InterText

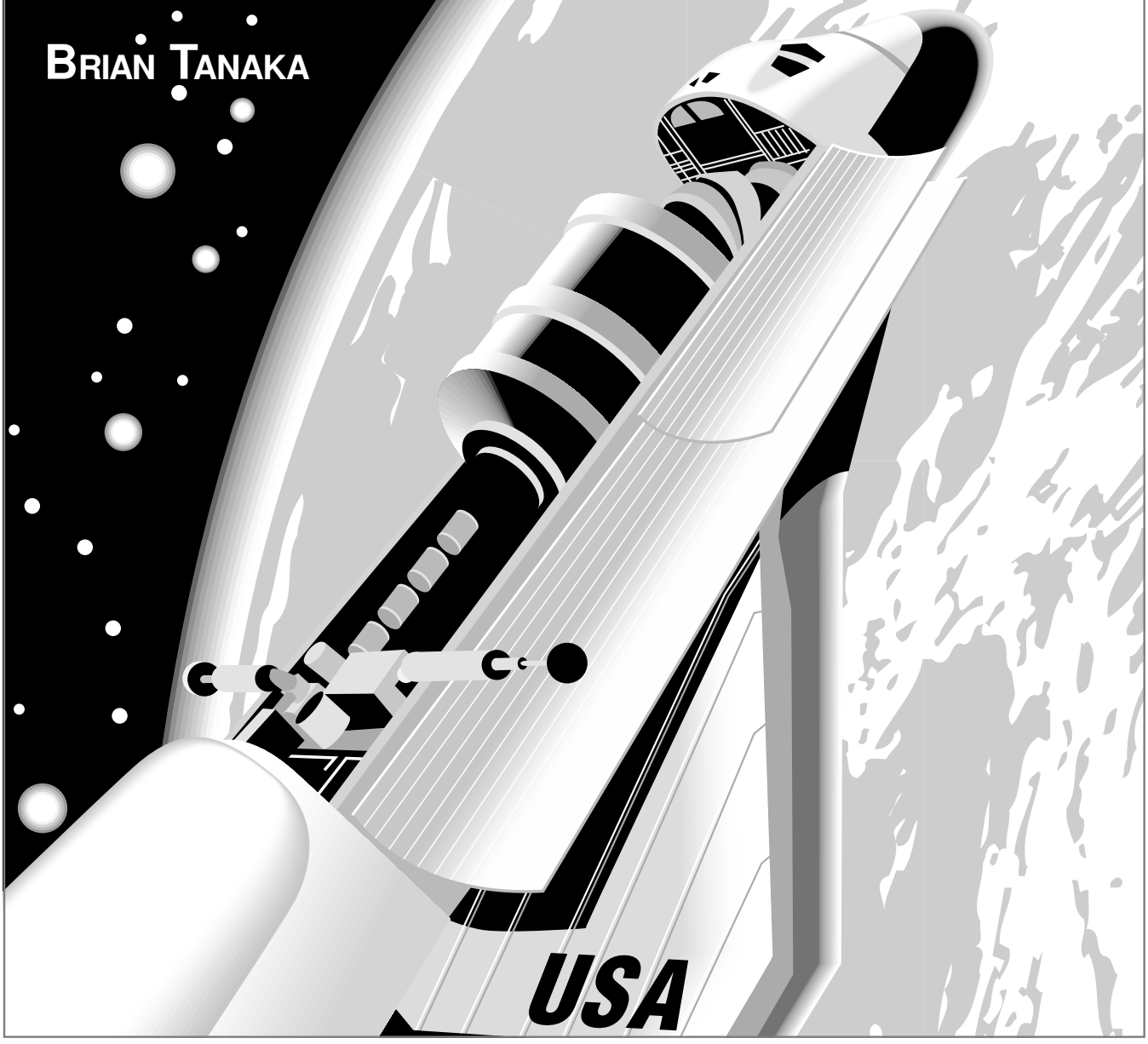
WARREN ERNST

JEFF ZIAS

KEN ZUROSKI

BRIAN TANAKA

Vol. 2, No. 4
July–August 1992



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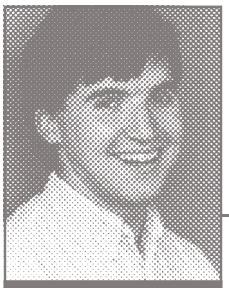
Our next issue is scheduled for September 1, 1992.



JASON SNELL

FirstText

Where Are They Now?

This issue of *InterText* is a milestone of sorts — this marks the final time I'll be writing to you (and assembling this magazine) from San Diego, where I started this thing.

I'm done with my undergraduate education at UC San Diego, and it's time to move on. But before I leave here, I thought I'd use this column to mention the names of a few people who have been involved with this magazine, and mention what they're up to now.

The first issue's cover artist, Jeff Quan, left UCSD last year for a job at the *Stockton Record* newspaper. He is now the resident Macintosh Graphics Expert (and a staff illustrator, too) at the much larger *Oakland Tribune* newspaper. Jeff's been quite a success since his departure from San Diego; I can only hope that he's not the only one.

The cover artist for the balance of our issues, Mel Marcelo, doesn't have a job lined up yet, but he has completed his work at UCSD and will no doubt have a great job by the fall. Mel has also had graphics in just about every issue of *U. — The National College Newspaper* this year, and will have a big graphic in *U.*'s summer orientation issue, sent out to all the incoming college freshmen in the United States. (As a sidelight, a column by your humble editor is also in there, and I will likely be a contributor to *U.* from Berkeley.)

One of our main contributors for the first three issues of *InterText* was Greg Knauss, a person described by his "about the author" blurb as being "loopy as a loon." (I might mention here that most "about the author" blurbs are written by the authors themselves — but I chose to write goofy little blurbs about Greg myself. He didn't appreciate it, I think.)

Anyway, Greg graduated from UCSD last year and is now *greg@duke.quotron.com* — yes, he's put his degree in Political Science (with an emphasis on Political Theory) to work as a programmer for Quotron, Inc., where he can be a Political Science major surrounded by Computer Science majors… Greg's still loopy as a loon, but his new job has pretty much drained all of the time he used to spend on hanging around my office, wasting time, and writing goofy stories like the ones we printed in *InterText.*

Philip Michaels, author of last issue's "Your Guide to High School Hate," was recently elected as the 1992-93 opinion editor of *The UCSD Guardian.* I wish him the best luck in the coming year.

You will notice that the name of Phil Nolte, my sometime Assistant Editor, disappeared from our staff box last issue. Phil's large workload and tenuous network connection makes it impossible for him to do the volume of work that Geoff Duncan does for the magazine. When Phil's workload eases or his computer link changes, we may see him back to that position. As it is, I'm going to refer to him as a "contributing editor," a venerated position in magazines, reserved for only the most revered.

Geoff Duncan, my Assistant Editor and a person who should be credited with doing a *vast* amount of work on this magazine, has wrapped up his year-long job at Oberlin College's computer lab and is now hoping to hook on with a computer company located on the West Coast. (Gee, aren't most of them?) As a result, his electronic mail address will disappear for awhile, though he can still be contacted through me. Hopefully by next issue both Geoff and I will be ensconced in our new locales, ready to go.

This issue is dated July-August 1992, so it may be a bit of a mystery as to why it's coming out in mid-June. The answer is simple — it's an attempt by me (and I think it helps Geoff, too) to get *InterText* done before I move about 500 miles away from the nearest UCSD ethernet dial-up line. While I'll still be dialing in, uploading the massive *InterText* files is a chore I'd rather not to from far away.

Our next issue is very tentatively planned for September, though unforeseen circumstances could put that off. I've yet to discover what classes I'll be taking in the fall, or where I'll be living, or just what kind of computer access I'll get at UC Berkeley. As a result, we'll just have to play it all by ear. But one way or another, you'll be seeing a Vol. 2, No. 5 of *InterText* come fall.

In two days, I'll pack all of the possessions that I've accumulated over the past three years into a truck. The day after that, I'll spend two hours in the sun, sitting through my graduation ceremony. And the day after that, I'll make the arduous 500-mile drive northward, to home.

It will be a drive through the high deserts of eastern Los Angeles county, through fertile San Joaquin Valley farmland, cities like Bakersfield and Fresno, and, eventually, to a tiny town nestled in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada mountain range. The place where I grew up, far away from the place where I've made good friends, done a lot of work, grown quite a bit — and started an interesting little computer magazine.

No doubt things will change with you, too, between now and the next time we meet. We'll be back here, electronically speaking, in a few months. Until then, I wish you well.

JASON SNELL has graduated *cum laude* and Phi Beta Kappa from the University of California, San Diego, with a B.A. in Communication and a minor in Literature/Writing. He will work as an intern at his hometowm newspaper, Sonora's *Union Democrat* this summer, and will attend UC Berkeley's Graduate School of Journalism beginning in August. He writes this biography blurb at the end of his column both to fill space and to allow readers to ignore these lapses into egotism.

One Person's Junk...

WARREN ERNST

"And this is the third time I've put in a request for more DNA. My sample will completely degenerate in less than a week!" Faye started to raise her voice as small droplets of saliva flew from her teeth and clung to her comm panel. "Just because I'm here doesn't mean that I have any less priority for raw materials than anyone else!"

Her next sentence might have begun, "And another thing…" if her Hypno-Chip hadn't cut in and swept her away.

"Sleep now…" it whispered into her auditory nerve, still monitoring her. Faye's adrenaline level and pulse rate were slightly below activation levels, but this time her brainwaves set the small silicon wafer off. *"You're now feeling very comfortable, very warm, very safe, very relaxed. With every breath you can just feel yourself getting more and more relaxed, falling deeper and deeper into a soothing, relaxed state…"*

While orderlies quickly ushered themselves into Faye's room, the Hyp-Chip continued to soothe her. *"While in this comfortable state, you find it easy to imagine yourself doing anything, anywhere you wish."* The orderlies picked up Faye's limp body. *"I want you to imagine yourself resting in a comfortable, wide hammock, strung between two great oaks, on top of a rolling, green hill. As you look up, you can see the warm breeze shifting the branches above you, causing yellow rays of sunlight to shine down onto your face."*

"I wonder what got 'er that time?" asked one orderly gently to the other. "My money's on alpha waves. She was startin' to get steamed there."

"Doesn't surprise me," said the other. "You've gotta be *real* uptight to get the Nobel at this age." He chuckled quietly, reaching as if to touch Faye intimately. They both knew that while she was under hypnosis, they could shake her silly and she wouldn't "awaken," but it was difficult to dispel the impression that Faye was simply asleep. *After all,* the orderly thought, *it* looks *like she was just napping.*

Faye relaxed on her hammock, smelling the delightful spring air. Baby birds chirped in a nest above her, singing, she could swear, "Row, Row, Row Your Boat."

From someone very close by, she heard *"Just above, you see that there are exactly 100 leaves."* She could see them all. *Of course,* she thought, *one hundred. "Now I want you to count them down, starting from 100, and as you count each leaf, you will feel ten times more relaxed than before, all the way down to one. Let's begin… 100… 99…"*

Faye awoke gently, finding herself on a new bed, but one made up with her old sheets. The wallpaper seemed different too.

I hadn't done any of the rooms with this, she thought. She slowly lifted herself off her bed and stepped to the window, throwing the switch from opaque to clear. She wanted to simply look *out*, and maybe see, oh, rolling hills and trees, maybe some birds too.

Instead she saw the institution, its low, beige buildings sprawling every which way, with only a patch of grass here and there. More disquieting to Faye, however, were the bars.

"What are bars doing here? Where am I? Phil!"

She glanced about the room, and heard a scream come from somewhere. And another scream. Then in rushed an alarmed man wearing a white lab coat. Not her Philip, she thought, but he seemed very familiar. Doctor someone or other.

He grasped her shoulders tightly.

"Who am I?" he politely demanded.

"Why, you're Doctor—" She searched for a name tag. Her eyes kept scanning him, settling on his lapel, "Ross?"

"Damn," he muttered, running his fingers through his dark hair, "it did it again. Faye. I want you to listen very closely and very carefully. OK? Are you ready? 'Command: Umdez.' "

"Your name is Faye Harrower, geneticist," he firmly said, removing the name tag. "You are being treated at The Methany Institute and recovering from a nervous breakdown you suffered seven months ago. My name is Dr. James Chandly." Dr. Chandly saw a glint of recognition in Faye's eyes, as if it were all coming back to her, and let out a deep breath. "Do you remember, Dr. Harrower?"

"Doctor, I am trying to retain my composure as best I can," she said, "but that's the third time this week that Hyp-Chip decided to step out for lunch and leave me in limbo. For the third time in as many days I woke up thinking I was still home, but some colorblind idiot redecorated the place. And this is the third time I've impressed upon the project my need for more DNA. They haven't told you anything, have they?" she said, lightening her tone. "They must know by now how low… they must know… they…"

Faye felt the stinging of tears against the insides of her eyes, and she blinked, hard. *Cool down,* she thought, *get control. You don't need to nap on the hammock again so soon.* She took a deep breath, letting the furrows on her brow smooth. A new angle of attack occurred to her, and she said softly, "Didn't you say that working on the project was good for me, Dr. Chandly? Maybe — maybe you could say something for me? Maybe cut through some red tape?"

"Well, I have thought about rattling some terminals for you; I think I could speed some things along. Let me see what I can do." He smiled warmly to her, and started to leave her room.

"And the chip," she asked, "can you do something about it? Get me a new one, perhaps?" She scratched behind her ear, as if she might affect it by touching the skin covering it.

Dr. Chandly looked thoughtful for a moment, leaning against the door. His hand went for his chin, as if he was

stroking the beard he used to have. "I think you're ready for something a little less heavy-handed. I'll have it reprogrammed tonight. It will let you relax wherever you want for however long you want using your memories as backdrop. This one won't leave you fuzzy afterward. All right?"

She nodded slightly, withholding a supreme feeling of accomplishment behind her small smile. *This is a real sign of improvement,* she thought, *the first in a long time.*

"Oh, and one more thing, Dr. Harrower. You *do* know about Philip, don't you? You do remember what the situation is?"

"What? Oh, yes. Did I call out for Mr. Harro— um, him just now?" *That bastard, that son of a bitch,* she thought, trying to suppress a sudden trembling in the pit of her stomach. *How could Phil, after 23, um, 22 years, up and do that to me?* She sat down on her firm bed, her smile now noticeably gone. "Yes, I remember. Thank you, Doctor."

Her door closed, and she heard it latch shut and lock. And she cried.

Fresh DNA arrived from the Human Genome Mapping Project coordinator herself, or at least from her office. A long letter of apology was transcribed for Faye, but as with all Faye's contact with the outside, it was screened and in this case, heavily edited. Faye never saw the point of this concerning messages of a technical or official nature, and it seemed to her that this note from the Coordinator was both.

"CLAUDE," Faye asked in the direction of her computer, "are you sure you can't get the original text of this letter displayed?"

CLAUDE, for its part, tried to requisition a copy of the original letter from COREY, Methany's central computer core, but COREY had the final word in these matters, and if the letter was for Faye, the word was "no."

"Access denied, Doctor. It is not permissible for you to view the original letter, by order of Dr. Chandly and the rest of the staff. Would you like to see the edited version again?"

"No, that's all right, CLAUDE." Faye grinned inwardly, glad that there was at least some recognition of her professional title once in a great while, even if only from a stupid computer. "It was only something like 'Sorry for the mix-up, blah-blah, I appreciate your contribution to the Project, blah-blah, I'm very happy that you can personally complete the Harrower Rung after all, blah-blah, Get well soon, blah-blah, Maybe something interesting will show up in your Rung, blah-blah, Sincerely, Janice Brooke, blah-blah-blah-blah.'"

"To what letter are you referring?" asked CLAUDE, "There have been no letters that you have read which contained the expression 'blah-blah.' In fact, Dr. Chandly has never transcribed those words before."

Such a bland computer, Faye thought, sighing. *My personal model has much more personality, even had the makings of a sense of humor thanks to Phil… damn. I sure could use him — CHIP, I mean. Phil can rot in Hell.* "Never mind, CLAUDE. Are you up to getting back to the rung?"

"We may continue sequencing your rung in twelve minutes, which is when the new genetic material will be fully immersed and the bare DNA liberated," CLAUDE reported. Somewhere in one of Methany's laboratories, technicians prepared the new batch for analysis, placing the pod cradling the genetic material into the scanning sequencer, which fed raw information into CLAUDE, which in turn fed filtered information to Faye. Or so CLAUDE informed Faye as it occurred.

"All right, are we ready to go yet?" she asked fifteen minutes later. Faye always liked to keep herself busy, and here at Methany, these were the only two hours a day she could. Doctor's orders.

"Yes, the matrix has assimilated properly," said CLAUDE. "We may proceed, Doctor."

"Very good," sighed Faye. "Now where were we? Oh, at RungStart plus 410,211. CLAUDE, throw up visual display beta and start spinning the sequencer."

And so work continued on Faye's section of the human genome, her "rung" it was called, as in the rung of a ladder. That's all the DNA was, a molecules-thick ladder, except that in the human genome, the ladder had three billion steps. Each "step" was a nucleotide base pair, every three a codon, every 20 to 200 a gene, every several thousand or so a genetic trait, and every million a Rung. Each geneticist on the Project was responsible for mapping out their Rung, and after the 3000 Rungs were complete, presumably all there would be to know about humanity's DNA would be known, all the codes decoded, all the mysteries solved.

Obviously entire chromosomes were cut to pieces, there only being 42 of them in humans, but occasionally Rungs had within them the whole code for something substantial. In her Rung, Faye found the mechanism whereby hair loosens and falls out at a given length, the procedure to make red blood cells, and all the code for a functional sixth finger, although that one went very recessive maybe a hundred thousand years ago. Sometimes the small tidbits of information like these made the project seem interesting, worthwhile; it broke down the tedium of having to sort through a million repetitive chemical bonds.

"Okay," started Faye, "so that pair's a T, then an A, and then a G — another Stop Codon. What's it look like to you, CLAUDE?"

To CLAUDE, it resembled a Thymine-adenine pair, followed by an Adenine-thymine, and a Guanine-cytosine after that. However, CLAUDE could only be 99.4% certain of its interpretation of the data, hence the reason for any human involvement in the project at all. Assuming this codon was a T-A-G, then Faye's conclusion matched CLAUDE's; this string of genetic code would, in fact, end here. "Yes, I concur, Doctor. This is a Stop Codon, ending the sequence of amino acids producing phenzotase. The total number of base pairs in the sequence is 624, beginning at RungStart plus 409,590 and—"

"Thank you, CLAUDE," Faye interrupted, "I'll ask you for the math when I need it." She wondered why CLAUDE did that, kept such careful track of irrelevant numbers and then reported them so earnestly. *Numbers have their place,* she thought, *and that's nowhere near me.*

"Okay, CLAUDE, start sequencing again, Display gamma, and stop when you find an A-T-G." She leaned back in her chair and waited. Generally, there was some noncoding intron, affectionately called Junk DNA, between the chunks of active DNA that actually translated into amino acids. The junk ended when a Start Codon, A-T-G, was found. Junk DNA averaged 300 base pairs long, but one chain of junk found in the Marshal Rung numbered more than 36,000.

After five minutes of reclining, Faye noticed the screen wink out, though CLAUDE's "thinking" indicator light flashed furiously, indicating a flurry of electronic activity. *Well, this intron's a lot bigger than average,* she thought.

After an hour of silent, though relaxed, pacing, Faye needed to talk. "Ummmmmm, CLAUDE, still sorting through the junk, huh?"

CLAUDE's screen jumped to life, though still quite devoid of information, and said, "That is correct Doctor. I have so far sequenced 12,060 base pairs without finding a Start Codon. Furthermore—"

"Wait just a minute, though. What are the odds you missed the Codon entirely, and are now running through active code?"

"In my present mode," answered CLAUDE, "the likelihood of this occurring is approximately 6,210,000 to one against." The "thinking" light blinked for a moment, then stopped, as CLAUDE awaited instruction.

"All right, I can live with those odds. You can keep sequencing through the night, can't you?" After all, she reasoned to herself, no point in wasting tomorrow's allotment of work-therapy time just sitting around checking over an endless line of junk.

This request was a new one for CLAUDE, but after consulting COREY it said, "That would be possible, but I cannot accurately estimate a time of completion."

"Just get to it, CLAUDE, and I'll get back to you tomorrow. Bye," she said, realizing that the day's interactive time was almost up. "Oh, can you summarize what you've found about this junk so far, and put it in some sort of chart or table, please?" Faye wondered why she'd asked so politely. She knew CLAUDE would comply instantly without complaining. *Chalk it up to a lack of staff,* she thought.

"Certainly, Doctor," CLAUDE said, displaying a summary on screen, "Goodnight."

But this is wrong, she thought, studying the screen. *This couldn't be; CLAUDE must have goofed something up. Where are all the C's in this thing?* Faye had already shut down CLAUDE for the day, so she was left to figure the math herself in her head.

Overall, she thought, *of the four base pair combinations A, T, G, and C, nothing more advanced than bacteria uses much more of one than another. In fact, after 22 Rungs, the level was something like 25 percent all around. And now here's this junk totally devoid of G's. In fact, the A's and C's are impossibly low too, each less than 5%. That leaves, oh my God, 90 percent T's. If CLAUDE is losing it, then the Rung won't get done for days while it gets debugged. Unless the sequencer is messed up.*

Faye froze in mid-thought. Everything about her ground down to a standstill, except for her pulse rate. *"Sleep now…"* she heard softly. *"As you enter this deeply relaxed state, you find that you are feeling very safe, very warm, and very comfortable…"* The Hyp-Chip continued to weave its web as orderlies ran through their routine, scooping Faye up gently, placing her on her bed, and quietly slipping out the door. *"In this state you can picture any scene and see yourself doing anything you want, either familiar and from memory or totally original…"*

Faye passed through her laboratory and into her office in the Bio-Engineering Department at UNYA, and the lights turned themselves on.

"Hi Faye. It's good to see you looking so well," declared CHIP, as its screen lit up. "It's Saturday, June 20th. You have new mail, a lot of it in fact, though most of it is garbage."

"Thanks, CHIP. I know, mail piles up after two weeks," Faye said. She felt good, real good, and ready to dive into the Human Genome Mapping Project again. She sat in her chair in front of CHIP, but it felt a little too big for her now. Her smile grew bigger. "You really think so, about me looking good?"

CHIP navigated through the system to Faye's electronic mailbox, and responded, "Well, you know I don't have any feelings in the matter per se, but, in terms of what you told me you wanted to have done to yourself, all of the procedures appear successful. You look like you've lost 40 pounds. The collegen and enzyme treatments have rejuvenized your skin. Your hair is once again dark brown, thick, and long. The repolymerizing of your tissue with the silca implants appears very natural. In every respect you look twenty-five years younger. Oh, by the way," CHIP added, "both your Polymer and Reconstructive Surgeons e-mailed to say that your tissue samples are all in the green, and that you can consider yourself completely finished with treatment."

"Well, that *is* good news," Faye responded. "Do you know what I did with the rest of the Nobel money? Wardrobe. Never had so much fun shopping before. I bought everything: new skirts, new shorts, new blouses, new slacks, of course new bras, and even new shoes, my sizes have changed so much. Know what, CHIP? I even bought some lycra and a knock 'em dead evening gown. I don't think anyone there would have believed I'll be 57 next month."

"Mazeltov, Faye. And they say money can't buy happiness. Do you want to read your mail now?"

"Okay, but just the important letters." Faye tried to get comfortable in her chair, but, like everything else, it just didn't fit her anymore. "Oh, can you requisition a new chair

from the University, something to handle a more svelte figure?"

"You got it. Here's the first relevant letter," announced CHIP, displaying it to the screen. It was from a friend, but its tone was all business and to the point. The gyne-genetic engineers could not de-integrate Faye's DNA into new haploid eggs, and while in the future the technology might exist to do so, Faye's menopause was, for the time being, permanent.

She closed her eyes, exhaled deeply through her nose, and placed her hand on her newly smoothed and flattened belly. *Damn,* she thought, *they were my last chance. Well, at least the rest of me is young again. Look at the bright side: ha-ha, no more stained underwear to worry about; my new panties are safe.* Faye tried to stop her grimacing, asking CHIP for the next letter, but a smile didn't come easy.

The next several letters were personal, and Faye's newfound enthusiasm didn't shine through at first, but by her fifth, she seemed as elated as when she first sat down.

"This last letter is interdepartmental, from the head honcho himself: Dr. Horner," said CHIP. "Want me to delete it?"

"No, better let me see what Jason has to say." *More fluff,* thought Faye, *a general morale booster, a new grad student Melinda someone-or-other is our newest intern… oh wait, a little something welcoming me back. At least it's nothing embarrassing.* "It says here that everyone else's rungs are getting sequenced pretty well. One of them is even done."

"Yep, though despite your absence, you've decoded more than most everyone," answered CHIP.

"That's because I enjoy it. And speaking of which, let's do a little work on the Rung before I go home. I think Phil's in for a surprise when he sees me now, a week ahead of time."

"I should say so, Faye. I'm firing up the sequencer now." Through the door from the lab, a machine growled to life, revving up to speed. "When you left we had come across some junk. It was sort of long-ish, and these first 453 base pairs are really unusual."

"Oh yeah, all those C's and that pattern after it," remembered Faye. "You make anything of it?"

"Yes, and you might find it interesting. That pattern after the C's doesn't code for anything biological, but maybe for something else. It's a set of prime numbers."

Inside herself miles away, Faye's Hyp-Chip, satisfied with its patient's current status, released her from its trance. Faye fell asleep without stirring.

Work continued on the Harrower Rung, after only a day's delay. Both CLAUDE and the sequencer checked out fine, and after surveying a section of the junk sequence personally, Faye felt that she wasn't chasing down a mere mistake, but something unusual, something worth studying further, an anomaly never before recorded in anyone else's Rung.

CLAUDE found a Start Codon after about 107,000 base pairs, making this the largest hunk of junk ever found, and that in itself warranted a further study. The first 400 and last 500 base pairs were all C's, something also never seen before.

"The likelihood of this occurring randomly is 1.6×10^{120} to one against," volunteered CLAUDE.

It's gotta be proud of itself when it does that, Faye thought; *there's no other reason for it.* She smiled and let CLAUDE indulge itself further, hoping the diversion would let a new hypothesis pop into her head.

"And the sequence between these beginning and ending numbers of Cytosine-guanine base pairs," continued CLAUDE, "is exactly 106,387 base pairs long, a Casidak number which—"

"What's that, a Casidak number? I've never heard that one before," piped Faye. She leaned forward in her chair as CLAUDE explained.

"A Casidak number is any number which factors into two and only two different prime numbers other than itself and 1, the smallest of which is 6, which factors into 3 and 2. In the case of 106,387, the factors are 557 and 191."

CLAUDE droned on about other Casidaks, primitive positive roots of Casidaks, and prime numbers in general. CLAUDE displayed the first several base pairs of the 106,387, and something about the sequence struck Faye as soon as CLAUDE said "Prime numbers are one of the few abstract mathematical principles understood by most primitive cultures."

"T-A-T-A-A-T-A-A-A-T-A-A-A-A-A-T-A-A-A-A-A-A-A-A-A, that doesn't code for any useful amino acid chain," Faye mumbled, thinking aloud. "But, oh my God, those right there are some prime numbers! A whole bunch of them, right CLAUDE? Look at this set right here," she said raising her voice in excitement and touching the screen, "there's 1 A, then 2, then 3, then 5, and then 7 A's, you see the pattern, don't you?"

"Yes, I do," CLAUDE replied. "The chance of this sequence randomly occurring are approximately 2.6—"

"Fine, fine, fine, CLAUDE, I get the picture." Faye didn't want any more huge numbers breaking her chain of thought. "There's a greater chance of me getting run over by a hoverbus than this happening completely by chance, apparently, okay, okay. Does this, uh, pattern occur at any other point in the junk?"

CLAUDE's thinking light flashed as it surveyed the junk. "No, Doctor, this is the only such arrangement in the junk sequence," it answered. "And to what hoverbus are you referring?"

"Never mind about the hoverbus, CLAUDE. There is no hoverbus. I wasn't talking to you anyway — and don't ask me who I was talking to, got it? Ok, how do you account for these—" *How would I classify this anyway?* Faye thought. *There's no set category for this kind of code.* "—unusual sections, the C's and the primes?"

"I am not capable of answering that question, Doctor,

due to a lack of data," CLAUDE answered mechanically, "however I can offer some suggestions which you may conclude upon."

"All right. Fire away, CLAUDE."

Faye ambled around her room, brushing dust off her newly acquired knick-knacks, while shooting down possible explanations much faster than CLAUDE could send them her way. After about 20 suggestions, Faye was glancing through her photo album.

"Recombinant obligate intracellular parasites?"

"A virus? That could account for the phenomenon, but not the actual sequence. This stuff wouldn't code for anything useful to a virus." She turned a page.

"Extreme missense mutation?"

"Nope. That might re-write a section of DNA, but the resulting pattern would be just as random as the original." Faye smiled, thinking of the story behind that photo of the stripper her co-workers got for her surprise birthday party. *God, was I over the hill then,* she thought, sighing.

"Errors in Okazaki Fragment placement from DNA ligase?"

"Possible for small repeating fragments, but certainly not for a couple hundred C's or those primes. And besides, this sequence isn't just in one human's sample; it's everyone's." Faye looked up from her album, still remaining seated. "That's one of the reasons why the Human Genome Mapping Project exists; the samples The Project distributes are representative, a collection of DNA from tens of thousands of people. Individual differences are a moot point. You're talking about things that affect just an individual's DNA; not a whole species', not all of mankind's."

"Any one of these conditions might have occurred some time ago," responded CLAUDE. "The older the genetic modification, the more representative it would be today. It is a simple matter of inherited traits, or in this case, genes."

"Can you break down the sample, CLAUDE, determine what percentage of it has this junk?" *Maybe we can see how far back this junk came to be,* she thought. Faye settled back down into her chair, slowly turning pages.

CLAUDE stopped thinking, and declared "Almost 100 percent of the sample possesses this sequence of junk, Doctor, indicating this junk was present from the earliest times of mankind's development, most likely in the first examples of *Homo Sapiens*."

Faye looked up, startled that CLAUDE would make such a sweeping conclusion. *Wait,* she thought; *statistically speaking, that would have to be the case.* "Humanity's last evolutionary jump," she said softly, "was about 120,000 years ago, and apparently this junk was along for the ride." As she pondered it, she asked, "Any more ideas about how it got there?"

CLAUDE settled into its "suggesting how the junk got this way" mode, and Faye settled back into her scrapbook.

"Histone contamination?"

"Couldn't make something this long, plus the changes would be in a lot more places than just here in this junk." Faye found another photo of a lab party, celebrating the completion of the department's first Rung. It was a big occasion, and would bring the department more prestige and funding that it had ever known. Everyone was there, including families and support personnel. It was her unveiling too, and heads turned as friends and colleagues recognized that stunning, curvy brunette with Phil as Faye. And there in the background was Jason, introducing Melinda to Phil. *That asshole,* Faye thought. *Wait, Melinda? Was this the first time they met? Jason introduced them? Why I didn't figure it out until now?*

"Genetic engineering?"

"What?"

"Genetic engineering. It is my last suggestion," said CLAUDE.

"But 120,000 years ago?" was all Faye remembered murmuring. Her mind, for the moment, raced. *Well Melinda is beautiful — and young, real youth… and blooming. Look at how she's looking at him! What chance could I have had?* she thought. Faye's eyes felt hot on the insides, and her last thought was "Again?" as the Hyp-Chip kicked in and brought her down.

"Sleep now…" the chip suggested, almost knowing Faye possessed no real power to resist. It continued through its routine, *"In this state you can picture any scene and see yourself doing anything you want, either familiar and from memory or totally original…"*

"Hi CHIP," said Faye as she walked into her office, "how goes the junk?"

"Good morning Faye. It's Monday, June 22nd," responded CHIP, "You have new mail — just a note from Dr. Horner, though. And I can't wait to talk to you about the junk."

"Yes you can, CHIP," said Faye, not missing a beat, "for just long enough to tell me what Jason wants."

"Oh, all right. He just wants you stop by his office sometime before lunch. Can I delete the message now?" *CHIP sure seems, well, chipper today,* Faye thought.

"Fine, fine, go ahead. Now, what about the junk?"

"Well first of all, I sorted through all the junk, and that took almost all day yesterday. Total number of base pairs before the next active sequence of DNA: 107,287."

"That's huge," interrupted Faye.

"The biggest section of junk yet found, in fact. Remember those 400 C's at the beginning? Well, there are 500 more at the end, leaving 106,387 in between. That's a Casidak number you know."

"Actually, I didn't," she said, repositioning her bra straps. *I wish someone told me they would dig in more with the extra weight and all,* Faye thought. She hoped it was just a matter of getting used to. "Should I?"

"Well, they're kind of obscure; I doubt a geneticist would have ever heard of them, though some astrophysicists

are really big on them. Basically, it's a really big number that only divides into two big primes. So far so good?" asked CHIP.

"You haven't lost me yet."

"Excellent. Now, some astrophysicists, who observe other stars in their search for intelligent life, think that the first messages Earth will get will involve Casidaks. Here's why: astrophysicists assume that aliens would want to keep the message simple and easily decoded, without references to language, so they would send a picture." CHIP's screen cleared and formed a rectangle, with an "x" on a horizontal side and a "y" on a vertical. "So say you receive a message with a Casidak number of 0's and 1's, which is also easy to send across space, by the way; you can lay the whole sequence into a grid with x columns and y rows of 0's and 1's, just like filling up a sheet of graph paper. The 0's make up the background and the 1's make up the lines the picture is drawn with"

"Does this have a point?" Faye asked, wondering where this would lead.

"Sure it does," answered CHIP. "Between those C's are a Casidak number of T's and A's. Those primes just after the C's are what made COLLIN, the Physics Department's computer, wonder what running it though a Casidak Square might produce."

"Wait, you chat with other computers at night?"

"Just to keep busy. I don't chat about anything secret," CHIP said. Almost sheepishly, Faye thought. "But the point is COLLIN hit something. The resulting Casidak Square was 557 by 191 dots, and believe it or not, what I think is a picture resulted. Here it is."

CHIP's screen displayed the "drawing" encoded within the junk of her rung. The coarse resolution and lack of color looked out of place on CHIP's normally vibrant and animated display; the picture itself looked as if a someone had drawn figures on a sheet of printer paper with a thick crayon. Human figures, albeit stick figures, were definitely present. Along with some other, less readily identifiable ones.

"This is the real McCoy, no BS?" Faye questioned. "I still remember when you—"

"Not this time, Faye. Here's the numbers, you can see the corroboration yourself. See?" CHIP displayed a chart.

"Well, these numbers look all right, I suppose."

OK, let me work this out, she thought, *displaying the picture again. That looks like a stooped-over man, like a weird hunchback with long arms, and there's an arrow pointing from it to this tall stick-figure man. And from that line, there's another arrow pointing to, whoa, what looks like an octopus? And what about this line here?*

Hours later, Faye had a printout of the picture on Jason's desk, and interpreted it.

"Now let me get this straight," said Dr. Jason Horner. A little too loud for comfort, thought Faye. "You think this picture does the following: one, establishes a base ten counting system based on this character's fingers." He pointed to the upright stick figure. "Two, that this hunched-over character with the big forehead and thick arms is an early human, Homo Erectus." He pointed to the hunchback figure. "Three, that this octopus thing had something to do with the change of this hunched-over thing to this tall thing." His hand swept all over the paper. "Four, that this octopus thing comes from a star in this constellation, as seen from Earth." He pointed to a set of dots bearing a strong resemblance to Virgo. "Five, and that now someone should go to someplace that you and your computer say is off the Baja Californian coast and do something." Jason pointed to what looked like a map of the western coast of the Americas. "And six, that doing this will contact these octopus creatures or something?"

Faye had no idea that it sounded so stupid in context, but CHIP and she, with the help of COLLIN, had spent hours reasoning it out. She stood her ground. "It could be. I was planning on letting the astrophysicists across campus play with it. They've been looking for this kind of thing for decades. Let them be the judges."

"No way," Jason proclaimed, getting louder. "You may be on a hot streak, Mrs. Nobel Prize winner, but these sort of sensational conclusions can only make trouble for this department. Remember the University of Utah and their cold fusion claims, or UC San Diego's aquatic mammalian communication 'breakthroughs?' They lost all their academic credibility and respect after those fiascos." Jason began to pace around his office. "This department has just completed its first Rung for the Human Genome Mapping Project, with more on the way, and one of our staff, namely you, is a recent Nobel Prize winner. To throw all this prestige away by letting this 'alien picture' thing leave this office is academic, scientific, and financial suicide, and that's final."

I might not have had any problems with Jason before, thought Faye, *but I can see why CHIP thinks about him the way it does.* "That's right, I am Mrs. Nobel Prize winner," said Faye, raising her voice more than she had in a long time, "and I think that qualifies me to judge what is scientifically legitimate and what isn't!" Faye slammed the door on her way out.

"You have new mail," said CHIP, "interdepartmental in nature."

"Let me see it already. It's about the damn Rung Completion party isn't it?"

"Dr. Horner shot down the picture theory, didn't he?" CHIP asked, knowingly.

"It's more than that," stammered Faye. "He's got dollar signs in his eyes and he thinks that he can push me around, that he can keep this theory under wraps indefinitely."

"What are you going to do?"

"Well, the party is tomorrow night, so I can talk with some people, important and otherwise. Maybe Phil would have an idea."

"And to totally change the subject, was Phil surprised to see you?" questioned CHIP.

"Yeah, he was surprised, but not all that happy, I thought." Faye's voice lost the edge it had very recently acquired. "But that's not important now. I'm going home to cool off."

Faye returned to the labs the next night, wrapped in her evening gown, ready to schmooze and lobby. *Phil knew what he was talking about,* Faye thought. Hours into the gathering, Jason approached Faye and Phil with Melinda, and leaving Melinda with Phil, Jason invited Faye into his office in order to speak privately.

"I've been chatting with colleagues all night, Doctor Horner," Faye said coldly, "and I think I have a strong enough leg to stand on to push this picture business through."

"Faye," Jason said smiling, "I've changed my mind. You're right, I think maybe you should shuttle it across campus, and see what they come up with."

"Wait, what's the catch?" she questioned.

"No catch, I've just had a change of heart. I consider you a valuable asset to this department, and therefore, your opinions are valuable to me as well." He poured two glasses of champagne, offering one to Faye. "But let's just keep it on campus, all right?"

She eyed the extended glass for a moment, and accepted it, taking a sip.

Faye felt funny as she slumped into one of Jason's chairs. Her senses suddenly numbed and she started shaking uncontrollably.

She saw Jason smile smugly as he poured his glass into a potted plant and turned toward his computer.

"CORBIN," he said, "I need to access to Dr. Harrower's files and notes. Copy them all to my location, deleting her originals, administrative clearance level sonza. I'll modify them later."

Faye tried to move, struggled to yell, fought to stop shaking, but she could not do anything.

"Now compose a letter to Janice Brooke, Coordinator of the Human Genome Mapping Project, something to the effect that unfortunately, due to a sudden mental or nervous breakdown probably resulting from extreme personal stress following dramatic physical reconstruction, Dr. Harrower will be unable to finish sequencing the last, oh," he calculated a number which would exclude the recently discovered junk, "700,000 base pairs. Please reassign the Harrower Rung, et cetera. You clean it up, CORBIN."

Jason turned to Faye, and said "What you've just drunk contains a little bug I whipped up yesterday, which is even now reacting with the trace anti-aging proteins still in your bloodstream, which will block all of this alien visitation nonsense from your memory once and for all." Jason grinned hard, looking Faye right in her trembling face. Unfortunately, the process will in all likelihood unbalance you mentally, but a good institute should be able to help you along. And," he added, "I think Melinda will be able to ease Phil's loss. She's quite the temptress; an effective tool, I've found."

Faye's Hyp-Chip had never sensed everything it monitored jump into the red so suddenly. As if by reflex, it totally shut Faye down, and she slammed into sleep.

The charter boat *Santa Maria* bobbed gently in the Pacific, swinging Faye's hammock. Despite the cooling effect of the setting sun, she didn't shiver in her bikini.

"Sweet," she whispered, nuzzling Juan's ear, "I have to get up now and check the asgal device."

He turned slightly, allowing her to roll off onto the deck with both feet. "*Sí.*" She pulled part of her suit up from her ankles and went below.

The device registered the magnetron waves stronger than ever before, winking softly. She stepped to the uplink board, and the satellite pinpointed them to the fifth decimal place off the coast of Baja California.

It matches, she thought, putting her copy of the Casidak Square CLAUDE printed out back into her tote. *There really is something to this map after all.*

As she put the sheet away, her tote tipped, spilling some of her papers. *No biggie,* she thought, casually scooping them up. *I'll have to frame these someday,* she thought as she held Methany's release forms. She glanced at the charred remains of Phil and Melinda's wedding announcement in the ashtray on the console, noting that it burned differently than Phil's divorce papers and his pathetic, whining letters, and chuckled. *And those too,* she thought as she went topside, loosening her bikini again.

"Phil," she said looking at Juan, "eat your heart out."

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Graduated from the University of California, San Diego on June 14, 1992, with a B.A. in Political Science. He now plans to look for some sort of gainful employment. Warren wrote this story, originally titled "Unsuccessive Sequential Events," for a class in science writing. Warren is a friend of famed *InterText* writer/loon Greg Knauss. According to Greg, there are a few things in this world which have weathered the ages: the pyramids, Stonehenge, and Warren's hairstyle.

Was

KEN ZUROSKI

When I first saw her, she was walking through the park on a warm summer day. She was wearing a long dress and a small piece of multicolored twine around her wrist as a bracelet. I was alone, watching people in the crowd. She was surrounded by her friends and didn't notice me.

Half a year passed; we were introduced through a friend of a friend. Then one night as I was working late, the phone rang. I picked it up and it was her, asking me to dinner in a wobbly voice.

"You know," I said, "I think I'm going to take you up on that."

Over dinner, she told me that she didn't believe in God and that her favorite singer was Dylan. She had been in a terrible motorcycle accident when she was young, and now she didn't drive. She was studying to be a biomedical engineer. Also, her Walkman headphones weren't working and did I think I could fix them? I told her to bring them by tomorrow and I'd have a look.

I grew accustomed to waking with her body next to mine. She would always entwine herself about me, her head on my chest. Late at night, I would lie motionless, listening to the sound of her beating heart; somehow I was reassured.

"Who will love me when I'm old and bald?" I asked rhetorically, one day, gazing grimly into a mirror at my receding hairline.

I felt a kiss on the back of my head. "It's good luck to kiss your lover's bald spot," she said, laughing. And, after a moment, I laughed too.

At a bar one time, I sat on a stool, fidgeting nervously and watching as she, with sublime nonchalance, beat an astonished steelworker at a game of pool: one ball after another vanishing into the pockets in rapid succession, the challenger standing there furious, his swagger evaporated, his pride depleted.

We visited some friends who owned a cabin in the mountains. The hour was late, but she was anxious to begin the return trip; she had an exam to study for the next day. I was tired and wanted to sleep, but we climbed into my truck, pulled onto the highway, and headed for home.

She fell asleep immediately, her head in my lap. I drove alone through the empty country roads. The panel-lights glowed yellow-green; outside the truck, all was darkness.

I grew tired. I could barely hold my head aright. The truck was swerving and the lines on the highway blurred; I had to pull over to sleep. I switched the engine off, and the night was very still. I lay my head back and closed my eyes.

She stirred, and I felt a kiss on my knee. "Someone cares," I heard her sleepy voice say.

I peered up into the sky. Overhead, the stars blazed furiously — hundreds, thousands, billions. "I care, Sue, very much," I said, and stroked her hair; but she was already asleep.

Then one day she came to me — it doesn't really matter where. She hesitated for a moment, and then said uncertainly: "I don't feel the same way I used to."

I stared for a while at the tabletop, then at the floor. Then I stormed from the room, slamming the door open with the flat of my hand. I strode away with giant, prideful steps. I heard her call my name, but I didn't look back.

We had one or two more telephone conversations after that. Toward the end of the last, she began to cry. I was astonished. I said: "Why are you crying?"

"Because I *love* you," she wailed.

"If we love each other," I said, "then we can work it out." But she hung up a moment later.

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Glow

BRIAN TANAKA

Annabella stepped forth into the twilight. Five years old. Curiosity on two skinny legs.

Her home was a trailer propped uncertainly on cinder blocks in a backwater town. At the edge of a backwater town. And in the dark interior of the trailer her father was passed out. Drunk. Lost in a boozy nightmare. Inert at the folding kitchen table. Forehead pressed to the flaky, plastic, simulated wood grain.

And Annabella stepped forth into the twilight.

There were no other kids for company. No playgrounds nearby. Just a burnt-out warehouse, and a public garbage dump. She followed the gravel road up to the chain-link fence that surrounded the dump. The heavy stench from the heap, a smell so familiar to Annabella, was being pushed off away from her by a choppy breeze. She put her fingers up to the fence and walked slowly beside it; feeling her hand vibrate as it skimmed the links. A raccoon crawling out of the dump through a hole under the fence heard her coming and froze halfway out of the hole. Of the two, Annabella was the least startled, but she watched warily as the creature considered her, then jogged off into the low, leafy brush.

The hole under the fence was new and small. The kind of rut a raccoon would make. Or a dog, or a rabbit. The beige earth was dug away to form a U-shaped trough under the links, and the bottom of the fence was bent up and away to make a larger passage.

The evening was cold, and growing colder as it dipped into night. Annabella folded her arms across her body. She considered the hole, and continued on along the fence. But it wasn't long before she turned back and returned to the hole.

She gathered her skirt before her and crawled into the passage. Her head passed through easily, but her shoulders were just a bit too wide. She began pushing with her legs. Pushing. Pushing. At last she came free and emerged fully from the passage, crawling on her hands and knees.

The dump was a great, dark desert of garbage, with rolling dunes of used diapers, newspapers, washing machines, and rotting table scraps. Annabella climbed over the nearest dune. And the one after that. And in the descending darkness, from the crest of a stinking dune, she looked down into a ravine of refuse whose dark shadows were but a stage for a glow. Some slab of phosphorescent, fluorescent, green garbage. Some toxic waste tossed over the fence by disposal workers too lazy to drive the last five miles to the official toxic dump site for one measly slab of deadly whatever-it-is was glowing down there. Beckoning.

Annabella half-climbed, half-tumbled down the hill to the glow. It drew her to itself, charming her with its steady, light. Trailer park Annabella. Drunk daddy Annabella. Dark world dwelling, brown-eyed Annabella. Turned on by the radioactive slab. Entranced by the magic in the night. She kneeled by the glow and studied it intently. Breaking free of her silent reverence, she giggled at the thought of a thing of such unearthly beauty somehow being abandoned in a garbage dump. Tenderly, she picked it up. And carefully, she stole back over the dunes.

Rufus Won't Wake Up

BRIAN TANAKA

The sight before the first officers on the scene was undoubtedly the most bizarre thing they had ever seen. A child's toy, a "Big Wheel" plastic tricycle, lay cradled in the front seat of a Mercedes Benz amongst the shards of remains of the shattered windshield it had burst through. The front wheel was lodged firmly in the vicinity of what should have been the jaw of the shattered skull of one Ned Dirkheim, sole occupant of the vehicle. As if this were not enough, a trail of blood, apparently left by the fleeing assailant, described a path from the site of impact, across the hood, through the parking lot, and out into the muggy night, signifying the impossible — or at least the highly improbable: Someone had ridden that tricycle through the windshield, and walked away.

"Where is he?"

"He's always late."

Ned Dirkheim, his face lined with deep furrows, looked at his watch for the fourth time in as many minutes. "Where is he?" he asked again.

Mark didn't feel he needed to answer. Instead he dropped his cigarette to the marble floor and crushed it with his foot.

"We ought to leave without him," Ned said, scowling. "That would teach him."

"Take it easy, Ned. He's always late. You know that."

Ned fidgeted with his car keys.

Mark continued, "Well, don't you? You should by now."

"Yeah, yeah."

"Well, if you don't want him in our carpool..."

"I know. Just tell him. I know. I just might do that."

"You've been saying that for the last..."

"I know! The last eight years." He regained a bit of composure and said, "I'm tired and I want to get home."

Mark just laughed. He was about to light another cigarette when he saw Douglas get out of an elevator on the far bank of the lobby.

"It's about time," Ned muttered to Mark. He turned and started toward the parking lot before Douglas could join them.

"What's up with him?" said Douglas, motioning toward the rapidly disappearing Ned.

Mark laughed and said, sarcastically, "Douglas, I'm surprised at you. Don't you know you shouldn't keep the Junior Vice President of Dayton Realty waiting?"

"Jesus. I forgot my briefcase, so I had to go all the way back up to…"

"Save it. Save it. I don't give a damn. Ned's just a little high-strung these days."

They caught up with Ned at his Mercedes Benz and he let them in without a word. They rolled out of the parking complex and Ned barreled out onto the Hollywood freeway. He pulled into the first lane and joined the thousands of other commuters bumper to bumper on their long, slow voyage to their suburban homes. The traffic crawled, threatening always to come to a complete halt, like a steel river on a concrete bed, flowing and snaking into the smoggy, brown horizon.

It was nearly an hour later when they crept off the Hollywood and onto the Ventura freeway. Ned took the Woodman street exit and dropped off Douglas in front of his home.

"Goodnight, Mark. Goodnight, Ned," Douglas said.

"Yeah, see ya' tomorrow, Doug," said Mark. They both glanced at Ned staring out of the windshield, but he said nothing.

The car roared off, back to the freeway, and out again into the Los Angeles twilight.

"If you don't mind me saying so, I think you should try to unwind a little," Mark said.

"Well, I do mind."

Mark decided it was not worth the effort to talk to Ned. He lit a cigarette and sat back to enjoy the ride.

A car passed them, swerved in front of them, cut into another lane and sped ahead.

"Damned kids!" Ned bellowed. He gripped the steering wheel tightly, and fear raced through him. "I swear to you, I'm never having kids as long as I live! They just grow up to be maniac teenagers."

"All right, Ned. All right. Calm down. Watch the road. Just get us home. Look, if the freeway is getting you so wound up, why don't we just get off at the next off ramp, instead of the one we usually use, and take surface streets to my house. We're nearly there anyway."

"What the hell." He turned down the off-ramp, and onto a wide boulevard.

"Slow down a little," Mark said.

"Just leave the driving to me," he said, violently snapping on the headlights and swerving onto a side street.

Suddenly a thump sounded in the car and a small white shape flew up in front of the windshield.

"What the fuck was that?" asked Mark.

Ned slammed on the brakes and the car came to a lurching halt. Both men looked back down the street. Ned felt dizzy as he recognized the lifeless shape in the street. It was a dog. A very dead dog.

"Let's get out of here," he rasped, his throat tight with revulsion.

"But, Ned, shit. That's someone's dog."

"I don't give a shit. It's not my fault some..."

"Look!"

A small boy had walked up to the dog. He pushed it a few times with his sneakered foot, and turned to face the car. Ned felt a strange bolt of energy race up his spine. For a moment, the child seemed larger than he should have been, his eyes more penetrating than they should have been. Ned felt a clammy panic embrace his heart — the boy seemed to loom over the car, towering there in the suburban street. He felt the child's gaze burst through his very soul like a buzz saw through butter.

The sound of the passenger door opening brought him back to his senses.

"Get back in here, dammit, Mark!" he said.

Mark turned to him and said, "Are you kidding me? That dog belongs to that kid. We better talk to him. And you should probably make some sort of arrangement for compensation with his parents."

Ned was feeling more like himself now. He glanced into the rear-view mirror. Yes, the small child was merely a small child. Apparently, he had gone through a momentary delusion — probably from the stress of the incident. *That child,* he thought, *is too young to think of taking my license plate number; I could drive off and no one would know.*

"Well, aren't you going to get out?" Mark said.

"No. No, I'm not going to," Ned said, "Let me take you home first — it's only a few blocks away — and then I'll come back. No use both of us being home late just because of some stupid dog." He put the car in gear and drove to Mark's house.

"Well, Ned. Good luck with the kid and his dog. I hope his parents don't give you too much hell."

Ned chuckled. "Oh, they won't."

"What makes you so sure?"

Ned just chuckled again.

"Look, Ned. This is the first time you've laughed all night. You're making me nervous. You are going back to the kid, aren't you?"

"Oh, Christ, Mark, why the hell should I? It's just some stupid dog. The kid'll get over it in no time. Next week he'll have some new toy and he won't even remember he had a dog." Mark didn't look convinced. "Just forget about it, Mark. You can bet I'm going to. Hell, I honestly couldn't even tell you exactly where it happened."

"Forget about it? How could I forget? That kid was standing there staring at us."

"Look. To tell you the truth, I don't really give a shit."

Mark had trouble hiding his contempt and said, "I don't think I'll need a ride in tomorrow. I'll take the bus." He slammed the door.

Ned drove back to the freeway. *Of course, I did the right thing,* he told himself. *I'm a busy man. I don't have time for some brat's tragedy. God knows no one had time for mine when I was a boy.*

Under the freeway overpass he paused for a red light. He noticed some graffiti scrawled across the concrete wall. *Damned kids, writing on the walls,* he thought. He read aloud: "Rufus won't wake up." *Must be the name of some new rock group.*

The light changed and he slid back onto the freeway. Soon he was near his home. He had almost put the incident with the dog out of his mind, and to completely eradicate it he decided to pull into his favorite neighborhood bar. He parked the car in the lot, got out, and locked his door. He noticed a tuft of fur caught in the chrome around the headlight and stopped to pull it out. There was more caught in the center of the grillwork, and he methodically pulled it all out. Amid the gore and fur was a dog tag. He read it and his initial fear rose up again in him. It said:

"Rufus"
1314 Kilgore Lane
555-6345

In his mind's eye he saw the graffiti under the freeway: *Rufus won't wake up.* It must be pure coincidence, he told himself. He looked down at the tag. His hand was trembling. He tossed the tag into a nearby hedge and headed into the bar. *Stupid kid,* he thought. *Stupid dog.*

"Hello, Mr. Dirkheim. Good to see ya'. Come on in and make yourself comfortable," Nick the bartender said upon spotting Ned.

"Hello, Nick."

"Say, you look a little shook up. Everything all right?"

"Gimme a bourbon, Nick. And make it snappy."

"Comin' right up." He poured a glass.

Ned promptly tossed it down. *Jesus,* he thought, *I've got to pull myself together.* He walked to the men's room and stepped inside. There in the brilliant florescent glare he saw, amongst the other graffiti, the last phrase in the world he wanted to see: Rufus won't wake up.

He stood stunned for a few moments, then rushed to the sink and soaked a paper towel in the lukewarm water. With determination he scrubbed at the scrawl on the wall. He noticed with horrified fascination that it was written in a child's hand. He scrubbed furiously but the words would not be removed.

Suddenly, the sound of barking from the bar grabbed his attention. He tossed the towel in the garbage and hurled himself through the door. A few people at the bar were laughing uproariously, and Nick was wiping down the far end of the bar, but no dog could be seen.

Ned strode up to Nick and said, "Is there a dog in here?"

"What?"

"A dog. Is there a dog in here?"

"You know I wouldn't let a dog in my bar, Mr. Dirkheim."

"Did you hear a dog just now?"

"No, sir."

Ned sat himself down on a stool. "Say, Nick, give me another."

Nick did, and then returned to wiping down the counter.

"Funny you should mention dogs, Mr. Dirkheim."

Ned lifted his glass to his mouth. "Why's that?"

"Well, there's all this dog hair on my bar. I can't get it off, it seems like..."

Ned spilled his drink, coughed and sputtered.

"It wasn't my fault!" he blurted out. "The damned thing ran right out into the street!"

"What the hell are you talking about? Keep it down!"

The knot of people at the other end of the bar laughed riotously again, but to Ned the laughter sounded like a pack of dogs barking. That this explained the barking he had heard in the men's room calmed him not at all. He jumped off his stool, tossed a wad of dollar bills on the bar, and dashed out the door.

Just outside he slipped and fell. He jumped back to his feet. To his great dismay, he saw that he had skidded on a pile of canine dung. He spun on his heels and headed in a dash for the car. Someone had carved into the paint on the hood with something sharp. It said: Rufus won't wake up.

Ned gasped. He fished his keys out of his pocket and fumbled with them, dropping them to the asphalt. He retrieved them and unlocked the door. Once seated, with the doors closed and locked, he picked up his car phone and dialed Mark.

"Hello."

"Hello, Mary Ann? Is Mark around?"

"Why, yes. He's here. Hold on a moment."

Ned held on. It seemed much longer than a moment. The seconds ticked by. They felt like minutes, hours, days. He began to wonder if they had been cut off. He pushed down the automatic door lock button again and glanced out the side window. He was horrified, but not entirely surprised, to see scrawled across the front wall of the bar in five foot letters: Rufus won't wake up.

He felt his bowels convulse involuntarily. *Come on... Come on...* he thought, *pick up the goddamned phone.* He knew he had to get back to the scene of the incident to straighten out the mess he had begun, but what he had told Mark was horribly true — he couldn't remember exactly where it had happened. All those dark side streets looked much the same. It could have been any one of them. But Mark could tell him exactly where it had happened.

A faint rustling sound on the receiver blossomed suddenly into a burst of static, followed by a low whine, an oozing howl slithering down the phone line and into Ned's ear.

"Hi," said a voice on the phone.

"Hello, Mark?" said Ned, although he knew it wasn't Mark. It was the voice of the child.

"Mister... Rufus won't wake up."

Ned's world spun. *It's impossible,* he told himself. Yet the voice continued.

"Did you hear me, mister? Rufus won't wake up."

"I hear you," he said. "Listen, kid. I — I — I'm sorry I hit your dog."

"No you're not!" The child's voice rose with emotion. It was plain to hear he was crying, and angry.

"I am. I'm really sorry, kid." He realized suddenly that he really was sorry. And almost against his will he shot back through the murky years of memory to his own childhood and all the pleas unheard, all the tears unseen. He once again felt his young, needy arms embrace his father who felt stiff and unyielding under the hug. His father who was a cold stone monolith. His father who could never return an embrace.

"No you're not!" the child repeated.

"Yes. Yes I am. I truly am." He felt somehow offended the child would not believe him just as he had come to this revelation that startled even himself.

"You're not sorry! You're not, you're not, you're not!"

"Please believe me."

"Rufus won't wake up, and neither will you." the child said.

And Ned Dirkheim drew his last breath in a rasping, rushing gasp. And Ned Dirkheim watched a speck in the sky turn to a distinguishable shape with impossible speed. And Ned Dirkheim recognized the shape as a Big Wheel. And Ned Dirkheim felt the convulsion of his car as the windshield burst. And Ned Dirkheim tasted plastic and came apart at the seams.

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The Unified Murder Theorem

CONCLUSION

JEFF ZIAS

Synopsis

They killed the guitar player on a Thursday night, as he sat in the bar, playing his blue-glowing guitar. The last words the hit men said were simply: "Goodbye from Nattasi."

***JACK CRUGER,** an accordion instructor, leads a mundane life — except when trying to make a baby with his beautiful wife **CORRINA**. But all of that changes the moment that **TONY STEFFEN** walks in his door. Tony gives Cruger an accordion to play — and blue light appears inside it when he plays. In addition, he plays better than he's ever played before.*

*Tony informs Cruger that the blue strands of light coming out of the accordion are **STRINGS**, each representing a path, a possible outcome. Cruger has been chosen to be a "spinner" of strings by the "**COMPANY**," — an organization whose job it is to create and support all worlds, galaxies, and universes. The company's chairman prefers to have living beings "spin" the fates… but there's a catch — there's another company, one that does what you expect the Devil to do. If Cruger spins for the "good guys," he'll be given protection in return — other spinners will ensure that neither he nor his family will be harmed… except for what is beyond their control, such as intervention from the Other Company.*

*Tony, occasionally accompanied by a beautiful young woman named **SKY**, sometimes visits with Cruger. Tony tells him that many of the company's executive positions are still held by aliens, most from the planet named Tvonen. The Tvonens are now very advanced — but their technology is completely analog-based, with no digital electronics at all. Earth is quickly becoming more technologically adept than the Tvonens. The Tvonens believe that human thought, with its pursuit of the Grand Unified Theorem — a theorem that could describe every detail of the functioning of the universe — would give the Company a giant edge in its ability to guide the universe.*

Tony is in charge of implementing the theory into a computer system that will allow the Company to have such control over the universe. Obviously, such a prospect is not taken lightly by the Other Company, operated by renegade Tvonens and shape-shifting aliens known as Chysans.

*But then Cruger finds Tony dead on his doorstep, and Cruger's neighbor **LEON HARRIS**, watching from next door, comes over and takes Cruger inside to call the police. In a panic, Cruger runs outside, only to find Tony's body gone. When Harris tries to grab him, he gets a powerful taste of Cruger's otherworldly insurance policy. Cruger, now without Tony, decides to let Harris in on what the Company is.*

In the wake of Tony's death, the two go in search of Tony's girlfriend Sky. They succeed in tracking her down, but she says she's never heard of anyone named Tony. The school has no records of Tony's existence. It's as if he's been erased from existence.

After being attacked by a group of thugs from the Other Company — and being saved by the insurance policy — Cruger and Harris try to figure out Tony's notes and how he could have been using his computer to control the entire universe.

From above, in a ship orbiting the Earth, God — the company's Chairman — looked down down on Harris and Cruger and saw possible sucessors. He had been Chairman for two thousand years, but it would be time to go soon. Since the use of Earth's technology would be what gave the Company power over the universe, it seemed fitting that a human should be the next chairman. These two men, the Chairman realized, were the Company's best hope, if the Other Company didn't get to them first.

*Cruger and Harris are introduced to **NESWICK**, an IRS agent who doubles as their new Company supervisor. His daughter, **TAMARA**, quickly becomes intimately involved with Harris.*

One night, while playing, Cruger is paid a visit by someone who seems to be a future version of himself: except this one says he and Harris have become God. The future Cruger also plays a guitar and is conspicuously missing a wedding ring. After exchanging arguments, the future Cruger disappears.

In a fit of suspicion about Neswick, Cruger follows Neswick to the airport, where he sees him rendezvous with his daughter, Tamara. Nothing strange there. But then, almost under his nose, Cruger recognizes a face: Sky! She kisses Neswick and then Tamara, laughing and talking.

Cruger feels his stomach sink at least a yard. He knows innocent coincidences like this are harder to find than dodo birds. Much harder.

Chapter 29

> *The unconscious is not just evil by nature, it is also the source of the highest good: not only the dark but also the light, not only bestial, semihuman, and demonic, but superhuman, spiritual, and, in the classic sense of the word, "divine."*
>
> *—Carl Gustave Jung*

"Leon, I have a strange question for you. If you tell me to eat dirt, I'll understand."

"Wow, I can't wait to hear it: ask away."

"Will you let Corinna hypnotize you? I have a theory I want to follow up on."

Harris was surprised. "Does your wife *know* how to

hypnotize people?"

"Sure. She was a therapist before we were married. They taught her in school: it's a standard technique." Cruger grinned. "No sweat."

"Has she done it since then?"

"Well, she hypnotized me once before we were married, but it's like riding a bike, you know? If you've done it you don't forget."

"And how do I know my brain won't be scrambled? And there might be things I wouldn't want to tell your wife." Harris grinned. "Might make her think twice about being with a guy like you."

"Um," Cruger said, "I'll take my chances."

"Uh huh." Harris paused a moment. "Ok, what the hell."

The two of them walked the fifty feet to Cruger's house. Corinna was home; they found her in the kitchen sorting through the mail.

"Hi, honey," Cruger said, and kissed her on the cheek. "You remember Leon Harris? Lives next door?"

"Sure," Corinna smiled and extended her hand. "Good to see you again, Mr. Harris."

"I've got a favor to ask, Corinna. Could you hypnotize Mr. Harris?"

Corinna stopped, junk mail in one hand and bills in the other. "Could I what?"

"You know, take him under so I can ask him a few questions."

"You've got to be kidding." She looked at Harris. "He's kidding, right?"

Harris fidgetted. "Uh, I thought you said this wouldn't be a problem, Jack."

"It's not." Cruger set his hand on Corinna's arm. "It's nothing serious, honey. It's just that, um, he's curious. He's never been hypnotized before and wants to see what it's like."

"That's not a good reason." Corinna said in a firm voice.

"Well, that's not the whole reason, really..." Cruger went on. His thoughts were racing. Should he tell her about the Company? About what he and Harris were doing? He wished he'd thought this through a little further.

"So what's the real reason for this?" Corrina was looking hard into his eyes.

"Um," Cruger started. "You see, uh, we..."

"We have a bet." Harris said sheepishly. Corinna and Cruger both turned toward him.

"A bet?"

"Well, not exactly," said Cruger.

"He doesn't believe that I was at the airport last night."

Corinna's eyes narrowed. "I don't get it."

Cruger jumped in. "See, I don't think he was at the airport because he was on a hot date with Tamara, and he says there's nothing going on between them." Cruger crossed his arms and smiled. "I've got fifty dollars on this."

"This is crazy, Jack." Corinna dropped the junk mail into the trash. "No."

Cruger took her hand. "Please, just once? I'll never bug you about it again." He looked into her eyes and tried to seem as sincere as possible. He knew sincerity counted at times like this.

Corinna appeared to reconsider. She turned back to Harris. "You're really willing to do this?"

Harris shifted and put his hands in his pockets. "Um, sure. Yeah."

"Alright." Corinna's mouth formed a straight line. "But just this once. And you'll use that money to take me to dinner. When did you plan on doing this?"

"Well, how about now?" said Cruger.

"Now? I've got to work in three hours!"

"How long will this take?"

"Long enough!"

"We don't have much time... we really need to get this settled. Please?"

There was a moment when Cruger almost thought she was going to say no, but then she nodded and led them into the living room. She made Harris sit down and, with a glare at Cruger, she began.

First, she systematically relaxed each part of his body, then told him a repetitive story about a man traveling downward, and further downward, on a fast, smooth, elevator. When Harris was definitely under, she nodded to Cruger.

"Leon, it's last night and you're at home. Can you remember that?"

"Yes." Harris' voice was entirely relaxed.

"What did you do?"

"Tamara came over. We talked and had some wine."

Cruger's raised his eyebrows; Corina pursed her lips. "Anything else you can remember?" Cruger asked.

"We had sex, then we went to sleep. We were tired."

Cruger smiled widely for Corinna's benefit, then thought for a minute."When you went to sleep, do you remember anything in particular, any dreams?" Corinna glared at him, but he ignored her.

Harris was silent. His face was slightly tensed compared to a moment before. Finally, he began forming words.

"I do remember a little. I was dreaming, I think. Yes, I was with Tamara." Harris's talking was very soft, barely audible. Cruger moved closer to hear better.

"She stood me up, and held my hands," Harris said. "We were both naked. Her eyes were closed and she seemed to be meditating, thinking very hard. My body became light and for a minute I couldn't see at all because of a bright light shining all around us. But, I could still feel Tamara's hands, warm, almost too hot to touch, in my hands."

Cruger paused for a moment, trying to anticipate Corinna's objections to the direction of his questions, but her objections never came. He glanced at her; she sat silently, leaning forward in her chair. "Um, go on," Cruger said, trying to make his voice sound calm and assured.

"I must have just slept more for a while and then, all of

a sudden, I was awake, and everything was extremely cold. I slowly opened my eyes, just a little at a time because hot, sticky air was sort of stinging. When I opened them up I was in a strange place, really strange.

"The air was misty with pockets of steam, and the ground was this dark green and purple color. Bright and shiny. The land was flat but all I saw around me were really smooth shiny black rocks, the ground, and these big balloon-looking things all over the place which were kind of like trees.

"I heard a noise and then looked around behind me. There was this little purplish thing, a creature. It had lots of arms and legs and the face was ugly — looked like a monkey with a frog's skin. This thing took my arm and led me toward this big smooth rock. There was a hole in the ground next to it, and this thing led me down the hole; it was like an entrance to a cave but very steep.

"We went down these corridors and then came to a room with torches lighting it. The room was filled with these creatures, they just appeared out of nowhere with all of their arms and ugly skin. A few of them blended into the walls behind them like chameleons."

Harris seemed to lose his train of thought as he paused for a moment, swallowing hard and licking his lips.

Corinna was still silent, so Cruger pressed on. "What happened next?"

"Then they all started making noise. They all seemed to be talking at once. They started forming this circle, joining all of their hands together and making this noise, this humming sort of noise. One of them pushed me into the center of the circle, then I swear I heard one of them laugh — I mean a real human laughing sound.

"They closed in really tight all around me. They stuck out hands and touched me, but, all of a sudden, I wasn't scared. Their hands were warm and smooth; I relaxed and stood there with their hands holding me up. Then it was very strange. I felt myself talking to myself, in a way. It was as if they were asking me hundreds of questions rapid fire and my brain was answering them. Every thought I had seemed to elicit some kind of feedback that I felt in their hands. I don't know how much time passed. I remember feeling tired then. Next thing I knew, I was in my bed at home just waking up."

"Did you feel like you just dreamed this?" Cruger asked.

"No. It seemed real. I told Tamara. She thought it was pretty funny. She said I've been reading too much science fiction lately."

Cruger paused, then looked toward Corinna. "I think we're done."

Corinna took a moment to respond, then she slowly began to bring Harris out of the trance. Cruger stood up and made for the bathroom, closing the door behind him. Then he sat down and slowly began to rub his temples. From the living room, he could hear Corinna's gentle voice—just a soothing sound, no words.

As Harris' story sunk in, Cruger's stomach muscles tightened to a knot. He could almost smell his own sweat, as the perspiration crept down his shirt sleeves. The pieces of the puzzle were starting to fit together, and he didn't like the image that was forming. It looked like a big lemon. Now, how to make lemonade?

Chapter 30

The next evening Cruger went over to see Harris at Tony's office, carrying a beaten-up guitar behind him and feeling a bit guilty about abandoning his accordion.

Had Harris figured out the whole picture, part of the picture, none of the picture, or just about everything? Hopefully he had figured out enough, because it was beginning to look like they were in a race against time.

"Do you know how this spinning works? Have you found anything like the code for that in the programs?" Cruger asked.

"I think I know how it's set up. I've made a basic assumption concerning the transference of energy — given the models for spinning that I know about."

"Well, good. Actually, I have a reason for asking. You promise not to laugh at me when I ask you a question?"

"All right," Harris said, "I can't wait to hear this one. I promise to not split a gut or anything, but can I just smirk a little bit?"

"OK; smirk away. Here it is: I've been thinking of playing — and spinning — with a guitar. Do you think you can fix it so that my spinning works with the guitar?"

To Cruger's surprise Harris answered seriously, although it did look like he was smirking. "I was wondering why you had that thing with you. Look, I think I know how to set it up. It would be a pretty good test to see if my theory about spinning is right."

"Now wipe that smirk off your face; you've enjoyed this enough already," Cruger said.

"Why do you want to have a guitar to spin with anyway?" Harris asked as if he wanted the information for his files. Probably very orderly files.

"All of this is so ironic, don't you think? Once I saw a cartoon that showed a man on his way through the pearly gates being handed a harp. The caption read: 'Welcome to heaven.' In the frame below, a man was being handed an accordion and the caption read: 'Welcome to hell.' I want to make sure my name shows up on the correct employee roster."

"Good point," Harris said. "the accordion is pretty hellacious. I'll chalk this up as a piece of *pro bono* work — change for the good."

Harris sat at the computer, entering new descriptive identifiers for Cruger's guitar. After about fifteen minutes had gone by, Harris asked him to try playing the guitar a little to see if it worked yet. Cruger struck a few chords on the instrument, and played a quick melodic minor scale, up and down. No blue light — nothing in the tone of the instrument was extraordinary in the least. The cheap thirty-dollar guitar

sounded like a cheap thirty-dollar guitar.

"Wait, I think I know what's wrong." Harris shook his head and kept on working.

Cruger held the guitar across his knee and struck a simple chord. Something was different; the sound was deeper, fuller. He continued to play and the instrument gained momentum, starting to resonate fully on every note. The higher harmonics intensified, ringing out richly across the room. Then, bending over the instrument as he played, Cruger saw a pale blue light shining from within the body of the small guitar.

Chapter 31

Getting the jump on them was easy. Cruger grabbed the phone, called Ms. Branner at the IRS, and said he was from the travel agency. *Just confirming the flight to Denver, that's right miss, Mr. Neswick's next flight is… what did you say? The twenty-third, 1 p.m., that's correct. And rental car is… Avis, did you say? Right again.*

So Cruger got to Denver on an earlier flight.

But the stakeout wasn't much fun. A stakeout is especially tiresome for a guy who doesn't know what he's doing.

Cruger sat in his rental car waiting for Neswick to pull out of the airport. There was only one exit from the Avis lot; he hoped he would recognize Neswick when he drove past. Cruger's stomach started to rumble every couple of minutes; it sounded loud enough Cruger worried a cop would come knock on his window, telling him to turn down his subwoofers. Ain't no subwoofers, he would have to say, it's my goddamn stomach: *You have a candy bar or something?* and the cop would go away with that puzzled-cop look on his serious face.

Finally, twenty minutes after Neswick's plane was supposed to have landed, Cruger saw him pulling out in a Ford Taurus. Must not have had luggage, Cruger thought as he turned the key in the ignition.

Cruger kept a safe distance; but he could see two passengers that looked to be Sky and Tamara. Neswick went south on 25 and stayed on all the way to Colorado Springs, then went through town and back into the foothills.

They stopped at a large house on quiet street that gave at least an acre to each home. The lots were lined by random assortments of gigantic boulders and jagged granite.

Cruger pulled up to the house down the street. He was close enough to see Neswick, Tamara, and Sky as they walked up to the door and knocked. It opened a crack, and the three filed inside. Cruger thought he saw a glint of silver from the clothing inside, but the door closed before he could be sure.

Cruger drove up to the house, got a closer look. The name NATASSI, in small white letters, was painted on the cedar box resting on the cracked 4x4 post alongside the steep driveway.

Cruger drove down the hill and got himself the closest Best Western hotel room. There was only one Natassi in the phone book. Theodore Natassi. He was on 266 Garden Rock road, right where Cruger had followed Neswick and crew. He imagined a trained detective would know what to do as he showered and lay on the bed, drifting into an unplanned nap.

Neswick and Tamara were talking in the other room — Natassi could hear Neswick with his annoying, dull voice telling her about the mountains and the American Indians and the Rockies wildlife as if he were lecturing a college class.

Natassi turned towards Sky. She was sitting the parquet kitchen table, eating dozens of cookies, seemingly oblivious to the ponderous bulk he turned towards her.

"Tell me about the school you attend," he asked Sky. He watched for her reaction, more important to him than anything she would say. Her expression did not change. He wanted to probe, but would start soft. Maybe in conversation she'd slip — a grimace, a frown — and tell him something, maybe something he really wanted to know.

"Not much to tell," she said without looking up, and then, "You know, I can eat a million of these things, these cookies, and not get fat. All the girls at school are starving themselves to try to get thin, and I eat all day long. Cracks me up." Sky, the wicked mistress of pure innocence. Natassi both hated and admired her ability to play the innocent foxy-cute teenager. They should give awards, he thought, for such great acting. She was the best. An Oscar to the alien girl who plays the airhead but is really Satan's handmaid.

"You've heard about someone breaking the rules? The deletions?" Natassi watched her face closely. "I want to find out who it is," Natassi said, making his voice stern. "You wouldn't have any ideas, would you? Operatives behaving abnormally? Getting too... involved here on Earth?"

She met his eyes for a moment but didn't say anything, her blue eyes tranquil and seeming to say, "I wish I could help but, alas, I can't." She sat still, wrapped in shorts that barely reached her thighs and a tiny halter top.

Natassi let the silence hang in the room. Why would she do it? Why would Tamara, or any other operative? Maybe a grudge, maybe personality clashes, maybe some of these humans rub you so far the wrong way you just have to take them out. Like Neswick — like *all* the Chysans — rubbed him, only much worse.

Chapter 32

Cruger didn't get much further the next day — no one entered or left the Natassi home. Then Cruger had to catch his flight back, wondering what he accomplished on his trip.

He had told Corrina he was going to the Polka festival in Pueblo. He talked about hearing the Detroit Polish Moslem Accordion Warriors play *Love Potion Number Nine* and other big hits. He said he sat in with Nose Harp players from

New Orleans. She didn't seem to care much, and the next morning was affectionate and athletic in bed, especially for a pregnant woman.

Neswick gestured for Harris and Cruger to sit. It was three days after the mystery weekend and Neswick had called them into an early evening meeting.

"The Company has a large and complex organization, but I'll tell you what you need to know. As you probably already know, a good percentage of the Company is composed of people from Earth.

"Many of the executive positions are still held by managers from elsewhere. The vast majority of these — well, I'll call them foreigners, sounds better than 'aliens' — most of them are from the same planet: Tvonen. You won't find this planet on any of your astronomy charts; I assure you. The Chairman himself is a Tvonen."

Cruger raised his eyebrows and exchanged a quick glance with Harris.

"These Tvonen went through a process of evolution quite similar to what the humans have endured. However, a few major differences exist, and I'd like to call attention to these differences."

Cruger noticed that Neswick always sounded as if he were addressing the graduating class at Harvard. The man's stiff, arrogant style bothered him.

"First of all, the Tvonens have creationist mythology like ours. The only irony is, their mythology is not allegorical but factual."

"We're familiar with the origin of the Tvonens. Tony filled me in," Cruger said.

"So you know about a Tvonen undergoing 'the change'?"

Both Cruger and Harris nodded.

"That special enzyme in their bloodstream controls the secretion of the hormone for sexuality. Isn't that cruel?"

"What is their civilization like now?" asked Harris.

"Now they are what we would call a very advanced society. They have technology that you would consider staggering. But, keep in mind, they are much different from humans. For example, they never devised any digital electronics. Their entire technology is based on analog computing and mineral crystals. They also have terrific projective holograms that can transmit with pinpoint accuracy. For clothing, they wear trained microorganisms that are self-cleaning and form-fitting.

"They may be more advanced than humans, but humans are about to pass them up. Digital electronics are more precise, more capable of the infinite. See," said Neswick, "the problem you men have is that you have no concept of the infinite. Once you master that concept, everything else is simple to understand.

"To picture the infinite, look at it this way: think of everything there is — I mean everything. Okay. Now realize that there is actually a little bit more. You see?"

Harris wondered if this was like when he tried cleaning things dirt and dust from behind the back of the refrigerator.

Cruger scratched his shoulder and felt like a not-particularly-bright Orangutan.

"Always, no matter what, there is a little more. Never can there be *everything*."

Cruger thought he understood but sarcastically played with the idea that he may not have understood *everything* that Neswick meant.

Neswick had a different meeting later that day. Now that he had them all in the same room, he could get the message across quickly and simply.

"It has come to my attention that someone is breaking regulations by performing unnecessary deletes."

He scanned the room quickly but, as expected, they all had blocks up.

"The importance of this mission cannot be overemphasized. Every extra delete greatly jeopardizes the work we are doing. Is that clear?"

Of course, they all had entirely unreadable, impassive looks on their faces. He excused them and they left, single file, no one talking.

He wondered if his management would see this as weakness on his part. *How could he let this behavior go unpunished?* But, how could he punish before he was sure of the identity of the perpetrator?

But playing with the Big Enigma was dangerous. It could only go on for so long.

Chapter 33

Sky walked out of class with a small collection of books and a few floppy disks, and Cruger was waiting for her.

"Sky," Cruger said.

"Oh, Hi." She looked at him with some apprehension. If she were a normal high school girl, she might simply be wondering why this grown man had come to talk to her for a second time.

Cruger guessed the apprehension was for a different reason.

"Do you have a few minutes? I need to ask you a couple of questions."

She waved her hand at a few classmates walking by. "Well, okay. I've got some time right now," she said.

They kept walking, drifting toward the benches at the side of the paved walkway.

"What class was that you just got out of?" Cruger said.

"Oh, that's computer lab — pretty good class."

"Sounds worthwhile. What do you do in there, the whole works?"

"Yeah, I guess," she said.

They sat on a wooden bench, facing away from the flow of students. There was a stretch of grass was in front of them as well as the school's token piece of art, a small bronze statue of a Spanish missionary.

Before he got a word out he knew it was too late. She could evidently read him much better than he thought.

"So you know a lot about us, Cruger. It doesn't matter. Your knowledge is irrelevant," Sky said. Her soft schoolgirl's voice had become steely cold and hard.

"Know what?" Cruger's insincerity was clear both telepathically and explicitly.

Sky smiled a wicked, gleaming smile . "I hope you're proud of yourself. And to think, I sort of liked you." She moved towards Cruger as he stood stationary, ignoring all the impulses he felt to run or do something equally cowardly.

She put her arms around his shoulders and brushed her lips across his cheek. She was changing now, into a taller, more womanly figure. Her light brown skin was unnaturally smooth and perfect, like a photo on a magazine cover. Her eyes became the deepest blue-green Cruger had ever seen.

"You like me too," she murmured.

He tried to move away but she held him with surprising strength. Cruger almost laughed at his predicament: here he was trapped by a student of feminine beauty. Sky had metamorphosed into (probably) the most beautiful woman in the world. She pressed herself closer to him, nearly smothering him in her soft face and cascades of golden-white hair. With one hand she locked his face in a grip much too strong to be coming from her delicate, perfect fingers. Her full lips pressed against his. She caressed his face with her other hand.

"You're mine now," she said.

Cruger tried to take a deep breath to stop his trembling, but it was no use. He was under her control — no longer a free-thinking individual but a prisoner, a victim, an object of a desire that he had no control over. One pocket of Cruger's frantic brain screamed the survival siren, the other repeated an inappropriate punch line over and over, softly: *what a way to go*. But it wasn't. This wasn't passion, love, or even animalistically physical. She laughed, reading his small, self-pitying thoughts.

"I don't care what you like. I have plans for you," she said. He listened and felt the reality of her statement dance across his body. Sometimes God throws you a slider, but Satan has the wicked sinker. And he sank. Like a caged animal, he stopped dreaming of escape through the cage door: his spirit was broken; he sank into submission; he gave up.

Chapter 34

Cruger came to consciousness and Sky stood before him. She was once more Sky the woman-child; her look of innocence mocked him. Cruger's quick self-survey told him that he was mostly uninjured and sitting cross-legged on the floor, but he felt dizzy. He also felt groggy; his throat felt dry; his eyes were swollen.

"What happened?" he said.

"You passed out. Out cold," she said, emitting a gleeful innocent giggle, as if she had just collected for Unicef or returned from a Girl Scout outing. The perfect voice was back, dancing like snowflakes in a breeze. "You were scared, poor Mr. Cruger," and she laughed again, this time with an air of scorn in her angelic voice.

"What are you going to do to me now? Rape me? Kill me?"

"I've been thinking about it," she said. "You'll be interested to know that I think I'll just let you go."

The thoughts rushed through Cruger's mind before he could stop them: he wanted to immediately go to the office and have Harris delete her. Kill her, erase her, get rid of her forever. Cruger quickly clouded his thoughts with his emotions of relief and the self-applause of his survival system. It seemed to work, Sky showed no visible reaction to his thoughts, if she had been reading him at all.

Cruger's voice was hoarse and weak. He said, "What would they do if they found out about that?"

"Nothing, nothing at all," she said, laughing as she shook her head from side to side. "They're a little disappointed in me, though. Even devils have standards, rules, limits, a sense of balance. I violated them. They can do take me back to Chysa, which is what they were planning anyway. My tenure here is up."

"Your two years of service?"

"Right," she said. "What good would it do for them to kill me? I'm a good little devil — maybe even an overachiever — especially if I'm back home where I can't do much damage. I trained for years to do my job; I became one of the very best." A frown came over her inappropriately innocent face; her eyes darkened. "I don't want to go back, but I have to."

"You couldn't hide from them, staying here on earth? Not that I'd want you to stay," Cruger said.

She smirked at him. "No, they can find me anywhere here — we have tools for that. Within hours they would have me retrieved. No point in trying to hide." She looked him squarely in the eyes. "You know something? I love life here. I've become so human that I can't remember the body I had back home. I'm so human that I'm moony over boys and I shop until I drop and do the mall scene, I mean all the way, Nordstrom cards and an analyst and the whole bit — all my spoiled friends at school with divorced parents have 'em. I love this body, I love your food and sports and sex and wine. I fit in better here than on Chysa."

Cruger wondered about the implications of devils enjoying themselves on Earth. Not like a duck out of water at all, he thought. The fact that she fit in so perfectly was frightening.

She read his mind. "Right, you aren't just a bunch of angels here, you know."

"And to think you haven't even been to Las Vegas or Manhattan or Bangkok; I think you would love it most of those places," he said.

For a moment she looked almost overwhelmed, as if she

were finally imagining her life away from Earth. Her large eyes focused directly on Cruger's. "No, I really can't kill you," she said. "Though you tempt me. What you're doing is important and we have this policy of minimal homicidal intervention with humans. It especially goes for you, since you're important to the future of the universe and that stuff. If I mess with you too much, I might cause a Big Enigma."

"What do you mean, Big Enigma?"

Sky laughed. "You know how the Big Bang starts a universe? Well the Big Enigma is a condition where all of the strings existence conditions cannot be resolved. Everything cranks to a halt. The solution set for all universal planar coordinates would become zero. Consciousness would be static, and we're stuck forever. Major bogus deal, huh?"

Cruger thought about the implications. he wondered if he flirted with the Big Enigma every time he spun. And people had been worried about nuclear weapons and the greenhouse effect, he thought.

"We need to continue the game. There's no game if we don't have players on both sides, right? Go ahead, do what you have to do. Go." Her words were matter of fact. She had decided what to do and luckily it left him alive.

She turned around and said one more thing: "And you know, I'm not the one you're really looking for."

Unfortunately, Cruger knew — he was now certain. Sky was telling the truth.

She walked away, leaving him to think about that.

In ten minutes Cruger was home and walked next door to see if Harris was there. No luck. Corrina was at work. Thank God. He walked back from Harris's house feeling somehow encapsulated as if a fine magical lore surrounded him and the pavement were undulant and insubstantial. The space in which he moved seemed crystalline and empty; what he felt was horror and relief, all rolled into a tight rock that somehow fit into his gut.

Cruger felt guilty from the start, but he figured he had to do it. He decided to tail her because, what the heck, he was running out of ideas. And he still remembered that his future self hadn't been wearing a wedding ring.

She drove to a nearby shopping mall with a small medical center that Cruger had often seen, but never been to. He saw that there must be some mistake. It wasn't the doctor's office — at least not the right kind of doctor.

Cruger walked into the waiting room after he saw her, through the half-closed blinds, get up and walk past a large ornate wooden door, into what Cruger presumed were the doctor's inner offices.

He gently walked into the waiting room, happy to see no one was around — even the receptionist was gone from her counter next to the ornate wooden door. Cruger skulked up to the receptionist area, looked into the appointment book, and read her name, clear as day, even upside-down, written in the book.

Then he got out fast, his heart beating faster than ever, palms cold and sweaty, legs threatening to sink him to the ground. *Damn, I knew it ... I knew it,* he told himself. When he made it to his car, he just sat there for a while, shaking, waiting for the ability to drive to return so he could get the hell out of there.

Chapter 35

Always do right. This will gratify some people, and astonish the rest.

— Mark Twain

Cruger called Tony's office — they still called it that — and Harris answered. He didn't tell Harris anything except that he'd be there in a few minutes.

Cruger tried to act cool, natural. Harris showed Cruger how the database of strings was laid out. The concept of digital representation of every event and person known was staggering.

"Isn't it impossible to have this much information stored on a small computer?" Cruger said.

"Yes, but it's not stored here. This is just God's front end. Inside there's that glob of Tvonen technology that seems to be doing most of the work."

"How close are you to finishing the whole project?"

"Pretty close. I think I can issue any command from here, but I still haven't run the caretaker program."

Cruger looked puzzled.

"The two of us can't control the whole show — I mean, even if we do end up being God, we're still only human," Harris said. "The caretaker will make sure everything runs smoothly, and will keep threads from tangling. We'll still be able to issue commands and guide the process, but it'll do most of the dirty work."

Cruger nodded, let Harris' words sink in, and then spoke.

"I need you to make some deletions for me."

Harris looked astonished. "Delete people? Why?"

"I've found out who the Chysans are — the aliens who are working for the Other Company."

"Who?"

Cruger ignored the question. "Pull up the deletion program," he asked. Harris nodded and brought up the routine.

"First, Theodore Natassi from Denver, Colorado."

Harris typed the name in, cross-listed with Cruger's thread.

"No entry. Who is this guy, and what kind of contact have you had with him?"

"I think he's near the top of the Other Company. I've never met him."

"Well," Harris said, "this won't work unless your string intersects with his. How about someone else first, someone whose string crosses his and yours?"

"Easy. Lyle Neswick."

Harris' face filled with disbelief.

"*Neswick?* No way, man. Neswick can't be Chysan.

That would mean that Tamara—"

"—is one of them, Leon. They've got to be deleted."

"No way," Harris repeated. "No way. I can't believe that Tamara —"

"I saw her with Sky and Neswick. They're working together… Sky admitted it to me."

"She was lying!"

Cruger shook his head. "She wasn't lying. I know — I saw her change shape. She's Chysan."

Harris swiveled around in his chair. "I can't believe it. Tamara? It can't be true."

Cruger grabbed the computer's keyboard and typed Neswick's name. Harris swiveled and grabbed it back, but Cruger managed to make a final slap at the return key.

"If you delete him, she goes, too!" he said. "He's her *father!* If he never existed, neither did she!"

"He's not her father! And now It's done, isn't it?" Cruger asked.

Harris let out an angry laugh. "No, it's not done." He pointed at the monitor.

Are you sure you want to delete this person?

Cruger tried to grab the keyboard back from Harris, but the athletic programmer shoved him away.

"They're all working for the Other Company!" Cruger yelled. "Neswick, Tamara, Sky… and Corrina." Cruger said.

"Corrina?"

"Never pregnant. Never an Earth woman. I suspected something was weird with the first 'miscarriage'. I never went to a doctor with her. Turns out she always went to shrinks instead of OB/GYNs."

"Holy shit," Harris said.

"Yep, holy shit.!" shouted Cruger. "Makes sense now, though. Why the hell else was I picked for the Company? Why did Tony come to me? I suppose it was my job because of who my wife was. My wife, a long-time agent from Chysa!"

Harris stared at Cruger in disbelief. Cruger stood for a moment, then slumped into a chair. They both sat for a while, just looking at the small computer and its screen sitting on the desk in the stuffy room. The screen still asked, *"Are you sure you want to delete this person?"*

"Let me tell you the story. Maybe it'll make it easier for you," Cruger said. "Sky was living with foster parents. She had been sent there at the *supposed* age of fifteen. No records exist for her whereabouts before that point in time. Also, she was pretty handy in computer class at school. She had been doing some extracurricular work there. Doing the code for Corrina — that murderous code. Before that, she had been keeping tabs on Tony."

"So they infiltrated the Company pretty well. How did they do it?"

"I'm not sure. The only thing we can be sure of is that there are more of them that we don't know about."

"Thank you," Harris said, "a very comforting thought."

Cruger continued. "Seems that Sky was having some real adjustment problems to life here. She was referred to a psychiatrist by the High School guidance counselor. Probably same shrink Corrina originally went to. She stopped going a few weeks ago, the records say. I got the name of the doctor from the school counselor but I can't find that doctor listed anywhere. Gone."

"That's suspicious, but a lot of things are suspicious."

"Another suspicious thing was that Sky, Tamara, and Neswick all knew each other *very* well. I followed Sky over to Neswick's place once. Then the three of them were all together over there, enacting the words *Menage a troi*."

"Neswick and Tamara, that's disgusting," Harris said. His voice, charged, higher than usual, rang of hurt.

"Come on, he was no more related to her than you were. That was all an act." Realizing that Harris may have been more attached to Tamara than he had guessed, said, "Sorry if this hurts — but, it has to be done. We've got to delete them all."

"Don't worry about it. I wasn't going to ask her to marry me. But I was dumb enough to get pretty involved with her. You know, agents of Beelzebub make pretty good girlfriends. She did everything to make me happy: had her own money, loved sex, loved computers, and never had to visit her mom or go to confessional."

"Sounds pretty good. Can't blame you for biting the hook," Cruger said. "I did."

"Yeah," Harris said, picking up the keyboard. "Let's get this over with."

"Don't do it," said a muffled voice from behind them. Nobody had come in the door, but someone was there. They both turned to see who it was.

Standing in the corner was a huge figure in a silver spacesuit.

"My name," the figure said, "is Natassi."

Chapter 36

That was when Cruger put it all together — the mystery man in the house in Denver.

"The devil himself, huh?" he said.

Natassi turned to Cruger. "That's what Uraken and the rest of the Company would call me, yes. And it seems that you've taken the biblical allusions to heart — you're working for God, on a mission against Satan."

"More or less," Cruger said. "Satan was a fallen angel, right? I guess that makes you an outcast Tvonen."

"Very true." The figure stepped forward, the floor creaking with his weight. Harris stood up suddenly but Natassi raised his hand, signalling him to stop. "I'm not the evil creature they would have you believe I am. I worked for the Company; I helped form it before humans had domesticated a beast — before Uraken was born. And I was thrown out — not because I was promoting evil, but because I was promoting free will."

"What?" said Harris.

The figure shifted its weight and the silver suit hissed, making it seem as if Natassi were sighing. "Do you know how the universe works, Mr. Harris?" Natassi asked. "As it currently stands, spinners guide the threads of the universe subconsciously, with their art. It's an organic method, one that allows for a great deal of… spontaneity. It's as close to free will as anyone can get.

"But the goal of the Company is *omnipotence*. The Unified Theorem is the ultimate application of that design. With your computer, you'll be able to run everything — *anything*. Total control."

"So you're saying you're a *good guy* looking out for the little people?" Cruger said incredulously. "I'm supposed to believe that?"

"What about you?" Harris spoke up. "How does killing people work into this plan of yours?"

This time, Natassi may have sighed. "We take what help we can get. Chysans are independent by nature: they despise authority and control, and hence the goals of the Company. Chysans enjoy as much violence and killing as they can find. We've tried to keep the Unified Theorem as far away from completion as possible. Tony was close, and he would have implemented the program the second it was ready. We killed him."

"And now you're going to kill us?" Harris asked, trying to guess how long it would take to quit out of the deletion routine and launch the caretaker program. "Where are your Chysan thugs?"

"They aren't here," Natassi said. "And they won't be. It seems that this meeting is the best we can hope to do. We're at the last moment of free will, and I'm here to make my last request."

"Which is?"

Natassi stepped forward. "Stop the Company!" he hissed. "Make it so there are no more spinners — so that those blue glows disappear forever! Then have the computer *delete itself*. Let the universe be on its own, to do whatever it wants."

"Total chaos," Harris said. "Sounds like something the devil would advocate."

Harris pressed down on the key combination that took him out of the deletion routine, back to the main menu. The computer screen flashed briefly.

"Don't start it!" Nattasi said, his voice rising. "Uraken's like almost every other Tvonen — he wants total control. You're giving it to him! The Tvonen will rule the universe. Take it from me. You don't want to see an omnipotent Tvonen."

Cruger looked at Harris. Cruger thought about Corrina, and about what the alien in front of him represented. Then he nodded at his partner, who tapped a few keys.

The disk drive whirred briefly; the program ran.

There was a God.

The alien began to fade away with an effect that looked more like smoke dissipating in a breeze than the *Star Trek* sparkles Cruger had expected to see.

"The Chysans won't be happy," Natassi whispered as he vanished. "I hope you can live with your decision."

A little while later the menu bar of the computer's screen flashed. The flash was followed by a gentle chiming sound effect that snapped the two men into a state of alertness.

"I don't believe it," said Harris. "We got a message off the network. Someone, something on the other end of that cable finally contacted us."

"Are you sure?"

"Damned sure. The only way we get this alert message is an incoming network packet."

The message, displayed across the screen in large italic type, was short and simple.

Congratulations on a job very well done. You're both on your own now. You're in charge. Congratulations on your promotions.

—Uraken

Cruger looked at Harris who returned the look. Cruger's mouth was open. His eyes were blank and his mouth then twitched as if either to begin talking or drooling.

"Congratulations?" Harris said.

Cruger composed himself a little. "Uraken?"

"What really gets me is the 'You're on your own' part. What do you think?"

"I think we're in charge now," Cruger said. "Which means that the people who are running the universe aren't Tvonens after all."

"The people who are running the universe…"

They stood there, less Godlike than anyone would ever have imagined, balancing their suddenly weak bodies on the feet of men who had just finished a marathon. "Congratulations" was the word that stuck with Cruger.

Cruger turned to Harris. "Congrats," he said, not sounding jubilant. "I think I'm going to go home and tell Corrina to get her ass back to Chysa."

"I'm thinking…" Harris said, letting the last word trail off into nothingness.

"Of what?"

"Nothing much. A programming project I did in college is coming back to me — a random number generator. I'm thinking about writing a new one."

Epilogue

It was Thursday night and Cruger was playing his regular sets of solo guitar at the Café Emerson. It had been two months since he had become co-keeper of the universe, two months since he'd went home to find Corrina already gone.

His guitar chops felt good, but remembering Corrina

brought him down. It takes a while to get over losing someone you loved, even if they aren't what they appear.

When two guys came up to him and shot him through the head, he wasn't even surprised. Spinners were being attacked all over by Chysans unhappy with the dissolution of the Other Company. They evidently didn't understand what "insurance" was.

So Harris's employee safety program kicked in immediately and Cruger was alive again, the bullets back in the thirty-eight, and two assailants erased forever. The only person in the Cafe that even knew something had happened was Cruger. Within a few seconds, he was able to take a deep breath and put it out of his mind.

Cruger said a silent thank-you to Harris, made a mental note to remember to thank him in person at the office in the morning, and decided to do one more tune before ending the set.

He played *Someone To Watch Over Me* with a wry smile stretched across his face. It was an excellent rendition, of course — probably the best any of the people in the bar had heard. Even the mistakes Cruger made — and there were a few— just added to the feeling and humanity of the performance.

An a unique performance it was. After all, most people did the song as a ballad. But not Cruger — he played it fairly up-tempo.

After all, if you can't set your own tempo, then who are you, anyway?

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Has begun a stint with the spin-off software company Taligent after ten years of writing and managing software at Apple Computer. He enjoys spending time with his wife and two small children, playing jazz with Bay Area groups, writing software and prose, and building playhouses and other assorted toys for his children to trash.

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