

Excerpt From
"High Hopes for the Dead"

by Alex Lobdell

Luke "High Hopes" Kittery twisted out the last screw from the toaster in his lap and tossed both screw and screwdriver back over his shoulder. The hazy reflection of his hollow-eyed, unshaven face stared glumly back at him from the stainless steel appliance casing.

"Come on, Toast Chief 4000," he mumbled. "Help me out here, would you?" He ran his hand over the appliance. "Or I'm the one who's toast."

Luke pulled the base from the casing, flung the casing aside, and eased a pair of needle-nose pliers into the toaster's core. Gently he pulled out a small, square computer chip.

With great care, he stood up and began picking his way across the ship's galley, stepping over what looked like an electronics torture chamber. Casings and wire-tangled guts of pulled apart personal computers, video cameras, entertainment units, a microwave oven, and a limp maintenance robot littered the floor. The once-white walls of the galley were covered with hand-scrawled diagrams of circuit configurations and mathematical equations, half of which were scratched out. A two-foot pile of empty meal pack containers overflowed from the tub of a dissected washing machine.

Dradling the chip, Luke made his way down a short corridor, the walls of which were also covered with row upon row of scribbled calculations, and entered the cockpit of the V.S. Tigris Dawn.

Such as it was. The cover of the navigational computer, charred and warped, lay on the floor beneath a jumble of soldering tools. Beside it, a grease-smudged digital encyclopedia lay on the floor, a complex diagram titled Master-Slave Drive Configuration on its screen.

From inside the exposed navigational computer compartment, an eerie blue glow shimmered.

Most of the myriad of screens on the pilot's console were black, except for the word STANDBY. Only the navigational screen was active. On it, a row of large numbers scrambled down its glass face.

In the window above the pilot's chair, distant stars hung absolutely motionless in a wall of black.

Luke knelt down and, wincing, reached into the glowing compartment and pulled out a food tray covered with a crudely assembled computer board. Wires trailed from it into the glowing chamber. Holding his breath, Luke lowered the chip into the last empty slot beside twelve other chips of various sizes and shapes.

From the pilot's console, a chime sounded, and Luke's bloodshot eyes shot up to the navigation screen. There was a small but perceptible increase in the rate at which the numbers cascaded down.

He let out his breath. "Well, that's it," he said to himself. "That's the last of them." He heaved himself to his feet, stepped over to the pilot's chair, and dropped into it. He stared out past the wooden rosary that hung before the cockpit window at the smattering of unfriendly stars that glowed coldly before him.

He rubbed his eyes. "Well, I guess I'm earning my pay on this run," he mumbled, and a humorless smile crossed his characteristically solemn 24-year-old face.

His thoughts drifted to the memorial plaque back at the Vanguard Mainstation on Poseidon and tried to think of the last name engraved on it—the one beneath which his own name would probably soon be neatly etched. It was Kenneth "Bumblebee" Newberry. His grim smile widened at the memory of the jovial, portly pilot.

Newberry had been nicknamed "Bumblebee" because of a trait that his typically cynical fellow pilots claimed he shared with that Earth insect: although scientists had proven that it was impossible for a bumblebee to be able to fly, it did anyway. Such was the case, the pilots claimed, with Newberry.

All of the Vanguards had nicknames, given to them by their fellow pilots. The pilot called "Zombie" had won his nickname after bringing his ship, or at least most of it, into port just one day before he was to have been declared officially dead.

High Hopes felt very close to Zombie at the moment.

There was Pirate, who had lost an eye to a micro-asteroid and wore an eye patch; the Kid, who, according to computer analysis, had aged only two hours on a four-month run to Achilles three years ago; Acid, whose arm had to be hastily amputated by medics after it suddenly began dissolving following her return from a seemingly routine flight; and Back Talk, who two years ago arrived at her destination of Earth, and much to everyone's surprise could only speak backward and couldn't understand a word that was being spoken to her. She had to be completely retrained by speech therapists to speak forward again, though when she got angry, she would still curse fluently in reverse, much to her fellow pilots' delight.

High Hopes' eyes drifted to the old Sacred Heart Spacecraft League card taped onto the pilot's console. Jesus stared at him solemnly from it. To this day he didn't know which of the Vanguards had put it there, or exactly why. For some reason he had always thought it had been Bumblebee. Had it been a message perhaps? The result of a premonition? The comfort of one soon-to-be dead man to another? Who could tell. The Vanguard pilots did things in their own weird ways.

The Vanguard pilots were indeed a strange group. But that was only natural. They had a very strange job: to ride ExploraCorp's frontships out into space and, in short, hope not to get killed. And to serve as instructional cadavers for scientists if they did not. That was it. Usually.

But this trip had hardly been usual, High Hopes thought to himself as a wisp of red ions shimmered briefly over the cockpit window and then was gone.

Excerpt From

"The Smile"

by Greg Beatty

"In 2001, I was a sophomore in college, not much younger than you are now, planning a double major in math and physics. Early in that year, Wilford and Turner announced a discovery. It's forgotten now, but it was a ten-day wonder then, and enough to give my studies a much needed focus.

"They announced that they'd verified that the quasar they'd been studying dated from far earlier than any previously verified astronomical object. Every calculation indicated it originated 800 million years after the Big Bang."

Walsh made another of his abortive gestures, as if his yearning to get to the answer was at war with a lifetime of respect. Glasberger nodded in response. "I know, I know. So what's the big deal? The big deal was, it was the first major, verified observation to break, no, to shatter the one billion-year mark. For me and others interested in the field, it was the sort of psychological barrier that the four-minute mile had been in sports, an accomplishment which, judging from the expression on your face, means nothing to you."

"Sorry."

"Don't be. One know-it-all in the room is enough, and I've had plenty of time to think about humanity's limits and achievements since I 'quit,' as you put it. Since I shifted my focus, as I like to think of it. Now, where was I?"

"You were deciding to trace the Big Bang back to its source."

"Well, you're a little ahead of me, and you make me sound even more grandiose than I suspect that twenty-year-old physics nerd was, but yeah. From that point on, I devoted myself to helping humanity see as much of 'the early days' as I could." Glasberger said, making little quote marks in the air.

"If I may, sir, I think everyone knows this part of the story." Walsh put in quickly. "In 2003, you began grad school at MIT, with summers spent interning at Hubble Ground Support, JPL, and Fermi."

"Right. I was building a base. A broad base."

"In 2010, you specialized in neutrino research, producing papers in 2012 and 2014 that developed a model allowing researchers to correlate neutrino absorption rates with UHF tracking to date quasar age more accurately. Then, in 2016, you—"

"My team."

"Right," Walsh said, flushing. "You and your team confirmed your mathematical model for locating quasars blocked by dark matter, to extrapolate galactic dates and position much further back than anyone had done before."

"Yes. We were sneaking up on the 100 million-year mark. 100 million years ABB—After Big Bang, we started calling it ABB. Somebody duplicated an old movie poster with a twentieth century hottie in it, something like 4 Million Years BC, and doctored it so dinosaurs and cavemen with our faces were looking at the Big Bang like they'd discovered fire."

Walsh laughed; Glasberger only smiled. "Yes. Well, late in 2016, I became interested in the shape of space at 100 million ABB."

"The shape?" Walsh asked obligingly.

"Yes. I'd become interested in some of the gravitational anomalies that the Eire neutrino team had documented, especially in the Australian team's observations of what seemed to be evidence of ripples or waves through the denser primordial matter. Since we were talking about the mass of the entire universe moving outward from a single point, earlier assumptions had been that any local variation would be minimal, if even noticeable at that scale. Essentially, we assumed that the young universe would be shaped like a sphere."

"Aha!"

"Aha?"

"Yes, I've always wanted to say that. 'Aha,' I say, as in, 'at last, something new, now I have a story.' May I assume that the universe was not in fact spherical, and how could you tell?" Walsh spat out hurriedly.

"No. No, it wasn't spherical. I used the basic results that the Sloan Digital Sky Survey had produced earlier, then started drifting over to use the Cal Tech evolutionary computing labs, adapting some of their cybernetic life programs to generate a model that started with the base forces of the Bang, to generate an image of what the universe would have looked like from the outside, a three dimensional shape rather than the two-dimensional snapshot that Sloan's people had managed."

Walsh smiled slowly. This part of the story was clearly new to him, and the level of ambition contained was clearly a more appropriate fit with the Glasberger he'd studied. "The universe," he breathed. "You wanted to look at the universe. From the outside. You don't think small, do you?"

"Hey, I was curious. And young. So I threw grad students and money and time on the fastest processors at the problem, played with the issues around shifting dominant radiation distribution into the visible spectrum without distortion, and found that the result was...this."

The scientist reached across to his desk and tapped a quick sequence on his home computer; he still preferred manual access computing to voice-activated, even in retirement.

Walsh looked at the presentation-quality hologram for a long time. When he finally spoke, his voice was carefully flat. "Dr. Glasberger. From this angle, that looks almost like a face."

Excerpt from
"Comprehending it Not"
By Cherith Baldry

Yesterday a judge in the European Court of Human Rights refused to hear a charge of rape brought by an android woman against her human supervisor. Her alleged assailant has been suspended on full pay by his employers, United Chemicals, Ltd, while they consider taking proceedings against him for criminal damage. The android, which was not available for comment, is said to be incapable of carrying out its assigned tasks, and may have to be reintegrated.

* * *

Francis Taverner finished clearing out the drawers of his desk in the priest's vestry and looked at the few possessions scattered on the desktop. A Bible and a prayer book. Notepad and pen. Half a tube of cough sweets. One glove he thought he had lost. He was still standing there when the door to the vestry opened.

Gillian came in, the android girl he had married to her human lover on that first night. She smiled at him, and held up a bundle of cleaning rags.

"I've been polishing the eagle, Father, but I've finished now if you want to lock up."

Francis nodded. Gillian put her cleaning materials away and then turned back, frowning a little at his silence. "Is anything the matter, Father?"

"I—I've . . ." Francis' voice failed. He cleared his throat and tried again. "I've been suspended, Gillian. I've got to leave."

She stood rigid, her face white. "Because of us."

"Yes." As she took a step towards him, he flung up a hand. "Don't blame yourself. The Bishop gave me every opportunity to wriggle out of trouble, but I didn't take it, so I've got to go. They'll send someone to fill in until you find a new priest."

"He won't be you, Father. He won't let us come in."

Francis shook his head slowly. "No one can stop you coming to church, but he won't give you the Sacrament."

He could not face her stillness and her bewilderment; averting his face, he began turning over the small collection of objects on the desk.

After a moment, Gillian asked, "Where will you go, Father?"

“Oh, not far. I’ve found a room. It’ll do until I decide what to do next.”

The silence continued until he had to look at her again. Her distress had faded. She was half-smiling, and her hands were clasped protectively at her waist. “I’m expecting a baby, Father.”

The shabby little vestry was suddenly luminous with her happiness and the warmth she held out to him.

“Gillian, that’s wonderful. I’m so glad.”

“I was thinking, Father—about the baptism . . .”

He was about to protest, when she held out her hands to him, unconsciously displaying to him the lettering of her android origin.

“Father, you’re still a priest.”

“Yes.” He had taken the notepad, and was scribbling on it rapidly.

“Yes, I’m still a priest, for the time being, anyway. Look, this is my new address. Come and see me there. You, and anyone else who wants to come. You will, won’t you?”

She took the scrap of paper from him. “Yes, Father, of course we will.”

“And—pray for me, Gillian. Please pray for me.”

Excerpt from

"Moses Disposes"

By Frank C. Gunderloy

The overhead fluorescents dimmed in the Temporal University Physics Lab as my good friend, V. Hector Sneakpeeper, powered up his Linear Oscillatory Viewing Etiological Recreater. "Come on, LOVER," he shouted, slamming at the control panel as the screen alternately blanked and flickered. "Show it to me, LOVER! Give me the picture!"

Outlined against the glow of the giant video display, V. Hector appeared blade-thin, with features like a starving condor. Despite such obviously artistic scholarly qualities, he nevertheless plodded along as a research assistant in the dismal slough of Physics. The English Department had washed him out for submitting poetry corrupted with rhyme and meter.

"More power!" yelled V. Hector, stabbing at a keyboard imbedded in the morass of meandering wires. Racks of humming black boxes seemed to close in around me under the fading light.

"Look, Hector, all I need is a quick peek at Moses on the Mount," I said, pulling at my collar. "Those picky editors at the *Journal of Holistic Neologisms* rejected my 'Divine Revelations' paper because I didn't actually witness the Word being given. And they had the gall to phone my professor about it on a Sunday morning. How's that for respecting the day? If I'd taken that call, they woulda heard a sermon to singe their earlobes, Sunday or not. 'Swearing by all that's holy' ain't just an expression, y'know."

"Let's have it, LOVER!" continued V. Hector, ignoring my increasingly passionate invective. "Now, LOVER, NOW!"

Much more of this, I thought, and Dear Professor B. can do his own dirty work. Just plant the ideas, he said, and they'll do the rest. OK, Prof, we'll just see if everything sticks in V. Hector's mind.

The shadow play on the screen steadied, revealing the image of an elderly Semite, bearded and be-robed (albeit none too cleanly), sweating laboriously up a steep mountain trail. He slipped on the rocky footing, bent to wipe his skinned knee with the wadded end of his beard, and began a silent tirade.

"Got him!" trumpeted V. Hector, doing a clumsy buck-and-wing.

"But, blast it, where's the sound? LOVER, can't you get it right the first time?"

"Never mind," I said. "Can we skip forward and catch him on the peak when he first got the Word? I couldn't care less if he breaks a leg getting there."

“Easily done,” said V. Hector, lapsing into lecture mode. “Now that we’ve tapped the right frequencies and reinforcement levels, all we need is minor adjustments in the overtone residuals. The history of all time has been recorded in the undying vibrations of light and sound waves, you know, and—”

“Yeah, yeah, I *do* know. Could we get on with it?”

V. Hector pounded his keyboard. Blue-green sparks leaped between black boxes, like so many acrobatic tree snakes.

The image rolled, then stabilized. The patriarch now stood atop a truck-sized red granite boulder, one of many tumbled along a broad wind-blasted ridge. His hair streamed behind his upthrust head and his beard lashed to and fro as he gestured and chanted skyward, arms pumping in a rhythmic ecstasy of supplication. A royal purple glow began to pulse in time with his silent litany.

Suddenly a tall sinuous man in a black ski mask came scrambling around one of the nearer boulders, slithering between the stone barriers like he had the hips of a snake. (*Snake!*) As he zigzagged toward our apparent vantage point, he kept a multi-lensed device aimed at us. A cable spiraled ominously to a shoulder pack labeled “Burst Power.”

“LOVER” suddenly locked onto the sonic frequency at full volume.

I barely caught the tail end of the Patriarch’s chanting—words indistinct but oddly familiar—before Mr. Ski Mask let loose with both lungs.

“YOU LOUSY SNOOPS! AIN’T YOU GOT THE GOOD SENSE TO KNOW YOU’RE MESSING WITH NUMBER ONE! YOU GOT NO PRIORITY! AND NO PICTURES UNLESS THEY’RE THE RIGHT PICTURES! TAKE THAT, YOU LOUSY FINKS!!”

I had a final vision of the patriarch turning toward us with a look of horrified disgust on his face, when the purple glow was drowned under a blast of light brighter than a fireworks finale, leaving me blinking and sightless.

“What the . . . ?” I finally managed, rubbing my eyes until I could squint myself back into visual coherence. When I agreed on this mission for my dear professor, I hadn’t bargained for a side trip to the optometry trauma center.

“Sun-gun,” said V.H., also pawing at his eyes. “Sabotaging little rat flashed it right up LOVER’s detector channel. Scrambled every frequency for a millennium in both directions.”

“Second question. *Who* in blazes was that?”

“Er . . . uh . . . ah . . . Dunno,” said V. Hector, not meeting my gaze, and perhaps putting a little more effort into caressing his smoking keyboard than might have been necessary. “Rats! It’s gonna take me a year to recalibrate.” He picked up a screwdriver, wiped away the tears, and began dismantling the one Gray Box. I might as well have been in Reykjavik.

“Hector . . .”

“You still here? Listen, I don’t want to say any more, but that little freak was obviously a corporeal presence. Scoot over to Engineering. They specialize in all kinds of gross solid state shenanigans, like time travel in the flesh.”

A loud ZAP! and a delicate curl of smoke signaled that the gesturing screwdriver and the innards of the Gray Box were not particularly compatible.

I scooted.

Excerpt from
"The Faith Equation"
By Peter Bell

"I'm one of a few people who remember life before the solving of the Divine Equation," Father Jones began. "I was only a boy, of course, but my memory is clear enough. Now, I've read enough bad literature to know how you would picture the time."

"A dark time," she replied.

"In a way. Different, certainly. God was not a certainty, merely an object of belief, and there were many different religions, following many different gods. Or no gods at all in some cases. Even those who followed the Christian beliefs weren't united, and tens of thousands of people died quite needlessly in religious struggles. Physics was just another specialist subject, like art, or sport. No, it's true," he said, in response to her doubtful scowl. "I can remember hating it at school. Almost as much as I hated math or chemistry. I think you feel the same way about cookery."

She blushed.

"And did you know that the man who discovered the Equation wasn't even Christian?"

Martha shook her head, astonished, causing Father Jones to chuckle.

"The Authority doesn't like people mentioning the fact, which is why they're still arguing over whether to raise him to the level of Holy Prophet or not. So you can imagine what a shock it was when he announced his discovery.

"Scientists were a select group in those days, and he found it hard to gain credibility for nearly a year. Imagine! An equation that proved the existence of God! It was treated as something of a novelty by most people—a fanciful notion dreamed up by someone with too much time on his hands. After the first year, however, other scientists began to review the findings and found that they were scientifically sound. Very few would admit it, of course, for fear of being ridiculed, and nothing was announced by the media, but the work was steadily gaining a foothold. Teams of physicists pulled it to pieces and analyzed it for miscalculations, but none were found. Much as they hated to admit it, this piece of frivolous party science was mathematically correct. God existed, and the laws of physics proved it.

"The findings weren't officially announced for several years, but word got around, as it always does. The various factions of the Church, many of which had been fighting for so long they couldn't even remember why they had started, began to put aside their differences. Congregations, which had been on the brink of drying up completely, began to swell again. There was nothing terribly dramatic, not like all those awful holo-films you see, but the difference was profound, and it started to snowball. Once the scientists finally decided to

announce that God had been found, the Churches banded together to form one Ecumenical Authority, and it wasn't long before whole countries began adopting its doctrines."

Martha nodded. She knew scraps of this already, but had never heard it recounted from a first-person perspective before. "Go on," she said, fascinated.

"Well, founded on a scientific base that nobody was able to dispute, and with such a large social influence, the Authority quickly became preferable in many people's eyes to the political parties that had controlled each of the individual countries until that point. The accumulation of power seemed to come about quite naturally. Within a decade and a half, the Authority was the one true, effective world power, and it hadn't cost a single life. The Quiet Revolution, as it became known."

"Not like the holo-films," Martha conceded.

"Not half as exciting," he said. "But twice as interesting. Because the Authority was quite unique in religious terms. It chose to embrace science, and physics and mathematics were elevated to the status of Holy Orders, to be studied for the good of God and the furthering of humanity. As the threat of war receded, scientists were able to focus their talents on purely benevolent areas, such as medicine."

He turned and indicated Deiniol's Cathedral. "That's why we are on the brink of eradicating most fatal diseases today, and why our personal technology has become so advanced in such a short space of time. The planet used to be polluted, and crime was a normal part of everyday life. All that is gone now, thankfully."

"So why do you ask me if I have faith?" she asked.

"I served the Authority faithfully for years," he said, his reminiscence over. "I was as happy as I thought any man should have a right to be. But then, one day, a new thought struck me. Why did I have Faith? As you said, because the Equation tells us that this is what is right. I went away and tried to satisfy myself with that answer, but is that really Faith? My belief in God and the teachings of the Authority required no effort on my part. There was nothing I could question or explore. I didn't actively go about believing things. I just knew them to be true."

Martha remained silent.

"I suddenly realized that nowhere in my being, not to the very depths of my soul, could I find a single drop of Faith."

Excerpt From
"Tampering With God's Time"
by Karina Fabian

She would have been glad to have continued like that, taking their money for a while before gently planting the suggestions that would lead them to relieve the world of their superficial lives, but people had become suspicious. So she moved to new challenges, the criminally insane. Gloriously complex. And not so easily missed. But as her esteem in the field grew, some took note of her "lost cases." No longer.

Finally, a place—a time—with no one looking over her shoulder. They couldn't appreciate her work here, not like they should, not in its entirety. She couldn't tell them how she cleansed the world. So, she would do her work in a different era.

She had lain awake all night, anticipating, planning. Diagnosis would be easy. She could smell madness, see vulnerability in the eyes, but the rest... New challenges lay there. In this time, it was simple: a suggested dosage given at a vulnerable moment, an incitement to self-violence with the proper stimulus. The modern mind, accustomed to daily comforts, is weak. How would she fare against a mind hardy from the constant struggle for life? The thought excited her. They even had the most delicious name for the insane then: demoniac.

With tired eyes and a nervous but eager smile, she stood on the platform and let the scientists and religious scholars make their final adjustments. Surreptitiously, she loosened the strap of the homing device. She'd ditch it ASAP. Maybe she'd plant it on some poor follower, bring him back. Might as well give the Church something for its trouble. A prayer was said, blessing her mission—touching, if ironic—as the countdown began.

A sonic boom.

The ground shook.

Already disoriented, Helen lost her footing, falling heavily on something fat and alive. It squealed and bucked from under her, dropping her in mud and feces.

"Shit!" she screamed, leaping and slipping. "Couldn't you have put me down a few feet over? Idiots! How the hell do I—"

A herdsman was staring at her, and she realized she'd spoken in her own language. Quickly, she switched. "Uh, hello. Can you—"

He bolted, calling to his friends.

"Wait! Help me out of here!" She lunged toward him, slipped, and fell again.

"I'll help you." A wiry arm yanked her to her feet.

"Thank you. I..." She stopped. That smell! Beneath the grime and sweat and sour food, that smell called to her senses. A demoniac! "Who are you?"

"We are Legion."

We. Multiple personalities? At least he's never alone. "How many are you?"

"How many swine in this herd?" The voice was gentle, mocking, enticingly mad. She smiled despite herself.

"Perhaps I could speak to another?"

Still gripping her arm, he shuddered. There! That slight dimming of the eyes, the turning inward as the mind struggles for new balance. Oh, she could work with this!

Legion II hunched, his new voice deeper, sinister. "So you come, our kindred spirit."

"Kindred? You feel kinship with me, when we've just met?"

"We know you. Past, present, future—here is no time for us; we know your works well. How many souls have you claimed for our Master? Eleven? Nay, twelve."

"What? How could you—?" Get a grip, she chided herself. You control. "Let's, let's talk about you..."

That look. A change. The grip tightened. Legion III laughed, maniacal. He swung her round. Her fear rose as she realized she had no restraints, no orderlies to come to her aid. He pulled. Her feet left the ground. She screamed as he flung her.

She landed heavily among the pigs. She fought to regain her footing, slipping in the manure and mud, shoving against grunting, wallowing bodies, vaguely hearing Legion arguing with another:

"...torment me..."

"...Beggone!..."

Suddenly, the herd went crazy, knocking her about in its wild stampede. Butted and battered from all sides, she fell again. Hooves bruised and trampled. She curled up, hid her face. She tumbled with the sea of bodies, her screams unable to block out the thunder of their feet and the horrid desperate squeals. In them, she heard the screams of her patients, crying for justice. A cloven hoof pierced her side and she felt the anguish of their families. She cried for them to stop, but they didn't; each pain became an accusation, each squeal calling "WHYWHYWHY?"

A horrible wrenching in her soul.

Then silence, broken only by her sobs. She looked up—

—into a face of utter kindness.

"Oh, God," she whispered, "what have I done? How could I have...how?"

"What's done is done. Your demon has left you. Your sins are forgiven. But this I charge you: Do not return from when you came." He looked to the one called Legion. She, too, turned and met Legion's eyes, weary and tear-streaked, but at peace. She knew his expression mirrored her own. "Care for each other. Tell no one of this day. Go now, and sin no more."

She looked questioningly at Legion. He smiled briefly and held out his hand. As she took it, the smile returned and she felt herself grinning back shyly.

When she looked back, the other had gone.

* * *

"A pig?" The stranger looked like he hadn't heard correctly. "You brought back a pig?"

"A sow, of weight so close to Dr. Barker that the machine didn't notice any difference when, after receiving no signal from her, the emergency recall cut in and activated the return device. How could it have gotten attached to a pig, and one of such perfect mass, we just don't know. I should have canceled everything then. God forgive me, I should have canceled. But the others convinced me to give it one final try, and Dr. Li Chen, our Hindu archaeologist, was more than willing. He kept saying it would be such an easy, lucky mission..."

Excerpt from
"Quantum Express"
By Vincent Malzahn

The computers of both worlds had absorbed themselves into the Quantum Particle Probability Machines and then began building additional equipment. The two super-computers had worked as a single mind and had devised equipment neither human nor alien could completely understand. Both sides had fully understood that the computers intended to transmit matter—even living sentient beings—through that information exchange based on effected polarization variances. Religious groups had protested on both planets, but explorers had eagerly taken the risks—explorers like Lance Larue.

Hainey double-checked the straps and sensors. She then stepped away from Lance and the slab. It began to sink while other bulky equipment rattled inward on massive rails. “Do you know what the Church says? They say you’re dying in there.”

“I outgrew the Church when I was sixteen years old. Even after my idiot uncle forced his Catholic version of history down my throat for five infernal years. On the day he expected me to be confirmed, I went and joined the FreeThinkers! The namby-pamby had a breakdown!”

Lance laughed. His fears remained, yet he believed her words revealed their foolishness. He had no use for religion or for God, and he only served himself and those who could pay his exorbitant fee and best publicize his epic adventures. Besides, he remembered living through the process hundreds and hundreds of times!

“Oh, Hainey,” Lance’s tone transformed into amused realization. “One of those Catholic groups got to you, didn’t they? Probably those pro-lifers, eh? They’re always trying to save me from this machine!”

A wild outburst of laughter. “If your bosses ever catch wind of that, if they ever hear you ranting like an empty-headed zealot, your career will be nothing but a memory. No legitimate scientist will have anything to do with you.”

The equipment closed in around him. As the last few seconds passed—a mere moment before the steel tomb of equipment slammed shut—she called out to him again.

“You had your chance to stop it. By the way, have you ever wondered why we have to strap you down so well?”

SLAM.

A chill arose deep within, growing and surfacing, until it sent an uncontrollable shudder throughout his body. Its intensity escalated with the volume of the humming equipment, reaching

a deafening level. For the fourth time, Hainey had struck horror into him with the simplest of questions. And this time he missed the opportunity for the clever retort he so needed.

A mind-numbing electrical charge exploded around his body and inside his head. A flash of light blinded and disoriented him.

* * *

There was utter darkness, utter silence, utter loss of feeling. Still, he could sense himself being pulled upward by an unknown force. He rose for an unknown time and crossed an unknown distance. He eventually came to a stop and just hovered there. As light and sound flooded back at him, he discovered that he floated near the ceiling. Below, he saw Hainey and another technician crouched over the aluminum slab; he watched attentively. He remained unafraid and unsurprised. He felt an incredible peace unlike anything he'd ever experienced.

Such a complete peace after such a hellish experience seemed impossible, but he did not dwell on the hell. He remembered the equipment shutting in around him, and he remembered remaining conscious as powerful scanning beams slowly burned him to a crisp. He remembered screaming in pain and horror for what seemed an eternity.

That seemed unimportant now.

The scene blurred, and the sounds became muffled. The blur shattered like a stained glass window. Thousands of colored particles swirled to form the sides of a dark tunnel. The sides of the tunnel seemed close, yet he could not reach them, could not brush up against them. At the end of the tunnel—which appeared a nearly infinite distance away—he saw an impossibly bright light. It appeared brighter than a thousand suns, yet it did not hurt to look at it. He accelerated toward it at an unbelievable speed, as if beyond that of light itself.

From the light he sensed a wonderful presence. An impossibly tender love and an absolute peace engulfed and caressed him. He felt a greater being merging with him, felt himself, his power and pride, ebbing away.

He resisted.

Something in the presence of the Other attempted to calm and reassure him, but the intrusion—the joining—horrified, disgusted and infuriated Lance. He couldn't discern time or distance, but he did near the light entirely too quickly for his taste. He twisted and squirmed, shouted and screamed. He fought for his very soul.

He felt the Other surrender. He felt the pain and disappointment in the Other and knew he had won. Before he came into contact with the light, the tunnel ended.

He arrived.

Excerpt From
"God's Gift"
by Greg Beatty

"So let me get this straight. You solved the problem of the exploding FTL drive, but the solution is worse than the initial problem?"

Thomas Wells nodded miserably.

"How in the world could it be worse? You look like shit, by the way."

Thomas ran a hand through his hair, rumpling it as much as Einstein's famous mop in the poster opposite him. That was about all that was the same in the office, though—that and the two men locked in painful conversation. The three months had taken as much of a toll on his office as they had on Thomas Wells. Maybe more. The last time he'd managed to convince Minister Creasey to come to his office, he'd cleaned and straightened to honor the man he'd needed to convince. This time, well, this time he'd given up, and the surrounding disarray showed it. The only clean spot besides the two chairs the men sat in was an irregular circle on the desk around a small device.

Thomas blinked. What had the other man asked? Oh yes. "How could it be worse? Well, take my word for it: it is."

"I thought you said you were onto something with the tests involving living subjects." When Thomas didn't answer, the minister prompted him. "Your reports said you could improve the odds if you included a plant or animal on the test rockets?"

The physicist nodded. "That was my idea, too. I couldn't support it mathematically yet, but intuitively it seemed like the essential time when a similar dividing line between otherwise identical states was the line between living and dead tissue. One instant, alive, the next dead...it was the closest precursor we'd experienced to the matter/anti-matter mirror."

"Is that what you're calling it now?"

"In public. In private I call it the mirror of life and death."

"Go on," the minister said.

"We weren't getting any further with mechanized trials, so I started with plant tissue. We'd switched to smaller ships, less to minimize loss when they exploded than to minimize the explosions. By this time, they were just enough of a shell to hold an atmosphere, minimal propulsion and navigation systems, and a radio. In case they survived. The first ones, with the plants, didn't even have the radio. We'd just send them through on autopilot, have them programmed to turn, and come back through. If they didn't blow up, we'd go in and examine them."

"And they had a better success rate."

"Marginally. We couldn't explain it, but it was there. There was some trouble—some plants that made it through withered and died—but we thought it was from residual radiation from the failed attempts."

"So you moved on to animal trials."

"Yes. You know all this."

"Except where it is headed. Except why it failed. Except why we can't send people through. Except why we're trapped on this damn rock, breeding ourselves to death."

Startled out of his self-pitying mope, Thomas looked up.

The minister was boiling mad. "You shit. You think you're the only one who wants the stars? The only one who cares? The only one who makes tough decisions about who lives and dies? Just this morning, I had to—"

Creasey took a breath, and, as plainly as if he'd folded his anger and tucked it into his jacket pocket, was calm again. "Go on."

Ashamed, Thomas went on. "Some of the plants that returned died, but at least they made it through. We figured, well, we were desperate. The clock was ticking. So we tried animals."

"With a higher success rate."

"Yes. And more ambiguous results."

"Explain."

"More of them survived. But more of them sickened and died. Some wouldn't eat. The turtles just sat there until they starved. Some—the mice ate each other. But the higher up the ladder of biological complexity, the greater the initial success rate. We decided we needed to try a conscious mind, fully aware of the dangers and the choices involved."

"And that's when you asked me to get you volunteers."

Thomas bowed his head. If he'd been ashamed before, what should he call what he was feeling now, so much stronger, so much darker?

"They were real volunteers," Creasey said mildly. "And they were all fully informed of their chances for survival."

"Informed! Well, okay. They could all parrot the statistics I'd told you in our previous visit, and all were very clear on how well they would be paid for each trial jump. Or their families, and—" Thomas broke off, rubbing his forehead. "It's just...oh, Christ. I can't tell it."

With that, the physicist reached out and pressed a button on the device on his desk. Silence followed, and Minister Creasey looked at him. Thomas explained, "There's some dead air at the beginning. Then you'll see."

"It's just a recorder, then?"

"It was one of several out at the test site. Three rigged for each human subject, and shh."

The first sound that came from the recorder was a ragged inhalation. Then a sob. Eventually, the crying stopped, and a man's voice could be heard. It cracked from time to time, and lapsed into sobs. Thomas had heard it before. He'd lost count of how many times he'd listened to it. To all of them. He listened to them at night, as a kind of penance. He cried too, most nights. Now, he just listened.

"...my family. Make sure you tell my family I loved them. Tell them I..." more crying, then...
"I'd do another jump, but I just can't—the dying is too hard. I can feel it. He—I—it only takes the briefest instant to die, but it's with me forever..."

Then there was just crying. The minister shook his head, troubled but still not getting it. Thomas lifted the recorder from his desk, and replaced it with another one. Before he pressed the replay button, he said, "I'm calling it molecular resonance. It happens on the cellular level."

Then he pushed the button. The two men listened to another weep. Eventually, they listened to him speak. "This is Devi Singh. Singh here. I...oh, it is too hard. I can't go on, knowing in my belly that I am dead. That I am already dead. Tell them I'm sorry. I can't..."

Excerpt from

"The Relics of Venice"

By Leslie Brown

After a quick shower and a change of clothes, Lynne hit the streets of Venice. She had an hour to kill before she was to meet Father Pietro.

She located the church and circled it cautiously. It was large and solid and brown. She was mildly disappointed that it was so plain, but that was testament to its age. She liked the way the square around the church was lined with cafés, their tables set out on the cobblestones for outdoor dining.

"It's safe to go in, you know. They won't eat tourists."

Lynne jumped in spite of herself and turned to face the speaker. His broad accent, somewhere from Midwest America, labeled him a tourist. Her breath caught in surprise. The young man grinning at her was *pretty*. Pretty in a Renaissance painting way with brown curls falling to his shoulders and a faint beard, little more than stubble, keeping him from being beautiful. His brown eyes were warm but he peered at her oddly, as if he were short-sighted. She smiled back, not even thinking to erect the barriers she usually presented to inopportune strangers.

"Actually, I'm not really a tourist. I was casing out my new workplace for the next three months." She nodded towards the church.

Her new acquaintance raised an eyebrow. "Are you a nun on a work term then? We have something in common!"

"How delightful! You're a nun, too?" Lynne tilted her head to regard him. His laugh was light and pleasant.

"I meant, that I work in the chiesa as well. I'm a restorer of wood, back from my evening walk to clear my head of solvents and lacquers.

My name is Paul Sinclair." He extended a hand and Lynne shook it.

"Lynne Carver. I work for FameGen."

"Oh." Paul's face lost its animated expression.

"What does 'Oh' mean? You don't approve of my job?"

"I neither approve nor disapprove. I am, however, reminded of the pilgrims to the Holy Land shelling out their precious coins to buy a vial of the Virgin's tears or Mary's milk. And what is it they say about the fragments of the True Cross? Put all the pieces together and you can build Noah's ark? I guess I don't approve of bilking the public, even if it is sanctioned by the Church."

“Sanctioned, paid for and expedited, Mr. Sinclair. May I point out that FameGen is not ascertaining the authenticity of the relics brought here? That has been done to the Church’s satisfaction hundreds of years ago. What I am doing is isolating DNA from the relics and making copies of this DNA. FameGen will then put it into acrylic pendants and the various churches will sell them. All we guarantee is that the buyer has some DNA with the same genetic code as DNA extracted from what is believed to be the foot of St. Catherine of Siena. There’s no snake oil salesmanship going on here.”

Paul smiled at her vehemence. “It just seems tawdry, Ms Carver. Remember when they sold copies of Elvis’s and Michael Jackson’s DNA? In the first case it was DNA but not Elvis’s, and in the second, it wasn’t even human!”

Lynne ignored his attempt to joke. “That didn’t involve FameGen. Don’t get me wrong, this isn’t my idea of a career-building move. I have a three-month contract to get this up and running. Once I make and store the DNA for the company, they can duplicate more DNA back in their labs without my help. What they needed for this job was a reputable molecular biologist to handle the precious relics under the eyes of their guardians and make sure nothing gets lost or mixed up. FameGen will call it their Replicas Sanctas line.” She glanced at her watch. “I have to meet Father Pietro now, if you will excuse me.”

“Certainly, but allow me to walk you in. I have to get back to work, too.” Paul made a courtly gesture towards the massive church doors.

“You got that move from Father Pietro, didn’t you?” Lynne asked as she passed him.

“He’s my idol,” Paul answered without a trace of sarcasm. The church was cool inside. Light still came in through the leaded windows and there were candles lit at different stations throughout the church.

“Where’s the relic?” Lynne asked Paul. There was no sign of Father Pietro and she wanted to get a look at her first job.

“This way,” Paul indicated. As he passed by the last pew, he banged his hip on a wooden carving that stuck out slightly.

“Are you okay?” asked Lynne. If she had done that, there would be a big purple bruise on her hip the next day.

“Yep. I don’t see very well in this light. I have retinitis pigmentosa,” Paul remarked casually as he maneuvered past the offending pew.

“Oh. That’s hereditary, isn’t it?” Lynne wished she could bite back the question but Paul did not seem to take offense.

“Yes, I’ll be blind in a few years. I have very poor night vision and little side vision. It’s like looking down a tunnel. I do most of my work by touch and smell, to prepare myself for when it does happen.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. I’ve learned to appreciate sight all the more. Here’s your foot.”

Excerpt From
"The Convert"
by Susanne Marie Knight

Father Wren shuddered. How had this creature gotten inside the Church? For once, he was glad that no light was allowed to penetrate the confessional booth. No matter how enlightened he believed himself to be, how could he not be prejudiced at the physical differences between Ophiuchians and humankind? And how much more difficult this encounter was considering that this creature could read his thoughts.

He shook his head to clear it. "So you are an inhabitant of Ophiuchi 4, Ping?"

"Yes, Father, and I seek to unite with Chloe."

A heavy emotion weaved through Ping's words. It sang to the primitive side of Father Wren, deep inside his soul. But what was it? What stirred his passion so that he lived, breathed, and felt this ancient emotion?

It was love. Strong and true, as solid as the centuries past, this Ophiuchian genuinely loved the human Chloe.

Mother of God! Here was a can of worms he had no desire to open.

"Er, Ping. As you probably know, this...this is highly unusual." Sweat beaded on Father Wren's high forehead. Unusual wasn't an unusual enough word. "I should, er, talk with Chloe Vargas about this matter before we...we go any farther."

"Understood, Father." An amused inflection now laced Ping's speech. "Matrimony is a blessed sacrament. Number seven on the list, I believe. You must confer with Chloe. She is the limb of my heart."

With a white cotton handkerchief, Father Wren wiped away perspiration. "How do you speak our language and know so much about our religion? About us?"

"Do not be troubled, Father. Chloe will explain all. We have conversed many long hours in the night. I feel I know her as well as I know myself."

A rustling behind the dark netting separating the booths indicated that Ping moved. Given the Ophiuchian's trunk structure, exactly how that was accomplished Father Wren had no idea.

"I will leave you now, Father. After your discussion with Chloe, we will talk again."

The creature was gone. Instinctively, Father Wren knew this to be so. Collapsing against the back of the booth's wall, he mopped at his forehead, again. Holy Mother of God! Of a certainty, now he had heard every story in the book!

Heard. He recalled the Ophiuchian's words about conversing with Chloe Vargas. The poor child's mishap clearly made a liar out of Ping. Because of an explosion six weeks ago at one of the mines, Chloe's hearing was completely gone. The only way to communicate with her was either by writing or by her lip reading.

But maybe Ophiuchians did have lips.

Recalling the tree-like shape of these native lifeforms, Father Wren shuddered, again. He then immediately bowed his head to pray. What he needed most of all in this truly bizarre situation was divine guidance and a loving attitude to the infinite diversity of life. After all, everything was beautiful in God's eyes. Before he contacted Chloe Vargas, he had to rid himself of prejudice.

Excerpt From

"Leap of Faith"

by Robert and Karina Fabian

"Hey, dreamer!" Her brother's voice cut through the air—and her thoughts. "Come here and tell these kids how I made it snow on the moon!" Even though he was only ten, two years younger than her, he'd already shown remarkable aptitude in environmental engineering and was allowed to help the Artemis colony engineers work the environmental systems.

Of course, the way he talked, you'd think he was the older and he'd made it snow all by himself, Annie grumbled, but she turned away from the sight of the boy chasing the birds—geese, Uncle called them—and went to support his story.

Besides, it's not like I don't have a calling of my own, she thought as she trudged through already melting snow to the knot of boys. She smiled and stuck her hand in her pocket where she'd put a small laminated card of St. Gillian of L5, Patron Saint of Space. On one side was a picture of the saint in a vac suit holding a stylized crucifix. On the other was the Prayer of St. Gillian. Sister Therese had given it to her the day she'd rescued Annie's class when their shuttle broke down.

The Order of Our Lady of the Rescue had begun in the early years of space colonization. Originally known as the Order of Our Lady of the Rescue, it was founded by the widow-turned-nun of R. Charles Hawkins, one of the most important scientists of the space era. As the economic advantages of space industries, aided in no small part by his inventions, increased, so did the number of people who worked and lived and even raised families in space. With the increase of population came an increasing need for people to fill religious roles.

Contrary to authors of old, humankind did not abandon its need to express its faith when it took to the stars, nor did it adopt a single enveloping generic faith. Despite the Spacer's Code that encouraged open-mindedness and an accepting attitude of differences, people still wanted to worship in the way they were raised or were most comfortable with and to pass on their traditions and practices to their children. Those whose religions allowed the use of lay religious leaders or emphasized individual expression of worship fared well, but as the number of Catholics in space grew, so did the need for consecrated priests, deacons and even nuns.

In those early days, however, serving a religious need was not enough in itself to justify the cost of putting and keeping someone "up there." Everyone served a dual purpose at least. Gillian found that purpose.

"St. Gillian knew that as more and more people populated space, there would be more and more emergencies," Sr. Therese had told Anne as the young girl stood spellbound in the cockpit of the rescue ship, watching as her friends were loaded by threes into an air-filled "rescue ball" and pulled from the shuttle. She had been one of the first evacuated from the school shuttle, which had been hit by a micro-meteoroid and was leaking air slowly. When one of the sisters had seen

the fabric crucifix necklace she clutched, Anne was invited to watch the rescue up close. Sr. Therese had kept up a running commentary about the rescue, the ship and now the Order.

"You can train people, establish failsafes, but accidents still happen, after all. And she knew that at some point, they would need search and rescue forces to deal with them—dedicated forces, not just people trained to do this as an extra duty. Now, the big profit-minded corporations of the time weren't all that interested in building such a force--didn't think it 'cost effective,'" the young sister snorted, "so Sister Gillian convinced Pope John Paul III to let her start an order with that mission. All of us have a vow of poverty, which makes us cheap labor, I suppose. The corporations provide us with the necessities to live, and donations take care of our training and equipment." She turned to Anne and smiled. "It's a wonderful life, exciting, fulfilling, and where else can you feel closer to God?"

She'd answered Anne's questions then about the ship and its controls, and invited her to pray with her for her classmates as they watched them, small and huddling in the big bubbles, accompanied by a vac-suited member of the Order who pulled them along. When the evacuation was over, she invited Anne to sit in the fold-out seat behind her that was used for early trainees so she could watch the docking. By the time she was back on the station and in her mother's arms, she knew what she wanted to do with her life.

Someday, I'll be a pilot for the Order of Our Lady of the Rescue, and I'll rescue people for air and supplies and the love of God. It'll be so exciting. She shivered again.

Her brother looked at her with disgust. "You really that cold?" he demanded. His coat was unzipped like the other boys. "The colony's always warm," he explained to them. "Seventy-two degrees Fahrenheit, or the gravity generator starts acting up. Nobody knows why, even after two hundred years. That was the hardest part of making it snow—getting it cold enough in the dome while keeping gravity at one G. Tell them what my idea was, Annie," he said, suddenly feigning humility.

"You don't need gravity to make snow," Anne supplied, shrugging in annoyance. The boys didn't look particularly interested. "Everybody knows that, so he asked why they didn't just turn the generator off."

That got their attention. "Nano! So you just floated?"

"Of course not," her brother scoffed. "There's still gravity on the moon, just—" A loud cracking sound followed by a short scream interrupted him.

"Somebody fell through the ice!" They took off for the lakeside.

Anne surged ahead, making her longer legs and adrenaline rush work for her. Someone needed rescuing! As she neared the lake, she saw some older boys hurrying, too. One fell to his belly and started crawling.

What's he doing? Get up and run! she thought. The little boy's screams faded in and out as he bobbed in the water. Someone had to get to him fast! She ran out onto the lake—

And fell through the ice.

Excerpt From

"Sometimes We Lie"

by Barton Paul Levenson

A cave mouth appeared in the rock wall they were skirting, and the boat nosed into a long subterranean grotto with lights burning in the distance. "This is fine," said Ghynam.

"But...you said to get...the medical station's further—"

"Yes, go there. I'm just getting off here." He left the cabin and jumped off into darkness.

He landed and rolled under a cave mouth, out of sight from the grotto, and crawled the long distance into the Sand Caves. There he took off his fisherman's clothing and padded to another cave mouth. He had last seen these caves twenty years ago. His recall of their layout was perfect.

Heavy breathing ahead. He climbed over a dune to see a naked young woman lying on the other side of the dune, panting. (There was just enough phosphorescence in the rock to see by.) Ghynam went to the woman and checked her. She was conscious, but looked exhausted.

"I can find you water," he said. "Come with me."

"I'm not...not allowed. Have to find..."

"You're not supposed to ask for help, but there's no rule that says you can't accept help if it's offered. You're going to die in a day or so if you don't get water, and I know where water is. Come on." He helped her up.

"I...I am ashamed, Master. I failed." Her eyes filled with tears.

"Don't waste water."

"I...I can't help—"

"Do I hear can't?"

"No. No, Master." She took a deep breath, stilled her breathing.

"That's better."

On the way they came to a young man, but when Ghynam checked him he found no pulse.

"Dead. Did you know him?"

The woman nodded uncertainly. "I think...his name was Nornti. Helfin Nornti. He was doing so well. It seems..."

"Wrong, wasteful, cruel?"

She sighed and recited the lesson: "Cruelty is the left hand of kindness. Nature is cruel; evolution is cruel; without such cruelty there would be no beautiful fish in the sea, no beautiful birds in the air, no beautiful thinking creatures like ourselves to see all this beauty and regret the cruelty needed to produce it."

He got up and walked away.

"Right?" she asked, following him.

He didn't answer.

After a while they came to a pool of rose quartz with a dim underwater light. It was filled with clear water.

"Drink, but not too deeply."

"Yes, Master." She knelt and drank for a while, then stopped.

"You have good control. You have passed the last physical test."

The woman grinned. "I really begin to believe I will be Itana at last."

"If you want to be."

"Why shouldn't I? I want it more than anything else in the world. My brother died being tested for the Itana."

She got up and they went on. Eventually they came to the check-in station.

"Hosuun, Narbi," said the young woman proudly. "I found water."

The Itana Master nodded and checked her name off on a sheet as she passed under the detectors.

"Nornti, Helfin," said Ghynam. "I—"

The woman spun around. "That is not Helfin Nornti! Helfin Nornti is dead!"

"I, too, remember a young man and not an old one," said the checker. "Who are you, impostor, and what do you here?"

Ghynam kicked out, not at the man, but at the heavy detector frame, and as the Itana jumped back out of the way, Ghynam leaped over it to land his foot in the Itana's chest. He followed up with head punches that knocked the man out. Then a kick from the side lashed his head with fire, and he sprawled on the ground. He caught the student's foot as she kicked again and pulled her off-balance, rose to his knees and crawled forward, grabbed her shoulders and slammed her down, struck her forehead with his palm to knock her head on the ground. Her eyes rolled up.

Ghynam took a moment to rip a sheet off the checker's pad. He wrote on the paper, Brave, daring, but hasty in judgment. Ghynam. He left it on the woman's chest.

Excerpt from

"Confirmation"

By Michael S. Poteet

When Tom next awoke, the temperature in his cabin was hovering around fourteen degrees centigrade. *So much for the repairs.* His hands shook as he rummaged through his rations locker for a pouch of coffee. He tried to slap it against his thigh, but missed. With a grumble, he tried again. This time he made contact, and he felt the heaters in the pouch's lining activate, warming his chilled hands.

Casting a longing glance back at his sleepsac, he floated out of his cabin down to the cockpit, not caring that he bumped off the tube's sides like a pinball in an antique arcade machine.

Sipping coffee between yawns, Tom strapped himself into his bucket seat and began powering up the *Cyrus*. The magnetic sieve instantly came online, and Tom breathed relief. The ship had checked out fine back at Thorne Station, but if a system as simple as the envirometer could malfunction, Tom didn't want to think about what other systems might. During the few hours of sleep he'd gotten, he'd had a nightmare: klaxons blared and warning lights flashed as the mag-sieve collapsed, liberating theimps from the *Cyrus*' massive collection tank.

But it had been just a dream. Tom grinned as the digital bar graph on a small display screen began to rise. Theimps were flowing into the tank just as they should. "Come to papa," he cooed.

He tapped a key on the base of his vidchat monitor. It lit up with the faces of a half-dozen other Harvesters: some as close as a few light years, others farther away, but all wishing they had a registered claim as good as Tom and Abby's.

No one was more envious of them than Jack Whittaker, who was working—if he could ever be so accused—a quarter-parsec away.

Tom spotted him in the screen's lower left corner. Whittaker was sipping a pouch of something that turned his cheeks and eyes bright red. "Drinking your 'herbal tea' again, Jack?"

"G'mornin' to you, too, a-hole."

Tom clucked his tongue in mock concern. "Really, Jack, it's a shame. You had such potential but never took the big risks. Of course, none of that matters now that Abby and I will make the Harvest obsolete within a decade."

"Big talk from a man whose partner isn't awake yet." Whittaker licked his lips, leering at Tom. "Keep her up past her bedtime, Don Juan?"

Tom blocked Whittaker's signal, refusing to dignify that slur with a response.

Tom had first met Abby over a year ago, as together they regaled some fresh-faced novice in Thorne's lounge with stories of life among the stars. He'd known immediately that he'd found in Abby Carter someone without whom his life would feel as empty as the space through which he traveled. He wouldn't deny that he first noticed her because she was incredibly sexy; Tom had never considered the standard issue, chocolate-brown Harvester's jumpsuit erotic before he'd seen how Abby's luscious figure filled it. But when he discovered her humor, intelligence, and passion for life, he decided she was more exotic than any particle of matter could be, and of infinitely more value. Kelly actually had hit the mark: life with Abby was about as heavenly a prospect as Tom could imagine.

Why *wasn't* she up, anyway? "*Cyrus to Nachtmusik*. Rise and shine."

No response.

Tom furrowed his brow. "*Cyrus to Nachtmusik*," he repeated.

"Where are you, Abby?"

Still no reply.

Sweat formed on Tom's palms. Motherlode would be an awfully lonely place without Abby.

"Tom!"

Tom exhaled—he hadn't realized he'd been holding his breath. Abby's rosy, freckled face filled the screen. *God*, thought Tom. Even when flustered, Abby was gorgeous. "What's up?" he asked.

"Just my blood pressure." Abby brushed loose strands of her strawberry-colored hair out of her face in an agitated way. "Tom, are you reading leaks in your collection tank?"

"No." This might not be the time to tell her his nightmare. "Are you?"

Abby frowned. "Don't ask stupid questions this early. I didn't get one second of sleep. I've been looking for a leak my scanners say is there, but I can't find it."

"Maybe we should rendezvous and look together. You know what they say about two heads."

Abby laughed; her laugh always reminded Tom of wind chimes dancing in a soft, summer evening's breeze. "Yeah, that two heads are the surest sign of prolonged exposure to radiation."

Excerpt From
"Lost Rythar"
by Colleen Drippe'

The starplane rocked in the wind.

After a time, Rach drowsed, hunched uncomfortably in a seat far too small for him. He woke suddenly to see the alien pointing to an irregular mass of color on the screen. They were well above the timber line, crossing a steep plain of jumbled rock. "I think that's it," Blaise was saying to Graf.

"Can we land here?" Graf asked doubtfully.

"They did, sort of." Blaise studied the screen. "I don't think this snow is very deep anyway. The wind is scouring it away." He brought them down slowly, in an awkward landing that left Graf clutching the back of Blaise's chair.

The ranger looked up at him. "You stay," he told Graf. "Blaise and I will go out." He did not want to leave the alien alone in the shuttle.

Without giving the other man time to protest, Rach clambered out into the storm. The wind nearly took his breath away as he felt the pilot stagger against him, groping for his arm. They crept forward using a mechanical torch from the shuttle, until the ranger stumbled against an obstruction.

Releasing his grip on Blaise, he grasped the ice-sheathed edge of a wing. The crumpled upper part was outlined against the blowing snow, tilting downward.

"Great Bear!" he muttered, but the wind blew his words away. Something was crawling toward him. It was as though a corpse had dug itself out of the ice. The ranger recoiled in horror from the sight of its hollow, frostbitten face.

Blaise struggled to the man's side, the light swinging in his hand. "Help me get him inside," he shouted as Rach recognized Heth Wolfbane's ravaged features. He and Blaise fairly dragged the aviator back to the shuttle.

"Bers," the man whispered, struggling as Rach tried to hold him. "Get Bers."

Blaise was nearly bent double with cold and Graf shook his head. "I'll go with you this time, Ranger," he said. Rach was too tired to argue.

They found Bers Wolfbane still in the plane. He didn't rouse even when they jarred his broken leg carrying him, nor did he show signs of life in the warmth of the shuttle. Blaise had made

Heth comfortable--shaming the ranger for his mistrust--but he looked sober when he saw the other Wolfbane.

Heth grew quiet, seeing that his cousin was safe, and squinted up into the ranger's face. "If I did not recognize you, Rach Bloodbear, I would think the All-Seeing had sent for us."

Rach clasped the flier's hand. "You're alive, Heth," he muttered. "Alive!"

"Thank God for that," Blaise said quietly, still looking down at Bers. The alien was so cold, his words came out in little bursts between fits of shivering. "You are strong people to live in this place."

Graf crouched in the space between the seats, bundling his own coat about the injured man. "Yes," he said in a low voice, "this is a hard place, Starman." He looked up then at Blaise. "You haven't really flown in such weather before, have you?"

"No," Blaise admitted.

"You might have stayed on your own world to--to teach?"

"I might." Blaise climbed stiffly back into his own seat.

Graf frowned. "Did your father serve this god of yours?" he asked.

"In a way."

"But not your way, I would guess," the warrior said shrewdly. "You chose more."

Blaise peered at the screen, sweating now despite the cold. "Not more exactly," he said. "But I seem to be getting it."

Rach stared at him, though he heard a faint chuckle from Graf. This alien, the ranger was thinking, is no older than Heth Wolfbane and I. What god could ask this of a man, that he should leave his home and all that he knew to come among strangers who threatened his life?