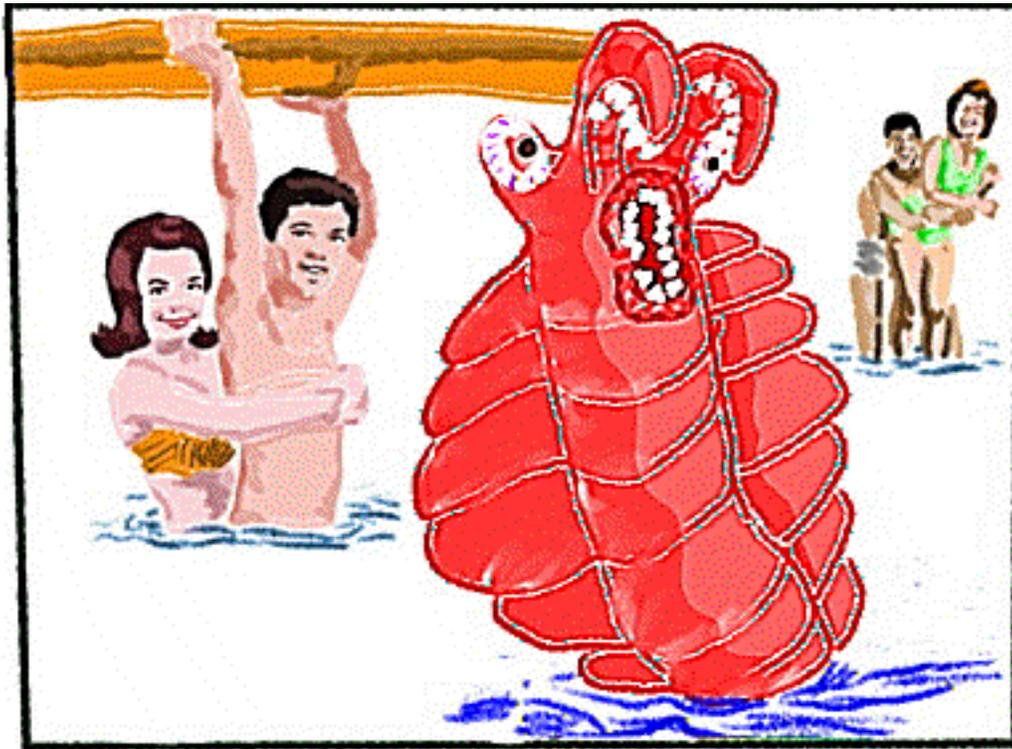


Planet Magazine #6

Wild SF, Fantasy, Horror, Humor, Poetry — Online™ Vol. 2.2 FREE!



INSIDE THIS ALIEN-FUNDED ZINE:

Science Fiction by **Jason Clark, Simon Joseph, Brad Stone.**

Fantasy by **James Bayers.**

Horror by **Drew Shelton.**

Poetry by **L. Norton, Paul Semel.**

Masthead

Planet: "The Only Online Zine Edited by Nonhuman Supermodels"



Planet Magazine, Vol. 2, No. 2; June 1995 (this is the 6th issue)

Editor & Publisher

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Cover title: "Anomalocaris surfaces in Beach Blanket Babylon Hell!"

Tools: Mac Performa 578, Painter, a Wacom ArtZ tablet, and some orange juice.

Background: Anomalocaris (weird shrimp), the monster/killer/predator of the Cambrian seas (~530 million years ago). Apologies to Annette Funicello, Frankie Avalon, and the video "Muscle Beach Party."

WHAT IS PLANET MAGAZINE?

Planet Magazine is a free quarterly of science fiction, fantasy, horror, poetry, and humor written by beginning or little-known writers, whom we hope to encourage in their pursuit of the perfect story. There could be other reasons we're doing this, of course, motivations that are obscure and uncomfortable; instincts linked perhaps to primal, nonreasoning urges regarding power and procreation — the very same forces, no doubt, that brought down the Atlanteans and their alabaster-towered oceanic empire. And the Dark Gods laffed. And laffed.

Anyway, Planet is nationally distributed in electronic form (text and full-color versions) via American Online, CompuServe, eWorld, New York Mac Users Group (NYMUG) BBS, Sir John's Pub BBS, and Cthulhu knows where else; there are a couple dozen printouts of each issue floating around, as well. We guess that total circulation is

something like 500 per issue. Feel free to pass this magazine along electronically or as a single printout, as long as you don't charge for it or alter it in any way. **We welcome submissions** (details below). **Planet** does not carry any advertising or offer a subscription service (but it can always be found every third month in certain locations; see below). Letters to the editor are welcome and are likely to be printed. Send questions or comments to PlanetMag@aol.com.

SUBMISSIONS POLICY

Planet Magazine accepts original short stories, poems, one-act plays, and odds-and-ends (use the lengths in this issue as guidelines), as well as original accompanying illustrations. We prefer unpublished SF, fantasy, horror, poetry, humor, etc., by beginning or little-known writers (we tend to eschew stories published in other e-zines, as well as porno, gore, and monographs of occult lore). Because this e-mag is free and operates on a budget of \$0.77 per annum, we can't afford to pay anything except the currency of free publicity and life-enhancing good vibes (of course, that and \$1.25 will get you a bed for the night on the F train, but it's still a shot of ego juice to see your name in print).

Story submissions: Send stories, poems, etc., as StuffIt- or Ziplt-compressed ASCII text files to PlanetMag@aol.com or PMagazine@eWorld.com. Two submissions max at a time, please.

Illustration submissions: Send only one or two illustrations per story as separate, compressed, 16-color, 16-gray, or B&W pict files to PlanetMag@aol.com. We're open to cover ideas (holiday, seasonal, topical themes are best); query first.

DISTRIBUTION SITES

Planet is distributed in three electronic versions — text-only (readable by Windows or Macintosh, using a word-processing program), Acrobat PDF (full-color version readable by Windows or Mac, using the free, downloadable Acrobat Reader), and DOCmaker (full-color version with sounds, readable by Mac only; needs no other software). Some of these files may be compressed with StuffIt (a .sit file); you'll need StuffIt Expander, or similar, to decompress them. This zine can be downloaded from the following sources, among others:

- The **America Online** Writer's Club Forum (keyword: WRITERS; the route is The Writer's Club: Writer's Club Libraries: Electronic Magazine Library), which carries all three versions. Also, AOL's Science Fiction & Fantasy Forum (keyword: SCIENCE FICTION; the path is Science Fiction & Fantasy: The Science Fiction Libraries: Member Fiction & Scripts Library).
- The **CompuServe** Science Fiction & Fantasy Forum (go: SFLIT; look in the Science

Fiction literature library). This library carries only the text version.

- The **eWorld Community Center's Trading Posts** (shortcut is command-g: TP); the path is Community Center: eWorld Live: Trading Posts: Newsletters folder. The SF, Fantasy & Horror Forum (command-g: SF); the path is Arts & Leisure Pavilion: Forums: Science Fiction, Fantasy & Horror: Alexandria Restored: In Print. And Ziffnet's Software Center (command-g: ZIFF); the path is Computer Center: Software Central from Ziffnet/Mac: Software Central: Member Exchange uploads: The Bookshelf.
- The **NYMUG BBS** (New York Mac Users Group) carries the DOCmaker and PDF versions in its Electronic Pubs folder. **Sir John's Pub BBS** carries these versions in its software files folder. (E-mail us for connection info.)
- No **Internet** archive site exists yet, but we're working half-heartedly on it.

At 2400 baud, the text file takes a few minutes to download, while the DOCmaker file takes about 15 minutes (set your modem to "stun"). At 9600, though, the DOCmaker version takes only about 5 minutes to download. At 14,400 bps, download 'em all. The DOCmaker version is the coolest (starting with **Planet** 1.3, you can click on the illustrations and get a special surprise).

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COLOPHON

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Editorial & Letters

Breakfast of Godzilla: Traffic Jam on Toast

A MAN, A PLAN, A CANAL, PALINDROME

Diving helmet? Check. Diving suit? Check. Leaded boots? Chee-eck. All I need now is to procure the oxygenating equipment. Just think of it: "The First Man to Walk the Mississippi." All the way from the Northern States to the Louisiana Delta. Slogging through the silt, with you, my friends, above me in the boat, keeping the sweet, sweet breath of life flowing down that tube to my watery little world below. It sounds crazy, I know. But you know how you always hear people say, "I don't know what I want to do with my life! What am I going to do? What am I gonna be?" Well, I've found my thing. It actually happened to me. Suddenly, everything...just...*clicked*. Everything. And now it's my whole reason for being. I mean, I know it's pointless. But haven't you seen a lot of famous things get done just for the sake of doing them? Hey look at that guy, the Human Fly, who scaled the World Trade Center back in the '80s — the Greed Decade. Remember how he methodically ratcheted up the corner of that soaring edifice? How he reached the top, turned, paused ever-so-briefly, and gently let himself fall toward the roaring, antlike crowd below — and how, within two, heart-stopping seconds, he sprouted mechanical gossamer wings, rising like a leaf in God's own updraft to disappear forever into the face of the sun? Now do you see? My greater, selfless act is to inspire people to complete their appointed tasks, whatever they may be, with bravado on this gritty plane of existence.

But it doesn't end there, no. Next, I'll walk the Atlantic. Right *across* the water. I've got these great little pontoon shoes — bright red and yellow, so the news helicopters can see me. I put some frictiony sandpaper on the bottoms of the shoes, and I'll just go. Up a wave and down the other side. Up another, then down. Ideally, it won't rain. But I'll be used to that, because walking under the river will be like walking through solid rain. And I'm gonna get some big sponsors too, like Kelloggs, and, well, at least Kelloggs, because you've got to eat a pretty good breakfast before you walk across the ocean. I can just picture those Frenchmen, hanging around on their coast, suddenly squinting out to sea: "Zut Alors, what ees dat? Ist das Limpett?" And I'll just come sliding down a wave, saying, "Bonjour! Got anything to eat?"

**Focusedly,
Andrew G. McCann, Editor
Planet Magazine, June 1995**

A NOTE TO READERS FROM OUR SILICON-BASED EDITORIAL BOARD

There is no doubt that **Planet Magazine** has a core of blindly loyal readers. Survey after survey confirms it. Nonetheless, many readers have e-mailed us to complain that — far from being the SF, fantasy, horror, etc., kind of zine that is being "advertised" — Planet, once downloaded, is in fact foolish, immature, and pointless.

Well... fine.

Permit us to respond thusly: To those who say **Planet Magazine** is silly, we say, "Pifflewafflefeathers"; to those who say we're childish, we reply: "No, YOU are"; and to those who claim this zine is irrelevant, we merely point to our long-running investigative series, "Tricia Nixon: The Disco Years." Case closed.

With "Turing"-Tested Sincerity, The Grand Assembled Silicon-Based A.I. Editorial Board

GUEST EDITORIAL: EMOTICON LEXICON

Hey, online consumers! :) There's a brand-old fad in e-mail communication that I just noticed! :(Emoticons! ;-> These are little typographical constructions, like sideways human faces, that help communicate your subtlest thoughts and moods! 8-O You put these symbols after a sentence to show, for example, that a murderously sniping comment you just made was really a joke! ;-P As a service to our readers, the following list shows the Top 10 emoticons downloaded from AOL and their generally accepted definitions! ?:^]

Top 10 Emoticons

Symbol	Meaning
*&6	I've got the flu, and my right eye is infected.
()!	Cyclops is sleeping peacefully.
((=	The saucer invasion has started.
{.:	In the kingdom of the blind, Frosty is king.
[~	The floor under my dresser is cracked.
c^v*	I'm one happy beatnik.
*99	I'm taking the overnight double-decker.
\/,	Turn down your stereo, please.
...	It's plantin' season.
Po+	There's a helicopter following my wife.

Special bonus: An extra five emoticons! :-+

Y2(I've had tee many martoonis.
<.0 I'm camping solo down by the lake.
Jl` Fnord.
Ui2 Glardo furbulat! (from the planet Chnepthu).
}}| Good robot, wise robot; remember the Laws.

**Best,
Bidermeier van Leeuwonhoek
Internet Guru and Cult-Leader-Without-Portfolio**

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Dear Editor: I must say, I was very impressed with Planet. I did get the Mac version with all the bells and whistles. It looks great. Nice job.

Jeff

via AOL

Dear Editor: I've read a few issues of *Planet Magazine*. In particular, one short story stood out. Honestly, offhand, I don't remember too much, except I believe it was a Sci/Fi story with a generational-conflict twist. That *Planet* doesn't have a specific angle, and hence, target audience is both its strength and weakness; however, if the point you'd like to make is that good writing is worth reading, then I encourage you in your efforts. What might be interesting is if you could arrange the pieces so that they had sort of a vague subject matter that would create in the mind of the reader the equivalent of one of these panel discussions one sees on TV.

One of the perhaps understated advantages of communicating anything online is that the bane of most startup publishers, namely overhead, is miniscule. With this in mind, good luck in the months and years ahead, and I'm looking forward to more of your "zine."

Yours Truly,

Glenn

via NYMUG BBS

[Glenn, thanks for the feedback. We're not sure which story you're referring to, either. As to re-jiggering this zine's format, we might if we ever find the time and energy. - Ed.]

Dear Editor: I just finished reading your first issue. It was really, really outstanding! I downloaded it off of eWorld, of which I am a subscriber. Speaking of subscribing, is there any chance that there will be an e-mail subscription service? Is it a possibility? I sure hope so.

Once again, keep up the great work. I'll start hunting for #2 next time on-line.
Sincerely,
Mike
via eworld

[To those who request it, we will send out an alert each time an issue of Planet is posted. For now, that's probably the best we can do. Hope that'll do.]

[Editor's note: The following is a recent review of Planet Magazine #1 from Ziffnet/Mac on eWorld. The author of the review is associate sysop Gordon Meyer.]

"Planet Magazine is a free, quarterly publication featuring works in SF, Fantasy, Horror, and Humor. The editor is Andrew G. McCann, and there are good number of contributors (both writers and artists) to each issue.

In the words of McCann, *Planet* is an "online-interactive, virtual-reality-specific, internet-savvy, multimedia-intelligent, mag-tronic e-zine that's mostly text." Actually, it's all that and more. *Planet* is well designed, interesting, and a fun read. *Planet Magazine* uses DocMaker to provide a Mac-only interactive magazine. Just double-click and start reading.

This issue, Number 1 (March 1994), features 4 SF stories, 4 poems, and 1 each of the Fantasy, Horror, and Humor genre. Of the selections, I enjoyed the horrific "Tails of the Answering Machine." There's probably something here that you'll enjoy, it's a good mixed-bag of entertainment."

LETTERS TO "THEM"

Dear Short Grey: I have built my own mysterious UFO, from which I use a secret ray to control the Earth. Problem is, it's getting a little dull, and the responsibility is really becoming burdensome. D'ya think anyone would mind terribly if I just stopped?
Buggin' out,
Eugene C. Chutney
Self-Abductee

Dear Body-Snatcher: Every morning, my human walks out the apartment door. I figure he must be spending 8, maybe 10 hours per day out there in the corridor. Wuzzup wi' dat?
Cutely,
Kitt E. Harebal

Dear Triffid: I propose a solution to the ongoing controversy surrounding the National Endowment for the Arts' support for unsavory artistic types. Why not use the funding to pay for psychotherapy for these young artistes? Maybe then we'll see something useful out of them — a Serrano keychain, perhaps, or even some Finley Brand Dessert Topping.

Sincerely,

[Admiral Snoutboy](#)
Dogsbody@nea.org

Dear Tribble: I hope you don't mind me using your Letters column to introduce my new fragrance. I originally planned to call it "Cheap Gravy," but quickly realized that wouldn't be a big seller. I've now renamed it "Instant Gravy." Anyway, that's what it is, in fact.

Thank you for your consternation,

[O. "Dee" Kohlony](#)
Casey@bat.org

Dear Heechee: I don't use the word "fabulous" lightly, but let me tell you about my recent spiritual epiphanies. Like most people today, I'm trying to achieve self-realization by following the dictates of a "channeled" entity — in my case, Voldanar, who speaks through my entranced upstairs neighbor, Solly Banquette.

But you know, after a while I became a little tired of schlepping up two flights every night (OK, I take the elevator) to get a daily dose of cryptic mumblings via Solly. I mean, what does this mean: "You are that which is, therefore you is; and I are. I are am. So, for you to be me, be ALL that YOU can be. In here, or, in China or Canada..." I mean, it almost sounds like he's making it up. I can't tell you how many times I lost sleep over these mystical ramblings as my brain slowly turns in toasty twists of pretzel logic.

So, I started thinking: Is there a better way? Why must we "channel" these entities? Why do we have to slip Solly a twenty every evening? And then I thought, hey, why can't we download such musings from an AOL data base, for example. Or, why can't Voldanar, or whoever, have his own Home page on the Web? With links to other entities' pages! And a browser could reach out and grab a PDF file containing all of the latest soul-spoutings. And, come to think of it, let's bring the New Age up to techno-speed by putting these entities on CD-ROM, with a boolean search engine. Y'know, type in "future AND romance BUT NOT dork," and see what you get. Should be much clearer, but I'll leave it up to the "experts" to work out the details. I tell ya, I don't know where my ideas come from.

[Cye-bye,](#)
[Chad Igor](#)
seeker@allis.com

Dear Klaatu: I've recently discovered an additional basic particle of matter, which joins the ranks of those old standbys the electron, the proton, and the neutron. This particle is a basic building block of food, in particular: The Crouton. These toast particles are related to the more fundamental "loaf" particles, which in turn derive from the very, very weak force. The crouton, like the neutrino, is notable for its ability to move unimpeded through more complex structures of matter, in particular The Lettucesphere.

[Professorially,](#)

[Jerry Bilt](#)

pictures@eleven.pm

Dear V: Raising my dog as a human child has been difficult but rewarding. Now, however, his elementary school is threatening to expel him because his presence is "disruptive," or so they say. Yet my boy can "speak," "sit," and "pay attention" as well as, if not better than, any damn human. As I am poor, please send money to help pay for my team of legal beagles.

[Obediently,](#)

[Aug E. Dawgi](#)

feel@home.org

Dear Bug-Eyed Monster: Last month, a group of men in white came to my house early on a Saturday and put paint all over the front, sides, and back. Is it because they are the house painters whom I had hired?

[Desperately,](#)

[Noah Goode Deall](#)

Killer@large.com

Dear Van Morrison: I'm the smartest person I know. That's safe to say, because, I figure, can we ever really know anyone else? Lately, though, I've begun to wonder if I really even know myself, and whether I am qualified to make any statement about my intelligence level at all. However, I've decided it's easier to just make darn sure that I know myself better than I know anybody else. And I'm going to be careful to avoid eye contact and commentary of a personal nature — even when buying subway tokens. You can bet my wife's none too happy with this decision! Ahhh, whattya gonna do.

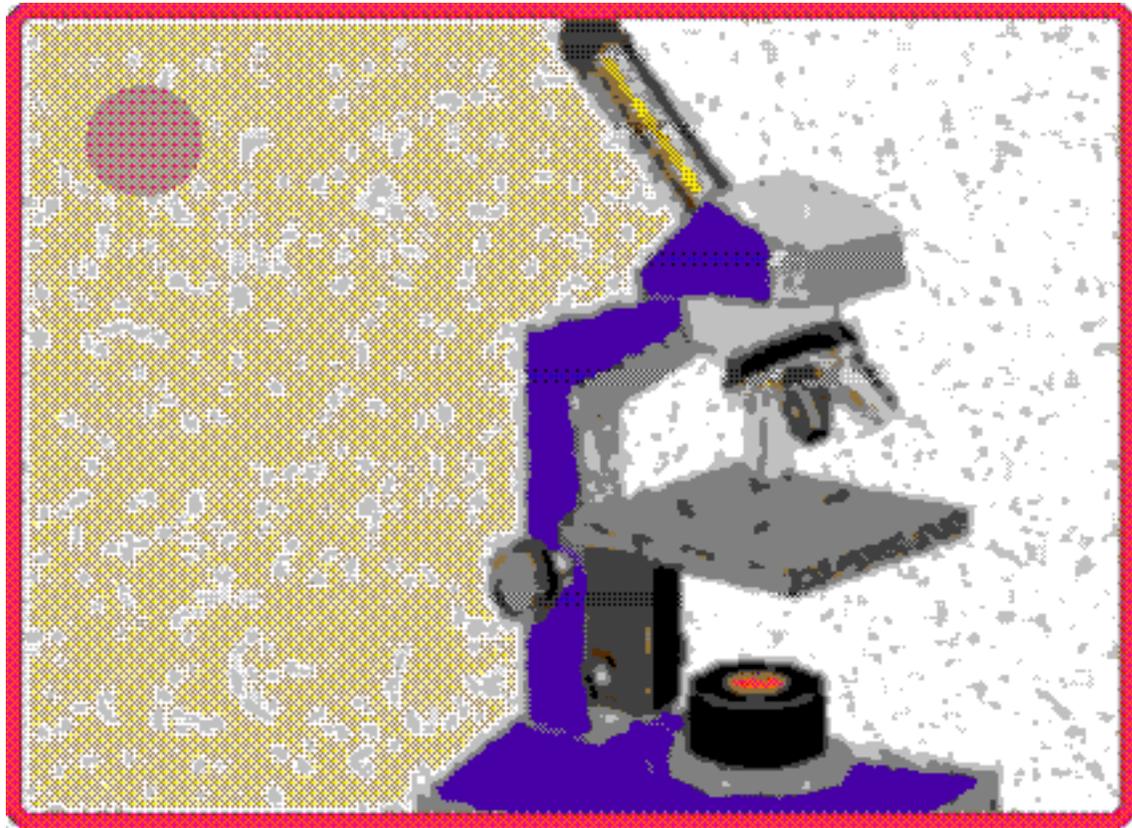
[Gazing Inward, Ever More Deeply,](#)

[Paul C. Tremmer](#)

[via anon.penet.fi](mailto:via_anon.penet.fi)

P.S. Please don't respond to this letter, I really don't want to know. •

Science Fiction



UNDER THE MICROSCOPE

by Jason Clark

Ameobin Dervin flowed **lightly** through the thick syrupy liquid that was his home. He navigated stealthily between the fibrous green strands that comprised his people's hunting grounds. Ameobin was on his first hunt, the glorious hunt!

Hiding behind a clump of the fiber, Ameobin spotted his prey, a small black glob munching harmlessly on another strand. The thing had raised, green spots coating it and was around half Ameobin's size. Although it knew of the hunter's presence, it paid Ameobin no heed, merely continuing its feast.

Pushing off of the strand, Ameobin floated toward his prey. With some effort he forced out an appendage from his outer membrane. His prey was facing away and did not sense Ameobin's approach until it was too late. As the prey turned to face the predator, Ameobin's membrane flowed over the little glob, engulfing it. In a moment the glob was gone without a trace and Ameobin was content to lie in wait for his hunger to rise again.

Joe Davis looked up from his microscope. Oh, how he loved watching all the little micro-organisms feed. He leaned back in his chair and glanced up at the clock. He was late for class! Rushing around the room to get ready, he pressed a button on the microscope labeled "TRANSFER TO CHIP." Depressing the button, Joe sent Ameobin and all his world into stasis. Time stopped for those in stasis, and Ameobin would continue his existence when Joe turned on that chip again. Joe pulled the chip out of the microscope and tossed it into a plastic container. On the side was written, "Amoebae 197." Joe left the room, turning off the light as he went.

Xeron Lifzer looked up from his positronic visual enhancer and smiled as best his scaled face would allow. How he loved watching all the little aliens rush about, doing whatever it was that those low life-forms did with their minuscule lives. Looking at his timepiece, Xeron realized he was late for a lecture on the multiple uses of tetrion compositions in high-gravity fields. His third tentacle whipped out and depressed a panel on the enhancer. Joe and all his universe was turned into data on a disk. Xeron pulled the disk out of its slot and set it neatly in its container. Written on the side was, "Universe 156." •

Story copyright © 1995 Jason Clark.

THE TIME MADAM

By Brad Stone

Sometimes Shirley and me play games at night. It depends on my mood. If it's bad at work, I'm not up to it. But on a day off, or if it's quiet on the streets, there's no stopping this cop's imagination.

We plan ahead. I tell her I like something prehistoric, from the dinosaurs. Later, she surprises me, with a deerskin vest or a wooden club.

We saw a flick about old England once and I got steamy. The next day she wears a long, curvey thing, moaning about her honor. I don't know where she gets all the costumes.

Shirley likes anything with cowboys. So I got hats and lassoes. I'm John Wayne with a Brooklyn accent. My NYPD pistol is a six-shooter. She stampedes.

Afterwards we tangle up and talk about the future. What it holds for us and for the baby we're trying to make.

* * *

Sergeant Mulgrew has a thing for prostitutes. He doesn't like 'em, says they're filthy slime stinkin' up his territory. They're always the first to come, he says, the whores with their gold-chained pimps. Then the drug dealers. Then the gangs. Then the hardcore criminals.

We've heard this before.

"Hooked on smack. Anything for dope." He's got a personal hatred. The word is, one of 'em bit down. I don't like to think about it.

So Looch and I aren't allowed to cut the hookers a break. Our streets are filled with 'em. We spend something like half of our nights in the van, bringing in whores.

Routine never changes. They come out at night, find their men, take their dough, get high, back by the next night.

Looch and I round 'em up like dogs. They smile, make kissey-face, say, "Come here honeys, Emilio, Looch, we like a man in uniform." We lock 'em up. Doesn't do any good, they're back the next day, a regular crowd and we know all their names.

So I notice when they start to disappear.

* * *

The night Lacey Love vanishes, Looch and I joke about it. We'd taken the van out that day. Lacey wasn't there and we didn't think anything of it.

"What, you gals found better streets than ours?" I ask Brenda Bush, behind bars. "We don't get to see Lacey Love any more?" asks Looch.

Brenda gets sad. "No one sees Lacey no more." She shakes her head, wig almost falls off. "Lacey's left the streets. Gone into business with a woman."

Looch and I look at each other. The only business Lacey Love knows is the back seat of a car.

"What woman?" Looch asks. We're both thinking dope.

Brenda shrugs. "A weird-looking thing," she says. "Puffy cheeks. Big mink around her neck, pink. And a ring." Brenda holds out her hands — "too big for an old woman."

That was the first we heard of her.

* * *

That night Shirley and I argue. I say "female cop." She gets mad, says I fool around at work.

I throw my hands into the air.

"Don't give me that Emilio, I know you do!" She's out of the bed, pointing.

I ask her where she gets the notion. "Perfume," she says.

I laugh and tell her again about the hookers. She pouts. I pick up the phone, "Here, call Looch."

She drops her head, sits on the bed. She doesn't move.

I curl up next to her, put my hand on her stomach, snuggle my nose into her neck. She smiles, giggles.

"Female cop," I say.

She disappears into the bathroom, takes my holster and uniform. Comes back and arrests me.

* * *

"Out, out, out," growls Sgt. Mulgrew. Looch and I brought the girls through the front door. Lost the keys to the pen.

"Out," shouts Sgt. Mulgrew. He's holding his pants. We get the keys, bring the girls around back. They mill around like dogs, chattering. Head count.

One less than usual. "Mona's gone," someone says.

I look at Looch. He's faking heartbreak.

"Get in the can," we say, locking the bars. Looch leaves. I stay and call Brenda Bush over.

She smiles, coyly, "You want some of this, Emilio?"

"Where's Mona?" I ask.

Brenda runs her hand through the fake nest on her head. "Went into business," she says. "Gonna make good money."

"Same as Lacey Love?" I ask.

Brenda nods. "Old woman with puffy cheeks. Mink and a ring. She asked me, too, you know." Brenda gives me eyes.

"What kind of business," I say to Brenda.

"Good money," she says. "That's all I know."

"What kind of business," I say, squeezing her hand. The other whores are looking.

Brenda pulls away and shrugs. "Not for me to say."

"Why'd you say no?" I ask Brenda.

"Not leaving my cat," she says lamely, eyes lowered. "No money worth leaving Marvin."

Brenda turns and walks away. Hiding something.

* * *

Looch and I are in the van, talking about women. Looch has tons of 'em, one every night. He brags about it.

"Not me," I say. "Got Shirley. We have a past together. Share a future."

He shakes his head. "Stupid motherfucker. Dumb, dumb, Emilio. You don't know what you're missing."

"I'm not missing anything."

"A new carton every day and you're milk won't go bad," he says, flashing teeth.

"You're gonna run outta women, Looch," I say. "Gotta think about tomorrow."

"Fuck it," says Looch. "The future can wait."

"It's gonna be you and the whores," I joke. "The only women for you." I look over at the sidewalk to point, see Barbara Booty . . .

. . . Talking to an old woman with mink around her neck.

"Stop the car," I yell.

* * *

I cross the street with Looch behind me. We're almost run down by a truck, beeping.

The two women look over. Barbara does her usual thing, screams "rape!" and runs for a warehouse.

Not the old woman. The old woman's graceful, like a bird. She moves without her feet. Glides.

Looch and I make the sidewalk, running. "Who is she?" he yells.

"Freeze," I scream, down an alley, gun waving.

Dead end. We turn around, there's no old woman. No mink. A little smoke, and a smell, like lemons.

* * *

Shirley sees I'm in a nasty mood that night, so it's quiet at dinner. Steak and fries, silently. I chew and think.

Afterwards, TV and cuddling. She lays on my lap, I put my hand on her belly. She looks up and smiles.

I say, "What?" She nods.

I stand up, throw my hands in the air. Hah! Emilio a father!

We lay on the coach and I listen to her stomach. Little Emilio.

Little Shirley. I look into her eyes and see an old woman, next to me in the sun.

We giggle into bed, troubles gone. She says, "What time?" I look at my watch, "Nine-thirty."

"No," she says, "What time tonight?"

I smile and think. I say, "The future. The next century. When we're old."

She grins and I see her mind, racing. She disappears into her closet, comes back an old woman, rouge on her cheeks, a sweater around her neck.

I tell her to put on a ring, the biggest she has.

Great sex.

* * *

Head count. One less. Looch looks over, frowning. No one says anything, they're quiet, waiting for us to figure it out.

"Barbara Booty." Looch and I say it at the same time.

"Where is she?" I say.

Quiet. The girls are looking down, counting floor tiles.

"Brenda," I say.

Quiet.

"Brenda!" She comes over, pulling on her wig.

"You finally come around, Emilio?" she asks. Doesn't mean it, she's nervous.

"Who is she? I ask. "Where's Barbara? Who's the old woman?"

She picks at her head, not talking.

"Selling drugs?" I ask.

Brenda sniffs.

"How's Marvin?" I say.

Brenda starts to cry. Big ugly tears, and the water wells up in the scars on her cheek.

"We wouldn't want Marvin to get hurt, right?"

Looch puts his hand on my shoulder. "Easy," he says.

"You got something to tell us?" I ask. "A drug ring?"

She shakes her head. Sobs, "I can't."

I look at Looch. He shrugs.

* * *

We talk it over with Sergeant Mulgrew. "The best thing I heard all week," he shouts, hand off groin. "Good news."

"Why good?" I ask. "Not if they're selling drugs."

"No, no," says the sergeant. "Not drugs. They're moving on."

"That's not what the girls say," says Looch. "They're going with an old woman, doing business."

"I know," nods the sergeant. "Believe me, I know. She's a madam, taking them to a better neighborhood."

I sigh. "I don't think so, Sarge. Woman's rich, wears jewelry."

Looch says, "She's not going to make any money off those skanks."

The sergeant stands and lights a Cuban. "Someone else's problem, boys, not ours."

I look at Looch, he's thinking it over. Nods and says, "Fine."

"We dodged a bullet," says the sergeant. "No pimps. A little drugs. No gangs. No hardcore criminals. Whores are always the first of 'em. Not this time. We got away easy."

I shake my head. Something's out there, hovering.

* * *

Shirley's nauseous that night, doesn't eat. We sit in front of the TV, not watching. It's quiet in bed when I say, "Indian."

She says, "Native American, you mean."

"Whatever," I say. "I'll be the chief."

"Not tonight," she moans. "I'm not feeling well." She turns her back.

"Okay, okay," I say. "No costumes. The '90s can get me going, too."

She doesn't laugh.

I give her some room and stare at the ceiling. The plaster's falling and I listen to a couple downstairs, they're fighting. And I can hear a baby, crying.

Shirley, breathing.

Think hard, Emilio, it's right there. Whores disappearing. An old woman, wearing mink. Jewelry. Rich. She wants street hookers. I look down at the dirty brown carpet and see a cowboy hat.

Nothing makes sense. I get up, get dressed. Wear all black.

* * *

Four in the morning, the pay-off. Brenda's talking to the dark. Someone's in the shadows, holding her hand.

"The late 20th century is in style, dear." An old, soothing voice.

"It's all the rage. Makes my customers crazy."

Brenda's sniffing, mumbles something about "how its going to feel."

"It's like a large hole. You step through."

"I don't think I can do it."

I nudge my head further, trying to see in the dark. There's a large shadow with moonlight in front. I see a feather, sticking out.

"You have a skill, my dear. Market it. You're in demand where I come from."

The feather is strange, like the end of something. A coat? It's pink. I stretch further.

"There's nothing for you here. Come with me."

"Will I feel anything?" Brenda's stuttering voice.

There's no answer. I stretch further. Silence. I see the feather is mink, and it's wrapped around the shadow of an old woman.

"Ms. Jivids?" Brenda turns around, looks at me.

I look at myself and see moonlight, shining on my chest. I step out, draw my gun.

"Now everyone freeze," is what I manage.

The old woman pulls Brenda by the hand, charges down alley. It takes a second and then I'm chasing them. She glides, faster than me and it's nothing like I've ever seen. But the end of the alley's coming and they're trapped.

"Stop," I yell, pointing the gun.

The old woman and Brenda turn. She's whispering something.

Brenda looks at me, terrified.

"Step away," I yell. "Let go of her." I cock the pistol, aim at the old woman.

A moment of silence.

Brenda screams, "I can't do it! I can't do it!" and pulls wildly at her hair.

The old woman looks down, holds her hand out. With her other hand she does something to the ring. Then a bright light, it's blinding and I shield my eyes.

When I force a look, I see the old woman with her arm around Brenda, pulling her into the light. Brenda's kicking and screaming. For the first time I see the old woman's face clearly, its pale and long. Cheeks are puffy, no eyebrows. Haunting.

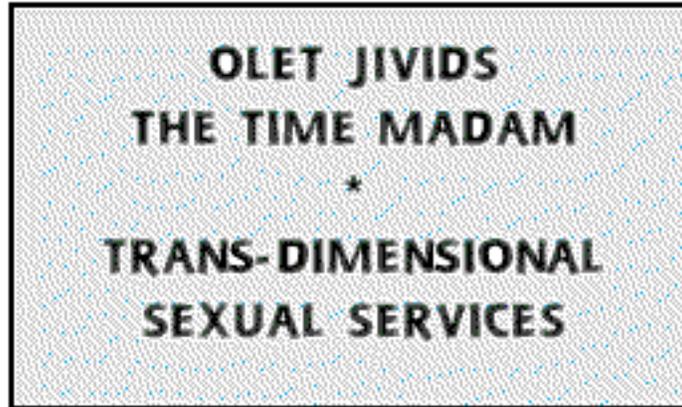
Something falls onto the ground.

Then there's darkness again. I'm alone in the alley and there's a smell, like lemons.

* * *

I inspect the scene and find two things. First, Brenda's wig, black and wormy. I don't touch it. Kick it to the side and leave it for the dogs.

Then a business card, under a layer of dirt and shoeprints. I pick it up, dust it off. It's nothing like I've ever touched, weightless, on silver paper. There are holographic words on one side:



I go home to Shirley. The sun's coming out. Two hours until I'm back to the office. I stand over the bed, looking at her.

Then I look down at the floor and see the cowboy hat. I pick it up, fold it in my hands. No one will believe it. I slide in next to Shirley and think.

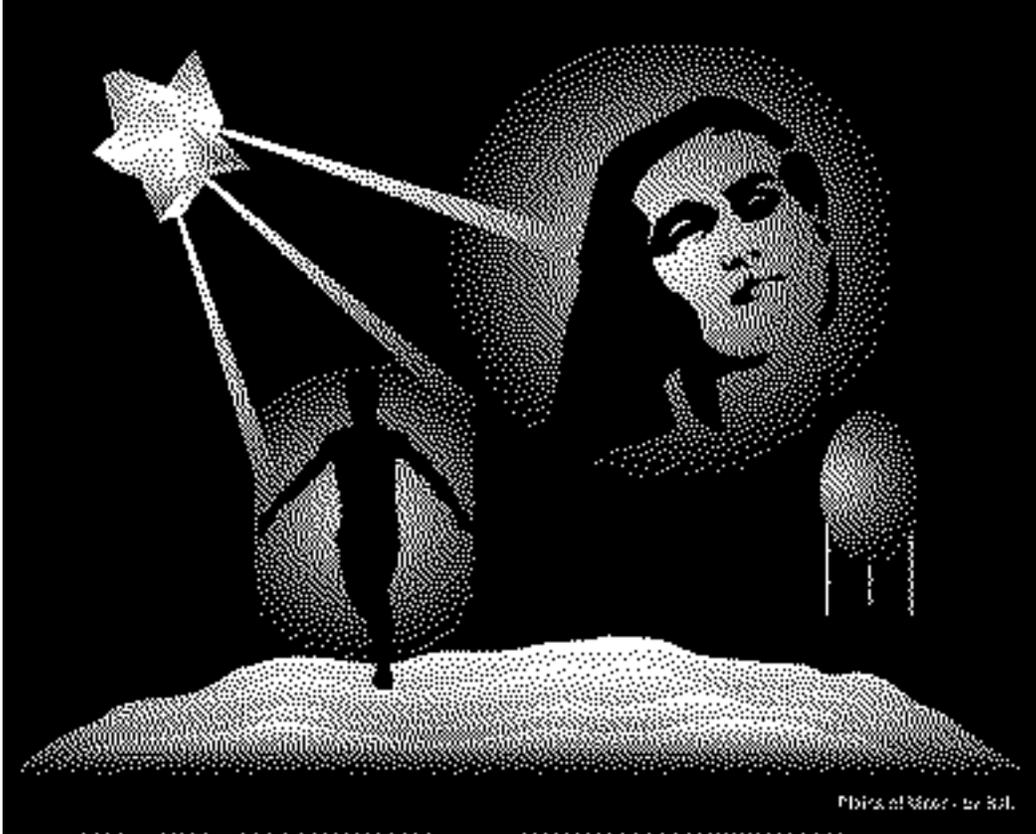
On the bright side, Jivids has probably left the neighborhood. She won't risk coming back. She knows I'm onto her, but knows I can't do a damn thing about it.

The other side's much worse. I think of what Sergeant Mulgrew said. Whores are always the first. Then the drug dealers. Then the gangs. Then the hardcore criminals. There's a buck to be made on the past and the future is coming back to cash in. Like a snake, eating its own tail, feasting on history.

Jivids told Brenda the '90s are all the rage. So there will be more of them, and there's nothing we can do. Looch was wrong about the future, it won't wait.

I put my hand on Shirley's belly and close my eyes, but I just can't sleep. •

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THE PLAINS OF MEER

by Simon Joseph

The fist-sized stone was pyramid shaped, perfectly cut on all sides, and clear as glass. I didn't think the geology of Thetus permitted diamonds. I had found it near the edge of a tidal pool on my morning walk up the North Beach. I immediately adorned my one-room bungalow with the mystery rock, displaying it on a driftwood table. There was no one to share this find with. I lived alone on Thetus, as a woman who sought her fate in the solitude of this big blue world.

That night I lay on my bunk nearing sleep. The eyes were heavy, half dreaming of a storm out at sea. Only half dreaming because I could still hear the surf roaring outside. One eye opened lazily to spy on the rock once more. Light danced off the multisided stone. Thin white beams flashed across the room, sweeping the dark. The rays bounced from wall to wall, flickering about.

A man runs barefoot on the wet hard-packed sand of low tide. His unrelenting stride dances to a beat, forward in rhythm. Sweating in his tattered clothes. Moving, hurrying, getting somewhere. I am a bird gliding high above, crisscrossing the runner's path. After

straying far ahead I double back, dive down and dart pass the man. His face transfixed, arms swinging wildly under striding legs. I circle above the human projectile and our motions lock in tandem. I hear voices in the man's movement, "Anticipate there, adjust here, footing soft, veer right, straddle over, find line, maintain, pace, second wind, surge now, forward, faster." Legs alternate each lunging step with machine-like continuity, rotating like a windmill. The arms swing back and forth maintaining balance. I descend again and glide past the man. The limbs are a mayhem of movement but the head is locked forward, bounding only to the runner's inertia. The eyes stare straight ahead, unblinking, possessed, fixed on a destiny imagined or real. The open mouth is seemingly breathless. I climb against a strong southerly wind. The man is running north. Like broken sails his ragged shirt and trunks flail behind him. He is impervious knifing into the ocean gust, skimming the coast with a thousand strides.

Lines of white energy tapped my forehead. I stared at one beam, a photon torpedo that was paper-thin and inches wide. I followed it to the ceiling corner and drifted to sleep again. From one dream I stumbled on to another.

Everything ceases. The man is kneeling on the sand, head bowed down before me, his hands holding my robe like a repentant Christian. The man and I are statues with frozen gestures. There is no urge to speak. I only want to stand above him. The man kneels repentant, for his own sake or mine it doesn't matter. Thoughts are too still here. Even where the ocean pounds the shores, with the wind-blasted sands, and the dune grasses crackling like fire. Here we stand and kneel, if only to cry out, "Look, look Thetus!" Alive all around us with her chaos of forces, my planet she listens, she sees. The sea falls away, the winds leave the sand, and the grasses become silent. Now I can breathe stillness. Our hearts have stopped beating. The man grips my robe and the side of his head presses against my thigh. My hands rest on his shoulders as I look out over the calm ocean. Thetus knows. Knows tranquility reigns.

The rock glowed a soft white hue in my room. I staggered off the bunk and approached it. I had not imagined the wild lights earlier. Diamond or not, no crystal in this universe exhibited these properties. I picked up the stone. It was warm and shone red through my fingers. How real is this? With the stranger on Thetus.

I put the crystal back down. Turning away I found a window and looked out into the night. It was dark. There were no lights, no running man, nor a kneeling one. Just the sea. Just me, Mara, alone on Thetus. Why was the man running, and kneeling before me?

I could see the glow out of the corner of my eyes. I turned and saw a shower of rays arcing and angling into a wild, gleaming matrix. I quickly looked down. Each light a channel to another place, to the visions. How? The visions felt so real. I noticed two beams converging at my feet.

The man — that same man — stands beside a ship. Not an ocean ship. It stands on the shores of Thetus, a tall metallic egg propped on three spindly legs. The incoming tide begins to fill the darkened crater underneath. A ship for the stars. The man is poised, standing at

attention, his suit gleaming blue and silver. An entry materializes on the egg's silver shell. He climbs inside and I follow. We stand on a mirrored floor and the space between us is small. An octagonal room. The walls are black, streaked with long curving strokes of white, red, and blue pinprick lights. Strips of the universe one beside the other, making a wallpaper of stars, nebulas, and galaxies. The man points to one bright speck. Flash of red. "Away," he says with his eyes. But to where? The man smiles, "Where the angels dance, on the plains of Meer."

I stood in the bungalow doorway and witnessed an intricate geometry of lights. From every angle white lines bounced on the walls, floor, and ceiling. I was drawn by the diamond's web of light.

"No!"

I fled out in the moonless night, running towards the beach. I stumbled on the loose sand. My chest pounded making me fight for breath. Scrambling to get away I followed the shoreline. I turned to look back. A pinpoint beam darted out of the house. It moved closer — not at once, not at the speed of light — extending its reach toward me. I tumbled forward crying out and fell into the surf.

I know that place, Meer. On the other side of the galaxy, as green with grass as Thetus is blue with the sea. The man grins, "We are here." We step outside the craft. Orange light makes the eyes turn away, blazing. He spreads his hand to the horizon and I see waves of tall grass racing up a sloping field. We are in a valley. I follow him. After a while, he stops and turns to me. Behind him I see an oddly shaped building. Beyond it many more line the green slope. Weathered and rusty looking like old corrugated steel. Half-moon shaped. He points to the building near us. The man is sad. His suit glistens under the bright sunlight.

I was kneeling in water. A wave crashed into me and knocked me back. I crawled out of the surf, coughing out seawater. I found dry sand and lay there, sprawled on my stomach, cold, exhausted. My eyes opened. Lights sparkled off the white-water.

We enter the strange building. A body lies still. A man with eyes closed. Wires in his skull. I kneel beside the cot and pull them from his head one by one. The man opens his eyes, smiles. He is not sad like his reflection standing nearby. The light is blinding. I feel his joy now, his freedom a super nova. I am lying down and I see him standing above me. The wires inside my head make me still. I am on Meer. The man is walking on the beach on Thetus. No longer running, no longer kneeling for forgiveness. A crystal is in his hand. He turns to face the ocean and throws the stone far over the waves. I see a splash, watch it descend in the murky water. It sinks into the green-to-blue-to-black, to a place of unlight. I lie in the dark. Helpless under the half-moon ceiling. Longing to run on the wet sand, wild with freedom. To kneel for forgiveness with tranquil heart. I am waiting for the crystal to wash ashore. To dance its light again, like the angels on the plains of Meer.

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THE PARCHMENT

by James Bayers

His Eminence, Hasfra, Docent of the King's Church, sat in his high-backed chair, one leg casually thrown over an armrest, and sipped his tea. For the moment, he ignored the old monk who was trying to gain his attention. He ignored him not because he was busy or out of any necessity, he ignored him to intimidate, to show the elder just how low of a position he held.

The monk, trembling now, cleared his throat nervously. Hasfra looked up as he sipped his tea; he knew this would be a complete waste of time and it irritated him to no measure. "What is it?" he snapped.

As if lashed by a whip, the old man visibly flinched. "I ... I ..." he stammered, "I beg audience with you, milord Docent."

"Out with it," said Hasfra. He was bored.

"His Maj ... His Majesty has doubled the tax yet again this year. My congregation barely made the tax last year. There is no possibly way we can come up with such a sum. Crops have not been that good..." The monk stopped and waited for his Docent to reply.

The Docent, still sipping his tea, did not respond for a long while nor did he look at the monk. Finally, he spoke in a near whisper. "Get out before I kill you." He carefully sat his cup down on the table.

Stunned, his mouth dropping open, the old man hesitated. "But ... But ..."

Leaping to his feet, the Docent whipped his sword free from its sheath. "Are you deaf, man?" he roared, kicking the monk so hard that it knocked him down. "I said get out!"

Holding his sword in one hand, aiming vicious kicks at the scrambling elder's legs, the Docent pursued him relentlessly. "How dare you come to me with such trivial matters when our good King wages war in the name of God and Church?"

The monk was in tears now. "I'm sorry milord," he sputtered. Regaining his feet, he darted for the entrance, but not before the Docent got in one last kick.

When the old monk was gone, Hasfra, closed the door, walked over to the table, picked up his cup of tea, took a sip, and let out a chuckle. Once word of this got out, the others would not seek his audience so readily. Their complaints were a drain on precious time that could better be spent on other endeavors.

Didn't the fools see? Every victory of the King brought more land and people under the Church's control. More land and people were good for the King, good for the Church, and good for the Docent.

A knock sounded at the door.

"Enter."

It was Brother Leppe, a soft fleshed man who had lost any idealism decades ago and was now thoroughly jaded. He carried the red, ceremonial robes over his arm.

"There are no other appointments this afternoon, your Eminence," said the monk in a bored tone.

The Docent stood while Leppe draped the robes over his shoulders. Standing back and appraising his work, Leppe gave a nod and the two made their way through the maze of stairs, corridors and halls, that made up the Basilica.

* * *

The walls of the cathedral towered over him. High above, shafts of multi-colored sunlight streamed in through stained-glass windows. Skillfully crafted, the windows depicted scenes from the early days of the Church. There was Urg putting the Word down on the scrolls, Onep driving the demons out from the Good Land, and Swo feeding the poor with help from God himself. Many more were represented and all stood in stern judgment over Hasfra, but Hasfra ignored them.

The Docent chanted the Eltide Prayer while he lit the twelve candles that represented the twelve months of the year. After he completed a verse of the lengthy, complex chant, the chorus of monks, chosen for the purity of their voices, would sing it back to him, their beautiful voices echoing through the cavernous chamber.

"Good Lord, bless us with a bountiful harvest this year," he chanted as he lit a candle.

"Good Lord, bless us with a bountiful harvest this year," sang the monks in reply.

"Good Lord, bless the folk so that they may multiply," he chanted, lighting another candle.

"Good Lord, bless the folk so that they may multiply," sang the monks.

Having performed the ceremony dozens of times, the Docent's thoughts drifted. If the Morturo campaign was successful it would bring another twenty thousand souls into the Church.

Twenty thousand would tithe two thousand in gold each year. Two thousand gold would buy one thousand more soldiers...

"Good Lord, bless those that forgive for they are the virtuous."

"Good Lord, bless those that forgive for they are the virtuous..."

* * *

Sparks burst forth as Modin, High Prefect of the Ironhammer Clan, Defender of the Faith, slammed his hammer down upon the red, glowing bar of iron again and again. Each strike perfecting the piece, molding the piece into a perfect match for the blade he saw in his mind's eye.

He quickly lost himself in the rhythm of his work and soon fell into a trance. The steady beat of the hammer, the flame, the forge; this wasn't work, this was how he communed with his god.

The heat from the forge was intense. Sweat beaded on his brow and shined through the woolly mass of white hair that covered his arms and chest. Light from the flames glinted from the dwarf's eyes, giving him an almost maniacal visage.

"Faster dogs!", he roared at his two young apprentices who were pumping the billows, "Faster, ere I'll use yer blood to temper my steel."

The two, already pumping frantically, look at each other in momentary disbelief, then redoubled their efforts.

Suddenly a twinge of pain lanced through the dwarf's chest. Modin stopped and clutched his right arm. He couldn't breathe...

The extra air roared through the forge and gave life to the fire. A face had formed within the flames. Coals made up its eyes and it had ashes for a beard. The Prefect stared on in disbelief as the face spoke.

"Modin!" it cackled.

The old dwarf fell to his knees. "Is... Is that you lord?"

"Who do you think it would be," it replied tersely, "and get up! Didn't I tell ye to prostrate yerselves before none?"

"We... We... thought you meant to prostrate ourselves before none but you, lord." He stood, clasping his hands together.

"Idiots!"

"Yes, lord."

"Modin, you've grown into a pompous ass of late. I command you to cast off your earthly possessions and wander the world until you have learned humility."

The face in the flames whirled about and disappeared.

Stunned, Modin found himself on the floor. Pain tore through his chest like some small, vicious animal was trying to claw its way out. Tears blurred his vision and his breath came in gasps.

The two apprentices, mouths open, were staring at him. One helped him to his feet.

"Milord?" one asked timidly, "are you alright? You fell."

The old dwarf blushed as he realized the two had not seen the face in the flames. No doubt they would run to tell Utalin, High Priest of the Ironhammers.

"Get out!" he snapped, finding it necessary to support himself by leaning against the wall. When they didn't move fast enough for him, he snatched the hammer up and threw it at them.

"Get out I told you!"

The note he left was short and to the point:

"Do not come after me as God has commanded me to go out onto the world and learn humility. See that all of my possessions and moneys are distributed amongst the poor and needy.

God said that some of our scriptures are in error. When he said that we are to prostrate ourselves before none, he included himself in that.

Modin, Prefect of the Ironhammer Clan, Defender of the Faith."

* * *

She walked without fear through the gloomy woods, up the twisty, overgrown trail to the hilltop above. A cool breeze rustled her long black hair as she entered the clearing. In the center of which a ring of stone stood out stark white against the dark grass in the moonlight.

Beautiful she was. She knew that because of the way men behaved around her. Some men acted like little children; some men stared, like they were starving and she was food. But tonight she wouldn't dance for them, she would dance for Her, the moon above. Her mistress shone above huge and white in the autumn night sky.

Nilly untied the drawstring that fastened her gown and slowly let it fall to the ground. The soft light fell across her, exaggerating her ample curves.

She began to dance. Holding her arms above her, she gently swayed her hips as she turned, keeping the beat within her in time with the cricket's chirp.

As she danced, she prayed. She prayed for a mild winter. She prayed for an abundant spring. She prayed that young Mali would have an easy pregnancy. Finally, she prayed that she and her sisters would be delivered from the Docent.

The last made her stop. Nilly didn't feel like dancing any more.

All witches were to be burned, decreed the Docent, their evil would not be allowed to sway the common folk from the true path any longer. God was good and God said that there was to be no other before him.

For centuries, way before there was any Church, her sisterhood had taken care of the people. They healed them when they were sick, they brought them into the world, and they returned them to the earth when they passed on. Now, the very same people cheered as her sisters were bound to stakes and burned.

A tear caught a glimmer of moon light as it trickled down her cheek. The tear came out of sadness, yes, but it also came out of frustration. She would not sit idly by to be found out and murdered. She would act. Nilly was not sure of exactly what she would do, but as she pulled on her gown and started back down to the valley below, she was sure that she was going to do something.

* * *

His face turning red with the effort, Modin strained against the lever of his crossbow's winch. Finally, with a click, the ratchet caught. He sighed a sigh of relief. The works must be getting in need of oil, he thought. Holding the stock between his legs, he forcefully shoved the cable down into the metal lock.

A scream. It must be the woman he saw from the hilltop. He had watched from there as red-tuniced Church Soldiers dragged her to the edge of the field and ordered the mob of peasants that followed to assemble tinder and erect a stake. There was no doubt that they were going to burn her.

Concealed from view by the bank, he examined the bolt he pulled from his quiver with a practiced eye. Grumbling, he held it at arms length so that his eyes could focus on it. Entirely made of metal, except for the feathers that it needed to fly straight, the shaft was tipped by a needle sharp point of steel. Dropping it into the grove of the crossbow, Modin knocked it to the cable.

Keeping his weapon pointing skyward, the Prefect grunted as he stood. Plucking his halberd from the ground, he climbed the trail to stand in full view of the humans.

At first they didn't notice him. They were nearly finished binding the woman to the stake. She struggled frantically against her captors. At one point lashing out with her foot to catch some unwary peasant in the nether regions.

Seeing that, Modin raised his eyebrows. Even when she's about to meet her doom, where most would be weeping and pleading for mercy, she's defiant. The Prefect would never condone that kind of behavior, but he admired it.

"May God 'ave pity on yer soul witch," said one of the Church Soldiers, a captain by the insignia on his red tunic. A peasant placed a torch in his hand.

"Worry about your own soul," she yelled back, still struggling against the ropes, "what you're doing here today will be one day known as the act of evil that it is."

"You'll be repenting soon enough..." The soldier made ready to drop the torch.

"Hold!" barked Modin in the voice he used to snap the knot of fear in the stomachs of young dwarven warriors.

He had their attention now. "Hold I say." He marched forward, plate mail clanking, and when he got within ten yards, he jabbed the point of his halberd in the ground and held his crossbow with both hands, the butt of it braced firmly against his shoulder. There were five of them. Fully armed and armored soldiers of the Church. He knew he didn't stand a chance.

"What be t' meanin' o' this dwarf?" asked the captain incredulously, "be ya standin' in t' way o' Church law?"

"Nay, I be standin' in the way of ignorance and stupidity. Now stand down, ere meet the consequence."

Modin, squinting one eye shut, cocked his head from one side to the next. He then took a step to the side.

The Church Soldier studied the dwarf's crossbow nervously. He had never seen such before. It was entirely made of metal and had a slew of pulleys and winches attached to it. "Yer but one. We're five. Ya cannot kill us all." He raised his shield to protect his midsection.

"No," replied the dwarf, still squinting and repositioning himself with small steps, "No. No doubt some of you will outrun me."

Flushing with anger, the captain tossed the torch onto the kindling, drew his sword, and started forward.

Modin yanked the crossbow's lever. The force of the launch nearly knocking him over, the bolt hissed through the air too fast for eyes to follow.

With the smacking of metal on metal, gasps and shouts, three of the Church Soldiers fell to the ground like puppets who just had their strings cut. One lay twitching, the other two, one of which was the captain, a hole punched through his shield, were still.

Dropping the crossbow, the dwarf darted over and yanked his halberd from the ground. Bellowing like some crazed demon, he swung the pole arm in great arcs as he rushed forward.

That was enough for the crowd of peasants. They scattered like hens from a fox.

The soldiers, mere youths, held their ground for a moment. Eyed their fallen comrades, then eyed the dwarf, dropped their weapons and ran.

"It was about time you got here," she said tersely as he kicked away the burning kindling with his plated foot.

He cut her loose with his dirk. "Eh?" he said, raising his bushy eyebrows, "do we know each other?"

"Yes," she replied as she rubbed her wrists, then a confused look crossed her face, "I mean no. I mean I summoned you."

Modin, looking over his shoulder, pushed her toward the woods. "Now's no time for talking. Let's get going."

* * *

With a plated arm around her waist, Modin herded the stumbling girl toward the woods line as fast as he could. There was no way of knowing how long it would take reinforcements to arrive and he didn't want to take any chances.

Under the canopy of the trees, safe for the moment, they stopped to catch their breath, or at least the dwarf did. Leaning against a tree for support, Modin breathed heavily. Aches and twinges shot through his body. He pulled a rag from his war harness — he always ordered his underlings to carry a clean rag into battle to wipe the blood and sweat from one's eyes or to use as a bandage — and wiped the sweat from his brow.

Leaning over, she wrapped her arms around the dwarf and planted a wet kiss on him with her full red lips.

"Hey," he sputtered, jumping back, pushing her away, his already flush face turning crimson. "Lay off!"

She laughed. It was a clear, full laugh, like that of glass tinkling. "I was only trying to thank you," she said, placing her hands on her hips, "I wasn't trying to kill you."

"Well..." The Prefect vigorously rubbed the wet spot on his forehead with his rag. "Don't do that again. It was my duty to save you because, unlike those idiots, I knew you were innocent. Witches don't exist. They're something conjured up by the powers-that-be for the populace-at-large to blame, instead of laying the blame at the feet of the powers-that-be where it belongs."

He started to walk, winding his way around the trees.

She followed him. "But I *am* a witch."

Modin turned toward her, his eyebrows knitted together and his mouth slightly opened. She's touched, he thought, those cretins had found some poor addled child and convicted her of witchery.

She saw his expression and correctly took it for one of disbelief. "It's true. I am a witch like my mother was a witch and her mother before her."

"Nonsense," blurted Modin who had begun to wonder what he had gotten himself into. "Look, you can't follow me."

She followed him. "I perform rites to the moon, sun, and the equinoxes. I ensure the crops will bear bountiful harvests and help women with child birth."

"Bah!" he said, picking up the pace in the hopes of leaving her behind. "So what if you do? You could prostrate yourself before pigs and dance upon lily pads. You're no more a witch than I am."

With her long legs she kept up easily. "I summoned you here, didn't I?"

"Ptwe!" He spit. "Coincidence. Nothing more." Modin was beginning to get irritated. "Now stop following me." He changed direction.

She followed him. "When I was arrested, I prayed to the sun, wind, and earth for deliverance. They answered my prayers by sending you."

He spun toward her and grasped her arm. His face had reddened and he spoke through clenched teeth. "Blaspheme! Look you, you may believe every word you are saying, but I know it not to be true. Now stop following me or I'll... I'll..."

She towered over him. "Or you'll what?" she retorted, placing her clenched fists on her hips.

The dwarf looked at her blankly for a moment then said, "I'll take you over my knee."

"Eww!" she squealed, fluttering her long eye lashes, and clasping her hands before her. "That sounds like fun."

"Argh!" blurted Modin, reddening. Turning his back on her, he marched off in the opposite direction.

She followed him.

"Now see here," he growled, spinning around to face her, pointing with a mailed finger, his bushy eyebrows lowered down over his eyes in a scowl. "I saved you from the stake and my responsibility ends there. It's very dangerous where I'm going.

You can't follow me."

"I too, am going this way."

He gave her a look that would make a young dwarven warrior ruin his pants. "Why?"

"I'm going to Navarith by the Sea."

The hairs stood up on his neck. He was going to Navarith by the Sea. "And what will you do there?"

She shrugged. "I am going to kill the Docent."

The Prefect's mouth dropped open, and he paled considerably. He was going to Navarith by the Sea to kill the Docent.

"As God is my witness!" blurted the Prefect, "I wish I never would've rescued you." He threw his arms over his head, did an about face, and marched off into the underbrush, angrily smashing shrubs and vines underfoot and slashing what he couldn't smash with his halberd.

"There's a road a mile or so that way," she shouted after him, "it is not so well traveled. You will be safe."

* * *

Modin cursed as he stared down into the depths of his ale. He had just returned from reconnoitering the Basilica and had found the place to be impenetrable.

Sitting here in this tavern he found, its tables, benches, and sawdust floor, he pondered his options. There weren't many. Modin, his situation looking bleaker by the moment, sighed.

"Mind if I sit?" she said as she sat, not giving him time to respond.

"Eh," he made a noncommittal noise, not looking up. It was her. The girl he had rescued from the Church Soldiers.

"Don't we look long in the face," she said.

Modin took a long pull on his mug. "So, have we killed the Docent yet?" He hated the way she bounced about with all that wasted energy.

"No," she said as she pilfered a slice of potato from his platter, "but I have a plan."

"O," he said, feigning disinterest.

"Yes. The Docent has a taste for... Well... Let's just say he doesn't believe strongly in the Church's tradition of celibacy."

Modin met her gaze with a keen interest now. The Docent had a weakness.

She sucked the grease off her finger. "I have already made arrangements to tend him this marrow."

Modin's face turned red. "How can you say such a thing?"

"We'll it's not that I have to sleep with him; I am going to kill him."

He shushed her and quickly looked around the gloomy tavern. There were only two other patrons and if they had overheard, they showed no sign of it. "How did you arrange these... Er... arrangements. Is not this the work of..."

"Whores?"

He expelled his breath explosively, his face reddening.

She continued. "In my work..."

"As a witch," he interjected.

She put her hand on his and stared into his eyes. "As a witch," she repeated, "I do much for the people who the Church forsakes. Some of those people happen to be whores."

Modin relaxed. "I thought you were going to tell me that you were a... a..."

"Whore? And what if I were?"

He stayed quiet for a moment and watched her eat his potatoes. Against his better judgment he said, "I need yer help to get to the Docent."

She paused, a potato slice half way to her mouth. "Why?"

"Because I want to kill him." He was uncomfortable and found it hard to find a place to let his gaze rest. Finally, he looked down into his mug.

"O," she said. "Why?"

The question irritated Modin. "Because he stole the parchment from us. The parchment written in Urg's own blood."

"I thought Urg was human."

He glared at her. "He's a dwarf, by God."

"Then why was it written in human?"

The dwarf slammed his mailed fist down on the table. "Will you help me or not?"

She let him wait a bit before replying. Then she smiled. "Yes, I will help you."

* * *

Modin, High Prefect, Defender of the Faith, watched from the shadowy alley way. It was night time in the city and a low fog had set in. The white stone of the Basilica reflected what little light there was, giving the huge fortress-like building a ghostly appearance.

"So, what if I can't get up there in time?" he asked her.

"Well..." she said as she thought it over, "I suppose I'll just have to sleep with him."

"God," blurted the dwarf, "do you always have to say things like that?"

"Like what?" she replied, clasping her hands before her and fluttering her eye lashes.

"Alright," continued Modin after regaining his composure, "so once you are inside, you'll make up some excuse, come down here and let me in."

"You have my word."

Something fluttered in Modin's stomach and his palms began to sweat. "It is time."

"Wish me luck."

He watched as she pulled her shawl tightly about her. "By the way, what is your name?"

"I'm Nilly. And yours?"

"Modin."

"Well met, sir," she said as she walked toward the Basilica.

"God speed, Nilly."

From his place of concealment, he watched as she made her way up the thoroughfare to the Basilica's little side door as she was instructed. Framed against that huge, doomed building, she seemed so small. A pang of guilt surged through him. He should have talked her out of this instead of using her as a means of reaching the Docent.

There was no honor in this. He would have to make up some story to tell the folks back home. The conversation played out in his head:

"It must have been a heroic fight."

"Not really, he was in bed, naked, and I whacked him in the head with my hammer."

Nilly passed through the door. She was in, but Modin's heart sank as two Church Soldiers stepped out and took up positions on either side of the door.

"Klarn!" he spat. Doesn't anything go right anymore? The Prefect hefted up his belongings and made his way down the alley.

* * *

Letting her in, the monk gestured for Nilly to follow. She pointed to the Church Soldiers on their way outside to guard the door. "What are they for?"

"These are troubled times, milady," replied the monk, "the kingdom is at war, and there are certain elements who wish to do the Docent harm."

The monk walked quickly and Nilly found herself having to run at times to keep up. They passed through a kitchen where the cooks and scullery maids pointed at her and twittered amongst themselves. Nilly smiled at them and winked.

Exiting the kitchen, they wove their way through a maze of corridors and passageways. She desperately tried to keep track of all the turns and branches, but eventually gave up.

He stopped before a richly paneled wall. Taking a lighted candle, he opened a small door, so small that they had to stoop to pass through. Nilly found herself at the bottom of an old, unused stair. The dust and the cobwebs were thick.

Up they went. When they finally stopped, she was out of breath.

The monk opened a door and gently, but firmly, pushed her through. With a click, the door closed behind her.

Nilly put her hand to her mouth. She had never seen such opulence before. Frescoed ceilings with pictures of mythical beings, gold-leafed moldings, stained-glass windows, and a most wonderful chandelier whose crystals sparkled in the reflected candle light. She turned slowly around, not being able to fix her gaze on just one of all the splendid items in the room.

"You're punctual. I like that."

She spun around to face the owner of the voice, her dress billowing out as she did so. It was the Docent. He sat low in a chair, not fully upright, but somewhat slouched down.

"You're pretty. A double blessing."

Unsure of what to do, she curtsied. He had his armor on. The only part of him that wasn't covered by metal was his head. His appearance surprised her. The Docent did not have what would be called a mean face; expressionless, stoic, maybe, but not mean. A receding hairline gave him a larger than normal looking forehead. Not in an unattractive way, but in a way that made him look more knowledgeable. Overall, he just looked tired.

"Help me out of this, would you?" he asked as he pulled off a grieve and threw it to the floor where it landed with a rattle.

Nilly smiled, swayed her shoulders a bit and ran over to help. As she did so, the leather sheath of the dagger she had strapped to her thigh slapped gently against her soft skin.

* * *

"... Oh, I could think of worse jobs, Teg," said Fomage, "like a grave digger or a stone mason. At least here we don't have to work hard or carry heavy loads."

"I guess ya be rights, Fomage," replied Teg, "bein's a soldier o' t' Church ain't so bads, I justs gets tired o' t' waitin' all the times. Waits. Waits. Waits. Seems I spend my lifes waiting, 'n fer whats, just to dies at the ends 'ats all."

"Ere," hissed Fomage, "what's this?"

There was a figure coming at them out of the thickening fog. It was short, but it was wide, nearly as wide as it was tall, and it made a metallic clanking sound as it marched forward. It wore a cloak with the hood drawn up. The two guards could make out no other features.

"Halt you," shouted Fomage, "halt in the name of the Church."

In response the thing parted its cloak and raised something. A moment too late, Fomage realized it was a crossbow.

The creature jerked back. There was a hiss followed by a loud crunching, popping sound that startled Teg.

Teg glanced at Fomage; his mouth dropped open. His companion was pinned to the Basilica wall by a thick steel bolt that protruded from his chest.

"Who t' 'ell are ye?" screamed Teg at the creature, stumbling back.

Whoever it was dropped his crossbow to the ground, pulled a hammer and shield from beneath his cloak, and advanced.

Teg had enough. He clawed for the door but Fomage's body blocked the way.

"Damn!" he blurted, giving the door an ineffectual kick.

Teg pulled his sword from his sheath and readied his shield. "All rights, you. Come on."

Whoever it was, did, raising its shield over its head like some metal roof.

Teg rained blow after blow down upon that roof, to no effect. Forcing itself in close — the thing was strong — it slammed its hammer full into the side of the soldier's knee, bringing the man down.

"Please. Mercy," he pleaded, the pain in his leg excruciating. But the creature kept coming. It shoved its shield under the soldier's and pried it up. Then, with heavy swings of its hammer, like a smith at the forge, it pounded the Teg's helmeted head into mush.

* * *

(continued on next page)

THE PARCHMENT (continued)

Modin, Prefect of the Ironhammer Clan, Defender of the Faith, tossed back his hood and peered out into the foggy night. There were no alarms raised. The night was still and the fog was impenetrable.

The longer Modin had waited, the more the old dwarf had fidgeted and the louder he had grumbled. Minutes had ticked by and minutes had led to an hour, still there was no sign of Nilly. He had to act.

He kicked the soldier off the steps and yanked the other off his bolt. Not having time to cock it, Modin decided to leave his crossbow behind.

The door creaked when he opened it. An old woman, holding the hem of her apron to her mouth, stared at him in horror.

Modin slammed the door behind him. She screamed and ran out a doorway to another room. Modin followed.

It was the kitchen. He stood with a scowl on his face as screaming scullery maids and cooks scattered.

So much for surprise, he thought. Picking the largest door, he marched through it.

He found himself in a long, wide hall. The walls were richly paneled and decorated with a myriad of pictures, tapestries, and military artifacts.

Muffled shouts continued behind him. Down the hall, Modin saw a Church Soldier and a monk emerge from a doorway. The two, engaged in some conversation and oblivious to the threat he posed, walked away from him. He noted that the soldier was not completely outfitted for battle, lacking both helm and shield.

He started off after them at a trot, his armor rattling with each down-step on the hard marble floor. As he did so, a sharp pain shot through his knee and into his hip, but he didn't slow a bit. Damnable arthritis, he thought.

The soldier glanced over his shoulder, spun about, drew his sword, and shouted, "Run, Torrance! Run and sound the alarm."

Torrance, his mouth open, stared stupidly at the soldier, then stupidly at the rapidly advancing dwarf.

"Run," screamed the soldier.

Torrance didn't move.

Picking up the pace, Modin, his shield braced before him, ran headlong into the soldier. Combined, his mass — greater than that of the soldier — his low center of gravity, and his momentum, knocked the legs out from under the human and sent him tumbling over the dwarf to land heavily on his back.

The force of impact bringing the dwarf to a stop, he wheeled and rained blows upon the man's unprotected head with his hammer. It was short, brutal, and messy. Blood and carnage was splattered across the floor.

Hooking his hammer back onto his belt, Modin reached up, grabbed the monk, by his collar and dragged him down onto his back.

Mere inches away from his face, the old dwarf, his blood-splattered face full of clogs and wrinkles, rumbled, "Where do I find the Docent?"

"T-t-t-the Docent?" Torrance's eyes bulged.

"Are ye an idiot, boy?" roared Modin, his reddened face turning crimson, "point me to the damn Docent if ye value yer life." Spittle sprayed from his mouth.

"U-u-up the stair. Follow the hall." The monk's eyes began to roll back.

"Don't faint on me now, damn ye," bellowed the dwarf, "which way down the hall?"

But Torrance had fainted.

"Damn," cursed Modin. He let go of the monk's robe, and when the monk's head struck the marble floor, it sounded just like thumping a ripe melon.

Farther down the hall, he found the staircase. He climbed it as fast as he could and as he did so, more pains tore through his body. There were pains from hundreds of healed wounds, injuries, and there were pains from parts of his body who were just worn out.

He remembered when he wouldn't even notice such strenuous activity. Now he had trouble catching his breath, and he could feel his heart pound within his chest.

Three flights later, he made the top of the stairs. He grasped the marble post to steady himself while he panted. Sweat trickled down his face into his armor. Taking his rag from his war harness, he mopped his brow.

Somebody shouted from down the hall. More Church Soldiers. They were milling about a door that — no doubt, thought the dwarf — would lead to the Docent.

He counted six of them. Not good. He heard more shouting coming up from the stairs below. No retreat.

An emotion of elation washed over him and he smiled. This was it. These were the Docent's personal guard. They would be good. He didn't stand a chance.

As he rushed them, he bellowed the ancient war cry of the Ironhammers. He wouldn't give them an easy victory. No, he respected them too much for that. He raised his shield above his head as was his usual tactic when fighting folk as tall as these. Driving head on into their flank, bowling over one soldier as he did so, he fell back against the wall.

They swarmed about him like ants on a beetle. The blows of their weapons on his shield and armor made metallic, staccato sounds. Searching for chinks in his armor, they found none, armpits, elbows, knees, all were covered by sheets of impenetrable steel. Only his face was exposed, and the dwarf guarded that furiously.

One soldier withdrew, his forearm smashed and useless. Another screamed, fell, and crawled away with a smashed foot.

"Enough!" The tone of the voice held such an authority of command that everyone stopped, even Modin. It was the Docent.

The soldiers backed off. The Docent had his forearm wrapped around Nilly's neck and held a dagger to her throat. Blood stained his white bed shirt where he had been wounded.

"Drop your weapons, dwarf," he said. Then, when Modin didn't move the Docent's face twisted in rage, "drop them, or by God I'll slit her throat."

"No," screamed Nilly as she flailed him with her arms and legs, "don't you dare, Modin."

With vicious swings, the Docent pommelled the girl with his dagger until she went limp.

He smiled. "Ah, Modin, Prefect of the Ironhammers, Defender of the faith. It is a pleasure. Drop your weapons milord Prefect or I'll kill the girl. You know I will."

Modin sighed, and as he let his breath out, all of his strength and resolve went with it. He dropped his hammer and shield to the floor.

Church Soldiers moved in and grabbed the dwarf's arms.

"The last time we met, it was on the battle field wasn't it?" said the Docent, "I believe I won that time as well."

He passed Nilly to a soldier. "Have the witch burned in the morn." The Docent turned and began to walk back into his room.

"Should we kill the dwarf as well, milord?" asked one of the soldiers.

With his back still turned, he spoke quietly. "No, I think not. He is equal of my rank and position. Strip him, take him down to the dungeon, and beat him. Milord Prefect will live out the rest of his years in a filthy, rat-infested cell. It will be a fitting end."

Then, without looking, he entered his room and closed his door behind him.

* * *

Modin opened his eyes. The fever he had suffered through had broken, and the pain that his torturers had inflicted upon him had reduced itself to dull throb. It was manageable. At that moment, he knew he would survive.

He was laying on a cot. Someone, a monk, was holding up a spoonful of thin gruel to his still swollen and sensitive lips. The monk was young and he smiled as he noticed his patient was conscious.

"You have survived. God is indeed merciful."

Raising his hand to take the spoon — he was not some babe who needed to be spoon-fed — the dwarf winced as he discovered that his fingers had been splinted.

"God had nothing to do with it," grumbled Modin.

The monk moved to put the spoon into the dwarf's mouth, but Modin closed his mouth before he could get it in.

"Of course he did. Now open up."

"Would God allow me to be captured? Would God allow me to be tortured? Would God allow a misguided child to be burned alive?" Anger grew within the dwarf, and his tone became mocking, cruel.

The Monk was nonplused, even serene. "I don't know. I don't question God. All I know is that you have survived and that is proof that God is merciful."

"Idiot."

"Come along now. Open your mouth."

"Go away."

"Look, I am tasting it. It is good."

"Be gone," barked the dwarf, turning his head away.

"Very well, I'll place it here on the floor. When you want it, you can have it."

Opening the cell door, the monk stepped out. Modin could hear the key being inserted into the lock and turned.

They had shorn his beard and locks. Was nothing sacred? In a sea of depression he slowly, like a leaf falling from a tree to the ground, sank to the bottom.

* * *

The days turned into weeks, the weeks into months and the months into years. Modin's wounds healed and his beard grew back.

The monk who had tended to the dwarf's injuries, Brother Chuttin, was to the dwarf as the shore was to the sea. No matter how severely Modin raged against him, Brother Chuttin remained calm, and even though the sea can wear away the shore, it's not noticeable in a single lifetime.

Modin quickly began to look forward to the monk's daily visits. They argued every aspect of theology. Does God exist? Is there a hell? Is there a devil? Why does God allow acts of evil to occur? Does it all come down to a matter of faith? When the monk would leave, the dwarf would go over the arguments in his mind, thinking of things he should have said and things that he would have better left unsaid.

Eventually, and after Modin swore an oath to Brother Chuttin that he wouldn't attempt to escape, the dwarf was allowed to leave his cell and do simple chores around the prison. He would sweep the floors, change the straw in the cells, tend to the sick, and minister to the forlorn.

* * *

Every day, for the last two years, the Docent would walk down the great hall on his way to his rooms and every day he would stop to look at the suit of armor that stood empty, against the wall. He marveled at the craftsmanship. Its lack of seams, joints without gaps, and its light yet strong construction. A man wearing this — a man couldn't though, the armor was made for someone much too short — could move normally, even run, without restraint. Wearing it would be like wearing another skin.

His eyes drifted over to the crossbow. Made entirely of metal, strewn with pulleys and winches, his best craftsmen could not duplicate it.

He thought about the old dwarf, the owner of the armor, who now rotted away in the dungeon. The Docent sighed as he hefted up the hammer admired its symmetry, its balance. All that talent going to waste...

* * *

It could even be said that Modin was happy, if it was not for two things: He was homesick and he couldn't stomach the atrocities.

The prison was not for the common criminal. This prison existed to house the religious violator, heretics, atheists, and others whom the Church deemed a threat. Modin found the Church to be cruel to those who strayed away from its flock.

It was happening again. Modin laid in his cot with his eyes squinted shut and his hands cupped over his ears, but this was not enough to block out the screams. The thugs were going at young Vik, a zealot who thought his ideas were better than the Church's. They had been torturing him for several days now. The dwarf had treated him; he knew that he wouldn't last the night.

Finally, Modin could take no more. "Stop it," he screamed, jumping out of bed and pounding the door with his fists, "stop it you bastards." He raged against the door until he collapsed from exhaustion, laying on the floor with tears streaming from his eyes.

Modin heard the key turn in the lock. The door opened. It was the Docent, surrounded by Church Soldiers.

"Milord, Prefect," said the Docent, "is there something wrong?"

"There's no need to do that to him," he roared in reply. Leaping to his feet, he advanced toward the Docent.

Swords were drawn and leveled at him. "Now, milord Prefect, whatever is the problem?"

"It's senseless what you are doing," replied Modin, speaking with such intensity that he spit with each word, the sword points pressing against his chest.

"I stopped by to ask you to make me a sword." Vik's screams continued. "I've seen your work and admire it greatly."

"Make them stop." Modin was breathing hard. "Now."

The Docent waved his hand. Shortly, the screams ceased. "As you wish."

"And I don't want that ever to happen again."

The Docent stared at the dwarf for a long time. He toyed with the holy medallion he wore about his neck. "It will not."

* * *

He paused at the doorway. His palms grew moist and his stomach soured. It had been three years since he stood over a forge, and three years since he had seen the face of God in the flames.

As Prefect he denounced the edicts of kings, and stood on the battle fields as bulwark to his armies. He had feared nothing his entire life, but now, he feared this.

The dwarf wished he could order everyone out of the room, but of course, someone would be needed to pump the billows. He walked across the smithy — the smells of the place bringing back life long memories — and picked up the hammer. It was heavier than he remembered. A good deal heavier.

Briefly, he struggled with an overwhelming urge to bolt...

He swung the hammer about in a vicious arc and smashed his guard's skull. He fainted and parried with the other guard, eventually breaking the human's sword. Without opposition he smote the man, crushing the arms that he put up over his head to protect himself and finally breaking his skull. Running out into the courtyard of the Basilica, Modin, Prefect of the Ironhammer Clan, Defender of the faith, lay about him with his hammer. Smiting monks, guards, and others until, his strength running out, bleeding from a score of wounds, he collapsed in a blaze of glory...

The hammer struck the steel, and with a loud ring and a burst of fiery red sparks, the dwarf's daydream vanished. Again and again the hammer fell, clanging out a mesmerizing rhythm.

It was awkward at first, but soon a lifetime of skill and experience awakened within him and anvil, steel, hammer, forge, and he became one. The sword slowly began to take shape. Each strike of the hammer shaping the lump of steel in gradual steps. And as it did so, Modin began to pray.

"I need more heat, please," he said quietly to the young human apprentices who were manning the billows.

The two, already pumping at a rapid pace, looked at each other, shrugged, then redoubled their efforts.

He prayed for his clan, he prayed for Brother Chuttin, and he prayed for Nilly. Those were easy. He prayed for the Docent. That was much more difficult, but exercising some effort, he could do it. But it took a tremendous effort of will to pray for the most difficult of all, an internal battle that he nearly lost. He prayed for himself.

* * *

"What did you say?" said the Docent, looking up from the sword that the dwarf had made him some months before.

"... I was merely speaking of the King's edict on the Morturo lands, milord Docent," replied Brother Leppe.

"No, I meant the part about the peasants. Read that back."

Leppe became nervous, the Docent had been acting strangely of late. He would sit with the sword for hours and stare down at it, running his hands over it, testing its edge for sharpness with his thumb.

Brother Leppe didn't like it one bit. A person begins to appreciate the mundane after a while and surprises became unwelcome.

"... For his service onto the King, all Morturo lands will be deeded onto Lord Aspil, Duke of Helensforth. Buildings, livestock, and harvests, are to be made his property alone. All those peasants, supporters of our vanquished enemies, current occupants of Morturo lands, are to be driven off..."

Brother Leppe, took the pen from the inkwell, dabbed it on the blotter, and put it into his Docent's hand. "It is ready for your signature, milord."

The Docent was staring at down at his sword again. He lost himself in the etched patterns, the roses, the ivy leaves, and the feathers. He saw himself reflected in its mirror finish with the swords etchings imposing a kind of gilded cage on his image. It was not a cage to imprison him; it was a cage to keep harmful things out. While he was in that cage, he did not need his trappings of power to keep the world at bay. He was safe there and he could rest.

"I think not." The Docent Smiled at Brother Leppe — the Docent never smiled at Brother Leppe.

"But milord," said Leppe, "the King. The war..."

"It is our calling, dear Brother, to be the moral compass of our people."

The Docent stood and paused. He looked as though he was in deep thought.

"Yes. I like that. Write that down. To milord, the King. It is my calling to be the moral compass of our people. In this capacity, milord, I must point out to you that removing the peasants from the Morturo lands, peasants who are our brothers in faith, is a moral wrong..."

Brother Leppe, writing furiously, took a rag from his frock and wiped the sweat from his forehead.

"... If you proceed in this matter, I fear for your very soul. Yes. That's it. Fill in the gaps as usual, seal it, and send it to his Majesty."

"B-b-but, milord."

"And Leppe," said the Docent, cutting the man off as he was leaving the room, the sword casually carried over his shoulder like some walking stick.

"Milord?"

"Ready the Church Soldiers."

"Yes, milord."

* * *

Modin was busy sweeping the halls of the prison, as was his duty. It had almost been a year since he had given his handiwork to the Docent, and doing so had been like giving up a part of himself. He remembered the feeling of euphoria he felt as he saw his work form before him. For the brief span of time that he worked on it, he could do no wrong. He had known perfection.

Ever since the Docent had banned the torturing of prisoners, the place had become something of a theological battle ground. There had been more than one instance when the dwarf had to physically separate a pair of overheated debaters.

He found out things about heretics that he didn't know before. If you tell a heretic that something is white, he'll go out of his way to show you just how black it is. If you tell a heretic to eat, he'll tell you he's not hungry. If you mention how hot it is, he'll wrap a blanket around himself. Heretics went out of their way to be difficult.

He didn't like heretics.

"Modin, my friend," shouted Brother Chuttin as he came running down the hall, his monk's habit flapping behind him, exposing his bare legs.

"Yes? What is it?" replied Modin, looking up from his work, at first concerned then mystified by the monk's ecstatic expression.

"The Docent requests an audience with you." Brother Chuttin was breathless and he found it necessary to pause between words.

Modin began to sweep again. "I suppose he wants a suit of armor now?"

"No," said Brother Chuttin, unable to suppress his joy, "you are free." He wrapped both arms around the dwarf — having to bend down to do so — and gave him a vigorous hug. "You are free!"

* * *

The monk who ushered Modin into the austere room quietly closed the door behind him. Across from him, stood the Docent, the sword the dwarf had made was in the man's hand.

It was an awkward moment. The two had a hard time meeting each others gaze.

The Docent went first. "I have your equipment here. Your arms and armor that is..." He trailed off.

"Thank you," replied the Modin, looking at his things placed upon the table, ordered in neat rows.

"I have assigned you an escort, that will lead you to the border."

The dwarf nodded.

There was an uncomfortable silence.

The Docent stroked his sword with his hand. "And I have decided to give you the Parchment."

Modin raised his bushy eyebrows.

Reaching under the table, the Docent brought forth a little chest. Opening it ever so carefully, the two peered in at the yellowed roll of paper, the edges of which were brown and crumbly. It was hard to believe that so many had died for it.

Modin couldn't think of anything to say.

The Docent turned and started to leave.

"Thank you, milord Docent."

Stopping, but not turning, the Docent replied, "No, thank you, milord Prefect." He then continued out of the room.

* * *



The King looked out across the lush, green farm fields at the Docent's army. He saw a few red tunics out there, trained Church Soldiers, they would be trouble, but for the most part, they were simple peasants.

"Peasants!" He spit the word out like it was an insult. "Who in the hell would let peasants into their army?"

"Obviously, milord Docent, your Excellency," replied Lord Kerrum with a smile.

The King glared at Lord Kerrum. "I didn't mean you to answer that."

"Yes, your Excellency," said Kerrum, still smiling.

A call came up the flank. "Messenger! Messenger!"

Sure enough, a man on horseback was riding full tilt down the ranks.

"Finally," said the King as the messenger slowed his horse to a trot, then stopping before the king. Not waiting for Kerrum to retrieve the message from the horseman, the King scrambled up and got it himself, nearly yanking the scroll tube out of the soldier's hand.

In agitation he unraveled the scroll and tried to read it. As always, when he read, he had to hold it at arm's length to bring the text into focus, and even then, it was tedious. The King gasped in exasperation. "Kerrum, read this to me."

He passed the scroll to Lord Kerrum.

Kerrum carefully unrolled the scroll and read it aloud.

"To his Majesty the King. I am glad you have taken the time to write. It is a pleasure to hear from you after all these years. I understand your concern, but if I may allay your fears, I shall tell you that the thirty-four-thousand dwarven warriors massed on your border are there for training and nothing else..."

"Damn them," swore the King, striking out so angrily at the air with his fist that it almost spun him around. "What does he think I am? An idiot?"

"There is more, your Majesty." Lord Kerrum continued reading.

"Send my regards to my friend, milord Docent, your Majesty. Inform him that we have built a shrine on the border to house the Parchment. If he would be so kind as to send a few of his monks to share the chore of tending it with a couple of our monks, I would be most grateful. It is our decision that the artifact will be shared by our peoples."

"It is signed: With my deepest regards, Modin, Prefect of the Ironhammers, Defender of the Faith." Kerrum rolled the scroll up.

"What to do!" shouted the King. Spinning about, he flopped down onto his field throne.

Lord Kerrum moved behind the King and began to rub the man's shoulders.

The King put his hand on Lord Kerrum's. "Kerrum, we've been together for a long time."

"Since the beginning, my Excellency."

"I value your opinion, my friend."

Kerrum was quiet for a long time. "Give into the Docent."

The King sighed. "I can't. I'm the King. I can't let the Docent order me around like some lackey."

"Be firm," replied Kerrum, "you'll get some concessions. It is better than wallowing the Kingdom in civil war and allowing the dwarves to march in unimpeded."

"I suppose," replied the King, his shoulders drooping. "Send for the scribe." •

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Horror



INTO THE DARKNESS

by Drew Shelton

I run, not looking back, not watching as the light fades. Some hidden facet of my being perhaps assumes that if I don't look, the Darkness will recede, go away, stop following me. The cloud of perpetual dark that surrounds me for most waking hours is following, ever reluctant to let me go.

Houses that seem lit in the distance turn dark after I pass; any light they shed ahead of me disappears only moments after my ground-thumping feet pass by. I run, run as I do most days, escaping, getting away. But today is different. Today, nothing I do can make my world stay lit. Darkness surrounds me, and I cannot make it recede without increasing my efforts tenfold.

I am very slowly advancing toward my home; too slowly, as I slow down, the Darkness gains speed, a renewed lust for the chase. I have looked at the streets for the past several minutes, scanning the horizon for a car, a person, anything. There are none. If I could find a person, the Darkness would leave as my companion's soul, filled of light, overwhelms my own. Most convenient for my adversary that I am damned to live a solitary life, a solitary job. There is no choice for me; I would do anything to make the darkness recede.

As I run, I see two yellow lights in the distance, like coins glinting in the night. I shriek, and run faster. The Darkness slows as I outrun it, coming closer to the shining lights, the headlights of a car. The light! The Darkness must be losing ground.

The car is not moving; it is parked, with someone slouched within: a woman. Unfortunately, she's also a stranger. I near the vehicle, reach through the window, and tap the woman gently on the shoulder. I receive no response. She is definitely alive, but in such a stupor that she'll be asleep for hours.

And I cannot survive the Darkness for hours, waiting for her to awaken. Considering all possibilities, I yank open the door and drag her away. She murmurs in her slumber, and I pitch her into the center of the road. As her head bounces on pavement she groans, and begins to sit up.

There is no time for explanations; she will only hold the Darkness until it can find a way around where she cannot see it. The car waits, the radio humming slightly, keys dangling loosely in the ignition.

The madness and terror of Darkness can force me to do things I might never consider. It is a moment's thought and I am in the car, sitting in the newly emptied driver's position, turning the key in the ignition. The humming radio cuts off abruptly and speaks. "What are you doing?"

Wonderful; one of the new "family" devices. These fancy keys tell the car my thumbprint, and I'm definitely not on the acceptance list for this one. "Who are you? Are you aware you are not allowed to use this vehicle?"

The advantage, for myself, of new micro-technology is its frailty in the face of physical work. A momentary impact with my heel shorts the equipment; it burbles quietly and then ceases. Another turn of the key gets the motor running; a good thing no one else tries to steal cars nowadays, or security would be much more powerful.

With skillful work, I turn the car around, dodging the figure in the road. The houses down the street are alight again, now that she can see them. I have a good lead on the Darkness now, as I speed up, heading home. There's maybe three miles to go, and I can go as fast as I like; the streets are conveniently deserted.

I watch as the needle on the speedometer creeps upward, hitting the seventy mark with the straight road. I know I'm outrunning the Darkness now; the faster I go, the slower it does, and the woman will repel it for some time.

Three miles. When I'm within Darkness, my senses are dull, my thoughts slow, my world horrifying. It's only by chance that I escape each time, and I work harder as it happens to prevent myself from entering it again.

Two miles. I once escaped the Darkness for an entire month, by taking an airplane flight, moving fast and far. It was by far the most glorious time of my life, and, as all good things, turned sour. It took time, but one day I awoke in Darkness, the living dark I had lived with for such a long time, never to leave me again.

One mile left. Sometimes I wonder why I had to get this evil placed upon me. I did nothing to deserve it. I don't tell anyone about it, and I don't know what it is. But I know what I have to do..

As I'm nearing my home, I slow down, skidding to a stop directly before my house. Who knows where the Darkness has gone? I can hope to enjoy the time before it returns. A short time, before the terror strikes.

* * *

The moment I reach my house, I slam my palm into the scanner by my door, waiting for it to recognize me. The door swings open, creaking, and I rush in. The door closes, though it can't block the Darkness. Almost nothing can.

I run down the hall, reaching the kitchen quickly. The lights turn on as I enter, and I stand by the sink, my thoughts suddenly numbing. Almost instantly a wave of terror washes over me, unspeakable fear. I seal the sink's drain and turn on the water while I can think to do so. I whirl around, thinking I see images on the edge of my vision, seeing the visions of my fear.

It's the Darkness. Its first fringe effect was always the unspeakable terror, the panic that hit me. It's getting stronger, more powerful and faster than before. There's only one way that I can stop the Darkness here, alone. I turn on the stove with my remaining thought, and press my hand against the burner.

I feel no pain as the skin curls and buckles with the heat, and blood leaks from the wound. A glance at the sink shows that it's about full, so I shut down the water while the injury gives me coherent thought for a minute. Taking a breath of Darkness in the air, I plunge my head beneath the water.

My mind clears instantly, and I feel better at once. The water; it's my only true method to fight off the Darkness. Even if only a minute of thought is given, a plunge in water is ideal. I draw up my head, ready to get to my bed and try to sleep before the cure is reversed.

* * *

This is definitely new. The Darkness never had any power over me before, beyond my mind and the lights around me. Now I cannot lift my head from the water. I lash out, splashing water around the room, a vain attempt to purge my area of the evil.

I can't, I just can't. The Darkness... I can't.... A few last spasms of my hand go before the Darkness begins to push the water down. The water takes its only outlet, myself. The clear fluid pours into my nose, then my mouth as I open it to scream.

It isn't long before the water floods my lungs, and I take a last gulp before my eyes glaze over. I feel myself lifting from my body, rising, above the floor and the boundaries of mortal life. I look down and see, spelled out in my own blood by my own hand, the name of my oppressor: DARKNESS.

Suddenly, I feel a sharp yank. Instead of rising further, I fall, screaming silently, through the floor. I grab at the counter, and my hands go right through. A moment later I slip down into the rapidly darkening earth. Then Darkness, Darkness forever. •

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Poetry

UNTITLED

by Paul Semel

sitting in the same room I was in
when fourth graders looked like old people
I sometimes wonder
if I'll ever get out

there's something kind of sad
26 and living at home
like life doesn't begin
'til you're out of the house

everything up 'til then
is just role playing
with mom and dad to catch you
when you fall down

26 used to seem so old
people were married by then
running after kids
a dog beneath their heels

replacing the bed didn't matter
moving things around
only strained my back
and no matter how many times

I convinced myself otherwise
I still think I won't be happy
just pushing my bed around •

Poem copyright © 1995 Paul Semel

BROOKLYN: MAY 1989

by L. Norton

It was a rough landing. The body shuddered, the skin almost shook loose, and we are only beginning to detect the nearly invisible strains — one at the joint riveting heart to mind, another where the body joins the soul. Bone weary, we raised the door, and could not stop smiling — we saw terraces of green where the mist had lifted, saw creepers belting red rock, a river thundering. We'd been sent as far as it was possible to go. We thought we'd be hurled out, along the way — spin contextless, compelled to shut our eyes forever, for fear of what we'd see. Here, trees jostle like huge stands of broccoli. We will have to learn all over again. We don't know the signs of this green new world, and all of it now could be important — the sky could be gray as the underside of an airplane, or even as the pale wool knotting our sweaters. Looking back, we'll need to weed out most of what we see now, describe it to fit. And there will have to be a reckoning, for the mist we see is from the crater we burned into the ground, and already, we have changed things — black pebbles — hidden for eons — are tumbling down the hole. We must begin describing because we will have to explain — why we left, and how the burned and smoking hole came to be there. It might begin thus: in this holy place, we crawled like ghosts, from the ground, where our ancestors had gone in a time of great sadness. But our longing became so sharp it burned a hole in the earth, and one day we saw the green hills, the great braids of water hurtling over rock. The sun's rays fell like bright shards of metal, our faces shone like pale moons, and yearning and delight so filled us we could not speak, without using "like," or "as." •

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Romeo Esparrago (cover illustration; "The Parchment" illustration) is about the same height as Tom Cruise. Romeo has a Web page path, and if Tom had one, Romeo's would be longer than Tom's:
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This is a hidden, self-referential statement signifying The End.