

A Random  
Collection  
of Events

a collection of short stories  
by Joe Sweeney



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## *Introduction*

Back in the 1990's, I decided to make a stab at writing again. Most of the short stories in this book are a result of that effort. I lost track of how many rejection slips I've gotten. Thanks to the new world of self-publishing, I now have the ability to present my stories to you without fear of editorial rejection. I hope you enjoy them.



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## Trial by Fire

Hastily pulling on her jacket, Deyna hurried out of the house and slammed the door behind her. A cold wind played with her un-brushed hair, tangling it even more. *What else didn't I have time for this morning?* she thought as she sped along the walkway. Her stomach grumbled in response.

"Oops!" Deyna cried, finding herself in a crowd of people, one of whom was now lying on the ground. "I am so sorry!"

"That's quite all right, Sister," the young man said calmly, reaching up to take her outstretched hand. "Perhaps I could ask you to take a moment to pray with us. Service will be starting shortly, and I have found it to have a remarkable effect when I am feeling too caught up in life."

"I really can't," she said, abruptly taking a step backward.

"As you wish. But if you should ever change your mind..." he said, smiling pleasantly, and then heading into the church.

Deyna paused a moment to collect herself. Turning, she nearly collided with another figure standing near her.

"Trying to set a record?" Jerrol laughed.

"I'm not usually in the habit of running people over," she replied. What was surprising is that it didn't happen more often. She was always in a hurry, constantly doing something, responding decisively in every situation. Maybe it was this constant action that accounted for her gaunt look. She was wearing herself down to nothing.

"Except when you're late for work," Jerrol commented. "You're setting a bad example for the rest of us lowly peons, you know."

"You'll cope. Besides, I wouldn't be late if I hadn't spent half the night trying to-- Why are you looking at me like that?"

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"I was beginning to wonder if you were going to take that gentleman up on his offer. You've been staring at the church with an odd look."

Deyna sighed, and shrugged her shoulders. "I guess sometimes I feel that I've missed something." She shivered slightly as the wind gusted, and pulled her coat tighter.

"Do you think the church might have that missing part?"

"I don't know, maybe. Most of them," she nodded in the direction of the people entering the church, "seem content enough."

"Everyone needs something to believe in. It provides a focus and helps you find a center for yourself. Whether that something is the church, or a higher power, or faith in humanity, or whatever, it all comes down to an understanding and acceptance of your place in the scheme of things."

"You make it sound so simple."

"It is and it isn't. It's one thing to understand intellectually, but another entirely to resolve it with who you are."

"Well, I don't think I'm going to resolve it standing here. Let's go." Deyna strode off in the direction of the Research Center, with Jerrol falling in by her side. Behind them, they could hear the beginnings of a sermon through the still open doors of the church.

\* \* \*

Meckleton Research Center was an imposing set of buildings. Katina approached it cautiously, not knowing what to expect. She had never been here before, never even given it a second thought. But, after years upon years of religious study, she still had not found answers to her questions.

She entered the Atmospheric Research building. It seemed empty, and she thought she could hear her heartbeat echoing off

the walls. About halfway down the hall on the left, she saw a large, ornate door. As she got closer to it, she noticed a plaque identifying it as the Office of the Director of Atmospheric Research. The door was partially open. She tried to slip quietly through the opening, but the hinges protested slightly as she opened the door wider. In the center of the small office was a desk, but no one was seated behind it. To the right, another door led to another office, and she could see someone seated behind another desk, intently studying some papers.

Katina crossed the outer office, and tapped lightly on the door. The woman behind the desk looked up suddenly, a startled look in her eyes.

"Can I help you? Are you lost?" The woman got up from her seat and came around the desk.

"No," Katina said. "I am not lost. I have some questions, I was wondering if, I mean..."

"Sit down. I suppose I can take a few moments. It'll be a nice change from this paperwork." The woman smiled pleasantly. "My name is Deyna. What's yours?"

"My name is Katina."

"Katina?" Deyna repeated as she returned to her seat. "So, what brings you here?"

"I, uh, have some questions," Katina said uncertainly, staring at the desk in front of her, "and the Old Ones could not help me."

"Hmm!" mused Deyna. "How many years of study have you completed at the Church?"

Katina's eyes widened. "I have studied all my life," she replied. "How--?"

"Your mannerisms and the mention of the Old Ones." explained Deyna. "It was not a difficult guess."

An awkward silence passed.

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"So," Deyna said. "What kind of questions do you have that the Old Ones couldn't answer?"

"Oh, they had answers to my questions," Katina whispered. She glanced uncertainly at Deyna. "The answers did not seem complete to me."

"Oh?"

"Yes." Taking a deep breath, she continued: "The answers they gave seemed without reason, except to say 'It is written so'. I came to realize that I could not accept that reason on faith alone. I must sound silly." The last was more of a question the way Katina put it.

"No, no," Deyna said hastily. "Not at all."

"I was hoping that you might provide some reason."

"You must know that my understanding of the subject is very different from what you've learned."

"Yes, that is why I have come to you. I wish to know what you know."

"It's not that easy. Probably the most difficult part is that my understanding is not based on a belief in the Elemental Gods."

Katina said nothing, but seemed to stare a bit more intently at an unspecified location on Deyna's desk.

"I can't actually answer any questions you might have," continued Deyna, "since we can only guess at what is beyond the clouds. I can say that there is no way that we can survive without protection beyond the Lower Layers."

"There really are Lower Layers!?" Katina asked, eyes wide in amazement.

"Yes, there are. But the layers are a result of a change in the density of the atmosphere. What I mean is," Deyna said, responding to the puzzled expression on Katina's face, "the air gets thinner the higher you go. This creates the cloud layers."

"But, how can the air get thin?"

"Have you ever noticed how a balloon gets smaller when it's cold and larger when it's hot?"

"Ye-es."

"Well, the balloon always has the same amount of air in it, so when the balloon is large the air is taking up more space. When you spread something over a larger area, that something 'thins' out."

"Oh, I see! So, the air is hotter as you go higher, and takes up more space!" Katina's eyes lit up with her leap in logic, but darkened immediately at the helpless expression on Deyna's face.

"Not exactly. That wasn't quite the best example. Heat is not the only thing that will cause something to thin out, especially air. The more room you have, the more room the air will take up. It spreads itself out to fill the area, thinning out as it does so."

"Oh. I thought that maybe the Fires in the sky were causing the air to get hot."

"Actually, we have never detected any fire in the sky itself. It's not even possible, because the air thins out to a point where there's not enough oxygen to support it. Not only that, but with all the moisture from the clouds, any fire would be damped as soon as it was started."

"So, what causes the Fires? I mean, we can all see them, especially when the Lower Layer weakens, I mean... in the Fight, uh. I don't know what I mean!"

Katina covered her face to hide her ignorance. Deyna walked around her desk and put a comforting hand on Katina's shoulder.

"It's all right. I know this is not easy for you."

"I feel so stupid," she said, looking up at Deyna.

"You're not stupid," Deyna reassured her quietly. "Look, what we call the Fires in the Sky are really just light. The light bounces around off the cloud layers, and creates the colors we see."

"Where does the light come from?"

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"That we should find out in another few days! If all goes well, we'll be sending up another plane to see what's beyond the uppermost cloud layer!!"

\* \* \*

The rain beat insistently against the window. Deyna stared at it thoughtfully for a few moments, finding a temporary inner peace with the familiar sight and sound. "Familiarity brings Security" came the old cliché, unbidden, to her conscious mind.

She turned from the window to face Jerrol, who had just entered her office. He was built as many others on this world: thin and lanky, pale skinned. He had a quick and friendly smile, and an open manner about him. But, again, all that was typical. What struck her most forcefully about him from the first she had met him was his hair and his eyes. It was as if he had the Fires burning in his soul. His hair had a reddish-orange highlight to it as the sky often did when the clouds were thin, and his eyes were bright as when the Lower Clouds break and the Fires showed through in all their glory.

"It seems the rains are finally relenting a bit," she commented, motioning him to the chair on the other side of her desk.

"Yes," replied Jerrol, seating himself in the chair. "Quite the worse storm in many years. But then, that is to be expected with the severity of the Fires this time around." He said it so matter-of-factly, yet he was looking at her as if he could see right into her mind. Deyna felt a small chill down her spine.

"It's difficult to shake the old beliefs," she said with a weak smile. "Part of me wants to believe that the Rains and the Clouds exist to protect us from the Fires. A childish fear, I know."

"A lot of people still believe in them. Look at how popular the Church of the Living Elements still is. People throng to mass by the millions, with the Water faction containing most of the hard-core believers."

"Speaking of which, a former acolyte of theirs was around earlier."

"Oh? So that explains your turn of mood."

"Yeah. She wanted some answers that the Church couldn't give. I got the distinct impression she was unhappy with what the Church has been preaching, and was looking for some alternative. So she denounced the teachings and came searching here."

"Hmm, most unusual," mused Jerrol. "Well, not important. What is important is: How about the next step?"

"The next step," repeated Deyna, all business now. "Are you certain as to the nature of the cloud layers?"

"As certain as we can be," he replied. "The department has come to a consensus that the readings from the last flight clearly indicate that there are a finite number of cloud layers. We think there may be something other than clouds beyond that final layer."

"Any conjecture as to what that something will be?"

"Our best guess is that there is nothing there," he said flatly, challenging her with his tone.

"How can there be 'nothing' there!?" Deyna asked in mock alarm. "Don't you get me going with that religious mumbo-jumbo!"

"Relax!" laughed Jerrol. "What we mean by 'nothing' is not the same as what the Church has been preaching. We envision something more like a vacuum. As you know, the atmosphere thins out the higher we go. We suspect that it may thin out completely to 'nothing' beyond the final cloud layer."

"How do you plan on operating the plane and protecting the equipment in this 'nothing'?"

"Well, the equipment has already been designed to be independent of the atmosphere and any other external influences -

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a completely self-contained unit. Our failures with the first flights brought that about. And since the plane will be unmanned as usual, operation should not be a problem, either. We're planning a night flight, to limit initial interference from the Fires until we know what's what."

"Are you sure you're not converted?" she asked, referring to his use of The Fires.

"I'm sure!" he said, laughing again. "But we've done some conjecturing about the light source which causes the atmospheric effects."

"And what have you come up with?"

"Well, we suspect that there may actually be a ball of fire in a fixed position out in space. We know that our planet rotates on an axis, so this object would account for the minute increase in heat and light on the day side."

"That makes a certain amount of sense," agreed Deyna, turning in her chair to stare at the rain again. The constant pitter-patter of the drops on the window was very comforting. How she longed to be outside this very moment! She could see several students laughing and playing out on the lawn. First things first, she sighed to herself. She turned back to Jerrol, who had been waiting patiently, expectantly.

"Make the final arrangements for the next flight," she finally said, "and notify me of the time and date of lift-off. Oh, and let's try to keep the actual mission goals quiet. The last thing we need is the Church stirring up more trouble."

"Aye, aye, captain!" he said with a foolish grin on his face. He paused before leaving long enough to throw her a mock salute, and then was out the door.

One her way home that evening, Deyna impulsively chose a path through the forest. It was the first really warm day of spring, and was very refreshing after the harsh winter this year. She slipped

her shoes off to feel the wet, new blades of grass between her toes. The young sprouts were still an amazingly deep, rich brown, but that would fade soon enough to a more moderate brown as they matured. Overhead, the leaves on the trees provided a wonderful contrast, with all the various shades of yellow, orange and red providing a truly dazzling display. With the moisture hanging in the air from the rain earlier, the twilight gave a feeling of unreality to the air - almost as if she were walking through a fantasy.

Deyna finally arrived home much later than usual, and headed straight for bed. Her walk through the woods had provided an outlet for the anxiety that had been building up for the past few months, and she slept peacefully.

\* \* \*

Jerrold barely noticed when Katina had slipped in. He was monitoring the signal from the plane, coordinating with flight control, directing the other team members at various consoles, and half-crazed with curiosity about what they would find when they broke through the Final Layer. And Deyna wasn't here yet, either. Amidst all this, he had caught sight of Katina out of the corner of his eye. It didn't fully register in his brain that Katina was there until several minutes later. She was sitting quietly off to the side - wide eyes absorbing, with little comprehension, the controlled chaos happening around her.

Well, as long as she stayed out of the way and, by the Fires, where was--

Deyna strolled in and sat heavily into a seat in front of the main console, dripping wet. The chair was not designed to soak up the water as well as the floor was, so the excess joined the puddle in which Deyna was seated, drained off and disappeared through the floor.

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"I was going to ask where you've been," said Jerrol, "but I think it's fairly obvious."

"I went for a long walk in the rain," Deyna said unnecessarily. "It felt so good to get out."

"Yeah, well don't rub it in," he grumped. "Now I see why you wanted to be Director - you delegate all the work so you can spend your time in the rain!"

"Rank has its privileges. What's the status on the plane?"

"We're about ready to break through what we think is the upper-most layer. We've been waiting for the final word from flight control. Ah, here it is now. Things should start to get interesting."

The monitor had been showing the flight of the plane between two distinct layers of clouds. Now that the plane was rising, the view was obscured by the clouds it was passing through. This went on for several minutes until, unexpectedly, the plane broke clear of the final layer. The camera on the plane swiveled up to show, not another cloud layer, but--

A shriek sounded from off to the side. Everyone turned to see Katina, her hands covering her mouth and her eyes wide with fright. She pointed a shaky finger at the monitor.

"It's, it's... the, the... Lost Ones," she stammered. On the monitor, thousands upon thousands of tiny, sparkling lights could be seen.

"What do you make of it?" demanded Deyna, a bit more gruffly than she intended.

"I'm not sure," Jerrol said weakly. "Definitely light sources, according to the spectrographic readings. But not nearly strong enough to cause the effect of the Fires!"

"Are you certain?"

Jerrol only nodded, his eyes darting back from one read-out to another, trying to make sense of all the data that was pouring in.

"It is said that those who do not believe, those who are sinners, will become Lost Ones and live for eternity in the Nothing with the Elemental Fire."

"Quiet!" Deyna commanded, sparing Katina only a brief glance. She ripped off a stream paper coming out of a printer.

"Jerrol, take a look at this."

"This confirms it," he said, after sparing the paper only a brief glance. "Those bright lights we see are either too small or too far away to have any affect on our atmosphere. Hey, take a look at what's happening!"

A bright glow was slowing building on the cloud horizon.

"The Fires!" Deyna exclaimed hoarsely. Katina whimpered, but said nothing.

The glow brightened as they watched, then suddenly erupted into a ball of flame. A great disk of fire slowly rose over the horizon, then the screen darkened suddenly. Katina let out a wild scream.

"He's come for me!" she shrieked. "Help me, God, please forgive me!!" Deyna and Jerrol rushed to her side, but she flailed wildly, falling to the floor. "No, no no, please, God, no," she sobbed. "Please, don't take me! I'll repent, I promise!!" Gently, she was carried out of the room, sobbing and moaning to herself.

\* \* \*

Jerrol seated himself in front of Deyna's desk, and watched her staring at the clouds. Wherever she was, she came back with a sudden start. She stepped back from the window and dropped heavily into her chair.

"Well?" she asked.

"Well," Jerrol began, clearing his throat. He waved the stack of paper he had been holding, then set it on her desk and said: "I have it all here, but I'll spare you. We figure the camera

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burnt out due to the intensity of the F-, uh, light. However, the remaining instruments continued tracking the object as a heat source. The path described an overhead arc, which means that the plane was between the source and the Upper Layer."

"How far?" Deyna was not feeling particularly talkative.

"Can't tell. But the light source is definitely strong enough to cause the effect of the Fires and provide warmth as well. We picked up that much."

"A ball of Fire in the sky?"

Jerrol nodded sullenly. "Fortunately, we had a back-up camera on board. As the light from the source," he carefully avoided referring to it as the Fire, "faded, those smaller light sources re-appeared. A few hours later, the process repeated itself and we lost the back-up camera. That's when we brought the plane in."

"Cyclic?"

"We think so," he replied, taking a deep breath. "And, adjusting for the speed and direction of the plane, the cycle matches exactly with the length of our day."

"Indeed?" Deyna swiveled in her chair to look outside again. The rain was much lighter now than it had been all those days ago. That day she had given final approval for the next step. The fatal step.

She turned back to face Jerrol, her face grave.

"We have to stop the research. We've lost our support."

"But, why!?" cried Jerrol. "I don't understand!"

Deyna said nothing; merely returned his hard stare.

Abruptly, he got up and strode angrily out of the office, slamming the door behind him. After he left, Deyna lowered her head onto folded arms, resting uneasily on the desktop. She could hear the crowd of Acolytes outside on the lawn, chanting for an end to the

sacrilegious research. Well, it seems as if they'll get their wish, she thought glumly to herself.

After many long minutes she got up, hunted around for an empty box, and began filling it with the memories she had accumulated over the years she'd been in the office.



## The Cold Sleep

Sharp pain. A sensation of falling. Heart pounding through my chest.

Bright light. I try to open my eyes against it, squeeze them shut again. My brain feels like it's on fire.

"--and take slow, deep breaths," a voice sounds in my ears. I'm having trouble understanding the sounds. "Slow breaths. That's it. Relax."

I regain some control over my lungs. It hurts to inhale, exhale, inhale, exhale. I'm exhausted from the effort, and fall asleep.

\* \* \*

I startle awake, and try to sit up. I'm on a white bed, in a bright room. There are things stuck in my arm. A heavy-set woman dressed in white walks over.

"Good morning!" she says. "Now, just lie back, don't pull the IV out of your arm."

"Wh... what?" I mumble.

"Everything's OK. You're in the hospital. As soon as you regain your strength, the doctor will be in to see you."

I lack the energy to understand, so I lie back in the bed and watch as she moves around the room. Her actions make no sense to me. But then, not much does. I can attach names to what I see: bed, room, woman; but those names mean nothing.

Soon, she is finished, and she leaves. I fall asleep again.

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I'm aware of voices. The words make no sense to me. I open my eyes and see two women on the other side of the room talking together.

"...disoriented and weak. He's still sleeping nearly 24-hours each day." I recognize her as the one from before.

"Just the same as the others." The other woman. "I see he's regaining his strength."

"Yes. I'd guess about another week."

"That puts him ahead of the last one by about three days. The shorter sleep period is having marginal success."

"He does seem more aware than the others at this stage. Still doesn't talk much, but he watches quite a bit."

"That's an encouraging sign. I hope that means he'll be able to integrate." A pause. "I see that the last one died."

"Yesterday afternoon."

A heavy sigh. "Well, keep me posted on his progress."

\* \* \*

"We're going for a short ride." It's the first woman - "nurse" is the word my mind provides. She slides me out the bed and into a chair with wheels. She rolls me out of the room and into another. Behind a desk is the other woman - a "doctor."

"Do you know where you are?" The question provides a focus for me.

I think about the question while the doctor sits and waits. It's difficult to make any sense of the words.

"A... hospital...?" I venture a guess. The word is familiar and seems to fit.

"That's right," the doctor smiles. "This is a hospital. Do you know what a hospital is?"

My head is beginning to hurt from the effort of thinking.

"Take your time," the doctor says.

I'm feeling very disconnected, but I know on some level that that is why I am in the hospital.

"It is a place," I say. "A place for... people. Who are... not well."

"Good!! Now, one last question, then you can go back to your room. Do you know who I am?"

"You are a doctor." My head is starting to spin. "A doctor is a people who... helps people who are not well."

I don't recall being taken back to my room, but it sure feels good to be asleep.

\* \* \*

"My name is Dr. Martin. We will be meeting every day at this time from now on. I am going to help you to integrate back into society."

I shift a little in the chair.

"A lot of what I just said probably doesn't make a lot of sense to you."

"No, it doesn't," I agree.

"That's OK," the doctor smiles at me. "It will take some time before anything does make sense. The most important thing for you to understand right now is that you are not well, and I am here to help you get well. Do you understand that?"

"I think so."

"Can you explain it to me in your own words?"

"I'll try." I think long and hard. I know that she will let me think as long as I like, just sitting there and smiling until I can figure things out. "I am feeling not well. Everything is strange. You are going to help me feel well, so that everything is not strange."

"Good. Let's start with how everything is strange. Can you describe that for me?"

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"I'll try."

"Take your time." Smiling.

"Well," I begin, "I know that I am seeing, hearing, tasting, smelling, touching. All these sensations, I react to them. My body seems to know what to do. Part of my brain seems to know what it means."

This is all very difficult for me, so I stop. Dr. Martin just sits.

"Another part of my brain is looking at the first part, like its looking through glass. Maybe sealed in a container. That part of me is just floating, off balance. The view gets a little hazy, sometimes."

"Does it bother you, this floating, off balance feeling?"

"A little," I admit. "It's like that's the real part of me, but I can't focus on that because the senses from the other part of me are demanding so much of my attention."

"I'm sure that it must be very frustrating. Would you believe me if I told you this is normal?"

"Do you feel this way, too?"

"Not me. But there have been others like you before. And they have described the same sensation."

"Others?"

"Yes. I have treated many people with the same problem."

"What is the problem?"

"Well, you have been in cold sleep for the past few months. Cold sleep is like suspended animation, or hibernation. People who wake up from cold sleep always have this problem, something they didn't have before. We are trying to figure out what it is about cold sleep that causes it."

She looks at me expectantly, but I don't know what to say.

"I know. It's a lot to understand at one time. For now, it would be best for you to go back to your room and give your mind time to sort out some of what I just told you."

\* \* \*

"Good morning, Dr. Martin," I say as I am wheeled into her office.

"Good morning," she responds, smiling. "How are you feeling today?"

"Good," I answer. "The time was good. My mind is feeling more settled."

"Good! Now, where would you like to begin?"

"You said that I was not well because of the cold sleep. I guess I want to understand how that came to be. If a person is well before the cold sleep, and not well after, then why are people in cold sleep?"

"There are many other ways someone can be 'not well', besides the way you are not well. Can you remember anything from before your cold sleep?"

"Before the cold sleep?" I start feeling confused again, but not as bad as last time. I take a deep breath, and just sit quietly for a few minutes, thinking. Dr. Martin sits quietly.

"I cannot think of a before," I finally say. "I can think of an after, which is here. When I sleep, it's like before here, what you say is the cold sleep. But I cannot think of anything before the cold sleep."

"That's OK. It's normal. The others said the same thing."

"Should I remember the time before?"

"Eventually, yes, because otherwise you will feel a gap in your memory. For now, you need to understand that you were not well in another way, which is why you were put into cold sleep."

"In what way was I not well?"

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"You committed several crimes. But you are well now in that way. The cold sleep cured you of that."

"Crimes?"

"Yes."

"Could I meet some of the others?"

She looks at me from far away, the same way I feel a lot of the time. "Perhaps," she says. "We'll see."

\* \* \*

The nurse takes me to the lunchroom. Her name is Linda. She and Dr. Martin are the only two I can ever remember.

Lunch is something called roast beef with gravy. Peas and carrots. Pudding for dessert. Milk to drink. I find it more and more difficult to go through the motions of eating. My body's responses to the tastes and smells seem unimportant and pointless. A lot of wasted effort.

Back in my room, I doze lightly. In my dreams, my trapped self belongs to the universe in ways my physical self can't understand. Physical existence is a chain, stopping me from experiencing reality. It's such a narrow perception of life; so painful and unbearable. The loneliness and isolation are like the clamps of a vise, squeezed tight by the constraints of existing in physical time.

\* \* \*

"How is it that cold sleep can both heal and hurt?" I ask Dr. Martin. It's another day, and another session. I look forward to them, and I shrink from them. They help me to understand more about this world I'm in, and I that I don't belong here.

"We've been able to detect a definite change in the neuron activity of people who go through the process. Almost as if the

pathways relating to personality have been altered. No sign of the mental anguish that led to the criminal behavior. Even the mentally ill are cured."

"This is good?"

"Yes. But the down side of it is these people express strong feelings of being detached, just as you do. The change appears to be more fundamental than just personality. We can't put our finger on what that change is."

"Is that why I'm not well?"

"Yes. We hope to help you overcome those feelings of detachment. At the same time, you can help us to understand what has changed."

"How can I do that?"

"By talking to me about your feelings. Why is it that you feel so detached? What is the significance of this 'trapped part' of yourself?"

"It is difficult to explain. I feel detached because of the trapped part. I feel trapped because I am detached from what goes on around me. I understand what I am doing, but not why. All that I do here is pointless."

"In what way is it pointless?"

"It's just pointless. I'm not accomplishing anything. Or learning, or experiencing. I feel like that pencil in your hand - an object reacting only to the will of its surroundings."

"What about happiness? Sadness? Pride? Doesn't the food you eat taste good? Don't you enjoy our sessions? Talking with Linda?"

"Those things don't mean anything. They are not true feelings."

"How!? How are they not true feelings? We live our lives on this Earth for the experience of those sensations. It's what makes life worth living!"

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"Those are just physical responses to a physical world. They don't mean anything."

Dr. Martin takes a deep breath, visibly trying to contain her frustration.

"I'm sorry," she said. "It's just that we got to the same roadblock with the others."

"There are no more others."

"Not anymore. There were. They died for no apparent reason. Can we continue this tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow," I lied.

Because I finally figured out how to release myself from the trap. For them, tomorrow will come without me.

## A Virtual Reality

"Seventeen years ago, the Germ Wars killed off all of our children, and left us barren. But, with your help, we can keep the memory of our children alive. For only one dollar a day, you can sponsor a Virtual Child. You choose the characteristics and age that you prefer, and our computers will simulate an individual child's life just for you. You will be able to access on-line pictures of your Virtual Child, share email and video conversations, and even make decisions about the child's future. So, visit [www.virtualchild.org](http://www.virtualchild.org) for more information on how you can sponsor a Virtual Child. And remember, together we can - 'Keep the Memory Alive'."

"Janeen," said Frank Walker, calling to his wife. "Janeen!"

Her eyes had glazed over - staring at something only she could see. Her mouth was clamped firmly shut, the tightened muscles adding to the already chubby cheeks.

"What?" she responded blankly. Focusing her eyes saw that her husband had turned off the monitor and was headed for the bedroom. He paused, and the light from the hallway light cast an image of him across the living room floor. An image in which the relaxed posture and extra body fat, sure signs of middle age, was magnified before his very eyes. He was not as overweight as his wife was, but would get there quickly if he weren't careful.

"Are you coming --?" he began, and then stopped. "Why don't you call them tomorrow?" he asked, referring to the commercial.

Warm tears slowly trickled from her eyes, and she sniffed quietly. She felt Frank's arms around her, holding her tight. For several minutes, she cried silently into his shoulder.

The Germ Wars in the first decade of the 21st century had taken her only brother. Maleek had just celebrated his 11th birthday; Janeen was two years older. The only explanation the

## A Random Collection of Events

geneticists could come up with was that the combination of two or more bacterial strains caused some kind of an infection in pre-pubescent children that destroyed their immune system. They were not really sure. All Janeen knew was that those two years meant the difference between life for her and death for her brother.

The Germ Wars had died with the children. And a war-weary world soon made another discovery: the same infection that had killed the children left the rest of the population sterile.

\* \* \*

Janeen said nothing more about it the next morning at breakfast, so Frank decided not to push the issue. Although, he thought, she did not seem her usual chipper self, which was actually a good sign. Usually she would cover her pain with a facade of good cheer and pretend that she hadn't cried herself to sleep. This morning she remained quiet and thoughtful throughout the meal. Perhaps she had finally come to a decision.

Well, she would certainly tell him when she was ready. There was no sense in wasting any more time thinking about it. As per their usual routine, they kissed as they headed out for work, parting ways for the day at the door to their apartment.

\* \* \*

Frank was surprised to find Janeen home that evening. She tended to work late; it helped to keep her mind occupied. Instead, she was sitting in front of the terminal, logged into the Internet.

"You're home early," he said, passing into the bedroom to change out of his work clothes.

"I decided to take the afternoon off," she replied.

Frank emerged from the bedroom and sat down next to her, eyes wide as he watched her navigate the Web.

"I still don't understand how this thing works," he said, "or what spiders have to do with it."

Janeen giggled at the private joke. "You could learn this in two seconds flat if you really wanted to."

"No thanks. I'd rather leave it to your expert care." He paused a moment, then: "So, what are you looking for?"

"I'm trying to find out more about the Virtual Child Preservation Society. But --" she tapped a few keys in frustration, "I can't seem to get much other than what's on their main website. Mostly an extension of their commercial."

"Honey," Frank said gently. "Why don't you take a break, and we can get some dinner. I stopped at the market and picked up some fresh clams. I thought I'd dig out my steamed clam recipe that you like so much."

"That is so sweet. Oh, alright, you twisted my arm." She logged off the net and followed Frank into the kitchen.

Over dinner, Janeen rattled on about what she had learned so far. The Virtual Child Preservation Society was founded by a group of parents about three years after the Germ Wars ended. They had originally started as a support group for parents who had lost their children to the war. Eventually, they enlisted some top-notch computer experts who developed the virtual reality program.

"There's a ton of literature justifying the existence of the Society, but it seems there's more to it, somehow."

"How do you mean?" Frank asked.

"Just a gut feeling, I guess. The organization is run by some kind of financial genius, and she's built an empire like you wouldn't believe. Not only does she have a staff of the best programmers, but she's also got the largest R&D around. Did you know that the VCPS has been behind every major advance in computers for the past ten years?"

## A Random Collection of Events

"Uh, no, I didn't."

"It's true. I had a hell of a time figuring that one out; they cover their tracks well. They have done more for Internet and Virtual Reality than any company in history. There must be more to it!"

After dinner, Janeen was back on the Internet. Frank knew better than to get in her way. She was a professional information snoop - that was how she made her living. Once she was on to something, she wouldn't let it go until she found out all there was to know. It was an obsession that began when her brother died - she wanted so desperately to understand how and why she lived while Maleek had died - that she tore through everything she could get her hands on.

Frank decided to go out for a movie. Afterwards, he strolled through his old neighborhood, taking note of all the changes since he'd been through last. After stopping for a while at an old corner cafe that used to be a school hangout, Frank finally headed for home.

Janeen was still at it. She barely noticed him as he passed through the living room. It would be a while before she joined him.

A muffled cry disturbed his sleep. He was still alone in the bed. Groggily, he crawled out and put on his bathrobe, entering the living room just in time to see Janeen being dragged out the front door. Suddenly wide-awake, he bolted after them.

"Hey!!!" he hollered, bursting through the open door. He was met with a karate chop to the back of his neck, and he quickly lost consciousness.

\* \* \*

He came to in a small office, lying face down on a couch. Head throbbing, he slowly pulled himself up to a sitting position.

He could hear voices coming through a door against the far wall. Curious, he walked over to the door in order to hear more clearly. Just as he reached it, the door opened, and a bulky man stood blocking the doorway. Over the man's shoulder, Frank could see his wife seated in front of the edge of a desk. The door hid the rest of the desk.

"What's going on here?" he demanded angrily.

"Has our Prince Charming finally awakened?" an unfamiliar female voice called from behind the door.

"He has, Doctor," said the guard.

"Show him in, show him in," the female voice said.

The guard stood aside and allowed Frank to enter. He stumbled into a chair next to Janeen, and grabbed her hand. The office was very luxurious and well furnished. It was obvious that whoever had taken him was, at the very least, wealthy.

"What's going on here, Mr. Walker," answered the woman on the other side of the desk, "is a dilemma." Her hands were carefully clasped and resting on the desk. Short, black hair salted with grey and a rather plump appearance gave Frank a strong matronly impression.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Frank said.

"Why have you kidnapped us?"

"Perhaps your wife can explain that to you. But first, allow me to introduce myself: I am Dr. Brenda Rothberg, founder of the Virtual Child Preservation Society. Now, Mrs. Walker, why don't you explain to your husband 'what's going on here?'"

"Well," Janeen began, "I finally found what I was looking for. It seems that this organization has a lot more on its agenda than emotional support for distraught parents."

"I would guess that agenda is classified somehow," said Frank, "Why else would they drag us unwillingly out of our own home."

## A Random Collection of Events

"You have guessed correctly, Mr. Walker. Except that it is your wife who presents more of a danger to us than you."

"Oh?" asked Frank.

"She was wise not to fully answer your question. She knows a lot more than she lets on."

"I figured that much," Frank said. "I still don't see how that gives you the right to--"

"The problem, Mr. Walker, is that the knowledge she possesses is too dangerous. The public wouldn't understand, and we'd have wide-spread rioting. Erasing that from her mind would be far too risky. She is so driven to know, that the process would damage her psyche. It would leave a large gap in her memory. With what you know so far," she turned to Janeen, "it wouldn't be a problem. The more you know, however, the more difficult the process."

"So what exactly is your dilemma?" Frank demanded.

"They won't let me go with the knowledge that I have," Janeen answered disconsolately. "The dilemma is what they should do with me. My choice is either to join them or risk the effects of a surgical removal of the knowledge."

Frank stared open-mouthed for several moments. Then he turned to Dr. Rothberg and said: "You can't do this!! We have rights under the law!"

"You are very amusing, Mr. Walker," she laughed. "Of course you have rights under the law. Fortunately, or unfortunately for you, an organization with sufficient clout can find ways around the law, especially in these degenerate days. The powers that be are not as interested in enforcing the law. So, yes, we can do this."

"And so," she continued, "we come to our second dilemma: What do we do with you, Mr. Walker? I offer you the same choice as your wife, out of deference to her. You see, we are a humanitarian organization, after all." She paused for effect. "I will

give the two of you some time to think it over. Guard, I believe there is an empty suite on the 35th floor. Please escort them there."

\* \* \*

Frank sat dumbstruck on the bed as Janeen paced the floor.

"What are we going to do?" he mumbled.

Janeen stopped her pacing and sat down next to him.

"Sweetheart, you have to tell me everything!" he said suddenly, grabbing her by the shoulders.

"I, I can't!" she sobbed. "I can't risk you, too. I've already forfeited myself."

"Listen to me! We're in this together, no matter what. Do you think those vows we took were meaningless to me? I love you, and whatever happens we stay together!"

"But--"

"No 'buts'. Now, tell me everything. What is it that's so important that they have to sidestep the law to protect it?"

"Okay," Janeen said, calming herself. "Do you remember I told you that the VCPS has been at the forefront of computer R&D?"

"Yes, I remember. Something about virtual reality in connection with the Internet?"

"Well, for the past ten years they have been developing a growing society of virtual reality children. With the Internet at their disposal, they have all the information they need to run a society. They use the Virtual Child sponsors as models to interact with the program so that it can learn the nuances of interpersonal skills. Frank, they hope to build an entire self-sufficient virtual reality civilization by the time humanity dies out!"

"How is that possible? Can you do that with computers?"

## A Random Collection of Events

"The basic idea has been around for decades. Computer games that simulate cities, colonies, or even civilizations were very popular shortly before the War. Except that their 'game' has the muscle of a world-girdling organization and communications network behind it. What I don't understand is why they are keeping all it such a secret."

"That part I think I understand," Frank broke in when she stopped for a breath. Janeen looked at him quizzically. "I may not know anything about computers, but I do know people. We survive on hope. If we lost that, we wouldn't have anything to live for. Look around you! The suicide rate is at an all-time high because our future is lost to us. We are the last generation of a dying race. We are hanging on to our last thread of hope."

"But this could be just the thing!", Janeen said. "This organization is dedicated to insuring that our civilization continues."

"Yes, but it would continue as a computer program," Frank argued. "That means nothing to the average person. They don't care if a computer is programmed to think and to feel, it's not real to them because it's still just a bunch of electronics and plastic."

"How can people be made to understand the significance of this project?" Janeen asked.

"Humanity has to be ready to accept it," Frank answered. "I doubt if they are. That's why Dr. Rothberg is keeping it a secret. If the general public found out about this project before they could accept it, then the human race would die out all that much quicker because it would be seen as an acknowledgement that human life had ended."

"And Dr. Rothberg needs time to work out all the bugs," Janeen said. "Oh, Frank! We have to help them!"

"I don't know, Janeen. After the way they--"

"It's our only hope," Janeen pleaded. "They are creating a whole new future for our children. Our children, Frank."

Frank took a deep breath and fingered the lump on the back of his head. He was resisting because these people broke into his home and kidnapped them, and were threatening to erase their memories if they didn't cooperate. When he put that aside and thought about it, though, it did make sense. Besides, how could he say "no" to Janeen?

"Okay," he said reluctantly.

"Oh, thank you!" Janeen said, throwing her arms around him.



## A Sudden Change of Life

"What a miserable day!" Morgan grumbled to himself as he hurried across the street to the bus stop. "I don't know why I put up with it."

Climbing aboard the bus, he dropped into a seat and stared out the window. His thoughts continued along a downward turn:

"I should just quit that job. They don't appreciate all I do for them; they just take advantage of me and pile on more and more work. I just can't keep up with it. What's the point to life when all you do is work through one miserable thing after another? I wish I could escape from it all."

His head bumped against the window, hard, when the bus hit a pothole. He swore softly. The ringing in his head resonated with the sound of the bell that signaled the next stop, which he realized was his. After getting off the bus, he stood on the sidewalk for a few minutes to gather his thoughts, then began striding down the street.

Walking at a steady pace, he reached his destination ten minutes later: a large grocery store set in a plaza. Once inside, he wandered through the aisles. He knew there were a few things he needed, but could not for the life of him remember what those things were. So, he settled for a few comfort foods - chocolate ice cream, a pizza, and some soda.

At the checkout counter, he pulled out his bankcard and slid it into the reader. The machine beeped at him a few times, then promptly spit his card back out.

"What the heck!?" Morgan muttered, trying the card a second time. Again, the beeping machine spit the card out. Looking at the cashier, he said: "There seems to be a problem with my card."

"You can have it checked out at the service desk," she said. "I'll hold your order for you."

## A Random Collection of Events

He stormed over to the service desk.

"I'm trying to draw funds out of my account," he said to the young lady at the desk, "but there seems to be something wrong with the machine."

"Sorry about that," she apologized. "We'll have someone repair it right away. In the meantime, why don't you fill out this slip with the amount you wish to withdraw? We can do the fund transfer right here."

"Thanks," he said, taking the slip she handed to him. Once it was filled out, he handed it back with his bankcard.

"Okay, if you'll just punch in your ID number on that keypad," she said, pointing to the one on the desk. Morgan did so.

"That's odd," she said. "Try your number again." With great care, Morgan punched in his number again. The woman frowned, then said: "There's something wrong here, the computer is not accepting your personal number. Let me see if I can find out what the problem is. What's your account number?" He rattled off a string of numbers, which the woman wrote down. She then punched the number in to her keypad. It seemed like an eternity before the computer responded.

"The computer says that there is no such account number on file with that bank," she said, returning the card to Morgan.

"What!!" he cried in surprise. "How can that be!?"

"I'm sure I don't know," she replied. "Perhaps you should check with your bank."

"I'll do that!" he exclaimed, and stalked out of the store, completely forgetting about his groceries.

Morgan waited impatiently at the bus stop, fuming at the unfairness in the world. When the bus arrived, the scene at the checkout was repeated. This time, it was his bus pass that was not cooperating. Sliding it through the reader produced a few warning beeps - nothing more.

"Let me see that pass," the driver asked.

Morgan handed his pass to the driver.

"I don't know where you got that pass, buddy," said the driver, "but it ain't no good here."

"What do you mean, it's no good?"

"Just as I said."

"But I just used this pass not half an hour ago to board the Allen Street bus. It says right on it - Transit Authority Bus Pass."

"It ain't my problem what the pass says. Could be faked, for all I know. But I can't let you ride with it. Either pay your fare or get off."

Morgan decided not to argue the matter further, and reached into his pocket for change. Not quite enough, he thought darkly. Pulling out his wallet, he drew out a dollar bill, and fed it into the machine. The machine spit it out. Morgan stared at it, dumbfounded. Three strikes and you're out, he thought.

"Let me see that!" said the driver, reaching over and taking the bill out of the machine. "What do you call this, eh!? This green slip of paper ain't no money I know of!!"

Morgan continued to stand there, dazed. He felt someone pushing a coin into his hand. He looked up and saw an elderly man return to his seat, smiling and nodding. Looking into his hand, he saw a bus token there. He muttered a dull thanks, dropped the token into the fare box, asked for a transfer, and stumbled down the aisle to a seat.

Twenty minutes later, Morgan was on the street again. He knew where he was: his apartment was just around the corner. How he got there, though, he couldn't say. He knew the route home like the back of his hand; he must have automatically gotten off the bus at the right stop despite his dazed condition.

"I could use a drink," he said to no one in particular.

## A Random Collection of Events

At his doorstep, Morgan pulled out his keys to unlock the door. It came as no real surprise that the key didn't fit. He rattled the door hard.

The door opened, and Morgan stared at the woman standing in the doorway.

"May I help you?" she asked.

"This is my house," Morgan mouthed, though no sound came out. He could feel some wetness out of the corner of his mouth, and hear his keys jangling in his shaking hands. The world seemed to be spinning ever so slightly.

"Are you okay?"

"I don't feel so good," Morgan whispered.

"You better sit down," she suggested, but he didn't hear her.

\* \* \*

Morgan awoke to the sound of two kids fighting. One was a boy, the other a girl. They were arguing over something, he couldn't tell for sure what.

Opening his eyes a crack, and looked around the room he was in. He couldn't see the kids who were arguing. All he knew was that he was lying on a couch.

His head felt cold and damp. He reached up and touched the wet cloth on his forehead. Holding it in place, he slowly sat up. He heard a sound behind him and, before he could turn his head, the woman who had opened his door had seated herself next to him.

"My name is Denise," she said. "You fainted. I barely got you to the couch in time. I've called the paramedics; they should be here soon. How are you feeling?"

"My head hurts."

The doorbell rang just then, and the woman got up to answer it. She ushered two people in uniform over to where Morgan sat, explaining to them how this man came to be on her couch. The paramedics said nothing as they checked all vital signs, then checked for obvious signs of injury, and finally for not-so-obvious signs.

"My name is Cheryl, what's yours?" the older woman asked.

"Morgan Lyzander," he responded.

"And where do you live, Morgan?"

"Right here, in this apartment."

Denise exchanged a look with the paramedics.

"I've lived here for more than five years," she said. "I don't know who this man is."

"Mommy, can we help doctor the sick man?"

"No, Amanda," Denise said, turning to see her two children standing in the hallway. "You and Michael go play outside until we are done here."

"I have proof," Morgan said. He withdrew his wallet and handed Denise a card.

"New York State Driver's License," she read. She showed it to the paramedic. "His picture and name are on the card, and this is the same address."

"Look at the issue date: February 23, 2095," said Sandy, the younger of the paramedics. "That's earlier this year."

"Yes," said Cheryl, "but that is not a state driver's license. The color and design are all wrong." She pulled out her own, and they compared the two. She put her card back, and then began packing her equipment.

"Well," she said as she stood up. "I can't find a sign of anything physically wrong. Or even anything to suggest amnesia."

## A Random Collection of Events

You may want to call the police, they can help him find a shelter for tonight."

"Thanks," Denise said as she showed the paramedics to the door. "You've been very helpful." She closed the door and turned back to the couch.

"Would you mind--" Morgan began, "Could I make a few phone calls? I'll pay you back. I may be able to find a place to stay tonight."

"Okay," she answered. "I'll be in the kitchen fixing supper."

Morgan sat down by the phone and dialed a number.

"Hello?" answered a young girl.

"Hi, Beth? Is your mom home?"

"Sure, hold on." Morgan breathed a sigh of relief. Maybe something was finally going right.

"Hello?" a woman's voice sounded on the line.

"Sally, thank heaven you're home. You would not believe what's been happening to me today."

"Who is this?"

"It's Morgan."

"Morgan who?"

"Morgan Lyzander. Your boyfriend." A worried note started creeping back into his voice.

"You must have the wrong number. I don't have a boyfriend; I'm a married woman. And I'm expecting my husband home any minute now."

"But--"

"Don't call here again." She hung up.

Morgan sat to think for a minute. Then dialed the phone again.

"Hello?" another woman answered.

"Inez? It's Morgan."

"Morgan who?" she asked, echoing the previous conversation.

"Your brother."

"I, uh, don't think so. I don't have a brother named Morgan anymore." She, too, hung up.

Now he was puzzled. First, Sally is married, something he didn't think would be very likely. At least, not for another couple of years. She wasn't ready for it yet - he had discussed that with her often enough. And second, Inez's comment that she didn't have a brother named Morgan anymore. Something very strange was happening. He dialed a third number.

"Hello." answered a male voice this time.

"Mark. Boy, I'm glad you're home.

"Who's this?" Again with that question.

"It's Morgan, your brother."

There was a long pause on the other end of the line, then a deep breath.

"Well, you sound like my brother Morgan. But I don't believe you are him."

"Why not?"

"Because my brother died in a car accident in September of 2085."

"A car accident!" Morgan exclaimed. "How did it happen?"

"Well, he had been drinking and beating on his wife. She ran out the door and into the waiting car of a friend. He took after her and collided head on with a truck. I thank God he was the only one killed, no one deserved it more than he did. So, you obviously can't be my brother. I don't know how you got my number, or what you're trying to pull, but I warn you - if you even come near either me or my family, you will regret it." There was a click at the other end of the line.

## A Random Collection of Events

It was a few seconds before Morgan realized that the other man had hung up. When he came to his senses, Denise was looking at him with a very worried expression.

"What's wrong?" she asked. "You look terrible!"

"I'm dead." At the puzzled look on her face, he explained to her what Mark had told him. "But I don't drink! I was just coming home from work, just now. I work at the hospital. Look, here's my badge to prove it. How can I be ten years dead? It doesn't make any sense. Nobody knows who I am." He stopped suddenly, and then took a deep breath. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't go on like that. I'll just be on my way." He stood up and turned toward the door.

"But, where will you go?" asked Denise.

"I don't know. I'm sure I'll find a shelter somewhere."

"Why don't you at least stay for dinner," she suggested with sudden decision.

"You're not worried about what I might do?"

She looked at him hard for a moment, then said: "Not really. I'm a social worker at a family clinic and, believe me, I've seen all kinds of weirdo's. I have a sixth sense about people, and you don't seem like the dangerous type."

Morgan smiled for the first time in hours. "Thank you very much for that vote of confidence. I really need it right now."

\* \* \*

"The least I can do is help you wash the dishes," Morgan said after dinner was finished. Stacking several plates, he carried them over to the sink and began running the tap water. After taking their dishes to the sink, the kids ran off to play.

"I can't believe how much your son looks like mine," Morgan commented. "Here, let me show you his picture." Drying

his hands, he reached for his wallet and pulled out a school snapshot.

Denise nodded in agreement. "He looks a little older, but he could be my son's twin. That's very interesting. How old is he?"

"Just turned ten."

"You're worried about him, aren't you?" she asked.

"Yeh," Morgan admitted. "No one seems to know who I am. Everything's turned around--"

"What?" Denise inquired, noticing that Morgan had a strange look on his face.

"It's peculiar. My brother said I had died in September of 2085."

"I remember you telling me that."

"Well, at the time, I was married to a real psycho. I was very depressed, and didn't know which end was which. My son was conceived in September of that year. According to my brother, I died before my son was conceived."

"Does that mean he doesn't exist?"

Morgan stopped what he was doing for a moment, and a pained look crossed his face. Then he smiled half-heartedly.

"I know what you're trying to do," he said.

"You do?" she asked with an oh-so-innocent look.

"You probably think I'm suffering from some kind of delusion, perhaps caused by a bump on the head or something. By forcing me to face an apparent inconsistency, you think I might come around."

"I had considered something like that," Denise admitted.

"You don't seem certain."

"Well, you don't exactly show all the usual symptoms of a delusional person."

"Thanks."

## A Random Collection of Events

"I'm just a little curious. You said that, according to your brother, you died before your son was conceived. How is it that you know when that happened?"

"Well," Morgan said, smiling. "My wife and I had been separated for several months. Labor Day weekend, she got into a car accident. She wasn't hurt, but she was all shook up. I took her home from the hospital, and wound up spending the night. When I spoke to her again a couple months later, she was pregnant."

"How do you know he was yours? I mean, someone else could have fathered the child."

"A genetic screening confirmed that I was the father."

Morgan rinsed the last of the dishes, washed down the sink and draped the washcloth over the faucet.

"Thank you very much for all your kindness," he finally said. "I feel as if I've imposed upon you long enough. I believe the paramedics mentioned a shelter? Perhaps you could direct me to the nearest one."

"There's one about a mile and a half up the main road. Do you need change for the bus?"

"No thanks. The walk will do me some good. It'll give me some time to think."

Denise gave him directions as she walked him to the door. Thanking her again, Morgan headed off at a brisk pace.

\* \* \*

The shelter was a building that Morgan recognized as the vacated site of an old multi-level department store. At least, that's how he remembered it. Not everything he saw lately matched his recollections.

Climbing the steps, he entered through the main door. The foyer was little more than a short, wide hall with a desk. A large,

well-muscled man stood just inside the door, arms folded across a massive chest. The man eyed him as Morgan stopped just inside the door to get his bearings. Behind the desk sat a stern-looking, middle-aged woman.

"Can I help you?" she asked, glancing up at him from the magazine she was reading.

"Uh, yes," said Morgan, approaching the desk. "I understand I can get a bed for the night here?"

"Sure can," she answered, consulting a clipboard. Turning the clipboard to face Morgan, she handed him a pen and said: "Print your name and date of birth legibly on line 267. That is your room number. Here is the key, a floor plan, and a list of our rules."

Morgan took the proffered items after returning the pen. He consulted the floor plan for the route to his room.

"It's almost like the Y," he commented.

"The what?" she asked.

"The YMCA."

"Never heard of it," she said.

"Never mind," Morgan sighed. He turned from the desk and walked out of the foyer into a hallway. Climbing the stairs to the second floor, he wandered around for a few minutes to familiarize himself with his surroundings.

His room was small and sparse, containing only a bed, a nightstand, and a narrow closet. It was dimly illuminated though a window by the bed. A single switch near the door turned on the overhead light. The room was clean and well maintained.

Morgan set the papers on the stand, and lay down on the bed with his hands behind his head. He stared glumly at the ceiling as he appraised his situation. No son, no money, no clothes, no food. And probably no job. Either he was living in some kind of mad delusion, or-- he didn't know what. It was almost as if someone had stripped him of his identity.

## A Random Collection of Events

He slept restlessly, his dreams haunted by desolate images. Standing in the lost and found among others who looked as misplaced as he. Sitting on a street corner, shivering in the cold and begging for money from indifferent pedestrians. Staring out the window of an empty room, watching the world continue without him.

He awoke with a start and glanced at his watch. Just a little after eight in the morning. If the time was correct. He hadn't thought to check his watch against another clock.

He crawled out of bed and examined his room more closely. He found a bathrobe inside the closet. Changing out of his clothes and into the robe, he proceeded to make use of the laundry and shower facilities he had noticed the evening before.

He had passed several other men engaged in similar tasks, but Morgan lacked the desire to socialize. His life was in too much turmoil at the moment for him to think much beyond his own troubles.

And now to the matter at hand. First, he read through the rules. Basically, he could remain as long as he wished, providing he disturbed no one else. He was required to check at the desk each day to maintain his resident status. A soup kitchen was available, as was a selection of clothes donated by various people. Everything else was up to him.

Food sounded like an excellent place to start.

Over a bland breakfast, Morgan reflected on dinner the previous evening. Denise had been very pleasant and helpful. And, he thought, that would probably be his last home-cooked meal for a while.

He needed a plan of action. Somehow, his world had changed, and it was essential that he figure out what had happened. Most importantly, he had to find out what had happened to his son.

## A Sudden Change of Life

A good place to start would be the library. Most of the city seemed to exist as he remembered it. The library should still be in the same place.

Except that he had no way to get there. It would take him hours to walk, and he didn't want to expend that kind of time and energy.

He thought he recalled something from the rule sheet that might help him out. He hurried back to his room and scanned through it one more time. Sure enough, day passes for the bus were available at the front desk.

Despite the macabre circumstances, Morgan spirits were high as he rode the bus downtown. At least he was out of his rut!

After some confusion transferring buses, Morgan arrived at the library. Once there, he took a copy of the daily paper and found a quiet corner.

The headline, in bold letters across the top of the page, caught his attention immediately:

Friday, August 12, 2095  
Women's Independence Movement  
150th Anniversary Celebration

WASHINGTON, DC - Today marks the 150th Anniversary of the Women's Independence Movement. Many events worldwide have been planned this weekend in celebration of 150 years of peace and prosperity.

A century and a half ago, this war-weary planet first witnessed the destructive power of the atom bomb. Two Japanese cities lay in ruins, and the balance of power among nations changed dramatically.

Amidst the global turmoil in the aftermath of the bombings, a multi-national group of women seized command of key positions among the Allied forces. In a

## A Random Collection of Events

decisive effort, the aggressive control of a male-dominated society gave way to the cooperative female-dominated society we live in today.

Among the events scheduled...

Morgan read through the article in amazement. Scanning the rest of the paper confirmed it: the majority of the world leaders were women. Several stories dealt with the changes in societal values as a result of the Movement. One in particular argued that the lack of aggressive male leaders had seriously hurt scientific progress, claiming that only wartime conditions could peak the competitive drive. The statistics quoted, however, were unconvincing.

A few more stories discussed the change in the job market. While the more physically demanding occupations still maintained a significant male presence, women held most of the decision-making positions. The Arts and Entertainment still had a relatively equal mix of genders.

The rest of the day was spent on other research. He hoped to figure out how he had gotten mixed up in this bizarre world. His investigations led him first through scientific journals, then theoretical works, and imaginative fiction.

Several hours were also spent perusing the daily newspapers from his home city at the time of his supposed death ten years ago. In them, he found several small blurbs detailing his arrests for disorderly conduct, driving while intoxicated, and assault. The final notice was his obituary, dated Labor Day Weekend ten years ago.

When he arrived back at the shelter late in the evening, he carried with him a wealth of information and an acute appetite. Without any money for food, he had subsisted on water from the public fountain. After wolfing down a tasteless dinner in the soup

kitchen, he then spent the rest of the evening in his room carefully considering the implications of his discoveries.

\* \* \*

The following morning, Morgan awoke early to the sound of his watch alarm. While at the library the day before, he had made it a point to confirm the time and date.

He had a lot to accomplish today. First he would spend some time selecting a new wardrobe from the 'Clothes Closet', the room set aside for donated clothing. After that, he wanted to attend the Anniversary celebration to learn more about this world, and also to take advantage of the free food that would be available during the course of the festivities.

The celebration turned out to be a mix of presentations, demonstrations, commemorations, speeches, awards, dancing, and eating, all with one goal in mind: to honor not only the brave women who began the movement all those years ago, but also those who contributed significantly to the improvement of the human condition over the past 150 years.

Several hours of wandering and sampling later, Morgan stopped to rest on a nearby bench. He was tired of walking, and his belly was stuffed. What he needed most right now was a nap.

He must have dozed off, because he snapped awake at the sound of his name being called. When he opened his eyes, Denise was sitting next to him on the bench.

"Every time I see you, you're unconscious," she said with a smile.

"Hmm, I wonder what that could mean?" He turned to the Denise's two kids and said: "Hello Amanda. Hello Michael."

"You want some cotton candy?" asked Amanda, pointing the sticky candy in Morgan's direction.

"Not right now, I'll have some a little later."

## A Random Collection of Events

"Look at my balloon," said Michael, holding it out.

"That's a very nice balloon," he said, taking it for a closer examination, then returning it to the boy.

"So, what brings you out in all this madness?" asked Denise, her arm taking in the crowd and noise around them.

"Just trying to rid myself of a delusion," Morgan answered with a grin.

"Mommy, what's a delusion?" asked Amanda.

Denise screwed her face in thought for a moment, then said: "It's when someone believes in something that's not real."

Amanda turned to Morgan, and looked up at him with the kind of serious look that only a four year old could accomplish.

"But we are real, you silly," she said.

Morgan laughed. "Yes, sweetheart, I know you are real."

"Can you spend the afternoon with us?" asked Michael.

"That's up to your mom."

"You're welcome to join us," said Denise. "Quite frankly, I would enjoy a little adult conversation."

"Well, then, I guess I can."

"Yeah!!!" shouted both the kids.

\* \* \*

Morgan helped Denise carry the sleeping children into her apartment, setting them gently into their beds. Exhausted themselves, they sat down heavily at the kitchen table.

"Coffee?" Denise asked.

"Excellent idea."

"The kids really seem to like you," she commented as she got up to start the coffee.

"I love being a father. Children have such a unique perspective; everything is new to them. To understand a child is to understand a different view of the world around you."

Denise sat back down again at the table. "You really do miss your son."

"Yes," he answered. Looking up with an intense expression on his face, he asked: "Do you believe me?"

"I don't know," she said honestly. "I did some checking yesterday. There are some parts of your story that can't be readily explained by ordinary means."

"Not by ordinary means, no. Do you believe in the supernatural?"

"I wouldn't really say that I believe in it. I mean, I've never experienced what you might call a supernatural encounter, but I've read a lot about them. I guess I've taken sort of an agnostic attitude towards it. It's not real until something happens that would affect me personally, and couldn't be explained by rational means.

"Cream and sugar?" she asked, getting up to pour two cups of coffee.

"No thanks. Black." Morgan accepted the steaming brew and sipped from the mug.

"I never believed in it," he said, setting his coffee onto a saucer. "I always thought they were hoaxes. Made up by poor souls who wanted a little attention. I thought that nothing would ever convince me otherwise."

Denise remained silent, allowing Morgan to talk.

"But this whole thing has me shaken up," he continued. "Maybe it is a delusion, I don't know. But I can't just let it rest. I need some kind of rationalization to hang on to, something to help me make sense of it all."

"Do you think the explanation is supernatural?"

## A Random Collection of Events

"I don't know what to think. I did a lot of research at the library yesterday. Uncovered a lot of harsh reality. And I did a lot of soul searching."

"What did you come up with?"

"Well, if I can't believe and trust in my memories, I'd be completely lost. As crazy as it all must seem to you, I wouldn't be the person I am today without that."

"I can understand that."

"So then I asked myself how I could be right and the whole world wrong. Assuming that I was normal, what scientific explanation could account for the changes I have observed to my surroundings? Among the science journals, I found a possible solution. There are a lot of articles on theoretical physics that talk about alternate universes, discussing some implications of Einstein's equations as they related to co-existing time-lines. They argued that an infinite number of similar Earth's could exist in parallel dimensions, each different in some way from the other."

Morgan paused to take a drink of his coffee. Denise shifted in her chair.

"So, you think somehow you've been transported to another universe?" she asked. "One in which you are dead and your son was never born?"

"I know that sounds crazy," admitted Morgan. "But I don't know what else to believe. There was nothing else in the science journals on the subject other than theory, but when I checked the subject index on the computer, I found hundreds of references under the 'Science Fiction and Fantasy' heading. There were literally dozens of stories of travel between alternate universes, with a wide variety of methods to get from one to the other."

"Do you believe this happened to you?"

Morgan considered the question. That was the bottom line, wasn't it? Did he believe he was whisked away somehow from

his Earth? Was he so desperate to escape from that unhappy existence that he found a way out? Or were his memories a fantasy concocted by an ill mind?

"I don't know what to believe," Morgan answered.

"What about your son?" Denise asked quietly.

"I can only hope he's okay," he said, wiping an eye.

"Maybe another Morgan Lyzander from another Earth has taken my place."

Gulping down the rest of his coffee, he stood up from the table and rinsed the mug in the sink.

"I appreciate the company this afternoon. You're kids are great. I should be getting back to the shelter."

"What will you do?"

"Find a job. Get an apartment. I can't live in the shelter forever." He paused at the door, looking out at the road. "Take some time to sort things out. I need a lot of time to think."

"Morgan?" He turned to face Denise. "Good luck."

"Thanks," he said.

Denise watched him as he walked down the street. When he turned a corner and disappeared, she closed the door.



## Storm Walker

The breeze whipped about, blowing Stefan's fine, long hair into his face. He brushed it back with both hands as he turned around to face the sheriff. Several deputies stood nervously behind the lawman.

"I'm telling you, I did not kill my wife," he said, his voice unwavering.

The sheriff eyed him. Everything about Stefan was long: arms, legs, face. Almost as if someone had set him on one of those old-fashioned torture racks and stretched him out. The black fedora and the long raincoat only accentuated the impression.

"I hear what you're saying, Mr. Langley," the sheriff replied. His gaze left Stefan for a quick glance overhead. Some heavy-duty clouds were rolling in, darkening the sky. Funny, he thought, there was no call for storms today.

"Then why must you continue to question me?" Stefan demanded, struggling to restrain his frustration and anger. A rumble of thunder sounded ominously in the distance.

"Well, you know, Mr. Langley," said the sheriff, shifting his weight from one foot to the other, "we do need to solve this case. And you were the last one to see her alive."

"I was at a job site when it happened," Stefan moaned, his voice filled with all the hurt and anguish and despair of his loss. A flash of sheet lightning illuminated the blackening sky, and was followed by a deafening crack of thunder.

"I understand that, Mr. Langley." The sheriff pulled his hat back onto his balding head. The wind was threatening to blow it off, and he wondered how Stefan's remained where it was.

"By the time I got home, it was too late." All the emotion seemed to drain out of his voice. His eyes, empty and unseeing, stared into a distant time, three days past. A sprinkling of rain began to fall from the clouds.

## A Random Collection of Events

"That's what I wanted to talk to you about," the sheriff said, taking a tentative step towards Stefan. "I have just a few more questions about --"

"I have already told you everything I know!" Hard steel entered his voice, and he glared at the officer in front of him. Lightning filled the sky, and angry thunder crashed in their ears. The rain became torrential, drenching the policemen.

The sheriff--startled by the storms impassioned glare--stepped backward involuntarily. A strange incandescence was filling the air around Stefan.

"You may have forgotten a minor detail," the sheriff suggested.

"I have forgotten nothing!" Stefan exclaimed. He turned and began walking across the field, his long strides consuming distance at an incredible rate.

The sheriff followed at a near run, holding onto his hat. The deputies remained close behind.

Stefan stopped short and turned on them.

"Every detail is permanently etched in my mind!" His voice rumbled like thunder and his eyes flashed like lightning. With each successive onslaught his body radiance intensified. He dropped to his knees, and buried his head in his hands. He couldn't erase the vision of her, lying there in a bloody pool, skewered by a garden rake. Or the whispers of undying love, barely coherent in his ears, escaping from her lips just as the life escaped from her body?

"If you'll just come along with me to headquarters," suggested the sheriff.

Stefan looked up at the sky, and raised his hands in supplication. "Why can't I just be left alone to grieve my loss?" he pleaded.

The officers jumped back, startled by a nearby strike. When their eyes had adapted to the light, they saw the lightning feeding into a spherical ball of light that engulfed Stefan. There was a sudden, explosive burst of light that nearly blinded the officers.

Peering again into the twilight revealed that the storm had passed and Stefan was gone.

\* \* \*

Not so distant voices percolated into his consciousness. He opened his eyes, rolled onto his side, and propped himself up on one arm. Several yards from where he lay, three people huddled around a campfire. The one facing him pointed, and the other two turned to look in his direction. As he rose to a sitting position, all three gathered together on the opposite side of the fire. Three pairs of eyes watched him closely, wide with wonder.

"Where am I?" Stefan asked, confused and dazed. "I was in an empty field near my house. I had just gotten out of my car..."

His legs were shaky, but he managed to stand and search the terrain. Under the light of the full moons, he could make out a sparse scattering of bushes along the desert floor.

"Wait a minute," he muttered. He dropped to a sitting position, eyes fixed on the two moons. They over-lapped and formed a lop-sided figure eight. A hint of clouds threatened to fill the sky.

Stefan took a deep breath. "Please tell me where I am, and how I got here," he insisted calmly.

One of the figures approached cautiously, and knelt in front of him. Stefan saw that it was a young, thin-featured female, trembling with fear. Her ears appeared almost pointed, and her large eyes were like saucers. Very fine, shoulder-length hair threatened to fall into her delicate face.

## A Random Collection of Events

"My name is Sharra," she said. "We mean you no harm. We are only trying to care for you. Please, do not call the storms."

"Call the... what?" asked Stefan, very perplexed.

"The storms," she repeated, and pointed to the receding clouds in the sky. Stefan noticed that her hand had one thumb and three fingers. "Allow me to tell our story."

Stefan nodded his head in acquiescence.

"Thousands of years ago," she began, "Elves and Man shared the Earth in harmony. Man has always been the more aggressive creature, and began to control larger and larger portions of the surface. The Elves were forced to retreat. Some burrowed underground. Others used their magic to create the passage that brought us to this world.

"This region of the new world is mostly arid. Those who settled here are known as the Irinoqua, the Elves of the Desert. Many tribes co-exist in this area.

"The past seasons have been increasingly sparse in rainfall. Our crops are dying, and the tribes are declining. We have prayed every night for half a season that we might see an end to the drought. A few nights ago, we received a sign that our prayers would be answered on the night of the Double Lunar Eclipse. The tribal chiefs selected us for the quest, and we were guided to this spot. As the Small Moon crossed the Large, the skies opened up in a torrential storm. When the storm ended, we found you unconscious at our feet.

"You have magic which allows you to Walk with the Storms; truly an answer to our prayers."

"What are you talking about? What is this nonsense about elves, and magic, and walking with storms?" Stefan demanded. A rumble of thunder sounded in the distance.

"Even now your anger draws the storms!" she exclaimed, pointing again to the sky.

Stefan looked up at the remote storm clouds, staring thoughtfully at them as he considered her words. He concluded that he might as well go along with it for now. He had no idea where he was, and he needed to gather more information.

He watched the clouds broke up and disappeared.

\* \* \*

Stefan awoke to the smells and sounds of meat cooking on a fire. Somehow, he thought he had dreamed it all last night, and that he would awake to find himself in a jail cell. But the growl in his stomach seemed real enough, as did the stiffness in his body from sleeping on the ground.

He took a few minutes to stretch, and then walked over to the fire to warm himself. The others made room for him, leaving as much space as possible between him and themselves. Only Sharra dared approach, and then to offer food. In silence, Stefan wolfed down the food until he could eat no more.

When they were finished, Sharra remained as the other two began packing the gear and cleaning the campsite.

"Why are they afraid of me?"

"You possess strong magic," Sharra answered. "It is something to be feared in one of weak nature, and yours is unknown to us. They are Trella and Ranock, each from a different tribe. How may we address you?"

"My given name is Stefan Langley. Mostly, people just call me Stefan."

"Even in your name," she mused. At Stefan's curious expression, she continued: "We have a word in our native tongue, *lyng-unestef*, which means 'Lord of the Storms'."

Stefan simply nodded, storing the information for future use. "I would like to know more about your people, and this place."

## A Random Collection of Events

"Elves are a peaceful folk. We live in harmony with the planet and in unity with each other. The details of our history you can learn once we reach the village."

"What about this magic you spoke of? Does everyone have it?"

"There is fundamental magic which everyone possesses. It is used for guiding us along our path. Few carry the magic to affect our environment, as you do."

"I still don't understand why I was chosen to be brought here."

"Our need is obvious. We were searching for an end to the drought so that we might survive. You must also have some need, which can only be filled here."

"What could I possibly need here?"

"That is something only you can answer. But your search for it has brought you to us; therefore, your fate must be on the same path as ours. Come, we are ready to move on. It is almost a days' walk back to the village."

The fire was doused, and the four trudged silently in the direction of the rising sun.

\* \* \*

The sun was setting behind them when they arrived at the village. Stefan was exhausted, despite the frequent rest stops along the way.

The villagers were curious, but stayed clear of the travelers. Sharra led him to a small one-room dwelling that contained nothing more than a bed.

"Rest now, Stefan," she said quietly, helping him into the bed. "There will be a ceremony later this evening in honor of your arrival."

His sleep was a restless one. He dreamt of being chased and captured by elves dressed in police uniforms. All around, lightning flashed blue and thunder wailed like sirens. The rain dripped blood red from the sky, and the clouds overhead took the shape of his beloved wife.

The flickering of a candle startled him awake, and he nearly jumped to his feet in alarm. Sharra looked up to him from across the room.

"I was just about to awaken you," she said, rising from the floor. She handed him the bundle she was holding. "I can take you to a place to freshen up. Here are some clean clothes."

"Thank you," Stefan said. He took the bundle, and then followed her around and behind the cottage to a larger structure. Inside, he found several changing rooms and shower stalls. The cool water felt good after the long, hot walk in the desert.

When he emerged, Sharra led him back to his cottage.

"You are quiet," she said.

"A lot has happened to me in the past few days. I'm having some difficulty sorting it all out."

"I am sure you will find the answers you seek." After a pause, she said: "The ceremony will begin soon. I have been asked by the Council of Tribal Chiefs to acquaint you with our customs."

Stefan said nothing, so she continued.

"First will be the *alinoqua*, the 'Return of the Rain'. This ritual will help reveal the roots of your magic so that you may better understand and use it. Through it, we will come to understand your true nature. After will be the 'Feast of Welcome', in which you will become one with our people. It is during this ceremony that you will choose a home tribe for yourself."

"Now, wait a minute, Sharra," Stefan objected. "I can't simply drop everything and stay here. There is an unresolved matter that I must attend to back home."

## A Random Collection of Events

"There is no resolution in turning back. Your quest for answers has brought you here."

"I can't believe that. Nothing that has happened in the past day has anything to do with reality. For all I know, I'm locked away in some mental hospital experiencing a delusion."

"Then you propose to return from whence you came?"

"Yes, I do," Stefan resolved.

"It is a long trip back, and late in the evening. What will you lose by seeking an answer here, tonight, before returning?" She paused, allowing him a chance to consider. "It is your choice; we will not hold you against your will."

Stefan examined his options. His best chance of getting back was by returning to the place where he was found. And he couldn't do that until the sun came up.

"Very well," he said. "I guess I have nothing to lose by attending your ceremonies."

Sharra smiled. She walked over to the door and held open the flap, allowing Stefan to pass ahead of her.

Two columns of elves stood outside the doorway. Some of the elves held small torches; others held drums and rattles. Sharra stepped in with one of the columns, while Stefan walked between the columns towards the other end. Once he reached the mid-point, the elves began marching alongside him. He could hear them chanting, using the drums and rattles as counterpoint.

The elves followed a winding path through the village that eventually led to the center. Ahead, Stefan could see a large bonfire. Directly overhead in the clear, night sky the two moons provided an eerie light. The smaller moon was following a higher orbit this time; there was no chance of the two eclipsing.

As they approached the fire, each elf tossed something into the flames that ignited and caused the fire to burn brighter.

Then the paired elves from each column would split, following a circular path in opposite directions around the blaze.

Before Stefan could get very close to the fire, he was aware of a low platform ahead of him. Two elves on either side walked him onto the platform, and then signaled him to kneel as they dropped to their knees.

Soon, the elves had formed a full circle around the bonfire. The chanting stopped. The drums and rattles were played to a fevered pitch. Two small gaps formed in the circle on either side of the platform, and five hooded elves, more elaborately garbed than the rest, entered from each opening. The gaps closed as the ten elves formed two rows in front of Stefan, facing the fire. As one, they knelt to the ground.

The drums and rattles stopped, only for the chanting to begin again. A figure appeared to emerge from the fire, and approached the platform.

"Your soul rages with the fury of the wind," she intoned.

Stefan's heart skipped a beat at the sound of her voice.

Surely, it couldn't be--

She walked forward and mounted the platform. Their eyes locked. By the light of the fire, Stefan could trace a faintly familiar outline under the hood. She beckoned to him in response to his scrutiny.

Stefan stood up and walked onto the platform. He brushed the hood back to reveal--

"But--how can--"

"A soul can take many different forms in any number of realities," she said in a soft voice, taking his hands in hers.

"I don't understand how--"

"Understanding comes from allowing your feelings freedom." She pulled him close and whispered: "I have searched for you all my life."

## A Random Collection of Events

Despite her elfin appearance, Stefan would know his beloved anywhere. Her touch, her scent, her presence; all were a meaningful part of him. When she died, it was as if a part of him had died as well.

Somehow, she was here on this strange world of elves and magic. Embracing her, he felt the comfort of a love he had thought was lost. The pain and relief welled up inside of him, and warm tears flowed from his eyes. A soft, gentle rain chattered around them.

"Your emotions are tied to the rain."

"Yes," said Stefan. "My anger has always felt like a storm inside me. You were my calm inside the storm. Without you, it raged out of control. The thunder was my heart pounding, the lightning my nerve impulses racing through my body."

"And the rain your tears."

They held each other close for a long time.

They turned their backs to the fire as the drums and rattles began a new beat. The elves began forming two columns again, this time heading off in a new direction. Stefan and his beloved stepped off the platform and passed between the columns, following as before, until they reached row upon row of tables laden with food.

Together, they stood at the head of the main table, and waited as the remaining elves filled the places at the other tables. Only when the last of the elves had found a seat did she speak.

"I, Korenna, the High Priestess of the Irinoqua, in the name of all tribes gathered here for the Feast of Welcome, offer our humblest thanks to the Spirits for answering our prayers, and our hopes that we are the answer to the prayers of this man that the Spirits have chosen to lead to us."

The gathering of elves cheered. Stefan turned to her as if to speak.

"We will first sample the offerings of each tribe," she said before he could open his mouth. She took his hand and stood, then led him to the nearest table.

The next several hours were spent visiting with each tribe. Each stop along the way had its own specialties, and its own character. Stefan learned much about the tribes that inhabited this strange world. As fascinating as the elf-folk were, he remained troubled by the decision that would be required of him.

At the end of the feast, he and Korenna returned to the main table. Slowly he looked out among the elves, all of whom looked back expectantly. Were they hoping that he would choose their tribe, or simply that he would choose to stay? Stefan agonized over the losses his decision would surely mean.

When his gaze finally landed on his beloved, he knew without a doubt what his answer would be. The agony in his eyes lifted. A serene and peaceful feeling washed over him.

"I wish to be at your side, always," he whispered, then gathered her in his arms and kissed her.



## From the Memoirs of Del Stevens

"Europa is within visual range, Captain," announced Jackie. "Shall I plot a standard orbital approach?"

"You can knock it off with that Star Trek crap any time now," Gram muttered from his seat next to the ship's pilot.

"Jackie, just contact the base for a landing beacon," I replied, ignoring Gram's remark.

"Opening hailing frequencies, sir," she said, sparing a sideways smirk in Gram's direction. "Receiving the beacon loud and clear." Jackie's behavior only served to enhance her elfin appearance. Thin and delicate seemed to be the best way to describe her, from her head down to her feet. Although delicate would be the last word one would choose to describe her once you got to know her.

"I have a lock on the signal," confirmed Gram.

"Good. This has been one long damn trip," I said.

And it had been, too. Toting cargo to and from the outpost on Pluto is not anyone's idea of fun. And with Pluto in opposition to Jupiter, the trip seemed even longer. Normally, a run like this was done with robot ships. In this case, however, the sensitive nature of the samples they were carrying required personal attention. So we had volunteered to make the trip. For a price.

What made it even longer was that Gram and I were adjusting to a new crewmember. This was Jackie Harrison's first cargo run, and she was beginning to grate even on my nerves. Not that she wasn't any good; I'd be hard-pressed to find a better navigator. But you can only take so much enthusiasm in closed quarters - and she had enough for a hold full of people.

I had taken over the business ten years ago from my mother, who retired after the death of my father. It seems I had also inherited my father's looks: the classic hero-type that is so popular in the action shows. Despite my best efforts, someone

## A Random Collection of Events

invariably mistook me for one of the characters. As a result, I didn't mind spending my life on board the trader ship and away from those troublesome people.

"So, Gram," Jackie said. "You still haven't told me where you got your nickname from."

"Not much to tell."

"You may as well tell her," I said, "or she'll hound you for the rest of your years."

"I suppose you're right," he began, leaning back in his chair. "Well, when I was about 17, just about the time I met Del, I had thought about joining the Navy. I was a bit heavier then--"

"A bit?" I interrupted.

"OK, a lot heavier. Point is, the Navy has weight restrictions. When I got on the scales, it seems a counter-weight snapped loose. The sergeant said: 'You seem to be a few grams over, boy'. Everyone laughed, then someone in the back hollered: 'A few grams!? Why, he's gotta be at least a hundred kilos over if he's a gram!!!'. Well, the joke got around, and it's been 'Gram' ever since."

"That's awful!!!" said Jackie.

"You think that's awful," I said. "you should have seen the guy after Gram tracked him down. I stumbled across the two of them, quite by accident, late one night. After I broke up the fight and got Gram's story, I decided to rescue him from Civil Court."

A warning note sounded from Gram's console. After a moment, he looked over at me. "Trouble. Looks like we gotta blue-boy on us."

"Damn! What does the Navy want with us?" I asked.

"Don't know, but they're signaling us."

"OK, let's find out what they want."

The forward view screen cleared to show a middle-aged woman, in full dress blue. She looked like a human incarnation of the Grim Reaper himself.

"I am Lt. Samantha Callahan, of Naval Intelligence," she said. "You are identified as the trader ship *Orinoko*, Del Stevens commanding. Is this correct?"

"I'm Del Stevens."

"You are hereby ordered to come about and stand to. I will be boarding shortly to conduct an inspection of your cargo. Failure to comply will result in your arrest and your ship being impounded."

"We're a bit anxious to dock, just getting in from Pluto. What exactly is it you're looking for?"

"I am under no obligation to explain my actions. You must comply under Section 25-C of the Naval Code."

"Fine. We'll be expecting you." As if on cue, Gram cut the image, and Lt. Callahan disappeared from the viewer.

"Jackie, cut the main engines," I said.

\* \* \*

"How long does it take to inspect a cargo bay!?" grumbled Gram.

"A long time, especially when they want to find something," I said. "I've got a very bad feeling about this."

Jackie opened her mouth to say something, but was interrupted by Lt. Callahan entering the bridge, followed by a handful of mean-looking guards.

"Under Section 29-B, Article 42, of the Trader's Codebook, I am placing you under arrest."

"Just one damn minute!!!" Gram exploded.

"Gram!" I shot him a warning glance. Turning to Lt. Callahan, I said: "We are returning with a hold full of samples from

## A Random Collection of Events

the science team on Pluto. I assure you, we are not carrying illegal substances."

"You will be presented with the evidence at your trial," she responded. "For the time being, I am taking you into custody aboard my ship. The rest of your crew will remain on board and be escorted to the docking port, where they will remain. Any sign of resistance..." she indicated the guards behind her.

\* \* \*

"People vs Captain Del Stevens. The Honorable Maria Breslin presiding. All rise," intoned the court clerk.

Not that there were many people in the courtroom. Aside from a few guards, Del and Lt. Callahan were the only others there with the clerk. And the judge, now that she walked in and took her place at the bench. The proceedings would be recorded electronically.

"Please be seated," said the clerk.

"Captain Stevens," began Judge Breslin. "You are charged with transporting illegal substances. How do you plead?"

"Not guilty, your Honor."

"So noted. You will have an opportunity for defense after the prosecution presents their case. Do you understand?"

"Yes, your Honor."

"Lt. Samantha Callahan will be representing the People. Lieutenant, please present your case."

"Your Honor, the Navy routinely operates undercover operations relating to the sale of illegal substances. Dr. Jake Matheson, Commander of Pluto Station, was an agent in one such operation. I wish to submit four items of evidence. One: a sworn deposition from Dr. Matheson, stating that Captain Del Stevens was observed purchasing and loading said illegal substances while

docked at Pluto Station. The deposition clearly identifies the package. Two: the package identified in the deposition, which we recovered from the cargo bay of Captain Stevens' ship, the *Orinoko*. Three: the *Orinoko's* cargo manifest, which does not list the package as part of cargo. Four: the afore-mentioned package."

"How were you made aware of the transaction, and the existence of the package?" Judge Breslin asked.

"Dr. Matheson contacted us by radio as soon as Captain Stevens left dock."

"And the contents of the package?"

"Assorted Plutonian geodes filled with Angel Dust."

"Evidence accepted. Captain Stevens, you may present your defense."

"With all due respect, your Honor, I have not had an opportunity to prepare a defense. I've been in jail the past two days and --"

"Captain Stevens," interrupted the judge. "I don't have time to listen to your excuses. Quite frankly, I don't have time for independent traders. The evidence seems clear to me, and I find you guilty as charged."

"But--"

"Guards, take him away."

\* \* \*

A jail cell is a very lonely and depressing place. Dark, dank, empty. Cut off from even the other prisoners; and nothing but time on your hands.

None of this made any sense to me. It was obviously a set-up. But why? And it was clear that the judge had something against the Independent Traders Union. And what was that scientists' role in this? Why did he falsify that deposition? And why did he plant the package on my ship?

## A Random Collection of Events

"Psst! Del!!!" a soft but insistent voice broke me from my reverie.

"Jackie?" I looked out the food slot on the door to see a hooded figure standing outside in the hall. "Is that you?"

"Yes!!" she hissed. "Keep your voice down!"

"What are you doing?" I whispered.

"If I can remember what Gram told me to do, I will be opening this door in about two minutes." Jackie rattled something for a bit, and then the door swung open, creaking slightly on its hinges.

"Hurry!" she said, closing and locking the door again after Del was out. "Gram is keeping the guards distracted. We haven't much time."

Quickly, we threaded our way back up to the main office. Surprisingly, not a soul was around. Just as we reached the front door, though, a clamor of footsteps sounded in the hallway. Gram appeared, flying past us and out the door. No question but that the guards were on his tail. We followed him out and into a waiting ground car. With Gram behind the wheel, we sped off.

In a few minutes, we stopped in front of what appeared to be a very old docking port. Inside was an old man standing next to my ship, which was powered up. Gram stopped only long enough to thank the man and hand him some kind of jewel in payment.

"All systems on stand-by," Jackie puffed, slipping into her chair at the helm.

"Let's not wait for the party!" I said, strapping myself in.

The *Orinoko* sped out of its berth, and into open sky. Once we cleared the atmosphere, I felt another burst of acceleration. The g-forces were building to nearly intolerable levels.

"I have two blue-boys on intercept," Gram shouted over the straining of the engines.

"Feed the coordinates to my station," Jackie shouted back.

The *Orinoko* went through a series of twists and turns, and I felt my insides turning to peanut butter.

"Hull stress nearing critical," Gram warned.

"I think we lost them with that last move," was Jackie's only response.

"Sounds like you're having too much fun."

"A blast," she said gleefully. "Prepare for hyper-jump."

Before I could get a word in edge-wise, my whole reality twisted as the *Orinoko* jumped through this universe along a fold in the space-time continuum.

When my senses finally cleared, Europa had been replaced on the forward screen by a string of asteroids. I could hear the constant ticking of micrometeoroids against the hull.

"Where in hell are we?" I demanded.

"The Asteroid Belt," Jackie said simply.

"You jumped from a low Europa orbit into the asteroid belt!?" Jackie only nodded in confirmation. "Do you know how dangerous that is? What you could've done to us, or my ship?" I ranted. "Who in hell do you think you are, taking a risk like that!?"

Jackie exchanged a guilty glance with Gram, shrugged her shoulders, and looked away from me.

"Damn it, woman, you're too good for your own good," I grinned. "Thank you, and good job. Both of you. Now, would you mind letting me in on your plans?"

"Well," began Gram. "We figured our little trick on Europa wouldn't keep them off our tail for long. Sooner or later, they'd be after us again. What we needed most was time."

"Right," Jackie chimed in. "So, we thought a direct route through the asteroid belt would buy us some time."

"Through the asteroid belt!?"

"Sure, Del," said Gram. "Who would expect that? We could lose 'em for sure in here, bide our time, and come out where we want for a Mars approach."

## A Random Collection of Events

"Okay," I said, still confused. "But why Mars?"

"Mars has only one small base, and practically no planetary monitoring capabilities. We can land unnoticed. Also, you forget I have friends in Pennsylvton." Pennsylvton was the unofficial name of Mars Base, used mainly by a small group of scientists.

"Yes, Gram, I do forget. At least, I try my best to."

\* \* \*

I could see the sun resting comfortably on the horizon from where Jackie set the ship down. The lights from the base several kilometers away were barely visible in the dusk. The outcropping of large rocks in the area, coupled with the twilight, provided a perfect cover for the ship. I was confident we had landed unnoticed.

"So, Gram, what's the plan?" I asked.

"Well, I think it would be safer for you to remain on the ship. Jackie and I'll head into town and find out what we can."

"Gee, and me without my red shirt," Jackie said.

"We should be back in a few hours," he continued, ignoring her remark. "Hopefully, with some useful information."

"Sounds OK to me," I agreed. "Besides, I could use some rest. Those beds weren't very comfortable in that jail cell."

As soon as Jackie and Gram had suited up and were on their way, I retired to my cabin to think. For as tired as I was, I knew I wouldn't be able to sleep. I needed some time just to process everything that had happened in the past few days.

The sound of the air lock cycling woke me from a light sleep and a bad dream. My head was pounding from the lack of rest. I quickly joined Jackie and Gram in the airlock, where they were just hanging up their suits.

"I thought Captains were supposed to be bright and alert at all times," said Jackie.

"Only in your space operas, Jackie," I answered, covering a yawn. "So, what did you find out?"

"You're a very popular guy in Pennsylvton right now," Jackie said.

"There's a price on your head, Del," Gram clarified. "It seems ol' Breslin once hung out with your parents a while back. The story is that they were the original three-some that founded the Independent Traders Union."

"I knew that my mom and dad had a hand in it, helping to lobby the government into de-regulating trade and cargo. They never mentioned anyone else by name, just that they had a lot of supporters."

"Breslin was more than just a supporter. She and your old man were an item at one time, but she couldn't keep him. Breslin and your mom were once best friends."

"I think I can see the rest. A bitter and angry Breslin now opposes the Union. But, how did she influence Dr. Matheson to cooperate?"

"Well, she's also a representative of Europa to the Earth Council," explained Gram, "with a lot of influence. She managed to arrange for some funding to be redirected to his project, and" reaching into his shirt, "I have proof."

"Oh-ho, so that's it," I said, looking over the documents in the reader Gram handed me. "I think it's time we paid a visit to the good doctor."

\* \* \*

"We are on approach to Charon," announced Jackie.

"No sign that we've been detected," added Gram.

## A Random Collection of Events

"Good," I said. "Now, it's just a matter of sneaking around Charon undetected, landing on Pluto, and breaking into the base. Of the three, I think the last will be the most difficult."

"The only security they have is a token force," said Gram. "Not much of interest that anyone would want to come out here for."

"Okay, Jackie, swing around the port side of Charon, then bring us in below the base horizon. Gram and I will walk to the base from there. Keep us on the monitor at all times. Be ready to fly in at a moment's notice if we need you."

"Aye, aye, Captain."

Within minutes, the *Orinoko* was resting on the surface of Pluto. Gram and I suited up and headed for the base. The walk across the surface was painfully slow due to the low gravity and the bulky environmental suits. With careful timing, we were able to enter the base undetected, and find our way to the scientist's office.

Dr. Matheson was quite surprised to see us. With Gram guarding the door, I walked over to the desk and dropped the reader on top of a pile of papers.

"What is this all about?" Dr. Matheson demanded.

"I was hoping you'd be able to answer that question," I responded, indicating the reader. "After you read these."

"I refuse to be coerced into anything."

"Fine. Then we will be on our way. Of course, the media will be our first stop on the way out. I'm sure they will be very interested in this." Del reached for the reader.

"I suppose I have nothing to lose by reading them," he said, eyeing the weapon Gram was holding.

"Take your time."

A few minutes passed while Dr. Matheson scanned the documents on the reader, pausing to scrutinize or re-read certain parts. When he was finished, he set them down thoughtfully.

"I presume you are Captain Del Stevens?" he asked.

"Yes, I am."

"And what is it, exactly, that you expect me to do?"

"Why, clear my name, of course!"

"This is a lot bigger than you think, Captain Stevens," said Dr. Matheson, tossing the reader back to me. "We intend to put a stop to your racketeering!" While I was distracted with the reader, Dr. Matheson reached under his desk and pulled out a weapon.

"Look out!!" yelled Gram. I stumbled out of the line of fire just as a laser beam sliced past me. A second beam from Gram caught the scientist in the arm, and he dropped the weapon, yelping in pain. Gram grabbed me and pulled me to my feet. We ran out of the office together, shutting the door behind us to slow down Dr. Matheson's pursuit.

"Jackie!" I shouted into his com-link. "Come and get us!!"

"On my way!" came Jackie's voice over the link.

Running was hampered with the e-suits still on. We entered the airlock and began cycling the door closed just as station security caught up with us. Once outside, the *Orinoko* stood waiting for us. I had a sudden feeling of déjà vu as we quickly boarded, and Jackie maneuvered the ship away from the station.

"Where to?" asked Jackie.

"Pennsylton is out of the question until things die down a bit," I said. "Matheson will know where we got those documents."

"Asteroid belt is a good option," suggested Gram.

"Anybody'd be hard to find in there."

"Make it so, Jackie."

"Aye, aye, sir!" Jackie smiled. "By the way, what are we going to do?"

I shrugged my shoulders. "Hide out until we can make some contacts in Pennsylton. Try and stay out of Breslin's way."

## A Random Collection of Events

"Wonderful," Jackie said sarcastically. "I've always dreamed of being a member of an outlaw band on the run from the law.

"Not as bad as you think," said Gram. "Can be kinda fun, actually."

Jackie's response was lost as the *Orinoko* jumped again along a fold in the universe.

\* \* \*

"So, I still don't understand what's going on," Jackie said. "I mean, I see Breslin's part in it, she's just plain seeking revenge. I don't get Matheson's part."

The ship was resting in a quiet cavity on a small asteroid, so Jackie didn't have much to do except ponder the situation.

"Matheson is a scientist who is very frustrated with the government right now," I answered. "Due to cutbacks in research, he has to rely more and more on the Independent Traders to transport his stuff. He's a man who is not overly fond of the concept of commercializing, especially in his realm. He believes that knowledge should be free for all."

"So, he concocted this scheme to bring about the end of the traders, in hopes that the government would pump more money into research," added Gram, sparing a moment from his console. He was re-working the transmitter to mask our signals.

"With Del as the fall guy," Jackie finished.

"You got it," I said.

"The transmitter is ready. We should be able to send a signal to other trader ships without being detected by the Navy."

"Whenever you're ready," I said.

\* \* \*

Jackie didn't think there could possibly be anything more boring than piloting a ship on a pre-determined and fixed course. Sitting at the navigation console, watching the stars go by, all the while just staring at the readings and watching for a deviation. In retrospect, she would trade that in a heartbeat for what she was doing now: sitting at the navigation console, watching the stars go by, knowing there would be no adjustments because the ship was not moving under its own power. Its flight path was at the whim of the asteroid upon which they were sitting, hiding from the Navy.

"We're receiving a locator signal from the Heron," Gram announced.

"Return same," I replied.

"Acknowledgment received. They'll be here in three hours."

\* \* \*

"Del, you old dog! What kind of trouble have you gotten yourself into now?"

"Same ole, same ole, Frank," I replied, helping my friend out of his spacesuit. I then led Frank out of the airlock and to the bridge.

"You remember Gram?" I asked.

"Good to see you again, man," Frank said.

"Same here."

"And this is my new pilot, Jackie Harrison."

Frank eyed her closely. "A real honor, miss," he said finally, then shook her hand. "I was at the opening ceremonies for the Naval Games. That was quite a stunt you pulled. Don't think I've ever seen a ship maneuver quite that way before. It's a wonder you lived through it."

"Yes, well," said Jackie, blushing profusely, "the Admiralty didn't quite have the same opinion."

## A Random Collection of Events

"Just as well. You'd never have cut it in the Navy anyway. So," Frank turned to me, "there's quite a bit of scuttle going about."

I handed the reader to Frank, who scanned through the documents. When he finished, he let out a long, quiet whistle.

"I've got one more piece to your puzzle, man," he finally said. Breslin is Matheson's sister-in-law. Her husband runs the local drug ring on Europa. She basically bought her position with her husband's proceeds. They've got plans to oust the current government. The good doctor has been in it from the beginning. His brother has been providing the ways and means to sell Angel Dust, which can only be found on Pluto, in order to fund his research. His disgruntlement with the government cutting his funds is just a cover. They know that the Traders Union has learned about their operations, and is ready to bring them down. They figured to bring us down first with you as the scapegoat. But this," he indicated the reader, "should lock things up for us."

\* \* \*

The rest you already know from the history books. I won't waste my time repeating it here. Suffice it to say we toppled that drug ring. I'll tell you, though, that was the most harrowing couple of months. I'm much happier playing the recluse on my ship. Never cared for all that public attention. Now if I could just get them to stop calling me a hero in those damn history books...

## The Awakening

*Romal*, the Elder called silently, *come here*.

An eager young man, recording device in hand, entered the room and knelt by the Elder's side.

*Your wish, Elder Kella*. He was stocky without being large, and exuded a youthful charm that Kella was sure attracted more than his share of the ladies.

*You may be seated*, the Elder thought with a wave of her weary hand. Elder Kella was the oldest of all the Kaltan Elders. Her age had confined her to this chair, in this room, more than a decade ago. Soon, her aged body would claim the ultimate price inherent in physical existence.

Despite her confinement, however, her mind remained active. Her powers were feeble and short in range, but still active. Romal had been assigned to her care because of her declining power. It was necessary to have a powerful, young mind in the event of need and, more importantly, for companionship.

*I am rested*, she sighed. *Tell me, now, Romal, where was I?*

Romal consulted his recorder only briefly. *The discovery of the mental field*.

*Oh, yes!* Her eyes lit up with the memory. *There was never a more exciting time in all of Kalto history ...*

\* \* \*

Kella Rea rested her clenched fists defiantly on Tollen Hass' desk, and stared him straight in the eyes. With her small build, the sight would have been almost comical if not for the intensity of her emotion.

"What do you mean, it's not good enough!!" she exclaimed. Kella was not one to be crossed. She was fiercely determined and dedicated to her research, and didn't care who she

ran over in the process. Her temper was as volatile as it was well known, and very uncomfortable to be on the receiving end.

As Tollen now found himself.

Not that this was the first time. Since he was newest project director at the Institute of Sensory Research, this hot potato was assigned to him. None of the other project directors would touch Kella Rea. She was a known quantity that most people preferred to avoid.

Tollen sat back in his chair, folding his arms across his chest. Physically, he had nothing to worry about. He massed better than twice Kella, and towered over her when he stood. Besides, it was well known that her bark was worse than her bite. Mentally, he prepared his argument.

"Kella," he began.

"Spare me the bureaucratic clap-trap," she snarled, almost reading his mind. Removing herself from his desk, she paced angrily around the room.

"Kella," he said again, more sternly this time. "You know as well as I do that your results must be reproducible. I'll grant that there may be evidence of this, what do you call it? A 'mental field'?" Kella simply nodded. "Your research is very thorough, and I can find no fault with your conclusions, but ..."

"Don't talk to me as if I were a child!" Kella snapped. She stopped her pacing, and faced Tollen squarely.

"But, no one else has been able to independently confirm your results," he finished.

"Fools, all of them! They don't even know what they're looking at."

"That may be," Tollen continued calmly. "Which is why I've decided to provide you with a partner."

"I don't need a partner!!" she nearly shrieked, not knowing whether to be more irritated by his composure or his suggestion.

"If you want to continue researching this 'mental field' of yours," boy, if looks could kill, "then you will take a partner."

Kella just stood there, glaring at him from the center of his office. Tollen waited her out. Normally, he would not tolerate this sort of behavior from anyone. And he had been prepared to let her go as one of his first decisions as project director. Until he reviewed her work. No doubt about it, Kella was brilliant.

So Tollen learned to ignore the outbursts, as long as they were confined to his office and out of site of the other staff.

"Oh, all right," she finally gave in, shoulders slumping.

"Good!" said Tollen, covering a brief smile with a hand to his upper lip. "Now, I've assigned one of the new interns to work with you; her name is Sharra Zell. I have her file right here, you may take it home and look it over. Your first step is to have her set up, under your supervision, a duplicate of the field study you are currently working on. Then, she will be partnered with another to conduct the actual study. After I have reviewed the results of both studies, we can then present your findings to the Board. Any questions?"

"No!"

"Excellent! Sharra starts tomorrow."

\* \* \*

*A glass of water, Romal, if you please.*

*Your wish, Elder.* Romal hurried out of the room. When he returned, Kella appeared to have fallen asleep.

*Elder?* he inquired, gently probing the surface of her mind.

*I am only resting,* she replied. *Eyesight can be so draining on the mental faculties.* Carefully, she brought the glass to her lips and sipped, then set it down on the table at her side.

## A Random Collection of Events

*We are just ordinary people, Sharra and I,* Kella smiled warmly. Romal's innocence was refreshing; and his awe of her clear in his mind.

*But the mental field would never have been discovered without you! If not us, then someone else eventually,* Kella replied. *It was all there for everyone to see. We just happened to see it first.*

\* \* \*

"No, no, no!!" exclaimed Kella. "Set the potential in this range here, and then manually adjust the sensitivity until you get a reading. Then you can shunt it through the amplifier like this, and the field lines should form on the screen."

An exasperated Sharra just sat back in her chair and watched sullenly as Kella's hands flew over the equipment. It amazed her at times that one so small could pack so much energy. Sharra herself was taller and thinner, though she judged they massed about the same.

"Now do you understand?"

Sharra eyed the board critically, biting her lower lip.

"Nope," she replied.

"Ohh, I give up!" Kella pulled her hands through her short hair and walked to the other side of the lab. Sharra swiveled around in her seat.

"With all due respect, Dr. Rea," she said. "It would help if I understood how you picture this mental field. I mean, I know how to use this equipment and all. But if I don't see what you see, I can't understand why you're doing what you're doing."

Kella looked at her thoughtfully, and then said: "Let's go get some coffee. A change of scenery will do us some good."

Rising from her chair, Sharra followed Kella out of the lab. Instead of following the corridor around, Kella cut across through

the garden, stopping to admire the flowers and the waterfalls along the way.

They found a seat in a remote corner of the cafeteria. Kella preferred the solitude of a corner, even though the room was nearly empty. The lunch crowd was long gone, and it was still an hour or so before dinner was served.

Sharra was amazed at the change that overcame Kella once they left the lab. The scowl on her face, which at first appeared to be a permanent fixture, disappeared entirely. Shoulders relaxed, eyes unfocused. She was a different person.

Kella noticed the scrutiny, and smiled.

"I'm not really such an ogre," she said. "Something about being there just kicks me into overdrive. It's like I have to constantly prove my worth to everyone."

"Or yourself?"

"Or myself," agreed Kella with a chuckle.

"So why do you push yourself so hard?"

"I don't know," she shrugged, staring into her coffee.

"So," Sharra said after a quiet moment. "I want to share in this vision of yours. Help me see this 'mental field' that you picture so vividly in your mind."

Kella sighed, pausing to collect her thoughts. "Have you ever instantly liked or disliked someone the moment that you met them? Have you ever felt someone else's rage or happiness or sadness or grief, as if it were your own? Have you ever sensed what someone else was going to say, before they said it? Or the presence of someone in the room, even before you looked? I've often wondered how these things could happen."

"You mean like telepathy, or ESP? The so-called sixth sense?"

"Those are the popular phrases assigned to what I'm talking about; you've got the idea. But how does it work? What is

the mechanism behind it? These are the questions that are rattling around in my head."

"There are many theories in regards to that. None that any respectable scientist would dare entertain."

"True," Kella acknowledged. "The reason for that is there is no solid basis for those theories. They build them out of conjecture and speculation without any real understanding of how the brain functions. They ignore the physical nature of the mind, focusing instead on thought itself as an independent entity."

"You don't believe they are separate."

"Not for an instant. Somewhere along the line, the brain developed to the point where conscious thought and self-awareness came into being. Generated literally from the sheer complexity. Taking this as a given, I think the so-called 'telepathy' is just another function of the power of the consciousness. We just don't understand the brain well enough to figure out all of its functions."

"Okay, that follows logically. But how does the 'mental field' fit in?"

"The mental field is the basic foundation generated by the complexity of the brain, upon which everything is built. Consciousness, self-awareness, thought itself, are all functions of this mental field. Different methods by which we perceive the mental field through our strictly physical point of view.

I picture the mental field being generated by the trillions of firing neurons in the brain. If we could detect and measure this field, we would fully understand how the brain works. Then we might be able to utilize 100% of our brain, instead of the 20% or so we are now capable of."

"Okay!" said Sharra excitedly. "Now I see what you're driving at!"

\* \* \*

*Sharra and I came to be very close during that time.* Kella recalled fondly.

*With respect, Elder. It is meal time.* Romal suggested. Kella merely nodded affirmative, not wishing to relinquish the memories enough to respond with a thought.

Romal quickly returned with two food trays. After carefully arranging one for Kella, he returned to his seat with the other. They ate in silence; while Kella continued to reminisce, Romal remained quiet out of an awe-inspired reverence for the Elder.

Soon, they completed their meal. Romal hastened to clean up, knowing that Kella would wish to nap before resuming her story. This worked well, as Romal had some studying to catch up on.

Several hours later, Kella was rested and ready to recommence.

\* \* \*

Tollen silently read through the findings, while Sharra sat quietly in her chair, fidgeting. Kella, as usual, paced the room with arms folded.

After a while, he finally set the papers down on his desk. Kella stopped her pacing.

"Well!?" she demanded, impatient for an answer.

"Hmph," he responded. "It appears there is a low, but still significant, correlation. Sharra's work supports your own."

"But?"

"No buts. It just seems there's more to this report than meets the eye. Sharra, you seem to imply that the instruments were inadequate to the task."

## A Random Collection of Events

"Yes, that's right," she said, making a conscious effort to relax. Just because you feel like you're on the hot seat with your new boss isn't any reason to be nervous now, is it?

"Do you believe in the existence of the mental field, as postulated by Kella?"

"Yes, I do."

"What, in your opinion, would account for the failure of the instruments? And could this account also for the inability of others to reproduce the results?"

"I, uh, think that the instruments we have are not designed to detect this sort of field. It's like trying to see light with a microphone. We were able to accomplish it only through a very delicate and carefully designed receiver. Without a feel for what the mental field is, it would be difficult to know how to measure it."

"I see," Tollen said. He paused for a few moments, digesting the information. Kella began pacing again.

"Now, Kella." She turned to look at Tollen. "I would like you to explain the extent of this mental field."

"The extent?"

"Yes. Basically, what do you believe is the range of its functions?"

"That would be difficult to say at this point. My guess would be that it would open up a whole new level of communication at the very least. Instead of relying on the five physical senses, or verbal and written communication, we would be able to directly relate thoughts and emotions to another. It follows that it should also be possible to detect the presence of other mental fields."

"Very interesting. And what are the ramifications of it's existence?"

"I hadn't really thought about that," Kella answered.

"Sharra?" At his question, she shrugged her shoulders. "I see. The mission of the Institute has always been to increase the understanding of our sensory input, which affects how we perceive each other and the world around us. Over the last few centuries, we have seen many changes in the attitudes of Kaltans; all a direct result of research conducted at this institute. I believe we are a much less violent and more compassionate people because of this.

"This discovery will have a profound impact on us. It seems you have uncovered a more basic level of communication, one which will allow for a clearer conveyance of thoughts and feelings. Along with that comes an added vulnerability. The honesty inherent in this form of communicating will limit our privacy.

"We must proceed slowly with this. I will see to it that you receive the support you need to develop more effective sensing equipment. At the same time, the Board will have to consider how best to integrate this knowledge into society. It would be most helpful to me if the two of you would carry on with your research and trust me to see to its assimilation."

Sharra and, amazingly, Kella had remained quiet the whole time Tollen spoke. The repercussions had never fully entered their heads. For Sharra, it was a matter of simply getting lost in the thrill of discovery. Kella, on the other hand, never considered the consequences. She was always so focused on the here and now that she couldn't think ahead.

\* \* \*

*I still find it difficult to grasp the full extent. Elder Kella sighed. Even after all these years. For you, it must be difficult to imagine life without. Soon, no one will remain alive who knew a life without this mental connection to others. Aside from Sharra and myself, only a few of the original team are left.*

## A Random Collection of Events

*That fact saddens me, Elder, thought Romal.*

*Why is that, Romal?*

*As an historian, it is more gratifying to share history with one who lived it. Much is lost in translation.*

*I thought that your device would also record my emotional state?*

*It does, Elder. But a recorded emotion responds in a predictable way, where true emotions do not. True emotions are what breathes life into history.*

*I grow tired, Romal. Please see to the lights.*

*Your wish, Elder Kella.*

## Mental Deficiency

"There haven't been any major problems. We had to make a few minor adjustments, as you know. This is the first extended use of the new engine design, after all."

Captain Jared Wright listened patiently as Engineer Kim Barnes continued with her report. She was a thin, nervous sort of woman, who tended to pace the room and used her hands a lot to speak. It tired him just to watch her. He often wondered how she ever sat still long enough to do any repairs or maintenance. Perhaps, he mused to himself, she needed to get it out of her system so that she could sit still for the engine work.

"The only consistent problem we've found," she continued, "is the alignment of the main thruster. For some reason, the constant stress causes it to fall out of alignment. But, we think we've got that one taken care of. A few simple adjustments to the thrust regulator and a bit of reinforcement on the main engine support struts has brought the problem under control. As for the forward thrusters, there's a minor variance in the alignment, but nothing that can't wait until we return to Earth."

"OK. Sounds great. Keep up the good work, Barnes."

"Thank you, sir," she said, pleased with his words of praise.

After she left his office, Wright spent a few minutes considering the situation. The ship was certainly of little concern at the moment. Two other items weighed more heavily on his mind right now: the stress between the crew and the science team, and the unfulfilled expectations of Earth Command.

Wright activated his log.

"No one can realistically suppose that a habitable planet will be discovered early in a survey mission. Unless that someone is a bureaucrat who feels personally responsible for justifying expenditures. I am just about fed up with trying to explain the odds

## A Random Collection of Events

to every paper-pusher who thinks he knows everything under the sun about space exploration.

"Of course, after nearly a dozen planetary surveys, you'd think we'd find something even closely resembling a habitable planet. Sure, the scientists are happy. They're getting some first class observations. But my crew is tired of carting them around as if the ship was no more than a glorified space-taxi.

"Aside from that, the ship is performing admirably. This long-term mission is proving to be more cost-effective than previous missions, when we had to return to Earth after each visit to a star system. Barring the unexpected, we should be returning to Earth once the survey of this cluster is complete.

"End personal log."

He thumbed the switch off with a sigh. Leaning back into his chair, he managed to elicit a squeaky reminder of the excess weight he had put on during this trip. He ignored the squeak to stare thoughtfully at the ceiling. Space-taxi was right. The initial excitement of planetary surveys had worn off after the first handful, and Wright found himself missing his old Earth-Mars cargo run. At least then he was able to see an occasional change of face and maintain some semblance of an active lifestyle.

A buzz broke his reverie. Reaching over to his desk, he activated his intercom.

"Yes?" he asked the speaker.

"It's Chris," replied a voice.

Wright pressed another contact, opening the door to his office. Dr. Christine Sullivan entered and seated herself in one of the chairs across from his desk. She had always struck Wright as the earth-bound sort. The kind of person who administrated quietly over some small office buried inside of a large company, and spent her spare time in a garden. She seemed oddly out of place on the ship, riding herd over a team of scientists.

"Hello, Jared. I hope I'm not disturbing you."

"Not at all, Chris. What's on your mind?"

"Well, we're picking up some weak EM signals from the fifth planet in the next star system."

"Oh?" Wright's eyebrows climbed into his forehead.

"Stronger than the usual background noise, I suppose. Otherwise, you wouldn't be bringing this to my attention."

"Yes. But not strong enough so that we can be certain of the source. It may just be a natural process is generating the radiation."

"But then, it might not, eh? What about the spectrum analysis?"

"High probability of an Earth-type atmosphere."

Wright stroked his chin thoughtfully for a few moments.

"I think this warrants a closer look. How many others know about it?"

"Just Serinaf. He's the one who brought it to my attention. I've already asked him to keep it quiet, and I trust he will." This last she added in response to the frown on Wright's face at the mention of Serinaf. There appeared to be some antagonism between the two that Sullivan had been unable to fathom.

"Good." Wright stood up and headed for the door. "I'll take care of the course corrections. Keep me posted."

Wright's office opened directly onto the bridge. Sullivan exited the bridge, heading down the hallway that led to the science section. At the navigation console, Wright stopped to speak to the officer manning the station.

"Robinson, we need a closer look at that star system," Wright said, pointing to it's position on the console map. "Just a general tour of the planets should suffice."

"Aye, sir," she responded crisply. Her long fingers rapidly programmed the course change into the computer; her eyes scarcely blinking as her hands flew across the board.

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It seemed at times to Wright that Monice Robinson was more a part of the computer. "Mon Ice" was the unofficial mispronunciation of her name, given to her by the rest of the crew. Whether she was aware of this or not was unclear, because her detached air maintained a very effective barrier between herself and everyone else on board. Not that Wright minded; she did her job as she was hired to do, and that was his only concern.

Once he verified the course correction, Wright logged off his shift and headed for his quarters for the evening. Luckily (or unluckily, depending on the situation), this wasn't too far. The exit from the bridge led to a corridor. The first door on the left was for his quarters, and the second for the conference room. The remaining three doors were crew quarters. On the opposite side of the corridor were the cafeteria and the rec room. The corridor ended at the engineering room, which occupied two floors. A stairway near the entrance led to the lower level beneath the crew section, consisting largely of the cargo bays.

Normally, the crew was paired up, except for the captain, to share a room- one from the day shift and one from the night. In this way, each would have the room to themselves for half the day. For this trip, however, things were far from normal. The half a dozen crew were squeezed into two rooms, and the third was now occupied by Dr. Sullivan. A portion of the cargo bays were converted to quarters for the science team (another dozen people), and the rest was filled with analytical equipment of some kind or other. It was fortunate the cargo hold comprised more than half the volume of the ship, because otherwise there would have been no way to fit all the people and gear on board.

Add to all that the modified engines controlling the distortion of the space-time continuum, giving the effect of faster-than-light travel. Yes, things were far from normal.

\* \* \*

Dr. Sullivan would certainly agree with that assessment as well. Living out of a cargo hold was not her idea of normal. She rarely spent any time in the cabin assigned to her; most of the time she was right here, juggling tempers and equipment among half a dozen cargo bays.

At this very moment, she and her science team were gathered together on the floor in the center of one of the bays. This was probably the one spot large enough to hold all of them at one time.

"This is just another fly-by, like the last one," she was explaining. "Marc, Lacy and Richard, most of the work will be on you. Unless we manage to grapple a few more small meteorites for Stan and Lori to do some work on. The rest of you can assist."

She paused to go over it again in her mind. Electro-magnetic radiation, stellar cartography and mass-spectrum analysis were about all they could cover at this point. With any luck, a few chunks of rock would take care of bio-chemical analysis. But without an actual surface landing, all that the rest of her people could do was try to help as best they could without getting in the way.

It was several days later, after the tour of the star system had been complete, that Wright spoke again with Dr. Sullivan. While the ship was being prepared for the next jump to the neighboring star system, Captain Wright met with Sullivan and Serinaf in the conference room.

The two scientists were waiting patiently for Wright by the time he arrived at the conference room.

"I apologize for being late," he said, as he seated himself at the table. A few last-minute course corrections had delayed him, but he didn't feel the need to explain ship's business to the science

team. Turning to Dr. Sullivan, he asked: "What are the results of the survey?"

"I believe Dr. Serinaf can explain," she answered.

Wright said nothing as he turned an expectant look upon Marc Serinaf. Something about this man, thought Wright to himself. Dr. Serinaf could best be described as swarthy. He was short and stocky, and his dark complexion and thick, black, neatly combed hair gave him an almost sinister appearance.

"To begin with," he started, his voice deep and guttural, "we have the preliminary data showing elevated EM signals emanating from the fifth planet."

"I am aware of that data," Wright said impatiently.

"Yes. We also have the data from the recent survey which clearly confirms an EM source on the planet."

"And your conclusions?" prompted Wright.

"We can infer that something is generating EM signals from the surface of the planet. The exact cause cannot be determined without a closer examination."

"Would you recommend a closer examination?" Wright asked tightly.

"That would be a reasonable course of action," acknowledged Serinaf.

"Thank you, Dr. Serinaf," said Wright, dismissing him with a nod. "Dr. Sullivan, a moment of your time, please."

After he left, Wright turned to Sullivan: "Why do you insist on having your staff report to me?" he demanded.

"Dr. Serinaf deserves recognition for his work. I felt he should be the one to present his results."

"I agree that he deserves the recognition. But I'm just captain of this ship, and any recognition from me doesn't amount to much of anything, especially back on Earth where it counts. I'm

sure he'll get all he deserves based on the reports that you file. So, from now on, I only want to hear from you."

"If you insist."

"I do. Now, I presume you want a closer look at this planet?"

"Yes."

"That can be arranged. However, once we reverse course, everyone aboard will know something's up. We need to decide now on a policy: do we tell them what's going on or do we keep them in the dark?"

"I see no point in keeping it a secret."

"I agree. I'll post a general announcement to the electronic bulletin board. In the meantime, we'll need to review the guidelines covering first contact."

"Aren't you jumping to conclusions?" asked Sullivan with a smile. "What makes you think there's intelligent life?"

"I'd rather be prepared for all eventualities, regardless of how improbable. Are you available tomorrow morning?"

Dr. Sullivan stood. "I'll be here," she said, then headed out the door.

\* \* \*

Except for the size and distribution of land masses, the fifth planet was nearly identical to Earth. The images of the planet displayed on the forward wall showed the same blue and white. Slightly larger in volume, slower rotation, longer period of revolution about it's sun.

"Hoffs, anything on the communications links?" Wright asked. He was sitting in the Captains' chair, behind Steve Maxwell and Bobbi Hoffs. The former was manning the navigation and helm console, while the latter was at security and communications.

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"Nothing, sir," she replied. "Although I can confirm the EM signals. No, wait. I seem to have lost them."

"How could ..." Wright began, then stopped as a sharp pain stabbed through his head. His vision blurred, and as he winced up at the display screens, all the images of the planet changed from blue-white to brown. Atmospheric readings jumped madly, then settled to show an airless world.

Wright closed his eyes and rubbed his temples, trying to focus. When he looked up again, everything returned to normal. A quick glance at Maxwell and Hoffs confirmed that he was not the only one affected.

"I've got confirmation on the signals, but it's difficult to hold," gasped Hoffs, rubbing her forehead with one hand while pressing at contacts with the other.

Nodding, Wright activated the temporary comm-link to the cargo hold. After a few moments delay, Dr. Sullivan responded.

"Yes, Captain, I'm here," her voice sounded strained. In the background, he could hear a dozen voices bickering.

"Doctor, what kind of readings are you getting?" he asked.

"It's very confusing. Some of my people are reporting an Earth-like planet, others an airless world. No two people can agree on exact readings."

"There's something on this planet that doesn't want us here. I've just gotten this sudden desire to leave as quickly as possible. Wait ... Maxwell!!" his voice sounded far-away as he spoke to someone on the bridge. "I'm ordering you to remain on course! Hoffs, have Robinson report to the bridge immediately."

"Captain, what's going on up there?" asked Sullivan in a worried tone.

"Sorry, Doctor. This urge to leave seems to be getting into my entire bridge crew. Listen, get your people settled down there and meet me in the conference room in five minutes."

It was closer to twenty minutes later that Captain Wright and Dr. Sullivan finally arrived at the conference room. Both were feeling very harried.

"Any clue as to what's happening, Chris?"

"Seems like mass confusion, Jared," was her tired response. "I can't get anyone to agree on the instrument readings. For now, I just have them comparing notes and trying to come up with a consensus. How about you?"

"The same, except for the powerful urge to leave. I don't feel it as strongly as I did on the bridge."

"You said something about the planet not wanting us here."

"Yeah, I've been thinking about that. The misinterpretation of the readings could be an effort to hide the fact that someone is on the planet. The urge to leave could mean they don't want us to find them, they want to be left alone."

"So, you are implying that there is an intelligence on the planet that is somehow affecting our perceptions and desires, perhaps through telepathy of a sort."

"That's the general idea."

"Interesting hypothesis. If this were true, how would we combat it?"

"I was able to clear my head by focusing and blocking out what appeared to be nonsensical. I knew what the readings were before, and that it would be physically impossible to change them. Therefore, what I was seeing had to be wrong."

"Okay. What do we do about it?"

Jared's expression hardened perceptibly at the question. "I think we should land on their damn planet. Show them that they can't push us around. Find out who they think they are."

"They probably think they are the residents of the planet," Chris said with a smile. "And if they don't want us here, then who are we to force ourselves? What gives us the right?"

Jared remained quiet, refusing to budge from his opinion.

"I have another idea," Chris suggested. "Why don't we simply try to maintain orbit for a few days? See what we can learn through scans of the surface. If, after that time, they change their minds and invite us to the surface, then we land. Otherwise, we leave peacefully and go on with our mission."

"Alright," he relented. "We'll try that."

The short walk back to the bridge gave Wright little time to prepare a definite plan of action.

"Hoffs, have the rest of the crew called to the bridge," he said as he sat in his chair. By the time the rest of the crew arrives, he would have decided on a strategy.

After a few minutes, everyone was assembled on the bridge: Kim Barnes and Sandi McAllister from Engineering, and Jimmy Fenton joined Bobbi Hoffs at Security & Communications. Monice Robinson had already been called to assist Steve Maxwell at Navigation & Helm.

"Listen close," Wright began. "There is a force of some kind on the planet that is manipulating our thoughts in order to send us away. Dr. Sullivan and I have decided to remain in orbit for three days to complete a comprehensive scan of the surface.

"It is critical that we maintain orbit for the next three days. It won't be easy. All of us must focus on the task at hand. During these three days, we will be on Emergency Alert. You know the routine: Each shift will be six hours on followed by four hours off. Second shift begins one hour before first ends, and ends one hour after first starts. First shift starts now. That means Robinson, Hoffs, and McAllister, you three have the next six hours to fail-safe the ship. I don't want even the slightest chance that one of us can break orbit until we're ready. Any questions?"

There were none. McAllister and Barnes beat a hasty retreat to the engine room; the rest of the crew busied themselves

with the task at hand. Wright decided everything on the bridge was under control, and headed below to the cargo hold to see how Dr. Sullivan was doing.

In contrast to the bridge, the cargo hold was almost organized chaos. While Wright's crew was smaller and had specific duties to perform, Sullivan's team was larger and extremely bored. Easily more than half the scientists on board had not had an opportunity to do any work within their specialty. The result was a sullen and restless group, prone to argument.

For now, though, they seemed to be working together in a relatively benign manner despite the stress of the unknown on the planet.

Wright took it all in a glance, and weaved his way to where Dr. Sullivan was working. She didn't see him coming, and nearly bumped into him when she turned to check another instrument reading.

"Oops! Pardon me," she exclaimed. "Didn't expect to see you down here."

"I thought I would see if there was anything you needed."

"You mean besides a larger ship and more equipment?"

They both laughed at the old joke. Granted, a re-conditioned cargo carrier was less than ideal as a research vessel; but what scientist ever existed that never wished for this instrument or that, which had been invariably left behind? Not a solar system went by that someone would need an item that wasn't expected to be needed.

"Actually, I think we're doing okay for now," she said. "It's a bit of a nuisance to be constantly re-checking and verifying our readings, but we're managing."

"Well, you know where to reach me."

"Thanks," she said, already distracted with the setting up of the next reading on another instrument.

Wright decided to get some rest. The past few hours had been quite trying, and all he wanted now was some peace and quiet.

\* \* \*

"Three days or three years, I don't think we're going to learn anymore than we already have."

Dr. Sullivan was slouching in the chair. Across the conference table, Captain Wright remained quiet. She was clearly exhausted, and had probably not slept much over the past few days.

"After careful correlation of all our data," she continued, "all we know for sure is that there are apparent signs of a civilization, and that they are probably generating the EM signals."

"Apparent signs?" Jared asked.

"Oh, sorry. Our telescopes have picked up roads and large structures. Cultivated fields. All clear signs of a people at least at the pre-industrialized age.

"What's confusing is the EM signals. In the case of Earth, activity in certain EM bands increased in complexity as we became more industrialized. The signals from this planet are equivalent in complexity to our early twenty-first century, but there are no signs of the contaminants produced by mass-production facilities."

"Maybe they have non-polluting energy sources."

"We considered that as a possibility," Chris admitted. "We just can't tell for sure."

"How about an estimate of the population size?"

"That's a tough one, too. We're guessing anywhere from two to four billion."

"That low? This is a fairly large planet, about a third larger in volume than Earth. They must have a very low population density."

Chris said nothing, eyes glazing over and staring off at the ceiling. The strain of fighting the mental force from the planet was wearing her down even more than the lack of sleep.

"Chris?"

"What!?" she said suddenly, snapping back to the here and now.

"I said, do you think we should leave?" Jared repeated.

"Yes," she said, resigning herself to failure.

"Okay. After we leave this star system, we'll take a few days to rest before the next jump."

The change was as sudden as it was unexpected. Chris and Jared could only stare at each other, open mouthed, not comprehending at first what had just happened.

It was as if a vise grip had been removed from their heads. Clarity of thought was so instantaneous that their minds were spinning.

Jared hit the table hard with the palms of his hands, and took a deep breath. Chris jumped at the sound.

"Amazing!" he said. "Don't you feel it?"

"Yes!" she gulped. "They are ... welcoming us."

They stared at each other for a few more moments.

Finally, Chris jumped out of her chair and said: "So what are we waiting for!?"

\* \* \*

The trip to the surface proceeded with agonizing slowness. Or so it seemed to Chris Sullivan. How many more details must she attend to?

The cargo hold was a blur of activity. Captain Wright shook his head in disbelief. Where there once existed a splintered group of sullen and depressed people, there was now a team

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working and laughing together for a common cause. Even Serinaf looked almost pleasant.

Stepping into the stairwell to have a word with the captain was a welcome distraction for Dr. Sullivan.

"Are you sure you know where to land?" she asked anxiously.

"Yes. The image of the landing site is very clear in our minds. You know, it would help immensely if we could establish verbal contact."

"I know, but we can't seem to find any hint of telecommunications."

"I'd be interested in finding out how they manage that."

"We will soon enough. How much longer till we land?"

"Just about half an hour. I'd better get back to the bridge."

Wright hurried up the stairwell and down the long corridor. On the bridge, Robinson and Hoff's were at their stations, while Maxwell and Fenton looked on. And, no doubt, both McAllister and Barnes were sitting it out in Engineering. No one wanted to miss the first landing on a world that was not only habitable, but inhabited as well.

"We have acquired a lock on the landing site," stated Robinson. "A signal beacon has been installed for final approach."

"Bring us down," responded Wright. "Hoff's, verify secure hatches. I don't want anyone leaving this ship unless I say so."

"Verified, Captain. Hatches are secure."

The whine of the main engine rose as it exerted the extra power required to hover meters above the surface. Slowly, the ship dropped until it rested on the ground. Wright felt a slight jar as contact was made with the planet.

"Sullivan," said Wright, activating the comm-link to the cargo hold. "What's the word on the atmosphere?"

"MacPhee just concluded the final tests now," she answered over the intercom. "There's nothing in the air that our lungs can't handle. We'll need to avoid exerting ourselves due to the slightly higher gravity. Also, the temperature is slightly below normal for us. Better dress warm."

"Alright. Meet me at the airlock with your contact team." Wright closed the contact and stood up. "Hoffs, you're with me. The rest of you know the drill."

There were actually two airlocks, both located off the short, connecting hallway between the bridge and the rest of the ship. Wright never gave the airlock doors a second look while the ship was in space. Now, he and Hoffs stood inside the port side lock after cycling the door open.

Dr. Sullivan and her contact team arrived shortly, and crowded into the airlock. They were loaded down with an array of portable equipment.

Wright took a few moments to appraise the team as Dr. Sullivan introduced them. Rita Kinsbury, psychologist. A small, dark, friendly looking woman with an expression that seemed to say she knew exactly what you were thinking. Scott MacIntyre, linguistic expert. A plump looking man with a twinkle in his eye and sportive smile on his lips. Known throughout the ship for his love of word-play. Jennifer Williams, medical doctor. An austere woman who took her work very seriously. And finally, Bobbi Hoffs, Wright's security & communications officer. A very large and rugged woman, she looked like someone who lifted weights in her sleep.

One thing that all members of the contact team had in common was their single-mindedness to their chosen career. Wright felt it was an important trait, in light of the type of people they would be dealing with. He couldn't take the chance of one of them being easily swayed by the mentally coercive inhabitants.

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"Is everyone prepared?" Wright asked. Anxious, affirmative nods met his gaze around the room. He turned to the outer door, and cycled it open.

They got their first whiff of the alien atmosphere as the door slowly opened. The difference in air pressure pulled some of the cooler air into the lock.

Once the door was fully open, Wright extended the boarding ramp and took a tentative step onto it. He looked around, noting similarities and differences. Though the sun was elevated well into the sky, it was not as bright as Sol when viewed from Earth. And the horizon seemed impossibly far away. Trees, flowers, grass and rocks filled the rolling landscape, and in the distance he thought he could make out some buildings.

Approximately 200 meters off the port bow stood about half a dozen humanoids. Must be welcoming committee, Wright thought to himself as he descended to the bottom of the ramp.

The rest of the team followed him. Once they were all off the ramp, Wright turned to Dr. Sullivan.

"A moment in history," he said.

"You are the first to step onto an alien world, Captain," she responded.

"Yes, and our next step is to introduce ourselves."

"I think we should let Scott handle that. He's the linguistics expert."

"Okay. Lead the way, Dr. MacIntyre."

They walked slowly over to where the aliens stood. As they approached, Wright noticed a pleasant, relaxed feeling coming over him.

"Chris," he whispered.

"I feel it, too," she said, nodding. "I think they want us to feel welcome."

The team came to a halt a few meters from the aliens.

Scott MacIntyre motioned the rest to remain, and then he took a few steps closer. Wright observed as he began a series of gestures and short phrases designed to encourage communication.

"I don't know if I like this idea of them putting emotions into my head," Wright whispered to Sullivan.

"It seems harmless enough," she whispered back.

MacIntyre returned to the team, a confused and troubled look on his face.

"Anything?" Dr. Sullivan asked.

"I'm not sure," he answered. "They've been giving me the silent treatment. Won't talk at all, not even among themselves."

"What is it you're uncertain about?" asked Rita Kinsbury, the psychologist.

"Just a feeling, that's all."

"Focus carefully on that feeling, Scott. It's important."

"Do you have a theory?" asked Sullivan.

"I believe so. Scott's answer would help."

"Well, this may sound kinda silly. But I got the feeling they sorta understood me. Like they could sense my frustration and tried to help me relax, even though they said nothing."

"What is it that gave you that feeling?" pressed Kinsbury.

"Oh, I guess body language was some of it. The way they held themselves, the expressions on their faces."

"They are aliens, Dr. MacIntyre," said Wright. "We can't assume they respond to stimulus the same as we do."

"I know that."

"It's more than just that, though," Kinsbury suggested.

"Yeh. I really felt they understood what I was feeling, and that I could understand their feelings. All very non-verbal."

"That would be my assumption."

"What are you suggesting, Doctor?" asked Wright.

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"It's just a hunch, but it seems to me they communicate telepathically."

"What evidence do you have to support that conclusion?"

"Purely circumstantial, I'll admit. I know that a small group is insufficient to generalize, but they appear to be cooperating as a social group, and communication is essential to the success of any society. There is no law that states it must be done verbally. In fact, much of our history has been recorded both graphically and in written form, in addition to story-telling. We just haven't advanced to the point where we understand the workings of the mind well enough to be able to use telepathy as a form of communication."

"That makes sense," mused Sullivan. "But why should we be able to communicate feelings and not thoughts?"

"That is obvious," said Jennifer Williams, the medical doctor who, until now, had kept silent. Everyone turned to listen to her.

"As Dr. Kinsbury stated," she continued. "The human mind is not well understood. Telepathy is understood even less. In fact, it is impossible to test under laboratory conditions. Human emotions, on the other hand, are an integral part of our physiology. Based on the similarity of the human and alien forms, and the fact that we can breathe their air, it appears they have evolved on a path parallel to ours. Therefore, they may also be subject to emotional states. Since it is a common evolutionary trait, it is logical to assume we can share that with them. Dr. MacIntyre communicates by that method almost subconsciously. All that remains is the medical break-through that would allow thoughts to be shared as well."

Noticing Wright's glazed look, Kinsbury added:

"Fundamentally, emotions are basic traits for a humanoid, whereas language is a fluid thing that develops according to circumstance."

"If all this is true," said Wright grimly, "then we are in for one hell of a getting-acquainted party."

\* \* \*

The days turned into weeks, until finally it was time return to Earth. The contact team reluctantly packed up their instruments and said their farewells.

Captain Wright made one last tour of the cargo hold before lift-off, just to reassure himself that everyone and everything was in place and ready to go.

He found Dr. Sullivan staring dejectedly at a bulk head.

"Everything okay?" he asked.

She sighed heavily. "Did you ever feel that you've been kicked right back to square one?"

"Many times," he answered.

"Well, that's about how I feel now. For all of our wonderful advances, we're still basically the same human beings that walked the Earth thousands of years ago. We haven't changed."

"I like to think we've matured somewhat in the last thousand years."

"We are only fooling ourselves if we believe that. We either walk a tight rope for fear of the destructive power of our weapons, or we kill so cleanly and distantly that it doesn't bother our conscience. And still we remain blind to the concept of humanity as a unified whole."

"Do you think the people on this planet have that answer?"

"Yes, I believe they do."

"And what of all the technological advances we've made. Aren't we better off with than without?"

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"Can we justify that with the death of billions? How many of those advances came at the expense of human life?"

Wright said nothing. Dr. Sullivan shook her head sadly and walked away from him, disappearing into one of the bays.

\* \* \*

Elder Pteri watched as the alien ship disappeared into the Kalto sky. The past few weeks had been difficult for all, and she was glad these strange beings were finally gone.

*We were once as they are now*, she mused.

*I can't think how it would be to speak as they do*, pondered Trella, suppressing a faint shudder. *So much misunderstanding.*

*I have spent a lifetime studying the ancient ways*, conceded Selik. *And yet, I never fully understood what was meant by "voice" communications and its' limitations until now.*

*Will they ever learn to converse as we do?* wondered Trella.

*It will be a long time*, sighed Pteri. *Their race is too immature to realize the full potential of the mental being. They are still intensely entwined with physical being.*

*It is too bad*, thought Selik. *The first intelligent race we meet and they are not our equals.*

*They have done well for themselves*, responded Pteri. *Their grasp of physical concepts exceeds our own. We simply chose a different path. Someday, perhaps, they will overcome their mental deficiency, and we will speak with them as equals.*

## Self Control

Carlson sank slowly to his knees in the darkness of the alleyway, taking care to remain centered between the building walls. Looking up, the sooty bricks loomed over him, coming together until he could barely see the sky. He could almost sense the sky was nothing more than the faint reflection of city lights against low cloud cover.

A low growl of frustration escaped his lips. If only I could remember how to get out of here, he muttered to himself. I just need to rest, some time to think.

The wall-shadows, his constant companions in this dark place, said nothing.

He looked back down the alley. Behind him was the corner he had just turned - from one alley into another. If he listened carefully, he could almost make out the sound of traffic lumbering along distant streets. He never seemed to get any closer, no matter how many corners he turned.

Rising slowly, he wiped his hands on his shirt. The cold gravel from the alley fell to the ground, releasing a faint oily smell. He glanced again at the wall-shadows - vague, stiff-limbed figures with eyes like dying coal embers. Constant companions that somehow remained without seeming to move.

A sound, like a hammer hitting brick, echoed through the night. Carlson's eyes scaled the walls left and right, up and down, frantically searching for the source. The hammer struck again, and this time he heard bricks crumbling. Bits of dirt and debris fell on him from the left. Slowly, he backed up, scanning the left wall.

Sure enough, a beam of light darted out of a hole in the wall. Far over his head, but still too close. Run! the wall-shadows whispered silently, urgently, with their still lips. Panic and fear sent another adrenalin rush through his body, and he charged down the alley further into the pit of darkness.

\* \* \*

"Damn!!" Roy cursed. "Lost him again!"

Dr. Roy Selvan jumped from his chair and paced the room, barely sparing a glance at the unconscious body of Agent Leroy Carlson lying in the bed. Nervous energy radiated from him, animating his nondescript features.

Lisa Parker just watched him quietly, thinking how comical he looked. In contrast to Dr. Selvan, she remained listless. The aura of unconcern that she projected enabled her maintain her distance, preserving her self-perceived image as a watcher of humanity.

Agent Carlson had been brought to BETA headquarters several days ago, barely conscious and babbling like an idiot. Hours after arriving, he lost consciousness: a victim of Kaltan mind control techniques.

The Bureau of Extra-Terrestrial Affairs had immediately called in Dr. Selvan from the World Institute on Mental Health, whose team of experts had spent the last several years unraveling the mystery of Kaltan psychology. With little success, unfortunately - the inhabitants of Kalto V simply had a very different mind-set from that of human beings.

"Well, Lisa," he said, finally coming to a stop in front of the assistant, "I don't think there's much I can do. Let's go see your Director Hanson."

\* \* \*

Allen Hanson eyed Dr. Selvan. He was suspicious by nature, a trait that his position as Director of BETA seemed to aggravate even more. It was frustrating enough to try and fathom the motivations of humans, let alone an alien race.

"The problem with Agent Carlson," explained Roy, "is that a mental block has been placed in his mind, one that I am unable to break through. It's as if a wall has been placed around his psyche, effectively trapping it from outside contact."

"So, what you're telling me," Hanson asked, "is that Carlson's mind is unreachable?" His frown was almost comical on his round face, made rounder by hair that had been cut uniformly to about a centimeter in length.

"That may be the case," Roy said cautiously. "This is the first instance of a mind block that we've encountered outside of our labs, and appears to go much deeper than anything we've ever attempted. I'd be very interested in knowing how this came to happen. It might help the prognosis if I knew what he was doing on Kalto V."

"I'm afraid that information is classified," Hanson said. "What's our next step?"

"Well," Roy answered curtly, "Normally, I would suggest Dr. Rachel Hansen take a look at him. She's our resident expert on this particular subject."

"Bring her in, then."

"She is in the middle of some very important work, which is why I am here instead of her. It may take several days."

"Dr. Selvan," Hanson said, using a tone that brooked no argument. "The information that may be contained in Carlson's head is of vital importance. This is a World-class Security Risk. Have her brought here immediately."

"As you wish," Roy acknowledged, rising from his chair. Lisa just shrugged her shoulders.

\* \* \*

These walls are like a maze, Carlson sobbed to himself. The alleyway was a brick-lined forest path, always winding but

## A Random Collection of Events

never crossing itself. Forever will I walk this path, chasing the darkness and followed by the shadows, until the end.

Safe for now, though. It has been some time since the light tried to break through the walls.

A movement out of the corner of his eye. Carlson froze. He peered at the wall. This looks to be more than a wall-shadow. Squinting his eyes, he could just make out an image. A painting, perhaps? Shaped roughly like a human.

Carlson took a few steps closer, wary of any hint of a break in the wall. Human, definitely. A woman, painted onto the wall. He returned to the center of the alley, and then took a few steps towards the darkness, watching the painted woman closely.

The painted woman followed him silently.

Carlson froze, listening carefully. Not a sound. He took three more steps.

Again, the painted woman followed.

He scrutinized the painted woman. No sign of light.

Okay. No sound, no light. And the wall-shadows say nothing.

\* \* \*

"If you didn't break through, then what exactly have you accomplished?" Hanson asked.

"We've created a stepping stone," Dr. Rachel Hansen said, matching Hanson tone for tone. She was a tall and imposing woman who rarely allowed herself to be pushed around by anyone. Not even if he was the director of a multi-national organization. "The Kaltans are able to 'monitor' mental blocks by placing a controlling 'presence' on the 'wall'. This 'presence' acts as a sentry to warn the psyche when a break-through is attempted. What I've done is to establish a 'presence' of my own on the wall. This

provides a link by which we can reach Carlson once we gain his trust."

"How much time?"

"That is difficult to say. Could be days, or even weeks. Playing with the mind in this manner is a very risky business. One wrong move and we could lose him completely."

"Hmph. Continue, and keep me posted with your progress. And bear in mind that when you do break through, any information he has is considered confidential."

"I haven't forgotten, Director Hanson. But, as I've said before, we can't read minds so I won't know anything unless Carlson tells me. All I can do is 'talk' to him."

\* \* \*

"You are not like the other wall-shadows," Carlson mumbles to the painted woman on the wall.

"I'm not the same," she replies. "Do you know where you are?"

"Yes, I think so. I was taken here by the others. They said I had to hide, and that I would be safe here. But I seem to have lost my way. Everywhere I go is just darkness and more darkness. I have been running for so long, and I am so tired. All I want is to rest."

"What are you running from?"

"I run from those who would break down these walls. The walls protect me. The others built the walls so that I could hide."

"Why do you need to hide?"

"I have a secret. I don't remember what it is, but I know I have it. I have to keep this secret from them, so I am hiding here."

"Who are you keeping the secret from? The others?"

"No, not the others. The others are helping me to hide with the secret."

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"Who are you hiding the secret from?"

"From them. If they knew the secret, it would be very dangerous. You are not one of them, are you?"

"I'm here to help you out of here. You said you were lost."

"Yes, I am lost. I seem to have lost my way. I can't remember how to get out of here. Do you know the way out?"

"Yes, I know the way out. I can help you find your way out."

"The secret must remain hidden."

"The secret will remain hidden. I am here only to help you find your way out."

Carlson considered her words for a long time, all the while moving slowly from alley to alley. He remained alert for any hint of light. Eventually he stopped, closed his eyes, and let out a quiet sigh.

"Okay. How do I get out?"

"You have to go through the wall."

"They are on the other side of the wall! The secret must remain hidden!"

"The secret will remain hidden. You belong on the other side with them. I can show you a way through the wall that will leave the secret inside."

"The wall will not break?"

"The wall will not break. There is a way through the wall without breaking it."

"What about the light?"

"The light belongs to them. It will not hurt you."

"But the light can't break through! The secret must remain hidden!"

"The light will not break through. The secret will remain hidden."

Carlson sat down carefully in the middle of the alley, resting, while he thought about her words.

"I belong on the other side of the wall?" he asked.

"Yes."

"What about the light and the others?"

"There are others who are your friends. They want to leave the secret inside."

Carlson said nothing, but started rocking gently back and forth. The gentle sway of his body seemed to sooth him while his tortured mind sorted out the painted woman's words.

"How do I get through the wall?" he asked.

"You must become a wall-shadow like me."

"I... I can do that?"

"Yes, you can. Take my hand."

"What about the light?"

"The light will not hurt you."

"What if the light tries to break through while I am close to the wall?"

"The light will not break through. I am holding it back to keep you safe."

"The secret will be safe?"

"The secret will be safe. Take my hand."

\* \* \*

Leroy blinked rapidly, his eyes adjusting to the light in the room. Seated in the chair next to his bed, Rachel smiled tiredly as she straightened her back.

"How do you feel?" Roy asked him, checking his vital signs.

"Head aches," Leroy responded, carrying a limp hand to his forehead and massaging it gently.

"Do you know where you are?" Roy continued.

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"Looks like a hospital."

"Can you tell me what your name is?"

"Leroy. Carlson."

"That's fine, Leroy. Just rest now." Roy stood back from the bed. Rachel rose from the chair and followed him out the door, with Lisa tagging along as the ever-present BETA observer.

Back in Hanson's office, Rachel watched the Director's face in amusement. It was obvious that he thought she had somehow divined critical information from Carlson's memory.

"Now that you've broken through, how soon until we can learn the status of his memories?" Hanson asked.

"We haven't broken through," said Rachel. "The wall itself is still in place. All I have done is to retrieve Carlson from behind the wall. Whatever information he has is still there, locked away."

"Is it possible to retrieve that information?" he asked.

"Theoretically, yes," she said. "But the process is just as risky. There still remains a chance we could lose him."

"I understand that. The information he has may be very important."

"May be!" Dr. Selvan exclaimed. "You don't know what the information is, how can you understand the risk?"

"Roy," Rachel said, placing a tired hand on his shoulder. Turning to Hanson: "Carlson remains in danger until we can remove that wall. With him back on this side of it, we stand a better chance of success. However, since we still don't know the nature of the secret he referred to, the effect of taking down the wall is uncertain at best. I suggest we proceed with the utmost caution."

"I take it," suggested Hanson, "that you will be remaining here until Carlson has recovered?"

"Or until he's a complete vegetable, yes," Rachel said. "I would hate to leave a patient in such a precarious state. Dr. Selvan

and I believe that we have already learned more about Kalto psychology than we ever could in the lab, so we have decided to temporarily suspend our other projects until we are finished here."

"Very well. I'll have Lisa assigned as a permanent member of your team while you are here at BETA headquarters. She will continue to act as an official BETA observer on our behalf--"

"We know," Roy interrupted. "To minimize the security risk."

"Just so we understand each other," Hanson said. "Lisa will take care of assigning quarters for you within the building, and any other arrangements you need to make. She will act as the liaison to me. I expect regular, daily reports on your progress." Clearly a dismissal.

"As you wish," Roy said, rising to his feet.

\* \* \*

"Oh!"

"It's okay, Leroy," Rachel's voice soothed.

"Heart rate is way up," said Roy.

"It's okay, Leroy. We're here. You're okay."

Leroy opened his eyes, and then closed them again, squeezing out the light. His fingers gripped the arm of his chair until his knuckles turned white. Taking a deep breath, he slowly relaxed.

"Leroy?" It was Rachel. "How do you feel?"

"Alright. I think I'm alright." Leroy gulped, and then gradually released his grip on the chair. "Whew!! What a rush!"

"What is it, Leroy?"

"It's the secret. I know the nature of the secret!"

Rachel and Roy just exchanged glances, waiting for Leroy to continue.

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"The wall... it fell. And for a moment, I knew. But then it was back up again, only thinner than before. I remember everything now: being captured on Kalto, the room they took me to, the... the... mind clamp. Returning to Earth. I remember everything except the details of their secret. That remains hidden behind the wall."

"What can you tell us about the secret?" Roy asked, casting a glance towards Lisa.

"It's very dangerous. We couldn't handle it, we don't have the self-control. The Kaltans," Leroy's voice filled with awe and wonder, "they have the secrets of the mind. Full mental capability! Too dangerous, too dangerous..." He whimpered quietly.

"Shh," Rachel said, taking his hand. "The secret is safe, Leroy."

## The Trading Post

Bailey Davis sat lightly in her chair; her elfin features a stark contrast to the utilitarian office that she called home. She was intently studying her computer screen, which displayed the floor plans for the space station. She was so engrossed in her study that it was several minutes before she noticed Jeremy Landau's lean frame resting casually against the door's frame. Despite his attempt at nonchalance, there was a definite sense of unleashed energy emanating from him. His body was taut and his hawk-like eyes were very alert.

"Detective," Bailey said, her easy gaze meeting his.

Jeremy nodded. "There is an entry worth noting on the wire this morning. It seems a shipment of permium ore is missing."

Bailey's eyebrows rose. "That's a disturbing piece of news," she said, her manner automatically shifting to a more formal tone to match his.

"I'm rather concerned about the safety of the station. If that ore finds its way here, it would present quite a hazard." Jeremy slid a few steps into Bailey's office.

Bailey shrugged her shoulders. "I suppose that would depend on who has it."

"I would not care to wager the safety of the station against the good intentions of those in possession of the ore."

"I suppose that would be a bit naive."

"Indeed. There is no doubt the ore is, as we speak, on its way to a rendezvous with a buyer. The details of the report indicate the ore was pirated."

"Pirates are usually intermediaries, intent only on theft and resale of goods." She could play this game as well as he.

"Precisely," Jeremy said. Bailey recognized his response. It was the one he used when he suspected far more than he was

## A Random Collection of Events

saying, and was hoping his opponent would inadvertently confirm his information.

"So. Do you think it's likely a pirate ship will show up at the station?" she asked.

"If they are known pirates, no."

"Then you suspect unknown pirates?"

Jeremy ignored the playful smile on her lips. "I think it's likely that the ore was not pirated, simply meant to look that way."

"And you suspect it may find its way here."

"Certainly a strong possibility, all things considered."

"Well, since I'm not privy to such details..."

An unspoken thought passed between them. After a moment, Jeremy nodded and left.

Bailey looked at the screen thoughtfully for a few moments, then turned it off and walked to the door. She stood there looking into the other room, the soft glow of the light from her office projecting her shadow into the darker room, enhancing her elf-like aura. Finding who she was looking for, she walked briskly across the room to where he stood.

The room is large, dark and currently vacant except for the two of them. A bar lines one wall, and the remaining walls have one-man vendor booths dotted along them, all closed for business at this late hour. The main floor of the room is littered with chairs and tables of various sizes and shapes.

At the main entrance to the room, a very tall and husky man locks up the door. Benid Osse ran a quick eye over the door and the room, and then turned to Bailey. She cocked her head, and they start walking back to her office

"Detective Landau is suspicious," Benid said, his thick voice carrying only as far as Bailey's ears, his lips in a tight line.

"That's all he has is suspicions," Bailey replies in a low voice. "He has an odd way of gathering information. He throws out comments and waits for you to react."

"You learn a lot by listening and observing."

"So you've said. I still don't see how that can work. Whether I say a lot of nothing or nothing at all, what's he going to get out of it?"

"Sometimes it's what you don't say that answers the question. It's a matter of sifting the gold from the mud."

"Man! Where do you come up with these sayings?"

"In my business--"

"Yes, yes, if you know the past you know the future. I thought that was just for your enemies?"

"It serves me just as well for my friends."

"Well, I'm glad you're on my side." They stopped at the door to her office. "Alright, I've got a call to make. Check security one more time and report to me later."

Benid nodded and headed back across the room, closing the office door behind him. Bailey sat down at her desk and stared thoughtfully at her computer screen. After a few moments, she tapped out a code on her console. The floor plans of the station were replaced a scaled and molting face.

"Readiness, all," the being asked.

"Readiness, all," Bailey replied, then tapped out another sequence on her console. "Location, this."

The being blinked once, and then closed the connection. Bailey got up, locked her office door, and walked through another door against the far wall of her office. She dropped unceremoniously into the large bed, leaving the wide door open and the lights on.

\* \* \*

## A Random Collection of Events

It wasn't until mid-morning that Bailey finally stirred. After a quick shower and dress, she headed through her office to the bar in the main room of the Trading Post. To all outward appearances, this was her primary business. The Trading Post was a place where merchants from across the sector could come and hawk their goods, paying a small concession for the booth they occupied. The space station itself was an ideal location for her business because it bordered several of the major civilizations - sort of a crossroads as it were. Hers was one of several businesses located on this level - businesses ranging from food to gifts to entertainment of any and every kind imaginable.

Curled like a pretzel under the bar was Jesse, her sister. Despite a fifteen-year age gap, they looked remarkably the same in physical appearance. Only by their temperament could they be told apart. Bailey was cool and confident, always in charge of any situation. Jesse, in contrast, was like a frightened bird ready to take flight at a moment's notice.

"How's it coming?" Bailey asked.

Jesse jumped imperceptibly. Not enough to hurt herself, she had long ago learned to control her startle response at least that much. Slowly, she extricated herself from under the bar and stood staring at the floor in front of her sister.

"J-just finished," she said, wiping her hands on her dirty pants. "A-all set for t-tonight."

"Great! Go clean up and I'll treat you to breakfast at Litza's."

"O-okay." Jesse disappeared. Bailey spent her time wandering around the room, chatting with the vendors. She like to maintain a cordial relationship with them all, partly because it was good for the outward perceptions of the business.

After a while, Bailey realized her shadow was back. She and Jesse walked across the busy promenade to Litza's Nook.

"Bailey! Jesse!" Litza cried. "How wonderful to see you!"

Litza and Bailey hugged, and then Litza led the sisters to a table.

"So, what? Your usual?" Litza asked.

"Naturally," Bailey said. "You know I only try something new to please a prospective client."

Litza laughed and headed back to the kitchen.

"May I join you?"

Bailey looked up to see a plump, jaundiced-looking person smiling benignly at them. The round face was accented by the lack of hair on top of the head.

"Please do," Bailey said, half rising out of her chair and indicating an empty one. "You must be the new doctor."

"Yes. I am Wehmy Meh-Li Ahe." She smiled as Bailey tried to form her mouth around that one. "Please, call me Wehmy, with a slight guttural pause on the 'h'. Oh, is it not your custom to shake hands when meeting?"

Bailey nodded and shook hands. "It's nice to meet you, Wehmy," she said, pronouncing the name carefully. "I'm Bailey, and this is my sister Jesse. We run the Trading Post."

"It is wonderful to meet you and your sister." Wehmy turned and extended a hand to Jesse, who moved back and stared at the table.

"My sister is a bit shy around strangers," Bailey explained.

"Ah, that must be a most interesting experience. Perhaps I will try that one day."

Bailey's quizzical look was interrupted by the arrival of breakfast.

"Here you are, my dears," Litza said, deftly landing the plates on the table. "I see you've picked up a guest. What can I get you?"

"I am not sure," replied Wehmy. "This station is run by humans, isn't it?"

## A Random Collection of Events

"Yep," Litza said.

"I would like to experience a standard meal to start," Wehmy said. "This will be my first human meal. What is it that humans normally eat at this time of day?"

"Well," Litza said, "this meal is called breakfast. Most human folks have scrambled eggs, bacon, toast with jam, oj, and coffee."

"That sounds interesting."

"Okay." Litza trotted off, not giving a second thought to Wehmy's request.

"So, if you don't mind my asking--" Bailey began.

"My gender? Oh, I get that all the time."

"I don't mean any offense by my question."

"Why should I take offense?" Wehmy asked.

"Humans have a tendency to take offense easily."

"True, but I am not human. I chose for this life experience to be from the planet Lakura. We are an easy-going, non-gendered species. My soul work is to know who I am through the study of the human condition. Your species is such an interesting one."

"How so?" Bailey asked.

"It quite amazes me how such a dominant species can be so conflicted. And ignorant of their choice!"

"I'm not sure I follow you."

Litza arrived with Wehmy's breakfast. "Here you are, dear. Enjoy!"

"Thank you!" Wehmy looked uncertainly at the meal before her.

"The yellow ones are the scrambled eggs," Bailey offered. "The square pieces are toasted bread, and the strips are bacon. These," she pointed to the display in the center of the table, "are condiments. You use them to add flavor to your food. Salt, pepper and ketchup for the eggs, jam for the toast, cream for the coffee,

which is the brown liquid. The orange liquid is orange juice. Knife and fork to eat with."

"Ah." Wehmy began experimenting with the condiments.

"Um, so you were saying about the human species being conflicted and ignorant?"

"Oh, yes!" Wehmy said around a mouthful of eggs. "Most beings I meet truly believe the illusion. Humans are on the verge of realizing the truth, yet choose to remain ignorant."

"Ignorant of the truth? About the illusion?"

"Exactly! You see it. Most interesting texture, these eggs. The toast is a bit unpalatable."

"So, what is the truth?"

"It's so obvious, I'm surprised you even need to ask. Life is the illusion. Each of us is an expression of God, so that He may know himself experientially. We create this illusion of life in order to create those experiences."

"That sounds a little simplistic," Bailey said.

"Oh, but it really is that simple. In fact, this illusion you and your sister have created is quite fascinating." Wehmy turned to Jesse. "What is your experience like, being so shy and afraid all the time? I really must try that."

Jesse cowered before Wehmy's attention, muttered something inaudible, and began fidgeting with her utensils.

"Even more interesting is your experience in relation to your sister," Wehmy continued, focusing the attention back on Bailey.

"What do you mean?"

"Jesse's obvious fear could be the outward manifestation of the fear you hide so well. Oh, what is this bacon?"

"Uh, it's the meat of an Earth animal called a pig."

"Oh. Animal meat. This is not settling well. I do believe I'm going to be ill." Wehmy stood uncertainly.

"Can I help you back to sickbay?" Bailey asked, concerned, rising to help.

"I'll manage," Wehmy said, and moved toward the exit.

"However, bacon is one experience I will pass on next time."

Bailey sat back down, staring blankly after Wehmy. Was it that obvious? How could Wehmy know anything about that? No one else knew - it was long ago and Benid would never betray her secret. A tugging at her sleeve brought her out of her reverie.

"T-t-take m-me h-h-home," Jesse mumbled.

"Of course." Bailey stood up and wrapped her arm around Jesse, leading her back to her rooms.

\* \* \*

When Bailey returned to the Trading Post, she noticed Jeremy sitting in a corner at an isolated table with Ryan Whitney, the commander of the space station. She had just managed to work her way discretely within hearing range when Commander Whitney rose from his seat.

"I leave it in your capable hands, Professor," he said, then walked past Bailey, nodding at her as he passed.

Bailey slid into the vacated seat. "Allow me to buy the next round."

"Thank you, no," Jeremy said, making as if to leave.

"I've never heard him call you 'Professor' before."

"No?" Jeremy stood up and walked toward the door.

Bailey paced him.

"No. Why did he call you that?"

Jeremy paused. "He was once a student of mine," he said, reluctant to say more.

"I did hear that you used to be a professor of... of..." Bailing groped at her memory unsuccessfully.

"Literature."

"Literature! That's right! How did you get from teaching literature to solving crimes?"

"My specialty was mysteries. If you will excuse me."

"Well, that explains it all!" Bailey said to his retreating back.

\* \* \*

Later that evening, Bailey noticed Jeremy back at the table. He was scrutinizing the room, and there was a hint of a gleam in his eye. He noticed Bailey's approach, but didn't acknowledge her.

"So, what brings you back to my neck of the woods?" she asked, sitting down at the table.

"I am on the trail of some information. What do you know of the freighter *Wnklbn*?"

"The *Wnklbn*? Doesn't ring a bell. You know, with the right hat and a pipe, you could almost pass for..."

"Yes, so I have been told. I understand you know the captain of the *Wnklbn*."

"Now, how can I know the captain if I don't recall the ship?"

"Easily. He is a frequent customer. He makes quite a show of buying wares here, and spends a lot of time talking with you at the bar."

"Hundreds of beings fit that description."

"It is suspected that he is a smuggler."

"Ah. The pernium ore." Bailey smiled sweetly at him. "And you think I know something about it."

"You seem to know much more than you let on."

"It's a hazard of the business," Bailey said lightly. "You'd be surprised how alcohol loosens the tongue, One learns to be discrete or die."

## A Random Collection of Events

"To be sure." He gazed sharply at her.

"Naturally, if I hear anything about the ore..."

"Naturally."

"Well, I'll leave you to your trail," Bailey said as she got up and headed back to the bar, where she was met by Benid.

"How is Jesse?" he asked, pitching his voice to be heard by several beings in their vicinity. As far as anyone would know, this would be a discussion about Jesse.

"She was a bit shook up after breakfast with the new doctor, but she's fine now."

"Yes, the new doctor can be disarming." They were behind the bar now and near the sales register, so had some relative anonymity. Benid pitched his voice lower. "Please be cautious around Detective Landau."

"Do you know something?"

"Nothing direct. I have a strong sense that he is close." A thoughtful look crossed his face. "How is the pick up to occur?"

"That," Bailey sighed, "I don't know. I've been assured that a distraction will occur, and the ore will be taken with no one the wiser. I hope it goes well, I'm not happy with not knowing."

Benid grunted. "It will go well if we are careful," he said meaningfully.

Bailey smiled and patted his arm affectionately. "How could I not be careful with my big brother watching over me?" Benid just looked at her, the faintest hint of pleasure at her affection showing at the corners of his mouth. Bailey and Jesse were certainly the closest thing he had to family since leaving his world behind.

"I'll be careful," Bailey reassured him. "Oh, is that the good doctor? I must go and see how Wehmy is doing."

Bailey met Wehmy near the entrance to the Post.

"How are you feeling?" Bailey asked.

"I am fine. That was a most unique experience. Luckily, the sickbay computer had several remedies to suggest."

"I feel so bad about you getting sick like that."

Wehmy shrugged. "Tell me about this place."

Bailey led Wehmy to a table and signaled one of the wait staff.

"Well, beings come here primarily to buy and sell their goods. That's what those booths are over against those walls."

"Then what of the tables? Why are so many sitting?"

"Discussing deals or just socializing. Appetizers and drinks are available for purchase."

A young man approached the table. "What can I bring you, Ms. Davis?"

"How are you with alcohol?" Bailey asked Wehmy.

"If you have anything like coffee, that was an experience I wouldn't mind repeating."

"Bring the doctor a Kahlua. I'll have a rum and coke. Oh, and bring a basket of cheese fries, but hold the cheese." Wehmy paled slightly at the mention of the word 'bacon,' but recovered when Bailey nodded knowingly.

"Yes, ma'am."

"Thank you for not ordering the bacon. I do not care to repeat that experience."

"I kind of got that feeling at breakfast."

"I am curious. The socializing engaged in here - does that include sexual liaisons?"

"Oh I wouldn't doubt it."

"Would I be able to observe such a liaison?" Wehmy asked eagerly. "I am not familiar with the mating rituals of a two-sexed species."

"Uh, well, beings tend to be very private about the actual, uh, liaison itself. You'll most likely see a lot of flirting, maybe some

## A Random Collection of Events

kissing and light petting, but nothing more. Most will go to the privacy of a room for anything more."

"And what of you? Are you currently involved in any sexual liaisons?"

Bailey suppressed a blush as the young waiter brought the food and drink, set it on the table, and wisely left quickly and quietly.

"You are quite direct, aren't you?" Bailey asked.

"I hope I have not offended. I am simply curious. It's all about the experience, after all."

"Yes, I see you believe that." Bailey looked at Wehmy with new awareness. She was startled to realize that Wehmy was sincere, and it would never cross Wehmy's mind to sit in judgment of another's actions.

"Well, then," Bailey said, relaxing slightly. "To be honest, I have no interest in sexual liaisons. I have my Trading Post, I have my sister - I'm happy with my life."

"There are so few who can say that. I'm feeling a bit odd."

"Odd in a good way or odd in a bad way?"

"I try not to label experiences as good or bad. But I would say I'm feeling good."

"It's the alcohol. Most beings experience pleasure when they drink it. You probably should not drink anymore until you know for sure how your body will react. Too much can cause a, uh... an unpleasant experience."

"I will take your word for that." Wehmy set the drink down, and proceeded to finish the last of the curly fries.

"Well, I really have to get back to work. Will you be okay?"

"I believe so. I would like to sit and observe for a while longer."

"Okay. I'll have some water sent to your table."

"Thank you."

\* \* \*

Bailey was serving at the bar when Captain Nvk of the freighter *Wnkbln* walked in and seated himself at the bar. Benid caught her eye, and glanced meaningfully at a human who had entered the Post after the captain, and was seating himself at a table. Bailey had to look twice at the man and still could not believe her eyes. But Benid's meaning was clear - that man was Jeremy.

"Captain greetings, mine," Bailey said.

"Barkeep greetings, mine," he replied.

"Usual, yours."

"Agreement, mine."

Bailey left to fix the captain's drink, and returned with it a few minutes later.

"Business, yours," Bailey asked.

"Good business, mine." He raised his glass in a toast.

"Many profits, mine."

"Many profits, yours," Bailey agreed, noticing Jeremy's watchful eye in her peripheral vision. She noticed Benid at the door, but he remained impassive except for a barely perceptible motion of his eyelids. That tiny signal reassured Bailey - Jeremy would be out of the way at the critical moment. In the meantime, she could not afford to spend too much time with the captain now. She kept herself busy serving and socializing with other customers.

A few hours later, Captain Nvk was approached by another, who lead the captain to an isolated table. The two had a very intense discussion before heading out together. Jeremy quietly followed them out.

After a very long night, last call finally came and went. Vendors closed up shop, and clients trickled out of the Trading Post. Bailey spoke to Benid as he locked up the door.

"So far, so good," she said. "Angthy played his part well. Captain Nvk seemed to believe he was the contact. Jesse has the systems wired and ready to go. Let's make haste to the cargo bay!"

Bailey and Benid exited through the service entrance, and were soon crouching out of sight in the cargo bay.

"How is the pick to be handled?" Benid asked.

"I still don't know. All I have are assurances that after Captain Nvk leaves the docking ring, a diversion will happen and the cargo he left will disappear."

"I am uncomfortable with the incomplete knowledge."

"So am I, but my contact is trustworthy. You haven't sensed anything?"

"No. All seems as it should." A soft beep sounded at Benid's belt. "There is Angthy's signal. Detective Landau should be rather too busy to pay attention to us for a while."

Bailey checked the time. "Jesse's counter measures should be in effect now."

As if on cue, the cargo bay door opened and Captain Nvk walked in. Bailey and Benid came out to meet him.

"Assurances, yours," asked the captain.

"Assurances, mine," replied Bailey.

"Location, this," he said, pointing to several containers marked with the seal of the freighter *Wnkllbn*.

"Understanding, mine," Bailey said.

"Profits, ours," the captain said.

"Profits, ours."

The captain saluted, and then headed for the airlock where his ship was docked. Bailey watched the time anxiously as he cycled through. After many long minutes, she could hear the *Wnkllbn* releasing the docking clamps, and felt the slight shudder as the freighter pushed off.

"Hopefully, we won't have long to wait."

Bailey had spoken too soon. The sound of a klaxon cut through the air, and she nearly jumped out of her skin. They managed to hide again just as the door opened. Commander Whitney and Detective Landau entered at a run, followed closely by several armed men and a woman with a hand-held sensing device.

"Over here!" she yelled over the klaxon, pointing to the *Wnklnb's* cargo. "Readings indicate a reaction in progress. Off the scale!"

Whitney strode over to the comm panel on the wall, shutting off the klaxon and opening the station-wide address in one smooth motion. "All hands, abandon ship. This is not a drill. I repeat: All hands abandon ship." He turned off the intercom and strode back over to the cargo pods.

"Lieutenant?"

The Lieutenant Kelly looked up briefly from her scanner. "Something in the pod walls seems to be interacting with the station's background radiation. From the power cells, I would guess."

"Can you stop it?"

"I'm, I'm not sure. I can attempt a local force field around the bay."

"Do it!"

Everyone began filing back out of the cargo bay so that it could be sealed. Bailey and Benid slipped back out through the vent.

"We must leave the station," Benid said as he steered her towards an escape pod.

She balked, as he knew she would.

"I can't!"

Benid held her firmly, but did not force her into the pod.

"We must. I will be with you."

## A Random Collection of Events

Shaking like a leaf, she entered the pod. Benid followed, closed the hatch and ejected the pod.

Bailey was paralyzed. All she could think about was those long days, so long ago. She and her sister alone in a pod smaller than this one. She was seventeen, and Jesse was barely two, when their cargo carrier was attacked by pirates. They had escaped, their parents had not. There had not been any news of the rest of the crew. Benid had been the first person she saw. He was serving on the patrol ship that found the pod. They became fast friends, and when the ship arrived at the station, he made the choice to resign his commission and stay with them.

\* \* \*

It was several days later and business was back to normal. Bailey noticed Jeremy in his usual corner, discreetly eying one of the customers.

"Allow me to buy the next round."

Jeremy looked across the table. "As you wish."

She signaled for another round.

"So, what ever happened? You know, with the permium ore?"

"You don't know?"

"How could I? I'm just a barkeep."

Jeremy grunted. "Just as we were about to leave the station, the commander received a response to our distress call. They had technology that helped us move the cargo containers out of the bay and into space. The cargo was destroyed by one of their torpedoes."

"You don't sound like you believe it."

"I don't. The explosion wasn't right for permium. Our rescuers didn't remain long enough for us to properly thank them. They seemed very anxious to leave."

"Very suspicious."

"Yes."

"Well, I see your drink is coming. I've got to get back to mingling. Happy trails!"

Bailey headed back to the bar, trying not to think too much about Jeremy.



## Bridge of Spies

"Good afternoon, Miss Baker."

Sandy Baker nearly jumped out of her shoes at the sound of his voice. She looked around and focused wild eyes on him for only a moment before regaining her composure and relaxing her clutch on the small pack she carried.

"Something wrong, Miss Baker?"

"No, Thomas, nothing is wrong," she said, silently cursing herself. "You just startled me, that's all."

Sandy walked the rest of the way into the suit room and set her pack on the table. Thomas was seated there, painstakingly shining the tools in his toolbox and laying them out in order on the table.

"I'm sorry, Miss Baker. You know I wouldn't do anything to upset you."

"Yes, Thomas, I know. Would you please help me with my suit?" she asked.

"I'd be glad to, Miss Baker!" Thomas stood up and shuffled over to the lockers that held the environmental suits. Opening the locker labeled SBaker, he carefully removed the suit and eyed it critically. Meanwhile, Sandy noted in the logbook her name, destination, time of departure and expected time of return.

"Looks to be in fine condition, Miss Baker," Thomas said as he began carrying it over to where Sandy stood waiting. He took no more than a few steps before he stumbled, catching himself on a nearby chair before he could fall to the floor.

Sandy did nothing, biting her tongue and resisting the urge to offer assistance. To do so would offend Thomas. More than anything else, he prided himself on his ability to function independently in his job.

"Fine condition, Miss Baker!" Thomas said, continuing across the floor to where Sandy stood, waiting impatiently.

## A Random Collection of Events

He helped her into the suit, and then expertly checked the suit from head to toe.

"Your suit checks out okay!"

"Thank you," she said, reaching out for her helmet.

"How are your instrument readings coming along, Miss Baker?" Thomas asked.

"They're coming along fine, Thomas. Would you hand me that pack, please?"

"Certainly, Miss Baker."

"Careful!" she cautioned, as Thomas nearly lost his grip on the handle.

"Sorry, Miss Baker," he apologized. "My fingers sometimes don't close all the way. I hope it's nothing important."

"It's just a circuit tester," she lied.

"Oh. You know what I sometimes wish, Miss Baker?"

"What's that, Thomas?"

"I sometimes wish I could go out there. It sure looks like a lot of fun."

Sandy hid the expression on her face from his eager gaze by placing the helmet over her head. Thomas helped turn it and lock it in place.

It was difficult to reconcile the man who stood before her now with the one she knew a year ago. In only the most superficial ways did Thomas still resemble his former self. The essence of what had made him Dr. Thomas Avery, the foremost expert in lunar geology, was gone forever.

"Someday, perhaps, Thomas," Sandy muttered over the suit radio. Turning clumsily in the bulky suit, she moved towards the air lock.

Once outside, she bounded earnestly across the surface. Her body automatically adjusted to the special gait she had learned as a child. Born and raised in the northeastern portion of the

United States, she discovered quickly that it was nearly impossible to walk efficiently in powdery snow the same way that you walked on bare ground. With each step forward, that foot would slide backwards as you tried to pull yourself along. Instead, Sandy would push off with one foot, allowing it to rotate as the snow beneath gave way. Leaning in the direction of the push, she would rest her weight on the other foot, using that leg as a support as her momentum carried her. Then push, rotate and lean back again. This process propelled her faster than a normal walk.

And it worked just as well in the powdery sand of the moon.

The exercise and the scenery helped keep her mind off of Thomas. Seeing him only served to bring back too many distressing feelings. Feelings she would rather keep buried.

In her mind's eye, she saw again the scorched backside of his suit where he had been hit, his oxygen cylinders nothing more than melted slag against his skin. In the few agonizing moments it took the rest of the team to reach him, he had already begun to suffer from exposure and lack of oxygen. A hasty, makeshift link supplied him with enough oxygen to survive as they raced across the surface back to the base.

It was a miracle that he was alive at all. Extensive damage to his spinal cord left him paralyzed for months. When he was finally able to walk again, it was more of a slow hobble across the floor. Most of his fine motor skills were lost.

Worst of all, his oxygen-starved brain had managed to salvage very little of his memories.

No one was supposed to be hurt! her guilt-racked conscience wailed. They told her that no one would be hurt.

Sandy stopped short as she reached a cluster of instruments set up near the foot of a small crater. With difficulty, she buried her thoughts and concentrated on the task at hand. Her

## A Random Collection of Events

official purpose out here was to monitor the equipment as it ran through a series of self-tests.

However, she had taken great care to write the diagnostics in such a way as to mask her absence for the duration of the program. That gave her about an hour to accomplish her other task. She quickly activated the diagnostics, then turned and headed towards a faint path that led over the crater wall.

It still amazed her that such an alien and hostile environment could bring back such memories of her childhood. Navigating through the moon dust and rocks, she could imagine that she was back on Earth trudging through new-fallen snow on her way to school. It was as if a giant plow had passed through, scattering chunks of dirty ice from the road and building crater walls out of the snow. At the time, she hated that walk to school each day, and despised her parents for not driving her. Now the memory was a pleasant reminder of simpler times.

Reaching the rim of the crater, she paused to catch her breath and peer into the hollow. The glare off the basin floor was blinding. The direct overhead sun rays beat down upon the fine particles of moon dust with a ferocious intensity. The atmosphere did little to ease the onslaught of energy, which bounced off the surface with seemingly no loss in strength.

It was the very fact of the intense solar radiation that protected her from discovery. While it was certainly possible that she would be seen by a visual scan of the area, it was highly unlikely. The filters required to cut out the radiation tended to limit visibility, particularly when the objects on the surface had an extremely low contrast.

A night-time rendezvous, on the other hand, would be quickly detected as unusually high thermal sources in unexpected places.

Resisting the urge to look up at the sun, Sandy carefully scanned the crater floor a second time. They're supposed to be here! she thought frantically to herself, seeing no sign of the ship. It's almost time!!

Relax. Calm down. They'll be here.

Taking a deep breath, she ran through her suit check-list. Oxygen level okay. Oxygen supply at 80%. Carbon dioxide a little high; but then, she had been climbing steadily for the past twenty minutes to get past the lip of the crater. Humidity also a bit high, but within normal. Internal suit temperature 27c. External temperature 102c. Suit integrity at 98%; she must have a minor leak or two somewhere, but nothing to worry about.

So, now what? There was nothing to do but wait.

She didn't have long to wait. A dust cloud kicked up about a quarter of the way around along the crater wall. Picking up the pack beside her, she began to plod through the dust towards the landing site.

The ship was actually a personal shuttle, designed to carry no more than two people in a pinch. The snub-nosed front end consisted mainly of a heavily tinted view port. The back end displayed the main thruster, capable of propelling the ship and its crew at speeds barely above 20 kph. In between was a small airlock on the port side.

She stopped two meters from the port side just as the airlock cycled open. The dim light from inside was no match for the sun, but she could see another figure seated at the control panel, clad in a similar type of suit as she. Once the lock was fully open, a second figure climbed out.

"It is imperative this disk is delivered to Dr. Leibermann without delay," a distorted voice sounded in her ears. The distortion was a result of a sound-scrambling device attached to the other's suit. Beyond one or two meters, the voices would be no more than static to anyone listening.

## A Random Collection of Events

Sandy reached for the small package the other was handing to her, and carefully placed it in a pocket of her suit.

"There are no further instructions at this time," the other said.

"Understood," she replied.

The other turned and re-entered the ship. She backed off as the airlock cycled shut, and watched from a safe distance as the tiny craft slid across the basin and just above the ground. Staying close to the surface, it soon disappeared over the rim of the crater.

As she made her way back, she pondered the other's last words. No instructions meant that some part of the operation was in danger of discovery. Someone was getting close, and it would be necessary to lay low for a while. But where was the weak link? Carefully, she retraced her actions of the past month or so, trying to find some clue. Any new people in her department? Any changes in attitude? There was nothing she could think of.

Her instruments still showed five minutes remaining for the diagnostics. She spent the time spot-checking several of the key tell-tales for any sign of fault. Once the program was complete, she pressed the transmit button. The full results would be dumped to her personal computer in her office, where she could analyze them more closely.

With a sigh, she reset the instruments for normal operation, then turned and began the long trudge back to the base. Where Thomas waited patiently for her return, and unknown others waited for a sign that would expose the spy in their midst.

\* \* \*

Mark Simmons watched as his pencil traced a graceful arc through the air, and then landed easily in his waiting palm. The trick was to avoid exerting too much force, which could cause the

pencil to rebound from the ceiling in an unexpected direction. Or, he might lose his precarious balance, reclined as he was in his chair with his feet perched on his desk. While either happenstance wouldn't hurt much physically in the low gravity of the Moon, it would certainly not do much for his credibility as commander of the largest base on the Moon.

Especially with his chief engineer standing in front of him.

As it was, the trick bought Mark time to think and, at the same time, made an impression on those who still had difficulty adjusting to the gravity.

Liz McAllister simply observed quietly. She had seen his trick hundreds of times during the six years she had been at this base. It didn't impress her the first time, and it certainly didn't now. As far as she was concerned, a base commander should show a little more restraint. His nonchalant attitude tended to annoy her.

"We'll have to delay the East Wing expansion," Mark decided, tapping the pencil in his hand. "At least until Friedrich can get the back ordered supplies in."

Liz's pulse jumped at the mention of the name, and consciously set her expression to cover her feelings.

"Very well," she said. "I can put those people to work on the re-pavement project in Central for now."

"Sounds good to me," Mark said, putting his feet down carefully and sitting forward, resting his elbows on the desk. "By the way, Liz. What's up with you and Friedrich? I hear you two broke up."

"I'd rather not discuss it."

"Well, I'm sorry to hear it. I always thought you made a great couple."

"Is that all?"

"Yes, yes," Mark said, waving his hand. "Don't let me keep you."

## A Random Collection of Events

Liz turned on her heel and left Mark's office. Walking with her eyes focused straight ahead, she went directly to her office and slammed the door behind her. Sitting in her chair, she turned it to stare out her window. It was the view of the lunar landscape that the window afforded which always caught her attention. Something about the empty desolation of the sandy surface against the pitch-black backdrop of space called to her, welcoming and comforting her forsaken soul.

Friedrich had understood that. Somehow, he knew that Liz needed that distant part of herself. It was her place to go when the frustrations of life caught up with her and she needed a rest. Friedrich accepted it, and gave Liz the distance she demanded. And for those times when she cast off the safety of her inner sanctum, Friedrich was there to support and nurture her frightened feelings.

Her stomach grumbled, reminding her that it was well past lunch.

\* \* \*

At the cafeteria counter, Liz just stared at the unappetizing choices on the menu.

"It's been far too long since I've been Earth-side for a decent meal," she thought to herself. Aloud she said: "I'll take the special."

She carried her tray to a secluded table, and began to eat with little enthusiasm. Mark was such an ass. Why did he have to bring up such a painful subject? There must be more to it than idle curiosity about her relationship with Friedrich. He must know something. It would be just like him to keep things close to his vest. In fact, she hadn't even seen Friedrich around since--

"--and I heard it was our own chief scientist, Dr. Leibermann!"

Liz's ears perked at the sound of Friedrich's name. The speaker was a young woman Liz didn't recognize. She was apparently exchanging gossip with her girlfriend.

"You don't say!" said the other girl.

"Yep! I guess he's been secretly passing information for months!" said the first girl. "Honestly, I don't know why--"

Liz stood abruptly and headed for the exit.

"Isn't that his girlfriend?" asked the second girl, glancing at Liz's back.

"She was. I heard he was spending a lot of time with that Baker girl."

\* \* \*

Liz stormed into Mark's office, leaned onto his desk and locked his eyes with her glare.

"Oh, uh, Liz!" he stammered. "What's up?"

"Why don't you tell me?" she demanded. "And none of your pencil tricks!" she added, grabbing the pencil from his hand and tossing it away.

Mark drummed his fingers, carefully avoiding her glare.

"Well, if you must know," he began. "Friedrich has been arrested by the AsiaDome commander, Takahashi Shiro. The charge is suspicious collaboration with EuroDome, with the intent of stealing government secrets."

"I don't believe it."

"Believe it or not--"

"Have you talked to Commander Takahashi about this?"

"We are in negotiations, along with the EuroDome commander Giovanna Russo, in order to clarify our position."

"And what is AmeriDome's position?"

"We are disclaiming any knowledge and remaining neutral."

## A Random Collection of Events

"Naturally," Liz said with a sneer.

"What do you expect me to do?"

"Ah! You are next to useless!"

Liz stormed out of Mark's office.

\* \* \*

In the solitude of her quarters, Liz stood staring out her window. The sound of her comm-signal startled her out of her reverie. She sat down at her desk and distractedly turned on her monitor. She was surprised to note that the communication was not only voice only, but marked secure. Adjusting her settings to secure her end, she accepted the call.

"Greetings, Elisa," a woman's voice announced. "Dr. Mitsu Hoshiko speaking."

"Hello, Hoshiko. How are you?"

"Ah, I am well. I have some, ah, information that may be of interest to you. This information is in regards to, ah, a mutual friend."

"Indeed?"

"Yes. This information is, ah, of a sensitive nature."

"Perhaps we could arrange a meeting," Liz suggested.

"Ah, yes. Meeting would be good. Are you familiar with this location?"

An encrypted line of text appeared on her monitor. Her eyes widened as she recognized the signature on the public key. It was Friedrich's. On a hunch, she applied a little-known decryption algorithm and was pleased when it worked. There was no doubt but that this message originated, somehow, from Friedrich.

"Yes," Liz replied. "I'm familiar with this location."

"Ah, good. Can you meet in two hour?"

"I'll be there."

The connection was closed without another word. Without a moment to lose, Liz grabbed a map from her desk and hastily transcribed the information from the decrypted message onto it. Grabbing a few additional items, she headed out the door. Her best bet would be the south air lock. If she remembered correctly, Thomas would still be on duty. She hated to use him like this, but she dare not take any chances.

"Good afternoon, Miss McAllister," Thomas said as she breezed in. "Heading outside?"

"Yes, Thomas. A, uh, surprise inspection. I'll need a rover to make my rounds."

"Miss Baker is a good worker."

"Hm? Oh, yes, she is a good worker. Would you help me with my suit?"

"You know what I sometimes wish, Miss McAllister?" Thomas asked as he helped her.

"What do you wish, Thomas?"

"I sometimes wish I could go out there. It sure looks like a lot of fun."

"Well, Thomas, how about we plan a trip together, soon?"

"Oh, that would be great!"

Liz smiled at the pleased look on his face.

"I'll be out a while, so don't wait for me."

"Okay, Miss McAllister."

After exiting the airlock in a rover, Liz paused to consult her map and get her bearings. Her gaze traveled over the landscape, picking out the handful of airlock buildings, trying to imagine what it was like when the buildings handled traffic in and out of domes, as opposed to subterranean cities. The domes were dismantled after humanity had finished its burrowing into the ground for a more secure environment. In fact, the only dome remaining was her destination: Glienicke Conference Dome. Named, as Friedrich so often told the story, after a bridge in his native city of Potsdam,

## A Random Collection of Events

Germany that had been used to exchange captured spies during the Cold War. When she had asked what spies had to do with sports and conferences, Friedrich had laughed gently.

"It is a philosophical relationship," he had said. "It is an exchange of ideas, instead of an exchange of spies. In either case, a guarded exchange of what each considers secret information."

The openness of the dome certainly facilitated the mood of the conferences. With all that "open" air, one was bound to feel less fettered. The fact that numerous sporting events were also held here, including the Olympics one year, added to the gaiety of the atmosphere.

Liz refocused and planned her trip. It should appear that she was actually touring the experiment sites. One of the sites came close enough to Glienicke Dome. With her route firmly in mind, she took off for her first "stop."

\* \* \*

Even though her destination was the dome, Liz stopped about a klick away, out of site of the main airlock. Her first task was to set up a disruptive field to cover her activities. Sorting through the items she had brought with her and using standard equipment on the rover, she was able to build a simple field that would absorb any energy signatures she and the rover were likely to generate. The net effect was that any sensor trained on this spot would not read anything abnormal in the area. It would take an actual visual scan for anyone to see her.

She got out of the rover and began searching the area carefully, consulting the notes on her map. After wandering in several circles, she finally found the hatch for which she had been searching. This long-forgotten hatch provided discreet access to the dome's underground access tunnels.

The hatch had to be operated manually and was used infrequently. As a result, Liz struggled with it before it finally opened for her, revealing a vertical shaft with a ladder mounted inside. She climbed down the ladder, pausing only long enough to close the hatch behind her. Not that that mattered much. The sections she would be traversing had been abandoned long ago, and as such had no atmosphere. She would have to walk several hundred meters before reaching the rendezvous point.

Liz turned her headlamp onto her map and consulted her notes once more. Along this corridor a few dozen meters was a turn-off that would take her where she wanted to go. She arrived at the rendezvous point in good time, and tapped a code into the airlock panel. After a few moments, the airlock began finally began to cycle. When the green light began to glow, she opened the door and stepped into the chamber. She was not surprised to find it empty. Whoever she was meeting would be waiting for her on the other side of the next door, and watching her very carefully. No doubt, if there were anything that aroused their suspicions her entrance to the inner sanctum would be denied.

She found she was holding her breath as the chamber filled with atmosphere. After what seemed like an eternity, the green light on the inner door lit up. She cautiously removed her helmet and took a tentative sniff. Satisfied, she removed her suit and hung it on the wall and opened the inner door. Standing just inside the anteroom was Sandy Baker.

"Hi, Dr. McAllister" she said nervously.

"Hello, Sandy."

"Please, have seat." She indicated a table off to one side.

Liz took a seat, and Sandy sat down across from her. "There is a lot to explain, but I have been instructed to get your consent first."

"My consent? I don't understand."

## A Random Collection of Events

"There is a group that is not happy with current administration." Sandy looked awkwardly at the table, not meeting her supervisor's gaze.

"No, they have not distinguished themselves."

"This group is seeking a change. Before I can bring you into to meet them, they require that you accept and respect their position and their anonymity."

"Change." Liz struggled with that. It should be such a simple choice. But she realized that it was more than just who was in charge. The signs were there all along. Friedrich was obviously involved with this "group" and their plans to put an end to the current regime. So her choice was not which side to back, it was whether or not she would back Friedrich. Where did her loyalties lie? Her ideals? Friedrich had often told her that she hid behind rules and regulations, afraid to make a choice. Which was, as he so often reminded her, a choice in itself.

"Alright," Liz finally said. "I understand, and I accept."

Sandy seemed to relax a little. "Okay. If you will follow me, please."

Sandy stood up and led her out of the anteroom. At the end of a long hall, she opened a door into a very large room filled with a lot of people Liz had never seen before. The room was set up in a similar manner as the one reserved for tribunal meetings. Rows and columns of chairs faced the front of the room. At the front, two tables with three chairs each, sitting side-by-side - one table for the chief engineers, and one for the chief scientists. All that was missing was the third, raised table behind the other two, also with three chairs, for the dome commanders.

Liz continued to the front of the room, leaving Sandy to find her own seat. She recognized a few of the people - fellow engineers from all three domes. Her subordinates averted their eyes when Liz walked by, as if ashamed at being "caught." Sitting in two

of the chairs at the left hand table was Aleksander Prazsky and Nyota Mvogo, chief engineers of EuroDome and AsiaDome. At the other table sat chief scientists Mitsu Hoshiko of AsiaDome and Joaquin Ruiz Saucedo of AmeriDome. It had been too much to hope to see Friedrich sitting with them.

Acknowledging in a brief nod that encompassed the four chiefs, Liz stopped in front of her friend Hoshiko.

"Greetings, Dr. Mitsu," she said, bowing her head.

Dr. Mitsu stood and returned the bow. "Greetings, Dr. McAllister," she said, then resumed her seat.

"I will explain," she began. "If you then wish to, ah, join us, you make take your seat." She indicated the empty chair next to her. Liz nodded, and Dr. Mitsu continued: "Those who are assembled here are, ah, not pleased with current political situation. We have been working towards change of ruling structure. We wish Moon to exist as, ah, entity independent of Earth. Dr. Liebermann's capture is one step in that direction. The coup will take place during his, ah, trial. Only way to get all commanders and chiefs in same room with, ah, our people."

It was a short and succinct explanation. Liz paused only long enough to be sure Dr. Mitsu had finished before promptly taking her seat.

\* \* \*

It hardly seemed a week had passed. Liz was again sitting at a table with her peers, looking out over a crowded room. Except this time, the three dome commanders were seated behind her and there were two more tables in front of her - one for the defense, and one for the prosecution. Friedrich was sitting, grim faced, at the defense table.

Giovanna Russo, commander of EuroDome, banged his gavel. He sat in the middle chair at the raised table, a chair that was

## A Random Collection of Events

taller and more ornate than the rest - an indication of his self-importance.

"The People vs. Dr. Friederich Liebermann," Dr. Russo announced. "Prosecution?"

"Berton Marshall for the prosecution stands ready, your honor."

"Defense?"

"Ernestine Sheffield for the defense stands ready, your honor."

"Dr. Liebermann, how do you plead?" Dr. Russo asked.

"On behalf of Dr. Liebermann," Ms. Sheffield replied, "we plead Not Guilty."

"Very well," Dr. Russo said in a bored voice. "Proceed."

Ms. Sheffield and Mr. Marshall scanned the room, receiving several slight nods from the crowd.

"Your honor," Mr. Marshall said, standing with Ms. Sheffield. At the same time, the five at the chiefs' table stood and turned to face the command table. Several people in the audience stood as well, moving to stand with the guards at the entrances to the room.

"Explain yourself, Mr. Marshall," Dr. Russo demanded.

"Your honor," Mr. Marshall continued. "There will be a change to these proceedings. We have evidence of extensive corruption on the part of the current administration. The people have decided on a change of administration."

"Guards!" Dr. Russo roared. All three commanders stood. The guards approached with guns drawn and seized them, cuffing their hands.

"Dr. Russo," Mr. Marshall said. "You, Dr. Simmons and Dr. Takahashi have been found guilty of violating the best interests of the people. You will be taken into custody and forthwith

removed from the station on the next available shuttle to Earth."

He addressed the guards: "Take them away."

The commanders were escorted from the room. Dr. Liebermann, who had taken his seat with his colleagues, nodded to the attorneys and then addressed the room.

"Ladies and gentlemen, Ms. Sheffield and Mr. Marshall are handing out the final version of the Declaration of Independence we have drafted. We'd like to get this ratified as soon as possible so that we can get our new government in place. Earth is not going to be happy with this turn of events, and we need to be prepared."

Dr. Mitsu stood and added: "Let us please take moment and toast - To a brand new day!"

"To a brand new day!" everyone cheered.



## Really, Do Not Listen to Them

Midway between the potato salad and the chocolate brownies sat the photos of the deceased. It was a jarring reminder of why we were gathered here today. I had been reaching for the potato salad, but after seeing the photos I decide on the brownies. I need the chocolate.

I still can't believe he's dead. Finally. After all my previous failed attempts, it was about time one of them worked. It's like that old coot was Superman or something.

Breathe! Don't get too excited, or people will notice.

Mmm, and dark chocolate, no less. I can feel myself calming down as the soft, chewy dessert melts in my mouth. I can get through this. Just a few hours more and all the people will be gone and I'll have the whole house to myself.

Well, except for them, of course. My real friends, who whisper all those devious plots in my ear. They will still be around to keep me company. I don't blame them for the failed attempts--how could they know what would or wouldn't work on real people?

We are quite the team, aren't we? My friends and I? They have all the brilliant ideas, and I have the means to carry them out. Grandpa was just the first. I'm getting excited just thinking about our next one. It will be brilliant, I'm sure of it! I can't wait.

Calm yourself now. Luckily, I can explain away my odd behavior as grief. It can often manifest itself in strange ways. Just hang on a little while longer.

What? What was that? Oh, now that's an idea! Which one? Yes, I see her. Okay.

Odd, It almost sounds like I hear those voices in my ear. Sounds like those cyborg thingies that flew in the big cube on that space show.

## A Random Collection of Events

Oh, well. I walk over to the punchbowl where Auntie is trying to fill her cup. I gallantly fill it for her, slipping in a bit of powder from the tube in my pocket. No one sees me. I gleefully hand the cup to her, put my hands in my pockets and wander away, trying not to whistle.

A few minutes later, I hear the commotion. Everyone gathers around poor old Auntie. Heart attack. It must have been. She's old and frail.

I wander back over to the brownies, giggling to myself. As I savor another one, I watch the crowd slowly disperse, empty looks on their faces.

I feel something brush against my arm. I turn, but don't see anything. I hear those voices again.

Him? Are you sure? Of course, you're sure, what am I thinking.

I sprinkle some powder on a brownie and walk over to step-brother. Here, have a brownie. You'll feel better. That? Oh, it's powdered sugar. Really good!

I wander over to the punch bowl. I hear a crash. When I turn around, I notice the brownies had been knocked over when he fell. That's really too bad. Those are some brownies.

People are beginning to look a little worried. The police are asking lots of questions.

I feel an odd breeze and see a shimmer out of the corner of my eye. The voices speak to me again.

One of them? Oh, that's bold! I like it.

Hmm, this one will be tricky. Wait, there's one rubbing at his nose. I sprinkle some powder into a tissue, then walk over and offer the tissue. He's very grateful.

I'm chatting with an officer over by the ambulance when I see the one with the tissue topple. This is good. I actually see the pain on his face before he collapses. It happens so fast!

**Really, Do Not Listen to Them**

Something sparkly catches my eye. It's very pretty. Like a one of those fireworks you see at Fourth of July. It shimmers and glides over to me, the voices droning in unison.

Hmm. I hadn't thought of that. Good idea.

I walk over to the punch bowl and sprinkle some powder into it, then stir it up with the ladle. More onto the fruits and vegetables. Too bad about those brownies. I sit in the hammock and watch. One after another after another. The punch. The pineapple. The celery and carrots. They start dropping like flies before one of the policemen realizes the food has been poisoned. Oh, well.

My friends are getting stronger and stronger. People are beginning to notice. A scintillating blob undulating across the lawn. The police are shooting it, but the bullets go right through. I can hear cars starting up and peeling out of the driveway. Some people are fainting, I can't tell them apart from the dead ones. It doesn't matter anyway. My friends hover over them and get stronger. The police give up and take off.

Pretty soon, I'm the only one left who's alive. My friends come over to talk to me. We have much to talk about. I'm getting excited just thinking about our next one.

What's that? Oh, no. Wait a minute! I'm your friend! I'm...



## The Spruce Tree

As I slowly drag another foot forward, I glance up to check on my progress. About another hundred feet ahead of me, at the top of the hill, I see a most fabulous spruce - the one that I had noticed from several miles back.

I stop and gaze at it - drinking in its beauty. This one must be the granddaddy of all spruce trees. The needles are an amazing color, a bright turquoise with a strong blue streak, shining through the partially melted snow as if they were crafted from glass. The snow itself rests heavily on the branches, like icing on a cake, until the bough can no longer support the weight, and falling gracefully to land with a splat!! on the ground below. Almost as if it had won a battle, the mighty spruce stands taller as the drooping bough springs back to attention.

From where I stand, I can make out the entire tree. It seems to reach right through the falling snow and into the clouds themselves. As I look upward, the wind-blown snowflakes have a dizzying effect on my tired mind, and soon ...

\* \* \*

My older sister spreads the paste onto her finger and mine, and then we press our fingers together. Of all my brothers and sisters, she is the only one older than I, and that by about four years. "Now, when this dries, we'll be stuck together permanently" she says. That seems OK to me, but then I'm only six years old, so what do I know? Except that I have to go to the bathroom all of a sudden. So I stand there squirming and holding myself with one hand while pressing the finger of the other against hers. Finally, I can't wait anymore and run off to the bathroom. "What a wimp. You're no fun," she calls after me.

## A Random Collection of Events

\* \* \*

... I open my eyes, and see nothing but white. It gradually sinks into my weary mind that I am lying down in the snow. I must have fallen while admiring the spruce. I search for my cold-numbed hands, and then gradually bring myself up on my knees, this being as far as I can coax my exhausted body into cooperating. After taking my bearings, I begin to crawl towards the spruce tree. It seems an eternity before the lower branches are within reach, and I eagerly reach up with one hand to grasp the nearest, as if to shake its hand in welcome. As I watch my fingers curl around the needles on the end of the branch, a pile of snow from the upper reaches of the tree lands square on my back, flattening me to the ground ...

\* \* \*

I am ten years old, and lying in my bed. All of my younger brothers and sisters are downstairs playing with the toys they had just bought, while mine sits uselessly beside me. It is a lap-counter, which attaches to a racetrack set designed for miniature cars. Of course, I don't have a racetrack, only a collection of miniature cars. My mom pointed this out to me while we were in the toy store, but I couldn't see past the fact that I would soon have a neat new way for counting. I was so proud of my choice! After I got home, and had tried to play with it, I realized that my mother was right. So I went upstairs, plopped into my bed, and started crying. When mother came upstairs to see what was wrong, I told her about the toy, and she said "I told you that in the store" and then left me alone to cry. I will never cry again.

\* \* \*

... I pull myself out of the pile of snow and crawl the last few feet to the trunk of the great spruce, then roll over into a sitting position, leaning back against the tree. I look up through the canopy, and see all the myriad branches sticking out in all directions from the trunk. The light is much dimmer here, and the color of the tree is hardly noticeable. I look out from under the tree to the valley below. It spreads out before me like a giant rippled white bed sheet, spotted with even more trees just like my spruce.

The day is dimming; night must be approaching, although the sun hasn't shone all day through the heavy blanket of clouds covering the sky. But that's okay; I'm looking forward to a long, final night. I hardly even feel the cold, now; it has seeped in so far as to disconnect my mind from my body. I feel more like I'm floating, finally free of all care and worry, no longer weighted down by expectation, obligation or gravity ...

\* \* \*

There had been so much rain; they let us out of school early. I flee my 6th grade classroom and head out down the dirt road that leads to my neighborhood, only to be stopped at the wash. It has rained to the point that the wash has flooded - I can't get across! What am I to do!? I wander aimlessly for a while, and then head in a little ways to a dry lakebed on one side of the road. I see other kids going that way, too, but I don't know where or why. I follow them, not knowing what else to do. There is a trail that follows along the wash towards the dam, which eventually opens onto a footbridge that crosses the wash. I never knew this was here; now I can get home! Eagerly, I cross the wash, feeling great joy. Oh! How my parents must of worried about me!! I enter the house, seeing my brothers and sisters already there, and "Where

## A Random Collection of Events

the hell have you been!?" demands my father. I feebly explain about not knowing how to get home. "Well, why didn't you know about the bridge? Your brothers and sisters knew about it!" bellowed my father. I'm sent to my room, where I ponder how I could be so stupid.

\* \* \*

... My senses clear very slowly, and I can hear voices in the background, and though I can't make out what they are saying I know that one of them is crying. Funny, I didn't think I had been followed, what are they doing way out here by my spruce? I am aware that my left hand is wet, and that the crying one is holding on to it. She clasps it tightly in her own hands, holding it close to her face. I can feel her sadness emanating from her, filling all of space and time with a palpable gloom.

I open my eyes cautiously, for the morning sun is shining brightly. From where I lay in the bed, the sunlight pours through the window and streams across the blankets; the golden rays are like a caress from heaven. Crawling out of bed, I slip into my bathrobe and pad bare-foot across the cold floor to the bathroom. Walking back to the bed, I pause to look out the window of the cabin, and my attention is taken by a giant spruce sitting majestically atop a nearby, snow-covered hill. That spruce looks vaguely familiar, like something out of a dream. I shrug my shoulders, and then snuggle back into bed, feeling the warmth of my love next to me. She draws my arms around her and holds them close, the whole of my existence wrapped up in this one joyful moment.

## The Secret

Gary hesitated, one foot resting lightly on the threshold of destiny, the other planted firmly in his past.

"What is this place?" he whimpered quietly, so that no one else could hear. His words fell flat, damped out by this ethereal place. There was no one else to hear the words.

His one hand was raised to his face, shielding his eyes from the pervasive light ahead; his other hand hanging back. He looked behind him longingly. Back down that long dark tunnel, where all he had ever known remained. His friends, his family, his life. The heartache that was living.

Ever so faintly, he could feel the pull of loving support from the light; he could feel the push of loving support from his family. Is this all they wanted of him now? Is there nothing else? What happened to the surety of the ground under his feet? The wind at his back? The sky above his head? Why did he have to leave the womb?

Gary was frightened. All his life he had known where he was and where he was going. Always firmly rooted in what he was doing. For the first time ever, he was faced with a true unknown. Ahead of him was speculation and uncertainty - no one knew the answer, and no one believed those who claimed to know.

All these thoughts scrambled his mind as he stood, poised on the brink between the lightness of his future ahead of him and the darkness of his past behind him. Is that the answer? Light or Dark? How could he be sure?

He raised his foot from the threshold to turn back, but felt the flow gently nudge him toward the light. Squinting into it, he could almost feel himself melting in. Well, not quite melting, but softly merging, softly calling, softly beckoning.

## A Random Collection of Events

"What is it, and what does it want?" He could feel a touch of panic rising in his stomach. The motion of the flow felt unsteady; he was like a boat on a slowly rolling ocean.

He took a deep breath, trying to calm himself. It was as if he breathed in the light. A sense of peace infused him. He lifted his back foot and slid it uncertainly over the threshold. That small intent was all that was needed. He felt his body expanding, melting, merging - becoming one with the light.

Slowly he effervesced, becoming one with The Light. His Thoughts expanded as his Spirit flew as his Body faded to memory. The pain was gone, even as he understood the need and the reason. He remembered! Everything!

His experiences flooded out, Dancing with the Divine. The Joy of Knowing overwhelmed him. He saw his life for what it was - a choice. He could choose again and again and again. Differently each time or the same. All that mattered was choosing and experiencing.

At last he knew the secret, he knew the truth. Life is Death and Death is Life. There is no difference. All is Love.

## The Stranger

I glance up for a brief moment, but in that moment I see the stranger.

His image strikes me hard; I know I will never get it out of my mind. Every detail is now stamped into my memory.

His eyes reflect a wild and guilty look. He knows he's been caught out. A bead of sweat trickles from the end of his nose. His mouth opens for a heavy breath. A thin tongue licks his upper lip, trying to catch the drop. His mouth closes again into a hard line, and his brow furrows in concentration.

Long black hair is matted to his head like a wet, stringy mop. His chest heaves from exertion, and glistens in the pale glow of moonlight through the window. Pectoral muscles flex beneath flushed skin. His arms appear to be reaching out in front of him, biceps straining against an unseen force.

What is it that brings this man to such a dark place? A place of inner secrets and forgotten lies, locked behind a door that should never have been opened. The dungeon of a tortured mind, dank and thick with vague memories that had taken up residence long ago. Caustic reminders of shame and humiliation caused by events whose details lay buried deeper still. Ghoulish things that had been driven into hiding by fear.

The stranger frightens me. I had not wanted to see him again. I look away and close my eyes, trying to block out the image.

I remove my hands from around her neck, and then blindly reach up and smash the mirror, hoping to destroy the stranger I had seen reflected there.

I look down at my beloved. How can I ever forgive her, now that she is dead by my own hand? How can I tell her that I no longer blame her for the rage that stirs my thoughts? How can I explain that her beauty ignites such uncontrollable passion and desire in my heart?

## A Random Collection of Events

The shattered glass adorns her skin, accenting the diamonds in her earrings and necklace. In each shard a different piece of the stranger peers out, mocking me. Taunting me with hints of unrevealed anguish. I brush them off her lifeless body and onto the floor. Climbing out of the bed to stand and mourn over her, my mind and my heart start to empty. The glass on the floor cuts into my bare feet, yet I feel nothing.

All is safely imprisoned once again. The new memories and the old are merged and tucked away, out of sight. The stranger always returns to the seclusion of his room once the deed is done.

I light a cigarette and inhale the toxic fumes. The nicotine rushes through my system. My brain clears, and a peaceful, easy feeling settles in. After a few more drags, I'm ready to go. I sort out my clothes from the tangled mess on the floor and get dressed. I stub out the butt in the ashtray on the nightstand and leave the apartment without another thought.

## The Grassy Knoll

"Mark!" Bang, bang bang! "Mark, are you in there?"

The door opened. "Jimmy! Come in, come in!"

"This better be important, Mark. It's two in the morning."

Jimmy sat down at the workbench and tried again to wipe the sleep out of his eyes. Mark, on the other hand, was wide-eyed and bushy-tailed. He'd gone back to work on a very large capsule of some sort. The open door of the capsule showed a compartment barely large enough for two men.

"Oh, it is, Jimmy! I've almost got it!"

"Got it? Oh, no, not that again."

Another knock at the door.

"That'll be Bruce. Get that for me, will you, Jimmy?"

"Sure."

Jimmy got up and opened the door. Bruce stormed in with a wild look in his eye.

"Where is that motherless s.o.b.? I'm gonna wring his bloody neck! Waking me up at this god-awful hour."

"Hey, Bruce!" Mark said, coming from behind the capsule. "Glad you both could make it!"

Bruce just growled and glared at him.

"Let me get some coffee," Jimmy said. Clearing a space on the workbench, he plugged in the coffee maker and filled it with grounds and water.

Mark continued to tinker with his contraption.

"So, you're not going to tell us you've got this thing working," Jimmy said.

"That is exactly what I'm going to tell you!" Mark adjusted a few dials, then grabbed two bracelets and turned to face Bruce and Jimmy.

"Hmph!" Bruce said.

## A Random Collection of Events

"Gentleman!" Mark said, gesturing grandly at his machine. "I present to you, the Time Teleporter!"

"You're sure it works?"

"Positive!" He handed the bracelets to the two men.

"Here! Look at this." Mark picked up a photo and handed it to them.

"I sent Mitzi and my camera through. Dozens of times. The camera had the timer set each time. That's one of the pictures it snapped. And, as you can see, my kitty-cat is perfectly fine."

Jimmy glanced back and forth between the photo and the cat, while Bruce glowered over his cup of coffee.

"I'm not sure what I'm looking at," he said, handing the photo to Bruce.

"That is the corner stone of a building, and you can see the building is not finished. Look at the year on the corner stone. Look at the car on the left."

"1925," Bruce mumbled. "Looks like a roadster."

"Precisely! Proof! This is a picture from 1925!"

Bruce dropped his cup. "It works?"

All three men stared at each other, then began hugging and clapping each other on the back. Bruce and Jimmy were now wide-awake from the adrenalin rush.

"It works!" Bruce yelled.

"Um, mostly."

"What do you mean, 'mostly'?" Jimmy asked.

"I have no control over where or when."

"So? What are we waiting for? Let's go!"

"Slow down, Bruce."

"Jimmy, why do you always have to be the voice of caution?"

"I've saved our necks more times than I can count. How about it, Mark? How sure are you of this thing?"

"Very sure. Now, these bracelets serve as a homing beacon so that I can bring you back."

Jimmy looked back at Mitzi again. "How many times, did you say?"

"Oh, forty or fifty times." Mark reached out and scratched Mitzi under the chin. She purred loudly.

"Let me see the other pictures."

"Right over here."

Mark watched intently as Jimmy studied the photos. Bruce, meanwhile, had wandered over to the capsule.

"OK," Jimmy said after a while. "I believe you've got it this time. When do we go?"

"When ever you're ready."

"I'm ready now!" Bruce said eagerly, putting his bracelet on.

"Whoa, boy! How do these bracelets work, Mark?"

"See that button? Press that when you're ready to return."

"How did you get Mitzi to press the button?"

"Hah! Oh, I have a constant fix on its signal. I can recall you whenever I want."

"OK, then. Let's do it."

Jimmy grabbed the camera, and then squeezed into the capsule with Bruce. Mark closed the door, turned a few dials, threw a switch and...

\* \* \*

Jimmy shielded his eyes from the sunshine. They were standing in a grassy area; it looked like one of those small parks that are often found down town.

Bruce nudged Jimmy. "Looks like a parade or something."

Jimmy glanced in the direction Bruce was looking.

## A Random Collection of Events

"My God!" Jimmy said, his jaw dropping. "That's Kennedy!"

"You mean President Kennedy?"

"Yes! That's his motorcade."

"We must be in Dallas in 1963! Any minute now he's going to be shot!"

"Sst! Keep your voice down, you're attracting attention." Jimmy set the camera to record a movie, and began capturing the scene.

Three shots rang out. Kennedy lurched forward, and the motorcade screeched to a halt.

"Holy Jesus!" Bruce whispered.

"I've got it!"

"Uh, oh!" Bruce pointed. People were starting to run directly for them.

"Let's get out of here!" Jimmy put the camera in his pocket and reached for his bracelet. Just as his finger touched the button, he saw Bruce disappear in a puff of smoke. The air replacing the vacated space sounded almost like a gunshot. A moment later, Jimmy was gone, too.

\* \* \*

Mark opened the door to the capsule, and the two men tumbled out.

"So? Tell me!"

"You are not going to believe it," Bruce said.

Jimmy handed the camera to Mark. His eyes got wide as he watched the scene play out.

"Well," said Jimmy, "I think we've solved the Grassy Knoll Mystery."

# Artificial Foods, Inc.

## Part I: Artificial Foods, Inc.

"Good morning, Artificial Foods."

"Yes, sir. Our multi-packs do come in a variety assortment."

"You would have your choice of either the 10- or 30-pack assortment. The 10-pack is geared specifically to one particular meal, such as breakfast, lunch, or dinner. The 30-pack contains an assortment for each of the three meals."

"Yes, sir. All cuisines are available, and are authentic replicas based on the finest recipes world-wide."

"We ship the same day the order is received, via overnight delivery."

"No, sir. There is no extra charge for that service."

"I can take your order right over the phone."

"Thank you very much for your order, sir. And thank you for calling Artificial Foods."

\* \* \*

"Good morning, Artificial Foods."

"Yes, ma'am. All of our products are made from 100% recyclable products."

"Yes, ma'am, we do recycle the product once it's been used."

"No, ma'am. There is no extra charge for the return of the used product."

"You're welcome. And thank you for calling Artificial Foods."

\* \* \*

## A Random Collection of Events

"Ah, Gertrude! You do such a wonderful job on the telephone."

"Thank you for those kind words, Mr. Belding."

"Not at all! Not at all! Now, I must leave the office for a while. I have a very important meeting with Mecha-Mate. I'll be back after lunch."

"All will be well while you're gone."

"I'm sure it will be, Gertrude. You are most a capable secretary."

"Thank you, Mr. Belding. Excuse me... Good morning, Artificial Foods."

\* \* \*

Frank Belding scurried out of the office, briefcase in hand. He was feeling extremely anxious about this meeting. Success would mean a very large boost for business!

After hailing a cab and advising the driver of his destination, Frank opened his briefcase to review his notes one last time. Mentally, he checked off the important points and rehearsed his presentation. When the cab arrived, he put away his notes, paid the driver, and hurried into the building.

Mecha-mate was the world's largest supplier of mechanized servants. So Frank was not surprised to be greeted at the door by a mechanical door-bot, or to be directed to the CEO's office by a reception-bot. Even the elevator was operated by robot.

One thing, however, still remained true: no robot could replace a secretary. There was simply too much involved in the position for such a limited device to cope with. The robots just could not manage the constant input and decision-making required

for the ever-changing, day-to-day demands. Outside of the CEO's office sat a very efficient looking secretary.

"Frank Belding to see George Markson," he announced.

"Yes, Mr. Belding," the secretary said. "Mr. Markson is expecting you. Go right on in."

"Thank you."

Frank entered the inner sanctum. George stood up from behind his desk to come around and greet him.

"Frank, welcome! Thank you for coming! Have a seat. May I offer you a drink?"

"Ah, yes, a glass of water please."

"As you say." George poured a glass of water and handed it to Frank, then fixed himself a cup of tea and sat back down at his desk.

Frank took a careful sip of his water and then set it on the desk. Pulling out a thick, neatly tabbed binder, he said:

"I have carefully researched your proposition. I believe a joint advertising effort between our two companies would be very profitable."

"Yes, yes, I thought you'd think so," George said with a genial smile. He accepted the proffered binder and set it on his desk. "Imagine it!" He raised his hands, palms out, and gazed off into the future. My mechanical men eating your artificial food! Commercials! Dinner parties! TV shows!"

"Yes, quite profitable."

"So, we have a deal, then?" George asked, standing up from his seat.

Frank stood and extended his hand. George accepted it and shook firmly, sealing the deal.

## Part II: Mech-Mate Corp.

The last time we saw George Markson of Mech-Mate Corp, he had just struck a deal with Frank Belding of Artificial Foods, Inc.

"Excellent!" George said, rubbing his hands together.

"Everything is going according to plan."

"What plan is that, Mr. Markson?" his secretary asked.

"Why, Garret, my plan to rule the world!"

Garret slapped his forehead. "Yes, of course! I keep forgetting."

"Never mind that now. Get me the production schedule. So much to do!"

Garret returned with a sheaf of paper.

"Ah, let me see, let me see." George's eyes scanned the pages.

"Perfect!" he exclaimed. "The servant line has geared up quite nicely. Garret, have Dr. Addlestein report to my office, at once!"

"Yes, sir!"

\* \* \*

Dr. Addlestein shuffled into George's office and sat down.

"You wish to see me, sir?"

"Yes, yes, Doctor! Sit down, please."

"I am seated, sir."

George looked up from his production schedule.

"Ah, yes. So you are. Tell me, doctor, how is the administrative line coming along?"

"Oh, not so well, sir."

"And why not?" George stood up and leaned over his desk, looking at the doctor with an evil eye.

Dr. Addlestein withered under the gaze.

"Uh, oh, well--"

"Come, come! What is the problem?"

"The complexity--"

"Ah, of course! My apologies." George sat down and smiled amiably, allowing the evil to leave his eye.

"Yes, sir. The demands on the bots are greater."

"Are you making any progress? Do you see an end in sight?"

"Oh, yes, sir! It's just a matter of time."

"Most excellent! Very well, then, off you go!"

Dr. Addlestein left the office. George returned to studying his production schedule.

After a number of minutes, he called: "Garret!"

Garret rushed into his office.

"You called?"

"Of course I did! Do we have the latest supply schedule from Artificial Foods?"

"No, we don't."

"Drats! Please, see to it right away."

"Right away, sir." Garret left the office.

George opened a desk drawer and pulled out a bag lunch.

"Well, I may as well eat. Can't take over the world on an empty stomach."

### **Part III: Artificial Foods vs. Mecha-Mate**

The last time we saw Frank Belding of Artificial Foods, Inc, he had just struck a deal with George Markson of Mech-Mate Corp.

"Mr. Belding, the first shipment is ready to go."

## A Random Collection of Events

"Excellent, Gertrude. Everything is going according to plan."

"Yes, sir!"

"We had best hurry. We haven't much time. Gertrude, forward the phones to our answering service and grab your bag."

"Oh, yes, sir!"

Later, back at the Mecha-Mate lab...

George Markson was inspecting rows and columns of servant bots.

"Wonderful, wonderful! I must say, Doctor, these bots look marvelous."

"Thank, you sir."

"Ah, here comes the first shipment from Artificial Foods. Little does Mr. Belding know, but the unique combination of ingredients in his product will combine with the negatronic brain waves of our bots to create mesmerizing mind rays that will allow me to control all the people in the world. Ah ha ha ha hah!"

"Not so fast!" said one of the Mecha-Mate bots, removing its disguise. "Your evil plan is foiled. I know all about your plot to take over the world."

"Frank Belding!" exclaimed George. "How ever did you--"

"Simple." Frank gestured to his left. Two more Mecha-Mate bots removed their disguises.

"Garrett! And Garrett?"

"No, George. Garrett and Gertrude. They are identical twins. Garrett was planted here as a spy."

"Aha! I thought that absent-mindedness of his might be a ruse. But," George snapped his fingers. "You three are no match for my two goons."

Two big gorilla-like men grabbed Garrett and Gertrude, holding the twins arms behind their backs.

"Not so fast!" said one of the Mecha-Mate bots, removing its disguise. "Your two goons are no match for the police."

Six more Mecha-Mate bots removed their disguises, revealing six burly police officers. The officers immediately handcuffed the goons.

"I'm so confused!" said Dr. Addlestein, looking back and forth between our heroes and the rest of the Mecha-Mates.

"Drats!"

"Yes, George, you will spend the rest of your life behind bars while I run both Artificial Foods and Mecha-Mate for the good of all mankind."



## The Greatest Stories Ever Collected

John approached the classroom with some trepidation. It had been a very long time since he'd taken a class.

Three men were standing by the door holding an intense conversation. One of them turned and caught his eye. John nodded back and walked up to the man.

"Is this the storytelling class?" John asked.

"Yes, it is. My name's Luke." The man extended his hand. "These are my friends Mark and Matthew."

"I'm John." They shook hands all around. "Guess I'll go in and find a seat."

"Good luck with the class," Luke said, clapping John on the back.

John entered the classroom, looked around, and selected an empty seat in the back row. Twiddling with his quill, he watched as about a dozen students, including the three men he had just met, trickled in and sat down.

At the front of the room, a man sat at a desk studying a book. John was surprised--he had not seen many books in his lifetime. Good scribes were hard to find, and the price of ink and papyrus was beyond the means of most people. He had to beg, borrow and steal to get enough to buy the materials he needed for this writing class.

Eventually, the man at the desk stood up and addressed the class:

"Welcome to Storytelling for Beginners. You will learn the art of storytelling by writing your own stories and comparing them with your classmates. The subject this semester: Write a story about the life of a man who is preaching a new religion. The story should be in first person, as if you were a disciple of this man. At the end of the semester, we'll bind all of the stories together into a book, which will stand as a testament to your new skills."

## A Random Collection of Events

## Dream World

The yellow cab stops in front of the red-canopied entrance to the Tavern on the Green restaurant. The evening is young, so the spectacular display of lights is hardly noticeable. A very light rain fills the air.

Sam Carter steps out of the cab and gallantly assists his wife Karen onto the sidewalk. Sam is dark-skinned, medium height and solid, but with a slouch that makes him look much shorter and exaggerates his growing paunch. His slouch and wide, easy smile reinforce his demeanor as a go-with-the-flow kind of guy, even though his eyes have the look of a man who's expecting the other shoe to drop any moment. Karen is a few shades darker, short and "pleasingly plump." She, too, has an easy smile that matches Sam's, and her brisk and efficient manner hides the empty and exhausted look in her eyes.

Karen raises her arm to shield her face from the light rain.

Sam glances playfully at Karen. "Are you melting yet?"

"Not yet, Romeo! Agh!! I hate the rain!"

They reach the door of the restaurant, where Sam bows as he holds it open for Karen.

"After you, my beloved monster."

"Thank you, good Sir Knight."

The maître d' looks up as they approach the station.

"Do you have a reservation?"

"Yes," Sam says. "The name is Carter."

The maître d' looks down briefly to consult his reservation list.

"Ah, yes! Mr. and Mrs. Carter. I am pleased you could join us this evening. This way please."

He picks up two menus and leads Sam and Karen to a very romantic table in the Crystal Room with a vase of daffodils in the

## A Random Collection of Events

center. The table is placed next to a window overlooking the garden in Central Park.

“Your waiter will be with you shortly. Please, enjoy yourselves!”

“Thank you,” Sam says.

The *maître d'* smiles, bowing slightly, and walks away.

Karen looks around the room, in awe at the sparkling chandeliers.

“Wow! I can see why they call this the Crystal Room. How did you manage such a magnificent view?”

“Well, you know how it works. A thinly veiled threat of hacking into their computer—”

Karen laughs, and then looks at with mild look of concern.

“Are you sure we can afford this?”

Sam frowns. “We have been planning very carefully for months. Can we just not think about money for the evening and have a good time?”

“I’m sorry. Yes.”

Karen looks around the room again, admiring the decor.

“This is really nice.”

The waiter approaches their table, smiling grandly, and presents them with a bottle of wine.

“Good evening, Mr. And Mrs. Carter. A bottle of our best chardonnay, compliments of the house.”

Karen looks surprised.

“Thank you,” Sam says.

The waiter nods and walks away from table. Karen looks after him with a quizzical look.

“How— What—”

Sam reaches across the table to hold Karen's hands.

"I wanted this night to be special. The owner remembers me from when I worked on their computer system a few years back. He assured me of a spectacular evening."

"It hardly seems like it's been ten years!"

"A wonderful ten years."

Karen feigns boredom. "Yeah, I guess it has—"

"You guess?"

"Well, you've managed to keep me entertained."

"I'm glad I'm good for something—"

"Ooo, keep up the sweet talk, Romeo, I'm starting to melt!"

"Now would not be a good time. I don't think the wait staff would be happy about cleaning up the puddle."

The waiter arrives and glances expectantly at them.

"Are you ready to order?" he asks.

Karen suddenly remembers the menu. She picks it up and begins to scrutinize it.

"I think I need a few more minutes," she says.

"Certainly, madam." The waiter walks away from table.

"Hmm, let's see, what looks good?" Karen muses.

"I think I'm going to go with the lettuce wedge and the prime rib."

"So predictable."

"And you don't find that entertaining?"

"Not really. Can't you re-program yourself?"

"Well, you know we've been working on that. We believe it's possible to connect a computer to the brain, and re-program the neural connections."

A look of mock belief crosses Karen's face.

"Really! How fascinating. Hmm, too many choices."

The waiter approaches table again.

"Are you ready to order?" he asks.

"Go ahead and order. I'll decide by the time it's my turn."

## A Random Collection of Events

“I'll start with the Iceberg Lettuce Wedge, then I'll have the Prime Rib Au Jus, medium well.”

“Very good, sir. Madam?”

“I think I'll have the Tomato Basil Soup. Then, oh, I guess the Salmon Pave.”

“Very good.” The waiter bows and walks away from table.

“Predictable,” Sam mutters.

“I am not!!”

“I thought you were in the mood for crab cakes?”

“I was, but the salmon sounds so good, and I just love artichokes and mushrooms.”

“As I said, predictable. I knew you would change your mind.”

Sam raises his glass. “A toast...”

“A toast,” Karen repeats, raising her glass.

“To the best ten years of my life. I could not have asked for a better friend or partner in life.”

“To the best ten years of my life. You are the love of my life.”

Karen pulls out a small gift wrapped in pastel blue.

“For me?”

“No, for the waiter.”

Sam opens the gift. It is a cast aluminum paperweight sun and moon dial.

“Very nice,” Sam says, examining it intently. “Not very... pliable.”

“Very funny. It is the symbolism that counts.”

Sam pulls out a small gift, also wrapped in pastel blue.

“Two minds...” Sam says.

“...one thought.”

“Scary,” they both say together.

Karen opens the gift. It is a set of antique-style tin photo frames.

“Oh!! These are beautiful! Where did you find them?”

“A little shop over by the Seaport.”

“Wow. Thank you!”

“And that's not all.”

“I knew you had something up your sleeve! I can see it in your face.”

“Well, not quite up my sleeve.” Sam pulls an envelope out of his suit pocket and hands it to Karen.

“Oh my god! Tickets to the Miles Davis Tribute!!!”

“Yep. The show starts at 8. We'll have plenty of time for a pleasant stroll over to Lincoln Center after dinner.”

“I can't believe this! I wish we could have seen him in concert.”

Karen looks worried. Sam reaches a consoling hand to Karen.

“It's okay, honey. I've planned it all out.”

“I'm sorry. My mind just keeps going back to money.”

“Well, Monday we'll be testing that new neural re-programmer. Care to be the first guinea pig?”

“I'll pass, thank you very much.”

Sam and Karen sit in silence for a moment. Sam is absentmindedly organizing things on the table.

“Well, if it's any consolation, I think about money lot, too. If I'd just been smarter about our investments...”

“We didn't know the dot-com industry would crash. At least we're a little better prepared this time around with this banking crisis.”

The waiter arrives with a tray carrying the first course.

“Tomato Basil Soup, madam.”

“Thank you.”

“Iceberg Lettuce Wedge, sir.”

“Thank you.”

The waiter walks away from the table. Sam and Karen eat in silence, until Karen looks at Sam with an air of feigned innocence.

“What is that on your lettuce wedge, my dear?”

“Why, it's... they look like... bugs!”

They laugh together at the old joke.

“But, they aren't computer bugs?”

“No, no, you see, a computer bug...” Sam can't finish his line as they break out into hysterical laughter.

“Man, I'll never forget that!” Sam says, catching his breath.

“Well, how I was to know you were talking about computer bugs? I am a nurse, and we were in a hospital!”

“That, my dear, is what you get for eavesdropping in on other people's conversations.”

“I wasn't eavesdropping! Besides, it got me you. And here we are, ten years later –”

“– laughing about bugs.”

“Even just laughing together. How many other couples do you know that still laugh together like this?”

“Um, fourteen?”

“Stop!! It's good to laugh with you again like this. I miss it.”

Sam's manner becomes a bit subdued. Karen tries to change his mood by changing the subject.

“So, how's the new project going?”

“Slow. It amazes me how people can be so resistant to something that will make their job easier.”

“People don't like to change.”

“Still –”

“Sam, you do what you do because you sincerely want to help people. Not everyone wants to be helped.”

"I know. It's just so frustrating. I thought everything was fine, then I find out they're not even using the new system!"

"They still use the old system?"

"Yeh!!"

"That sounds crazy."

"It is crazy! The old system takes ten times longer!"

"But the old system is a habit to them. Habits are hard to break. Your boss is still happy with your work, isn't he?"

"Yes."

"So, focus on that."

"Hey, I thought you were supposed to be the emotional one and me the fixer."

"You know I like to mix it up."

"I know. Keeps me on my toes. They're getting tired!"

"Your toes?" An impish look crosses Karen's face. "How about I rub them for you?"

Karen reaches under the table. Sam bumps his knee.

"Hey!! Stop! You know I'm ticklish!"

The waiter arrives with a tray carrying the second course. Sam and Karen look as if they were two kids caught misbehaving. A slight look of amusement crosses the waiter's face.

"The Salmon Pave, madam."

"Thank you!"

"The Prime Rib Au Jus, sir."

"Thanks."

"Will there be anything else, sir?"

"Not at the moment."

"Mmm!! This smells good!" Karen digs in to her anniversary dinner with gusto. "Speaking of toes, have you given any more thought to dance lessons?"

"Ah—"

"Jill takes lessons at a church across the street from the hospital. She loves it!"

## A Random Collection of Events

“How much for someone with two left feet?”

Karen smiles weakly at the feeble joke. She drops the subject, and they laugh and chat about other things for the rest of the meal.

After dinner, Sam and Karen are holding hands as they walk to Lincoln Center.

“It doesn’t look like it’s going rain,” Karen says, peering into the night sky.”

“No, it’s holding off. It’s actually rather nice out.”

“What?”

“Yeah, there’s something about a cloudy sky, the smell of rain, lightening in the air. It’s invigorating!”

“You are nuts.”

Sam attempts to look suave and debonair. “It’s part of the old Sammy charm.”

“Hmp.”

“Admit it, you love that about me.”

“I don’t have to admit anything!”

“It will go a lot easier on you if you just admit it!”

“I won’t! You can’t make me!”

“Oh, we’ll see about that!”

Sam chases Karen a bit and catches her. They continue walking arm in arm. They reach an intersection and stop for the light. A car also stopped for the light has its window down and there is a dance song playing loudly through it.

“Hey! Remember when we used to shake our booty to this song?”

Karen starts dancing suggestively around Sam.

“Mmm, it sounds vaguely familiar.”

“Why don’t we go dancing anymore?”

“Um, that would be my two left feet. Your booty always moved enough for the two of us.”

The light turns green, and they start across the intersection.

“What about lessons?”

“Lessons?”

“Yeah! Jill has a friend who’s going to some kind of dance studio. I hear it’s a lot of fun and great exercise!”

“Well, I’ll take a look at our budget. Maybe we can squeeze in a lesson or two.”

“That would be wonderful.” Karen’s sarcasm goes right over his head. “Hey, I think I see Lincoln Center!”

“Why, so it is!” Sam checks his watch. “We made good time.”

In their bedroom after the concert, Sam and Karen are getting ready for bed. Sam closes the window and draws the shade to shut out the sounds of the street and the glare of the street lights.

“I had a wonderful time!” Karen exclaims.

“Yeah, me too. That was the best tribute to Davis I’ve ever seen.”

“Let’s do that again in another ten years.” Karen sits down heavily on the bed.

“Are you okay?”

“It’s nothing, I’m fine. Just feeling tired. It’s been quite an evening.”

Sam does not look convinced.

“Now, don’t give me that look,” Karen says.

“You haven’t been sleeping well for the past few weeks. What’s up?”

“Nothing, really. I guess I could use some time off.”

## A Random Collection of Events

“Been a while since you've had a vacation.”

“Alright, alright.”

“Okay. Good night.”

They kiss good night and lay down with their backs to each other.

\* \* \*

*Karen stirs and cautiously opens one eye. The sun is shining, and the breeze carries in the chirp-chirp of birds in conversation. From where she lays in her bed, she can just barely see the tops of the trees in the park across the street. Jumping out of bed, she showers, dresses, and grabs a gym bag and a pair of dance shoes. Just as she's heading for the door, the phone rings.*

“Hello, Mom!”

“Karen, dear, I wish you wouldn't do that,” Emily Hamilton says.

“Sorry! I just can't resist.”

“Richard and I were wondering if you're free for dinner this evening.”

“Sure!”

“Oh, good. I thought you might be going out with your girlfriends.”

“We're meeting for lunch instead. They both have other plans tonight. So, what's the dress code?”

“Wear something nice. Your father is entertaining some of his associates.”

“This better not be another one of those thinly disguised blind dates!”

“Oh, I wouldn't do that!”

“Of course not. Gotta run, mom. I'm on my way to the gym.” Karen hangs up and runs out the door.

*After lunch, Karen breezes past the reception desk at Stepping Out Studios, sparing the clock a brief glance. It's only about a minute after, Mark shouldn't be too bothered. Passing through the Grand Ballroom, she enters Studio 2 and sits down in a chair and begins to change into her dance shoes.*

Mark Lansing is standing by the sound system, sorting through CD's, and glances in her direction. Mark is a lithe man with an intense look and erect posture. He moves fluidly, as if every movement is choreographed and intentional.

*"Sorry I'm late. You know me and my sense of timing."*

Mark smiles at the old joke. *"Oh, yes, I know. I'd like to work a little more on your Tango. There are a few points I'm still concerned about."*

*"Okay, if you promise me some Cha Cha after!"*

*"I promise."*

*They meet in the center of the dance floor and begin to warm up to some basic Tango steps.*

*"Hey, isn't this the week Stefan is out of town?"*

*"Yes. It is the first time we have ever been apart."*

*"How long have you two been together?"*

*"Ten years, yesterday."*

*"Wow, he was gone for your anniversary!"*

*"Yes. We had to cancel our plans. Are you ready?"*

*"Ready as I'll ever be!"*

*They stop dancing, and Mark says: "One of the keys to Tango is to keep close - we must move as one. If we are too far apart, we turn slower and we lose our timing. Crouch down. Now, put your right leg between mine, our thighs should be in contact. Like this."*

*Mark holds Karen in the proper position.*

*"So, when we do the right turning promenade, I can easily get around you on the quick-quick. Ready?"*

*Karen nods. Mark and Karen practice the step in slow motion.*

*Karen stumbles a bit.*

*"It's not easy doing it so slow."*

*"No, it is not. We will try it again a little faster."*

*Mark and Karen practice the step again. Mark stops and holds her in place at the end of the step.*

*"Now, notice how far apart we are? You are not turning with me; you lost your frame on the second quick. Keep your thigh glued to mine. And*

## A Random Collection of Events

*the energy of the turn must come from your upper body, not your leg. Try it again."*

*Mark and Karen try the step again.*

*"Better."*

*They continue practicing the step for about fifteen minutes, incorporating it into various patterns.*

*"Man, that's hard work!"*

*"We'll take a short break."*

*Karen walks over to the water fountain and gets a drink. When she's finishes, she sashays' seductively back onto the dance floor.*

*"Okay, how about some Cha-Cha?"*

*A faint smile plays on Mark's lips.*

*"I think you have earned it."*

*"You know the song I want!"*

*"Naturally. I fail to see what you like about that song."*

*"It's got a nice, strong beat. And the lyrics are kind of nasty, you know?"*

*"Yes, I know. I do not find that appealing. For me, a Viennese Waltz puts me in the mood every time."*

*"Not me. I want something that makes me feel sexy. A really good Latin beat does it for me, too. Give me Marc or Enrique any day!"*

*"At least you have good taste in men. Which doesn't explain why this one is your favorite."*

*Mark starts the music, and he and Karen take up position in the middle of the floor.*

*"She's a strong, confident, sexy woman! Like me!"*

*"Oh come and dance with me, my baby,*

*Let's dance, till we go crazy*

*The night is young and so are we*

*Let's make love and dance the night away."*

Mark and Karen move into the dance. As they dance, a small crowd gathers at the studio door. They “ooh” and “ah” as the couple moves around the dance floor. This is clearly Karen's favorite dance – her face is beaming, and her moves are sharp, crisp, and sexy. As the music ends, Mark whips Karen around to face the crowd, and they both bow deeply. The crowd applauds resoundingly. Karen smiles grandly.

“Thank, you! Thank you.”

Karen looks at the clock and notices the time. It is after 2:00 PM.

“Oh, look at the time!”

“I think we have done enough for today.”

“This is more of a workout than my workout this morning.”

Karen wipes her face with a towel, and sits down and changes back into her street shoes.

Your hard work is paying off. Your style and technique are improving.

“Thanks, Mark!”

“Have you thought any more about performing in the showcase?”

A gleeful look crosses Karen's face. “You know, I think I'm going to do it!”

“That is wonderful. I will put together a few routines, and we can start practicing on Monday.”

“I'm really nervous about it.”

“You will do well. You enjoy dancing, and that makes all the difference.”

“You keep telling me that!”

“It is true. You would be surprised at how much people respond to the emotions of the dancer rather than the skill. I've told you about Jerry—”

“Oh, yes! The guy with two left feet who danced like Frankenstein.”

“Yes. He got a standing ovation at his first competition because the joy on his face filled the room.”

“If you say so. That won't stop me from being nervous.”

“Naturally.”

## A Random Collection of Events

*"Oh! I have to run. I'm meeting my parents for dinner. See you on Monday!"*

\* \* \*

Sam stirs and cautiously opens one eye. The sun is shining, and the breeze carries in the chirp-chirp of birds in conversation. He rolls out of bed and puts on his robe. Karen opens her eyes and looks blankly at him.

"Good morning, sunshine," he says.

"Um, good morning." She rubs her head as she slowly sits up. "Oh, I feel like I haven't slept at all."

"Are you okay? You don't look too good."

"Yeah, I'll be okay. I'm just going to lay here for a bit."

Sam looks worried. "You've been awfully tired lately. Is it that time of the month? Are you taking your iron pills?"

"No, I just didn't sleep well, is all. I'm sure it will pass."

"Okay. I'm getting some breakfast." Sam hesitates at the bedroom door. "I get you anything?"

"No, I'm good."

"Okay. Holler if you need anything."

Sam heads to the kitchen as Karen buries herself in the blankets.

Karen shuffles into the kitchen somewhere near noon. Sam is sitting at the table with his laptop, still in his pajamas, working on a spreadsheet.

"Honey, look at this!"

Karen is rummaging around for an easy breakfast.

"Look at what?"

"My pay-off projection has dropped from five years to four and a half."

Karen sits at the table with her breakfast. She gives Sam a tired look.

“Do we have to do that now? I'm really not up to it.”

“We always have a mid-month budget meeting.”

Yes, I know. But not right now.”

“Okay. When?”

“When? I don't know. After I eat.”

“We have to review our budget.”

“We don't have to right now. It's not like it's a life or death situation.”

Sam chuckles. “Man, you're in a mood!”

“What was your first clue?”

“You don't have to snap at me.”

“Just lay off me about the budget, okay? Let me eat in peace.”

“You're shaking. Are you okay?”

“I'm fine!”

Sam gets up from the table. “You don't look fine. I'm taking you to the hospital.”

“No! I'm fine!”

“Then let me take you back to bed.”

“I'm not going to bed! I just want to eat my damn breakfast!”

Sam stops, a look of bewilderment crossing his face. “Well, excuse me for caring!”

“Sam, there are just some things that are out of your control.”

“What's that supposed to mean? Why do you think I have this need to control things?”

“Because you do, Sam! Ever since the dot-com crash—”

“Why do you keep bringing that up? Why can't you just leave it alone?” Sam storms out of the room.

“Sam—!”

\* \* \*

*The mid-morning sun shines gently onto the terrace of Inside Park at Bart's. Richard and Emily Hamilton, Karen's parents, are enjoying Sunday brunch. Richard is a retired stock broker in his late sixties, and jovial in both manner and appearance. He tends to have a very pragmatic approach to life. Emily can be best described as a sourpuss. She also has a strong Victorian attitude that is clearly reflected in her dress and manner. Lying on the terrace between the two is a pug dog. Karen walks onto the terrace, spies her parents, and heads in their direction.*

*"Hi mom, hi dad! Oh, there's my little Nicky Palumbo!"*

*Karen squats down and rubs the dog's ears, then sits in one of the empty chairs at the table.*

*"So, dear, what did you do with yourself after dinner last night?"*

*"Oh, I went out with my friends to the club."*

*"You know, dear—"*

*"Yes, I know, mother."*

*"It's no use reminding her," Richard says. "Our daughter has a mind of her own."*

*"Thanks, dad."*

*Richard smiles broadly at his daughter.*

*"I, for one, am very proud to have a dancing daughter!"*

*"I really love it!" Karen gushes.*

*"We know you do, dear. But a mother can dream, can't she?" Emily turns to Richard. "I swear she takes after you."*

*"You mean the 'me' before you tamed me."*

*"You are much happier now."*

*Richard beams affectionately at his wife. "You know that I am, dear."*

*"Ugh! You two, sometimes!"*

*Richard reaches over and takes Emily's hand.*

*“And after all these years, you are still so in love.”*

*“We have been very blessed with a happy marriage and a healthy child,” Emily says.*

*“I still think you should have had more children.”*

*“Oh, no, I just couldn't. It was really almost too much for me, your illness as an infant and nearly losing you when you were four.”*

*Richard places his other hand on Emily's, patting it affectionately, then raises his orange juice in a toast.*

*“Here's to our happy, healthy family!”*

*Karen and Emily join in the toast.*

\* \* \*

Monday morning finds Sam sitting at his desk, glaring at his computer. Jack Morgan, Sam's boss, pokes his head in. Jack is a no-nonsense, results-oriented person.

“Sam, I hear there was a problem with the program on Friday.”

“Yeah, I'm just looking into that now.”

“Any ideas?”

“Well, it looks like we had an odd case.”

“Odd in what way?”

“It seems there was a strange combination of exceptions the case workers forgot to tell us about, and this particular case was accidentally closed.”

“Hmph. The way they tell it, you'd think it was the end of the world.”

“One case out of hundreds is not the end of the world.”

“No. When will you have it fixed?”

“Well, now that I know what the problem is, I just need to talk to them and clarify the rules. After that, it's just a half hour work. I could have it done by the end of the day.

“Good.” Jack heads off.

## A Random Collection of Events

After a few minutes, Sam heads to the water fountain. On the way, he passes Tom Handy's office. Tom is Sam's co-worker and best friend. He is a lanky, gangly man who never seems to take anything seriously.

"Hey, Sam..."

Sam pauses at Tom's door.

"Hey, Tom."

"Heard about the problem Friday."

Sam comes into Tom's office and sits down.

"Yeah, more of those oddball exceptions that we never find out about until they happen."

"Not your fault."

"I know, but I always feel like it's me that did something wrong. I'm the one responsible for the program working right."

"Gotta let go of that, buddy."

"Easier said than done. I keep thinking I've lost my edge."

"Well, you're sure not looking so sharp this morning. I think it's more than just that program bug."

"Well—"

"I knew there was something. How was your big night out?"

Tom's guess is right on the mark. Sam's response is rather bland.

"Oh, we had a great time." Tom looks questioningly at Sam. "We had another fight on Saturday."

"Money and control issues again, I suppose." Sam nods. "Sam, you really have to let go of some stuff, man."

"Please. Not you, too."

"Alright, but just remember not everything's your fault."

Sam gives Tom a plaintive look.

“Anyway,” Tom continues, “don't forget your pennies tomorrow night. You'll get your chance to win millions! That'll solve all your problems.”

“Oh, snap! Is it that time of the month already?”

“Yeah, that time. Time to kick my ass in Scrabble and pick my pockets clean.”

“Well, you shouldn't have slept your way through college. I'd better call Karen and remind her.”

Sam heads back to his office, completely forgetting about his drink of water.

“Later, dude!” Tom calls, and opens his desk drawer and starts searching for loose pennies.

Sam dials, and after a few rings Karen picks up the phone.

“St. Vincent's ER, Karen speaking.”

“Karen, it's Sam.”

“Hi, Sam. What's up?”

“Oh, working hard as usual. How's your day?”

“A little slow here. Did you get that bug fixed?”

“Yeah, it was just a little thing. Anyway, tomorrow night is Scrabble night at Tom and Maureen's.”

“Oh, yes. Is it the third Tuesday already?”

“Yeah. So, are we going?”

“Of course. I've got to get back to work. See you tonight.”

“See you tonight. Love you, babe.”

“I love you, too.”

Karen hangs up the phone and stands with a vacant look on her face. Jill Franklin, Karen's best friend, stops in front of Karen. Jill is a nosy and opinionated person.

“What's up, girl?”

“Hmm?”

“I said, what's up?”

Karen's gaze focuses on Jill. “Huh? Oh, nothing. That was Sam.”

## A Random Collection of Events

“You okay?”

“Oh, I'm fine.”

“You don't sound fine. Hey, how was your big night out?”

Karen's response holds little enthusiasm. “It was alright.”

“Girl! You gone out on a big anniversary date and all you can say is it was alright? What is wrong with you?”

The vacant look reappears on Karen's face. “Oh, Jill, I just don't know.”

“Don't know what?”

“I'm just so tired of planning everything so carefully. I wish just once he'd act like the old Sam.”

“There's nothing you can do about that. It's all on him.”

“I know.”

“He's a good man.”

“I know.”

“Well, just remember to toss him my way when you're done with him.”

Karen smiles. “Sure, I'll do that. Where's the chart for 3?”

“Dr. Fran's got it.”

“Damn. Now I have to chase her down. 4th needs to see it before they move the patient up there.”

“Good luck! I've never been able to catch her sitting still.”

A female voice over the intercom interrupts their conversation: “Code Blue in ER 4. Code Blue in ER 4.”

“I'll get that one,” Jill says. “You go find Dr. Fran.”

“Thanks!”

Jill rushes off to emergency room #4, along with several other nurses, orderlies and doctors. Karen heads in the opposite direction.

Later that evening, Sam and Karen arrive at Tom's house and ring the bell. Maureen, Tom's wife, answers the door and invites them in. Tom is sitting on the couch watching television. He gets up to greet his friends. Sam notices the show on the TV.

"Hey, isn't that the one where the crew is trapped in a shared dream?" Sam asks.

"Yeh, 'Waking Moments.' Chakotay was just going into a lucid dream state."

They all sit down at the dining room table where a Scrabble board is set up for play. There are several snacks on the table. They take turns selecting tiles from the bag.

"That was a cool episode," Sam says.

"Lucid dreaming?" Maureen asks. "Where you know that you're dreaming and can actually exert control?"

"Yep," Sam replies.

"That's going to be the topic of my thesis. Pretty heady stuff for a TV show."

"You're getting as bad as Tom with the puns."

"God, I hope not!"

"I like the ones where the mess with your mind," Tom says.

"Yeah. 'Next Generation' had a few really good ones, like 'Night Terrors.'"

"Is that the one where the Enterprise is trapped in a Tyken's rift?"

"Yup. The crew is sleep deprived because of the telepathic aliens."

Karen and Maureen look at each other and roll their eyes.

"That one was kind of spooky," Tom says.

Karen and Maureen each draw an extra tile and display it.

"Okay, boys," Maureen says, "are we going to play or what? I have an 'L.'"

"I've got an 'N,'" Karen says.

## A Random Collection of Events

Sam and Tom each draw an extra tile and display it.

“Hah!” Sam exclaims. “An ‘A.’ Beat that.”

“T” for Tom. Looks like Lady Luck's on your side tonight, Sam. Again.”

Sam plays a word, and then heads over to the bar for a drink.

“So, how's school, Maureen?” Karen asks.

“If I have to write one more paper –”

Tom chuckles and nearly chokes on a mouthful of chips. “She's on that computer 24/7! Sometimes I think she's one of the peripherals!”

Maureen rolls her eyes as she takes a sip from her drink.

“Tom Pun is No Fun. I have only two more papers to write this semester.”

“So. –” Karen begins.

“–when do you graduate?” Sam finishes her sentence.

“I don't know which is worse,” Maureen says.

“I could live without either easily enough,” Karen says.

“What's that?” Sam asks.

“Puns and mind reading.”

“Oh, sorry. Am I reading your mind again?”

“Sometimes I feel like an open book. Who's turn is it?”

“Yours,” Tom says. “Personally, I think it'd be cool to really be able to read minds.”

“Not as cool as you might think, Tom,” Karen replies.

“So, what's the current psychological thinking on it?”

“Mind reading?” Maureen says. “No such thing. Some people are very skilled at reading facial expressions, leading you to believe that they are reading your mind.”

“The how do you explain Sam?” Karen asks.

You two have been together quite a while. Sam knows you well, so he can make better educated guesses.”

“Sometimes he doesn't even look at me, though. How could he be reading my face?”

“Watch his eyes. They are always darting here and there. He's a hyper-aware person, and he picks up a lot using peripheral vision.”

“Is that what it is?” Sam says. “Is it my turn?”

The game and conversation continues until both begin to wind down.

“Well, it seems you're all out of luck,” Sam says, placing his last tile on the board. “My last tile is a blank. Let's see, final ranking is: Me 170, Tom 70, Karen 72, and Maureen 109. Pay up, everyone!”

“You should be about ready to retire by now,” Tom says. “Here's your one dollar and four cents.

“Sixty-three cents from me,” Maureen says.

Karen says nothing, staring at the words on the board. Tom notices her intent gaze.

“Interesting collection of words,” Tom says. “You could write a news story with all those words. Let's see: A Tragic ACCIDENT: During last night's STORM, a DRUNK driver ran a STOP SIGN, injuring a young couple and their child. ‘It was s a BLOODY MESS,’ an on-looker was quoted as saying. In the confusion, someone is able to KIDNAP the young child, who is then left to grow up as an ORPHAN.”

Karen pales, but says nothing as she mechanically helps Maureen clean up the snacks and glasses. Tom starts putting the game away, while Sam is talking on the phone.

“Yes, I'd like a cab at –”

“So, Karen,” Maureen says. “You've been awfully quiet tonight.”

“I just have a lot on my mind.”

“The cab is on its way,” Sam says.

“A great game, as always,” Tom says.

## A Random Collection of Events

“Yeah, one of these days you might even win.”

They all walk to the door as Tom grabs Sam and Karen’s jackets.

“Well, Lady Luck can't stay with you forever.”

“Why not? I'm a charming and handsome guy. Aren't I, honey?”

“No shortage of self-esteem there,” Maureen says. “Do you need help getting his head out the door?”

“I think I can manage,” Karen says.

“See ya tomorrow, Tom.”

Hugs are passed all around, except for Sam and Tom who shake hands in an exaggerated manly fashion.

“If I must. Take care, buddy.”

Sam and Karen wave good bye as they get into the cab.

The ER is very busy the next morning. Karen and Jill are checking charts and hustling from room to room. Karen notices one of the patients in particular out of the corner of her eye as she's rushing down the hall with a chart. She stops at the nurse's station to enter data into the computer. Jill is talking on the phone.

“Dr. Stevens needs a CT of the pelvis, without contrast, stat. Patient is Morrissey, ID #42219354, in ER 2. Yep. Thanks.”

Jill hangs up the phone.

“Who's that just outside of 3?” Karen asks. “65-70 year old male, looks like his wife sitting next to the gurney.”

“Uh, mm, that would be Hamilton I think. Mild concussion from a fall.”

“He looks familiar. Has he been here before?”

“Honey, they all look the same to me after a while. Have you seen the chart for 1? Bloomberg, I think.”

“Dr. Martin has it. He's consulting with neurology.”

"Thanks. You OK? You don't look yourself."

"Huh? Oh, I'm fine."

"Okay, then. Gotta run!"

Jill takes off down the hall.

Karen works her way over to where the Hamilton's are, and pauses to get a closer look. The wife takes advantage of Karen's momentary pause.

"Well, hello, dear. I'm Emily Hamilton and this is my husband Richard. We've been waiting quite a while. When will we see the doctor?"

Karen picks up the chart from the gurney and makes a show of studying it while furtively looking at them both. They look slightly familiar to her.

"Has your husband been here before?"

"No, he's always been very healthy. Why, the only time I've ever known him to be out of sorts was when our young daughter died thirty years ago. He took it very hard."

"Infant daughter?"

Oh, yes. A terrible car accident."

"Car accident?"

"Yes. A drunk driver. Richard blamed himself, but of course it wasn't his fault."

"No, of course not. Uh, well, let me go find the doctor."

"Thank you, dear."

Karen walks numbly back to nurse's station and stands in front of the computer. She stares at it absently. Jill arrives with a handful of folders.

"Are you done there?"

"Hmm?"

"The computer. Are you —"

Jill takes a closer look at Karen. Karen is pale.

"Karen? Are you OK?"

"Hamilton..."

## A Random Collection of Events

“The concussion? What about him?”

“I don't know. Something's nagging at my brain. I've seen him before.”

“Well, you know they all look –”

“No! This is different. I feel something... a connection somehow.” Karen starts trembling slightly.

“Karen, honey, why don't you come sit down for a bit. I'll get you some water.”

Jill takes Karen's hands and starts to lead her to a nearby chair. Karen moves slowly, vacantly.

“Like a dream. I, I think I dreamed about him.”

Karen stops rock still. Her eyes widen with astonishment, and then she collapses. Jill barely manages to ease her to the floor.

“Karen!” Jill looks up and around frantically. She calls to an orderly passing by. “Hansen!! Get Dr. Evans right away! Karen's passed out!”

Karen comes to just as Jill is settling her into an empty room. Dr. Evans, the neurosurgeon, arrives and begins examining Karen.

“Have you ever passed out before?” he asks.

“No.”

“Dizziness? Nausea?”

“No.”

Jill steps in long enough to hand Dr. Evans some lab results, and then scoots out again. He flips through them.

“Pregnancy test came back negative. Jill said you mumbled something about a dream just before you passed out.”

“Um, yeah –”

“What about the dream?”

“It's kind of silly, really –”

"It might give us a clue as to what happened."

"Well, there was this elderly couple just outside of 3."

"Yes, the Hamiltons."

"Well, I had the strangest feeling I'd seen them in a dream."

"Your maiden name is Hamilton, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"Are they relatives of yours?"

"No, not that I know of."

"Maybe related to your parents?"

"I, uh, never knew my parents. I was adopted."

"Oh, so you're real name is not Hamilton?"

"Well, actually, it is. My parents, the ones that adopted me, knew the last name of my real mother. When I turned 18, I had my name legally changed to Hamilton."

"Unusual. Do you remember your birth mother at all?"

"Not really. I was kind of young at the time. Vague memories, but nothing I could say for sure."

"What happened to her?"

"I-I'm not sure. I have a recurring dream about a car accident, it sort of feels like it's something that happened when I was little."

Sam rushes into the emergency room at that moment. He goes to Karen's bed and grabs her hand, looking at her anxiously.

"Karen! Are you okay?"

"Karen seems to be fine. I think it's just a stress reaction."

"A stress reaction to what?"

"That would be difficult to pin-point without further tests."

"Will I need further tests?"

"I would hesitate based on this one incident. There is no other apparent cause that I can see. I think the best thing for you is some bed rest. Take the rest of the week off." Dr. Evans start to

## A Random Collection of Events

head out the door, but turns back just before he leaves the room.

“Oh, you may want to have a chat with Dr. Radcliff.”

Karen just nods.

“Who is Dr. Radcliff?” Sam asks.

“She's the staff psychologist.”

“Why would you need to see a psychologist?”

Karen shrugs her shoulders. “For the stress, I guess.”

Sam stays protectively close to Karen as they leave the hospital.

\* \* \*

*Happy hour is just getting started, so the bar is relatively quiet and empty. A sign advertising "Open Mike Nite" stands by the front door. Karen and her two best friends, Stella Parker and Doreen Watson, walk in and find a corner table. Stella is short and energetic, with a constantly roving eye that misses no man. Doreen just the opposite, always prim and proper.*

*“So, Stella, what happened to that guy you were seeing?” Karen asks.*

*“Oh, you know how it goes, girl.”*

*“You won't catch me chasing after any man!” Doreen says.*

*“Oh, come on!! They can be a lot of fun!”*

*“I can wait for the right guy to come along. I am not in any hurry.”*

*“You don't know what you're missing! What do you say, Karen?”*

*Karen looks up from her drink. “Hmm? Oh, why even bother, I say.”*

*“Yeah, I know you! Cutting up the dance floor all the time. No time or energy for chasing guys.”*

*“Is there something on your mind?” Doreen asks Karen.*

*Karen stirs her drink absently. “Sometimes I wonder if I'm missing something.”*

*“I can tell you for sure, girl, you're missing something!”*

*"I don't think she's talking about that."*

*"Don't knock it. Nothing better than a little bump-bump-bump in the bed."*

*"You are so crude! Karen is much more refined than that."*

*Stella and Doreen stop and look expectantly at Karen, who blushes a bit.*

*"It's hard to explain. I-I don't have any thoughts about being with a guy in that way."*

*"I hang onto hope, Sister Mary Karen."*

*Doreen shoots Stella a dirty look.*

*"I just want to share my joy of dancing with someone."*

*"I thought there were plenty of dancers at all those competitions you go to," Doreen said.*

*"Well, yeah. And some are very passionate about dancing. Maybe it's something more than that."*

*Doreen shoots Stella a warning glance. "Don't say it, Stella!"*

*Stella tries her best to look innocent. "Say what?"*

*"Go on, Karen."*

*I guess someone to experience life with."*

*"You're talking about companionship."*

*"Yeah, I guess so. I mean, that's what life's all about, isn't it? The experience?"*

*"So what are you waiting for? There's a really cute guy right over there that's been looking your way. An experience just waiting to happen!"*

*"I think she had something a little less—"*

*"Oh, yes, something a little less. So, you won't mind?"*

*"Knock yourself out," Karen says.*

*Stella gets up from the table and heads over to the bar.*

*"That girl's got a one track mind," Doreen says.*

*"That's for sure! But someone's got to take up the slack from the two of us."*

*"That's one way of accounting for it."*

*"I just think that's her joy in life. Just like mine is dance."*

## A Random Collection of Events

*"I really don't think sex should be someone's joy in life. It's not proper, especially for a woman."*

*"Who are we to judge?"*

*"Sometimes I wonder who's side your on."*

*"Ah, but are there sides to take?"*

*"Well, there is certainly right and wrong."*

*"Right and wrong are judgments. So I ask again: Who are we to judge?"*

*"God will surely judge her actions."*

*"Perhaps. But since I am not God, I won't be judging anybody. Not even Stella. Besides, I think we've got God all wrong."*

*Doreen looks a little alarmed. "How so?"*

*"Why would He give us free will, then punish us for not doing His will?"*

*"We've had this discussion many times."*

*"Yes, we have."*

*Karen and Doreen smile fondly at each other, and then look over to where Stella is flirting with the man at the bar. Karen points to Stella with her glass.*

*"You certainly can't deny that look of joy on her face," Karen observes.*

*Doreen grimaces and signals to the barman for another round.*

\* \* \*

Sam finishes tying his tie as he prepares to leave for work. Karen is sitting in bed writing in a journal.

"Another dream?" he asks.

Karen hesitates. "Yeah."

Sam looks at her quizzically.

"I was in a bar."

"A bar?"

“Strange as that may sound.”

“Any good looking guys?”

“I didn't notice. I'm wondering if I'm a nun or something.”

Sam shakes his head. “So, you never told me about the dream - the one with the old couple in the hospital.”

“I don't recall exactly. Just a vague recollection of sitting outside for breakfast. Oh, and there was a dog. A pug, I think.”

Sam sits on the edge of the bed next to Karen. “I can't picture you as a dog person.”

“Well, I don't know that it was my dog.”

“Good point. I suppose nuns aren't allowed to have pets.”

Karen smiles. “I guess that would be kind of awkward.”

She puts her journal down and looks out the window. “It really feels sometimes like I'm living a double life.”

“How do you mean?”

“Well, the dreams seem so real, I sometimes catch myself smiling about something someone said.”

“Someone in a dream?”

“Yeah.”

“Maybe you should talk to someone about it.”

“I'm talking to you.”

“No, I mean—”

“I know. I've got an appointment with Dr. Radcliff today.”

Sam gets up and kisses her on the forehead. “Okay. Call me if you need anything.”

“As you wish, dear.”

Tom pokes his head into Sam's office. “Hey, buddy. What's up with Karen?”

“They're not sure. You know how it is with doctors. It's all guesswork.”

## A Random Collection of Events

“That's for sure. The human mind is a funny thing, and can't be fixed with a simple three-finger salute.”

“No.”

“Wasn't that the whole idea behind electroshock therapy? To re-boot the brain?”

“You've got one twisted mind.”

Tom is not paying attention because he is warming up to this new train of thought.

“After all, the brain is just a very sophisticated computer.”

“Tom.”

“Neural pathways instead of circuit boards.”

“Tom!”

Tom's focus returns to Sam. “What?”

“Go back to work.”

Dr. Radcliff sits easily in her chair, looking calmly at Karen. She sits as if nothing in the world could possibly rattle or ruffle her. Her friendly, pudgy smile is very encouraging, and her large brown eyes are both trusting and trustful at the same time.

“So, you were adopted when you were five, but changed your name back to Hamilton when you were 18.”

Karen stirs a bit restlessly. “Yes.”

“That's a bit unusual. How did your adoptive parents feel about that?”

“I don't know. I ran away from home when I was 16, and found a job at church helping with the orphaned kids.”

“There is a most interesting parallel between your dreams and your experiences.”

“Do you think there's any truth to them?”

“The dreams? I doubt it. Dreams are very tricky – they can be whatever the dreamer wants them to be. However, your dreams

do indicate a desire to escape. What I'm most interested in is what you want to escape from."

"I guess I never thought about escaping from anything. I have my work, my husband, my friends. Life is pretty good."

"'Pretty good'? You say it like you're trying to convince yourself. How are things at home?"

"At home? Okay, I guess. The usual stuff, you know. We fight about money and things, just like anyone else."

"Tell me about your most recent fight over money."

"Uh, well, I remember I hadn't slept very well the night before. It was last Saturday. I came into the kitchen to get something to eat, and all he wants to talk about is the budget. Some new thing to pay off our bills faster."

"You don't want to talk about the budget with him?"

"It's not so much that, as, well, it's all he ever talks about anymore. Anything we want to do it's 'well, we'll have to look at the budget'. He has to have the receipt for everything I buy. He records every little penny in a ledger, and comments when prices go up, or we over-spend. He obsesses over that budget, and it's driving me crazy!"

"Was he always like this?"

"No. When we first met, he was so easy-going about money. He loved to have fun. He made good money and wasn't afraid to spend it, after his bills were paid. It's one of the things I loved most about him."

Karen shifts uncomfortably in her chair. "He knew how to have fun, and it made me feel good to have fun with him."

"So, what changed?"

"Well, at first it was the dot-com crash, but now with the economy the way it is—"

"The dot-com crash? What is that?"

"Oh, back in the nineties business was very good for computer programmers, especially anyone who did web sites.

## A Random Collection of Events

Except that there was a lot of over-speculation, which led to the bottom falling out of the market. We lost everything: all of our life savings, our house. He was very depressed for a long time, he felt like it was all his fault. Now, we are so in debt and it's a struggle just to make ends meet. It is even worse now."

"I see. So, because of this dot-com crash, Sam feels the need to control spending?"

"Yes. And more than that. He seems to be more competitive. Games aren't fun anymore. Like, for example, we get together with some friends once a month to play Scrabble for money. He never loses."

"Never?"

Karen pounds her fist on the arm of the chair. "Never. He can be ruthless at times."

"That makes you very angry."

"It does! I wish he'd just stop it!"

\* \* \*

*In the main ballroom, the Friday night dance is in progress. Music is playing, and several couples are dancing. Karen comes off the dance floor and heads to the concession stand for a bottle of water.*

"Good evening, Karen."

"Hi, Mark! I didn't expect to see you tonight. Didn't Stefan just get back from his trip?"

"Yes, he arrived late this afternoon. He was so exhausted he decided to turn in early."

"Poor guy!"

"I thought I might as well come to the dance."

"Well, I'm glad you're here!"

"I see you've been practicing your form. You look very good on the floor."

*"Thanks! It's all those extra beginner group classes."*

*"That certainly helps."*

*Karen cocks her head as a new song comes on.*

*"Hey!! That sounds like a rumba! Come... dance with me!"*

*Karen leads Mark onto the dance floor.*

*"So, you haven't talked Stefan into coming for lessons?"*

*"No, he has no interest."*

*"That's too bad. I think I'd want my life partner to enjoy dancing as much as I do."*

*Mark leads her into an underarm turn.*

*"There seems to be no shortage of eligible men here."*

*Karen looks around the room with little interest.*

*"None of them are quite what you are looking for?"*

*"Not quite. I'm not entirely sure what it is I am looking for."*

*"You have a unique nature. Very spiritual and open-minded. Not tied to the material world. There are few people that would satisfy you."*

*"Thanks, I think."*

*The song ends. Mark leads her off the floor, and then bows over her hand.*

*"It is meant as a compliment."*

*"Then I will accept it as such."*

*A young, eager man walks up to her. "May I have this dance?"*

*Karen nods assent. The young man escorts Karen onto the dance floor. This particular song is a waltz, and the young, eager man leads her haltingly and repeatedly, but with a lot of enthusiasm, through a few simple patterns.*

\* \* \*

*"I had a really strange dream."*

*Sam looks at Karen inquiringly.*

*"I was dancing—"*

*"Dancing?"*

## A Random Collection of Events

Karen nods. "I think I was in some kind of a ballroom. There were a lot of other people there, some dancing, some not."

Sam has put his robe on, and hands Karen her robe as she gets out of bed. Together they walk to the dining room. Karen sits down at the table while Sam fixes two bowls of cereal.

"So, what kind of dancing was it?"

"I don't know. Not the kind we used to do at the clubs. It seemed very formal."

"You mean like in Victorian days?"

Karen laughs. "No, not quite like that. I mean, not quite as formal as that, but I think the dance steps were similar. It seemed like the kind of dance that Jill goes to at the church."

"Interesting."

"Don't you think it'd be fun to learn to dance like that?"

Sam just raises his eyebrows, and continues eating.

"I know. Your two left feet. What about lessons?"

"Oh, yeah, I said I'd look at the budget."

Karen decides to let that pass.

"So, can I get you to do the laundry today?"

"Ah, you're going to play the sick card, huh?"

Karen glances at Sam, trying to gauge his meaning.

"For as long as I can."

"Well, babe, I think after this weekend that card will expire."

Karen sighs and rolls her eyes. "I guess I better take advantage of my vacation while I can."

"Tsk, tsk. Sick time and vacation time are two entirely different things. You are not off the hook for a taking a real vacation."

"You can't blame a girl for trying."

Sam picks up the bowls and puts them in the sink. He smiles at Karen.

“You'll have to try harder than that. Well, I'm off to do the laundry.”

“I'm going to lie down for a while.” Karen heads back to the bedroom.

After so many days off, Karen is glad to be back to work. As soon as she gets to the nurse's station, she goes right for the computer.

What's up, girl? You're looking a lot better.”

Karen looks up briefly. “Thanks, Jill.”

“What did you do for yourself with your time off?”

“Doreen, Stella and I had lunch Saturday, then breakfast as usual with my parents.”

“Wait. Doreen and Stella?”

“Yeah, we usually go out to the bar, but they had other plans.”

“The bar?”

Karen stops what she's doing and inhales sharply. “Wait—” Karen laughs uneasily. “What am I talking about?”

“You tell me.”

“It's those dreams. They seem so real sometimes.”

“Uh huh.”

“Don't give me that tone.”

“I think you ought to talk to someone about these dreams, Karen.”

“Do you know what happened to Hamilton?”

“You've sure like changing the subject off of you.”

“Ah, here he is. He's was admitted. Doesn't look like he's doing so well.”

Jill looks over her shoulder at the computer screen.

## A Random Collection of Events

“The concussion must have been worse than they thought. Mild aphasia. Evidence of a subdural clot in the left temporal lobe. Looks like Evans is going to operate.”

“Hmm.”

“Why are you so interested in this case, anyway? Is it because of that dream?”

“God, I wish everyone would stop bringing up that dream! It was just a dream!”

“If you say so.”

“Jill, please, let's just forget about it, okay?”

“Forgotten. Not another word from me on that.”

Karen gives her a dirty look and heads down the hall. Jill takes her place at the computer to enter some patient notes.

At home that evening, Sam is in the kitchen preparing dinner. Karen walks in and starts to help.

“I've got it, Karen.” Sam waves her off. Karen sits down at the table.

“You don't need to keep doing everything for me.”

“You've been so stressed lately. I just want you to relax.”

“I can take care of myself. And if I'm stressed, that's on me, not you.”

Sam sets two dishes on the table, and sits down.

“These are funny shaped meatballs.”

“They're not exactly my specialty.”

Karen takes a bite of spaghetti and makes a face.

“What's in the sauce?”

“Oh, there's a bunch of spices in the cupboard. I tossed some in to add a little flavor. The jar sauce seemed kind of bland.”

They eat in silence for some time.

“Sam, it would really help me if you would just give me a little space.”

“What do you mean?”

“I'm not a cripple. I can do things for myself. It makes me crazy with you doing everything for me.”

“Okay. I get it.”

“Oh, please don't sulk. It's not that I don't want you doing things for me. But you're only doing it to take care of me, not because –”

“Not because what?”

“You used to cook me dinner and it was romantic. Now you cook me dinner as if I was a child.”

“That was ten years ago. You can't expect us to be the same.”

“Can't I?”

“People change.” Karen just looks at him.

“Yeah,” Sam continues. “We've grown into a more mature couple. What?”

“Nothing.”

Sam continues, focused on his point and oblivious to Karen's.

“The romance fades and real life settles in. That's the way it is.”

“Fine.”

Sam and Karen finish their meal in silence.

Jill is entering information into the computer when Karen arrives with a stack of papers. Karen looks exhausted and frazzled, and has dark circles under her eyes.

“More lab reports?”

“Yes! I wish they'd finish up the program for the lab. It'd sure be easier to have them enter this instead.”

## A Random Collection of Events

“You can say that again. Hey, maybe you could get them to snag Sam.”

Karen's silence catches Jill's attention. “You two still fighting?”

“You know how it is.”

“You look like you're about to drop.”

“I'm not sleeping well. And I am at the end of my rope with Sam!”

“Give it time. It'll settle down.”

“No, I don't think it will. And don't give me that look.”

“I know what you're thinking, and it'll only make matters worse.”

“I see Mr. Hamilton's surgery was this morning. I wonder how he's doing?”

“Don't change the subject.”

“I don't want to talk about it.”

“You can't keep burying your feelings. You're going to snap.”

“I'm fine!”

“Suit yourself. But don't say I didn't tell you so.”

“Oh, dear...” Karen's expression falls and her shoulders slump.

“What is it?” Jill looks at the computer screen and reads the information Karen had pulled up. “Oh, it doesn't look like he's going to make it.”

Karen sits down heavily in the chair. Her breathing is ragged, and she's shaking. A short laugh escapes her lips.

“I don't know what's come over me.”

“Take it easy, girl. Are you okay?”

Karen nods vaguely. “Yeah, I just need a minute.”

Jill doesn't look convinced. “You just sit right here. I'll get some water. You stay right here?”

Karen just nods again. Jill rushes to the water fountain. When she gets back, Karen is passed out on the floor.

Dr. Evans is bent over the unconscious form of Karen, lying in a hospital bed. He looks up as Jill walks in.

“What happened?”

“She was reading over the Hamilton case.”

“Ah. That's the guy with the concussion? The same one that was in her dream?”

Jill nods. “I thought she'd be okay! I didn't think she'd—”

“It's okay, Jill. No one's blaming you.”

“I feel bad about it. I shouldn't have left her alone in the chair.”

Sam rushes into the emergency room. He goes to the side of Karen's bed and grabs her hand. He looks at her anxiously.

“Is she okay?”

“Sam, there's no easy way to put this. She's in a coma.”

“Is there anything you can do?”

“I'm afraid not. It appears to be stress induced. Since there's no physical cause, I have nothing to repair.”

“Stress?”

“I'm sorry. All we can do for now is monitor her condition.”

Dr. Evans nods to Jill, then walks out of the room.

“Jill, what happened?”

“She was reading a patient's file on the computer, and then sat down in a chair. I went to get her some water, and next thing I know she's on the floor out cold.”

Sam stares vacantly at Karen for a moment, and then he looks sharply at Jill.

“A patient's file? Which one?”

Jill hesitates.

## A Random Collection of Events

“Hamilton?” Sam guesses. “What about him?”

Dr. Evans operated on him for a subdural clot. He's still in recovery, but not doing well.”

“She's obsessed with this guy!”

Sam sits down beside the bed. “What is it, baby? What is it with this guy?”

He looks up at Jill. “Did she say anything to you at all?”

Jill shakes her head no.

“I don't understand.” Sam shakes his head mournfully.

Jill quietly walks out of the room.

Sam starts to doze with his head lying on the bed, and he begins to dream.

\* \* \*

*He is walking along a sidewalk when he sees three women entering the bar. One of them looks vaguely familiar.*

*“Don't look now,” Stella says, “but there's a handsome man at three o'clock heading our way.”*

*All three woman pause and turn.*

*“Karen!” Sam calls. He catches up to them*

*“Yes?”*

*“It's me. Sam.”*

*“Sam who?”*

*“Sam your husband.”*

*Karen laughs.*

*“Not very original,” Doreen says.*

*“You're kind of cute. I'll play wifey with you.” Stella snuggles up to*

*Sam.*

*I'm not married, but thank you anyway.”*

*She turns and continues into the bar, her friends and Sam following her. Stella is still attached to Sam.*

*"It must be the coma!" Sam says. "Maybe even amnesia."*

*Karen sits down at a table. Sam gently detaches Stella and stands next to her. Stella puts on a mock pout, and sits at the table with Karen and Doreen.*

*"Don't you remember? The hospital? Fainting? That elderly couple. What was their name, Hamilton, I think?"*

*Karen looks up at him sharply. "What about my parents?"*

*"Uh, he had a knock on his head, I think."*

*"There is nothing wrong with my father."*

*"Why you got to be spreading lies like that?" Doreen demands.*

*The commotion has attracted the attention of the bouncer.*

*"Is this gentleman bothering you, ladies?"*

*"Yes he is!" Doreen says.*

*"I'm sorry," he says to Sam, "but I can't have you disturbing the ladies. I'm going to have to ask you to leave."*

*"I'm not leaving without—"*

*The bouncer takes a firm hold of Sam's arm.*

*"I only ask once. You may leave now, voluntarily Or I can escort you out. Either way. Your choice."*

*Sam starts to resist, but then changes his mind and turns to go. The bouncer releases his arm, and Sam leaves. The bouncer bows to the ladies, and heads back to his post.*

*Sam continues walking along the sidewalk when he sees Karen sitting on the patio talking and eating with an elderly couple. Nicky Palumbo, their pug dog, looks up and starts barking at Sam as he approaches.*

*"Not you again."*

*"Karen, please, let me talk to you."*

*"Who is this young man?" her father asks.*

*"I'm Sam Carter, sir. Karen's husband."*

*"Husband?" Karen's mother asks.*

## A Random Collection of Events

*"He's not my husband."*

*"He's seems like a nice enough man."*

*"He's been following me around making the most outrageous claims."*

*"If you'll just let me explain."*

*"Are you stalking my daughter?" her father asks.*

*"I'm not stalking anyone... what? Your daughter?"*

*"I will not tolerate anyone bothering her."*

*Nicky starts growling at Sam.*

*"But, Karen's parents died when she was a little girl! In a car accident!"*

*"Really, now!" exclaims Karen's mother.*

*"That's preposterous!" her father says.*

*"I know it sounds crazy."*

*"More than crazy. He says I'm in a coma and suffering amnesia!"*

*"If you'll just listen for one minute."*

*"I think we've listened to enough," her father says. "It's time for you to leave."*

*Sam looks pleadingly at Karen.*

*"Go away," she says.*

*"If you do not leave right now, I will call the police!"*

*"But—"*

*Richard stands up and signals to the waiter. Sam, frustrated, reluctantly backs off.*

*"Yes, sir?"*

*Richard looks at the waiter, then calmly sits down again.*

*"I'll have another cup of coffee."*

*"Yes, sir."*

*Nicky settles down. Emily reaches down and pulls the dog up into her lap.*

*"There, there, Nicky. What a good dog you are!"*

*Sam continues walking along the sidewalk when he sees Karen approaching a dance studio.*

*"Karen, please, let me talk to you."*

*"What do you want from me?"*

*"I just want to talk to you."*

*Sam looks and sounds dreadfully pitiful, but Karen ignores that.*

*"I don't want to hear anymore of your crazy ideas!"*

*"They're not crazy. Really."*

*"They sure sound crazy to me."*

*"I realize I haven't been the greatest husband lately."*

*"Look, I've never been married. I've never even met you."*

*"Maybe that's why this has happened. The coma, the amnesia—"*

*Karen runs up the stairs to the dance studio.*

*"Wait—"*

*"Just leave me alone!"*

*Sam stands on the sidewalk a moment, and then follows her up. He stands in front of the reception desk, peering past it into the Grand Ballroom. He sees a few couples dancing, and he can hear music playing. He steps back and reads the sign a sign advertising the hours for dance lessons.*

\* \* \*

Sam wakes up and sees Tom sitting in a chair on the other side of the bed.

"Hey, buddy, how are you doing?"

"Ow! My back." Sam stretches. Tom nods in Karen's direction. "No change."

"You look like you've slept in hell."

"You know those dreams Karen was having?"

"Yeah."

"This is going to sound weird, but I think I've been having the same dreams."

"As Karen?"

“Yep.”

Sam and Tom are quiet for a few moments.

“Yeah,” Sam says. “I’m walking on this sidewalk, and I come to a bar first. Karen’s with two women I’ve never seen before. She acts like she doesn’t know me. The bouncer practically throws me out. So, I keep walking and then I see her sitting at a restaurant. One of those with the outdoor patio, you know? She’s with some people who claim to be her parents. The father threatens to call the police, so I leave.”

Sam stands up and starts pacing around the room.

“I keep walking and I come to some kind of dance place. Karen is just getting there, too. She tells me to leave her alone and goes inside. I look in and see a bunch of people dancing. Then I woke up and saw you.”

“Weird.”

“She seemed so happy. In the dream, I mean. Except whenever I showed up. Then she just gets mad at me.” Sam sits back down again, and they are quiet for a few moments.

“You know what this sounds like?” Tom says. “Do you remember that Star Trek episode that was on when you were over last time?”

“Oh, yeah. ‘Waking Moments.’ About the shared dream.”

“That’s the one. Chakotay realizes he’s dreaming because he chose a full moon as a trigger.”

“Do you think I’m dreaming Karen’s dreams?”

“No doubt. You’ve always been very tuned in to her. I wouldn’t be surprised if you’ve entered her dreams while you were sleeping.”

“I didn’t think coma patients had dreams.”

“Why not?”

Dr. Evans walks into the room. He looks at Sam.

“May I speak with you a moment?”

“Uh, well, I've got to get back to work. Later, Sam.”

Dr. Evans sighs. “Sam.”

Sam doesn't look at him. “She's dying, isn't she.”

Sam fidgets with one of the IV tubes. “How long does she have?”

“That's difficult to say. The decline in her brain functions are erratic.”

“What about the dreams? Could they be causing her coma?”

“It's more likely stress induced. I don't see how her dreams could be the cause of the stress.”

“Maybe the dreams are keeping her in the coma.”

Dr. Evens shrugs his shoulders. “It's not my field of expertise. Perhaps you should talk to Dr. Radcliff.”

“I have to do something!”

Sam doesn't even notice Dr. Evans leave.

Sam is sitting across from Dr. Radcliff. He looks very morose. She is looking thoughtful.

“Dreams tend to be a reflection of what's going on in your life. How has it been between you and your wife?”

“Not so good lately. We've been fighting more. About money mostly. It's been getting steadily worse since the dot-com crash, and things aren't very good at all now.”

“Hm.”

“I went from six-figures a year to under 25,000 in the blink of an eye. We lost a lot of money.”

“I see.”

“She said I changed after that.”

“How does she say you changed?”

“She said I'm not as much fun anymore. That I worry too much about money, and try to control everything.”

## A Random Collection of Events

“That is common behavior when someone feels they are at fault for something. Do you think you worry too much and try to control everything?”

“I guess I do.”

“What about when you first met? What would you say you were like then?”

Sam laughs. “Bugs.”

“Bugs?”

“Yeah. I was consulting at the hospital she was working at. I was talking to a colleague about some of the computer bugs in the program. She overheard part of the conversation and misunderstood. She thought I was talking about a different kind of bug!”

Dr. Radcliff nods.

“I guess we had more fun before we were married. I figured that's just the way it goes. You settle down into married life and deal with the setbacks that life throws your way.”

“It's interesting that in her dreams she has her real parents, who are rich, and all she does is have fun. No responsibility.”

“Huh. I never thought of it that way. Why is she dreaming of that?”

“People have a variety of ways to escape from the unpleasantness of life. Alcohol and drugs are the favorite methods. Controlling your environment is another.”

“I guess I thought I should have done better by her. I thought I could do better by her if I paid more attention to our finances and handled our money better.”

Dr. Radcliff sits quietly while Sam stares thoughtfully at the floor.

“Do you think she's trying to escape because she's unhappy with her life? Unhappy with me?”

“Only Karen knows what she's unhappy about, or what she's trying to escape from.”

“So, do you think I could be sharing her dream?”

“There is no scientific basis to the idea, although there is still a lot we don't understand about the mind.” She leans forward in her chair. “There is a lot of literature out there that suggests we are more than just a physical being. That our spirit is what powers our body. It has been suggested that our spirit selves can communicate with each other.”

Sam sits up straight suddenly, a mildly wild look in his eye.

“I have this idea. It's from a TV show. The crew of a spaceship is trapped in a shared dream. One of them enters the dream in a lucid state, and save his crew mates.”

“An interesting story.”

“That was my thought, too. If I could direct her dream—”

“I'm not a dream specialist, so I couldn't advise you on that course of action.”

“No, I suppose you couldn't.”

Sam slumps back into the chair.

“It does seem to me, however, that she wants to fall in love again.”

“What do you mean?”

“You say she's observed a change in you since the ‘dot-com’ crash. Perhaps Karen is escaping because she misses what the two of you had before. She doesn't want to leave you. So rather than living a life that misses it, her mind creates a life in which she never met you.”

Sam looks at Dr. Radcliff uncertainly. “But she really wants it back.”

“I suspect so.”

Sam puzzles over the thought for a minute.

“So, what if I could somehow rekindle the romance? Make her fall in love with me again?”

## A Random Collection of Events

“It's certainly worth a try. Just remember that there are no guarantees.”

Sam's clenched hand taps the arm of the chair a few times.

“I know. But I have to do something!” Sam stands up decisively. “Thanks, Dr. Radcliff. You've been very helpful.”

“Good luck.”

Sam leaves the office feeling very hopeful.

Sam is back in Karen's hospital room. He lays his head down on the bed as before, and prepares for sleep. He is anxious and restless, but after a while he settles into it.

\* \* \*

*Sam is walking along the same sidewalk. He looks into a shop window and sees a full moon.*

*“That's odd.”*

*He stops walking, puzzled about the moon. He looks up. There is no moon in the sky.*

*“It can't be a reflection.”*

*He taps his finger on his forehead. “That moon - it looks just like the one in the Star Trek episode. That's my trigger. I must be dreaming! This is Karen's dream!”*

*He starts walking again, faster this time.*

*“The dance studio. I have to find that dance studio.”*

*After walking for what feels like an eternity, he finally finds it. He pauses outside the door.*

*“Here it is. What do I do? How do I make her fall in love with me again? I've gotten so used to those damn machines at work that I've forgotten how to relate to people.”*

*Sam paces back and forth on the side walk, indecisive.*

*"I can do this! I'll just have to wing it."*

*Sam resolutely walks into the studio. He stops at the reception desk, staring into the ballroom. He sees Karen dancing with someone, and feels a twinge of jealousy.*

*"Are you here for the group class?" the receptionist asks.*

*"Hmm?"*

*"The beginner group class at seven."*

*"Uh, yes, I guess so."*

*"That will be \$10. Sign here please. You can have a seat over there."*

*Sam pays and sits where the receptionist indicated. There are a few other people sitting there. After a few minutes, a young woman walks up to the group.*

*"Good evening. Are you all here for the group class? I am Miss Marilyn, and I'll be your teacher. Step this way please."*

*They follow her onto the dance floor. Sam keeps looking over at Karen. She notices, but studiously ignores him.*

*"Tonight's lesson will be the Waltz. Let's start by having the men line up here, and the women over here." She indicates imaginary lines on either side of her.*

*"The Waltz is in 3/4 time. What that means is that there are three beats for every measure. Each time there is a beat, you will be taking one step. For the beginner Waltz patterns, we'll be counting two measures like this: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6."*

*She looks about, but no one seems to have any questions.*

*"We'll start with the basic box pattern. I'll show the men's part first, then the ladies."*

*She turns to face the men.*

*"Let's start with the first half of the basic box. Gentlemen always start with the left foot. Watch what I do."*

*She turns her back to the men.*

*"Take one step forward with the left foot, step to the side with the right foot, then step together with the left foot. As you take the steps, you can say 'forward, side, together' to remind you, or you can count the beats: 1, 2, 3."*

## A Random Collection of Events

*She turns to face the men.*

*"Now you try it."*

*The men attempt the steps, with mixed success. Miss Marilyn corrects them.*

*"Make sure that each time you take a step, you change your weight. The foot that will be stepping next must be free - all your weight should be on the other foot. Now, for the second half of the box, step back with your right, to the side with your left, and together with your right."*

*Miss Marilyn demonstrates the full box step.*

*"The entire basic box is the six steps: forward, side, together, back, side, together. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6."*

*The men attempt the steps again, with mixed success. Miss Marilyn walks over to Sam.*

*"What's your name?"*

*"Uh, Sam Carter."*

*"Well, Mr. Carter, you seem to be stumbling on your side step. It looks like you're bringing it forward then moving it to the side. That's actually two moves instead of one. What you want to do is move your foot directly to the side position, like this."*

*Miss Marilyn demonstrates. Sam's face lights up in glee.*

*"Oh! Diagonally!" Sam tries it and gets it right.*

*"Yes, just that's it!"*

*"Triangles! A half a box is a triangle!! The two triangles make the box."*

*Sam's triumphant announcement catches the attention of all the other dancers in the ballroom.*

*"Yes, I suppose you could look at it that way. Okay, ladies!"*

*Miss Marilyn turns to face the women.*

*"Your steps are the mirror of the man's step. Women always start with the right foot, because you know women are always right. Watch what I do."*

*A few people laugh at the joke. Miss Marilyn turns her back to the women, and walks through the basic box.*

*"Back, side, together, forward, side, together. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6."*

*The women practice, with mixed success.*

*"Could you show that to me again?" one of the women asks. "I seem to be having trouble."*

*Miss Marilyn walks over to the woman and demonstrates again. The woman attempts the step.*

*"I see. You are not changing your weight when you bring your feet together."*

*"Oh! I see."*

*"Okay, now let's try it with a partner. Gentleman, take your partner's right hand in your left, and hold it up to the level of her eyes. Place your right hand on her shoulder blade. Ladies, place your left hand on top of his arm just below the shoulder."*

*Miss Marilyn inspects the couples, tweaking a dance frame here and there.*

*"Very good. Keep your arms strong, like they are in a cast. Now, the men are the leaders. Ladies, you are the followers and don't move unless he moves. You should feel him move through the connection of your arms. Gentlemen, this will be the only time you can tell the lady what to do."*

*A few people laugh at the joke.*

*"I'll start by calling out the man's steps, then by counting. Ready?"*

*Several heads nod, some of them uncertainly.*

*"Ready, and forward, side, together, back, side, together."*

*Everyone stops at the end of the box step.*

*"Not bad. Remember, it's six steps total, and change weight with each step. This time, we will do two boxes in a row. Ready? And... Forward, side, together, back, side, together. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6."*

*The couples manage to get through the two boxes, with mixed success.*

*"Okay. Let's change partners. Men, move to the next woman to your right. The man on the end comes around to the other end."*

*The men change partners, and take up the dance frame again.*

## A Random Collection of Events

*"Once more, two boxes in a row."*

*Miss Marilyn counts as the students dance two more box steps.*

*"Very good! Let's take a short break. Then I will show you an underarm turn."*

*Sam walks over to the bistro and buys a bottled water. Karen walks over and stands next to him. She looks amused.*

*"Triangles?"*

*"Uh, yeah, my mind kind of thinks in patterns."*

*"If you're good at patterns, you should do very well with ballroom dancing." Karen looks Sam straight in the eye. "What are you doing here?"*

*"Look, I'm sorry if it seems like I've been stalking you. It's just that—"*

*"Just that what?"*

*"Well, uh, it's my wife, she's, uh, sort of, uh—"*

*"Left you? You left her?"*

*Sam shakes his head "no" to the two questions.*

*"Oh, not dead?"*

*Sam kind of shrugs his shoulders at that last one. "Well, I guess you could say she is. She's in a coma and not expected to survive."*

*"Oh!! I'm so sorry!"*

*Sam rushes his thoughts out. "You look a lot like her. When I saw you the other day, and called her name, and you turned—"*

*"We have the same name?"*

*Sam nods in agreement.*

*"Oh, I feel so bad for you."*

*"She was the best thing in my life."*

*"You must miss her a lot."*

*"Yes, very much. I never realized how much until just now." Sam looks around the ballroom. "She would have loved to do something like this with me."*

*Sam sighs and puts his head in his hands. "I wish I had, but I was always so worried about money that I never took her seriously."*

*"How can you put a price on joy?"*

*Sam looks up at her intently. "I guess all I do anymore is put a price tag on life. No wonder she left me."*

*"I'm sorry."*

*Sam stands up resolutely. "I'm sorry, too. For bothering you. I'll go."*

*Sam heads out the door. He stops in the middle of the sidewalk, looking lost, not sure what to do next.*

*"Sam!"*

*Sam turns to see Karen standing in the doorway.*

*"Well, you know, I've been kind of looking for a dance partner. If you might be interested—"*

*Sam's face splits into a huge grin. "I'd really like that."*

*Sam walks over to Karen and takes her hand to escort her back up the stairs and into the ballroom.*

\* \* \*

Sam is awakened by Karen's hand stirring. Excitedly, he stands up and look into her eyes. Karen clears her throat.

"Where am I?"

"You're in the hospital. Everything will be okay now."

"I had a dream that I was dancing. You were there, too."

"Was I dancing?"

"Trying to. You were dancing triangles and boxes."

Sam laughs.

"What happened?" Karen asks.

"You were in a coma."

"Last thing I remember was... Mr. Hamilton?"

"He's fine. Dr. Evans found a second clot and removed it."

"Good. Visit—"

"I think they'd like that. They don't have any family. How about we adopt them?"

## A Random Collection of Events

Karen wrinkles her brow.

“Sorry. Reading your mind again, aren’t I”

Sam and Karen are preparing to leave the hospital. Jill walks into her room, followed by an elderly couple.

“Karen. I have someone who would like to meet you. I’d like you to meet Richard and Emily Hamilton.”

“Oh!” Emily stifles a sob, and stares teary-eyed at Karen.

“What, what’s going on?” Karen looks oddly at the Hamiltons, on the verge of tears herself.

“You were only four years old.” Richard sounds very old and sad.

“I, I don’t understand.”

“We were driving home one night from a concert. There had been a storm earlier, and the fog was thick. A drunk driver ran a stop sign and hit us broadside. There was a huge traffic jam, and lot of confusion. It was a bloody mess. In the confusion, you were kidnapped. I, I, I...” Richard chokes up and his voice cracks.

“I should have been watching you more closely. I am so very sorry.”

Karen looks bewildered. “Is this true?”

Jill hands her a lab report.

“I, uh, took the liberty of running a blood test. You are related to the Hamiltons.”

“Oh, my God.” Karen just stands there, lip trembling and tears welling in her eyes.

Richard holds out his arms. “Please, can you ever forgive me?”

“Oh, my God.” Karen rushes into their open arms, sobbing.

Sam, looking stunned, just looks on. “I’ll be damned.”

Dr. Radcliff walks into the room.

“Sorry to break in on this happy family reunion.”

Karen steps back, wiping her eyes with her sleeve. Sam hands her a tissue, and she blows her nose.

“It's okay,” Karen says.

Well, as you all know, Dr. Evans has given every one here has a clean bill of health,” Dr. Radcliff says.

“Thanks again for everything Dr. Radcliff,” Sam says.

“I'm glad it worked out.”

Karen draws Sam, Richard and Emily close to her.

“It's good to have our daughter back,” Emily says.

Sam and Karen have just left the hospital and are standing on the sidewalk. Karen takes a deep breath, breathing in the air and sun.

“Do you mind if we just walk for a little bit? I'd like to stretch my legs and feel the sun on my face after being cooped up in there.”

“I don't mind.”

They walk in silence, holding hands. Karen takes another deep breath, and exhales joyfully. She looks at Sam, who appears unusually relaxed and content.

“There's something different about you.”

“Really? What?”

“I don't know. You don't usually walk this slow.”

“We're not in a hurry, are we?”

“No, but—”

“But I always am?”

Karen nods her head, afraid of another argument.

“It's okay. You're right. I've decided I'm tired of that, and I would rather just treasure these moments with you.”

## A Random Collection of Events

They continue walking, and eventually Sam stops in front of the Stepping Out Dance Studio.

“What's this?” Karen asks.

“Looks like a ballroom dance studio.”

Sam has his most innocent face on. Karen gives him a look.

“I'd wondered if you were leading me somewhere. You've always got something up your sleeve, don't you?”

Sam bows as he holds the door for Karen.

“After you, my beloved monster.”

“Thank you, good Sir Knight.”

“Are you here for the group class?” the receptionist asks.

“Yes, we are.”

“That will be \$10 each. Sign here please. You can have a seat over there.”

Sam pays, and he and Karen sit where the receptionist indicated. There are a few other people sitting there. After a few minutes, a young woman walks up to the group.

“Good evening. Are you all here for the group class? I am Miss Marilyn, and I'll be your teacher. Step this way please.”

They follow her into the Grand Ballroom. Sam keeps looking at Karen. She notices, and smiles back at him.

“Tonight's lesson will be the Waltz. Let's start by having the men line up here, and the women over here.”

Joe Sweeney was conceived in Alabama and born in Upstate New York (a relative location). He spent the next 18 years in the tow of his Air Force family, living in all four corners of the States - Florida, Arizona, Northern California and Maine - and picking up five more siblings along the way. As a child he loved to write, but high school had somehow transformed him into a geek. He spent the next 30 years programming computers, at first as a hobby and in later years as a career. Now living in Arizona and approaching 50, he has decided it's time to return to his first love - writing.