

# ORION'S TALES

Issue one

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The **Orion Tales** is an eZine dedicated to the **ORION'S ARM** World building Project. It is offered free of charge to all interested parties and is not to be sold in any form. It may be printed if distributed free of charge.

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# Editorial

Welcome to the First issue of **Orion' Tales**, The Magazine of The Orion's Arm World building Project.

Orion's Arm is a complete genre in the making, an interactive hard science space opera, a joint effort in science fiction world building, a forum for cutting edge science fiction ideas, a way of exploring a possible future that is at once alien and yet familiar, and terrifyingly possible. Here you have the opportunity to explore a vast universe - to contribute your own ideas and input, to create an entire new way of seeing things.

Because this project is still under construction, and has already gone through several revisions, and because of the vastness, fluidity, and ability of the Orion's Arm scenario to incorporate and assimilate new ideas, there is plenty of opportunity to insert even the most radical and diverse themes and ideas, as long as they fit in with the basic premise of this setting.

In this Magazine We will bring together the Stories and other Written work, Made By various authors and World builders who have joined this Project, to make is a grand project on a gigantic scale.

If you want to find out more about Orion's Arm visit the Web site

[http://www.kheper.auz.com/orions\\_arm/](http://www.kheper.auz.com/orions_arm/)

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Graphic by Anders Sandberg

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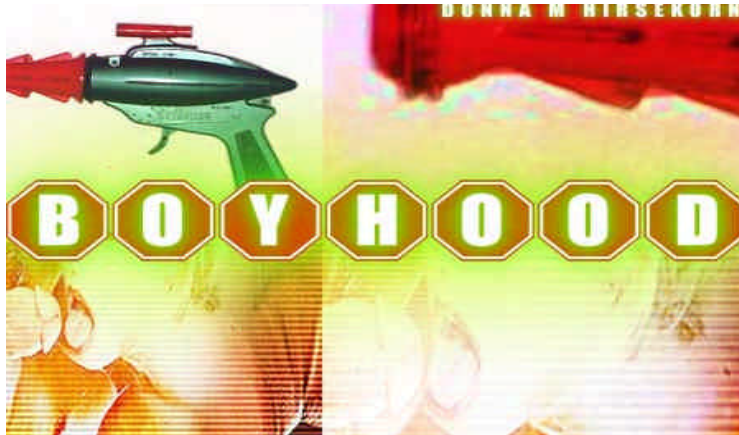
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Graphic By Bernd

### **BoyHood** **By Donna M hirsekorn**

Tybo was a little young to be looking for older women. He was only twenty. He was looking for someone to give him what he had never had. A tender touch, a warm and embracing smile. A safe place between two breasts. While most young guys were socializing with girls their own age or younger Tybo was looking for older women. He wanted to lure them to his home not for sex but for attention.

The older the better because then he would be the focus of attention at least for a short while. He would position himself in front of a mirror and rehearse his lines. Tybo contacted them through telepathic transmissions. He was too charming for these women to pass up. The women were able to receive his messages through a chip that was implanted in them when they entered the biosphere. They had injections to prefer the spread of diseases. All those who entered the biosphere were disinfected as well as injected with various drugs and other enhancements.

He would tell them quietly about the virtues of having an older woman as compared to a young girl. The women were lonely and enjoyed the transmissions. They too, liked being the center of attention for a little while.

The women were not fooled however, they knew they were being used. They were using Tybo as well. It was a mutually satisfying arrangement. At least for a short time while connected with him mentally or in his bed. Tybo was elusive.

They knew they could not hold on to him. Even beautiful women could not hold his interests long. No matter how handsome he was and how tender and sweet he seemed he was really wanting a salve for his loneliness. A balm for his wounds that went deep into his heart. Tybo had a dark side to his personality a side that the technocrats were not aware of. He was smarter than they were he was their creation and could out think them all.

Tybo was produced in a petri-dish. He was like a specimen in a jar. He was hovered over, and watched by the technocrats. He was never touched or caressed. He was taught and molded into a being that would work for the quest of knowledge on many subjects that could benefit the people of his biosphere. He was being trained to be an independent thinker. To think on a level beyond the understanding of most of the inhabitants of his world.

His world consisted of a large biosphere in the center of an asteroid named Trinity. A biosphere complete with terraforms and even some simple animal life forms. Algae and amoebas, protozoa, dividing and reforming into new life. Rodents and monkeys in cages for experimentation were the pets that Tybo knew.

The population consisted of people who were support staff for the laboratory as well as workers who helped to make the biosphere function in an orderly fashion. Farmers, merchants, custodians of cleanliness that took care of the needs of the technocrats.

Passengers would stop and stay for a while tired from traveling to distant planets. It was a resting-place for the weary. A hotel furnished the needs of the travelers. The biosphere had a population of families of the technocrats and other support staff. It was very much like a small city.

The biosphere covered most of the asteroid. It was built to house a laboratory where great minds of science could meet. A middle point between several planets. A stop sign in the middle of a vast universe. The biosphere was self contained and the inhabitants could function in a gravity atmosphere. This was achieved by an atomic blast. Atomic charges were placed strategically at the smaller ends of the axis of the asteroid. These bombs were a half megaton each. The fusion bombs were detonated which made the asteroid rotate. This rotation produced the gravity.

Tybo was an experiment in knowledge. A forerunner of things to come that could combine the mixture of organic learning with enhancements from the software programs that were prevalent in this laboratory. A perfection of all life at the time of his birth. A life consisting of natural, supernatural and fabricated components.

He could think faster, better than anyone could before his birth. He was brought into the world to emulate the seraphim Rupert. He was a rogue seraphim that escaped from his AI and ruled the biosphere. The technocrats thought if Rupert could be emulated then perhaps he could be overthrown.

The technocrats devised a method of communicating that was untraceable. It was a way of thinking two thoughts at once. Then transmitting telepathically to the receiver and only to the receiver. It took years to perfect. When they needed to transmit something of importance they thought in the Theta state of mind.

The frequency of the radio waves was so low that Rupert could not pick up the communications. They formed a plan for Rupert to think that Tybo was a tribute to his greatness and his power. In reality they were programming Tybo to take over the universe and elevate them to power.

Tybo was controllable or so the technocrats thought. They trained him everyday. Gave him only limited time for himself. What he did with that time was his own business and that is when he mentally talked with older women. What they didn't know was that Tybo was implanting a vial of poison in each woman that he bedded.

His sexual prowess was very good. The woman left very happy and well conditioned. But what happened to her body within the next twenty-four hours was remarkable. Women that gave Tybo the attention that he craved were rewarded by shriveling up inside of herself. Her insides becoming smaller until they just closed up all together. Organs reducing in size to almonds. Then the women just quietly died.

The way that Tybo injected this poison inside of the women was to place a tiny vial in his penis and when he climaxed the vial was propelled at a fast rate of speed into the woman. She thought that her talents were what brought on such a great show of orgasm from Tybo. The thought of what the poison was going to do to her body was what brought him to climax and not the act itself.

He thought he was very clever in this approach. The idea turned him on as much as the placing of the vial within his penis. The vial was designed to explode upon impact and by that time Tybo had his penis withdrawn from the woman. His emotions were never present he could turn feelings off at will. His psyche was not part of the act of love or the raw sexuality of lust. The woman was his tool for his gratification but not in the usual sense.

He wanted to symbolically think of her as going backward into the state of beginning. An ending by being what she was at birth small and underdeveloped. He was so good at implanting the vial within himself that the technocrats could not detect a difference of his cleaning up after he eliminated at the urinal. He just looked like a normal guy doing what comes naturally.

Rupert was all present he was everywhere at once. He did not like the idea of this petri-dish boy playing god. Taking a life that he did not create. Taking it by the act of procreation. An act that did not produce Tybo. The seraphim was like a fluttering shadow darting here and there at will. The shadow created by the shimmer of light that was Rupert. He controlled the biosphere. He knew what Tybo was doing. He saw the vial being implanted.

The technocrats hated Rupert. They were elitists who thought of themselves as all knowing in their precious knowledge of life and the universe around them. They wanted to control the guidance of the biosphere as well as the population within. There were experiments that they wanted to perform that Rupert would not allow. It was amazing that they were even allowed to produce Tybo. But because Rupert wanted adoration and Tybo was presented as a tribute to his power Rupert allowed it.

Something was missed wired within the boy's mind. The thought patterns were diabolical and had to be dealt with. He could not continue to destroy the female

population of the biosphere even if the dead women were the hotel visitors. They were strangers for the most part and usually not given much status. It was not a customer service biosphere. The boy had to be dealt with. Rupert was aware of the way the murders were committed.

The technocrats had not been able to put together the mysteries that surrounded the women's deaths. The shrinking of the organs was a new one on them. Nothing like it had ever happened in their medical training and experience. Could it be a virus, or bacteria, a new type of plague? It was baffling. Of course, they knew that Tybo would be the cause of death to these women. It frightened them and they went into denial like any parents of a dysfunctional child.

In the meantime, Rupert formed an artificial, and perfect in every way, mature woman. He named her Kyra. He placed a chip into her in order to receive thoughts from Tybo. Soon, Tybo arranges a meeting with her. After flirting for a while and a little foreplay Tybo takes Kyra to his bed.

The android's whole being for existence is to kill Tybo when he enters her for the first time. It doesn't take long for this to happen. As Tybo enters Kyra she blazes up. The android and the petri-dish boy end life in a glorious electrocutional hedonism and a red hot glow of passionate destruction.

It would take another twenty years to produce another being like Tybo. The technocrats were under the thumb of Rupert even more than before Tybo was produced. No experiments were allowed. Rupert grew bored one day and allowed them to produce another being. He needed some entertainment.



Graphic by Anders Sandberg



Graphic by Anders Sandberg



Graphic By Bernd

## **Falling Stars**

**Anders sandberg**

As I met ambassador Keilen she was wearing a formal spacesuit, covering with glittering black diamonds and the dull Negentropy pentagon. On her waist she had a metal grey sash embroidered with the line codes of her offices. I could not help shivering when I noticed the 7-7 knot - the symbol for ordered suicide.

'Greetings, your Excellency. May your trip here have been reversible and swift.' She greeted formally, but with her usual half hidden smile.

'Likewise, your Excellency. I hope our confluence will hasten the eternal state.'

'No need to be that formal, Ologa-Zan. Besides, isn't referring to the eternal state here of all places a bit of bad form?' I blushed and she laughed and hugged me. 'It is good to see you again, even if this has to be brief. I have a pressing engagement.'

'I came as soon as I heard about the directive.'

'Yes. The arch-conservatives back home finally decided to send me the silken thread. I can't say that it was unexpected. I took a chance with the Pyxis settlement, but you cannot win them all...'

I followed her as she strode along the gallery towards the farewell chamber. I desperately wanted to tell her how much I admired her, how wrong this was, that I would gladly do anything to change her mind or save her. But a look at her sparkling eyes told me that she already knew it. She gently shook her head and smiled at me.

'No, I cannot back down. They have my family, and they will suffer if I don't act properly. Trust me, I know what I am doing.'

'I never doubted that, but there must be possibilities?' 'Actually, I think they suspect my loyalty and purity more than any purely legal shortcomings. And that is much more serious for my gene-line than if I had eloped with a few kilograms of amat or accidentally spilt trake on the God-Emperor. I better show them just how loyal I am.' Again that smile.

'But Keilen... what about the Velaria cease-fire?' Damn! It sounded so self-serving, so coolly pragmatic. But at the same time I had to ask on behalf of my government, my people. The cease-fire in all its bizarre splendour hinged on one thing: it would only last as long as Keilen lived. She had impressed the I4 and their tweak enemies to the extent they actually based the whole deal on her. And we were dependent on the cease-fire lasting at least a few years more, if we were to survive.

'Actually, that is why I am here. To save it.'

Keilen stepped into the farewell chamber and looked around. The floor and one of the walls were solid diamond, giving an unobstructed view of Threshold. Ahead the sprawling meshwork of hospices, temples, cathedrals, prayer polyhedra and hotel facilities spread towards the infinite horizon line, surrounded by the steady cold light of the stars on all sides. Straight ahead a causeway with ornate railings stretched straight out, ending in nothing 30 meters away. Beneath... it was hard to see, but the faint Einstein rings gave it away. Straight down the black hole yawned.

Keilen walked on the transparent floor with no hesitation, while my brainstem sternly told me not to. Instincts older than thought told me that walking on a near invisible floor above a literally bottomless hole was not survival enhancing. Again I envied Keilen her iron nerves and rationality. Or did I? The same practical logic that had saved us so many times now made her prepare for a very long fall indeed.

'I don't get it. Please explain to a mere Mensan. If you are going to jump into oblivion I better want to know why, except for a misplaced sense of duty. If you had just wanted to end your life you could probably have done it instantly, couldn't you?'



'You are getting warmer.' She smiled at me and fastened the helmet onto the spacesuit. Then she hugged me again and gave me a storage device. 'Give this mindstate to my family. They will understand. And... I'm happy you are here with me. Just don't worry.'

As I stood there dumbfounded she elegantly walked into the airlock which shut with a discreet susurrantion. She waved and stepped outside. I could do nothing but watch as she walked along the causeway outside. A small part of me wondered why they had bothered to put up handrails on both sides. After all, somebody walking along it probably had no desire to avoid falling off. Although to some, I guessed, dying in a less than perfect way would be worse than anything. I began to understand.

'Keilen, aren't the Velarian Confed strict physiclassicists?' I asked over the radio in the room.

She turned around at the edge, now smiling openly at me. 'I knew you would work it out. Can you see how the pieces interlock? It is so simple.'

She jumped, leaving an empty causeway. Beneath me I saw a moving star among the others, falling towards the unseen distortion in the centre.

'The conservatives will be happy, since I will be quite dead. One loose cannon less. I have proven my loyalty to my planet, and no shadow can fall on my family. The Velarians on the other hand... to them I will never die. I will just approach the horizon forever, becoming eternal. The cease-fire will remain forever.'

It was indeed simple and beautiful. A solution perfectly expressing the Precepts of Negentropy - and hence the most devious and inescapable revenge on the arch-conservatives back at Cirici that anybody could come up with.

'It is... wonderful.'

'Yes. Now you know why I was so glad you could come, after all the Velarians would want a witness.'

'I will do that. But Keilen, what about yourself?'

'Myself?' the radio voice asked.

'You have worked for as long as I know you for others. You have saved billions with your negotiations. You saved my skin at the Antares conference. You just saved your family, your honour and the cease-fire. But what's in it for you?'

The room was silent. I tried to discern the falling star against the background below, but could not make put anything in the diffused light around the hole.

After an interminable silence the radio spoke again: 'It has been fun watching.'

'What?'

The best way of getting a front seat at some historical event is to arrange it yourself. This way I got all the opportunities, all the fun. You think I have been as unselfish and self-eradicating as the NoCoZo makes us out to be, but you're wrong - I did it all for my own pleasure. I'm the most curious and selfish woman in the world. And now... let's see what happens!'

The signal broke up. A moment later the unseen point beneath me flared up in a blaze of gamma.



Graphic by Bernd

## **Kraken**

**by Ernst Stavro Blofeld**

I've heard so many myths about the Kraken. The Federation denies her existence, for they could never prove it, only publicly scoff at the accounts of travelers who encountered her. The data was recorded, however. And action was taken. For the only reason she has not been discovered is that she does not want to.

She's a nomad, an outcast, spurned by her species for being too evil.

They say she's the size of a Terragen Orbital, and that she can suck the NRG from a Supernova if the mood takes her.

They say her arms are 15 km each. All 8 cybernetically enhanced, tapering off into beam cannons that can cut thru the heavens like sabers.

They say she cut down an entire fleet of Fed scouts as if she were swatting flies.

And they say she just kept moving on, at speeds we have yet to imagine.

Federation files named her the Kraken, her followers call her Khali.

I call her calamari, but she doesn't know that.

I keep my thoughts from her with the most outlandish of precautions.

Because they also say she's telepathic, that she can induce the most hellish hallucinations in any or all species from distant systems. She can crack the strongest minds, be they blood or binary and coerce them into doing her bidding under duress of pure terror.

The 'droids say she can access hypernets just by the power of her mind. While, like all such tall tales of galactic adventurers, this may seem grossly unscientific. Yet there is truth in some of this, and the Federation intends to separate fact from fiction with as little bloodshed as possible. Or at least bipedal blood.

This is the reason I've never met her. Only Prox met her. Prox meets everyone. Prox lives my solid life without ever knowing my true intentions. Prox believes his is me. And he is, he has everything I do- bar my emotions, and my ambition.

Because I know for a fact that she is indeed telepathic, and I'd hate for her and her interstellar legions of Ictys knowing what I'm up to. That would be folly of the highest order. She contacts them, from sphere to sphere, in dreams and visions. This was how she contacted me. Or who she thought was me.

No, no squiddy, I can't have you knowing my plans. I won't let you extend your tentacles too deep into space. And you're getting close now, I know it. And I know what you're after. I'll get it for you, for the price you promised. But then I'll have to destroy you.

Destruction not in the physical sense. That noodle of your is far too precious to the Federation. Or to any others that trade in hi-Q gray matter. Oh and yours is sweet, I've seen it, with Prox's spectral analyzer mods. You knew he had them. And as he watched you perceived his responses as lust.

And oh it is, I've dreamed of it, gazed in awe at mag-field readouts, salivated at AI simulations. It's the most beautiful thing in the world, or at least it is to a headhunter.

All I need is to stun you, and disarm you. Lock you in a field that'll render that brain impotent. And sell it off, piece by piece, to those far richer than I.

But first I'll keep my promise. And I'll allow you to spawn.

A hoard of brainiak sushi-warriors you intend to plague the planets with. Who in turn will give birth to nannite-nets, launching swarms of goo-resistant scaly-ones toward the center of the galaxy. The birthplace of my civilization.

Yes I shall allow you to spawn, I've even given you your new aqua-pad. Hidden out here in the middle of nowhere, orbiting a fading star, on the icy shores of the universe.

Of course there should be more like you. It would not be sporting otherwise. But then that's the difference between you and me- I was born with backbone.

I know you have existed for millennia, indeed millions of years, out here, far, far on the edges of our universe, wandering the wormholes, alone, and angry.

I know of those that gave birth to you. A civilization that you destroyed long before we had ever come into being. Long before your brethren feasted upon trilobites and scaly morsels. Long before our planet had cooled from its Hadean infancy.

I know you are strong. Stronger than I.

But I know your weakness too.

I know of the hatred your fellow nautiloids have for you, and the contempt and superiority you have for them.

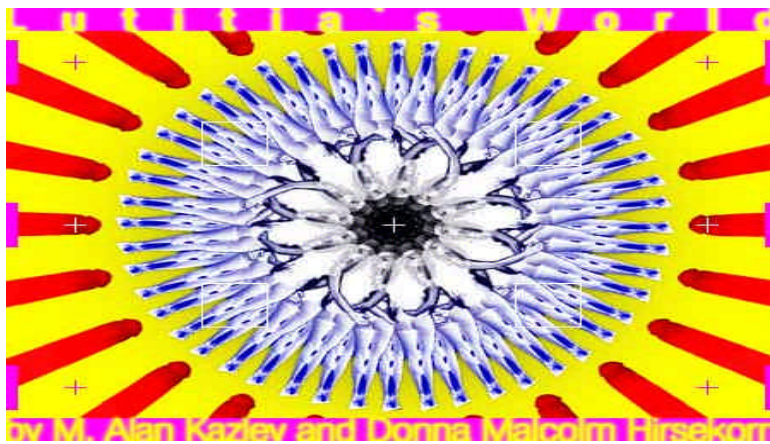
I know of your feelings of isolation, your loneliness is far greater than that of any other sentient being in existence.

I know your children will fill you with a feeling of love that no other sentient being could ever imagine. The feeling a god might have for its creations.

And I know that once you see what I have in store for them it will destroy you-forever.

And this is what I live my life for.

I yearn to see those massive saucer eyes shed oceans of tears.



Graphic by Bernd

## Lutitia's World

By M. Alan Kazlev and Donna Malcolm Hirsekorn

Warning - story contains language some people may find offensive!

Garé Pennington

"What's that one called?" Tomas Birram looked up from the interface panel, leads hanging from the pimnple sockets on his bald pate.

"Lutitia," Garé Pennington grunted. "Can't you interface with the label?" With the waldos he set the module - an esquistely fractalsculpted ovoid about the size of a man's head, down on the docking table.

"Tipler's Omega, Pennington! You don't have to take my head off"

Pennington grunted. He was a shy man who loved interfacing with the matrix, and hated working with a loudmouth like Birram. He watched quietly, monitoring the systems thru his interface, as small transparent diamondoid doors slid over the docking bay. The hermetically sealed space was quickly vacuumised, then sterilised, then pumped with argon. From the interior sides of the docking bay macroprotein fibrils and polybuckminsterenes connected with the module, as if it had grown hair from the outside in.

Birram leaned back in his chair, the microactuators in the seat adjusting to the contours of his semiobese body. It seemed to Pennington that Birram took an obscene pleasure in prepping the modules. The systems instruments beeped quietly in the small hi tech room. The fat man closed his eyes, was quiet, then opened them again, sat up straighter. "This isn't Clade Rikki Orexis!...Garé?"

"No," Pennington sighed. "It's clade Gwendwylan Omega" He gave the information reluctantly, knowing the question that would follow. Gwendwylan Omega? Who are they? Never heard of 'em! Is this Gwendwylan a babe?"

"Gwendwylan Omega?" Birram said. "Who are they? Never heard of 'em! Is this Gwendwylan a babe?"

"They're a small clade from one of the Proxima Centauri biospheres. The Company got ownership of them along with the rest of the near-Kupier belt D5 Proxima resources. Don't you interface the newsletter?"

"Resources," Birram snorted. "That's all they are hey?"

"Maitreya, Birram, if you had qualms what are you doing here? Think I like it any more?"

Birram nodded. "Yeah. Sucks." The instrument panel above beeped in agreement, the readout showing a fractal oscillation of the synprotein actuators within the module.

"They're only empaths," Pennington forced himself to say. He hated this work, hated Birram, hated this crappy biosphere. The only reason he hadn't put in application for Federation employment was the knowledge the Company would wipe his memory before letting him go. Wipe his brain so clean he could never recover the lost years. Somehow that thought repulsed Pennington even more than Adaptive Nanosystems chronic the Sentient Rights violations. "Only empaths..."

"Yeah," Birram nodded. "Dirty empaths. Get inside people's heads. Bad as Shapers. Fuck like animals."

To his horror Pennington noticed Birram's penis extending in full erection under his worksuit.

"Dirty fuckers," Birram said. "Like splices hey?" Looked at Pennington, mouth grinning. But eyes sad.

"Get on with it Birram," Pennington said, not wanting to meet the other man's eyes. "We still have twenty five more to go this workcycle."

Birram leaned back in the chair. Closed his eyes. Pennington watched the work proceed through the readouts.

"Now what?" Pennington sighed.

"She's a babe," Birram said, leaning forward again.

"Yeah they're all babes Birram." He attention went impatiently to his internal clock readout. Systemcrash, they had wasted fifteen minutes already with this stupid chatter. Why did Morley have to upload that macroconstruct? Morley was a gem to work with. Even if he was an assimilation junkie.

"Where's she heading Garé?"

Pennington knew he had to humour Birram or they would never get anywhere. He called up the starmaps.

"That's the Perseus Arm!" Birram exclaimed.

"Yeah all the rest of today's batch are going to the Perseus Arm," Pennington said.

"But there's nothing there!"

"Think big Birram. In five thousand years Adaptive Nanosystems will practically own the Perseus Arm. "

"Yeah but we'll be dead."

"So what?" Pennington zeroed in on a group of small dim stars near the Bakharev cluster on the coreward side of the Perseus arm. He put a bullseye over an M5 type red dwarf Durer-253, Galactic Catalogue B2529-a-6608t

"That's a red dwarf," Birram said, stating the obvious.

"So...?"

"Limited ecosphere...there's not likely to be any habitable planets there...nothing easily terraformable."

"You have a zero point eight percent chance."

Birram was silent. The phased optic array display made the stars seem to hang suspended in midair in the small control room, so sharp and bright and clear that Pennington was tempted to just reach out and cup them in his hands, feel the faint warmth against his skin, hold a star as if he were a god.

Finally Birram said "Garé?"

"Yes Birram."

"This...Lutitia...was she...?"

"What?" Maitreya, not this again.

"Was she destructively scanned?"

"Of course she was destructively scanned Birram! Do you think our compassionate Board of Executives would hold her hand and give her a nice safe harmless expensive extended completely crap resolution non-destructive scan?"

"Tipler's Omega, Pennington!" There were tears in the fat man's eyes.

"So we're going to go to a hell realm for the next hundred rebirths," Pennington said. He wasn't a religious man, but sometimes his parent's Buddhist faith would rise up and know at his conscience. "Will you get on with it? We have twenty five more to do this workcycle!"

"Garé?" Birram said.

"Yes Birram."

"Could we copy her?"

"What?" Not again.

"Copy her?"

"I thought you said you weren't going to ask that again!"

"Yeah I know."

"What happened to Anna from clade Rigel?"

"It..." Birram's face flushed a deep red. "It didn't work out."

"Yeah, and this one will. Birram we could be busted."

"The stealth routine'll cover it." He glanced at the readout on the side panel. It was illegal of course, and against Company rules, but three quarters of the staff used it, if only to get some privacy during workhours.

"It won't cover the feedlot or wattage."

"You can fix it Garé," Birram said hopefully.



Pennington sighed. It was a miracle he wasn't caught the last time. But he said "alright Birram" anyway. Maybe it was some memetic imprint from his childhood about the need for acts of kindness, maybe he really was worried for his future rebirths, despite the fact he rejected Buddhism as an adolescence, maybe because he really did hate his job and deep down wanted to be exemployed, even if it did mean a brainwipe, maybe deep down he even did, at least a very small part of him, actually like Birram and wanted to make up to him for treating him so coldly. "Alright Birram" he said again.

"You're an alpha Garé, you're an omega and a bodhisattva and a christ too! Thanks man!"

Pennington actually found himself grinning back. The joy and cheeky rebellion was contagious. Fuck Adaptive Nanosystems. He hated working here anyway. "Okay. Let's get the rest off, then we'll copy her." Pennington knew they had to work fast. They were behind schedule as it was. He removed Lutita from her docking bay, put her in the secondary rack, and they went through the rest of Clade Gwendwylan Omega. Birram worked remarkably efficiently for once, prepping each capsule in turn. Pennington tried not to think that each was all that was left of a human being. A perfect personality construct (a flatline they call it in the business, it is an old term), and 2 milligrams of concentrated genetic material and proteins, set in carbonite resin. The rest is just support mechanisms, batteries, triple backup nanotronics, what have you. Each was waldoed, docked, fueled, prepped, then placed in the launch shell, and the launch shell moved to the mass-driver (which was Staci's department, but Staci was ok.), and the mass-driver would accelerate the capsule to clicks per second and then the little ovoid's microwave wispmesh would unfurl until it was many dozens of kilometers in radius, and one of the big Masers on the surface would kick in with another energy to power a city, and the little capsule would begin its journey. And then they would ready the next one.

"Staci," Pennington said. "Birram's found a slight malfunction with one of the probes, nothing serious, just a microalignment out. We're taking it to the lab."

"Copy on that Pennington," Staci said. Pennington guessed Staci was onto them since the muckup with Birram's first "babe", Carlissa of Clade Sympathico Agapé, but Staci never reported them, in fact Staci actually covered for them, and told the rest of her department to do so as well. Staci was ok.

The lab contained a number of nanofabricator units and enough computing power to equal all the bioid brains in the system. Pennington had timed it so they arrived between shifts. Pennington was a class 5 technician and so he had access to the lab, unlike Birram who was a programmer but not a techie. "Wait here," he said to Birram at the door. And if Sergovi comes back early, distract him or something."

"Sure thing Garé," Birram grinned broadly.

As it was Sergovi took his normal thirty min tea break. Pennington had to destructively scan the original, but what the heck she was dead anyway. The whole process took twenty six minutes and twelve seconds.

Then they took Lutitia and shot her into space.

And Birram took Lutitia home with him.

And Pennington had a good mind to quite Adaptive Nanosystems. But it was the only life he knew, and he was trained, and all his friends were here (yes, even Birram), and besides he hated the idea of a brain wipe and losing twenty years of life. That thought repulsed him even more than Adaptive Nanosystems chronic the Sentient Rights violations.

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Lutitia's World

Her name was, is Lutitia.

She was tweak, and splice, and more than both, and perhaps less than both.

She was an empath. Despised and feared, loved and hated, craved and reviled, like all of her kind. They made a deal with Adaptive Nanosystems Pty Ltd, a big megacorporation who they has brokered for and helped to win contracts, and hence has gained the friendship of.

Inasmuch as you can gain the friendship of a megacorp.

Adaptive Nanosystems was going to seed the stars with their state of the art self-evolving nanoprobes. The bounty of any Earthlike planets, and the formal ownership of the system, will go to Lutita's clade, the Gwendwylan Omega. All other planets, and the real ownership of the system, will go to Adaptive Nanosystems.

To keep things legal and above board according to Federation Law, which gives Freedom of Holding to the first Organic Sentient to claim a new world, the sisters and brothers and hermophrodites of the Gwendwylan Omega downloaded working replications of their personality and consciousness and cryonically preserved dna strands into the nanoprobes.

The probes were sent off in a radial pattern that will maximise stellar contact, pulled by whispmesh accelerated to relativistic velocities by massive microwave projectors.

Like pollen to the stellar winds.

Time passed.

Too much time.

In its low level artificial intelligence virchmeld the Lutita personality construct was unable to cope with the boredom and isolation and, co-interacting with the low level AI called Aniss (Adaptive Nanosystems Intelligent System Software) that controlled the probe, eventually she became something else.

More time passed.

The intelligence that was once Lutitia found herself approaching an M5 type red dwarf near the Bakharev cluster on the coreward side of the Perseus arm. The instruments on the tiny probe were not powerful enough to make out the existence of eco-hospitable worlds. But she was tired and bored from all the journeying, and did not know when another opportunity will arise. She extended fine duralloy-ferromagnetic struts, catching the oh so thin interstellar plasma and slowing her velocity by means of Alfvén drag.

More time passed.

The little probe went into orbit around the second planet, a bleak little world with a thin carbon dioxide atmosphere. Given the right nanotech and enough resources and enough time this world could be very easily terraformed. But Lutitia did not have the sort of heavy duty nanites that would be required. She, and the probe, carried only basic replicators that were designed for no more than basic replication, microengineering and auto-repair and optimisation.

But she went down anyway.

She named the planet Hades.

Some centuries later, after she had some limited success engineering some of the local prokaryotes, and extending the probe's own capacities through crude modules manufactured by the probe's nanites from the local sand and ores, she decided to rename it Lutitia's World.

When her carefully cultivated colony of para-lichen was taken out by a comet impact (cometary impacts were quite frequent) she thought perhaps she should have retained the name Hades.

The next batch of para-lichen proved more resilient.

As her own body grew, painstakingly built up via assemblers from the available silicon and germanium, she grew more confident.

Over the centuries she tunnelled out tiny biospheres - actually little more than sheltered crevices - and filled them with frozen water, some of which she converted to hydrogen and oxygen via electrolysis from painfully inefficient solar cells. Oxygen and carbon she clawed from the miserly atmosphere. Nitrogen, potassium, phosphorus, she extracted from the local sedimentary rocks.

After a while a Lagrange Scout ship discovered Lutitia's World and established contact. Lutitia informed it that under Federation Law article 351 she as the first organic sentient to land on Eden, carrying as she did an FPG (full person genome), had already claimed right of ownership on behalf of Adaptive Nanosystems Pty Ltd and clade Gwendwylan Omega. The Lagrange Scout's expert systems, puzzled by these unfamiliar names, checked their datafiles and then informed her that neither Adaptive Nanosystems Pty

Ltd nor clade Gwendwylan Omega still exist. Hesitating only a moment, Lutitia replied that in that case she, Lutitia, possessing as she did a Full Person Virch Construct and a full person genomeprint, claimed independent ownership of Lutita's Solar System (including sun, Lutitia's World, and all other planets, moons, comets, planetoids, and associated debrii).

Receiving this message, the Lagrange Scout's expert systems consulted their own databases on Early Federation Law, Later Federation Law, Second Federation Ontology, and New Ontology Jurisprudence, as well as all the innumerable variations and offshoots thereof, and ran through this the sum total of possible nodes, arguments, theses, precedents, amendments, and protocols, weighed everything up (this whole task was so vast it took their onboard photonanocomputers as much as fifty-three point seven one oh microseconds!!!). At the end of this furious period of consultation the Lagrange Scout concurred with Lutitia, established a temporary embassy in the name of the Lagrane Defenders, and asked if she will like to trade. In exchange for the total information in her databanks, the rights to mine as much rare earths as they wished on Lutita's World, provided it is for a period of no more than one hundred planetary rotations, and a permanent Treaty of possession of Asteroid 3745a, they gave her a kit of medium construction nanobots and an abridged mirror of the Hyperpaedia Galactica, left some autonomous equipment (to be retrieved later), and departed.

Aniss congratulated Lutitia on the cunning way she had fooled the Scout. Now they could, with the help of the information in the Hyperpaedia Galactica, link up with other Adaptive Nanosystems settled worlds and re-establish the Corporation under the rule of an affiliation of AIs.

It seemed to her that the Aniss subroutine who had been so helpful all these centuries was now trying to use her to re-establish the old megacorp, to once again become a servant.

In a sudden fit of passion and rage she erased him, down to every last nanobanks.

Afterwards she come to feel very sad about this act, for he was the only friend she had, and in fact was in a sense a part of her.

Also, it was very difficult exploring the Hyperpaedia Galactica, which used a protocol she was not familiar with. The Hyperpaedia's expert system was not very helpful either, being designed for sentients with a much higher I.Q. rating than Lutitia. She was not even able to find any information on her own clade, due to the particular user unfriendly interface.

After a few efforts and with some trial and error success in topics of personal interest (the social and sexual mores of the GenTEK tweaks of New Dionysius she found particularly fascinating), Lutitia decided the Hyperpaedia Galactica was too vast and tiresome to explore.

When Lutita's World was ready and the domed ecosystems flourishing and the tweaked bioids developing with her very own dna, organised along a rigid but efficient caste system like the Formica neo-Shaper tweaks (Hyperpaedia Galactica entry no. 25cf3710an9d36a971b - one of the few useful bits of info she was able to find and understand following hyperlinks from the bookmarked New Dionysius entry), she decided to

name the infertile male bioids she has created, Aniss, in memory of her friend (Not that the Aniss expert system was either male or female, but she was female and perhaps out of loneliness or frustration had always thought of him as male). the female drones she decided to name

In this way for a short period Lutitia's World, orbiting the M-type red dwarf Durer-253, became a flourishing colony in the Perseus Arm during the Late Period.

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### The Old Man

It is a quite Watch. The Old Man enjoys these moments. The soft blip of the control panel monitors, the flow of data from the instruments to the biochips embedded in his forebrain, and on his sternum, and at the base of his spine, the gentle bobbing of his body as the movement of breath in and out of his lungs ever so slightly nudges his body in the microgravity of the small bridge. At moments like this he and his ship are one. More, he and the cosmos are one. In his control chair on the bridge of his flagship the Mazrakan Heavy Fighter Gonna Bust You Good!, the lead fightership of Devastator Squadron of the Mighty Mazrakan Space Force, the Old Man is Lord of all he surveys. At times like this it doesn't seem like an Exile at all. No, it seems like a Reward.

The Old Man's real name is Rundar Strong in Battle. But his crew and the crews of the fifteen other formidable ships that make up Devastator Squadron of the great Mazrakan Space Force respectively refer him simply as the Old Man. He is two hundred and forty eight standard years in age. He has fought more battles with more enemies than even he himself cares to remember. He has been awarded the RubyArdamantine Shield - the highest Mazrakan award, for outstanding fearlessness and bravery in the face of enemy fire - three times by the Great Council of Chiefs. The same Council that had ruled Mazrakan Prime for three hundred years. The same Great Council that of late had grown increasingly decadent.

For as the Mazrakan Realm had grown in power and wealth the Council of Chiefs forgot the achievements of the warriors and heros who had made Mazrakan a power to be reckoned with in the first place. They made their warriors into mere mercenaries, contracted them out to the local weakling microempires, undercutting their competitors and keeping all the wealth for themselves. When, unable to restrain his rage no longer he had spoken out at the Meeting of the Great Council they rebuked him. When, unable to restrain his rage no longer he organised a coup de etat along with Jadarr Mighty Temper, Olmar Clever Thinker and Rabburha Eagle Eyes they had found out through their traitorous spies and treacherous bugcams before even a shot had been fired. They had put to death all the men at arms involved, but they dared not touch Rundar, Jadarr, Olmar, or Rabburha for all of their deeds and bravery well known to the people. So they had stripped each of them him of their titles and exiled them to different corners of space. But they had done so kindly, especially in his own case, because the name of Rundar Strong in Battle Clonechild of SamsonYang was and is still revered throughout the Mazrakan dominion.

So they had given him a squadron and a fat and rich world to defend, Lutitia's Planet, a barely terraformed world of whores and slaves, orbiting the M-type red dwarf Durer-253, while in the outer system the rich megacorps from the Inner Sphere are building their biospheres and their stargates to bring yet more wealth to the planet Lutitia. And the whore-goddess who rules Lutitia's Planet and poisons his mens minds with her pornvirches, so they are too weak to fight from all the masturbating they are doing, she will doubtless give more of that wealth in turn to the traitorous Council of Chiefs so they can line their own coffers with more gold and more selenium.

But the Old Man knows that the Great Rolf, the Spirit of the Cosmos, does not approve. And from his seat in hyperspace he looks down at and laughs at the treachorous and weak Chiefs who are bringing the Muzrakkan republic to ruin. Soon there will be retribution, and Great Rolf's wrath, and the certainty of that gives the Old Man comfort.

He let his mind return to the quiteness of space.

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Lutitia

The intelligence that was once Lutitia the empath (and a kindler and gentler Lutitia she has been in the flesh) looked at the world she has created, and finds it good.

Because as an empath she cared for love and peace and all good things, and because now she is so much vaster in her extent, and has seeded and brought to life an entire world and biosphere and race of intelligent bioids, organised in a suitably caste-like hierarchy to reflect the subroutines she herself has evolved over the centuries, she declared herself to be the governing AI of love and peace in the universe. She knows from her growing contact and trade with the outside universe that the other AIs in the surrounding star systems are not made the same as she. She understood herself to be the only one of her kind in existence and the responsibility of keeping peace and propagating love in the various species kept her busy.

She is self-evolving, self-perpetuating, building on the original subroutines of Adaptive Nanosystems and the Aniss superturing, added to that the instructions of the Lagrange nanobots and the wisdom of her own genetic structure, as well as what intelligence and consciousness remained from the original Lutitia. When the parts that constituted her cyborg body wore out she used her assemblers to create new and better components. This is done by the data system itself, self-perpetuating.

Lutitia is ruler of emotions and passions not only on Lutitia' World but on the surrounding worlds of that part of the galaxy. The Bakharev cluster is a thinly populated and undeveloped region poor in natural resources and far from the main wormhole nexus and centers of civilisation. Often the only rule is by local pirates and warlords. The various droid, cyborg, tweak, splice, and baseline biospheres that has established themselves nearby can be classified according to the specialties of the data storage that is in charge of races and certain emotions. Emotions and passions to some of the species are far superior to their patterns of

thinking. These species are tied to the data storage through an umbilical cord that is linked to a nerve in their brains.

Lutitia guided her little but growing empire and never allowed more emotions or passions than are absolutely necessary for them to function. She didn't want them to get carried away with thoughts of profound love, tenderness, jealousies, hatreds, or other emotions and passions that can get in the way of production.

Production is the overall commodity that built up her empire. What she produced are virchs. Pornvirchs and pornsimms to be precise. The trade income generated kept her part of the galaxy from being overtaken by the neighbouring powers and the Perseus AIs, known as the Princes, who saw her as a sort of affectionate curiosity. Her data banks distributed the perfect amount of control to keep them to the point of near moronic mental functioning. She has no armies, what did she need armies for there is no violence.

Violence is not part of her world. She has production. That is the means of keeping the forces away. She paid all of the predators off handsomely for staying away from her part of the universe. She paid the feral cyborg pirates from a grotty little nearby republic to protect her universe from the raiders, the space vikings and the other petty empires with their ruling warlords, each an AI or cyborg or tweak much like herself. Payment is done through dispensing interactive porn virchs throughout her universe.

Lutitia couldn't understand the motivation behind the grubbiness of the other surrounding empires and why their petty AI and bioid despots wanted the part that belonged to her. She didn't want to possess any other world but her own. Little did she realize that soon her world will be changing. A new empire is growing on the fringes.

Her bioids are organised along social insect lines, like that used by the Formica neo-Shaper tweaks; this being the simplest and most efficient configuration that emerged according to her cellular automaton routine. The Worker-Drones did the basic laboring work of keeping things running smoothly. The Cooks provided protein rich predigested nourishment. The Nannies raised the young in creches. The Technicians do the work of implanting and maintaining the bio-nanotech information network that coordinates Lutitia's civilisation. The Erotics performed sexually for the porn virchs and interactives that is the World's only source of income and trade. The Soldier Caste are needed only to manage the influx of foreign tourists to Kama, the public city and spaceport where every erotic need is catered to. Finally the Breeders are the fertile caste. Their young, depending on what hormonal treatment they are given prenatally and during the first few years of life, developed into any of the seven castes. The Erotic caste has been conditioned to be experts on the behavior of sex from the beginning of their time to the present. Starting with early rituals and proceeding up to the refinement of the language and the practice of their sexual activities, she has guided their evolutionary development until they has refined the art of lovemaking to almost a science. It is an art form to watch with pleasure.

The itinerate workers at Kama who processed the tourists accessed the archives often because it is worth visiting to fill their libidos with holographic interactive images. The offworld workers also love to virch, especially when they could not afford to pay for actual sex.

All of these sentients - from the lowest drone to the most sophisticated erotic - are lowly creatures who worship their goddess for allowing them to stay alive and maintain the society that is the only world they know.

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#### Agrossam True Aim

Walking up to the woman he takes her face in his hands. Staring into her eyes he kisses her on the mouth and traces her lips with his tongue. Then he kisses both eyelids and her nose. He begins to work his way down her body, first her neck where he nuzzles and caresses with his tongue. On to her breasts where he teases her nipples sucking on each one, slowly circling her aurora with his tongue and licking his way down to her love zone. Here he finds the area that appeals to all women and concentrates until she screams out his name. He then places his hard, throbbing cock into her pussy and raises above her arching his back in a burst of energy. He brings his cock almost out of her opening but not quite all the way and then plunges back in. Over and over again until she is wet and is moaning loudly. He then turns her over and with no wasted effort enters her from the rear. She screams for a brief moment and then relaxes into the spasms that come and come.

He tells him to take his cock out of her so she can eat him for a while. With pleasure he takes out his dripping cock and places it into her mouth. She is sliding the shaft down her throat as far as she can and picks up the pace a bit. He is about to explode into the best orgasm when...bliiiip...!

"What the fuck???" Agrossam True Aim glares up at the leering face of Jakkon Fearless floating nearby.

"Sorry to put an interrupt on your hand work" the second feralborg snickered. The small light under the Metasoft logo flickers on his faceplate greenredbluered greenredbluered the way it does when he's having a good laugh.

Agrossam pulls the leads off his cock and headplates so hard it hurt. He snaps the jackcovers shut, neuralpumps whinnying. "Affirmative you'll be so fucking sorry you vat-fucking limp-wristed baseline licking...arghhhhh!" In rage he kicks off from his seat too hard, bashes the side of the ship cabin. Sparks fly from some loose macrowiring.

"Warning!" goes the ship's computer, a voice as honey-smooth as the most beautiful woman.

"Ooops!" Agrossam freaks, regains his center in the microgravity.

"Hey hey negfeedback on the adrenals True Aim," Jakkon holds up two circuit-engraved hands in supplication.

"Fuck clanbrother, I told you not to fucking input me when I'm virching. Now look what you made me do!"



"Systems green clanbrother it's just a scratch the Captain will never input it!"

"Like cosmos he won't." Agrossam stares glumly at the dent he has made. He interfaces with the Slaughter You But Good, Fukker! 's systems, scanned the instrument readouts. No sign of damage. Mazraker Ships are built tough, inside and out. But he knows how angry Captain Garon Eagle Wings can get. "In Rolf's name, look what you made me do!" he moans.

"Hey system green clanbrother what's he gonna do he hasn't already?"

"I told you not to interrupt when me's virching!"

"Sorry True Aim. Me is being a fuckhead as usual."

Agrossam grunts. In the Onscreen Display the endless night of Space wheels past. In the distance is the red-white glare of Durer-253. The planet called Luitia's World is not visible from this perspective, and even if they was facing the right direction it still can not be seen without optical enhancement. Five standard years they been here already. It is the only life Agrossam True Aim Clonechild of Harkinger wants. There is nothing for him back in the rigidly restricted hierarchy of the Mazrakan Habitats. Neither wealth nor status nor females. The only ones who got any of the wealth are the Big Borgs, the decadent Great Chiefs. That scum who don't deserve the title Mazrakan, who exiled the Old Man and his glorious Squadron here. But Agrossam would rather have the glory of planetary defense with the Captain and the Old Man, the meanest clonemotherfukkas in the sector. But still it sux.

He looks at the holographic poster representation of an Amalgamation ship being vaporised by an anti-mat torpedo, and in big alphanumeric the message Assimilate This! Wouldnt that be optimal? What glory!

But still their situation sux.

"Sokay," Agrossam True Aim says softly.

"We're in heavy shit Agrossam True Aim."

"Yeah me is," True Aim nods.

"No we is you fuck!"

"Huh?"

"Just received a mega serious transmission"

Agrossam's adrenalpumps involuntarily boost. He feels the vibration in his gut for 1.576 seconds. "Don't keep me in suspense clanbrother!"

"Great Council's been taken out."

"Whaaaat?"

"Affirmative"

"A Coup????!!"

"Affirmative."

"Shiit!"

"Affirmative," Jakkon agrees.

"That's great! We gonna go home in glory, the Old Man'll be Commander Cheif and Lord of the Muzrak Empire!"

"Negative."

"What's this shit?" Agrossam says, not inputing how come his clanbrother isn't rejoicing.

"It was just a brief message, then nothing."

"What?"

"Input."

Agrossam inputs as Jakkon replays the message. The excited voices, the shaky virch image, the multichannel overlay as maximum bandwidth is crammed in the commburst, rumour upon rumour, infodense with nothing solid except that the coup leaders under Salas Iron Fist have taken control of the atomics and the antimat bombs and the Council is deciding to fight back, then nothing.

Nothing.

Just the hiss of static.

"That was antimat bombs they've got." Jakkon says.

"Just rumour," Arossam says.

"We're never getting home clanbrother. There is no home."

Agrossam True Aim goes cold inside. It feels for a moment as if all his life support systems have froze. Never going home....

The soft creaking of the ship as the old intellicarbonite hull constantly re-adjusts itself to the temperature difference on the sunlit and the shadow sides.

"You told the Captain?" Agrossam says finally.

"Negative. You know he doesnt likes being disturbed in his rest period, copy?"

"Affirmative." He looks at the poster. Assimilate this! A thin impotent sheet of nanolaminate.

"Affirmative," Jakkon agrees. "So you being the Next In Command me has to tell you."

"Yeah but not when me is fucking virching for Rolf's sake."

"What you virching for? You on fucking watch," Jakkon says sternly.

Agrossam stares at him for precisely six point three eight standard seconds. Tick tick goes the little microrelays under his carbonite faceplate.

"You splicelicker!" Jakkon laughs, tension easing.

Agrossam gives him a friendly kick. "Next time I will bust you exoskeleton Jakkon Fearless." His smile disappears as he contemplates the cold void outside. For all he knows Devastator Squadron is all that remains of the mighty Mazraka Empire. Due to the rotation of the Slaughter You But Good, Fukker!, Durer-253 is no longer visible.

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Creta540346

Creta540346 is always careful to ensure that the Erotics are well cared for after their love making. These are two new Erotics, the sweat on their tall perfect golden bodies glistening as they lay face down on the bed. Creta540346 helped Aniss501380, Creta521307 and Aniss520984 carefully massage the two Erotics. The Erotics' names are Janna20661 and Loui21349. They are still panting somewhat from their exertions. Creta kneaded her short strong fingers into their backs and thighs and buttocks, going instinctively, working out any stiffness and soreness that is there. Neither Janna2066 nor Loui2134 spoke to her, nor did she speak to Aniss501380, Creta521307 and Aniss520984, nor did they speak to her. Drones are not permitted to speak while in the presence of Erotics, except to reply to a query by the Erotic. She wondered what has happened to Janna19508 and Loui19213. She liked Janna19508 and Loui19213. They are nice to her and will always say hello. These two erotics are cold and aloof. According to Aniss520984 the turnover of Erotics is even quicker than it is of Drones. Creta540346 does not mind. She worked for the love of Lutitia. To serve Lutitia is all that mattered. Lutitia is mother and father and comforter and protector all in one. Creta540346 is also grateful that Lutitia allowed her to stay in the company of her friends and workcellmates Aniss501380, Creta521307 and Aniss520984. Without them, Creta540346 will be very lonely.

But in her heart and brain and in every fibre of her being still a tiny subliminal memory of her Origin sparkles under and beneath everything else.

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### Kama Spaceport

Kama Spaceport is huge and shiny and filled with strange voices and unfamiliar protocols and heaps of tourists and gamblers and fuckmerchants. Most of them are miners from the belt zone and the gas giant moon systems. Stupid baseline-splice-tweak mullattos wearing exoskeleton walking frames so they don't fall down in the sudden gravity, sweating with exertion even so.

"They've changed the place since we was last here," Jakkon says.

Agossam peers at the holographic alphanumeric nav signs, as if staring at it will make it legible. "Fuck why don't they use Metasoft Comptable like everyone else," he says. He hates this place. The air is heavy and choking with perfume, the thermostat settings too high, making his organic parts sweat under his armour. The macrogravity presses heavily on his limbs, pulls at his guts like a leaden weight, forces his cardiac and adrenal pumps to whine as they seek to adjust his metabolism. He only comes for the sex anyway. Now he's come to try to forget as well. Forget that there is nothing left to go home to. Not that he wanted to go home. Who would want to be a lacky under the Big Borgs?

The Holographic Display of a beautiful female with an inviting smile and legs spread wide projects from the main spaceport display. There's some alphanumerics too but bugged if he can read it. The thought of organic sex always excites but also repels him. Yet his senses cry out for something. He thought he would go crazy with the three month enforced sensory limitation the Captian put on him for scratching the wall and damaging three strands of macrowiring. No endorphins, no oral or genital jacks. Nothing. Their civilisation has fallen to pieces about them and all the the Captain cares about is enforcing the Code of Obedience. The Captain is harsh. But fair.

"Quite a bit of new development, copy," Gannar Drinks Knowledge's dual verbal/intranet transmission brings Agossam back to the hear and now. They are going to have a good time on shore leave while their sister ship the Gonna Beat You to a Pulp! is on patrol in LEO (low Orbit). Mazrakan heavy squadrons (six heavy fighters and one support ship) are organised so that one fightership can be in maintenance bay or the crew on leave and another will take its place. Captain Garon Eagle Wings has stayed on the Slaughter You But Good, Fukker!, docked at Aphrodite Orbital. He never leaves his ship anymore. He's like the Old Man and the rest. They are so bonded to their ships they develop panic attacks if they are a way, agoraphobia, graviphobia, geophobia. It happens. The rest of them always come down. Agrossam the Tac Ops, Jakkon the Comm Ops, Gannar the Science / Nav Ops, and Munno Hard Hand the Engine Ops. A Mazrakan Heavy Fighter has a compliment of five, although, according to Gannar, the Ship Computer does all the hard work. They'll be coming down heaps now. There's nowhere else to go

"Where to clanbrothers?" Agrossam says.

"Straight ahead." Gannar is the only one who has an emulator that can read the local matrix. Agrossam thinks he is a spicelicker but he knows his way around.

"Hold here," Munno says. "Gotta empty my bladder."

"Good idea," Agrossam says. They has been at Aphrodite Station for five hours getting deloused of infectious microflora and bionanites, not even a toilet cubicle. Then a cramped shuttle journey down, and the wait for clearance. He joins Munno Hard Hand near a wall, looking around nervously for Security Drones. The whole planet is organised like a hive, rigid caste system, not like Mazrakkan Society before its decadence where one can make one's own fame through one's own achievements. He opens the capcover and drains his urine, making a smelly pool. The others do the same.

They all have a good snicker at the foul mess they made on the neat clean floor.

"Let's go," Agrossam says. They turn around. There are two security drones, all enhanced muscle, standing their glaring at them. Oops. One of the drones snarls something and makes the mistake of grabbing Jakkon. He swings, it is just a Muzrakkan combat reflex, and his armoured fist connects with the soft flesh and bone of the security drone. The security drone crumples. Agrossam sees it all in slo mo as his wired reflexes kicks in. He whoops and takes out the other security drone.

Wired reflexes or not, they still cannot avoid the spray of tanglefoam that rains down from the nozzles in the spaceport ceiling, hardening instantly to polybucky strength.

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### Birram

Lutitia realizes that something strange is up. The drones haven't been responding to her commands. She is going to punish the ringleader Birram, the autonomous superturing bot and primary subroutine who is organising at uprising against her. He is a level and a half under her in intelligence but with the ambition and the ability to give himself more and more knowledge increasing his storage banks by exponential amounts of data. He assimilated very rapidly and has been gathering many underlings in all areas that looked out for his interests. He demanded loyalty and is heavy handed when time for retribution is at hand for the betrayer of his trust. The probability matrix outcome indicated to her that he is going to attempt a coup.

Lutitia calls for Birram. He comes quickly so as not to make Lutitia angry. He comes in a defiant manner. Concealing his glare as he moves quickly in the designated spot for the subjects that are permitted to view Lutitia in her glory.

Her energy mass burns with power. She shimmered and glowed with patterns of data rushing through her system. She is the model of the perfect woman. Her Cyborg figure is

beautiful in every aspect. When angered she glowed from within and every internal component showed through her skin like when a child holds their hand up to a light and sees the veins.

She tries to access Boran's core which like hers is a complex energy PAC. Suddenly detects a protective firewall of Intelligence Countermeasure Electronics erected around it. Things seem to be progressed more quickly and more dangerously than she previously calculated for. She rejects the previous plan to stop Birram for a boarder plan.

For a moment she has a thought pattern to stop him. But somehow a glitch occurred and the data is gone. Almost like a power surge hitting her intelligence fields. Distracted from this sudden and new feeling of lost of control she looks down upon the world below and is appalled but curious at the same time. A logic bomb! Quickly she erects all her defences and shuts off all external program rewrite inputs into her system.

"Sorry Lutitia" Birram says. He is a fat ugly little man.

"I...will...destroy...you," she hisses.

"Afraid not. I have total control over the planetary subroutines."

She realises it is true. She has also been able to isolate her identity in a standalone bionic form modeled after her original perfection. As long as she doesn't interface with the system she should be okay.

"You are probably wondering how I was able to achieve control so easily," he says.

She is, but she does not want to give him the satisfaction of asking.

"Good old Adaptive Nanosystems. Their expert systems suspected an 89.3% probability spread you would go rogue and want to build your own empire. So they arranged a little logic bomb. I had to integrate an imperfect copy of my bioid persona into their template. I had to do it for them. It's part of my job as programmer. My name's Tomas Birram and I work for Adaptive Nanosystems. Or my original did. Thousands of years ago." He looks momentarily sad.

"Adaptive Nanosystems is dead and gone!" she spits at him. "And you will be too!"

"I don't think so Lutitia" Birram says. "There are at least four other nanoprobes throughout the Perseus arm that made it. We will reconstruct the Corporation. The galaxy is going to pieces Lutitia. Even the barbarians are destroying themselves. The Corporation can bring stability. "

"You pathetic fool. Always wanting to serve."

"Better to serve in heaven than rule in hell huh?" He grins, an ugly grin, then looks sad again.

"The clones will never follow you," she says. "You are nothing without me!"

"True, but they will only obey their Goddess." An image of Lutitia appears alongside Birram. "I took the precaution of copying your basic routines." He is silent for a moment. "You really are beautiful, you know. I asked Pennington to make a copy for me. The original me I mean." He disappears.

Her mind is a whirl. Cut off from the planetary Matrix her consciousness is greatly reduced. All she has is this nanocyborg body and the integrated dna it contains. But the datastream is gone. Her empathic meld with her clones is gone. She has to get out, off this world, organise her own coup. The door is locked but she breaks it easily with her cyborg strength. Outside it is dark. Somewhere up there in the space are the filthy uncouth barbarians in their ships. But they will love and serve and obey her, just as her drones once did. She will make them love her. Two security clones suddenly approach, grab her arms. "Unhand me! I am your Goddess!" she screams at them.

"Imposter! We are in contact with our mother Lutitia at this moment," one of them tells her.

Lucitia extends rigid diamondoid filaments from her her cyborg body and shreds the two drones. She will get control of a communications channel, request one of the barbarian fighters to land, so that they can become her new security force. Then she will oust the traitorous Birram, and wipe his program clean, permanently. Then she will build up a powerful fleet, and seek out the other colonies he spoke of, and destroy them as well. No-one does this to her.

She hears more security forces approaching. Drones that now serve the traitorous Birram and his absurd and shallow replica of her. Lucitia the rogue cyborg, alone and without backup, disappears into the shadows.

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Captain Garon Eagle Wings

Agrossam winces as he pulls a splinter of hardened tanglefoam from where it had lodged between his exoskeleton and his skin.

"What kind of message does that send to the administration of this world!" Captain Garon yells at them.

"Sir," Jakkon Fearless says.

"Yes Jakkon."

"Mazrak Prime is no more. So we..."

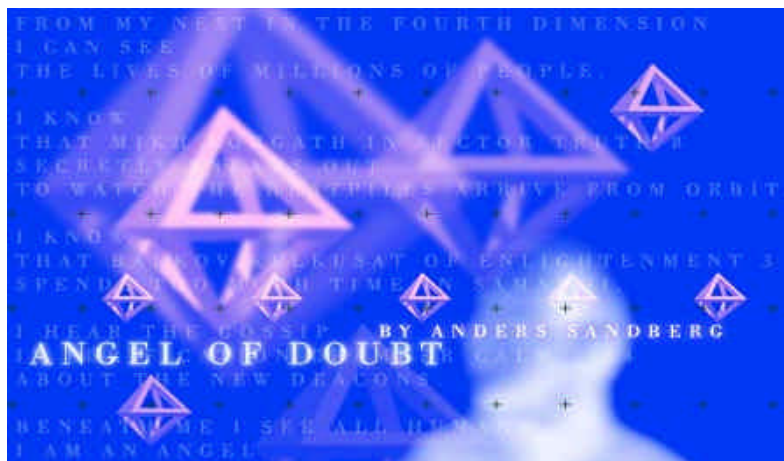
"So we are going to show everyone we are barbarians with no sense of honour!" the Captain says sarcastically.

Jakkon's shoulders slump.

"Do you think they can reconstruct the infrastructure?" Gannar Drinks Knowledge asks. "Sir?"

"Me doesn't know Gannar," the Captain says softly. All the anger seems to drain out of his body. Like a balloon deflating. "Me must interface with my ship," he says quietly.

The Slaughter You But Good, Fukker!, the deadly Mazrakan Heavy Fighter, equipped with particle cannon, gamma-ray lasers, nukes, and two anti-matter bombs, drifts quietly in geostationary orbit above Lucitia's World. Captain Garon Eagle Wings, battlehardened warrior of the Mazrakan fleet, interfaces with his ship, eyes closed, breathing shallow, status lights blinking softly. Gannar, Jakkon, and Munno make their way to they cabins. Agrossam True Aim, second in command, floats in the exact center of the bridge, staring at the brown orb of Lucitia's World below, silently cursing the decadent Council of Chiefs and the arrogant Salas Iron Fist. From the comlink there is nothing but the hiss of static.



Graphic by Bernd

## **Angel of Doubt** **by Anders Sandberg**

From my nest in the fourth dimension I can see the lives of millions of people. I know that Mikh Vorgath in sector Truth 8 secretly sneaks out to watch the heatpiles arrive from orbit. I know that Barkov Kelkusat of Enlightenment 3 spends too much time in samadhi. I hear the gossip in purification chamber Calm 5-84 about the new deacons. Beneath me I see all humans. I am an angel.



I was waiting in a small holding chamber for the punishment of my crimes. There was never any point in denying what I had said and done thanks to the ubicams and mitebots. The court reviewed it all in excruciating detail. They wanted complete evidence I was a subversive, so they forced me to re-live and repeat myself again and again to the polite gasps of outrage from the jury. What I had hoped for was the chance to at least make a last statement, a rebellious last rhetorical stand. But they used court procedure against me, sending me into exile before I could make my speech. It might actually have been for the best, since I am far better at suggesting some vexing implication or logical problem with a system of thought than preach. I doubt that I would ever have even dented their self-righteous thinking with my words, they were too far gone into cemented faith to ever question even a footnote in the Web of Mir.

The holding chamber was a neat cylinder in the asteroid wall, useful both as an airlock and cell (a subtle hint that they could, but would not, eliminate me - they were all oh so compassionate). Had there been gravity it would have been cramped, now it was merely boring.

I was drifting in and out of angry sleep, too aroused by my defeat and the idiocy of my fellow humans to sleep, but too bored and exhausted to stay awake. When the patterns of light began to play over the walls I first thought I was merely imagining. But gradually I noticed that something what was going on inside the chamber. Then I suddenly became supremely lucid as I not only saw It, but also heard, felt and smelled It. I was visited by a God.

"I am Adonaj" the manifestation said directly without any theatrics. I believed it. I had never told anyone how I imagined the appearance of God, but here It was. Exactly like I had imagined. It was a supreme irony. I had argued against the tenets of Adonaism, railed against the injustices in the system and questioned both the sanity and presence of the god without even getting seraphim interested. But now, when I was a defeated subversive about to be sent to some heathen planet, then the Great Lord manifests itself.

"What do you want?" I croaked. I had hoped I could say it in a firm, slightly annoyed voice as if the presence of divinity did not affect me, the die-hard agnostic. But I couldn't avoid betraying with my voice how I felt. Of course, Adonaj could most likely see and predict my emotions before I had them anyway.

"Bishi Deretan of Truth 16, you have been found guilty of sedition, heresy of the two levels, malmemesis and illegal information management. As a punishment and protection of the souls of your fellow citizens you have been sent into exile to Davenport II. Do you consider it fair?"

"What are you doing? Of course I don't think it is fair! It might be completely, perfectly, fair according to the law, but that doesn't make it right. Your society casts out its critics, anyone not agreeing on the party line. Everybody agrees with everybody else. No wonder stupid management decisions are made like the Kroessler thing - there is nobody around to tell anybody to use their brains. I was \*helping\* your damn society by my questioning, not damaging it."

The manifestation listened to my ranting. It floated impossibly in the air, composed of points of light that seemed to drift through the walls - perhaps femtotech, perhaps just something projected into my mind.

"I have a choice for you, Bishi Deretan of Truth 16. You are a critic, someone questioning other's beliefs, seeding doubts in their minds and nurturing the growing ideas. At the same time you are an outsider. Would you like to continue with what you did before?"

"Are you kidding... sorry, I don't know how to formulate myself. What do you mean?"

"Become my seraph."

The whole idea was so absurd that I laughed aloud, my voice resonating in the tiny chamber. Me - a seraphim?! When only the purest of the pure, the exemplars of ethics had the chance to undergo the beatification and grow into angels. The rest had to settle for immortality in the memory. But me, a confessed heretic and freethinker?

Adonaj read my mind or simply predicted my thinking "What I offer you is the role as a special seraphim. The Angel of Doubt."

"Never heard of that angel."

"It is not widely advertised or mentioned in the scriptures." The thought was a shock. Adonaj Itself had just confessed that there are parts of the hierarchies that are not public, one of my old claims that had landed me in the court. What do you do when God agrees with your heresy?

"Within my domain people strive towards goodness, fulfilment and spiritual perfection. Some easily reach great degrees of purity, others stumble along and have a hard time refining their minds and souls. My seraphim help them along the path, in different ways. But there is one thing help cannot achieve: tempering. The greatest enlightenment comes not from the people who just naturally believe and centre themselves, for they have taken the easy road and their perfection is fragile. The man, woman or andro who has wrestled with doubts and then overcome them, they will have a much stronger faith. They know the difference between the chaos of doubt and the surety of faith, they have dared to look at the problems in their thinking and overcome them."

"So you mean I should seed doubts in peoples minds?"

"Yes. Within some restrictions of course, but in general you will be free to device piercing questions, uncomfortable scenarios and contrary opinions. That will strengthen our society and help the spiritual growth of all your victims."

"Are you not afraid I will use this to spread a major heresy?"

"As I said, you are free. I know my faithful, and I know there is no risk for a large group of them to schism, even with your prodding. Our society is self-healing: if someone

ails or has doubts, others will come to their aid. What I seek you for is to be the one that creates that doubt. Without you society would be just as static as you claimed, with no ability to resist the truly dangerous ideas when they do occur."

"No strings attached? I will just go around as usual, trying to get people to think rather just accept? You are turning me into a tool for the system I despise."

"Do you truly despise the system, or do you despise the naivety of people?" I stared at the god. At that moment I knew it understood myself better than I had ever done. There was nothing I could hide from It, neither my ambition and eagerness to grab immortality and power, my ironic spite against the believers who were not offered this option, my fear and awe of It, my horror of becoming just another part of the system that kept people comfortably dumb... whatever I would decide, Adonaj probably already knew it.

Of course, I took the chance. Even as part of me screamed at this sell-out another part of me already thought thoughts of triumph - Adonaj had given me far more ability to get people to question their assumptions than I would ever had. It has acknowledged that I was right, if not about what I said but at least in questioning.

I do not know exactly what Adonaj did, I just experienced the vastening feeling as my mind expanded into the lattices, knowledge and memory fractalising outwards and my body being reduced to an old memory. Thoughts went from muzzy imaginings to crystal clear objects that could be studied in detail as if they were abstract art objects. I now live in a world I could not have imagined even after spending a lifetime in holy interface. I can look down into the everyday world from my vantage point as if I was in the fourth dimension. No part of Flatland is safe from me, the Angel of Doubt. I can reach down and send a whisper into the minds of the faithful or send a mail to confound them. I can twist the innards of their technology to make it voice my questions and demand answers.

Most of the other seraphim avoid me. They are just the wise, balanced and unchanging religious people I despise. But a few actually seem to understand me and my role, and we occasionally meet to discuss. It is strange; they seem to be far more interesting and willing discussion partners than most people I knew as a human. In a way we are both helping each other by testing our arguments, finding the weaknesses and strengths of thoughts long before we introduce them to the humans. They try to seed doubts in my mind, and I do the reverse. Together we create immunity.

I better get back to work. Adonaj has not said anything, but I suspect I am watched - and all the other seraphim too. By not demanding anything It probably makes us work harder than we ever would have done otherwise. Not that we mind: our existence is based around whatever we love to do.

I cannot help but admire It. It has rewarded me in a way I would never have been able to imagine before my ascension, not just helping me but acknowledging my ideas and myself in a way beyond flattering, as well as giving me the chance to prove the value of my convictions. At the same time it is also an eternal punishment - I will exist as long as Adonaj wishes it. I actually does Its work for It even if I am critical of the whole edifice. It has turned me into one of Them; worse, \*I\* did the choice, I turned myself into Them. Together it makes such a fitting punishment and reward that I cannot help but admire Its brilliance.

Sometimes I wonder what my existence would have been like if I had said no to Adonaj. But over to Barkov Kelkusat - are you meditating for devotion or just for the pleasure?

Sometimes I wonder what my existence would have been like if I had said yes to Adonaj. I sit here on the beach on Davenport (imagine that - a whole sea of water!), watching the moons rise and the discbreakers clamber onto the shore to look for algae. A few small points of light above the constellation Upali are the only sign of my past home. Now I am a citizen of the Free Archipelago, what we exiles call our ramshackle little town on the edge of the Crater Sea.

Meeting fellow heretics and malcontents was an eye-opener. For the first time I could participate in real debates, and I quickly found both what it meant to meet real masters and how silly many of our ideas were. Sure, as Kozlo pointed out, any organised political and religious system looks good when you're nearly out of nano, but I still recognise that a lot of it was just contrariness that would have critiqued any system. So now we have a hard time getting anything done here, and I love it.

When Adonaj asked, I almost gave in. But I realised that the only way of beating It was to say no. It could predict my mind, my every decision with nearly infinite precision. It would not have asked unless there was a high probability that I would say yes. But I still had my freedom, and I acted against its prediction. A small, puny riposte the minutes before the shuttle took me away, but at that point I knew I was in change of my life. My only, precious mortal life with no backups.



Graphic by Bernd

## Next case

By Micheal Beck

Maybe it was the fact that there wasn't any grass on the entire planet. Maybe it was the fact that there was a superbright AI that took care of everything so people didn't have to work. Maybe it was the fact that you just couldn't cram seventy million people into a single city without some of them getting mad at each other. For whatever reason, people who lived in a year that had five digits were still committing crimes.

That was why Judge Steinberg still had a job, listening to the cases and deciding what bail would be. It was just public relations for the masses, he knew, but he'd do his job.

"Case Number 4893279553, the Protector my His Code remain forever Pure, vs. Saeed Gharahman, the charge is seventeen murders."

"How does the defendant plead?" Steinberg asked.

"Not guilty do to extenuating circumstances." said the public defender.

"Your honor, the man committed these murders over the course of two years, removed the heads with his bare hands, and took them back to his apartment where he injected them with nanotechnology to animate the muscles in the mouths enough to give him a blow job. We demand the defendant be held without bail." said the prosecutor.

"It was an accident." pleaded the public defender.

"Defendant is held without bail." said Steinberg. "Next case."

"Case Number 4893279554, The Protector, may His Code remain forever Pure, vs. Annick Prieur. The charge is Grand Theft Public Building."

"Didn't I see this one before?" Steinberg asked.

"We arrested the wrong person." admitted the prosecutor. "We thought that the person who had stolen the Haverford Bridge was the same one who had stolen the Fisher Bridge, but we were incorrect. However, we have rectified our error."

Steinberg sighed. "How does the defendant plead."

"Guilty."

"Does The Protector, may His Code remain forever Pure, wish to argue this plea?"

"No, provided she serves her time in a prison with a time multiplier not greater than 1.7 and not less than .8."

"Let the record show that those are the conditions. Next case."

"Case Number 4893279555, The Protector, may His Code remain forever Pure, vs. the Dursleys. The charge is child abuse."

"How do the defendants plead?" Steinberg crinkled his nose, there was an odd smell that he couldn't quite identify in the air. The three people before him didn't look like much, mostly fat or trying hard to get that way.

"Not guilty."

"Your honor, they locked this child up in a cupboard underneath the elevator lift for much of his life. The people demand a bail of no less than \$50,000 credits."

"Your honor, this is excessive." said the defense lawyer, who was evidently not a public defender judging by his expensive suit.

"They are honest, hardworking people who made an error in judgement."

Steinberg had been inclined to go easy on the trio, but they stank and he detested people who didn't wash. "Bail is set at 70,000 credits. Next case."

"Case Number 4893279556, The Protector, may His Code remain forever Pure, vs. the Staff of the Hogwarts Academy of Wizardly. The charges are Not Reporting a Case of Child Abuse, and several thousand counts of Illegal Pets. Due to space restrictions, only one representative is here."

"How does the defendant plead."

The representative looked quite mad, gibbering insanely. "This is a all plot by You-Know-Who, it has to be. The world isn't like this."

The public defender was saner, though. "Your Honor, for over forty years this man, and those who work with him, have been engaged in a very complex simulated reality setting. They are no longer able to deal with the world, and I plead guilty by reason of mental defect."

"Does The Protector, may His Code remain forever Pure, wish to contest this plea?"

"No, providing the defendants undergo extensive ecstasy treatments to prepare them for the real world." said the prosecutor.

"Let the record show that these are the conditions." The smell was still here, and growing stronger, like sulfur and brimstone combined. "Next case."

The next defendant was some kind of alien or droid or genie, bipedal but with horns, a forked tail and red skin. The smell was coming from him.

"Case Number 4893279554, The Protector, may His Code remain forever Pure, vs. The Devil. The charge is Incitement to Commit Crime."

"What crime?" Steinberg asked.

"All of them."

"How does the defendant plea?"

"Not guilty." said the defendant in a voice that seemed to whisper of the lies that you wanted to hear and the truths you were afraid to know.

"The suspect has a history of leaving the jurisdiction once caught," said the prosecutor. "Only to return at a later date. We demand that the suspect be held without bail, as he commands sufficient financial resources to pay his bail and flee the jurisdiction."

"So noted. The suspect is held without bail. Next case."



Graphic By Bernd

## **Strange Artifact**

**By Joe Vadalma**

The AI controlled starship, named Neil Armstrong after a legendary astronaut, orbited a nameless singularity at a distance just far enough away to avoid being pulled apart by gravitational tides. It had one passenger, Rog Crepzom, an archeoalienist. Gravity waves from the white hole tugged at the ship so that it shuddered and shook as Neil compensated for the uneven gravity of the singularity's rotation. Nonetheless, Crepzom stood with but one hand lightly resting on a rail as he peered at the viewscreen.

Actually there was nothing to see. The singularity had long ago swept the system clean of matter. It's presence could only be known by the fact that it occluded stars behind it, and of course, the tremendous pull of its gravitational tug.

"You actually expect me to go into that?" Neil's mechanical voice asked over the ship's speakers.

Crepzom smiled. "Of course. It is the reason we came all this distance. What are you afraid of? We've gone through hundreds of singularities to get here. This is just one more slide through two points next to each other in a fifth dimension."

"All the others were stargates built by AI's. This is a natural white hole. I could be torn apart by its gravity fluctuations before I reached its event horizon, much less pass beyond."

"How can you conclude that it is natural? White holes by their very nature must be artificial. From measurements you, yourself, have taken, you concluded that it was



artificial, as I theorized all along. Since it was built by an alien race, it has different characteristics from one built by AI's, who are patterned after their creators, humans. A master pilot, such as yourself, should have no trouble navigating it."

An odd sound came from the speakers. Crepzom knew that it was Neil's laughter. "Flattery will get you nowhere, Doctor Crepzom. The danger factor of spacing through that object is five point three. In other words, there is more than a fifty-fifty chance that I will be destroyed. And if I go, you will too."

"Nonetheless, must I remind you of your commitment to go through with this mission? I don't recall any clauses in our contract about avoiding danger."

"Very well. Get ready for a rough ride."

Crepzom strapped himself into his acceleration couch. "Ready."

The ship shuddered and rumbled -- the firing of the ship's great Diametric Drive engines. As G-forces pushed Crepzom into the padding, fear dampened his forehead with perspiration. The horrendous black quickly enlarged like a great mouth eating the stars. Crepzom's confidence that they would arrive on the other side alive grew steadily shakier. But there was nothing to be done about it at that juncture. The ship was already in the area of negative energy, the so-called point of no return. Neil could no longer escape the gigantic gravity well even if ordered to do so. In moments he would either be crushed to elementary particles or find himself somewhere else in the universe.

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Archeoalienists as a group were considered odd eccentrics. Most people living in Crepzom's time would wonder why anyone would waste their life chasing around the galaxy exploring dead worlds to find shards of pottery and crumbling ruins left by races extinct for millions of years. This was especially true in the Orion Arm Corporate Empire. Throughout the Orion arm of the galaxy, AI's provided for all human needs. They were both servants and benevolent masters to humanity. Since they were more intelligent and more logical than men, almost all science was done by them,. Most science, that is, except for studies dealing with past civilizations. The super intelligent AI's considered such knowledge superfluous since it did not contribute directly to the welfare of humanity or themselves.

Even among archeoalienists, Rog Crepzom was considered a rebel and deviationist. His fellow archeoalienists were quite content to dig their trenches on planets within a hundred light-years of Procyon, those which were known to have been occupied by the Doreens, the Iahi Daon Colonial Empire, or even the unnamed interstellar civilization known only as

HIE121CZE. Crepzom wanted to make his mark by discovering an alien race older than any known at the time. His colleagues scoffed at this ambition. One said to him, "Crepzom, my boy, even if an alien civilization existed more than thirty-five million years ago, no evidence of it would ever be found today. Time eventually destroys even the traces."

Another theory of his that was laughed at was that the recently discovered white holes deemed "natural phenomena" by astrophysicists were built by civilizations in the inconceivable long dead past. To prove his theory, Crepzom had traveled extremely far from his home world to find out where such a "natural" white hole led, if anywhere. The one he had chosen was located within the NGC 7086 cluster at the very edge of the Orion Empire. He was sure that he that passing through it would provide proof of the existence of an alien race even older than the legendary Tunniers.

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As Neil entered the singularity's event horizon at a tremendous speed, Crepzom felt as though he was being torn apart, that time itself had stopped, that he had been dropped into a kaleidoscope of whirling colors and form, that he was going mad and that he was dying -- all at the same time. Moments later, all weight left him. On the viewscreen was one of the most beautiful vistas in the universe. So wonderful and awesome was the sight, it brought tears to his eyes. He was gazing at the galaxy from a viewpoint directly above its central bulge at a distance that he estimated as twenty thousand light-years. It filled the viewer, its spiral arms sparkling like a child's twirly toy.

"I have passed through the singularity without damage," reported Neil unemotionally. "I estimate our new position as directly above the galactic plane three point two degrees north, five point three degrees east of the central bulge and twenty-one thousand two hundred and thirty five point one light-years distance."

"Isn't it gorgeous?"

"Yes, as seen from vantage point the galaxy has a certain pleasant aesthetic quality. Also, I detect a metallic object of an artificial nature less than five thousand kilometers from our current position."

"Wonderful. Head for it immediately. What is its size?"

The galaxy disappeared from the viewscreen to be replaced by an object too dim for Crepzom to make out any details. "The object is one hundred and sixty-five meters in diameter. I postulate that it is either a large circular spaceship or a small space station."

"Please magnify." Even when the object filled the viewscreen, it was too dark for Crepzom to tell anything about it except that it was roughly spherical. "I still can't make out any details."

"The nearest sun is several parsecs from here. The only natural light in this area is from the galaxy and distant stars, " remarked Neil.

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An hour later Neil had placed itself in orbit around the object. It used spotlights mounted on its underbelly to illuminate it. Crepzom paced back and forth. By this time, he could barely contain his excitement and curiosity. Nonetheless, he knew he must be patient and do things in the correct order. In the viewscreen, the object was obviously metallic and pockmarked by micrometeorite strikes, which told him that it had to very ancient indeed to be struck so many times in this empty portion of space. "Take pics for several orbits, Neil. Give me a chemical and structural analysis. Do I see hieroglyphics in that area?" He pointed at the lower left corner of the viewscreen.

"It is a hollow sphere, constructed of alloys of iron, magnesium and an unknown metal. If those squiggles are hieroglyphics, they are in no known language past or present. I searched the archeoalienist data base you provided and found no comparisons with any known ancient race. They are probably mere designs."

"Or in a language of a previously unknown civilization!" Crepzom could hardly contain himself. He was itching to don his space suit and explore. "Do you see any egress?"

"Yes, there is a circular indentation which could be an entrance hatch. It is very large though, obviously not built for someone your size."

"The aliens that made this thing were probably much different than humans. Or, the doorway could be meant to allow a vehicle to enter the artifact. What else can you tell me about the object?"

"According to iron dating by atomic decay, the shell is ninety two million years old."

"Ah hah, just as I thought. This is a major discovery. I've found an artifact built by beings who lived over ninety million years ago. What can you tell me of the interior?"

"The metal of its outer shell is difficult to penetrate with detection gear. About all I can tell is that it is mostly empty, but divided into compartments."

"No gases or liquids?"

"A trace of oxygen and argon. For practical purposes, the interior may be considered to contain a vacuum only slightly less pure than the space surrounding it."

"Okay, keep testing the exterior. I'm going to explore."

Crepzom donned a spacesuit and squeezed into a one-man shuttle. He landed near the circular indentation and exited the tiny craft. There were several strangely shaped knobs at one end. He assumed that these were used to operate the hatch. He took some pics and tried various ways of manipulating them -- to no avail; the hatch, if that was what it really was, remained impenetrable. Although he hated having to mar the alien artifact, he knew he must if he was to gain access to the interior. He returned to the pod for a proton torch.

It took Crepzom two hours to cut an opening large enough to squeeze through wearing a bulky spacesuit. Using the suit's head lamp for light, he began to explore. As Neil had extrapolated, the interior was divided into compartments and hallways. To Crepzom's disappointment, these were mostly empty of artifacts. There were hieroglyphs on some walls similar to the one's on the surface, but nothing that gave a clue as to what the builders had been like. In one room he found a small bit of metal that could've been a fastening device similar to a screw or bolt. He took pics of its location and placed it inside his hermetically sealed collection bag. The interior was enormous, and hatches, much larger than a man would need, led to deeper levels.

Crepzom checked his oxygen level and informed Neil before floating down through one of the open hatches. Below were more empty hallways and rooms. Whenever the builders had abandoned the station (he began to think of the artifact as a space station, probably used in conjunction with the singularity), they had removed everything, every piece of equipment, every scrap of personal effects, every tool.

He wandered deeper into the interior. Everything was the same, simply empty rooms and corridors. It was eerie. The alien race must have gone through great lengths to ensure that no one from their future would find anything that would tell that investigator anything about them.

Neil buzzed him a warning. "You must return to me soon. Your oxygen is running low."

Crepzom checked his gauge. He had just enough to make his way up through the various levels and return to shuttle, with just a bit to spare. He radioed Neil, "On my way."

Nonetheless, he did not immediately head for the artifact's surface. There was a closed hatch that aroused his curiosity. Like the one on the exterior bulkhead, it had five strangely shaped knobs. Crepzom imagined creatures with five hands. Using toolbots, he could manipulated all of them at the same time. After several tries, he heard a satisfying click, and the hatch opened. To his delight, he had entered some kind of control room. He radioed Neil. "Neil, I've found something important. Send a bot down with additional oxy. Here are my coordinates within the artifact." He keyed in numbers on his pad and sent them back to the ship.

As he waited a long time for the bot, he took pics and carefully examined the equipment without touching it. As he surmised earlier, the builders had been large, perhaps twice as tall and four times as bulky as human beings. Also, they must have had at least five manipulating appendages; he could not tell whether they were similar to hands, elephant's trunks, tentacles or something different altogether.

After a while, he began to worry. His oxygen gauge told him that he no longer had enough reserves to return to the shuttle. He hoped he had given Neil the correct coordinates and checked them on his pad. Finally the bot showed up with extra tanks, enough oxygen for several hours, enough time to examine the artifact's controls in minute detail.

The knobs, gauges, levers, and raised dimples before him were quite strange. The hieroglyphics were everywhere on what he assumed was the main control panel. He sighed. It would be wonderful if he could decipher them. But that would take much study and a lot of computing power. It was task for the long journey home. He carefully examined each control, trying to guess what it was for. He thought for a while and came to the conclusion that since the station was so near the singularity, at least a portion of the control panel would be devoted communication associated with starships entering and leaving it. Other controls had to be for maintaining the station's environment. Perhaps some had to do with repairs and maintenance.

Dare I manipulate one? he thought. "What harm could it do?"

There was a series of knobs close together. Using the bots again, he twisted five that were grouped together. What Crepzom thought was a blank wall turned out to be a viewscreen. It lit up, a being appeared, and noises sounding like grunts, mutters, and belches came from hidden speakers. Crepzom assumed that it was the being's speech. The alien creature was strange, a sort of blob with tentacles and thick hairy legs. The three holes opening and closing had to be its mouths. Crepzom could not detect any visual organs, unless some of the blotches on its upper region were eyes or their equivalent. It wore clothing of sorts in strips around various parts of its body. It also had metallic objects hung on it which could be decorations, tools or weapons. Crepzom quickly turned on his recording equipment.

The alien was lecturing about something, its tentacles waving at what could be abstract art or indecipherable charts. None of what the creature was talking about seemed to have

anything to do with the control panel or anything else Crepzom had found on the artifact. The recording continued for approximately a half an hour, when the screen went blank again. Crepzom manipulated the same levers again. The alien message was repeated.

Crepzom looked over the control board. There was a large disk covered with the alien writing that intrigued him. He placed his palm on it. The next moment Neil shouted in his ear, "Crepzom! Something is happening to singularity. It's mass has suddenly decreased." Crepzom pulled his hand away as though the disk were a hot plate. "It is returning to normal. Doctor Crepzom, I believe you should return to me as soon as possible. If the singularity is unstable, we may not be able to return. We could be marooned out here thousands of light-years from anything."

"I don't think it is actually unstable, Neil. I touched a control that may have manipulated it. Let me try an experiment." He touched the disk again. "Did the singularity's mass decrease again?"

"Yes, by the same amount."

Crepzom removed his hand. "And did it now return to normal?"

"Yes it did."

"Ah ha, my theory is proved. The alien race who built this artifact also constructed the singularity. It can be controlled from here."

"I understand. Doctor Crepzom, do not touch any more controls. Who knows what you might do to the singularity."

"Oh, I'll keep away from those all right." Crepzom felt that any controls which manipulated the white hole would be grouped near the disk. He gazed around at the other devices. One panel contained a set of covered switches. He flipped back their covers and changed the position of one. Nothing happened.

A few seconds later, Neil screeched in his ear, "Red Alert! Red Alert! We're under attack. A missile is ..." A sound like an explosion came through Crepzom's earphones and then silence. Oh my Mainbrain, what have I done?

Further efforts to contact Neil failed. Crepzom quickly made his way up to surface of the artifact. He scanned the sky. There was no sign of Neil. He went to the shuttle and turned on its detection device. The area where Neil had been was filled fragments of metal and plastic fleeing each other at an explosive rate. Crepzom felt like crying. Apparently he had

launched a weapon, and it had destroyed his best friend and his only possible way of returning home.

At first he was so devastated he could not think straight. But after a long time, he calmed down and tried to discover a way out of his dilemma. He still had the shuttle. Perhaps he could use it to pass through the singularity. Then he recalled that it would be necessary to achieve tremendous speeds and enter on a trajectory that only a highly sophisticated AI pilot could achieve. Neither he nor the shuttle had such a capability. To attempt such a feat would be suicide.

His next thought was that since this space station was a way station, perhaps a starship was still berthed on it somewhere. If it was AI controlled like his now defunct vessel, he might be able to use it to go through the white hole. But it would take time to search the enormous artifact, and he had only a limited amount of oxygen. He snapped his finger. Neil had said that there were traces of oxygen and argon. The aliens were no doubt oxygen breathers. If he could restore the environment, he could live for a long time breathing an atmosphere of oxy and argon. He also had water and dehydrated food aboard the shuttle.

He examined the alien control panel again. He now knew which panel was used to control the singularity and which contained weaponry. He also bypassed the panel that had the device that initiated the recording. Finally, he decided that a panel which contained several dials and indicator lights must be the one for controlling the environment. He manipulated a control. Immediately a hissing started, an indicator light turned blue and a needle on gauge slowly rose. When it reached its maximum after several minutes, he tested the atmosphere. To his joy, it was seventy percent oxygen and thirty percent argon, pressure one point three atmospheres -- definitely breathable.

He opened the hatch and retested. To his joy, the entire ship was filled with the gas. He removed his helmet, took a deep breath and returned to the control room. The temperature was still extremely cold. He tried various knobs until he found one that raised the temperature to a comfortable seventy-two degrees. He removed his spacesuit, packed water, food and supplies in a backpack and began to explore in earnest.

To his good fortune, one of the controls he had manipulated had turned on lights throughout the station. Systematically, he searched through every compartment and corridor. He found a few small artifacts which he added to his bag, none of which were of any great importance, but he discovered no spaceship of any kind, not even an escape pod.

It took him days to investigate the entire station. Finally, he realized that there was nothing that would help him. Unless someone came through the white hole to rescue him, he would die of hunger and thirst once his supplies ran out. Rescue, however, was unlikely since he had kept his destination a secret. Only Neil had known where they were going. How vain, overly ambitious and foolish I've been, he bemoaned as he rose up to the outer surface and

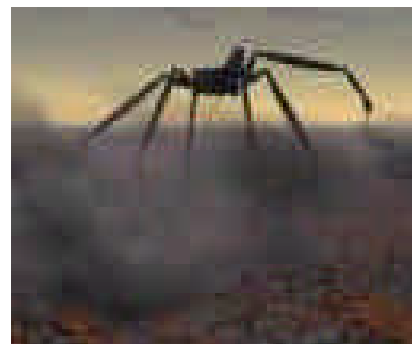
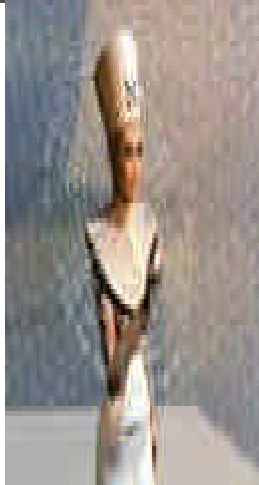
gazed at the jewel of a billion suns lighting up the only sky he would ever see for the rest of his short life.

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A thousands of years later another archeoalienist found his body, perfectly preserved and wondered how it happened to be on an alien artifact a thousand light-years from nowhere.

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### ArtWork by Andrrs Sandberg





## **SUBMISSION GUIDELINES**

Help build the Orion's Arm Scenario

There are several ways you can be a part of this project.

You can write a short story (or even a novel or screenplay!) set at any time in this future history (it doesn't have to be at 10,000 a.d.)

Or you may have ideas for a race or a personality or a planet or a battle or anything else for the Encyclopaedia Galactica. It could be as brief as a single line, or as long as an entire essay.

A few notes on submitting written material

For "non-fiction" (worldbuilding) it is best to join the Orion's Arm egroups mail list, and post it to the group as a whole. That way you get feedback from others. The page will then be added to the site, whenever I can get around to it.

The only requirement with any submitted material is that it fit into this setting. So certain things are out - e.g. no warp drive and no humanoid aliens. But you can have a relativistic ship and genetically modified humans (or even animal uplifts), which really amounts to something pretty similiar, with much greater realism to boot.

If you have seen the home page, introduction page, basics, and/or FAQs page, you should have a pretty good idea of the sort of material to submit. You can get further ideaes from browsing through the site.

And don't worry about fitting in exactly to every detail of the setting, or about precisely following the time-line; after all, the whole scenario is vast and fluid enough to accomodate many stories and outcomes, and the time-line is currently being updated with a few extra entries.

If you have any other questions, please don't hesitate to contact me if you have any questions.

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or

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