

A glowing biological specimen, possibly a larva or insect, is shown against a black background. The specimen has a large, rounded, glowing blue head and a long, thin, glowing blue body that curves downwards and to the right. The body is illuminated with a bright blue light, and there are some red and white structures visible at the end of the body. The overall appearance is ethereal and scientific.

# Spiral

Volume 2, Issue 3  
Summer 2009

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## Table of Contents

Name Here	<i>Tess M. Yanisch</i>	1
What We Know	<i>Faith Hays</i>	9
First Snow	<i>Alyssa Zullinger</i>	10
Untitled	<i>Greg Schram</i>	11
The Pied Piper	<i>Miranda Fisher</i>	13
Achilles	<i>Stefan Babich</i>	14
The Entertainer's Ego	<i>Faith Hays</i>	41
Operation Ragnarök	<i>Daniel Kessler</i>	42
Switchblade	<i>Jeremy Ledgister</i>	44
Desire	<i>Stephen Burrows</i>	50
Yoshino	<i>Daniel Kessler</i>	51
Shadows (cover art)	<i>EJ Landsman</i>	52
	(story) <i>Edward Allen Underhill</i>	53
Mercury Space Fighter	<i>Mike Rawcher</i>	66
Contributors List		66
Staff List		67
Announcements		67

For Sam

by Faith Hays

# Name

by Tess M. Yanisch

## I

**I**t was a dreary day in February when I first heard about it. I had gotten up to get some water and was halfway back to my cubicle, staring blindly out the long window bank at the rain pouring down to the street below. It made me feel damp and chilly in the big air-conditioned building; it always had before, and now, with the Crisis, the gray seemed to seep into my bones and stay there. The sterile florescent lights were no comfort.

I was shaken from this daze, however, by the sound of two co-workers arguing.

“Just another all-out-busted hope—”

“No! He’s not in it for the power, or the money, anyway. You ought to see the story. The things this guy is doing are unreal!”

A derisive snort. “What, like walk on water?”

“Like stop an ancient blood feud and send half the adults in a town out to the mountains to find fresh water! Like get a group of kids to rebuild the village while they’re gone!”

“Psh. That’s nothing special. People are scared, they’ll do what anyone who seems to know what they’re doing tells ‘em to do!”

“Hey, I’m not saying I believe he’s God. But you’ve got to admit—”

I wandered over. “Hey, Jeff. What’s going on?”

Jeff glanced at me and straightened his blue tie and brown suit, embarrassed. “Carl’s been telling me about this guy over in Asia somewhere. Helped a few people and now has a cult saying he’s the Second Coming.”

I shook my head. “Sounds like an early bid for power, if you ask me.”

Carl nodded, eager to have another listener. “Right, that’s what I thought too, at first. But he didn’t start the cult and he doesn’t seem to know what to do with ‘em. If you look at some of the footage, he just seems so *oblivious*—”

I blinked. “There’s footage?”

“Yeah, check the net. China can’t stop all the Eastern news anymore, there’s just too much else going on. Besides, I think it’s more like Nepal or something anyway. But he’s not from there, either.”

“Isn’t he supposed to come down from Heaven with trumpets?” I asked, curious in spite of myself.

“Huh? --No, no. He isn’t—whatever the cultists say, he isn’t—it’s not the Christian God. They just say he’s *a* god. Or a god’s kid, or something. A god incarnate.”

“The things people grab on to for hope,” Jeff muttered. I waved him away. I’ve tried many religions in my life, mostly offshoots of trying to be Buddhist but not being able to sit still enough. Jeff is an accountant. He worships cold, hard data and grim facts. I’m surprised he wasn’t promoted even higher in the industry once the Crisis hit. He’s the ideal analyst; he’ll never sugarcoat the facts, it’d be blasphemy.

“If he turns into a holy dictator some other extremist will kill ‘im,” Carl conceded, a surprisingly heartless remark from him. “But I don’t think it’ll happen.”

“Let the people have their hope,” I said. “It sounds like the guy isn’t doing any harm.”

“Yet,” Jeff muttered grimly.

A phone rang somewhere off in the cubicle maze, and I jumped. When the world is going crazy, you get a little paranoid. What if it had been mine? I wanted to be productive—wanted to hang on to the job I had. I said my goodbyes and walked back toward my cube, looking out the window again as I did. Already, the blue-gray smog of winter twilight had descended on Seattle. The wind gusted against the building, and I shivered.

## II

That was how I first heard of Name, the Pacifying One, the Child. A few days later, he was all over the news—he’d somehow managed to stop a Middle Eastern warlord from nuking the next-door country over their oil and negotiated a food exchange instead. He spoke at the peace conference to just a few top leaders. They exited, witnesses reported, looking dazed and bewildered, but none claimed manipulation or unfair dealings. Perhaps they couldn’t afford to. The Crisis had officially spread to even the wealthy in the oil regions.

At that point, we still didn’t have a name for him. That came a week later, when a small pamphlet began circulating on the practicality of sharing and compassion. It was obviously hastily formatted off an online template, to the point where there were empty squares where photos should have gone and the text under the title still read, “by[Name Here].” The pamphlet was picked up, reprinted, fleshed out, but the unknown author made no attempt to clarify his identity. Soon Name Here became a household phrase, delivered with no more humor than Grace or Earnest, just a name.

Within the next few months, there were public speeches. The next thing we knew, Name had over a million declared believers and more joining every day. Over in the States, of course, we watched and laughed, wait-

ing for the twenty-minute wonder to wear out.

But it didn’t.

By August, Name’s followers numbered in the double-digits-and-six-zeroes, and enough people had seen him to raise the question worldwide of whether he was a himat all. Vids of its speeches made it onto the unblocked uTube, but no one seemed to be able to decide. We were all too distracted by the content of the sermons.

Actually, they weren’t really sermons at all; there was nothing preachy about them; they didn’t glorify the speaker at all, and often in fact Name seemed to be trying to dissuade its followers from following it personally. There was no reference to the gospel of any known religion, and references to a specific God were few or nonexistent. They were more like how-to seminars on living simply, or the importance of having friends to talk to—suicide prevention, nuclear disarmament, crop rotation. After a well-publicized murder of a gay European politician (the murderer proudly confessed, declaring she’d done her part to improve the Crisis and please God) the speeches left small towns. Name went to the city where the murder had taken place, trailing adherents in its wake, and requested an audience with the country’s leader and the victim’s family. Two days later a platform was set up in the city’s main square, and Name—unannounced but clearly not unexpected—stood behind a podium and delivered a twenty-minute talk on tolerance and religious understanding. The crowd assembled in the street (comprised of grandmothers busy knitting, teenagers on skateboards, homeless people coming from the soup kitchens) was clearly ready to scream and cheer for the riproarer of a speech they knew Name could deliver.

But Name did not shout or declaim. The speech was sorrowful and gentle rather than angry, a quiet resignation to being unable, at the last, to understand a human action. That innocent, hurt bafflement cast a spell over the silent audience, a quietness from speaker and listeners that lasted until the very end of the speech. “I do not wish to criticize others’ worship,” it said softly, “indeed I have no right to do so, given—well. . .” and shook its head wryly. “No, I do not wish to criticize worship,” it went on, more strongly. “But this is not worship. This is not sacred. I will not, cannot believe in any deity that would wish one of its people dead. And we are all its people. Listen to me: for I am the Child!”

It said something else after that, but it got lost in the roar of the crowd.

## III

Name got more involved after that. More involved with its followers, more involved with politics, more involved with technology. It met with the crowned heads of Europe and the poor in its slums. It was seen in Africa and Australia, staring at the growing deserts or the teeming, desperate cit-

ies. It talked with bakers, bankers, activists. It seemed to finally realize that it had a huge, wide-reaching influence, or to come to the conclusion, after long deliberation, that using its personal fame to further its philanthropic goals was ethically okay.

It seemed to transform anyone who met it personally—they came away speaking of determination, childlike innocence coupled with a razor-sharp mind, and an overwhelming charisma. They couldn't tell you if Name was male or female, but they did say it didn't seem to make any difference. Name wouldn't let anyone who needed aid go unassisted, either: it helped negotiate peace treaties, investigated political corruption, urged its ever-growing supporters to volunteer at charities, and pitched in itself to do everything from mundane construction to coordinating relief to some of the hardest-hit regions.

It also took an interest in the global market.

When Name was planning its first visit to North America, last September, it contacted several of the largest States-based industries—ours included—and requested to meet with someone from them. “Not your CEOs, please,” it said, in a hand-written letter brought to our door by a Follower with a private plane—the only reliable method of transcontinental mail anymore, what with all the unrest. “Someone who knows mostly what's going on, but not all of it. I want to meet your people, not your symbols.”

There was a great deal of excitement over all this, of course. Carl nearly blew a gasket. He wasn't a Follower yet, but he was a fan. “Did'ja hear about it?” he asked me, that morning. “Did'ja hear?” Even Jeff seemed mildly intrigued. “I wonder why Name would want to discuss the global financial future with middle management. It wouldn't be very useful.”

I merely shrugged and went on with my routine. I was curious, of course, but I knew whatever happened would happen without any commentary on my part. I was content with observing closely as it all unfolded. So the summons to the C.E.O.'s office later that day came as something of a shock.

He looked up as I entered the room. “Cliffordson? Ah, good. Sir, the Board held a drawing today—No, no, no one's position has been cut, it's—I apologize for the short notice, but it is a trying time and—” He broke off and started again. “Henry, it is your lot, should you wish it, to be this company's ambassador, to meet privately with Name.”

I'd seen it coming but I hadn't. I nodded, numbly, not sure what to feel or think, let alone what to say. “Good. Good,” he said, obviously relieved. “I shall send our reply to Name right away. I assume she'll contact you with further details.”

I remember hearing that “she,” and wondering about it. I also remem-

ber walking out of the office, surrounded by people, with someone slapping me on the back and several people expressing jealousy that they hadn't been chosen. I remember riding home and smelling French fries on the bus. I remember taking a shower and going to sleep that night.

I sort of remember waking up and taking another shower. I know I was sitting in my living room at ten in the morning. The room was clean and neat because I'd tidied it just a few days previously. The sun was pouring in between the curtains and I could see the base of a tree that grew and towered over the one-story rental. I was dressed in shorts—it was still warm, an echo-day of summer—and a nice collared short-sleeved shirt my mother had sent me. I think I was debating going into work.

The doorbell rang.

I was distracted; in that state, I should have ignored it. But something—automatic reflexes, nervousness, a sense of fate—compelled me to get up and answer it.

I was not exactly surprised to see Name standing there, framed by the light glistening off the broken concrete path leading to my front door. I was not entirely astounded to see the pale, medium-height, androgynous form in off-white robes on my stoop. I was not absolutely shocked to feel a strange surge of excitement and affection when Name looked at me, brushing the short light-brown hair out of its bright blue eyes and asked, “Henry Cliffordson, I presume?”

I was not exactly surprised. But that doesn't mean I knew what to do.

So the fact that I greeted Name warmly and confidently, like an old friend, really surprised me. I'd expected this (if I'd expected anything at all) to feel like one of those awkward first dates when you don't know anything about each other and the other person makes ten times what you do and you're scared out of your mind. Instead it felt like one of those days you meet someone in the grocery store and talk about the price of pastrami and when you leave you wish you could've hung around and told them your life story—only Name actually *wav* hanging around. I invited it in cordially, and it ducked in past me, smiling. I immediately knew now what people talking about it had been trying to say. Something about it made you instantly at ease—made you feel admired, listened to, appreciated. Whatever it was, male or female, it was somehow extremely attractive—and yet it wasn't all a physical attraction, it was a meeting of the minds, a deep and abiding love for that half-glimpsed smile. It was not entirely separate from the charisma that emanated from it like a palpable wave, and yet it was not a result of that charisma: they enhanced each other, like the moon and the night sky.

I made us coffee and we settled down on two armchairs facing each other. I forget what we had been talking about, though I know we'd been chattering nonstop—it certainly wasn't business, and somehow I'd realized

that that had never been Name's real business in the States. I do know that Name was a fascinating, brilliant, and witty conversationalist. There was a sudden pause in the conversation, and Name put down its coffee on a side table and leaned in towards me. "Do you know why I asked your company to meet?"

"No idea," I replied. An hour before I would have said to discuss the pending mergers, or globalization, or reorganization of the World Economic Structure. Name changed the way you saw things. "I think you wanted to learn about us." By *us*, I didn't mean the company. "Why did you wait so long to come?"

"Because I wanted to learn about me so I could learn about you. You are people who didn't already know me. What do you think of me?"

"You're wonderful." I paused. "But they're scared of you. Lots of people are scared. Not just here; all over; but I bet they wouldn't be as honest where they already know you."

"Exactly. Why are they scared?"

"Because you're a threat."

"A threat to what?" It was genuinely curious. I wondered if with great intelligence came a similarly massive blind spot.

"To—to—them. To their power, or monetary control, or religion. Whatever."

"But I'm not trying to take any of that! Least of all religion. And I'm trying to tell the people who—who *worship* me—(it looked embarrassed, and I suddenly thought of a picture I'd seen once, of an overwhelmed young pop star amid a hundred swooning fans) —that it's the ideas that are important, not the people or the trappings. And the ideas are almost all the same! That's what I'm using! It's not that original. I'm only trying to remind people. I'm only doing what anybody could have done."

"Yeah. Maybe. People won't listen to 'anybody.'"

"They listened to me."

"You're not anybody."

"But I am; that's the point!"

I pushed the question aside. It's difficult to argue with a person oozing charisma who's protesting what you say. "Fine. But some people don't listen to the message, they listen to the words. Or the speaker. And if those don't look 'right'—you could be in trouble."

It nodded. "I'll remember. Thank you." I was struck again by how genuine, how serious, it was. I felt a sudden rush of near-protective affection. And suddenly I wondered . . .

"Where did you come from?"

It laughed. "Where did you?"

"No, seriously. No one's ever heard of you before you were an adult."

"Does it matter? I am here now."

"Then you're not—you're not really a—"

"Again I ask you, Henry: does it matter? I try to teach tolerance. I must honor the extensions of that. Does it matter what I am, if what I do . . . ?"

We lapsed into silence again, for a while. It was not unpleasant. Name spoke first. "I have already learned much from you, Henry. More, indeed, than I think you meant to teach."

I blushed. "I don't—I hope you don't mean—I mean, not everyone will think you're naïve, and not everyone will be trying to get a piece of you for their own power, and not everyone will refuse to understand that giving resources to people who need them isn't theft from the oversupplied—but that will be out there, and your people now won't tell you, because they're trying to protect you or get a piece of you or think you'll magically already *know*—and I don't want you to get hurt, you could do so much, but you've gotten too big too fast and you've scared them, everyone you haven't personally met who stands to lose if you help the world gain, and they won't play fair. And you assume everyone will play fair, because you're you, but they won't. And I don't want that to happen to you, because you—you of *all people*—you don't *deserve it*." I stopped short, gasping, on the verge of tears. I hadn't blurted like that since grade school. (As I recall, a bully had tried to hurt the class gerbil.) I looked up. Name was gazing at me, distant and yet incredibly there, concerned.

"I think I understand," it said quietly. "I don't understand why, but I realize what. This is not the first time I've heard this idea, but it is, I must say, the most complete—the most honest." It placed a hand on my arm, a hand like gentle electricity. I shivered, but immediately felt calmer. "I apologize for intruding like this, but I am more grateful than you can imagine. Still, I must leave you now."

I nodded. "Thanks," I croaked. This seemed woefully inadequate. "For—everything." It nodded and stood. As it turned to go, I reached out impulsively. "Name—" I blurted.

At the door, it turned. "What is it?"

Not knowing, I opened my mouth. "That first speech you gave, in Europe—at the end—what did you say?"

Name stood in the door, framed again with light, glorious leaving as it was coming, and smiled. "So are we all."

## Epilogue

What came in the news in the months that followed that meeting—the nukes, the murder, the inevitable riots and threats of war that followed from Name's most passionate followers, actions against all the wishes of that most certain of pacifists—was only a postscript to me. Name had been so

calm, so sure, so normal and yet utterly surreal. That was what occupied my thoughts, in the closing days of 2027—whatever else you believed, Name had been so *human*. Charisma and certainty aside, there had been no special effects, no out-and-out miracles. It hadn't been a life of fantastic grace and generosity, just a life completely and honestly free of pettiness and malice. Did the absence of ill will make good will? Did the absence of hate mean love? Did Name campaign for peace out of a sense of duty or out of a gladly sacrificial compassion? I certainly didn't know. But, out of all these imponderables, what struck me most was that we couldn't find a difference between a thoroughly decent human being and a god incarnate.

## What We Know (opposite)

by Faith Hays





## First Snow

by Alyssa Zullinger

all that was left  
 were footprints in the snow.  
 they darted in and out of the woods like barbed wire.  
 Kim was the only one who saw it.  
 the next day she crossed that line, through the bushes and spindly trees.

she came back in August  
 and never said a word again.

the rest of us did nothing more than photograph,  
 and Cory, he sketched,  
 in a big curving huddle, our shadows falling over  
 the plate-sized shapes of feet,  
 and flashes cutting through our shadows.

when Kim came back in August,  
 her eyes were hooded, and she responded with nods and closed eyes.

as the snow melted, Cory said, we should follow before they're gone.  
 we should find Kim.  
 but as the sun glinted off those tracks, we knew  
 we had no business looking at them.

when Kim came back, she brushed her hair but never cut it.  
 she ate alone. she traded nervous stares with Cory.  
 finally, he tried to hold her again.  
 she slipped away,  
 shaking her head.

the first snow came in October.  
 it took the power out.  
 only I saw it, by the window lighting candles:  
 Kim sat cross-legged in the snow,  
 the wind catching her hair like corn tassles.  
 out from the woods came yellow eyes,  
 a creature piled in silver lichen  
 spoke with the voice of wind through trees  
 and so did Kim, like infant words.  
 then she slipped past the first line of trunks,  
 became a shadow in the wood, and then  
 was gone. the snow lay white and still;  
 the lights buzzed and beamed back on.

## Untitled

by Greg Schram

**L**ong ago, when the Earth was only mud and water, four Spirits wandered its expanse. Each had his own domain: Coyote dwelled in the West, Sea Turtle swam in the South, Eagle soared in the North, and Raven cawed in the East. The four Spirits lived in seclusion for many years, traveling endlessly through their lands until they had nowhere left to roam. Where their four corners met, the great Spirits called council to discuss the fate of the Earth.

They made a great bonfire and watched its smoke rise into the barren sky, and the great Spirits noticed how empty their planet was.

"We must fill the lands," said Coyote, "for the ground was meant to support many legs."

We must fill the waters," said Sea Turtle, "for the waters were not meant to be lonely."

"We must fill the air," said Raven, "for the winds were not meant to blow unheeded."

"We must fill the heavens," said Eagle, "for the Earth was not meant to exist unguarded."

The Spirits returned to their lands and began to work. Coyote cre-

ated the beasts of the land, and they filled the West, and the ground held beneath them. Sea Turtle created the creatures of the ocean, and they filled its depths, and the waters were lonely no longer. Raven created birds, and in flocks they glided through the air, and the wind's power was known throughout the East. But Eagle created no creatures of his own, and the North was silent and barren. The other three Spirits wondered why Eagle had not filled the sky as he had proposed, and so they journeyed to his land.

In Eagle's land lay a great circle, which Eagle was weaving from strands of the sacred bonfire smoke. It glowed brightly, and lit the sky above. Eagle met them as he spun the smokethreads from one side of the circle to the other, and he stopped at their feet to explain.

"This is the moon," said the Spirit of the North. "I will put it in the night sky, so that even in the darkness there can be light, and the Earth will be guarded from mystery."

When Eagle had finished the moon, the Spirits lifted it into the sky. It shined over the North, where its guardian Eagle now rested. It shined over the East, where Raven created birds of night to fly by its light. It shined over the South, where Sea Turtle's waters reflected its glow, and it shined in the West, where Coyote's beasts lay sleeping.

The beasts awoke in the light and saw the moon's majesty, and they were overcome with amazement. Coyote grew jealous of their awe, and he crept to the North where Eagle still slept, and with all his strength he leapt into the sky. He snapped at the moon, but got only a small mouthful. The next night, when he had regained his strength, Coyote went back to the North and leapt again. This time he bit more, perhaps a quarter, but still he could not pull the moon from the sky. After many fruitless nights, Coyote lay down to sleep, and in the morning Eagle woke and slowly began to restore the moon.

Coyote still leaps at the moon every night, slowly eating it away during the first weeks before he grows weary and Eagle takes up the bonfire's smokethreads to mend the moon anew. Sometimes, if you listen closely, you can hear Coyote's frustration as he howls at the great sphere in the sky . . .

*. . . and that is why the moon grows and fades, little one."*

*Young Mi'mite nodded sagely. She liked these stories of the world-that-was. She ran the events through her mind once more and furrowed her brow as she did so. "Why did Eagle not get mad at Coyote?" she asked.*

*"O, you underestimate Coyote, little one. So great were his tricks that Eagle never found out his plans. Beware of Coyote! Had the other Spirits followed his path of mischief, you and I may not be here to tell of it. But that, my little one, is a story for another night . . .*



## Pied Piper

by Sarah Bollinger  
design by Miranda Fisher

# Achilles

by Stefan Babich

The gunship emerged from the thick cloud cover to a hail of fire. The bulky craft pitched and rocked as flak burst all around it, peppering its armored sides with bits of jagged metal. Crouched in the cramped hold with fifty other soldiers of the Army of the Democratic Republic of Herra, Achilles held tight to his rifle. This was the worst part of any battle. The hellish descent, trapped helpless inside the rocking ship, knowing that at any moment a stray rocket or lucky shot could put an end to you—forever. Up here, stuffed in this metal cage, it didn't matter how fast, how strong you were. There was nothing you could do but pray, if you believed in prayer, and hope, if you didn't. Your life was in the hands of the pilot. You either would die, or you wouldn't. It all came down to luck, to a variety of factors beyond your control. The pattern of the descending gunships. The dispersal of flak. The whims of the pilots and the gunners down below.

Only when the ship finally settled on the streets of the war-ravaged city far below did the buzzing in Achilles' head finally stop, only then could he breathe freely. Before he donned his gray, dented battle-helmet, Achilles paused to wipe the sweat from his brow.

The door to the hold hissed open, and blinding light streamed in. The dark visor of Achilles' helmet filtered out the worst of it, but he still had to squint against the sudden glare. The soldiers surged out, and almost at once, they were under attack. Many died before they had a chance to exit the ship, and many more fell in the brief seconds afterward, as the troops rushed for cover among the heaps of rubble and wreckage that dotted the plaza of Geetar City.

The fear of the gunship was gone, replaced by relief, sweet relief. Achilles was free, free to move, to run and jump and fire. Out here, on the battlefield, he was in his element.

The masked soldiers of the Royal Army of Geetar advanced, blasts of green light spraying from their guns. Achilles dove, rolled behind a fallen column as the shots tore up the ground all around him. Using the column as cover, he took aim and fired into the heart of the enemy throng.

Each shot found its mark, and the soldiers fell, one after the other, smoke rising from their cauterized chests.

Achilles broke from cover, racing across the square toward the palace,

dodging and weaving amidst a storm of enemy fire. A crater, filled with the smoldering remains of a downed gunship, lay only a couple dozen yards from the palace steps. Achilles dashed for it. A couple of the enemy tried to take him down, but he was faster than they were, and he blew them away, one after another. Only once was he struck, a glancing hit to the shoulder that was repelled by his pauldron.

Of course, it was the armor that made it all possible, at least in part. A fairly recent invention, made possible by the discovery of a new element, stronger than diamond, and infinitely more abundant. In the older wars, there were no super-soldiers. There couldn't be, because at any moment a strafing run by a Herran bomber or a burst of shrapnel might put an end to a would-be hero's career before it ever got off the ground. And if one fighter happened to live longer than the rest of his platoon, well, that was just the luck of war.

The armor reduced the probability of sudden, unavoidable death. Now, a soldier with perfect reflexes and a good aim had a fighting chance. Not much could break the armor; plasma and synth-swords could, but not much else. And plasma had a wide dispersal pattern, so that lowered the risk from snipers. What the armor meant was no more cowering while debris rained all around, no more cringing every time you heard the roar of an engine. It was a return to combat as it had been once, long ago. As it was meant to be.

Kneeling amongst the shattered remains of the transport, Achilles took down the rebel fighters, one by one, with cool precision, indifferent to the shots that rained around him, the jets of plasma that burned through the craft's wing just feet from his head. *Close*, he thought, as he ducked back just in time to avoid a particularly well-aimed salvo. But out on the battlefield, close counted for nothing.

He knew where to shoot, where the enemy's armor was weakest; the gut, the gap between helmet and breastplate, and soon he had his assailants scrambling for cover. Their armor, sadly, was nowhere near as strong as his. What the rebels did have fanatical devotion to their cause, and suicidal determination. What the Herrans had were trillions of dollars and an entire solar system of industrialized worlds.

So far, the Herrans were winning.

Behind the black visor of his helmet, a dark grin spread across Achilles' face. He was the best, he knew. Some of the others were good, it was true, but none could match his skill, his raw power. Ten years of training, nine hours a day, seven days a week, had brought him to this point, this peak of perfection. Now, as he ran for the palace steps, not even the commander could catch him; he lagged a few paces behind, and Achilles could hear his ragged breathing as he struggled to catch up. He couldn't catch up,

though—no one could catch Achilles now.

Guards surged from the palace, and Achilles hurled a fragmentation grenade. It landed in their midst, and the first two ranks went down, falling backwards into their comrades in a tangle of flailing limbs. And then, before they could recover, Achilles was among them, a whirling tornado of fury, slashing with his synth-sword, shearing through the Kevlar alloy of their armor as if it were made of silk. Several of them drew blades of their own, but they could not take him down.

His armored body suit continued to pump chemicals into his blood, giving him that extra boost of strength and stamina that enabled him to push beyond the limits of his human body, to truly excel. These ill-trained cadets were no match, and by the time Achilles' comrades reached him, the palace steps were clear.

Achilles pulled off his helmet and raised his synth-sword high, the shard of violet crystal shining brilliantly in the sunlight. The clouds pulled back, and a ray of the purest gold fell upon Achilles, bathing him in a nexus of godly light. He could see the soldiers in the plaza below staring up at him in wonder.

*I have earned this moment, Achilles thought. I have purchased it with blood and sweat. I have fought for it for ten years. Now, the glory is mine and I will treasure it forever.*

But then, as quickly as it had come, the moment was gone, and the crowd parted to reveal a slim, dark figure. With supernatural speed, she raced across the plaza, taking the palace steps in a single bound. Achilles' smile faded, and he felt his heart freezing in his chest. Kathryn 246 was here, and his moment of glory was lost in the blur of her slender legs as she ran past him into the palace, the soldiers of Herra behind her, a whirlwind of destruction that nothing could withstand. Achilles moved to follow, but his chest burned and his legs were filled with water. The fatigue of the battle had caught up with him.

An armored head, severed from one of the rebel soldiers, went sailing through the air to rest at his feet, sparks still crackling from the tangle of charred flesh at its base. He picked it up, and his gaze traveled from the dull black visor to the graceful, deadly figure of Kathryn 246. Achilles felt the cold weight of certainty settle in his chest, a ball of lead that stole the strength from his limbs and left him kneeling on the marble floor. No matter how hard he trained, no matter how well he fought, he would always be second best.

It was a scientist named Gazor Farks who first came up with the idea; manipulate a few genes, change a few amino acids here and there, and *voila!* A new and better race of men, faster, stronger, more resistant to pain and

weariness. And, of course, obedient to their commanding officer. The perfect super-soldier.

The idea caught on with the federal government, and soon thousands of credits were pouring into Gazor's coffers. He used the money to update his equipment, develop new technology, fund a number of questionable experiments on human subjects in his private lab on Concord 4. Private in theory, if no longer in fact. For everyone knew that Gazor now worked exclusively for the D.R.oH. military. Theoretically, he was still free to pursue private contracts with intergalactic banking guilds or foreign planets. But, of course, if he did, there was always the *possibility* that he might have a tragic accident, that his laboratory would be seized by the government until investigations of "possible illicit associations" could be completed. That the government would simply appoint a new scientist, perhaps not as bright as Gazor but still capable of producing their precious army of super-soldiers. Business must go on, after all. Of course, Gazor didn't particularly mind the way things had worked out. The government provided him with all the money he would ever need--so long as he showed results.

Over time, Gazor learned to perfect his techniques of genetic engineering. He sent out employees to scour the galaxy for men and women with superior genes; where bribery and enticement failed, he resorted to coercion. The government turned a blind eye—the consensus among federal officials was that the ends justified the means. And in this case, the "ends" were an army of beautiful, skilled superheroes, and victory over the hated Rebellion. Within a couple of years since the start of the "super-soldier program," Gazor Farks announced that his first batch of soldiers was ready for "practical application." He called them the Elite.

Kathryn 246 was part of an experimental second batch, one of twelve women in an army of men. No one knew exactly why a dozen of the Elite in batch two had turned out to be female—at first Gazor Farks wanted to recall the entire batch, terminate them, and start over. After all, if a mistake in the genetic grafting process had resulted in two X chromosomes instead of the usual X and Y, who was to say there weren't other problems, as well? But because of time and financial constraints, Gazor eventually changed his mind, and decided to turn over Batch 2, including the twelve women, to the army of the D.R.oH. He kept his private fears to himself, and when the federal investigator asked him why twelve of the new recruits were women, he merely shrugged and told them that it was nothing to worry about, a small discrepancy confined to the X chromosome.

It seemed as though Gazor Farks' initial fears were largely unfounded. Batch 2 of the Elite performed excellently, even better, on the whole, than Batch 1 had.

It was during the attack on the rebel stronghold of Xraxos XII that

Achilles had first witnessed what the Elite were capable of. At first he had been skeptical—what could this young, dark-haired woman know of battle?

Kathryn 246 had led the charge on Randos Hill. She had proved to be both an excellent strategist and an able warrior. The Rebel stronghold that had stood for over a month against the grand army of the D.R.oH fell within two weeks of Kathryn's arrival. And Achilles knew, beyond a doubt, that the title of "best soldier" was no longer his.

Achilles pulled off his gray-white battle helmet and tossed it aside, letting it roll down the pile of rubble to rest against the base of one of the palace's many granite columns. Sitting atop the mound of shattered stone, he gazed out across the plaza of Geetar city. In distant corners of the courtyard, pockets of resistance were slowly and steadily being crushed by the D.R.oH forces. Gunships continued to spiral down from the sky, which was once again overcast and gray. Columns of armored figures marched in ordered rows from the hulking transports, an inexorable tide that crept across the city, bright banners of red and gold waving in their midst.

The chill wind whipped through Achilles' blond, short-cropped hair and into his eyes, forcing him to squint. In the distance, he could hear the booming of cannons and the dull crash of explosions.

The crunch of booted feet on gravel to his right made him turn. Kathryn 246 was there, standing in the shadows of the palace veranda. Her forehead was lined with thought, her youthful face troubled. Achilles turned away, feeling a hollowness growing in the pit of his stomach, and didn't turn even when she moved over to stand right beside him. He didn't trust himself to look her in the eyes. Didn't want her to see the bitterness he felt. He tried not to hate her; it wasn't her fault she was better than other humans, better than him. If anything, Gizor Farks was the one he should be angry at. But no; if Gizor Farks was just one of many scientists, all struggling to be the first to create a super-soldier. If anything, the government was to blame, for financing such a program in the first place. But the government was simply responding to the military threat posed by the rebellion. So maybe the rebels were to blame.

Or maybe no one was to blame. Maybe the existence of people like Kathryn was an inevitable result of the fundamental human drive for advancement. Maybe she was just a force of nature. Maybe plain, ordinary men like him had been destined for replacement all along.

"The inside of the palace is clear," Kathryn told him, breaking him from his private contemplations. "We've captured the rebel king."

"You fought well today," Achilles said, his voice flat, unemotional.

"So did you. You practically took the palace steps single-handedly."

"Today marks a glorious victory for the Republic," intoned Achilles. "We have captured an important rebel stronghold, with minimal casualties."

"Yes, a great military success," Kathryn agreed. Achilles frowned. Despite her words, she didn't sound very thrilled.

"Is something wrong?" he asked, turning to face her for the first time.

"No," Kathryn said flatly. But he could tell from the sound of her voice that she was lying. Achilles narrowed his eyes, and she sighed.

"It's just . . . do you ever feel that maybe we shouldn't be here?"

Achilles frowned. "Of course we should. This planet is a key military stronghold . . ."

"No," Kathryn interrupted. "I mean, do you think we should be fighting in this war at all?"

Achilles couldn't hide his shock. "Of course! If we don't, the rebels will spread to other planets, other systems of planets . . . we'll have socialist regimes sprouting up all over the galaxy!"

"Is that really so bad? I mean, face it; our government's not all that great, either. Our leaders were content to sit back and watch for three decades while thousands of people starved to death during the recession, and now they're surprised that not everyone likes them?" Achilles' eyes went wide. "I can't believe you said that." He stared at her, and his frown deepened. "Our government is all that stands between us and chaos. Anyway, aren't you Elite supposed to be, like . . . unswervingly loyal or something?"

Kathryn grimaced, and shifted uneasily. "Do me a favor, okay? Just forget I ever said that. Please."

"I'll try." The silence stretched between them, long and uncomfortable. Kathryn cleared her throat and changed the subject. "You fought brilliantly out there today. I'm sure your father would be very proud of you." Achilles forced a smile. "I hope so." If only she knew.

His father. General Falx Achilles, war hero and celebrity. The very sound of that name sent Achilles spinning backward in time, back to when he was just a small, scrawny, sandy-haired boy cowering behind the dining room table while his parents talked.

"Listen to this report," his father said, and his voice was uneven, threatening to explode at every syllable. "It's from the instructor at the junior academy. 'Your son has difficulty focusing on his studies. His interactions with the other students are limited, and he seems to experience drastic, arbitrary changes of mood. I would recommend that Jason receive extra help.'" He paused, and Achilles heard him take a deep breath. His shoulders were bowed, and his fingers began to knead the checkered table-cloth.

His father went on: "It is possible that your son may suffer from a minor psychological disorder. You may want to consider having him examined by a specialist." And then it came, the explosion Achilles had been waiting for. "Can you believe it, Jessica?" his father bellowed, his voice like the roar of a gunship's engine. "Just look at him! He's behind in all his studies, his instructors say he needs 'extra help!' Extra help! At this rate, he'll never make it to the officer's academy."

"Well, maybe he won't," she cried back, and her voice was high and shrill, the whine of a single-man starship. "And there's nothing wrong with that. Maybe he'll find a different job, a job where he can be happy. Like a transit pilot, or a mechanic . . ."

"An engineer?" his father sneered. "Is that a joke? The Republic needs soldiers, Jessica, not engineers. The rebels are getting stronger every day, more and more planets are slipping away. What the hell good will a mechanic be when this nation falls into the hands of a bunch of socialist yuppies? If we don't win this war, those rebels are going to come and take this house away and leave us living in a hovel!"

"Keep your voice down, he'll hear you."

"I don't care! Have you seen the way the other boys stare at him? Like he's some kind of animal. Everyone knows it; there's something wrong with his mind. He doesn't think like other boys. He's mentally deficient..."

"He's not mentally deficient!" Jessica protested, her voice rising another octave, rattling the wine glasses on the table.

"He is! You know he is! He doesn't speak right, he can barely read..."

"He's just a child!"

"He's nine years old. At that age I was reading Butler ...Capitalism and Interplanetary Trade. He can't even get through introductory material."

"He just needs time . . ."

"He needs 'extra help,' that's what he needs. Did you know Commander Pitts's son is already in secondary school? They moved him up two levels because he was so bright . . ."

"Well, then, maybe you'd rather have Adolph Pitts as your son!" The words were spoken hastily, in a moment of righteous anger, and Jessica bit her lip as soon as she realized what she had said. But, now that they had been uttered, there was no retracting them, no turning back. The damage had been done.

For a few seconds, there was silence in the hall. Achilles huddled behind the tablecloth, and his knuckles were white as he squeezed his hands together before his face to stop them from shaking. Then his father spoke, and his voice was soft, like the gentle hiss of falling snow. "Maybe I would."

And in that moment, the world of young Jason Achilles teetered and fell. All nine years of his hopes and dreams came crashing down into a pool

of inky darkness and he screamed, loud and long, and was still screaming when his mother carried him upstairs and laid him in his bed.

Achilles dreamed. He dreamed of the charge on Randos Hill. The pieces of wreckage all around him, the sense of panic, the fear that he would die before had a chance for glory, a chance to prove himself. He would die here, upon this hill, and he would forever be a disappointing, mentally deficient boy, worthy of nothing more than a brief mention in a list of casualties, to be filed away and then forgotten.

The ruined gunships rained down upon them, smoldering remains bursting in bright plumes of orange flames, shards of shrapnel ripping the earth into jagged furrows. Achilles looked ahead to the slim form of Kathryn 246, and was filled with despair. The commanders had been a fool, for letting this girl, barely over twenty, led this attack. Now they would all die, including Achilles, and it would be for nothing, nothing at all. Randos Hill would stand; the rebels would have their victory.

Green streaks of light arced out from the Anti-Air Turrets atop the hill, while high overhead, the surviving gunships circled, just out of range, unable to get closer, unable to strike.

There were only twenty of them, him, Kathryn, and eighteen others. Such a paltry little force. How could she think they could take the hill, when an army of thousands could not. They would be spotted; sooner or later, someone would realize that the gunships were nothing but a diversion, would look down to see Kathryn's band scaling the muddy slope, and would pause just a few seconds from their assault on the gunships to obliterate them.

On they crawled, through the mud and the grime, hidden by the smoke and the haze, and at each moment, Achilles expected to feel a rocket or a bullet or a laser entering his brain.

But no one saw them. No one noticed until it was too late. Kathryn's force reached the top, a score of elite soldiers, and fell upon the unsuspecting rebels before they could raise their guns. Dozens died in a matter of seconds, cut down by the mud-covered band, and then they were amongst the anti-air guns, and Kathryn was planting the explosives. Bullets pinged off the metal of the great turrets, sparking all around them. There were plasma blasts, too, and one melted a hole straight through the breastplate of the man to Achilles' right. He fell without a sound, or maybe there was a sound, but Achilles couldn't hear it. Kathryn screamed at them to run, to get back down the hill. The rebels had recovered from their surprise, and now more enemies were closing in on them, guns held at the ready.

And then, just as they were scrambling back down the hillside, a rocket, fired from above, caught Kathryn in the chest. The explosion blew her

backward off her feet, down the hill, and she was dead—Achilles knew she was dead. She had to be.

But when he reached her body, she was still breathing, shallowly. Her outer armor was cracked and splintered, and the suit beneath was drenched with blood. Her helmet had been torn away in the explosion, and the right side of her face was a mess of torn skin and broken bone. Without thinking, he grabbed her and lifted her in his arms. She was light, surprisingly so.

Even now, a year later, Achilles wasn't sure what had made him risk his life to save her. He barely knew her then, and her mad plan had nearly gotten him killed. But it hadn't; he was still alive, and the fortress of Randos Hill was going up in flames behind him. Perhaps it was gratitude that drove him, the gratitude of a soldier to a commanding officer who had proved herself worthy of his loyalty. Or perhaps it was something more—all he knew was that it was wrong for this young, brave woman to die here, alone, in the mud. So he ran, and behind him followed a wave of fire.

The explosions had gone off, and the anti-air guns went up in a cloud of smoke. Gasping, trembling, Achilles staggered to the foot of the hill, carrying Kathryn in his arms.

He had come to her while she lay in the medical ward, too weak to move. Plastic tubes pumped drugs into her arms, and her face and chest were swathed with bandages. She opened her left eye as he entered, and he saw a spark of recognition in her stare.

"I heard what you did," she murmured, her voice faint. "You saved my life. Thank you."

"You're welcome." It sounded wrong, but Achilles couldn't think of what else to say. He moved over to stand beside her bed, and took her hand in his.

"Are you all right?"

"The medics say I'll get better. They say I'll be ready to leave the ward in thirteen days."

Thirteen days. That was less than two weeks. Achilles felt his heart sink. Given the extent of her injuries, she should be there for months, not weeks. Why would the medics say something so blatantly absurd...?

Unless there was no hope. Unless she was going to die, and there was nothing they could do for her but comfort her with false hope. Achilles felt his heart constrict.

Kathryn reached up and unwound the bandage from around her face. Achilles gasped. It had been less than a day, and already her face was healing. The seared flesh and fractured bone had been replaced with a purple swell, which was already beginning to recede.

She smiled. "We heal faster than most people," she explained, and he

knew she meant the Elite, "but we're not invincible. I would be lying dead on that hill right now if it weren't for you."

"We've been trying to take that hill for months," he said. "And you did it. Just like that."

She shrugged, then winced at the movement. "I guessed they wouldn't expect a small strike team. I figured they were expecting a full-scale assault."

"It was brilliant."

She flushed. "Thanks."

He smiled. "Get some rest. We need you back." He squeezed her hand once before he left.

Achilles watched her now, as she combed her raven hair back, and tied it in a ponytail. The right side of her face, which had been ravaged in the explosion, was almost completely healed. Around her eye, the skin was a little rough, a little uneven, and if you looked closely you could still see the trace of a scar upon her cheek, where a piece of shrapnel had been.

Her chest, where she had been struck with the rocket, was, like her face, almost completely healed. From afar, there was little to show that she had ever been wounded at all. If he had not seen her lying in the medical ward with his own eyes, battered and near death, he never would have guessed the extent of what she had been through.

No human could have taken a blast like that and recovered so completely, Achilles thought. At least, no average human. But, in so many ways, Kathryn was far from average.

She could him watching her and smiled. He turned away, and stomped off through the camp, hoping that the chill winter air would help clear his head.

The plaza was strewn with rubble, and D.R.oH war vehicles combed the surrounding streets. Banners of red and gold now hung over the palace steps, and the Herra National Anthem was being blared from loudspeakers erected throughout the city. It was a moment of celebration—another planet had been freed from the clutches of Rebel socialism.

Why then, he wondered with a twinge of irritation, did no one seem to be celebrating? The atmosphere of Geetar City was decidedly subdued. Most of the citizens had opted to remain indoors, and the streets were empty save for parading soldiers and vehicles of battle.

Achilles paused to grab a bite to eat from the rations tent at the south end of the encampment, then started back to the palace. It was time to get to work.

Before he had gone more than twenty steps, a man emerged from a nearby tent and called out to him. Achilles slowed to a halt, and turned to

face the newcomer, who stood before him with uplifted chin and ramrod-straight back—the stance of a soldier.

“Corporal Achilles?”

“Yes?” Achilles replied, guardedly.

“My name is Lieutenant Jax Janet. Please come with me. General Achilles wishes to speak with you.”

Achilles felt the breath leave his lungs. “My father?” he asked, unable to fully hide his trepidation. “He’s here?”

“Yes, in the upper level of the palace. He arrived just last night.”

General Falx Achilles was seated, poring over a sheaf of military documents, when his son entered. He looked up as the younger Achilles approached, and motioned to a second seat, a white, plastic contraption that had obviously been brought over from the capitol. Achilles saluted, and took the chair.

“Well, Jason,” his father said, setting the papers aside and lacing his fingers together. “It seems you’ve come a long way.” His face was flat, carefully controlled.

Achilles inclined his head modestly. “I’m only doing my duty, sir.” In the corner, a light bulb flickered in its wall sconce. Achilles glanced at it, then away.

“I’ve been hearing some . . . interesting things about you. They say you’re a deadly fighter. That you’re brave to the point of recklessness. That you’ve single-handedly claimed more kills than any other ten soldiers combined, excepting the Elite.”

“I only want to make you proud, sir.” He smiled.

“And is this your way of making me proud, Corporal? Killing people?”

Achilles’ smile slipped a notch. “Sir?”

“Look at yourself, Jason. You’re a butcher. A blunt instrument, a mindless killing machine. That’s not something to be proud of. The commanders say you’re bloodthirsty, wild . . . two years in service and you’re still only a corporal. And with your service record. Did you ever stop to wonder why that is?”

Achilles went pale. The General pressed on, remorselessly. “Death is never something to be proud of, son, even in war. It’s a terrible, terrible thing. Yet you seem to delight in it. I swear, I don’t understand you at all.” The General sighed. “Did you really think this would make me proud, boy?”

Achilles’ face twisted with rage. He was on his feet in an instant, his face inches from the General’s. The other man shrank from him, and Achilles could see the fear in his eyes. He reveled in it. “I see now what you are,”

he hissed, his hands gripping his father’s shirt. “You think you’re better than the rest of us. You sit here in your chair, staring at charts, writing reports, issuing orders, and you think that you’re purer because your hands are so clean. You forget—without us, you’re nothing. It’s the soldiers who fight the battles, the soldiers who pay for the victories with their blood. You speak of war as if it is a noble thing, while you bury your head in your books. Well, war’s not a noble thing. There’s nothing noble about it. It’s ugly, and it’s messy.” He leaned closer, until he could feel the General’s breath on his cheeks. “Out there, on the battlefield,” he whispered, “it’s kill or be killed.”

Roughly, he shoved the General away from him and stormed from the room in disgust. Behind him, the General recovered his voice.

“How dare you!” he cried, bursting from the room, his fists clenched at his sides, his face livid. “How dare you speak to me that way? I am your commanding officer! I am your father!”

Achilles strode away and did not look back.

Achilles returned to his tent and collapsed upon his cot, his features black with rage. The other soldiers shied away from him; they were afraid of him, he realized. To them, he was a wild thing, an enigma, a creature of savagery and destruction. He understood now what he had become, and hated himself for it. All those years of training had not made him a man. They had made him a monster.

He pulled off his glove, stared at the scarred knuckles of his hands. In his mind’s eye, he saw those hands as they had once been, covered in blood, swollen and purple. He had spent an entire day pounding against a cliff of rough granite, in order to condition himself against pain. He had delighted in the waves of agony that rolled down his arms, laughed as his flesh broke and peeled away, knowing that each scar, each line of blood would make him better, make him stronger. Now he was repulsed at the sight of those same hands. Shivering, he tugged the glove back on, and tugged off one of his boots.

Lifting his leg, he reached down, and touched the base of his foot with his glove. He felt nothing. His feet, thick and calloused from weeks of running barefoot over thorns and stone, over snow and burning sand, were as dead as the Kevlar boots that housed them.

He raised his arm, flexed a muscle. With that arm, he could break man’s neck as easily as he could snap a twig, could bend a steel rod as thick as a tree branch. How many bones, he wondered, had those arms broken? How many throats had been crushed by the merciless grip of those armored fingers?

“Achilles? Are you all right?” He looked up, into the jade green eyes of Kathryn 246. She, at least, wasn’t afraid of him, he thought. Why should



she be? She was a match for him; more than a match. Kathryn, who had had her chest blown apart by a rocket and survived, who could catch a darting fly between her fingers, feared nothing.

And she was beautiful, too—her body was free of the scars, the bumps and fissures that lined Achilles'. He wanted to kiss her.

He wanted to strike her. He wanted to rape her.

He loved and hated her, and he couldn't stand the sight of her a second more.

"Just leave," he said, speaking to the wall rather than to her.

"All right," she said, and there was no hurt in her voice, just puzzlement. "If you need me, I'll be at the palace."

She left, and Achilles lay alone with the silence and the pain.

Achilles was awakened by the shrill beeping of his personal transmitter. With a groan, he rolled over, rummaged through the pile of his equipment and brought it up to his face. He squinted at the tiny letters scrolling across the bright bleu readout screen.

COMMANDER J.P. FAULKMAN. He sighed, and flicked the red switch at the top of the cylindrical device, holding it close to his lips.

"Corporal Jason Achilles, reporting for duty, sir."

"Corporal, this is Commander Faulkman. I'm ordering you to take a couple of troopers down to Kathryn's quarters and place her under arrest. Immediately."

Achilles was certain he had misheard. "Sir?" he asked. "Did you just say—you want me to arrest Kathryn 246?"

"That is correct, Corporal."

"But . . . why? I don't understand."

There was a burst of static as the Commander exhaled heavily through his nose. "You do not need to understand Corporal. You need only obey."

Achilles rose to his feet, the last of his weariness flown away. "Yes sir," he said, and switched off the transmitter. Stretching to drive the stiffness from his limbs, he knelt to retrieve his equipment. It was probably all just a big mistake, he thought. Still, he couldn't deny that he was looking forward to seeing the look on Kathryn's face.

A few minute later Achilles, dressed in full battle armor and flanked by two soldiers of the D.R.o.H. army arrived at Kathryn 246's tent. Brushing aside the entrance flap, he strode purposefully inside, and leveled his rifle at her face, taking pleasure in the expression of utter shock and confusion he saw there. *Even better than expected.*

"Kathryn 246," he said, his voice sounding harsh and mechanical through the battle helmet, "You are hereby under arrest by the order of Commander John Phillip Faulkman. I am here to escort you to the com-

mand center."

"What the hell?" Kathryn said. Achilles saw her glance stray to her weapons, which were lying on the floor only a few feet away, and he curled one finger around the trigger of his rifle.

"Don't even think about it." Although the thought made him guilty, he had to admit he was enjoying this. Fast as she was, strong as she was, there was absolutely nothing Kathryn could do but stand and stare helplessly at the gun pointed at her head.

"Jason, what is this? I haven't done anything wrong."

Achilles shrugged, almost apologetically. "Maybe it's all just a misunderstanding. I'm sure it will all be sorted out eventually. Now, come with me."

But, to his surprise, Kathryn turned pale, and her lip trembled. "I didn't mean what I said," she whispered. "I didn't mean it, Jason. You didn't tell them, did you?"

Achilles was taken aback. "What are you talking about? Have you lost your mind? This is obviously just some small mistake. You're overreacting."

"Am I? Perhaps you don't know our beloved leaders quite as well as I do."

"This is not a discussion, Kathryn. You're behaving irrationally."

She took a deep breath. "Achilles, I thought you were my friend."

"Orders come first. Kathryn, you're making this a lot harder than it has to be."

"I'm not going."

*Damn it.* She was determined to test him; perhaps she didn't believe he would follow through with the arrest. Perhaps she expected him to apologize and back away through the tent flap with his head between his legs. If so, she was sorely mistaken.

"You don't have a choice."

She laughed bitterly. "What? Are you going to shoot me?"

Achilles jabbed a finger over his shoulder. "Not me. But they will." The other two soldiers had entered the tent and were standing with drawn rifles, staring at Kathryn.

"Fine." Kathryn glared at him as they marched her out, two flanking her and one ahead. They passed though the tent entrance, and started across the plaza towards the palace steps.

They were halfway across that plaza, just passing a cluster of parked speeders, when she struck.

Her hand was a blur as it shot around, catching hold of Achilles' rifle, tugging it from his slackening grasp as her foot snapped up, catching him in the groin and sending him soaring backwards. She spun around, the

barrel of Achilles' rifle knocking the next soldier's weapon aside as her fist slammed him hard in the face. The soldier stumbled, and Kathryn spun around him, putting his body between her and the final soldier, who had brought up his gun to fire.

Bringing her leg up, she drove her foot hard into the first trooper's shoulder blades, sending him toppling forward into his companion. Both men went down in a heap.

And then she was off, racing across the square, straight for the speeders. More surprised than hurt, Achilles was back on his feet, and he belatedly at the two troopers lying on the ground.

"Get her! Take her down! Aim for the legs, don't kill her!" The troopers moved to obey, but Kathryn fired off several shots over her shoulder, and the two men were forced to duck for cover.

Kathryn leapt into the nearest speeder, revving the engine and roaring away through the camp. The vehicle's machine guns flared, and nearby soldiers dove for cover, crying out in shock and fear. *Why?* Was all Achilles could think. There was no reason for it. *She's gone mad.*

A few seconds later, she sped around a bend in the street. Achilles stood in the plaza, trembling with rage, staring off in the direction her speeder had gone. Grimacing at the pain in his shoulder, he ran for the palace, determined to get some answers.

"I'll be very direct with you, Corporal." The Commander was pacing back and forth across the room, his hands clasped tightly together behind his back. "There's been an . . . insurrection."

"What do you mean?"

The Commander stopped and spun abruptly, coming around to face Achilles. "It appears that some of the Elite have defected to the Rebellion."

Achilles shook his head. "That's not possible. They're genetically bred to be loyal. They would never . . ."

"Apparently, there's been some sort of problem with the genetic grafting process. In Batch 2. Tell me, Corporal, have you ever seen any hints of disloyalty, any signs of . . . independence? Think carefully, now. This is very important."

Achilles hesitated. "Well," he said, thinking back to earlier that same day, "Kathryn did ask . . . she wondered . . . if maybe we shouldn't be fighting against the rebels."

The Commander nodded, as if his worst fears had been confirmed. "It's as I thought," he said. "Batch 2 is no longer loyal to the D.R.oH."

"They're joining the rebellion?"

"More than that. A couple of them made an attempt on the Prime Minister's life." The General sighed. "Gizor Farks has been placed under house

arrest at his laboratory until the federal investigators can get to the bottom of this. All current production of the Elite has been suspended. In the meantime, the Prime Minister has sent out a red alert. All members of Batch 2 have been deemed a serious threat. They have been scheduled for termination. That includes your friend Kathryn."

"You want to kill her?" Achilles asked in disbelief. "But she hasn't done anything wrong."

"She hasn't done anything *yet*," the General corrected grimly. "But she may in the future. In fact, it's more than likely, given what you've told me. I'm afraid we simply can't take that risk."

"So you mean to kill her for something you *might* do in the future?" Achilles demanded, his voice hard.

"We can't afford to wait around until she actually turns traitor. It's best to—what's the expression?—nip things in the bud."

Achilles turned away, his lip curled in disgust. Perhaps, he thought, Kathryn had been right. "Is this how the Republic rewards the people who fight for it?"

The Commander bristled. "It's necessary."

"It's cowardly."

"Will you do your duty, Corporal, or do I have to find someone else?" Achilles' throat had gone dry. He swallowed hard. "Why me? Why don't you just send the whole damn army after her? It's not like she has a chance."

"We need the army here. Intelligence reports have hinted at a possible rebel counter-attack, and we need to be ready. I can only spare a small force."

"And you want me to lead this force?"

The Commander snorted. "Because you're the best I have. Because, quite simply, you're the best fighter I've ever seen, besides Kathryn herself. So, what do you say . . . *Captain?*"

Captain. Achilles swallowed again. He stared down at his hands, then up at his commanding officer. The General's eyes were hard, but beneath the rigid exterior, Achilles thought he could see a trace of something else, some other emotion. Was it trust? Or even—respect?

They couldn't rely on Kathryn—not any more. Couldn't rely on any of the Elite, for that matter. Their superheroes, their genetically engineered champions, had let them down, had turned against them. But they still had him—Jason Achilles, the soldier who would never let them down. No matter what they might say of him, no matter his faults, there was one thing they could never deny . . .

He always got the job done.

And he did it without the aid of enhanced chromosomes, superior genes, or superpowers. He did it with his standard human muscles and his

average human brain, with sheer tenacity and dedication. He would never be as fast as Kathryn, perhaps, but that didn't matter. He was the one they counted on.

"Well, Achilles? What do you say?"

Achilles' hands tightened into fists. The scars on his knuckles stretched until they shone as white as his armor. "I'll do it, sir."

The Commander beamed at him. "Thank you, Captain. Now go. Do your duty. Kill the traitor."

Jax Janet was waiting for him in the hall outside. He saluted as Achilles approached. "I have a detachment of twenty men awaiting your command, sir," the junior officer said, and the word 'sir' sent a surge of elation through Achilles' heart. "We have two speeders standing by, with Xraxian lizard-hounds. They have her scent. Just give the word, and we'll move out."

"Just twenty men?" he asked. "That doesn't seem like a lot. Do I have to remind you that this entire city is still filled with people loyal to the rebellion?"

Jax Janet grinned. "Twenty men. And a Lancer, sir."

A Lancer. An armored vehicle of destruction, equipped with cluster missiles and heavy lasers. A machine that could cut through ten feet of solid stone in a matter of seconds. Achilles returned Jax Janet's grin with one of his own.

"Have them form up by the palace steps. Take a gunner and head to the Lancer. I'll lead the rest in the speeders."

Jax Janet saluted. "Where will you be, sir?"

"Collecting my things."

Achilles raced back to his tent, and finished donning his armor. Moving with feverish haste, he strapped on his boots, slung his ammo pouch over his shoulder, snatched up his rifle, and ran for the door. In addition to the laser rifle he always carried, Achilles was equipped with a synth-sword sheathed at his hip, and a shard-pistol, tucked securely in his left boot.

Just as Jax Janet had said, a score of soldiers were waiting for him at the base of the palace, seated inside a pair of rumbling speeders that rested on a triple set of wheels only a few inches off the ground. He could just make out their silhouettes through the tinted glass of the front windshield.

Off to one side, the bulky form of the Lancer sat still and silent like a sleeping predator. Achilles signaled to Jax to rev up the engines, then clambered inside the first of the speeders.

"We've got her speeder, sir," the driver said, glancing back at Achilles over his shoulder. He pointed at the blue readout screen on the console in front of him. "It's about six miles north of here, outside the city limits. It's not moving, so she must be traveling on foot."

In the back of the speeder, behind a mesh cage, a pair of ferocious Xraxian lizard-hounds hissed and snarled, eager to begin the chase. Genetically engineered for hunting, the animals were possessed with a supernatural sense of smell. Achilles found it ironic that after hundreds of years of technological advancement, the Republic still relied on such old-fashioned methods of tracking.

*Old-fashioned, but effective.*

"She's got no way to run. If she goes on foot, we can track her with the hounds. If she uses a speeder, we can follow her tracks. There's nothing out there but mountains and ice. In a couple of days, her speeder's fuel cells will run out, and then we'll have her."

While they drove, Achilles communicated with Jax Janet over the vehicle's built-in com system.

"The men back at command have made an inventory of everything that was in the speeder she took. A rifle, synth-sword, and knife, ammo, food supplies for a couple of days. No extra fuel, and the clouds are too damn thick for solar power. She's in a fix, to be sure."

"She'll have to turn and fight eventually," Achilles warned. "We'd better be ready."

Jax Janet laughed aloud. "She's no match for us," he said. "We've got her twenty to one."

"Don't underestimate her, Lieutenant. I've seen what she's capable of."

"Yes, sir," Janet said, but Achilles could tell by the tone of his voice that he didn't believe.

He just didn't understand Kathryn 246.

Throughout the remainder of the night, they followed Kathryn's trail north, the bright beams of the Lancer's headlights illuminating the long furrows in the flat ground made by the wheels of the renegade's stolen speeder. Though he was loath to close his eyes, even for a minute, Achilles forced himself to rest, knowing he would need to be at the peak of his strength when they finally caught up to Kathryn. He could not afford to be burdened by fatigue.

Kathryn, of course, had no such luxury. She had no one to drive her speeder for her; she would have to stay up the entire night.

As the first rays of dawn broke over the eastern hills, the terrain began to change. The flat, rolling grasslands of the previous night were replaced by rough, rocky ground. The speeder bounced and lurched, and Achilles gritted his teeth and locked his legs tight against the back of the seat in front of him to avoid being jolted against the roof.

They were entering the foothills of Geetar's northern mountains now. Flakes of white snow cut the air, striking against the speeder's windshield, limiting their visibility, and the pilot was forced to slow to avoid slamming against one of the many boulders that lay hidden in the gloom.

Just a few hours after daybreak, they came upon Kathryn's speeder. It lay abandoned at the bottom of a steep slope, covered in a thick blanket of snow. Jax Janet brought the Lancer to a halt, and he and Achilles clambered out to inspect the vehicle.

Achilles peeled back toe hood and stared at the empty synth-crystal cylinders inside. "Fuel cells are empty," he said, sliding the hood back into place. "She's on foot now."

"There's a small spaceport on the other side of these mountains," Jax Janet informed him. "If she can make it there, she might be able to hitch a ride on a cargo ship and escape."

"Not likely," Achilles replied. "We'll catch her, Lieutenant. We will."

They set off once more, winding upward into the mountains. Progress slowed to a crawl as the vehicles struggled through the maze of fissures, rocks, and ice blocks the landscape had become. Eventually, Achilles was forced to call a halt. Stepping clear of the idling speeder, he made his way forward to where the Lancer sat perched precariously halfway up a steep hill of ice. A row of glistening spikes extended from the rear of the craft, digging into the frozen ground, anchoring it in place. Achilles fervently hoped that they would hold.

"We can't go on like this," he called up to Jax Janet. "The land vehicles won't make it."

"We could call for air support," Jax Janet suggested, but Achilles shook his head.

"They'd never make it in this weather." Overhead, a thick bank of gray clouds roiled and churned like a thick, greasy soup. "We'll have to continue on foot. Leave a few men to guard the speeders. I'll get the hounds."

Using laser cutters, the troop of sixteen managed to burn away enough of the ice to make a path to the top of the hill. From there, Achilles took a quick survey of the surrounding area. Craggy peaks rose up in every direction for as far as the eye could see. Without the Xraxian lizard-hounds to guide them, Achilles' team would have been hopelessly lost. But the snarling beasts never hesitated as they sped off down the hill, nearly pulling their handler from his feet.

"Don't let go of the leashes," Achilles cautioned, grabbing the man's shoulder to steady him. "If those things run off, we'll never find her in this mess."

For the better part of two hours, Achilles and his men followed the lizard-hounds through the mountains, slipping and sliding over the treach-

erous ground. As time wore on, the beasts began to weaken as the cold set in. Native to the moderate climate of Xraxos IV, they were ill suited to the frigid air of the Geetar Mountains.

"The hounds are freezing, sir," Jax Janet informed him, and Achilles swore viciously. "They can't go on much longer."

"Give them blankets and keep them warm. We can't afford to lose those things."

"We'll have to give up the hunt, sir. At least until the storm passes."

"No, Lieutenant," Achilles growled. "We press on. With or without the hounds. She can't be far," he muttered, almost to himself. "She's not wearing winter gear. She has to find a place to rest, a place to keep warm..." He put his forehead in his hands, trying to think. "A cave, or a sheltered dell...someplace out of the wind..." His head snapped up. "Leave a couple of men to watch over the hounds, and gather the rest. We're moving out." Jax Janet saluted. "Yes, sir."

For another hour, they continued to scour the area, relying on sight alone, for their scanning equipment was so bogged down with ice that it would not function properly. Just when Achilles had begun to lose hope, a shout came from up ahead, a shout that sent a jolt through his limbs. "There's a cave up ahead, sir. Just up that slope."

Achilles turned to look. There, barley visible through the curtain of whirling snow, the mouth of a cave could be seen, just twenty feet above them, and two dozen yards ahead. The cave was fronted by a narrow ledge that looked out over an enormous chasm. Achilles motioned to his men to follow him, and started out onto the ledge, heedless of the wind whipping all around him, his eyes fixed only on the cave ahead of him.

He had beaten her, trapped her, cornered her in the mountains. Yet Achilles felt no pride, no sense of victory. He knew that he owed his success to his superior equipment, not to any particular skill or talent he might possess.

*Did she really think she could escape? He wondered. Did she really believe that she, alone, was a match for the army of Herra?*

But she nearly had been. Kathryn 246 had nearly escaped him, escaped them all, and she had done it on foot, alone, without armor or winter clothes. He, with his speeders and his troopers and his lizard-hounds, had nearly lost her. Who, he wondered, had beaten whom?

Perhaps it didn't matter. Soon enough, Kathryn 246 would be dead, and the Elite would be gone. Soon enough, things would go back to the way they had been before, the way they were meant to be. Back to when greatness was determined by strength of will, not the composition of chromosomes. Back to when sweat was more potent than DNA.

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The inside of the cave was dark. Five great pillars of ice that stretched from floor to ceiling glittered in the gloom, rising up from drifts of piled snow like rocks thrusting from the sea.

Achilles switched on his flashlight, and was nearly dazzled by the reflected light. Caught in the beam of Achilles' flashlight, the ice crystals shone like diamonds in the sun. Achilles could see that the cave was much larger than he had at first thought, almost a hundred feet deep and at least thirty feet wide. The roof was just high enough so that Achilles could stand upright, though it sagged in several places as it drew farther from the ice pillars.

"Fan out, search every corner," Achilles ordered. "She's got to be here somewhere."

Achilles moved cautiously ahead, almost to the back of the cave, his gun leveled before him, eyes narrowed as he struggled to piece through the rays of sparkling light to spy his quarry.

"I don't...don't think she's here," Jax Janet said, moving up to stand beside him. Achilles had no answer. Absently, he laid one hand against one of the ice pillars, his fingers tracing a series of deep, horizontal slashes in the column's smooth surface.

He frowned, and turned to better examine one of those slashes. It was deep indeed, he noted, cutting almost halfway through the pillar, and the edges were smooth and even.

A synth-sword, Achilles thought, might make just such a mark, though it would surely take many blows to make a cut so deep.

Jax Janet leaned closer, to see what had caught Achilles' eye. He frowned in puzzlement. "What the devil...?"

But they had no more time to ponder the mystery, for in an explosion of white powder, Kathryn 246 came bursting up from out of a snowdrift near the cave entrance, right behind one of Achilles' troopers. One hand seized the doomed man's helmet, jerking his head sideways, while the other drove a long combat knife deep into the crack between helm and breastplate.

Achilles, and several other nearby soldiers turned to fire, but Kathryn went sideways, holding the dying trooper's body before her as a shield. Her gun flashed, and two more troopers went down, smoke rising from sizzling holes in their chests.

Kathryn released her human shield and dove to her right, somersaulting behind a snowdrift. Lasers struck the snow all around her, sending puffs of vapor into the air.

"Get her!" Achilles yelled. "Take her—"

But he stopped as a small green orb, snatched from the belt of the murdered trooper, flew towards him, arcing out from behind the snow drift

where Kathryn had taken cover. Instinctively, he threw himself flat to the ground as the grenade spun past overhead, coming to land against the base of a nearby ice pillar.

"Down!" Achilles yelled, a second before the grenade exploded, shattering the pillar and sending shards of jagged ice flying in all directions. Jax Janet screamed as an ice shard tore through the acrylic visor of his helmet, and Achilles growled as several more clattered against his armor, battering him and stinging him badly. More troubling, though, was the ominous rumble that sounded from overhead. A second later, the rumble was joined by a terrible cracking sound as the four remaining ice pillars began to splinter and crack beneath the weight of the piled snow above. Weakened as they were by the deep slashes in their shafts, the pillars could no longer hold up the roof. The cave was coming down, and Achilles and his troopers were trapped inside it.

A trap, Achilles realized, and felt himself go cold inside. "Run!" he bellowed, gesturing towards the mouth of the cave. "Get outside, now!" Chunks of snow came crashing down from the crumbling roof, and there was a terrific crunch as a second pillar gave way. Through the haze of white specks that now obscured his vision, Achilles caught sight of Kathryn 246, making a dash for the entrance. He tried to hit her, but a chunk of falling ice landed on his helmet, staggering him and sending his shot harmlessly wide.

A second later, everything was chaos, as a third pillar gave way, and an entire section of the roof collapsed, raining down upon the hapless troopers, driving them to the floor beneath its weight. Somehow, Achilles managed to dodge the deluge. Rolling and leaping, he made his way to the front of the cave, the screams of his troopers ringing in his ears.

With a tremendous whoosh of air, the rest of the cave came crashing down, burying everything under a suffocating cloud of snow. Roaring in protest, Achilles thrashed and punched and tore his way through, clawing up through the snow and rolling down onto the ledge below.

She had been clever, he thought bitterly. Luring him into the mountains, stealing his advantage, forcing him to leave first the speeders, then the hounds behind. Her ambush had been well planned, and now Achilles was alone, just as she was.

He almost preferred it this way. He and Kathryn, just the two of them, with no machines or troopers to interfere. A duel of equals, winner take all.

Kathryn came thrusting clear of the snowdrift just a couple of yards to Achilles' left. He had lost his rifle in the collapse, so he sprang at her, synth-sword glittering as it struck. She saw him just in time, threw up her rifle to block. The violet blade sliced deep into the barrel of the weapon, tearing

through the armored shell and the wires within, rendering it useless.

Achilles swung again, and Kathryn leapt back, casting aside her ruined gun and drawing out her synth-sword. The two faced off, circling, looking for an opening.

"Jason, why are you doing this?" she yelled at him, her voice high and shrill in the roaring wind. "I've never done anything wrong! I've only ever served the Republic."

Achilles didn't answer. He came on hard, suddenly, driving her backwards under a flurry of blows. His sword cut left, right, and center, and Kathryn's arms worked in a blur to defend.

"You have to believe me. I didn't want to kill those men in the cave. I was just trying to save my life."

Achilles swung hard to the left and down, knocking her sword aside, then brought his blade across the other way, aiming for her neck. The blow would have taken off her head if she hadn't managed to duck just in time.

Something changed in Kathryn. He saw her eyes go hard as she realized that he wasn't listening, that he meant to finish her, no matter what.

She continued to parry, but her movements were no longer solely defensive; she watched the movements of Achilles' sword closely, waiting for an opening. A moment later, she found one. As Achilles brought his blade down in a vicious chop, she slipped aside and thrust hard for his stomach. Achilles barely managed to jump back out of range.

Achilles' momentum was broken, and now it was Kathryn's turn to take the offensive. She rushed forward, hammering Achilles with a flurry of blows that left his fingers numb. One blow slipped past his guard and drew a line of sparks across his breastplate. She worked his blade high, then abruptly broke away, stepping back before coming back in with a thrust toward his face.

Achilles raised his blade to block, but the attack was a feint. Kathryn dropped low instead, skidding forward on her knees as she brought her sword slashing across at Achilles' legs, a move designed to cripple, not kill.

Achilles hopped back and over that scything blade. Kathryn came back to her feet and leapt at him, her weapon a blur of amethyst light. He halted his retreat, and stood firm against Kathryn's charge. He would not give ground, not any more. He had given enough.

Kathryn continued to speak, continued to plead with him, but Achilles couldn't hear her. He matched her intensity, foiling her strikes and countering with some of his own.

"Did you think you were so much better?" he screamed in her face. "That you could beat me and walk away?"

"Is that what war is to you?" she cried. "A game? A chance to prove how good you are at killing people?"

Achilles snarled in rage, and his strikes came fast and hard. But despite his fury, despite his mighty effort, each blow was met with a solid parry.

Both swung at the same instant, and their blades connected, sliding along and locking together at the hilt. Achilles seized the opportunity, leaping forward, taking one hand off the handle of his weapon and punching out hard, connecting solidly with Kathryn's chest.

Kathryn went flying backward to land in the snow. Her synth-sword clattered to the ground at Achilles' feet, and he kicked it aside as he sprang at her, blade swishing downward.

"I have you!" Achilles cried in triumph.

Kathryn rolled aside as the sword came down, and it struck the ledge where her head had been, driving deep into the ice. With a snarl, Achilles tugged at it, trying to wrench it free.

Kathryn's boot hit him in the side of the knee, buckling his leg, and he tumbled sideways, just in time to catch her second kick full in the face. The spikes of her boot slammed into the place where his armor was weakest—the visor of his helmet. A spider-web of cracks appeared before his eyes.

Kathryn lunged for her sword.

What might have happened next was anyone's guess. Because at that moment, there was an earsplitting crack, and a second later, the entire ledge broke away, sending Achilles and Kathryn tumbling away.

"Achilles? Jason Achilles?" He raised his head to see the instructor peering down at him, his mouth turned over in a frown.

He swallowed. He could feel the eyes of all the other students on him, as if he were the star attraction in some exotic exhibition.

"Achilles, did you hear the question?" He shook his head mutely. "I asked you," the instructor went on, speaking as he might to an infant, though the boy he was addressing was nine years old. "I asked you to tell me the maximum velocity of a modern Herran transit speeder."

Achilles sunk lower in his seat, as if hoping he might disappear through the floor. The boy racked his brain, remembering that the instructor had something about speeder engines, not more than five minutes ago. He had typed it on the holoscreen, even. He tried to focus, but the ringing in his head made it hard to think.

"Well? I'm waiting."

The ringing was getting louder. He stared up at the instructor, and though he could see the man's lips moving, he could not hear his words, could not hear anything but the ringing reverberating through his skull.

The world dissolved into a spiral of swirling color, and was replaced by white. Just white, covering his entire field of vision. For a second Achilles thought he had gone blind. Then he realized the truth, reached a hand up

and wiped away the snow from the cracked visor of his helmet.

He was lying face up in the snow, at the bottom of a cliff. The powdery cushion had broken his fall, had saved him from death. He turned his head, grimacing as lines of pain shot up his neck. Kathryn 246 lay to one side, unconscious, her dark hair clogged with ice, a trickle of blood running from one side of her head. He leaned over and felt for a pulse. She was still alive.

Alive, but helpless. At his mercy. He smiled grimly, and dug through the surrounding snow until he found his synth-sword.

He waited until she started to stir, then plunged the sword downward into her thigh.

Kathryn screamed, her eyes snapping open, her back arched in agony. Achilles twisted the sword and slid it free with relish.

"You didn't win," he told her.

Kathryn rolled away from him, blood spilling from her pierced leg to stain the snow red. She tried to crawl, so he reached over and grabbed her, pressing his armored fingers deep into her wound until she collapsed, gasping, on the ground.

Reaching into his belt pouch, he retrieved his intercom, and dialed the number for the Lancer.

A burst of static came in, followed by a man's voice.

"Private Jenkins here? Is everything all right?"

"I've got the renegade," Achilles said. "She was trying to cross the mountains to the spaceport, join up with the rebels. I got her, but I'm stuck in a damn pit. I need a pick up. My long range radio's been knocked out, so I need you to contact HQ and call for an air transport."

There was a moment's silence. "The weather's cleared. I'll have them send a gunship down to pick you up."

Achilles switched off the com and turned to Kathryn. "Well, Kathryn, it looks like it's over for you." He stood over her, the synth-sword glittering in his hand.

"You bastard," she spat at him. "I trusted you."

"Your last mistake."

She took a deep breath. "You're going to kill me now?"

"Yes."

"Then at least tell me why."

He considered that for a moment. "Lots of reasons," he said at length. "Because I was ordered to. Because the Elite are turning on the Republic and we're not safe until you're all destroyed. But mostly because I hate you. I've always hated you, on some level. Hated you and loved you at the same time. Strange, isn't it?" He laughed. "You're so perfect, so brave and strong and beautiful and kind, it's impossible not to love you. But I couldn't

love you and not hate myself at the same time. We were too much alike, you and I, reflections of each other's movements; but there was one difference. I was a monster. I sacrificed everything to be what I am. I paid for my strength and my skill with years of training, years of dedication. You got it for free."

"I didn't choose to be like this."

"No, you didn't. And I'm truly sorry it had to be this way." In the sky above, the dull roar of a gunship's engine could be heard, drawing steadily closer. The transport was on its way. *End it*, Achilles thought, and he angled the sword to strike. "Why did you have to be so damn good at everything?"

"You called me your friend," he said. "But you never understood; I have no friends. I turned away from that part of my life long ago. I know what I am—a weapon. An exceptional weapon, true, but nothing more. There is no difference between me and this sword."

The roar was growing louder, and Kathryn had to shout to be heard. "That's not true. You saved my life. You could have left me to die on Randos Hill, but you didn't. You came back."

"You don't understand what I am."

A shadow spread across the ground, blotting out the sun. The gunship had arrived; it was time to finish Kathryn and be gone. But no, Achilles realized. The gunship could never have come this fast. The D.R.oH base was at least an hour away. He looked up, and found himself staring down the turret of a Rebel battle-cruiser.

Achilles burst out laughing. He couldn't help it; it was just too ironic. The moment of his victory had been stolen by a fluke.

"Put your hands on your head, you Republican bastard," the gunner called down to him. "We know who you are. We intercepted your com signal." Achilles hesitated. "Drop the sword, or you're dead meat, dirt bag." In the end, there was nothing he could do but obey.

The craft moved lower, settling into the crevasse, and the sidehatch sprang open. A pair of rebel soldiers surged out, moving to the wounded Kathryn and helping her to stand.

The gunner kept his weapon trained on Achilles, his eyebrows narrowed dangerously. "What'll we do with this one?" he called back to the pilot. "We don't really have room for a prisoner."

The pilot shrugged. "He's one of them. Just shoot him. He'd do the same to us."

Achilles tensed, bracing himself for the end.

"Let me do it." Kathryn had stopped, and was staring back at Achilles with an unreadable expression.

The gunner shrugged his indifference. "Have it your way."

Limping, leaning on the other men for support, Kathryn moved back toward Achilles. One of the men handed her a pistol, and she raised it and pointed it at Achilles' chest.

He stared at her, his fists knotted with impotent rage, the ridged white plates of the gauntlets grinding together. "You'll never get off the planet," he hissed at her. "You won't get past the blockade."

Kathryn shrugged. "Maybe, maybe not. I am a damn good pilot." Her finger tightened on the trigger.

"I should have killed you when I had the chance."

"Hurry up and finish him," the gunner called impatiently. "We've got to get moving."

Kathryn's eyes locked with Achilles,' and he saw something there, something that gave him pause. His breath caught in his throat, and he braced himself to move.

Kathryn's hands moved in a blur, her thumb flicking against the side of the gun, opening the ammo chamber, her middle finger snaking around and tapping the cartridge free. Her other hand snapped up in a blink, catching the falling cartridge. There was a click as she cocked the gun. It was all too fast for the other soldiers to see, but Achilles saw, and he understood.

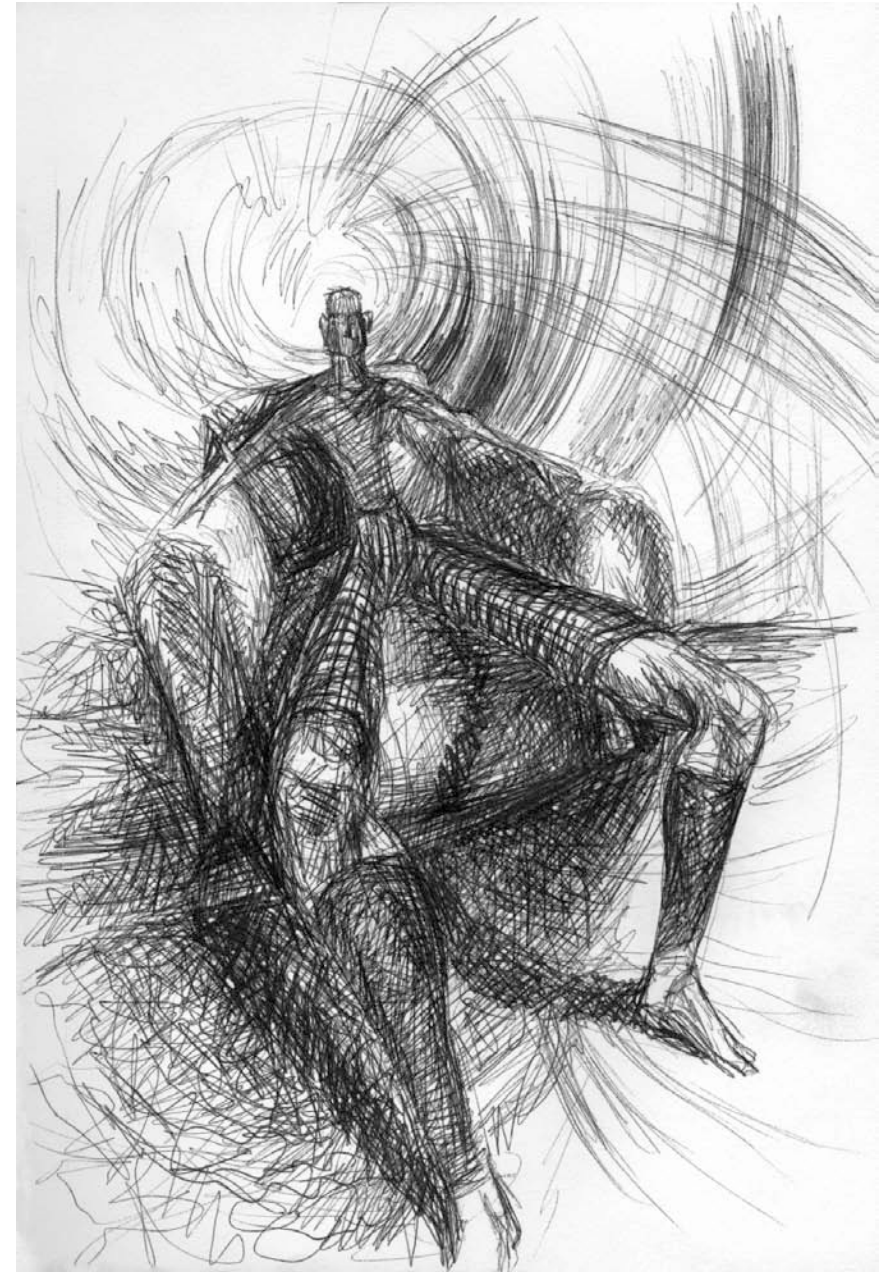
"You're dead, Achilles," Kathryn said, and she pulled the trigger. There was a flash, a bang, and Achilles crumpled to the ground.

"All right," she said to the other soldiers, "Let's go." They moved back to the ship, and the engines roared to life. Achilles lay facedown in the snow, not daring to raise his head until the ship had moved away. He rolled to his back, staring up at the vanishing speck.

She had let him live. In spite of his betrayal, in spite of what he had said, Kathryn 246 had spared his life.

"Damn you, Kathryn," he muttered, tugging off his damaged battle-helmet and letting it fall with a soft thump into the snow at his feet. "Damn you to hell."

He sat back against the icy wall of the cliff and gazed up into the sky, watching the rebel ship until it disappeared.



## The Entertainer's Ego (opposite)

by Faith Hays



# Operation Ragnarök

by Daniel Kessler

## Part One



found this letter in the bathroom cupboard this morning, in the bathroom labeled "Bathroom #3":

Dear future Server:

When you receive this letter, I will be dead. Or, at least I hope I will be dead. Hopefully, I will be buried beneath hundreds of tons of concrete and steel in a town just southeast of the capitol. (The debris will be from the factory that constitutes the town's primary income in soy and wheat, which I have recently learned are the key ingredients to the explosive that will destroy the factory. I would record the name of the town, but I do not know it.)

This is my official report of the happenings of the fourth of November 2026, which should, if I have succeeded, be known henceforth as the Day the West Fell.

First, there are facts that require exposing.

If I have succeeded, I will not look myself. The explosions will have torn my body to smithereens, and to seek me out would be to risk your life immeasurably. Even posthumously, my body will be a ball of gas so potent that to enter a five hundred foot radius would kill you within a matter of five minutes. (Depending on your weight, you will die more or less slowly.) I ask that a retrieval mission not be attempted at least until the world has been repopulated in the estimated year 40,372, P.O.R. By that time, the gases should have expressed themselves fully and my body, fossilized, as may be, will be safe to touch.

If I have failed, there is no helping me or the others. You will have been ordered to destroy the headquarters and issue the arrest of the first guards of the capitol to postpone the revealing of the headquarters until time is enough that it can be destroyed. If the headquarters has been discovered, you will be found within days. Estimations note that one business week will be time enough for them to find and dispose of the remaining Servers.

When the guards are arrested, Operation Ragnarök must be secured in the ruins of the Alpine Temple. If I have failed, there is now a twelve percent chance of safely securing the records of O.R. until time has come that

we can redeploy. By this time, however, I fear that they will have realized the flaws in their System Prime and will have secured further.

If the aviation squads have not arrived in time to defuse the counter-attack, which is most likely, then you must hide out in the temple for one lifetime. Your children must be raised there and educated in the ways of the Operation, and all grammars and philosophies necessary to understanding it. This process must continue until time has come to redeploy.

But, if I have succeeded, this is all useless information. You need only know that if you live on to see tomorrow or the next day, or every day necessary to constitute a human life: we have won, and that is all there is left to know. You can enter the freezing compartment at midnight, setting the machine to the appropriate date-time signature. In an estimated 38,000 years, you will reawaken and the earth will be covered again in life, at which time it will be your mission, along with your fellow Servers, to repopulate the planet and recivilize the world.

You will find the plans for repopulation in the top right drawer in the guest room down the hall in the second floor of the Alpine Temple. If they are not in that drawer, I suggest you check the cupboard in the bathroom labeled "Bathroom #3".

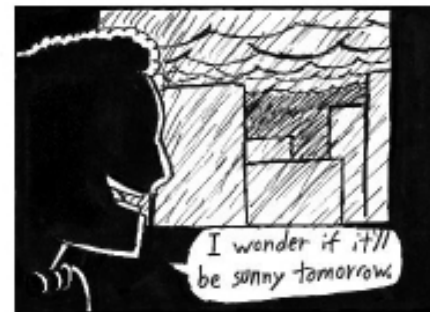
Thank you for reading. I hope you have a pleasant day.

Server Prime, Out.

Chapter One



by Jeremy Ledgister







## Desire

by Stephen Burrows

Ernest woke up bleary-eyed, flumped out of bed, tugged on his fuzzy rabbit slippers. Then he glanced across the room at the thick silk curtains. They were black. Not his favorite color, but he'd inherited them from his father and didn't have the money to replace them. Seeing no trace of light around the edges, he stumbled over and cautiously pulled the edge of a curtain back. It was dark outside. Hallelujah. So he yanked the curtains aside and lifted the window open, holding it up with one hand as he leaned out and twisted around to look at the few stars visible in the light-polluted sky.

A car honked in the street ten floors below. Glancing down, Ernest thought about jumping out, but decided he wasn't in any condition to do it. Maybe later, once he'd gotten some coffee in him.

The newspaper lay on his welcome mat where it dropped through the mail slot every morning between six and seven o'clock. There was a footprint on it. He must have gotten in from the party even later than he'd realized. But at least it had still been dark. Winter was good to him that way.

The newsprint felt like crocodile skin on his hands tonight. Same headlines as always. War. Pestilence. Famine. Death. Celebrities. Oh, and a new vampire movie. Those were always good for a laugh or two. He dropped the paper by the others on his sofa; it would be time to clean up again soon, if he ever got a night off. When was recycling, he wondered as he wandered into the bathroom and grinned into the mirror. It had cost him good money to have that mirror shipped from Romania. He wasn't rich like some of his relatives, but he cared about his appearance and had wanted a mirror where he knew he would see himself clearly.

Ernest's toothpaste was orange. Peach. He hated the taste. Soon it would be time to switch back to mint for a few years, not that that would be much better, or try cinnamon. When he had finished brushing and flossing, he pulled a file out of the medicine cabinet and went to work on his teeth. His father had always liked his teeth. Perfectly conical. Not something you see every day. With teeth like that, you could really *go places* in the world, his father had said, you could *go places* without being ashamed of yourself.

Back in the kitchen, he poured himself a mug of rat's blood and mixed in the instant coffee crystals, then set it in the microwave to heat. Three minutes and fifty-three seconds to read the classifieds – more habit than ne-

cessity, now that he'd landed a plush job at the 24-hour Wal-mart wearing a giant yellow face on his chest and smiling at everyone who walked in. Hello. Would you like a yellow smile sticker? Would you like a coupon? Have a nice day. Just the job he'd always dreamed of. But at least he knew none of the customers would look him in the face.

His father would have said, it's that hair. That's why you can't get a real job. What were you thinking dying it hot pink?

But years ago, Ernest's father hadn't been able to stand their poverty – he'd called living without a velvet-curtained four-poster poverty. I can't take it anymore, his father had said. Then one day his father flew non-stop to sunny California. And that was that.

So Wal-mart it was. Ernest pulled on his uniform and paused at the door of the apartment. He glanced at the window, longing. It would be faster. It would be more fun. To fly the night with his brethren, daring the light of the moon. But everyone looked down on him these days. And he might find some decent food in the subway. So he locked the door behind him.

## Yoshino

by Daniel Kessler

In early April I was a Yoshino cherry seed.  
I remember it distinctly.  
How the folds of my skin protected from the cold.  
I must have felt so alive.





by EJ Landsman

## Shadows

by Edward Allen Underhill

### Part Five: Sirius

A warm smell—a warm, harsh smell of smoke. Sirius opened his eyes. Above him, faint twinkling stars winked against a pure black sky. But he'd seen the night sky of London; it never looked like this . . .

Tendrils of smoke curled upward. Orange flickered next to him. It must be a fire.

In a rush of white silk, a figure leaned over him. A long face with a pointed chin, clear blue eyes, full red lips . . .

Long yellow hair brushed his face.

"You're back," murmured a deep, throaty voice. Light, pale fingers swept across his face . . .

And then everything swirled, and the smoke and the black sky swallowed up the stars and swept away the face . . .

Sirius opened his eyes.

"Siri-san?"

There were no white stars. There was no black sky. There was only a whitewashed ceiling.

"Siri-san? Are you awake?"

Sirius blinked and turned his head. Sitting next to the bed, wearing a familiar worn sweater, was Nettie. Her kitten ears had popped out again—they were perked forward.

"It's not you," he whispered.

Nettie's dark eyes were worried. "It's me, Sirius. It's Nettie."

Behind her, hanging on the wall, was a little square picture frame, and in its center was a white flower.

The frame was still crooked.

"You've been out for over a day." Nettie's voice went on, but it blurred into the background. "Emmeline found you. But I don't know how long it had been before she did. No one was out in rain like that . . ."

"Amos."

\* This piece is the fifth in an eight part series. Please read the last four issues of *Spiral* for the other parts.

Nettie stopped and looked at him.

Sirius's eyes jerked away from the white flower. "Where's Amos?"

Nettie looked down at the sweater and pulled the tattered sleeves over her hands. "He's here," she said quietly.

Sirius watched her.

Her ears were no longer perked. "He hasn't woken up yet," she murmured quickly, and got up from the chair she had been sitting on. "I'm going to go make some tea for you, now that you can drink it." She disappeared from the room.

For a while, Sirius stared at the ceiling, as if—if he stared long enough—he might be able to see through it.

He heard Nettie bump the kettle against something in the kitchen.

He blinked, and slowly sat up. Then he pushed aside the blankets. He was wearing his nightshirt. It took him a moment to find his pants, even though Nettie had only draped them over the end of the bed. He pulled them on. The curtain was drawn in his room, and he couldn't see the weather beyond it. But he didn't want to pull the curtain aside, so he turned and left the room instead.

He paused in the hall, but the only sounds were faint from the kitchen—the creak of the floor. Nettie wasn't standing still.

He looked at the door at the end of the hall. Then he went quietly to it, turning the knob just as quietly, and went in.

The curtains were not pulled here. Through the only window in the room, he could see that it was still raining.

He suddenly realized he had never actually been in Amos's room.

It was tiny.

Why had Amos picked this room?

Sirius nearly tripped over a blanket on the floor. He looked down. There was a pillow here, too. Nettie had been sleeping here.

Amos hadn't picked this room. It was just that when they had moved in, Sirius had announced he would take the first room, and Nettie had fallen in love with the east-facing windows, and somehow, Amos had never said anything about it.

Sirius stepped carefully over the blanket on the floor, around the narrow rickety wardrobe, until he stood beside the bed.

Nettie had knotted a cloth around the gash on Amos's arm. There was another bandage over the one on his forehead, and another wrapped around his hand.

His hair was at least dry now. Strands of it were tangled over his eyes.

Sirius stepped forward.

He'd been able to leave the picture frame slightly out-of-place and crooked.

His fingers touched Amos's forehead, brushing his hair away from his face.

He suddenly remembered his fingers were cold—colder than Amos's would have been—and he pulled away quickly.

He held up his hand, studying his palm. Through his fingers, he caught a glimpse of a familiar silver chain on the tiny bedside crammed into the corner between the wall and the bed.

He dropped his hand and looked down at the table. The chain was discolored, but he couldn't tell why, until his eyes drifted to the silver pentacle. It was dulled by soot, and a streak of blood zigzagged across the star.

It should be cleaned. Amos threw a fit when his clothes got muddy—wouldn't he, if this was dirty . . .

Sirius's fingers brushed against the pentacle.

A sharp flash seared across his vision.

A stone tablet sliding together . . . through the gap, a wink of silver . . .

A flash of fire . . . a leering ghostly face . . . a shimmering smiling one . . . three slashing claws . . . a pair of spectacles glimmering in flickering candlelight . . . the domed ceiling of a church . . .

He pulled his hand back.

In another bright flash, the room came back into focus.

Sirius looked at the dulled pentacle.

It was raining harder now. He could hear it pounding on the roof.

A creak on the floor made him jump.

Nettie jumped, too. "Sorry," she said quietly. "I didn't expect to find you here. The tea's ready, if you would like some."

Sirius nodded, and his eyes drifted back to the tiny bedside table.

Nettie followed his gaze. "What is it?"

Sirius turned away, without looking at Amos. "I think a similar item was used to seal me, that is all," he said, and left the room. Nettie jumped hastily out of his way.

Sirius went down the hall to the kitchen. Two cups of tea were steaming on the counter. Sirius picked one up.

Nettie came down the hall behind him. "I thought you didn't remember anything," she said.

Sirius stared into his tea. "It's beginning to come back."

Nettie folded her arms. He could feel the way she was standing, even though he couldn't see her. "What happened?"

"When?"

Nettie only raised an eyebrow. "I've been dealing with Amos for years. You think I'm going to fall for that?"

"Amos's job proved to be slightly more complicated than anticipated. I'm sure he can fill in the details when he wakes up." He reached for the

little saucer of cream, but it slid across the counter out of his reach.

"How much did you see?" Nettie asked.

"Amos said you were harmless," Sirius noted.

"He always says that to people he doesn't trust."

"So he doesn't trust me."

"You should know better than that. Just because he didn't trust you at first doesn't mean that wouldn't change. How much did you see?"

"You mean in that old barn or whatever it was?" Sirius looked back at her.

Nettie glowered. "You know what I mean."

Sirius looked away again. "It was a fire that killed Amos's mother, wasn't it?"

Nettie's frown disappeared.

"It was. But she wasn't my mother."

Sirius and Nettie turned around. Amos was leaning against the wall partway down the hallway, wearing his nightshirt and extra pair of trousers. Even in the shadows, he looked ashen.

"Amo-*chan* . . ." Nettie began.

Amos straightened and came forward, one hand against the wall for support. "Her name was Alyce Christopher, if you were wondering. I have no idea who my real mother was since she took off, by all accounts, immediately after she had me. Alyce Christopher was a nurse working at the hospital."

"And there was nothing to do with you, so she took you in," Sirius said quietly.

Amos cocked an eyebrow at him. "Well, don't make it sound troublesome or anything." He sighed. "May I ask if you're going to drink that tea? Because if you aren't, I'm going to."

Nettie slipped quickly past Sirius and picked up the second teacup from the counter. She set about pouring cream and sugar into it.

"I suppose you haven't told Nettie a thing about what happened," Amos said, rubbing his eyes with the back of his free hand. As a band of light from the window flickered across it, Sirius caught a glimpse of the pentacle. Amos had the chain clasped in his hand.

"How did she die?" Sirius asked.

Amos's eyes jerked to Sirius, and just as quickly jerked away. "You seem to know that already." He dropped his hand.

"She became a ghost," Sirius said. "And then a demon."

Nettie paused.

"And you know exactly why that happens," Amos answered, coldly. "Don't tell me you can't put two-and-two together, Sirius."

"I cannot read minds," Sirius said stiffly.

"Neither can I." Amos's knuckles had gone white around the chain.

"So I guess you'll have to tell me what that woman wanted with you. Unless most women throw fireballs at you for fun?"

Nettie set down the cream. "What woman?"

"That is none of your business," Sirius said.

"Really? Did you notice me getting flung around in that old warehouse?"

"What woman?"

Sirius glanced at Nettie. "Ears."

The ears didn't disappear. They only lay backward.

"I got you out of that Seal," Amos said, "and I was stuck in a burning building while a floor collapsed out from under me. I think I have a right to know what she wanted!"

"My past is my business," Sirius growled. "If I'm to stay out of yours, then you are to stay out of mine."

"Yes, because you so obviously stayed out of mine," Amos snapped. "It's an accident that you happened to figure out as much as you did? Did it come to you in some sort of prophetic dream?"

"Who was the man with the spectacles?"

Amos froze.

"That's enough!" Nettie shouted.

The only sound was the rain falling on the roof.

Nettie's ears were flat back against her head. "We're not going to get anywhere if you two go at each other like malicious schoolchildren. Now, would one of you grow up and please tell me what happened?"

Sirius saw something flicker across Amos's face—something that looked somehow familiar, even though he was sure he had never seen it before.

Amos stuffed the pentacle and chain into his pocket. By the time he looked up, it was gone. He leaned against the wall, waving a hand. "It's all right, Nettie. We're both fine, and I'm sure it's nothing to worry about. Just an unfortunate incident, that's all."

Sirius felt empty. There was a faint smile on Amos's face—it wasn't strained, it was barely tired. It wasn't something anyone could see through.

But Sirius was sure it wasn't real, because he felt empty, because he was sure he had seen *real* in that flicker, and it had been frightening . . . but not as frightening as this smile.

"Who was the woman?" Nettie asked.

Amos's hand didn't leave his pocket. "She had already destroyed the spirit when I got there."

Nettie's ears stopped lying flat and bounced back. "D-destroyed?"

Sirius thought he saw Amos's smile slip, for a moment, but maybe it



was only the movement of a shadow across his face as he straightened a little.

"There wasn't anything I could do," he said quietly. "There are people like that—you know that, Nettie—people like me, but they only want to destroy spirits without giving them a chance. Spirits like that—ghosts—if they stay too long in this world, they lose themselves and become demons."

"Because they can't leave," Sirius said. "Because some sort of tie is keeping them here."

There was definitely a slip this time. A quick moment, and then Amos turned his head, and his bangs hid his eyes. "People like that just want to destroy demons, without turning them back, without helping them pass to the place they should be." He looked up again, and shrugged. "I'm sure that's all she was. She didn't want us there because of what we wanted to do. She was a fairly powerful person, so she thought perhaps it would help to remove us forcefully."

Nettie frowned. "I don't like where this is going."

Amos sighed. "There were a few spells flying back and forth. With Sirius there to help, it wasn't really a problem. We got out, after all. It was just a little troublesome."

"Then why did Emmeline find the two of you unconscious on the street?"

Amos jerked a little. His eyes met Nettie's.

She turned to Sirius. "Well, I suppose it's hardly surprising from *some* people, but what was wrong with you? Don't tell me: you accidentally flew into a steeple and knocked yourself out."

Someone knocked quietly on the door. Amos jumped—a little too much.

Nettie sighed. "Coming!" she called.

"I suppose I'd better go find something a little more dignified," Amos said, recovering. "Would you mind terribly if I took that back now?"

Nettie pulled off his sweater and handed it to him. "It will only be Emmeline, you know," she said.

Amos took the sweater and disappeared down the hall. The door at the end closed.

Sirius looked at Nettie. "Are you going to answer that knock?"

Nettie's ears disappeared. She turned to Sirius. "There's one thing I would like to know," she said. "And that is, since you quite clearly can't get over your past after two hundred years, why do you expect Amos to get over his after only ten?"

Sirius said nothing.

Nettie turned away and went to open the door. Sirius went down the hall to his room, closing the door behind him.

\*\*\*

It kept on raining. Sometimes it was a heavy rain that pounded down on the roof and turned the glass in the windows blurry with thick rivulets of running water. Sometimes it was a thin rain that kept the streets gray and cold, and made the apartment feel damp.

Two days later it was still raining. Early that particular morning, it was the thin sort of rain.

Nettie was climbing onto the counter to reach for her cleaning supplies, still stacked one on top of another in the corner, since there was no room for them in the closet, when a knock on the door startled her. It had been very quiet in the apartment the past few days. Amos and Sirius rarely spoke to each other. Amos had mostly been working in his office, writing articles, and Sirius had spent most of his time in his bedroom alone. The only breaks from the silence were Emmeline's visits, because she always chattered happily.

The sudden knock on the door startled Nettie so much that she lost her balance a little and knocked her precarious tower of cleaning supplies. "Oh, no!" she cried as the entire collection started to tumble.

Nothing hit the floor. The falling objects slowed down until they all hovered a few feet above the floor. And there they stayed.

Nettie looked around.

"Trying to destroy the kitchen again?" Amos asked. He was standing in the kitchen doorway. He looked only barely better than he had a few days ago. His sweater hid the bandage wrapped around his arm. The ugly gash on his forehead had closed, but the red mark was still clearly visible. His bandaged hand was clasped around something—Nettie caught a glimpse of a silver chain.

"Someone knocked," she said, hastily scrambling down from the counter.

"Oh, is that what that sound was?" Amos's eyes didn't leave the objects hovering in the air.

Nettie began plucking them up, one by one. "I could have caught them," she said.

"You didn't have enough time."

"So you should have let them fall." She picked the last bucket up and set it on the counter. "That's not the sort of thing you need to be worrying about."

Amos waved a hand in some sort of complicated, vaguely graceful gesture. "Pardon me for trying to do you a favor."

"I'd do without favors if it meant you hanging onto a few more years of your life," Nettie murmured, walking past him toward the door.

The knock came again, rather more emphatic. Nettie went quickly to the door and opened it. "Yes?"

On the threshold was a drenched middle-aged man with gray hair and deep crow's feet around his brown eyes. He wore an overcoat. A sodden hat was clutched in his hands. "I do beg your pardon," he said. "I was wondering whether this might be where I'd find Mr. Amos Christopher."

"It is," Amos said, coming up behind Nettie. His hands were both empty now.

"Oh, good," the man said in relief. "I was worried I'd got the wrong address. City's so big and all. I asked the landlady downstairs and she said"—he frowned a little—"the good-for-nothing lout was up here."

Amos's eyebrows jumped. "Well," he said. "Good of her to give you directions."

Nettie opened the door wider. "Come in," she said. "Can we help you?"

"I'm hoping so." The man stepped in and dripped on the mat as Nettie closed the door behind him. "I've got a bit of a problem with my master's house. I'm his butler, most of the time. My master just inherited the house from his father, may he rest in peace, and he was going to begin his life there with his fiancée—beautiful young lady, she was."

"Yes?" Amos prompted.

Behind him, a door opened down the hall.

The man's shoulders slumped. "Only a few months ago, my lady passed away from pneumonia. Of course, my master was heartbroken, couldn't be consoled. But he's going to have to move on with his life sometime."

Sirius appeared in the parlor behind Amos.

"And now there's the odd part." The butler looked a little nervous. "And I'm coming to you because I've heard that you'll actually believe this: The lady won't leave. I thought my master was mad with grief at first, saying she would appear in his room late at night, that he could hear her voice when he was alone. But then I heard her myself and I knew he wasn't pulling my leg. She's still in the house."

"And she won't leave," Amos said.

"That's the thing."

Nettie took a breath. "Well, sir, I'm truly sorry to hear that, but unfortunately we can't take any new cases at the moment. We'll be sure to let you know when we can—"

"I can certainly help," Amos interrupted.

Nettie looked at him sharply.

Amos ignored her. "Perhaps if you'd be so kind as to tell us your name and give us the address, we can do our best to help you out with your problem."

"Well, my name's Ben," said the man. He reached into his overcoat and pulled out an envelope. "I've already written down the information in there for you, Mr. Christopher."

"Amo-*chan*—" Nettie began.

"How kind of you to think ahead." Amos took the envelope with a dashing smile. "We'll be there as soon as we can."

"Thank you. Thank you very much." Ben nodded to them.

Nettie opened the door for him, and he left, plopping his sodden hat back on his head.

Nettie closed the door. Then she turned around, arms folded across her chest, her pleasant smile gone. "Amos—"

Amos looked up from the envelope. "Nettie, this is what I do. What *we* do, in case you've forgotten. You were the one who made it easier for people to find us."

She closed her mouth. Her lips were thin. "You are in no condition to handle this."

Amos opened the envelope. "I don't see why you should say that. I've very nearly recovered entirely, and anyway that has nothing to do with my ability to handle a case."

"Oh, Amo-*chan*, doesn't it?" Nettie stomped her foot in frustration. "You and I both know perfectly well what that pentacle takes—"

Amos glanced at her. She stopped abruptly. "Very well," she said with a sigh. "On the condition that I come with you."

"You often have before." Amos took out the slip of paper inside the envelope. "I'm sure we'll be fine with Sirius along as well."

Sirius blinked. "I'm coming?"

Amos turned for the kitchen. "This is what we do. As soon as I've had something to eat, we can take care of this. Nettie, is there any tea?"

"Wait," Sirius said.

Amos paused, just past him, and turned back.

He was closer than he had been the last few days—closer than he had been, probably, since Sirius had carried him back to the apartment. And he was looking up—Sirius found himself looking straight into Amos's amber-colored eyes. He couldn't remember the last time that had happened, either.

But he'd seen those eyes recently. He'd seen them when they were full of tears . . .

"Nothing," he said, dropping the hand that he'd raised, without realizing it. "I will be ready to go."

Amos turned and went into the kitchen. Nettie followed him.

Sirius looked after them.

In the flash of memories.

The flash of memories that didn't belong to him.

That was where he had seen those eyes.

They didn't get out the door without one minor hitch.

"Now you listen here!" Mrs. Maloney roared. "I've got an appointment and I can't take her along! The legal kind—got to get that estate of her parents' figured out—and I can't take a little girl to a meeting like that. You're going to look after her for me."

Amos sighed. "Mrs. Maloney, as I've already explained, we can't do that."

"Why not?"

"We're going out ourselves at the moment."

Mrs. Maloney put her hands on her hips and leaned down, one eyebrow raised. "Oh? And where might you be going that you can't take a little girl along?"

Amos opened his mouth, and said nothing.

"Mm-hmph."

Amos ran a hand over his eyes. "Look, we really can't—"

"Let that girl look after her"—Mrs. Maloney jerked her chin at Nettie—"and I won't charge you next month's rent. Provided you haven't got yourself killed by then anyway."

Amos hesitated. He looked sidelong at Nettie. She raised her eyebrows. He knew that look. He'd seen it plenty before. It was the look that meant, *We'll be out of money within the next week, which is your fault, but you wouldn't know because you don't keep track of the finances like I do.*

Nettie's looks could be very long-winded.

"All right." Amos nodded. "She'd better grab her coat, though, since we're going out."

So they ended up in a carriage rumbling away from the apartment with Emmeline sitting next to Nettie.

"Where are we going?" she asked, peering out of the window at the rain still falling. She was wearing a coat and a hat over her curls.

"Well . . ." Nettie looked at Amos and Sirius, sitting across from her. "We're going to help *Amo-chan* and *Siri-san* with a job, *Emmie-chan*. Do you think you can be a good girl and stay out of their way?"

Her eyes widened. "Certainly!" She sat back in her seat and smoothed her coat over her dress. "If there's anything I can do to help, you ought to tell me." She looked between Amos and Sirius. "It does seem like help is needed," she said quietly.

It took them nearly an hour to reach the estate—by then it was into the afternoon. The house was outside of London, a bit into the countryside. As the carriage rumbled up, Amos put his head against the window and looked out. Something about the house sent a shiver down his back. He had never liked mansions—they always seemed cold and gloomy—but this one looked even worse. There was something about the towers . . .

They reminded him of a church.

He closed his eyes.

The carriage stopped. Amos opened his eyes and led the way out. It was still raining, even out here. They hurried under the porch roof, Nettie tugging Emmeline along by the hand.

They were met at the door by Ben, who ushered them inside. It was as bad on the inside as it had looked on the outside. The ceilings reared high above their heads, edged by carved wooden molding. The walls were covered in elegant wallpaper. They walked up a wide, sweeping staircase under a glimmering chandelier, and Ben led them off into the hallways of the house.

The hallways were dead and silent—a heavy church kind of silence.

"She's mostly been around this part of the house," Ben whispered, when they finally stopped in a wide hall full of dark mahogany and burgundy carpets.

"Where is everyone?" Nettie asked.

"No one's here," Ben answered, still in a whisper. "No one will venture in here now, and anyway I got most folk out of your way in the basement. The house is yours to look around."

"Your master?" Amos asked.

"Been out of the house nearly a week now," said Ben. "With a cousin. Can't stand to be in here now at all." He eyed Emmeline. "Sure you don't want me to look after the little girl, Mr. Christopher? Might not be a fit place for her."

Emmeline glowered at him.

"She's tougher than you think," Amos said with a flicker of a smile. "That won't be necessary."

Ben bowed and left.

Nettie watched him go. "*Amo-chan*," she said quietly, "I think we should leave."

Amos was already walking slowly down the hall, inspecting the towering portraits hanging on the wall.

Nettie gripped Emmeline's hand tighter and started after him. Sirius followed a few steps behind. "I haven't felt something this strong for a while," Nettie said. "This is dangerous—"

A soft jingling interrupted her. Amos pushed back his sweater sleeve. The string of bells around his wrist was shaking. "She must have quite the tie to this place," he said. "Come on."

They went down the hall. Emmeline tried not to look at the portraits on the wall—the eyes seemed to follow her. She tugged free of Nettie's grasp and took hold of Sirius's hand instead. He jumped a little.

Amos paused. For a moment he was perfectly still, and then he reached out and gently pushed open a door next to him. The others came up and

peered inside.

It was a smallish room—at least for this house—and looked rather like an out-of-the way parlor. In one corner was a piano, in another a sofa. But Amos was looking at the far wall.

Hanging there was a portrait, long and oval, in a golden frame. Gazing out at them was a slender young woman with rich dark hair, round dark eyes, and ivory skin, wearing a white dress, holding a bouquet of pink flowers in her hands.

Amos walked into the room. Nettie followed him.

“That’s her,” Amos said, nodding to the portrait.

Emmeline let go of Sirius’s hand and came forward between Nettie and Amos. “She’s pretty,” she murmured.

The painting began to crack. Spidery lines ran across its surface, across the white dress, through the bouquet, over the ivory skin. The paint chipped, peeling backward.

Something began to leak through the cracks in thin rivulets. Something red.

“Oh, God,” Nettie whispered.

It was blood.

It trickled from the frame, seeping through cracks until it was pouring down the painting.

Amos felt his stomach turn over. Behind him, Nettie reached for Emmeline.

In the doorway to the room, Sirius slowly turned a blank face upward toward the painting. He watched the blood coursing down the painting, under the frame, slowly seeping into the wall. It was on his hands, too. He could feel it there, slimy and thick, dripping from his fingertips—they weren’t fingertips like Emmeline’s as she reached for Nettie’s outstretched hands. They were long, bony, pointed and clawed. And his wings—he could feel it there, too. He could never feel the feathers before, but somehow now he knew it was trickling off the ends of them as well. Maybe it was a pool. Maybe it was a sea. Maybe he was standing in it, as deep as his knees. There had been enough deaths, enough burning, slashing . . .

They were weak. They had all been so weak. He had wished they would put up more of a fight. If they did, it wouldn’t have felt so easy, it wouldn’t have been so easy . . . Perhaps she would have stopped. Perhaps if she had seen that it was hard, perhaps she wouldn’t have ordered him, so many times . . .

He could see it all. Every single moment, every single memory. It was all there.

Amos pulled the pentacle out of his pocket. The bells around his wrist vibrated.

From the walls an inhuman sound slowly rose, groaning upward into a high shriek.

“Sirius!” Amos shouted.

Sirius’s eyes fell from the painting.

It was all humans ever did. They took the power they could get and they used it, used him, because he was power.

*His fingers touched Amos’s forehead . . .*

Humans meant death . . . blood . . . tears . . .

*. . . brushing his hair away from his face.*

Weaknesses.

Sirius held out his hand.

Nettie turned back to reach for Emmeline. From the corner of her eye, she caught sight of Sirius. His hand was outstretched. His eyes glowed a bright, icy blue. Sparkles collected in the air, and then he was holding his staff.

He whirled it over his head.

“Amos!” Nettie cried.

A burst of red lightning exploded through the room.

Nettie threw herself straight into Amos, pulling Emmeline with her, sending the three of them into the wall.

The lightning streaked through the air, right where Amos had been standing.

The painting erupted in a shower of sparks.

The shriek cut out.

In the sudden silence, Amos looked past Nettie. For a second, he could see Sirius in the doorway, his staff raised, his wings unfurled. His fingers had turned to long claws, his ears tapered into long points, his eyes glowed icy blue, black marks striped down one side of his face in a tattoo.

Then Emmeline pulled free. “Sirius!”

Sirius staggered. When he straightened up, it was gone—all of it. He was standing with his hands loose at his sides, and he looked the same as he always had.

Amos pushed himself away from the wall and looked up. The painting was gone. It had vanished completely. All that was left was a dent where it had once been. Plaster was strewn across the floor.

The blood was gone, too.

“Siri-san,” Nettie whispered.

Amos bent over and picked up the pentacle. It had been knocked out of his hand when Nettie had plowed into him. He tucked it back in his pocket, trying to stop his hands from shaking.

He turned and looked at Sirius.

Sirius silently looked back at him.

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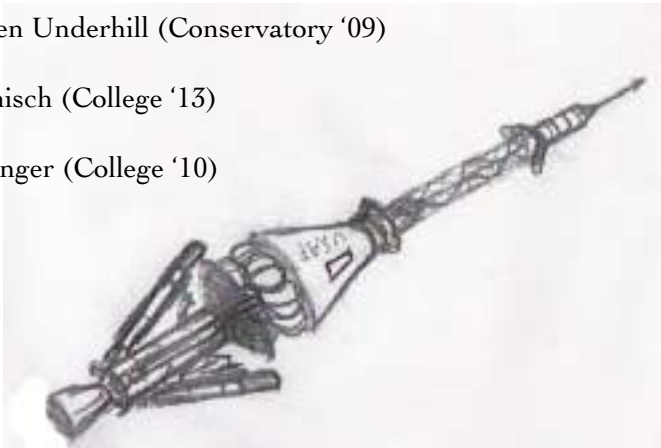
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**Upcoming Deadlines:**

Nov. 28th at 11:59 pm  
(Volume 2, Issue 4: Fall 2009)  
Feb. 28th at 11:59 pm  
(Volume 3, Issue 1: Winter 2010)  
Apr. 28th at 11:59 pm  
(Volume 3, Issue 2: Spring 2010)

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**Have erotica?**

We're trying to gather enough submissions for an entire erotic issue of *Spiral*!  
Submit your erotic material by  
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*\*We accept pseudonyms,  
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**Genre Workshop**

Saturday, November 21st

11:00 am – 2:00 pm

*email Bryn.McDonald@oberlin.edu by November 15th to sign-up*



*Front Cover Art:*  
“In Desperation”  
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