

ISLANDED IN THE STARS

By

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ABSTRACT

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This is a creative thesis consisting of original poetry and science-fiction. Its major theme is that of communication between the Self and the Other, the climax of the various pieces usually being achieved at the point where the protagonist or narrator comes to a greater understanding of the Other. As the fictional pieces here are science-fiction, the "Other" often takes the form of an extraterrestrial intelligence or a human greatly different to those we are familiar with today. The poetry does not have an avowedly otherworldly theme, instead focusing on the Other closer to home, ranging from historical personages to European places and citizens, and from dogs to angels. It is to be hoped that the reader, apart from coming to a greater realization of his or her own place in the cosmos, also has fun reading this.

I would like to dedicate this work to my mother and father, George L. Huggins and Linda K. Huggins, and the books they read me, which were my first gates to the stars. This is for them, and for my Father in Heaven, and my Lord Jesus Christ. Those whom we cannot repay, we can only honor.

I would like to thank Gordon Henry, Lister Matheson, and especially Anita Skeen for putting up with me through the past three years and guiding both me and this project, neither of which would be what it is today without them. Also, thanks to Alan Newton for his support and reassurance in the early years at Michigan State.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	1
Islandings	5
Rengu: Spring Noon	6
Buchenwald Reflections	7
Christmas	8
Friday	10
Dead Man Laughing	12
Brotherdammerung	13
Moviesynthesis	14
What Avenger Is	15
Dogs: A Response	16
For Nana Who Lived Far Away	17
Signal Mountain Blackberries	18
Sonnet Triune: Grandfather -- (Grand)son -- Father	19
Coffee with Kim	20
Stone Solo	21
Her Gift	22
Soliloquy For The Middle-Class Hamlet	23
Valjean and Javert	24
What Germany Saw	25
Sestina: Ending	26
Intuition in Butterflies	28
Moscow River	29
Counterrevolutionary Sonnet	30

St. Vasily's Cathedral: Winter	31
Sestina: Notes on a Small Revolution	32
Sestina: The Tower of London	33
Shipsong	34
Viet-Nam	35
Warplane	36
Why I Still Watch Star Wars	37
Towers of Babel: New York and Star Flight	38
Flying Fish	39
In the Stars	40
The Sea Like Fire, The Beaches Glass	41
When the Fleet Comes	58
Requiem with Interruptions	89
Bearing the Pattern	118

INTRODUCTION

I came to Michigan State University both to write poetry and to write fiction. Under Gordon Henry, (and also with the assistance of such teachers as Tim Powers and Joan Vinge, my instructors at the Clarion Writers' Workshop) I learned to shift my concentration from simple, plot-oriented stories full of visual "special effects" to stories centering on people. . . both human and inhuman. Dr. Henry taught me to develop my characters outside the bounds of a single story; to play with them in different situations. Irina Ivanovna has gone through two other incarnations on Vadagon than the one you see here. Joan Vinge and Tim Powers (brought to the University by Lister Matheson) taught me to delve for my characters' motivations; to consider them in terms of their loves and hates; wants and fears. From these lessons came the inner and social conflicts that face Sean Gyranhijjor.

Both Anita Skeen and Marcia Aldrich helped shape my poetry. Recognizing my love for wordplay, Professor Skeen helped me to loosen my poems, making the narrative flow more accessible to the audience (who, owing to the unfortunate circumstance of not being me, were often confused by my habit of trying to pack in three allusive references in a single line!) Dr. Aldrich, with her many different poetry assignments, motivated me to find new forms (among them the Sonnet Triune and the renga) to express myself in, and

taught me the importance of structure and cohesion in my poetry.

"Islanded in the Stars" is not just a catchy title, though it is that, and certainly intended to emphasize the science-fictional bias that appears in my work. "Islanded in the Stars" captures a theme central to most of my pieces; a paradox in the human animal. A part of the universe, but also, inevitably, apart from the universe. Tolkien's elves, upon awakening to life by the waters of Cuivienen, named this paradox most succinctly by calling themselves Quendi, or Speakers: we, like them, are the part of the Universe which speaks. Anything else which speaks is by definition included in this definition -- but is also, by the very act of speaking, separated from us. It is another that also speaks.

It is in the moments at which "apartness" between speakers is stretched; the moments in which the speakers seek (or are thrust into) a violation of their universal Apartheid that my pieces find their tension. This location of tension differs from that of many of my contemporaries in that it develops the speakers interpersonally, while much contemporary fiction develops its speakers intrapersonally. That is, I develop my speakers, or characters almost exclusively by showing them in interaction with other characters and with their worlds. For example, Dr. Emily Quirran is faced with death as a result of prolonged contact

with an alien mind. It is only through communication, not only with the (as she sees it) "primitive" Sunone priest, Wings-Over-Sun, but also with her friend Sandor, that she can begin to understand and overcome her problem. In so doing, she and Sandor realize their love for one another. Wings-Over-Sun and Dr. Quirran also manage to form a new basis of communication and respect between the races.

By contrast, in her short story, "Acts of Violence," Ursula Hegi develops the narrator and his mother through noncommunication. The more mother and son try to speak to one another, the less they understand one another, until finally, the story culminates in an act of violence which leaves the narrator gasping on the floor. He is overpowered by his mother, but does not comprehend her. The reader comprehends both, but this comprehension is accomplished through watching the characters alienate one another; not through watching them commune. Hegi develops the characters within themselves.

My fiction especially is greatly predicated on the idea of contact with the alien. Whether this is literal "alien contact" in the sense of extraterrestrial intelligence or contact with humans or a human society having a radically different Weltanschauung makes little difference; the portrayal of the contact with and the concomitant understanding between the "aliens" in question is what is important. From this exploration emerged not only the race of Sunones, whose strictures against surgery and practice of

reincarnation appear to be religious in nature to Humans, but also Marta Krovikian, the cheerleader-wannabe-turned-soldier who finds herself cast in the role of alien, and is forced to abandon either that role or her own sanity.

In my poetry, the tension of alien contact is seen throughout, although never between humans and what we would term "aliens," in the classic sense. Nevertheless, angels are met. Russia, that alien nation with whom our own has fenced and quietly warred for the last fifty years, makes an appearance. Even the family dog and my own relatives (who a lot of people are convinced are from outer space anyway) become alienated and then re-explored.

But all this is window-dressing and props. As one artist to others I invite you for a peek behind the set, and show you the foundations of the building, the ribs that hold the hull of the ship together. But to really appreciate the vessel I have built, you must see it from without, and move deeper in at the same time, and so I bring this introduction to a close. Go on, turn the page. What follows is much more interesting. Go.

Islandings

Spring Noon

In late morning heat
Sycamore limbs fall skyward:
Solid waterfall.

Bare limbs recall the winter
White ice in germination.

Awash in flat cloud
Wakes of the invisible
Ships retreat dockward.

Spiders hunting: eight-legged pearls
Flash blackly; beckon sunlight.

Reflected in pools
The sky peers into the sky
Through branchy netting.

Noon passes in a shadow,
Tilting dark blades to the east.

Buchenwald Reflections: 1995

It begins with a knock,
It began with a knock,

Gentle green knocks on the roof of the bus,
Fevered gray knocks on the door of the house,

Breaking my concentration,
Breaking the doorframe.

And the brakes whine in protest.
The dog, the baby, whined in fear.

We are led from the bus.
We were forced on the train.

We are met by a Stadtführer,
We were sent by the Staats Führer,

Shown the ruins of houses
Shown the Houses of Ruin.

And we spend awhile among them.
We were spent in piles among them.

Nothing grows from the ground
But the germs grew in our bodies.

But a few weeds that mock the stone
We cherished the weeds or anything green.

The earth seems burned.
It wasn't the earth we worried about.

The sun flew quickly, afraid to stay,
The sun sank, stealing our warmth.

Christmas

Old Jesse still talks about it
in his cicada-edged croak that
races to a meeting with entropy.

"That night with all the *lights*"
he calls it and the others nod
muttering in the code that old people use
that once squeezed puzzled glances from now-dead parents
back at the dawn of time.

It gets no better name from him.
Perhaps these sheep have eaten away his vocabulary
over the years --
so much fractal grass,
leaving a gritty stubble of sentences.

"That night with all the *lights*," oh, yeah
they murmur, traceless now of terror when
darkness turning inside out around us
left only a dozen frightened shepherds facing
the choir of storms.

Somehow the sheep (damnedest thing)
just raised their heads like everyday and
we, our faces in grass and toadstools prayed
living wool to be a shield against lightning.

This same staff I hold today in my hand
twisted like it wanted a better look, and even though
light was all the universe, I was sure I could hear
grass weeping under the cold weight of my shadow.

Fear not? The memory of impossible words
from somewhere inside flashing wings, so calm.
Instinctively believing I dared to look and

Some days I can still see the afterglare:
Elusive purple feathers

That night with all the *lights* they charged us
wielding soft, impaling words. Fifty stars grew faces:
 Glory to God in the Highest.
 Glory to God in the Highest.
 The Highest.
 The Highest.

Caught between heavens and earth, just listening --
of all the kingdoms only we were not yet part.
Eighteen different notes of light crawled up
my spine, a sounding board. Gone

so quickly I almost thought

I dreamed if I had not
heard the rocks sustaining their final note
basalt profundo
and known (not knowing how)
where to see the child.

God, I'd rather see the angels again than take that.
All the lights shrunk to nothing to him,
the One Who.

I woke in a cell in the city; fined ten shekels
for shouting in midnight streets something crazy
about a King.

I don't shout any more; the sheep need feeding,
but sometimes when all the others are out on far hills
I imagine myself again before those eyes in a grown
Man and in my lone and windcracked throat far from
any stage

I sing.

Friday

I think it was the trees that were most real that night.
Thick, knotted, brown, so *hard* trying
the limits of their forms, to grow
a century a second

it seemed, once He was there, to pass that slowly
my six wings stiff with the tension and gazing
so that rocks only days younger than
I really would cry out

I thought, if it might do some good, I would appear
to comfort Him, to tell Him, no, even here
among these false, cloudy sleeping men,
"*I am ready to go with Thee,*"

one of them mumbled, not knowing what he spilled from soft
lips
Decaying with disease that only I and He could see.
That one must have seen me and told
for it is written

I was there, and strengthened Him: I
Strengthen *Him*? Oh, of course! And after that
I slew the Enemy who coiled like poisoned gravity around
us, and with one hand gave God back the Earth,
hanging it upon

Nothing. I did nothing but watch the leaves, falling
early as the fires of humans, reckless in the spring
smelling of sulfur, they came with the Dark
Lights, with crackling voices,

Oh, my brothers and sisters (for once they were). But now
not
an instant did I hesitate to draw my long nozh and vred,
(as one of your time has said) my blade and heart
leapt as the Rock

(So He called him) raised sword and rushed them,
spirit, blood and flesh burning high together --
when He whispered, "Dost thou not think
that I cannot now pray to my Father and He
shall give me twelve legions of angels?"

I could see my name on his lips
as they trembled
so scared.

I said, no
not twelve.
Please, God
Just one,
Now.

And then they took Him. And then the trees and the rocks
And the Rock and I, we looked unseeing in the night, finally
into each other's eyes, little and littler brother.

And we ran.

Dead Man Laughing

Scarcely more than scenery now, but then

*Remember, we did not know what to think, what fear
they cast upon us with their eyes, like stars. . .*

*No, no, like pools of solid stone, robes carved of rock
and flowing, shining waves of heat,*

*But they were cold, remember? Cold like slate, as smooth
as ice giants, shining --*

-- reflecting --

*-- and all chilling smiles,
so cruel, as sharp and curved, like Scythian blades.*

*Yes, laughing like a razor in the moon, we fell before
those mouth-shaped edges, what worse could come
we thought, and bared our necks for killing as they opened.*

"Why do you seek the living among the dead?"

No more, no sense; we waited to understand,

(I wonder, did we even hear the words?)

*but turned with cry-filled throats to go our ways and then,
looked up, and saw
oh, God.*

*Those smiles become clear, of course
tears smash through ice*

*and joy through iron and now,
how impossible*

*unthinkable
not to laugh.*

Brötherdämmerung

The last time we went to war
We brothers bound
In brotherhood combined
Against you, clearing
The ammunition racks of our tall pine
That grew in the neighbors' yard, our
Ship of shells and cluster bombs
(Spiky balls of needles
And cones that smelled like board)
Waiting. waiting. waiting
For you
For you and her to appear
Around the horizon of the house.

Your shrieks smoked up
When we threw the fusillade
Of cones and needles
And we, not warriors
But gods unassailable laughed
At your shots that almost brushed my toe,
Faint echoes
Of our own barrage
So weak
Until

Your hands went white
Around the first branches, and your sister
Followed in your green wake
Through knives, I remember my bombs
Dwindling in the volume of fire
We poured down, I remember the ball of needles
Falling into your sister's face as she looked up;
Screamed and dropped, running for the house;
For Inside. For the domain
Of mothers and fathers.

You climbed on
We concentrated
Our fire on your head which blazed
A beacon in the late fall sun and you
Reached for me. I climbed, anxious
Not to share the fate of other gods
Shattered at the touch of earth. Eventually
You dropped, and turned your back
Still under our fire
While we watched,

We gods, we brothers and knew
It would soon be time for us
To go Inside.

Moviesynthesis

for my sister.

There is a half of a half of the sky
Hanging above us at sunset --
the terminator, astronomers call it, conjuring for us
pictures of steel endoskeletons and lasers.

I showed you that movie still
I have no idea why you liked it:
all explosives and blood and fire
so unlike you,
a tree seen through sequential autumns
turning colors in a spiral through time,
only little changes when we separate,
I missed that

when a year = a second then a tree = an explosion.

So maybe you have understood, after all,
and I am the slow one, only now seeing
the patient ways you have made
so much air and fire, light
into you in places
I cannot know.

Because we never see the whole sky.

Unblocked by the earth are stars:
just loci of probability, like trees
in a forest that fall
unseen.

What Avenger is

Avenger was
the name of Darth Vader's flagship
filling the 88mm sky with a satanic
red glow over white planets'
blood

called my name
in my darkest moments of childhood
hate I wanted to feel, possess, be
a ship metallic in the dark
night

terror in the sleep
of the wicked I would invent
crimes, make them pay, gutshoot single-handed
a burglar, caught alone in our
house

my cousin called
home the other night and told how
her ex-boyfriend used to play with her,
panted and sweated and she
fought

to no avail
I tried to conjure up the fire
that burned in the stars and lithium
fusion engines within myself
now

I find
that moviemagic does not change
halogen and neon to lasers
or bring avengers from hollow plastic
models.

Dogs: a Response

Dogs know stuff about things.

*. . .
They know who puts who "to sleep."*

--"Dogs," by Tim Seibles

It's not that they know
Stuff, though imitation comes so easily;
Deeply whirling brown eyes in lines
We complete into faces
Puckered up into kissing faces:

Good boy. GOOD BOY!

That's how well they hide it, their tongues
Hanging out, a limp, wet, pink over teeth. Someone
Ought to remember scabbards
Serve to hide their reasons for being.

Not-knowing can be a choice.

Who ever really knew any
One who understood the word
STAY!
When it mattered?

Dogs know what not to know, like
Kids. Know
Just enough
About fences to bark at you
Every day for twenty years;
Make you jump out of the soft warm
Morning coffee.
Instants of fear.

You get in your car and they smile behind
Chain-link: You can't touch
Us.

Think back to schoolyard dust and the bully,
Laughing. Sneer.
Barking.

Lock. Load. Aim.

Say, like his flabby, 300 lb. mother,
"Good boy."

Now. . .
squeeze.

Then laugh and fill the world.

Nana Who Lived Far Away

I lost another grandmother last night.
Right on schedule it seemed. We
see death only from the outside but
what I saw wasn't like death at all:

"Call for mail, one dead grandmother."
Other than the word, who could tell?
Hell, she lived two thousand miles away --

Gray and straight woman, a collection of
rough stories, polished by mom and dad
add something. But how could I miss
this woman? Such things should not be

the only substance of the near zero I
try to remember of her and make something, to build
willed sorrow: an elegy, a thing that *should* be.

Me, I have only a finished book, one more
lore collection, forever sealed and dry.
I lost another grandmother last night.

Signal Mountain Blackberries

To Virginia Dare Sain Cheshire (Mema) *in memoriam*
1900-1997

they burst in summer spheres of night
 from under leaves where fingers rove
 when hunger seeks a hunger's love
short fingers probe the branches' height.

they stain the cards that spin in hands
 that carded wool in firelight
 that playing under skin stretched tight
embellish tales of vanished lands.

they cluster sugared shot and shell
 dripping black and purple blood
 we cut the pie she thanks the Lord
a millionth time completes the spell

she holds for ninety-seven years.
 Twelve years since i had shared her sky
 my phone rings and blackberry pie
and card hands run between my ears.

this deck of hers flips, colored bands,
 flat faces sliding by unseen
 too quick to catch a purple stain
i wonder in how many hands?

Sonnet Triune

Grandfather -- (Grand)Son -- Father

So long ago I, once a mountain lord
sneaked off to find truth in the tales of sea
and after chased a motorcycle dream

The highway spread before me, like a gourd
Poured out in snaky fire so I could see

Roaring over the cities' tired gleam
To find the shore where sunrise cuts the blue

My Indian's dark flesh, cooled by the air
with me she thrummed beneath that moonlit sky
on our last night, I left her about two

In the morning, when I climbed the lighthouse stair,
The ocean crashed its greeting then and I

Boarding an anchored ship at birth, I sailed
she told me. Big and green with pride I rode,
Cream dribbling from my lips among the trees
poured out upon a western wind that wailed
She led me through a maze, where she had sowed
seeming eternal lace of glowing bees

To hold me close a shining sun upon
which fluttered batwing shadows, passing sad

I that night made a mask of fallen leaves
to walk away. She watched me like a gun
stared out like some great telescope gone mad
Tried not to show my fear, or how I grieve

But stand upon this wet and alien shore
Considering seagulls and how they soar

Coffee with Kim

Moons of cheap lighting in fans
Move in ripplishimmer ways; it's basic physics
Governing these two handled bowls.
Cappucino and chocolate, plain tea
(Lent strikes again, Kim's giving up coffee.
What's Lent doing in the middle of a semester, anyway?)
The cups
Dip up and down in semi-orbits, melting everything.

Like a combination meal
The parts all come together:
Pork with beans, eggs with bacon,
Coffee with Kim.
Small parts of things that allow the world --

A little conceit
On my part; the conversation
Is linguistics and classes and graduation and future and
Dances in and out of modulation with the jazz
That passes for the music of the spheres
In tiny universes like this.

The doors of night on the edge of vision
Are not quite open, and we drink to that;
To another victorious game of telephone tag
Where the two-dollar prizes sit steaming in front of us.

Locked here in a seven week moment
Until the coffee-laced now collapses, and
We'll be relegated to the virtual
Contact of screens.

My enemy my ally my friend,
Each the "each other" we keep calling.

Despite the fact that I can hum
Oh-bla-di, oh-bla-da with the best of them
I notice that alone at breakfast with the paper
I don't drink coffee anymore.

Stone Solo

One in the morning is green
with secret-agent shadows cast by telephone
buttons and digital numbers showing
oblivion time:

Not enough

That this is when you call me,
from Kansas or Spain
reminding me of summer and java;
asking about my girlfriend
but telling me about your new man how he
makes you feel: like skipping
across the surfaces of lakes
proves how close we are

reflections of stone, spun by
an unknown Thrower and we

fly skip
 fall kiss

water, but never in the same place
always just missing
each other with others
opposite sides of badly synced
mirrors that go on and on
without gravity or friction
to stop us

in this pool of night
where we are still
just friends.

Her Gift

- Zhui (Taiwanese)* 1. *You can have what you want.*
2. *A carved wooden plaque containing this message,*
traditionally displayed in homes.

You can have what you want.

It hangs
hovering on my wall,
the soft polished brown; curved wood
is her skin under lamplight and
the grain pervading, lines of force dancing
carving her fibers when
she walks, turns.

Through the blackbranded ideograms
canted like eyes,
run the teak microfilaments of
hair hanging like the crimson tassels;
closing my eyes I touch them,
feel her for an instant
like rain running in place, echoing
her laughter, her voice
struggles with my native tongue.
Broken English tinkles on the floor
scattering shattered syllables.

You can have what you want.

She gave it to me.

Soliloquy For The Middle Class Hamlet

Damned villains and dread lords fill all the air.
The smoky ghosts of bookshelves in the night

Mock me; mock my puerile papers strewn
from floor to desktop; scattered magazines

fill all the house. The dishes in the sink
mark still more sins of mine like diamond dust,

half-noticed and abrasive. It is I
who leave her finding stains and socks each day

somewhere. When will I learn to get it all
together? That's the question of *my* life

where shame comes in a million specks of gray --
not one true streak of pure and honest black

to gouge with red and wash between us. Just
forgotten chores and toilet seats left up

(I know she hates that) rub our edges; what
unspoken and unthought of penance fits

these crimes of mine that make a bodkin laugh
and beg to rather slink back to its sheath

than drink this shallow pool of me, lukewarm?
A thousand paper cuts? Mosquito bites?

Or being slaughtered by a horde of ducks?
Is this what I deserve? I, a mere boat

cast into seas where battlecruisers roam
with dark guns, speaking only with their fire.

One of them, she rides the storms to kill
or die in sunsets, ice, and glowing embers,

while I patch leaking seams, becalmed and still
in these horizons, all my sins remembered.

Valjean and Javert

"Men like you can never change,"
you most carefully do not say, but think,

Men like me can never change
and you narrow eyes over a bitter sigh knowing that

No, 24601
sins, mistakes, errors, cannot be forgotten because

My duty's to the law,
anyone should know this steep, wet island, honor:

you have no rights
once you have fallen off there is no return. You have

Come with me, 24601
ways of revenge, they cry out: silences, tones, thrusts of
speech.

Now the wheel is turned around
And I can only grunt pain, because you say

Jean Valjean is nothing now
Nothing even now. And

Dare you speak to me of crime
build artillery on the shore, just for me,

And the price you've had to pay
for our beachside house, now so alone and

Every man is born in sin,
dying. Except somehow you. You have not yet fallen,

Every man must choose his way
so you think, but here drowning it is clear

You know nothing of Javert
you are floating sightless beside me.

I was born inside a jail
I will not swim back to your shore, because

I was born with scum like you
only in the water can I even begin to wash;

I am from the gutter, too
though I drown in it.

What Germany Saw

was not

(in iron)

blood caked, foam drooled

(probably)

in ovens, tanks cored

ground melted to glass

only red and black spinning

great turning

steel rising, swords gleaming

a nation of victors

simple glory

Likewise what I saw

(in light)

was not

(hopefully)

sobs edged in madness, micron blades

stretched thousands of miles

winding, wounding code

across oceans

only gold and flame spinning

spiral turning

we rising, gleaming

"*Ein Reich der Zwei*," simple love.

How can we be forgiven?

Sestina: Ending

*Once there was a woman. . .
but I forget. . . she was. . .
I hope she will not come again.*

*I think she hurt me once but . . .
That was very long ago.*

I do not like to remember things any more.

--Ezra Pound, "La Fraisne"

The glass that was lightstained is broken:
A delusion of grandeur of sand,
And scintillations of thunder
Hide shards in each flagon of wine,
Transparent in slaughter of fields
Where her water flows into mine.

And this water, dark gathering, flooded the mine.
The engines on mountings lie broken,
Out of reach of the sun, playing in fields
Of gold that when round us like sand
Trickled madly in torrents of wine.
We rolled oblivious, to all, but the thunder

Comes swiftly, or else is not thunder.
And a gloryhole is not a mine.
When frozen, the sweetest of wine
Can't be drunk; it can only be broken.
At greatest need you can even drink sand,
And I did though surrounded by fields

Gone pale in her fever. She fields
All the armies ever boasted of thunder.
One by one in the passage of sand,
One by one, planting sniper and mine,
I slaughtered her forces. How broken
They bleed coughing thick clotted wine.

In this hot haze induced by no wine
I've lost track of the desert battlefields
Where we fought till she called me, voice broken.
I remember a time I loved thunder
In cool dawn, when her sword next to mine
Raised twin steel against worlds of mere sand.

Seeing clear now, this mountain of sand
I recoil from the memory of wine
And her future, so easily mine
Hangs a shadow thick over the fields.
At such cost even conquest in thunder
Could not pay for the sword-that-was-broken.

Empires built on sand and wine,
The fruit of my fields. Come quickly, thunder.
Hide in roaring waves this broken realm of mine.

Intuition in Butterflies

lying together, our hairs blend incestuously:
cables of exploded copper wire, extruded winding
crowns above two faces sharing freckles,
sharing hazel sharing eyes through
nucleic acids' accidental amours:
embarrassing
to be bent face to face, pressed
lip to lip in public:
we're not related

nor is this: I saw two butterflies today dive wrestling,
tickling, orbiting some dancing gust of air, green
deflowered leaves with pilots' licenses
drifting down in chase until another leaf
reached just before the earth and pulled them down,
then mating back to back as if afraid
to see their own green mirrored in an eye.

so that's why you left.

Moscow River

Moscow River, *Moskva ryeka*
Glinting green in even-sun
Even then she smiled upon me; my stay
Was only half-begun. I didn't know the word for "stay"
Or "laughter," "have" or "kiss" or "run."
Moskva ryeka, Moscow river
Glinting green in even-sun.

Moscow river, hardly noticed
Shimmersplashed with golden leaves
Listening to her liquid singing. Dark in silence,
She retrieves a laugh I thought had disappeared
A song that I had disbelieved.
Hardly noticed, Moscow River
Shimmersplashed with golden leaves.

Moscow River, frozen solid
In the length of winterwhite
Days as short as hammerblows that barely even
Crack the night. Learning each the other's language:
What we mustn't, what we might
Frozen solid, Moscow River
In the length of winterwhite.

Moscow River, cool and warming
White and blue in Apriltide
Took my hand and led me onward, and cataracted
At my side. Flowing in the moonlight falling
On us in an endless slide
Cool and warming, Moscow River
White and blue in Apriltide

Moscow River, *Moskva ryeka*
Glowing red in fall of sun
Sank beneath the Kremlin walls, night ended what
We'd just begun. The words I learned are useless now.
Meaningless -- except to one.
The one I left, The Moscow River
Dorogaya -- yarkiy son.

Russian: Darling -- bright dream.

Counterrevolutionary Sonnet: Moscow 1993

Wind driven in brief spirals, leaves of red
and gold bounce off the towers. Afternoon
is mourned from onion domes, the chanting lead
strains, pulling up the image of the moon.
I walk beside the wall that holds the men,
hands cold and jingling eighty rubles' change.
And equinox returns to us again
in squares of red and gold marked paper. Strange
how in the fall the colors stay the same
though arches rise to mark the sickle's tomb.
One more *Oktyabr'* lends the past its name;
Wind snatches at my burger in the gloom.
Makdonald's wrapper falls upon this shore,
Leaves swirl -- and I can't see it anymore.

St. Vasily's Cathedral: Winter

Olga Korbut should have trained her legs
In the metro, in the city's guts, where packed
Like villi in steel worms you try to breathe,
Haze thicker than in gyms or pine-branched saunas
Of vodka, beer, tobacco, men; all used
To gazing like spelunking sunflowers, safe
From falls until a voice (an angel recording)
Announces "*Stantsiya Okhotniy Ryad.*"
Where Marx's prospects were. The grimly tired
Zhigulis thud a contrabeat to doors
Hissed open. You, a constant sheen of sweat
Crawling down your face, sidestep through halls;
(Cold tiles of blue and beige) you hit the stairs
Just short of running -- up the subway wells --
And Kremlin walls look down, beneath their stars
Red, shifting in the winter morning rays.

Red Square is gray and curved. You start below
The Kremlin. Cobbles arc, a sculptured hill:
They form horizon's edge just ten feet up
And ninety yards away. You see the sky
Dip down to touch the wall where buried men
Lie opposite the world's oldest mall.
And on -- no, past -- the stones, a flash of gold
It rises as from stone, and you walk on;
In wings of powdered jewels: rocket carved
In brick, for. . . God! Five hundred years ago
Some genius taught a building how to fly. . .
Its launch is silent. Thunder only you
Can hear above the shouts of hawking guides
Orion beating skyward on his bombs
Prayers thrumming in your knees. And soon you'll go.

Look back,

Close.

Are those stairs

still on the ground?

Notes On A Small Revolution: Oct. 4, 1993

In the land where smoke is *dim*
You can ride in kilometers-long guns
Woven radially under the earth,
They erupt here and there on the surface.
I walked toward the building where red
White and blue shadow grey in the days

Full of old rain, in those first days
The words, like the sights still were dim
As if heard in the deep infrared.
I was young, and had never heard guns
Break the fragile American surface
Tension held by the powers of the earth.

In Moscow, cement encased earth
Shook. A sudden compression of days
Swept like waves through a watery surface:
Gray streets buckling with age carrying dim
Sounds of faces, like faraway guns
On the sea, throwing salvoes of red

Like the trees, how they clung to the red
Leaves blowing and scorching the earth
Said their speaker, and promised them guns,
Waved before them the bright steel, days
Barbed, no longer impossibly dim,
Hunting memory, watching it surface.

One more high shout plunged through the surface
Of wallowing murmurs in red
Stabbing courage and vodka and *dim*
Fear and *rodina*, love of the earth
Breaching! Seventeen thousands of days
Brought to death by harpoon-training guns.

And a roar like clairvoyance of guns
Crying, "Now is the time to resurface."
Broke out under the weight of the days
Piling sunset on sunset, all red
Magma birthing to shatter the earth
My feet moved, and all the rest is dim.

Sixteen revolutions of the earth, just days
Later red flowers shared the street surface with me,
A dim watcher, smelling echoes of guns.

dim: smoke
rodina: motherland, home country

Sestina: The Tower of London

Loquitur: *En* Queen Elizabeth I Tudor, dying.

1558

But we always come back to our Tower
Rising up through our island's great mist
That shrouds suns without number. My face
Crowned in red and gold -- ah, the old dragon
Henry laughs at the break of this morning,
The beginning and end of my wait

1577

On the throne. He said nothing of weight,
Of the shore-rooted shadows that tower
Over ships that sail out of the morning
And into the ravening mist.
He knew nothing of riding the Dragon
When I feel its fire in my face.

1588

Now I feel this wind in my face
Like chilled lead on this hill where I wait
For the shattering death of the Dragon,
For the sight of the galleons' twin towers.
Words as light, to men grey as the mist
I speak, feeling the coming of mourning.

1601

Two Richards are with me this morning
On this stage, they use me as their face
Blankly painted. How could I have missed
Them? The Second is I, and I wait
For the drumbeats to sound from the Tower
Like the laugh of the Third, a mad dragon.

And my hands are the claws of that dragon
Curved and hard, they tap stone in the morning
Whose severed light slants on the Tower.
But whose hands? And whose is this face
That says nothing; does nothing but wait
For the blade, dirty gray like the mist.

1603

Now my lungs heavy, full of old mist
Mock the sounds one expects from the dragon
Island rulers, and I feel the wait
Lifting with the beginning of morning.
As she sets, the moon changes her face,
But we always come back to our Tower.

Wait, mist.

On the Tower is a dragon
I have waited many mornings to face.

Shipsong

**You are born in wine and water, named by breaking
into glass, the sheets of water shattering
welcome in waves around your roundness, calling**

**low, the rhythm of your screws strides out
light drum beats in ocean, a snare
to the slow double bass of lunar time**

**rising black and midnight above
The graves of your sisters, a tilting floor
for dancing before retiring in ocean beds**

**where you make love,
make war, make legends, make madmen
dive after you to draw Eurydice
with sonar, keening
for you in a dark measured in tons
per square inch.**

***Titanic.*
Lusitania.
*Andrea Doria.***

***Arizona.*
Bismarck.
*Hood.***

Viet-Nam

Viet-Nam comes to me like a lover:
I smell her in the folds of blankets,
I see her shadow; an arching tree in the moonlight:
Hamadryad. Part of the scenery
of the male.

I feel betrothed
to her, to a myth of jungles and ganja
of growing up too soon or not at all:
Stallone Rambo and Dalton Trumbo threatening
like Charlie, like tunnels, like black
pajamas waiting with assault rifles.

She stalks me and I
am somehow flattered, even though
I prefer to look at others: Ardennes. The Bulge.
Guadalcanal. Iwo Jima: there was valor, there glory, but she
keeps showing up in tales read and written:
Like the girl you hang out with for years
because you're just "good friends."
Suddenly you notice -- she's part
of all the best stories.

She sits beside me laughing
at herself, at me, at those who claim her
(and know her no better than I)
an excuse for disillusion among those
who never were illusioned.

When it rains I fear her; the lightning
reawakens rumors of her youth, of schizophrenia
and death let loose like wolves among the boys
(so old now) and I hide myself from her; I know
enough to know I do not know her. The endless water
stirs legends of sleepless pouring, touchless wounds
blood or water, flowing unstoppably away. . .

I do not know her this way; to me
she is the familiar partner, crawling in
at night beside me; the accustomed lover I
cannot imagine her
not being there.

Warplane

gone roiling through grey it moves

on artifice thunder

fueled by *dino-saur*
(= thunder lizard)
bones distilled

now repeating
sounds of their death
repeat

the meteor's roar and a

flickering nonshape;
departing exhausts

collapse in pencil clouds
of drifting frost.

Why I Still Watch Star Wars

We drift in the dim hall of mostly space
On the dark side of the force
Flowing through us, binding us, in these scarce
Padded cinema chairs that protect
Us from the ineffable thrust
That strings the stars, like dust
In momentary cobwebs, pulling
Us into the other dimension.

I've got a bad feeling about this.

There's something alive in here,
And Han Solo was right when he said:
"It's your imagination, kid."
So many parts of America and childhood,
Swirled and spiraled in; now, with a long time ago
In a galaxy far, far away.

Or maybe it's just
Sitting beside you speculating
"You think a princess, and a guy like me. . . ?"
Lines ricochet between shadows, ghosts
Of dreams and what
I want to say

"You mean you've never heard of the *Millennium Falcon*?"
Should you have? Only if
You want to feel as I do
Because otherwise, what a piece of junk it is
When a little boy, his old man and their god
Save the world and I grin.

Ridiculous, it may be
But when, I ask in the sunset
Has it been otherwise? It is just this
That keeps me standing, staring quickly crosseyed
At the horizon until I see
Me under two suns in a desert sky
Waiting for stars.

Towers of Babel: New York and Star Flight

Driving from Jersey, New York seems to launch itself,
holding
Moments from liftoff, the fog pooling thick round the bases;
Rising from engines quiescent till recently, folding
Multiple moonshots in seventeen seconds of stasis.
Gravity's music goes forte approaching the center,
Curves the light in on itself just like Einstein suggested.
It
Speaks of mad poets, or else a mad, gambling Inventor --
Photons compress down to gammas and then are digested. Yet
Under the firepits where we wait the silence disguises
Longing for towers uncatchable, faith not quite dying
Sunset on sunset; we know that the sun also rises
Ending our liturgy: "*one day we'll find ourselves flying,*"
Whisper the dreamers while gravity holds them in thrall,
Praying for launch, exaltation, explosion, for fall.

Flying Fish

**Just before rainbows
Strike exaltation from wings
The ocean lets go.**

In The Stars

The Sea Like Fire, The Beaches Glass

by

G. Scott Huggins

The bonshrike plant quivered under Irina Ivanovna's fingers. She held it by the tip of the branch, the branch that -- almost -- resembled the springy wood that she remembered from her father's dacha outside Moskva. Not wood, but like young trees, the shoots quested upward from the soaked, black earth, from the chyornozyom.

It was her color too, now. The jet hands holding the only slightly greener needles of the bonshrike still had the power to surprise her. Like garden, like gardener, she thought, varying the English saying. A good variant? As with trimming the plant, there was no way to know until she had tried it in practice. She rolled the phrase in her mouth again. An inapt simile, she decided. There was no black earth on Vadagon, save that in this greenhouse.

The plant's shaking ceased. Expertly, she tied it off, and released it. The plant sprang violently into its new shape, clipped and bladed frond-spikes protruding upwards, reaching toward the bluing sky. It was a good oxygen-producer. Instant bonsai, people called it; the plants

responded in seconds, not days, to the ministrations of the artist. Everything happened so quickly, here. Except the days, Irina thought. Rigel's actinic torch was purple, almost motionless, on the horizon.

She sat back, and the footsteps that she had earlier ignored continued. Then stopped.

"I thought I would find you here," said Galya.

Irina froze. But she had known that this time would come. She had not expected it now. She had not expected it in her garden.

"Vladimir was not here, and you did not answer the door, so I came in."

And how did you know that my husband was not here? Irina did not ask. It did not matter how she knew. Galya was not the type to admit to things.

"I am surprised you did not come sooner," Irina said. She did not turn. She was surprised by her own calm; the clarity of her thought. There was fear there, yes, but anger as well. It supported her; drove her to speak: "I would have gotten in touch if I had known where you were." If I had known for a fact that you were.

"There were. . . complications," Galya's voice wavered for the first time, under the influence of some strong emotion, Irina could not tell which. "I could not come for Seryozha until I knew. . . where we might go."

Irina felt her eyes widened, and almost she whirled on the woman. Not even to find out whether her own son was

alive? Or did she know? And how? Irina said nothing. Somehow, she had always been certain that Galya Isaakovna was alive. It wouldn't have been like her to die, certainly not at the Zamyorzlaya Bitva. She shuddered. The Americans simply called it the Glass Beach. An easier name, from an easier language. An easier people.

Had it truly been easy for the Americans, sitting there in their high castle? She looked up. Through the roof of the greenhouse, a bright star hung overhead. Raphael Semmes, almost as large as Rigel in the sky, if nowhere near as bright. She felt a sneer tug at her mouth.

"And?"

"And what?"

"Where will you go?"

"Liberty."

Irina closed her eyes. Before, it had been an effort not to turn to face her former friend. Now, she did not want to. In her mind's eye, she could still see Galya as she had been after Landing, as they had been together: two girls with more brains and stubbornness than sense, sitting out late into zenithnight. They would twist each other's hair into outlandish shapes in the harsh blue starlight, making bets on how long it would be before Isaak Borisovich came out to yell at his daughter and her friend the kryestyanka, peasant, whom she would not give up seeing. Yes, before: that was the word. Before Irina had gotten bored of spending every waking hour discussing who ought to

marry who, and before Galya had gotten bored with everything else. Before Rigel had been so hot, when the Sujarto Process had still held its invisible ozone fence up against that pinpoint furnace.

Even as they had drifted apart, they had always been there for one another. But Irina did not know if she could retain her memory, her vision, if she looked at Galya now.

"You will go to the Polar Chain with the Americans?" She would not call the ragtag new colony Liberty.

"Where else can I go?" Now there was bitterness in Galya's voice. "Where else can I live?" She paused. Did she want an answer? Then her voice softened, slightly. "Where is Seryozha?"

Irina caught a breath. Did Galya know? Wouldn't she have to? "He and Irinochka are outside. I told them to come back before it got too dark. Irinochka has an interesting definition of 'too.'" Please, Bog, let her disobey tonight. This was going to be bad enough without Seryozha here. Rigel hovered, frozen. Days lasted a long time on this world of Vadagon -- Waterfire. Soon evenday would be over, and evennight would begin. And then the black, jeweled sky of nadirday. . . seventy-two hours from starrise to starrise. Not a world made for us.

"Will they be all right?" Galya asked. The tone of the question told Irina that she didn't know, and probably hadn't even given it a thought. Same old Galya. But surely, looking at Irina's own skin. . .

Like thunder out of the clear sky, Irina realized that Galya hadn't yet seen her skin. The housecoat covered her feet while she was kneeling, and her hands were in front of her. I could tell her how it was, Irina thought, but would it make a difference?

The panic in the prefab pods that had once brought the first colonists from Earth (in another incarnation, a lifetime ago, called Ivan Grozniy) was restrained, but always present, as was the antiseptic smell that pervaded the hospital section. People shouldered past each other, like something out of a painting: Escher mixed with Dali perhaps. It was as if the shadows had come off the walls, and no one had the authority to tell them to return, to fade back into flatness. Only a few people wore the deep tan of sea-farmers. Mostly, they were white as the sky. . . or black as the kelp in shallow sea-beds. All moved with a restrained fear; an urgency.

Irina kept telling herself that it was better than despair. Wasn't it?

A doctor, red hair bursting from his black scalp like a fountain of lava, disconnected the IV drip from Sergei's tensed arm and put a skindage over the place the needle had been. Irina let the boy's hands go, and he started to wipe away his silent tears, breath shuddering between his lips. Already his skin had taken on a deep brown color, even though he was still pale with fright.

"You've been very brave, Seryozha," Irina said. There was no way to tell if the words had done any good. Where was Galya? A week ago, she had left him, while she saw to family matters, and Irina hadn't cared. It was difficult to care about anything when everything you knew was most likely going to die in a couple of years.

The last week had changed everything, and Galya was nowhere to be found.

Irina's hands were tired from holding Seryozha's, and she stretched them. Almost completely black, now. Her stomach rumbled.

"You'll want something for that," the doctor said, handing her three packages each about the size of a hand computer. "Concentrated rations. They'll abate the hunger."

"There's enough here for almost three days," Irina protested.

"You'll never notice it," the doctor said as he helped Sergei off the bed. "Can't force the body to produce melanin at that rate without cost. As all great space explorers should know, 'There Ain't No Such Thing As A Free Lunch,' so you'll need about three lunches, breakfasts and dinners to get back the energy your body is going to burn darkening you. Don't skimp. You or the kids." His bright green eyes burned into her, all seriousness. "You could drop dead of malnutrition if you don't eat it all. And

that's just to get you past the melanin enhancement. You should eat normal meals, too."

"That's not likely to happen," Irina said.

"Possibly not," said the doctor, looking away, voice dropping. "But you should be all right if you stay in your homes and lie low. If worst comes to worst. . . well, the folks out in the boats are our people, too, after all." He moved off, calling a nurse to help him get the next person - a big, German-looking man wearing uniform -- into the bed.

Our people? Irina shook her head. Your people, doctor. Americans. Well, mostly Americans. There were Germans. . . Russians, even, she forced herself to admit, who would listen to anything.

Irina hurried the children outside into the near-vacant Prizyemlyagrad streets. The sky was lightening to white, and Rigel was just below the horizon. It was a quiet of more than dawn. A line of people, pale white people, stood at the entrance to the grounded module that served as the hospital. They looked at Irina and the children. Some gazes were steady. Some hopeful. Some twisted in. . . anguish? Fear? All were silent. On the roofs of Prizyemlyagrad, the populace waited, watching the sea.

The bay was encircled by ships. At least a hundred ships. Everything from one-man skiffs and aircoral canoes to two big cargo haulers that had come with the Americans in Raphael Semmes.

Somehow, even nine hundred light-years away, one could not get away from Americans. She snorted and quickened her pace, forcing the children to trot to keep up.

"Mama, I'm hot," Irinochka said. "Can't I take this stuff off?"

Irina paused, gauging the star's glow. "Yes, but when I say it goes back on, no arguments. You too, Seryozha." There was a silent nod as the children doffed their long, loose, white robes. Would they suffice? Irina knew there had been desert people on Earth who had fought the sun this way. But Rigel was no friendly sun. No one called it "the sun." When people got burned in the heat of zenithnight, it was called starburn. And that had been before the scientists and most of the Colonial Government had seized control of the Raphael Semmes and brought the artificial ozone layer tumbling down.

As Irina led the children inland, the signs of human habitation began to fade. A single road led up onto the heights of the island of Novayalta.

"Why do we have to get our skins turned black just because we're going for a walk?" Seryozha asked.

Before Irina could answer, her daughter sighed, "Mama already said, dummy. We might have to be out during zenithnight. You want to get starburn?"

"No, but why do we have to be out at all? The doctor said we should stay home."

"That's where we're going. Home. On the other side of Novayalta," Irinochka said, primly.

If it is still there at all, Irina thought, and checked herself. This was no time for Russian pessimism; it was very unlikely that the dissenting minority of the Colonial Government had been able to divert any forces from its blockade of Prizyemlyagrad. And the scattered homesteads on the far side of the island were not attractive as a military target. Thank Bog Vladimir loved solitude the way he did. Perhaps he would even be there waiting for them. Irina shook her head. Her xenobiologist husband was halfway around the planet, planting remote biomonitors; he probably didn't even know about the Rebellion. No, that isn't fair, she chided herself. He's almost certainly frantic with worry and on his way back home at top speed.

"Maybe it's your home. But it's not like there's not room enough to stay in Prizyemlyagrad. Anyone can check out a room if they need to. The doctor even said so." Seryozha spoke with the stubbornness of a child grasping the obvious.

Before they started using the modules for barracks, yes, thought Irina. She said, "The doctor may have been right. But I want to be sure."

Seryozha and Irinochka shared a look. When adults wanted to be sure it usually meant that being a child was about to get awfully tedious.

"If it weren't for the stupid Americans, we could at least take a boat," said Seryozha.

To this, Irina heartily agreed. Well, half-heartily, anyway. There were American defenders on the beach. It had been the Americans who had foretold the destruction of Vadagon's biosphere, the instruments of the Semmes that had shown the inevitable result of the artificial ozone layer that protected the Human colonists -- and was killing the native life.

The colony had been presented with Hobson's ancient choice: keep the ozone layer in place, and die with the native life, or take it down, and die of radiation-spawned cancers. For nearly an Earth year, the colony had been face-to-face with its own death.

Five days ago, the news that Vadagon need not die, the news that ought to have had the populace dancing in the streets, had sparked armed rebellion throughout the colonies, and brought the hastily-assembled fleet to besiege Prizyemlyagrad.

Not all Americans were idiots who didn't understand basic science. Just most of them.

"Why won't they let us take our boat?" asked Irinochka.

"Because they may want to use it."

"But that's stealing."

Irina sighed. How to explain to a ten-year old that what was about to happen was far worse than theft? That on an ocean world, any boat was automatically a military asset? That just because a team of scientists and security personnel had already taken over the Raphael Semmes and

reversed the Sujarto Process didn't necessarily mean people still wouldn't fight over whether it ought to be done?

How to explain the implications of their new skin color? That many people -- especially Americans -- had come to this world to avoid people who looked like they did now? How to explain racial and color hatreds to a child who had never met anyone from a different race?

Maybe the doctor was right. Maybe everything would be fine. But the police and few armed men on the beach couldn't possibly hold off that fleet.

Irina had listened to the stories of her great-uncle, when he spoke of his time in the Russian army on Earth. She doubted very much that the doctor had heard similar stories. He was an American.

The sky lightened. A purple spark had appeared behind them, brightening rapidly towards the blue. From behind them, there was a crash. Another. Then answering crashes.

"What's that?" The children turned to look toward the distant beach.

"Don't look back," said Irina. "You know better than to look toward Rigel." She quickened her pace, and handed them the food packs that the doctor had given them. That will keep their eyes off Rigel. And off the fact that their friends' parents are killing each other. But as they moved deeper inland, the apathy with which the children picked at their food told her she had been wrong.

"Irina? Will they be all right out under the star like that?" Galya's imperious tone forced Irina from her reverie. She turned, and forced herself to look.

Galya stood before her, dressed in a long white robe, her face and hands like leather. Old leather. Her eyes were clear and bright, but her hair hung, white, brittle, and limp, like a dead wig. Two deep scars pitted her forehead, an angry, sick white. Irina felt the word melanoma form in her mouth, felt the deadly roundness of it on her tongue. As she watched, the wrinkles realigned in an expression of horror.

"You. . . Irina, you. . ." Galya's mouth worked.

"I see you've decided to stay here on Novayalta." She was fighting for composure. "They must have gotten the new bl. . . melanin facilities up in record time."

Irina said nothing, just waited. Galya was beginning to see the fact that stared her in the face.

"You did get. . . it done here, didn't you? Not before. . ? You said they'd be all right with you, the children, you didn't. . ?"

"What was I supposed to do, Galya?"

Tears began to form in Galya's yellowish eyes. "You couldn't. Not to my son. He was my son!"

"Then where the hell were you?" Finally, she said it. "Do you think I wanted the responsibility; wanted to bring him along? You must have seen what was happening, so where did you go?" The greenhouse glass vibrated with echoes.

"Where did you go?" Galya screamed back. "Vasily searched and searched. . ." she trailed off, as if unable to comprehend what she'd just said.

Irina felt herself nodding, the anger coursing through her like flaming water, like *Voda-ogon'*, like the planet's name. Yet her voice was soft. "So Vasily was there. With the fleet. And you knew it was coming. Rebellion. Why didn't you take Seryozha with you? Didn't Vasily tell you what would happen?"

Galya said nothing.

"What did you think I would do?"

"You. . . you were supposed to stay. . . Vasily said his son would be. . . be safer. . . with hi--"

And Irina felt her anger drain, like one of Vadagon's sick, weak tides. Galya had never really been a conspirator, or a Rebel. She was just weak.

"Why didn't you stay?" Her words were a plea.

"And be part of Zamyorzlaya Bitva?" The words were cruel, but they seemed forced out of her. "Bozhe, Galya, it was a war zone! I had to take the children out!"

And I knew the Americans would do it. And she was once more halfway up the side of Maliy Ararat, pushing the children's screaming faces and her own into the dirt as the hell of zenithnight had (impossibly) brightened and a heavy hand of warm air had pressed them down, down, into the earth. Zamyorzlaya Bitva: The Frozen Battle.
Kristallwueste. The Glass Beach. All that was left of the

place where man had first touched this world. Friends. Family. History. All destroyed when the Raphael Semmes' com laser had fired on the Rebel-controlled city. The ruby beam had flickered, dimmed and dancing through the mushroom cloud made by rock converted instantly to steam. The town, the beach. All fused to glass. Melted.

Too parched in the scorching waves of zenithnight to answer their whimpering questions, she had led the children, silently on. By the time they had reached this house, all three of them had been badly starburned, exhausted, and dehydrated, through robes and melanin-enhanced skin alike.

"And what were you doing?" Irina heard herself say. Her voice was calm and flat and deadly. Galya actually winced. "Vasily was in that fleet, and you let me wait there for him with my daughter and your son. You thought that was safe? You thought I was safe? When you knew the Americans. . ."

"The Americans?" Galya snarled. She spat. "The Americans caused it all, destroyed, burned, killed them like animals! Destroyed our city, our homes! It is all the fault of the proklyatiye, yebyonniye Amyerikantsiy!

Irina stood rooted to the spot, hearing the condemnation that had been in her own thoughts tumble from the mouth of this haggard, ugly woman, whose skin color was more important to her than life. All the fault of the Americans. I have said it myself. But which Americans?

The ones in the ships, or the ones in the starship? Do I even know?

"And where are you going now?" Irina heard herself ask. "Liberty?" She sneered the word. "With Americans? With your son, who looks like me? Will you reverse the enhancement? Leave him naked before Rigel?"

"At least he would be himself again. He would be beautiful again. . ."

Irina gaped. She could not help herself. "Beautiful? As you are beautiful? How long would that last, even at the Pole? Look at you!" She pointed to the glass wall of the greenhouse. A wavering, distorted orange figure looked out at them. "Or would you take him up to Raphael Semmes, where the rest of the Americans have gone?"

Galya gave her a look of pure hatred, and once again, Irina felt a sort of disgusted pity. That's where Galya had been. Trying to get a berth on the Semmes, which was being hastily converted into a city in space. Of course she had been rejected. The widow of a Rebel fisherboat captain and the daughter of a dead Russian colony founder. No real education. You're just the kind they don't need up there, Galya.

"You can't get away from the Americans, Galya. Or your son's skin color. Or mine. They are here to stay." She felt her own tears well up. How it hurt to say that. To admit it to herself. But there was more to Russia, more to Germany, and even America than skin color. Her family had

known that, hadn't they? The crew of the Semmes had thought so. Hadn't they?

"The Americans. . ."

"They did what they had to do." It was like ripping her own guts out to say the words. "The colony was too small to stand a real war, and you know it." She repeated the words like a mantra, the excuse others had given her, when she had sneered at them. Now she knew the words were true, but they were no less hateful. No less guilty.

Galya's eyes were cold, and she could read the thoughts out of them. Traitor. American-lover. Chyornaya. It was easier to take than she had thought, and at the same time worse than she had ever imagined.

Children's voices shouted laughter, far outside the greenhouse, just barely audible. Galya's head snapped around, and there was fear and thwarted love etched in her face.

"He's still your son, Galya. Where will you take him?"

"I. . ."

Galya looked toward the door as if it would bite her. The children were taking their time. They were still in the brush outside the house. "I will. . . I must. . . must make arrangements. I will come back. I will."

She turned and walked quickly from the room. Irina started forward, then stopped. Her hands fell.

After a while, she turned back to the bonshrike plant.
Its needles quivered, waiting for her touch. Waiting to
change in an instant. Waiting to be changed.

The End

When The Fleet Comes

by

G. Scott Huggins

My wife turns gently beside me in the dark warmth of our bed; the smooth rippling of her fine scales against the skin of my arm and side are enough to bring me fully awake; I open my eyes to the wan light of the sun through the dimglass.

In these shadows it is all but impossible to tell our skins apart; bluegray scale and pinkish-tan skin blur together in the middle of the otherwise photorealistic wash that is our bedroom. I am awake, completely. It's a trick I've always had. Ajna wakes more slowly and later, so I am careful as I roll out of bed and walk into the kitchen on my toes.

This walk is something I've learned from a lifetime of being around Hrredin. I can't do it while wearing shoes, of course. In public I'm confined to the flat, heel-toe gait of Humans, but at home or in private company I come to my

toes without thinking. I've surprised many Hrredin that way. They've told me so.

I go to work an hour before Ajna does. It's already 1500: morning. I shower and dress quickly.

A look through the refrigerator provides me with the last slice of a piyu flank which I wrap with a length of leaf. Harsh green and blood flavors mix. No Human can be a connoisseur among the Hrredin, nor can one survive without some vegetable matter. I'm just wiping my mouth when I hear Ajna step into the kitchen behind me.

She is smiling at me, but her pointed teeth and deep, compound eyes are only half-showing; Ajna is not a morning person. She grips her nightcloak with all eight fingers, as if it is sleep itself that she can hold on to. Her bright red crests are folded back against her scalp. She stretches in a yawn, arching her narrow spine.

"Good morning," I say to her. "Big day today?"

She scratches an eye. "Not as big as for you. Happy Fleetday, Sean." Now she smiles wider. She draws from the pocket of her cloak a small bauble and hands it to me.

My stomach knots and I feel my face grow hard as I take it.

It is a little thing. A ball of glass surrounding another ball of blue-painted ocean with continents picked out in green. On almost invisible supports, two large, blocky battleships slowly orbit the model planet. In

transparent red Latin letters are the English words: "When The Fleet Comes."

I consciously ease my grip on the thing. "You're not serious?" I hear myself say, fighting a storm that threatens to spill over my mind and out through my lips.

Ajna's crests flare; she senses that I am troubled, but does not know why. "Why not? It's an official holiday now. I know only the Human bureaucrats get off work, but it's your holiday all the same."

The bottom is emptying out of the world. "Is that how you think of it?"

"Well, you don't talk about it much, so I can't say it's our holiday, but. . . "

"I don't talk about it at all!" I am surprised at my own vehemence. I am squeezing the ornament again. "This is. . . not mine. I don't spend one day of the year crying for Earth, or making those horrible attempts at music, or poisoning myself in the streets until I vomit, all because of a dead world."

There are no tears in Ajna's eyes; there cannot be, but her face is closed and withdrawn in sorrow. But not for herself.

"I know you don't," she says. "Perhaps it's time you did."

"What?" I cannot believe what I am hearing. I look desperately at the clock. 1550. "I. . . don't have time to discuss this. I have to go. I'll be late. I love you."

"Good-bye, Sean," she says sadly. She turns away, walking toward the bathroom. I am left, holding the ornament. I give it a last, hateful look, and then walk out the door. On the way down the hall to the elevator, I drop it in the trashcan.

Down on the ground, the streets of Dreyudan are less than half-full as I walk to the maglev station. Aliens going about their daily lives.

I wince at the thought. Aliens. People I've known, or might have known, all my life. My adopted people, and beautiful: silver-gray, finely scaled skins; large, sensitive compound eyes; crests of red, purple, gold. They walk on their toes and the balls of their feet. Long, long ago, when I was a child, I saw Human women at a party unconsciously trying to imitate that walk by using shoes set with long posts at the heels. They were not half so graceful.

I am Hrredin. By choice; not by birth. I speak Pliya better than I speak English, for all that my walk is flat and I have hair on my head, and smooth, light-tan skin. I don't think about it any more than I think about my inability to truly see ultraviolet.

And my wife, whom I love, has just reminded me -- violently -- that I am an alien on her planet. I press my identity ring up against the gate and climb the shallow steps to the train platform. Ugly suspicions begin to flit

around in my head. Perhaps it is time you did. What did Ajna really mean?

We married later in life than most people. I was twenty years old (although one of my few Human friends had insisted on sending me a card commemorating my thirtieth birthday. How anyone measures Earth years anymore baffles me: they're only about two-thirds as long as a Hrredin year); Ajna was twenty-one. We were content with each other, and did not want children. We'd discussed that problem in detail before we were married. Has she changed her mind? She could, of course. Of all the women in the world, Ajna could do that.

Hrredin mate for life -- when a couple first experiences intercourse, their pheromones imprint on one another, making sexual relations with another literally impossible. But I was Human: imprinting would not occur. Her egg-brother had reminded me of that in a private corner at our wedding, teeth slightly bared, just short of the white smile that invited a fight.

"So, Sheyaan," Thijna had said, mangling my name on purpose, "it seems you have won her. For a while at least."

I felt my eyes narrow. Marriage was for life; everyone knew that. Our marriage vows had not been changed because of my biology. What did he mean?

He read the question even out of my alien eyes. "When she comes to her senses, I will be there. Many would consider that this is not a marriage at all, no matter what

has been said." And he had whirled away, crests flat with frustration. I knew he was telling the truth. As a lawyer, he probably knew just which people would have to consider it so to make it true.

Ajna had been furious when she had learned of it. Egg-siblings were close, but Thijna had been grossly out of line. Or so she had said then. Does she still think so now? Why would she remind me of this annual madness that the Humans down in the Quarter celebrate? Or suggest that I join them? I shudder.

The train has arrived; it hovers in the pit. I join my fellow passengers in stepping aboard. A few polite smiles flicker between us. Everything seems more detailed, more important today than on any day before this. Is that contempt I see in my neighbor's eyes, the way he stands there, tall in his winter coat and work skirt, orange crests spread wide in the morning air? Two women whisper together and I nearly glare at them. Are they talking about me?

I tell myself I am being ridiculous. I did not think like this yesterday. Especially about Ajna. Why would she deliberately hurt me?

There are two other aliens in the car. One is a mountain of hair. I don't recognize the species, but then, Dreyudan is a starport city. The other is a Human. Short, shorter than me. He smiles nervously at me; a big Human smile with the corners of his mouth touching his ears. He

takes a couple of steps toward me even as I will him to remain where he is.

"Vy konyechno nye gavaritye parusski?" It sounds like someone asking for something he knows he won't get. I don't look at him as I answer, in Pliya.

"I don't understand. Sorry."

"Ee-it iys nothing," he says in the same tongue, heavily accented, as the maglev stops, but his face falls. A lonely look. He says something that sounds like, "Kogda flota vyernyotsa," and leaves. I am finally able to wrap my confusion and worry into a combination of counting stations and wondering what language the Human had used. I manage to keep my mind on my work for the rest of the day.

I do this until I notice that the clock reads 3600. It is time to go home. To Ajna. To my wife whose ornament lies in a wastebasket on the floor of our building. And whose meaning lies hidden.

I have closed down my terminal and am walking toward the maglev station. I tell myself again that I am overreacting. I know Ajna. She loves me. She has never suggested that she considered marrying a Human a mistake, or anything different from marrying a Hrredin.

Until now.

I hesitate at the station gates, identity ring half-raised. Silver-gray, finely-scaled people move around me, like water around a stubborn rock. I decide that I need

time to think. I will walk to the next station, and then go home.

The streets are cold and not very crowded, yet not as cold as they might be. Dreyudan is sufficiently north not to be troubled by severe winters, and the buildings block the wind the mountains don't.

I've nearly decided what I will say to Ajna when I hear the shouts. High voices yelling. I quicken my stride and turn the corner. I stop.

A severe gray building looks out over the brown dust of a schoolyard fenced in by a low rim of glassteel. Old plastic poles and exercise equipment litter the hard ground. And in the middle, three children surrounding a smaller one, who is lying on the ground.

"You want some more of this, you piece of shit?" yells one of them. "What's that? I didn't hear you!" The smallest of those standing punctuates his words with a kick. His victim moans and the other two laugh. I freeze, mouth going dry in spite of my age.

There were never enough places to run in the corridors of a Human Lifeship. No place for children, cramped in the small rooms, to escape without incurring the wrath of the Spacers; grim men prematurely aged by helplessness and defeat, leading what was left of the Human race to some other place in the giant shells that crept along, just barely faster than light.

I had almost gotten away that time. I was now faster than Vlad and his cronies could have believed. If only the grate had held and I had not fallen practically in the middle of them.

Dazed by the impact in the full gee of the Outer Shell, I could do nothing as Vlad released a high, braying laugh: "Damn, it be raining fatboy pieces of shit today." And then it was all fists and blood and crying. I stopped when I realized it was only me; that they had left, still laughing.

When I presented myself to Mr. Johnson, the graying director of the Children's Corridor, he shook his head. As he went to get some disinfectant, he muttered something I was probably not intended to hear.

"No goddam wonder we lost the War."

Three months later we landed on Hrredin. No Human family had money to spare for another child. I was raised in an orphanage, learning the language and getting used to forty-hour days on my own. With no other Humans. The Hrredin children nicknamed me "Happy," because they couldn't understand why I was.

The memory comes out of dark places, and before I know it I have vaulted over the wall, my twenty-four year-old legs nearly buckling as I land. "That's enough! Get off him right now!" My voice surprises even me, somewhere in the dim distance where surprise matters.

The attackers straighten as if shot, compound eyes glittering fear and hatred. My blood pounds. Nine years old, probably. Just about the time a Hrredin starts to get dangerous.

"Shit, it's another one," one of them mutters.

"Who says it's enough, rat-face?" says the leader, sneering, teeth bared. His head comes to my neck. He is tensed for combat. The others are nearly my height.

I feel my own lips pull back at the racial insult and then I am no longer there. As if I am controlling a puppet I make myself step forward and backhand him across the jaw. He snarls and leaps; I bury my left fist in his nose, and he falls back. I look around wildly, raising my arms and flinching from the blows I know are coming from either side, but the nearly silent pads of running feet make me look up.

The two bigger boys are running for the fence. I look down. The boy I've hit whimpers and shakes his head, then scrambles to his feet and runs, leaving a violet stain from his flat, bleeding nose in the dirt. A long, shuddering breath leaves me.

I reach down to the remaining boy, huddled beneath his winter coat. He flinches slightly at my touch. I reach for his hand. Five pale fingers grip my wrist.

"My God," the words leave me as I look into the face of a Human boy. Blood runs from a cut on his lip. He is perhaps seven years old. Pale skin; eyes that look slightly

tilted somehow. Dark, curly hair. He looks up into my eyes as if I am something outside his experience.

"Thank you," he chokes out, in English. "You saved me. They said there were people like you, but I never. . ." he trails off, unsure how to continue. "You speak English?"

"I understand," I reply in the same language, almost without realizing it. I am more concerned with his words. People like you. Human vigilantes perhaps? "I would have done the same for anyone," I say, probably too defensively. "Are you all right?"

"I've had worse," the boy says glumly, then brightens. "Who are you?"

"I'm Sean," I say. "What's your name?"

"I'm Young-Jun Tomlinson," says the boy. "I don't think I've ever heard anyone mention you."

"I doubt we know many of the same people," I say in as neutral a tone as possible.

"You live outside the Quarter, don't you?" Young-Jun eyes me suspiciously, as though I might suddenly grow antennae.

"Yes," I smile grimly, "and you live inside it."

He turns to go, and I remember the times I had to walk home, alone, not knowing who might have retreated just ahead of me, ready to strike again.

I sigh. "Why don't I walk you home, Young-Jun?" After all, it isn't that far to the Quarter. I'll call Ajna and tell her what happened.

"All right," smiles Young-Jun. He leads me down the side streets to another avenue.

The sun is setting. "This happen a lot?" I ask softly.

"Enough," he mutters. "They think Humans take their jobs and shit, and they don't like the way we look. My dad says if they weren't so butt-lazy they'd keep the jobs themselves. My dad says at least they don't have to worry about us marrying their daughters." He laughs quietly and I am glad the lengthening shadows hide my flushed face.

We are now in the Human Quarter. There is no line of demarcation save that the apartment buildings and houses have grown steadily shabbier. Stains mark the walls. Here and there, a rectangular building squats among the triangles. A few of the charitable groups that had helped build these projects actually consulted Human architects, or at least residents. Colored lights begin to peep out the windows. Occasional singing drifts from doorways, both recorded and actual voices. And smells. Strange smells, tickling the back of my mind.

And now I am here, in the Quarter, going to a house that is most likely celebrating Fleetday. I think of the ornament shoved in the trashcan, and a feeling of subtle dread steals over me. The lighted windows seem walls, forcing me onward, permitting turns neither to the right, nor to the left.

Young-Jun turns a corner and we come to a small, squat building. Square. Young-Jun's parents must be better off

than usual to afford a room here. We go down some stairs and Young-Jun raps on the door. It opens quickly.

A girl stands there, looking down on Young-Jun. She is about twelve, dressed in black, wearing a loose shirt and the long, nearly form-fitting tubes that Humans call "pants." Her long red hair falls down past her shoulders.

"It's about time you got here," she says to Young-Jun. "Mom and Dad are worried about you." She calls back into the house. "He's here, Dad." Then she looks up and sees me. Her eyes -- blue, but tilted just like Young-Jun's -- go wide.

"Uh, hi," she says to me, and a nervous smile spreads over her face. My breath catches. She turns away.

"Dad, you better come see this."

A tall, thin-faced man, over thirty by the look of him, hurries in. A worried face peers out from under light red hair. "Yes, what is it? What's wrong? Young-Jun? Are you all right?" He sees me. "Who are you?"

Before I can answer, Young-Jun jumps in. "This is Sean, Dad. He helped me get away from those snakes I've been telling you about. He's from outside the Quarter!"

"Really?" Young-Jun's father looks the question at me.

I wince. Snakes. I've seen the term before, scrawled on walls, but this is the first time I've heard someone actually use it. The counter to "rat-face." I feel unclean.

"There were a few Hrredin involved, yes," I say. "Your son was facing unfair odds. I'd have done the same. . ."

"You must think I'm rude to question you like this at the door," Tomlinson breaks in. "My apologies, sir, do come in." He stands out of the way. "Your mother wants to speak with you, young man." Young-Jun's face falls, and he disappears into the next room as if facing doom itself. I step into the house, and the smell overwhelms me.

It is meat, but not meat. Not the raw flesh I am used to, but hot, and there are other smells too. Vegetables? Hot food? It is like something out of the deep past, but different, very different. Only after this do I notice the room.

It is small, perhaps half the size of my own living room. Deep brown carpet covers the floor. I can see the kitchen off to the left. A small multicom is on low volume in the opposite corner, flashing images obscured by white noise. An old set. A dark hallway leads to the right. Tomlinson ushers me in. His daughter returns to her place in a chair opposite the multicom. She watches me.

I am watching the tree. Earthlife. It dominates the room, set against one wall. It is a foot taller than I myself; head height for an adult male Hrredin. It is composed entirely of dark green needles. Hung on the needles are ornaments: Gold and red balls, wreaths, and much more. Near the front is a model of a Human cruiser, its running lights flashing. Fiberoptics flash on and off, a

galaxy of colors through the tree. At the top of the tree is a globe with familiar markings: a misshapen green horse leaping from a mountain balanced on its tip. Earth. Above all this is a yellow banner with red felt letters. "When The Fleet Comes."

Looking more closely now, I can see that it is not a tree at all, but a metal skeleton with plastic needles. A very good re-creation.

"You like our tree, do you, sir?" says Tomlinson. "A very old heirloom, that. From Earth itself. It used to be a Christmas tree in my boyhood, and in my father's."

Christmas. I vaguely remember Christmas. Scattered images of excitement and good. "It's very nice," I say absently. Now I see that not all the ornaments have something to do with Fleetday. One is a piece of wood carved to resemble a hoop of leaves. In the middle turns a fat, red, bearded figure. Another, so old that I can barely make out the design: A town, covered in snow, all the buildings square. Above the town, so large it must be false, shines a cross-shaped star. The hills around the town, where not covered in snow, are green. Whole hills of green.

"This one's mine!" announces Young-Jun, from around my waist, reaching up to hold a paper ornament. I take it from him gently. Two Human silhouetted faces, obviously male and female, look outward. Between them, colored in green and blue crayon, is the Earth. I hand it back to Young-Jun and

feel a sting in my thumb. A cut, almost too thin to see, oozes a single drop of dark red blood.

"Young-Jun is our artist," says a new voice in strangely slurred English. I look up. A short woman with olive skin, almond eyes, and long black hair is looking at me with a smile on her face. She is actually sweating.

"Mrs. Tomlinson, I presume?"

"Indeed, Mr. . . ?"

"Gyranhijjor. Sean Gyranhijjor. Just Sean," I say, noting the strange looks I'm getting.

"That's a Hrredin surname," said Mr. Tomlinson, guardedly.

"Well actually it's my. . ." I hesitate. My wife's name, I am about to say, but I remember Young-Jun's comment about snakes and his father's failure to call him to task for it. "My legal name. For ease of pronunciation," I say, and feel like a traitor.

"Ease?" laughs the girl. "What do you call yourself when you want to confuse people?"

"For Hrredin, it's easy."

"You are most welcome to our house, Sean," says Mrs. Tomlinson. "I am Young-Ae. This is my husband, George, and my daughter, Amanda. You know Young-Jun already. Please stay and share the Fleetday meal with us."

"Yeah!" says Young-Jun. Both George and Amanda smile encouragingly at me. The smells from the kitchen are singing in my brain. And Ajna is at home.

"I. . . I'll have to call my wife," I say, and wonder who spoke. Is this me, about to sit down with Humans to a Fleetday dinner? This stupid holiday devoted to wishful thinking? Or is it my stomach overriding my brain?

"The phone is here," Young-Ae says, handing it to me. I dial.

"Hello?"

"Hi, Ajna," I manage.

"Sean! I was beginning to worry. Where are you? You aren't still mad about this morning, are you?"

"No, of course not," I say, keeping my voice low. Another wave of shame passes through me. It is too late to back out. I can tell her what I was about to do. She will understand.

But it will mean in effect, admitting she was right to give me that ornament. And involve lengthy explanation. Perhaps it is time you did. Is this what she meant by that?

"I have to work late. I'll be back before midnight. I love you."

"I love you, Sean. Good-bye."

I switch off the phone. It is, to my knowledge, the first time I have ever lied to my wife.

The family is waiting at the table for me, and the heat emanating from it is like nothing I have ever experienced. Covered dishes are everywhere. Steam is rising from some of them. The smells coming from them are pieces of dreams and memories and forgotten warmth made strange by space and

time. I approach and we sit together. Then George rises and holds up a bottle. He rises and steps toward me, unsealing it. Into a small glass, beside the mug of water, he pours a reddish-purple liquid. I barely stop myself from recoiling as the smell hits me. Alcohol. Of course, alcohol: the slow, metabolic poison that Humans take. It will kill a Hrredin. The glass is full, and I tremble. They will drink this red death, and expect me to do so as well.

I remind myself violently that I am Human.

George reseals the bottle after pouring a very small amount for Young-Jun. Then he lifts his glass. "To our unexpected but most welcome guest, Sean. Truly a blessing and a gift on this Fleetday. May he be remembered and blessed. . . when the Fleet comes."

"When The Fleet Comes," they respond, and I find myself muttering the response a half-step behind them. They drink, looking at me. I drink. I recognize it. Gunberry, but not as sweet. The bitterness of the aftertaste hits me and I force myself not to grimace. They drink this on purpose?

Then I feel fingers of warmth spreading upwards from my stomach, into my arms. Against my will, I find myself relaxing.

"And the sooner the Fleet comes, the better," I hear George murmur under his breath. I see Young-Ae nod.

Do they really believe it? I cannot tell from the expressions on their faces. No. Admiral Anasizawi's

message notwithstanding, the Fleet must be dead by now. The Fleet. Barely one undersized task force, I remember hearing a Spacer mutter. All the ships that couldn't get home in time for the Last Battle, and the old, old man who had led them, saying, in a broken voice, "I shall return."

Perhaps, with no more Earth left to give their lives for, the Admiral had tried to give the Lifeships hope. Perhaps they found what happiness can still be found for Humans with no adopted worlds. I find myself hoping that, at least, even though I have spared no thought for the Fleet or Humans at all in years.

Amanda breaks into my thoughts. "Were you really speaking Pliya to your wife?"

I look at Amanda. She faces me with cool, smiling eyes; waiting for any answer.

"My wife. . . does not speak English," I say. Again I am ashamed, but less strongly than before. God help me, am I becoming accustomed to this? Has Ajna ever spoken of me this way to others?

"I know a chap with that problem," says George. "Married a girl from Arabia. Spoke no English at all. Get along all right in Pliya, though. Doesn't matter to the kids of course. Both Young-Jun and Amanda speak perfect Korean, so their mother tells me. Can't understand a word myself."

The dishes are passed around the table and we serve ourselves. Almost all of it is unrecognizable to me. I

haven't thought of cooking food since childhood. They tell me the names of the dishes in their English and Korean equivalents. Roast Turkey. Calamari. Glass noodles. Kimchee. I remember kimchee because after the first bite I am forced to drain my entire glass of water. It is like acid! Young-Jun giggles at me and Amanda suppresses a grin.

"So what exactly happened to make you follow my little brother home, Sean?" asks Amanda, eyes flashing.

"Well, I. . . " I begin, and am grateful to Young-Jun who leaps in, starting from the very beginning, and ending triumphantly with me vaulting the fence like a mythical hero and destroying his tormentors with the sheer force of my superior Human wrath. Amanda rolls her eyes through her brother's story and I am caught up in the meaning of that expression; irises and pupils moving like sparks under her dark lashes. Hrredin eyes do not move.

Hers move back to me. "I sort of meant what were you doing there, Sean?" She gives her brother a sharp look.

"I was just taking a walk. Killing some time after work."

"Well, it was still very brave to do what you did. I hear those snake kids around that place carry knives."

I wince at the epithet. "The Hrredin," I stress gently, "say the same about Humans."

"Indeed," says Young-Ae, "in this neighborhood, that is often the truth. Our young people, they believe a blade settles many things that unsettle them." She glances at her

daughter. "So do theirs. Of course, you might not know this, Sean, living where you do." She says it in a flat, calm voice, and I realize that a line has been drawn. A barrier beyond which I may not cross. Here as well, I am almost accepted. Not quite an alien.

Besides which, she is right. I do not know these people. They have isolated themselves from my world, closing themselves off. Or did I close them off? Or is it a thing that simply must be? The grease from the fried "calamari" starts to congeal in my stomach, separating into parts.

"Do you and your wife have any children?" George asks me. He looks at me with a peculiar intensity.

"No," I say, expressionlessly as possible. "My wife can't have children." Not with me, anyway. Never with me.

"Ah, that's a shame," he says, chewing his "turkey." "But not uncommon, in these days." He sighs. I can guess what he means. Quite a few Humans are sterile. Some Lifeships took near-misses from nuclear weapons. I say nothing.

The conversation drifts to other things and runs from discussions of the neighbors to jobs to things I do not remember. I am mostly absorbed in the food. Amanda grins at me when I stumble over the names of dishes.

For dessert Young-Ae brings out a loaf of fresh bread of a kind I have never seen before. It is light, like foam,

not dry and flat. She then brings out a jar filled with a red miasma of dark shapes.

The faded label says: "Strawberry Jam."

My mouth goes dry. It is a name I vaguely remember, and a taste I have long forgotten. Kept safe for almost seventeen years. It is beyond price.

Even I understand that there are no words for such a moment. Straining, the lines coming hard to her smooth face, Young-Ae cracks the vacuum-seal, and spreads the jam on five slices of bread.

The flavor is almost too much. Childhood and dim shapes that I recognize vaguely as my parents coalesce around the fresh, red sweetness. Through half-lidded eyes, I see George and Young-Ae, also locked in memory. More memory for them; they are older. Amanda and Young-Jun chew quietly, faces smooth with solemnity.

They understand the reasons, but not the feel. Not even Amanda could have been born on Earth.

After the meal, conversation continues in the living room, until I remember that Ajna is waiting. Guiltily I look at my watch. It is 4500. Past time to go.

And I do not want to leave. It is like a dream that has become more and more real. I find myself wondering why, in my youth, I did not allow myself to be pulled into the Quarter; into the "lower classes" where I so easily could have belonged, completely and totally. Here, beneath the notice of the gods, are riches they do not have.

I could have been George's co-worker. Young-Ae's husband. Young-Jun's father. I feel as if I have just been told for the first time that I am blind, and that other people can see.

Young-Ae and Young-Jun start to clear away the dishes. Amanda and George rise. "Come into the living room, Sean," says George, "and I'll give you the Grand Tour, such as it is." Amanda gives a strangled gasp and blushes, running down the hall to shut her door.

There isn't much to see; the apartment is tiny. The furniture is all Hrredin; shipping the Christmas tree must have claimed nearly all of the Tomlinsons' baggage space. Young-Jun makes a whirlwind appearance and tries to explain the significance of every piece of matter in his bedroom, but George stops him. The tour takes less than ten minutes.

Back in the living room, George excuses himself to go help his wife. A cool hand rests on my shoulder. I turn to meet Amanda's smile. "Come with me," she says, taking me by the hand. "Let me show you the garden."

"Garden?"

She gives a low, deprecating laugh. "Well, we call it that, anyway. Sounds better than 'big flowerpots on the patio.'" She slides open the glass door on the far wall of the room.

It is dark outside. Mist swirls in and out of the spotlight that illuminates the tiny outdoor space in the center of the building. Three other apartments face a lawn

of bluish moss crossed by a pavement and a bench. On either side of the porch are two large tubs of dirt. One is bare, the other studded with thick wisps of green. Grass?

"Onions," Amanda says. "They're pretty hardy; you can even grow them now. Look." She digs her hands into the soft loam of the other tub. . . and comes up with a nightmare ovoid, brown, scaly, and horned.

"Potatoes," she says, meeting my puzzled eyes. "Real potatoes. You know?" I did, but could only stare. "Well, they're almost like gold, here. They'll even grow in winter. With those and the onions, it's almost like Dad having two jobs."

"And you leave them out here?"

Her eyes darken. "You don't steal Earthlife. Ever. No one steals Earthlife. Damn sure no one steals it twice." She hands the thing to me and laughs softly when I hesitate.

"It's warm."

"We have to heat the tubs a little," she says. "C'mon, I'll show you how to put it back." She kneels beside me and her hands close around mine, holding them and the potato. A warmth more than simple heat can account for flows through my hands, spreading. Amanda spreads her fingers and parts the loose, black dirt, nestling the potato and our hands into it.

"Sometimes I like to come out here and put my hands and feet in the dirt," she murmurs. "I feel like I could take root myself, like a tree, if there still were any." The

dirt is warm and damp around our hands. Slowly, she disengages, reaches behind her. I follow her movements; she brings out a pair of cups: newly polished stone, and a bottle, her dirt-encrusted hands arranging them as if by rite; a quasi-mythical being from dead stories. She turns and blinks at me with her astonishingly mobile blue eyes.

She is in her element. And she is beautiful.

I push the thought away, but it will not be wholly silent. She continues, pouring a golden liquid into the cups.

I have never seen this kind of beauty before.

She hands me a cup and raises her own. "When The Fleet Comes," she says. Now I can hear the sardonic tone of her voice. I raise my cup and the smell of alcohol burns through my nose. I almost sneeze. How much can I drink before the poison starts to work? In any case, there is no more of this than there was of the wine, and I feel no effect. She notices my hesitation.

"When The Fleet Comes," I say.

"The aliens will be fucked," she answers, as if completing the sentence. Then she laughs as if at some joke and drains half the cup. I drink, and then splutter, breaking into a dry cough. This is liquid fire! It burns in my stomach and I wince, but Amanda is still laughing. I try to cover my distress. She raises her cup to mine and drinks, motioning for me to do the same. This time, the alcohol is in my mouth before I even think about it. It is

easier this time; smoother. Something else today was easier the second time I did it, but I am not sure anymore what it was. Ajna's words float past me: Perhaps it is time you did, and a wave of anger hits me. Maybe she was right. Maybe I will show her she was right. Perhaps this is what she meant. I take another swallow of the burning liquid, and my cup is empty. She raises the bottle and leans toward me.

Our noses are nearly touching now. Her breath is a memory of flowers and wine and everything that ought to have been. A spinning flame seems to be just out of sight. "Amanda. . . " I say. And then our hands entwine, flaking dirt and her scent rushes in on me and there is nothing but our two mouths locked together and time slows to a crawl, impeded by the clumsy movements of our fingers, a pleasure rising almost to pain. Our mouths break apart for breath, and she fumbles with my skirt.

Like a bomb the knowledge bursts in on me that we are about to do the impossible. No Hrredin can do what I am about to, and that secret rushes to my face in a snarl of joy, and Amanda somehow catches it and smiles herself as she loosens her shirt, transcending and transcendingly Human. Her eyes flare blue under their strange tilt, her father's eyes. . . and that thought shatters the moment like a spike of ice as I remember exactly where we are.

"What's the matter, Sean?" Amanda murmurs as I hold up a hand and look wildly back at the glass door. It is

vacant, except for the lights of the tree. My breathing returns to something approaching normal.

"What's the matter?" I repeat stupidly. "My God, your father. . . I mean, we can't. . . not here in the yard. . ."

She looks puzzled. "You think he doesn't know?"

"He. . . ?" It is as if my tongue has turned wooden.

"If it hadn't been my idea anyway, I'm sure he would have suggested it," she goes on. "Lots of women have already had two children at my age." She pauses. "I'd really like my first to be yours, Sean."

My romantic illusions, my lust, collapse.

"But why?" I manage.

She sits back, looking at me quizzically. "Why? You're from far outside the Quarter, aren't you, Sean?" She gestures to the empty streets. "Take a look around you. We're dying here, and everybody knows it. You don't think a decent man would marry a girl who hadn't had at least one healthy child, do you? My chances are probably better with you than with anyone else. Don't you want children, Sean?"

A child. A child of my own. Is this what she is offering me? What Ajna and I gave up, so long ago. Ajna and I. The thought hits like a fist.

"Amanda, I'm. . ." married. I cannot say it. Shame rolls over me at what I was about to do. "I have to go." She does not say a word as I rise and pull aside the door.

Except for the tree and a solitary lamp, the living room is dark. I have to wait for my eyes to adjust to find the door.

I whirl as George steps into the room from the kitchen. Fear contracts in my gut as I throw my hands up, trying to stammer something.

"You didn't take very long, Sean."

He just stands there, watching me matter-of-factly. "I'm not angry with you, Sean, just a little. . . disappointed. It's her first time, at least I think so, and you might have been a little more. . . gentle."

"It's not like you think. She told me you knew. We didn't. . . we didn't."

Now he narrows his eyes. "You didn't? Why not?" He takes a step toward me. "Not good enough for your money, Sean? Is that what you're saying?" Now he looks very dangerous.

"Oh, no! It's not that at all, it's just that. . . dammit, George, I'm married, you know that! What would your wife say if --" Once again, shame almost drives me to my knees at how close I have come.

George gets the same puzzled look that his daughter had worn. "My wife is fertile." He looks down. "I'm sorry, that was badly put. But you did tell us yourself your wife couldn't have children; she's got no exclusive right to you, and what's the harm in your giving Amanda a good start?"

"George, you don't understand. Among my wife's. . . people. . . you just don't. . ."

George's face hardens, but there is sympathy in his eyes. "Look, Sean, this is no time for old customs. We want to keep as many as we can alive, but that won't matter if there's no one left to remember them, will it?" He takes me by the shoulders. "This is what we have to do to survive; what Humans have to do."

What we have to do. Betray our words? To survive.
But survive as what?

"Look, your wife doesn't ever have to know; Amanda's husband will raise your son as his own. But if she did know she would. . . she would have to understand."

"You don't know Ajna. . ." I begin, and stop. George pushes me away as if I've burned him.

"Ajna?" he repeats, looking at me in disbelief. "Ajna? My God, that's not. . . a Hrredin name?" It is a question but he reads the answer out of my face. "That's where you got that last name of yours: you married a Hrredin." His face flushes dark. "You son-of-a-bitch. You'll kill us all, and for nothing."

"George, I. . ."

"OUT! Get out of my house!" he yells. "Get out and don't come back, you perverted bastard!" He advances. I run for the door; it barely misses my heel as it slams behind me. I run for a long time, the world becoming a

blur. By the time I stop, the square houses are behind me, and the triangles of Dreyudan are coming into view.

I stop, looking back. Alcohol, fried grease and shame all come together in my throat. Twisting inside, I pour it out on the ragged surface of the street. I heave and heave until there is nothing left. Spoiled food and lust run from me together.

And I finally begin to understand. In a rush of comprehension I see what the Human race might have been; what it once was. So beautiful. Maybe. And tears start to fall from my eyes.

Perhaps it is time you did.

And now I know what Ajna meant. What she had tried to make me see; this people, my people that was worth grieving for. Turning to the wall I retie the knot in my skirt. It is time to go. I scan the night. Off in the distance, I see the gray height of a maglev rail. I start walking toward it. Somewhere along that rail is a station.

I will kill us all, he said. Maybe. Maybe the Human race is really dying. I hope not. I never knew how much of me was Human, and thus, I never knew how much was Hrredin. I will never know fully, but perhaps I will know more, and next time, I will learn better. Without needing to be ashamed.

And Ajna knew. She knows better than I do. She tried to tell me, but I wasn't listening. I am now.

I walk faster. Maybe they haven't emptied that trashcan yet. It is late, and Ajna is waiting.

The End

Requiem With Interruptions

by

G. Scott Huggins

You writhe free from Delusion into what you call the Elastic Place again and nearly Share in despair, before you remember. The Delusion is worse than here, and Sharing might send you back there. You permit yourself only a quiet shudder as the Things begin to form in the darkness and float past. You know some. Most are horribly alien. All are, somehow, tinged Human.

This place, like the stars, belongs to the Humans. All things, it seems, belong to them. Perhaps their strange unpriests, (priests who work without metal?) are right, and their gods do indeed punish all those who do not believe in them. But that would mean you are dead.

Souldead? Impossible. The souldead are simply gone.

Or do the Humans know what the priests do not?

It cannot be true. You will not let it be true.

Perhaps this time, the Elastic Place will stay real. Almost

without thinking, now, you begin to harvest the Things, and change them; Human under your hands softens, becomes Sunone. Very few of them ever fight, and those that do can be dropped. Whatever they are, the Things have little in the way of will.

And now you are building home into the Elastic Place, even though sometimes you see the corners of your home move, and the trees soften. But now you have brought your own mate here, and the Elastic Place is only an unpleasant fancy until finally you hold your mate and you try so hard to see precisely what she is saying and then it all gives too far and tears. You have time only for fear before Delusion rises up like a great worm to wipe out everything you know.

For one moment, when he sees me, Sandor's face lights up from across the restaurant and he waves. Halfway there, his smile fails, and I know I must look bad. I thought it was bad enough each morning, in the mirror, after the dreams. Here it is worse.

"Jesus, Emily, it's good to see you," he says. Still, his voice sounds anything but good. Probably no wonder, even though I know I look better than I did a month ago. I pull out the heavy, wooden chair and nearly fall. The lack of sleep is starting to take its toll, the doctor in me says, but I catch myself and sit down.

"It's good to see you too, Sandor," I say, "You're looking well." In his case, it is true. Space-tanned skin, curly hair, mustache. "How's work on the Lattice coming?"

"I'm hurt you had to ask," he smiles. "Didn't you see the difference on your way in? I've got stories. . ." He stops himself. "But first, I'm starved, and if you're not, you ought to be, after what I've heard about your tour. Let's get the food on the way." He begins to key in his choices. I lift the menu and have just decided what to order when Sandor takes my right hand.

I flinch, but do not pull away as he examines it: a pitted, white glove of scar tissue. He pauses over the middle and index fingers, where the nails are missing. His eyes are dark when he looks at me. "Good God, Em, you never told me about this. I'd heard there was only one death?"

I nod and the motion. . . slides.

Sandor's face fades into the vertiginous weightlessness of the sickbay, multicolored fluid spotting the air around me as my patient cries in agony and another alien tries to sign to me, breaks into pieces so pretty and I'm fighting, fighting to get back to. . .

"Em? Em?" Sandor is saying, and I come back, looking at my snow-white hands. The dreams are starting to intrude even when I am awake, now. I know what they are. I had been planning on reconstructive surgery, of course, but there's no point, now.

"I'm not a surgeon any more, Sandor."

His mouth freezes open for a moment. "What? But why? There wasn't a radiation flash or anything? Not because of this. . . ?"

"I just got the word today," I began. And, dammit, I hadn't been going to ruin this; we hardly ever get to see each other any more, but he knows about the accident, and so now I have to tell him; might as well get it over with, everyone will know soon enough.

"My brain is degenerating." I rush the words out. "Looks like an Alzheimer's variant, but it isn't responding to treatment. Brainwaves going all over the place. That's why I -- blanked out just now. The dementia is beginning. I don't know -- no one knows how long, but it's starting to progress pretty rapidly." I stop. There is nothing else to say.

And Sandor, being the good friend that he is, says nothing, and holds my hands, my ugly, pointless hands, until the silence passes and the meal comes.

Priest Wings-Over-Sun finished his fifth glass of the brown, stinging sugar water and released some of the gas back into the air. He was not sure why the Humans seated on either side of him had turned their primeyes (no, just eyes, he reminded himself. Humans had no overeye -- poor things) to look at him, nor what the motions of their faces, sliding grotesquely over their skulls, meant. Nothing good for a lone Sunone, he was sure.

He considered asking a crewmember for another serving of the drink, but decided against it -- the shuttle was nearly to the station, and he had enough sugar stored to last him through many long conversations.

He told himself again that anger served no purpose, but it did little good. These Humans with their soft skins and barely detectable vibrating speech and their repulsive faces had caused the souldeath of one of his Entrusted. They had been warned. They had been warned by the dead one's mate, but they had not listened. They had used metal -- metal! -- on his Entrusted. And now he was dead, and worse than dead, his soul lost. His skin tried to climb his body with the thought: souldeath. Never to join the Choir-in-the-Heart of the next life. . .

Now Wings-Over-Sun had a letter of apology from someone in the Human Navy, who, as far as he could tell, had not even been aboard the ship. He also had a widow to bring home and comfort as best he could. All things considered, it was enough for anger. And fear.

It is becoming easier to maintain the balance, and you almost succeed in believing that Delusion is over, that it was never real to begin with, and that the Elastic Place is solid. It does appear to be solid in some places -- the least terrifying ones, where you spend the most time. You smell the odors of a meal and try to remember the last time you tasted sugar.

But then the door bursts open and you are falling, the floor sliding away, only it is not a floor but a deck, and you are back on the Human ship, and a giant is on you, Human, and she wields shining swords of metal.

Metal. You had not known the Humans were soulkillers.

You raise your hands in desperate, useless defense and find a warblade in them. You parry, but the singing metal splinters your glass blade and you know an instant of terror-beyond-death and then Delusion reaches up and swallows you effortlessly.

I sit up, gasping, out of the nightmare. Horrible shapes are all around me, alien shapes, but I know, I know that if I can just hold on for a moment it will sort itself out.

There. I am me again.

Why am I fighting Humans in my dreams? Why am I wielding a sword of glass? Why does the thought of metal terrify me? The answers, surely so obvious, slide away with the rest of the Elastic Place (and where did that phrase come from?) and leave me. . . where? Here.

It is not my apartment.

I am lying on a long couch, with a thin, brown blanket over me. Clashing bits of memorabilia line the walls. Short and long Japanese swords. A Russian wall hanging in bright reds and greens. Maps of Earth and its colonies. A man's room. Sandor. Memory begins to return, in the

faltering manner I am getting used to. I am still wearing the clothes I met him in.

"Are you all right, Em?" Sandor is standing in the hall by the clock. Four. I've been asleep almost three hours. Almost a record for the past week.

"Don't you have to be at work?" I ask.

"I keep my own hours a lot these days. You fell asleep in the tram."

"You. . ." a portion of my sleep-fuzzed mind springs into focus. "You carried me here." How ridiculous looking. But it is a chill image. How long before I have to be carried everywhere? Before someone has to feed me? Before. . . I clamp down on the thought. That way lies madness, on an even faster path than the one I am already on.

"You want to talk about it?" he says.

"No," I say automatically, but the look on his face tells me I will speak. If not now, then sometime.

"It's all. . . dreams," I say. "Like dreams coming to life and life turning to a dream. Sometimes I. . . can't tell where they break apart."

"What do you dream about?" He sits in the papasan opposite me. "The blowout?"

I look at him sharply, and he raises his hands in mock protection. "That's about when this began, isn't it? It'd be a miracle if you didn't dream it."

"It always starts out the same," I manage. "I'm somewhere alien. I see dreams, like things floating past,

and they're alien, too. So I pick them up and try to make them. . . right, to make them mine. But they already are. Then I notice that I'm the alien, and the aliens are Humans. But I'm fighting the alien."

"The aliens that are Humans or the aliens that are aliens?"

"Yes. Neither. Both." A laugh fights its way to the surface and breaks bitterly. "I don't know. And I've got these heavy glass blades because metal is too deadly, and I really hope she doesn't touch me, because I'll die."

Sandor's raised eyebrows say it all. "Dammit, I know it doesn't make sense!" I yell. "I don't make sense anymore; my dreams don't." He says nothing. Absolutely calm, and I can't stand it. "And you sure as hell don't, either, Sandor," I add. "Why did you even bring me here?"

He opens his mouth, pauses, and then says, "You needed to be taken somewhere. And I don't know where you live these days. What else?"

He'd been going to say something else, but I was too tired to dig.

"It's either that or I'm back on Thuy Kieu. Sometimes both."

He leans back to listen, and I have no choice but to begin the story.

The meteor strike was a nightmare that shouldn't have been; the point from which I could measure all subsequent

nightmares. It had come in too fast for countermeasures, and punctured us in a line right through the passengers' quarters into the main rotation gear. We'd lost gravity instantly.

I didn't think we'd have very much work ahead of us. I know it sounds cold, but it's the way it is. Punctures usually don't leave much in the way of injuries, but we'd been lucky, in a way. No one had been in either of the outer compartments, and the emergency bulkheads had sealed almost instantly. Only one spacer was sucked out.

But there was a dining room -- a wood-paneled dining room -- full of passengers between those two bulkheads.

Five minutes after arriving in sickbay, I was pulling splinters out of the third spacer's belly, trying to get a zero-gee IV into place, while my midshipmen tried to keep the air between me and my patient free of the mists and drops of blood that floated around the cabin like a sick snowstorm.

I started sewing the man up, but halfway through, a rating arrived, calling, "Eetee case, complications! Who's on it?"

I didn't want it, but it was ultimately my responsibility; we had no alien specialists on board. "Finish," I barked at my aides. "Bring him here." I shoved the cot aside and braced myself to catch the new one.

"God, what is it?" Whatever it was, it was hideous. I hoped blue was its natural color. That was better than the

alternative: that it was cyanotic. The surface of its head was one great, shiny cap, like a compound eye, except in the front where two smaller eyes, a knife-thin nose, and a jointed jaw made up a kind of a face. It was bilaterally symmetric with thin limbs and thick digits. The chest was spouting globules of deep purple blood from one large splinter. I could cut it out without too much trouble. The ultrasound was showing no surprises. I could almost have pulled it out, except for one large barb.

The being was obviously in pain; a patch on its throat glowed red and white alternately, and it was struggling. The rating and I tied its limbs down. I didn't dare use an anesthetic. I was just positioning my scalpel when my arm was jerked around.

It was another of the aliens, flailing wildly, trying to keep its balance in zero gee. I tried to grip its hand in mine, but it tore loose, signing, +No cut. No touch, not with metal. You cannot. You kill.+

It was using Sameslan, of course. Bad Sameslan. While anyone can (and does, at least a little, if they travel interstellar) learn to read Anglic, almost no alien races have vocal cords capable of reproducing it. We can't reproduce theirs either. But most of them have limbs that can approximate the gestures of the sign language invented by our own Deaf, so it's the interstellar lingua franca -- and probably will be until we run into someone with more

ships or a better idea. No one travels interstellar without learning at least a little of it.

In this being's case, very little. Nevertheless, a wave of relief swept over me at her words. +You are a doctor?+

+No. Wife of him. You cannot cut. We have Healer. Healer comes.+

Thank God. I signed as slowly as I dared. +Where is the healer? Please hurry.+

+Healer on our world. Husband must go back.+

My hope was replaced by disgust. We were already at least one Jump from this being's home system. She didn't understand even the basics of star travel. +If I do not cut, he will die,+ I signed slowly. +He will not live until your doctor comes.+

+Not doctor. Healer. Priest. Only Priest can cut with metal, or. . .+ she fumbled a few gestures. +. . .he will die. Forever.+ The patch on her throat was cycling through all the colors of the spectrum.

Then I understood. She had already given him up. Wanted him uncontaminated for whatever next life they believed in. Such courage, so misguided.

There was a good chance her mate would die anyway. The ultrasound showed no surprises, but there was a lot of damage inside. All I could do was sew him up and hope for the best.

A crazy part of my mind muttered that it might be more merciful to do as she asked. It would be easy to let him go. No one would blame me for it, and there were plenty of Human casualties that needed attention. . . I was instantly ashamed. How could I even think this way? I didn't consider myself a racist, yet here I was, considering putting this. . . life out of its misery because it wasn't human. Religion was not an issue.

"Get her out of here," I told the rating, my harshness fueled by my own guilt. He picked her up in his powerful arms and kicked off. She struggled, throat flashing so brightly I could see the light reflecting off the far walls. My scalpel was in my hand. I checked once more for signs of any hidden blood vessels I might damage. Nothing. Just one swift cut. . .

The world exploded into pain and blue fire.

Sandor is watching me, his mouth slightly open, as I finish my story. "I woke up in one of my own beds with my hands bandaged. They had to restart my heart twice. The patient actually lived. But he went into a coma and never came out. A closer scan showed a kind of defense system, like an electric eel; very powerful conduction system right below the skin."

I struggle to keep my thoughts focused. Through the retelling of the story I have felt them slipping away,

trying to slide off to the side and out the door. Sandor's words bring me back.

"Look, I have some leave coming up, and you're going to need to make plans -- for what's coming." He has trouble getting the words out. "I'd like to help."

"No, that's okay," I say automatically. "You don't want to use up your time because of me, and what can you do, anyway?" I say it lightly, but I see him flinch. "You know, Mom will be coming up soon, and there's a lot to plan and. . ."

"And I'd just be in the way," he says, face blank. "I know. It's all right. I'm sure you've got a lot of people who'll be there. Call if you need me." He rises to go to the kitchen. Soon he will offer to take me home, and this will be the last time we'll see each other.

And Andrea is on assignment. Kirill and Janesha both looked frightened when I called them, mouthed variants on "I'm-so-sorry-Em-call-if-I-can-help-good-bye." And I haven't even called my mother but I will have to sometime. And I hate being helped by anyone, but most of all her, and by the time she's here, there'll be no one else.

As long as no one is helping me yet, I can still feel like I'm going to stay sane; stay me. And I know I am being foolish.

I make myself say it: "Sandor. I'd be glad of your help."

Wings-Over-Sun drew the cloak around himself, high over his head to shield his overeye from the garish Human colors. It was unlikely that anyone would try to bespeak him here unless they were already in front of him, and the large compound eye that covered the back of his head was very sensitive. Using only his two, simple primeyes, he felt almost blind. Was this how Humans were forced to see? He looked at that moment far more like an old, blue-skinned, Human man than he would have cared to acknowledge.

The Humans seemed anxious to avoid him, even in the press that exited from the lander. He was just as grateful. The three balanced soulprobes in the quiver at his back were fragile. He did not expect to need them, but Priests always carried their soulprobes; they were the mark of his office. He shuddered. So much metal, everywhere.

It was easy to find her; she was the only Sunone in the gate. She was also cloaked. She jumped upon seeing him and hurried forward.

Wings-Over-Sun was glad that none of the Humans would understand her near-hysteria. They were half-blind, after all and communicated among themselves by indetectable air vibrations. None could perceive the subtle patterns in the rapid flashes produced by a Sunone throat. A good thing; it would do their cause no good to appear desperate. He caught her hand almost as soon as she had bowed. «You may rise, Horizon-At-Noon. I thank you for your prompt greeting.»

«I apologize for my haste, Wings-Over-Sun. I am grateful you have come. We entrust ourselves to your justice.»

His anger flared again. He had known her; knew that the love between her and her mate had been strong. She had not yet let go. It would have been best if they were alone, so that she could share her grief, and he his knowledge and reassurance. But this was not a thing Humans should see, and privately, he was glad of it. The trip had been very tiring.

«I fear that justice may be a long time coming. I wish it were not so, but Humans are ignorant of many things. They do not listen to us. I have come to take you home, and to speak with them, so that this thing will not happen again.» It was then that he noticed the Human woman standing behind his Entrusted, watching them both.

She was not very much taller than they were, which was saying something. Obviously female -- Human sexual dimorphism was disgusting. One of the truly pallid ones -- dark hair with a white streak through it.

«What is that doing here?»

The Human's arms and hands moved. Her face remained still, and she gave no vibration. Belatedly, he recognized Sameslan. +I am your interpreter. Horizon-At-Noon hired me to assist you both. You will kindly refer to me as 'she,' at least in my presence. Do you understand?+

Wings-Over-Sun stared stupidly. Impossible that she could have seen. «No Human can understand our speech.»

The Human's mouth moved upward slightly. +All Humans are not 'ignorant.' Speak slowly. I am still learning. If you continue to hire me, it may be easier for you to use Sameslan. Can you do so?+

+Yes. I'm not sure how well,+ he managed.

+Well enough. I am called Lyan. It is a pleasure to meet you, Priest.+

«With respect, I cannot say the same. I am here to comfort and protect my Entrusted. I have no interest in anything else on this world.»

He let Horizon-At-Noon translate. His arms were getting tired, and he did not know all the symbols, nor could he figure out the equivalent for those that required five fingers in place of three. +Horizon-At-Noon has tried to explain: you will speak for your kind about the requirements of your religion.+

«I do not know,» he signed, +religion.+ «I am a healer of souls, and I want to make sure those Entrusted to me and mine remain undamaged.»

Even Horizon-At-Noon had trouble with that speech. There was, as best he could tell, a discussion about souls. He caught some of the gestures Horizon-At-Noon was using: +part-of-person-that-cannot-be-seen.+ Lyan used a new gesture; a single gesture, like pulling something small apart. Then she wrote it down. He was surprised they had a

word for it. He was fairly certain Humans had no souls.
But she continued.

+I understand. We have many of your profession here.+
Then how could you have been so stupid as to let this
occur? he wanted to ask, but did not. This interpreter did
not know, nor would she have appreciated being blamed.

The Human is still there, sitting silently in your
house when the whole Elastic Place warps again; you try
desperately to hold it together, and almost succeed this
time. There is a way, and you know you can find it if only
that Human would leave but she is always there; always from
the ship where it all started. A crack opens up in the
Elastic Place, folding it up like leaves and then bright
light with impossible colors floods through you.

This place is new.

Not Elastic. Not Delusion. You are looking at a Human
running toward you, as if through water. His face is
twisted, his mouth opens and he reaches; you fear for your
life, and then waves upon waves of pain and vibration hit
you and you flee and. . .

Delusion comes. Always, Delusion comes.

I do not know who is screaming. Then I realize it is
me, and I stop. I am holding tightly to something that is
murmuring in my ear. It is Sandor. Slowly, I let go, and
he releases me.

For the first time, I see him scared.

It is night, and his eyes show that I have woken him up. A large flashlight lies on the floor of my bedroom; he must have grabbed it on his way up.

"I know this is kind of a dumb question," he says, getting his breath back, "but are you all right?"

"No," I say, and almost follow it up with, I'm in Delusion. Another one of the phrases I keep remembering from the dreams, always right before I wake up. At least it makes more sense than an Elastic Place.

God, I'm so tired. I never sleep more than two hours, and they can't do anything about that either. One of the doctors says if he finds another case of it, he'll name it after me. What an epitaph.

"I've never heard anyone scream like that." He looks at me as if expecting me to fall over. Finally he says, "Come on. We both need a drink."

He is tired, too, I notice as I follow him downstairs. I'm at my most lucid just after waking, and I know that he must have done a lot for me over the past week. Has it only been a week? It might have been more. Will he run out of leave time?

I sit at the table while he heats water, but I don't try to follow what he's mixing. The scent of chocolate and something else sharp brings my senses to a new height. Even without lights it is all so bright. I look back and see him

cutting something sweet. Sugar. I need sugar, it has been long.

He is cutting with metal. I nearly bolt. Doesn't he know only the priests touch metal?

He slides the cup over to me with a tiny slice of cake on the side. He sees my face and flinches. What kind of expression do I have on it? "It's just me, Em. Sandor," he says.

I want to throw the whole damn plate at him then for that, for thinking I'm insane while I'm lucid as stone right in front of him. I hate him for not knowing the difference, while knowing I would do the same to him if he were the one going mad.

So I sit and sip the chocolate laced with rum. It is very good. Sandor almost sits, but there is a call; he goes to take it.

By the time he is back, I have finished my chocolate, and his, and half of the cake left in the refrigerator.

Wings-Over-Sun had not thought he could possibly be more tired than angry, and yet he was. A week he'd been on this planet, and aside from meeting Horizon-At-Noon, he had accomplished nothing.

Oh, he had done a great deal. He had met with officials, complained to officials, been chivvied by officials, been sent to other officials, and filled out many forms, but he had nothing. He might as well have gone to

visit Horizon-At-Noon's husband's body, for all the good he had accomplished. Indeed, talking to Human officials was very like speaking with breathing corpses. They looked alive, but said nothing. Not even a spoken word of promise that anyone could stop this tragedy from happening again.

And now he felt that tragedy as deeply as Horizon-At-Noon, and the horror that she had felt as her husband had been soulkilled right in front of her. The torrent of emotion that had flowed into him during their Sharing, the first time they had contrived to be without Lyan, had almost been too much. Now Horizon-At-Noon was much calmer for having Shared. . . but he was more tired, more upset.

He caught sight of the stars and the rest of the Lattice wheeling by, a cage of corridors, docks and chambers that crawled like a floating spider over the curve of the Earth. At least he'd been able to find a room in one of the rotating toroids. Weightlessness only added to the fatigue he had picked up in endless meetings with officials.

+We do not operate according to your concept of Entrustment,+ Lyan had signed to him at one point. +We have had similar offices, but we don't work that way any more. Even if you represented your world, this would be difficult. You must have patience.+

Lyan was another problem, but one he blessed. She did speak for him. He sometimes suspected that she only made it easier for him and the Humans to misunderstand each other, but she did so very well, and because of her, he had been

able to miscommunicate with many more Humans than he might have otherwise. He checked himself. Even their depressing sense of humor was beginning to infect him.

The chime at the door was unexpected. Horizon-At-Noon was, as usual, in her room. For a moment he thought it might be Lyan, but she was in the kitchen, oblivious. He signaled to her to open the door.

The man was inside almost before the door was open. The vibrations that passed between him and Lyan were strong, and went on at length, punctuated with strange gestures. Finally, Lyan turned to him.

+This man demands to speak to you.+

Wings-Over-Sun looked at the man closely. Pink skin, curled hair, and more hair over its disgustingly soft mouth. He had not seen this Human before.

«What does he want?»

There was another long period of vibration. Then Lyan signed, +He is surprised I can understand your speech. He wants you to stop asking about the accident aboard the Thuy Kieu and about Doctor Emily Quirran.+

A name! The killer had a name. But he was not here to seek punishment, in any case. Lyan had already warned him of the impossibility of such a thing. +The Fleet protects its own,+ she had said, and if that wasn't Entrustment, what was? So alien!

He regained his composure. +Tell him that I will stop when I am sure that surgery by your kind upon my kind will not happen again.+ He paused. +Why does he interfere?+

When Lyan turned back this time her face was changed. More open, somehow. +He says he is the friend of Dr. Quirran and that she is dying. He says they have friends who have told them about us. He can do nothing to help you, and very little to help her. He asks that you not shame her because of your religion.+

Wings-Over-Sun felt his throat patch glow hot with frustration. +What do I have to do with 'religion?' I do not serve your gods. I speak of my people. You refused to listen to them and the soul of one of my people is dead. His body breathes uselessly in your hospital, and his widow mourns in the next room because of your stupidity!+

The man growled low at Lyan in response. She signed:

+He says that your friend might not now lie in a coma if his widow had had the intelligence to warn the doctor of your people's defense system.+

There was no end to these Humans' delusions. +Tell this man he is insane. We have no "defense system." What possible defense system could a wounded Sunone use against a Human? Your people have all the weapons,+ he signed, bitterly, +and all the starships that you arm without enemies, and you think it makes you wise.+

The Human seemed to hesitate. Lyan translated again.
+He wants to know, if you have no defense system, what
burned his friend's hands when she operated on the Sunone.+

Burned.

The word stood out like the sun seen from his window in this place with no atmosphere. Impossible. But could it have happened? He did not want to think so; it would mean that these Humans were just too similar to Sunones, to him. Disgusting. Immediately, he felt ashamed. If there was any chance that a soul might be saved. . . he forced himself to sign clearly.

+What is your friend dying of?+

There was a moment. Then: +Her brain is losing
function and she will soon die.+

For the first time since receiving the report back on homeworld, Wings-Over-Sun felt a surge of hope.

+If you want her to live, take me to your friend.+ He was not sure what the significance of opening eyes and mouths wide was among Humans, but both Lyan and the man were doing so. He had no time. +Do it now!+

He grabbed his case. For the first time since his novitiate, he nearly clutched his soulprobes hard enough to break them. He flashed in protest as Sandor pulled him out the door.

Now there are three places you are trapped in. There is
Delusion, the Elastic Place, and this third.

You believe it to be the Human Hell.

So bright, this place, and dry, and cold. Things are narrow, as if seen only through primeyes under water. And you see a thin, wasted Human that stares at you. You stay very still, and it does the same. It is all you can do to keep from moving.

Eventually, you may be fortunate enough to fall into the Elastic Place. But Delusion is always there, pulling. It is as much as you can do to keep still.

But you do not pray. There can be nothing here to pray to.

i am trapped i cannot move there is someone something else here with me in my head in myself it runs together the thoughts run together i run together and dissolve i wonder if that has been the secret of madness incurable madness for all time a hysterical laugh would well up but i no longer control my lungs could the old ideas of demon possession be true i try to think of a prayer but i know none.

i am not dying i am being killed up until now i could force it out by being awake by being in delusion but delusion was really sanity it could come only at night but now it is here it is in control it is too late to tell anyone no one will believe a crazy woman not even sandor.

i wonder if it is possible to die of terror and lack of sleep.

The tall man led him and Lyan through a maze and into a room. The apartment inside was large, and well-kept.

In the center of the room slumped a woman in a large chair, facing a mirror. Her eyes were dull. A fluid ran from her mouth. Wings-Over-Sun stepped forward, not daring to let his hopes die, even for an instant. He stepped between the Human woman and the mirror.

«Moon-in-Eclipse,» he called, gently.

You try to speak, but cannot. How can there be words for this miracle? The priest has come for his Entrusted, even in the Human Hell. You collapse before him.

The Human's head snapped up and she gave a choked cry. Wings-Over-Sun jumped back. Even he had not really believed. «Moon-in-Eclipse. Sleep. Let go.»

And my enemy is gone. Relaxed, but still there. I smell him. Weakly, I raise my head.

Sandor, and a woman I have never seen are watching me from the corner. Before me stands a Sunone, and suddenly I know who is inside me.

I scream.

The man ran forward, between Wings-Over-Sun and the woman. He showed his teeth and vibrated so hard that Wings-

Over-Sun felt the wind of the Human's breath. Lyan followed and a conversation ensued.

Finally, Lyan signed, "He is frightened because of what you have done to her. He thinks you have lied to him in order to hurt her. He says he will kill you if you hurt her. He. . . I think you should think of her as one of his Entrusted," Lyan finished.

Wings-Over-Sun stood amazed. So much knowledge, and yet the Humans were so slow. She thought to tell a priest about Entrustment. He had known this from the conversation they had had in his apartment. He chose his next words carefully.

«Tell the Human this: I am going to do something dangerous. If it is not done, his Entrusted will die very slowly, as he already knows. If I succeed in this, it will save her life and I will go. If I fail, she will die quickly, and more mercifully than otherwise.»

The man and the two women vibrated among themselves for a long time.

+The woman asks for help. The man says you ask for much trust.+

Wings-Over-Sun did not answer, but looked at the Human and nodded, once. He had learned the gesture. The man looked down. Then he rose.

Wings-Over-Sun took a wooden knife from his belt and carefully made a shallow cut in the palm of his hand. Purple welled up. Ignoring the silvery pain, he inserted

one end of the rod in the incision. Hopefully only one would be necessary, but soulprobes had crystallized before. Taking the woman's head in his hand, he bent it down until the back of her neck showed. He turned to Lyan.

+Tell her she must remain absolutely still.+

To her credit, Dr. Emily Quirran did not flinch at all when the wooden knife passed between her vertebrae and came within microns of her spinal column.

Wings-Over-Sun placed the rod between the cuts, and Shared, stepping through the conducting rod, and into the Human darkness, singing, calling for his lost soul.

And in the horror of Delusion, rising more triumphant than any army, and more beautiful than clouds under the moons, you see the song of your priest, who has come even into Hell for his Entrusted, and a door opens, a path of Sharing at the triple point of your horrors.

Calling you home.

Light. Wind. Detachment spreads itself through the axons and dendrites and pure, colorless fire blows from fingertips to viscera. My spine stiffens and I surge back: the Sunone's grip is an unbreakable, soft shell, and a scream forces its way up from my lungs.

Then I am sustaining a note, and the whole world is the note; a note for a chord that was never expressed in sound. And the thing that has been inside me, the shadow, is gone.

Sandor is holding a cloth to the back of my neck and I am looking at the Sunone. He is unsteadily sheathing his knife.

I see the woman ask him, +Are you all right?+

Erratically, he signs back, +For the first time since I come, things are right.+ He turns to me. +You will be well.+

It is as though I am blind, and my eyes are clearing. I understand it all. +You will return your. . .+ There really is no better word in Anglic. My medical training throws up terms: consciousness? closed-energy symbiont? sequenced waveform brain? None of them are right. +. . .soul. . . to its body? We have kept it alive.+

+No,+ signs the Sunone. +Once the. . . circuit. . . is broken, it cannot be restored. He is dead, yet lives. Here.+ He taps his own head. +I will take my Entrusted back to our village. Back to the. . . Heart.+

I shudder, discovering that I know what that means, though I cannot express it, and that it is good. +Thank you.+

+We have been most fortunate,+ he signed. +Even among our people, to share bodies with another soul is possible for the untrained but. . . unusual. Dangerous. Usually, when we are cut with metal, our souls simply die. You will not do this to one of us again.+

+You know I will not,+ I say.

He blinks his two simple eyes, and his face assumes an expression I now know to be one of surprise. +I do. We are no longer superstitious fools to you, are we?+

The words hurt, coming from one whose mind I have seen. Shared. +And am I still an ignorant conqueror?+

His eyes drop. +No. It was wrong to think so.+

+Yes.+ He knows I speak not of his thoughts, but of my own. +We must speak. I can help you,+ I say, but my head swims, and I fall back. He nods.

+Later. Later we will help each other. Now we must rest.+ I see, for the first time, his own fatigue.

He rises and leaves. The woman follows, and I am left alone with Sandor. He dresses the cut on the back of my neck, and then we sit on the couch exhausted, falling rapidly toward sleep. A sleep without dreams. A sleep with hope for waking on the other side.

Before the world fades, I catch a glimpse of Sandor, and memory gleams bright and unclouded and whole, like a jewel. I think he will not be leaving soon, and for the first time in weeks, I am happy.

The End.

Bearing The Pattern

by

G. Scott Huggins

The gun was heavy, and little drops of water; perspiration, trickled from above the trigger down to my hands, tickling all the way down to my elbows. I came to the balls of my feet. Footsteps. Soft footsteps, just around the corridor.

It had taken all my patience to let him come to me. And he had. Slowly, I gathered air in my lungs.

I leapt.

Everything happened together; the hallway leapt into focus and with it Heath, eyes going wide at my yell, then another high yell, a yellowish-white blur in front of my face and then stinging pain and numbness all up my wrists as the gun was ripped from my hands to clatter against the far wall. The momentum of my leap carried me across the corridor, where I landed squarely on my ass.

"What the hell. . . " I spluttered, looking up, and froze.

About ten centimeters from my nose hung three thin, silvered blades. They bobbed a little from side to side, warping my crazily elongated reflection when they moved. Beyond them, a curiously small, pale face stared down.

Out of my peripheral vision, I could just see Heath staring, mouth open, his own watergun hanging limply in his fingers. I didn't dare take my eyes off the owner of the blades.

She was almost kneeling, but was still about one and a half meters tall. She was holding the blades in her right hand -- no, the blades were fixed to her wrist above her right hand, and she was holding her forearm with her left.

Both arms were encased in bone.

In fact, she was encased in bone. From her neck down to her false ribs, she was a single plate of dun armor, thick enough to give only a vague impression of the breasts that lay beneath. A joint revealed a series of smaller plates, reaching down from her sternum at the apex to down between her legs. Between her legs there was nothing but a small knob of bone. Her legs were also armored; a ridge of bone the thickness of a femur ran the length of each, broken only at the knee joint. Her feet were a series of thin, interlocking surfaces. Now I could see that her arms were more lightly armored, wrapped in spiderweb frameworks of supporting bone, like a grid. Between the grid supports,

the armor was about the thickness of a fingernail. Her elbows and shoulders were heavily knobbed. Three large sections, like huge vertebrae, climbed up her neck, the last of which arced high over her head, splitting her black hair down the middle. Thin runners of bone branched to the sides, leaving shoulder length hair to grow from the sides of her head.

Of course, I had heard about military bioarmor. This was the first time I'd ever seen it.

Now she rose, and I could see she was well over two meters tall. "Excuse me," she said. Her voice was soft, but cool. "You startled me. I did not mean to hurt you."

I let out a long, shuddering breath and flexed my fingers. The feeling was returning in a rush of needles. Nothing hurt, but they wouldn't stop shaking. I closed them into fists behind me and got up. "Uh, I'm all right."

Heath made a noise like a strangled gurgle.

She seemed to scratch the plate on the top of her head. "I must be more careful," she said absently, almost like she was talking to herself. She said, "I'm slightly nervous today. It won't happen again."

"I see," I lied. My mouth switched to autopilot. "Well, as long as we've met, I'm Carl Shire. This is my friend, Heath." I extended my hand automatically.

She hesitated, then took it. Her hand was small, warm, dry and completely normal to the touch. Over it there was a

cuff of bone and three slits that just might be housings for blades. I fought not to stare.

"Marta Krovikian." She turned and offered her hand to Heath, who gingerly took it.

"Are you visiting a friend?" I asked. No one else was in the room. She must have been standing right in the doorway when I'd jumped around the corner.

"I am a student like yourself." Her voice was flat.

"I thought that all soldiers had their armor removed before mustering out." The words were out before I knew it, and I wished I hadn't said them. Her eyes arched.

"I chose not to," she said, slightly louder, now, looking around. I followed her gaze.

The hallway had about ten people in it, all in various stages of moving in. Every eye was on her, a tower of reinforced ivory filling the door to her room.

"Well, it was, uh, nice to meet you. I've lived here for a year. My door's open if you have any questions." She said nothing. "See you around." I turned and picked up the watergun where it had fallen.

It was completely unbroken. I turned back to Marta, but her door was closed. Heath and I looked at each other, and I followed him back to his room.

I stepped over the boxes and sat in the room's empty chair, accepting the beer Heath handed me.

"Well," I said brightly, "that was interesting." I took a long pull of the beer to quell the shaking I felt beginning to crawl up my spine.

"You okay?" Heath asked. "I've never seen anyone move so fast."

"I'm all right. Or will be." At least I thought so. Now I had time to be scared. To distract myself I asked, "What do you know about things like that?"

"I know I wouldn't use 'things like that' as a description where she could hear you."

My head jerked up. "Hey, I meant the armor, not her."

Heath shook his head. "With that stuff, it's a little difficult to make the distinction. Don't you know?"

"I'm a Poli Sci major, Heath. I know how much it costs, not what it does."

Heath shook his head in mock sadness, then went on seriously. "They have to grow that directly onto her own bones. Her muscles are underneath. Highly augmented. It's artificial cell division. So she can't take it off."

"I knew that, but not why."

"Well, it's hard to explain, but she's designed to destroy tanks. Don't get in another fight with her."

"I didn't. . . " I began, but saw Heath laughing over his beer. I gave him a disgusted look, and finished mine. Then I walked back to my room to finish my own moving in. It was hot, and I'd suggested the waterfight to cool us both off. It had worked. I could still feel chills, even if not

the way I'd planned. I passed Marta's room several times. The door remained closed. Eventually, I stopped thinking about her.

2

The floor orientation meeting was a week later. Heath and I were among the last to enter the large, triangular common room.

Marta protruded in the room like an upthrust rock spire in a busy harbor. The dun tones of her armor reflected a red, ghostly reflection of the clear red sunset shining through the glass. She sat on a chair that was comically small for her, next to an empty sofa. I circled around in front of her, taking one of these seats while a large number of people sat on the floor, a good three meters away. Heath gave me a look, but followed, sitting on the other side of me. I smiled at her, and in return got a cold lift of the eyebrows. Her nostrils flared, as if smelling something unpleasant. Well, now what had I done?

"I thought I'd approach slowly, from the front, this time," I said, with a small laugh.

That seemed to do it. A corner of her mouth quirked upward, and a little of the ice in the royal blue eyes thawed. I looked around, and became conscious of more eyes. Measuring eyes. Questing eyes. No one was, of course, rude or brave enough to stare outright.

Under the broken gazes, I began to understand that my gesture of sitting next to her might have been taken as the act of a particularly gauche spectator.

I fidgeted uncomfortably with this thought. Marta's eyes wandered, but mostly stayed fixed on the door in the center of the hall; the private apartment of our Resident Assistant, who was late. I opened my mouth, but then thought better of it. There was no time to explain about Peacey, anyway, and she was coming in the door as soon as I abandoned the notion.

Paige Crenner was a tall blonde with the tendency to remind one of a crane, in both senses of the word. She was striking, and aware of the fact. She wore her hair in short spikes, except for thin, trailing wisps that ran to waist length. Her clothing almost always conformed to the lines of her body, which was in very good shape, thanks both to nature and the fact that she was a karate instructor. Hoops hung and protruded; ears, nose, eyebrow.

Except for her current girlfriend, Nanya, everyone called her Peace, after her initials and politics.

She sat down languidly, next to Nanya, and began her speech about how she welcomed everyone to Kassebaum Hall and Kansas State University, how honored she was to be the RA this year, et multiple cetera. Soon, she turned to the obligatory beginning-of-the-year, state-your-name-and-major ritual. "First of all, I'm Peace Crenner, and this is my partner, Nanya. I'm the president of Free Women For Choice

on campus, majoring in sociology. I'm on the Debating Team, I'm the treasurer for the Separate Society here, and I like to do work for the Green party. Okay, next, please?" She turned with a smile to a morose looking freshman on her right.

I was still trying to think of worthy things to say about myself when Marta stood. There was a swish of indrawn breath. Sitting beside her in an open room, I felt even smaller than I had a week ago.

"My name is Marta Krovikian," she said, just loud enough to be heard. "I am a former combat specialist in the United States Army. For those of you not familiar with it, I am currently bearing the Standard Combat Growth Pattern of Osteoplastic Armor. It functions as a bodily organ, much as your skin does. It permits full range of motion." Just slowly enough for the eye to follow, she spun on one foot, collapsing to a crouch, and then reaching up to touch the ceiling. "Like so. In addition, the Pattern provides for unarmed combat."

She twitched her fingers, and all six of the blades I had seen a week ago unfolded over her shielded knuckles. Then she turned so that the back of her head was to most of the room, and pointed to three tiny gleaming black spheroids mounted on the back of the skull crest. "These simple eyes give me the ability to detect motion beyond my normal range of vision.

"I realize that I look unusual in this setting, and wish to allay anyone's anxieties now. Having done so, the subject need not be raised again. Unless there are any questions?" She surveyed the room, almost daring.

Peace raised a hand. Her expression was unreadable; perfectly neutral.

"Could you tell us why you still wear your armor?"

Marta regarded her calmly. "I bear the Pattern," her stress on the verb was slight "because I choose to." There was an instant of tension between the two women. Then Peace inclined her head, seemingly in acknowledgement, though what she was acknowledging, I could not then have said.

3

Two weeks later, I saw Marta in the hall while taking out the trash. It was the first time I'd seen her since the floor meeting. She was either out or in most of the time. Nobody knew which. Nobody ever knocked on her door, as far as I could tell.

The empty bucket in her hand said that she had just done the same thing. As I dumped my can, a small piece of paper with hasty writing on it caught my eye. I picked up the crumpled thing and straightened it out without thinking.

It said: "Armered Bitch Go Home."

I was actually surprised. I shouldn't have been. Despite its success, the South China War had made the

military unpopular. I heard it in my classes: War was unnecessary, soldiers were unnecessary. After Nato put down the Czar in 2025, the problem was worse. But I had tuned it out. Few people cared, at Kansas State. Fort Riley museum was occasionally vandalized, but the ROTC program was very small and ignored.

But now I was surprised. It had gotten *personal*. I put my trashcan back in my room and went to Marta's door. I knocked loudly, and realized, to my horror, that I had no idea what I was going to say.

I didn't even know why I was doing it. I didn't know Marta. Maybe she deserved it. Maybe I just didn't like her getting picked on.

Maybe I liked sticking my nose into other people's problems. I was a Poli Sci major.

A muffled, "Open," reached my ears, and the door slid aside. She looked at me across one of the small, standard-issue tables that come in every dorm room, crouched over it on the chair, knees high, looking much like a praying mantis. On the table was a chess board with half the pieces remaining, interlocked in patterns of block and attack. Unfinished work glowed above the computer.

"Yes?" she asked in her perpetually neutral voice.

Like a drowning man, I grasped at the board presented to me. "Chess problem, or unfinished game?" I asked in return.

"Problem, actually. I pulled it off The Fifth Net." she said, looking at me measuringly. "You play?"

"In high school, I did." I looked at the pieces, and the problem appeared. "Queen to king's. . ." I broke off. I had just set white up for checkmate. I was rewarded by one of Marta's tight smiles.

"That's the obvious. Next guess?"

"It's got to be a pawn move, it's always a pawn move," I muttered, social problem forgotten in favor of chess problem.

"Be my guest," she said.

I went through all the possibilities, none of which were useful, most of which were fatal. We stared at the board together for long moments. Then I bowed my head, laughing quietly. "Oh, tricky," I said. Marta looked at me quizzically. "Queen takes bishop."

Marta looked at me like I'd gone insane. "Rook takes queen."

"Exactly, and now pawn takes pawn. . ."

"Oh!" Marta's eyes flashed. "Very good," she said, after a minute. "Would you care for an entire game?"

"Sure." She yielded the chair to me and moved the table so that she could sit on the bed. The game opened fast, and I found myself taxed merely to stay on the defensive. I sighed in mock irritation as I sent a knight to cover my threatened bishop. "Don't you have work to do?" I asked facetiously.

"Yes," she said, seriously, "but chess has always helped me to relax when things get tense."

"Relax?" I asked. She nodded. I fished out the crumpled sheet of paper from my pocket. "Would this be one of the reasons things are getting tense?"

She took the sheet of paper and scowled darkly. "Where did you get this?"

"You dropped it by the trash."

"What right have you to intrude in my affairs?"

"Look, I just wanted to help. . ."

"I don't need your help."

This wasn't going the way I had thought it would. "No one says you do, but I didn't think. . ."

"Correct, you didn't. I think you should leave."

"Marta," I began. She rose and looked down on me. Hard.

"Out."

I stood, moving very slowly. What exactly triggered those combat reflexes? I hoped it wasn't anger. "Very well," I managed. "I apologize deeply for troubling you with my assistance." I turned my back to her and left. The door shut behind me. Nenya was walking by, and she gave me a supercilious glance.

I wanted to hit something. Dammit, I'd done the right thing. Or I'd tried to. And she'd made me look like an ass. But she'd been hurt, too. I didn't know whether to be angry at her or pity her.

The next day, I saw another note on her door, and checking quickly to make sure she wasn't around, I peered at it closely. This one said: IRON MAIDEN BABY KILLER.

Disgusted, I ripped the note down and tore it up. Because she still didn't deserve it, I was sure of that.

Two hours later, while poring over a download from the library, there was a buzz at the door.

"Open!" I sang out. The door slid open, and Marta ducked under the doorframe. For a minute, I was afraid that she had somehow seen me take the note from her door, and was come to talk about more "interference," but she didn't look angry.

"Yes?" I inquired, politely.

"I've come to apologize," she said, in that same flat tone that never altered. "You were concerned. I appreciate that. I. . . sort of acted on instinct. I won't say that it won't happen again. But I should not have been angry."

Against all logic, I was smiling. "Won't you sit down?"

"Actually," she said, giving me that smile that looked like she was afraid of breaking her mouth, "I was hoping you'd come back over. I'd hate you to think that you could get out of losing to me at chess by getting yourself thrown out of my room."

"I was hoping you wouldn't see that," I mock-groaned.

"I almost didn't," she said, softly.

I continued the game of chess and won it. We played again, and she put me soundly back in my place. Then it was time for class, and I left.

She never knocked on my door again. But I watched hers. And every two or three days, there'd be something new on it. Obscene cartoons, sometimes, but mostly invitations for the homicidal, armor-plated, baby-killing bitch to go fuck herself. I pulled them down.

The next week, I got two myself, one calling me a warmonger and the other depicting me with a drill between my legs trying desperately to penetrate the shell of some mutant crab thing. I spat and trashed them, thinking black thoughts about Nanya, and whoever she'd told.

Conversations tended to stop when Marta Krovikian entered a room. No one dared stare at her, but they didn't want to talk around her, either. Even Peace, who at least always greeted people, seemed to find other things to occupy her attention when Marta was there. But at least she left Marta alone. So I thought.

One day, after a chess game, on our way to the dining hall, Peace passed us. She mumbled greetings. Marta waited until she was gone. "She is annoying," she said.

I agreed, but was surprised to hear that statement come from Marta, who I didn't think had been around long enough to learn that.

"What makes you say that?" I asked automatically.

"She's like a friend I had, once." Her eyes focused on a point somewhere long ago. "She. . . surrounds herself with mirrors, and builds up images before her, of how things should be. She doesn't care about the way things are. Or the way they might want to be."

I was amazed. "Marta," I said, "you're a poet."

I got a quirky smile and a shake of the head.

"Has she been bothering you?"

"She wants me to visit some of the groups she belongs to."

"Well, in fairness to the groups, their members can't all be as, ah, emphatic as Peacey."

"Their mirrors won't reflect me."

"What, are you a vampire?" I laughed.

Coldly: "I may have tasted enough blood to qualify."

"I was kidding," I sighed.

"I know." Now the smile was sad. "I didn't drink any of it except my own. I guess I don't qualify."

"I guess not," I hesitated. "Marta, if I may, I think you could stand to take the world less seriously. You could even laugh once in a while."

She stopped. "The world is serious, Carl. The world is deadly serious about everything it does. Even when it laughs, the world never forgets how important it is. You're intelligent enough; but you haven't learned that."

Annoyed, I let it drop.

The place was full, and there were no free tables. We got our meals and sat with the rest of the sixth floor in its traditional corner table. For once, conversations didn't stop. Peace was giving some poor freshman her Views.

". . . oh, but you're male. You obviously have great understanding of women who want to be sistermothers. What gives you the right to an opinion?"

"The Constitution," Marta interrupted, not looking up. I winced. Well, Marta had to learn, sooner or later.

"The Constitution?" Peace repeated blandly, rolling her eyes. "A piece of paper created by white males to legitimize their own power. It doesn't even guarantee civil rights for women. I thought about being a sistermother once," she said, turning back to her original opponent. "I guess you think I'm not capable of raising a child?"

"That's not what I meant."

"Well, it's what you said!" Peace bridled. "Maybe if people would pay more attention to what they say, we wouldn't have a need for people to wear things like Marta does."

Marta slowly turned her head to face Peace squarely. "I swore an oath to defend the ideals on that 'piece of paper.' And the Pattern is descended from an art form older than language. Its kind will not be removed from the earth through controlling language. What we say does not start wars; what we do, does."

Peace smiled and put a hand gently on Marta's ribbed shoulder. "Well, of course they made you swear an oath, but people are more important than ideals. They wouldn't let you into their army without. . ."

"Take your hand off me."

Peace froze. The massive forearm swung up and knocked her fingers aside.

"Off!" There was a moment of charged silence. Marta spoke again.

"What do you mean, 'their army?'"

Peace drew her hand back and looked hurt. "Well, I was only trying to be helpful!" she huffed. "Their army, of course, the army of this country that uses people to oppress people, all over the world!"

Marta raised a massive fist. She spread her fingers. "Very well. I see that you believe me to be," She ticked the points off on her fingers. "A tool, a traitor, and possibly an idiot. Which is it, please?"

"I never said. . ."

"You most certainly did. Only a tool would swear a coerced oath. Only a traitor would permit her use against her own. Only an idiot would swear an oath without knowing its implications. I ask again, which do you take me for?"

Peace's look changed to one of purest sympathy. "I'm so sorry. I didn't realize what they must have put you through. It's not surprising that you feel a kind of loyalty, it's a common technique. . ."

"Stop it!" But Marta's voice was softer, and she spoke as if to a child. "'Their' army didn't do anything to me. I neither need nor want your excuses. I am what I am. Would you want me," she glanced at Nanya, "making excuses to people here for what you are?"

Peace's face became deadly expressionless. "Oh. I see. Simple heterosexual bigotry. Well, I was born lesbian; I have a right to be who I am, and I'm proud of it!"

"There we have the difference and the likeness between us, then," said Marta, calmly. "I was not born the way I am. It's not natural. But I, too, have the right to be what I am. I, too, am proud of it."

Peace stood. "Proud? You've subjugated your body to those who buy only death!" She strode out of the dining hall. Nanya half-rose, looking at Marta in fear, anger, and something else. Then ran to follow her partner.

"Better the body than the mind," Marta said quietly, and went on eating. Conversation did not resume.

4

From then on, the number of notes on Marta's door, and mine, doubled. A letter to the editor denounced the "hate language" used by "a militarist" to insult a "dedicated, open-minded woman" like Peacey. About four days later, though, as I reached to take yet another piece of paper off

of her door, I paused. The script was neat and even, not jagged and hurried:

"Individualism is a fatal poison. But individuality is the salt of common life. You may have to live life in a crowd, but you do not have to live like it, nor subsist on its food. You may have your own orchard. You may drink at a hidden spring. Be yourself if you would serve others."

-- Henry van Dyke

An ally? But who? I didn't care. I hoped it would do some good.

Two days later I saw the results. Marta Krovikian stepped into the lobby -- in blue.

She was everywhere blue. The ribs of her arms; the plates of her legs and torso. The ridges were highlighted with white and lighter blue, while joints and gutters were velvet navy -- almost black. A dark, double-beaked, abstract bird-of-prey launched skyward on her chest plates. Only on her face, hands, and exposed neck was there no trace of color.

She gazed defiantly into the lobby, a third-full with morning studiers and breakfast-goers. Slowly, a low clap rang out, and then another. Then the whole lobby was applauding. She gave the lobby an amused half-smile with a

gracious bow of the head. She took the step that put her beside me.

"Shall we eat?" she asked quietly. I bowed deeply to hide my blush. When I looked up, I saw Peace standing in her doorway. There was a look on her face I couldn't interpret. Rage mixed with knowledge of a defeat, mixed with. . . what? I gave her a wide smile as the elevator door opened, and about ten people, including Marta, stepped inside.

The questions around Marta changed. It wasn't, "What kind of person goes around in armor anymore?" It was, "Where did you learn to do that?" To this, Marta only answered that she had had little formal training. And I began to notice that while I was still removing hate mail from her door, there was much less of it. Sometimes, there were things like this:

"Genius is the power of lighting one's own fire."

-- John Foster

It was the same person who had written the first note. Whoever it was, I wanted to meet that person. Being Marta's friend was hard work. Just below it was one saying: 30,000 DEAD IN TWO WARS. HOW MANY MORE WILL YOU KILL?

I mentioned it in the caf one day when I was eating with Heath.

"I'm glad someone's been able to break through to her," he said, chewing on an alleged dinner roll. "No one should be alone that much. But she sort of does bring it on herself."

I nodded, even though his remark grated on me. Did she really? Was it her attitude, or just her armor that kept people away. I said, "I wish she were a little more alone, in a way. Those notes get pretty vicious."

I looked up and saw Nanya sitting down about three chairs down from me. I felt anger flare up in me. I'd pulled a swastika off my door just two days back, and I was pretty sure she was one of the chief rumor mongerers about everything that allegedly happened between me and Marta.

5

A couple of days later, I was playing chess with Marta in her room. She was quiet, even for her, looking blankly at the board. Her blue eyes contrasted with the flowing blue-purple-black color scheme of her armor.

She advanced a knight. I began considering the implications, when I heard her say softly, "I have been unwise."

I looked at the board more intently. "If that move was a mistake, I don't see it. . ."

"Not about the game, Carl." I forgot the board.

"Is there something wrong?"

"Possibly." She looked away for a moment, and then said, "You know the old man who preaches at the Union?"

I felt my eyes roll. "Oh, yeah." Fred Morrùn was the progeny of an old-time preacher family who had made it their personal crusade to deliver the student body of Kansas State from their sinful ways, real or imaginary, for literally generations.

My imagination caught up with me. "What did you do?" I asked, trying to fight a smile that was forming somewhere around my stomach. Marta actually looked guilty.

"Well, I wouldn't have done anything," she said, "but there I was just walking by when he pointed me out, and standing there with those thick glasses, yelling about how I'd disfigured the temple of God by bearing the Pattern, and. . . so. . ." The words came out in a rush. "So I walked up to him, told him his glasses didn't suit his temple very well either, and before I knew what I was doing I'd grabbed them off his face and thrown them over Anderson Hall. It wasn't my fault that he tried to hit me and just about broke his hand. *Stop laughing!*"

I did, instantly, at that tone of voice. Her blue eyes blazed fiercely. "I could have killed him," she whispered. "He could have died right there in my hand. Because I was angry."

I began to see. I'd dreamed of hitting Fred Morrùn; I didn't know anyone who hadn't, but this. . . "I'm sorry," I said.

"It's all right. I decided to tell you." She paused.
"And I suppose, from your point of view, it was funny."

The door chimed.

Marta blinked, then said, "Open."

It was Peace. I felt my stomach sink.

Peace looked at us both, and raised an eyebrow. Then she decided to ignore me.

"Yes?" said Marta.

"I. . . wanted to tell you how sorry I am about what I said earlier. I mean. . . I heard about what you did to that asshole by the Union. I didn't mean to hurt you. Well, I did, but I didn't understand you then. I was hoping that we could be friends."

Marta looked up, then away. "Neither understanding nor being friends is an easy thing, with me. But your apology is accepted."

"May I. . . sit down?"

Marta gestured. Peace sat.

"Marta, I don't want to impose on you, but I would like you to help us. You showed today that we can use men's weapons against them. You're really very inspiring."

Marta tilted her head. "Whom do you mean by 'us?'"
Inspiring to do what? Act against men? I don't act against men. I acted against a man, and only because he was being a hypocrite in public, and using me for an example. If you want action against men, you're far more effective."

Peace sat a little straighter. "Ah, but not as effective as you could be. That armor of yours. . . you've made it a wholly feminine power. I was wrong about that, before."

Marta frowned. She carefully picked up her queen from the board and held it up to the light.

"It's all a game to you, isn't it? You don't want a friend. You want a playing piece. And here I am. So well positioned; your lady in painted armor. But every queen starts out as a pawn. Thank you, but I do not want to be yours." She wrapped her fingers around the piece. "Why do you hate them so much?"

Peace's face flushed dark and when she spoke it was low and ugly. "You know, or should. Men are rapists. Nanya knows. Because they cause the wars that plague half the world. Because they use all of their strength, even our strength, to subjugate us, to keep us as chattels. Isn't that reason enough?"

I rose to leave. Marta looked up. "Sit down, Carl."

It was less than a command; more than a request. Her face was even harder now. She turned to Peace, almost gently. "Do you really believe that women would do it better? Not differently, but better?"

Peace leaned closer, and clasped Marta by the forearm. "Of course we would, we could. . ."

"Take your hands OFF ME!"

Peace recoiled, but found herself caught by a twist of Marta's wrist, gripping hers like a vise. A broken, jagged look was on Peace's face as she stared into Marta's eyes, and I knew: *Peace was in love with Marta Krovikian!* But there was not, could not be reciprocation. . .

Marta leaned into Peace's face, holding her painfully. "Don't you see," she hissed, "that if a man did to you what you are doing to me, you would call it assault? Don't hear yourself becoming what you hate?"

Peace lost all semblance of composure. "But we're women! We don't destroy everything we touch! We're not like them!" she cried furiously.

Marta's face went terrifyingly blank. She took the point of Peace's jaw gently in her hand and turned it up to face her. "Never tell me that again. And never return."

"No, wait. . . ." But there was no waiting. Marta altered her grip, forcing Peace to her feet with a gasp of pain. Marta marched her through the door.

"Out! Lock!" The door closed and locked, shutting out the sight of Peace slumping against the opposite wall. Marta took two steps back, unseeing, and folded herself on the bed. She put her head in her hands, and began massaging her face, and then her hands together, and then her face, and lower neck. Her hands seemed to recoil from the armor, and at the same time seemed to try to cover every exposed area of her body.

"Marta?"

She jumped and stared at me. For the smallest second, I knew what it was to be the target of a deadly weapon.

"Carl." She took a deep breath. "I don't think I can finish our game right now."

"We can't anyway," I said, trying to force a lighter tone. "You've broken the queen."

Marta opened her fist and looked at the splintered plastic as if she'd never before seen such a thing. "I'm sorry," she said quietly. But she didn't seem to be speaking to me. I felt cold. She looked scared.

She put the pieces on the board, and took a bottle from under her bed, and filled a low tray with the liquid. She dipped a dirty washcloth into the solution, and began cleaning her right leg. Where the solvent touched her armor, the intricate, rounded, purple-blue-black enamel dissolved and ran, leaving clean, yellow-white organic.

"What are you doing? Marta, this isn't because of that idiot in the Union is it? You couldn't have taken that seriously?"

"No, but I take that seriously," she said sadly, not stopping, and gesturing toward the door. "I take those seriously." She pointed to her desk, and I noted a pile of papers on it, all sizes. I looked through them.

I'd never seen such a differing array of messages. There were notes; all the kinds I'd torn from her door and many others that I'd never seen, proposing everything from a date to crude sex to undying love. What in the world?

Marta was looking at me with one of her small smiles. "Well, don't look so surprised, Carl. Even your efforts can't stop people sliding them under the door." I winced. For all my self-congratulation, I had simply never thought of that. Somewhere among the hundreds of notes, it dawned on me that Marta was many things to many people, and all in their minds. They built castles around her, put swords in her hands, killed her, and removed her armor with their minds, thousands of them. Because whatever else you could do with Marta Krovikian, you couldn't ignore her. Not and still be alive.

"I understand," I said again. My eyes burned. Her legs were yellow-grey again, and the color was being stripped from her arms.

"No, you don't, and neither does she, and neither do they. This," she indicated the tessallations on her armor, "was a mistake. All I want; all I have wanted, is to be left alone, and none of them will ever understand. I really want to be alone, Carl. It's what I've wanted for so long that I don't remember the last time I was lonely. I can barely comprehend the concept. And it seems that they either hate me for it. . . or don't believe it's possible."

"I don't hate you for it."

"No, you don't."

"Then if you want to be alone so much, why do you tolerate me?"

"You let me be alone with you, Carl." She looked at a far point on the ceiling. "You don't demand. I suppose that's why, here, you're the closest thing to a friend I have."

I didn't feel offended. I just nodded, and rose. "Call me when you're ready to play." I think it was at that moment that I finally began to understand Marta Krovikian.

6

But she was right, nobody else did. They were curious as to her sudden reversion to type, but their questions, polite or probing, were rebuffed, with increasing intensity. It didn't work in her favor. I could see the fame she had won facing the dear Reverend deteriorating into something worse than ambivalence. Her reputation as something cold and inhuman was back. And there was something worse. A directed enmity marshalled against her, and it lived on the floor, in the big room off the common area. I was reminded of the proverb of what Hell hath no fury like when I saw Peace looking at Marta Krovikian. That was certainly something that wasn't restricted to one orientation. And why was I surprised about that?

The notes started to reappear. It was about that time that I caught one of the perpetrators. I had just turned off the light when I heard a soft step in the hall. Ever so faintly, there was a scratching. I walked to the door and

looked through the peephole. Someone was holding a piece of paper on Marta's door, working on a message. I was just sleepy enough to be pissed and heedless. I opened the door, stepped out, and spun my victim around by the arm in one smooth motion. "What the fuck do you think. . ?" The words died in my throat as my grip was expertly broken. I backed off quickly and came up with my fists raised, one tingling badly.

Nenya stood facing me, her face a mask of rage, her own stance promising a much more refined way of fighting. I was much stronger than she was. But I remembered Peace's black belt. "So Peacey can't even write her own shit these days, is that it?" I asked, breathing heavily.

Then I noticed the large blue splotch below Nenya's left eye, how thin and drawn she looked. I saw the note where it had fallen by the door:

"No one respects a talent that is concealed."

-- Desiderius Erasmus

"Holy shit," I breathed. "It's you. Why?"

She stared defiantly up at me. "As if you could ever understand." She shook her head. "Step back."

Without thinking, I did so, and she picked up the note, fixed it to the door. Looking me straight in the eye, she said, haltingly, "I. . . ask you. . . not to tell Peace about this."

I felt my eyes widen. "You mean she doesn't know? And she still. . ." Nanya blushed, the bruise dark against her cheek. I shut up.

"The day I tell Paige Crenner anything I think she wants to know will see a wind chill factor in Hell," I said evenly.

She nodded, straightened, and left. I went back to bed. I was a long time getting to sleep.

Nanya's secret efforts did not hinder Peace. It took time, but there were complaints. A couple of residents expressed misgivings about living in the same building with a person who was so effectively armed. Armed deliberately, if stories told by the Army were true, to kill armed opponents. Not long thereafter, an open letter, put forward by the Separate Society, appeared on the editorial page of the school paper expressing its "real regret that the relevant authorities have not seen fit to insure the security of the majority of students in regard to keeping campus free of weapons."

Once started, the thing proceeded with alarming speed. Rumors mentioning Marta Krovikian by name began to circulate, always in vague terms, alleging "threats." Other groups on campus began also to show their "concern," as well. And when the opportunity presented itself, Peace acted. One day, the paper mentioned a minor, drunken brawl. One of the residents had pulled a folding knife, and had

been arrested. I was in the room, sitting, as usual, over the chess board when the door chime sounded.

"Open."

Peace stepped into the room, and there was nothing of peace in her face. It was a mask, hard as ivory. Marta stood, eyes blazing. "I told you not to return."

"I'm afraid you don't have that right, Ms. Krovikian. I am a Resident Assistant and have the authority to enter the residents' rooms for the welfare of the students."

"Really? And what might justify concern over student welfare here? Is playing chess dangerous?"

"I have reason to believe that there are weapons in this room."

Marta spat. "Yes, you would believe that, wouldn't you? Be my guest." She swept a hand around the room.

"I don't think a search will be necessary. There are six knives, right in plain sight."

Marta's eyes narrowed. I didn't get it either. "What do you mean?"

"On your wrists, there. Three on each hand. It is against the rules of this hall to keep weapons in the rooms of residents."

Marta slowly made a fist and the three mirrored blades slid into view. "You aren't talking about these?" Her voice was frozen lead sliding on velvet.

"I'm afraid I am. You will have to give them to me."

"Be careful what you wish for, Ms. Crenner."

"Are you threatening me, Ms. Krovikian?"

"The threat is in the ear of the hearer."

"Then I repeat, you must surrender your weapons."

"My 'weapons' as you call them, are a part of my body. I believe, in certain circles, your hands and feet are considered deadly. Do you remove them?"

"Hands and feet are not legally recognized as weapons by the University," Peace said, primly. "I'm afraid double-edged blades are."

"If you have been listening to me at any point in the year, which I doubt," said Marta, implacably, "you know that no part of the Pattern can be removed short of major surgery."

"Then I'm afraid I'll have to file a report of noncompliance with Residence Hall regulations."

"You go ahead and do that."

Peace was not stupid. Theoretically, she could have called the police and had Marta Krovikian removed from her room immediately, but a police officer might not have seen Peace's brand of reason. Therefore, a report was filed through campus authorities. Protests were raised. In less time than I believed possible, the bureaucracy, motivated by hundreds of correct shoves at the right time, reacted. Marta stood in my room holding a sheet of paper one week later. She ran her hand over her exposed face, probing the flesh. She sighed, and the eyes looking out of that shielded head were tired. "It appears that our Resident

Assistant has won. I am to present myself to the student tribunal. I must prove that I am no danger to the student body. Failing to appear will result in discharge from the hall."

"You can prove you're no danger, can't you?" I asked hopefully.

"Carl, don't be stupid. Of course not. I am a danger to the student body. A controlled danger, but I am dangerous." She sat.

"I underestimated her. She had more resources than I let myself think. The tribunal will consist of at least a majority of her allies. They will merely seek to prove that I can kill a student on this campus, if pressed. And I can. I can kill anyone on this campus, and no one within reach could stop me." It was not a boast. "And even if they could find me safe enough to live with, she knows that this is exactly what I most wish to avoid. She has dragged me into the spotlight."

"Could you move off campus?"

She laughed bitterly. "Oh, really, Carl! Would I be on campus if I had another choice? Why would I subject myself to the stares, the whispers, the thousand invasions, if I could live alone? But do you think any landlord in town had a room for me? Strangely enough, they were all filled the second I walked in the door."

"Why are you here, Marta?"

"I just told you. . ."

"I don't mean the dorms. Why are you here? In school. Why don't you just become a hermit someplace quiet? If you hate being around people so much, then why are you even here?"

Her face had turned the color of concrete at noon. "I thought you were my friend, Carl."

"The only one you have, and I'd really hate it if you had to leave, so stop trying to distract me and answer the question." I began to have that detached, two-seconds-after-the-car-wreck feeling.

"I'm not independently wealthy," she started.

"Oh, stop. You called me intelligent once, don't pretend you were lying now. You could make a decent living holding cars up one-handed for a mechanic who can't afford a hydraulic lift if you wanted to; why are you here? What's more important to you than your solitude?"

"I don't want to be just a tower of armor for the rest of my life, Carl!" she snapped. "Maybe I'm trying to deal with this the best way I know how. I thought college would be. . . different, somehow. Maybe I'm naïve." Her voice had softened.

"Good, at least now I know you won't just give up." I picked up the letter. "This is bullshit, you know. If anyone but you faced this kind of prejudice, Peace and her friends would fall over themselves helping you. Let's use their own arguments against them. They want fair, we'll give them fair."

"How?"

Feeling giddy with the surreal feeling of absolute hopelessness, I stood. "My lady, I am a. . ."

"Poli Sci major," she said with me, rolling her eyes.

"And," I continued, "this sort of bullshit is my business. I do not intend to have my chess partner kicked out from under her roof without a fight. Come with me."

An eyebrow raised. "Where are we going?"

"We're going to the library. Then we're going to the Student Senate and look for precedents. Then we're going to find manifesti from every group that's crucifying you and hoist them on their own petards."

"We're going to lose, Carl. We have a week."

"And what are you going to do with it, lie down and die?" I snapped.

The quirky smile I knew so well finally reappeared. "Lead on. I suppose I might as well learn some research before I get kicked out of school."

That night, I plowed through the library looking for anything that would help us. I looked up legal precedents, anatomical definitions, statements of purpose, anything. At three in the morning I read the same sentence five times and sleepily suggested we call it a night.

"Oh, by the way, Marta. . ."

"Yes?"

"Whatever you use on that Pattern of yours, to decorate it? Use it. From now until the hearing."

"Carl, we've been through that. It's over."

"No. Public opinion is important on this. You had a lot more allies than you can believe simply because of how you looked. One of the rumors going around is that you're still on active duty and were ordered by your superiors to stop defacing the uniform. That's bad. Admittedly, it won't be much, but it's got to help."

We took it up at noon the next day. Marta appeared in brilliant pigments, an explosion of red and black in a fiery pinwheel that licked up her limbs, moving with her. We worked through that night and started another day.

By eight on the third night I had enough material to choke several committees and was starting to formulate my plan of attack. But I had to have a break before I went on. I couldn't take any more chess, so Marta suggested that we go down to the weight room.

My weight training is strictly low key. I picked up one of the short arm-curl bars as we entered the empty room and found a corner. Suddenly, Marta called out, "Catch!"

I jumped and yelled, staggering under the weight of the ten kaygee bench press bar she threw into my hands. She picked up its mate, one-handed, and blurred it through the air, twirling it like a baton. It cracked audibly onto her right wrist, and she held it like a quarterstaff. She essayed a shy smile. "I wanted to be a cheerleader, once."

"You what?" Truly ridiculous mental pictures formed in my mind.

"So long ago. So foolish." She looked into the mirror as if trying to find the past. "We trained with these in unpowered combat." She began to slide weights onto the two ends of the metal staff. Twenty kaygees first.

"You don't mean you hit each other with those?"

"It's the greatest confidence builder in the world to be hit by a drill instructor armed with one of these things and get up with no more than a sore back, Carl."

"What if someone took one in the face?"

"We had visors." She was done. The assembled weight was at least seventy-five kaygee. Slowly, under her wrist muscles alone, the massive barbell began to rotate in the air. She twirled with it, now on one foot, now on the other. A quiet croon came from between her lips; a long, wandering descant. Now the weight was twirling very fast, and she was using her arms, one over the other, to keep it going.

"These are speed kata exercises in our school of martial arts. I'm forbidden to teach it, but you certainly can't apply it." I nodded mutely. Now the dance became more intricate, and the weight became a spinning blur, described by a flashing grey border of moving iron. She moved to the large punching bag in the center of the room. Then she started striking. The huge barbell lashed out, once, twice, three times, and each time it grazed the surface of the bag, ever so slightly, and a metal on plastic zing rebounded through the room. Then legs and arms flashed

out of the dance, each barely missing contact with the surface. It went on and on, faster and faster, Marta dodging the blows of an unseen foe, and then a foot leapt out of the redblack maelstrom, striking the bag dead center with a BOOM! The bag jerked, reaching an angle of forty-five degrees before it swung back down, meeting the unyielding rod in the hands of Marta Krovikian. She stopped it, and then set the barbell down, breathing hard. "Pity I had to pull the punches, but a full bar strike would have split the bag."

"I believe it."

She ran her hand along her opposite arm, along the main bone crest superior to the ulna. "It's so incredible, and yet it cannot keep me safe. It can only keep me whole." She put her hands to her face, then looked at me. "Carl, in a few days, the questions about the Pattern, and why I bear it will begin, and I will not be answering them. Do you know why?"

"You choose not to."

A rueful laugh. "You *have* been listening. It was wrong of me to tease you. But you if anyone deserve to know. And because you do not seek it," she paused as if before some inner barrier. "I will tell you," she said.

"If you don't want to. . ."

"Let me." She flicked her blades in and out, convulsively. "I might not be able to again."

I nodded. She sat on a bench-press machine, dwarfing it.

"My unit was sent in against the New Czar. There weren't many of us. There didn't need to be.

"You'll never know the confidence we felt that day. We were killing machines, armed to our artificial teeth. I went in with a slow microreactor on my back powering a Gauss antitank cannon and a flechette thrower that could shred anything unarmored. Lasers, grenades. . . oh, we had it all. Eight-man platoons, traveling in pairs. We ran at fifty miles an hour, and were sent scouting into the heart of enemy territory. And Hank and I ran into the center of the Pit."

"The Pit?"

"Part of the war you didn't hear about. The Czar, now, he wasn't quite as stupid as you'd have him out to be. The Custer of Crimea, they called him. Hell, I did, going in. The war only lasted three days; this was the first of them. And contrary to the rout you heard about, the Czar's soldiers held. They died, but they didn't rout.

"The Czar was tricky. He had his forces all over the peninsula, positioned to meet our beachhead. So Hank and I went in from the coast, around the curve of the Black Sea. What no one knew was that the Czar had militia reserves all through the desert. The biggest of these, the best armed, lay hidden, ready to take our lead elements as they pursued the retreating *zashchitniki*. This was the Pit. We ran

right into the middle of it. We were monitored for about a hundred miles; never knew it, and then. . . then the forest came to life.

"There were bunkers, all through the ground, and they just sprouted, like cottonwood, all at once. Hank and I, we stood back to back, yelling for backup. They'd jammed the net. They ran at us waving anything they had: new guns, old guns, swords, fists. At that range, a flechette gun doesn't kill; it. . . strips." She shuddered only slightly, and went on. "Skeletons fell at my feet, just like parts made by robots, and I couldn't pause to do more than reload. And reload. Women, children." Her voice was a whisper.

"Reload. Then there were no more reloads. We were in a hailstorm of fire, but it was too small to really hurt us; their few heavy weapons couldn't fire without hitting their own people in the back. I fought. Hank fought. And then I couldn't lift my leg anymore because there were twenty people holding it down. And then it was like falling in a screaming ocean. There were a hundred people on each of us. We weren't even hurt. But we couldn't move. They kept us pinned, and the ones nearest kept. . . kept *touching* me, trying to find the joints in the armor, trying to find some way in. The Pattern was the only thing that kept them out.

"The local commander arrived, too late to salvage Hank. They'd pretty well torn his helmet off, along with most of his face. But I was still alive. How could I be kept that way?" She seemed to shrink.

"They drove their one tank across my feet, Carl. That's how they kept me there. And even this bone has a breaking point. My feet were crushed, and the only reason I didn't bleed to death in the desert was because our blood is loaded with coagulants. So I lived. I lived while they drove trucks over my hands, keeping me spreadeagled on the sand. I lived and was conscious while they discussed how to rape me. And the women stood back and provided. . . ideas. They ordered me to surrender and take off my armor."

"You didn't surrender."

"I never surrendered." Her teeth showed spasmodically. "But I lay there helpless while they tried with knives, swords, rifles. It all just bounced off, even at point blank range as they tried desperately to penetrate, right here." She tapped her featureless pelvis. "It only lasted three hours. That's all. They felt me, probed me, for three hours, trying to find the secret. They didn't. They got angry. Took off my helmet, broke my jaw, urinated on me. But at the end, they heard the radio telling them that they were needed at the front, because the rest of the force had landed and there weren't going to be any troops left to lead anyone into their trap. So the commander ordered their tank to back off my feet; I nearly passed out from the pain. I awoke just in time to see them lower the turret gun at the same point they'd been hammering at all night, and fire." Her hands went to her face. "I won't try to describe it. If it had been a modern round, I'd have been blown in half."

But it was an old, light tank. The shell blew the armor in and left me slowly bleeding to death. Then, they finally left. By the time the helicopter found me, I was nearly dead. I survived. They put me back together again. I did not surrender. I can never surrender. And because the Pattern kept out those hands, I can't bear the thought of losing it. I don't think I could stand to be touched without it. The thought of sex. . . you have to surrender, you see? But sometimes, sometimes I miss feeling." She held her palms up. "Now you know."

"Now we know." Peace stepped into the room with Nanya behind her. The door had been closed, so how. . ?

Then I remembered the tiny vents, set low in the doors. I looked to Marta, betrayed by her own words to a simple eavesdropper. She rose, and her face was immobile as the rest of her body.

"Coward," she whispered.

Peace's jaw dropped, theatrically. "Coward? Coward? You have the gall to stand there in that abortion of armor and call me a coward? You slaughter people for pay and call me a coward?" Her eyes went cool and mocking. "You didn't get half what you deserved."

"*Dammit, no!*" Nanya's shout wiped the triumph from Peace's face, and she looked down on her smaller partner in disbelief. "What's happened to you, Paige?" Tears of anger were running down her cheeks.

"I thought we didn't do this to each other. You told me we didn't. You told me it was never our fault! She was raped, Peace, and you say she deserved it. . ."

She was cut off by Peace's hand around her throat. "You little bitch. You think I don't know you've been looking at her, this whole time?"

Nenya's hand came around and cracked into the side of Peace's head, and she howled. She thrust Nenya from her and kicked viciously into her stomach. Nenya crumpled. Peace stood over her, punctuating words with blows: "She. . . wasn't raped! She was shot. . . butchering people. . . in that damned invasion! She's a traitor. . ."

Then Marta was standing over her, bending Peace's right hand back, back away from Nenya. Peace's scream rose as her wrist cracked. Somehow, even then, she broke away, and stood facing Marta, one hand dangling limply, snarling hate.

I leapt up, crying out, "No!"

Marta blurred. The women flowed together; Peace's karate reflexes trying to block a bioarmor fist. Tin shield against the cannon. Peace folded over, and horror stared out of her eyes.

She coughed once, and blood poured down her chin, onto Marta's forearm. Three silver blades were buried in her lower gut. I was stone.

Marta's wild eyes stared into Peace's and whispered, "This is how it was, and it is not rape?" Peace's mouth worked; she coughed. Blood spattered. Marta lifted her, on

the blades, off her feet. The world spun, and my stomach emptied on the floor; still I heard Marta, screaming:

"This is how it was, and it is not rape? Answer me!"
A wet, retching sound: someone trying to inhale.

Marta set her down and pulled the blades out, dripping. As her opponent fell, she whispered, tears streaming from her eyes, the words fueled by hate and the last of the air in her lungs, "That is. . . how it was."

Blood pooled underneath the crumpled form. Nenya gasped from her place on the floor, staggered to her feet, and stumbled out the door. Marta looked at her blades, now red-black with blood. She seemed to wake up from some other place, and turned to me, almost as if she wanted to ask a question. Then she collapsed, falling beside Peace.

I did not pass out. I spent the longest minutes of my life in a gym waiting for the sirens to arrive, and watching Marta Krovikian, her rage spent, massaging her face with her hands.

7

The police took her away, and she went without resisting. I was taken too, for questioning. I answered.

"Where is she?" I asked the detective in the brown suit, when he was done.

"Via Christi, in Wichita. They're doing all they can."

"I mean Marta."

"Don't worry about her," said Brown Suit, grimly.
"We'll take care of her."

"She's my friend," I said, softly.

"Oh." He was startled. Then his eyes narrowed, but softened at the same time. He spoke into a phone, then faced me again. "Her attorney's with her now, but. . . she isn't expected to be competent to stand trial. She won't talk; hasn't said a word. Follows simple instructions. We're calling a doctor to confirm."

"What happens after that?"

"She'll be consigned to a hospital, indefinitely, after they cut her out of that armor."

My mouth went dry. "You can't do that."

"We don't have much of a choice, Mr. Shire. We can't afford to have mental patients around that stand a good chance of winning an argument with a tank."

"She'll die. You've got to listen to me, you'll be condemning her to death without trial."

"Son, they do this sort of thing all the time," said Brown Suit, placatingly.

"Not to her! You don't. . ." I couldn't go on. "Can I see her?"

"When they're done."

Two hours later, I was led to her cell. I was surprised to see a mountain of metal and bone standing outside of it. But it wasn't Marta. It was unmistakably masculine, and even taller than she was. A large, open-

barrelled, magnetic cannon hung by his side, and there were corporal's chevrons on his shoulders. He stared straight ahead, into the cell, at a point on the wall. Marta was sitting with her feet up on the bunk, face in her hands. Her red and black coloring was partially removed in ugly, dun strips where something had been applied to take the blood off. Faded red mixed with muddy gray in runners.

"Let me in."

"Oh, no," said Brown Suit, "Not on your life. I'm not going to be faced with a hostage situation. She could kill you by patting you hard."

Anger flooded me. The Detective looked at me as if to say, "take it or leave it." Then he went out. There was nothing I could do but look through the bars.

She looked at me with the same old neutral mask on that she wore every day in public. But now there was a deadness in the blue eyes. She did not speak.

I knelt down, leaning against the cold bars and whispered, "Marta, please, you've got to talk to them. They'll take away the Pattern without even a trial if you don't. They think you're insane." She looked up, and I half expected to see the old quirky smile, and hear her say, "Are they wrong?"

I didn't.

"Marta, maybe you can plead temporary insanity, and I'll testify all the way to back you up. Please, Marta. You can't surrender now. Fight this."

Slowly, she stood up. I felt the mountain of the Corporal turn and move behind me, watching her intently.

Slowly, very slowly, she approached the bars and knelt opposite me. She looked me in the eyes, her hand emerging from the cuff of the synthetic bone. Under the three hidden knives, five soft fingers reached between the steel and touched my face, sliding along my nose, cheek, and neck, softly caressing my throat, then my shoulder, then my ribs.

Everything blurred, and her hand traveled back up to the shoulder, down the arm to the hand. She held my wrist as if she were afraid of breaking it, and gently pulled my hand to her face.

I sat unmoving, as she held my hand to her forehead, closed her eyes, and felt my fingers with her cheek. Then she dropped my hand, and bent her head, looking down. I blindly groped my way out of the jail, and before I knew it, found myself on a street, walking. I didn't stop until dawn, in the middle of a field, far away from everything.

A week later, they performed the operation that removed the Pattern from Marta Krovikian. I tried to see her. I was told that she was "severely disturbed" and was not allowed to have visitors. Three days later, I read the obituary.

The funeral was small. Nanya was there, too. All she said was, "I'm sorry," and then we cried. We keep in touch. We remember Marta. There were a few soldiers, ex-soldiers. They were very cold; distant. I suppose it was only fair.

Who could tell them differently? We had never borne the Pattern. Marta bore the Pattern. It destroyed her, and saved her. It kept her alive and killed her. It was beautiful, and it was horrible. Marta always talked about "bearing the Pattern." And Nanya said maybe we all have one; something that kills even as it strengthens, heals as it wounds. "Peace was my Pattern," she said. "And Marta was the way out of it. For better or for worse." I don't know what my Pattern might be, but I'm keeping an eye out for it.

Because if it's anything like Marta Krovikian, it will be worth seeing. Whatever happens.

The End

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