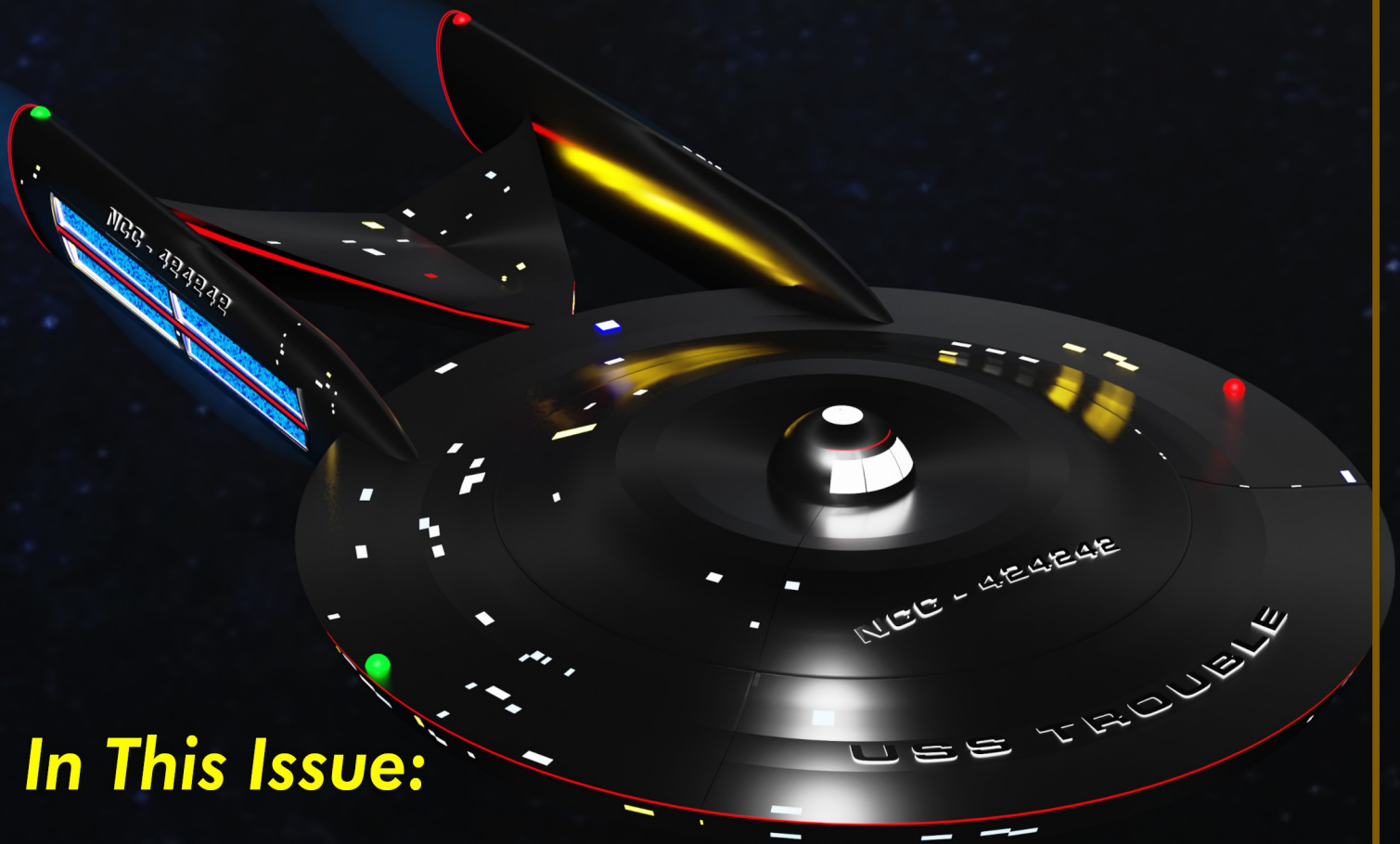


RETROZINE

Two Fandom
Elders,
One More Time!

January 2022 No. 3



In This Issue:



Original Fiction By:

*Marjorri Donatello * Alan Dunwell * Niall Shapero*



Fan Fiction By:

The Crew of the USS TROUBLE



Non-Fiction and Commentary by:

*Jacqueline Lichtenberg * Germaine Swanson*

RETROZINE

<http://retrozine.net>

On Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/Retrozine>

On Twitter: @Retrozine2

Print and online layout © 2022, Retrozine

Retrozine is a labor of love. It will always be free to read on our website, or download and read on your couch.

Got questions?

Contact us!

To Subscribe (or just to get the next issue): subscribe@retrozine.net

For submissions and letters of comment: editor@retrozine.net or submissions@retrozine.net, your choice.

For technical/web issues: techinfo@retrozine.net

Interested in advertising with us? Please see our web edition for more details.

COPYRIGHTS and Credit Where Credit Is Due:

ORIGINAL AUTHORS/ARTISTS RETAIN ALL RIGHTS TO THEIR OWN WORK.

On our cover, I (Fa) used some models made by others and downloaded from Thingiverse and Blendswap (where you can find my own models, too, [Creative Commons](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/) licensed!):

Tardis by Kazzee CC-BY-SA

Tricorder by Wythkyn CC-BY-SA

Starbug from Red Dwarf by TheInsomnolent, CC-BY-NC

Bird of Prey by nd4spd1919, CC-BY

Coke Bottle by DalekSupreme, CC-BY-SA

Basketball by optionalTom, CC-BY

all other 3D/Blender models by Fara Shimbo, CC-BY-SA-NC, many available at <http://www.thingiverse.com>

In This Issue:

Commentary:

[It's A Marvel](#)

by Germaine Swanson _____ 4

[Can You Outgrow YA Category Fiction?](#)

by Jacqueline Lichtenberg _____ 6

Retroactive (*Original Fiction*):

[Mountain Thyme](#)

by Alan Dunwell _____ 21

[A Walk Through A Maze](#)

by Niall Shapero _____ 29

[The Accidental Lunatic, Part 3](#)

by Marjorry Donatello _____ 53

Retrospective (*Fan Fiction*):

[Here Comes Trouble!](#)

By the Crew, and Others _____ 11

It's A Marvel!

By Germaine Swanson

As I write this editorial, we are 10 days late on releasing the third edition of *Retrozine*.

The content of this current issue is a departure from our original vision. Authors and Artists in fandom have been difficult to come by. Perhaps we just don't know where to look but we continue to search.

We arrived at a creative solution to less content than we wanted. We created a Federation Starship and crew who are on their first voyage. The U.S.S *Trouble* was born after a few sessions of creative silliness about how we'd staff a ship if we could choose anyone. We progressed to the art and the depiction of the ship, the bridge, and bridge-crew. I think, no, I'm sure, Fa had a blast doing all that creating.

See if you can identify the characters and whatnots that are on the bridge. You are in for a treat.

Our script and story come from the logs and observations of the various crewmembers we identified. They are written by friends and subscribers of *Retrozine*. There are still crew positions left to be filled. If you are interested send an email to the Editor (editor@retrozine.net)

Drop us a text or email. We'd love to read your opinions.

We have a Twitter feed, but we haven't fed it yet. @Retrozine1 is our Twitter handle. What would you like to see us post?

Is there a theme to the last few sentences? Why yes, there is. We'd like to hear from you, our readers, and subscribers. What do you think of the zine? What would like to see here? I appreciate the feedback I have received but I'd prefer to see it in writing.

In an idle moment I decided to finally watch some shows from the Marvel Universe on Disney+.

I used to read Marvel comics when I was a kid and a teen. When I became a mom, I never stopped my kids from buying them because I'd read them, too. As far as I know, they didn't buy them very often. I did have objections to the way women were portrayed back then but I liked the fact that the characters had personalities and character flaws.

I figured I would just watch *Shang Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings* and maybe *Loki*. I heard a lot of positive things about them. I agree with those assessments. But, at least for me, watching Marvel is

like eating popcorn: you don't realize you've been eating until you are searching for the last greasy kernel in the bottom of the container.

Prior to my binge, I saw *Guardians of the Galaxy 1 & 2*, *Black Panther* (of course), *Dr. Strange*, and *Avengers: Endgame* in the theaters. Therefore, I am no stranger to the Marvel movie universe. But, prior to this, my tv binging was more old school SF. I admit it. I was a snob.

I watched *Loki*, *Hawkeye* (my favorite of the superheroes) which are both live action series. I am committing myself to watch the next season of each if they return. *Falcon and the Winter Soldier* was a surprise. I hope that series continues.

What If...? left me feeling unsure of whether I just watched a series of comic book vignettes or live action. The art was that engaging. The final episode was not written as I expected. But, on second thought this is the Marvel Universe, plot twists are inevitable. Having exhausted all the "new to me" programs, I watched *Dr. Strange* again. I'm ready for *Captain Marvel*, and *Black Widow* when I have some free time followed by *Black Panther* (again). Sorry, not sorry, Antman and Spidey. You are not on my list.

Watching all those movies and shows over about two and a half days should have made them run together into a hodgepodge of similar story arcs and tropes. They didn't. Each was distinct enough that I accurately passed a quiz about some of them. Of, course I did follow up my binge with reading about the characters, plots, and chronology of the universes in several sources after the test. (Not Wikipedia. Yet.)

I found I liked (okay, loved) each program I chose to watch but for different reasons. They all kept my interest. I've been known to read or scroll my phone when tv action gets slow or predictable. I was neither bored nor manipulated into excessive excitement. The storylines were not too far-fetched if you considered the genre. If you can believe a guy can out fly helicopters wearing a winged backpack, nothing was excessive or defied conditional belief.

My binge was a delightful escape from my *Star Trek Discovery* and *Star Trek Lower Decks* obsession I had in the fall. Some of the later iterations of 'Trek are very dark and somewhat disturbing. I must take them, and the *Mandalorian* in small doses. Mostly though, I am distracted by work, reading, or, listening to audiobooks, or podcasts to take frequent binge vacations.

I enjoyed my sojourn in the Marvel Universe, but it hasn't replaced my favorites Sf and vintage movies. We'll see what the future holds when the sequels are released.

Contact Germaine: editor@retrozine.net

Can You Outgrow YA-Category Fiction?

By Jacqueline Lichtenberg

In brief, the answer to the title question here is, “No.”

But that begs the question, “Why?”

What is it about YA category fiction that is eternal? Why does it haunt the reader for a lifetime? Why is it worth revisiting periodically?

And if you raise kids, of course, you must revisit the YA section at your library.

And if you do revisit the YA section, you will find (sometimes to your dismay) that things have changed. A lot.

But have things really changed?

Does fiction teach? Or do fiction publishers just publish what readers want?

If fiction teaches, what does it teach? Certainly not that vampires are real and werewolves are sexy!

What is all that “supernatural” stuff really about and why is it so entrenched now in the YA section?

All of these questions are pregnant with other questions.

Drill down, and you get to the essence of fiction and why all human cultures tell stories.

Most people are inoculated with an allergy to “philosophy,” but it is in the realm of philosophy that you find salient discussions of these matters and structured systems of “values” that different cultures admire.

When you revisit the YA section to pick out stuff for your kids to read, you suddenly discover that your kids generation is imbibing a totally different set of “values” than your generation did at that age.

It's a shock. I remember my parents being very put off by what my generation went for hand over fist. I remember the scorn, and the aversion. And the corrective measures.

At that time, I felt that I knew better than they did.

Actually, I still feel that way—but of course MY CHILDREN are all wrong about their values.

Now my grandchildren are growing up in yet another, totally different, world that requires massive adjustment in values.

From this perspective, I can see that by and large, the differences in values are generated (in our day and age) by technology and the way it has infused our lives.

Here's a study where scientists are trying to learn to think about how humans and society evolve, how things change from generation to generation.

If they are correct in their approach (I have my doubts), this means that our social values of "fairness" and our approach to 'strangers' is a very recent thing in the development of the human animal.

<http://news.sciencemag.org/sciencenow/2010/03/playing-fair-came-late.html?rss=1>

If we as a species accomplished that much that fast, it's small wonder YA needs revisiting and a thorough study with every generation.

EXAMPLE OF SPEEDY CHANGE:

a) When I was a teen, the caricature of the wayward teen girl was the image of her lying prone over her frilly pink bedspread, talking on the telephone (a very large handset attached to a larger base by a cord which was attached by a long cord to the wall—poorer families had shorter cords). Even rich people had only one telephone line, but the richer people had more than one extension phone. This incessant telephone talking was deplorable behavior that would lead to juvenile delinquency.

b) My children talked on the phone incessantly, but I considered that healthy development of friendships, associations, and socialization. We were not rich but had several extensions, and little by little, acquired several phone lines.

In between, the teen acquired a desk and a notebook computer in her room upon which she incessantly interacted via chatroom with boyfriends, girlfriends, possible predators.

c) My grandchildren aren't up to texting age, but today's teens text incessantly and statistics organizations publish numbers that are reported on television in that "deplorable" tone of voice. Facebook. Social networking in general. Twitter. Oh, so very terrible a breakdown in the moral fiber of this nation, exposing our children to predators right in the palm of the hand.

Welllllllll.

Suppose we go back to caveman days. What did teens do then that was ever so deplorable? Wander off gathering roots and meet some teen-guy predator from the neighboring cave?

Introducing children to the public has always been a very harrowing experience for parents. It's scary. It's terrifying.

I don't know why there aren't more horror movies about it.

Now I admit that today it's more terrifying than ever because of the "Future Shock" effect that Alvin Toffler described so well in his book by the same name.

Back in caveman days, all evidence we have shows that society and technology changed very slowly. People didn't travel far, didn't mix with "aliens" from afar, and went into their father's profession (or mother's). As in the middle ages, parents could prepare their children to be successful in "life" because "life" would be the same 50 years from now, pretty much (provided someone didn't invent the wheel).

But archaeologists are now tracing how humanity spread throughout the globe. People may not have gone far in one lifetime, but a tribe or a people would creep across territory generation after generation—things would be different.

The one thing that has allowed our species to survive, as far as I can tell, is adaptability.

Each generation starts fresh, and *adapts* to the new world their parents have created from the world they were handed.

According to Alvin Toffler, (and I can see he's right) it's happening faster now. It's happening so fast that the very physiological limit of the basic human being is being slammed into, and perhaps is breaking down.

We are going to have to adapt faster than ever in human evolution.

So the best YA fiction you can supply will be about *adapting* to the *absolutely unthinkable*.

In the 1930's-50's, the "unthinkable" (denied by all old enough to be parents) was "aliens land on the White House Lawn."

Today, we are quickly verifying that Earth is not the only planet of its type in this galaxy. In fact solar systems are common, and many are not very different from ours.

Faster than light travel is still a theoretical impossibility, but theories have been overturned in living memory.

In that 60-year interval, what is impossible has changed, though our attitude toward "the impossible" hasn't changed all that much.

In that interval, oddly enough, on the deepest philosophical level, there has been a massive shift in our understanding of the universe we are embedded within, and a lot of philosophy written in the late 1800's has cycled back around into fashion, and then sunk down into unconscious assumption.

That cycle is philosophical. And right now, the prevailing philosophy in a goodly portion of our public society (not so much in private; but what is acceptable in public) has reversed.

In the 1800's and most of the beginning of the 1900's, to be socially acceptable (to be worthy of that "fairness" the article talks about) even if you are a stranger, you had to be "morally upright" and that was measured by Religion.

People of the same general Religion would accept each other on sight, at face value. The world was an amalgam of puddles of little religious groups, and alliances of similar groups.

Introducing children to "the public" or "the world" was a process of teaching "proper" behavior as a member of a particular religion. "The Family That Prays Together Stays Together" was a popular slogan.

Today that's all turned upside down. Religion is a private matter, kept inside the home, inside the place of worship, and it is politically incorrect (especially in public schools) to display one's religion or behave in a specifically religion-prescribed manner.

So children being introduced to the "outside" from the "inside" of a home, children in transition to adulthood, are learning that Religion isn't "real"—it isn't something one dares to share publicly.

It has become "unthinkable" that the portrait of Reality painted by Religion (any of them; doesn't matter) is actually real.

Only the portrait painted by "science" (which works on theories that are constantly overturned) is real, and may be spoken in public.

So whereas YA once deplorably portrayed a world where the portrait painted by Science was actually "real" (*i.e.* aliens from outer space) and thus the publicly agreed "reality" painted by Religion was false, today YA deplorably portrays a world where the portrait painted by Religion is actually "real" (*i.e.* angels, demons, supernatural creatures erupting from other dimensions, possession, etc) and the portrait painted by Science is false.

Do you see the paradigm?

Youth, making the transition from the privacy of The Home to functionality among The Public (*i.e.* strangers; do read that item on "fairness") need to consider, adapt and adjust to Adult Hypocrisy.

That's what has to be resolved during those transition years.

Adults operate (philosophically) on two or more levels at once.

Children don't.

That's why children are always coming up with those stunning one-liners that make the world so simple.

To transform a child into an adult, we teach how to resolve adult hypocrisy. We teach how to operate in a two-valued world where two mutually exclusive realities are simultaneously true. We teach "political correctness;" but with each generation the exact content of what is "politically correct" (*i.e.* publicly espoused) changes.

That shock at dipping into the YA section again after a decade or more operating in the adult world comes from discovering how much the content of "politically correct" has changed.

That shock rocks us at the foundations of our personal philosophy and calls all manner of assumptions into question.

Now, personally, I think that's a healthy exercise—questioning assumptions.

And so I think you can't outgrow the salutary effect that reading YA novels can have on you.

It keeps you young.

It keeps you aware of the discrepancy between public and private.

And at this time in history, technology is rapidly erasing the dividing line between public and private.

The older generation feels "invaded" and deeply offended by say, GPS tracking of their cell phone. The current pre-teens can't imagine a world where the location of a cell phone is unavailable. How could you find your way around without the GPS in your car telling you to turn right?

What 5-year-old has seen their parents stop at a gas station to ask directions?

By the time that 5 year old is 25 and raising kids, his kids won't be able to imagine how the world could function without medical histories available on a central database so every doctor you see has all the information about you.

But maybe the pendulum will swing back, and the public world will become dominated by Religion again, and science will shape and form only our private world, inside the "family" or "tribe."

Oh, do read that article and ponder what it means that "science" is trying (however ineffectually) to study the evolution of "fairness."

Here Comes *Trouble!*



Admiral's Log, 2121.21:

Admiral Germaine Swanson recording

I have been assigned to the U.S.S. *Trouble* for its shake-down cruise to Beta Kerrotyn for “research” purposes. However, I was given sealed orders to be opened in the Captain’s presence once we near the system. Sealed orders are never a good thing when you are hastily given them right after you have announced your upcoming retirement. In literature, at least, the adventurer who is dreaming of retiring to some lovely resort planet is usually the first or only one to die. Not gonna happen with this kid. I’m getting out of this mission whole and alive.

I have confidence in our captain, Fara Shimbo. I knew her at the Academy and have heard about her unorthodox technique for getting the job done. She has an excellent record: no crewmember has ever asked to be reassigned nor has there been a report of court-marshal or absence without leave. Maintaining loyal crew is necessary to survival in space. I'm curious whether it's an iron fist or loyalty that keep crew morale high. It is my personal mission to observe how she does this so I can create a program for the Academy's Officer Training Corps.



My experience has shifted from active space duty to a desk job at the Academy. I evaluate and train Counselors and instructors. Mainly, I ride herd on instructors who try to teach or encourage insurrection. Star Fleet had a very bad history of power-hungry officers and instructors leading their students to wreak havoc on unsuspecting planets or societies. Since I was kicked upstairs to this post there have been absolutely no incidents of this nature for twenty years. I nip those tendencies in the bud and have fired many space heroes with ambitions of glory who planned to teach their “special” skills of command.

The trip has been eventful so far. The crew is diverse and intriguing. They were definitely chosen for skills and abilities and not just to fill slots. Unorthodox but efficient, no marching minions or “cannon fodder” on this ship. I wonder if the ship's name is *Trouble* because she brings it to opponents or a more disturbing reason. “Trouble” is actually a “questionable” mis-translation of a series of chirps and clicks made by the bigwig who was given the honor of naming her. Standard is not his native language. The concept is like being squashed by a giant human foot descending from the sky. It's unclear whether the *Trouble* is the squasher or the squashed.

The ship managed to stop dead in space, no propulsion. It was assisted by what appear to be intergalactic mechanics whose home gravity is different to that of the ship. They managed repairs despite their troubles with our gravity. They moved as if they were marionettes or controlled by strings from above. I have never heard of them before, but they are said to be very famous and heroic. One, Captain Virgil Tracy, is remaining onboard in case of additional difficulties.

One of the Jefferies Tubes was harboring a giant cat-hairball that had become sentient. I am conducting research with Starfleet to find out whether it should be treated as hostile or officially identified as a sentient lifeform. Xeno-sciences is studying to determine its nature and how it was generated from cathair. Did I mention there are many, many cats, and a cat-like creature on board? I'm not sure of their purpose but they are here by request of the captain, sanctioned as necessary by Star Fleet and have the run of the ship. My husband, Mark Swanson, is the Master Tactical Officer and weapons specialist. He is skilled in the use of dragons in planet-side warfare. I'm not sure why he is assigned to a Research vessel, but I haven't read our orders yet either. It is unusual for husbands and wives to be assigned to the same crew but we each have distinct specialties, so I imagine each of us is the best fit for the job.

Just before the Captain and I were to meet to discuss the sealed orders, the lights in the whole ship turned green, bilious green as if the ship was experiencing stomach upset. The chief engineer, Commander Bob Shimbo (Captain Shimbo's husband), was finally able to resolve the problem by rebooting the lighting. I'm not sure of the cause.

She's invited me to sit with her in the command center on the bridge. It reminds me of a tricked out old-fashioned BarcaLounger for three. Usually, her first officer or her Number One join her there. She has given me the center seat of honor, but I contend I am not here to lead but perhaps to consult at best.

I am waiting in the Ready-Room for the Captain so we can unseal these orders. I think I am making her nervous because I've been staying in the background and just observing operations.

Captain's Log, 2121.21

Captain Fara Shimbo recording

The *Trouble* left port today on its first journey, a shakedown run to Beta Kerrotyn and back. Naturally, nothing went right, which I expected; but none of the things that went wrong, went wrong in the way they were supposed to, which I should have expected too.

I have what Starfleet calls a "loose" approach to the captaincy. I can dish out discipline with the best of them, being the kind of Big Sister that Lucy van Pelt only dreamed of being. But in general, I

don't care how things on board get done, as long as they *do* get done. So if you show up on my bridge in your official Starfleet bunny slippers, I don't care, so long as you do your job and when I say, "Jump!" you jump!

I have also made a couple of "odd" staffing decisions.

For example, I have sprung a certain Mr. Mudd out of chokey to be my Special Negotiations Advisor. No worries, he's tame, he knows who feeds him, and I told him he could bring his pet (which truth be told, I wonder about, but it is kind of cute). Besides that, he's my uncle, and he'll behave because I Know Too Much.

I should mention, the pet's name is Moriarty, and the two of them spend way too much time in hushed but extremely excited conversation. Well, since they converse, I guess Moriarty isn't really a pet *per se*, but they're fluffy and can be cute in a deadly sort of way.

And I hired an old robot named Rosie to be our official Tea Lady, because she needed a job, and providing a good cuppa to a harried crew is probably the most important role on any starship; and if it ain't, it ought to be! The way I see it, they're my crew and therefore my responsibility, and that means I ought to keep 'em happy. Right? Right. Hence, Tea and Sympathy, and, I am happy to see, a good swift whack upside the head when called for. Yay, Rosie!

I also brought on board a Master Tactician. Granted this is supposed to be strictly a science ship, and we are not to engage in any battles, I don't know why. But sometimes you need to chagrin someone really well, and besides, this guy has a whole herd of dragons, so there's that.

The Chief Engineer just happens to be my husband, and the master tactician just happens to be the husband of Admiral Swanson, about whom more anon.

Our Comms/Cryptography officer is a rather lovely theropod, called Lieutenant Figni Dorcas Eppri Addomecaroi (we just call her Dorcas) and I swear, she cannot stay still for more than 30 seconds. Some days it drives me to drink, so Rosie gets plenty of work.

I allow music on the bridge, and food. This is because I am Sicilian and music and food belong everywhere.



Cats are allowed on the bridge. I mean, yeah, try and stop them. We have a few cardboard boxes for them. Cardboard is hard to find, and the replicators do a lousy job making cardboard well enough to convince the cats. Of course, cats are like that....

And I kept my blue uniform because something in the yellow fabric just plain makes me itch, and yellow is my least favorite color anyhow. Itching makes me grumpy. Being grumpy makes me start biting people. You don't want that. Also, command yellow doesn't go with my hair which is the one and only concession I make to fashion.

I've also made a couple of other changes of a "non-conformist" nature, and I dare anyone to fight me over them.

Anyway, Admiral Swanson and I go way back to our Academy days. I was a strictly science-type and Swanson was a "people-person" and always being pushed (it seemed to me) toward the command track, which I avoided like the plague so why am I

even here. She made Captain long before I did. (I think I only made Captain because I was the only person left who was willing to deal with the *Trouble*.) Good times, back at the Academy. As things usually happen in Starfleet, we were soon on separate ships as well as separate paths, and we lost track of each other for a long time. Now she's here on our shakedown cruise and why, I don't know. She told me to just command the way I'd normally command and I have probably made her wonder if I should be in charge of anything more than a broom closet.

We left Starbase A-You're-Adorable with instructions to not show our faces again until we'd reached Beta Kerrotyn, and somewhere along the way, the hamster in the wheel that runs the ship must have died or gone on strike or something, because the *Trouble* just ... stopped. Here we were with no propulsion in the middle of nowhere and Bob The Engineer couldn't find the problem. The only thing still working was the Interocitor I'd picked up in one of my more questionable adventures, and the only people we could contact for help turned out to be Interplanetary Rescue ("Our services come with strings attached!").

A guy Virgil Tracy Jr⁴ and his brother John Tracy Jr⁶ came out and I don't know what they did to get us going again, but the music they did it to was pretty cool. We gave Virgil a tour of the ship. I've got to say, how these guys can do anything what with the herky-jerky motions that it seems are all



they're capable of, I don't know. But they do know their stuff. Or at least, they know something. They knew where to look in the Jeffries Tubes for a giant ball of cat hair that had somehow become sentient, for one thing.

At around 8 hours into our journey, all the lights in the ship suddenly turned green. I had a really hard time convincing a new ensign that no, you can still see Orions even when the light is green; they don't "just blend in." Shimbo (the other one, not me) fixed it by the essential technique of turning them all off and turning them on again.

Did I tell you the *Trouble* is haunted? It is. By a ghost who's more afraid of us than we are of him. Makes him useful.

After a few other bits of fuss that I'm sure the officers in charge will include in their own logs, we made it to Beta Kerrotyn, with both nacelles still attached, and were declared fit to begin our first mission. Whatever that turns out to be.

The Admiral was very quiet the whole way. Quiet people make me worry.

And that thing I locked in my quarters had better stay there.

Comm's Log, 2121.21

Lieutenant Figni Dorcas Eppri Addomecaroi recording

(Note: Direct translation from Dorcas' native language.)

Are all present, crew. But, are not all complete. Having a proper tail is only myself and Moriarty. Must be fixed, all the rest.

Worked before with upright-biped crew. Keep their balance, how can they? Think always, will shortly, fall over. But, appear to be kind, these odd persons. Devious, but kind, one excepted, but is no matter.

Are, very possibly, most diversest crew in Starfleet. Addomecaroi, very few



in all Federation-official-capacity. This crew has a me! Also a Chíkshu, called by Captain a “trilobite,” having eyes which fascinate me. Many others not two-leg-ged, not upright. Is good. Two-legged uprights are rare. Matters much to represent us.

Feathers on top of arms falled out. Must find out why, feel naked.

Lucky-found, this Interocitor. To use is easy. Is mechanical, not touch-screen, as-is everything else here. Upright bipeds, they can use, so of course is Star Fleet, everything made for them. Not on *Trouble!* On my hands have no claws, but skin too dry for touch-screen, wearing a glove for screens annoys, so is better Interocitor.

Left today Starbase, goodbye said by very few onlookers. Disappointed. Maybe expect us to come back, again and again? Assume too much, they do. On board is Admiral Swanson; having brass on board never a good sign. Means safe voyage. Safe voyage is dull voyage. Hope, I verily do, for great deeds. Have already written song!

Ongoing is something odd on ship. Say she is haunted. We know one ghost, but is something different, down in lower decks. Writing myself another song, perhaps! All is well!

Helm’s Log, 2121.21

Lieutenant A. G. Chamberlain recording

Recording on departure from the U.S.S. *Trouble*, NC-424242 encountered to Beta Kerrotyn and back under direction of our iconic captain, Fara Shimbo. As we traverse into the vast beyond, our Captain, known for her kibitzing Brooklyn style, announces we are coming to a stop!! Wait! Oh My! A menagerie of stray cats seems to be on the deck, roaming freely and creating hijinks on the main control panel! The largest cat seems to be recalcitrant, when told to get down—but, here we go, we are up and running once again! (SMART CAT)!

We are fortunate to have a super crew which makes for a winning Team! Except for some wool-



ly beasts, the likes I've never seen, I'd say we are good for many excursions! I hope there is no brouhaha between the beasts and the Crew!

Our tea lady, Rosie the Robot, is serving spirituous libations today. I'm having a delicious Baileys Irish Cream. She does come off as slightly supercilious; however, if anyone asks, you didn't get that from me.

A lot of static on our boards and cooling air passing by leads me to believe we've picked up an unknown entity. Fortunately I sense no pugnacity. I've heard whispers from others on board about this as well. We are about to come in for a landing. More on the way back.

Tactical Officer's Log

Master Tactician Mark Swanson recording, Stardate 2112.17

Having arrived at Beta Kerrotyn as our shakedown passage, we are now as ready as *Trouble* gets for our first mission. Part way through it I found that the ship is leaking information like a Nedadyn Plateau kilometer-high waterfall. My console is locked up against the ship's computer changing anything but something has a camera pointed at it.

The main fighting plans displayed on the console are therefore set up with harmless sounding plan names for the micro lens to read. The anti missile plan is *Acupuncture Storm*.

The real plans are all a click away. They control some remarkable *pure science* instruments. Who knows, they might even work.



Possibly irrelevant as the dragons have no real controls at all: just a little dial for how many dragons I think a situation might need. Which amuses them.

Why the dragons planted themselves and me, their Luck, aboard this ship is not clear. But why they do things never is till it's too late.

Senior Cryptanalyst's Log

Chp Pntshe Dh recording, Stardate 2112.17

The Captain has referred to This Self as a "trilobite." This is not offensive. Rather, let it be said that it may be an attempt at self-kindness, since Terra's actual trilobites are, at the present time, extinct, and the captain is much saddened by this, or so I was told. This Self was touched when she told me this, and as a comfort to her, I have her several of my hatchlings that she may keep in the aquarium in her own proper quarters, until the time should come for them to be socialized. This will not be for many years, however. And the hatchlings will be happy and comfortable in their tank until that appointed time. They are still mainly green but observing the changes in their colors and patterns as they grow might be helpful.



As far as the rest of the crew goes, This Self finds them a humorous lot, although I do not understand their humor, nor they mine. At least they "make the attempt." But I am sure that this will resolve itself given time, and long lifespans on their parts; longer, I strongly suspect, than is their normal allotment.

This Self is the only Chíkshu amongst the crew, for which I am extremely grateful. When we are together, all we do is bicker and dance, and speaking, naturally, for no one but myself, I find both of these pastimes tedious in the extreme. They cannot pronounce This Self's name so they call me Chip. This, too, is not offensive.

This Self has been given no assignments as yet. However, a person on board, who is called by saying "Mudd" (which of course, I cannot), and who is not, *in sensu strictu* (I have just mastered Latin!),

a member of the crew, has approached me and asked if, when I am off-duty, I might find myself doing something for him. He has obtained, and I gather he has done this by means powered by questionable motives, a very old map, and a scroll of some kind of writing upon it, that he has been utterly unable (and I am not surprised) to decipher. He knows not what language has been written there, nor knows he where these items originated. Upon asking why he wanted this done, he mentioned only that they were of “intellectual interest,” and as such should be pursued. This Self does not believe him; I am assured there is information therein which he feels can elevate him in some way. But that is irrelevant.

An “all-hands briefing” is about to begin to discuss our first mission. This Self has no hands; does that mean I am exempt? Perhaps I had better be present anyway.

Captain’s Log, 2121.21, supplemental

Captain Fara Shimbo recording



So, there I was, resting in my quarters playing with my favorite cat Harry, when I hear the *Trouble* is now in parking orbit around Beta Kerrotyn; and the Admiral has just called me to my Ready Room. She didn't mention either of us bringing pizza, so it seems that Something Is Up.

Don't touch that dial!

Mountain Thyme

By Alan Dunwell

Will you go, lassie, will you go?
And we'll all go together
To pull wild mountain thyme
All around the blooming heather,
Will you go, lassie, go?
Francis McPeake

Brigid paused on the track to catch her breath and was struck not for the first time by the beauty of the early Irish summer around her. Here she was having to stop and catch her breath, not like when she was just a lass and skipped up the trail without a second thought. Though she was born and bred to Belfast she had left that life behind her long ago. At seventeen, when her mother brought in yet another boyfriend with wandering eyes and hands she fled to her Aunt Megan's croft in Upper Dreen near Feeney and never looked back. She for sure didn't miss the sectarian nonsense that seemed to ferment in every corner and alley of Belfast. Even here and in Feeney, the Prods were at risk. Herself claimed neither and wanted none to do with it all. She was doubly glad to be shut of the place when in '41 came the Belfast Blitz. Whether or no her mother still lived she had no way of knowing.



“Auntie Peig, I’m here.”

“So I see. Ye can use the same room you used last summer, up the stair and on the left.”

“No, I mean, I am here. From now on. Unless you say me no.”

“And about time is what I say,” she replied. “What was it this time, another man of your mum’s? Aye, I thought as much. We’ll get ye registered for school in the fall and by then you should know all the other children from hereabouts that you have not already met.”

Brigid took her bag upstairs and had her room well set in short order. She breathed a deep sigh of contentment as she did every time she came to her Auntie Meghan’s house but felt it right down to her very toes this time knowing that there was no leaving this time. Bouncing back down the stairs to the kitchen she picked up a knife and started chunking the vegetables as if she had never left.

“What of the local news, Auntie Peig?” she asked.

“The Mulrooneys have two new cows, Kerry cattle they are, and I’ll be thinking he spent a pretty quid for them. But, ohhhh, the milk and butter they give. I’m sure he’ll be breeding them into the herd and his meadows will have a good lot of black cows come the next few years. Of your chums I haven’t heard much. Colum, though, comes over and helps with haying and heavy chores that are more than I and Caitlin can handle. Speaking of Caitlin...”

A small hurricane burst through the kitchen door and set upon Brigid with squeals and kisses and hugs which she returned in kind.

“You are early! Early but welcome none the less. It is so good to have you about and of course I’ll not be one to keep you from doing all the heavy lifting from now on. Ye ha grown beyond me.”

This brought a laugh from all three for it was patently true. Brigid had shot up in height and begun to truly fill out to what would become her womanly form. She laughed but she also blushed.

“Off you two go and catch you up on all the blether,” said Peig, “I know there will be no getting any work out of you two till you do.”

So out the door they went into another beautiful summer. But they both pitched in and did the farmyard chores as they went. Making sure all the horses and sheep were watered and fed for the evening and the chickens up into the small fenced yard. They would be put up into the hen house later before bed, and thankfully mucking didn’t come till morning.

“We are old enough this year,” said Caitlin “will ye go to pull the thyme with me? No one has asked me so we’ll just have to see who we meet on the trek.”

“I had forgotten that we can go with the other girls this year. I love going with Auntie; I always learn a new bit of lore or information, but it will be fun to just be, well, loose like.”

“It will be in a fortnight on Saturday,” Caitlin announced, “so that gives up plenty of time to trim our baskets. We can go into Feeney and buy up a some bright ribbon and whatnot, we’ll just have to see what there is that strikes our fancy. Maybe it will strike some of the lad’s fancy too, eh?”

Much giggling and chatter ensued and the time flew by till here it was that Saturday morning and Auntie dropped them off at the trailhead where the others were already gathering.

“The two of you be on your best manners, now. I don’t want to be hearing anything later on that I’d disapprove of. Are you hearing me?”

“Aye, Auntie,” and Aye, Mum,” came the chorus.

“Humph. As if,” Said Peig to herself with a smile as they ran to meet the others.

“Look who is here this year. Caitlin and Brighid. Welcome lasses, welcome,” Said Mrs. Donegan, the local school mistress who was to accompany them. “Brie, be sure to come see me and get registered for class when we get back. I know it is Summer but best to get it done so we don’t forget.”

“I will, Mrs. Donegan,” replied Brighid. And with that off they all went up the track. At first there was much chatter, later some singing, and finally just contented, silent walking in the glorious beauty of the Irish Summer hills.



“Here we are, everyone!” exclaimed Mrs. Donegan as they topped a small ridge and came to several wide vales and meadows all covered in blooming heather. “Let us all pair up and spread out and work across to the base of that far ridge there.”

“Yes Mrs. Donegan,” came the response chorus of young voices. At first Brighid and Caitlin went together but were soon joined by Colum and his friend Mic.

“Ah, look at these poor lassies. Trying to go it on their own, Mic,” said Colum. “I expect that they’ll be needing some male assistance in lifting their baskets, don’t you think?”

“Don’t be fooled there, Colum,” Mic replied, “they just might be stronger than they look. They might have to carry your own self after you get too tired.”

Caitlin pushed her blouse sleeve up a bit to display her bicep and flexed it to show off. After much laughter they paired off with Mic and Caitlin going one way and Colum and Brighid another which was just to the two girls’ liking. As Brighid bent to pull another clump of thyme she felt a tug in her hair. She looked around but Colum was well away from her and there was no one else about. Lifting a hand to smooth her hair she felt something and pulled a small bit of thyme from her hair. Looking around again she still didn’t see anyone about that could have tucked that into her hair.

“Very curious,” she thought, and tossed the sprig into the basket with all the rest.

As they all gathered again and started the trip back down the trail Caitlin quietly said to Brighid, “I saw the two of you snogging. Thought you were out of sight, didn’t you. Well, no matter. It gave Mic some nice ideas and we ended up the same!” The two relapsed into quite with their remembered thoughts of the day. Back home again they showed off their takings to Auntie Peig and told all about the trip, leaving out the bits about snogging, of course.

“So, you were well behaved were you? And what a good bit of thyme you gathered. Tomorrow we’ll tie it in bunches and hang it dry from the kitchen rafters. And was there no bit of cuddling, though? The two of you with those fine young lads.”

“Oh, NO! How can you say it?” the two lassies chorused. They all three burst into laughter and they confessed that *maybe* there had been some cuddling.

“The oddest thing did happen though,” said Brigid and she told about the strange appearance of the thyme in her hair. Then she noticed that Auntie’s face had gone all pale.

“What is it, Auntie? Are you well?” she asked.

“The Fay. Oh no, not you, love. I’ll not have you marked by the Fay. But I suppose there is little that I can do about it now. Had you burnt the thyme that would have broken the tie.”

“What do you mean? There was no one there and certainly not any Fairy folk. You don’t believe in all that anyway, do you?”

“I’ll not say whether I do or no.” Auntie Megan returned. “There are enough things here this close to the old mountains that can’t be explained away with our new science and smart ways.”

“Remember how the cat would not go into the milk house last year, Mum.” said Caitlin. “Yet after you hung it about with rowan berries then all was well again. And what of that small scarf Lile found in the hedgerow that was made so fine of no thread that anyone knows. It is true enough, Brigid, that it makes one pause.”

“Well, what of the thyme in my hair then? How does that signify?” Brigid asked.

Auntie Peig cleared her throat a bit and said in a quiet but serious voice, “When a Fay gentleman of high rank decides to take an interest in a mortal lass he first makes a requests her in some way. Sometimes it is a small bower of heather, or a coronet of flowers laid where the lassie can’t miss it. Or in your case a bit of heather or thyme tucked in the hair. If the lassie burns the offering then that is the end of it. If it is kept though, then sometime, maybe not right away but sometime, there will be an offering made and finally a price to pay of the Fay that can not be denied. That is what is said. However, time goes slowly up on the mountains and slower still for the Fay. They exist in time as they will. While we see time like the arrow, for them it is more like the swallow sees, forward and back do not mean the same to them. So sometimes though a lassie is marked, he may not remember to get back before her life is spent, we can hope for that Brie. We’ll speak of this no more and hope that it is all a mistake.”



“And will you go, Lassie? One more time with me before I’m off.”

“Must you go?” Brighid asked though she knew the answer well, as they had talked it out more than once. “I have a hard time fathoming my ‘Dove’ gone for a soldier.”

“Aye, Brie, I must. Who am I to stay about here while the other men are already enlisted and headed out. War is an odd time; the young fellows off for soldiers and the lassies in the factories and mills. Here you will likely be safe since there isn’t bugger all for the Germans to bomb, and wool is needed for the war effort too. It isn’t just a matter of what others are doing though, I feel that I must go to protect Ireland, and yes, England, and maybe even the Scots, as well, from the bloody Bosh.”

“This filthy war. Will it never end? I don’t like the going of you but I understand you must. So yes, I will go.”

And go they did but by themselves this time to the high meadows where they first pulled the thyme. Slowly they worked and gathered in the springy sprigs till Brighid’s basket and Colum’s pack were full. There in the heather they sat together in the quiet and held hands and kissed now and then.

“I’ll not ask you to wait for me,” Said Colum. “Who knows what will come in the future. But know you well that I love you and if I can come back alive and in good health I will. I’ll not come back if I’m crippled up, I’ll not burden you with that. We’ve already seen how that tears the heart and hearth apart. So as I say, know well that if I can come home to you that I would wed ye if you will have me.”

“There has never been anyone but you, Colum. You know that. So come ye back to me.”



Then there was France, and Dieppe, and Colum’s plane reported missing over the French countryside, just there, just that little way across the Channel. And the years rolled by, and the pain grew softer but never was it gone. Always there was the fine young lad, kept well in her mind, just as when they had gathered the thyme together. Now here she was, going up the trail alone again and it was most likely her last time too. The years seem to keep piling up and she was no longer that Spring chicken. Yet as long as she could keep coming she would for Colum’s sake as well as her own. She topped the final rise and there were the timeless meadows of heather and thyme before her, looking as they had the first moment that she laid eyes on them. Settling down her creaky bones in the heather she started to pull the thyme, once again singing a quiet tune that she had learned when she was very young. Then she felt a slight tug in her hair and with a small smile she slowly turned about. This time there was someone there, a fair man with sandy hair and a fine face and slim but moderated build.

“So! You have finally come have you?” she said.

“I have,” he acknowledged. “Know you who and what I am?”

“If I’m not wrong you are Fay. Be you the same that tucked that bit of thyme in my hair those many years ago? I’ve never forgotten that.”

“You are not wrong, I am of the Folk. And indeed it was I who made the request to you, though it doesn’t seem that long ago to me. Time flows differently for all of us and sometimes oddly and in whirls up here in the mountains. I hight Elevan, and I am a gentleman of moderate standing among the Folk. It is time that I make you an offering and state the cost of the same. Be ye ready for that, for I sensed that you might be?”

“My time has flown faster than I ever would have thought, but I do believe that I am now willing to consider what you may say. Please do so.”

“You had a man, hight Colum,” he said, and she could not help but give a small gasp at hearing his name spoken out loud. “I can make it so that you may see him one more time, but only for one night. The cost unto ye is that thereafter you would willingly come with me and abide.”

“You must know that in all my life I have loved no one but Colum. Can you be accepting of that?”

“Oh, aye,” Elevan said, “That I know and accept full well. I would ask only that you abide with me and be a happy as you might. So, would you go, Lassie? Both to him and at last with me?”

“Then yes and yes. Yes I will go to him, and yes with you as may come,” was her gentle response.

The air seemed to cool and the light of the day faded about her. In the dark she heard distant thunder; no, not thunder, big guns far off. The air was warm but dry and still, and she felt more than saw that she was young again. In the low light she saw a barn, or that part that was left of a barn what with half of it smashed down, though the rest of it looked to be solid and safe. She wended her way through the low grass to the barn and went in the main aisle when she heard the sound of a rifle safety click off. Turning she saw Colum, oh my living God, it is Colum.

“Who goes. *Wer bist du!*” said the dark form in the side stall as he swung the rifle around to point.

“Oh, Colum, it is I, Brighid.”

“*Wer bist du?*” Colum said again and then, “*Qui es-tu?*”

“No, Colum. It really is me, how can I make you believe. Remember what you last said to me in the heather, you said you would wed me when you came back.”

Slowly Colum scooted forward in the stall till he could see her better. Then he leaned forward, dropped the rifle to his lap and wept. She went to him and held him to her and only then did she see that he was wounded, badly.

“How, why, are you here in this hell hole? How can this be, love?” he asked.

“How, I know not except that it is by the Fay. Why, is because there is nothing on this earth or above it that can keep my love from you. Just accept it and we shall be together at least for this night.”

“I fear that I’ll not be coming home to thee, Brie. My crate caught flak and I along with it. I managed to get down and come here to this barn but that was two days ago. I’ve no water and I can no longer move about. I’m well behind the lines and I’m slowly bleeding out though I patched myself as best I could. The Fay you say, eh? Then there will be a price to pay if I recall the stories right. What did they ask of you?”

“Only that I abide with them. I know not what that means exactly but for the love of you I am willing to pay anything.”

“But you have your whole life ahead of you, don’t let them take it from you,” he said.

“Time flows in strange ways, my love, for though I look young to you here I am in fact old back home. Well into my eighth decade. How the Fay let me be here and be young I know not.”

“It doesn’t matter, Brie. Just hold me, and I you. For as long as I can still draw breath, I will love you with all my heart and soul.”

And so they did as well as he said and in the night he fell into a deep, relaxed sleep as if all the pain and worry had dropped from him. Still she sat and held him. As the first light began to dawn on the French countryside and illuminate the barn with a gentle rosy glow he drew his last breath and quietly and peacefully passed away.



She awoke standing in the field of heather once again and fell to her knees and wept for a long, bitter time. Elean was still there and laid a gentle hand on her shoulder as she wept, but all else was changed. There was a chill wind blowing in a cloudy sky and she could see by the foliage that summer was well past.

“How is this?” she finally asked. “It is well into fall is it not?”

“Ah, did I not tell you that time passes as it will as we move among it? It is not only well into fall but two years passing fall of your time.”

“Caitlin and Mic must think me long dead then.”

“Aye, they found your basket and Caitlin twigged right away as to what was happening. Mic is not a believer and he mounted a long search for you before giving up and accepting. They are both at ease with it all by now.”

“I suppose that if I am to honor my promise to you that it is for the best and as it must be. What is next?”

“Take my hand and we will go over the ridge here a little way, it is not far.”

“A little way is about all I’m capable of now I think.” She said as they proceeded slowly up through the heather. As they topped over the ridge and started down the other side it was easier going and her steps seemed lighter. It was as if the years fell off her like old bark from a tree with her every step. Below them she beheld a small village and beyond it several of moderate manor houses. Right so they came into view of some of the villagers loudly hailing them with cries of greeting and good cheer. She stopped and noticed that it was still summer here and she bent over easily and pulled a small bunch of thyme. Then it was with amazement she saw her hand was that of a maid, not the old hands that she had become so accustomed to, and held that she was again young and she was passing fair!

“Espy me! Yet you have changed not,” she said unto Elean.

“Nor will there any change be henceforth for you, fair Lady,” he replied. “See the manor house second less the end, that is where we go. That be mine home.”

Brigid let her sight pass across the valley and all she beheld was fine and fair beyond her expectation and yet it was also simple and true Ireland. After a moment of hesitation as she thought again of Colum, as she would still many a time in the future, she took Elean’s arm and said, “Then let us be off home, shall we?”

A Walk Through A Maze

By Nail “Nicolai” Shapero

I heard a shriek from my entry-room, followed by the sound of something hitting the floor, hard. I was just coming out of the shower, so I grabbed up my *tuu-shir-tal*¹ and slipped to the side of the entry-way. Whoever let out the shriek was now cursing, in a language that I couldn’t quite place.

Discretion being the better part of valor, I called out, “whoever it is, I don’t have anything of value.” I looked for something to cover myself with—a towel provided some cover, at least I could cover up my brush. The voice from the entry-room said something, but again I couldn’t recognize the language. I called out, in Raikan this time, instead of my native Harashan, “I don’t have anything of value.” If they’re after something else, and it’s a female, my chances of escape are poor. The voice from the entry-room said something more, and this time I recognized the language.

Imperial Anglic? But it doesn’t sound quite right. A dialect perhaps? Or is it just a terrible accent?

My chances clearly were improving. I took a moment to slip on a robe and I replaced the towel with a more complete tail-cover before confronting the source of the racket. A female; her scent tells me that. She is more Groundling in fur pattern than one of the People. Dark back, head, arms and legs, white front, black socks, and gloves. And an extremely strong female scent; likely in season. Definitely not what I need right now!

“Who are you, and what do you want?” I asked, this time in Imperial Anglic. The female stopped cursing, but sat staring at me, eye-to-eye in challenge. In a fight between a male and a female, it is the male who always suffers. I broke eye contact, and sat, outside of *maai*², my *tuushir-tal* scabbarded once more. The female was sitting in the middle of the room, her brush out straight behind her.

“This one is the *kol-ka hengocha Tyel Tal-Sora Pa do Ashan*³. And you are?” I asked, careful to bare my throat and look at a spot a hand-span in front of the female.

1 Tuu-shir-tal, Harashan, literally, “knife of honor”, used in ceremonial combats.

2 Maai (間合い), translating simply “interval”, is a Japanese martial arts term referring to the space between two opponents in combat: formally, the “engagement distance”. Used here in place of the equivalent Harashan term.

3 Third-ranked hengocha, so rated on the Greatship Tyel, by name, Tal-Sora Pa, of clan Ashan. A full, format statement of name, giving professional standing, on which Homeship, a name, and a clan affiliation. A hengocha is a particular variety of entertainer – think “cross between Geisha and courtesan”.

“My name is Mia Falkenberg. I am ... I was? In my home in Los Angeles and I saw a spot on the wall of my apartment. I tried to clean it, and then I was here. I must be having a psychotic break,” she said, looking down at her arms. She swept her brush—quite a thick brush—around her feet.

I looked away. Her brush is uncovered, and that, together with what her scent—so strong and so ... attractive—is definitely not what I should be thinking about now. I couldn’t help but lick my lips; they were dry, a sign that the female’s scent was having its predictable, and currently unwanted, effect. “With apologies, gentlebeing, but what ship is the Los Angeles? I know most of the major Greatships...”

“It’s a city. In the United States. I’m a human being; *H. sapiens*. I must have fallen and hit my head. This all has to be a hallucination!”



“If it is a dream, gentlebeing, then it is a dream that I must be having; because you look and smell like either one of the Free People, or of one of our planet dwelling cousins. I have seen humans—and you are not human.”

“Which is why this has to be a hallucination. I don’t have a tail. I’m ... I don’t have fur like this!” she said, waving her arms. Her tail was twitching, in a pattern I would associate with irritation. “If this is real, and you’ve abducted me, and done this,” she waved her hands, pointing at her torso, “then you’ve got a lot to answer for!”

“I have done no such thing. And I don’t have access to any technology that could change a human into such a careful representation of one of the Free People. But you look, and smell like a female *Shidran-kas*⁴.”

She licked her lips; clearly, she was also a bit nervous, or she was imitating my own reaction. She stood and closed the distance between us in a heartbeat; her arm was raised, and her claws were out.

I bared my throat and covered my nose. “This one has done nothing to deserve punishment; this one...”

She stopped and stared at her right hand. “I have claws...”

“This one does not know his error, but...”

“Why are you cowering?”

“Your claws are out, your arm raised, you are within striking distance. ‘Males are the grass,’” I quoted, my throat still bared.

“And you thought I was going to hit you? You’re frightened? Of me?”

⁴ The Free People, the people and their Homeships, taken as a whole, known as *Shidran-kas* in Harashan, L’Drey in Raikan.

“This one is neither stupid nor insane,” I said, closing my eyes and setting down on the floor mat. Better to submit than to fight.

“If I’m crazy,” she said, as if to herself, “at least it’s not too bad a form of insanity. Ok, let’s explore the limits of this drug crazed dream.” She sat down beside me, still well within *maai*.

“‘Males are the grass?’ So, you’re stepped on?”

“Yes. The average level of aggressive hormones in females is higher than the average level in males of the People. So, females are typically stronger and faster. ‘The nail that stands up, gets hammered down’.”

“Ok, that explains your reaction. But if I’m dreaming, why would I swap men and women’s positions in the hierarchy?”

“You said you were ‘human;’ their females and males are equals in the Empire. Though the Uplifts are the true rulers; they ‘run the show’. Their rulership is benevolent, from what I have been able to observe.”

“If you’re not a drug induced hallucination, how did you learn to speak English?”

“This one doesn’t know what ‘English’ is—we’ve been speaking Imperial Anglic. Though you have a terrible accent.”

“What is this ‘Empire’? And where are we?”

“This one and the gentlebeing are on the Greatship *Tyel*. The *Tyel* is in orbit about the star Humans have designated ‘Helena;’ we are in Imperial Space. We’re one zone⁵ away from New Sparta.”

“Okay, ask a silly question, get a silly answer. Now, I promise not to hurt you; having you cowering in front of me is getting on my nerves.”

“If the gentlebeing will step back two paces, this one will sit up.”

“You really are afraid?” she stepped back the requisite two paces; out of *maai*, at least for the moment. And I sat up.

“This one was and is.” I rubbed my nose.

“You’ve been abused, before?” she asked, and sat down, trying to imitate my seated posture.

“This one...”

“Would you stop doing that?”

“Politeness dictates...”

5 A “zone” in Imperial stellar cartography, is a region roughly 120 standard light-years side-to-side. Roughly 12 hours flight time for a typical freighter in jump-space.

“Referring to yourself in the third person. Use first person, please? And I’m still waiting for an answer to why or how you speak English? Or ‘Imperial Anglic.’ Or whatever you call it.”

“This... During the Occupation, I ran supplies into and ‘responsible Imperials’ out of Occupied Imperial space. To ‘fit in’ I had to learn the language...”

“You were a smuggler?”

“Among other things. I was helping the Resistance.”

“A freedom fighter? What kind of a crazy world have I gotten into? Some sort of science-fictional fever dream?”

“I don’t know what a ‘science-fictional fever dream’ might be. But you’re here, this is reality, and you are an anomaly yourself; if you’re trying to spy on the Free People, if you’re in the pay of the Commonality...the General Amnesty covered my actions.”

“What is the ‘Commonality’?”

“The ‘Commonality of Man’. The humans who refused to live under the Uplift government during the Interregnum...”

“During the what?”

I sighed. “Where is the world you called ‘United States’? A colony outside both Imperial and Commonality space?”

“Not a world. The United States is a nation on Earth. Los Angeles is a city, on the West Coast, in California, a State in the United States.”

“No one has been to Yarthe in octads. No one in either the Empire or the Commonality even knows for certain where the world that gave birth to both humans and Uplifts is. If you’re from Yarthe...”

“You’ve made a mistake. Earth,” she emphasized the odd pronunciation, “is the home of mankind, yes. But I don’t know what ‘Uplifts’ are, and we’ve barely gotten into space. We went to the moon—Earth’s one large moon—back in the 1970s, but we haven’t been back in over forty-five years.”

This strange person was making less and less sense. I switched to Harashan and called out to the netAccess, “Net: what is the current year date in Empire of EarthClan space?”

“1865th year of the Atomic Era—note, year is given in Human base eight-and-two system,” the netAccess unit replied.

“Who were you talking to just now—and what did you say?”

I explained. And she said, “so you’ve got Alexa. At least one point of commonality.”

“But you said the date was forty-five years past 1970? I assume that’s forty-five in base ten.”
“Past 1975. It’s 2021.”

“The year is 1865 of the Atomic Era dating system that both the Empire and Commonality use.”

“Atomic era? Dating from what? 2021 was Anno Domini—in the year of our lord.”

At least this was a question I could answer. “The Humans date from the detonation of their first atomic weapon in warfare.”

The female’s jaw dropped. “August 6th, 1945, so if this is the 1865th year of the atomic era, then you’re saying that this is ... 3810 A.D.? I don’t know what anesthetic I’m under right now, but it’s having one heck of a side effect.”

“If you were from 76 A.E., you’d have had to come nearly two-eights octads through time.”

“What’s an ‘octad’?”

I thought for a moment. “An octad, in Human terms, would be ... eight-squared Han-standard years. One of our years is 667 and a fifth days; our day is almost the same length as a Human standard day.”

“Well, I must say that my imagination is working overtime. Your people use a base 8 number system?”

I held up my hands—spreading the three fingers and thumb on each hand and wiggling them. “Yes. It seemed obvious to our ancestors. The use of binary based computers early in our technological age solidified the use, I expect. But if you would lower your ‘walls’—not the innermost one—I can...”

“What do you mean, ‘walls’?”

“Let me into your mind, and I might be able to ...”

“Let you into what?!?”

“Into your mind; all of the People are what humans call ‘telepaths’.”

“I’ve gone into a cross between Star Trek and Babylon 5. You’re all teeps? I’ve really got to stop binge watching those shows if this is the result.”

“If you’re sane or insane, I can tell that much. And if you’re having some sort of ‘psychotic break’, I can see to it that you’re provided with the services of a healer-of-the-mind.”

“Ok, is there some sort of ceremony you have to perform? Do you have to touch me?”

I shook my head. “No, it is enough that you relax and think of nothing. Especially do not try to fight me when you sense my probing into your memories.”

“Huh. As if I could.”

I waited, took a deep breath. If this one is a somehow transformed human, then someone or something is performing banned experiments. And grabbing someone through time? I closed my eyes and reached out with the Talent to reach into the other's mind, and into her recent memories.

GET OUT OF MY MIND! her 'cast was a scream of multicolored fireworks between us; I pulled out and opened my eyes. I was flat on my back, another two paces away from the female.

"I think I can explain what may have happened to you, gentlebeing."

"Good. But it felt like you were ..." she was standing, her fur standing on end. She shook herself. The shake started at her head and traveled back through her body, finally ending with a snap of her tail.

"You are acclimating quite well to an ... unusual ... situation," I said, as I sat up.

"It felt like you were ... inside me. I have never felt anything so ... intimate!"

"This one was only..."

She held up one hand as she interrupted. "Stop. Drop the formality, please. I've never shared thoughts with another ... and ... you really think I'm sexually attractive?"

Honesty is usually the wisest course, even if it results in additional scars on the nose. "Yes, you have a thick brush; it's not covered. And your scent is strong ... and carries a significant pheromonal load. Your face is quite symmetrical, your eyes are a beautiful deep shade of blue. You are also well muscled; not those of a dancer like me, more like those of someone accustomed to the practice of martial arts that stress strength and speed of strikes."

She resumed her seat, staying well outside *maai*, for which I was grateful.

"Ok, just what did you learn, while I was learning that I 'turn you on'?"

"That you show signs of having stumbled across a portal to the Maze. What is the Maze, I can almost hear you ask? It is a transport system that was created by a race during the last cycle of the multiverse before the Beginning."

"Huh. There was nothing before the 'Big Bang,' if that's what you mean by the 'Beginning'."

"With all due respect and apologies, gentlebeing, the current multiverse is just one of what we believe is an infinitely repeating cycle of multiverses. What we call the 'Maze' existed before the beginning of the current expansion. Either that, or someone from late in this multiverse cycle went back to the beginning and created the Maze. Definitely Third Variety."

"Ok, what's 'Third Variety'?"

“First Variety are those species that are capable of developing into sapient beings like Humans, Shidran-kas, or any of the other intelligent species in the multiverse. Second Variety is beings like us. Third Variety is what we may someday evolve into, or if we are unlucky, meet.”

“Why unlucky?”

“What do you say to a God? Third Variety, if they exist, will, we believe, have powers liken unto a God.”

“Ok, so Third Variety is the Q.”

“You’ve heard of a Third Variety species? Or being?”

She shook her head. “A fictional creation. In a television series. Do you have television?”

“Full image recorded plays—or vids as the Imperials call them—exist. Some are even quite interesting. So, one that you saw considered the possible events following contact with a Third Variety being, or species?”

“Yes. But you were saying about this, ‘Maze’? A ‘transport system’?”

“Yes. This Third Variety species—or individual—created a network of portals into the Maze. Each portal leads to a place-time and many ‘adapt’ anyone who can use the Maze to the bulk of the conditions on the ‘other end’ of the portal. You were certainly a Human before you touched a ‘Yellow’ portal. That you could sense the portal, meant that you could use it. All you needed to do was touch it; which you did. Then the Maze transported you to ‘here-now’ and adapted you to survive the most obvious environmental conditions you’d be exposed to. A green portal means that you must do something monumentally stupid to end your current incarnation if you use that portal. A yellow portal is dangerous, but the ‘other side’ is not particularly dangerous if you’re careful. Imagine that a portal opened onto a spaceport landing field. If you cleared the area, or at least avoided being caught underneath a landing ship, your chances of survival would be pretty good.”

“Are there other kinds of portals?”

“Yes. Black portals. If you don’t think fast, or you make the slightest mistake, or frankly if you’re not properly equipped, you’ll be in your next incarnation. How soon? Perhaps only an eye-blink after arrival. If, say, you used a black portal that led to the outside of a space station, and you were not wearing a vacuum suit. As one of the Humans I spoke to said, ‘Pop goes the weasel’.”

“How do you tell where the portal leads, other than the ‘threat level’?”

“By exploration. The *Tyel* does not currently hold anyone capable of running the Maze. We have maps made by earlier generation Runners, but there are no currently living Runners on the *Tyel*. The *Larn* has one living Runner. They are exceedingly rare; few Homeships have more than a single person with the ability to run the Maze.”

“Well, it looks like there was at least one Human. Me. So, how do I get a job as a ‘Maze Runner’? What does it pay? If this is all a fever dream, I might at least make it an entertaining one.” She looked at me, took a deep breath, and grinned.

I slid back another pace, increasing the distance between us. “Please don’t look at me, that way.”

“What way is that?”

I took a deep cleansing breath. “Looking eye-to-eye is to send a challenge. It makes me nervous. Politeness dictates that you look past me. Unless you are offering challenge. Or ... other things.”

The female looked away and took a deep cleansing breath, in through her nose and out her mouth with an audible *whoosh*. “So, you’re afraid of me?”

“You’re taller than I am, muscled for hand-to-hand combat...”

“So, my self-defense classes paid off, even after this ‘Maze’ gave me a new body?”

“Yes. The Maze makes as few changes as possible to ‘adapt’ the individual to the target environment. As to why...”

“How do you know this?”

I take a deep cleansing breath and wait eight heartbeats before attempting to answer. “Every ‘maze runner’ has recorded her observations and reported them to their ship’s Council. Then that Council informs other Councils on those Homeships which they routinely contact. The information spreads—without charge. It is an obligation all accept, that any new discovery regarding the basic nature of the Maze must be shared.”

“So, who do I report my ‘discoveries’, such as they are?”

“If you allow, I can prepare a report—in Harashan—and transmit it to the Council of the *Tyel*. Festival is about...”

“Do you have to go into my mind, again?”

“It would be most helpful, yes. I can try and be more ... gentle ... about the intrusion, but...”

“I’ll feel it.”

“Yes, but I can provide you with something to ... lessen? ... any potential untoward effects. A small bowl of *zhinj*...”

“What’s *zhinj*?”

“*Zhinj* is a mildly intoxicating beverage; the active component is a drug Humans call caffeine. It acts as a central nervous system depressant...”

“So, you want to get me drunk before you ‘fuck my mind’?”

My fur bristled. “I have no desire to ‘fuck your mind’. I simply offer a possible solution to your problem of extreme sensitivity to mind talk,” I said, with a low growl, my hackles rising.

The female scuttled back a pace. “Sorry. Ok, give me a glass of this ‘zhinj’ and thank you.”

I took another deep breath and closed my eyes. It was clearly going to be a “learning experience”. “I will need to heat the *zhinj* and unless I provide a straw, you will not want to try to drink from a Human-style tall glass.”

“Couldn’t I just...” she began, then sat with her mouth open.

“Yes, your muzzle would make any attempt at drinking from such a vessel a bit ... messy.

And if you poured it fast enough, well ... you might find yourself becoming quite incoherent. In Human terms? Think of *zhinj* as the equivalent of a 151-proof vodka. You have no built up tolerance unless the Maze has given you such.”

“What do you have to do?”

I stood. “*Zhinj* is best served hot, though not too hot to lap up,” I said as I began preparing a bowl for the newly minted female. To help her, I continued talking, telling her each step as I carried it out, until she interrupted my stream of calming babble.

“You—and now me—get drunk on caffeine. What does alcohol do to you? Do you get wired on it?”

“Our bodies excrete ethyl alcohol; it is a waste product,” I said, as I continued heating a bottle of *zhinj* in a hot water bath.

“You piss alcohol?”

“If you mean, do we urinate alcohol, the answer is, ‘yes’.”

“Is it bacteriologically contaminated, or is it just water and alcohol?”

“Water, alcohol and other assorted waste chemicals. The only reason I know about the alcohol is that I found one method of raising funds for the Resistance was collecting Shidrankas urine and distilling it to isolate the alcohol...”

“So, you sold your piss to help fund this ‘Resistance’? Who did you sell the resultant to?” she made a funny, barking sound, which I assumed was her attempt at Human style laughter.

“We sold it to Commonality troops. The Imperials thought it was quite humorous, too. As one of the Resistance leaders told me, ‘If we can’t beat ‘em, you can piss on ‘em’. He than laughed, a bit like you tried to do just now.”

“Well, faint heart nor false heart, so ... give me your ‘anesthetic’ and let’s get on with it.”

I took a deep breath and poured *zhinj* into a drinking bowl and set it in front of the female.

“Aren’t you going to drink with me?” she asked.

“Among the people, sharing food--and more so, sharing intoxicating beverages--is a more intimate action than having sexual intercourse. You drink, I scan your memories, and I will prepare a report for the Council. And no, I will not share the pillow with you--nor will I drink with you,” I managed to keep my hackles from rising, by sheer force of will.

The female made barking sounds--the closest approximation of human laughter that she was now capable of, or so I imagined. “My apologies. I can tell that I’m going to have to learn how this dream works, or it’s going to be an unending stream of unconscious booby-traps going off in my face,” she said.

“You’ll also need to learn Harashan,” I said. Or we’ll both go stark raving mad.

She picked up the bowl and stared into the pool of *zhinj*. “How do I drink this?”

“Just dip your tongue in, curl it under, and bring your tongue back into your mouth,” I said.

“Just like a dog?”

“I don’t know what a ‘dog’ is--just try and lap it up the way I described.” I sat, closed my eyes, and began a simple four-deep six-shallow breathing cycle, in through the nose and out through my mouth, while the female lapped up the *zhinj*. From the sounds that she made, I concluded that she was making a mess of her fur and spilling half the *zhinj* on her ventral fur. *I will help her clean herself up ... later.*

Chapter 2: What do you want?

“The Councilor will see you now, *kol-ka hengocha Tyel Tal-Sora Pa do Ashan*,” her *Adjudicator-second* said. “Are you prepared to sponsor this ‘stray’ yourself? You will need to have an answer for the Councilor.”

“This one is well aware of his responsibilities in this situation, *sidar-ko*,” I said, and bowed low to the ship-sister. I had been careful to shower before my appointment, and I did not use any of my customary perfumes; this was not a meeting where I wished to distract from my words.

The adjudicator reached back and parted the privacy beads, and I entered the audience room.

6 Sidar-ko: Ship-sister, Harashan.

The Councilor was already seated on a raised dais. I sat down on a small pad placed three paces in front of her. My report on the human “runner” was open on a display panel where both of us would be able to view it. I closed my eyes and began counting heartbeats. Eight-cubed heartbeats “pause to reflect” before discussions of import—perhaps a hand’s *kir*⁷.

“The Council has heard your report, *kol-ka hengocha Tyel Tal-Sora Pa do Ashan*, and finds it most interesting. And I, Councilor *Tyel-Kana Po do Haran*, found it of particular interest. Is the *hengocha* aware of my particular responsibilities within the council?”

The Councilor had either counted my heartbeats or had a particularly good time sense. “This one is only aware that when the summons came, that this one was instructed to meet with the Councilor chosen by the Collective to discuss this matter,” I said, careful to bare my throat and bow low to the *sidar-ko*.

“I am, among my other duties, the head Archivist for the Tyel. And what you offer here is of considerable interest—both to the Collective, and to me personally. The Tyel has not had an active Maze runner is over an *octad*.”

“This one was aware that the Collective was lacking a Maze Runner, but this one had not been aware that it had been quite so long since the Tyel had had this resource,” I said. There was a slight breeze from the air system carrying the female’s scent to me; she was young, fit, and likely no more than an *octad* older than me; fortunately, her scent also clearly marked her as between seasons.

“The Council ordered a full investigation into your background, *Tal-Sora Pa do Ashan*, shortly after your report arrived. Would you be interested in hearing what they found?”

“This one would be glad to be enlightened, should the gentlebeing and the Council so wish it. Though this one is somewhat confused as to the reason for such a background investigation, being a mere male and obviously not privy to the politics involved in such decisions,” I said. *Safer to appear ignorant in the halls of power*, I thought, well within the innermost of the eight walls of self.

“Please look at me when we are talking, *orphan*. And remember, I know more about you than you think. You came to the Tyel three years ago, with a bloody back and under a lifetime employment contract. That contract was rendered null and void when you came through the first airlock.”

“A matter of quite public record. This one’s contract was purchased by a citizen of the Tyel, who saw to the preparation of manumission papers for this humble individual once this one was on board. She also purchased citizenship for this one, for which this one was most grateful.”

“Yes. All matters of public record, and easily verifiable. She also arranged the purchase and transfer of your current living quarters in the Core Entertainer’s District. You are still paying off the debt for the citizenship and property purchases, are you not?”

7 Kir: unit of time. 64 kir = 1 san. 8 san = 1 day. In human terms, 1 Han-day is roughly 24 hours 5 minutes.

“The arrangement with the gentlebeing in question is ... a work in progress. The payment schedule was provided to the Guildmistress of the Entertainer’s Guild, and this one is repaying the loan, with interest. This one has not missed or had to delay a single payment.”

“How would the honorable *hengocha* like to have his debt paid in full by the Council?”

I cocked my head, and opened my mouth to respond, but words failed me for a hand’s *ral*⁸. “This one would ask what service the Council would give this one that would provide sufficient funds to clear this one’s debt. It is no small amount.”

“The debt? It is a minor matter. Four eight-to-the-sixth Tyel Marks for your living quarters and another three eight-to-the-fifth Tyel Marks for your citizenship papers. The total? It doesn’t even rate a line item in the Ship’s budget.”

“But this one must ask, why the Collective would consider providing these funds for someone such as this one? What task does the Council deem this one so suited for, that no one else might serve, that would warrant such payment? And for how long a term will this task last?”

The Councilor grinned, with her lips but not her eyes. “You were trained on the Tal as a *d’aka troven*⁹ where you demonstrated considerable talent for that field before the Tal was lost to raiders and you were orphaned. Before that rather unfortunate event, you were appointed—while still a probationary adult, a mere seven Han years after your Opening Day¹⁰—to the Tal’s Strategic Planning Board. When the Tal was raided, you managed to escape and found your way to the Daikwan, where you were forced to become a *hengocha*. Your employment contract was purchased by a *shidra-salach*¹¹ who, together with her crew—which included you, as her ship’s purser—became *aka’v-sho*¹² for the *Tirál*. After several years of “problem removal” for the *Tirál* you were stripped of your citizenship, whipped nearly to death—eight-squared lashes with a tangle whip is often enough a death sentence, but you somehow managed to survive—and then you were used in some ‘less than appropriate’ fashions, prior to the sale of your lifetime contract to a citizen of the Tyel and your subsequent repositioning here, on the Tyel. Have I misstated your past history in any of these ‘broad strokes’?”

“No, Councilor. Though this one is surprised that the investigation uncovered certain aspects of this one’s past; this one had thought that the *Tirál* maintained better security concerning the *aka’v-sho* that it employs.”

8 Ral: Unit of time, equal to 1/64th of a *kir*.

9 D’aka troven: A student of the “Hunt-science”. D’aka tro (“Hunt-science) is known to Humans of the Empire and the Commonality as sociodynamics, the mathematical study and prediction of societal behaviors.

10 Opening Day: when a *Shidran-kas* demonstrates that she has the *Talent* (has demonstrated at least minimal telepathic capabilities). Prior to a *Shidran-kas*’ Opening Day, she is considered a child. After her opening day, until she has lived an *octad* longer, she is a “probationary adult”. Only after having lived an *octad* past her Opening Day is she considered a full adult.

11 Shidra-salach: Master and owner aboard of a starship.

12 Aka’v-sho: A member of the crew of a “Hunter Ship” for a Homeship. Basically, a “trouble twister” who helps to resolve “problems” (usually by methods that are considered less than “nice”). More like the original Mission Impossible TV show, though, than say the 00 sorts of the James Bond novels.

“The only Homeship older than the Tyel is Larn. Do you not think that our intelligence services would learn just a few more tricks in the two eight-squared *octads* of the Tyel’s existence? The *Tirál* is barely eight *octads* out of the ship yards. And she has been refitted as a Greatship for less than seven-eights years.”

“This one apologizes for his ignorance, but please recall, gentlebeing, that this one is a mere male...”

The Councilor held out her hand, palm facing me, claws extended. “The games stop now. I know that you are both more intelligent and more dangerous than you appear, and far more so than you allow your contacts to think. I will not insult your intelligence, please do be so kind as to not insult mine.”

I bared my throat and bowed low to the Councilor.

“Better. You have found something that is potentially of considerable value to the Collective. A functioning Runner in time for the Great Gathering would solidify the Tyel’s status as second only to the Larn among the Greatships.”

“But Councilor, the Festival is soon upon us, and the Great Gathering is only...”

“A short time away, yes,” the Councilor interrupted. “This potential runner must be taught to speak the People’s tongue before the Great Gathering. You will be provided with sufficient assistance--we are well aware of your talent for languages. Teach her to the level of an educated adult...”

“But she’ll have to learn two eight-to-the-fifths ideographs, four basic politeness levels, the two-eights combinations thereof, the different dialects of male-to-female, female-to-male, male-to-male, female-to-female...and Imperial Anglic has a phonetic alphabet with no remaining politeness levels or gender-based dialects. She will have to learn...”

“A great deal. You will be provided with sufficient resources to perform your task, and why your payment will be significantly greater than what you might normally expect as a third ranked *hengocha*.”

“And if I fail?”

“Must we dwell on that unpleasant possibility?” She paused, and grinned again, showing pearly white carnassials. “Have you considered the beauty of the Botanical Gardens at this time of year?”

“If the gentlebeing is finished with this one’s instruction, he sees that he needs to begin his task promptly,” I bowed low, waiting for her dismissal. *Who knows, as the Humans say, “She may die, I may die, or the horse may even learn how to sing.” But if I am to remain in this incarnation for the Great Gathering, I shall have to teach the human how to speak Harashan. I just hope that I can manage to get her to speak without an accent. One way or another, I will be free of any debt.*



When I returned to my living quarters, the Runner was sitting in the entrance room, trying to play one of the lesser *tirkan*¹³ that I use for practice. “I am afraid that your time for playing is at an end, gentlebeing,” I said in Imperial Anglic.

“Oh? You rushed off as though your tail was on fire. Something important, I assume. Can you tell me just what’s going on here?”

“I have been instructed by the Council to teach you our language--both spoken and written. You will be required to demonstrate your linguistic abilities to the Council in the not-too-distant future. You have, in the meantime, been designated as what you might call a ‘stray’. You have no clan, but you are not an ‘orphan’ from a defeated or extinct clan.”

“So, I’m not at the bottom of the heap? How nice,” she said.

I could see her hackles rising. “No, gentlebeing, you are not. But ‘strays’ need patrons if they are to be accepted by the Collective.”

“And they’ve selected you? Just what I needed, how nice,” she said again. “So what’s my punishment, as a ‘stray’ if I don’t like the situation, or I don’t feel like learning your language?”

“The Council will do nothing to you, gentlebeing.”

She laughed her strange hybrid Human-and-*Shidran-kas* laugh again. “So why should I care what they want from me? If they’re not going to punish me for non-compliance...”

“They will punish me, as your patron, for any action on your part that does not comply with the objectives laid down by the Council,” I interrupted, before the female might say something that would get both of us in trouble.

She sat, her mouth open, for a hands’ *ral*, while I walked over and sat, three paces away, outside *maai*.

“Suddenly, that doesn’t sound like the Council is playing fair. Why punish you for something that I might or might not do?”

“This one is a male, and thus ... expendable. The number of fertile females is ...”

“Hold it,” she said, holding up one hand, palm towards me with extended claws. “So, if I misbehave or don’t perform the way this ‘Council’ wants, they beat you up?”

“No. If the Council perceives that you need to be disciplined, I will be sent to the Botanical Gardens.”

“So? What will they do, make you do ‘community service’ by gardening for a few hundred hours...pardon me, ‘*san*’?”

¹³ *Tirkan*: a musical instrument resembling the Japanese *koto*, though tuned to a different set of scales than that instrument.

“No. I would be used as fertilizer.”

“What?!? They’ll kill you if they don’t like what *I* do? What kind of...”

“Don’t say another word!” I interrupted. “They would end this incarnation, but ... while I might have to consider my ‘one life lesson’, I would reincarnate in eight-squared days. It’s just that I’d prefer to have more than just that ‘one life lesson’ to guide me.”

“You’re serious? You think you’ll be reborn if you die?”

“We know this—we’ve had hard scientific proof of reincarnation for as long as we’ve had faster-than-light starships. I believe that the first proofs were found during the initial stages of the Diaspora, though the scientific community didn’t fully accept the idea until *octads* later.”

“Proof? Ok, so they’ll just be giving you a ‘time out’, then, if they use you for fertilizer? That seems a bit harsh a punishment for something that *I* might do.”

“There are harsher punishments.”

“Worse than killing you?”

“Strapping me to a post and whipping me until I lose consciousness. And repeating the punishment each evening until I either die or stop resisting authority.”

“That sounds like you’re familiar with...”

“Eight-squared lashes with a ‘tangle whip’. A tangle whip is a whip with embedded steel hooks designed to flay the flesh off a body.”

“And you survived this?”

“Barely. But yes, I survived it. I bear more than just the scars of the ‘mark’ of my profession on my back, gentlebeing.”

“And that’s worse than dying?”

“In my opinion, yes. I was fortunate. My punishment could have been worse still.”

“Ok, I’ll bite. What’s worse?”

“Two possibilities. First, they could have put me in a cage for the rest of my natural life. Or they could have ‘silenced’ me.”

“Life without parole? How long?”

“Perhaps as much as seven *octads*. We live a good deal longer than Humans.”

“Over eight hundred years? Yeah, I guess so. What does it mean to be ‘silenced’?”

“The subject has the nerve centers that enable the telepathic function burned out. And all sensory elements of the brain are ... burned out ... except for those related to pain. Then the subject’s nerves are stimulated to produce maximal pain. The pain is continued for typically a year or two, until the subject is more vegetable than *Shidran-kas*.”

“They’d do this to you, if *I* don’t do what they want?”

“No, they’d just use my body for fertilizer. I’ve been told that the manner of death is quite painless. We’re not cruel, after all.”

She swallowed and cocked her head in a gesture that I would normally consider indicative of confusion. “So, what do they want me to do in order to keep you from becoming fertilizer?”

“You need to learn to speak our language, *Harashan*, at the level of an educated adult, as well as to read the written form of our language.”

“Is that all?”

“That is the beginning, certainly. You’ll also have to learn how to conduct yourself in polite society, and to do that, you will have to learn our customs—not merely at an intellectual level, but at a ‘gut’ level.”

She shook her head and sighed. “And if I don’t, they punish you. ‘Males are the grass’. Damn!”

“It is the way of things.”

“You’ve provided food and shelter for me. And you’ve already gone to bat for me before this Council. The least I can do is to try and **not** get you killed. When do we start these language lessons?”

“Now.” I moved a pace closer to the female. “The most important root is *aka*. It means ‘hunt’ and the ideogram appears in many other words...” and I drew the simple ideogram for ‘aka’ in the air...

Chapter 3: Where are you going?

“The ship-sister’s *Harashan* has improved significantly of late. May this one inquire as to the source of this sudden marked improvement?” I asked in *Harashan*.

“In addition to paying careful attention to the honorable teacher’s lessons for the last two seasons¹⁴ this humble student has read several of the books in your library. They are very ... ‘interesting’. The ship-brother should have used the rising quaver just now instead of the descending.

14 A “season” is ¼ of a Han-standard year, or 166 days (there are three days “between” the seasons to make the total come to 667 days for the year, with a “leap day” added at the end of every fifth year).

The latter is indicative of a subordinate-to-superior female-to-female interrogative, if I understand the tonal shifts correctly,” she replied. As was now customary our conversation continued exclusively in *Harashan*.

I could not help but laugh. “It is clear that this one...”

“Please drop the formality. I understand that you are my teacher, and a male, but ... as a favor to this student, could the honorable teacher use the informal address forms?”

“Very well. I was trying to trick you; just to see how far your studies have gone. But the books in my work area don’t have audible tracks, so ...”

“True. But they give me a better understanding of the Free People. They help me to understand not merely *what* the levels are, but *when* to use them for best effect. A people’s fiction can tell you a great deal about a people--and you have a rather extensive collection. Not to mention a few even more ... ‘interesting’ ... works that you buried behind those mathematical texts.” She looked at me, eye-to-eye, and grinned, showing gleaming white carnassials.

I slid backwards, opening another two paces between us. “Those are some of *my* training manuals.”

“For your work as a *hengocha*? I hope that I haven’t inadvertently stolen some Guild secrets...”

“No, but ... some of that material is, well, more than just a bit explicit,” I said, and I could feel the blood rushing to me ears. There are times when I wish that I had better control over my body’s responses.

“Actually, I thought that the descriptions were simply ... clinical. I had to look up a number of the ideograms in your ship’s library, in the medical dictionaries. But the illustrations ... well ... they did leave very little to the imagination. Given that they were of the ‘how to’ and ‘when to move like this’ instructional variety, they served a useful function. Some of those illustrations seemed to have been taken rather directly from anatomy texts. And yes, I can tell by scent as much as by sight when you’re slightly embarrassed. Your ears practically glow.”

I closed my eyes and took a deep, calming, breath. *The horse is actually learning how to sing, and who would have guessed that she had such a wonderful voice?* I thought, keeping it within the innermost of the eight-fold walls of self.

“But to settle your ‘nerves’, teacher, perhaps this one could provide you with a bowl of *zhinj*? The honorable teacher could then observe my handling of the proper ceremony, and instruct this one regarding any deficiencies that the honorable teacher might observe?”

I took another deep, calming breath, careful not to let it all out at once before responding. “The ship-sister should be well aware of the significance of shared intoxicating beverages, such as *zhinj*.”

“The ship-sister is well aware—and is not suggesting shared drink, merely that she would appreciate being able to verify that her understanding of the proper ceremonial actions are correct, through providing the honorable teacher with a bowl just for him.”

I looked at the female; she was sitting properly, four paces away, her eyes downcast. *She’s trying to demonstrate another lesson learned. I should allow her to proceed.* “As the ship-sister wishes. The bowl and the bottles are behind the mirror,” I said, pointing to the full length mirror standing by my work desk.

“Not needed,” she said, and reached into her side pouch. She pulled out a heating bowl, a drinking bowl, and a bottle of spiced *zhinj*.

“Did the ship-sister...”

“Purchase these with her own coin? Yes. The honorable teacher provided the ship-sister with funds that she was told were hers to spend as she wished,” she said. She set the drinking bowl down within my reach.

“A fine piece. The product of Tyel-Larn Shen do Tsvo? Or was it one of her apprentices?”

“The ship-sister Tyel-Larn Shen do Tsvo threw it, painted it, and fired it herself. On her name’s word.”

I could not help but raise an eyebrow whisker. This drinking bowl must have cost her nearly an eight-day’s discretionary funds. If she intended to impress me with her devotion to the ceremony, this is certainly a first step.

While I was turning the drinking bowl, studying the care of the artist and the clear beauty of the piece, Mia Falkenberg went about the initial steps of preparing and presenting the drink. *She chose the second best of my presentation stands—appropriate for a teaching-demonstration, but not for a quality customer. Suitable for use with one’s instructor, but just barely insufficient for an important client.* “That is an interesting choice, gentlebeing, for the table.”

She bowed. “Were this one to use her instructor’s best stand, it could be interpreted as a claim that this one was the equal in skill to her teacher—clearly not the case, unless and until the teacher so declares. The second best is appropriate for a student, wishing to demonstrate her learned skill, but without asserting superiority. As is appropriate.” She bowed again, and bared her throat, having come close enough that she was within my *maai*.

I set the drinking bowl down on the stand. “Proceed.”

She bowed again, touching the floor with her forehead, managing to bury her muzzle in her ventral fur. I haven’t seen her do **that** before—she must have been practicing the move after I went to

my pillow. But since I haven't been going to sleep much before High Sun¹⁵ she has to have been sacrificing sleep time to practice.

The rest of the preparations went in like fashion; the ship-sister demonstrating that the ceremonial and stylistic movements of the presentation had been made a part of her, rather than moves merely repeated by rote. *She lives the ceremony, rather than just copying my moves—and she has been studying the less common differences between male and female presenters.*

With the bowl finally filled—and four drops carefully spilled by the gentlebeing in a diamond pattern around the bowl with one point of the diamond facing me—I took a moment, perhaps a hand's *ral*, to breath in and scent the steam rising from the heated *zhinj*. *Spiced zhinj, likely a first distillation.* “This one must admit that the teacher does not recognize the spices used. They were?”

“Ground up *Tagi* leaves and pollen from the *Shoban* flower. They signify...”

“Respect and honor to the recipient. An interesting choice,” I interrupted, as appropriate once the spices were identified. It would not do for the ship-sister to enumerate some of the **other** meanings for that combination of spices. And what is not said, what is not recognized, can be judged to have “not happened”. I lapped up two tongue-cups worth. The *zhinj* was just hot enough to be on the edge of “too hot to drink”. Spice and near-dangerous heat; oh, what is unsaid practically screams out at me. I closed my eyes, turned the bowl around three times by feel, and bowed low to the ship-sister.

“Ship-sister, the message you have sent--and the message that you did **not** send--are both clear and understood,” I said, and, opening my eyes, I locked eyes with the ship-sister. **You have done well,** I ‘cast, breaking with custom to ‘cast to the female before she ‘casts to me. I then broke eye contact, and bowed over the drinking bowl, lapping up the *zhinj* until only the scent, and the four drops remained. “This one believes that the honorable ship-sister is quite ready to be presented to the Council in the matter of this ceremony; based on your demonstrated language skills, she is ready to speak before the Council as well.”

“As you might say, ‘the horse has actually learned to sing’,” she said, after she had gathered up the drinking bowl and removed the stand. She grinned and licked her chops when she was done.

And my suspicions regarding the unstated message are confirmed, I thought, carefully hiding the thought deep within the eight-fold walls of self.

15 High Sun: the equivalent of midnight for the *Shidran-kas*. High Sun is “noon”, and the middle of what would normally be a sleep period.

Chapter 4: Who do you serve?

“If you are to remain here on the Tyel, you will have to have a more ... appropriate ... name.”

“What’s wrong with Mia Falkenberg?”

“It’s not a *Shidran-kas* name. We will need to see to your adoption into a clan. I’m afraid that it will have to be one of the lesser clans.”

“Why do I have to be a member of a ‘clan’? And why a ;’lesser’ clan, if I must belong to one. I thought that you said that people like me—who can use this ‘maze’--are rare and precious commodities.”

“Your mind is that of a Human, and your thought patterns are ... disruptive. You have not lived your life on a Homeship, and you will be the source of continuing ‘disturbance’ until you learn to fit in, not merely at an intellectual, thinking level, but at an emotional level.”

“So, the plus of being a Maze Runner is almost completely negated by being an Outsider? And my name marks me as an outsider.”

“As does your status outside the clan structure. As a female, capable of producing viable offspring, your value to the community as a whole cannot be discounted. But to be allowed to breed, you must...”

“Wait. Just. One. Minute. ‘Allowed to breed’? What kind of a ...”

“Stop,” I held out one hand, claws extended, before she could say anything more. “Remember ‘the nail that sticks up’.”

“Understood,” Mia said, calming down quickly. “But what do you mean by ‘allowed to breed’?”

“Each addition to the community,” I said, “requires life support services be adjusted to support that individual. And that support changes over time as the individual grows. The Homeship—the Collective—must be protected. We cannot allow our population to outstrip the resources available—balance is essential to survival. When there are sufficient resources accumulated to permit ‘spawning’ a new Homeship, breeding restrictions are reduced, and the price for a breeding permit drops.”

“I need to pay your Council to be allowed to have children?”

“Yes. Normally, citizenship comes with authorization to breed one and one eighth offspring.”

“Replacement. Okay, why the extra eighth?”

“To permit controlled growth—and the extra eighth can be sold on the open market, if one finds oneself in financial trouble.”

“How does that work? I assume it still takes two individuals to ‘make a baby’?”

“Yes, and it is customary for both to contribute one half the authorization required. In your case, however, you are not yet a citizen. You’ll earn your citizenship through service to the Collective—far faster than you would be able to purchase citizenship otherwise.”

“So, they—or someone—will be paying me in addition to the ‘Maze Running’ work I do?”

“The Council will be paying you. Along with those of the wealthier merchant houses that might contract for your services.”

“Who is paying for my ‘life support’ right now? The way you make it sound, if someone doesn’t pay for the air that they breath...”

“They can serve the Collective in the Botanical Gardens, yes. I am paying for your support, for now. And I have pledged my breeding authorization—one person—for your continued existence, here.”

“What? You mean you can’t have children...”

“Until you are a citizen, and I am able to recover the pledged authorization.”

“Why? What would make you *want* to do that?”

“Because gentlebeing I have been where you sit now. Friendless. An *orphan* from a dead clan—Ashan. A state which I find upsetting is not one that I would wish on another—and when I have the ability to save another...”

“‘That which is hurtful unto thyself, do not do unto others’. Where did you pick up that little bit of wisdom?”

“Is it such a surprise to you that someone who has been at the bottom of the societal heap might not wish to see another condemned to the same fate?”

“Yes, it is. I thought that with your mansion, your fine clothes and tasty foods that you were anything but poor.”

“Now, yes. But I owe another for pulling me up out of the Pit. What I do for you, is to honor that individual’s kindness by ‘passing it along’ to another.”

Chapter 5: And who do you trust?

“And what is it that makes my request such an imposition? I have done everything that has been asked of me—even changed my name from Mia Falkenberg to ‘Tyel-Tyel Kan do Akal’.”

“You’ve asked to join me on the pillow—not for anything more than sleep, I will admit, but ... really!” I could not help but growl at the Maze Runner, and I could feel my hackles rising.

“I’m not asking to ‘have sex’ with you. I’m just ... lonely.”

“Lonely?” I asked.

“Yes, lonely. I like to have someone to hold, and to hold me when I sleep. And I have been sleeping alone for more than two seasons—half a Han-standard year, nearly an Imperial Standard year.”

“You can doubtless find some female from Clan Akal who is, like you, somewhat lonely, and ...”

“But I don’t *want* to hug one of those old hags! They only took me because **you** asked them to.”

“No, that wasn’t the only reason...”

“Oh? Did you pay them as well?”

I took a deep, calming breath. The Runner had learned her lessons too well. “There might have been a small exchange of coin, this one will admit.”

“You *bought* their acceptance. Why couldn’t **you** just accept me into your clan?”

“I am a male—and the *only* member of Ashan on the Tyel. I do not have the *authority or right* to admit *anyone* to Ashan. That is the *essence* of being male and an *orphan*,” I said. *Some lessons were clearly not learned as well as others.*

“I do not want to hold a female. I like *your* scent; and you have bent over backwards, figuratively speaking, to help me adjust to your world. Can’t you just bend a bit more—I’m not asking to have sex with you. I just want to hold and be held. You’ve helped me in so many ways already. Can’t you help me in just one more way?”

I took a deep, calming breath, and settled down on my haunches. “Sit, please, gentlebeing,” I said. And I closed my eyes; I remained silent, eyes closed, for eight-cubed heartbeats, “the pause for matters of import”.

“Have you decided yet, teacher?” the female whom I must now think of only as “Tyel-Tyel Kan do Akal” said as I finished my count.

I opened my eyes and looked the female over carefully. “You do not understand what you are asking of me, gentlebeing. I *think* that I understand what **you** meant by your request, but ...”

“My request would mean something different if it came from one of ‘the People?’” Tyel-Tyel Kan do Akal said, a low whine in her voice.

“It would involve considerably more than just ... ‘holding’ each other. It would be a ... request for ... considerably greater intimacy than just two individuals sharing a sleeping space.”

She took a deep breath, in through the nose and out through the mouth. A calming breath. And then she closed her eyes. *Another ‘pause before discussing matters of import? And just what does this Human-who-is-now-People have in mind?* I thought.

“This one has seen the way that the honorable gentle-being looks at this one’s brush,” she said. “It makes this one feel good to know that this one is attractive, and that one who has done her so many favors finds her physically attractive. Is there some aspect of this one’s personality—her soulself—that the honorable gentlebeing does not find as attractive as the physical packaging containing that soulself?” she said.

“No,” I said. “Yes, I’ve looked at your brush ‘that way’, but ... I’m not ready to take this kind of step. We can be ...”

The Runner held up one hand, palm towards me, with extended claws. “Stop! ‘What is not said, does not happen, does not change the Way’,” she quoted.

I bowed low to the Runner. *Better, then, to leave it unsaid, as the core of the message has been understood.*



I checked the time: it was close to High Sun, and I felt odd. Bloated, and I could taste stomach acid at the back of my throat. *Time for a visit to the sandbox.* I shucked my sleeping robe, removed my underwear, and stepped onto the sand. My bowels emptied in a rush. I shook my head; I was dizzy. Then I vomited, and then the blackness took me.



I woke up feeling hot. I was back on my sleeping pillow; my eyes were gummed nearly shut, my mouth tasted like a poorly cleaned sandbox smelled. I managed to open my eyes. There were two Ship-Services personnel in biocontainment suits kneeling by the pillow; one wore the sigil of the medical services, the other—clearly a *Tchel-yii*—wore the sigil of the security services. The Runner was kneeling next to the medical officer, but only in a simple ship suit. She had, I noticed, at least added a tail cover to her usual dress. “What...” I started to say, before a fit of coughing halted my attempt at speech.

“You are sick; particularly nasty, and highly contagious virus. You, and your stray, have been quarantined. *Tchel-yii First Tyel-Larin Pa do Isan* was called in to trace your movements as you recalled them for the last four nights. We have isolated the source for your infection, together with everyone whom you may have contacted; all have received preventative inoculation and placed in quarantine,” the medical officer said.

*A Tchel-yii First? Clearly, the Collective considers this an important matter. *How long?** I ‘cast. Under the circumstances, surely I would be forgiven ‘casting to the female medical officer before she ‘cast to me.

“You will both be quarantined for an eight-day, just to be safe. Your home has been isolated—it is operating on an independent life support module. Grant your stray this—she saved your life by summoning aid,” the medical officer said. She nodded to the *Tchel-yii*, and they left.

This one thanks the Runner, I ‘cast.

“You were lying in your own filth—I heard you throwing up. You were ... a mess. I pulled you out and washed everything out of your fur. I had to take certain ... liberties,” she said.

When did you put me on my pillow? I could tell from the scent of ozone in the air that it was still daytime.

“You slept through the remainder of the day I found you, the full night, and it’s High Sun again. I was ... worried about you. Your nose was dry and hot, I called in Ship Services and told them what happened, and they sealed us off.”

You’re not in a biocontainment suit. Why?

“The medical officer said that I was already contaminated. The virus is an airborne one but is also carried in ... ‘bodily fluids’ ... like excrement and vomitus. You were soaked in both. I couldn’t just leave you that way! She gave me several injections—they said that, most likely, I’ll only have ‘mild’ symptoms. Less than one part in eight-squared chance of death.”

Have you... I couldn’t complete the ‘cast.

“Researched *bloodright*? Yes. If we both live through this, I could command you to *my pillow by bloodright*,” she said.

I closed my eyes. *To be ‘owned’ by a female, at her beck and call. *When can I expect to be so summoned?** I ‘cast.

“I won’t ask you—I’d never tell you—and I don’t plan on demanding you share a meal with me, either. Think about that, *kol-ka Hengocha Tal-Sora Pa do Ashan*,” she said, bowed to me, and backed out of my sleeping quarters.

To Be Continued..

The Accidental Lunatic

by Marjorry Donatello

Part 3

4th September

Today I am a mole.

Evidently there is a coronal mass ejection headed our way, so everyone, and I mean *everyone*, is now in the Underground. The original city, built in lava tubes. Wargentin's got plenty of these. Lava-filled crater, right?

When they told me "lava tubes," thought first of something like, barely head-high and arms-wide hamster tubes. There are those, yeah, but the two main tubes everything else branches off of, those are huge! Dwallin Avenue has two storeys!



Anyway. There's tracks in the floors that were used for mine cars, I think. Now they're used for "rail-surfing." They have "little red wagon" things with train wheels and no handle, and the idea is, you got a set distance to get the thing up to speed, while you have one foot always in the wagon, then at the "start" line, you jump in the cart and you have to stand up until the cart stops. You, and your partner if you've got one, can wiggle and stuff to keep it going. Or try to. They tell me it gets really silly and sometimes it borders on obscene.

There's a basketball court down here, and a pool that right now has salt water and dolphins in, and a baseball diamond except they play with marbles while lying on the floor.

There's still a working mine, southeast of the city, it says here. There's pipes EVERYWHERE, never seen so many. *Sigh*. I HAVE NEVER seen so many. Don't get me started on why I'm supposed to be writing in Good English.

Anyway, this siren goes off, to warn people to get underground. (Or to "The Underground." And yes, there's "Mind The Gap" signs all over the place.) You can stay up in the domes if you want to. They pile dirt around the domes, and my former roommate told me that there's a huge electromagnet around here that they use to ward off the bad stuff but that'd have to be a zinging-huge magnet, and I never seen anything like that, so who knows. But everybody comes down here. They also have this algae that they spray on the domes somehow and that's supposed to help. Lead-bearing algae or something. Suppose I need to look into that.

The dolphins get carried down here, and the cats have been trained to come down here when they hear the siren and they get some kind of special treat. There's jays and parrots all over town, and they learned to follow the cats to get their special treat. There are even some special trees grown in pots that get carried down here, and tomato plants and things. Wargentin has a "scion" of Newton's Apple Tree and they make sure that gets brought down here. They make sure the coffee and chocolate trees and the vanilla vines come down here too. The tea bushes have their own protection, apparently. Lots of tea snobs here.

And Thobo Haradu is the owner of an ENORMOUS spider plant which every-



body in town takes care of, and they bring it down here, set up a Tiki Bar under it, and worship it as a god of some kind. So, here we all are.

CME's a pretty big deal. This one's just supposed to graze us, it's pretty late in the day here and the sun's only just on the horizon. But still, it's pretty nasty stuff what with no atmosphere and no magnetosphere. Made a huge noise when the airlocks to the domes got locked. That'd be the part of a movie about this when everybody would panic, right?

Nope. Everybody down here is partying and having a wonderful time! I was just passed by somebody riding a horse! Robot horse, and not big, but yeah, *riding a horse*. And a few streets down from me, the Wargentin Crater Gilbert & Sullivan Society is setting up a stage. We're having possibly a life-threatening CME and the whole moon is panicking and us, we're partying. I don't believe this place. Sometimes I think all those people who say Wargentin isn't real are right. Of course they say Australia isn't real but I can see Australia from here.

Almost all the current Residents lived down here before the domes were built and they all have their own rooms which they also use as classrooms or labs sometimes.

Baby, the Leopard, is enormous.



No chance to collect my mail before I had to come down here, but you know, even though I'm pretty sure it's impossible, I do keep thinking about what I would use to design Uncle Lou's Creature. I'm thinking of starting with a radiolarian. I need something with a protective shell. Most radiolaria use silica for their shell but as a group they use all kinds of different things so they can probably be easily coaxed to use even more different things. OR....

Haven't heard anything from Earth. Probably all to the good. Wonder if they know about the CME down on Earth. News doesn't get around like it used to. "To avoid panic," they say. Had no idea how much was going on on Earth until I came up here where I can get all the news from

everywhere and now, you know what? I'm SO glad I gotta stay here!

What I did hear came over the tannoy shortly after I got settled into my old dorm.

“Good Morning, Wargentines, Students, Visitors and all the ships at sea. We will be down here for between 40 and 48 hours, so hopefully all of you have brought lots of snacks. Classes will be held on schedule in the old classrooms. Ask your professor where these are if you don’t know.

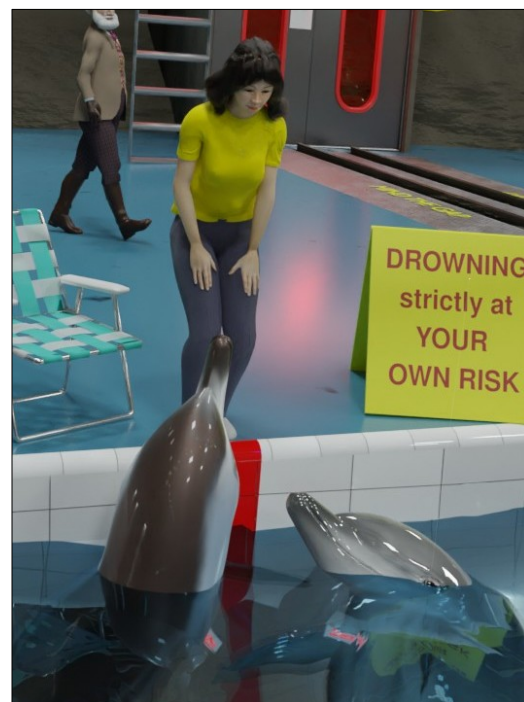
“The 7689b Railsurfing Championship will be held tonight on the Nogrod Rails, please sign up NOW if you will be participating.

“The Wargentini Crater Gilbert & Sullivan Society, and the WC Symphony, will be performing *The Gondoliers* tomorrow night at 1900.

“News regarding the CME will be displayed throughout the Underground as it comes in. Over and out.”

So, we’re stuck down here for a couple of days. Suppose it could be worse. And oh! They show a continuous feed of Earth (for as long as the feed lasts, they say) so we can watch the auroras.

Saw a couple of the other Aliens today! Evidently they been ... they’ve been ... off somewhere doing something or other and just got back. One is a really tall, black guy (by which I mean he’s 0x000000, CYMK, painted-with-Vantablack black) and the other is an opalescent snake that moves all the time and spins around and is really hard to watch.



I never thought I would but you know I miss being able to look out of the window while being lectured to.

After the classes I met with Einarsdóttir and Noor over some pretty decent lasagna. Here are our planets that we have to fix up. I’m going to omit the technical details because they’re boring (to me anyway). We named them after our cats.

Mutch is a Class P2 planet. Orbits a K2 star. In the process of becoming tidally locked. Little to no magnetosphere. It has, they tell me, “Moveable Seas.” The planet revolves slowly and along the day-side of the terminator seas evaporate, and along the night-side they rain down again. Gravity’s kind of high but tolerable. Air has LOTS of oxygen, probably too much, so the place is a fire-hazard.

7689B RAILSURFING CHAMPIONSHIP

5TH SEPTEMBER 1400H,
NOGROD RAILS

DIVISIONS:

ALL COMERS •
HUMANS • FACULTY •
STUDENTS • MAILEIAU •
ARTFUL MOVERS •
COSTUME DESIGN •
TRICKED-OUT WAGONS

SIGN UP IN ROOM 128 UP TO ONE
HOUR BEFORE EVENT STARTS.

Beezer is a Class P4 planet. Orbits an O8 star. It has a magnetosphere and isn't tidally locked, but it's way out and rotates at an angle of about 70° and has a really thick atmosphere, mostly nitrogen and methane which makes me think there's probably somebody already there already.

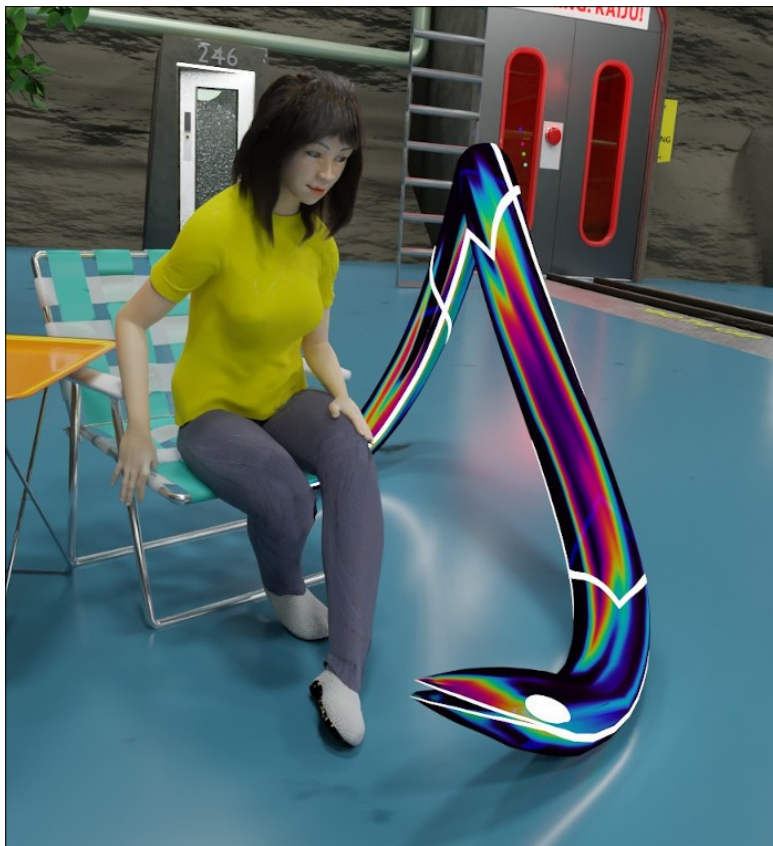
Fuss-Budget is a K3 planet orbiting an A0 star. It has a thin atmosphere, a slight magnetosphere, rotates really fast (the day is only about nine hours!) and it's hot. There is probably plant life there, which I guess is okay.

Looking over these things, occurred to me that both in these cases and the mysterious quest my Uncle Lou set me on, they're—conveniently (suspiciously?)—pretty much the same thing. And nobody said I had to start with Earth microbes now, did they, right?

There are microbes that came in on Maki, there's papers about them that I've read and some of those cell lines are stored here at Wargentin, but they're kept under strict quarantine and you need special permission to get at them and no "mere freshman" has a hope of that. Alien Cats believe in heavy decontamination, I guess, because there's awfully little of that kind of stuff.

But does the Alien Cat have any I can study? And if so...

Well, they keep telling me, "it doesn't hurt to ask," so, here goes.



Well, I asked; I asked again, anyway, I did bring it up once already. I didn't even get bitten. Maki listened closely to what I was saying and said, "Well, I can't really help you there. Spreading microbes around is considered rather *gauche* in the more fashionable parts of the galaxy, so when I get here I'm usually way cleaner than I want to be. But for what you're thinking, I know exactly the person you should talk to." The Cat made some kind of whistle, and the snake came over to us, twirling slowly in mid-air.

Sahn and Maki were quiet for a while but I could tell they were talking between themselves somehow. Maki's expression changed a couple of times, but I have no idea what the meaning was. The snake just slowly twirled. You feel this weird *almost-tingling*

when sahn's moving. After a while, Maki cantered off, and Orhauder stopped twirling and slowly fell to the ground.

"I am Orhauder," sahn said, "and you may call me 'Orhauder' and nothing else."

"I am Marjorry Donatello and you can call me 'Jorry,'" I said.

"Maki tells me this: that you are interested in vacuum-living microbes."

What do you say to that? "I am."

"May I ask, to what end?"

I was pretty stumped. I don't know how to explain a "will" and stuff to an alien. So I just said, "Curiosity." I noticed we were attracting attention.

"I will accept that," Orhauder said. I should mention, all of Orhauder said that. Sahn has a mouth of sorts under what look like eye-spots of sorts, but the voice comes from the whole... snake.

Suddenly, it occurred to me, that *I am talking to an extraterrestrial*. I could not let it see I was panicking!

But apparently it did. "You probably know only this about me: that I am a *maileiau*, and that once I was a spy. Know also this: I have been a spy for many thousands of years. I have seen a lot. I know the patterns. If we speak privately, those gathering around us will only be more curious and will harass you the more. Please speak freely."

"Okay..." I said. "I want to know if there are any microbes that live natively on a surface like here."

"A very, very few," Orhauder said.

Probably because I was panicking, I said, "Can you get me one?"

Orhauder positively crackled, and all the hairs on my arms stood on end. "Some more of me for you to know. I cannot collect things. I only collect information. Extremely detailed information, I am proud to say. Would this be acceptable?"

I wanted to say "yes" but could only squeak and nod.

"Then I will pick one, and know that I will consider how to put the information in, as they say here, 'plain English.' When I am done you will be able to find the information in your folder. Should you have any questions thereafter, Maki can find me." Orhauder started spinning again, rose into the air, and spun off into some other part of the Underground.

The moment, the very moment, that Orhauder was out of sight, I got descended upon by I think every person at Wargentini! Orhauder spoke to me for a second, and now here I was, a celebrity. "Sahn's gonna get you something?!" "Why do we need alien microbes when the Solar system is full of the damned things?!" "You're gonna share it, right?" "What's this about microbes?" "Don't you dare

tell me that someone's coming here with new microbes! Some day we're all gonna die of alien microbes!" I was never so happy to hear a klaxon go off and have to run off to a class in my life.

All through that class I kept trying to tell myself, "Ignore them. Ignore them all." But I also had visions of tenured professors hacking my folder to try to get the information that Orhauder was going to leave for me. I mean, my first chance to publish a paper would go POOF if they got in. But I was going to have to stay on the Moon and live with these people for the rest of their lives and what if this and what if that, and why am I worrying about any of this all I did was ask a question! Anybody can ask a question, right?

Well, apparently not, because after class I had to go meet with Einarsdóttir and Noor and Singh and they welcomed me into the office as if I was The Golden Child.

(As if I *were* the Golden Child. Damn the Society for the Resurrection of the Subjunctive Mood.)

BUT... since we were at SAWarg HQ and Orhauder was a Real World Thing, *they couldn't quiz me about it and it was driving them MAD!* Maybe I *am* the Golden Child!

I gotta say, this was the most satisfying meeting I've been in since 6th grade!

The meeting was rushed. Found out why; they all wanted to talk to me afterwards and passed me little notes to that effect. Just like 6th grade. Decided not to respond. Maybe they'd offer chocolate or something.

I went back to my old dorm room to check my mail just because (did I mention already that you're not allowed to use wearables or implants up in the domes? I forget why but I think it has something to do with cosmic rays. They SAY it's because they want you to get used to actually talking to people which, I mean, really, why bother, but hey.)

Anyway, there was mail. Long mail from a guy Simon Schuster who is apparently my Uncle Lou's executor. He sent me a copy of the will. It gives very specific requirements for this thing I'm supposed to come up with. It must move. It must ingest things and excrete different things. It must still be doing so after ½ lunar day and ½ lunar night out on the surface by itself. So yeah, I guess that's a starting point.

He also says that Papa has already filed to have the will contested, and "strongly" suggests I get a lawyer of my own. I asked around if there are any lawyers at Wargentín who can work with Earth and they all suggested one man.

I'm going to see him tomorrow. Wish me luck.

To Be Continued....

Got a story to tell, in words, pictures, or sound?

WE WANT YOU! Yes, YOU!

Deadline for the next Issue (No. 4, March) is 21 February 2022.

Submissions can be sent to editor@retrozone.net or to submissions@retrozone.net.

Here are some tips for getting things to us.

📖 WRITTEN WORD:

For New and Original written-word science fiction, fantasy and fanfic, please send your work in a **plain text file** (no pre-formatting or PDFs, please, it only makes our job harder! We will make them here). This may be .txt (plain text), .odt (OpenOffice, LibreOffice), or .doc/.docx (Microsoft Office), though we can read pretty much every file format you can think of. We don't have a word limit, but we may suggest that anything very long be serialized.

NOTA BENE: Initial submissions of longer works must be at least 1,000 words so that we can properly decide if your work is going to be a good fit for our audience. If you're 1,000 words or less, just send the whole thing.

If you are submitting a story that has previously been published, please note we have a cut-off date; we are only accepting work published in the 20th Century. Please include the place it was originally published, the editor at the time, the date of publication, and any reviews you think might be of interest to potential readers.

If you are including illustrations, please see the notes below for whatever type of art you have. If you were not the artist, please forward permission to use the art from the original artist if the work was not a work-for-hire. (A "work-for-hire" is any work that has been ordered from an artist and paid for, and is therefore no longer the legal property of the artist.) If you wish to use a work which you have purchased from an artist, such as a print, make sure you purchased publication rights as well.

🗣️ SPOKEN WORD/READ FOR YOU:

Please send text files first! We have really good, experienced editors here who may want to suggest clarifications, additions and the like. Once the story has been accepted, you may choose to narrate it yourself, or choose a narrator. (And please, no offense intended, but please carefully consider your narration skills before taking this step!) We will give you instructions on how to send sound files if the story is accepted, but we reserve the right to reject a sound file if it is of poor sound quality (too much background noise, cats yowling to be fed, etc).

🖼️ TRADITIONAL MEDIA ART:

Please send these as .png files, with images as large and clear as you can manage and uncompressed. One shouldn't have to say this, but please only send images of your own work unless the art is an illustration for a story which you are submitting

at the same time. If you are considering submitting a print you bought from an artist, please refrain unless you purchased publication rights at the same time.

■ DIGITAL 2D:

Same as the above really, but here we will accept .psd (Photoshop) and .xcf (GIMP) as well.

🗑️ 3D/3D PRINTABLE:

If you're just sending a static image (or a collection of different views of a 3D object you've made, the guidelines are the same as for Digital 2D. We'd much prefer either .blend (Blender), .skp (SketchUp) or .stl (stereolithography, the standard for most 3D printers) formats for these files. One of us (probably Fa) will likely print your model to make sure that there are no holes, that supports work, and to determine approximately the amount of time and how much filament a print takes. I (Fa) print on a Lulzbot Mini.

🎵 MUSIC and MULTIMEDIA:

Please, please, *compress these files before sending them!* [filename].tar.gz is preferred. We'll take .wav, .mp3 and .mp4 formats, as these are the most widely compatible with different operating systems. (If you are unfamiliar with translating between formats, Tenacity is an excellent, and free, tool for sound. If you want to try your hand at video recording and editing, Fa uses OpenShot on Linux (works on all platforms) for her YouTube videos; also free and very easy to learn.

🗿 SCULPTURE, CERAMIC and GLASS:

Pictures of same only, please. We cannot be responsible for the way objects subjected to the post may be handled (trust us, we can tell you horror stories). See the guidelines above. Please include the size and medium/media of your creation, and anything else you might think cromulent.

LET'S GET CREATIVE!

If you've got something that just doesn't fit into the categories above, please email a description, and we'll see if we can work something out.

LICENSING:

Original works which are being published for the first time can be [Creative Commons](https://creativecommons.org/) licensed. Do follow the link and look into it (creativecommons.org).

LAST BUT NOT LEAST:

You may only contribute **your own work!** You may not "agent" for someone else, or "surprise" someone by trying to have their work published for them. If you don't own it, don't send it. Fa has been bending computers to her will for almost fifty years now, and both of us have taught, and raised kids. Trust us, we know all the cheats.

Got it? Good! Please send submissions to submissions@retrozine.net. We will send you a note letting you know your submission was received, but we cannot guarantee when we'll get to look at it in depth.

See you next time!

