

Eldritch Science



November 2022

Editorial

Eldritch Science continues its record of once or twice a year publication. For this issue we have three pieces of fiction, three poems, a front cover, and one piece of interior art. The stories range from space opera to the supernatural to fantasy, a magical academy.

We still have available the content item: First Chapters! Yes, if you are a Neffer and have published novels, send us the first chapter (and, if you wish, the cover image), and we'll publish it as an introduction to your tale.

As a Reader reward, your Editor has published a series of SF novels, most recently the first Adara novel, *Practical Exercise*. If any of you would like a free review copy of *Practical Exercise* or any of my other novels, you have but to ask.

Eldritch Science

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Published by the
National Fantasy Fan Federation
(Founded 1941)

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Electronic Subscriptions to Eldritch Science
are included with all memberships in
The National Fantasy Fan Federation
<http://N3F.org/Join>

N3F Membership with electronic N3F Newsletter—\$6
Non-voting memberships (electronic newsletter) are free
N3F Membership with paper N3F Newsletter—\$18
Eldritch Science is only distributed electronically.

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72 ... Front cover of Practical Exercise by Brad Fraunfelter., and used with permission.

Lois Was Right David Kopaska-Merkel

robbery in progress
Clark jumps into something
more comfortable

Clark searches
for a telephone booth
bank robbers floor it

bomb counts down
Clark's in line
for a changing room

Clark reels
Kryptonite spray
between the eyes

gunshot at the prom
Clark changes
into his tux

Clark's mistaken
for an ICBM
WWIII

Foray To The Third Dimension David Kopaska-Merkel

The hyperplane, a prototype, set out,
First baby steps beyond their natal plane,
The ship returned, the crew was quite insane,
They'd homeward plunged to Flatland's safe re-
doubt,
No polygon was ever meant to see,
The horrid shapes that thronged dimensions three,
Worse yet, one blasphemy reached in and caught
The captain from the shelter that he sought.

With mouths afoam, and staring eyes, the crew,
Jabbed any that came near them; some they slew,
Brave soldiers ringed them in, but strange shapes
grew,

They penetrated walls, and people too,
Disturbing bowels; breaking homes in two,
Then they were gone, but where they went
none knew.

A Stranger and A Shootout A Space-Cowboy Story By Patrick McKay

Prologue

"So boss, who arr we killin today?" Lek asked as he and the other squad leaders came into the command center.

"Just anyone who stands in our way, we have direct orders from the Cortez boys, its a kidnapping the Capin' wants," their commander replied.

"Please tell me boss that we git to go north out of dis heat," Julk asked.

"And please tell me that we git to do some pluderin' and ravishin' too ey!" Louie said.

"Iss a ways north, but no boys, I'm afraid dis is strict business. In n' out n' no time for partying ey. The Capin' was very stern," the commander replied.

Lek and the others let out groans of frustration. This was going to be one of those "serious" missions.

"Alroight, so whose da targets anyway?" He asked.

"Two young girls, Fluria and Gladys Suka."

"Ooooh, is fun to be had with them anyway?" Louie asked, excited again.

"No Lou, Capin' says they are to be in 'prime condition.'"

More groans, though Lek wasn't surprised, since these girls were high profile

targets apparently.

"Well boss, where arr we headed anyway?" Julk asked.

"Brownville."

Chapter 1

"Welcome to Brownville!" the sign said enthusiastically.

Jonathan Lee snorted. *The lack of imagination hurts my head.*

The name was accurate, though; the brown dirt was everywhere, and entirely uninterrupted by any foliage whatsoever.

"...the A'pash soil is not infertile, however, but the colony is only two hundred years old," the audio program John had been given said in his ear piece.

From the ocean to the desert... I'm a genius, John mused to himself.

It was worse than *just* desert, however. No plants meant no roots, desert meant no rains, and no roots or rains led to a whole new problem. Dust storms were the great plague of A'pash.

"The A'pash Legislature has recently implemented even more funding for water-import terraforming, and within fifty years the green surrounding the poles of the planet will stretch miles toward the equator!" the program said enthusiastically.

From Earth itself to backwater dust colony... I am in for some life change.

John could be happy, though, that there was no dust storm now and at least the sky wasn't brown, too.

The airfield he had landed at was up in the hills near the town; the view let him not only see the small town below, but also the large rock formations all around, as well. It was there that he had been given the audio program, a "New Citizen's Guide" the man had called it. It was supposed to help him adjust better to the planet and its culture. He figured he'd give it a listen as he walked into town, though he was only listening through one ear piece.

"First time visitors to A'pash will likely be surprised by the climate, but perhaps more unique is the charming frontier culture prominent outside the capital."

As he walked into the town, John saw that the name "Brownville" was bad for another reason, since the town itself was wildly colorful. Everything from the houses to the gardens were bright beacons of extreme colors. Flowers were common, with tulips a favorite. Various crops were in greenhouses which themselves were painted in oranges, white, and purples.

Is this the "frontier culture?"

The buildings themselves were even more intense, with homesteads in shades of red, yellow, and gray being common. When he got onto the town's "Main Street" at the bottom of the hill, he saw that the color mellowed out with the businesses and government buildings, but John still walked past a deep purple mansion and two different churches, one white and yellow, the other painted baby blue with a green neon sign.

"One of the main differences between the Federal Earth Unity and A'pash is, of course, the absence of the Darwinian Intellectual Hierarchy, leading to A'pash's great intellectual freedom."

Like there are any great Intellects that have come from A'pash, John joked to himself. But in spite of his mocking thoughts, he couldn't help but smile a relieved smile.

All of the town and the audio program he took in as he walked down Main Street, on one side a large inn with a big neon sign that said, "Susaka Inn." John, however, was walking to two buildings on the other side of the road, where he had immediate business, the Town Hall and the Hungry Sparrow Bar right next door.

Definitely the bar first.

The bar was one of the few buildings in Brownville that could be described as brown, but the owners were clearly going for an old "Cowboy" aesthetic, evidenced by the wooden exterior design and the rustic saloon doors.

Jonathan was in need of a very special kind

of drink before dealing with any other business. He stepped up onto the town's "Boardwalk," which he immediately realized was just an Astroluminum elevated walkway as opposed to the genuine article, and then pushed open the saloon doors and stepped inside.

"The intellectual freedom, large religious groups, and a difficult world to call home all encourage a private kind of self sufficient individuals who can seem very cold and distant at first glance."

John immediately looked over the establishment's patrons and realized that he had already outed himself as an outsider. Most of the patrons gave him subtle sideways glances, or didn't even look at him, wanting to keep their affairs to themselves. John's high curiosity was the clear exception to the atmosphere in the room.

From everyone in everyone's business to this strange sort of privacy... I think that's a change that I can get behind.

What he had seen while he looked over the room was that everyone was dressed as if it was the Old American West; cowboy hats were everywhere. The demographics were scatterings of middle aged to old men, mostly sitting alone or in pairs, drinking, eating, or just sitting silently. The lone exceptions were a table of silent gamblers playing poker and a table of men in the back who all looked to be law officers.

John walked toward a seat at the bar, taking one near the entrance. There was no one else on any of the bar's nine other seats, confirming to him the introverted nature of the crowd.

"The amount of guns carried may also be a surprise to first time visitors and may cause some concern or worry, but A'pash has been ranked very high in recent safety metrics, and the carrying of guns is more frontier precaution than real danger."

As he went to grab his wallet, he did a quick check that his two guns were secure, his Tosaki-Durnell TDc8 rail-blaster still resting in his right hip holster, and his Glock 19 Gen 200 still safe in his vest.

The old barkeep then came up and asked him, "Howdy son, what's yer fancy?"

"Starwalker's soother,' please and thank you," John responded with a wearied smile.

The barkeep nodded and went straight to making it. John lifted his pinch front cowboy hat to get sweat off his brow and tried to cool himself by running a hand through his blonde hair and fanning himself a couple of times with the hat.

"Visitors may wonder about certain rumors circulated on the Interwebs of stories of space pirates attacking satellites over A'pash, but these are misleading and false information. While some satellites have been lost over A'pash, the causes are still being investigated, with micrometeoroids, solar radiation, and faulty hardware all highly likely candidates for causing the issues, leaving nothing to worry about for visitors and citizens."

His drink came quickly, and good for him too. His long space voyage to the planet followed by the hot walk into town had him exhausted and he welcomed both the chemicals and the alcohol as he took a big swig of his orange and green drink.

He let out a grunt of approval as the drink worked its magic slowly, his mind half drifting off and half listening to the audio program as it continued,

"While they are extremely rare, first time visitors should be aware of the Lester-Iago law, or put simply, the legal dueling law of A'pash. The basic idea being that, if there are disputes beyond the ability of a law court to handle, then a challenge to a supervised gun duel can be issued and considered a legal form of resolution with protections from any sanctioned violence therein. However, visitors have nothing to fear, as all new arrivals to A'pash, new citizen or not, have a thirty day-"

With all the prattle of the audio program, John barely heard the feminine voice behind him say, "Hey, baby!"

What really got his attention, though, was

the soft hand that was placed on his shoulder. He pulled the ear piece out and looked down at the hand, but before he could get a look at her, he was surprised again by a kiss, placed delicately on his right cheek.

He locked eyes with the strange woman as she pulled slowly away from his face. The dark blue of her eyes studied him as much as he studied her. Dark brown eyebrows furrowed her light skin. She was not pale per se, but her complexion was much lighter than John expected from a resident of this sun-scorched desert world. She was very dusty and dirty, though. Her hair was the same dark brown of her eyebrows, of course, but long and put up in a messy bun.

There was a round hat held by a cord behind her head, bright green in color, matching the vacsupport-jumpsuit she wore. Blue tinted goggles were in her hair. Over the jumpsuit was a sleeveless, light brown cover that broke the bright green pattern.

She was attractive, very attractive John might say, but right then he didn't care about that at all. What interested him was why she had kissed him, why she was rubbing his arm with her right hand, while she stared at him making emotionless observations. Why was she dirty? Who was she in the first place?

He guessed she had been out working on this dusty planet as the reason she was so dirty, but before he could derive any significance from that, she surprised him again, by moving her hand down to his and weaving her fingers into his.

The emotionless observations then turned into a soft and yet hollow grin as she leaned in and said softly, "I need your help. Go with the flow, please."

John's brain was working overdrive trying to figure out what her angle could possibly be, but then he realized, *the fastest way to find out is to go with the flow.*

So he gave a soft nod and watched the grin on her face become suddenly more full and real, a little genuine happiness in it.

Happiness dashed as soon as John felt a firm slap on his shoulder and heard a man behind him say, "You're a very lucky young man."

John turned to meet the gaze of the oldest of the law officers he had seen at the table. The middle aged man who had walked up to their seats had his white hair covered partially by a cowboy hat. His small stature made John guess that the hat's top barely came to the top of his own head. The rest of his garb was as stereotypical of the Old American West as the rest of the men in the bar, a vest, boots, and revolver holstered below the hip. His face was relatively young-looking for what his hair would testify; altogether John figured that the man was probably in his eighties.

The man's gaze was uncomfortable, and John did not like the plotting look he had, so he said, "Yes, sir, I think so. I'm John," extending his hand as he spoke.

The man took his hand and with a firm shake and a toothy grin replied, "Sheriff Fremont."

"A pleasure, Sheriff."

"Likewise. And you seem to have found yourself some very pleasurable company," Fremont said, pointing at the stranger whose hand was still holding his. He felt her squeeze his hand, not knowing what she might be meaning.

"Yes, sir, she certainly is something else," John said, looking back at the woman.

"Ain't that the truth. Now Sophie, how come you didn't come over and say 'Hello?' Maybe introduce your friend here."

So, her name is Sophie.

"I wasn't sure you'd care, Sheriff," Sophie said.

"Well, I care a great deal about you, missy. I'd appreciate introductions to the people you," he coughed, "associate with."

"Well, Sheriff, I aspire to be as independent as you," Sophie said, John noticing a suppressed cringe on her face.

The Sheriff must not have seen it (Sophie was good) as he replied merrily, "An admirable

goal, missy. Now if you'll both excuse me I've got a town to protect."

With that and a chuckle, the Sheriff gestured to the law officers John had seen as he entered. He then strutted out as all but one of the officers followed right after him.

When they had finally left the bar, John watched as tension fell from Sophie's shoulders. She had watched them exit, and with them gone, she let out a sigh and hung her head.

Every fiber in John's mind was screaming at him, "*Ask her what the Yspe that was about!*"

Instead he kept his hand intertwined with hers and used his other to grab his drink, chugging the rest of it in a shot. With it finished, he let out a satisfied breath, rubbed a spilled drop of the drink off his chin, and then set the glass down with a soft *clack*.

And then he paused for a moment, not looking at her.

"Hi, Sophie."

"Hi, John."

"He didn't seem *that* bad," John said, knowing he was wrong and fishing for a reaction from her.

She pulled her hand away immediately and leaned on the bar next to him. "Harold, a pint please," she yelled at the barkeep.

After a brief, "Eh'yeah," from the barkeep she sat there thinking, until she eventually said, "He was only *tolerable* because I threw myself at you so decidedly, and he was too spineless to try anything with you as an unknown risk."

She took a breath, and the soft, genuine smile returned to her face as she continued with, "Thank you John, you really helped me out there."

"Well, as a general rule I try to help out girls who kiss me," he replied.

"How very noble of you."

He smiled himself and thought for a second.

"We seem to have started at a weird step in this relationship. What with a kiss before even an introduction." He extended his hand. "I'm Jonathan Lee."

She removed her other dirty glove and took his hand in a good shake.

"I'm Sophia Sare. It's nice to meet you, John."

"You may have guessed that I'm a stranger 'round these parts. So could you help me out and tell me of any other bums I should look out for?" John asked.

She chuckled and then said, "No, no, the Sheriff is really the worst one, round these parts anyway; and seeing as you are not a young, out of town lady, you won't have much to worry about from him on the day to day."

"And nobody confronts him about that?" John asked.

"Nope, seeing as none of their own daughters are threatened by his advances. Well, that and the fact that most of the girls that blow through here aren't necessarily very 'moral young women' to begin with." She made air quotes with her fingers at "moral young women," presumably having heard that phrase often used before.

The conversation paused as Sophia's beer was delivered. As she took a drink, John said, "And then there is you."

"Mmmm, what about me?" A whimsical tone in her voice and an eyebrow arching as she turned to look at him.

"Well, separated from both those groups by being both nobody's daughter from around here, and also presumably a 'moral young women' yourself. Putting you in the position of not having the protection of the townsfolk but wanting it all the same," John reasoned.

As he spoke, her expression gradually became more interested, a mellow but decided fascination on her face. After a breath, she said, "Just like me to go and kiss a bright man."

"Or maybe just observant," John deflected, an old concern coming to the surface.

"No. That's not true."

John locked his gaze with hers, knowing that if he turned away she would know. Confidence was key.

"Oh my... how did you leave Earth-space?" Sophia asked.

Woah, what? Did I overplay that? Has she figured me out!?

John knew the thought process she had gone through, but played dumb by asking, "Why would I be restricted?"

"You are too smart to have easy access out of their borders. Did you actually get your Tec-ton travel license?"

"Didn't need it. Legally I'm a 'Normie.' Tec-ton Tier Parents, but still," John said, and while he didn't show it, he winced internally.

That was unnecessary information. I have to do better, not reveal what she doesn't need to know.

"'Legally,' ey? Is that accurate though, Jonathan?" Sophia asked, her voice becoming quieter.

"How couldn't it be? The tests are flawless," he lied.

There was a pause, then she took a shuddering breath and a twinkle appeared in her eye. She lowered her gaze and twirled some of her hair. John for his part was now very scared. He had heard stories that Earth agents were always prowling the free colonies looking for Mason level geniuses, and if "Sophia" was smart, she knew that John at the very least had fudged his test results. Which was a true intellectual feat in and of itself.

I've said too much. Der'mo! I've let my guard down too much already! You gave her your name, too! Idiot! You can't let mom and dad suffer for your failures!

His hand slipped down to his slugger subtly as the woman in front of him kept twirling her hair. As he felt the grip of his gun come into his hand, she put the strand behind an ear and raised her hand up.

"Harold!" She called.

The bartender is in on it, too!?

"A bottle of your good tequila please!" she called out.

He flinched, almost pulling his gun out right there.

Tequila?

She turned to look at him again and leaned away as she saw the wild look in his eyes he was trying to suppress.

"John? What's wrong?" She asked.

"I uh..." He covered his eyes with his other hand and took a shuddering breath.

Now he felt a soft touch on his other arm, twitching briefly as he heard her say, "John, are you alright? Did I do something? Are you feeling okay?"

John was beginning to calm down now. *Is she... just... like me? Out here in this Wilderness of free colonies? Free?*

He lowered his hand and said, "Yeah, sorry, just the... climate I'm adjusting to."

Sophia smirked at that while Harold the bar-keep set the tequila bottle down and then placed two glasses next. She opened the bottle with a loud *Pop*, and then picked up a glass and said as she poured out a drink, "Okay, liar."

She then handed him the first one and poured out the other one.

"Congratulations on getting out, John," she said in a toast.

John didn't know what else to say other than, "Thanks."

With that, they clinked glasses, and John had his second morning drink.

"Wow! That is good. How much do I owe you?" John asked.

"My treat, John, it's not everyday a genius escapes the clutches of the Masons of Earth," Sophia said, pouring them both another one.

"Besides, you did have to get kissed by me."

"Well, I'll just have to manage the deep, emotional damage you've inflicted on me with a third glass of this delicious stuff," John said, grabbing his refilled glass.

"An excellent plan," Sophia said, clinking her glass to his again.

But as he lifted his drink a scream came from just outside.

And then the shooting started.

Chapter 2

"Everybody get down!" the barkeep yelled.

John didn't; instead he shot out of his seat, almost knocking Sophia over in the commotion, and whipped out his Tosaki-Durnell. He moved to the close side of the saloon doors and yelled at the barkeep, "Harold! What are your walls made of?"

"Astroluminum."

"Yspers!" John swore as he slid down the wall, which Harold the barkeep had just told him wasn't bulletproof.

He whipped out his personal device and got to the camera, then stuck it around the corner, under the bottom of the saloon doors, and looked around as best he could.

He watched as an armored, helmeted man with an assault rifle of a make he didn't recognize burst fired down the street, and if John was right, he was firing at the Sheriff's office.

This man, this raider, John also was able to see was crouching in front of a large, two seat speeder as well. One that looked like the old motorcycles of the past.

This flow I'm going with has gone off the rails!

With that info he pulled his device back and put it into his pocket. He looked up just in time to see another man come to the other side of the doors. He had a scruff on his stress-worn face, his clothes different from most of the other men John had seen there with a trench coat instead of a vest and no cowboy hat on his head. He had a large revolver in his hand, and John watched as he put a finger to a print reader on the bottom of the grip; the next moment a virtual Deputy's star appeared on his trench coat.

It was the last law officer from the table.

The man muttered quiet curses as he loaded his revolver. When he finished, he cocked it and then returned John's stare.

"Who are you?" he asked.

"John Lee, and I see that you are Deputy Harrison Kraggs," John replied, reading the Deputy star and the I.D. it had on it.

"So you can read, ey? Can you shoot?"

"Hilarious, yes, I can shoot. Can you?"

"Hilarious. What did you see when you poked your device around the corner?" Kraggs asked.

"An armored man with an assault rifle and two seat speeder firing at the Sheriff's office," John said.

"Blast it! Blasted raiders and kidnappers probably!" Kraggs paused and tilted his head. "And based on the sounds out there we are looking at a full scale pillaging."

John had not focused on the sounds outside, but as soon as he did he heard exactly what Kraggs' was talking about. It sounded like a fierce battle was happening at the Sheriff's office with full auto firing booming through the air, nearly drowning out the screams from around town.

"How come we didn't see them coming? It's all flat desert for miles around," John asked.

"If they have speeders they could rush up quickly. The real blasted question is how we didn't *hear* them coming! The defensive grid should have sent them all down to the abyss with a sound like thunder and we didn't hear a thing!" Kraggs yelled, frustration in his voice.

John pondered that and its implications for a moment before snapping himself back to the present. He took a nervous breath, *Whatever you do, do it now, and commit all the way!* he thought to himself.

It would be easier to stay in here... But something in the back of his head convicted him to "go with the flow" one more time. After he realized what he had to do, he also realized that it could have other benefits for establishing himself there.

But that is all for the future. For right now...

"What are you going to do?" John asked the Deputy.

He was rubbing his chin thinking, and blurted out in frustration, "I don't know! Maybe try to make it into the Sheriff's office and see what his plan is."

"Okay, and what do you want me to do?"

That got the Deputy's attention. He looked at Jonathan, confused, before simply asking, "What?"

"Deputy, how do you want me to assist you?" John rephrased his question.

"Deputy! Don't worry about my bar and customers! We can take care of ourselves!" Harold yelled from behind his bar as he chambered a shotgun with a loud, *Chck-chck*.

John turned and also saw the customers with revolvers drawn, all taking cover behind over turned tables and with guns aimed at the door. Sophia was also crouching with the rest of them near the bar, a laser pistol in her hand. When their eyes met for a brief moment she raised an eyebrow in surprise. When he turned back, he saw the change on the Deputy's face from confusion to a joy in his eyes and smirk on his lips.

"Harold, drop any raider that enters your establishment!" Krag's ordered. He turned to John next and said, "If you can help me get to the Sheriff's Office, that might get me to commend you to him."

"Mmm, we'll see about that," John said as he stood and cocked his gun, activating its acceleration rails and other electrical enhancements with a soft *vrtrrrrm*.

"That one raider directly in front of the door, I need to take him out first," the Deputy informed John.

"Okay."

"And well, since I'm required to do this next part by law, John, I, Deputy Harrison Krag's, do formally request you help me engage and arrest several violent criminals and protect the town of Brownville and its good people. Are you willing?"

"Yes, officer. What's the play?"

"We smoke this bugger outside first, then you cover me as I go next door to the town hall on the right," Krag's started.

"Alright."

"Then you come back here and help guard this building and the intersection right outside."

"Agreed."

"And we go out on three," Krag's finished.

Jonathan nodded, his pulse pounding like a drum.

"Three," Krag's began.

"Two." Outside the sounds of gunfire picked up followed by more screams of terror.

"One."

They each threw open a saloon door and rushed outside onto the "Boardwalk." The raider was right where John had seen him, still aiming toward the Sheriff's office. John got a better look at his helmet then, seeing it was both armored and a survival helmet, with long tubes attached to both sides of the helmet coming together in the middle.

He also saw that the raider wasn't expecting them, and with that he and Krag's both fired.

BANG!

The bullets struck the raider back to back, John's glowing blue one hitting the hip, and Krag's entering the upper torso. The man dropped right there.

As his vision narrowed and his mind fell away, John scanned their flanks, to his left near the intersection of Helios Lane and Main Street and saw two raiders next to another speeder. One of them yelled, "They got Juk!"

John opened fire right away. He aimed for the one in front who had yelled and was pulling his assault rifle up, and then squeezed the trigger.

BANG!

And missed.

The shot went right past the raider and hit the speeder behind him, somehow right in the battery block.

The explosion was deafening.

Not only deafening, but beautiful, blue and orange energy shooting out as the speeder blew to pieces. Powerful as well, the shock wave throwing both John and Krag's into the bar wall.

"Ahhh..." John groaned in pain at both the blast and the ringing now in his ears. After five excruciating seconds the ringing stopped and he managed to pick himself up and start moving

again. Looking around he saw Krag do the same just a second after him; he also saw that another raider who had just come out of a building had been killed by shrapnel from the speeder. The two raiders that had been next to the speeder were both gone, blown apart by the explosion.

Krag started running toward the battle at the Sheriff's office, but a raider far down the street saw this and fired a burst at the Deputy, pinning him.

The raider doing the pinning was across the street from the Sheriff's office, in front of the town's local hotel, and was a long shot for John to make.

Steady your grip, John... then aim...

With a *BANG BANG*, he managed to plant two quick shots into the raider's torso, sending him dead to the dirt. Krag looked up after with surprise on his face to see the man gone.

"Go! I'll cover you!" John yelled at the Deputy.

Krag didn't wait; he ran a full sprint down the boardwalk as John watched the mass of speeders by the Sheriff's office for anyone turning their fire on the Deputy.

As Krag passed the alley next to the bar, he turned his head as John heard a "Help me!" come from it.

Krag kept running, but yelled back at John, "Help her!"

John listened and approached the alleyway, still watching to see if Krag needed help. But the run was short and John watched as Krag dodged a handful of bullets and got into the Sheriff's office.

He made it!

Seeing the small victory, John clutched his gun in both hands as he came to the corner of the bar. He took a breath, and then rushed around gun first.

He saw a middle aged woman held by one of the masked marauders, the raider saw John too and put the woman in front of him and put his pistol to her head.

"Back off or I blow her brains out!" he yelled,

the woman struggling fruitlessly and screaming in fear.

John's gun was level with the raider's head, mostly exposed over the woman's shoulder. The raider was very serious, but John couldn't let him take the woman. *I'm going to have to take the shot*, he realized.

As this deadly intent came, time slowed even more, he focused on nothing but his target, a tiny spot in the helmet's viewport

He squeezed the trigger, in a moment that felt like a thousand.

A flash! *BANG!* Blue light streaked in an instant toward the man's helmet. John missed the viewport, but still hit one of the large tubes on the helmet, causing blood and water vapor to spray outward as the raider's head was thrown back.

While the raider did fumble, he did not drop. *Best be sure*, John thought. He sidestepped and fired again; this time with no hostage in his way he placed the bullet right in the raider's chest, knocking him over.

With that he lowered his gun, approached the woman, and said, "It's okay, you're alright."

"Thank you," she responded in between sobs.

"It's alright. Here, come hide over here," John said, helping the woman get behind a recycler in the alleyway, easily big enough to hide her from the street.

After helping her down, he scanned their surroundings. There were no raiders anywhere he could see,. Based on what he could hear, John could tell that the only serious danger was by the Sheriff's office. The combat sounded even more intense now.

But then the hairs raised on the back of his neck as heard something from the other side of the bar.

Right after a furiously quick moment of yelling and shooting, he heard the yelp of a Tiger, followed by terrified screams.

"Stay here!" he said to the woman, before running around the back of the bar.

When he rounded the corner he skidded to a

halt. He saw two raiders by a bigger speeder, with three seats instead of two and a thicker plate of armor on the front. One of the raiders looked different as well, his helmet was more advanced and cleaner, and he had two different tactical sashes going across his chest. One held a large set of ancient flare guns, and the other a string of equally old, high yield grenades.

The other raider was sitting on the large speeder in the driver's seat, and neither had seen him yet. Even so he cowered immediately and tried not to make any sudden movements, raising his pistol slowly.

His heart was beating in his ears as he worried he would be spotted. As he moved slowly he saw the different raider yell something at somebody he couldn't see, and then pull out one of the flare guns. He shot it into the air, a bright green light with a trail of green chemical smoke trailing behind it.

"We have them! Retreat!" the raider yelled.

Oh, no! He must be their leader. Krag said they were probably kidnappers, so was this whole attack just a distraction for this kidnapping? And they have "them," their targets?! Blast!

There was no one else near who could do anything. John raised his pistol up, but then hesitated.

I'm outnumbered, outmatched... and the victims' only chance.

And all I have to do is go with the flow...

He fired.

And grazed!

But his second shot struck the raider leader right in the stomach, and the third hit the hip. The leader toppled as John switched targets. The driver of the large speeder reached for his pistol and turned to see him in an instant, just in time for John's fourth shot to hit him in the heart.

"Blast! They killed da boss! Go!" he heard a voice yell.

Since the two he could see were dead, John raced up around the back of the bar prepared for more. As he rounded the corner, however, he saw two other speeders, with one raider and one bound young woman on each, just as both

of them rushed away back past the front of the bar.

There was a split second where John raised to shoot, but with the women on the vehicles he held his fire, not wanting to hit them. So they sped off at high speeds, rushing out of the town, John standing there, quiet. Besides speeders racing away and the dry wind, the town itself fell silent, no more bullets shooting through the air.

"Errrrraughh..."

John turned toward the sound that had broken the silence, the groan of an animal, but not just a feral growl, but one filled with sorrow.

It had come from the border of the mansion John had passed, right across the street from the bar. White fence was broken, and there were two figures lying on the ground near the entrance, one a dark-haired man face down in the dirt, blood pooled in some of the dust around him.

The other a Tiger.

Obviously a member of the elevated race that lived among humans. The Tiger had a simple shirt and pants with multiple scorch marks and tears from other wounds. The creature was still alive, but its breathing was heavy, and it, too, was down in the dirt. John knew very well that anything that could down a Tiger like this must have been extreme.

It was trying to rise, but clearly could not. John ran up to it and said, "Hey, hey! Stop, slow down, you are badly wounded!"

He took its pulse with one hand, (*not as strong as it should be,*) and put his other up to its nose, a gesture that would let it sniff him and trust him more on an instinctual level. Even in its rough state John wanted it to trust him rather than tear him apart.

A large furry paw grabbed his head. John couldn't dodge it in time and grabbed it back with his two arms, hoping that maybe he could pry it off before it ripped off his jaw.

But instead of mortally wounding him with a flex of its claws, the Tiger turned its head and looked him right in the eyes.

"Save," It coughed up blood violently, but

then took a breath and said much stronger, "Save the girls..."

"Please."

With that, the paw fell away, and it gave a pained roar before collapsing unconscious back into the dust.

He stood slowly, his mind racing.

He turned and watched far off in the distance; the two speeders were now joined by more and rushing away.

How? How could I even do it? I don't even have a vehicle.

His gaze then turned toward the large speeder whose driver he had killed. He let out a shaking breath as a shiver went down his spine. It would be almost impossible, he might die, and he didn't know if he could even get the girls away from the raiders at all.

But I have never refused a Tiger anything, not once.

"And I'm not starting today," he whispered to the wind.

He stood still for a moment, and then ran toward the large speeder, a plan forming in his mind. He needed weapons, and the leader's assault rifle and explosives both would serve well. He also took the flare guns thinking they may prove useful and grabbed as many rifle magazines as he could find.

The select fire looks like a Pomel Interstellar design, single-shot, full-auto, and safety on the bottom. Thirty round magazines of old time metal bullets, iron sights, short barrel... If the bullets go out the right end I'll do good work with this.

He snapped in a magazine, chambered the rifle, and slung it over his shoulder. He then stood and grabbed the helmet of the dead driver, still on the man's head. He pulled it just right so that the corpse came off the speeder and the helmet came off the corpse.

He quickly secured the sash of explosives and then the flare guns and mounted the speeder. He stared at the controls, reading what was labeled, seeing the symbols on various buttons, and deduced how to drive it.

"John! What are you doing!?"

Krags had just come from around the front

of the bar. John didn't respond to the question, he couldn't waste a second. Instead he pointed towards the man and Tiger and shouted,

"Take care of them! Their wounds are bad!"

John put on the desert survival helmet. The helmet's heads-up display was minimal, although it did have a rangefinder that followed his eyes.

And measures in old yards, weird.

The HUD also displayed the temperature and how full its water supplies were. Next he pressed the button helpfully labeled "Front Seat Belt," and watched as the metal clamps crawled up his body and secured him in place. He leaned forward and grabbed the handle bars.

Then revved the engine.

Nothing happened, except a button began flashing with a "Disengage Brake" alert.

Oh.

He pushed the button and braced himself. This time as he revved the engine, he shot forward, but used to quick accelerations, he had no problem adjusting and turned down Main Street to pursue the raiders.

He heard Krags yell again, "What are you doing!?" But he was going too fast to respond. When he got onto Main Street and had his straight shot out of town, he accelerated and shot down the road. Brownville went by in a blur, but he still saw shattered windows, bullet holes everywhere, and a homestead burning down.

As he broke past the last line of houses, he saw a cloud of dust being kicked up to the south. *Dust kicked up by speeders.* His targets found, he sped up into the desert alone. He hoped that he would be followed and joined by allies, some Deputies perhaps, but he worried that none would come.

Chapter 3

Rushing out into the desert, John saw a tower rising above the otherwise flat ground. It was the same tan color as its surroundings, but had too many clean lines to be natural.

A camouflaged tower? Why wo- OH! Oh, no.

A loud voice boomed across the desert, coming from the tower and four other locations John couldn't discern, "REBOOT COMPLETE."

He passed the tower, but looked back at it as he heard a mechanical shift. He watched as the top came up and swiveled around, and a large gun extend out and track him.

Hjek! The defensive grid Krag mentioned. It was deactivated? And now its not!

John didn't have time to think about the ramifications of that; instead he veered hard to the left as the tower powered up with a loud VRRRMMMMMM!

He swerved back to the right just as the tower fired.

BOOM!

John would have been thrown from the speeder if he hadn't been strapped in. The high explosive shell had not hit him directly, but it was still a high explosive shell. The explosion wracked his body and vehicle, tossing him far to his right. It also kicked up shrapnel, John felt a large rock shatter against his left shoulder, and something scraped along his back in a grazing cut.

The blast also had thrown the speeder to the right. It had not crashed, but it had needed to right itself, bobbing up and down as it stabilized.

But John stayed focused. His G-force implants had kept him from being disoriented and he grabbed the handle bars and got himself accelerating again. But the defensive tower was powering up again, and he could now see two others farther away with guns trained on him.

He focused on listening to the towers; they were all charging nearly in sync. *Come on... come on...* The towers all charged VRRRMMM...

And John twisted his accelerator hard.

He shot forward in an instant, and the shells landed behind him. This acceleration was a lot more potent than the first, and John felt his G-force implants generated chemicals that flowed into his system in order to keep him completely focused. The blast of the three explosions hit his back hard, but they also pushed him forward even faster.

John knew he had gotten lucky; though, the towers were very modern and should've been able to track him no matter what maneuvers he pulled. *My speeder probably has a range distorter, but that won't save me without some skilled driving.*

...

Well, it's do or die I guess.

He started listening to all the towers charging up as best he could. Hearing the one to the far left come up to max, he slowed down drastically, and the shot landed in front of him.

Five variables, three only if you count the three towers in near sync with each other. I can only detect it by sound, and I have to dodge at just the right time...

For the next tower, he banked hard to the left as it fired, but the shot landed too close, and the blast threw him and his vehicle forward.

Blast!

He stabilized just as the other three towers charged up. There was a red bar that read "Danger" on his speedometer. John knew he hadn't pushed his accelerator all the way.

So he took a breath and did just that.

"Oh yeahhhhhhhh!!!" -B-B-BOOM!

The explosions rocked behind him as John blazed forward. His implants heated up as they worked to keep him focused. The ground shot past him, and his helmet's HUD told him that he was going "600 MPH."

He turned south again and heard as the next two shots fell behind him without so much as kicking dirt up on him. He took some pressure off the accelerator but was close to breaking the sound barrier.

The farther he got from the towers, the less accurate their shots became. He weaved side to side just for safety, but John knew he had made

it out. It wasn't long before the next shot he should have heard didn't go off, and when he looked back the guns were silent.

"Oh, yes... oh, gosh," John said, breathing a sigh of relief, not realizing how tense he had been.

He slowed his speeder down out of the "Danger" zone, and then looked at the dust cloud. His HUD told him it was around three miles ahead of him, and he was able to guess that the raiders were going about 400 MPH. So he slowed himself down to 410 MPH and found the "Cruise Control" button.

His speeder was kicking up dust like all the others, but John could still see behind him. When he checked to make sure the defensive cannons were deactivated, he saw just how far he had gotten from Brownville, the hills disappearing quickly behind him as he raced out into the flat desert.

But what struck John more than anything was the fact that there was no one coming after him. No one racing out of Brownville in order to help him on his Good Samaritan mission.

Not even Krags.

Surely somebody will come. Surely the girls aren't the only people out here that DON'T want to kill me.

He looked back again; not one lone speeder was rushing out of town to help him save these girls.

Space them! Space them all and focus, Jonathan! You aren't going back, not until you've saved the girls. Now think! This is hard, but not impossible. What do you have?

The element of surprise was the first thing he figured. With all the dust they were kicking up and how far away they were, John felt confident that the raiders hadn't spotted him yet, or even suspected any pursuit.

Grenades, as well. The cruise control held him stable as he pulled out one of the explosives and studied it. It was extremely simple, a large cylinder with a pin at the top, but based on their size alone John knew they packed some power.

Beyond that and his small assortment of

personal weapons, John had nothing else to speak of.

He took a breath and tried to focus on his driving rather than the odds against him.

I'd put the odds... Ten to one against me.

He took himself out of cruise control so that he would be forced to focus on his driving. He had already been pursuing the raiders for half an hour, and as he focused on following them through the barren landscape, the minutes began to tick by slow and steady.

He drove onward, waiting for anything to happen; the sheer nothingness did not help John get his mind off his probable death. So he turned his mind to deducing everything he could about his enemy.

Why raid a town to get just two girls? Sure they are wealthy, but the casualties they took are surely not worth just getting a little spending money. There is no question that the girls were THE target, but what can you do with them other than blackmail the authorities, or more likely, their parents?

He was stumped until he remembered the large mansion, and the sentient Tiger that most likely would have been enhanced by the family themselves.

How are they so rich? What did that man in the dirt do to get so wealthy?

And for that matter, why didn't they execute him and the Tiger? Unless they want them alive so that they can be blackmailed! Hmmm...

So the father is the key to this.

...

Little good that does you now, John.

He kept driving, straight south at high speeds, nothing in sight but sand and a little dust cloud straight ahead.

It was another hour before something changed suddenly.

The raiders turned right.

Driving westward now. Why? Why now? There are no landmarks. How would they even know to t- Oh no! Oh no, oh no! The dust cloud is behind them, they have a clear view of me now! Blasting Oltzitz!

He cut his speed by a third and tried to turn

to a less visible angle, but John feared the worst. His element of surprise was likely gone; they knew he was coming.

A thought occurred to him, however, an advantage he could try to exploit. He fiddled with some settings on his helmet until he found a zoom feature, and he zoomed in on the raider column, which he hadn't been able to see until then.

It was not a clear image, and John struggled to make out his opponents. *Six... no seven speeders. And the people, blast they are so small! Um, at least a dozen.*

So... twelve, minus two hostages equals ten raiders.

The irony struck him a moment later.

I guess ten to one odds was pretty accurate.

He kept pursuing them, falling in behind their formation again. The travel was now due west, and John began to count the minutes. Twenty-seven in the raiders turned again, this time to the left, driving southwest.

He followed and kept track of the time going this new direction. Only ten minutes in, however, the sand cloud began to disappear. Thirty seconds later it was gone. John zoomed in with his helmet, but saw no speeders waiting for him. In fact he saw nothing at all other than the same desert and horizon.

"They disappeared!" John yelled, before devolving into a creative assortment of expletives about the raiders and their disappearing act.

He slowed down, caution now in his approach as he tried to figure out what had happened. He tried to guess how it was even possible, because anything other than state of the art holograms wouldn't have made them disappear so suddenly.

As he moved closer to the disappearance, however, he discovered the cause as much more benign.

A sheer cliff that broke the flat desert and descended down quite a ways. As he approached, he slowed his speeder to a halt and leapt off and headed to the edge on foot, walking up slowly, his assault rifle locked and loaded.

When he got a glance of something over the edge, he got down into a belly crawl and scooted himself up to the precipice in the extreme desert heat. With his perch, he saw just how the raiders had disappeared. No speeder could have made the twenty meter drop over the cliff edge, but there was a large ramp right next to the edge that descended down the cliff.

It was made of loose stones that seemed to have been blown right off the cliff side, making it clearly unstable for anything other than speeders, and even then John doubted just how safe it was.

But it was doable, evidenced by all the raiders now being parked down below the ledge, their bikes sitting near a strange set of structures.

Strange looking, anyway. There were three small buildings, all metal and covered in dust. One was so small he figured it could only be a storage shed. One was near a small solar array and appeared to have various power related utilities around it, as well as a moisture collector and a small water tank attached to one side. The last was a small building with a large air conditioner attached and one of the speeders parked next to it.

With the air conditioner, it must be a barracks of sorts. That must be where the girls are.

A second speeder was parked in between the utility building and barracks. The rest of them were all parked away from the buildings at a set of four standing batteries, probably connected to the solar array somehow, and were recharging their speeder's battery packs.

It was a way station. A "refueling" point for the raiders.

Which had lots of implications.

What the hjek! This is... established industry! There is no way they could have this without a well-funded and LONG established operation. And why do they need this? Well, that answer is easy, they need to refuel because the journeys they take are that long.

Which means that, if I don't stop them here, we are going to keep riding south or wherever else in this blasted desert until I trace them to

their headquarters...

"Aw..." Another torrent of swear words escaped John's lips, not as creative and more subdued, though, by his exhaustion. His HUD was telling him it was now 41°C outside. He drank out of his water supply, but he knew that he himself was operating on nothing but a Starliner food breakfast and two alcoholic beverages himself, not to mention whatever his speeder was at for its own power.

Now or never, I keep going like this and I am royally spaced. I have to attack now...

He turned his gaze back over the edge and observed the raiders. He could see eight at the batteries recharging their vehicles. One appeared to be standing guard in the most minimal way he could while the others conversed amongst themselves as their speeders recharged.

The girls and whatever remaining raiders were nowhere in sight. *Meaning they are in that building.* He thought through his options. He didn't think he could feign to be one of their own. If he tried picking them off from the ledge then they could just threaten the girls and he'd be screwed. Even if they needed to use them for blackmail, they could still kill one of the girls and have what they wanted.

He kept going through various ways he could engage them, but then he remembered something from the shootout in Brownville. When he had shot the speeder in the battery pack with his gun...

And here they were, parked next to giant battery packs, and John had grenades now.

He ran to his speeder. They didn't seem on high alert so his element of surprise was still partially in play and every moment he sat there was wasted now. He had to save the girls quickly, or he was going to have to drive deeper into that cursed desert.

He jumped on his speeder, took off the sash of grenades, and then strapped himself in. He checked his assault rifle, made sure he had a full mag, and chambered it. He did the same with both of his pistols, and then holstered them and

slung his assault rifle over his back. He checked the grenades one last time to make sure he understood them as best he could.

All that done, he approached the ramp down the cliff. The raiders hadn't seemed to slow down, so John reasoned that high speed descents were probably better.

"Uggghhhhh..." He groaned, as he second guessed himself. It was a dangerous descent, and an even more dangerous plan.

Idiot! This is all your idea! You know this is the best idea you'll have. Fully commit or walk away now!

He took a breath and hit the accelerator.

He shot over the edge and onto the ramp. He looked over to see all the raiders turn and stare at him before he shifted all his focus to surviving the next twenty seconds of his life.

It was the most precarious slope he'd ever been on. It was surprisingly flat, but still very rough. Large rocks occasionally jutted up above their fellow stones and added the extra bit of maneuvering John had to do. The speeders downward thrusters also pushed down on the stones and gravel, making the ground shift beneath him as he rushed down. And while it was wide, John was having to make very sure that his vehicle did not slip too far to one side and send him plummeting to his death.

He made it farther and farther down, the desert floor approaching rapidly, his breath bated all the while.

"Ahhhhhhhhh!" He screamed as he raced off the ramp at the bottom. He had made it. He had done it.

He let out several shuddering breaths as the adrenaline coursed through his system. "Aw yeah, yeeehawwww!" he yelled with joy.

Relieved to be alive he got ready to risk his life again. He turned his speeder toward his foes at an angle that would let him drive past them, but also put him safely in throwing distance. *The key part of the plan.* He grabbed the sash of grenades via one of the explosive canisters, and looped a finger through its pin.

And then shot forward.

He accelerated and accelerated, wanting to go as fast as possible for what he was about to do. The raiders stood there watching him, but after he had picked up speed and it was clear he wasn't slowing down, they drew their weapons and yelled. He didn't hear anything over his roaring engine and kept charging them.

So they opened fire.

A little at first, but five seconds in, John was in a bullet storm as full auto rifle fire was sent his direction. Most of the bullets missed, but even five hundred yards away John still heard a few *ping* of his speeder's frontal armor. His HUD proved its worth as he rushed his foes, telling him just how far he was.

"400 Yards."

As he sped closer, he set the cruise control and took his hands off the handle bars. It was a straight shot there and he wanted both hands to thrown the big grenade belt.

"250 Yards."

His vision narrowed as the adrenaline began to course through his veins; he kept his firmest grip on the grenades, and he lowered his head some as the raider's fire intensified even more.

"200 Yards."

He prepared to throw, picking out a central spot he wanted to hit. Scores of bullets now ricocheting off his speeder's armor, showering sparks into his face.

"145 Yards."

John had thought the bullet swarm was intense before, but as he closed the gap it increased dramatically.

"120 Yards."

John's ears were filled with the sounds of *ping ping pi-pi-ping ping!* as the bullets got more and more accurate.

"100 Yards."

PING! A louder noise was followed by a violent jolt to John's head. His helmet had been hit, and it threw him back. He was disoriented himself, and the sudden jerk of his body caused his speeder to shift off course.

His HUD in his helmet was no longer on his target, but John knew he was still fast approaching, but now knocked off balance.

Blast! Was all John could think as he tried to pull himself back into a throwing position.

"52 Yards."

John managed to pull himself up and quickly adjusted his speeder back on course, sparks flying past his head the whole while, the wind rushing past him with the bullets.

"33 Yards."

John raised his head to get a better view of his targets.

"21 Yards."

He pulled the pin as a bullets grazed his helmet.

"9 Yards."

Through all the fire, he managed to chuck the grenade sash toward the batteries in the middle.

He turned away and then cranked the accelerator as high as it would go. He whisked away, keeping his body low. Looking back at the raiders, he saw that the bullets had stopped as their survival instincts kicked in. The raiders were running as fast as their legs could carry them from the grenades.

But it wasn't enough.

The grenade went off and had enough power that it detonated all the others on the sash, and those burst the nearest standing batteries and speeders, and the chain reaction kept going.

The explosion was beautiful. The batteries' energies spewed out like a volcano. Electric bolts shot out of the orange-blue core of the explosion, The core glowed like a Sun-Flare. It was so bright that John had to look away, and so powerful that even though he had raced over a hundred yards away it still knocked him forward, hurt his chest, and caused his ears to ring through his helmet.

After the shock wave hit, he slowed the speeder down gradually and turned back. The dust blown up into the air was a hundred yards high and a small amount was even landing on him. As the ringing in his ears subsided, John watched the pillar of dirt fall back to the ground. He looked over at the barracks next; the structures had all survived the blast shock-

ingly well and none of them seemed to have any major damage.

And I bet whoever is left is scared stiff! I've got to move fast, though.

So with his ears recovered, he drove back towards the barracks. He saw that there truly was nothing left that had survived the blast, only scattered pieces of metal, and sometimes flesh. He passed the speeder between the two larger buildings and then parked himself near the barracks door.

He pulled his assault rifle up to bear as he dismounted from his speeder, checking the chamber and safety for the umpteenth time to make sure they were what he wanted.

Loaded and semi-auto, good.

Looking down his iron sights he did a quick scan of the area and then approached the door. The structure's exterior was Astroluminum, and the door was no exception. He ruled out kicking it open, worrying it would expose himself too much, so he hugged the right side of the wall and faced the entrance, rifle first.

He reached out his hand for the door knob and gave it a soft twist.

Click.

He tried his best to stay quiet, hearing his heavy breathing in his helmet as he pushed the door gently.

Eeeeeee...

The door pushed open a few inches with a noise that made John wince. He gripped his rifle with both hands and then shifted and kicked the door. It flew open, and he entered fast and scanned for threats. The left corner of the room, *clear*. There were metal bunks, storage lockers, and more doors on each side of the room, and a table in back.

Then he saw the girls, sitting back to back on metal chairs, either unconscious or dazed. He could see that neither of them were tied up but one was sitting with her back to him, and all he could make out was her bright red hair. The girl facing him was brunette, and he could see that her once nice white sundress was now covered in dust and blood, and she had a wound on

her head that looked like she had been struck with a blunt object.

The center, clear.

But as he turned toward the right corner of the room a raider lunged at him and knocked his rifle away before he could fire. John raised his hands to fight, but the raider followed up by pistol whipping him in the helmet before he could react, knocking him back into the wall.

I found the blunt object!

John's head was spinning, and he raised his arms to cover his torso and face, hoping that the next attack would be a fist and not a bullet.

But no attack came, instead, a question.

"Who da heat arr you?"

John realized then that it was his helmet. He looked like one of the raiders instead of some law enforcement officer.

Or at least, from the waist up. The raider looked over his clothes next, which were clearly not that of a desert bandit, but before the man could realize the truth, John said, "Hey!"

The raider looked up.

"My eyes are up here, buddy."

John then swatted the pistol out of the man's hand and threw a punch with his left straight for the neck.

This proved to be unfortunate for everyone involved.

John knew a throat punch could end the fight right then, but he also had a small window to hit, and then the raider shifted. His fist instead hit the large, metal helmet.

The raider was knocked backwards into the wall behind him. John felt his hand break with a sickening *crrikk*.

"Ahhhhhhhhh...!"

He stood there gasping from the pain, but he knew that he had to press his advantage as best he could. He stumbled over toward the raider, grasping his wrist until he got closer. The raider was starting to move away from the wall, but John just heel kicked him back into the wall, his next yell one of rage, not pain. He rushed toward his dazed foe and threw a punch into the much less armored stomach.

This spot is soft!

He let loose, whaling into the raider's chest over and over and over again with his good arm. As he struck the man's ribcage repeatedly, he eventually heard the *crrrikkks* of broken bones coming from his foe.

But the man was still standing.

So John grabbed him by his helmet, pulled it forward, and then slammed it back into the metal wall.

CLANG!

He pulled back and did it again.

CLANG!

The raider tried to pry John's hand off. He let go only to throw a punch into the raider's chest and cause him to keel over. He then grabbed the helmet again and sent it back up into the wall.

CLANG!

CLANG! CLANG!

John roared with rage as he continued his assault,

CLANG! CLANG!

CLANG!

With one last effort,

CLANG!

And with that final blow, he was too exhausted to continue. He then noticed that the raider wasn't moving either, and when he let go of the helmet the raider slid down the wall and let out a soft groan, and John saw that he had actually dented the metal wall he had smashed his foe against. His foe, who was now knocked out on the ground.

His rage satiated, John felt anew the pain in his hand. He looked at it through his padded gloves as best he could; it seemed to him that he had several broken knuckles, and maybe a bone or two.

Probably endless fractures as well.

He looked around to see if there were any medical supplies in sight.

No, but I should look in the lockers if I can.

But he had something else to do just then.

The brunette was still stunned from the blow, but the aggression and yelling of the battle that had just taken place had clearly gotten

the other's attention. As John turned to look at her, his gaze was met with one in return, one both clearly in shock and very afraid.

She is scared of me. Unsurprising... OH! And not helped by this blasted thin, John realized, as he then took his raider helmet off with his one good hand.

He was blinded a little by the glare, but as his eyes adjusted he looked at the girls again. The one looking at him was probably in her early twenties. She had freckles, was wearing a green sundress, and was meeting his gaze with brown eyes. Her sister was still unconscious but John could now tell that she was younger, in her teens only.

"Hello," John said softly, with as much of a smile as he could. The girl, *well this one is a woman, John...* The woman looked at him and didn't make a sound.

And then he saw something out the corner of his eye, and a well trained instinct made him reach for his Tosaki-Durnell.

"Get dow-!"

BANG-BA-BANG!

The woman screamed, but that was only a distant sensation as John's ear rang and he fell to the ground. As he blacked out the last thing he recalled was that his shot had hit true, the raider was on the ground with him.

BANG!

John shot up off the ground, causing his head to spin. His brain was muddled, but he knew two things- his gun was in hand, and the raider was still alive, he had only hit him in the shoulder.

He rushed to stand, but had to catch himself on a wall as the world spun, and he lost his balance. He needed to get up, to see what was going on, but his vision spun as much as his head.

The one thing that worked well were his ears, their surgical enhancement letting him hear the footfall behind him.

Taking a deep breath he whipped around and put his back against the wall, pointing his handgun out into the room that he couldn't see.

"Stay back!" He managed to yell out in his

stupor.

His vice grip on his pistol was met with a different feeling entirely, a soft touch from the person he could tell was near. For the second time that day John's hand was gripped by feminine fingers.

"Its okay, we're safe now," the woman said.

John's eyes began to recover as he felt the woman standing next to him, all he saw being a mess of red hair.

"Wha- what happened?" he got out, panting.

"I shot him, he's dead."

Chapter 4

He focused on the image and voice of the woman in front of him, her red hair surrounding her face like a cloud. He found, though, that when he did, a sharp pain grew in his abdomen and left arm, the latter of which he didn't seem to be able to move.

"You're badly wounded," she said to him. She was looking him over, looking at the areas that hurt increasingly as John came back to himself.

"I've been shot," he said, thinking aloud.

"Twice," the woman added, now fiddling with his pants.

"What are you doing?" John asked, surprised even in his stupor.

"Getting your knife so that I can bandage you," she replied, opening his knife with a *click*, only to then drop it to the floor.

"Your hands are shaking," John observed, his eyesight finally returning to normal.

"Yeah, well, I've had a rough day!" she shouted, pent up emotion bursting forth. All John could do was look at her, and he saw her angry resolve break into shuddering breaths and tearing eyes. He could tell she was resisting crying, but after everything that had just happened, he didn't think she could. So he stumbled his way over to her and hugged her with one good arm as she broke down. She sobbed into his shoulder and held him tight as the whole day came crashing down on her. He tried not to

gasp as she pressured his bullet wounds, but the pain was too much.

She stopped sobbing and stepped away, tears running down her face, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, here let's... let's bandage you up."

"No, not... not yet," John got out, "check your sister first."

"Oh blast! Gladys!" she yelled, running back to her sister right then.

John sank back against the wall, pain flaring in his chest as he did. He couldn't feel much pain in his left hand anymore, but it was replaced with an even stronger one in his bicep. He looked at his arm, but could only stand to stare at his mangled flesh long enough to know that his arm was basically useless and he was going to start losing a lot of blood when the adrenaline decreased in his system.

Blast!

The older sister had woken up the other, "*Gladys*" her name is "*Gladys*," and was embracing her, checking her head wound, and saying a lot of things to her that John was catching none of.

Blood flow, I've got to stop it or I'll bleed out before I can get them out of this burning place.

He noticed his jumpsuit had engaged its auto-tourniquet for his arm, the pressure immense, but it was already saving him a lot of blood.

But not enough, Yspers!

It was then he remembered he had a coagulant kit in his vest, a metallic ointment that could help blood clot. As he applied it to his wounds it stung at first, but then as it started to sink in and work his wounds both flashed with fresh pain. He gritted his teeth and clenched his good fist trying to sit through the pain. The pain was bad enough that he grunted through his teeth and fresh sweat slicked his brow before eventually it started to ease.

"Are you okay?"

John grunted before getting a laugh out.

"No, of course you aren't."

"Even medicine is painful," John said, still laughing.

Gladys spoke then, but he couldn't hear her,

almost missing it entirely.

"What did you say?" he asked, just now realizing that she was standing up and conscious.

"That you are going to be in for a world of hurt, if medicine is hurting ya, too." Gladys said, meeting his gaze for the first time. Her brown eyes looked glazed over, but she was somehow still present enough to be funny.

"Gladys! He saved our lives!" the redhead scolded her sister.

"Yeah, Flur, I know. That's why I'm building a rapport with him through my..." Her head nodded and she wobbled in a brief loss of consciousness, "my sense of humor!" she finished.

"Gladys, are you okay? Stay with me!" "Flur" said.

"My head hurts, Flur," Gladys replied.

"Welcome to the Pain Club," John said.

"Darn, can I leave it, please?"

"Your club membership will be revoked as soon as we are back in town. So let's get out of here," he said, before then starting to push himself to his feet.

"Woah! Hold on there, cowboy, let me help you up," Flur said as she came over and grabbed him under his shoulder.

It was still painful as he stood, but Flur made it much less so.

"Thank you."

"Of course."

After a little lightheadedness faded, he asked, "Do either of you know how to drive a speeder bike?"

"A bike?" Flur asked.

"Yeah."

"Well no, our dad only taught us how to drive cars and shuttles."

Blast! I have to drive? Blast! Better go now while I'm still able to sit upright and stand.

"What? Why are you worried?" Gladys asked, John having apparently shown his frustration. *Another sign that I'm not all there. Yspe it! It would be so much safer if I weren't so injured.*

But would it be safer if I tried to train a completely ignorant person...

John sighed.

No.

I have to do it.

"No worries, let's get ready to go. The speeder is parked outside."

The girls looked at each other, concern on their faces at that. John wondered why until he took a closer look at their faces. The parched lips, the red eyes, the dried skin.

"But first lets see if we can find you two some protection from the desert."

"Oh, thank you, the wind was just murderous," Flur said.

"I used one of their helmets for that very reason. So let's see if we can scrounge up a couple more."

He turned and saw the man he had beaten unconscious. He was about to walk over and grab his helmet, but he then remembered the chest wound he had and instead just pointed and said, "Can you get his and mine please?"

"Flur" nodded. He continued to scan the room until his eyes finally saw the raider that had shot him, dead on the ground. He moved over slowly and looked at "Flur's" handiwork.

A bullet hole through the head.

And the helmet.

Blast... she really did it. Blew his brains out while he was on the ground. That's... some admirable grit. The problem is she wrecked the helmet, and I blew up the rest, too.

He heard something then, a small sound as if someone was talking, coming from the body. John got down to one knee with a lot of effort and looked for the noise. It only took him a moment, but he picked out a small, long distance communicator that had a red light flashing.

"Oi Louie! Dis is Krel, we arr flyin' over to da rondayvoo in an hour. See you there, copy?"

They were going to be picked up in an hour. By other members of their group? There is more of this group than this?

More importantly, they will notice something is wrong soon. I can't fake "Louie's" voice since I never heard it. We probably have about an hour before we should worry, but we still need to get

Yspe out of here now.

"We only have two," John reported, pocketing the communicator subtly.

"What does that mean?" Flur asked.

"Well, I would go without, but driving will make that hard."

"Then I'll go without," Flur offered.

John sighed, thinking before he said, "Fine, but you wrap your head completely. Even your eye's. Its afternoon now and I don't think I need to tell you how bad the heat will be, local girl."

"You're right, I know. Can I use your knife?"

John gestured to it on the floor and said, "Be my guest."

He watched as she picked it up and went to the corpse and cut a large piece of cloth from the chest.

Grit.

"Here, Gladys, let me help you with this," John said, helping her get the helmet on and access the water supply.

"It's a little big on you," John laughed, the helmet making Gladys' thin body seem very small indeed.

"Yeah, well, maybe the world is a little big for my liking," Gladys retorted, her voice distorted by the helmet's speakers.

"Can one of you jokesters help me with this?" Flur said, holding up the fabric she had cut.

He walked over and tied the cloth around her head, and when he finished said, "Gladys, the speeder is out front, I'll walk your sister out."

Gladys nodded, and the three of them got out of the hot building out to the hot outdoors. The sun was high in the sky and the heat was extreme.

"Wow, you really blew them away," Gladys said as she got on the speeder, looking over at the destroyed power terminals.

"It was well earned," John replied as he helped Flur onto the speeder.

"Mmmm... And does our secret rescuer have a name?" Gladys probed.

"Oh, I'm John," Then speaking to her sister he asked, "And I never got your name, 'Flur.'"

After a pause, "I'm Fluria."

"Well, Fluria, I'm going to get you and your sister home now with all the strength I can muster."

"Thank you, John."

He smiled a smile she couldn't see, "You ready back there, Gladys?"

"You sure you can drive one handed, blonde?"

"Better than you with two," he shot back, smirking.

"I bet you're single, the way you address a young lady like that!" Gladys retorted.

"Gladys, shut up, you're sixteen!" Fluria yelled back at her sister.

John said nothing but gave her a smile and a wink that Fluria, of course, couldn't see.

"Alright, let's get out of here."

As he threw his leg over and saddled up on the speeder, he felt a sudden sharp pain. Before he buckled himself up he looked down.

Yspers! The wound is open.

His clotting work was nearly all undone, and when he took stock of his arm wound he saw that, while still improved from before, it was so large that his measly clotting ointment had done only so much.

Blast! Blasting Yspers! He made himself take a breath, *The human body has five liters of blood and I need more than half of that. At most I've lost half a liter. So with the current flow and the amount before I fall unconscious, mixing in the what, two hour trip back to Brownville?*

If I can get back to town it doesn't matter how much blood I'll have lost, the Doctor has enough advanced machinery that I'll be fine... eventually.

But to get to Brownville...

...

Blast its going to be close.

No more delay!

He put on his helmet.

"Here we go!"

Chapter 5

The pain was immense now.

He could feel his heart beat in his gut as the tiniest flow of blood pulsed out at each beat, and with how fast he was driving John's heart was beating fast.

Ascending the hill had been no trouble, and now he was struggling to reverse the turns he had made to get there, the desert was desolate and flat, with no landmarks to guide a wounded traveler home.

Time is my only guide. Twenty-seven minutes here, a half hour there, and then over an hour back to Brownville.

But if I up my speed from the 400 MPH I was going to say, 500.

Some easy head math later and he had cut down his travel time by half an hour.

Blast, that's so little... but better than nothing. Now for cruise control to reduce some stress.

With these steps in place, John knew it was just a waiting game. He had to last and find the way back.

Throbbing in his left arm and gut made each minute go by as slow as stars in the sky. Each second he had to fight the urge to slouch and open up his wound more.

The one upside was that he knew exactly when he had to make the first turn. A slight shift right that took them due east.

So far so good. Or... as good as it can be.

Fluria had started leaning forward against him, "to help keep the wind out of my face," she had explained. John for his part had mixed feelings about it he didn't mention. The human touch and connection he found he appreciated after the previous violence he'd done. But the price of his human connection was an added pressure to his chest that made it harder to keep his back straight and wound from getting worse.

So he drove on in silence, finding even the cruise controlled drive exerting and focusing all his energy on staying alert. He could feel the wind flying past his wounds, getting small

amounts of grit into them that added sharp little stinging to his already pulsing pain. He decided after they had made the first turn that he would stop looking at his arm, the sight too morbid for him while he was trying to focus on saving himself.

And these two.

The whole time he could tell he was getting worse. His jumpsuit was mostly powered by the motion of his body, but it was in his best interest to move as little as possible. That meant, however, that his tourniquet was starting to slack, and there wasn't much he could do about it.

"We're half way back," John said as they made the second turn, saying it aloud not only to tell the girls but to remind himself as well.

Half way back Jonathan, just keep going. Half. Way.

They were going straight north now, in a rush against a ticking clock.

Or in this case, "beating."

As the minutes ticked by, John counted it a blessing that he had made the last turn already, as he felt himself beginning to lose focus. His mind and eyes wandered, he saw that his clothes were all ruined, including his custom made deer leather vest, large bloodstains combined with the actual bullet holes meant that everything north of his belt was ruined beyond repair.

He was upset by his loss, the back of his mind wondering why he cared so much about clothes he couldn't wear if he was dead, but death was taking a backseat to the loss of his jacket.

He had made that jacket with his dad, out of the very first buck John had shot for himself, way back when he was thirteen. He had skinned and cured it himself, and while it had tasted fine, it was the skin he was really proud of. When his mom had made the vest out of the hide, it had come out way too big, (one of the few things his mother wasn't actually that good at,) but she had found the good in the failure and said to her disappointed son, "But think positive Jonathan, this way, you'll grow into it."

He remembered then that his pants he wore outside his jumpsuit were still intact, he had his wallet, and with that his I.D., personal device, his old ticket from the SS Hungaria, and his photo of his parents that he had taken on his antique Polaroid.

With that assurance, things didn't seem so bad. Fluria was touching his arm, but before he said anything, he realized that she was wrapping a piece of cloth around it and cinching it tightly. An extra tourniquet to help him that little bit more.

"Thank you."

"You're welcome," she said, her head having rested on his back the whole time. *She did it by touch*, John realized.

Time went faster than he thought it would, and the last leg of the journey was much better occupied by memories of his childhood. He drank the last of his water, refreshing himself for what he knew was the final push.

Saving two girls, too. Hjek, I might come back a hero, John mused to himself.

He saw the hills first. Including the big one the shuttle port he'd landed at was on top of.

We've made it!

His sudden relief brought back a renewed focus, but that focus scared him, because with his sharpened mind he could feel sharpened pain. His wounds were bad, worse than he had noticed for a while since he had let his mind wander.

Oh blast! Why didn't I see that before? My mind wandering was a sign, I've lost a lot of blood, over a liter probably.

Get back to town, Jonathan! There! There's the town!

Indeed it was now coming over the horizon into view, but John also made out some details that gave him pause.

First, he saw an energy shield had been put up just outside the town's Main Street, and then he saw a strange brown tower, fast approaching as they raced toward it. The tower particularly worried John, but he couldn't remember why.

Blast this fog of blood loss! What is wrong with that tower?

Then, an image of Harrison Kraggs, the Deputy he helped, flashed through his mind, he could see the man, revolver out, gray vest with his Deputy star.

And he could hear the words, "Defensive grid."

OH! Oh no.

The defensive grid! Did they turn it off-

But before he could finish the thought, the top turret swiveled, and an artillery cannon popped out the top and point straight at them.

Blast!

"Hang on!" John yelled.

With that, he cranked the accelerator to the max and they shot forward. He saw other towers off in the distance swivel their turrets and pop their own cannons out. He also noticed that there was one turret behind and to the side of the one they were already fast approaching.

And in an instant he had a plan.

His gravity implants were working, giving him clarity even at the high acceleration and that clarity helped him come up with an idea.

Friendly Fire! It ain't much, but it ought to buy us some wiggle room from these towers. Its the best chance we have. We have to make it to the town, the town, Jonathan!

He sped towards the closest tower. He saw what he had suspected- the towers could aim up, but not down very far. As he closed with the tower he saw it try to track him with its gun, but it couldn't go down any farther.

The other towers did open fire, however, and the speeder was racked with shockwaves as one explosive shell missed after another. Even in their missing, John still felt slammed by every nearby shell landing.

But then, when they passed the first tower, the shooting died down for just a moment.

No friendly fire. That bought us just a couple seconds, but at 600 MPH this might be enough!

So they turned slightly and raced toward the last tower that stood between them and Brownville. Shooting forward they soon came under fire again, volley after volley coming close enough that they could feel it reverberate through them, but no shot striking home as

John did basic evasions.

These speeders must have disorientation modules, otherwise any defensive system as advanced as this would have blown me up in one shot when I tried to leave the first time. Speed and tech, it has to be enough!

They raced on and got close to the second tower, and that bought them their second reprieve. They were a couple miles from the town now.

Just a few more seconds!

He pushed the accelerator back up to full, and they shot straight for Main Street. As shots fell around them John got a closer view of the shield; it was projected by a mobile generator, and there were uniformed men behind it, all aiming at the speeder.

Except one, who appeared to be waving at them.

Little good waving can do when we are being fired at!

Explosions fell behind them as they raced toward the shield. They would pass through the shield, which would be a concern only if they were in it for more than a second.

However, then John saw something much more concerning, the man was not waving at them, but rather was standing in front of his fellow soldiers who were all taking aim at them as they shot towards town.

They think we're raiders!

The last seconds slowed into moments, dust shot up as shells landed around them, explosive vibrations rocked the vehicle from every side. John felt the air blow past him as they rushed forward, he felt the shockwaves of the explosions shake his core, and he felt Fluria's arms holding tight around him.

And then, there was a moment, when John knew the next shell would fall. They had been getting closer, and he had been keeping track of their fire rate to try and dodge, but he hadn't for this last one. He had messed up, and he knew the shell would land close enough that they would be hit with a force powerful enough for them to crash, and at 600 MPH, die like that.

But the shot never came.

They were too close to the town.

We made it!

And the town was coming up fast.

Oh blast!

John smashed the brake as hard as he dared. He felt his body get thrown forward and his G-force implants fire in his neck as he resisted the force. The forcefield was coming and there were many men and other obstacles on the other side, he turned just enough to make it past them all, and felt his skin tingle and chest feel funny as they shot through the energy barrier, past the portable generator and the men near it, and burst through the other side. As they continued to slow down he saw obstacles and debris in the street. He struck a large piece of metal that made the speeder jerk, but he managed to dodge a man on horseback with a quick turn. All the while the force of the stop built a pressure in his chest that felt crushing as his arms gave out, and he was pushed up against the handle bars.

John roared, the pain was miserable, and as they came finally to a slow speed he kept hitting the brakes as hard as he could, just wanting to stop completely, for everything to just stop.

And then, there was a moment, where everything did stop, where all of a sudden he knew that the speeder wasn't moving anymore. He fell back into his seat, the pressure having mounted and mounted until it was gone, and he felt like he could breathe again.

Everything was crystal clear then, the town around him, the pain throbbing through his body, the form fit of the helmet, and the yell coming from behind him of, "Put your hands up!"

John unstrapped himself and swung off the vehicle. With his good arm he stripped his helmet off and turned to look at the man. He was Chinese, in a uniform of some sort, followed by other uniformed men with guns aimed at him. But John didn't care about any of that, he simply yelled back, "Don't shoot! These are the girls! I... saved... them."

The corners of his vision started to black, and he had to take deep breaths to maintain his focus.

"I believe you! I do! I think you are a blasted legend, man!" The Chinese man yelled, "But I need you to put your hands up so that my friends and I can sort this out, okay?"

John didn't trust him, or at least, he didn't trust all the guns pointing his way, so with emotion in his voice he yelled back, "One of my blasted arms doesn't work! Please, for all that is sacred, just lower your guns, and I will get down in the dirt for you!"

The Chinese man turned and yelled at his comrades, "Lower your blasted barrels and use your eyes! Those are the girls in the dresses! We got jumpy! Now let's do our real jobs and help these people!"

The men looked at each other, and then started to lower and even holster their weapons.

Oh thank God... he's on our side. They must just have been protecting the town. Blasted helmets... nearly got me killed...

John's vision faded as he felt the relief wash over him, and the adrenaline leave his body.

"You are a real life hero man, let me take care of yo-"

Whatever the Chinese man was saying faded away as John stumbled. He caught himself the first time, but his body couldn't take anymore, and he slipped off into the abyss, falling to the dust as everything else faded away, too.

Beep... Beep... Beep...

John's eyes fluttered open. Wherever he was, it was bright, and they struggled to adjust.

Beep... Beep... Beep...

He felt the bedding he was on, soft and... medical. He wasn't sure how he could tell, it just seemed obvious. And white too, not helping with the brightness in the room.

Beep... Beep... Beep...

"Hey Doc, our man is waking up, I think."

John's eyes were still closed, and he had barely stirred, so how this familiar sounding man could tell was strange to him. Not like it

mattered, he was right, and John let out a tired "Hi," to prove it.

Beep... Beep... Beep...

"Hey! Man, it is good to have you with us in the land of the living," the familiar male voice said.

"Mmmm, did I die?" John asked, actually curious.

The man laughed, "No, no. No you just were really messed up, man. Lost two liters of blood, your heart rate was something like a hundred sixty, don't get me started on your left arm, and blast man, odds say you should've been unconscious while driving, should've crashed and died."

"Well, I guess you can just call me a real space cowboy then," John quipped, not knowing what else to say. He'd known the odds, more or less anyway; it was a long shot. But everything he'd done that day had been a long shot.

Wait... How long have I been out? Is it still "today?"

The man laughed as John's eyes came into focus. It was the Chinese man. He didn't really remember what they'd said to each other in that last, tense moment, but he knew the man had helped him.

"It's you?" John said, so surprised he sat up, painfully enough that he remembered the reasons he was in that medical bed with a heart monitor beeping at him.

"Yes, indeed. Though 'You' is not my name. Nor is it a traditional Chinese name if that was what you are thinking, you colonial bumpkin," the man joked.

"No, no. And I ain't no colonial bumpkin, Mr. Asian Man, I'm a born Earther."

"Well dang, I suppose that would make you more like me than the Chinese people out here, Mr. Caucasian Man."

"You're from Earth?" John asked, smiling.

"I was, yeah; registered citizen of A'pash now, same as you."

John paused, "You looked through my things?"

"You didn't come in wearing that shirt, did you?"

He looked down and saw he was in a white undershirt, and under his white sheets were loose, white shorts as well. He took that moment to look around. They were in a very small room, the man sitting on the one chair, near John's small medical cot.

"Besides, we needed to know who you actually were and such, and we wanted to check and see if you had any medical records the doctor could access, and the doctor wanted to be sure he was paid, though the redhead you saved nearly yelled his ear off at that, and then there was a stretch where we wanted to be able to contact any family you had, just in case."

John stared at the man as he talked; it was a lot to process, and all very rational reasons.

"So yes, Jonathan Tate Lee, we looked through your things," the man said with a teasing smile.

His teeth were pure white, contrasting heavily with his darker skin, and short, spiked, black hair. He was crossing his arms, which let John see just how muscled the man was. He looked like an ancient Greek statue. Except that he was made of flesh, and in a tight fitting uniform that John now recognized as belonging to a security company. "Parker Protections" it read.

"I suppose I should be fair. Here's my I.D. Mr. Lee," the man said as he pulled it out of his wallet.

"Maxwell Alexander Cheng," Jonathan read aloud.

"That's me."

"Well, Mr. Cheng, it was hard to tell, but it looked to me like you really helped diffuse a rather tense return for us. I didn't want to eat any more bullets, so thank you."

"Aw well, they just saw your pilfered helmets and lost their heads. I just helped the men find them again." He paused to chuckle, "Seriously, though, I'd have done it again. And please, call me Max," he said, offering his hand.

John shook it, "John. It's a pleasure to meet you Max."

"Likewise."

John felt good, not physically yet, but so far

he had been pleasantly surprised by the people he had met. He liked Max, and the only thing keeping him from being totally at ease was all the questions eating away at him.

"Max, how long was I out for? It looks like midday out there," he asked, seeing that the bright light was the midday sun.

"Midday it is. You were out for twenty-two hours, if I'm not mistaken. Welcome to tomorrow."

John couldn't see much out the window, but he did see repairs of the damage to the town.

"Has a lot happened?"

"I'd say so, yeah. But I'll fill you in on what I know later."

"Okay. Uh..." John paused, feeling tense about his next question, "You didn't actually tell my parents anything did you?"

"No, you never got that bad. Though I did actually have to convince people to have cooler heads again," Max said with a chuckle.

"Who was worried?" he asked, his curiosity piqued.

"Well, you've made yourself a little cluster of friends around here. The young ladies you saved, of course, then a fine lookin' gal who said she met you at a bar, 'Sophie' she said her name was. Even one of the Deputies was worried about you, though he was trying to hide it."

John smiled, *these really are decent people*, he thought.

"Now, Max, please don't take this the wrong way," John began.

"Mmm?"

"But why are you here?"

Max paused for a moment, "Do you mean 'here' as in, 'with you right now?' Or why am I in town?"

John hadn't thought of that, "Both, I guess."

"Well, the latter is because my company was brought in after the attack to help the situation. Treat wounded, do some repairs, and protect against any possible second wave.

"The reason I'm here with you right now is cause I heard what you did, saw a little of it, and truthfully, I was impressed. So when the doctor

said you needed to be kept under twenty-four hour observation and he was too busy with other wounded, I let myself get roped into your friend's volunteer group to watch over you. Fair warning, you're kind of a local hero now,

"And anyway, speaking of that doctor, he hasn't shown up yet. Here, I'm gonna go harass him to give you a check up," Max stood and walked out the door, "Hey, Doc!"

He continued yelling down the hall, but John just tried to take in all of what Max had told him. He didn't feel the greatest, but he felt much better than before, and seeing the tissue-repairer around his arm for the first time, he knew he'd be okay physically. But he'd found himself caught up in a lot of things, and he could tell Max hadn't told him everything significant yet.

But something that he came back to over and over, was one thing Max had said, *"...you've made yourself a little cluster of friends around here."*

...

Friends, ey? That's... new. Sort of. Human "friends." He smiled a soft smile. *"Friends," you say, Max? Well... we'll see. I hope you're right. I think that sounds nice anyway.*

And with that thought, John fell back down against his pillow, and put an arm behind his head. For the first time in a long time, his mind wandered to things different from stress about the Masons, or his new equations to improve energy cannons. He thought about the people he'd met and wondered what to make of them all, while the *Beep... Beep... Beep...* of his heart monitor continued in the background.

Chapter 6

"Well young man, you're looking a lot better than when you first got dragged in here," the doctor said after concluding his examination and scans. He was a bit older, probably a hundred, but John could tell he was a good doctor.

"Hey, thanks, Doc, I appreciate all you've done," John replied.

"Oh, don't thank me yet, I wasn't finished. I haven't gotten to the physical therapy."

"Oh? Is it really needed?"

"Well, it's more a precaution than anything else, but seeing as your bicep was over seventy percent destroyed, I am prescribing you one week of it to make sure that the muscle works the way it's supposed to."

With that the doctor sent a note from his personal device to John's, a prescription to get the one week of physical therapy.

"And! Before I forget, I am requiring you," he looked at his watch, "an additional three hours of bed rest here. And even after that you take it easy, especially with your abdominal wound!"

"Alright Doc, alright. I wasn't planning on doing sit ups anytime soon."

"You better not, or I won't fix the massive internal bleeding you'll have caused yourself!" The doctor then smiled and continued with, "Take care of yourself, young man, you've earned a break, I'd say."

He smiled softly. "Thank you, Doctor, I will."

"Good man. Now if you'll excuse me, I have some other patients to check on."

John nodded as the doctor exited, closing the door behind him. He sighed and took in the quiet, the first quiet he'd had since arriving on A'pash.

"Long overdue," John said to the quiet, happy to have it. He recalled a quick conversation he'd had with Max while the Doctor had started the exam,

"I've got to head to actual work now," Max had begun, *"but I'll be sure to let the others know you're up."*

"Oh, uh, Max?"

"Yeah, John?"

"Could you, uh, not do that?"

"Well, why?" Max had asked, puzzled.

"I want them to know I'm okay, obviously, but if you could wait just a couple hours, I think I'd appreciate some time alone," he had explained.

"Aha, I understand, man, sure, I'll wait a while. But you better see them soon, yeah?"

"Of course, I will."

"Alright, well, enjoy yourself then. I'll see you around," Max had said, right before heading out.

Yes, you will, John thought in reply, back in the present.

He pulled out his personal device. He did need to tell his parents what had happened. He wrote a text message, telling them the gist and that he was okay, and that he'd tell them everything when he could. He then paid the fee to send the message on the first Warp Probe to Earth, where it would transmit his message, and others, to the appropriate addresses.

That done, John finally felt he could rest easy. So he took the doctor's order seriously and laid in bed, a little bit antsy, but otherwise content and comfortable. His mind wandered off to little memories of Earth, in no particular order. His parent's home and property, his trip to the ocean when he was fifteen when he'd fallen for that Arabic girl who was also visiting New Cali, his mother's flower garden, and his Tiger Tonno's soft fur.

The Doctor had shut the bright window earlier, and that mixed with good memories led him gently to sleep.

Yelling woke him up.

It was dark outside now, and the room was, too. The *Beep... Beep... Beep...* of the heart monitor continued softly in the background, joined now by the noise of muffled yelling outside in the Doctor's office.

John for his part felt rather refreshed after his latest nap, his wounds mending rapidly, and with the commotion outside his room, he managed to sit up easier than he expected. His bare feet touched the cold floor, and he was reminded of the fact that he was wearing very little, and nothing that belonged to him.

The doctor had pointed to a bin on shelf that held all his possessions, and the yelling outside was getting closer, so he limped his way over to it. Pulling it onto a table, he saw his guns at the top with their magazines laid out near them. He didn't know for sure if his Tosaki-Durnell had a good charge, so he grabbed his Glock instead. When he picked it up with his good hand, he

heard his door open rapidly,

"Sheriff, Mr. Lee is too unwell to be..." the Doctor was shouting, stopping when he followed the Sheriff's gaze to John standing there. "Ah, Mr. Lee, you are doing better I see," the Doctor said, lowering his head.

"Just a little bit, Doctor. Is there something I can help you with, Sheriff?" John said, concerned but acting calm and collected.

"Son, put the gun down please," Sheriff Fremont said, John now noticing a Deputy standing behind the man.

John had to suppress a sneer, "Is there a problem, Sheriff?" he asked, loading his Glock nonchalantly with his one hand not in a cast.

"Because you are under arrest, boy," Fremont said aggressively.

His Glock chambered as he slid in the magazine with a *chck!*

"What?"

"Son, put the gun down, you are under arrest for child endangerment and other charges."

His vision narrowed as he felt a deep wrongness, a cringing injustice in the Sheriff's words.

"What?" John asked, venom in his voice.

Fremont retreated at the intensity, but John watched the man steel himself and wasn't surprised when he aggressively replied, "Put the gun down, son!"

His grip on the pistol tightened.

The Deputy out in the hallway tensed and snapped the strap off his revolver.

The Doctor started to speak, but then there was a yell down the hallway that got the Deputy's attention. John watched him turn and then throw his hands up.

"Krag, what are you doing!?" the Deputy yelled.

Krag!

John heard now as Krag yelled back, "What are *you* doing, Vernen!? I was wondering if we had a traitor shut down the grid, but I didn't think you'd out yourself by going for the h-"

The Sheriff had exited John's room to confront Krag, putting a prompt stop to his yelling.

"Deputy, what are you doing here? Lower your weapon, Deputy Vernen is here assisting

me with an arrest."

"An arrest? What happened? Is John okay?" Krag asked.

John wasn't able to appreciate the Deputy's care for him, as right after the question was asked, the Sheriff replied with, "Mr. Lee is fine, but he is under arrest, Krag."

John stood there with his pistol in hand and feebly holding his wallet with his other, his only exit blocked by the bodies of the Sheriff and Deputy. The Doctor was still in the room, and he came up and said softly,

"John, go with them. I'm sure this is just the Sheriff posturing, it will blow over."

"How can you be sure?" his reply equally quiet, Krag and the Sheriff talking outside.

"What charges does he actually have on you? This is just his way of feeling more secure in his ego. This town ain't big enough for the two of you. Let him take you down to the station and grill you for a while, feel good about himself, it'll pass soo-"

"And what if he presses some stupid charges, ruins my life for the next six months?! All for an ego trip? No, no, I ain't going to that blasted cell!" John yelled.

The Doctor stood there silently, and Sheriff Fremont looked in the room, locking eyes with John.

"Intent on resisting arrest?" Fremont asked pointedly.

"Intent on not having my life ruined."

"The more difficult you make it, the more charges I add," he said, snapping the cover off his own revolver.

John had an idea, but it required some thought, first put into the insult he used, "You are worse than an Earth Fed," and he meant it.

Fremont pulled, slow and clumsy and John was faster.

But he didn't move.

"What did you say to me, boy?!"

John held his Glock firmly at his side, "At least the Earth Feds are honest about being self-serving Ysper scum," he walked forward slowly.

"Stay back or I'll drop ya!" The Sheriff yelled.

He gambled and dropped his gun, "Shoot an unarmed man in front of the Doctor? All I want to do is leave, Sheriff, and how would that look to the townspeople?"

He kept walking forward and Fremont retreated slowly. He kept his eyes locked on the older man, not flinching, not showing fear, just staring. The Sheriff backed out into the hallway, and John could see the indecision plain on his face.

As he stepped out into the hallway, Krag said, "John, what are you doing?"

"Leaving," he replied, his eyes not moving from the Sheriff.

"I will bring you in," Fremont growled.

John walked backwards down the hallway, the front entrance ten meters more behind him.

"Sheriff?" Vernen asked, not knowing what to do.

"Krag, keep them here as long as you can," John whispered to his Deputy ally.

"What are you going to do?" Krag asked.

"I'm getting out of here." And with that, John rushed to the exit.

The Sheriff yelled, "I will put you in cuffs!"

And Krag yelled, "John, wait!"

He didn't wait. "Krag, please!"

Before John turned out the door, he saw Krag's reaction, disappointment on his face, but nevertheless he blocked the Sheriff in the hallway.

"Hey!" He heard the Sheriff yell, but by then he was out in the street, with only a white shirt, shorts and socks, a muscle weaver on his arm, a cast on his hand, and his wallet which he had put into his good, right hand.

He felt the sand through the socks and a pain in his abdomen as he ran, ran up Main Street past the Sheriff's office and The Hungry Sparrow bar. He heard a voice call to him from the other side of the road, by the large Inn, "John!"

He turned and saw Fluria running toward him from the entrance of the Inn.

He slowed down a little bit, *why is she at the Inn?*

"I have to get out of here!" John said, panting.

"John wait, you're hurt!" she called after him.

He turned to yell over his shoulder and felt a throb in his gut, and then a tear that caused him to stop, and shout at the pain. He clutched his wound and remembered the Doctor's warning about exertion.

Ysping idiot! He cursed himself. The pain was strong enough that he barely noticed the familiar hands grab his arm.

"John! What's wrong?" Fluria asked, her tone full of worry.

His breathing was surprisingly difficult. "The Sheriff... he tried to arrest me... he must be jealous... somehow... I have to get out of here."

With that he tried to keep going, but Fluria held him back. "No, don't go, we can fight the Sheriff."

"What, no! He has the law... he can't be fought... I asked too much... of Krag's... he is holding the Sheriff back... I have to go!"

"No! You're wrong! He may represent the law, but he doesn't have the true law on his side!" She stood in front of him, a fire in her eyes almost as bright as her red hair. "He *can* be fought. You fought for my family, now let us fight for you!"

John was stunned; he didn't know what to say.

"Now you go and get yourself a room in our Inn, march yourself in there and I'll get my father, he'll break the Sheriff in two! But go!" Fluria yelled at him, pointing towards the Inn's doors.

He hesitated for only a moment, "Okay."

His breathing was easier, and with very little pain he walked over to the doors, seeing Fluria watch him as he went in before she ran off.

Grit...

He closed the door behind him and found himself greeted with a very nice lobby, a chandelier illuminating the golden walls and the velvet floors, a cafe off to his right, and a young concierge at the front desk. He approached the

young man and pulled a wad of cash out.

"I need a room, any room."

"Oh my goodness, sir, you are bleeding!" the concierge exclaimed.

"Eh?" He looked down and sure enough, his white shirt was stained red.

The concierge picked up a phone, "Shall I call you the Doctor, sir?"

"The Doctor is kind of busy right now, and I need a room!" He yelled, slamming a hand down on the desk.

"Of course, sir, right away." The concierge paused and looked at John's left arm for a long moment.

"What is it?" He asked, impatient.

"You wouldn't happen to be John Lee, would you, sir?" The concierge asked.

John didn't like the question, *has the Sheriff already put out an alert for me? No, this is far too soon.*

"Yes..." He answered cautiously.

"Well, sir, you are the man that saved the girls, yes?"

"Uh... yes."

"Then, sir, your room is free. Mr. Susaka explicitly told me that the man who saved his daughters could stay here until the sun went out."

John paused, dumbstruck.

"Here is your key, sir, it's just upstairs. Do you think you can manage it, or would you like some assistance up? And are you sure you don't want me to call the Doctor?"

"No! Don't call anybody!" He looked at the key, "Room 210?"

"Yes, sir. Overlooking Main Street across from the elevator."

"Mmmm..." And with that he hobbled over to the elevator, clutching his side the whole way. He went up, and then found himself in a fancy hallway, with a room right across from him that read "210" right on the sign.

He stumbled over and managed to get in, his key card just needing to tap a scanner. It was dark in the room but he saw a bed by the window and an end table by the bed. He threw his

wallet onto the table and slammed the door behind him.

His mind raced as he paced by the bed. *I'm a sitting duck here! I can't do a blasted thing but sit here and pray the Sheriff cools off!* But then he remembered what Fluria had said to him, "you fought for my family, now let us fight for you!"

John took a breath, and then sat on the bed.

Okay Flur, you fight for me. Krag's did, can you help me? Can your father?

Not that it matters if you can, I'm stranded here anyway. He twisted his torso just a little bit, and flinched at the sudden burst of pain. *Stranded here bleeding to death. Oh gosh.*

He laid himself down on the bed and put pressure on his wound.

Keep your heart rate low, John, low blood flow. Keep the pressure applied, maybe they'll patch me up when I'm behind bars.

Ohhhh... why did I come here? Why did I have to get shot by those blasted raiders? And why did this blasted town have to have such a narcissist Sheriff!?

He sighed.

Why did I come here... freedom, I guess. Freedom to be smart, I suppose. I don't feel very smart right now. Chasing criminals across deserts and standing up to law officers, neither criminal nor innocent... try to do the right thing and I get shot for my effort!

Blast it all!

He laid there, tired but restless, his brain still churning.

"The right thing," I guess I did do the right thing, I shot the bad guys and saved the girls, and the Sheriff still decided I'm the bad guy... But Krag's didn't... Krag's held off his own boss for me, and he doesn't even seem to like people too much.

And the girls, well of course they'd like me, I saved their lives.

I guess Max seemed impressed by me, and the Doctor helped me out too...

And Sophie somehow looked at me and decided I could save her from the Sheriff. I never asked her if she chose me randomly or if there was

something else, some other reason.

All these people, and I'm in their hands now. I need to be saved by them... and not bleed to death in the process. So faith, huh? Well, I suppose Mom would be happy anyway, er, well, probably not that I've been shot, yeah, whatever.

Mmmm, she'd probably also be happy that I've met some young ladies, haha! Yeah, Sophia, what a girl, she figured me out quick. Dad would like that about her, Dad would probably also be able to appreciate her good looks too! Ha!

"Mmmm, well, but John, you know I love your mother more than any other dame I've ever met," John imagined his Dad saying, causing him to chuckle softly, his eyes closed.

He remembered something else his father had told him regarding the ladies, "You go get yourself a great wife John, the second greatest wife of all time." He had of course asked about the greatest wife of all time, and his Dad had simply said, "Well, you can't have her! She's mine!"

"Yeah Dad, I know," he said softly to the room.

He was drifting off, the pain only a dull sensation now, his tired mind wandering to other thoughts about women, his conversation with Sophia replayed in his mind and he smiled in the moment as he smiled in the memory.

And the tequila, oh, what a shame I can't get some more of that. The company was really good too.

And then he remembered the fiery woman who had executed her kidnapper in the desert.

The grit to be admired.

What quality women they have out here! If I'd have known I'd have been out here way sooner.... And beautiful too... what a world...

And gently he lulled off to sleep.

Chapter 7

Knock knock knock.

The knocking was the first thing John heard as he awoke. The first thing he felt was a wetness on his chest, and when he opened his eyes

he looked and saw that his white undershirt was half red, and taking one deep breath he could tell-

Aw Yspers, that's a lot of blood.

"John?" a male voice called from behind his door.

He froze, not wanting to make a sound out of fear. He couldn't tell if the voice beyond the door was friend or foe.

"John?" the voice called again; this time he thought he might recognize it.

Is it... Max? I think so. But can I trust him? Is he here to arrest me? I don't know what his company's contract says, maybe he is forced to be a lackey of the Sheriff even if he doesn't want to be?

"John, are you okay? Mr. Susaka told me you were in here."

Mr. Susaka? The Sheriff is Fremont... Is Susaka the concierge? No, Susaka is Japanese, and the concierge was definitely not.

Who is Mr. Susaka?

"John, do you not trust me?" Max said.

Nope.

How can I? I don't know what master you serve. Maybe this "Susaka." Who is Susaka? I've heard the name before...

"I'm not with the Sheriff."

That's exactly what somebody with the Sheriff would say!

...

Blast it, John, trust him, you are bleeding out right now.

"Max, I've torn my wound, and I don't know who I can trust."

"Buddy, listen to me, you have a lot of people you can trust in this town, and I'm one of them. That's half of the reason I'm here, to tell you what those people are doing for you. And if you can let me in, I have a field patch kit that I can help you with and a world of a story to tell you."

John smiled softly, and then realized he had to get himself off the bed.

Blast this is going to hurt.

"Give me a secon- ahhhhhhh!" he yelled in pain as he sat up.

"You okay in there, man?"

"Mmm, nope. I hope that patch kit of yours works."

"Is it your gut wound?"

John winced as he hobbled to the door, clutching his stomach, "Yup."

His breathing was hard as he came up to the door, the pain causing his world to spin.

He undid the latch, and then tried to open the door. But his bloodied hand slid on the spinning handle.

"Blast!" He cursed under his breath.

With a firm grip he was able to open the door and saw Max, standing there alone.

"Geez... I was going to make a joke, but you look really bad man," Max said.

"Yeah, and you come alone?" John observed, leaning against the wall to support himself.

"Yeah, well, it turns out that you aren't the only person that doesn't like the Sheriff. But let's get you back to that bed, you look awful."

"Sounds good to me," John said as he turned toward the bed. Max came along beside him, and wrapping an arm under his shoulders, lifted up and helped him back to the bed. *Woah, he is almost lifting me completely. I could tell he was strong, but hjek, compared to him I'm a light weight.*

"I hope he doesn't charge you for the sheets," Max said, opening a window to let in some daylight.

"Me, too."

"Let's make sure it doesn't get any worse," Max said, tearing open the patch kit.

John lifted his ruined shirt to give him access to the wound.

"Ooooooh! Well... uh..."

"What?"

"Well, the good news is that the patch kit should be enough," Max said, touching near the wound.

"And the bad news?" John asked.

"Well, uh, I said 'should' cause I'm pretty good at this stuff. But it's gonna be close."

"Oh, joy."

"Hey man, if that's what you think I won't

disagree with you," Max said, starting to pull the materials from the kit.

"Shut up and heal me."

"No and yes," Max quipped, "Here are some pain killers."

John took them and swallowed them. "You said you had some u- Ow!"

"Sorry, sorry. I'll be more gentle there," Max apologized.

"No, just get it over with."

Max looked at him questioningly. "Are you sure?" he asked.

"Yes," John replied.

The look on Max's face changed. It became colder, more distant, and more professional. John watched him look around briefly, before grabbing the plastic wrapping of the patch kit and bunching it into a long thin piece.

"Bite down on this."

John grabbed it and obeyed.

"I'm going to try to be careful, but this will hurt."

John nodded.

"Alright, man, you asked for it."

The last thing John was able to think was gratitude that Max had shut the door, because even with it shut he knew he could be heard out in the hallway, the shouts of pain roaring loud through his clenched teeth. Max worked well, though; John could tell through the pain that the man had experience.

And then just like that, the pain stopped and Max said, "All done."

John was panting, but he managed to lift his head enough to look at his wound, and he saw the healing patch, perfectly applied.

But lifting his head strained him and his head collapsed back onto his pillow.

"Take a minute, you're in rough shape. I'll just, uh, be over here," Max said, sitting on a chair that John hadn't even really noticed until Max grabbed it.

John took his minute, then two, and as the adrenaline left his body he felt more and more exhausted, and the light of the room seemed somehow further and further away, until even-

tually he fell fast asleep.

It took John several moments to realize he was awake, his tiredness gradually receding. Slowly he opened his eyes and looked at around his room. Max was gone, and the light from his window had changed, shifted somehow.

How long was I out for? What time is it?

He spotted a clock on his end table that read "2:25 PM."

So it's afternoon, but when was Max here?

What day even is it? Blast, I'm so confused.

He sat up painfully and looked around his room. It was a very standard, though nice, hotel room. Closet, bathroom, small bedroom, and nothing useful to him at all.

There was a window. He wasn't sure if he'd be able to see anything that would help him know what day it was, but he figured it was worth a shot. He got up off the bed with a wince and opened the curtains. He looked down at the street below. There was more commotion than he had expected, with large numbers of people talking in the street, hovering near the Sheriff's office and the Hungry Sparrow Bar, mostly townsfolk, but John did see several Parker Protections personnel intermingling with the various groups. But then his eye caught a creature he recognized. It was the Tiger.

The Tiger that had asked him to save the girls.

It was walking behind an Asian man who was approaching the inn from up the way John had entered town. Multiple people tried talking with them, but the man always seemed to say something quick and then continue walking, as if he was on a mission.

Is the Tiger coming here? To talk to me? And who is she with? Is it Susaka?

John looked down at his shirt, a little more self conscious about his minimal clothing covered in bloodstains. *Nothing I can really do about it if they are coming to talk to me. Oh! But what does that patch look like?*

Lifting his shirt up he saw his wound, or more accurately, the patch now completely cov-

ering it, and keeping the flesh tight together so that it could begin to heal. All with ointments to prevent infection and stimulate tissue growth made John wonder if he'd even need the Doctor to change the dressing job Max had done.

Well, at least I won't bleed to death. Max really is good.

His mind then shifted back to his potential guests.

If the Tiger is coming to talk with me, I can count on the company being pleasant at least, and I might as well wait here for a few minutes. I give it three before they are here.

He sat down painfully onto the bed and waited. Two minutes later there was a *knock knock* on the door.

"Yes?" John said.

"Mr. Lee, may I come in?" the voice of a Tiger asked.

"Of course, one moment."

With a grunt of effort he stood, but then he heard the door unlatch.

Huh?

Then it was opened, and the large figure of the Tiger entered the room. She was wearing the very simple clothes her kind were like to wear, a closed vest and very loose pants, though this particular outfit was quite nice. John could see the remnant of a few bandages from the raid, however, reminding him of that day and its pains.

Still, his love of Tigers overpowered any other discomforts of his memory and he enthusiastically greeted it, "Hello, there."

"Hello, Mr. Lee, this is Mr. Hiram Susaka," the Tiger said gently, gesturing toward the man as he came in behind her and approached John.

"Ah, so you are the 'Mr. Susaka' that I've heard of," John observed.

The man looked him over quickly, taking in the bloodstain and the rest of him with a quick glance.

"How badly are you hurt?" Susaka asked quickly, gesturing at the bloodstain.

John heard something suppressed in Susaka's tone but just responded with, "Oh, no, its been patched up, I'm fine."

The man looked at him for a moment afterwards, breathing deeply. John saw that the man too was wounded, small bandages on his head. As John looked at him more, however, something about him seemed familiar.

"Do I..."

He stopped as Susaka got on one knee, then the other, and then kow-towed down before him.

"What are you doing?" John exclaimed, surprised.

"You have done an immeasurable deed for me. Given your blood for mine without even being asked. Your nobility is a grace I do not deserve!" Susaka said, a sorrow and conviction in his tone.

And then it clicked for John. The girls hadn't looked particularly Asian, but clearly Susaka was their father. Why else would he have fought for John in the court of public opinion? *"Given your blood for mine..."*

John started to bend down to raise the man up, but winced as his gut throbbed in pain.

"Mr. Susaka, please stand, you don't have to do any of this."

The man did not stand, "Love compels me, love for my daughters, who are the dearest things in the world to me!" Susaka now sat up, a fire in his eyes,

"Sir, please let me do something for you! Make some request of me! I have great means and a fierce determination, you will not stop me from this!"

"Mr. Susaka... please stand, you don't need to humble yourself to me."

John offered him a hand, and after some hesitation, he took it and stood.

"Why did you do it?" Susaka asked him.

"Ah... uh..." John sat down looking for the words, "Well, I fought them' cause I didn't want anybody to die, I guess."

There was a pause, then he looked down and asked, "But why did you chase them into the desert?"

John sat down. He knew this was what Susaka had been getting at before, but the question bothered him somehow. So he rested his

chin on his good hand, like the old Thinker statue, and thought.

"I... really did it because of your Tiger," John said, staring into the distance.

"What do you mean?" Susaka asked after a second's hesitation.

He looked at the Tiger, surprised in a realization, "I don't know your name."

"Oh, you must forgive me, this is Orma," Susaka said, introducing her.

"Hello, John," Orma said with a slight bow.

"It's very nice to actually meet you, my dear," John said quietly, the soft words accompanied by a soft smile.

He took a breath and then said, "I knew that what was happening to them was terrible, and I also knew the odds were impossible and that there was hardly a point to try anything. But sir, it's uh, it's hard to explain in a way, but my closest friend is a Tiger, and I've never refused him anything. Orma, lying there in the dirt, was very much just... a strange effigy, a symbol of the friend that I care so much for... And I've never refused him anything.

"So when she asked, I went. That's all."

He watched Susaka glance at Orma and then pace the room, contemplating.

"My dear creature, you have done so much for this family, thank you," Susaka said.

"You are my family," Orma responded simply, her voice somber and deep.

Susaka nodded at that and then approached John, he pointed to a spot on the bed, "May I sit?"

"Please."

He sat, and then took on a contemplating pose of his own.

"There is a saying in the Gospel of John, the reference escapes me but I believe Jesus says that, 'Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one's life for his friends.' Now I do not know what that makes you, because you are not my daughters' friend. Which seems, in my view, to make you a fool."

The three of them chuckled.

"You must forgive my asking, but are you

some kind of thrill seeker?" Susaka asked.

"You don't believe me?"

"Well, you ask me to believe that you leapt to put yourself in danger for stranger's sake. Aside from the noblest of intentions, I do not see what your angle could be."

John wasn't so sure how noble he was. "You don't think I can have good intentions?"

Susaka shrugged, "Out here under alien stars, at the borders of civilization, on a planet hostile to life, good intentions are risky to trust. And if you really hail from Earth itself, the odds are quite low that you really are such a selfless person."

"So you've found out I'm from Earth," John observed.

"I've found out as much as I could about you, which was unfortunately little considering how important you have made yourself in my life. You have only done things that would incline me to trust you, and I suppose it is a failing on my part to see all these things about you and assume you have some ulterior motive..." He paused, and then said, "And yet, I must ask, I must know. What are your true motives? Would you truly have me believe that sentiment and a man's good nature are the reasons my daughters were saved?"

Susaka got quieter and leaned in as he asked, "What do you want?"

John sat silent for a long time, thoughts swirling as he tried to think of what he could even say,

"I know... little about good and evil. But even in my limited understanding I can only find it doubtful that an evil man, wishing to leverage or harm you in some way, would risk his own life in a foolish gambit to save two of the most precious things in the world to you. And a selfish man would be even more unlikely to lift a finger to have helped your daughters, even if he suspected some personal gain."

John looked the man in the eyes, "Mr. Susaka, I didn't even know you existed before a couple days ago. I did it with no expectation of anything, and I think I would even do it again.

So yes, I would have you believe that... *senti-ment*, and good intentions are the reasons I went to save your daughters.

"You offered me something before, said you were indebted to me. If you feel the need to help me, then fight the Sheriff like Fluria said you would, and I guess I wouldn't be opposed to you paying my medical bills either. But after that, I don't even know if I'll stay in this blasted town. I might even fly off to some other planet, and you won't have to ever worry about me again."

Susaka paused, then stood and paced a few steps.

"I have already paid your medical bills, and I have a... proposition for you."

John smirked with the realization, "So that was your game, some sort of test before the real conversation? To make sure I'm worth even discussing this idea of yours with?" he deduced.

Susaka nodded, "Something like that."

"Well, what is it? What is this 'proposition' of yours? Something to do with the Sheriff?"

Susaka paused, "Mmm, in a way I suppose... but as I think about it more, I suspect it would be better discussed at a later time. After I have fully cleared your name and burned Sheriff Fremont's. Especially given its... unusual nature."

"Susaka, these past few days have been nothing but unusual. Tell me what you want," John insisted.

"No, no. My mind is rightly made up, it would be ill advised to discuss it now," Susaka rose and straightened his vest, "especially while Fremont holds some vestige of power."

Susaka stood silent for a moment, John seeing a look of concern on the man's face, "I still have not gotten your possessions back from the Sheriff's department even, but I can assure you that is on the agenda."

John wanted his clothes and money and guns back, but Susaka's avoidance occupied his mind, "Are you really going to dangle this in front of me and make me wonder what you want for however many days you are off com-

bating the Sheriff?"

Susaka only smiled and John saw some mischief in his eyes, "I am, indeed. So until then we shall have to give you something to do, and something to wear perhaps."

"Yeah, that would actually be nice. But you aren't getting out of this that easy."

"Oh, really? So you think giving Fremont breathing room to operate in is worth us discussing an idea of mine that requires he be disposed of anyway?"

John sighed, deciding it may not be worth his single minded pursuit, and made curious by an something that popped into his mind.

"How are you doing this? Burning down the establishment like this?"

Susaka smiled, "Well, Mr. Lee, I have dealt with much tougher opponents than a small town Sheriff. I have conquered trillionaires at the negotiating table, and was handsomely rewarded for my troubles. So when I say that I am throwing talent and resources at this problem, understand that it *will* be solved in our favor; it is just a matter of work now."

John didn't know what to say, "What... that is, who do you work for?"

"Oh, I am long retired. But the story of my work we can save until you are dining as a free man at my house down the street. For now I will have uh, oh, I shall have Gladys and Fluria pick up some things for you. You are a bit too big for my clothes, I would wager, so they'll buy something quickly." He snapped his fingers and pointed at Orma, who brought out her personal device, "Now tell me, what size are you?"

Thus John found himself listing all his measurements for Orma to jot down and send to the girls. "Excellent, I will have those delivered to you at light speeds. Is there anything else I can do for you right now?" Susaka asked.

John thought for a moment, "Uh, this may sound strange."

"Name it."

"Could you tell me what day it is? Or, uh, how many days it has been since the desert?"

"Ah, well, it has only been two, why do you

ask?"

He shrugged, "My sleep schedule, if you can call it that, has been unusual, I've fallen unconscious multiple times and the days have blended together. It's really been only two?"

"Only two, John."

"Okay," he replied, melancholy. "There is one other thing," he added.

"Name it."

He pointed at the flesh weaver attached to his left arm, "Can you help me get this off?"

"Ah yes, certainly," Susaka said, examining the device.

"Yeah, it's been done for a while. And if you could maybe return it to the Doctor's office so that he doesn't think I stole it, that would be good."

"Ah, yes, that would likely be wise. Simple too, seeing as the Doctor has requested me step in today for a check on my minor wounds," Susaka replied, looking over the controls of the device.

"Oh yes, I forgot that you were injured. They knocked you out, didn't they?" John asked.

"They had to. Either that or kill me, I fought with everything I had there. I am surprised they did not kill me, however," Susaka said as he started to enter commands on the flesh weaver's screen.

John was surprised by that realization, "That's a good point, you shot at them and everything, didn't you? So why didn't they kill you?"

"Well, unfortunately I did not actually get a shot off. My drills for drawing were quite lax, I'm afraid, but I did point it at them before they knocked it out of my hand. I cannot understand why they merely beat me instead of simply blowing my brains out. Though I suppose I am grateful in a sense."

"That's so strange, do you suppose it was just undisciplined men delighting in cruelty?" John asked.

"I had that thought, but then remembered the reports I had heard. That these outlaws of A'pash are notoriously hard to interrogate. They do not break, *ever*. Which, in my humble

opinion, would seem to indicate they are at least trained, if not fiercely disciplined."

"And the grunts being disciplined implies something more, some strategic mind."

"Exactly," Susaka said, followed immediately by the machine saying in a feminine voice, "Are you sure you wish to disengage the seal?"

"Yes, please," John said.

With that, Susaka pressed one more button and a loud *chinck* accompanied the opening up of the flesh weaver.

"Alright, now let's just grab it and open it up more," Susaka said, grabbing the two halves that had become apparent and pulling them apart.

"Ah!" John exclaimed as the needle-like fabricator tool came out of his new, pink bicep, leaving a small thread of flesh stringing out as it was pulled away.

"Everything alright?" Susaka asked.

John pulled off the thread of flesh and then flexed the muscle, "Yeah, it's sensitive, but I think it's just about good as new."

"Good, the Doctor always does good work," Susaka said. John then heard an alarm go off, and Susaka pulled out his personal device, "Speaking of, I should head in that direction. Stay put, Jonathan, I will have news for you in a day."

"Thank you, Mr. Susaka, I don't know what to say."

"Then say nothing so that you don't sound bumbling. Orma, let's get on our way."

Orma nodded and John smiled at Susaka's advice, "Anything to pass the time in here?" he asked.

"I will have one of the my employees give you access to the guest computer in the wall," Susaka said nonchalantly.

And then it clicked for John, "You own this hotel." He remembered the neon sign he had seen as he walked into town. "That's your name on the hotel."

Susaka smiled a proud smile, "Have a good day, John, I shall bring you news as soon as I can."

And with that, he turned and walked out the

door, Orma following right behind him, "Have a good day, my friend," she said as she shut the door behind her.

And just like that, John found himself alone in the room again. He had gotten some of his questions answered, but now he had even more.

Chapter 8

The employee came quickly and gave John weird looks all throughout the process of setting up the wall screen, and then gave him the terminal.

It's the bloody shirt. Or maybe uncomfortable with me and his boss's views on the matter.

They didn't say a word to each other, something John was more than okay with. When the man left, John immediately opened multiple different search engines.

Susaka could see this, look over your use of the device, he told himself.

And I don't care.

He used a command to enter the same two words in every search engine.

"Hiram Susaka... just who are you?" he whispered aloud.

Few results came up, the main ones being articles about his unusual retirement from T.J.C.

Thomas-Johnson-Cicero! The robotics and weapons company? He was an executive, grew up on the free world Heredidon, and went to university on Earth after he performed the Intelligence Placer. Got scholarships when they found out he was a Tecton. Tested weapons for T.J.C. in the free colonies where it was cheaper, and so he already had a residency of A'pash when he wanted out and cut a deal with the company and didn't return to Earth.

Kept a few schematics for himself... became a businessman... and is one of the reasons Earth changed their policy on Tecton emigration and dual residencies.

You sly Sfenjuut, you tricked them good. That loophole hadn't existed for very long, but the M-sons had to change that one right after this, I'm

sure. Can't have high level weapons engineers leaving.

So that's how you're so rich, and did business with trillionaires, too. But why are you here?

The A'pash Interweb was rather empty with that query. *Guess I can't expect him to have written a personal blog.*

Suddenly the door opened and he heard a familiar voice say, "Hello? John?"

He closed all the tabs he had open with some quick inputs. "Gladys?"

"Yeah, I got you stuff," she said, her head popping through the gap she had opened in the door.

"Hey, that's great. Come in, come in."

She walked in slowly, holding a clear bag he could see was full of clothes.

"They will probably charge you for the sheets," she said awkwardly.

John just laughed. "Darn, I was hoping to avoid that."

"Well, maybe they won't, my dad will probably tell them not to. Seeing as he is buying you clothes and what not."

John thought for a moment, watching Gladys fiddle with the bag. "Gladys are you okay? You're less... sassy than I remember."

She winced, and fidgeted even more, until she eventually said, "I'm sorry about that."

"About what? What for?"

"Well, it's just, you were rescuing us... bleeding... and I called you "blondie" and all sorts of other stupid stuff and that was... not goo-"

"Fine," John interrupted.

"Huh?"

"It's fine, Gladys, it's more than fine, actually. I appreciated it. All the pain I was in and all the death, too, and here is this girl doing as poorly as me, and she teases me. I was dying out there, and you helped me not feel dread in those moments."

Her eyes grew a little teary, "So you're saying I can call you blondie whenever I want?"

He smiled wide, "Any time."

She wiped her eyes and said, "That's good because it's all I think about when I see your stupid hair."

"Hey, what's wrong with my hair?"

She sat down on the bed next to him, "It's way too spiky, and frankly a disaster."

"What?" John said, then holding up the clear, crystalline terminal trying to see himself in the reflection.

"Oh, it's bad, trust me. There is a mirror in the bathroom you can use to see the disaster I speak of, but I didn't think to bring you a comb or hat, so there isn't much you can do about that."

"Does the sink run?" John asked as he put down the terminal.

"Uh, yeah. Why do you ask?"

"You're right, my hair is bad. But you also underestimate what a desperate man can do with just water to fix it."

"Pffft, whatever."

John laughed at the stereotype Gladys had fallen into.

"What?" she asked, surprised.

"Nothing, don't worry about it."

"Fine, I guess. Here's your stupid clothes by the way," she said, tossing him the bag.

"Thank you, I appreciate this."

"You have no idea how tempting it was to buy just one size too small, make you think you're fat, or that you gave the wrong measurements."

"You're a real charmer," John said sarcastically.

"Thanks, I know," Gladys said with a smile, John then looked through the bag at the simple clothes that she had bought for him.

"I'll stand outside while you try these on, make sure they fit and stuff," she said as she stood.

"Okay, I'll just be a second," John said as he dumped the bag on the bed.

Gladys left the door open a crack as she exited, and John started on his bloody shirt. Slowly he pulled it off, the movement hurting his gut, but his new arm muscle worked as smoothly as he could want. He saw also that he was stained with his own blood where the shirt had been sticking to his chest. The patch was still holding strong, but he knew he would have to be careful

as he put on the new clothes.

"Finished," he called when he was dressed. They were simple athletic type clothes and fit him easily, but he noticed could also be tightened, presumably to keep out dust. Simple shoes too, with laces and a simple dust seal as well.

Gladys opened the door and looked in, "It fits."

"Indeed it does."

"Great! So I won't have to go back to the store."

"Yeah, now you can get back to your soap operas," John quipped.

"And is that a bad thing?" Gladys retorted, hands on her hips.

"To each his own."

"Mmm, and before I go back to my soap operas there was something I needed to tell you."

"Oh?"

"My dad wanted me to tell you that he wanted to make sure you stayed put. He said it was very important that you stay here until he was all done with the Sheriff, and that he was sorry it slipped his mind and he didn't tell you sooner," Gladys said, counting on her fingers what John guessed were all the things she had been told to remember.

"I had gathered that. Does he think the Sheriff will try something, though?" he asked.

"He said that if the Sheriff got you in his custody then it would be at least a setback, if not a disaster, and the Sheriff knows it, too. But as long as you are in the hotel my dad can protect you."

"Well, thank you, I'll certainly keep to the hotel."

"Mmm, I'm sorry, but he told me that you should stay in your room. And based on how I got in, lock the door, too."

"Okay, if he thinks it's best."

"You do know how to lock doors, right?" Gladys taunted.

"Go back to your trash shows!" John shot back, grabbing the door.

"As long as you stay indoors and keep being blonde."

"Oh so now you like my hair?" John asked.

"Nah, I just like making fun of it."

John stood there silently, and then slowly chuckled until he was really laughing, Gladys joining in, too.

There was a pause after they both calmed down, Gladys shuffled awkwardly before finally saying, "Thank you for saving me."

John just smiled, "I'm happy I did."

Gladys smiled and backed away to leave.

"Don't forget to lock your door, blondie."

"Don't worry, I won't need your help with that."

She smiled and turned around, walking toward the elevator, and he shut and locked the door.

Looking back at the bed, he saw the blood-stain he had left on the sheets and his old bloody clothes lying on the bed. Spotting a trash can, he grabbed his old medical garb and walked over and threw them away.

Afterwards however, he felt very tired, his wound still draining him of energy, and the conversations having taken their own sort of toll as well. So when he remembered that his blood-stain on the sheets was actually not that big, sleep suddenly sounded very good.

Rest the wound, too. Yes, I think sleep is an excellent idea.

He hobbled over to the light switch and flipped that, closed the window he had opened, and then sat himself down on the bed. When he finally laid down, he suddenly felt much better and even more tired.

They should make all beds this relaxing.

Bending his chest to pick up the covers ended up being a very painful idea, and he gritted his teeth as he physically recoiled after trying. Kicking them haphazardly up to cover him was a bit better, and as soon as he had the blankets he knew that sleep would be sure and swift.

Knock knock knock, the door tapped.

He woke up gently, coming to his senses swift and sure. It was darker than he remembered it being, but looking over at the

nightstand he saw an antique style digital clock, the time of "7:04 PM" glowing a soft red into the dim room.

"Mmmmf, yes?" he called, yawning right after.

"Room service," a woman's voice called through the door.

Through the discomfort, John sat up at that, the pain having the unintended effect of waking him up more.

Room service? "I didn't order anything," he replied.

"Compliments of the house."

Likely Susaka's doing, John reasoned, but just to be safe he opened his computer terminal quickly. The light of the screen hurt his eyes, but he managed through his blurry vision to open his door's security feed. The bright light made it hard to make out much of anything, but he could clearly tell that there was only one employee at the door as opposed to several law officers.

"One moment please," he yelled, and with that he stood slowly and walked to the door. His gut wasn't bothering him as much as before, though each step he took did still make him wince.

When he got to the door he first flipped the light switch; he groaned as his eyes uncomfortably adjusted to the brightness. Not wanting to keep the employee waiting, he rubbed his eyes with one arm and got the door open with his other.

"Mmmf, hello th-" He began, but when his arm came down he looked at something that definitely didn't strike him as room service.

The woman who was at the door did indeed have a silver platter that smelled of meat and other wonderful things, all covered by a matching, round lid, but that was where the similarities ended.

Instead of some hotel uniform he had seen the other employees wear, he saw a sleeveless amber dress in its place. Floral designs that decorated the whole thing all in similar, but different, shades of the amber color. The dress going

from her knees to the large straps going over her shoulders.

While he did briefly notice the fashion of the piece, the pseudo-discskirt style and the tightness of it all being homages to the 28th century, he was far more interested in the woman who wore it.

"May I come in?" Sophia Sare asked him.

He snapped out of his stupor enough to reply, "Please do," and got out of her way.

She walked in with the platter, John realizing as he heard the *thump, thump* of her footfalls that she was wearing cowboy boots. He followed her in as she placed the tray down on a dresser near the door and realized then that her hair was down and fell almost to her waist.

There was a pause as she turned back and they both stood looking at each other, the silent tension finally cut as Sophia said,

"You are full of surprises, it seems."

"You're one to talk," John retorted.

"What do you mean?" She asked, a little surprise in her tone.

John scratched his head, then pointed at the meal and said, "I, uh... I didn't order anything."

"I know, that's why I brought it," Sophie replied.

"Huh... what?"

"Well, I knew the doctor had given you something small to eat, but when I asked the concierge about you, he said that you hadn't left your room all day. And so I double checked and found out that *you*," she pointed accusingly at John on that note, "have not eaten anything all day!"

John realized she was right, he hadn't eaten for a whole day, and as he thought about it he started to get hungry.

"It wasn't surprising that the others forgot to feed you, seeing how busy they are fighting the Sheriff, but Jonathan, you are wounded, you can't starve yourself, you stupid Ysno. Why didn't you order anything?" She scolded.

John shrugged, "Honestly Sophie... I forgot."

"Ugh! How could you forget? It's your own body. I know you're smarter than this, too."

John remembered how she knew that as

soon as she said it, how she had pried for information so well that he had worried for his safety.

"Is that what you meant before?" He asked.

"That you are full of surprises?" She asked.

"Yeah."

Sophia twirled a strand of hair and thought for a moment, "Well, no, I meant that I just hadn't pegged you for the hero type when we met. Which is kind of silly of me since you had just saved me, too."

Blast... I was ready to Yspling kill her, and now here she is bringing me food. John thought.

"But there is actually another reason that I'm here," she continued, an insecure look on her face.

"Oh?"

"Yeah, I just, uh, I was just thinking about how our last conversation went, and I wanted to apologize and make sure we were square before I left town."

"What do you mean?" John asked, wondering about multiple things she had said.

"Well, I sort of went crazy is all, interrogating you like I did. I was too curious and I know now that you are uncomfortable talking about those things. I saw the look in your eyes, John; it scared me, but I also completely understand, especially if I am guessing correctly what your life has been like. And I just didn't want you to be upset with me or anything, especially since you really did save me from the Sheriff."

John wasn't sure what to say, but after he thought for a moment he realized something that made him wince,

"I'm sorry I scared you."

She was clearly surprised by that, but then he saw the surprise turn into a smile.

"It's okay. I... understand."

They both stood silent again for a moment, but then Sophia exclaimed,

"Oh Ysper Jonathan, that's a lot of blood on the bed! Are you sure you're okay?"

"Oh, that was all from earlier, I'm okay. Max actually patched me up, see?" John said before he lifted his shirt up so that she could see the patch.

It suddenly occurred to him, however, as she stared down intently at his abdomen that she was, in fact, staring down intently at his abdomen. He put his shirt down and looked at her face, and saw the moment when she also realized what she had been doing. John for his part felt very self conscious, and remembering something ran a hand through his hair and asked,

"Uh, is my hair a 'disaster?'"

A look of confusion swept over her face for a moment, and then he saw something click in her eyes and she started laughing hysterically.

What? What is... What the hjek? Oh gosh, I'm wounded and I'm asking about my hair and...

And with that realization, John laughed at the ridiculousness of it all, too. They both calmed down (John faster due to the pain caused by the laughs,) and Sophia said with a chuckle,

"You've become quite a celebrity, you know?"

"Oh yeah?"

"Oh yeah. The whole town was talking about you *before* Susaka made you his martyr to bring down the Sheriff. Now everyone has an opinion about you, and even some of the people on the Sheriff's side are still fans of you."

I'm in the spotlight, that sure is new.

"Really?"

"Yeah, really, and I'm sure your ego will grow three sizes when you hear how some of the women are talking about you."

"*Really?*" John exclaimed.

"Yes, really Jonathan, you're famous now. Around Brownville, at least. Hjek, the citizens who are standing against Fremont are even talking about making you Sheriff. Which is a change that I, for one, would be very happy with," Sophia said, a full, beaming smile on her face. The total opposite of the hollow one she had given him on their first encounter.

"Woah, me? Sheriff?" John asked.

"Yeah! You would be a great Sheriff."

"While I appreciate the compliment, I'll have to put more thought into that idea."

"Well, that is fair," Sophie chuckled before saying, "Just don't forget the rest of us when you're Sheriff, John. Remember that I liked you *before* you got all famous."

"Well, Sophie, I think I would be hard pressed to forget you."

She smiled wide, a glint in her eye, and there was a calm, happy silence for a moment now, before she said, "That was the other thing I wanted to do before I left. I just wanted to say that I did enjoy our conversation. Getting to know you and everything."

"I liked it, too. A lot actually," John agreed, then a bold idea sneaking into his mind, "And you know, we could do it again sometime."

"I think I'd like that," Sophia replied.

"Alright, and next time, I'll buy the tequila."

Sophia laughed, "Fine by me."

An alarm then sounded from her personal device.

"Aw, blast," she said, pulling it out of one of her dress pockets to silence it.

"What's up?"

"I have to go."

"Really?" John asked, a little downtrodden.

"Yeah, really. I was supposed to be back home days ago, but with everything that happened it didn't work out at first, and I wanted to be sure to see you. But I really have to go to-night."

"Is something wrong?"

"No, I just have things I have to do at home that I've been putting off for too long before all... *this* happened, and I just need to go home," Sophia said, shifting slowly toward the door.

"Where is 'home,' might I ask?"

Sophia paused for just a second before replying, "Winter Valley."

"Well, when we have that rain-checked conversation, should I come to Winter Valley, or would you rather come here?"

A smirk replaced the smile on her face, a scheme clear in her eyes, "Lift the lid," she said, pointing at the tray of food.

John walked over to the tray, aware of Sophia shifting behind him as he did. When he lift-

ed the tray he saw by a steak, with broccoli and mashed potatoes on the side.

And sticking out of the steak was a calling card, small and white, and when he picked it up he could tell quite sturdy. *Sturdy enough to stab into a steak apparently.* It read "Sophia Sare, Prospector," and had contact info listed below.

"How about we talk about it more later?" Sophia said, now at the door.

"Okay, I can live with that."

"Mmm, well, how about you just focus on staying alive for now, moron. I'm not going to have to stay and watch you eat that?"

"Well, that depends, will that make you stay longer?"

The look she gave him spoke a thousand words. *"Are you serious?"* were the three that were most prevalent.

"Fine, fine, I won't push my luck," John consented, walking over to see her out.

"Ah, there it is."

"There what is?"

"The smarts I know you have," Sophia quipped, before looking at the time and saying, "I really do have to go now."

"Okay. I hope I'll be able to see you soon," John said.

"Well, Susaka got a meeting together for nine A.M. tomorrow, the vote at high noon will be on whether or not to keep the Sheriff... Good luck John, I know I'll see you again soon."

"How can you tell?"

"Oh, I've just got faith is all. I'll see you around. But until I do, *eat!*" she yelled, jabbing him in the chest with a finger.

"Okay, okay, I promise," John chuckled.

"Okay," Sophia said, smiling, "Enjoy your meal, ta ta."

"Bye," John said, waiting just a moment to watch her walk away before he finally shut the door.

Tomorrow at high noon my fate will be decided by people being influenced by two warring egos. If they rule against me, do I stand my ground and fight in court? Or do I run away?

Don't be stupid John, you will stay and fight it in court. I am in the right, and I'm sure Susaka

could get me a great lawyer to boot. But that might take a whole year or more, and certainly would be miserable. They might even put me in jail during the trial.

So I guess whether or not I ever get that conversation with Sophia depends on the vote, too.

Oh, blast that!

He then smelled that wonderful smell of food again.

Oh yes, lets focus on that for a while.

Five minutes later and his plate was clean.

Dang, I really was hungry, he joked to himself.

And with a full belly came a tired body. His gut did hurt a little more at being filled with food, but he knew he needed it, As he found a spot on the bed relatively free from blood and laid down to sleep he found that his full stomach calmed his nerves, and helped keep his mind off things. Right then he just felt drowsy, his eyelids heavy.

Thoughts of Earth's oceans led him quietly off to sleep, the sound of waves the last thing before his rest.

Chapter 9

Knock knock knock sounded on his door, *Guess sleeping in ain't an option.*

"John, this is Hiram Susaka, may I come in?"

"Mmmphf, one moment," He replied, getting out from under the covers. As he stumbled out of bed the familiar pain in his gut helped wake him up as he fell out of bed in a way likely not conducive to healing it. Picking himself carefully off the floor he stood and walked over to the door carefully, trying to rub the sleep from his eyes as he did. When he got to the door he unlocked it and sure enough, Susaka was there, along with Orma and Gladys as well, who was looking just a little less tired than John. Susaka smartly dressed in a suit and time, with a small briefcase in his left hand.

"Ah good, you are dressed already. We will head down to the church now," Susaka said.

"Wait, what? What are you talking about?"

"Oh, forgive me, I forgot I haven't explained. The meeting today starts in an hour and I would like you to come with us," Susaka explained.

"Why? I thought you wanted me here?"

"I only wanted you here so that Fremont wouldn't arrest you. But I need you to make an appearance today. The townspeople need to know that you are an actual person, a good person at that. Because right now you are just an image on a wanted poster that people keep talking about. I need to humanize you, and in order to that you need to be there."

"Okay, I follow you so far, but why won't the Sheriff arrest me?"

"In front of all the people in a church? Too risky, it makes him look irreverent."

"I see..."

"So you will come, yes?" Susaka asked.

"Yes, yes, but not right now. Give me a minute to go to the bathroom and stuff," John replied, walking away.

"Of course, we'll wait outside a moment, Susaka said, closing the door.

After using the bathroom John washed his face in the sink and got himself a drink of water while he was at it. Now a little more awake than before he went back to the door and asked as he stepped outside, "Do y'all got black coffee?"

"Ew, you drink it black, too?" Gladys said drowsily.

Susaka ignored his daughter, "Yes, downstairs, I ordered some for myself already, I'm sure the pot will have enough for you as well."

Five minutes later John was walking out of the hotel with a steaming cup of coffee in his hand. The familiar bitterness of it reminding him of the pots his mom would always make for the family.

"Quickly now, best not encounter the Sheriff in the street," Susaka warned. And so they walked briskly down the dirt road, past the purple mansion, to the baby blue New Dutch Reformed church. Across the street was a Mormon meetinghouse.

"Why are we going here instead of the town hall?" John asked.

"The town hall is not big enough to host a gathering of most of the townsfolk, so in a highly split decision the Dutch Reformed church was chosen over the Mormon one as the place to hold all meetings," Susaka explained.

"Ah, did you have a preference?" John asked.

"Not particularly, I knew it would be controversial so I stayed out of the matter. And besides, neither outcome really would affect me anyway seeing as we are neighbors with both churches."

John suddenly realized, "I suppose I shouldn't be surprised you are the owner of that mansion over there."

"You are just figuring that out now?" Susaka asked with a chuckle.

"Hey, in my defense I had some other things I was occupied by these past few days."

Susaka just smiled to himself amused, turning toward Gladys when she said, "Well dad, Brig was upset when the Dutch Reformed was chosen as the meeting spot."

"Yes my dear, unsurprising considering his family is all Mormon."

"Well but you could have swayed things to the Mormon church," Gladys pressed.

"Yes, but that would have been unwise. And besides dear, not only would Flur's friends at the Dutch Reformed been upset anyway, but Brigham hadn't even asked you out then, now had he?" Susaka asked rhetorically.

"No, I suppose not," Gladys said downtrodden.

"So cheer up my dear, you have him now anyway, madly in love with you, proving him a young man of good taste," Susaka said, giving her a side hug.

"Yeah yeah, whatever dad," Gladys replied, hugging him back.

Susaka laughed at what John guessed was the stereotypical "teenagerness" of the reply. As they approached the doors, he announced "Here we are."

He then knocked loudly, and a moment later a middle-aged man in cargo pants and a t-shirt opened the door,

"You're here early, Hiram," The man said

jokingly.

"Yes, Reverend, just like usual," Susaka replied with a small smile.

The man laughed. As Susaka walked in he followed with, "Who knows, maybe you will be a real one some day."

"Mmmm, *sure*, if you need anything I'll just be in back."

As John looked around he saw lots of pews on each side of a central aisle. Unsure of something, he crouched down and touched a pew. *Wow, real wood on this ball of dust.* The stained glass windows and morning light gave the room a very somber cast..

"Actually there is one thing," Susaka began, "Is it all right if I project the news onto one of the monitors up front? I like the background noise."

"Sure, you have a pass code. right?" The Reverend asked.

"Yes, I do."

"Good deal, go for it."

"Thank you," Susaka took out his personal device and begin to set up the projection.

"Now, Hiram, is this the golden kid you've been going up to bat for?" The man asked Susaka, John standing and staring blankly.

"He is indeed," Susaka confirmed, walking briskly down the aisle.

"Well, it's a pleasure to meet you, kid. Don't worry, I knew right when I heard the tale that you were a good one," the Reverend said, shaking John's hand firmly.

"Well uh, thank you," John replied awkwardly, distracted by the building around him.

"Sure, good luck today, and know that you've got a lot of people praying for you today, kid."

John didn't know what to say other than, "Thank you, I appreciate that."

The Reverend smiled and nodded before walking off, leaving John to wonder who he was, but he was distracted by other things, mainly trying to remember, *when was the last time I was in a church?*

Years ago, with mom. I can't remember, it's

been a long time.

John sighed as he looked at the largest stained glass window, in back behind the choir rows, an image of Jesus, one hand extended and pierced.

Let's hope the townsfolk have God's mercy on their minds today.

The sound of Orion's Spur News Network started coming softly from the right side monitor. Susaka sat in front of it in the front row, Gladys sitting near him. John walked over and asked, "Who was that man just now?"

"Oh, he is my old friend Michael. He's the groundskeeper here. Jonathan, would you come sit. I wanted to go over some things for the meeting today."

As he did, Susaka put some papers back into his briefcase and looked at John very sternly, "Now, my daughters and I have discussed what happened after you rescued them, but I am missing what happened in your pursuit and the battle. In fact I was meaning to ask if you had told anybody this at all?"

"I haven't actually, I haven't talked about much, since the only person who asked anything was the Doctor, and that was just medical stuff," John replied.

"Of course, I just need to know everything you can bring yourself to remember. In order to defend you properly I need to know everything I can."

"I understand. Give me a second and I'll get started," John replied, starting to recall everything he could.

"Oh, one moment, please. May I record you?" Susaka asked, grabbing his personal device.

"Sure," John consented. A moment later the monitor had been muted and the recording had started.

"Whenever you're ready," Susaka said.

John nodded and swallowed, "Well I... I heard the first shots while I was still in the bar. The Hungry Sparrow bar, and I immediately drew my Blaster-Slugger and tried to find cover..."

He recounted slowly but surely the battle in

the town, his decision to go after the girls, the defensive grid firing at him, tracking the raiders through the desert and then his assault on their compound, ending with his getting shot.

"After that I'm sure your daughters could tell a better account of what happened. My blood loss was... bad," John finished, taking a breath after reliving all the intensity of the experiences. He even saw Gladys shudder subtly.

Susaka turned off the recording and was silent for a moment, "You are... a very impressive man, Mr. Lee. And I... once again, that is, I just wish you know how much I appreciate what you've done for us."

"I'm happy I was able to, sir."

"Yes well, I hope you understand that even after I have saved you from our foul Sheriff that the debt I owe you will be far from cashed. I intend to make you know how grateful I am."

The doors opened and a trickle of people started to come in and take seats at various points in the pews.

"I'm sure, sir, that you will treat me better than I deserve," John said.

"Oh, I am only repaying like for like, I assure you," Susaka replied.

The flow of people started to pick up as John realized nine o'clock was approaching quickly. As he sat there his thoughts of his fate floated through his mind, one of them forming a question for Susaka,

"Is there anything else you need from me?"

Susaka looked up from his notes and thought for a moment, "Speak little, and when you need to, tell the truth."

John nodded, "I can do that."

"Excuse me, sir?" A voice came from behind him,

John turned to see who was addressing Susaka but instead saw a young man who was looking right at him,

"Sir, my name is Brigham, and I just wanted to thank you so much for saving Gladys. Er, and Fluria too, of course. I'm sorry Mr. Susaka, I didn't mean..."

"It's alright Brigham, say what you wanted to say to Mr. Lee," Susaka replied.

"Alright well, really Mr. Lee, thank you so much for saving them. I didn't know what to do with myself when I heard that Gladys had been taken. I really thought I would never see her again, and when you brought her back it was like life was worth living again. Thank you, sir, thank you so much!" Brigham said, grasping John's hand and shaking it rapidly.

"Well Brigham, all I can say is that you're welcome, and I hope you never forget all the good you have with Miss Gladys here," John said, winking at Gladys.

"Oh no, sir! I won't ever! I can assure you of that," Brigham exclaimed.

"Brigham, stop it," Gladys said, blushing and grabbing his hand.

"You're not bad, kid, now you spend some time with her," John said with a smile.

"Thank you, Mr. Lee, sir!"

John chuckled as Brigham sat down next to Gladys in the pew behind him and began a hushed conversation. Then John saw him kiss her forehead.

"And we are just getting word that the A'pash Legislature is making a special official policy announcement this very morning at nine o'clock. We go now live to our local sister channel, A'pash Daily, with reporter Xherdan DeWalt," the OSNN news anchor announced. Susaka turned up the volume of the news, the background chatter of the people arriving growing louder.

"John!" A familiar voice said behind him.

He turned to see Fluria, in jeans and a flame orange top, walking up to their pew.

"Fluria, hi. It feels like it's been a while."

"I know, I wanted to come visit you but I was busy recovering myself, and alsooo... working on something."

It was then that John realized she was keeping her hands behind her back, "Oh yeah? And what might that be?" He asked.

She said nothing, instead just smiling wide and bringing what was behind her back out. It was a piece of clothing he thought he recognized, and then she unfolded it,

"My vest!" He exclaimed.

"Yup!"

John sputtered through sounds as he tried to find the words, "It's clean! There's no blood, and no bullet hole either!" He said, taking it from her and examining it.

"Yup! It's almost good as new. We don't really get deer leather around here, and it was really hard to simulate, but Plasti-thread eight mixed with Fenriginaol comes pretty close in every category except touch, and some micro-felt fabric helped with that too."

"Wow, I couldn't even tell without touching it," He looked back up at her, "This is really great, Fluria, thank you."

"Of course, it really is just a token of my appreciation for being alive to do it. If you ever get bullet holes in it again just let me know, and I'll be able to patch it easy."

"Ha! Well I hope I never have to take you up on that offer," John said.

"Oh me too," Fluria said with a chuckle, "Is that spot taken?" She asked, pointing at the spot right next to John.

Ah, interesting.

"Oh, not at all, take it. I'm going to put this on," He replied, standing.

As she sat down he put on his familiar vest, happy to have something of his back, but also reminding him of all of his property he still didn't have.

Thus caught up in his own thoughts, it took him a moment to realize the sudden change that occurred in the room, *it's so quiet, the background chatter is gone.*

Looking around he saw people staring at the entrance, if they dared to speak only whispering. When he followed their gaze he saw the source of the muted tones.

Fremont.

The Sheriff stood in the door way, two deputies behind him, one on either side. His hands rested on his belt, just inches away from his revolver. His vest and cowboy hat were both white, his eyes were locked on John, and he clenched his fists as he looked at him.

No weakness, no faltering, keep eye contact...

I didn't flinch, I didn't flash any weakness, guess all the years hiding on Earth were good for something in the end.

A slight movement and a breath was all he noticed, but when he flicked his eyes down at Fluria he saw her holding up a small revolver she must have been concealing and she was still concealing, holding it behind the pew's back to keep it out of view of the Sheriff.

Does she really think that Fremont is going to shoot me right here? That seems foolish, why would he risk it? Does she know something I don't? It doesn't matter, I'm not giving him any justification if he wants to harm me.

Fremont took a step, *click*, and then another, *click*, every step making his boot spurs hit the floor, giving every step a *click*. As Fremont came up to the front the height difference between them seemed less in a way, but John stood his ground and didn't move, his feet planted even as Fremont stepped past him and advanced farther up the aisle.

Fremont looked away first, glancing quizzically at the news on the monitor.

"Alright folks, it's nine o'clock, lets get started here pretty quick," A man walking in the front door exclaimed loudly, John didn't recognize him but several soft greetings all including, "Mr. Mayor," gave John a good guess.

"Howdy folks, good to see y'all! Why all the dour looks? Is it something I s-" The Mayor began to ask, just then seeming to wonder about the atmosphere in the room before he was interrupted by a forceful voice,

"Susaka, would you please turn up that monitor, I'd like to hear the announcement if you don't mind?" Fremont said, speaking over the Mayor to ask his otherwise courteous question.

The monitor was then going to the official government announcement, but John was focused on Susaka and his reaction. He watched as Susaka reached for his personal device and used it to turn up the volume, "Of course," he replied coolly.

The announcement had already started, and

as John turned to look at the monitor he saw a middle-aged man in a suit and tie at a podium, several similarly dressed figures all stood behind him, with a couple men in military dress thrown in as well, all of them looking quite somber, the screen read, "Congressman Taquinga."

"...we have deliberated amongst ourselves continuously on how to respond to the threat for these past few days. A'pash takes its sovereignty very seriously, and our aerospace is a major part of that."

Are they talking about satellites shot down? Like in the audio guide?

"Therefore we came to the decision to bring in an organization not local to A'pash, but local to our Wilderness frontier society we share with several other world governments. This group is called 'The Sundance Security Collective.'"

John had never heard of that organization before, but he saw Fremont cover his mouth in shock, and heard scattered murmurs throughout the crowd. When he looked down at the Susaka family Hiram looked concerned, though not as much as Fremont had been. Fluria looked like she was trying to remember something, but Gladys had turned pale and was clearly terrified.

"The SSC is a large, interstellar organization, with several privately owned warships, several off-world prisons to make sure that criminals are kept in far away and secure locations, and numerous security forces that all are highly trained and motivated. And now, the A'pash Legislature has officially signed a contract with The Sundance Security Collective to bring in all of these assets to protect our property, our world, or freedoms, and most importantly our people and children."

More murmurs from the crowd, and a sole laugh. John turned to look at Gladys and saw her laughing softly, but with the relative quiet it spread through the whole building. What shook him however was the tears ran down her face as she laughed hysterically, her eyes glued to the monitor.

"Details of the agreement will be released

online so long as they do not need to be classified. But some important ones I will go over are these; All members of the SSC have been granted temporary citizenship, as well as pardons from any past offenses against the Government of A'pash in the few cases that has occurred. All members currently active will have the power of law officers of A'pash as per Larry-Esp Law Enforcement Legislation, section four."

"Gladys what's wrong?" Fluria asked her sister,

"You don't remember Flur? Oh you'll remember," Gladys replied bitterly, tears in her eyes.

"Admiral Lathom and I will discuss more details of this legislation and of course be open to questions shortly, but the last major announcement I will give before I turn it over to the Admiral is that this law has already come into effect. As of Nine A.M. Capital standard time, the SSC will now be protecting all citizens of A'pash. On planet or off, on the ground or in the stars, our citizens will now be protected!" The Congressman ended triumphantly, reporters shouting questions that got muted as Susaka turned off the volume to the monitor.

Gladys was sobbing now, Brigham and Fluria trying to console her, but John watched Susaka push them both away and grab her firmly by the shoulders.

"Daughter! Overcome your hysterics! Let the tranquility come and cease your cares!" He yelled to her, as he spoke of tranquility the sound of it shifting more to a mantra of sorts, one that, combined with the shock and yelling, actually got through to Gladys and helped her calm down.

"Tell me daughter, what is it that makes you react this way? It is just memory, there is no consequence! Concentrate," Susaka asked, holding Gladys' face in his hands.

Gladys took many breaths before she finally began to speak, the whole room staring at her,

"The... the... the... the S... SC, or whatever their stupid acronym is! The- they! They are the ones that kidnapped us!" She yelled.

The room was dead silent except for the

sobbing breathing of one girl.

"Excuse me, but how can she know that?" the Mayor asked, standing as he did.

The moron! She hasn't had a chance to even begin with that yet!

"Shut the hell up!" John yelled at him, hoping to silence the man from making any more stupid remarks.

But then he saw Gladys stand and turn toward him, a fierce fight in her poise and tone as she yelled,

"Because when they were electrocuting my sister to knock her out, the blasted Ysper was enjoying it, and kept zapping her and zapping her until his boss came and pushed him away, and he scolded him by saying he 'was acting more like a xeno than a Sundancer!' He told the blasted Ysper that he wasn't acting 'like a proper employee of the Sundance Security Collective!' He said it just like that, mockingly, like the name itself was a joke! And then after he stopped and his boss turned away, he electrocuted me, and when I lasted longer than a second under that torture he kicked me in the head and took me. They took us! And now they are the law! They... they... oh Daddd..." She sobbed, breaking down.

Cries echoed in the church, thoughts spun in John's mind, and Fluria said so softly he could barely remember it...

"Dear God, help us, I... I remember that."

Its a front, the raiders are taking over the planet. That speech reeked of space trash anyway, but this is them covering for a full military takeover. And they voted for it too! How did these Sundancers leverage the whole government? What are they? Blast! At least Earth is subtle! What the hjek is happening!

Through the sobs John heard a ping come from Fremont's direction. Turning he saw the man pull out his personal device and then stare at it in shock, opening it and reading something that made him glance at Susaka, and then at John.

An APB. They put out an arrest call for me. They must have if I'm so famous.

"Susaka," Fremont said to the man.

Susaka glared in reply, and Fremont looked down at his screen.

John looked and saw Fluria had left the revolver on the pew seat, he grabbed it quickly and checked the ammo.

"Susaka they've..." Fremont began, *Here we go.*

"They put out an arrest warrant for your daughters."

John blinked, *what the blast!*

Orma, who had been silently in the corner for everything, suddenly stood and unsheathed her claws.

"What are you talking about?" Susaka asked, incredulous.

"They put out one for you too," Fremont replied simply.

"What? How?!" Susaka exclaimed, Gladys crying louder in his arms.

Fremont took a breath, "For... *erhrm*, 'Aiding and Abetting a Domestic Terrorist.'"

Oh mercy...

"What do you mea-" Susaka began,

"Me," John interrupted.

Fremont nodded, an emotion in his eyes, *pity?*

"Let me guess, I'm a mass murderer who also committed vast property damage?" John asked, his eyes watering and his body burning from rage.

"Something like that."

Everywhere I go, wanted for something in the most wrong way possible.

"There is something else," Fremont said.

So this can get worse huh?

"What now?" Susaka asked, John hearing meekness for the first time from the man.

"We uh, took a prisoner in the battle," Fremont began, "And they want him released."

Blast it all!

That got the crowd involved, several frustrated shouts rang forth before Fremont raised his hands and yelled, "Hey! I know this is wrong, you don't have to tell me. That's why I will... drop the charges I pressed against Mr.

Lee here, and then... resign as Sheriff rather than enact this decision."

The Mayor stood and spoke. "Well hey now Fremont, lets talk about this maybe."

"Shut up, Maddox, you shriveling cow! Get out!" Fremont yelled at the Mayor. Soon other shouts joining in ,causing the Mayor to retreat out of the church.

John looked at Fremont, suddenly unsure what to think of the man,

"Oh don't look at me like that. I still want you gone or behind bars," The now ex-Sheriff said softly.

"Then why did you do it?"

Fremont sighed and thought. "Tyranny makes strange bedfellows."

John nodded, somewhat amused by the thought, before he was touched on the shoulder, "We need to leave," Susaka said, standing now and still holding Gladys.

"What's wrong?" John asked.

"We need to leave town, we can trust no one not from Brownville. And even some of the locals we have reason to suspect. We must leave!" Susaka said, heading towards the exit.

John didn't know what to do other than trust the man who had helped him so much already, and so he followed them down the aisle and toward the door, Orma leading the way. As they left he saw many glances from the townsfolk, but also received many pats on the back and simple encouragements like, "I'm sorry," "Tough break," and "We know the truth."

All he could say was "Thank you," over and over. Trying to mean it even while his mind was distracted.

What do I do? I am the criminal now, and while it seems most of the townspeople are on my side, I can't push my luck. I need to get out of here. And I can't go to just Geronimo or Winter valley, I have to get off world. But how can I get through the terminals? I don't even have my I.D. Not that it would help me since I am probably the subject of every security briefing in every space-port across the planet.

Which begs the question... am I safer here?

On A'pash? At least for now anyway?

As they left the church he followed the Susakas back to their house, unsure of what else to do. As they approached a gate automatically slid open, and when they arrived at the front door Susaka said, "Open," and the front doors swung open for them all to pass through.

"Fluria, take care of your sister. Orma, begin preparing our exit as well as the legal documents," Susaka commanded.

"You feel the legal documents are necessary Mr. Susaka?" Orma asked.

"Yes, Orma, I do. Please see to them."

Orma nodded and walked up the stairs near the landing, while Susaka walked toward a room on the other side of a massive, well furnished living room.

John pursued, "Mr. Susaka, what are you doing?"

"I am protecting my family," He replied, not stopping or even turning his head.

"I had figured that part out, but what are you doing? How are you going to protect them?" John pressed, having to run to finally catch up to Susaka.

Susaka opened a sliding door made of wood and paper and stepped into another room, John looking around saw many Japanese antiques, as well as several degrees, certificates, awards, and family pictures all decorating the room. A desk stood in the center, with more mementos on it, Susaka was silent when he walked up to the desk, when he approached it he lifted a Bible up from what was clearly its' designated location, and then pressed heavily down on the wood there until part of it caved into the desk.

At the point one of the walls slid upward into the ceiling and revealed something that blew John's mind.

Stars and planets! That is...

"Amazing," He said softly.

A wall of weapons greeted John's gaze, rifles, pistols, grenades, light support weapons, strange devices he didn't recognize, and what appeared to be a small robot all hung from the wall.

Susaka grabbed a small brick like device from off it and entered a code into it, bringing it to life with a soft, *whrm*, "Don't drool, Mr. Lee, these are mine to do with as I please."

He then grabbed a pistol off the wall, pressed its' auto-cock button, and then pointed it at John.

"And before I do anything with them we need to have a conversation."

Chapter 10

John threw his hands up.

"I have one question for you Mr. Lee," Susaka said coldly.

"Alright, ask away," John replied, both confused and seething.

"Did the thought occur to you to turn in me and my family in order to reduce your own sentence?"

John raised an eyebrow in surprise, "No. That idea never occurred to me. Why? You thinking of pulling the reverse?"

Susaka looked down at his device, read something on it, and then lowered the gun.

"This thing is quite the help you see, it is a non-touch lie detector. And you are telling me the truth," He said.

John immediately understood what Susaka had done and why, and yet, "After all I've done for you, and this is how I am treated?"

"When you have children you will understand," Susaka replied, setting the object down and starting some task on a computer in the wall.

"Oh, I understand perfectly well why you did it. Blast, it makes too much sense for my liking. I just thought I was no longer the stranger and I guess I was wrong," John said.

"You still are the stranger Jonathan, but you just passed the final test my paranoid mind was able to come up with, which means..." he paused, turning away from the computer and looking John in the eyes, "I don't want you to be the stranger anymore."

John's silence was indicative; he was sur-

prised and did not know what to say.

"Your family is not on A'pash, is it?" Susaka asked.

"No, just me," he replied.

"Well, then Jonathan, I would like you to be part of mine until we can get you back to yours," Susaka said earnestly, extending his arm to offer John the handle of the pistol.

"I..." John began, so emotionally confused he couldn't speak and just stared at the pistol handle.

"You don't have to say anything, John. Except whether or not you will travel with us as we attempt to escape this blasted destruction of A'pash."

He looked Susaka in the eyes, "I... I will, thank you."

"Good, I hoped you would. And now you won't have to drool either, whatever you want to be equipped with is yours. Which I was hoping to do anyway in a calmer circumstances," Susaka said, gesturing at the wall.

"What do you mean? Calmer circumstances? Equip me?"

"Well Jonathan, seeing as we shall be going into hiding together, you will be able to use whatever you want from my own arsenal, which is quite impressive if I do say so myself.

"And as for calmer circumstances, that was perhaps just wishful thinking I engaged in before we found ourselves hunted. Do not worry about my proposition for now. Right now we must get off world."

"But how? You don't own a ship, do you?"

"No, but I may still be able to get us off planet. It will take some effort, but I can do it. Oh, but that reminds me, I will need to secure my finances quickly if we will have any small hope! The private companies that are local will fold eventually, and unfortunately I have done my business with them for years."

"Aw blast!" John exclaimed.

"What is it?" Susaka asked.

"I should secure mine too, but the Sheriff's office still has all my things."

"And you cannot login outside your device?" Susaka asked.

"Not without compromising some of my own safeguards. Oh blast, I really need to go get it."

They both stood silent, the gravity of what John had to risk weighing on both of them.

"Go now, we left the meeting ten minutes ago, we have time before whatever new Sheriff is installed musters the mettle to come try and arrest us. Especially with public opinion as strong as it is."

"You're right, I'll be back as soon as I can. If I... don't come back fast enough, where might I meet you?"

Susaka stared in thought, before saying, "Can you memorize a latitude and longitude?"

"Yes."

And so the Japanese man listed the numbers, and John used the tricks his parents had taught him to help commit them to memory.

"Go now, let us hope you won't have to use that," Susaka said.

"Agreed," John said as he exited the office.

Through the living room and to the door, he opened it up to see a small group of citizens outside, staring at the residence, and now him as he stepped outside.

John didn't make eye contact, walking out the gate determined to get what was his. As he walked down the street he saw a larger crowd outside the Sheriff's office, a much noisier one at that, with lots of questions being shouted. There was also a large vehicle at the end of the street near the Doctor's office, it was a wheeled truck, with a large "Parker Protections" label on the side of its dark blue hull, a few personnel talking near the vehicle.

As he came up to the crowd he cut through as best he could to the doors, where a screaming man was yelling about injustices in the face of one of the Deputies. John approached the other and summoned up as commanding persona as he could. He got up as close as he could to the Deputy, before the bearded man stuck an arm out fiercely and stopped him from getting closer.

"Hey pal! Back off! What's your deal?" The man said gruffly, fight in his eyes.

"My name is Jonathan Lee, and I am here to retrieve my property being held here," He said firmly, his eyes not wavering in the face of the Deputy's intensity.

At the mention of his name, the man's face changed, it softened and then he took a shuddering breath.

"You're the guy that fought them, and they want you arrested for it?" The Deputy asked.

"Yes," John said, no lie he could think of a better risk than the truth.

The man rubbed his beard and turned away, clearly thinking about something difficult for him. John observing a wedding ring on his hand.

"You, uh, you saved my wife, in the alley. She told me about it, and recognized your description," The man choked, a small sob in his throat, that he cleared with a cough.

"So what was it you wanted again?" The Deputy asked.

John himself softened, relieved to have a connection with the man, "I need my property that was confiscated by Fremont, its got all of my money, I.D.s and everything," He said earnestly.

The Deputy thought for a moment.

"That's it? That's all you need?" He asked.

"Yes."

The Deputy looked around at the crowd for a moment, and then leaned over and spoke to his partner, "Can you handle this for just a second? I'll be right back."

"Fine! But hurry, Ben!" The other Deputy spat back.

"I can help," John offered.

The other Deputy eyed him suspiciously before turning back to "Ben" and saying, "Just hurry."

After the Deputy went inside, John put his back to the door and crossed his arms. *The least I can do to make him feel better about this. He must know about the arrest warrant, he must; and he helped me anyway. I've got to be grateful.*

The crowd eyed him strangely, and mostly shouted questions at the Deputy, things like, "Are you one of them now?" "What does this mean for the Constitution?" Or just as simple as,

"What is going on?"

Yspers... One of the greatest political moves I've ever seen. This band of brigands, or whatever they are, has somehow leveraged an entire world into bending the knee. They have effectively taken control of the whole planet with this new legislation, or "deal," as the politicians are so apt to call it.

How? How can you do that? A'pash has a space navy right? Defensive satellites at least?

...

Or do they not?

There is a secret here, and the simplest solution to this problem is...

Oh my... It can't be. No, it can, its so simple. Does A'pash not control its own solar system? Or even airspace? The blasted audio program! The satellites! That's it! They control the skies! Blast!

Wait...

This can't be the Masons, can it? Use a proxy to take over a planet and then have Earth sweep in. No, this isn't their usual strategy, and it doesn't feel like any sort of PSYOP they would try.

This is something entirely new.

Which brings back the question... Why do they care about Susaka? I killed a dozen of them, so I am obviously a threat, but they kidnapped his daughters and put out a warrant for his arrest. Somehow, all of this comes back to him.

Alright Hiram, you and I are going to have to talk. Or perhaps I'll have to snoop. Either way, I will find out.

The doors flung open, hitting John in the back, he stepped down and out of the way rapidly to avoid getting run over.

"Move it people! Back off!" A law officer yelled, walking out the door and trying to force the crowd back.

The next moment John saw "Ben" come out with a box, but trying to get out of the way himself.

"Here," Ben handed him the box. John proceeded to grab as many of his things as fast as he could, attaching his belt and holster with it. He stuffed his pockets with his wallet and other random possessions, and then made sure to grab and load his guns. He wasn't sure what to

do with his ruined clothes, but then the commotion got worse, multiple people shouted obscenities, and he looked up at the ruckus. He couldn't tell what was happening until he saw the cause of the chaos.

The raider.

The prisoner walked out onto the "boardwalk" with a grin on his face. He was cuffed, and being held by an officer, but when the crowd started to jeer and boo the first law officer pulled out his revolver and pointed it towards the sky.

BANG!

"If any of you harm Mr. Lek Ebal, you will find yourself prosecuted to the highest extent of the law! If I hear one report from anybody, it will be investigated fully. Do I make myself clear?"

The crowd's sudden silence was disheartening, *come on! Stand against this little thing or they'll take everything from you.*

The law officer then turned to the raider and pulled out a key, unlocking the cuffs he said, "Mr. Ebal, you are free to leave, for your own safety I would encourage you to leave town. But if you decide to stay know that any Deputy will come to your aid at just a holler. Alright?"

John stared at the raider, who somehow looked both well put together and like a hardened criminal at the same time. His disheveled blonde hair clean, unlike his face, its features handsome but dirty. His teeth were just a little yellow and pointed when he smiled, but his smile still flashed radiantly.

"Alright, officer, I think I get it," The raider replied, looking over the crowd with an observing eye and a confident smirk, "I think I shall head down to the bar if that's alright?"

"Sir, I can't recommend that, for your own safety," The Deputy cautioned.

"Well, awfficer, I'm goin. I trust your office will do its' job effectively and keep me safe, as a citizen is deserving."

"Parker Protections will make sure you are safe," A familiar voice said.

John turned toward the man he had spent hours with and who had saved his life at least

once. Max stood there with a grim look on his face, a hand on his sidearm. He scanned the crowd quickly, John meeting his eyes for just a moment before he looked back at the raider.

The raider, John saw, was smug at Max's words, "Well ain't that something, looks like you showed up awfficer. Parker Protections has got some sense anyway," he said.

Max, did your company get turned on us too? On me? Is this just business?

He felt a wave rush over him, sadness making his heart sink.

"Now, time for a drink I think," the raider said.

A drink? You destroy and get to drink to your success afterwards?

This time he shuddered, a cringe at the thought causing him to shake.

The raider walked to the bar along the boardwalk. Some in the crowd turned away, but John watched and walked along as the rest of the people followed slowly. Murmurs floated between individuals but for the most part the people walked silently.

The raider walked into the saloon and ordered, "One scotch!"

John watched him sit at the bar and look around at the patrons, several of them getting up to leave, many just staring, or clearly trying not to.

As a group with a couple young women, John even thinking they were teenagers, walked out the swinging doors the raider yelled out at them, "Stay lassies! I've got a respectable government job now ey! Don't you want a piece of me now? Maybe some time together to get acquainted? Ahahaha!"

The law is wrong. A murderer, and probably rapist, gets to walk free. So if the law won't do anything... should I?

John then saw Max stand right at the saloon doors and look in, clearly placing himself strategically.

Blast! Max seems to be protecting him!

But he also saw me and didn't make any move to arrest me. So where does he fall into

this? What does he want? If its just peace then I can't blame him, really, and there isn't anything I could do that would be okay. Certainly couldn't pop a bullet into his worthless a...

I can!

The Lester-something law! A legal duel! Even if they use magic legal powers later to make it somehow not acceptable, I'm already a terrorist anyway, one murder charge wouldn't change anything.

And if the people see... well, that's got to count for something.

John stepped out of the crowd, approaching his enemy.

Max locked eyes on him as he came up the stairs and approached the door. John watched the man shift and stopped in his tracks just a meter from the door.

"What are you doing, John," Max asked, quiet and cool.

"Just entering a business," He replied confidently.

Max looked up at that, and John knew he was being studied, but he didn't try to hide his emotions, not that time. *It doesn't prove anything, and I'll know now what he thinks.*

Max had a quick surprised and suppressed chuckle, "Something legal, oh you're clever, maybe the dueling law?"

John said nothing and kept his focus glued to the man.

"Well if you're set on doing something to that scum, then I might have something better than killing him," Max said at almost a whisper.

John let out a relieved breath, "Maxwell, I am... happy to hear that."

Max smiled softly, "It's in my pocket, here," he said as he pulled out a small plastic container and popped it open. "I pulled it from our supplies, said it was defective in the record, but it is instead, a fully functional interstellar tracking device."

John looked at the object the size a small contact lens. It was mostly transparent, with a crystal structure John could barely make out.

"Max, this must be forty thousand silver dol-

lars! How does it even work?"

"Try seventy thousand. And the way it works I think you might enjoy. It is usually powered by excess body heat and if you coat it in a layer of tissue repair ointment it can slip right into even a small cut with a little push. Its invisible to most medical scans, and it will have just enough juice to put out two pulses that can reach planets away with accurate location information. And even farther at the price of accuracy."

"But, why track him? What do you think he could lead us to?" John asked.

"Well, how do control a whole planet?" Max asked.

"Well you isolate it, the easiest way to do that would be some sort of effective ground installations, railguns with some advanced targeting could do it pretty easily."

"True, but they'd probably be spotted by A'pash satellites before they could get a shot off."

"So then what? A'pash doesn't have a large military, but I thought the patrol vessels and Starbase especially were enough to give serious pirates second thoughts. The Hungaria docked at Bedonkohe Station, I saw some of the weapons arrays, it would take dozens of pirate ships to even dare attack the planet."

"Maybe, or maybe they could do it with one."

John didn't hide the confusion on his face. He looked around and saw the crowd still shifting, and the raider being a general nuisance at the bar, but John felt less rage, the anger drowned out now by curiosity.

"What are you saying?" John asked Max, ideas rushing through his mind.

"Well all I was meaning was that, you are clearly thinking of normal pirates in small skiffs and junk ships. But these clearly aren't ordinary pirates if they would even dare try to subjugate a whole planet. So what if they're in possession of something extraordinary?"

John didn't know what to think of that, only that it was surprisingly believable. Alien technology was not common in the Wilderness, but it also wasn't unheard of. There had always

been tales of strange artifacts found out among the stars for as long as ships had been common, but the difference with the Wilderness stars was that sometimes, something *would* be found. Very often stonework structures, or tracking beacons, all extraterrestrial in origin.

But a weapon like this...

"So you think these pirates have some sort of super weapon? Some... Matter to Anti-Matter machine? Or an alien spacecraft?"

"No, no, nothing that science fiction-like, but it wouldn't be hard for an organized group of pirates to have a real edge over A'pash, and the Free Colonies in general. And maybe they keep it somewhere that he will be scurried away to. I had a contact tell me that there is a Sundancer ship coming here to pick this guy up in twenty minutes, that was five minutes ago. So now I have two questions for you John. Where do you think they are taking him? And what are you going to do about it?" Max asked pointedly.

John knew what he wanted to do, but something was bothering him, "And what exactly are you going to do, Max? Offer me up as a sacrifice to do your dirty work?"

"Oh don't worry, wise guy, you are going to do the thing I can't do, so that I can do the thing *you* can't. You are going to get that tracker in him, and then I am going to cover your escape out of this town. So not only are you going to need the tracker," He said, handing John the tracker, "but also the keys to the speeder you took from the raiders, which happens to be parked behind the Sheriff's office. And lastly, this," Max finished, handing John the key to the speeder, and then a deep blue business card with the Parker Protections logo, and all of Max's contact information.

"And when the situation gets heated, as a temporarily enfranchised law officer, I will get you out of whatever pickle you find yourself in right now so that you get out of here a free man," Max explained, covering a smile on his face with a hand as he composed himself.

"You worked this all out pretty quick, Max. And pretty simple to boot," John observed.

Max shrugged big and had a small grin, "So

is that a 'yes?'"

"Deal."

Max said loudly, "Well be sure to control yourself, sir!" And then looked away, coughed, and quietly said, "Go for it."

John understood the cover immediately, the townspeople needed to think that Max was completely uninvolved in order for their scheme to work fully, "Oh, I'll control myself, no worry about that," He spat back with as much fake anger as he could muster, and with that, turned and walked into the bar.

He moved slowly as the raider chugged another shot, he had a small tube a tissue repair ointment that he had gotten back with his other possessions, he took out the tracking device and coated it quickly in a thick glob of the stuff and clutched it in his left hand.

And then approached the raider.

The man had noticed him and setting down his glass asked, "Somethin I can help you with?"

"Yeah, you're in my seat," John replied, noticing that the raider was, in fact, in the seat he had taken when he first came to town.

"Am I now? Seems like you've got plenty of other options to sit your xilth self at," The raider replied, barely turning his head and only looking at John out of the corner of his eye.

"Oh, I see. You're right," John said, taking the seat directly on the man's right.

"That's a mistake roight ther-" The raider began before John cut him off with,

"Barkeep, something cheap for my friend here!"

The raider just stared at him, frustrated, John kept his eyes on the barkeep and then said, "You know, I was wondering something..."

And then he feinted a strike with his left arm, the raider shifted to block, and John twisted a blow right into a sensitive spot near his ribs.

"Ahhhh!" The raider yelled, keeling over in his seat.

John spun out of the chair in a dash and grabbed the man by the hair, jerking his head back.

"How easy is it to crack your head's open-" And he stepped and pulled the raider's head, "-when you aren't wearing helmets!" He roared as the raider's head smashed into the bar with a violent *thoom!*

The man fell out of the chair onto the ground.

Now the tricky part.

He had kept a hold of the tracking device through the violence, and he knelt down onto the raider and got the tracker ready.

He flipped the man over and saw that he had opened a cut in his head like he had hoped. Surprisingly he was also still conscious, holding his head in pain.

John grabbed at the arms with his free one, and with some strain against the writhing man he managed to kneel on top of his arms.

"Come on," he muttered to himself as he gripped the raider's head with both hands. He saw Max starting to shift and knew his window was closing rapidly.

He put the tracker in his right hand and then fully gripped the raider's face with his left hand, and held on tightly as he slowly pushed the tracker into the shaking cut.

The raider yelled in pain at John's attack, "Shhh, it'll be over soon," John grunted as he finally got the tracker completely into the skin. With it done he threw a punch at his face to keep him down, and then with his opponent clearly defeated, he stood up.

When it was all over he noticed his heavy breathing and tunnel vision, the latter of which faded as he stared down at the raider, *Lek, they said his name is Lek I think*, and saw just how much he had brutalized him. He felt something else in that moment, catharsis rushed over him like a wave and gave him a shudder and then some degree of calm.

"Get the hjek away from him!" He heard a familiar voice yell.

He turned in time to see Max rushing toward him, and didn't try to resist as he was pushed away.

"Get away from him or so help me I will put you down right now! Get out of here! Go!" Max

yelled as he knelt down to check on the raider.

At that point Harold the bartender and the crowd were all approaching to see what had happened.

"Stay back! All of you!" Max yelled at the crowd, drawing his handgun, "All of you get out!"

"Get out" ey? Clever word choice, Max. Gives me the ability to escape easily and let you have an excuse for the authorities.

So John obliged and turned to leave, cutting through the crowd as fast and quietly as he could, and in just a moment he found himself outside the bar.

Speeder behind the Sheriff's office, just down to the right, I need to grab that quickly and then get to the Susaka's to find out the plan. Oh! And before I forget...

He opened his personal device as he walked down the "boardwalk" and went straight to his finances, he immediately transferred all of it he could to his device's secure virtual wallet, which he knew would be safe once he disconnected from the local interwebs. As he rounded the corner around the side of the Sheriff's office, he transferred all the rest of his assets to his parent's accounts so that they wouldn't be totally lost.

"Surprise."

John flinched and reached for his Tosaki-Durnell before he saw that his spook was actually Krag.

"Krag, what are you doing?" He asked astonished, putting away his device now that his business was done.

Krag was leaning on the wall with a suitcase next to him on the ground. John saw deep bags under his eyes and a thick stubble on his face and the man's clothes were also disorderly and dusty.

"Are you okay?" John asked.

Krag smiled painfully, "Naww, I lost my job, twice in a way."

"What happened?"

"Well Fremont wasn't happy with the little stunt you pulled, and I got suspended for that. Then, when I heard that he had resigned, I as-

sumed Hiram Susaka had finished him. And then when I walked back into the Sheriff's office to try and get myself back to work, and it was... crazy isn't a string enough word. The government takeover has them eating each other. I saw three resignations just while I was there. And when I finally got explanations about what had happened, I knew that I wasn't coming back to work either," Krag said.

John thought for a moment, "What made you decide that for certain?"

"Well, maybe you'll know what I'm talking about, maybe not. But when the other Deputies handed me the law and I started reading about the SSC, I didn't need to read long before I could just tell that they were purely criminal. And I want no part of it. I want off this planet if they are going to be in charge and odds are that Susaka has a way, and you are going with him. I wanted to ask you, John, if I could come with y'all?" Krag asked.

John blinked. "You want to come with us? Virtual strangers and an association that will make you a criminal yourself. How do I know you won't try to turn us in? How can I trust you, Krag? I want to, but I don't know how to!"

Krag looked away as John spoke, and when John had finished he heard the man take a shuddering breath.

There was a silence, interrupted by, "You can't," Krag said somberly, "I can't give you any real reason to, I wouldn't trust me either. But... can't you just... ask? Please, John, I have nothing left here. Please, John."

John saw real pain in the tired eyes of his Deputy ally, who was now just a man with what he suspected was real misery.

He felt his personal device resting in his pocket, grabbed it and authorized a call to the nearest "Hiram Susaka" on the network.

Ring-ring.

"We have maybe five minutes-" *ring-ring* "-es to get out of here," John said.

Ring-ring.

"What do you mean?" Krag asked.

"Jonathan, is that you?" Susaka's voice said over the phone.

"Yes! And we need to get out of here now, the SSC has sent a shuttle and it'll be touching down soon."

"Chikushō! I expected this but not so soon. I am nearly ready, the girls... I do not know. Do you know how long?"

"Maybe ten minutes, probably less."

He heard Susaka give a frustrated groan as he kept his eyes on Krag, "You should go to the safe house if you can, steal a speeder if you must. Just get out of the town now!"

"I won't have to steal a speeder, Max gave me one. And there is something else you should know before I go," John replied.

"What is it?"

"Harrison Krag is coming with me, I trust him, and you can use your little lie detector on him if you don't trust my assessment. But I think he's good."

There was silence on the line until Susaka finally said, "There is no time to discuss this, so I suppose I am forced to trust you, Jonathan, and the Deputy by association."

"Thank you, are you sure you don't need any help? You don't need us to come back for something?"

"No, I hear the girls coming now. Hurry away! We will be right behind you! We cannot let them track us so we must go. Go now if you can, John. I hope I shall see you at the compound."

"You as well, Susaka, get out of there and go!" John said, and then hung up.

"We good?" Krag asked.

"Only when we get out of town. Is that your speeder next to mine?" John asked.

"Yes indeed, a little old but she'll keep up," Krag said, proud of the small red vehicle as he mounted it.

"It's got a nice color," John observed as he got on the familiar raider's speeder he had spent so much time on.

"Isn't it? Now where are we going?" Krag asked, tossing John a turquoise riding helmet as putting on his own red one.

"Just follow me," John said as he put on the helmet.

A little small but it'll do.

He fired up the engine and it roared to life. *How nice of the Sheriff's office to give me a full charge, wouldn't want it to sit in the dust,* John observed.

"Hey!" A Deputy yelled, having come out the back door after hearing the roar of the engines.

Bye. John hit the accelerator and shot out of the alley.

I forgot you had kick girl!

As he turned right and drove out into the street, pedestrians shot out of the way. He made another sharp right and headed west. As he rushed out of Brownville with dust kicking up behind him, he turned back to see Krag right behind him to his left.

Susaka's directions are far west. So west we go. Westward ho!

And so John hit the accelerator and rushed back out into the desert, unsure of anything beyond survival, he had to get to the compound, then get off the planet.

And beyond that...

Fight.

The tracking device posed him a question he didn't know how to answer. He didn't know what would happen with it. He had Max's contact information. But once he was thrown off the networks he wasn't sure what good it would do him.

The takeover of the SSC, the raiders, was unheard of. All John knew now was that one way or another crazy things were about to happen.

And he was caught up in the middle of it, riding through the desert, all because of a shootout that had made him anything but a stranger.

Imaginary Destinations David C. Kopaska-Merkel

The last jump was bad

These unfamiliar stars
align to form a pattern:
of dotted lines and angles:
A geodesic sphere of stars
Surrounding us—

Our ship at its center
All stars equidistant
And of equal magnitude
And no stars or galaxies
visible beyond the pattern

Obviously unlike anything
Known to humankind

The calibrations all knocked
Haywire just before we jumped
To some place, and time, we think
But I wonder: is any of this real?

Sensor readings are ... unsettling

And the accidental calibration
Settings were, according to Ship
Imaginary numbers

Minute shocks rock the hull
Every few microseconds
And micro-explosions
Not the impacts of normal matter
But positrons and antiprotons

We'll leave nothing
For posterity

Save a final flash of light
In this imaginary realm

Book of Memories By A. C. Cargill

I moved ghost-like through the night-darkened house. Silent. Cold. Unfeeling. Through every room, past the piano, the sofa, the chair. Here a lamp. There a vase. Everything standing in its proper place — waiting, waiting, in the silence and the dark.

The clouds parted, and the full moon shone through, casting its bluish silver light across the town, down the street, into my living room window. I froze, transfixed, as the dark turned to light, as the objects around me sprouted shadows that grew longer, longer until they reached across the room to where I stood.

The book still lay on the table. Dusty. Moldy. Faded. It hadn't been moved — hadn't even been touched — in all these years. The book, filled with photos, clippings, ticket stubs, brochures, letters. All belonging to a grayish mass called "Memory." The book. My book. My book of memories.

Moonlight shone and flickered on the cloud of dust that rose as I touched the book, lifted it, held it, turned the cover to see once more ...

... the Greek Isles. Our honeymoon. Sunshine. Olive trees. Rocky, dusty roads that led to ruins of one kind or another. How young he was! How young I was! Our youth was a shining halo that we wore like a crown. Our youth was soft skin, shiny hair and teeth and eyes. Our youth was supple joints and taut muscles. Our youth was passion that burned hotter than the Greek sun and welded our hearts, minds, lips, and limbs together. Our youth welcomed the perspiration of our passion like rain to the roses.

The room we rented in Naphplion, with its balcony and a view straight out of my every childhood romantic notion, stared back at me from beneath the plastic. It stirred my memory, disturbing the dust of my mind, as I had disturbed the dust of this room. We had walked the streets of that town, ignoring the shopkeepers who implored us to come inside and see the finest — jewelry, clothes, trinkets, and on and on. We stopped in one shop. He bought me a dress — all filmy, clingy, very trans-

parent, gauze-like material. It had been a long time since I had worn that dress. A long time since I *could* wear it.

We ate dinner in a quaint place by the shore, smiling politely as the owner showed us with great pride: his sparkling kitchen, complete with fresh fish (the smell lingered in my mind) and a stew of sheep heads that bobbed and stared when he lifted the lid (the feeling of nausea I had felt then at the sight came back to me clearly now, bidden by a photo of me in that dress — a memory — in that book). Candlelight flickered. Waves splashed their song on the shore. And we ate. Chatting — eating — chatting — eating. Happy to be together at that moment, that time, that place. Happy to let the future be. Happy to end the story here. A happy ending ...

From Greece we returned home. Home to the States. Home to schedules and deadlines. Home to commitments and responsibilities. The end of the honeymoon. The end of our golden time and our passion that had burned hotter than the Greek sun. The story goes on.

I turned another page — another month — another year — another memory. My fingers traced a trail across the headline on the yellowed paper:

Local Scientist Appointed to Head Special Commission in Washington, D.C.

Neatly cut from the local paper with the date taped to the top, lovingly placed and pasted on the page, the article, with its accompanying photo — young, smiling, confident — gave all the details of that day. Several photos on the next page of the album — that book of memories — told the rest of that adventure. There we were packing, waving goodbye to the old set of friends, arriving at our new home, getting to know what would soon be the new set of friends. Smiling faces. Hands waving. Goodbye. Hello. Goodbye. Hello.

Dust rose and swirled from the sofa cushions as I sat to ease the pain in my back and hips. Years spent in virtual invalid status at the sanitarium had stiffened these once supple joints.

“Creak — pop — crackle,” they complained loudly through the swirls of dust as I sat, slowly, carefully, letting my weight settle deep into the

sagging, dusty, moldy cushions.

“Ahhhhh!” I sighed aloud. The sound died quickly. It sank into the moldy, damp carpet. It soaked into the heavy, velvety draperies. It submerged into the sagging, dusty, moldy cushions. It met the walls and slid down them to the floor. It met the windows and turned into mist.

The moonlight was disappearing as the moon set over the horizon. The shadows swelled and merged into one great, room-filling, heart-filling darkness. The pages in front of me lost their contrast, turned from pages of memories to a blur of gray.

The room was suddenly filled with harsh yellow light from the bulb in the ceiling fixture.

“Are you alright? Why are you sitting here in the dark? Boy! It sure is dusty in here. Come on, let’s go home now. What’s this? An old photo album? Is that yours?” Ms. McKinzie fired out questions like a machine gun.

“It’s my memories. I want to take it with me.” I clutched the book tight. My book. My memories.

“Well, alright, but let’s hurry. We’re late. It was against the rules for me to let you come here, you know, so let’s not make it worse on ourselves. Grab the book and let’s go.” Ms. McKinzie tried to help me off of the sofa, but my weight, my age, my creaking, popping, crackling joints, all fought against her.

“Let me stay a while longer.” I used that small, pleading voice guaranteed to wring an “Oh, alright!” from her lips — tight, firm, straight-lined lips.

“Oh, alright!” Ms. McKinzie was huffing and puffing from the strain of trying to lift me. A strand of her brown, silky hair had come loose from its perfect styling and hung curly, wild, and free in front of her forehead. Somehow that image suited her better than her usual clean, starched, everything-in-place appearance.

The loose hair strand was put back in place with a smooth, well-practiced gesture. She was Ms. McKinzie, head caretaker at Smithson’s Sanitarium for Invalids and the Aged, once again. The creases around her still-young eyes softened slightly.

“Can I see some of your pictures?” she asked, in soft tones. She normally spoke in whiplashes,

the words leaping off her tongue and stinging the ears of anyone in range. Very officious.

“Well ...” I didn’t know what to say. She had countered my ploy to stay here a little longer. If I wanted to stay, I would have to share these bits and pieces. Old yellowed photos and newspaper clippings. A pressed flower or two. Greeting cards from *him* to me. Cards from me to *him*. And letters. Ah, yes, the letters. They read like a symphony, sweet melody rising and falling like his gentle breath as he had lain sleeping beside me. The melody wove around a harmony, in and out like needle and thread sewing our hearts, our thoughts, our lives together.

“Well?” Ms. McKinzie was still waiting for my answer, standing over me tall, straight, powerful.

“Sure,” I sighed.

She sat on the sofa beside me, coughing a little — just a little — at the dust that rose. I turned back to the front of the book, back to the beginning, back before Greece, before that big important job, before all the days of our life together and all the days apart.

There I was as a baby — new, fresh, trouble-free, worry-free, error-free. And there I was at three, at five, with my sisters and brothers.

“So many pictures from your childhood!” exclaimed Ms. McKinzie. “Your parents must have loved you very much.”

“Loved us,” I echoed, staring blankly at the photos. “Well, I guess. My father lived always with the thought that we might die at any time. He took photos just in case.”

“Is that your father?”

There he was, looking at us, his children, with his warm, weary smile. His children. His life. They were one and the same.

“The pictures are from Kindergarten thru High School.” I pointed them out, going from dimpled imp to cocky young woman — graduating top of her class, life before her, a red carpet to her glass-slipped feet.

I turned a page.

“What’s this?” she asked, genuinely interested.

“My room off-campus.”

“Is that your mother?” she asked.

I paused, staring, running my fingers over the

plastic that covered the photo. My mother. A thousand memories stirred by that photo — times of laughter, times of anger, times of caring, times of pain, and the joy that had filled me as she lay dying.

“Yes. That’s her.”

“And is this you? How young you look! Such long, brown, shiny hair — just like mine.”

Ah, youth! I listened to her talk in tones so smooth — like cream — so unlike Ms. McKinzie. Gone were the lash stings. Her face had changed, too. Lines around the mouth were barely visible, even in the harsh light of the ceiling bulb. Her brows unknitted and raised slightly over eyes that took on a new sparkle. She looked almost — well, *radiant*.

“Yes, that’s me. College graduation.”

She moved closer, holding her face nearer to the book, nearer to my past, my life. I felt a rush — hot, fluid, building up like water in a tank, then bursting. An inspiration. An idea of stupendous import. These memories *must* live again. These memories must go on after me, as I had gone on after *him*. These memories would lead me to immortality, as no painting, sculpture, book, poem or other manmade work could. These memories — the most intimate details of my life — birth, school, work, marriage, bliss, heartache, death — would continue on past the grave, if they were remembered by someone — by the *right* someone.

Here she sat, my new self, eager, longing to soak up my life, carry it forward. I could feel a loud “Yes!” rise from her unspoken and penetrate my mind. “Yes!” it said again in that ghost voice. “Yes! Fill me — make me one with your memories!” I knew then that instead of jealously guarding the book, the memories, I must pass them on. The time was now. My joints had issued a warning. This just might be my last ...

No time to waste on morbid, self-absorbed prattling. I began.

Story after story unfolded. Here was my graduation from college, from childhood, from Mother. Moving away. Getting away. Getting my first real job as a college graduate, not as a grill cook, or waitress, or dishwasher, but in an office — clean, neat, nine-to-five.

The room — with its dust and must and shad-

ows hanging in every corner and heavy draperies framing windows filled with the black of night — transformed slowly into a mist that dissolved. I was back in that first office. Fresh from college. Fresh from stifling oppression. Fresh into a world where I could decide even the smallest detail of my life — what to wear, what to eat, where to live, where to work, where to shop, whom to see.

Whom to see ...

There he stood — not *the* him of later years, but the first him who came so close to being the only him. The engagement was brief and embarrassing, full of instances of struggles. For dominance of one will over another. For overcoming the self-hatred I felt every time he won. For repressing the guilt I felt over my joy every time I gained the upper hand. Each new struggle ate away a little piece of me, nibbling mouse-like on my cheesy self, gnawing rat-like on my crusted insides. I left.

From the first job to a better job, to an even better job, to yet a better job.

As I remembered, my bloated, almost useless body melted into its youthful, slender formerness, business-suited (“Dressed for Success”), brown hair shortened from waist-length to collar-length. Once again the confidence of my youth filled me. Once again I followed my own path, winding into the fog and mist obscuring a distant horizon.

Another him. A better him than the last him. But still not *the* him. This one had a musical gift, a soft voice, a soft touch, fingertips like velvet as they glided here, there, seeking, finding ...

The sobbing burst forth from the mist. Startled me out of my reverie. Great gasping sobs, salty-wet, stinging eyes and cheeks. My eyes! My cheeks! My sobs!

Ms. McKinzie sat beside me, unnoticing, her eyes shining with her own tears, swelling, welling, spilling over the rims of those soft, brown, young eyes. Rolling, winding, slipping, sliding down her velvet, young cheeks. Hanging, like drops of dew glistening in the yellow-bulb-glare, from her firm, young chin. Dropping, splashing, landing on her square, strong, young shoulders. Suddenly I realized how much like me at her age she looked. The perfect choice. The perfect home for me — for my

memories.

“He played songs for me.” My voice broke her out of the whirlpool of dew tears — hers, mine — swirling ’round and down, becoming one. The spell had started. The spell must go on. “They were tender, hot, burning songs. They filled the corners of my mind with flowers, filled the caverns of my heart with desire, realization. I was so alone — working, dressing for success (in the office — not the living room, the bedroom, the home), eating, sleeping, working, dressing ...”

She sat transfixed as I spoke, the spell weaving deep, the words working their way into her conscious, subconscious, and at last — the ultimate resting place — her memory. My memories. Her memories. The spell must go on.

I turned another page, another day, another month, another year. The songs ended. The soft, velvet touches ended. The love ended. The friendship began, rooted, sprouted, shot up a slender stalk that bloomed, spread wide-open its petals that fell one by one by one until the last drifted down ’round to the ground, and withered, crumpled, faded, fell into small bits that soon disappeared from sight.

“Where is he now?” asked Ms. McKinzie. Her fingers traced his silhouette in the photo. Her eyes studied his face, hair, shoulders, arms, legs and back to his eyes. She was examining every feature and facet, every hair, every twist and turn, nook and niche, storing them for later, tucking them away. Memories. Mine. Hers. Ours. The spell wove deeper.

“We lost touch. The last address I had for him was Boston — teaching at the University, but not music. Business Administration.” I paused, staring straight ahead. “He really helped my career along. Pushed me. Dried my tears — tears I couldn’t shed at the office, couldn’t let them see, couldn’t let them know they had gotten to me.”

I sat back on the sofa, eased into the cushions, ignored the dust that swirled around my head, lined my nostrils, stuck to each strand of my hair — my thin, gray, straggly hair.

“Even when our love had turned to friend-

ship, he helped me, was there with a shoulder for my weariness, there with a tissue to dry the tears ...”

“... there when I didn’t get the promotion,” said Ms. McKinzie. She looked up from the book, startled by her own voice, stunned by words that had flowed out as if they were her own, but that were *not* her own.

“Yes, there even then. And later, when I met *him*.” I turned another page, turned another corner, down another street of my life.

“That’s *him*!” Ms. McKinzie gasped as she spoke, held a hand up to block the sound, stared at the photo — all sunshine and smiles — of a man she had never met yet she had instantly known.

Our meeting, the first meeting, the first photo of *him*. Tall, trim, square-shouldered, dark hair, blue eyes, regal nose, perfect lips. Perfect ...

“Kisses so sweet,” she said, running a finger across slightly moist, slightly pursed, young lips.

“So sweet,” I echoed. My cracked lips caressed the words, my thick tongue shaped them as drops of saliva formed and glistened, then faded.

The sound of our voices was absorbed by the carpet — thinned, faded — by the sofa, all dusty, moldy — by the chair, coated still with an undisturbed layer of history — by the curtains framing the windows-turned-into-mirrors-by-the-black-night. We were there in those mirrors, side-by-side, one old — bloated, squatting like some pale toad, small-eyed, shrivel-lipped — croaking in the ear of the other — younger, slimmer, brown-haired, brown-eyed, soft and shining, and listening. The spell wove on.

“How did you meet?” Her question burned into my ears, sent their fiery message to my brain. I was young again, sitting at my usual table at Hank’s Bistro, passing my fork from plate to lips, plate to lips, barely tasting as I read newspapers, books, reports from work.

“Please pass the salt,” he said. The voice was firm, warm, liquid, magic.” As I spoke Ms. McKinzie leaned closer. I smelled her hair — sweet-thick like lilacs — saw her skin — smooth as cream and as white. Just as I had been. But not now. Not now. My hair had turned dry, crackly, wispy-thin, faded-out gray. Faded-out. My skin was sickly-pallor-hued, greenish-hued, old-age-

hued.

“I passed the salt, reaching forth my hand, fingertips touching his in Michelangelo fashion, spark of life as his touched mine. ‘Thanks,’ he had said. All I could do was smile and nod.”

Smile and nod. I made the motions as I spoke, caught up in the memory. Smile and nod. Ms. McKinzie repeated the motions, following the spell, unaware that it *was* a spell. I had to go on, had to complete the transition.

“Leaving the bistro, I collided with a man entering. Newspapers, books, reports flying, scattering, under feet, under chairs, under tables, *his* table. He picked up the papers, gathered them like fall leaves off a lawn, like fallen petals after a Spring shower, carried them as we walked, talked, wound our way through the streets, people, cars, hustle, bustle. We reached my apartment. I invited. He accepted. We went in, sat, talked, sipped tea, and finally parted. The next day, roses — a dozen (a mix of red and yellow), and a card ‘For my one and only.’”

The card in my book of memories was yellowed, but the words still legible, written by some florist, but his words, passed from his lips to the florist’s pen to my eyes, my heart, my memory, her memory.

“‘For my one and only.’” Ms. McKinzie mouthed the words, her lips lost in a pantomime dance. “‘For my one and only.’”

The pale toad and the slender youngish woman stared back from the windows-turned-into-mirrors-by-the-black-night.

A pressed red rose and a pressed yellow rose — old, withered, faded — lay side-by-side on the page, under the plastic. I lifted the plastic, inhaled the faint fragrance. Ms. McKinzie inhaled.

“Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhh!” It came from me as a long, drawn out, release of something deep inside, a release from darkness into light, from the forgotten to the remembered.

“Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhh!” I sighed again.

“Creak! Pop! Crackle!” replied my joints.

“Then what happened?” Ms. McKinzie’s voice sliced the silence, cleaved it in two halves which fell apart like an apple and rolled around in the stillness, dusty-musty-moldiness.

“Courtship. Dinners. Movies. Theater. Picnics.

Then living together. Then marriage — simple, elegant — with flowers — bouquets, vases, garlands — on tables, on walls, on lapels — with guests — family, friends — smiling, hugging, kissing, shaking hands, then finally seeing us off on our Grecian honeymoon.”

“Then the trouble started,” said Ms. McKinzie.

“Not yet. Not yet. Greece was wonderful. The problem was that the story didn’t end there. Happy endings depend on when you end the story. We came back from Greece all full of sunshine, smiles, hopes, dreams, plans. We came back to my apartment. We packed, cleaned, sorted out the past from the future, moved, unpacked, settled in.”

Settled in. My stuff. His stuff. Mingling. Clashing. Winners kept. Losers discarded.

The image of our first house filled my eyes. The sounds filled my ears. The smells filled my nostrils. My fingers reached out and felt all the touches once more.

It was a fairly new house — brick façade outside, roomy inside with warm tones of rust, orange, yellow and brown. The yard was just a little wider than the house but extended behind it far enough that, if desired, another house could be built there. The grass was thick and soft and smooth, and when I walked on it in my bare feet, it was cool and slightly ticklish. We played, ran, chased each other and lay catching our breath while white clouds floated by, robins and wrens and blue jays flew and landed and flew again, and every now and then a jet shot like a thunder-arrow across the blue over our heads.

Our second floor bedroom overlooked the backyard. In the late afternoon the sun streamed in through the woven blind on the window and painted stripes of sunlight on the carpet, the walls, the bed, and us — his arms wrapped around me, my arms wrapped around him. The passion had cooled but not enough yet. Not enough yet.

We cooked in the kitchen. We ate in the family room and watched TV. He went to work. I went to art school. It was a happy time, a tranquil time, a time when hopes, plans and dreams still lay before us, a time never to come again.

“Here we are at his company’s picnic. There I am graduating at last.” Each photo was like a dagger stabbing my eyes, my heart, my mind. I knew

what was coming next — the appointment.

“Maybe we should stop now,” stated Ms. McKinzie. Her voice pierced my reverie, brought me back to the room filled with dust, back to the image reflected in the windows-turned-into-mirrors-by-the-black-night of the toad-woman croaking in the younger woman’s ear. She trembled in a way that seemed like fear — the fear of losing herself. She was strong, clinging to that self, resisting the spell.

If I stopped now, when would I start again? Would I ever start again?

“Creak! Pop! Crackle!” answered my joints.

And my mind filled with a firm resolve. The spell must go on, must finish.

“No. I’m alright. It’s just ... that ... I wanted to try to end the story here ... before ...” I sighed. The story *did* go on. She had to know it all, had to know the time of madness, confusion, and finally of facing the world with all its ugly reality, had to know all of my memories before they became her memories. Before the spell would be complete.

“They called him for an interview. He went. He interviewed. He was hired. We were so excited. It meant moving, living in D.C. — the heart of the nation, a place of glittering parties, of knowing the right people, of saying the right things.”

“You looked radiant,” Ms. McKinzie almost whispered, in breathy tones, as she gazed down on the next photo.

Ah, the reception — a promising start, a future shining brightly ahead of us, a yellow-brick road that shone like gold and was surrounded by rainbow colors that hid the darkness just over the horizon. He was my handsome prince, pulling me up from the imagined hovel of my daily existence, up from the 9-to-5 tedium, up from the dinner alone at Hank’s, up from embarrassing dates that ended with an awkward kiss at the door and “I’ll call.” Life should have been a happily-ever-after.

Should have been ... should have been ... should have been — the words echoed in my brain, bouncing around with nothing to quiet them.

“We danced ’til dawn,” said Ms. McKinzie, the words coming out as if her own — the spell continued. “We waltzed ’round and ’round, bright lights in our eyes, bright dreams in our minds, bright hopes in our hearts.”

"Some nights are meant to last forever. Yet they end," I added. "I never wore that gown again. His job kept him very busy. Instead of lying in the afternoon sun peering in our bedroom window, arms wrapped around each other, we kissed 'goodbye' in the morning and 'hello' at night. Sometimes — when we weren't worn out from our busy lives — we made an attempt to recapture the passion of our earlier days. The sight of him — wet and clean from the shower — still excited me, still made me catch my breath as a hot wave passed through me. But he ..."

The pale toad in the windows-turned-into-mirrors-by-the-black-night sighed, its voice trailing off, unable to say how he had changed, how he had said she had grown fat and unattractive. The youngish woman by her side sighed and sat up straighter, a slight flush washing across her creamy cheeks, a glint of moisture appearing on her lips, a dreamy haze of memory filling her eyes. My memories. Becoming her memories.

"And then?"

"And then. Frustrations mounted — my attempts to get my paintings into a gallery, his long hours on the job, our infrequent and increasingly unsatisfying attempts to recapture that initial passion. Arguments flared — one-sided arguments — me shouting, crying, pleading — him puzzled, confused, wondering when the rational, intelligent, talented, loving woman he had married had metamorphosed into this overweight Harpie, lashing out with her stinging snake-tongue. Me wondering what he really did on nights he worked late."

"Here we are on vacation in Germany." The photo showed a man looking older, strained, but still unmistakably *him*, and a woman with a forced smile, not quite as slim and shapely, not quite as hopeful of the future, a Cinderella whose life was not happy-ever-after, a princess whose life with her prince was not what others thought.

"It's torn."

The tape that had held the two halves of the photo together had yellowed and come loose. I lifted the page and removed the tape so we could see the images more clearly.

Germany had been a whirlwind of sights and sounds.

"Here we are at Neuschwanstein — the elabo-

rate, desperate attempt of King Ludwig II of Bavaria to escape reality's ugliness and retreat into a fairy world where all was beautiful.

"Here we are in Ulm in front of the great cathedral that had once towered over a small collection of houses, shops, a town hall, small plots of life-sustaining crops, grazing herds, dense forests and distant mountains. It still towered over most of the buildings, but here and there a glass-and-steel weed had sprouted and shot up into the sky, dwarfing its bell towers.

"Here's the house we stayed in as guests of a German family overnight in Stuttgart. Their traditional German breakfast — meats and cheeses, breads and rolls, fresh fruits, and tea — had stayed with us until the evening. We ate dinner in a building that had stood since 1627, had survived the bombs of World War II, had served once more as restaurant and hotel — not for foot-weary travelers trading pots and pans, trinkets and treasures, but rather for tourists with pockets bulging from a lifetime of saving for a glimpse of places like this, for a few weeks, days, moments living a dream, pretending that time has turned back, that things were simpler, that there were no schedules, appointments, bills, worries, and storm-cloud future waiting back home."

Back home. I sighed. Ms. McKinzie sighed with me. Why can't the story ever end during the happy times? Why must it always go on? The pale toad had no answer. The youngish woman had no answer. The swirling dust had no answer. Only those creaking, popping, crackling joints responded.

Reluctantly — like children on the first day of school leaving behind their summer joyous, care-free days — we returned home. Our time in Germany had renewed us, refreshed us, revived our spirits, rekindled the fading embers in our souls, roused the dragons of our hearts — dragons that had sunk lower and lower, finally lying languid in the depths from thirsting for the waters of our desire. We tried to keep the embers burning. We tried to keep the dragons quenched and aroused. We tried in the airport as we claimed our luggage and inched our way through Customs. We tried in the taxi on the way back to our house in Maryland. Even as the key turned in the lock, we still

breathed the air of Germany, still filled our ears with its sounds, still filled our eyes with its sights. We unpacked in the bedroom while the afternoon sun came in through the window. We re-kindled our passion, roused the dragons, and ended in each others arms while the sun streamed in upon us. That was Sunday afternoon.

Monday morning we stopped trying.

Monday morning he rose, shaved, showered, dressed, kissed me “goodbye,” and resumed his role as Head Scientist for the President’s Commission. And I resumed my role of Woman-at-home-all-day-who-was-not-really-a-housewife-but-who-was-really-a-frustrated-artist.

“You did have a show or two,” stated Ms. McKinzie, pointing her young, slim finger at a photo, tapping a manicured and polished nail on the plastic over it.

“Yes, I had some of my work in shows. Yes, I had some recognition locally for my art. Yes, I liked the recognition. Yes, I hungered for more.” I said each sentence with a sigh.

The photo she pointed to showed one of my paintings hanging in a local exhibition, showed me — pointing, smiling — standing beside it.

“He took the photo,” I said. He had cancelled a meeting with his staff to be there. It meant working late the next day. But he had read the pleading script of my eyes, had heard the desperate desire in my voice, had felt the gasping struggle — like a flailing, drowning, swimmer going down the third time — in my lips as he kissed me “hello” the night before.

“He was there for me,” stated Ms. McKinzie. “He *did* care. That’s why he worked so hard. That’s why he left me alone so much. That’s why he called me whenever he could to get together for lunch, or dinner if he was working late. That’s why he arranged all those little weekend trips to any sight available within driving distance.”

Her eyes sparkled as she spoke. The sparkles were memories. Mine to her.

“He *did* care,” I echoed, “but the passion was gone and now it’s too late.”

I turned another page, turned another corner, turned a new leaf. Another yellowed news clipping — another hope that had budded on the vine, bloomed, flowered, and withered without ever

bearing fruit — stared back from the page, its headline mocking with every word:

“Local Artist Wins Scholarship at Sorbonne.”

Here it was.

“It” was my chance to rise above just being a locally recognized artist. “It” was my chance to be more than a Woman-at-home-all-day-who-was-not-really-a-housewife-but-who-was-really-a-frustrated-artist. “It” was the sweet flower of opportunity hanging heavy and fragrant on the vine.

“He hadn’t known I had even applied for the scholarship,” I murmured, lost in the past, lost in the house in Maryland, lost in the years of dust and shadows of regret — dust thicker than that which swirled around me at the slightest movement — shadows darker than those that slinked around the chairs and tables, hid behind the frames of the paintings on the wall.

“I didn’t want him to know of my failure if I didn’t get it,” whispered Ms. McKinzie. Her voice was as soft and thick as the dust. Her tone was as dark and hidden as the shadows.

“Of course I wouldn’t get it,” I said. “Then I could cry alone. I could cry in the morning, wringing out my soul, licking the salt tears as they ran down cheeks to lips. I could dry my reddened eyes in the rays of the afternoon sun and be ready with a smile and a kiss ‘hello’ for him.”

“But I *did* get it,” said Ms. McKinzie, almost in a trance and the spell invaded the crevices of her mind and settled there. “And when he came home that night, I showed him the letter of acceptance, waited for him to say ‘Well done!’, waited for his arms to hug me warm and tight like they used to, waited — and waited.”

“He read the letter and said nothing.” I spoke the words through a great, gasping sob. “He read the letter, handed it back to me, and went upstairs to change. We ate dinner in silence. We sat silent in the living room watching the news and then a string of mindless programs. We prepared for bed in silence — changing our clothes, washing our faces, brushing our teeth — not touching, not daring to speak, our breath taken in silent gasps.”

The old toad — pale green and bloated — sat quivering on the sofa, its reflection in the windows

-turned-into-mirrors-by-the-black-night seemed smaller and somewhat more faded than before. The younger, slimmer woman beside the toad sat a little less straight, a little less tall — as if burdened by the weight, the irony, the regret of each memory. My memories. Her memories. The spell went on, rooting deeper.

“I don’t have to accept it,” said Ms. McKinzie as she sat up straighter and saying words that were not her own, words that we mine, words that the spell had made hers. “I don’t have to go. Even if I do go, it’s only for a year. It could make a big difference in the acceptance of my paintings.” Each sentence I uttered had been more desperate and pleading than the one before it. I loved this man like I loved each breath of air, each sip of water, each crumb of food. Yet I needed more.”

“Cinderella found and married her prince, and moved into the palace,” I continued for her. “But was she really happy ever after? Or did she, too, start to feel the walls turn into the bars of a cage? Did she, too, miss the days when her destiny was under her control?”

I stared at the article, my cracked lips barely moving as I spoke. “He kissed me ‘goodnight’ and rolled over as I turned out the light. About a half hour later, as I lay staring up through the darkness at where I knew the ceiling to be, he rose, put on his robe, and left the room, closing the door softly behind him. He didn’t come back to bed that night. The next morning he had left for work before I woke.”

“Around lunchtime he called,” Ms. McKinzie continued my narration, “and said that I should do whatever would make me happy. But what was that?”

I counted them out on my fingers. Graduating from college and being out on my own away from the dominance of my mother should have made me happy. Building a successful career should have made me happy. Finding my prince should have made me happy. Having my paintings accepted in exhibitions should have made me happy. But they didn’t.

Not independence, not a career, not my prince, not success with art — none of these had made me happy in a lasting way. The initial rush of elation would quickly fade as I started to want more. Like

a spoiled child who is handed toy after toy — each increasing in novelty and splendor — I would cherish each one for a few moments and then reach for the next one. I could never satisfy myself.

Then there was the mother.

I was the reason she was stuck at home, she would tell me. I was the reason she was a housewife instead a pursuing her talent. I was the cause of all her regret, all her sorrow, all the miserable failure of her existence. For I was a girl. “If you had been a boy,” she accused me, “I could have stopped having children.” I would hear this and either — depending on my mood — laugh secretly to myself and praise the X chromosome for its part in the conspiracy, or in the deep dark corners of my mind curse myself as a wicked, villainous fiend for having chased the Y chromosome away as it was about to change my fate forever.

Would I, in turn, blame *him* for any regret I would feel if I did *not* accept the scholarship? The question still burned in my brain after all these years — as was still unanswered, for I *had* accepted it.

“I spent a year in Paris. My French improved. My painting improved. I won first place for watercolor at the Paris Exhibition. The painting sold to an American collector who introduced me to a gallery owner who encouraged me to devote all my time to watercolor.” As I spoke, my fat toad-finger pointed to the photos in the album. Photos of me standing beside my painting at the exhibition. Photos of me receiving the prize. Photos of me with the American buyer and his gallery-owner friend. Photos and memories. Photos taken by *him*. He had flown to Paris to take them. He had come to stand by my side. He had arrived to share my joy. He had hoped that I would come back happy and — at last — content.

The scenes of those days, those times, those memories faded from my eyes, from my ears, from my mind.

Silence — thick, sickly-lightbulb-yellow — filled my eyes. Silence — dusty-thick, moldy-curtain-thick, rotting-carpet-thick — filled my ears. Silence — dull, aching, scream-covering white noise — filled my mind.

“There is no ‘happy ever after,’” said Ms. McKinzie in that spell-made trance voice. “There

is no ‘content at last.’” Her eyes rested on the final photo on the page. The photo of the opening of my one-artist show in the American buyer’s friend’s gallery. The photo of smiles and elation. Balloons deflate. Elation fades.

I turned the page.

“He started to travel out of town a lot.” I pointed to a photo of him boarding a plane. “‘Business for the President’ was all he could tell me. Once a month. Twice a month. Then a month at a time. Dallas. Los Angeles. Phoenix. Chicago. Seattle. Miami. I took photos at the airport. Him leaving. Him arriving. Kisses ‘goodbye.’ Kisses ‘hello.’”

“I painted a lot,” said Ms. McKinzie.

“Paintings that grew in complexity, in depth, in size. Paintings that never came close to expressing the conflicts growing inside me — between cold distance and burning desire.”

Suddenly the room seemed overwhelmingly oppressive. The moldy, damp carpet spewed forth the sighs and regrets of this evening and many others. The heavy, velvet draperies spewed forth the sounds they had sucked up over the years, months, days gone by. The sagging, dusty, moldy cushions spewed forth a great sigh from the weight of all those years — the weight of my existence, the weight of discontent, the weight of never having a happy ending no matter how long the story went on.

The happy ending wasn’t there — wasn’t in the life I had tried to build with *him*.

I turned another page in this book — a book that grew heavier as each story, each memory, was told, examined, re-lived, transferred from my memory to her memory.

One painting had sold at the show. Just one. The gallery owner had displayed a couple of my paintings for a month afterwards and then returned them. I would bring around new paintings as they were finished, but he never had space for them.

Still I kept painting. Still my paintings were a mask for the twisted, contorted, tee-tottering emotional jungle that daily sprouted new buds, dug in new roots inside me.

“Don’t turn the page,” commanded Ms. McKinzie in a low, breathy whisper forced out from between clenched teeth.

“I must,” croaked the toad in the windows-

turned-into-mirrors-by-the-black-night. “I must. The story goes on.”

The youngish hand of the youngish woman held down the page, but the swollen toad fingers persisted. The page was turned.

Each word screamed up from the yellowed newsprint into our eyes. Each scream echoed through the hollow corners of our minds. In the room all was silent. We stared at the headline:

“Head of President’s Special Commission
Shot by Wife.”

The photo of him being loaded into the ambulance. The photo of me being led away by police. It was all there on those pages.

“My attorney talked me into a temporary insanity plea,” Ms. McKinzie said, staring at the page. The dust swirled around us. She coughed a little — just a little. “Maybe my attorney was right. I just couldn’t take it anymore.” I listened as she spoke. “He was away more and more. When he *was* home, we lived as co-workers, speaking and touching only as necessary to carry on the daily functions of our existence. My mind blocked out the stories of him with women in each city — women who didn’t care about me, about my pain as seeing their photos, at knowing he had touched them, had lain with them, and that he didn’t do that with me.”

The words echoed in my mind. Rolling. Bouncing. Sliding. Ringing. Side to side. Upside. Downside.

As the final vibrations died, my eyes filled with the sights that awaited them on the pages that followed. These photos I had not taken. My fingers had not pasted them down with care, had not preserved them for this hour, this moment, this final reckoning. The events the photos depicted I did not remember. They would forever be a blur — in my memory, in her memory.

They took me from the jail where I had been held during the trial. They drove me to the sanitarium. They brought me inside and checked me in. They left me there to await the fulfillment of my sentence. They went on with their lives, with building their own set of memories — and left me to continue building mine. But my mind stopped,

my senses disconnected, my body became an automaton.

The doctors watched me, scribbling in their notebooks. The nurses watched me, reporting to the doctors. The aides watched me, reporting to the nurses. But I remembered none of it except the eating.

In the sanitarium eating had become my only pleasure. I would savor each bite, rolling it around my tongue to squeeze out each taste sensation — squeeze out the bitter, squeeze out the sour, squeeze out the salty, squeeze out the sweet. Only when the flavor was all gone would I swallow. Pumpkin pie — bite, roll, roll, roll, roll, swallow. Mashed potatoes — bite, roll, roll, roll, roll, swallow. Cottage cheese, sliced ham, meatloaf, carrots, chicken potpie — all met the same fate, all became just taste sensations, at a time when my other senses had become stunted, useless. My eyes would not see ugliness or beauty, but only where the bathroom was, where my clothes were, where my food was. My ears would not hear the sweetness of a violin playing or the joyous shouts of children at play, but only the shrill voice of staff members telling me where to sleep, sit, stand. My touch would not feel soft, velvet rose petals, only stiff, starched linens and towels — hospital issue.

No, these photos I had not taken, had not pasted down, did not want to see now, did not want to invade our memory.

“He recovered, they told me.” The words were a whisper that quickly became lost in the heavy drapes, quickly soaked into the dusty cushions, and bounced a faint echo off the windows-turned-into-mirrors-by-the-black-night.

“But I stayed at the Sanitarium. Bit by bit, memory by memory, my senses returned. My eyes beheld the passing seasons — beheld the blossoms turned to fruit — beheld the leaves that grew, changed color and fell — beheld the wind pushing perfect snowflakes in swirling eddies on my windowsill.”

There was a photo of me sitting in my room. I was staring at the camera with a blank expression, two red dots for eyes. Who had taken this? Had he? Had he actually come to visit me in my isolation, come to build up new memories, come to see the wretch that had been his wife?

“Who took that photo?”

The question hung suspended over our heads, its Damocles edge sharp and gleaming, its query unanswered.

“It was *him*.”

The answer came at last, but it wasn’t an answer. It was a hope, a wish, a possibility.

“When did I grow so old? When did the gray steal across my head — like mold across bread — and consume it? When did the smoothness of my skin give way cell by cell to this blotchy, wrinkled, greenish mask? When did the shape of my youth become consumed by this fatty, lumpish mass?”

“That’s not me.”

Again it was only a hope, a wish, a possibility.

“Yes, that *is* me,” stated Ms. McKinzie. “He must have been there, must have taken these photos, must have preserved them here in this book — my book of memories. He was the one who had left the book lying as I had found it when I first came into the room.”

There was one more page to turn, one more page of memories. We turned that page together — Ms. McKinzie and I. It contained only one photo.

“He is still so handsome.”

“Yes, he is still handsome.”

His hair was grey, his blue eyes were not so bright and shiny, his shoulders were not so square, his stance was not so straight — but it was still *him*.

“He probably took this picture himself, setting the camera on timer then running to the chair to get into position before the ‘click’ of the shutter.”

Ms. McKinzie sat staring at the photo. I sat staring at the photo. The sickly-yellow-lightbulb glare reflected up at us from the plastic.

I had finished. All the memories — bits and pieces of life, scenes and snatches of the high moments and the low moments, frozen frames as I had stood at crossroads trying to decide — all of it has passed from pale, croaking toad to slender, youngish woman.

The book lay open on my lap — open to that last page, that last glimpse-bit-piece-moment, forever frozen, forever, stored in her memory, my memory.

I closed the book and stood up — tall and straight and powerful — from the sofa. The dust

made me cough a little — just a little — as it swirled around me in the otherwise still air.

The sun was sending stray rays over the horizon. Not full dawn, but just enough to lessen the mirror-quality of the windows. Still, I could see us — reflected, reversed — in those mirror-windows. Still we were there, me standing — clutching the book to my breast, my heart — stretching up to my fullest height, brown eyes sparkling, brown hair shining, lips remembering.

“Kisses so sweet.”

A strand of hair fell curly, wild, and free across my forehead. I loosened the rest of my hair, let it fall long and brown and silky past my shoulders, just like when I had first met *him*.

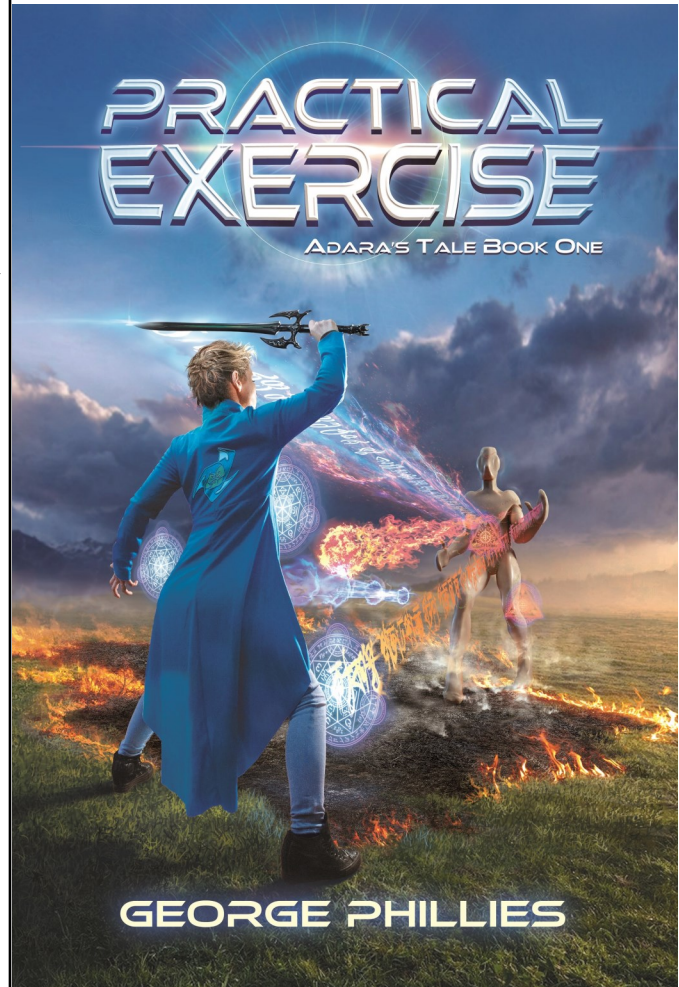
There she sat — silent, not hearing, not seeing, not speaking, reflected in the windows. The reflection faded more and more as finger by finger, ray by ray, the sun pulled itself up over the horizon, ascended once more over treetops and rooftops, over dreams and illusions, bringing light to the shadows, light to our hearts and minds, light to our memories.

I touched her shoulder, caught her as she started to fall forward off the sofa, pushed her gently back against the cushions, stretched forth my hand with fingers extended and closed the lids down over eyes that had ceased to see. Clutching the book tighter still lest it slip away with her, I went into the hall where earlier I had seen a phone. I hoped it worked.

Maybe I could reach him. He was still alive. Maybe the story hadn’t ended yet. There could still be a happy ending to this book of memories.

Fiction by Neffers

We have now reached a traditional section of Eldritch Science, namely Fiction by Neffers, fiction by people who are dues-paying or Public Members of the National Fantasy Fan Federation. Please consider submitting your work for future issues.



Author's Introduction

Because Academic Warfare is Deadlier Than the Other Kind

Readers are doubtless familiar with magical academies modeled after English Public (meaning private, boarding) Schools. In those hideous places, student ages range from 10 or so to 18. There are vast numbers of unpleasant practical jokes, students destroying each other's property, students in charge of disciplining younger students, beatings and floggings, and rarely a modest interest in academic life. Clubs and team sports are viewed as the critical part of a student's education. Studying is at best secondary when not deprecated. The Faculty are teachers, not academicians; they do not perform research or write scholarly works.

Dorrance Academy is not one of these places. Dorrance resembles an American research univer-

sity, though there are several tracks. One set of students arrives, collects marginally passing grades, makes social contacts, and receives a passing diploma. A second set of students works respectably hard, passes well a legitimate and respectably lengthy set of courses, and is prepared for a career. For a very few students, academic work leads toward an academic vocation. There are athletic facilities, but intramural team sports are a modest interest, while intercollegiate athletics do not exist.

A minor authorial aside: As it happens, your author is also a research scientist, a retired physics professor. Once upon a time, many decades ago. I was an undergraduate, graduate student, and post-doctoral fellow at America's Dorrance Academy, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. I have woven into the tale a fair piece of advice on how to succeed and be at the top at the top-line university. If you are headed off to such a place, please keep my advice in mind. You may also assume that a number of the events here are lightly disguised from real life occurrences.

And a minor historical note: In our world, Friedrich August Kekule von Stradonitz was a great 19th-century German theoretical and organic chemist. Kekule substantially created the theory of the molecular structure of organic compounds, based on atoms connected by bonds. He later proposed and demonstrated that benzene has six carbon atoms arranged in a ring. Kekule assured fellow chemists that both of these results came to him first in daydreams, the starting point for benzene being an image of a snake swallowing its own tail. The relevance of this anecdote to Adara Triskittenion's academic career will become clear, late in the novel.

Chapter 1—I arrive at Dorrance

My first view of Dorrance Academy was in the early morning. The rising sun was low above the horizon, so I cast long shadows down the slope in front of me. Dawn's rays painted the grass and trees in gorgeous shades of green-gold. The Academy's buildings were tinged with burnished bronze and faded copper. It must have rained last

night; you could see sparkling raindrops hanging from late summer flowers. I was still chilly from crossing the Purple Sea. The sun was pleasantly warm against my cloak. Over my back, under my cape, I wore my *gnothdiar*, my spellcaster sword, one of whose other purposes is to be extremely sharp.

Academy buildings were an eclectic range of every known style. That's every style known to us, the Timeless Ones, the Hidden Masters of such part of existence as we choose to rule. The One Library was a vast slab of golden granite and window glass. Even from here, well up on a rise over a mile away, I could see the shimmer of its wards, spellwork that protected it from fire, flood, and every other imaginable disaster. The School of Theology building was architecturally unique. It started with limestone slabs, columns, and gargoyles, fused at one end to brickwork of rococo ornateness, which in turn merged into a mass of silver and glass, finally reaching an open court surrounded by topless columns and four quartz towers, those being the personal and staff offices of the Four Patriarchs when they were in residence, the whole thing all being one building.

I'd waited a decade and a half for this day, a decade and a half in which I knew this was what I wanted to do. When I was seven, I learned that you could study magic, and there was this strange magical puzzle that no one could solve. Just before I turned twelve, I came fully into my magic. With Dad and Mom watching carefully, I set an agelessness spell on myself. So long as I held that spell in place, my command of the Presence, the Fire behind all magic, would continue to grow. So long as I held that spell in place, I'd be a young adult, my body growing no older. I'd stay the same height and build that I'd been when I was eleven. After that, eight years at Barlow Prep, interspersed with two years apprenticeship in combat magic, brought me almost to the current day. Of course, someday I would finish at Dorrance, put aside my agelessness spell, and become a grownup. That time would happen after I'd established myself as a scholar.

I'd arrived on a rise, several hundred feet above the sloping plain on which the Academy

waited. My two shipping trunks hovered behind me. The view was enchanting. The Academy plain stepped slowly down toward the Pelnir Sea. Beaches were golden yellow. Several large-scale enchantments meant that the water for a fair distance out from shore was pleasantly warm and absolutely clean. Off in the distance, around the bay from the Academy, the long white block of the New School gleamed in the sunlight. It was a wonderful moment that I paused to enjoy, fixing it in my memories.

Four and six decades ago, my older brothers Heath and Moore had passed through Dorrance. Now I, their kid sister Adara, would follow their example. Their achievements, earned through hard work, brought honor to our family, the people of Triskittenion Hall. I would have to work even harder to outshine their accomplishments.

Entering student interviews were in Ellwood Hall, off to the far right, just this side of the Campus Martius. Campus Martius? We were, divine beings help us, required to study martial magic. As an heiress of House Triskittenion, I'd been expected to master combat sorcery. I'd tried. My first tutor grumbled that I relied too much on speed and brute force. He warned that would work poorly, given that I'm a young adult, not a grown-up. Grandfather Worrow was more tolerant, not to mention more demanding. For my first single-person hunt, I brought home from a neighboring plane the heads of three night terrors. Their skulls decorate my bedroom's walls. After my first hunt, my tutor grumbled less.

I heard a high-pitched whistle to my left. At the neighboring entry point, someone had opened a deep gate. The gate's surface was black, shot through with the fluorescent clouds and bursts of particolored lightning that fill the Void. Through it walked someone close to my own age, well, physical age. He came through first, so he had to have opened the gate himself. Yes, I do know how to open a deep gate. That's one of the things you learn to do in order to support really high-powered spells. However, I am definitely not stupid enough to walk through one. Deep gating is surely an effective way to get here in a whole hurry from far away, as opposed to what I did, taking a long walk across the Purple Sea. Deep gates take you into

the Void, which at my physical age is definitely a bad place to be. All right, some boys think they are invincible and indestructible.

I watched as he pulled more and more of his trunks through the gate. He wasn't keeping good control of his gate, enough so that the wards around my arrival point, the wards around my steamer trunks, and finally my personal wards began to flicker into activity. I've opened larger deep gates, with people standing there to intervene if needed (it wasn't), but my deep gates were rock solid and completely under my control. His gate was unstable. Before the matter got too serious, he pulled the last of his trunks through the deep gate and closed it.

The fellow to my left was doing something that rearranged his steamer trunks into a line suitable for towing. He could wait. I tapped my lead trunk once to get the attention of its spellwork. My trunks dutifully followed me, like a kindle of kit-tens hoping for snacks, as I started down the hill. School housing was off to the left, so I would need to walk the trunks there, sign for keys, lock up my trunks, then walk all the way across campus to be interviewed. It was good exercise.

"Look out where you're going, you idiot!" That shout was the boy from the next entrance point, moving faster than I'd say was sensible for someone with all those trunks behind him. He obviously thought that I was in his way. "I'm Harold of House Fourbridge, soon to be a great combat sorcerer, so you get to wait while I pass." He made an insulting hand gesture. Supposedly some students try to start fights just to be in a fight — a massively stupid behavior. Was that what he wanted? Or was he just being crude?

I pushed my hood back from over my head and reached behind me, my left hand tapping my trunks to stop them. Pushing back my hood meant I had my right hand almost at the hilt of my *gnothdiar*, while my left hand was out of his sight, where I used it to cast a shielding ward. I wouldn't dream of starting a fight, but if he did my trunks were now protected from damage.

"Nice to meet you," I answered cheerily. "I'm Adara Triskittenion."

"We are Harold Fourbridge. You may walk behind me, like all my other girlfriends." He

marched on by. I probably should not have goggled. I decline to believe that a young adult is old enough to have real girlfriends. However, he was well taller than I am. He might be one of those boys who tamper with their agelessness spells until girlfriends are possible. He appeared to be growing toward adult height and build well before he should. Given his control of his trunks, I was happy to have him downhill of me.

My student quarters were in the promised line of solidly built, well-maintained town houses, each with walk-in basement. Living space, bedroom and bath, and study occupied the three floors above. The unman in the front office was happy to make clear: The buildings might be called ‘temporary’, but some students stayed for a decade or more while finishing their academic work. He was apologetic: Other students had already reserved the services of all the porters, so I would be expected to do my own housecleaning.

“Just like home,” I said. “Mom expected me to scrub part of the kitchen floor. Every week. By hand.” He smiled and nodded approvingly. “And if you need a wooden floor cleaned, and don’t mind spellwork, though the good spell wants water and oil soap for that wood, ask me quietly.” He could work out ‘I do favors for you, and you return them someday.’ His smile was very wide.

I’d registered early and paid extra for an end apartment in Knowlton House, so my third-floor study had views in three directions. Now that I’d seen it, I could say that the price was clearly worth it. The furniture included several chairs, a couch, a large desk, a dresser, an inadequate bookcase, and a small circular table, all of ironwood. The study had a food preserver. Its spellwork clearly needed some retuning. Where would I sleep? One of my trunks held a carefully folded low bed.

I had several hours before Ellwood Hall opened. I had time for useful work. I took the minutes needed to reinforce the house wards with my own. They could be broken, but not without me knowing. Then I cast a full set of housecleaning spells on all four floors. Several times. The past resident had clearly not been heavily into cleanliness. Yes, I remembered the ceilings and the spaces within the walls, including a minor death spell for insect pests. Finally I remembered

the tiny gaps between the boards in the hardwood floors. Mom had given me a spellbook, her mother’s as it happens, with spell diagrams for the best cleaning spells. I had most of them memorized, sort of, but having the diagrams for the delicate heavy-duty spells at my fingertips, just like home, helped.

Eventually I fell back on water and cleanser for the bathroom, water and glass soap for both sides of the windows, water and soap for the window screens, and water and oil soap for the woodwork, with spells driving them to do their duty. Mom had made sure I’d packed all those soaps in a sealed tin box. Yes, I do know the spells to drive cleanser to do its duty. House Triskittenion does not allow unmen servants in the Hall proper, so I’d been doing those chores for years. Those spells demanded several changes of water for each floor. The place had been filthy, but finally it was more-or-less clean. More passes would be needed before it sparkled. I could imagine doing all that work by hand. I would have needed a week, worn my fingers to the bone, and needed a bath. Several baths.

Soon enough I would walk over to Ellwood Hall, then find a refectory for lunch. The rules said we were expected to eat in a refectory, until we joined an eating club or moved into a residential house. Unless the food was totally bad, I certainly was not going to do my own cooking, even ignoring that I was not allowed to cook extensively in the townhouse. Cooking is a total waste of time for a serious student.

The hour for entrance interviews arrived. Dorrance Academy was covered with paved walks, polychrome stone blocks carefully fused together. Almost every student could gate from building to building, but there were too many people in too small an area for gating to be safe, so it was not allowed, except for Faculty members gating into their offices. Students were obliged to walk. Good exercise. Taking the trail toward the Campus Martius, I soon encountered another, slightly confused-looking, first-year student.

“I’m Dairen of Charlemont,” he announced. He put his nose back into his map.

“Adara Triskittenion,” I replied. “Are you

heading to Ellwood Hall?"

He nodded.

"It's down this path." I pointed. "Do you have a course of study in mind yet?"

"General Magic-Construction," he answered. "I'm from Almasi, way south."

"General Magic? That's my planned course, too," I answered. *Well, I thought, construction is a bit different than pure General Magic, but there's no sense in starting with an argument.*

"I already have my major research project in mind," he announced. "I'm going to measure the size of the Purple Sea." He went on at some length. Listening to him, I realized that he had no idea how to do it. He just knew what he wanted to do.

The Purple Sea is a place you can go when you shallow-gate. You gate to the sea, walk a modest ways, and gate back, considerably away from where you started. There's this great debate about whether the Purple Sea is actually the surface of some enormously huge sphere, or whether it's flat and goes on forever. I have no idea why anyone would think that the Purple Sea is a sphere.

Halfway down the walk, three fellows emerged from behind a hedge. They were more than a bit noisy. I'd say they were singing, except they made yowling tomcats sound melodic. Their gait said they were drunk. Then I recognized the one in front. It was Harold Fourbridge. Again.

"Ooh, firsties," Fourbridge crooned as they approached. "No armor, no sword, so you each get a paddling."

Dad had warned me about that custom. Upper-classman to some extent harassed lower-class students, meaning in particular first-year students like me. The Faculty had finally suppressed most of the custom.

"You get to cooperate, or you get paddled twice," Fourbridge continued.

"That r-rule," Dairen stammered. "We're not students yet, we haven't registered."

I heard the fear in Dairen's voice.

"That nonsense," I said firmly, "was banned by the University Council a millennium ago. You three can just take a hike."

This was a truly lousy way to start off my academic career. Dad had warned me that these

things still happened, forbidden or not, but they should very certainly not happen to an heiress of House Triskittenion. Dairen looked around, hoping for rescuers who were nowhere to be seen.

"I guess you're first," Fourbridge announced. He reached for me.

I still had my travel wards ready to power up. He touched them. A flare of light filled the space between us. His next several words were quite impolite. "Okay," he announced, "you get to do this the hard way." He started to draw his sword.

I saw some not extremely impressive enchantments floating above its blade. He began his draw first, but I finished my draw before he finished his. He was sloshed, and I am always stone-cold sober. My *gnothdiar* was in my right hand, my right leg forward. My left leg was back, braced. My left hand was above it in a casting pose. I felt the tingle of the readied void nodes in my wrists.

"Be a good boy," I said, very slowly and quietly, "put away your butter knife, and be on your way." Dairen had slipped to his left, so he was now completely behind me. I'd have preferred he stayed to my side, so if something completely stupid happened, the odds would appear to be three to two rather than three to one. Okay, I suspected that he would be of no value in a combat situation. I've been trained on one-on-several combat, but these three were all a head or more taller than I am, and considerably heavier.

On the other hand, they were drunk. I could smell the beer on their breaths.

"Listen, you..." he started. He knew a remarkable number of impolite words.

"You drew on me. Continue, or put your toy away." I was now thoroughly annoyed. His face was ruddy. I loaded my left hand with a stack of combat spells, one extremely powerful. His two friends stepped behind him and grabbed his arms. One of them looked at me, winked, shook his head, and rolled his eyes. They assisted him from the scene.

Dairen was in tears. "This was supposed to be a nice place, a wonderful place to study," he mumbled.

"It is a nice place, especially once classes start," I said. "There are supposed to be proctors

and lictors to keep the peace.” I sheathed my *gnothdiar* and lowered my combat wards. Now my hands were shaking. I’d ramped up to combat mode without even thinking about it. And I’d done it right. Muscles and spells had been at the ready, but I had been completely calm. “When we get to the Entrance Hall I’ll have to chat one up.” I tapped the hilt of my *gnothdiar*. One of its spells had indeed stored images of the event. That sorted out who would have started the fight, not that I had any interest in fighting.

For more, the complete novel is available at
Smashwords.com and Amazon.com.