgusting in a few minutes. Eating was aesthetically questionable in the best of circumstances, all that grinding and mashing and slimy, saliva-wet mush sloshing around the mouth, then forced down the throat with those semi-involuntary contractions. Ugh. She put the thought aside and consulted her calendar to confirm that she had no more meetings or calls scheduled for the day. Then she headed back to the company apartment.

She intended to do some sensory exploration touring before she left, to really experience life in a body (she had a guidebook and everything), but it had so far been easier to go back to the little rooms and watch videos or plan for the next day's business instead. She boarded a public rail, shifting bodyweight to balance against its motion. It had been very awkward at first, and continued to feel unstable whenever she had to alter her stance for someone else's passage, but as long as she kept still it was surprisingly easy now. The body did know.

As she waited the few seconds for the door to recognize her at the company building, she saw a familiar-looking form drift past across the street. It looked like the woman from the foodshop-- but the person, whoever it was, was looking down and half turned away, and she couldn't tell for sure. Since it hardly mattered anyway, she went inside and forgot it.



She awoke suddenly later, called from rare deep slumber by the body's alarm--weight had changed, a strange sound had registered on the ears, eyes must open, muscles tense, heart rev. You had to trust the body on things like that--it wasn't even a choice, it just seized you, locked you into its nervous system with a vise of ancient instinct and chemical reactions. Eyes opened as prompted, staring into a light shining on her face.

"Lida!" said an urgent voice.

It *had* been Ellen outside, Nishek thought, but why here, how here? Crazy? Armed?

"Ellen," she said cautiously.

The light shone at her a few moments more, and eyes blinked and squinted independent of her command. An arm tried to lift to block the light, but her own impulse to stillness fought it, reducing the movement to ineffective twitches. Then the light shifted away, falling to the floor, and she could make out the figure sitting on the bed beside her, head bowed.

"I'm sorry," Ellen said. "I didn't mean to frighten you. Well, I did, but . . . I thought if I woke you by surprise maybe I'd see Lida, before, you know, before you came back yourself. I can see now you're not her, but I thought she might still be there somewhere."

The body was trembling, heart-pulses furious against ribs that seemed tightened around them, breath short and quick. Nervous reaction. Nishek sat up and pulled the legs closer to the torso, tried to fold them neatly, lost track of the muscles. She was agitated too, even apart from the body's stress, unable to manage the details of where and how to place limbs.

"I didn't see her," said Ellen, although Nishek had not asked.
"She's dead then."

"I'm sorry," said Nishek mechanically. "How did you get in here?"



The company apartments were supposed to be highly secure against unauthorized intrusion.

"Broke in." The woman's voice was muffled. She was crying again. "I used to be pretty good at it. That's why Lida's parents hated me--I was a crook."

Nishek watched her in silence, feeling heartbeats gradually slowing, stability returning. Alarm was seeping away, but the immediacy of the body still clung around her in a tingly hyper-awareness of itself and its surroundings. Ellen's spine curved, shoulders slumping even farther forward as she curled over on herself, head reaching toward knees.

"Call the police if you want."

Nishek did not so much want to as assume that she would, but first, answering some obscure impulse, she pushed herself closer and extended an arm--clumsy, heavy, flesh-wrapped bone--to lay around Ellen's shoulders. The woman turned, weight pushing against her, warm, damp face under collarbone, shaking.

"I just loved her so much," she said, muffled against Nishek's chest.

She was still making those uncomfortable choking sounds. It sounded sad, really. Emotion, not just gasping noises and heaving breath the way it first impressed on the ear. It was clearly pain, but it didn't hurt her personally the way it would have at home, so Nishek lifted the other arm, automatically, as if it were a natural response, and patted Ellen's back. Not off balance at all, she rocked gently back and forth in a soothing rhythm. If something hurts, you tend it. The body knows.





An Incident at the Artemis Arms

by Jill Elaine Hughes

The Artemis Arms were the poshest upper-atmosphere condominiums in the system. Even so, they were not entirely safe.

Aurelia Moon and her husband Bytthus Moon knew that they had been fortunate to purchase their unit on the ground at deeply discounted pre-launch prices; once the housing complex had been released into the upper atmosphere, the real estate values rose astronomically. The Moons were not wealthy people, but they had saved their carbon-bars carefully for many years, scrimping and saving as much as possible, even putting off replacement of old and discontinued home help modules and ring cruisers until they could finally afford to buy their dream home.

Aurelia and Bytthus, their two children Wachovia and Ypres, and their old, discontinued (but still reliable) service module BI-898 were the first family to live in the Artemis Arms when it launched. And being the first buyers in the new complex---moving in even before the rest of it was completed---won the family a huge price discount. For the first few months the Moons lived there alone, save for the two fancy service modules that took care of cleaning the hallways and maintaining the holo-landscaping for the complex, and the Moons grew accustomed to the luxury of doing whatever they liked, whenever they liked, without a condominium board to dictate how loud they could and



could not be, how neat and tidy their holo-patio and garden must be, or where they could and could not park their ring-cruiser. Bytthus was a holo-novelist who composed his works at home in the holosuite. Aurelia was a homemaker. So the Moons spent nearly all their time at the Artemis Arms, leaving only for brief trips to the ring-market on weekends for basic supplies.

The peace, quiet, and complete freedom afforded by the empty condominium complex allowed Bytthus to make amazing progress on his latest holo-novel, and he completed the first draft in less time than he had ever done before, which pleased his publisher immensely. The Realtor who sold the Moons their deeply discounted unit sheepishly explained that the condominium developer was trying out a new marketing strategy on the remainder of the units, and that was the reason that thus far, they had been slow to sell. Whatever the reason for the delay in attracting other buyers, Aurelia liked the quiet, open space of the empty complex because it allowed her to let Wachovia and Ypres roam free without worry of crime or danger befalling them, and the time away from her children allowed her to catch up on her reading, a luxury she had not enjoyed much since before her oldest, Wachovia, was born.

But after a few months of this blissful solitude, more families began to purchase units and move into the complex. Some, like the Moons, had upgraded from cheaper units on the ground, while others had moved in from neighboring posh atmospheric developments that had suddenly become less fashionable when the Artemis Arms were launched skyward. But in nearly all cases, the families were from the upper crust.

Bytthus's holo-novels were well-known, and he could probably classify himself as a minor celebrity. But the Moons were not rich---they made just enough from his royalties to live comfortably and for Aurelia to stay at home with the children. Simple living came naturally to the Moons, and it showed in the way they maintained their condominium. Their home furnishings were old, functional, and minimalist, reminiscent of 21st-century



Scandinavian design---Aurelia even had a few antique IKEA pieces which had belonged to her great-grandmother.

But if the new neighbor families had anything in common, it was status-seeking and conspicuous consumption--- expensive possessions appeared to be the most important things in their lives. Aurelia and Bytthus had never seen so many laser-guided ring cruisers in one place, and most of the other Artemis Arms families had at least two of them. Some even had leather interiors, made from the priceless cloned cattle on distant Io's biosphere plains. The Moons had only a single, economy-model ring-cruiser; at least twelve standard years old, it had cracked plastic upholstery and several dents and scratches.

But fancy leather-upholstered ring-cruisers weren't the only priceless things all the new neighbors possessed. Nearly all the Artemis Arms residents except the Moons had at least three service modules in their homes, all of them the latest, most expensive models from the most prestigious manufacturers. But the Moons' battered old BI-898 module had served them faithfully for many years, even helping to nanny their children. They were reluctant to trade the module in, or even worse, sell it to O'Rourke, the greasy scrap dealer in the ring market who had once offered them five hundred carbon bars for BI-898 in the middle of the street when the module was helping Aurelia carry her shopping packages home. Fortunately for BI-898, the old robot had no feelings to be hurt by such a comment.

Indeed, the Moons and their children had grown unnaturally attached to the old robot, as if it was a beloved pet organic dog. Aurelia had even assigned it a gender, calling it "her" and "she" and setting its voice generator to "feminine". She gave it a nickname, "Bitsy," which irritated Bytthus, although he would never admit it.

Bytthus had often thought his wife's attitude toward the service module a bit too sentimental, but at the same time he loved his wife dearly for her sentimentality, a quality that had become all too rare among women. Bytthus would even have admitted that



he was fond of battered old "Bitsy", the way one is fond of a well-worn sweater or a comfortable pair of shoes. But Aurelia's devotion to BI-898 bordered on familial love. Bytthus had never thought this out of the ordinary until the wealthy, showy new neighbors started moving into Artemis Arms and broke up the Moons' blissful solitary existence with nasty comments and idle gossip about the Moons' Spartan lifestyle, cheap furniture, ancient ring-cruiser, and Aurelia's bizarre devotion to a dated household appliance.

"I never saw anyone with so little regard for appearances," sneered Lucinda Dust at the newly established neighborhood macramé circle. Lucinda was the matriarch of a large, wealthy family who had moved into the deluxe duplex unit next to the Moons. "One would think that when a family moves into an upper-atmosphere community they would have a lifestyle suited to their address, and not one suited to the psych re-programmer's office."

"I agree," said Natalia Wanderer, who lived two doors down from Lucinda with her husband and their two young girls. "Aurelia really should get out of the house more often---she clearly doesn't understand a modern way of living. It's sad, really, watching her plod around with that junky old robot."

"It belongs in the scrap yard," Arlene Watchtower chuckled as she expertly tied a complex macramé knot. "They stopped selling upgrades for those old BI modules *at least* ten years ago."

"Didn't BI Corporation go out of business?" Lucinda asked.

"I think so," said Arlene. "I'll ask my husband. To think, the Moons keeping a *service module* for that long! Not to mention all their unfashionable patio furniture. Their condominium is an *eyesore*."

"Definitely bad for our property values," Natalia agreed. "I know that Mr. Moon---what's first name? Byte or Bythher or something?"



"Bytthus," purred Lucinda, who fancied herself the know-it-all of the neighborhood.

"Right. I know that Bytthus is a famous holo-novelist and all, but those Moons really need to get with the program if they are going to live in a condominium complex of this caliber," Arlene said. "My husband and I didn't move here to live next to a bunch of junk-loving Luddites. Did you know that they bought their unit at a *huge* discount? It's embarrassing."

"When is the condominium board forming?" Natalia asked. "Once we have a board, we can *make* the Moons get with the program."

Arlene set her macramé down and stretched her fingers languidly. "I already talked to the Realtor about that," she sighed. "She said they have to sell six more units before they can legally turn the complex over to a condominium board. So it might be six months to a year before we can begin enforcing any kind of *discipline* around here."

"That might be too late," growled Lucinda. "By then the Moons will have wreaked havoc on the whole complex and we'll be living in a junkyard. You know how Aurelia lets her children run wild all over the place with that old robot. God forbid, they might even drive away respectable buyers!"

"Don't worry. I'm sure there's *something* we can do," Natalia said as she completed a complicated braid knot. The women exchanged knowing looks, but said no more.

#

Aurelia was in her living room, gazing dejectedly out the window onto her holo-patio. She had never been very creative with gardening---no matter how hard she tried, she always programmed the generator incorrectly, and instead of getting the daffodils, jonquils, and juniper shrubs she hoped for, she would end up with some form of mutated, dying jimson weed and orange thistles. As a result, the Moons' garden looked like a mad botanist's experiment.



Wachovia was sitting in the middle of the beige-carpeted living room floor, playing with her resin Animaux tiles----the latest in expensive children's toy trends. She had begged Aurelia and Bytthus for a complete Animaux tile set relentlessly for nearly a year. Although the toy was expensive, Aurelia had finally relented and bought the most basic set available in the ring market without Bytthus' knowledge and given it to Wachovia for her tenth birthday. Wachovia was disappointed not to get a full set of tiles, but she was happy to have scored a major toy coup against her famously skinflint parents by receiving this small set of discontinued tiles devoted to Earth-based bird and reptile species.

Bytthus griped to Aurelia in private for making such an extravagant purchase on a mere child:

"Three hundred carbon bars for a *toy*? It's not even a *mechanical* toy! Just an overpriced set of dominoes!" he had shouted at Aurelia the night of Wachovia's birthday, after the children had gone to bed.

"Bytthus darling, she's been a very good girl this year, and most of the other children in the neighborhood have more toys than she does---"

"I thought we were raising our children better than to judge themselves only in terms of what others have," Bytthus said, using his best holier-than-thou novelist's voice.

"But Wachovia loves playing with them so much," Aurelia cried. "And she's *learning* from them, too. She's learning all about the old organic birds and reptiles." The next day, Aurelia made sure to instruct Wachovia to play with her tiles in front of Bytthus while he ate his breakfast, and told her to show each tile to her father and explain what she knew about each of the ancient organic animals they depicted. Just as Aurelia had hoped, Wachovia melted her father's heart when she showed him with each resin tile how much she knew about long-extinct organics



like the North American robin, the Pacific cockatiel, and the venomous Gila monster.

Aurelia glanced beside her at the unread stack of books she had downloaded from the holosuite several weeks before. Since the new families had moved into the complex, she'd had fewer and fewer opportunities to send the BI-898 and the children out of the house so she could read in peace. Her snobby neighbor Lucinda had even deposited Wachovia and Ypres at the Moons' front door one day last week, complaining that they were trampling her holo-tulips while they played hide and seek. Aurelia had taken the children back from Lucinda meekly with a mumbled apology, without voicing what was really on her mind---that it was more likely one of Lucinda's huge brood of spoiled obnoxious brats who had trampled the holo-tulips, and not the Moon children.

As Aurelia gazed out her window, trying to think of a way to escape into one of her holo-novels, BI-898 was busy finishing its daily task of kitchen-sanitizing. BI-898 had been programmed in basic domestic service tasks at the time of its manufacture, such as kitchen and general household sanitizing, laundry, fetch-and-carry, and the like. The BI Corporation had issued a few upgrades for the 898 and 899 models that extended its use into basic child care and shopping-related chores, but after the second upgrade, the BI Corporation had discontinued the model and all its upgrades altogether and subsequently changed its business plan exclusively to nanochip manufacture. But the corporation failed miserably at the new venture and shut down shortly after. Most families that owned a BI-898 or 899 either sent them to the scrap yard or sold them at a loss to the extrasolar mining companies, who reprogrammed them for use in the nitrogen mines past Pluto.

Not so the Moons. The Moons had received a used (but well reconditioned) BI-898 module from Bytthus' grandmother as a wedding present, and from their wedding day forward had made use of the service module whenever and wherever possible, because save for her skills as a basic staples cook, Aurelia was not the most skilled of homemakers. She also had a history of



moodiness and depression, which had gotten better since Ypres birth, but the threat of which always dwelled somewhere at the edges of her gaze. BI-898 helped keep Aurelia in one piece, and allowed her the quiet, free moments away from the children and housework she and her fragile mind sorely needed. A dreamy, ethereal woman, Aurelia was most content when lost in her reading, or sitting alone in the holosuite with Bytthus, helping him with his novels.

After many years of heavy use, BI-898 seemed to adapt its own programming to suit the needs of its temperamental mistress, often in ways that the BI Corporation never imagined. Originally designed to be no more than a non-thinking assistant in the most basic of household tasks, after many years serving in the Moon household, BI-898 rose to supreme housekeeper-at-large, mastering tasks that even the neighbor's late-model deluxe modules would never complete satisfactorily. It could iron and fold Bytthus' garments with a military-like precision; it could draft comprehensive shopping lists based on Aurelia's past purchases, and even make suggestions on how to make better use of supplies; it could organize the children's toys and even structure their playtimes around Aurelia's frequently changing moods.

For example, BI-898 (or "Bitsy", as it had learned was its given name) had learned by rote what all its tasks for a given day should be, and completed them entirely on its own without need of any command or instruction by Aurelia of any kind---a remarkable feat for any robot. The artificial intelligence used in service modules up to that time had almost no concept of self-directed tasks; everything required a specific command, either given verbally by the robot's human master or via programming downloaded into the robot's task portal. Bitsy had long since ceased to require either, and came to Aurelia and her children seeking not instruction, but usually, conversation.

"I have finished the kitchen sanitizing, Miss," Bitsy bleeped as the robot daintily rolled over to its spot by Aurelia's feet.

"That's nice, Bitsy," Aurelia said absently. She kept staring out the holo-patio window.



"All other household tasks complete," Bitsy bleeped. Aurelia thought Bitsy was leaning toward her slightly, the way a dog seeking a treat might after fetching its master's slippers, but perhaps this was just a trick of the holo-patio light.

Aurelia said nothing, but tapped BI-898 lightly on its central processor and went to her bedroom. BI-898 stood in the patch of light spilling from the holo-patio for a moment.

Wachovia and her younger brother Ypres came in from playing knuckleball in the ring-corridor.

"Hi Bitsy," Ypres sang. Ypres loved the robot in the same way he loved his favorite Galaxy Dolls.

"Hiya Bitsy," Wachovia said, trying hard to sound more mature than her silly little brother. "Where's Mom?"

"Your mother is in her sleeping chamber", beeped BI-898 matter-of-factly.

"You mean her *bedroom*," Ypres scolded. "Why do you use all those weird words, Bitsy?"

"I speak in the language in which I am programmed," beeped BI-898 with the blunt non-emotion of artificial intelligence.

"You're so silly, Bitsy!" Ypres was tossing his knuckleball from one hand to the other. "Can you play with me, Bitsy? Wachovia won't play with me anymore. She says she's too big."

"I *am* too big," Wachovia snarled with the slightest tinge of sisterly affection. "I'm going to find Mom," she said, and disappeared down the hall.

"You'll play with me, right Bitsy?" Ypres tossed his knuckleball straight for BI-898's head. Without thinking, the robot ejected a tiny robo-claw, which caught the knuckleball expertly.

"Good catch!" Ypres cried.



"Thank you," BI-898 beeped in dry, courteous robot language. BI-898 tossed the knuckleball back at Ypres. It landed softly in his hands. He didn't even have to reach for it.

"You're always the best to play with, Bitsy," Ypres said softly. He forgot the knuckleball game as quickly as it had begun. "What's for lunch?"

The old robot rolled over to the kitchen counter and paused for a moment before saying, "Your mother has not prepared it yet. I have set out wheat and soy staples and turned on the convectioner."

"MOM!! Bitsy says it's time for you to cook!" Ypres howled. "MOOOMMMMM!" Silence was the only reply.

#

The next few months were difficult for the Moons. Aurelia had taken to her bed, sinking into a depressive funk the likes of which hadn't gripped her since before Ypres was born. Nobody understood why, least of all Aurelia. Bytthus, who had relied for years on Aurelia's silent, spongelike inspiration when composing his holo-novels, grew blocked and frustrated, sitting in the silent holosuite brooding for hours over his frightening lack of ideas. Wachovia had grown bored with her Animaux tiles and cast them aside in favor of writing petty criticisms of her classmates in a "slam book", a sort of diary that had become fashionable among her school friends. Ypres tried to play with the expensive Animaux tiles, but was too small to understand the lessons in ancient biology they tried to teach. Instead he fashioned them into knuckleball toys which he tossed against the wall, since Wachovia refused to play with him and BI-898 had become too busy running the household to serve as catcher.

With Aurelia taken to her bed, rising only for trips to the toilet, and Bytthus locked in the dark holosuite with his demons, the condominium became stale and dank from both a lack of Aurelia's feminine touch and the overhanging dark cloud of her



depression. BI-898 did its level best taking over all aspects of running the household, including drawing the children's baths and making the most basic of wheat-and-soy food concoctions, but even the faithful old robot could not replace Aurelia's gentle, creative spirit in the house. Aurelia may have been a poor homemaker, but it was her ethereal, creative nature that had strung the household together, however bad her holo-gardening and replicator-programming might have been.

The sinister change in the Moon household was not lost on the neighbors. The Artemis Arms had finally sold enough units to be turned over to a condominium board, and the election of the board members had been an event of some fanfare in the exclusive community. The crisis at the Moon home was such that the election had passed by unnoticed until BI-898 answered the door one morning to find several hostile-looking neighborhood women standing on the Moons' front stoop with their arms folded and their brows knitting.

"Tell your mistress that the Artemis Arms condominium board wants to see her," Lucinda Dust barked at the ancient service module.

"Mrs. Moon is in her sleeping chamber," BI-898 beeped back as politely as a robot could.

"Well, wake her up then," growled Arlene Watchtower. "We are here on official business."

BI-898's programming did not know how to respond to such hostility. *Shouldn't the carbonates have left when I told them the Mistress was unavailable?* it thought. *Surely the carbonates misunderstood what I said.*

BI-898 tried again. "Mrs. Moon is in her sleeping chamber," it beeped again.

Natalia Wanderer rolled her eyes. "What a stupid robot. I can't believe they still haven't scrapped this piece of garbage," she hissed. Natalia expertly kicked the sharp point of her heeled



slipper into BI-898's task portal, causing it to short-circuit, and then she callously knocked the battered old robot onto its side. "Let's go, she said sharply to the other women, and they all shoved past the disabled robot into the Moons' living room.

The commotion disturbed Bytthus, who was locked up in his frustrated holosuite. He burst into the living room, looking unkempt and haggard. He looked on the disapproving, surgically altered faces of the Artemis Arms condominium board with a mixture of embarrassment and outrage.

"Uhhh, ladies. Uhhh, who are you? Who let you in?"

"Your junky old service module failed to protect your door," said Lucinda accusingly. "You really should get a new one."

Bytthus noticed the disabled BI-898 struggling to right itself off the beige living room carpet, and started to walk towards it, but Arlene Watchtower blocked his path. "You are aware that the Artemis Arms now had a governing board, Mr. Moon?"

"Well, ahhh, no. No I wasn't aware of that." He paused for a moment, trying to place who these angry women were. "I don't believe we've been properly introduced," he said, as pleasantly as possible.

"Forgive me," said Lucinda, who considered herself the epitome of contemporary manners. "I am Lucinda Dust, your *next-door neighbor*. We've met before, so I don't know *why* you wouldn't remember *me*." She blinked her eyes accusingly at Bytthus.

"Well, I---" he stammered.

Lucinda went on. "And this is Arlene Watchtower, and Natalia Wanderer, the board president." Arlene and Natalia nodded their hellos but did not speak.

"Fine," sighed Bytthus. "Now what can I do for you?"

"Well, Mr. Moon, we have received numerous complaints from around the complex about the dilapidated state of your household," accused Lucinda. (Which wasn't really true---the



only complaints had come from these women, who had managed to elect themselves to the condominium board when no one else was interested in the job).

"I had no idea," mumbled Bytthus.

Natalia stepped forward and handed Bytthus an official-looking envelope. "Mr. Moon, in this envelope you will find a list of the condominium board's grievances against your household. I suggest you read it carefully. We are giving you two weeks to remedy these grievances, or further action will become necessary."

Bytthus took the envelope distastefully between two fingers. He was noticeably trembling. "You see ladies, there ahhh---well, we've been having some difficulties here at home, you see. Mrs. Moon is not well. I hope you can understand."

"We understand that Mrs. Moon is not well. That is exactly why we've filed these grievances," Arlene said.

With that, the ladies of the Artemis Arms Condominium Board turned on their heels and left.

Bytthus sighed heavily and walked over to the struggling BI-898, who was still flailing and beeping futilely on its side. "There you go old girl," whispered Bytthus gently as he righted the robot. "Sorry you had to go through that."

"The carbonates---the carbonates---" BI-898 sputtered between alien-sounding beeps.

"It's all right, Bitsy," Bytthus soothed. "Just calm down. Those old hags are gone now." BI-898 clicked and whirred; for a moment Bytthus thought the battered old robot was furious, then dismissed the thought as absurd.

Bytthus picked up the sinister envelope and opened it against his better judgment. "We'll see just what those busybody bitches



think of us," he said to the robot without waiting for an answer. BI-898 kept clicking and whirring.

Bytthus read the list of grievances aloud:

"The Artemis Arms Condominium Association Board of Managers levies the following grievances, which threaten the property value of the complex, against Mr. and Mrs. Bytthus Moon, inhabitants of Unit 2E, Charon Wing, Artemis Arms Condominiums.

- Poor maintenance of holo-garden;
- Lack of supervision of Moon children in common areas;
- Poor and unkempt condominium décor;
- Unattractive and threatening-looking ring-cruiser;
- Parking of said ring-cruiser in public view;
- Lack of participation in community activities;
- Use of dated and unsafe home help module;
- Unruly and disturbing behavior in the condominium complex and their own unit;
- General disrespect for the community.

The Board of Managers require that the Moons bring their unit, their children, their personal property, and their personal behavior within the community norms, or face further consequences."



"Bastards," scoffed Bytthus. He crumpled the notice into a ball and tossed it into waste recycler. A look of defeat came over his face, making him look even more haggard than before. He stared past BI-898 without seeing the robot and walked, hunched over, back into the holosuite. He did not emerge for two days.

Even if Bytthus had not seemed to comprehend the magnitude of what the sinister, self-serving women of the condominium board were trying to accomplish, BI-898 had, even if only in a small, robotic way. Over the next few days, BI-898 flew into what some might call a frenzy of activity, doing its limited best to address some of the board's grievances against its owner family. BI-898 somehow managed to convince Wachovia to drive the Moons' rusty old ring-cruiser into the Artemis Arms' general storage caravan and out of plain sight. With Ypres' help, BI-898 erased Aurelia's faulty programming from the holo-garden by short-circuiting the projection module with a combination of Ypres' knuckleballs and BI-898's robo-arm. The robo-arm's tip melted in the process, but the images of mutated jimson weed and unsightly flowers were replaced with a plain white square of light. Wachovia helped the robot liven up the stark, minimalist décor of the living room by spreading out her colorful bedspread over the old Scandinavian sofa and hanging what remained of her Animaux tiles (those that Ypres hadn't turned into knuckleballs, anyway) on the walls. BI-898's nanny programming kicked into high gear, scolding the children if they ever ventured out of the robot's sight.

Having made the Moon home more presentable in the eyes of the condominium board's requirements, BI-898 set to work on trying to heal its afflicted master and mistress. Thus far, in accordance with its non-intervention programming, BI-898 had left Aurelia to wallow in her bed under dimmed lights, but the day after Natalia attacked the old service module with her shoe, BI-898 seemed to abandon more and more of its original programming in favor of something else---even the robot itself knew not what.



That morning, BI-898 rolled into Aurelia's bedroom and flipped on the lights. Aurelia moaned loudly, covering her eyes with her hands. Her hair was tangled and her face gaunt.

"Bitsy, go away."

"It is time for your breakfast and bath, miss," BI-898 chirped.

"Not today. Leave me alone, Bitsy."

"It is time for your breakfast and bath, miss," BI-898 chirped again, louder this time. The battered old robot spat out its remaining undamaged robo-arm and pulled the covers off the bed, leaving Aurelia's naked body exposed.

"Bitsy!" Aurelia was shocked. "What are you doing?"

"It is time for your breakfast and bath, miss," the robot repeated mechanically.

Aurelia sat for a moment, shivering from the cold and blinking her eyes at the light she hadn't seen in many weeks. "You want me to get out of bed, don't you Bitsy?" she said, affection slowly creeping into her voice.

"It's time for your breakfast and bath, miss," the robot buzzed again.

Aurelia blew out her breath in acquiescence. "All right, Bitsy, you win," she said, and followed the faithful old service module into the bath suite.

When Aurelia emerged from her bath an hour or so later, she looked renewed, although still very thin and gaunt. She ventured into the kitchen, where she found soy and wheat staples waiting for her by the convectioner. "You're such a help around the house Bitsy," she said, and tapped the robot on its central processor, just like old times. "Where's Mr. Moon?"

"Mr. Moon is in the holosuite, Miss," beeped BI-898, just as it had done for years.



"Go and fetch him," she ordered the robot. "Tell him it's time for lunch."

BI-898 beeped understanding, and rolled off toward the holosuite. Bytthus entered the kitchen a moment later, and upon seeing Aurelia in the kitchen and back to herself again, the haggardness upon his face seemed to melt away all at once.

"Aurelia, darling. You're looking well."

"Bitsy got me up this morning, dear."

"I need you in the holosuite, Aurelia." He looked up at her, begging with his eyes.

"After lunch, darling." They embraced for a long time.

Aurelia, Bytthus, and the children enjoyed the first human-cooked meal they'd had in many weeks. After lunch, Ypres impressed his father with his skill at knuckleball, and Wachovia talked about what she was learning in school. As they were clearing the plates, there was a sharp rap on the front door.

"Will you answer that, please Bitsy," Aurelia asked sweetly.

BI-898 obediently went to answer the door. The imposing women of the Artemis Arms Condominium Association were behind it.

"You again," Natalia Wanderer growled at the robot. "Didn't I shut you down once already?"

BI-898 ignored this. "The Moons are finishing their lunch," the robot beeped in electronic monotone.

"Insolent thing," Lucinda Dust hissed, and shoved the robot roughly aside as the condominium board swept into the Moons' dwelling.

"What's this?" Aurelia sputtered. "What's going on?"



Bytthus had to struggle to speak, he was so angry. "Darling, when you were sick----I was going to tell you---"

"Well, well, well," sneered Lucinda. "It seems Aurelia is back among the living. And just in time, too! The women of the Artemis Arms condominium board wish to convey an official message to the entire family." Wachovia and Ypres stared at the pack of well-dressed, mannequin-like women with a mixture of wonder and terror; Aurelia's gaunt face had gone gray.

Natalia stepped forward to speak. "We are pleased that your household has chosen to comply with most of our grievance recommendations," she said matter-of-factly.

"I don't know what you mean---" Bytthus started, but then his eyes came to rest on BI-898, and suddenly after looking around the room, he understood what the faithful old robot had done. "Oh, that. Of course, we were happy to ahhh, comply." Aurelia started to say something, but Bytthus quickly silenced her.

"One thing remains, however," spat Natalia. "That robot."

"What's wrong with Bitsy?" Ypres asked.

Arlene Watchtower tossed a stack of reports onto the Moons' kitchen table. "Quite a lot," she replied, looking directly at the child. "Your positively *ancient* old service module is unsafe, and a menace to our community. Read these reports on the causes behind the BI Module Rebellion at the mining colonies if you don't believe me."

Aurelia stood up and stared Arlene and the rest of the board down like a harpy about to strike. "Bitsy---I mean, BI-898 has been a part of our family for many years. We will not get rid of her."

Aurelia's remark sent a titter through the condominium board. "Her?" exclaimed Lucinda. "You act as if the rusty piece of junk were a *person*."



"I told you the woman was a nutcase," sneered Natalia.

Arlene took a long, imposing-looking document from her retinue and handed it across the table to Bytthus. "I suggest you read this document carefully. It details the steps the Board can take to seize your property if you do not comply with the community regulations. And community regulations require that old and unsafe service modules such as the one in your possession must be destroyed."

Aurelia and Bytthus stared straight ahead, stunned. Wachovia and Ypres stared at the floor in silence.

"We're giving you forty-eight hours to comply," Natalia said.

"We won't," Aurelia said. "Do your worst, run us out of town if you have to, but we won't destroy Bitsy ourselves."

The women collectively scoffed and turned to leave. Before they could make it to the door, however, BI-898 was there to meet them. A panel opened on the front of the old robot's central processor, and a long, narrow attachment that Aurelia and the others had never seen before emerged. There were some faded letters inscribed on the attachment, but it was covered over with many years' worth of rust and grime.

BI-898 turned to face the group of women and squawked: "The Moons will comply. The Moons will remain here. I will not remain here." As soon as the battered old robot finished speaking, the long, narrow attachment began to glow a deep red from a heat source buried deep within its metal body. The intense heat burned the rust and grime off the attachment, and for the slightest moment, Aurelia could read what the inscription said: "AUTO-DESTRUCT."

"NO!" Aurelia shrieked. But it was too late. With a final beep and whir, the robot's central processor melted into a useless puddle of liquefied metal and ruined circuits.



The women of the condominium board stared, open-mouthed, at the ruined service module. After a moment, Lucinda spoke softly. "I suppose that is that," she said.

"Just like in the mining colony rebellion I read about," Arlene said, "but with less explosive force. I knew those old BI units were dangerously unpredictable." The women left.

Wachovia and Ypres both began to cry. Aurelia collapsed into a heap at her husband's feet, while her husband stared at the ceiling, helpless.

"What the hell are we going to do now?" he said, to nobody in particular.





The Changeling

By Fran Jacobs

In the moonlit clearing the faeries were dancing.

I had been watching them since the sun had set, their hair and gossamer clothes swirling with every movement, a dazzling array of colour like a liquid rainbow. Their long limbs were pale and sparkling in the light, while their lilting music and bare feet drummed on the earth made the grass and trees tremble. They were hypnotic to watch and it left me feeling a little bit dizzy.

Not everyone had chosen to join the dance. There were some, like me, who had just found somewhere comfortable to sit on the grass and were watching the revelries with wild eyes, and others who had found their own entertainment, either in the generously provided food or drink, or in the arms of another faerie. Every now and then a cry of pleasure or a drunken roar would be heard over the sound of the music, but no one paid it any attention. It was all part of the tradition that came with a faerie dance, after all.

I sighed and got to my feet, wiping the grass stains from my breeches. Even though the night was still young, everyone was already so caught up in the festivities that I knew no one would notice me sneaking away. What was one adopted mortal boy to them, after all? So with a walk that I hoped was casual and nonchalant, I made my way towards the edge of the clearing and the safe darkness of the surrounding trees.



The lilting sound of the music followed me, sounding ethereal, almost ghostly, as I pushed my way quickly through the trees heading towards the portal that would take me to the mortal realm. My heart was racing inside my chest and I had a familiar feeling of butterflies in the pit of my stomach. It was the same feeling I had every time I left for the mortal realm. I was always terrified of being caught, that perhaps someone had seen me sneak away from the clearing, after all, and were now following behind me. They would then want to know what I was doing and where I was going, and I knew that I wouldn't be able to tell them because I would be in more trouble than my life was worth if anyone found out what I was up to, but I was willing to risk it.

When a hand closed around my shoulder, my heart leapt into my throat and the butterflies in my stomach became a cold, tight knot. I swallowed. "Where do you think you are going?" an unfamiliar voice growled in my ear.

"Just ... just for a walk," I whispered, turning slowly, my body trembling with the fear I felt, a fear that evaporated as my eyes came to rest on a familiar face, that of my sister, Alaia. When my gaze met her violet, cat-slit eyes, she laughed.

"You should see your face, Kyra," she said.

"It isn't funny," I muttered. "You could have been anyone!"

Alaia's eyes narrowed and she folded her arms beneath her breasts as she gave me a disapproving look, one I was all too familiar with. "You wouldn't be worrying about who I was if you were doing something that wasn't going to get you into trouble," she said. I didn't answer her, just shifted my weight from foot to foot, my eyes fixed on her pale bare feet. "Kyra ... Kyra, you are in enough trouble already, you really shouldn't be making it any worse for yourself."

"Can it get any worse?" I demanded, a sudden flare of bitterness making itself known in the pit of my stomach. "Mother has



already threatened to send me as the next Teind, can it be worse than that?"

"Yes!" Alaia snapped at me. "She can *actually* send you! Heavens, Kyra, she isn't asking a lot from you, just that you bed a few women, father a few children. Any other mortal man your age would love to do such a thing, why do you protest about it so much?"

"Because it isn't what I want to do, Alaia! I do not want to be used as some sort of mortal stud!" The blank look in my sister's eyes told me she didn't understand why I didn't want that for myself. But why would she understand? She was fey, and I was mortal, and even though we had been raised together, brought up as siblings, there were some differences that existed between us, naturally it seemed, that made sure she didn't understand why this was so hard for me.

I was a Stolen, at least, that was what the faeries called it. It was their name given to the mortal children that they stole, children that they raised as their own in the hopes of them one day fathering children with faerie women to improve the faerie stock. I had been fifteen when my parents, Ashiya and Tel'ain, had told me the truth. It was something that had been happening for centuries, apparently, and there were many other mortal men living in Faerie, fathering half-breed children, so neither Ashiya or Tel'ain had thought that I would be a particular problem. They thought I would be all too willing and happy, even eager, to go along with their plans, to father children in exchange for all the wonders of Faerie, of living forever and spending my life in drunken, wild debauchery, with nothing to worry about, unlike the mortal stock from where I had come. But I hadn't been happy about it, I had been upset and horrified at what they had demanded I do for them.

And, when I had continued to refuse, my parents had taken me to the mortal world, to show me the life that I would have had. My real father, Grevan, was a farmer, who rose every day before dawn to feed the animals and muck out their stalls, before he



headed out to the fields to work. A younger boy, my brother, went with him, while my real mother, Selyna, worked at the house, cooking and cleaning and chopping logs. She was helped by Tylin, the changeling, Ashiya and Tel'ain's own faerie born son, who they had left behind in the crib, when they had stolen me, to avoid suspicion. No one knew that Tylin was a changeling, but I doubted that it would make any difference to Grevan and Selyna if they did. They were a close family, loving, and even though life was hard for them, I envied them that.

It had been another two years before Ashiya and Tel'ain had realised that our trip to the mortal realm had done little to change my mind and that was when they had lost their patience. Ashiya had given me six months to show some sign of doing what they wanted, or they would offer me as the next Teind, the offering of a mortal, made every seven years to Drakan, the Lord of Demons. Those six months were nearly up, so I wasn't surprised that my sister was a little anxious about me.

I sighed, letting my breath out heavily. "I am sorry, Alaia. I know that I am worrying everyone, that they are concerned. I will do what I have to, you know that I will. Just not tonight."

"I don't see why not tonight! It's a perfectly good night!"

I smiled at her. "You think that every night is a good night for making love, Alaia, but I can't. I have someone I have to meet."

"Oh?" She arched one perfect white eyebrow. "A lover, Kyra? You have a lover?" I didn't answer but I felt my face flush in betrayal and she laughed brightly, clapping her hands together like a delighted child. "You silly boy, you don't need to hide the fact you have a lover! That is, after all, what we all want from you."

"No," I said a little sharply. "You want me to father children. That is not the same thing." Her eyes narrowed with confusion and I sighed again, reaching out to touch her cold, bare arm gently. "I have to go. We can talk later, all right?"

"All right."



"You will lie for me, should mother ask?"

"Of course," Alaia replied, surprised I had even asked.

"Thank you." Without another thought I turned on my heel and continued my way through the dark forest towards the portal that would take me to the mortal realm, and to Tylin, my lover.

Ever since Ashiya had shown them to me, I had been fascinated by my mortal family. Everything about them interested me, the lives that they led, how closely they resembled myself, but most of all, it was Tylin, the changeling, who was living my life, who awoke my curiosity the most strongly.

The very next night I had gone back to watch them, alone, from the bushes, and, that same night, Tylin had called out a greeting to me. The crippled changeling boy had somehow known that I was there! I had been frozen by the shock of it and had remained hidden until Tylin had gone back inside the small farm house, then I had fled, back to Faerie. Only I had found myself unable to stop thinking of the changeling and my natural parents and I had returned a few nights later.

Again Tylin had known that I was there, no matter how well I had tried to hide, and every time I had returned, the faerie boy had called out to me, asking me to show myself. After a while Tylin had started to talk to me, to ask me questions about my day, even though I never replied, until eventually he had asked me if I was a faerie. I had found myself answering him before I had even had time to think, telling him that I was, because that was how I saw myself, even if it wasn't exactly true.

And that had been that. I had shown myself and we had talked and I had come back the following night, and the night after that, just to see him. We had gradually gotten closer until one evening the crippled changeling had seduced me in the bushes outside his parents' house

Eight months later we were still lovers and whenever I could, I went to him, and he was always waiting for me.



#

Tylin was lying face down on his bed drawing, his twisted legs hidden beneath the patchwork quilt that covered them, when I climbed in through the window. He didn't turn to look at me, just continued with his sketching, but he spoke to me, in his soft voice that always made my heart race, over his shoulder, "I wasn't sure that you would come tonight."

"I got held up," I said, sitting on the bed and resting a hand lightly on the back of his calf. "I'm sorry. My ... my sister caught me."

Tylin turned over quickly, throwing my hand off of his leg. "What ... what happened? What did she say?"

"She wanted to know what I was up to. I ... I told her I had a lover, but nothing more than that." I bowed my head. "I am scared, Ty. I am scared my mother will send me away, that I won't be able to see you again."

"No." Tylin shook his head. "No, Kyra, that won't happen." He caught my hands and I felt that same sudden rush of heat that I always felt when Tylin touched me. "It is just a bluff, to make you do what they want you to do. They don't mean it. My father is always telling my brother that if he doesn't behave himself he will send him off to join the King's Army, but we all know it's not true. It's just a bluff."

"No," I said, shaking my head. "I don't think that it is. Not with my parents. I think they mean it. I think ... I think that if I don't do as they ask they *will* send me away. They will send me to Drakan."

"To the Lord of the Demons." Tylin frowned. "I always thought that was just a story, something to scare children into behaving, but ... but I was always led to believe faeries weren't real either and they clearly are." His brow creased. "I don't know what to say, Kyra. I don't want to lose you but perhaps you should do what they ask. It ... it wouldn't be that hard, would it?" He gave



me an anxious grin. "You could always think of me, while you did it."

I swallowed tightly. "Is ... is that what you want me to do?" I asked him. "Bed some woman and just think of you while I do it? Because I don't think I can do that! Tylin, I care about you. I don't think I could just bed someone to make my parents happy!"

Tylin gave me a sympathetic smile. "No. I couldn't do that either." Then his smile grew. "You care about me?"

I hesitated, staring at my hands nestled in his. "I love you," I said.

Tylin's mouth met mine in a gentle kiss. "I love you, too," he whispered.

#

It was nearing dawn when I finally made it back through the portal and into Faerie. I was late, far later than I had wanted to be, but I had found it too hard to leave Tylin, to climb out of his warm bed and gentle embrace, to face the cold of the night air outside. I had only left, in the end, because I had had to. The cock had crowed and, in the rooms above, I had heard Grevan and Selyna moving around, getting ready to face the day. I hadn't wanted to be caught, so I had dragged myself out of bed, climbed back out of the window and headed back to the portal. It was only when I saw the sky turn grey, with the coming sun, that it had finally hit me just how late I was.

As I ran through the trees, my heart raced and my mind whirled with various excuses that I could give to explain my absence all night, but as I came bursting out, into the clearing, I was grabbed by two sets of strong hands. Before I had chance to think I was being dragged through the long grass over to where Ashiya waited, surrounded on all sides by faeries, including my father and my sister.



"Well," my mother said, her voice frosty. "This is a pleasant surprise."

"I-I am sorry," I gasped. "I ... I fell asleep-."

Ashiya's cold hand, landing across my face, split my lip and snapped my head back. "Do not lie to me," she snapped. "I know exactly where you have been!"

I glanced at Alaia who refused to meet his gaze. "You told!" I gasped.

"No." Alaia shook her head. "No, Kyra. I ... I didn't."

"I had you followed," Ashiya said, with a cold shrug, as though she saw nothing wrong in sending someone to follow me, her son. "I saw you slip away and was curious, so I sent someone after you." Her amber eyes narrowed dangerously. "I had no idea that you were going to the mortal realm!"

"I ... I was just curious about them," I said desperately, "about my family-."

Ashiya slapped me again and this time I stumbled, and would have fallen, were my arms still not held tightly. "Liar! Do you think that we are idiots, Kyra?"

"No," I whispered. "No ..."

"Good, because I know exactly what you have been doing in that mortal house! What you have been doing with that changeling! How you have been wasting your seed in the bowels of that crippled faerie! It has to stop, Kyra. Now! I will not have this behaviour from you."

"We have given you everything," Tel'ain said, in his soft, quiet voice. "Why do you repay us like this?"

"I ... I can't help it," I whispered. "I can't. I ... I love Tylin."



"Love?" Ashiya snapped. "A foolish mortal word that they use to try and justify their lust! You do not love that boy."

"Yes-."

"No," Ashiya said firmly. "You do not." She folded her arms beneath her breasts. "Now you have a choice, Kyra. Either you give up that changeling now and do as we ask you to or you will be taken away to the holding cell to wait for Drakan's arrival at the birth of the new moon."

"I ... I will do as you ask," I whispered. "I ... I swear it. But I can't give up Tylin. Please ..." I struggled, trying to free my hands from the tight grip so I could grasp Ashiya's cold long fingers, but my arms were still held firm. "Please ..."

But Ashiya just laughed, a cold sound without any real mirth that sent a chill down my spine. "You had your chance to do what we asked of you, Kyra. If you had then we would never have found out about Tylin and you could have had both. Now it is too late. Make your decision."

I swallowed tightly. The look in my mother's amber eyes was hard as stone, there was no warmth there. I turned to look desperately at my father and my sister, but they wouldn't meet my gaze. No one would meet my gaze. I knew then that this was it, this was the end. I had two choices, to give up Tylin and father children, or try and keep my lover and lose him anyway, and my life as well. It was no real choice, and a smart man would do what Ashiya had asked of me, but when I opened my mouth to speak, I found that he couldn't say the words. I couldn't say yes, that I would leave Tylin. Just the idea of it, of never seeing his face again, or hearing his voice, or feeling his touch, was too unbearable. All I could do was stand there, staring at my mother's bare feet in the lush grass.

When it became clear that I wasn't going to say anything, Ashiya sighed. "Well, it's clear what your answer is."

"I'm sorry," I managed to say finally.



"So am I, Kyra," Ashiya replied, sounding weary. She waved her hand and, before I had a chance to say another word, I was led firmly away.

#

From the bottom of the holding cell, which was nothing more than a deep pit in the ground accessible by a rope that was now pulled up, I could only see the sky. During the day I could watch the sun rise and feel the warmth of it on my face. Daylight was the time when my father came to see me, with food and water, but he didn't speak to me and I didn't attempt to start a conversation. And when the sun set, and the moon rose, and the sky came alive with sprinkles of stars, shining so far above me, I could listen to the music coming from nearby and see the flicking ash from the fire, floating in the breeze. I could hear the rustle of the trees and the long grass, the drumming of bare feet on the ground, and it left me feeling lonely and detached. I was no longer part of it, of the warmth and light of the fey, but I was not part of the cold hardness of the mortal realm either. I was between realms, dead to them both, yet not dead at all, and it was a strange place to be.

Tylin filled my thoughts during those long hours, although I quickly forgot how his voice had sounded and how his slim body had felt in my arms. All I had left was the image of his face, with the blue-black hair of his faerie mother and the large green eyes of his faerie father, there in my mind, when I closed my eyes, but it was of little comfort to me. I missed him, more than I thought that I could, and it hurt to think I would never see him again.

I wondered how he was without me. Did he miss me? Was he worried about me? Was he upset? Did his mortal mother try to comfort him, while he cried at nights, not sure where I was, as I cried being apart from him? Did his father ask him what was wrong, was he concerned about his crippled son, while my own adoptive father wouldn't even look at me, let alone speak. I didn't know. I didn't know what to think, but I knew that it made no difference. Tylin might be upset about me now but in time he



would get over it and move on. Perhaps marry, perhaps not. I hoped that whatever he did with his life, he would not completely forget me.

And when I wasn't thinking about Tylin, I was thinking about Drakan. It was only natural, in the circumstances. I had seen him once before, seven years earlier, when the last mortal had been given in offering. A handsome man, tall, blond, dressed in black, he had seemed friendly enough, yet coldness had radiated from him, an aloof arrogance that had made even my sharp-tongued mother quiet and fearful. The mortal we had given him, a girl that time, had cried when she had seen him, but fallen silent the moment he had touched her. Her eyes had been wide, goggling with fear, but she hadn't made a sound, and then Drakan had led her away. It had been the first night that I could remember there not having been a celebration, and when I had fearfully asked my mother what Drakan did with the mortals, she hadn't been able to tell me, but I had seen a look in her eyes that had scared me. Soon I would know, first hand, what the Lord of Demons did with his mortals, and I would be unable to tell anyone. And I was more than a little afraid.

#

It was evening, five nights later, when my sister came to see me. At first I thought that perhaps she had come to bring me something to eat, or to talk to me, only she didn't say a word, just stood at the top of the pit looking down at me. In the end her constant staring made me feel uncomfortable so I called up to her, "Do you want something?"

"Do you really care about that changeling boy?" she replied.

"Yes."

"He ... he cares about you, too."

That caught my attention and I half stood up. "You ... you have seen him? Spoken to him? Is he all right?"



"I wanted to meet him," Alaia said quietly. "I wanted to see what was worth so much to you that you would give up your life. He knew I was there, watching him, asked if I had seen you. I ... I told him what happened and ... and he wept."

"Oh." I had to swallow back a tight lump that had formed in my throat. I didn't like to know that Tylin was unhappy.

"So you really do care about him?"

"Yes." There was a long pause and then the rope came rattling down, barely missing the top of my head. "Alaia, what are you doing?"

"Climb up," my sister said. "And quickly, before anyone sees me."

She didn't need to tell me twice and when I had climbed to the top I turned to her. "Why are you doing this?" I asked her.

"Because, believe it or not, I do actually care about you."

"But ... but what about the Teind? What about mother?"

"I will explain it to her, make sure she doesn't come after you, and we can always steal another mortal. It's not a problem."

Her cold, callous and complete lack of concern unsettled me, but I forced myself to smile. "Well," I said, "thank you. But ... but I am not sure what to do now."

"Go to Tylin," Alaia said with a shrug. "He's waiting for you."

"He is?"

"He spoke to his parents, they agreed to let you come and stay with them."

"They did?"

"Apparently they just want him to be happy. They don't know who you are, or what he is, but he told them you had been thrown



out of home and they agreed to take you in." She gave me a sad smile. "So, I guess you're going home, Kyra."

"Yes," I said, returning her smile. "I guess I am."

I turned and walked away from her without another word, heading towards the dark forest trees. I could hear the music playing in the distance but it sounded quieter than usual and somehow lacking in its usual festivity, it was certainly not loud enough to drown out the nervous thumping of my heart inside my chest. I was going home, back to the mortal realm where I had been born, back to my mortal parents who could never, of course, know who I really was to them, but most importantly, I was going back to Tylin.

I stepped through to the portal to the mortal realm and I didn't look back.





Fiction Review: The Undead Zombie Anthology

(<http://www.undeadanthology.com>)

Editors: D. L. Snell and Elijah Hall

Permuted Press

When the editors over at Permuted Press asked me to review a PDF of zombie fiction, my first reaction was "oh oh ... do we want to get into the business of reviewing electronic media publications?". That's when they assured me that the "real" book was going to be actual hardcopy, that they were sending out PDF's to get the word out early and make it easier on potential reviewers. Good thinking on their part. It worked.

I was not totally unexposed to zombie fiction prior to reading this anthology of zombie stories. We receive occasional zombie stories among the submissions to *nanobison*. Nor had I missed any of the recent major theatrical releases featuring zombies. I have certain scenes from "Shaun of the Dead" and "28 Days Later" forever etched into my mind. But I was not what you would call a fan of the zombie written word.

After reading this anthology, what I can safely say to potential readers is that they need not currently be fans of zombie fiction to enjoy this book. Indeed, I should issue a warning: consuming these stories may well turn some of the readers into rabid zombie fiction fans, in the same slow, relentless way that radiation, microbes, passing comets and voodoo curses can turn regular people into flesh-eating zombies.

Not all of the stories were created equally. But most were crisp and smoothly executed. I enjoyed seeing the zombie in the protagonist role. There were lots of fresh ideas among the liberal doses of expected flesh-ripping. Few of the stories went on too long to hold my interest. I especially enjoyed the humor, both the subtle and the outrageous "in your flesh with biting jaws".



The size of this volume (over 250 pages) may seem daunting for a collection of this kind, but then it is a collection of short stories after all. The casual readers will take in whatever portions they can handle. And those readers who count themselves among the zombie faithful will consume every story, with all the zeal and abandon of any zombie on a still breathing human.

I give this work a *nano nano* and look forward to the next offerings from this publisher.

- Doug Helbling

***nanobison* Review Rating Guide:**

<i>buffalo drop</i>	Don't bother. This book is an insult to the pulping of trees.
<i>hoof's up</i>	Readable diversion.
<i>nano nano</i>	Somehow fresh, crisp, edgy, or otherwise diverse and thus recommended by one or more of the <i>nanostaff</i> .
<i>golden bison</i>	When "WOW" is a word that comes to mind: a remarkable work, inspired and impacting.



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